

MOVING ON

A review of the need for change in athletics in the UK

Andrew Foster

Executive Summary

Introduction

Towards the end of last year UK Sport and Sport England invited me to bring forward independent recommendations about the future direction of athletics in this country. I have been helped in this by Michael Johns and David Whitaker and I am very grateful for their wisdom and support. Our report is published today under the title *Moving On: a review of the need for change in athletics in the UK*.

I would like to pay tribute to the support and encouragement we have received in carrying out the review from the athletics community in general. The staff of UK Sport and Sport England have been particularly helpful and some of the key background papers they and others prepared for us have been brought together under separate cover. They also are published today and are available on request from UK Sport.

This is a summary of the main themes and recommendations in the report.

Athletics in the UK

The British people care about athletics. There are more than 1400 affiliated athletics clubs with around 150,000 members. Perhaps half a million young people participate in some form of organised grass roots activity. Something like 750,000 people take part in mass road races.

We are justifiably proud of the great athletes we have produced over the years and our continued achievements at international level. Since 1966 senior UK athletes have won 61 medals in major championships, 20 of them gold. We had an excellent Olympic games in 2000 and the last

Commonwealth games and European Championships were outstanding. Great Britain has won the men's European Cup three times in five years. We have good young athletes coming through, as junior international performance shows, and in 2002 we topped the medal table at the Paralympic World Championships in Lille.

Athletics has the support of an unparalleled body of volunteer workers and helpers at local level. This is one of the sport's defining features in this country and we must preserve it.

We have with the BBC the best domestic television coverage of athletics in the world. This generates significant income for the sport alongside outstanding sponsorship contributions from Norwich Union, Rover, Reebok and others. And many with other commercial interests in athletics, often distinguished former athletes, have served their sport well.

The British people express their affection for this old, great and truly beautiful sport in many ways, and we must do everything we can to safeguard its joys for the future, for those who will watch and those who will take part. It really is worth it, but there are challenges to be faced.

The changing context

Some of the challenges are simply facts of life. Britain used to be one of the dominant powers in world athletics, along with the USA, USSR, and West and East Germany. But despite continued successes, we and others in Europe have lost relative position on the world stage as the number of countries competing internationally has doubled. The trend line for GB team points at World Championships and Olympic Games is

downwards and the same is true at junior levels. International athletics is an increasingly tough environment in which to succeed.

Even allowing for this, however, performance in the last World Championships in Edmonton and Paris was judged to be disappointing, and we have repeatedly been told that athletics in the UK is not fulfilling its potential.

Some attribute this to general evidence of falling participation in sport amongst children and young people. The adult population has unprecedented leisure and sporting opportunities and athletics has to compete with them. These broad social facts do not, we are told, augur well for performance athletics in the future.

We have come to the conclusion however that there are issues around the culture, organisation and management of athletics that we *can* do something about.

Culture and organisation

Athletics is essentially an individual not a team sport. Perhaps it should not surprise us that the culture of athletics as a whole reflects something of athletics at the individual level. Our impression is that the world of athletics is run by individual people and organisations without a strong sense of partnership, and with an inclination to compete for dominance. Territory and position are jealously guarded. The competitive mindset runs deep and manifests itself constantly. We have encountered some worrying symptoms: destructive hostility between individuals and organisations, backbiting, blindness to the facts, resistance to change, self interest. One interviewee memorably described athletics as an archipelago not a landmass.

One particular battleground is the balance and relative value of professional athletes, coaches and managers on the one hand, and those who work for the sport as amateurs and volunteers on the other. Many sports wrestle with this. The way forward is to accept the realities of a modern world and embrace the pluralism of a sport that is blessed with so many different forms of help and support. Another battleground is the very

purpose of athletics, with some favouring the elite end of the sport and others emphasising the personal wellbeing and public health benefits of mass participation. In reality, these purposes are not mutually inconsistent but serve each other, and they have more equal legitimacy than some individuals and organisations will truly accept.

If athletics in the UK is to move forward this intolerant nonsense must stop: one of our key messages is that for the sake of athletes and athletics, peace must break out.

The sport is also held back avoidably by its management and organisation, some elements of which do not meet modern standards. Policies and priorities are not fully shared. There are too many organisations with a major stake. Roles and responsibilities are unclear and inconsistent. Too little planning and decision making is devolved to the local level.

Major investment is also needed, and it is potentially available in the shape of the £41 million 'legacy fund' set aside when the 2005 World Championships were lost to the UK.

A new compact

We have a number of practical suggestions to make. They are underpinned by a belief that investment should be linked to progress and outcomes through a new agreement between the sport itself and those who fund it. We suggest an early injection of 'pump priming' funds to get things moving in an agreed direction, and then significant further investment once a number of key 'must do' objectives have been met. This is the 'new compact'

However I must personally say, and I emphasise this, that I could not conscientiously recommend the release of significant new investment without seeing signs of a new mindset in athletics and a suspension of hostilities; and, at the same time, specific developments in the organisation and management of the sport.

Those responsible for the sport must regroup to face the challenges, and now is the time. Athletics is not in crisis but it is at a crossroads: a failure to work together now could have adverse consequences for years to come.

