

MINUTES

RFL BOARD OF DIRECTORS MEETING

Venue RL Headquarters, Rowsley Street, **Date & Time** Tuesday 3rd December 2024, at 10.00 am
Manchester, M11 3FF

Present Simon Johnson, Sandy Lindsay MBE, Dr **Chair** Simon Johnson
Cherrie Daley, Julia Newton, Tony Sutton

Jamie Jones-Buchanan – RFL Board Observer
Ed Mallaburn – IMG Observer
Michelle Maple – Secretariat (minutes)
Rob Graham (Item 4)
Alison O'Brien (Item 5)
Dane Vishnubala (Item 6)
Phil Bentham (Item 7)
Gavin Wild (Item 7)
Marc Lovering (Item 8)
Victoria Sinacola (Item 9)

Agenda Item	Who
<p>1.0 WELCOME AND APOLOGIES</p> <p>The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting. No apologies for absence were received.</p>	
<p>2.0 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST</p> <p>Declarations of interest were noted as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> SJ – director of RL Commercial Ltd, director of RFL Investments 2020 Ltd and director of IRL Ltd. Chair of SIS, who has Betfred as a shareholder. EM – director of RL Commercial Ltd. TS – director of RFL Investments 2020 Ltd and of RLWC2021 Ltd. JJB – director of Leeds Cricket, Football & Athletics Ltd, trustee of Leeds Rhinos Foundation, trustee of Leeds 2023, patron of Inspire North, pundit at Sky TV pundit. JN – chair of Women in Sport, chair of GB Taekwondo, SID at Capital Letters and board advisor at LCR Property. 	
<p>3.0 MINUTES FROM THE PREVIOUS MEETING & ACTION TRACKER</p> <p>Minutes The minutes from the meeting held on 17th September 2024 were accepted as a true and accurate record. JN suggested that reference to the Women's Rugby League Strategy 'runway' be incorporated into the last paragraph of section eight.</p> <p>The summarised minutes of the meeting held on 17th September 2024 to be published on the RFL website were agreed, subject to TS reviewing the redacted sections.</p>	TS
<p>Matters Arising</p> <p>The following matters arising were reviewed and noted:</p>	

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Wheelchair Premier League</u> – It was noted that this initiative would be pushed back a year, starting in 2026 to allow additional delivery time. • <u>War of the Roses</u> – Following initial support for this concept, the proposed event would not go ahead in 2025, nor would a mid-season international. Instead, it was proposed to stage Round 20 of the men's 2025 Super League season across two weekends. <p>Progress against the action tracker noted.</p>	
4.0	FINANCIAL & FACILITIES MATTERS	
	<p>Management Accounts</p> <p>The meeting was joined by Rob Graham, who provided a report on the management accounts to 31st October 2024 and the 2024 forecast outturn.</p> <p>The overall variance was £62k ahead of budget, primarily due to the timing of costs in the overhead/central cost departments. However, a number of additional variances to budget would contribute to the forecast £638k loss for the year.</p> <p>The Board discussed the RFL's administration of the DCMS loans to member clubs through RFL Investments 2020 Ltd, and there was general agreement that initial discussions with Sport England on funding to assist with these costs should be escalated.</p> <p>It was also felt that it would be helpful for the Board to receive an overview of RL Commercial's financial position to better understand why some targets had not been achieved in 2024, and any risks around the international series with Australia in 2025.</p> <p>Accordingly, it was agreed that the finance team would work on some longer term scenario planning, with a view to bringing this back for a broader strategic discussion with the Board in the new year. SL felt that this should include discussion on the current capacity of the team to ensure sufficient resources were in place to achieve the organisational targets.</p>	<p>RG</p> <p>RG</p>
	<p>Budget 2025</p> <p>RG summarised the draft budget for 2025 and key movements in the assumptions, together with potential new areas of income and efficiencies going forward.</p> <p>The draft budget had been reviewed at length by the Audit and Risk Committee and recommended for approval. However, it was noted that the RL Commercial budget had yet to be approved by its Board members, and this remained the most significant risk to the draft RFL budget, given the majority of income was driven by RL Commercial's activities.</p> <p>SL requested that the budget be reformatted to clearly set out the annual profit and loss.</p> <p>The budget also assumed that the RFL would operate as it had in 2024, albeit the net budget loss position indicated that the RFL could not continue to operate sustainably without further cuts, or new revenue streams. Education had been identified as a potential area for revenue growth, and it was proposed to expand the RFL's education offering to incorporate a wider range of activity including for example first aid and mental health training, with the creation of a standalone business unit. Detailed proposals would be presented at a forthcoming Board meeting.</p> <p>Discussion also took place on the England programme, and the requirement to avoid further budget overspends. TS reported that a recent meeting took place with the Performance Department to discuss the Ashes Series in 2025 and to request a breakdown of their requirements to establish what was achievable.</p>	<p>RG</p> <p>VS</p>

The Board discussed Salford's recent request for an advance on their distribution, and the governance process behind this. RG reported that the request had been discussed by SLE shareholders and was referred back to the RL Commercial Board.

