

MINUTES

RFL BOARD OF DIRECTORS MEETING

Location RFL HQ, House of Sport, Gate 13, Rowsley Street, Manchester, M11 3FF **Date & Time** Wednesday 29th March 2023, 11.00-15.00

Present Simon Johnson, Sandy Lindsay MBE, Rimla Akhtar OBE, Cherrie Daley **Chair** Simon Johnson

In attendance Ed Mallaburn – IMG (observer)
Tony Sutton - RFL CEO
Robert Hicks – RFL Company Secretary
Alison O'Brien – RFL (in part)
Laura Fairbank – RFL (in part)
Rob Graham – RFL (in part)
Prof. Chris Brookes – RFL (in part)
Prof. Ben Jones – RFL (in part)
Michelle Maple (minutes)
Max Smith (Student observer)

Item No	Agenda Item	Who
1.0	<p>WELCOME AND APOLOGIES</p> <p>The Chair welcomed everyone in attendance to the meeting and formally congratulated TS on his appointment as RFL CEO. No apologies for absence were noted.</p> <p>Max Smith to attend the meeting as an observer.</p>	
2.0	<p>DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST</p> <p>Declarations 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. RA – member of the Government Loan Committee. EM – director of RL Commercial Ltd TS – director of RFL Investments 2020 Ltd, trustee of RFL Facilities Trust Ltd and director of Rugby League World Cup 2021 Ltd 	
3.0	<p>MINUTES FROM THE PREVIOUS MEETING & ACTION TRACKER</p> <p>3.1 Minutes</p> <p>The minutes from the meeting held on 15th February 2022 were accepted as a true and accurate record, subject to the following amendments:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Item 9, paragraph 2 to read, 'A positive meeting had recently taken place with <u>some members of</u> the Wheelchair team.' 	

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Item 5, paragraph 3 to read, 'CD also felt there was currently a gap between the sport's strategic objectives and the actual outcome measures and suggested <u>a performance subcommittee be explored</u>'. Item 5 - RA requested additional narrative on the further oversight of specific areas as required by the Board and agreed to forward some comments for inclusion to RH. 	RA/RH
	3.2	<p>Matters Arising Progress against the action tracker was noted, with the following points discussed in further detail:</p> <p><u>Item 1 – Strategic Partner: Long Form Agreement</u> RH reported that further work was required by IMG; however the agreement was expected to be concluded by the end of April.</p> <p><u>Item 1 – Strategic Partner: Grading</u> A meeting took place with the RFL Council members and observers on 9th March to present the proposed criteria.</p> <p><u>Item 5 - Pulse Survey</u> A survey had recently been issued to staff.</p> <p><u>Item 6 – Presentation Skills Training</u> This would be progressed once the organisational culture work had been undertaken.</p> <p><u>Item 9 – Safeguarding Training</u> NL to source a date for safeguarding training for the Board.</p> <p><u>RFL & RL Commercial Board Minutes</u> Following discussion with RL Commercial Chair, Frank Slevin, the Chair advised that redacted minutes from both boards would be published on the RFL's website going forward, with commercially sensitive matters or items impacting GDPR restrictions removed. As such, the RFL Board would remain informed on key issues, whilst protecting them from any conflicts of interest.</p> <p>To ensure thorough reporting from and to both boards, the RFL CEO would report to each RL Commercial Board meeting, and the RL Commercial MD would report to the RFL Board meetings.</p>	NL
4.0		GRADING CRITERIA	
	4.1	<p>Recommendation from RL Commercial on the club grading model ("the Model") Following IMG's presentation to Council on 9th March, a consultation process with clubs had commenced, with sessions scheduled on 13th and 22nd March, and 5th April. Individual club meetings were also being scheduled as requested with the Executive and/or IMG.</p> <p>A presentation had also taken place to the Community Board, who felt they had been overlooked during this process. Consequently, the 'Catchment' pillar had been renamed 'Community', with the catchment score reduced from two to one and a half, and one point allocated to community activity (club foundation turnover) to address concerns that this had been omitted from the criteria.</p> <p>TS reported that all feedback was being logged, and voting intentions were being closely monitored. Several potential revisions were being modelled for further discussion at a session on 23rd March.</p>	

