

## MINUTES

### RFL BOARD OF DIRECTORS MEETING

<b>Location</b>	The RFL, Rowsley Street, Manchester, M11 3FF	<b>Date &amp; Time</b>	Tuesday 6 <sup>th</sup> May 2025 10.00 am
<b>Present</b>	Lord Jonathan Caine, Joanna Coates Martin Coyd OBE, Abi Ekoku, Rob Graham, Dermot Power, Emma Rosewarne, Tony Sutton	<b>Chair</b>	Nigel Wood OBE
<b>In attendance</b>	Jo Drapier, Sport England Jamie Jones-Buchanan, Leeds Rhinos Alison O'Brien, Company Secretary (Interim) Michelle Maple – Secretariat (minutes) Rhodri Jones, RL Commercial – Item 8 Marc Lovering, RFL – Item 6		Prof. Ben Jones – Item 5 Dr. Dane Vishnubala – Item 5 Richard Yates – Item 5 Victoria Sinacola – Item 9

Item No	Agenda Item	Who
1.0	<b>WELCOME AND APOLOGIES</b> Nigel Wood OBE formally welcomed everyone to a meeting of the newly constituted, interim RFL Board. In the absence of a permanent RFL Chair, it was agreed that the meeting would be chaired by Mr Wood and that, going forward, the Board would elect a chair on a meeting by meeting basis.  There were no apologies for absence.	
2.0	<b>DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST</b> Declarations of interest were noted as follows: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>NJW – director of RL Commercial Ltd and minority shareholder in Bradford Bulls RLFC.</li> <li>TS – director of RFLI Ltd, director of RLWC2021 Ltd and director of the RFL Facilities Trust.</li> <li>JC – director of RL Commercial Ltd, Women's FA National League board member, Interim CEO of England Hockey.</li> <li>LJC – vice chair of the All Party Parliamentary Rugby League Group.</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.</li> <li>RG – director of Facilities Trust.</li> <li>JD – chair of Scunthorpe Touch RL club.</li> <li>MC – coach Medway Dragons RL club.</li> <li>ER – OurLeague member and potential witness in the brain injury claim.</li> <li>AOB – Company Secretary of RFL Facilities Trust, Director of ERL.</li> </ul>	
3.0	<b>MINUTES FROM THE PREVIOUS MEETING &amp; ACTION TRACKER</b> <b>Minutes</b> 3.1 The CEO confirmed that the minutes from the meeting held on 4 <sup>th</sup> February 2025 were an accurate record.  The summarised minutes of the meeting held on 4 <sup>th</sup> February 2025 to be published on the RFL website were agreed.	

3.2	<p><b>Matters Arising</b> Progress against the action tracker was noted as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Several Operations and Legal items remained outstanding, but would be addressed in the coming weeks.</li> <li>• The review of unacceptable language and behaviour would form part of the forthcoming review of the Tackle It Plan.</li> <li>• An external consultant had been agreed to undertake the Board annual evaluation process. The scope of work had yet to be agreed, together with the appropriate timeline, with the latter depending on the appointment of a permanent Board.</li> </ul> <p>ER queried whether organisational culture would be reviewed, and whether any training in this area was available for RFL employees. TS confirmed that a new staff online training platform had recently been introduced, and culture would be reviewed in the coming months.</p>	
4.0	<p><b>FINANCIAL &amp; FACILITIES MATTERS</b></p>	
4.1	<p><b>2024 Management Accounts and Forecast Outturn</b> RG provided an overview of the RFL's management accounts for the period to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2025 and the forecast outturn. Key points were noted as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• An adverse variance to budget of £163k was reported.</li> <li>• The Match Officials department was forecasting a £26k negative variance due to some departmental overspends in staff costs. The Head of Match Officials had been tasked with sourcing budget savings to recover this position.</li> <li>• The Finance budget forecast a £17k overspend due to statutory minimum wage increases, unbudgeted recruitment costs and increasing the RL Commercial Accounts Officer role to four days a week.</li> <li>• Executive Assistants and Project Support costs included an unbudgeted spend of £38k, which related to a Welfare Manager contribution for RL Cares.</li> <li>• Whilst no profit had been forecast through RL Commercial from the Ashes series, sales were performing strongly, and it was anticipated that additional revenue would be available via the existing "waterfall" funding arrangement.</li> <li>• Magic Weekend had also outperformed the budget and was expected to generate a modest profit for RL Commercial.</li> </ul> <p>TS advised the Board that a large proportion of overspends were related to legal expenses incurred during the period. The RFL remained mindful that it needed to generate its own income going forward,. It was hoped to continue to grow revenue streams going forward, together with prospective income through education opportunities.</p> <p>The Board discussed the autumn men's Ashes Series. The matches at Headingley and Bramley Moore Dock had now sold out, and it was hoped to achieve a target audience of 73,000 at Wembley.</p> <p>JC queried what proportion of the £163k variance was ongoing cost versus one-off legal expenses. RG said the bulk of the costs were one-off.</p> <p>AE enquired how much of RL Commercial's projected income of c£23m related to broadcast income. RG confirmed that £21.5m was broadcast income, with the additional income relating to other commercial activities.</p> <p>It was noted that the budgeting process for 2026 would commence in the coming weeks, with the budget principles to be presented at a future Board meeting.</p>	
4.2	<p><b>Salford Red Devils</b></p>	

