



ValueAlpha



**Independent External Evaluation of the Board of Rugby Football  
League by Value Alpha Limited**

**2019**



The Code for Sports Governance sets out the requirement for an external evaluation of the Board to be facilitated at least every four years, or at the request of Sport England (Requirement 4.2). The Code further comments that an external evaluation of the Board provides an independent perspective on the performance of a Board.

Carrying out such an evaluation and addressing any issues identified is one of the ways in which a Board can ensure it is providing best value to its members and other stakeholders and meets the challenges of changing economic, social and regulatory environments. Aside from the requirement in the Code for Sports Governance, independent board evaluations are increasingly becoming established best practice across business internationally. It can be a critical structural tool for assessing Board effectiveness in delivering the short and medium-term objectives, managing risk and change and preparing for the future.

In embarking on such a thorough independent board evaluation and devising a clear action plan, the Rugby Football League is recognising that robust governance extends well beyond strict compliance with the Code for Sports Governance. It embraces scrutiny, check and challenge on the skills, experience and ways of working of the Board and it looks at governance 'in the round'. It assesses the adaptations and enhancements required to stay ahead of the emerging challenges inside and outside the sport.

External scrutiny and the quantitative and qualitative analysis of the consultation with the Board and major stakeholders is a serious, thorough and reflective undertaking requiring honesty, self-awareness and critical thinking.

This commitment of senior time and resources will enable the Rugby Football League Board, and the executive team it supports and guides, to look to the future with increased clarity of purpose. The Rugby Football League has recognised the value of challenging itself. In publishing the evaluation and action plan, it has demonstrated its commitment to transparency and a culture of continuous learning and improvement – which is at the heart of strong and confident governance.

This is a significant development which will make the Rugby Football League Board best able to excel in the role it has now and more importantly, be fit for a future which includes the Rugby League World Cup in 2021.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Phil Smith".

**Phil Smith**  
Director of Sport

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### A. Introduction

Value Alpha Limited was commissioned to conduct an independent, external evaluation of the board of Rugby Football League in August 2018.

### B. Process

The process consisted of

- six **face-to-face interviews** with board members
- one **face-to-face interview** with a recently-retired board member
- **conversations** with 11 stakeholders – including one meeting, four telephone calls, and email correspondence

The interviews were conducted with the assistance of a **questionnaire** which established the views of members on a range of issues identified in the Value Alpha board evaluation model. The questionnaire provided consistency in terms of the issues covered, while allowing scope for discussion on other matters, and/or the interviewee to spend more time on a particular topic, if he or she wished.

The interviews involved both **quantitative and qualitative data collection**, the former facilitating comparative analysis, the latter allowing more in-depth coverage of issues.

Scores were collected from the six directors. No scores were collected from any of the other participants in the interview process.

All interviews were conducted on a confidential and non-attributable basis.

The exercise included attendance at a **Council** meeting on 12 December 2018, and a **board observation** on 23 January 2019.

In the lead up to the release of the final report, socialisation meetings were held with the Chairman, Senior Independent Director and the Chief Executive.

### C. The Evaluation Model

The model assesses the effectiveness of a board in terms of its ability to make high-quality, strategic decisions based on key components

- a) **Critical issues** – do board discussions focus on the areas which create long-term value for the organisation?
- b) **Skills/competences** – do board members possess the attributes (skills, knowledge etc) needed to contribute meaningfully to the discussions taking place inside the boardroom?
- c) **Interaction** – do board members work well together, display appropriate behaviours, and create the right team dynamic?
- d) **Systems and processes** – are the governance processes in place to allow the board to operate effectively?

The model was covered off by means of:

1. Quantitative analysis – ranking scores were used to inform a), c) and d) above
2. Qualitative analysis – commentary on all areas was collected during the interviews

### D. Executive Summary

Rugby League had recently experienced, and was coming to terms with, an inflection point in the sport's development. 2018 had been a bruising year, with significant disagreements among clubs leading to the creation of a new governance structure for the Super League, with Super League clubs establishing a separate Super League executive.

