



All-Party Parliamentary Rugby League Group

Ordinary Meeting Minutes

15 December 2015 Committee Room 13

Meeting commenced 1806

In Attendance

Members: Marie Rimmer MP (in the Chair); David Mowat MP; Lord Hoyle

Honorary Life Members (all, no affiliation): Spen Allison;

Organisational Associate Members: Mark Foster (RFL); Ikram Butt (BARA); Ashlynn Lucas (Bramley Buffaloes); Martyn Cheney (Bramley Buffaloes); Jacqui Forster (Supporters Direct); Alistair Davis (Try Tag Rugby); Carl Duckells (Try Tag Rugby)

Individual Associate Members (all, no affiliation): Martin Coyd OBE; Carl Dalby; Gary Slater; David Ballheimer; Gavin Willacy.

Secretariat: Mark Ramsdale; Jack Baker

Minutes Silence

A minutes silence was held for Zacharias de Lange, Chris Leatherbarrow, Dave Batchelor and Colin Welland.

Welcome

The Chairman welcomed the following new Members: Rt Hon. Hilary Benn MP; Ranil Jayawardena MP; Andrea Jenkyns MP; Paula Sherriff MP.

The Chairman welcomed the following new Honorary Members: Sir Rodney Walker; Nigel Wood; Sarah Williams MBE; Ian Proctor.

The Chairman welcomed new Associate Members: Hunslet Hawks, Whitehaven RLFC, Nigel Kitching, Anthony Dellar, Rugby League Writers and Broadcasters Association; Bradford Bulls; Carl Dalby; Matthew Fitzgerald; Darren Williams; David Johnson; Gavin Willacy; Michael O'Shea; Richard Austin; London Skolars; Try Tag Rugby

Apologies

Members: Lord Smith of Leigh; Rt Hon. Lindsay Hoyle MP; Jamie Reed MP; Debbie Abrahams MP; Lisa Nandy MP; Andrea Jenkyns MP; Karl M^cCartney

Honorary Life Members (all, no affiliation): David Hinchliffe; Sir Rodney Walker; Sir Ian McCartney; Sally Bolton OBE

Organisational Associate Members: Thomas Todd (Whitehaven RLFC); Nigel Wood (RFL); Major David Groce (GBAFRL); Trevor Hunt (RLWBA); Dan Steel (London Rugby League Foundation);

Individual Associate Members (all, no affiliation): Iain McIlwee; Graham Oliphant; David Johnson; Steve Evans; Chris Ashton;

Minutes of the Previous Meeting

As the meeting was not quorate, it was agreed that the minutes of the previous meeting would be circulated for approval.

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Matters Arising

The Secretariat raised the following on-going activities not covered by the meeting's agenda:

- The Secretariat is in the process of reviewing the history of the Group to go on the website.
- The Secretariat removing the Portcullis from the Group's logo, as per the rules for All-Party Groups.
- The Secretariat is in dialogue with the Assistant Private Secretary to The Queen regarding Royal Patronage for the game. A review of Royal Patronages is currently underway, and set to be complete in the first half of 2016. The Secretariat will update the Group.

Correspondence

Sent

- Letters of condolence to the family of Zacharias de Lange, Chris Leatherbarrow and Dave Batchelor from the Chairman, on behalf of the Group.
- Letters to the Chairman and Deputy Chairmen of the LGA Culture, Tourism and Sport Board, offering an opportunity to brief the board on the work of the Group, and the ways in which councillors may be able to get involved.
- The Treasurer wrote to all Super League, Championship, and League One clubs not Associate Members of the Group, encouraging them to join. A number of new Associate Members resulted. All clubs at all levels are welcome.
- A letter of support for Try Tag Rugby in their attempts to access parks in London.
- Letters to the CEOs of North Queensland Cowboys, Brisbane Broncos and Sydney Roosters, inviting them to Parliament during the World Club Series.
- The Treasurer wrote to train companies servicing rugby league heartlands, asking them to consider supporting the Group.
- The Secretariat emailed the new Member for Oldham West and Royton following his recent election, inviting him to join the Group.
- The Chairman wrote to the charity Heartbeat of Sport and AXA regarding the possibility of an event in Parliament to promote heart awareness in rugby league and in other sports.

