

**RFU COUNCIL MEETING**

14 June 2024

**Post-Meeting Council Briefing Note**

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**1. Presidential matters**

- 1.1 Rob Briers (President) noted that today's meeting was a particularly comprehensive one with some major items for discussion and decision.

**2. CEO's Update to Council**

- 2.1 Bill Sweeney (CEO) updated the Council on key ongoing matters. The verbal and written update included:

**2.2 Community Game Future**

- a. Sport England's Active Lives Survey results show that the game is recovering well post-Covid. Men's over 16 participation was growing again, which was a result of hard work at clubs across the country.
- b. The numbers in the women's game were flat year on year, although the sample size remained small. However, there was renewed growth in the pre-teen and teenage age groups. The focus must now be on maximising the impact of Rugby World Cup 2025.
- c. Understanding player trends was increasingly important in helping the RFU shape rugby into a game people want to play. Age Grade Registration had been a success with boys' and girls' registrations growing. We continue to prepare for Adult Player Registration with the aim of launching ahead of the coming season.
- d. Community Game Future would hopefully now enable us to drive the game forward across England.

**2.3 Red Roses**

- a. The Red Roses remained number one in the world. John Mitchell and his team won the inaugural WXV competition and secured a third successive Grand Slam.
- b. The RFU's Sports Industry Event of The Year Award for the record breaking 'Red Roses Rock Twickenham' fixture against France during the 2023 Six Nations recognised efforts to grow the women's game.
- c. Growing attendances at women's games builds momentum prior to hosting the Rugby World Cup next year. 2025 would be a pivotal moment, not just for the game in England but for women's rugby globally and rugby generally.

**2.4 England Men's Team**

- a. Steve Borthwick and his coaching team guided the senior team to third place in the 2023 Rugby World Cup and work to develop an exciting group of players was continuing following some great performances in the 2024 Six Nations tournament.
- b. Re-establishing England A and the work to rebuild the U18s and U20s pathways was starting to reap benefits, as was seen in the performances that led to the U20s winning the Six Nations Championship.

**2.5 Men's Professional Game Partnership (MPGP)**

- a. Work with the other stakeholders in the professional game had led to the co-creation of an agreement that would set the men's professional game up for a successful future. Once signed the MPGP would pave the way for a new way of working that would better develop players, support the Premiership with its ambition to become the best league in the world and ultimately support sustained success for England's Men's teams. There was detailed discussion and scrutiny of the current proposals. There had been number of presentations on the objectives and guiding principles of turning the MPGP into a genuine strategic partnership with PRL, which was reiterated again at the Council meeting.

**2.6 Nations Cup**

- a. Negotiations on the 2026 Nations Cup were continuing between the Six Nations and SANZAAR, with the objective of making significant progress on an agreement over the coming months.

**2.7 Finances**

- a. Despite the impact of Covid and the economic challenges that followed, the RFU would end the year in an improving financial position. However, as had been explained to Council in previous financial updates, the economic outlook remains challenging. The RFU must meet this challenge head on to

secure the future success of the game in England. Work continued on the Stadium Masterplan which would provide a long-term vision for the future of the Stadium. Council would receive a full update at a Council Informal being planned for late June / early July.

## 2.8 Player Welfare

- a. Introducing a lower tackle height into the community game was challenging but important. Analysis into the impact of the changes in tackle height would continue, with the hope that the Law change would make contact rugby safer and more attractive to play.
- b. In the elite game, work continued with the PRL and World Rugby in developing and analysing the Head Acceleration Event dataset collected from the smart mouthguards worn by selected PRL and PWR teams this season. Additionally, the Advanced Health Brain Clinic had now seen and assessed over 200 middle-aged retired players who had concerns about their brain health.

## 2.9 Digital Transformation

- a. The Digital Transformation Programme had begun and was already yielding results. Through work to engage existing audiences and reach new audiences, more than 800 million interactions had been achieved through the website, social media channels and email. This would enable the RFU to better understand the people who play, run and support the game and in turn take better decisions to support them.

