

Taken for granted



League development suffered a £10million blow at the turn of the year. PHIL CAPLAN reports on the implications

There were two ways of looking at the announcement of a £10million pound drop in central funding for rugby league, delivered by Sport England midway through the opening of advent calendars.

The obvious one was to view them as Scrooge and see it as another stick to beat the game's hierarchy; devoid of commercial income, they had now had the goose laying their golden egg part-repossessed.

Letters went out to staff, recruited under the Whole Sport Plan that was coming to end, explaining the position and either confirmation of contract termination or the need to re-apply for slightly different roles under a new, trimmer structure - merry Christmas indeed.

Standing in reception at Red Hall on Christmas Eve the usual feeling of being aboard the Marie Celeste, exacerbated by only a skeleton staff being in, was overlaid by a sense of understandable foreboding and uncertainty. But, there is another way of perceiving the shortfall, and that is to look at the granting of just over £17million pounds until 2017 as a realistic appraisal of where the sport sits, especially in times of austerity.

The magnitude of the previous award was a surprise and, in some respects, a never to be repeated windfall. Many on the inside knew that its targets were unattainable but the welcome investment and jobs created, albeit now some of them temporary, allowed development and performance work to be done that would have previously been unthinkable.

So to New Year's Eve and a more clandestine meeting with a Red Hall insider to discuss the implications of the new deal. Can rugby league survive facing its own fiscal cliff?

"It's not been a surprise for most of us. Everyone was aware that the funding cycle is four years and the majority of people employed in September 2009 had a fixed term contract to 31st March 2013. There are a couple of people that didn't realise they would be on the affected list, but you would have to be a little naïve not to realise the funding situation and the state of the global economy."

"There was a million pound cut in 2011, which was an indicator, and an initial meeting in July where those potentially at risk were told, so it is already some six months in the making."

With the sport crying out for a top level spokesperson as it heads into what



When Santa didn't come down the Red Hall chimney: Funding blow for the RFL *SWPix.com*

could - and indeed should - be a defining year, here was an opportunity to crow about what has been retained rather than allow vultures to circle and pick at a seemingly decaying carcass.

"Absolutely, when you look at some of the rivals like rugby union, cricket and tennis, they are comparable. Take tennis, who you would think would be a big player. They have only been given funding for a year and been told that they have to write a plan and make it sustainable and believable for the following three years.

"In a way, we are in the premier league of sports that have been given guarantees over a four-year cycle. Sport England obviously believes in our plan and we have got market value for what we can achieve."

The greater danger, perhaps, is that with an anticipated spike of interest created post a - hopefully - brash and successful World Cup, we will not have the staffing structure to cope.

"Our game is predominantly volunteered within community clubs and leagues, and what we have gone away from in the last four years is them actually delivering. We had a big increase in staff in 2009 who ostensibly took on the role of the volunteer, so we will need to attract them back and empower them. Any juniors who watch the World Cup and are inspired will still be able to turn up at a local club and not notice a difference."

Geographically, when much store is being set on geographical expansion in Championship One, there is a worry that economic retrenchment could mean a focus solely on the northern-centric base.

"That is probably of our own making. A lot of the clubs in expansion areas have become overly reliant on funded community coaches or development officers. The point going forward is that we have to ensure those clubs are self-sustainable and not run by external staff. One of the tasks over the last six months has been to work on a staff exit strategy so that we can leave the game in good health if they did lose their positions."

So the talk is of leaner, fitter and a more fit for purpose organisation. "Definitely, it



Development path: England Lions U18s grapple with the AIS in December