	<p>The Board reviewed the paper pertaining to Salford Red Devils ongoing financial issues and current risks.</p> <p>It was noted that an advance of £500k was issued in November 2024. The £500k was already included within the RL Commercial budget for central distributions, with the club due to receive £1.3m in 2025. Whilst the process did not breach any regulatory scope, the RFL had faced some criticism for its handling of this situation, and it was felt that a thorough and independent review of the process should now be undertaken to ascertain any improvements and lessons learned.</p> <p>TS reported that a meeting took place with the club's CEO last week, and concerns were raised about the ownership's ability to provide liquidity. ER enquired as to the likelihood of an insolvency event. It was confirmed that the club would be required to meet pay day within the next three weeks, which would be a critical point in terms of its sustainability going forward.</p> <p>LJC enquired as to the potential grading sanction for the club. TS confirmed that the club would be subject to a penalty under the finance grading pillar should it suffer an insolvency event. Whereas this would previously have resulted in an automatic downgrade, member clubs had requested during the recent consultation period that this be amended to a loss of grading points instead. Notwithstanding this, it was noted that the RFL Board had the right to invoke termination of membership under the Insolvency Policy and to readmit the club on terms as it saw fit.</p> <p>DP felt that further work was required to review the Articles of Association and Byelaws to ensure the RFL strengthened its position in the event of any future club insolvencies.</p> <p>The Chair enquired whether an independent external party would be appointed to undertake the review into the actions taken regarding Salford, and when this would take place. TS stated that this could be undertaken by the Audit and Risk Committee, with the assistance of an independent person to report into the Committee.</p> <p>AE felt that the public perception was that the Board would put the appropriate provisions in place to stop this situation happening in the future, and would expect to see some communication on a decision taken by Board members.</p> <p>The Chair also queried the impact on repayment of the Sports Survival Fund loans. TS stated that the loan repayments were deducted from central distributions to prevent clubs from defaulting.</p> <p>It was agreed that the Board would be required to issue some communication on this issue following its meeting, confirming that new interim Board was in place and that the RFL continues to robustly manage this situation.</p>	TS/ NW
5.0	<p><b>BRAIN HEALTH UPDATE</b></p> <p>The meeting was joined by Richard Yates, Professor Ben Jones and Dr. Dane Vishnubala, who provided an update on the latest position relating to the brain injury legal claims, and the ongoing research in this area.</p> <p>5.1 <b>Legal Claims</b></p> <p>Following the original claim in September 2021, RY confirmed that progress had remained slow-moving. The claimant lawyers had recently confirmed that they intended to discontinue the case against the IRL, leaving the RFL and BARLA as the named defendants.</p>	

