

Introduction

The board is very grateful to the Presidential team for convening the recent discussion with Clubs and the proposed meeting with Trustees. We are also appreciative of the time and effort dedicated by rugby colleagues across the County to deliver the modern game. We know everyone involved is motivated by a desire to see the sport thrive and grow long into the future. We had a full and open feedback session with the Presidential team and received their notes of the meeting.

It is worth noting board directors themselves are passionate about the sport; we too want to see Northumberland succeed. We believe this is a shared duty and responsibility; no one group, or person has a monopoly on good ideas but we do have different roles to play.

Rather than respond to each point in the meeting notes we have tried to address the issues raised under a few themes: rugby, roles and responsibilities, and culture and behaviours. We also encourage Club Chairs and Secretaries to refresh their knowledge of the CB's foundation document, it's Mem&Arts. The end of season 'one pager' chart may also aid readers as they think about the points made. These are not new, have been developed and/or agreed by Clubs and have been widely circulated¹. They augment the briefing the presidential team received from central RFU colleagues ahead of your meeting on the current 'state of the game' and the board's open letters to all members posted since autumn '21.

Rugby

Post-COVID the rugby landscape, as with every aspect of society, is very different. We cannot undo the experience of COVID and so there can be no 'going back' to the old world. As the RFU briefing makes abundantly clear the shape of rugby, frequency of play, nature of player and attractiveness of the sport have all been impacted. Adult male game completion rates are improving albeit with lower actual game numbers. Amongst the young adult population rugby ranks 24th most attractive sport versus 4th in the older demographic².

Against this marked change Northumberland has been punching well above its weight. In the last year alone we have doubled our proportion of RFU budgets for rebuilding adult rugby. Six of our clubs availed themselves of this opportunity of funding and support. Some clubs have had intense interventions - volunteer training, DBS approvals for coaches, new formats of the game as well as supporting hospitality offers, etc.. Child and female player numbers are growing. New game formats are retaining older players and widening the socio-economic profile of players. More decisions are being delegated to those at the 'coalface' who know the players best e.g. team managers and lead coaches taking the lead in CB representative team selection.

Rugby is delivered by clubs. The vast majority of volunteers work for clubs. The CB board carries much of the responsibility for enabling and facilitating play. The

¹ Mem& Arts, One pager lessons learned season '22-'23

² Steve Grainger, Director of Rugby Development RFU, 7th Feb '24

primary responsibility for delivery rests with clubs. The future of the game may mean a 30 year player engagement with 8 games a year versus the historic model of 8 years engagement and 30 matches. What do clubs, as well as the CB need to do differently to make this adjustment? This is not an exam question for the board alone. It is an evolutionary process and already we are seeing new initiatives emerging. The board has been encouraging and supporting these wherever possible, seeking funding, leveraging in RFU and other support.

Perhaps the 75% of our clubs who didn't bid for the rebuilding funding or haven't asked for any support have done it on their own and been successful. That's great if that is the case and maybe they could share their learning, so others benefit. Reports of all CB supported efforts are in the monthly reports and subsequently progress notes are posted on the website. Task and finish groups, the neurodiversity one being the most recent, have been working to provide an easy path forward for clubs in areas where there is increased regulation, attention or activity. Similarly, a small team is developing a summer coaching conference and the Safeguarding team have invited people to participate in an 'Active Bystander' project aimed at spectator behaviour and engagement.

If there is a specific new initiative a group of clubs want to pursue we are all ears. We will commit time and effort to helping you design and deliver it. It is not for us to determine what you do to develop rugby in your clubs. That is a club responsibility.

Roles & Responsibilities

There appears to have been much talk at the meeting about the board not communicating with the clubs. What about the other way round? There are six volunteers who make up the board. Each club has tens, if not hundreds of members. Each month the board produce succinct reports on each area of responsibility. These are shared widely and we always invite comment and feedback. The County Office is a 'front door' for phone calls and emails on any topic related to rugby, liaison with the RFU, guidance and support. The website has a plethora of information available to all at any time. The new 'forms' section enables those actually delivering rugby to do their jobs in real time, digitally, with a clear audit trail and with minimum fuss. We also appear at General Meetings and are available for questions. Where is the reverse flow of information and questions?

