PENNY STEWART, RFU COUNCIL REPRESENTATIVE FOR NORTHUMBERLAND

NOTES FROM THE RFU COUNCIL MEETING HELD 16th JUNE 2023

Please just drop me a line or give me a call if you would like to discuss any matters or require more detailed information, as I have provided a high level brief only.

CEO Report

Bill Sweeney reported that good progress is being made with PRL on the new Professional Game Agreement. A joint vision of 'World beating English teams and thriving professional leagues delivered through a fully optimised system in partnership with our players'.

Going forward the new PGA is likely to be referred to as the 'Professional Game Partnership' showing that it is more of a working partnership between all bodies involved. The role and effectiveness of the Academy system will be included in any Agreement. Bill emphasised that there is no 'new' investment coming to the RFU in the short-term; he acknowledged a lack of success at International level, and that Rugby is currently not achieving the RFU's growth ambitions. It was also confirmed the new 'partnership' will not take any more money away from the Community game. The recently-publicised review of Professional Rugby by DCMS is solely limited to that area. It is also hoped that Broadcast & sponsorship revenue will increase in coming years. It is also the aim to make the Professional game more sustainable, generating its own revenue. Other key aims linked to this going forward include a winning England, high quality domestic, European & International Competitions with a rejuvenated player pathway but also considering the players welfare. Bill was asked to provide a short briefing note for Council to engage with their Clubs, and this will be done.

Nominations Report

In a report from the Council Nominations committee 5 Council members who have to step down due to completing the full-term limits were recommended for Distinguished Membership and the composition of the Nominations Committee moving forward was agreed, with Penny Stewart being newly elected to the committee. The allocation to various RFU Sub-Committees of Council members was also agreed.

Lowering the Tackle Height

A presentation about the engagement sessions following the announcement of lowering the tackle height was given. The Roadmap, with engagement sessions planned, was released to the Game in a recent CGU. We were promised that, should demand require, additional sessions will be held. Head Injury Prevention & Management Sub-committee reported that over 200 tackle workshops are underway. The main comment was that key resources can be found on Englandrugby.com under the Tackle Height hub. This is constantly being updated and all players, coaches & clubs should be looking for more information over the coming weeks. Injury and especially concussion data will continually be monitored.

Adult Male Recovery Plan

The major focus still moving forward is around the Adult Male Recovery Plan. Linked to this the top priorities will include:

- Tackle Height Implementation
- Preserving a targeted number of Adult Male teams to be at risk
- Sustaining the engagement of more 16-21 year old male players
- Completing the Community game strategy/plan for implementation from season 24/25.

Travel funding is also being looked into plus the increased match official costs were noted.

Communications around Tackle Height, Papa Johns Community Cups and County Championship was noted by CGB and pressures on the Communications team were acknowledged.

Match Completion in the leagues is back to the same level as pre-pandemic but match completion in merit tables is below what was hoped for. Teams are encouraged to use 'Game-On' where it is possible to get a game played.

Community Game Strategy

An oversight Group has been set up by the Community Game Board. Community Game of the Future is one of the main focus points at the moment and Council were taken through the work to date what has followed on from the Game congress held in September 2022. This piece of work is important since there is a need to respond to shifting societal trends, evolving player preference and the profile of the game is changing. This is an opportunity to plan for long term investment and establish a clear role for the RFU where it can have the most impact – do we need more RFU 'boots on the ground' and where? The aim is to have more people playing (enjoying and engaging with all formats of) community rugby. This will cover coaching, refereeing and player welfare alongside competitions, Regulations and Discipline/ Safeguarding. As the programme is developed the game will be involved in engagement forums and surveys.

Regulations

The annual review of RFU Regulations has now been agreed, with the Governance Standing Committee being given delegated authority to finalise the wording. This also includes the regulations for all Competitions. Detailed Communications will be coming out to the Game in the coming weeks and reiterated again for the start of the season.

Premiership Cup

Council was given a presentation on the new Premiership Cup which is to include all teams in the Premiership and Championship clubs in 23/24.

2023/24 Business Plan

Council was taken through the business plan for the coming season but to start with a reminder was given on the current state of affairs- compared to pre-pandemic levels revenue across the current 4-year cycle is hugely reduced (some £15 million/year) and the revenues for 23/24 are again a lot lower the pre-pandemic forecasts. Whilst dealing with this the RFU has also faced the high inflation costs all clubs (and homes) have faced in recent times around utilities, people (wages), technology and Insurance. It is likely that the RFU will face a £12 million deficit for the 2022/23 season. Thus the reality is that the game has finite resources and far less to invest than pre-pandemic, but there is a willingness by the RFU not to further reduce its' investment in the Community Game.

National Youth Council

Council received a short report from the NYC – the process of establishing a network of Youth-related bodies to work with CBs is a focus for the 2023/24 season and is intended to highlight the value of including the views of younger players and Volunteers.

Review of Papa Johns Cup

An initial report from the review of the Papa Johns Cup was noted- this is still to be digested in more detail. The recommendations will be considered by ACMSC with some minor tweaks being considered for the coming season. (These are likely to include much better and earlier communications, earlier draw and draws done 'to the end' so teams can see where they may be going. The advice for expressions of interest for those Clubs wishing to enter the competition will be brought forward to October 2023.

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Current Committees/Task and Finish Groups:

Club and CB Development Sub Committee
Nominations Committee
Tackle Height Oversight Group
Lessons Learned Sub-Group 2