## 2.10 Inclusion and Diversity

- a. Inclusion remained critical to building a successful and thriving game. This season the first Inclusion and Diversity Impact Report was published outlining the progress made since the action plan was launched in 2021. Work to change perceptions of rugby, such as the Routes into Rugby video series, are starting to work. However, work must continue to make sure that rugby is, and is seen to be, a game for all. In the elite game a collaborative approach between the RFU, PRL, PWR and the RPA meant a unified approach to setting consistent standards for inclusion.

## 3. **Chair of the Board of Directors Update**

- 3.1 Tom Ilube CBE (Chair of the RFU Board of Directors) noted that the Board had a very busy season as it had addressed a wide range of important issues critical to the game's long-term future. This was a period of significant generational transformation across both the community and professional games. The wide range of issues considered by Board over the season included topics ranging from the PGP, Tier 2, Global Calendar and other World Rugby initiatives, CGF, Stadium Masterplan, Digital Transformation, RFU Optimisation, the RFU's major commercial partnerships, enhancing youth engagement, Women and Girls' game and RWC25 as well as the RFU's Business Plan and finances. Having completed his time on Board, as well as standing down as a Council Member and as the Chair of the PGB, the RFU would be bidding farewell to Phil de Glanville at the end of this season.
- 3.2 Board continued with their programme of having at least one Board meeting per season away from Twickenham and to spend time in a local rugby community to help understand the work, challenges and commitment that goes into the game from all aspects of the game. This year the May meeting was held in Bishop Auckland Rugby Club in Darlington with a focus on the Women and Girls' game and RWC25 Impact work.
- 3.3 Ilube updated the Council on the operations of the Board of Directors, including the last meeting of the Board on 16 May. This included the Professional Game Partnership, Tier 2, the Community Game Future business plan for 2024/25, Adult Player Registration and strategy for the management and prevention of head injuries.

## 4. **Adult Player Registration**

- 4.1 Council was updated by James Cook who was overseeing the project. It was on track for this to begin from July 2024.

## 5. **Men's Professional Game Partnership**

- 5.1 Following extensive collaboration over the last 18 months, a resolution had been reached on the final outstanding points on the Men's Professional Game Partnership, representing a transformation of the professional men's game. The objectives of this Partnership are:
- Improving the men's performance system, providing better access and management of top players to enhance performance, while increasing playing opportunities for developing talent.
  - Establishing a new aligned governance structure, the Men's Professional Rugby Board, reducing conflicts and improving decision-making.
  - Stabilising the professional club game while safeguarding the RFU's financial position through a funding agreement comprising two, four-year terms.

- 5.2 Council APPROVED the following:
- a. delegation of specified regulatory decisions to a new Men's Professional Rugby Board, following RFU Board approval of the same
  - b. that the mechanism for promotion and relegation for the eight-year term will be a two-match home and away play-off between the bottom placed Premiership club and the winner of the Championship/Tier 2, provided that that latter club meets the Minimum Standards Criteria in place at the relevant time. This continues to allow for promotion and relegation, better provides a mechanism to determine on-field competitiveness and takes into consideration the financial challenges of clubs in both leagues.

## **6. Tier 2**

- 6.1 Since February 2023, the RFU, Championship Club Committee and Premiership Rugby Limited had been working to develop a reimagined Tier 2. The objective was to create a second tier that supports the English system by developing young English talent, whilst supporting the clubs become financially sustainable by growing local audiences and increasing the value in the league.
- 6.2 In April 2024, Council approved the principles of a new governance structure, the Minimum Operating Standards, and the principle of Tier 2 comprising 14 clubs from 2025/26. Since April, the RFU had been working with the extended Championship Executive team to reach a final position.
- 6.3 Council APPROVED the following:
- a. The delegation of governance and decision-making responsibilities to a new Tier 2 Board, made up of representatives from the Championship Clubs and the RFU, with an independent chair.
  - b. The revised timeline and milestones for completion of the essential MOS self-validation process, noting that if these milestones are not achieved, the league will need to be delayed, and would likely commence from the 26/27 season.