Despite the fact that these were not ideal circumstances for the board to take on an additional project, and also given the view that 'there is never a good time to conduct a board evaluation', directors made it clear that they were determined to instigate a process of performance assessment, as part of their commitment to moving the sport forward. One director described the process as 'open heart surgery'.

In being conducted by an independent, external adviser, directors also accepted that there would be higher levels of accountability, and strong challenge, in terms of their assessment of their own effectiveness.

That said, the evaluation found directors who were willing to be self-critical, and open to observations of what needed improving in terms of being both ‘fit-for-purpose’, as well as ‘fit-for-the-future’.

Despite the trauma of what many described as a ‘civil war’, fought out in full public view, the evaluation identified a board which had stuck together, and had shown high levels of solidarity and teamwork. Indeed, the need for the board to show leadership had cemented relationships, when other boards might have fragmented, with directors disagreeing with each other, whether in private or publicly. This was a positive aspect of a dispute which, in many ways, had otherwise damaged trust across the rugby league community.

The consultation with stakeholders proved to be important for the exercise, providing a valuable external perspective on how the board could improve its performance. This contributed significantly to the ability of the evaluator to triangulate perspectives, and place director responses in a wider stakeholder context.

The principal focus of the evaluation was therefore how the board could improve its effectiveness at this critical moment of the sport’s development, particularly given the need for the sport to pick itself up and ‘move on’.

Against this background, in most of the areas considered in the evaluation process, the report concludes that the board is operating at above average levels of performance. Where 4 = average performance, above 4 = good performance, and below 4 = performance requiring improvement:

**Critical issues** – the board scores 4.3, marginally above average performance

**Skills/competences** – the board enjoys a strong mix of desirable attributes, with further development possible and desirable, particularly in the area of diversity

**Interaction** – the board scores 4.8, a position of strong performance

**Systems and processes** – the board scores 4.5, with the potential for greatest improvement in performance lying in the area of pre-meeting process

Given recent events – for both the board and the management team – these levels of achievement are commendable.

As well as assessing the current level of health of the board, its ‘fitness-for-purpose’, the evaluation also considers what more needs to be done by the board to improve its effectiveness, its ‘fitness-for-the-future’. The report advises that there are significant opportunities for positioning the board, and the sport, in the new world, and that, for this to happen, the board will need to show more leadership in a range of areas.

Fine tuning to achieve yet stronger board performance is possible, and this report makes recommendations accordingly.

## The Results – Quantitative Analysis

Board members were asked to rank the degree to which they considered board discussions covered the **critical issues**, using a scale of 1 (poor) to 7 (excellent).

Separately, respondents were asked to assess the quality of the **interaction** on the board, using a scale of 1 (poor) to 7 (excellent).

The quantitative analysis paints a picture of a board which is performing particularly strongly in terms of

1. Awareness of its legal, regulatory and compliance obligations
2. Taking decisions efficiently
3. Taking governance issues seriously

In terms of behaviours, the evaluation identifies the board as performing particularly strongly in terms of

1. Constructive, creative challenge
2. Being independent – doing the right thing for the entity
3. Driving and delivering professionalism within the boardroom
4. Earning trust among director colleagues

Concerning areas for development, the analysis suggests that the board needs to develop its performance in terms of

1. Becoming more leadership focused
2. Strengthening its involvement in setting strategy
3. Deepening the conversation about resources, especially people

In terms of behaviours, the evaluation exercise suggests that the board should seek to become stronger in relation to

1. Tuning in more to each other – EQ
2. Being action-focused – ‘moving the dial’

The quantitative analysis paints a picture of a board taking its responsibilities seriously, and achieving good levels of performance in key areas of value creation.

At the same time, in terms of moving from 'fit-for-purpose' to 'fit-for-the-future', by their own admission directors are acknowledging that more can be done to improve performance and lead the sport to the next level. This is a critical objective, particularly given the opportunities which lie ahead, not least those generated by the hosting of the Rugby League World Cup in 2021.

