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TO: Stephen Pearson Esq.

*Chair of the Future Competitions Structure Working Group
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RFU League Re-Structuring Proposals – Preston Grasshoppers RFC & The Future of Community Rugby

Please see attached our response to the RFU New Competition proposals

- The proposed RFU structure addresses many issues, but too much regionalisation risks losing competitive matches and less matches, if Saturday loses the ‘this is the day I play rugby’ tag, risks player retention and would adversely impact on income and hence sustainability.
- We suggest an alternative flatter structure with less geographical sub-division and leagues of 14 teams – we believe confining our opposition to Northern counties is appropriate. It meets player concerns on number of matches and travel time, would reduce our cost base whilst maintaining attractive fixtures to support club sustainability. It provides a guaranteed number of 1st XV home games sufficiently early to support planning of adequate match day income generating opportunities and provides a profile that would appeal to a range of club sponsors and ideally a title sponsor for the league.
- If this is not feasible, the adoption of the RFU proposed structure is workable although reduced games at level 5 poses a threat to player retention and commercial sustainability. It would be considerably enhanced by the introduction of well policed, mandatory salary cap levels with clear severe sanctions for non-compliance, and the adoption of an end of season play-off and League cup competition.
- Wage inflation in the community game must be brought under control. If there is no change to the salary cap structure, and clubs are still allowed to opt out of the system it is difficult to see the current wage-inflation issues being managed with the resulting adverse impact on sustainability. We are supporting the objectives of the RFU by committing significant investment in the future of the game through our large Mini and Youth sections but are seeing ever decreasing senior team reward for doing so under the current system.
- The RFU can support its aspiration to keep up rugby participation by challenging National league clubs to become genuine community hubs where the emphasis is on high quality competitive rugby with enjoyment being the prime objective. We consider Preston Grasshoppers to be a model of such a community hub and will continue to invest to keep that level of engagement but worry that there is no incentive for others to become community hubs - indeed the incentive is probably negative in that clubs who do not will obviously have a lower cost base. We believe the introduction of qualification requirements related to community engagement would provide such incentives.

- The proposed cup options are of limited appeal, but an end of season play-off format based on final league position leading to a 'National champions' final on a showpiece ground, coupled with a League cup, with a final at the same venue and on the same day as the National final would seem to be more attractive for players and potential sponsors.
- As a club which has played at both level 4 and 5 in recent years, we are probably more interested than most in the mechanisms to be used to place teams in the revised structure. Even in a transition year we would advocate continuation of at least a minimum promotion and relegation between divisions and firmly believe that as well as playing field merit, the qualification for involvement in National league rugby should include metrics associated with community support

Our supporting document explains the challenges we face as a one of the biggest community clubs in the country and the process we have undertaken to identify what structure would allow us to continue to provide significant participation levels. We believe it is vital that the proposed restructuring of the RFU Leagues should ensure that the future viability and profile of true community clubs are put at the core of the decision-making process when this is put before the RFU Executive. Those whose primary concern is centred purely on retaining a pathway to Level 2 should no longer exert extra influence on the process of how the league structure should be arranged.

We would therefore expect the RFU to ensure that a strong stable system that is skewed towards clubs who are the real heartbeat of the game in terms of driving participation to be at the heart of any systemic change to the league structure going forward. We hope that the key requirements listed in our documents would feature significantly in the criteria that forms the basis for your decision when that time comes.

Finally, can I offer an open invitation to you or any of your team, to contact me to discuss our proposals or indeed, should the circumstances permit, to visit our club and see our facilities in real life.

Yours sincerely,

Gareth Dyer

Head of Rugby Operations; On Behalf of Preston Grasshoppers RFC

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