



**MINUTES**

**RFL BOARD OF DIRECTORS MEETING**

**Location** RFL HQ, House of Sport, Gate 13, Rowsley Street, Manchester, M11 3FF **Date & Time** Wednesday 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2024, 10.00 am

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

**Apologies** Jamie Jones-Buchanan – RFL Board Observer

**In attendance** Ed Mallaburn – IMG Observer  
Michelle Maple – Secretariat (minutes)  
Rob Graham, RFL – Item 5  
Alison O'Brien, RFL – Item 7  
Prof Ben Jones – Item 6  
Dr Dane Vishnubala – Item 6

Item No	Agenda Item	Who
1.0	<p><b>WELCOME AND APOLOGIES</b></p> <p>The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting. Apologies for absence were received from Jamie Jones-Buchanan.</p>	
2.0	<p><b>DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST</b></p> <p>Declarations of interest were noted as follows:</p> <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 RFL Investments 2020 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	<p><b>MINUTES FROM THE PREVIOUS MEETING &amp; ACTION TRACKER</b></p> <p>3.1 <b>Minutes</b> The minutes from the meeting held on 12<sup>th</sup> March 2024 were accepted as a true and accurate record.</p>	
	<p>3.2 <b>Matters Arising</b> Progress against the action tracker was noted.</p> <p><u>Championship Broadcast Deal</u> The Board noted that the offer had not received sufficient support from clubs, and had subsequently been withdrawn by the broadcaster.</p>	

		<p><u>Board Appraisals</u></p> <p>The Chair requested an update from VS on any outstanding documentation, after which time individual appraisal meetings would be scheduled.</p>	
4.0		<p><b>APPOINTMENT OF NEW NON-EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR</b></p>	
		<p>Following interviews to appoint a new Non-Executive Director, the Chair reported that Julia Newton had been selected as the preferred candidate. Accordingly, the Nominations Committee recommended that the Board endorse this appointment.</p> <p>The Board <b>approved</b> the appointment of Julia Newton as a Non-Executive Director of the RFL Board.</p>	
5.0		<p><b>RFL &amp; RL COMMERCIAL</b></p>	
		<p>The Board reflected on the working dinner held on the previous evening, which was joined by RL Commercial Chair, Frank Slevin.</p> <p>It was agreed that the CEO would write to FS to confirm the actions agreed, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the scheduling of an RL Commercial forum for all clubs to follow the RFL Council meeting from September onwards.</li> <li>• the RFL’s commitment to supply further information on the Women and Girls game and positive social impact data.</li> <li>• that the RFL would resubmit its offer to the RL Commercial Board scheduled for 7<sup>th</sup> June, together with relevant stipulations .</li> </ul> <p>It was noted that that the governance process had been discussed to ensure greater alignment with shareholders.</p> <p>The Chair requested that appropriate dates be sought for a joint board dinner in the coming months.</p> <p>EM also provided a brief update on IMG’s latest activity, including the appointment of an individual to focus on sponsorship sales. SL suggested that it would be helpful to schedule a session with the Championship and League 1 clubs to help them maximise their sponsorship opportunities, potentially via a webinar, and that further consideration should be given to exploring the market offered through the Community Game.</p>	
6.0		<p><b>FINANCIAL &amp; FACILITIES MATTERS</b></p>	
	6.1	<p>The meeting was joined by RG, who presented an update on the 2024 management accounts and forecast outturn, the Financial Reserves Policy, and the proposed sale of Odsal.</p> <p><b>Management Accounts</b></p> <p>The Board reviewed and noted the management accounts for the period to 30th April 2024 and the forecast outturn for 2024.</p> <p>The Finance team were working hard to make savings and to reduce overheads. An update would be provided to the Board in due course.</p>	
	6.2	<p><b>Financial Reserves Policy</b></p> <p>The Board reviewed the RFL’s draft Financial Reserves Policy. It was acknowledged that the organisation needed to build its financial reserves to enable core services to continue in the event of any financial downturn; however, the RFL’s ability to generate trading surpluses had diminished following the sport’s realignment.</p>	