## **E. The Results – Qualitative Analysis**

The interviews complemented the ranking exercise and, along with the observations made during attendance at RFL meetings, and all the material collected during the evaluation exercise, provided a high level of granularity and context.

### **Board**

The board meeting observed was highly effective. There was an open, liberal and inclusive atmosphere, with creative, constructive challenge, and robust discussion. The meeting kept to time, with important issues receiving appropriate and adequate coverage. There was a feeling among some directors that the amount of material to cover made some of the discussions too pressed, and that maybe the meetings should last longer or that there should be more of them in the course of the year.

Throughout the board meeting, directors were professional, exhibited accountability to each other, continually manifested their understanding of the need to work in the wider interests of the sport, and demonstrated high levels of collaboration. All directors were able to be involved in the conduct of the business, including Chris Hurst, for whom this was the first board meeting.

It was clear that the complexity of the rugby league world represented a constant challenge, which directors acknowledged they needed to address. The appointment of Chris Hurst to the board, for example, was evidence that directors understood the necessity of developing and widening the base of skills, knowledge and experience in the fast-changing world of broadcast, digital and marketing.

The board also recognised the challenge involved in ensuring it was considering issues from a strong perspective of diversity. Some directors acknowledged the perception, for example,

that there was a football mindset on the board, and that issues could be viewed through a football lens, a view shared by external stakeholders. Equally, there was a strong profile of legal expertise on the board.

Increased diversity was acknowledged by directors as important in terms of the need to be able to position the sport more strongly in relation to the community base, and the future of the game. In this respect, the board exhibited limited gender diversity, and no diversity in terms of people from black and minority ethnic backgrounds, and with disabilities, to name but two other attributes.

The board had strong levels of expertise in terms of sport generally, and was confident that it had sufficient knowledge of rugby league in particular, not least through access elsewhere in the governance structure to practitioner knowledge. As such, directors did not consider that Club representation on the board would add any significant value in terms of increasing 'sector knowledge'; indeed, they considered that there was considerable strength in the board being able to make decisions independently.

In summary, all of these considerations pointed to the need for the board to remain focused on ensuring there was sufficient diversity in the boardroom, and throughout the decision-making structure. Solutions for addressing this point included shaping the board's composition carefully in the course of future appointments, as well as considering whether to extend the size of the board. This latter consideration should be considered in the wider context both of leadership and director workload – see below.

## **Leadership**

Directors acknowledged the need for the board to assume more of a leadership role in light of the developments over the past year – the change in governance had happened for good or ill, and the sport should now move on. This sentiment matched the wider stakeholder mood which had considered that there had been a leadership vacuum in the sport, exacerbated by the 'civil war' and the 'breakaway'.

To deliver that role, in terms of value-add, the board might reflect on

- The institution – would the board be missed if it disappeared?
- The directors – were they visible enough in the sport, and particularly among the staff?
- Board size – was consideration of increasing the size of the board too much prone to sensitivities around loading cost into the business?



Some directors felt strongly that they were most effective by being strong board members, displaying high levels of board craft, and that this was more important in running a business than showing their face at matches. Although all directors did not necessarily feel the same way, there was a view that reductions in fee levels was not the appropriate response to external perceptions that the board ‘cost too much’.

The board considered that RFL was a business as well as a sport, and that the directors represented good value to the sport, particularly where the commitment of time was in excess of what was envisaged.

### **Leadership structure**

Some directors considered that the current arrangements regarding Council were inadequate, with little value generated by the meetings as they were currently constituted.

There was a gap between what the board might perceive as a good Council meeting, and what Council members perceived as a good meeting, with external stakeholders feeling that a ‘show and tell’, or showcase, approach didn’t work. The Council meeting on 12 December 2018 had come across, to external stakeholders, as an information download from the board although, from a director perspective, the framework and content of the December meeting had been intentionally managed to settle the sport down after the breakaway had taken place.

In any case, as a consequence, there was little dialogue in the meeting, and a question mark remained on how meaningful overall levels of two-way communication had been. Neither had non-executive board members played a value-added role during the formal sit-down part of the meeting.

