

The Welsh Rugby Union has undertaken a new review into its processes after recent contract negotiations with its senior Women's international squad.

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The Wales Women's squad were awarded 37 new full-time professional contracts last month, making them one of the best looked after international sides in the world game.

The new contracts were welcomed by all parties but protracted and sometimes challenging negotiations in advance of agreement being reached were the main subject of the review.

The WRU will publish its findings after key recommendations have been ratified by a formal Board meeting in the coming weeks, but it is keen to share the headline points in a more timely manner to achieve greater transparency for all involved.

The review was conducted by Board members Alison Thorne (an Independent Non-Executive Director) and Claire Donovan (a National Council Member) with chair Richard Collier-Keywood and CEO Abi Tierney key contributors.

"We have been primarily motivated by a need to do the very best that we can for our players, but it has also been necessary to take a balanced approach and build a framework that is financially sustainable," said CEO Tierney

"The review examines processes and behaviours at the WRU with regards to the consultation process on new contracts and we have listened to the concerns it highlights and already committed to a series of improvements in this area.

"We are responding to the recommendations of an extremely thorough review process which saw 50 or more hours of interviews take place and listened to around 30 people throughout the playing squad and other individuals involved in negotiations.

"We have found further areas to improve upon. Over the last few years, the way the WRU has invested in our senior women's high-performance squad has changed significantly —with more funding and focus and more professional players and opportunities.

"This year has been a significant year of transition for the Wales Women's squad. With high expectations and new ways of working come significant pressure and challenges, and it is clear that we need to work harder to make sure that we develop an effective and rewarding relationship with our players.

“Our intention was always to invest further and expand the opportunities so that more women can become professional players. We are grateful to the players for working with us and highlighting that contract negotiations were not handled as they should.

“This constructive engagement led to a review undertaken by an independent Board member and a nationally elected Board member to consider what had happened and how we can continue to learn and improve.”

WRU chair Richard Collier-Keywood said: “What we saw highlighted significant problems that should have been tackled earlier and with better communication across the year, and we are very sorry for the additional and avoidable pressure that several people described to us.

“In contrast to the senior male players, the women in the national squad are direct employees of the WRU.

“The review has highlighted that we should have prepared better for the implications of that responsibility and avoided, as far as possible, the breakdown in trust that ensued.

“There are a number of practical steps we can now take to ensure we improve the way we support our high-performance players and create an employment framework that encompasses development, performance, culture, and behaviours, shaped by the players and the coaching team alongside external expertise.”

Tierney added: “We have been delighted to confirm 37 new full-time contracts which make our Wales squad one of the best looked after in the world game.

“The WRU will continue to invest in the women and girls’ game which will receive in total £26m in funding over the new five-year strategy we will be confirming in the next weeks. This amounts to a £6m uplift recently approved by the WRU Board.

“These moves are indicative of how WRU has learned from previous experiences and show the improved governance processes we now have in place.”

Women’s contract process review summary of main points:

Background

1. The contracts for the Women’s 15 rugby squad were due for renewal/review in June 2024. This would be the third iteration of the contracts since first introduced in 2021 by the WRU. All contracts effectively expired at the same date due to the new nature of the programme.
2. The Performance Management Team (PMT) and the Executive Leadership of the WRU were coordinating the renewal process & negotiations during the first half of 2024.
3. Richard Collier- Keywood, Chair, & the WRU Board on 8 August 2024 received a letter from a senior player on behalf of the squad setting out their concerns on how they had been treated during negotiations.

4. After consultation with the WRU Board, Rugby management, Executive leadership and players the Chair set two streams of work:
5. a) Completion of the negotiations with a core team of Abi Tierney [Group CEO] Lydia Stirling [People Director] and Delyth Davies [Senior Legal Advisor].
6. b) A review of the whole contract process (not the contract itself) Chaired by Alison Thorne [Senior Independent Director] and Claire Donovan [WRU Board member & Elected National Council Member]. Alison Thorne is Chair of the People, Culture and Governance Committee and Claire Donovan is the Board Champion for Integrity and safeguarding.
7. The wide terms of reference focussed on understanding key steps in the contract negotiations, the cultural background for them, learning for everyone, and recommendations on how to sharpen the process.
8. About 30 people volunteered to talk to Alison and Claire in confidence from all elements involved in the process. The Panel is grateful for their openness and the contributions made.
9. The ambitious timetable for the review was completion by 28 October 2024. The women's team was at WXV in South Africa for over three weeks in the middle of this period and not all contributors were in one place. Due to Diary challenges the review was completed and presented to the Board on 31 October. Further aspects of it will be considered by Board in the week commencing 4 Nov.

Conclusions

As Women's professional sport grows the dynamics about employment, engagement, media, brand and the structure of the Women's game in many sports is undergoing rapid change.

The WRU process for contracts failed to take this into account when approaching the new round of contract negotiations. Nor had it established an approach and methodology that supported the start of a new Professional era from its conception in 2021.

Although every individual and all elements entered the process with the aim to deliver more for Women's rugby in Wales, all had different views as to what this entailed.

This is reflected in the belief system that exists in the WRU that Performance is different and is outside the normal employment rights and obligations. This is incorrect and needs to be addressed and changed.

The WRU has employment responsibilities to the women's players with contracts that do not exist elsewhere in the performance pathway (i.e. in the Men's game), and this must be recognised. The players have been kept at a distance from the People team and the wider WRU and this has resulted in mistrust which could isolate the players even further if not resolved.

The players, having had little exposure to contract negotiations previously, did not know what to expect and there was a level of inexperience as to what might happen. A view of 'we go in high; they knock us down and we agree in the middle' seemed to prevail. Whilst from a management perspective, they went in with the best financial offer they could provide and were proud of the additional funds that had been allocated and made that clear from the start. This prevented effective engagement.

The WRA filled the void for the players as communication became difficult with the WRU Performance Management Team (PMT) though within the WRA there were differing views and styles of approaches which contributed to the misunderstandings arising.

One of the pivotal moments was towards the end of July when the PMT were very worried that the process was likely to impact the preparation for the Scotland game on 6 September with awareness that the players said they were considering strike action. With contracts still not signed, the WRUEL made the decision to put a deadline on signing of the contracts by issuing a letter requiring signature within three hours under threat of pulling the women's team out of matches and rapidly bringing through the U20s. The WRUEL were very frustrated with the process and now understand this was a mistake. The WRUEL has apologised to the Chair of the WRU and clearly accepts that this was an error and apologises to the players too. It is hoped that this will be an important milestone in rebuilding a positive relationship between WRUEL and the players.

In any sport governing body, there must be an awareness of the position of power it holds in determining international careers and the impact that has in the contract process. By creating a clear process with open dialogue this will minimise the potentially negative impact of this dynamic.

Due to the lack of a clear transparent plan for the contract process, there was a lack of effective communication. This and the pivotal moments shown in the full report created heightened emotions and poor behaviour manifested itself from different and most of the parties at different stages. Although the panel has an understanding of the drivers, there is no excuse for the poor behaviour demonstrated, people should show respect to each other, be courteous and considerate.

Recommendations

The review panel have made a series of recommendations in response to its findings, and these are now being discussed with the WRU Board

The recommendations focus on:

Future Negotiation process

Performance and Behaviour Model for Players

Communication

WRU as an employer and the Players as employees

Organisational Structure of the Women's Game

Leadership skills

Employee Voice

Values and relationships

The WRU is grateful that the players escalated these issues to the Board and for their openness and contribution to the work of the review panel. Once the Review has been finalised, it will be published.