		<p>The longstop date for new claimants to join the action was 30<sup>th</sup> May 2025, with 175 claimants already in place.</p> <p>The Board noted the update, and that further details would be provided in due course.</p>	
5.2	<p><b>Research</b></p> <p>The Board received a comprehensive update on brain health data and research, and a summary of incidences of head acceleration events.</p> <p>It was noted that concussion rates had initially increased but were now reducing. A suite of measures are either already in place or were being considered to reduce concussive and sub-concussive injuries, such as mandatory mouthguards for players and modifying player behaviour and technique.</p> <p>AE enquired whether there had been any changes to the standard player contract, such as a clause on acceptance around Rugby League being a contact sport.</p> <p>TS reported that the RFL was exploring options for a medical notetaking app, enabling the transfer of medical records when players moved clubs, or were on loan or dual registered. This had been discussed at the recent club regulatory meetings. There was general consensus that there was a need to enhance record keeping, although it was recognised that some clubs had their own systems, and there would be no compulsion on clubs to adopt a central system at present.</p>		
6.0	<p><b>DEVELOPMENT UPDATE</b></p> <p>The meeting was joined by Marc Lovering, Director of Participation and Development, to discuss the 2024 Community Rugby League 'More Than a Sport' Report 2024. Key highlights were outlined as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participation increased across youth and junior levels, although male open age continued to decline.</li> <li>• Wheelchair Rugby League participation continued to grow, and new pathways for women and youth were introduced. Touch, Tag and Masters saw strong growth in 2024, with 103 teams attend the London Tag Fest.</li> <li>• Over £1.7 million was invested into facilities in 2024.</li> <li>• Volunteer engagement increased by 4.3%, which was boosted by the National Volunteer Awards.</li> <li>• The OurLeague Life programme resulted in eight Community Wellbeing Hubs, with initiatives launched to prevent youth crime and support employability.</li> <li>• The schools and universities programme expanded, with the introduction of the Pathway to Performance (P2P) programme for U15 and U16 female players.</li> <li>• The Community Lions had a busy year, with victories in the U19 European Championship and a tour to Perth.</li> </ul> <p>In 2025, it was planned to build on this progress and review the competition structure and playing calendar to maximise growth, and increase focus on community clubs.</p> <p>Discussion took place on the regional leagues and the ongoing challenges relating to travel costs and player supply. The Chair suggested initiating a discussion with the National Conference Leagues on any potential changes to relieve some of these issues.</p> <p>JC commended the positive growth across the women's and girls' competitions, and asked whether the clubs in the Midlands and the south were also attached to men's teams. ML confirmed that this growth had been driven through women's open age competition, although many played Rugby Union as their first sport, participating in Rugby League in the off season.</p>		

		The Chair enquired whether the Pennine Leagues still operated an August to April competition structure. ML stated that this offer was still available, but numbers were diminishing.	
7.0		<b>BOARD GOVERNANCE AND SUCCESSION</b>	
		The Board received an update from TS on the following governance issues.	
	7.1	<p><b>Co-opting of Board members</b></p> <p>According to Article 48, any co-opted appointments were considered to be temporary, with formal elections to take place at the next Council meeting. It was noted that the current circumstances were a reflection of the urgent need to ensure a Board was in place and that the RFL remained compliant with its Code for Sports Governance requirements. The process for co-opting directors would generally be the responsibility of the Nominations Committee, with potential co-optees undergoing a selection process based on skills and/or experience.</p> <p>Co-option would cover the period of time until the Council meeting on 15<sup>th</sup> July 2025, when directors would be re-appointed. Assuming reappointment, the co-option would last for a maximum of nine months post this meeting.</p>	
	7.2	<p><b>Sport England Board Observer</b></p> <p>The role description for the Sport England Board Observer was noted for information and agreed.</p>	
	7.3	<p><b>Executive Director Appointments</b></p> <p>The following Executive Director appointments were confirmed via a Nominations Committee on 21<sup>st</sup> March 2025:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tony Sutton - RL Commercial Board observer and appointed to the RFL Board Ex-Officio as the RFL Chief Executive Officer.</li> <li>• Robert Graham, Executive Director with responsibility in Finance, Audit &amp; Risk, Facilities, Risk management and corporate services.</li> <li>• Nigel Wood, Senior Executive Director with responsibility in day to day general operations and leading the Strategic Review Committee, and RFL nominated RL Commercial Director.</li> <li>• Martin Coyd, Executive Director with responsibility as programme lead for England Wheelchair RL &amp; Wheelchair Management Group.</li> </ul>	
	7.4	<p><b>Senior Independent Non-Executive Director (SID)</b></p> <p>In the absence of a longest serving independent director, Joanna Coates was nominated as the RFL's Senior Independent Director based on her previous experience.</p>	
	7.5	<p><b>Nominations Committee</b></p> <p>It was proposed that the Nominations Committee should consist of Independent Non-Executive Directors only, and should be chaired by the Senior Independent Non-Executive Director.</p>	
	7.6	<p><b>Non-Executive Director Independence</b></p> <p>In line with the Code for Sports Governance, at least 25% of the Board should comprise Independent Non-Executive Directors. The RFL's current Non-Executive Directors included Abi Ekoku, Dermot Power, Lord Jonathan Caine, Joanna Coates, and Emma Rosewarne, thus ensuring that 55% of the Board were independent.</p>	
	7.7	<p><b>Board Lead and Committee Appointments</b></p> <p>The following appointments were noted:</p>	

