



## MINUTES

### RFL BOARD OF DIRECTORS MEETING

**Location** RFL HQ, House of Sport, Gate 13, Rowsley Street, Manchester, M11 3FF **Date & Time** Tuesday 12<sup>th</sup> March 2024, 11.00-16.00

**Present** Simon Johnson, Sandy Lindsay MBE, Dr Cherrie Daley, Tony Sutton, Robert Hicks – Company Secretary **Chair** Simon Johnson

**Apologies** Ed Mallaburn – IMG Observer

**In attendance** Jamie Jones Buchanan – RFL Board Observer  
Michelle Maple – Secretariat (minutes) Rob Graham, Director of Finance – Item 4  
Marc Lovering – Director of Development – Item 6

| Item No | Agenda Item   | Who |
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| 1.0     | <b>WELCOME AND APOLOGIES</b><br><br>The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting. Apologies for absence were received from Ed Mallaburn.  |     |
| 2.0     | <b>DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST</b><br><br>Declarations of interest were noted as follows: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 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.</li><li>• EM – director of RL Commercial Ltd.</li><li>• TS – director of RFLI Ltd and of RLWC2021 Ltd.</li><li>• JJB – director of Leeds Cricket, Football &amp; Athletics Ltd, trustee of Leeds Rhinos Foundation, trustee of Leeds 2023, patron of Inspire North, pundit at Sky TV pundit.</li></ul> |     |
| 3.0     | <b>MINUTES FROM THE PREVIOUS MEETING &amp; ACTION TRACKER</b><br><br>3.1 <b>Minutes</b><br>The minutes from the meeting held on 17 <sup>th</sup> January 2024 were accepted as a true and accurate record.  |     |

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|     | <p>3.2 <b>Matters Arising</b><br/>Progress against the action tracker was noted.</p> <p>The Board discussed the development of the Performance and Coaching Strategy for the England Teams, with CD enquired as to whether progress was on track to meet the May 2024 deadline. It was agreed that TS would review the progress in a month's time and reshape the work plan if required.</p> <p>RH requested that Board members complete the Board Evaluation survey by the beginning of April.</p>  | <p><b>TS</b></p> <p><b>All</b></p> |
| 4.0 | <b>FINANCIAL &amp; FACILITIES MATTERS</b>  |                                    |
|     | <p>4.1 <b>2023 Forecast</b><br/>The meeting was joined by RG, who presented an update on the 2023 management accounts and forecast outturn, the amounts outstanding from RLWC2021 Ltd to the IRL, and the proposed sale of Odsal.</p> <p>RG set out the forecast for the outturn to 31<sup>st</sup> December 2023.</p> <p>The Board briefly discussed the autumn internationals and acknowledged the requirement to balance the performance and commercial elements of the series. The IRL would confirm its position as to whether this would go ahead at its meeting in April, which would then provide some certainty on the required costs across the rest of the England programme.</p> <p>RG also set out the accounting position for Odsal.</p> |                                    |
|     | <p>4.2 <b>RLWC2021</b><br/>Ahead of the IRL Board meeting in April, the Board discussed the outstanding rights fee debt from RLWC2021 Ltd to the IRL.</p> <p>The Board discussed in detail the final accounting position and agreed a position to be presented to the IRL.</p>   | <p><b>TS</b></p>                   |
|     | <p>4.3 <b>Odsal</b><br/>RG presented an update on purchase proposals for Odsal. A discussion took place about next steps and it was agreed that Knight Frank would progress matters on the RFL's behalf.</p> <p>A brief update on sale of the venue would be provided at the forthcoming Council meeting. TS suggested that, whilst the Board had the right to approve the sale, it would be advisable to allow Council members to vote on the sale to protect the RFL from any position of conflict, given it was holding a member's asset during the club grading period.</p>  |                                    |
| 5.0 | <b>BRAIN HEALTH COMMUNICATION &amp; OPERATIONAL PLAN</b>   |                                    |
|     | <p>RH provided an update on the rollout of the Brain Health Committee recommendations, which would be presented at the forthcoming Council meeting.</p> <p>An analysis of the first four rounds of the season indicated that the average amount of high tackles per game had begun to reduce. Moreover, tackles making initial contact to the head and neck area had reduced from 12% to 3% by round three, and the number of head injury assessments had slightly reduced, which was considered to be a significant improvement in a short period of time.</p>  |                                    |