	<p>As such, it was agreed that a target would be set within the Operational Plan to achieve a liquidity ratio of greater than one, and that this should be reported to the Board with the RFL's net current assets figure at each year-end.</p> <p>Discussion took place on options to maximise the cash reserves, and it was agreed that proposals would be brought to the next meeting in July.</p>	
6.3	<p><b>Odsal</b> Further to the last meeting, two offers had been received for the purchase of Odsal.</p> <p>It was agreed that any revised offers should be presented to the RFL Council for transparency, before the Board took any final decision on whether to sell the site.</p>	
7.0	<p><b>BRAIN HEALTH COMMUNICATION &amp; OPERATIONAL PLAN</b></p>	
	<p>The Chair welcome Professor Ben Jones and the RFL's new Chief Medical Officer, Dr Dane Vishnubala, to the meeting to present the ongoing research on implementation of the brain health regulations, together with proposals to renew areas of research from 2025. Key points were noted as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Results to date from the 2024 Men's Super League season indicated an increase in and speedier Play the Ball incidents, a reduction in head contact of 67%, an increase in instrumented mouthguard usage to 75% and more stable concussion rates. Penalties had initially increased, albeit this was starting to settle down.</li> <li>• Average rates of tackles to the head and neck areas had reduced from 13% to 4.2%. Average rates of shoulder tackles had increased from 15% to 45%.</li> <li>• Core data streams under review included player tracking data, match event data, injury surveillance, instrumented mouthguards and player profiling.</li> <li>• Concussion remained the sport's most common injury, with the highest number occurring from the line of tackle, and the second highest from kick-offs.</li> </ul> <p>A split strategy for the elite and community elements of the game was recommended going forward, with the elite research focused on promoting the unique physical demands to maximise commercial and fan engagement opportunities, whilst ensuring robust individual player management from a performance and welfare perspective. At a community level, it was proposed to focus on promoting the unique physical demands to maximise participation, ensuring robust population level management from a welfare perspective.</p> <p>BJ stated that the risk of head acceleration events could be reduced by modifying the individual player risk factors through targeted individual interventions. As such, the research would continue to monitor the risk factors around concussion, and design individual interventions to manage risks during training. RH added that the ongoing research would need to be discussed with clubs, to ensure they were aware that this may result in additional costs to ensure the welfare of their players. A proposal would be brought back to the Board for discussion in the coming months.</p> <p>DV also presented a review of his first few weeks in post, including proposals to improve education levels across the England teams and competitions, conduct a clinical audit in 2025, improve the current IMMFOP offering and improve overall governance and risk management processes. It was hoped that some of this work could be funded through small grants.</p> <p>Discussion took place on ensuring appropriate levels of insurance were in place to protect players. It was noted that the significant rise in indemnity costs for doctors may deter their participation in the sport. Further work was being undertaken to explore a</p>	

		group policy, which may require some input from clubs, and options for the women's and wheelchair games to ensure appropriate standards at this level of the game.
8.0		<b>ACADEMY LICENSING 2025-2027</b>
		<p>The Board reviewed the recommendation to award Academy Licences to Leigh Leopards and Salford Red Devils, together with a detailed summary of each individual application.</p> <p>The recommendation to award a Full Academy Licence from 2025 to both clubs was <b>approved</b> by the Board.</p>
9.0		<b>CLUB GRADING CRITERIA</b>
		<p>The meeting was joined by Alison O'Brien to present the club grading process being undertaken by the Executive in 2024, together with the timeline.</p> <p>It was noted that Sport Resolutions had been appointed to agree an arbitration process, and an external assurance partner had also been appointed to review the process.</p> <p>The facilities audit of all 2023 Grade A and Grade B clubs was complete, and feedback was being provided to the clubs confirming their current scores and any changes required to maximise their score for 2024.</p> <p>Clubs would receive either a 0.5 or a 1.5 score on the stadium pillar. This was done via self-assessment in 2023, with 17 clubs ranking themselves at 1.5 points. Any work would have to be complete by the Data Capture Form submission date.</p> <p>It was noted that the grading announcement was scheduled for 23<sup>rd</sup> October, with clubs to be informed the day prior under embargo. Clubs would then have 48 hours to launch any enquiries with Sports Resolutions, who would have five days to present their deliberations back to the RFL Board. The Chair requested that a placeholder Board meeting be scheduled for the afternoon of Friday 1<sup>st</sup> November, should this be required.</p> <p>A brief discussion took place on whether to include Board composition within the grading criteria. Whilst this was currently a minimum standard requirement under the Code for Sports Governance, it was felt this should be considered as part of future grading criteria.</p>
10.0		<b>GOVERNANCE &amp; OPERATIONAL</b>
	10.1	<p><b>Board Evaluation Survey</b></p> <p>Members reviewed the results of the Board evaluation survey. It was noted that some members felt hard copies of papers were not always circulated in advance of meetings to allow sufficient time to study the content. RH agreed to explore potential solutions, such as a courier service.</p>
	10.2	<p><b>RFL President and Vice President</b></p> <p>The Board <b>approved</b> a recommendation to appoint Adam Hills as the RFL President for 2025 and 2026. It was agreed that this would be reported to the Council meeting in July, and be formally ratified at the Council meeting in December.</p> <p>There was also support for the Executive's proposal to select up to two Vice Presidents, to continue to allow selection of the longest serving Council member, but to also incorporate positive representation of the game and share the President's workload.</p>
	10.3	<p><b>Council Membership and Articles</b></p> <p>It was proposed that the RFL Council membership be enhanced to include representatives from a Foundation, Match Officials, PDRL/LDRL, Wheelchair RL, the eight Women's Super League (WSL) clubs, and Women and Girls RL.</p>