		<p>Feedback thus far had included considerable debate around player development. Given this was specific to each club and local area, it was proposed that this form part of the proposed minimum standards, which would sit alongside the grading criteria and the game's operational rules. Player development plans would be managed by Marc Lovering's team and would be made relevant to local clubs and their communities. SL suggested that this be referred to as the 'Community Rugby League Development Plan'.</p> <p>A working group had been established to work through the draft minimum standards and discuss sanctions for non-compliance. The draft standards would also be circulated to the Board and the RL Commercial Board for review and comments.</p> <p>The proposed changes to the grading criteria model and the minimum standards would be circulated to clubs on 5th April, followed by a call with clubs on 12th April, and a formal vote being taken on 19th April.</p> <p>As part of the minimum standards, it was noted that category A and B clubs would be required to have a talent performance pathway in place, which would require RFL approval, and would need to be aligned with their development plan. CD pointed out that the pathway would directly impact the grading scores, therefore there must be a very clear interface between grading and the minimum standards, with clubs fully cognisant of the consequences if they failed to meet the minimum standards.</p> <p>Discussion took place on sanctions for not meeting the minimum standards. It terms of voting, TS stated that 51% of members (55 votes) were required to pass the resolution on 19th April provided that 4 members from both Championship and League One together and Super League voted in favour. Seven votes were from the Community Board. It was hoped to achieve a majority vote of 75%.</p>	<p>TS</p> <p>RH</p>
	4.2	<p>Resolution to be proposed at RFL Council on 19th April 2023</p> <p>A draft ordinary resolution had been prepared for the meeting on 19th April; however, following comments from the RL Commercial Board RH would amend the resolution and share this with both boards as soon as possible, prior to its circulation on 5th April.</p>	RH
5.0		CONCUSSIVE & SUBCONCUSSIVE IMPACTS	
		<p>The meeting was joined by Professor Ben Jones (BJ), Professor Chris Brookes (CB) and Laura Fairbank (LF), who presented updated research on concussive and sub-concussive injuries, the Clinical Advisory Group's (CAG) position on tackle height and player load, and its subsequent recommendations for the sport.</p> <p>Following a thorough review of the research data, CAG had agreed to recommend to the Board the following four points:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concussion and illegal head contact was a significant concern in Rugby League and a significant risk to player welfare. • There is a need for a review of contact to the head/neck of the ball carrier. This should include reviewing tackle height at all levels of the sport. CAG have concerns with the frequency of contact to the head/neck of the ball carrier, despite the laws of Rugby League already prohibiting this. • During the 2023 season, the frequency of contact to the head/neck of the ball carrier should be significantly reduced, and the implementation of the Tackle Height Sanctioning Framework may be beneficial. Although data are only available in Super League, all areas of Rugby League (professional and community) should prioritise minimising contact to the head/neck of the ball carrier. 	

- Based on the published scientific evidence and new un-published scientific data, the current Rugby League tackle height (even if officiated stringently), will likely be insufficient at reducing contact to the head/neck of the ball carrier due to the fast speed and evasive nature of the sport. The need for reduction is due to the now known risks that head impacts can cause.

As such, CAG recommended a reduction in tackle height for the 2024 season. Further, CAG recommended changes to contact load guidelines to reduce the amount of head impacts, as follows:

- During preseason full-contact training should not exceed a total duration of 30 mins per week; controlled-contact should not exceed a total duration of 30 mins per week; and wrestle training should not exceed a total duration of 45 mins per week. These thresholds remain higher than those proposed by World Rugby in rugby union. During the regular season full-contact, controlled-contact and wrestle training should each not exceed 30 mins per week each.
- Full-contact training should not be undertaken in the day prior to a match, or in the two days following a match (where the player participates in more than 20 mins of a match).
- In Men's Super League the number of matches should be reduced across a season, whilst remaining the same in Women's Super League. Where possible matches should be played on a 7-day turnaround. The minimum turnaround between matches should be 5 days. Where a 5-day turnaround takes place, a longer rest period should follow.
- Full-contact, controlled-contact and wrestle training should be accurately monitored via duration and using instrumented mouthguards where possible.

It was also recommended that law trials be undertaken in the U18s competition during June/July to obtain the relevant data, which would be reviewed by a new subcommittee of the Board to inform changes to regulations and Laws of the Game from 2024.

The Board discussed the proposals in detail, and reviewed the research findings on concussion mechanisms, head accelerations and the instrumented mouthguard data. It was recommended that the new subcommittee should be chaired by the RFL CEO, with Professor Brookes as deputy chair, to send a strong message that player welfare was front and centre of the game and to obtain buy-in from the sport's players and stakeholders.

The Chair also felt that the Board required regular updates on this process and any findings from the law trials, and the sport's players, their representatives and club representatives should be fully engaged in this consultation process throughout the rest of the year, prior to any changes in the 2024 season. The Chair asked for the issue to be on the Agenda of each RFL Board meeting so that the Board could be kept updated and provide comments and suggestions on how to bring the game with us.

The Chair queried whether the law trials would be long enough and were at the right level.

RA added that player safety was paramount, and the Board must also be mindful of the risk of other concussion cases being put forward. In light of the data received, the Board must act in the best interests of the sport and support the recommendations.