The Chair queried how Salford had managed to run up such significant costs whilst being in special measures. TS stated that a sustainability cap had been put in place in late 2023 to prevent overspends on players; The Chair suggested that some governance changes were required to help prevent this situation in the future, with the Special Measures Committee to include JN as chair of the Audit & Risk Committee and to meet monthly to receive a report from the Executive team.

It was felt that this was the best outcome to give Salford the best chance of completing the 2025 season and to minimise disruption to the competition.

The Board also discussed the 2025 Salary Cap regulations approved at the previous meeting. As such, clubs were given the opportunity to retrospectively approve the amendments, and opted not to do so. Accordingly, the amendments would not be introduced in 2025.

The Board **approved** the draft 2025 budget.

RG

5.0

GRADING UPDATE

The meeting was joined by Alison O'Brien, who confirmed the changes to the Club Grading Criteria model for 2025 across the pillars of Fandom, Stadium, Community and Minimum Standards.

- **Fandom: Digital** – with two seasons of data now available, the Digital thresholds would be amended as follows:

SOCIAL FOLLOWING		POINTS	TOTAL ENGAGEMENTS		POINTS	WEBSITE VISITS		POINTS
FOLLOWING THRESHOLDS	>300k	0.15	ENGAGEMENT THRESHOLDS	>20m	0.6	WEB VISITS THRESHOLDS	>2m	0.375
	>200k	0.1		>10m	0.4		>1m	0.25
	>100k	0.05		>2m	0.2		>500k	0.125
	>25k	0.025		>500k	0.1		>100k	0.1
	10% YoY Growth	0.05		10% YoY Growth	0.2		10% YoY Growth	0.125

- **Fandom: Viewership** – To reflect the new deals with Sky Sports, the BBC and the launch of the new SuperLeague+ streaming platform, the model for viewership would use one year of data and the TV average match audience, with points as follows:
 - Not on TV - 0.5 points.
 - Broadcast on any TV or streamed platform - 0.75 points.
 - Six clubs with the highest Average Match Audience = 1.0 points.
- **Stadium** - A stadium development exemption would be introduced for clubs that had commenced stadium redevelopment which would affect negatively the overall score, allowing clubs to use the previous Facilities Score points for a maximum of two years. Changes will be made to LED Perimeter Advertising Boards and Big Screen as follows:
 - Not in place - 0 points.
 - In place but does not meet the specification, but meets the following minimum standard: LED Perimeter Advertising Boards as per specification but minimum height of 600mm - 0.0625 points.
 - Big Screen 30m2 and pixel pitch 10mm or better - 0.0625 points.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ In place and meets the specification - 0.125 points ● Community: Catchment – Signing a Rugby League Development Agreement with another Local Authority District would allow a club to add its population to its data as long as the agreement remains in place. ● Minimum Standards – In the case of an insolvency event, a grade deflation would be replaced with a grading points deduction. From 2025 (for 2026) a deduction of 50% of the Finance pillar points score would be made (maximum 2.25 points deduction). <p>The changes would be reflected in the 2025 Grading Criteria Handbook published at the end of January 2025.</p> <p>It was noted that an ordinary resolution had been proposed by Batley Bulldogs and seconded by Dewsbury Rams for vote at the Council meeting on 4th December, as follows:</p> <p><i>“It is hereby resolved that the Club Grading Criteria model is amended such that if the winner of the Championship Grand Final is a Grade B Club it shall be promoted to Super League either to replace the lowest ranked Grade B Club in Super League or as an additional Club if all Clubs in Super League are Grade A”.</i></p> <p>The Chair confirmed that a poll vote would be taken at the Council meeting</p>	
6.0	BRAIN HEALTH & MEDICAL MATTERS <p>The meeting was joined by Chief Medical Officer, Dane Vishnubala, who presented a comprehensive summary of the latest brain health data and insight from the 2024 season.</p> <p>The following key messages were noted from the 2024 seasons;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Reduced concussion in Men’s Super League, Women Super League & Academy ▪ Increased iMG compliance ▪ Identified areas of the game (higher tackles and kick offs) that are the highest risk ▪ Secured game-wide medical indemnity insurance quote ▪ Developed proposal to increase ability to recognise and identify head injuries, via enhanced video replay ▪ Enhanced cross-sport knowledge exchange (NFL, NRL, BASem, MRC grant in collaboration with rugby union) ▪ Delivered first sport-wide Academy PaCE (player and coach education) festival ▪ Identified income generation activities for medical and research activity <p>Further research was ongoing on players receiving or inflicting the highest amount of injuries to establish any trends or patterns. The concussion spotter initiative was also being revisited with Sky Sports, with a view to reducing the number of cameras required and costs to make this proposition more viable.</p> <p>The education provision and overall support for doctors was being improved to encourage more medical professionals into the game. A blanket medical indemnity insurance was also being explored for the game to ensure all doctors and physios were fully covered and assist clubs in finding match day cover.</p>	