	<p>It was also proposed that the Articles of Association be updated to highlight the RFL's responsibility for inclusion and diversity, and Women and Girls RL.</p> <p>The Board supported the principle of expanding the Council to ensure a fair representation, but felt that equal weighting should be applied to tiers one and two. It was agreed that a different class of share would be explored for the WSL and the Community Game. Different weightings for the WSL may be considered once this division became fully professional.</p>	
11.0	<p><b>RL COMMERCIAL MD REPORT</b></p> <p>The report from the RL Commercial MD was taken as read.</p> <p>Discussion took place on the paper circulated for approval from the Challenge Cup Working Group. EM and SL queried why additional prize money was proposed at a time of financial challenges for the organisation. RH confirmed that clubs had lost significant money on the Challenge Cup competition in 2023, and this would ease this situation for participating clubs.</p> <p>EM also enquired whether Super League clubs would be supportive of the suggestion for them to enter the competition earlier, thus creating an additional game. This was also contrary to IMG's recommendations to reduce the number of matches. RH stated that this had been proposed to encourage additional buy in to the competition.</p> <p>Whilst the Board was generally supportive of the overall proposals, it was felt that the loop fixtures proposal should be discussed further at the forthcoming RL Commercial Board meeting in June.</p>	
12.0	<p><b>CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER'S REPORT</b></p> <p>The report from TS was taken as read.</p> <p>It was noted that UK Sport could not support the bid application to host the Wheelchair RL World Cup in 2029 as Wheelchair RL was not classed as a Paralympic sport. However, this issue had been elevated to DCMS for further review.</p> <p>ITEM REDACTED – COMMERCIALY SENSITIVE</p>	
13.0	<p><b>OPERATIONS &amp; LEGAL REPORT</b></p> <p>The report from RH was taken as read.</p>	
14.0	<p><b>OPERATIONAL PLAN &amp; INSIGHT REPORT</b></p> <p>The report from AOB was noted.</p>	
15.0	<p><b>FINANCE &amp; CENTRAL SERVICES REPORT</b></p> <p>The report from RG was noted.</p>	
16.0	<p><b>PERFORMANCE, DEVELOPMENT &amp; MATCH OFFICIALS REPORT</b></p> <p>The reports from ML and RH were taken as read. Draft performance strategies for each cohort were under review before being finalised.</p>	

17.0	<p><b>PEOPLE &amp; CULTURE REPORT</b></p> <p>The paper by VS was noted. The Board was pleased to note the results of the Gender Pay Gap report, with the gap reduced from 15% to 10%.</p>	
18.0	<p><b>LITIGATION</b></p> <p>The report was taken as read. RH updated the Board on the latest position relating to brain injury historic claims. The 148 formally named Claimants had now increased to 182, with a Group Litigation Order likely to be issued across Rugby League, Rugby Union and Football for a further 34 Claimants. Historic insurers had yet to confirm their coverage of the claim.</p>	
19.0	<p><b>BOARD SUB COMMITTEES</b></p> <p>Reports from the following subcommittees were noted:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community Board – 3 April 2024</li> <li>• Performance Committee – 9 May 2024</li> </ul>	
20.0	<p><b>RISKS</b></p> <p>No risks arising from the meeting were noted.</p>	
21.0	<p><b>AOB</b></p> <p>No issues were raised.</p>	
22.0	<p><b>DATE OF NEXT MEETING</b></p> <p>9<sup>th</sup> July 2024</p> <p><b>There being no further business, the meeting closed at 15.00.</b></p>	