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|     | Despite some public criticism to the contrary, the Board recognised that the impact of the recommendations aimed to ensure higher levels of player safety would be presented at the Council meeting.  |  |
| 6.0 | <b>DEVELOPMENT UPDATE</b>   |  |
|     | <p>The meeting was joined by ML, who summarised key points from the Community Rugby League 'More Than a Sport' review in 2023 as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participant numbers for 2023 reached approximately 97,000. This was a gradual year on year increase, although active participation had yet to reach pre-Covid levels.</li> <li>• Community club players grew by 5%, with the most significant growth being amongst women and girls, with over 7,000 community club participants. Women and girls' participation had increased by 33%, and wheelchair players increased in number by 74%.</li> <li>• The Rugby League World Cup had left a strong legacy for the sport, with the social impact programme delivering £195k into the community game and a £1.5m investment into facilities.</li> <li>• Social Rugby League (SRL) including non, minimal, and limited contact versions of the sport was becoming critical to the RFL's development, and it was intended to build this momentum during 2024.</li> </ul> <p>Going forward, ML reported that the Community Strategy would be refreshed, although no significant changes were anticipated. The Enjoy the Game campaign would also be renamed 'Respect' in 2024, and the team intended to consolidate new programmes and focus on the retention of participants. ML also suggested that reporting of the Women's and Wheelchair Super League programmes as part of the development programme reviewed review.</p>   |  |
| 7.0 | <b>COMPETITION STRUCTURE REVIEW</b>   |  |
|     | <p>The Board reviewed the paper outlining the process undertaken to review the competition structure for Tiers 2 and 3, resulting in the following recommended structure:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Championship</b> – A 12 team competition, with 22 regular season games. Prize money would be provided for the winners of the Championship Grand Final from 2024 to ensure that the game had significance and remained a prize in its own right. An enhanced total distribution budget would also be maintained between twelve teams.</li> <li>• <b>League 1</b> – A 12 team competition, with 22 regular season games. Prize money would be provided for the winners of League 1 (League Leaders) from 2024, and an enhanced distribution budget would be included at no cost to current clubs.</li> <li>• <b>Post Season</b> - The top eight Championship teams would play off for the Championship Grand Final and the bottom four Championship teams would play the top four League 1 teams in a new post season phase, the Super 8's.</li> <li>• <b>Super 8's</b> - Each team would play each other once, with points "zeroed" to start the Super 8 mini competition. The teams in places nine and ten in the Championship and one and two in League 1 at the end of the regular season would receive four home games, and the other four teams would receive three. On completion of the Super 8 fixtures, the teams in places four v five would play off in the Super 8's Grand Final to determine the final promotion spot. This could also be the Super 6's to manage the total number of games played and</li> </ul> |  |

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|            | <p>would be assessed following the data derived from current changes made under the Brain Health recommendations.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>League 1 Relegation</b> - The bottom eight finishing teams after the regular season in League 1 would not participate in post season. The bottom club in League 1 would be relegated to the National Conference Premier division, subject to the club eligible for promotion meeting minimum standards and a play-off between the bottom club in League 1 and the club eligible for promotion, giving the League 1 incumbent an on-field chance of maintaining League 1 status.</li> <li>• <b>1895 Cup</b> - Early data indicated that the previous changes made to the competition in 2023 had been positive, and minimal changes were proposed for 2025.</li> </ul> <p>It was noted that a transition process would take place in 2024, where an additional team could apply to join League 1 in 2025, with the incoming team selected on a modified grading criterion. A modified play off structure at the end of 2024 would also deliver a further club to League 1. As such, it was proposed that the Championship in 2025 would be 13 clubs, with League 1 consisting of 11 clubs, and the Super 8's would continue the transition to only deliver one further net movement into 2026. In 2026 the Championship would be 12 clubs and League 1 will be 12 clubs, with the Super 8's operating in its normal operating format</p> <p>The Chair expressed concern that introducing relegation from League One could unnecessarily destabilise the League One division and could potentially result in the loss of an expansion club. TS felt that the changes would protect League One as a viable competition, following its recent challenges. It was also felt that the RFL could not protect the expansion clubs, and it would be beneficial for the Board to have a greater understanding of the strategy around them.</p> <p>It was agreed that the relegation point should be revisited for the 2026 season to ensure that the potential promotion clubs had a reasonable chance of staying in the League One competition, and the relegated club would have a reasonable future at that level.</p> <p>The Board <b>approved</b> the proposed competition structure subject to finer operational detail on fixture scheduling be resolved and with the caveat that the prospect of relegation from League One would be reviewed at the Board meeting in December, and further information would be provided on the expansion club strategy.</p> | <b>TS</b> |
| <p>8.0</p> | <p><b>RL COMMERCIAL MD REPORT</b></p> <p>8.1 <b>MD Report</b><br/>The report from the RL Commercial MD was taken as read. Key points were noted as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The 2024 season had started positively, with the free-to-air coverage being well received and the Super League+ app generating a profit.</li> <li>• Attendances were increasing, indicating that the increased content was driving increased interest in the sport.</li> <li>• Clubs had been advised that an England football international would be held at Wembley stadium on Friday 7<sup>th</sup> June, which may present some logistical challenges for the Challenge Cup Final.</li> <li>• IMG were now issuing monthly updates to all shareholders.</li> </ul> <p>The Board felt that IMG should also issue quarterly updates at Council meetings.</p>   |           |