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• International Rugby League Board – permanent RFL Chair as Board member and RFL CEO as Board Observer.</li> <li>• Board Welfare and Safety Lead to include safeguarding and anti-doping - Emma Rosewarne</li> <li>• Nominations Committee Chair – Joanna Coates as SID</li> <li>• Audit &amp; Risk Committee Chair – Dermot Power</li> <li>• Remuneration Committee Chair – Ed Airey (as existing)</li> <li>• Inclusion Board Chair – Jamie Jones Buchanan (as existing)</li> <li>• Community Board Chair – Martin Coyd (proposed to Committee, subject to their confirmation).</li> <li>• Performance Committee – the current terms of reference were being reviewed.</li> <li>• RL Commercial (RFL appointed board Directors) – Nigel Wood &amp; Joanna Coates (Tony Sutton as Board Observer).</li> </ul>
7.8	<p><b>Process for Appointing Chair and NEDs post Council Meeting</b></p> <p>It was noted that the Nominations Committee, observed by JD as Sport England observer, concluded all recent Board appointments, with members co-opted on an interim basis. Following the Council meeting in July, all appointments would follow a documented and structured process.</p> <p>The Board confirmed that it was satisfied with and approved the above approach.</p>
8.0	<p><b>RL COMMERCIAL UPDATE</b></p> <p>The meeting was joined by RL Commercial MD, Rhodri Jones, who provided a summary of RL Commercial activity, with highlights noted as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The recent Magic Weekend event at St James' Park in Newcastle achieved record attendances, and it was intended to take the event back to Newcastle in 2026. Ticket sales revenue had surpassed the target, and a full reconciliation would take place in the coming weeks.</li> <li>• The Challenge Cup Semi-finals were due to take place at the weekend, with a sold out crowd in York and strong attendances expected at St Helens for the men's and women's teams.</li> <li>• The RL Commercial Board recently met with IMG to discuss broadcast strategy, and a further session would be arranged with directors Eamonn McManus, Paul Lakin, Nigel Wood and chair Frank Slevin, with the next steps to assess the valuation of the sport in the current broadcast market.</li> <li>• A number of commercial contracts were due to come to an end on the conclusion of the broadcast cycle, and planning was underway to expand the commercial portfolio.</li> <li>• Work had also commenced on the 2026 calendar. The Super League Grand Final would be played a week earlier on 3<sup>rd</sup> October in line with the NRL Grand Final, thus requiring the season to also start a week earlier. The Challenge Cup competition would follow a similar format to 2025, with the Final moved to the end of May in line with the availability of Wembley.</li> <li>• Discussions were taking place with the NRL on the optimum date for the World Cup Challenge, including the possibility of playing this at the end of the season in 2026.</li> </ul> <p>JJB enquired when the Magic Weekend dates would be confirmed for 2026. RJ stated that it was expected to have confirmation of the date and venue by the end of June. AE also enquired whether Newcastle City Council contributed towards the event, given the economic impact benefits to the city.</p>



