

PENNY STEWART, RFU COUNCIL REPRESENTATIVE FOR NORTHUMBERLAND

BRIEFING NOTES FROM THE RFU COUNCIL MEETING HELD 1ST DEC 2023

Please see below the briefing notes from the RFU Council Meeting held on 1ST December 2023. As always, drop me a line or give me a call if you would like to discuss any matters or require more detailed information.

BRIEFING NOTES:

1. Presidential matters

- 1.1 Following the process conducted by the Council Nominations Committee, the Council confirmed (via email approval) that Malcolm Wharton CBE would chair the Governance and Representation Review of the Union. Work would continue with the Council Nominations Committee on selecting other appointments to the group.
- 1.2 There was a consensus among the Council to review, rewrite and strengthen policies and processes around media disclosure and confidentiality.

2. CEO's Update to Council

- 2.1 Bill Sweeney (CEO) updated the Council on matters being undertaken by the Executive Staff:
- 2.2 Community Game Future
 - a. The Community Game Future project is intended to map out a ten-year plan for the community game, responding to current challenges but also looking ahead to how our game may need to evolve to meet a changing landscape and player preferences. Following the game engagement series carried out at the end of the summer and priorities brought to Council in September, work is now underway to develop and assess the tangible delivery options aligned to these priorities.
 - b. A number of working groups are up and running on this with Council representatives on each, along with groups set up to look at systems needed to deliver this work and management of change required.
 - c. Feedback, data and anecdotal evidence suggested that the implementation and adaptation of the community game to the new tackle height law had gone successfully. Work was still being conducted on monitoring and ensuring that the new law continued to be effective.
- 2.3 Professional Game Partnership
 - a. Work with the other stakeholders in the professional game continues at pace with the development of a joint strategy for the professional men's game. There is significant work to define the detail underpinning the PGP, including the future 2nd tier competition structure. In line with the timelines of the current Professional Game Agreement, which expires in June 2024, the new arrangements are set to come into force at the start of the 2024/25 season, with a new second tier competition due to start in 2025/26. This will continue to be brought back to Council in future meetings for further consultation.

3. Chair of the Board of Directors Update

- 3.1 Tom Ilube CBE (Chair of the RFU Board of Directors) updated the Council on the operations of the Board of Directors, including the last meeting of the Board on 15 November. This included discussions on the Professional Game Partnership, the Community Game Future and Digital Transformation. The Board also approved the 2023 Annual Report & Accounts.

4. County Championship & Papa John's Cup Regulations

- 4.1 Council approved the proposed County Championship and Papa John's Cup Regulations for the 2023/24 season. The main regulatory changes are:
 - 4.2 County Championship
 - a. The format and structure of the regulation has been modified to create a more clear and accessible document for members of the game to engage with.
 - b. The Council agreed an amendment to the proposed resolution such that players registered at National League clubs but who had not represented those clubs' first XV would be eligible to play in the Jason Leonard (men's U20) competition.
 - 4.3 Papa John's Cup Regulations

- a. A number of changes to the Papa John's Cup Regulations were made in response to feedback provided from the teams who competed in the inaugural competition in 2022/23:
 - i. The draw of the competition would take place following the last game in December (weekend of 16th/17th), which would be communicated to the participating clubs in early January, allowing for a longer period of time for clubs to organise travel and other administrative arrangements.
 - ii. The regulations relating to kit clashes within the competition have been modified to mirror the position within the leagues such that the away team changes their kit in the event of a clash to ensure further consistency.
 - iii. The Competition Organiser will have the ability to reverse the home and away team in a given fixture in any fixture within the competition in their discretion to aid in balancing home and away fixtures of participating clubs.

5. Rugby Players Association (RPA) Update

- 5.1 Representatives from the RPA gave an update of their work to Council, both across the game as a whole and in respect of individual players. The RPA is the representative body of professional rugby players England, representing over 800 male and female current rugby players as well as more than 400 former professional players.
- 5.2 The Council expressed their thanks for all the work the RPA do in the professional game.

6. Inclusion & Diversity Update

- 6.1 Jatin Patel, Inclusion & Diversity Director, provided Council with an overview of the RFU's I&D work so far this season. The update covered progress across the four workstream areas (Employees & Board, Fans, Followers & Partners, Game Play and Game Leadership) and enablers, including data and education, as well as why I&D remains important to the long term future of rugby union. Council Member, Matt Webb, who is Chair of the Inclusive Leadership Delivery Group, updated Council on progress in recruiting the new group and started a discussion on the future of Council's co-opted members.

7. Digital Transformation Update

- 7.1 Claudio Borges, the RFU's Executive Director of Engagement and Business Growth, and Eddie Keal (Council Member for Middlesex) updated Council on the various projects being undertaken to help digitally transform the organisation and more broadly, the game. The programme aims to transform the rugby experience of players, volunteers, and fans through more relevant and targeted content (including video, campaign and web), enhanced digital platforms and greater use of data to understand those involved in the game so we can better serve their needs and enrich their experiences.

8. 2023 Annual Report and Accounts

- 8.1 Council was briefed on the 2023 Annual Report and Accounts which had been approved by the Board and would be published shortly – the report detailed some of the very key topics, successes and challenges faced by the game and the sport over the previous year. The topics include reference to the current rugby environment, the strategic objectives of the Union, an overview of the Governance of the Union and the financial statements.
- 8.2 Much work had been undertaken in the formulation and completion of this year's report, as a way to make the document more effective and accessible as a communication tool to the wider game.

9. Reports

- 9.1 Angus Bujalski (Executive Director of Legal and Governance) provided an update on the hearing taking place that day relating to the head injury litigation.
- 9.2 Council received reports from the following groups and the opportunity to question their authors: Community Game Board, Professional Game Board, Governance Standing Committee, Council Inclusion and Diversity Working Group, Council Nominations Committee, Board Nominations Committee, Head Injury Prevention and Management Subcommittee and a report on the wider women and girls' game.