It was acknowledged that the Council meeting was only one of several stakeholder communication opportunities, or platforms, but the special nature of the meeting – effectively one between shareholders and board – justified the need to revisit arrangements for making the meetings themselves, and the wider relationship, more effective.

### **Operations**

Several directors observed that the Pareto Principle seemed to apply to board business – 80% of board time was spent on 20% of the sport (the problem clubs and issues). The board

was spending a lot of its time ‘in’ the sport rather than ‘on’ the sport, managing rather than leading, and having to handle the ‘here and now’ too often.

Nor had the board yet identified where the line should be drawn in terms of ‘broker of last resort’. More than one director considered that the management of crises drove out the quality time needed to discuss growth.

There was a feeling that there needed to be more board-level focus on performance management, against the backdrop of high-quality KPIs. The Board and Executive needed to have clarity and agreement on the data provided to the Board, so that analysis and insight was maximised. This also had an impact on tracking the benefit of investment, and subsequent outcomes.

Overall, these comments suggested a lack of board visibility of the issues affecting the business. An action for the board would therefore be to provide further clarity on the information and reports directors required, to continue the process of improving the quality of board Management Information.

Board consideration of the ‘soft stuff’ – culture, vision and values – remained outstanding. The board hadn’t had the discussion on how the two different cultures (Red Hall and Quay West) could be reconciled, or which should be the dominant, or prevailing, culture.

The board also needed to spend time considering what steps were required to restore morale with a bruised and battered staff. This discussion had to take into account not just the executive perspective, but also the role of the directors, since the board was considered relatively invisible to the people in the business.

In different ways, directors expressed a view that the board needed to be able to assess, and subsequently advise on, what further support the executive team needed, as well as what further board (secretariat) support was required to help Karen in her role as company secretary. It was also not clear that all directors were content that delegation and decision levels had been adequately thought through, and correctly set, in terms of deciding what issues should be resolved at board level, at committee level, and at management team level.

Some directors had posed the question as to whether the board had sufficient knowledge of the business to assess whether the current staff talent pool and mindset was

- Fit-for-purpose?
- Fit-for-the-future?
- Underpinned by proper succession planning?

The board's overall concern on these issues pointed to a wish to have greater visibility into, and understanding of, significant HR matters within the business.

### **Stakeholders**

Some directors considered that the organisation's current positioning was confused – unless the board could define what it stood for, stakeholders could not be expected to know. Ongoing bickering and sniping within the sport constituted an own goal, not least in the eyes of sponsors, and there needed to be a concerted effort to regain trust with all stakeholder bases. This would require a conscious effort to deploy a stakeholder management strategy.

As part of these considerations, the board needed to consider what single action could provide evidence that the organisation was serious about change (repositioning)? What different actions were needed to provide evidence to different stakeholder groups about this change (repositioning)?

### **Positioning**

A common observation revolved around the theme that the board hadn't spent time drawing up the 'big picture', and hadn't designed the three to five-year plan, (although the board had just signed off an updated Strategy, to the end of 2021, following completion of a full consultation and evaluation). It was felt that there was a 'sticking plaster' approach in the organisation, and this could come across as a siege mentality. There was a difference of view inside the organisation between whether success came from the 'top-down' or the 'bottom-up', and what this meant for different parts of the game, including 'off-field'. Combined, the board and the sport were lacking a narrative, which it was the board's job to provide. Until then, both risked underselling themselves.

### **Board process**

In terms of the quantitative analysis, board process was considered particularly strong in terms of

1. Levels of director commitment
2. The meeting itself

Directors considered that improved performance was necessary in term of

1. Pre-meeting preparation

Levels of director commitment were considered to be high, and one of the questions to be addressed was whether they needed to be higher still, for example through more, or longer, board meetings – or, alternatively, through having more directors on the board – at least until the turbulence had settled?

There was a general feeling that the board was executive-driven, which implied that directors needed to be clearer about their agenda, and to communicate it to the executive.

