

Meeting Minutes: JSG WRU Meeting

Date: 10th May 2023

Attendees:

- Nigel Walker (WRU)
- Ieuan Evans (WRU)
- Malcolm Wall (WRU)
- Barrie Jones (Crys16)
- Keith Collins (OSC)
- Grant Berni (OSC)
- Lynn Glaister (CF10)
- Simon Harrington (CBSC)
- Dan Hallett (DOSC)



Agenda Item 1: PRA Deal and Payment Strategy

- Nigel Walker provided an update on the PRA deal, stating that it is currently subject to banking consent. NatWest has granted the required permission, but the process with the Welsh Government is ongoing. Some advanced payments have been made to the regions to support them during this delay. The lending arrangements and due diligence have caused the process to take longer than anticipated. The completion is expected within the next couple of weeks, and the WRU is in daily contact with the Welsh government to meet their requirements.
- Lynn Glaister raised a question about whether the WRU proceeded with the agreement without making the necessary arrangements with the Welsh Government. Nigel Walker assured that this was not the case.
- Malcolm Wall emphasized the importance of the deal's long-term planning opportunities and highlighted the need to develop academies, improve player pathways, and enhance commercial efforts to attract more funding for the game. The WRU and the regions are working together to create a plan to raise additional funds during the six-year framework.
- Barrie Jones inquired about the expected completion date of the deal. Nigel Walker acknowledged the time sensitivity and stated that every month that passes the more difficult it has been for the regions but everything possible was being done to assist the regions. The WRU is working closely with the Welsh Government to expedite the due diligence process and aims to complete it within the next couple of weeks.

Agenda Item 2: Professional Rugby Strategy

- Lynn Glaister expressed concerns about the number of players being released from clubs. Nigel Walker explained that player releases at this time of the year are common, and the regions have retained the majority of their players. Cardiff is an exception, where some players have been released due to specific circumstances. Nigel Walker confirmed that a strategy day is planned next month, where the WRU and regions will collaborate to develop a comprehensive strategy for professional rugby in Wales.
- Lynn Glaister emphasized the importance of having a comprehensive strategy that provides hope for the future of Welsh rugby. She also inquired about the duties of Mick Hogan, who has been brought in as a consultant to the PRB (Professional Rugby Board). Malcolm Wall clarified that Mick Hogan's role is solely focused on improving the commercial performance of the regions.
- Barrie Jones sought assurances that the WRU would not adopt the Scottish or Italian models of reducing the number of professional teams. Nigel Walker assured that the

PRB has discussed and voted to stick with the four-region model, and there have been no changes in this regard.

- Ieuan Evans highlighted the significance of improved commercial performances to sustain the four regions and stated that it's the size of the cake, not the size of the slice, that matters.
- Dan Hallett inquired about the progress on the independent ownership of the Dragons. Nigel Walker stated that the conclusion of the independent ownership is on track within the specified time limit, without disclosing the specific timeframe.

Agenda Item 3: Squad Sizes

- Nigel Walker mentioned that squad sizes in the regions have traditionally been around 48-50 players. However, going forward, he anticipates squad sizes to be reduced to 40-42 players. This reduction presents a challenge but also an opportunity to give younger players a chance. He clarified that this does not mean having a team primarily composed of 18-20 year-olds. The intention is to review the inclusion of 21-23 year-old players who traditionally wouldn't have had such opportunities. The adjustment has been made for financial reasons, and the squad sizes will be kept under review.
- Lynn Glaister sought clarification regarding the squad size target of 40-42 players, citing information that Cardiff is likely to have only 39 players next season. Nigel Walker acknowledged the slight deviation but mentioned that initial discussions with the regions indicated a target of around 42 players. He acknowledged the challenge this presents but assured that it would be monitored closely.
- Dan Hallett raised concerns about player safety in case of a run of injuries in specific positions, such as props. Nigel Walker emphasized that player safety is of utmost importance, and they would not field a player between 17-19 years old who is not capable of competing at that level. He mentioned the consideration of loan systems if a region is unable to field a complete team due to injuries.
- Regarding the impact of call-ups to the national squad and Six Nations on squad sizes, Dan Hallett highlighted the possibility of some teams being significantly reduced, with Ospreys potentially losing a full team. Nigel Walker stated that the URU season starts later this year, allowing time for players to join their teams after national duties. He also mentioned ongoing discussions with Ospreys about the challenges they may face during certain stages of the season. The situation will be monitored closely.
- Barrie Jones emphasized that the World Cup period will be challenging for all professional sides. Nigel Walker acknowledged the difficulty and affirmed the need to find solutions.
- Keith Collins raised concerns about the potential for increased injuries if more players are away with the national team. Nigel Walker discussed a conversation with an Ospreys colleague, who mentioned that the team had a relatively good year in terms of injuries. However, if the attrition rate increases, it will pose a challenge. Player welfare and fixture fulfilment are paramount, and measures such as loan systems will be considered to ensure safe participation if a team cannot field a complete squad.
- Keith Collins expressed his appreciation for the response and the consideration of player welfare.

Agenda Item 4: WRU Cost Savings

- Lynn Glaister inquired about cost reductions within the WRU and whether all parties are sharing the burden. Nigel Walker confirmed that the WRU has been actively seeking cost-saving measures over the past three months. Initially, there was a significant gap between available funds and planned expenditure, but this gap has been closed through cost-cutting and savings across various areas.

