Independent Review of UK Athletics – Summary of findings[i]

Background

A review instigated to recommend areas of change and organisational development to ensure that the leadership, governance and management of Athletics at the UK level is '**fit for the future'**. Throughout the review, these four words were very much the focus. Particular reference was given to:

- Strategy
- Leadership and Culture
- Governance
- Integration and Connectivity

The review has been positioned as the 'discovery' phase. Recommendations will be made to UK Sport as to what action should follow from this review.

Research and Evidence

In conducting the review, extensive research has been undertaken. This has included reading a number of previous reviews that had been commissioned – including the Deloitte review (2003), and the Foster report (2004) amongst others. This has been supplemented by further research carried out by the UK Sport secretariat at the request of the reviewer.

In a little over a month, around 40 separate interviews were conducted, with nearly 50 different individuals in locations such as London, Birmingham, and Edinburgh. Many of these then involved follow up conversations.

Participants in the review have also submitted position papers to serve as evidence for the review and the UK Sport Board.

The current position

Whilst the focus of the review was to recommend areas of change in reference to the 'fit for the future' mindset, it is important to acknowledge the current state of affairs.

The scars inflicted as a result of the period of difficulty within Athletics are clear to see. The impression formed during the review was that Athletics in the UK is not (currently) in a good position.

Many of the participants that were interviewed highlighted a disappointment at having experienced poor behaviours within the sport, and also referred to a general culture of mistrust. This was particularly highlighted in relation to the relationship between UKA and the HCAFs. UKA were accused of adopting a defensive approach to the engagement with stakeholders.

It was often referenced that the current state of Athletics 'couldn't get any worse'.

'Sportscape'

It was evident during the review that, even to those within the sport of Athletics, the 'Sportscape' was unclear and complicated. Most participants found it difficult to accurately describe the Athletics stakeholder map, the routes of funding, and the various pathways within the sport.

Current Culture

The complicated 'sportscape', and lack of clarity of the roles and responsibilities are perhaps contributors to the pervasive culture that has existed within the sport. Other factors include the drive for medals, the individual nature of the sport, as well as the reflection of national politics under devolution.

There is a desire for more transparency and openness, particularly around decision-making. It was also suggested that the culture has not been as collaborative as is necessary for the sport to succeed.

Cause for optimism

A consistent message throughout was that all is not lost. There is an appetite within the sport to make this work, with contribution from all parties. The recent collaborative approach adopted from new leadership within UKA has been well received within the sport, and it would be advisable to maintain this.

It was also apparent that a good example in relation to behaviours already exists within the sport. Some participants spoke positively about the Paralympic World Class Programme, in particular the transparency in relation to decision-making, and a general collaborative approach.

Signs of progress

One example worth highlighting to evidence that the sport itself has already taken steps to work more collaboratively relates to Coaching. The CEOs of the HCAFs and UKA met recently to discuss the way forward for Coaching. An agreement was reached on the appointment of a Head of Coaching who would lead on a strategy for Coaching for Athletics in the UK (a current gaping hole within the sport). The developments in this area could be used as an example of the benefits of the Athletics bodies working together.

Action

The following recommendations focus on areas identified within the Terms of Reference.

Leadership, Culture and Connectivity

Addressing the Culture and Connectivity, together with the recent additions to the UKA leadership, could transform the position.

The success of the transformation will be underpinned by the behaviours displayed by those at the top level of the sport. It is paramount that the previous 'stone-throwing' culture is eradicated, and a more positive, collaborative approach is adopted.

One quick action to help in this regard would be to make use of a CEO forum with attendance from the CEOs of all five bodies. This forum's first task would be to collaboratively agree a way forward for the development of a strategy for Athletics in the UK, perhaps building on the 'Athletic Nation' vision document. It would be beneficial for the Home Country Sports Councils to align in order to encourage this and all other forms of constructive collaboration.