	It was also intended to undertake a soft audit of clubs medical data. Whilst it was acknowledged that it was the responsibility of individual clubs to retain medical records, DV felt that ways in which the RFL could support them should be explored.	
7.0	LAWS OF THE GAME	
	<p>The meeting was joined by the Head of Match Officials, Phil Bentham, and Gavin Wild, Compliance Manager, who outlined the proposed law changes for 2025 and changes to the on-field sanction framework for 2025.</p> <p>The Board reviewed and approved the recommended law changes for 2025, but suggested that the following change should go back to the Laws Committee for further review:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The “downtown law” was agreed as going back to committee for further review. <p>The proposed changes to the On Field Sentencing Guidelines for the 2025 season were also reviewed and approved by the Board, with the final position to be circulated to clubs for information.</p>	
8.0	SPORT ENGLAND TALENT FUNDING	
	<p>The meeting was joined by Marc Lovering, who provided an update on the application to Sport England for the upcoming Talent funding cycle from 2025 to 2029.</p> <p>It was noted that decision was expected on 10th December from Sport England, with a 10% increase expected on the current position for core funding, albeit this had yet to be confirmed in writing.</p>	
9.0	PEOPLE PLAN	
	<p>The Board noted the progress made on the 2024 People Plan and on next iteration of the plan for 2025.</p> <p>Victoria Sinacola provided a brief update on a number of key people issues, with external legal advice being sought where required. Following the suspension of two key members of staff the Board was mindful of the welfare of both individuals and on colleagues managing their additional workload.</p> <p>Discussion followed around risk management of a former employees claim and to whether a solution be sought, TS agreed although he felt the risk was low due to our processes and procedures followed, to re-consider a negotiated settlement.</p> <p>The Board noted the current pressure on the People team, and were keen to support VS wherever possible with the current workload.</p>	TS
10.0	RL COMMERCIAL MD REPORT	
	<p>The report from RJ was taken as read.</p> <p>The Chair’s position on the RL Commercial Board was also up for renewal, as was Anna Chanduvi’s term as non-executive director. There was general agreement that the Chair’s position should be renewed, whilst recognising that his term as RFL Chair would conclude in a year’s time. As such, further consideration would be required as to how best to manage the transition process for his successor.</p>	
11.0	ROLL OF HONOUR AND PRESIDENT’S AWARD	
	The Board approved the Executive recommendations for both awards, as follows:	

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Roll of Honour - Sam Horner • President's Award - Jonathan Hyland. 	
12.0	CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER'S REPORT The report from TS was taken as read.	
13.0	OPERATIONS & LEGAL REPORT The report was taken as read. It was noted that the Operational Rules Tribunal found the two defendants in the Sheffield compliance case guilty, both of whom had appealed. Mark Aston's case would be heard by Sport Resolutions. Once the appeals had been concluded, the Chair requested a review of the overall process take place. Discussion also took place on the proposed changes of control at North Wales Crusaders and Cornwall. Further details would be brought to the Board in due course.	TS/RV
14.0	OPERATIONAL PLAN & INSIGHT REPORT The report from AOB was noted.	
15.0	FINANCE & CENTRAL SERVICES REPORT The report from RG was noted.	
16.0	TALENT AND PERFORMANCE REPORT The report from ML was reviewed and noted by the Board, including an update on the 2025 Ashes Series planning.	
17.0	DEVELOPMENT AND PARTICIPATION REPORT The report from ML was noted.	
18.0	MATCH OFFICIALS REPORT The report from PB was noted.	
19.0	PEOPLE & CULTURE REPORT The paper by VS was noted.	
20.0	LITIGATION The report was taken as read.	
21.0	BOARD SUB COMMITTEES Reports from the following subcommittees were noted: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Laws Committee – 25 September • Brain Health Committee – 26 September • Performance & Coaching Sub-Committee – 6 November (verbal) 	

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Community Board – 27 November (verbal) 	
22.0	RISKS No risks arising from the meeting were noted.	
23.0	AOB The Board commended the significant work undertaken to complete the recent grading process successfully.	
24.0	DATE OF NEXT MEETING 4 th February 2025 There being no further business, the meeting closed at 15.00	