- Dan Hallett raised the topic of the finance director leaving, which leaves a vacancy at the top of the organization. Nigel Walker explained that the deputy finance director will assume the role temporarily, and the position will be advertised in the Autumn.
- Lynn Glaister mentioned that fans would like more details about the cost savings made. Malcolm Wall clarified that the funding provided by the WRU to the professional clubs has not been reduced; rather, the focus has been on ensuring that clubs manage their spending within their income. He emphasized that investments in development have not been cut as they are vital for the long-term future. While there have been cost cuts within the WRU, Malcolm Wall expressed concerns about the perception that funding had been reduced

Agenda Item 5: WRU Enquiry

- Barrie Jones requested an update on the WRU enquiry.
- Nigel Walker informed the attendees that an independent review, chaired by Dame Rafferty, has been ongoing for approximately 10-11 weeks. Two reports have been received so far, and interviews have taken place with more scheduled in the coming weeks. The report is expected to be delivered within the next three to four months.
- Lynn Glaister acknowledged the importance of independent reviews and expressed the need to move forward.
- Nigel Walker stated that the organization is committed to implementing the review recommendations in full. He highlighted the progress made by the organization over the past 18 months, recognizing the continuous need for improvement. The report is eagerly awaited to understand the existing gaps and receive recommendations for further improvement. The organization strives to become more inclusive and enhance its contribution to Welsh rugby.
- Ieuan Evans emphasized the importance of not being stagnant during the independent panel review and expressed the determination to continue evolving across the entire organization.
- Lynn Glaister inquired about potential conflicts between the major reforms being implemented, such as executive changes and November elections, and the review recommendations.
- Nigel Walker expressed confidence that the announced governance changes, including the introduction of independent non-executive directors and the goal of having at least five women on the board, align with best practices. The organization has designated Equality, Diversity & Inclusion (ED&I) champions on the main board and executive board, established a whistle-blowing hotline, and formed an ED&I steering group. He assured that these initiatives will not contradict the review recommendations.
- Ieuan Evans emphasized the need for continuous review, assessment, and measurement in governance, emphasizing that it is crucial for all organizations.
- Lynn Glaister asked if the WRU would be involved in promoting wider diversity of governance within the regions.
- Nigel Walker explained that discussions regarding diversity of governance have been taking place over the past few months. It is the responsibility of all organizations involved in Welsh rugby. During the district visits to discuss governance changes, several clubs requested assistance, and the WRU has committed to providing support. The organization aims to understand the current gap and learn from the ongoing review to share knowledge and work collaboratively with clubs and regions.

Agenda Item 6: Any Other Business (AOB)

- Lynn Glaister informed the attendees that the URC has reached out to the Joint Supporters Group (JSG) to seek opinions regarding their PR and communications. A meeting has been scheduled with the URC in the near future.

- Ieuan Evans expressed his satisfaction with the URC's initiative.
- Malcolm Wall confirmed the awareness of the URC's request and stated that the received report will be incorporated into the strategy days mentioned by Nigel Walker. The organization is collecting input from various stakeholders, including themselves.
- Barrie Jones asked if there was anything the organization would like to see from JSG.
- Malcolm Wall expressed the need for increased support at games to drive progress and achieve bigger and better outcomes. He thanked everyone for their support and emphasized the importance of its continuation.
- Barrie Jones provided an example of the successful marketing of the European Challenge Cup quarter-final by the Scarlets, resulting in a significant turnout of local attendees. He expressed the hope that these attendees would continue to engage with the organization.
- Ieuan Evans emphasized the positive influence and impact of scenes and support like those witnessed at the quarter final. He highlighted the value of parochial support in fostering the game of rugby union.
- Keith Collins mentioned the remarkable support of over 2000 Ospreys fans during an away game against Saracens. He shared the players' awe at the overwhelming turnout. He also stressed the importance of shedding the perception that it is the Welsh Rugby Union versus the four regions, and instead promoting unity.
- Nigel Walker emphasized that it is Welsh rugby as a whole that needs to succeed, not just the regions or Wales. He highlighted the interdependency between the success of the regions and the senior men's team. Sustainable success requires successful regions.
- Keith Collins expressed frustration over having to play URC games with a depleted squad and welcomed the Union's willingness to collaborate rather than work against the regions.
- Lynn Glaister shared positive feedback regarding the Women's 6 Nations, noting that friends who attended the games and had not previously watched rugby were now considering attending pro games at the Arms Park due to the enjoyable atmosphere. She thanked Nigel for the improvement in the women's game and highlighted the potential for traction in the women's rugby market.
- Nigel Walker acknowledged the efforts of Iwan Cunningham's coaches, support staff, and players, highlighting their hard work and deserving rewards.
- Lynn Glaister inquired about the timeline for appointing the new chief executive and chair.
- Ieuan Evans confirmed that they are currently in the process of shortlisting candidates for the independent chair, and subsequent appointments will follow. It is anticipated that all positions will be filled before the end of the year, with the independent chair being the first appointment.
- Lynn Glaister asked if the commitment to having either the Chair or Chief Exec be a woman still stands.
- Nigel Walker affirmed the aspiration to have five women on the board and either the chair or chief executive position. However, the organization recognizes that the best candidates for the roles need to be selected, and achieving the aspiration might require multiple stages rather than a single step.
- Ieuan Evans reassured attendees that they are pleased with the number and quality of candidates.
- Barrie Jones concluded the meeting by expressing gratitude to all attendees. He noted that the minutes would be agreed upon by all parties before being issued to the members. The next meeting is scheduled for August 9th.