



MINUTES

RFL BOARD OF DIRECTORS MEETING

Location RFL HQ, House of Sport, Gate 13, Rowsley Street, Manchester, M11 3FF **Date & Time** Tuesday 21st November 2023, 10.00-14.00

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

In attendance Ed Mallaburn – IMG Observer Rhodri Jones – RL Commercial (Item 6)
 Jamie Jones Buchanan – RFL Board Observer Alison O'Brien – RFL (Item 7)
 Michelle Maple – Secretariat (minutes)
 Rob Graham – RFL (Item 4)
 Marc Lovering & Victoria Sinacola – RFL (Item 4.2)
 Dave Rotheram – RFL (Item 4.2 & 5)
 Ben Jones – RFL

Item No	Agenda Item	Who
1.0	<p>WELCOME AND APOLOGIES</p> <p>The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting. No apologies for absence were received.</p>	
2.0	<p>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 RFLI Ltd and director of IRL Ltd. Chair of SIS, who has Betfred as a shareholder. • RA – member of the Sports Survival Fund Loan Committee. • EM – director of RL Commercial Ltd. • TS – director of RFLI 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. 	
3.0	<p>MINUTES FROM THE PREVIOUS MEETING & ACTION TRACKER</p> <p>3.1 Minutes</p> <p>The minutes from the meeting held on 5th September 2023 were accepted as a true and accurate record.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The summarised minutes of the meeting held on 5th September to be published on the RFL website were agreed. 	

	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 – Long Form Agreement</u> Final amendments to the agreement were being worked through with IMG’s legal team.</p> <p><u>Item 8 – Match Officials</u> Relocation of the Match Officials department to the Etihad offices was now complete.</p>	
4.0		FINANCIAL MATTERS	
	4.1	<p>2023 Management Accounts and Outturn The meeting was joined by Rob Graham (RG), who summarised the management accounts for the period to 30th September 2023 and the forecast outturn. RG highlighted for the Board what had accounted for the variances, both positive and negative and the steps being taken to manage any negative variances.</p>	
	4.2	<p>2024 Budget The meeting was joined by members of the Executive Board whilst this item was discussed.</p> <p>The Board reviewed an initial draft of RFL’s budget for 2024.</p> <p>It was noted that the RFL’s budget was pending approval of the RL Commercial budget, as any movement in the RL Commercial 2024 budget would impact revenue to the RFL via the Residual Value Share. RL Commercial’s Audit & Risk Committee had recently reviewed the RL Commercial budget, together with a Finance Working Group with club and RFL representation to test some of the assumptions. A final version of the budget would be presented to the RL Commercial Board on 11th December.</p> <p>A base budget for the RFL had been prepared indicating that the RFL could operate with some minimal changes and adapt to a lower Residual Value Share. Notwithstanding this, the Executive had agreed some areas of focus to potentially generate future revenue streams for the sport.</p> <p>Key movements within the 2024 budget were highlighted as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RL Commercial Share – The RFL Share is set out in the Framework Agreement and will be affected by the decrease in the RL Commercial revenue for 2024. • OurLeague Active – A 2% increase in net income was anticipated. Fees would also be increased by £1 for all age groups liable to pay. • Championship & League 1 - The share payable to Championship and League 1 clubs would decrease due to reduced revenue from RL Commercial. Funding would be allocated via the ROI model for 2024. • Women’s Super League (WSL) – Attracting future investment in this area would be a key focus for the Executive in 2024. • Grant Funding – This area had seen a positive impact in 2023. • England Performance – Budget allocation for the England teams had been allocated differently across all 3 programmes for 2024. • Central Costs/Overheads – A 5% increase in insurance costs had been factored into the budget. • Match Officials – The referee communications kit ongoing provision would be at a cost with RL Commercial contributing. This would result in an increase on the 2023 budget. Travel and subsistence costs were expected to be higher in 2024 based on the 2023 actuals. 	