Transparency was also raised repeatedly in the meeting notes. We have five observers at the board - RFU Rep and Presidential team - all of whom also spend time in clubs. How often do club members or CB Reps ask them questions to clarify or amplify discussions at board? How often do they use this route to raise agenda items or suggest initiatives?

Every club has a number of specialists - safeguarding, age grade, etc.. as part of their organisation. The board has run a number of events to enable these isolated individuals to meet, share their experiences and build confidence and capability in their roles. We are confident clubs have effective mechanisms for incorporating their own new learning into the operations of their club. This activity does not need to be mediated by anyone else. More layers of meetings and personnel simply dilutes

the information being disseminated, creates delays or worse, generates confusion and a greater risk of crossed wires and misinformation.

It appears that the information provided by the board, and the details about how easily this can be accessed on the web site has not been shared effectively with clubs and their members. Certainly, the board are not receiving questions from clubs, or their members as these questions arise (despite the board's repeated invitation to do so). The list of issues presented to the board by the Presidential Team contained several discrete concerns; these concerns cannot have all arisen in the same week we believe they could have been addressed as and when they arose in the manner encouraged by the board, rather than remaining in the hands of the CB Reps for discussion all at once.

Perhaps one of the real issues here is that the traditional role of the CB Rep is no longer relevant and needs to be reviewed. This is a joint CB and club matter.

The Mem & Arts, recently updated and adopted by all clubs, makes clear the role of the members in relation to the board. There have been repeated attempts over many years (since original incorporation) by many different people to explain the differing responsibilities. Some individuals continue to believe and behave as if the County is an unincorporated membership association. It isn't and hasn't been for many years. Clubs need to brief and hold their representatives to account accordingly.

Members i.e. the clubs appoint the board and can remove it. In extremis members can also dissolve the CB, accept new members or exclude others. Legal responsibility for all other CB decisions rests with the board. The directors are personally responsible for their actions and have legal and fiduciary duties to the CB. This duty transcends any desires articulated by people in a general meeting.

Culture & Behaviours

Twice in the last week members of the board, at separate events and locations, have heard of the parallels between the change process which took place in the NFL in American Football and the state of English rugby today.

The NFL found, like most sporting organisations, it was governed by individuals who had finished playing. That resulted in decision makers usually being in the second half of their lives, with fond memories of their younger and fitter days. Many had a resentment of the fact they were getting older and less able; they sought to prevent change in themselves and, consequently, that mindset of opposition to change spilt over into their wider decision making.

The NFL worked out it made "better" decisions when those empowered to make decisions had not themselves been very experienced or high performers in the sport / activity and could review the issues free from emotion, or historic personal experience. The downside of this was that this can often result in resentment and accusations toward those decision makers based upon their perceived lack of knowledge.

It feels to the whole board that this is exactly where Northumberland is today. This is ironic. The current board was recruited and installed with a very precise remit. We were charged with delivering major change in structure and culture after a period of decline and confusion.

We know change is hard. We know it is painful, and we know that not everyone in our CB wanted it to happen; but the majority of the clubs did. We know it has to be negotiated and subject to compromise. It does not need to be personal, aggressive, intimidating and bullying. We do not believe anyone would accept some of the behaviours seen at general meetings, anonymous papers, and emails sent to the board and County Administrator. Were we on the pitch the referee would have sent people off. In the workplace they would have been disciplined. This has to stop if anyone is to be attracted to be a CB director in the future. Colleagues need to focus on constructive support and challenge of the board. They also need to call out bad behaviour where and whenever they see or hear it.

If the majority of the CB (clubs) have changed its mind, and do not want to proceed with this change then the majority should say so. Equally if the majority of the CB has not changed its mind, and do not want to regress to how things were, then the majority must confirm their position. Remaining silent on this is no longer an option.

The current board comes to the end of its term this summer. There is very little appetite to continue in the current toxic atmosphere and circumstances. We will all fulfil our duties to the best of our abilities until that time.