Some NEDs felt that the executive was being too defensive at times, and needed to understand how better to take feedback and challenge. One comment was made that ‘there are the same discussions, but nothing changes.’ For their part, the executive felt that there was a bit of a ‘them versus us’ dynamic – with NEDs picking holes, when the executive was doing its best. The board was expecting too much with the resources available.

There was consensus that executives and NEDs needed to continue to work to get closer to each other, since they were all in it together. It was a small board, so no-one could ‘go missing’.

Pre-meeting process – the quality of the board (and committee) pack, and management information (MI), was considered in need of strengthening. For some directors, papers did not follow a sufficiently strong, and logical, value narrative.

Director commitment – this was the stand-out strength of the board, with directors exhibiting ‘over and beyond’ behaviour.

The meeting itself – while generally considered to be good, some directors expressed doubt about whether sufficient time was spent on priority/important issues. The Audit and Risk Committee was performing well, although directors pointed out that greater diversity would lead to more challenge taking place in meetings, leading potentially to more valuable discussion, and higher-quality decisions.

It was also noted that Ralph was new in his role as CEO, and that the board, including Ralph, was seeking the right balance in terms of which issues needed to come to the board, and which issues could be handled at executive level.

Staying current, relevant and skilled – directors considered there was insufficient investment in director development.

## G. Recommendations

Based on the information gathered during the evaluation process, and in the context that the board evaluation constituted an excellent platform for refreshing board process, and increasing board effectiveness, it is recommended that directors build on current stability and strengths, and consider adopting the following recommendations:

1. Revisit the skills matrix and its underlying philosophy, if necessary, as a precursor to considering what steps need to be taken to create a more diverse board
2. Consider whether further NEDs should be added to the board to address issues of diversity, leadership and workload
3. Devise a board succession plan in the light of the conclusions from consideration of points 1 and 2
4. Be clear about the amount of time NEDs are expected to devote to the business, and consider whether expectations are exceeding what was agreed in the letter of appointment
5. If so, either reduce the amount of time directors are expected to spend in/on the business, or remunerate them accordingly to reflect levels of effort currently being expended
6. Discuss how to reboot the relationship between the board and the Council
7. Set this work in the context of a more wide-ranging objective of
  - a. devising a stakeholder management strategy
  - b. defining the bigger picture and value narrative for the sport (and for the board)
  - c. considering how the board's (re)positioning can be evidenced to stakeholders by definitive actions, and communicated to stakeholders
8. Arrange an away-day to consider the findings from this output, and begin the work to articulate the purpose, vision and values of the RFL, and the desired culture and behaviours
9. Ensure that sufficient time is also spent at the away-day for the board to reach agreement on the arrangements for oversight of, and occasional involvement in,
  - a. strategy development, and consideration of the business plan and operating model
  - b. assessing progress in operational performance, including the appropriateness of the KPIs being used for this purpose
10. Tie in this work to a project covering data collection, analysis, and commercial (re)positioning
11. Strengthen the reporting to the board on people issues, including the talent pipeline, succession planning and performance management
12. Decide what further level of support the management team needs to execute its responsibilities effectively
13. Instigate improvements to the areas of board process identified in the report, including strengthening of the secretariat function to provide more support to Karen
14. Consider how the board can work better together by setting out everyone's expectations concerning the board pack, management information, delegation and decision-making levels, and related issues