	<p>The Executive had identified several areas of focus. In addition, potential new income for 2024 was considered possible, including additional grant income, expansion of Rugby League Learning and discounted merchandise for OurLeague members. Other areas of focus above the Base budget items included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Investment into the Women’s Super League , with a view to attracting revenues into the sport. • Environmental sustainability initiatives. • Replacement of the Chief Medical Officer, further medical provision and introduction of concussion spotters at all Super League games. • Increased media and public affairs support via an additional media role. <p>RA queried whether the areas of focus for 2024 were in line with RL Commercial's priorities, given decisions by RL Commercial could also impact the RFL budget. RG confirmed that regular sessions were taking place with RL Commercial executives to ensure alignment between the two organisations on budget priorities.</p> <p>The Chief On-Field Officer, Dave Rotheram, discussed the England Performance budget in further detail. The revised budget was considered to be achievable and the introduction of three England programmes rather than one was considered the optimum way forward for the sport.</p> <p>The Board was disappointed to note the possible cancellation of the test series against Samoa in 2024.</p> <p>RG updated the Board on the proposed sale of Odsal and implications of this. Whilst a number of prospective purchasers had come forward to express interest in the site, RA suggested that it would be prudent to include a minimum of six months costs to maintain the venue in the 2024 budget and a possible write down of the site’s value, to be confirmed by the Executive.</p> <p>A lengthy discussion took place on the areas of focus for 2024. There was general agreement that the WSL and brain health strategic objectives initiatives should be addressed as a priority. It was felt that the Executive should seek to attract additional funds for the media role and environmental sustainability objectives should they wish to pursue these two options.</p> <p>The Board approved the draft budget, with the additional costs of the WSL investment, concussion spotters and a new Chief Medical Officer, plus maintenance costs at Odsal.</p> <p>ITEM REDACTED DUE TO COMMERCIAL SENSITIVITY</p>	RG
5.0	CONCUSSIVE AND SUB-CONCUSSIVE IMPACTS	
	<p>5.1 Brain Health Sub-committee</p> <p>The meeting was joined by Professor Ben Jones (BJ), who presented a comprehensive analysis of the research undertaken on collision and head acceleration events, together with data from the recent Academy law trials.</p> <p>The Brain Health Subcommittee and Clinical Advisory Group had issued 44 recommendations for the men’s and women’s game to reduce concussive and sub-concussive impacts, incorporating law amendments, operational and regulatory amendments, medical and first aid standards, and coaching and performance intervention measures.</p>	

	<p>Subject to approval, the changes would be confirmed at the RFL Council meeting in December, before engagement with stakeholders took place and further coaching and education took place at clubs.</p> <p>The Board reviewed the recommendations at length, with particular reference to the contact training guidelines, the head contact and tackle height framework, the mandating of instrumented mouthguards, and the change in the legal tackle height to the armpit and below. It was noted that the recommendations had been reviewed by the Match Officials and a number of Head Coaches.</p> <p>It was recognised that the change in tackle height would require players and coaches to work on a new tackle height technique. JJB felt that it was more efficient to tackle low, and a lot of players had moved away from this technique. JJB also suggested that increasing the number of substitutes permitted, and allowing more frequent substitutions, would help to spread the load across the team. It was felt that the mouthguard data would be key to helping the Board to make informed decisions on this issue, and this should be considered further by the Laws Committee.</p> <p>The Chair asked who would monitor the number of matches played and match turnaround. BJ confirmed that data would be received and monitored centrally, but coaches would manage this process.</p> <p>RA asked whether there were any unintended consequences of lowering the tackle height, and whether sufficient research had taken place on this issue. BJ felt that the sport was responding to the data accumulated over the past 18 months in a responsible and proportionate way. Data would continue to be collected to identify any consequences of lowering the tackle height, but given the research presented, it was felt that the Board had to take action to reduce concussion and sub-concussive injuries.</p> <p>The Board approved the 44 recommendations, including the introduction of the tackle height and head contact sanctioning framework from 1st January 2024, but requested that a detailed communications plan be produced for stakeholder engagement and that this should be shared with the Board and updated with Board input as appropriate.</p>	TS/RH
5.2	<p>Laws Committee</p> <p>The Board reviewed and approved a series of recommendations from the Laws Committee, relating to Scrum Penalties, the Six Again rule, the 18th Player Interchange, a law of 'reckless endangerment', and the introduction of a green card system.</p> <p>The Chair agreed to include a summary of the Board's deliberations on the recommendations in the Chair's Notes issued after the Board meeting.</p> <p><i>DR and BJ left the meeting for the remaining items.</i></p>	SJ
6.0	<p>RL COMMERCIAL MD REPORT</p> <p>The meeting was joined by Rhodri Jones (RJ), who presented an update on key RL Commercial issues:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The men's Super League Grand Final achieved a crowd of 58,137, and the WSL Grand Final achieved a crowd of 4,547. Together with a strong Play-Off series, the overall budget was in a reasonable position. • The Autumn international series achieved crowds of around 45k overall. It was suggested that a deep dive take place on the best options for international fixtures going forward, together with the optimum scheduling for these fixtures. 	