BJ reported that consultation was taking place with the NRL, who had been collaborative throughout this process, although similar trials and law changes were not yet underway in Australia. Accordingly, it was intended to present these findings to the

		<p>International Laws Committee, and to visit the relevant people in the southern hemisphere to seek some alignment across the international game on the proposed changes. The Chair added that this would be raised with the IRL Board, with a request that the NRL Board also review these findings.</p> <p>The Board:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Approved the creation of the new subcommittee. • Noted CAG's recommendation to lower tackle height to the armpit line of the ball carrier at all levels of Rugby League from 1 January 2024 and the recommendations on player load. • Approved the Law Trials. • Instructed the Executive to create an operational and communication plan (on law trials, stakeholder engagement, laws of the game and the regulatory framework) to enable the Board to approve final sign-off of the CAG recommendations in December 2023, and requested an update to be provided at each Board meeting between now and December. <p>The Chair felt that this information should be shared with the RL Commercial Board, given that broadcasters would need to be engaged in this process. It was also suggested that an update should be presented at a forthcoming Council meeting.</p>	<p>RH</p> <p>RH</p>
6.0		FINANCIAL MATTERS	
		<p>The meeting was joined by RG, who presented an update on the management accounts and the forecast outturn for 2022, including the impact of the RLWC 2021 tournament.</p> <p>The Board supported the principle of granting a loan to RL Commercial, subject to more detail being provided as to how the loan would be used.</p>	
7.0		GOVERNMENT & OPERATIONAL	
	7.1	<p>Board Evaluation</p> <p>The results of the Board evaluation from 2022 were reviewed, together with some suggested actions for improvement.</p> <p>In respect of the Board's review of significant accounting policies, it was suggested that these be reviewed by the Audit & Risk Committee. RA added that, as previously discussed, the Audit & Risk Committee felt the Board should have further oversight of key corporate and operational risks.</p> <p>It was noted that the Board also required further review of progress against the Operational Plan and further feedback from the Executive on key areas.</p>	
	7.2	<p>Sport England Governance Code 2023</p> <p>The Board noted its obligations relating to Sport England's Governance Code, and approved the following statement:</p> <p>"The Board has considered and is content to confirm the Rugby Football League continues to comply with A Code of Sports Governance in respect of the Requirements listed below.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Structure – Requirements: 1.1 – 1.18 2. People – Requirements 2.4 – 2.6, 2.8 – 2.13 3. Communications – 3.2, 3.3 4. Standards and Conduct – 4.2 – 4.6 5. Policies and Processes – 5.1, 5.4 – 5.7 	

8.0		OPERATIONS & LEGAL REPORT The report from RH was taken as read. The Board noted the significant increase in safeguarding cases this year and the subsequent workload for the operations team. Initiatives to strength behaviour in the junior game were being explored, and it was noted that two clubs were facing expulsion from the competition at an Operational Rules tribunal later in the day due to poor behaviour, which would set a precedent for other clubs in the competition.	
9.0		OPERATIONAL PLAN & INSIGHT REPORT The report from AOB was noted.	
10.0		FINANCE & CENTRAL SERVICES REPORT The report from RG was noted.	
11.0		PERFORMANCE, DEVELOPMENT & MATCH OFFICIALS REPORT The report from DR and ML was noted. RA requested that Wheelchair RL and PDRL stop being referred to as 'inclusion rugby league', and that this language be reviewed. This view was supported by the Chair and Board generally. RA also requested that community game participation trends be reported to the Board going forward.	TS - DR/ML TS - DR/ML
12.0		PEOPLE REPORT The paper by VS was noted.	
13.0		LITIGATION The paper was noted.	
14.0		CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER'S REPORT The report from TS noted. It was noted that interviews were scheduled for the Board Observer position on 25 th April. Further to discussion at the Board dinner on the Wheelchair RL roadmap, it was agreed that TS would provide some feedback to the relevant people on the ideas debated.	TS TS
15.0		RISKS No risks arising from the meeting were noted.	
16.0		BOARD SUBCOMMITTEES The Board noted the minutes from the following subcommittees: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nominations Committee – 15 February 2023 Remuneration Committee – 15 February 2023 	

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community Board 22 March – Chair Summary • Clinical Advisory Group – 23 January 2023 minutes enclosed. • Clinical Advisory Group – 20 March 2023 minutes enclosed. • Inclusion Board – 2 March 2022 	
17.0		AOB No items were reported.	
18.0		DATE OF NEXT MEETING The date of the next meeting was noted as 24 th May 2023 (Dinner on 23 rd May). There being no further business, the meeting closed at 15.00.	