Received

- An email concerning those rugby league players who have given their lives whilst serving in the Armed Forces, and asking about the wreath-laying ceremony at the Cenotaph. Responded providing details of the ceremony this year, on the eve of the Challenge Cup Final.
- A letter from the RFU regarding their schools rugby programme, offering to meet with the Chairman, as well as RFL representatives. **Action: Secretariat to organise meeting.**
- From an Associate Member of the Group, concerning conflict between Touch Rugby League and EnglandTouch (Rugby Union). Secretariat raised with the RFL.
- Notification that player's association, League13, has been dissolved. They are therefore no longer an Associate Member of the Group.
- From the APPG for Sport, an invitation for the Group to be involved in a Parliamentary Sports Day next June, showcasing the sport. **Action: Secretariat to liaise with Group Officers and the RFL.**
- The Chairman received a communique from Ladbrokes, offering a meeting to discuss support for the Group and for the Political Animals. **Action: Secretariat to organise.**
- A piece asking that the Parliamentary Group press the government to improve central funding.

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International

- The Chairman wrote to England Coach Steve McNamara, on behalf of the Group, to congratulate all involved with the England squad on their test series victory over New Zealand.
- Continued correspondence with the RLIF and RLEF concerning a split in Italian rugby league. **Action: the Chairman is due to meet with Dr David Collier OBE from the RLIF, and Danny Kazandjain from the RLEF.**
- The Chairman wrote to the FCO and APPG for Kenya requesting support for rugby league in Kenya. Received a response from the Sports Minister, who has asked officials to approach the RLIF to discuss how they can assist with the growth of the game in Kenya.
- Related, email from the RLEF's MEA director regarding rugby league in Kenya and Burundi, requesting support. Specifically, to educate Sports Ministry Officials in these countries on the difference and existence of the two codes of rugby football. The RLEF has written to them on several occasions, and not received a positive response. **Action: Chairman to liaise with an MEP to table a motion in European Parliament.**
- The Chairman wrote to the Charge d'Affaires at the Hungarian Consulate, requesting assistance for Hungarian Rugby League.
- From Pakistan Rugby League, regarding joining the Group as an Associate Member.

BBC & Press

- A letter inviting BBC Head of Sport, Barbara Slater, to speak to the Group. Barbara and Rona Fairhead, Chairman of the BBC Trust, will address the Group's Ordinary Meeting in January. Related, the Group received various pieces in response to the announcement.
- An email received concerning BBC coverage of rugby league, specifically a lack of coverage on BBC Local television news in the North West.
- A piece concerning coverage of rugby league in the Sunday Times' Wales editions.

Access

- A letter to the RFL, asking for a briefing on initiatives and strategies in place in sport relating to BME representation. A response was received, and shared with Group Members.
- From the parents of a junior player relating to youth and junior transfers in the amateur game. The Chairman wrote to the RFL asking for a briefing on the operational rules, and supporting the application of discretion in extraordinary cases.
- The Treasurer raised the issue of a dispute between North West Counties and the RFL, regarding primary rugby league.

Honours

- A piece questioning why Gus Risman is the only 'immortal' not to receive an honour.

London Rugby League Foundation Event

All MPs with a London Foundation club in their constituency were invited; as well all Foundation clubs. The Chairman wrote to Hard Rock Café, thanking them for supporting the Foundation.

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Annual Dinner

- Letters of congratulation were sent to all award winners at the Group's Annual Dinner, and to all new Honorary Members. Nigel Wood responded with thanks to the Group.
- Related, the Chairman wrote to OAK Insurance and the RFL, thanking them for their support for the Annual Dinner.

Contact with MPs

Emails were sent to MPs with:

- Champion Schools Finalists in their constituencies
- constituents selected in the England Youth squad
- clubs successful in attaining category 1 academy status

Group Activity Report

Parliamentary

The Secretariat provided references to rugby league in Parliament since the previous meeting:

Following the Spending Review and Autumn Statement, the Chairman raised the Government's support for the 2021 rugby league world cup bid. The Chancellor responded:

"I am glad that the hon. Gentleman has noticed the bid that we have made for the rugby league world cup. Let us just hope that England, and indeed all the home teams, are a bit more successful than we were in the rugby union world cup."