9.0		<b>OPEN LETTER AND RFL REVIEW</b>	
		<p>The meeting was joined by Victoria Sinacola, Director of People and Culture, summarised the results of the Gender Pay Gap Report 2024, and provided an update on the two open letters received relating to behaviours towards women and across the sport.</p>	
	9.1	<p><b>Gender Pay Gap</b></p> <p>According to the average hourly rate of pay for male and female employees, the gender pay gap increased by 6.8% and 9.9% in 2024 to an average of 16.7%. Whilst disappointing, it was felt this was due to a larger proportion of women leaving the organisation and restructure process reducing women in the upper and middle quartile. To close the gap, departments had been asked to look at gender pay rates and ensure equal pay for like for like work, and encourage positive recruitment.</p> <p>JD enquired whether the RFL undertook any benchmarking place against other sports NGBs. VS confirmed that regular benchmarking took place, both externally and internally, when grading roles.</p>	
	9.2	<p><b>Open Letters</b></p> <p>In respect of the open letters received in March 2025 expressing concern about potential misogyny and the treatment of women within the sport, an open meeting took place recently with 30 staff in attendance, who were invited to discuss their concerns, and a annual staff survey was also underway.</p> <p>Concerns had related in part to the recent departures of RFL Board members, and the increased workload experienced by the Operations and Legal teams. The Executive had reassured staff on their concerns, and it was agreed that an independent external review would take place, taking into account staff feedback. This was not included within existing budgets and would be an additional cost.</p> <p>It was felt that the letters also related to some poor behaviours in the wider sport, although some female players were reluctant to come forward. Therefore, the scope of the external review would incorporate as many views as possible.</p> <p>The Chair asked whether there had been any internal complaints received previously at the RFL or RL Commercial. VS stated that there had been some issues reported of unacceptable language and micro aggressions, together with the concerns raised above.</p> <p>DP enquired who would appoint and monitor costs associated with the review. TS stated that a tender process was ongoing, and the executive would discuss the returns and overall scope before making a recommendation, with some involvement from the Inclusion Board. The Chair felt it would be beneficial to have also some NED involvement in this process.</p>	
10.0		<p><b>CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER'S REPORT</b></p> <p>The report from TS was taken as read.</p>	
11.0		<p><b>EXECUTIVE REPORTS</b></p> <p>The following reports were taken as read:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Operational Plan &amp; Insight Report</li> <li>• Finance, Facilities &amp; Central Services Report</li> <li>• Performance, Development &amp; Match Officials Report</li> <li>• People &amp; Culture Report</li> <li>• Litigation Report</li> </ul>	

		The Chair enquired whether the Executive was comfortable with the current disciplinary processes, and this had been a source of contention amongst some clubs. TS stated that there had been some issues with video referee decisions due to the lack of a high definition feed into the Ref Box at Wilmslow. However, a solution had been sourced to improve this process and the overall timing on decision making. The new on field sanctioning system had generally been well received, and some minor improvements to the system had recently been discussed at the club regulatory meetings.	
12.0		<b>BOARD SUB COMMITTEES</b> Reports from the following subcommittees were noted: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Performance Committee – 30th January 2025</li> <li>• Audit &amp; Risk Committee – 31st January 2025</li> <li>• Brain Health Committee – 9th April 2025</li> <li>• Nominations Committee – 5th February, 21st and 27th March 2025</li> </ul>	
13.0		<b>RISKS</b> No new risks arising from the meeting were noted.	
14.0		<b>AOB</b> <b>Strategic Review</b> The Chair provided a summary of the ongoing strategic review into the sport. Areas currently under discussion included competition structure, the appropriate governance structure for the sport, Salary Cap, and the financial sustainability of the sport and potential future investment.  <b>Board Meetings</b> Members were invited to provide feedback to TS on the optimum arrangements for Board meetings moving forward.	<b>All</b>
15.0		<b>DATE OF NEXT MEETING</b> There being no further business, the meeting closed at 15.45.	