## **7. Council Nominations Committee**

- 7.1 The Council APPROVED the following:
- a. The Committee's recommendation to Council for the ratification of initial Committee/Sub-Committee membership for 2024/25.
  - b. The Committee's recommendation to Council for the appointment to the Council Nominations Committee of Deborah Griffin (for a one-year term) and Eddie Keal (for a three-year term).
  - c. The Committee's recommendation to Council for the appointment of Ted Atkinson and Phil de Glanville as Distinguished Members of the RFU.
  - d. The Committee's recommendation to Council for the awarding of the Rose Award to Philip Johnson and Fiona Stockley.

## **8. Community Game of the Future**

- 8.1 Council reviewed, discussed and ENDORSED the four-year investment and prioritisation plan, and supported CGB in its implementation over the next four years and reviewed the Delivery System plans. Council also ENDORSED the roles and responsibilities of the Local, Regional and National Functions and ENDORSED a commitment to establish a number of Regional Rugby Development Bodies. Further work would be shared with Council in September/November and the system would not be operational until July 2025. The 2024/25 season would be used as a transitional period while further detailed work would take place.

## **9. Council Ways of Working 2024/25 Trial**

9.1 The current ways of working had been reviewed which considered relevant recommendations from the recent Tackle Height Review Group and wider consultation with Council to identify ways to better structure Council meetings and associated information flows. Council APPROVED a trial for the 2024/25 season and to adopt a remote session for April 2025, and a full two day Council Conference for June 2025.

## **10. Adult Male Competition 3-Year Review (FCS)**

10.1 CGB tasked the review group to assess aspects of the original Future Competition Structure (FCS) implementation to ensure the core principles that FCS originally stood behind remained true where possible; a reduction in travel time/distance; prioritising the interests and experience of the player; competition integrity and club sustainability (protecting revenue from home fixtures and travel cost).

10.2 Council APPROVED the following recommendations from the three-year review of the adult male competition structure:

- a. CBs that currently do not permit Lower XVs to play in the RFU Leagues will be required to reconfirm their exclusion of the national policy (approved by Council in April 2021), by 31st December 2024. A vote to confirm the exclusion must be held if the minimum threshold (4 eligible clubs or 10% of eligible clubs – whichever is greater) requesting a vote is achieved.
- b. Raise the current ceiling for Lower XVs from Counties 1 to Regional 2.
- c. No significant changes to the league structure.
- d. No change to the Papa Johns Community Cup, but it is recommended that ACMSC determine the structure of the PJCC cup for the 2024/25 season.

## **11. 2024/25 Regulation Changes**

11.1 Key changes were proposed for implementation in Season 2024-25 pertaining to RFU Regulations 1 to 22 and RFU Competition Regulations. These were made available from 24 May for Council to review.

11.2 Council APPROVED the regulation changes to the RFU Regulations and competition regulations (delegating authority to the Governance Standing Committee to finalise). In particular, this included a complete re-write of Regulation 19 (Discipline).

## **12. 2024/25 Council Handbook**

12.1 The RFU Council Handbook brought together information and several policies that were pertinent to Council members. Aspects of the information changed annually, and the policies were reviewed regularly. Council APPROVED the 2024/225 RFU Council Handbook.

## **13. 2024/25 Budget and Business Plan**

13.1 Council was presented with an update on this year's budget and business planning and provided an update on the RFU Optimisation Project as well as the proposed process for the next six months.

## **14. National Youth Council Report**

14.1 Council was presented with an update from the Chair of the National Youth Council in particular on ongoing work from the season, detailing the composition of the National Youth Council, work undertaken with the CGB and on social media.

## **15. Reports**

15.1 Council received reports from the following groups and the opportunity to question their authors: Community Game Board, Professional Game Board, Council Nominations Committee, Governance Standing Committee and Head Injury Prevention and Management Subcommittee.

This was Rob Briers' last Council Meeting as President, and Council thanked him for all his work during a successful year.