At CMS questions, Vice-Chairman Jason McCartney MP asked if the Secretary of State would join in congratulating rugby league star Kevin Sinfield on being shortlisted for the BBC sports personality of the year award, and, following the autumn statement, and how the Government are supporting the sport of rugby league, in particular the bid for the rugby league world cup in 2021. The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport replied:

"I would, of course, like to congratulate all 12 contenders for the sports personality of the year award. However, hon. Members might be aware that there are some fans of Leeds Rhinos in the Department, one of whom is not sitting a million miles away from me, and I am sure that she will be very vocal in supporting Kevin Sinfield. However, with regard to the rugby league World cup, when we hosted the competition two years ago, it drew more than 450,000 fans and generated an estimated £9.6 million. Officials are due to meet the rugby league next week to discuss its proposed 2021 rugby league World cup bid."

The Chairman also expressed his delight at Kevin Sinfield's nomination.

In her maiden speech the Secretary, Marie Rimmer MP, made reference to St Helens Rugby Football Club, in her constituency.

In a response to a written question from Craig Williams MP on the potential economic effect of hosting the 2017 Champions League Final in Cardiff, the Sports Minister referenced the success of the games held in the city as part of the 2013 Rugby League World Cup.

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The following Early Day Motions were tabled.

- 396 – 120th ANNIVERSARY OF RUGBY LEAGUE (Greg Mulholland MP)
- 397 – RUGBY LEAGUE STATUE AT WEMBLEY (Greg Mulholland MP)
- 498 – LEEDS RHINOS RUGBY LEAGUE TREBLE WINNERS 2015 (Greg Mulholland MP)
- 500 – SUPER LEAGUE RUGBY IN MANCHESTER (Greg Mulholland MP)
- 636 – RUGBY LEAGUE EUROPEAN CHAMPIONSHIP (Ian Lucas MP)
- 644 – ENGLAND AND NEW ZEALAND RUGBY LEAGUE INTERNATIONAL SERIES (Greg Mulholland MP)
- 718 – ENGLAND VICTORY IN RUGBY LEAGUE INTERNATIONAL TEST SERIES (Greg Mulholland MP)

Public

The Chairman took part in the wreath-laying ceremony at the Cenotaph on the eve of the Challenge Cup Final on behalf of the Group.

In October, the Group hosted a reception in Parliament in conjunction with Associate Member, the London Rugby League Foundation. The reception showcased the game in London and the South East.

The Group held its Annual Dinner in the House of Lords in November. Professor Tony Collins spoke on 120 years of rugby league.

The Chairman met with Associate Member Steve Evans, to discuss support for the Group.

The Chairman met with a representative from AXA UK, to discuss support for the Group.

An article on the Group appeared in the match day programme for the second international match between England and New Zealand, at the Olympic Stadium. The Secretariat circulated to Members.

The Chairman took part in a plenary session at a conference organised by Associate Member, Supporters' Direct.

The Chairman was invited to attend a game between the Army and RAF in September, but could not attend at short notice.

Press

The Group issued press releases on:

- New Organisational Associate Members: London RL Foundation; Hunslet Hawks; Whitehaven RLFC; RLWBA; Try Tag Rugby
- New Honorary Life Member Sir Rodney Walker.
- The remembrance event at the Cenotaph on the eve of the Challenge Cup Final.
- EDMs on: the 120th Anniversary of rugby league; the Super League Grand Final; international rugby league; England's victory in the international test series against New Zealand.
- The announcement that BBC Head of Sport and Chair of the BBC Trust would address the Group in January.
- The London Rugby League Foundation event.
- The Group's Annual Dinner.
- Welcoming government support for the 2021 Rugby League World Cup bid.

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At the time of the meeting, the Group had 1,614 followers on Twitter. The Group's twitter name is @UKParliamentRL

Political Animals Report

The Secretariat reminded Members that they are always eligible to play for the Political Animals (Associate Members are also) and reiterated the eligibility criteria that are contained on the Animals' website and requested that all Associate Members who may know someone who could be eligible to review and introduce to the Club Captain (Group Chairman) or General Manager (Group Secretariat).

The Political Animals played a London Select XIII on Saturday 7 November in East London, ahead of the test match between England and New Zealand at the Olympic Stadium.

The Secretariat noted that details of further fixtures will be circulated in the new year, once confirmed.

Annual Dinner Review

The Secretariat noted that feedback from the Annual Dinner had been very positive, but invited Members to provide further feedback, to help improve the dinner next year.