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The England wheelchair fixture against France at the Leeds Arena was considered to be a success, and SL was thanked for her contribution in securing the venue. SL stated that the trophy lift had taken place with the players' backs to the audience, and asked that this be addressed going forward. • IMG were continuing to work on the sport's digital channels and commercialising some of its assets. It was intended to use the Our League app to stream Super League matches to keep all content on one digital platform. • Venues and fixtures for 2024 were being finalised. Magic Weekend would be staged at Elland Road in Leeds due to the unavailability of St James Park in Newcastle. The World Club Challenge was due to be confirmed imminently, with Penrith due to sign heads of terms. • Three commercial partnerships had been renewed with current partners since the last meeting. <p>CD enquired as to IMG's views on the future of international Rugby League. EM stated that successful England teams were considered to be critical for the growth of the sport and its fan base. The relationship with the NRL and ensuring their support for the international game was key to this process. It was also recognised that fans wanted to see England play Australia and New Zealand to have the opportunity to see the best players in the world competing. RJ confirmed that options to replace Samoa in the 2024 test series were being explored.</p> <p>RA asked whether there were any opportunities for the England teams to better engage with the grassroots of the sport. . The Board felt that this type of work should form part of the England playing contract going forward on an all-year round basis.</p> <p>The Board thanked RJ for his update. RJ left the meeting for the remaining items.</p>	TS
7.0	<p>GRADING</p> <p>The meeting was joined by Alison O'Brien (AOB), who presented an overview of the recent trial grading process and key learnings. A full review would be presented at the forthcoming Council meeting in December.</p> <p>Going forward it was proposed to update the Grading Handbook to include calculation examples and more detail on process. An online Data Capture Form was also being explored, with the form being pre-populated with previous year's data to reduce the administrative burden on clubs.</p> <p>Audit evidence would also be required with the Data Capture Form submission, with an independent auditor appointed to verify some of the information. The RFL would also undertake an audit of Grade A and B venues in early 2024 to feed into this process.</p>	
8.0	<p>CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER'S REPORT</p> <p>The report from TS was taken as read.</p>	
9.0	<p>OPERATIONS & LEGAL REPORT</p> <p>The report from RH was taken as read.</p>	
10.0	<p>OPERATIONAL PLAN & INSIGHT REPORT</p> <p>The report from AOB was noted.</p>	

11.0		FINANCE & CENTRAL SERVICES REPORT The report from RG was noted.	
12.0		PERFORMANCE, DEVELOPMENT & MATCH OFFICIALS REPORT The report from DR and ML was noted.	
13.0		PEOPLE & CULTURE REPORT The paper from VS was noted.	
14.0		LITIGATION The paper from RY and RH was noted.	
15.0		RISKS No risks arising from the meeting were noted.	
16.0		AOB	
	16.1	Safeguarding Training SL noted that the action plan had yet to be circulated following the recent safeguarding training.	TS
	16.2	Board Appraisals The Chair confirmed that dates would be scheduled in the coming weeks for Board appraisals.	SJ/NL
17.0		DATE OF NEXT MEETING Wednesday 17 th January 2024. There being no further business, the meeting closed at 15.00.	