## BOARD EVALUATION – RECOMMENDATIONS AND ACTIONS

	Recommendation	Current Position / Actions	Timeline
1	Revisit the skills matrix and its underlying philosophy, if necessary, as a precursor to considering what steps need to be taken to create a more diverse board.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Skills Matrix reviewed after Board meeting on 22/05.</li> <li>- E&amp;D monitoring updated.</li> <li>- Commitment to positive action in relation to recruitment of next Chair and NED.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Q2/Q3 2019</li> </ul>
2	Consider whether further NEDs should be added to the board to address issues of diversity, leadership and workload.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Discussed at Board meeting on 22/05.</li> <li>- Agreed that number of NEDs should increase by 1 taking the Board to 7 Directors.</li> <li>- Commitment to positive action in relation to recruitment of next Chair and NED.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Q2/Q3 2019</li> </ul>
3	Devise a board succession plan in the light of the conclusions from consideration of points 1 and 2.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- NED terms are not identical.</li> <li>- Rotation of certain NED roles.</li> <li>- Senior Independent Director appointed.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ongoing</li> </ul>
4	Be clear about the amount of time NEDs are expected to devote to the business and consider whether expectations are exceeding what was agreed in the letter of appointment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Additional Director to be appointed. Revision of Chair's role to enable this appointment to be made at no additional cost.</li> <li>- Additional responsibilities spread across the directors.</li> <li>- Review of Board meeting structure and delegation carried out.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Q3 2019</li> <li>- 22/05/19</li> </ul>
5	If so, either reduce the amount of time directors are expected to spend in/on the business, or remunerate them accordingly to reflect levels of effort currently being expended	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- As above.</li> <li>- Addition of a new NED and revision of the role of the Chair will mean NED remuneration will not be revised upward and workload will be shared more efficiently and effectively.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Q4 2019</li> </ul>

6	Discuss how to reboot the relationship between the board and the Council	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Part of wider stakeholder communications action plan.</li> <li>- Part of wider meeting structure review.</li> <li>- Regular dialogue with members.</li> <li>- Visible and transparent target setting.</li> <li>- NEDs to speak at Council meetings.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ongoing</li> <li>- Completed</li> <li>- July Council 2019</li> </ul>
7	<p>Set this work in the context of a more wide-ranging objective of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. devising a stakeholder management strategy</li> <li>b. defining the bigger picture and value narrative for the sport (and for the board)</li> <li>c. considering how the board's (re)positioning can be evidenced to stakeholders by definitive actions, and communicated to stakeholders</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Governance Statement on website.</li> <li>- Board profiles, Sub Committee terms and reference and 2018 Board agendas on website.</li> <li>- Strategic Review completed through stakeholder consultation and circulated to all stakeholders.</li> <li>- Clear definition of role of NGB.</li> <li>- Council to be kept informed of Board meetings and matters discussed. Mechanism TBC.</li> <li>- Visible and transparent target setting</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Completed</li> <li>- Completed</li> <li>- Completed</li> <li>- Completed</li> <li>- Q3 2019</li> <li>- Completed</li> </ul>
8	Arrange an away-day to consider the findings from this output, and begin the work to articulate the purpose, vision and values of the RFL, and the desired culture and behaviours	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Away day to be arranged for once new Chair appointed.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Q3/Q4 2019</li> </ul>
9	<p>Ensure that sufficient time is also spent at the away-day for the board to reach agreement on the arrangements for oversight of, and occasional involvement in,</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. strategy development and consideration of the business plan and operating model</li> <li>b. assessing progress in operational performance, including the appropriateness of the KPIs being used for this purpose</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Agenda to be structured to cover these areas.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Away Day Q4 2019</li> </ul>
10	Tie in this work to a project covering data collection, analysis, and commercial (re)positioning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Growth Strategy to be presented to Board.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Q3 2019</li> </ul>

11	Strengthen the reporting to the board on people issues, including the talent pipeline, succession planning and performance management.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Board to be kept updated on every additional appointment and departure.</li> <li>- Board to be kept abreast of Achieve and Develop system and its application and any proposed future changes.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Activated Q2 2019</li> <li>- Q3 2019</li> </ul>
12	Decide what further level of support the management team needs to execute its responsibilities effectively Instigate improvements to the areas of board process identified in the report, including strengthening of the secretariat function to provide more support to Karen	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- New secretariat system to be put in place and streamlining of Board reporting system for Executive.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Q2 2019</li> </ul>
13	Consider how the board can work better together by setting out everyone's expectations concerning the board pack, management information, delegation and decision-making levels, and related issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Proposals on revised Board Pack format considered and supported at Board meeting on 22/05.</li> <li>- Redistribution of NED responsibilities (interim and medium term) and succession planning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Completed</li> <li>- Interim completed</li> </ul>