AOB

Main business concluded at 1824

Presentation: Mark Foster, RFL Marketing & Communications Director

The Chairman welcomed Mark Foster, RFL Marketing and Communications Director.

Foster opened by thanking the Group for inviting him. He outlined his role, and focus on improving the visibility and profile of the sport, increasing central and club generated income, and supporting development and growth at the club and international level.

Discussing achievements in 2015, a particular highlight was selling out the Grand Final. The World Club Series also helped to bring in fans who might not have engaged otherwise, as did the Magic Weekend in Newcastle. Whilst there was a lot of initial scepticism to the new league structure, it did deliver in terms of more games mattering, and engagement with the sport increased massively according to figures. Best practice forums, especially those around the World Club Series, were also very useful.

Foster outlined targets for 2016: raising the visibility and profile of the sport by at least 15%; selling out the Super League Grand Final; to have ten sell out games; and to have a successful Four Nations tournament.

Outlining some of the strengths of the sport, Foster noted fan loyalty and propensity to buy, a high female audience, and the work of foundations, Sky Try and RL Cares. Additional content, such as microphones on players is also something that the sport is often at the forefront of.

Highlighting weaknesses, there is a need for better business insight. Foster also noted the lack of "star" or iconic players, and outlined the plan to use five ambassadors wherever possible to promote the sport. To combat a relatively weak London presence, planned to bring at least three major events to the capital each year.

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More immediate challenges are increasing club attendances, particularly away support. Thursday night games also present a challenge, as whilst there is no other sport on television, challenging for attendances. Foster noted that there was a commitment to make sure clubs would only have two regular home games on a Thursday night.

The Secretary noted that it is often difficult for Parliamentarians to get to Thursday night games.

Longer term challenges include growing bigger clubs that engage communities. There is also a need to engage in the right way with youngsters, and Foster focused on the importance of media. Important to establish a regular international calendar.

Closing, Foster discussed opportunities, particularly better use of digital media and data and insight. Priorities focused on customers: growing attendances, memberships and group sales; growing capability and capacity for clubs; content improvement for digital and social media; creation of “star” players with increased visibility and profile; and a strategic approach to staging matches and raising the profile of the game in London and the South East.

Opening to questions, Foster gave his assurances that there is no complacency. The Challenge Cup Final is also a big priority, and there is now a Marketing Manager specifically in London. Acknowledging that Thursday and Friday night games might not always allow young children to watch live rugby league, Foster highlighted that SkyTry money is being invested into Primary RL, and one focus of this work is on giving juniors opportunities to watch the sport.

Whilst the lower leagues do not receive such good coverage as Super League, they have received increased central funding in recent years. Foster emphasised that there are still limited resources, though, and clubs need to be strategic and resourceful, with RFL support. With specific reference to London, strategy is to focus on events in London rather than the clubs, though not to say that the RFL doesn't support them.

When asked how much influence the the print media has compared to digital media, Foster noted the challenge in the print media is to spend time fighting for one or two pages, with stories tending to focus on personalities, or gossip. Media channels tend to have excellent websites, so much of the focus is on these. On the BBC and challenging press coverage, BBC had done a good job for the sport this year. Further success would be to see the Super League Show on national television at a sociable time.

On comparing rugby league to other sports, reason why others have been successful is not the product, but the event. There is a need for big experiences for people to buy into.

Greg Mulholland took the Chair.

Asked how supporters could be given a voice and a stake in the club they support, Foster noted that much of the 2013 Rugby League World Cup success was down to success at the community level. Supporters need to be seen as more than customers, but as the heartbeat of clubs.

On crossover between different sports and specific teams, data insight allows the segmentation of fans. Viewers that engage with rugby league also often engage with rugby union. Foster emphasised the importance of opening doors to other sports, and considering how rugby league can learn from these.

The Chairman thanked Foster for addressing the Group. He went on to thank Officers and the Secretariat for all their work this year, and all Associate Members for their continued support. Reflecting on the recent England series win against New

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Zealand, the announcement of a 10 000 increase in participation in the game, and Kevin Sinfield's nomination for BBC Sports Personality of the Year, the Chairman hoped that people could put club loyalties aside and support the game.

The Chairman closed by wishing all a very Happy Christmas and all the best for 2016.

Meeting closed at 1927

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