Structure/Governance

In the course of the review, many suggestions for structural change within Athletics were put forward, some more radical than others. The initial views formed in the review were in favour of the following actions in relation to the Governance and structures of UKA:

- **To reaffirm the Articles of the UKA** – A simple exercise of cross referencing the Articles of UKA and the HCAFs identifies areas of overlap in responsibility. An action to reaffirm the role of UKA within its constitutional documents would provide clarity and certainty in relation to what UKA is (and isn't) responsible for.
- **To give each HCAF a seat on the UKA Board –** This change is recommended to allow for the HCAFs to be part of the decision-making for Athletics across the UK. It is important to note that any individuals appointed by virtue of this must adhere to the duties of a director set out in the Companies Act 2006, most notably to act in a way which is most likely to promote the success of the company for the benefits of its members as a whole. They must not act on behalf of the body they are nominated by.
- **To radically rethink the UK Members Council –** Throughout the review, there was little support for the UKMC as it currently operates, and confusion as to its core purpose. Some participants did put forward that the group should be a source of information for the decision-making authority within UKA. The timelines of this review did not allow for a thorough examination of the most appropriate function/role of this group and how any change would be brought about, but it is recommended that this is explored, with a genuine consideration as to whether the group has a role at all. Different options for the group should be considered, including making it a more representative function, or replacing it. All considerations must take into account the confines of Company Law.

Areas of focus

The review also exposed certain areas which require immediate attention. A focus on addressing these areas should be a priority for the new UKA leadership.

Communication

A fast improvement is needed in the sphere of communications. It is no secret that the sport has suffered from persistent leaks of information over the past 18 months. This could be attributed in some part to the disaffection with the approach taken by UKA to communication.

A highly defensive approach to relationships with the media is counterproductive. A more proactive approach and tone from the leadership might have a positive impact in this area.

A new approach is also necessary for internal communication, marketing, and communication with the sport as a whole.

It's important to stress that this is not a criticism of the individuals operating within the UKA communications department. It is more a reflection on the tone and mentality in this area across UKA.

Digital strategy

It was surprising to discover that there was little evidence of a digital strategy for the sport. There are many people across the UK partaking in activity which is not overseen by the traditional club structure of the sport but would fall under the remit of 'Athletics'. However, there was no evidence of the channels to effectively engage with these people. Therefore, a recommendation for the new leadership would be to prioritise the formation of a digital strategy to engage with a wider audience.

Events

Identifying the correct mechanism for the operation of commercial events is a challenge. It was widely perceived that events are and should remain a responsibility of UKA, and the team within UKA is well respected.

The climate will become increasingly difficult, with new challenges being presented regularly.

This review did not seek to assess in detail which mechanism for the operation of events is the most desirable. However, the review did receive some suggestions as to how events could be operated. Therefore, the recommendation is to explore the options put forward and other available options. The business case for each option should be straightforward to produce, and decisions should swiftly follow.

Ethics

In the evolving landscape of new technologies and performance enhancements, ethical considerations will become increasingly finely balanced.

It is paramount that levels of authority in relation to decision-making on the 'grey areas' are crystal clear. Individuals operating under pressure to deliver targets will find it difficult to maintain objectiveness. Therefore, a safe and independent centre for advice on these matters is required.

Shared Services

Another consistent theme of the review was that the sport was over-administered. A brief inspection of the operations across the sport supported this view. There are clear overlaps in certain areas and there are opportunities for further efficiencies. It is important that any potential efficiencies are not imposed, and instead any decisions are reached collectively.

When?

There has been considerable cynicism amongst stakeholders that this review will be 'kicked into the long grass'. This is perhaps an effect of recommendations from previous reviews not being acted upon effectively. To avoid the same situation occurring here, it is recommended that a decision on the optimum course of action for the period of May – October 2020 be made swiftly and that all recommendations have clear timelines for implementation.

The role and impact of UK Sport

It is necessary for the UK Sport Board and executive to reflect on its role and impact, not just on the sport of Athletics, but across the system.

The new funding strategy announced by UK Sport in 2019 does appear to address the notion that was often highlighted in the review that UK Sport's approach is solely driven by medals. The culture within the high-performance system will be directly impacted by the areas set out in the strategy, such as funding longer-term potential, focusing on ethical and behavioural standards, mental health, athlete transition, and connectivity. It should be noted that this message doesn't appear to have filtered out well enough to the system.

UK Sport should also consider what is the appropriate level of intervention to adopt for sports in crisis. It is important that UK Sport recognises situations in which it is appropriate to take a more interventionist approach, and how it would do that. This is particularly relevant in relation to Board appointments. UK Sport should be vigilant about appointments that are made at Board level and ensure that its role is sufficiently influential. In this instance, the time is right for UK Sport to be more proactive.

[i] *This summary was prepared by the secretariat from an oral presentation that the reviewer made to the UK Sport Board, and was subsequently authorised by the reviewer.*