Key recommendations

We make a significant number of recommendations. They do not directly address everything that needs to be changed or improved. They focus on:

- essential rationalisation of the structure and management of athletics
- a few priority areas for the development of practice
- a change management process designed to draw the sport together and ensure progress and hence further investment.

If the basics of attitude and good management can be improved much else will naturally follow in the course of time. In that sense our proposals are intended to be catalytic.

We attach particular importance to the following priority proposals.

Organisation

The English regions should be managed by a new body - English Athletics - with operational responsibility for delivering all aspects of athletics in England except the management of elite athletes and anti-doping work. The balance between its streamlined central office and its nine regions, or 'hubs', should be its defining feature, with decision making powers devolved as far as possible to the regional level so that what happens locally reflects local circumstances. This approach commands widespread agreement.

We hope that the AAA of England will play a very full part in designing and establishing the new organisation and that the skills, energy and commitment of its people will be retained for the sport.

UK Athletics should develop its vitally important strategic role, providing leadership across the athletics community and a framework of objectives, resources, guidance and support for the home country bodies. It should continue to manage elite athletes and anti-doping work and remain as the internationally recognised governing body for athletics.

Performance Director

The key post of Performance Director is shortly to fall vacant on the planned retirement of the present Director. We strongly recommend that it should be filled through international search with the help of appropriate recruitment consultants. The aim should be to secure the services of the best available person in the world.

Club development

The English regions and the Celtic home countries should be asked to bring forward 'club development plans' consistent with UK Athletics strategy. This process should be backed by a new revenue Club Development Fund, formed by releasing some of the currently unused legacy funding. Some of this should be available in advance to fund early developments amongst clubs, with further investment contingent on improvement.

School curriculum

It is planned to produce new curriculum resources for schools by September this year which are 'child-centred, developmental, progressive and inclusive'; we recommend this as a further area for early legacy funding, with a sum for pump priming made available as soon as possible this year, and further support delivered on the basis of achievement after, say, eighteen months.

Teacher training

Developments are needed and planned in teacher training. Again we propose sufficient early investment to get things moving and then further resources contingent on performance.

Membership

A single comprehensive membership scheme should be introduced in England as a priority, alongside the developing schemes in the other home countries. Sufficient legacy funding should be released to conduct market research on membership services and to design and develop a scheme. It should be introduced quickly with tangible benefits flowing to members as soon as possible. UK Athletics should manage this process with a view to

handing a working and obviously self-financing scheme over to English Athletics within eighteen months.

Competition

The competition structure needs reform and we require UK Athletics to take a strong lead, supported by sufficient early investment of legacy funding to begin to drive change through.

Managing change

It is essential that change is managed in a modern and determined way: driven by the incentive of major investment, led by those who are committed to the direction of travel, and paced so as to achieve significant improvements quickly. The road from Athens to Beijing is not very long. We suggest a tried and tested project management approach, with costs reimbursed from legacy funding when the first tranche is released.

There should be a Project Board comprising representatives of UK Sport, Sport England, UK Athletics, the AAA of England and the Celtic home country bodies. Membership should however be predicated on assent to the priority recommendations of this report. There should be an independent chair. The Project Board should have oversight of the change process and, over a project lifespan of around twelve months (a maximum of eighteen) make firm recommendations about the release of legacy funding contingent on progress that it would monitor and seek to drive through. Note that it is a temporary body.

A senior, full time Project Director should be appointed for a maximum eighteen month period. He or she would be accountable to the Project Board for delivering change, with its support, in a timely and sustainable way.

The Director should have the support of a Project Team to facilitate this, comprising representatives of the involved organisations - but again with membership dependent on agreement with the broad direction of policy. The role of members would be to deliver the commitment, resources and expertise of their parent bodies.

An early priority task would be to design a detailed workplan and agree it with the Board. This should be geared to deliver the priority recommendations outlined above and as many as possible of our other proposals over the maximum project lifespan of eighteen months. We offer broad strategic direction. If it is accepted the sport itself must work on and own the details of implementation: this is the role of the Project Board and Director.

The pace of work should be fast. We suggest that the Project Board should be ready and able to draw down pump priming legacy funds within six months to support developments in clubs, schools, membership, competition and possibly coaching; and as soon as possible thereafter, to demonstrate the achievement of our key objectives, and significant progress with others, as justification for more substantial investment.

At the risk of labouring the point, there must be a clear understanding that initial legacy funding should cover project costs and an injection of pump priming to achieve selected practical benefits quickly, but that the larger part of the resources available should be released only against demonstrable progress in implementing comprehensive and sustainable change.

Making a decision, making a start

We can only make recommendations: who decides? We propose that UK Sport and Sport England take the lead jointly, receiving our report, consulting briefly with key stakeholders and appointing to the Project Board and Team those who are content to go down the chosen road. The Project Director and Project Manager posts should be advertised as soon as UK Sport and Sport England have considered our report.

I have no vested interest in the sport of athletics, but a very strong desire that the passion so many of us feel for it should find a fuller expression through its healthy development and achievements.

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