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| 8.2  | <p><b>Championship Broadcast Right</b></p> <p>The Board reviewed an offer from Premier Sports to secure Championship broadcast rights for a three-year term from 2024 to 2026.</p> <p>Subject to approval, the deal would go live from mid-April on Super League+, with the Premier Sports platform starting in June.</p> <p>The Board <b>approved</b> in principle the Premier Sports proposal for Championship broadcast rights and mandated the RL Commercial Executive to conclude the contractual formalities, subject to the Championship clubs being supportive of the deal at their meeting on 13<sup>th</sup> March.</p>  |  |
| 9.0  | <p><b>GOVERNANCE &amp; OPERATIONAL</b></p> <p>The Board reviewed the annual reports for Safeguarding, Misconduct, Welfare and Integrity.</p> <p>Discussion took place on the ownership of mental health and wellbeing and ensuring a synergy between Welfare Officers and medical staff. RH felt that welfare should form part of the new strategy being developed by Chief Medical Officer, Dr Dane Vishnubala, and this area should report into the medical team as opposed to operations. CD agreed and suggested that stronger framework was required to ensure coordination of the positive work being undertaken in this area.</p> <p>SL enquired whether the RFL should be charging for DBS checks in line with many other organisations. RH felt it was more beneficial to incorporate DBS checks within Our League Active to encourage registration from coaches and match officials.</p> <p>SL also queried why uptake for the Listening Club initiative had been minimal for a third year. RH stated that the Safeguarding Manager had been focused on the considerable safeguarding caseload, however the wider team would be working on this initiative to encourage a stronger uptake.</p> <p>CD noted that the women's team may be 'between' support in this area and that their needs should be monitored given the opportunity for positive impact in this space. CD also enquired about the provision of wider well-being support to NGB staff from RLC vs access to these services as part of the central employee value proposition. TS confirmed that this was part of the Charity's extended services in their agreement, and clubs liked the familiarity of Rugby League Cares.</p> |  |
| 10.0 | <p><b>RFL COUNCIL MEETING</b></p> <p>Discussion took place on the Council meeting agenda, which included presentations on club grading, brain health recommendations and a commercial update.</p>  |  |
| 11.0 | <p><b>CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER'S REPORT</b></p> <p>The report from TS was taken as read.</p>  |  |
| 12.0 | <p><b>OPERATIONS &amp; LEGAL REPORT</b></p> <p>The report from RH was taken as read.</p>   |  |
| 13.0 | <p><b>OPERATIONAL PLAN &amp; INSIGHT REPORT</b></p>  |  |

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|      |      | The report from AOB was noted. It was noted that the RFL reserves liquidity ratio was being redrafted and would be reviewed by the Audit & Risk Committee in June. The Board was supportive of this approach.  |           |
| 14.0 |      | <b>FINANCE &amp; CENTRAL SERVICES REPORT</b><br><br>The report from RG was noted.  |           |
| 15.0 |      | <b>PERFORMANCE, DEVELOPMENT &amp; MATCH OFFICIALS REPORT</b><br><br>The report from DR and ML was taken as read.<br><br>The Chair recalled that the Board committed to reviewing the England Women's Head Coach element of the Head of England Pathways (Female) role after his first year in the role, with this being separate from his other role. TS felt that the two roles were contracted together but agreed to clarify this position. | <b>TS</b> |
| 16.0 |      | <b>PEOPLE &amp; CULTURE REPORT</b><br><br>The paper by VS was noted.   |           |
| 17.0 |      | <b>LITIGATION</b><br><br>The paper was noted.  |           |
| 18.0 |      | <b>RL COMMERCIAL</b><br><br>The update from the meeting held on 21 <sup>st</sup> February 2024 was noted.  |           |
| 19.0 |      | <b>BOARD SUB COMMITTEES</b><br><br>Reports from the following subcommittees were noted: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Remuneration Committee – 17 January 2024</li> <li>• Performance Committee – 14 February 2024</li> <li>• Audit &amp; Risk Committee – 28 February 2024</li> <li>• Brain Health Committee – 4 March 2024</li> </ul>   |           |
| 20.0 |      | <b>RISKS</b><br><br>No risks arising from the meeting were noted.  |           |
| 21.0 | 21.1 | <b>AOB</b><br><br><b>Community Board</b><br>SL reported that the recruitment process for new Community Board members had concluded, with some strong candidates identified to join the board. It was hoped to also recruit a women's player before the next meeting in April.  |           |
|      | 21.2 | <b>NED Recruitment</b><br>Date for the final interviews were being scheduled for a new RFL NED, and a recommendation would then be made to the Board.  |           |
| 22.0 |      | <b>DATE OF NEXT MEETING</b>  |           |

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|  | 22 <sup>nd</sup> May 2024 |  |
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|  | <b>There being no further business, the meeting closed at 15.30</b> |  |
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