

England Athletics Consultation 2013 – Final Report

1. Background

In May 2012 England Athletics (EA) submitted its Whole Sport Plan (WSP) for 2013-2017 to Sport England. This plan outlined a bid for funding of £30.6m and the budget included planned expenditure on a range of activities. As part of this budget, EA had included a plan to raise its income from registration and affiliation by increasing the registration fees for individual athletes and by introducing differential fees for track and field athletes and road runners. These plans were made without consultation with key stakeholders.

After EA announced in autumn 2012 that it was making the changes to the fee structure for its registration and affiliation scheme, the plans were met with widespread discontent. Three consultation events were therefore arranged and took place in London, Birmingham and Manchester, where representatives of clubs voiced their opposition to the rise in fees and other aspects of the amendments.

In response to this feedback, EA undertook to fix athlete registration fees at £10 per registered athlete for the Affiliation Year 2013-14, while at the same time promising to undertake a further period of consultation prior to making any further changes to the pricing and nature of the registration and affiliation scheme.

This resulted in a reduction in planned budget for EA, something that was exacerbated by the fact that Sport England's award to athletics was finalised at £22m, £8m less than originally anticipated/desired.

The 2013 spring consultation, therefore, initially took place in order to identify the views of stakeholders within the sport on EA's registration and affiliation scheme, with a stated aim of identifying preferred pricing structures for registration and attitudes of stakeholders towards levels and types of expenditure.

However, the consultation events of winter 2012 raised further, wider questions about governance and communication. It was clear that representatives of clubs were unhappy at not having their views heard and were frustrated that key decisions that affected the running of the sport were being made without meaningful communication with clubs and the large body of volunteers that serve the sport.

The scope of the 2013 consultation was therefore widened and, in addition to gauging views on registration and affiliation, it was decided that stakeholders would be asked to provide their views on the effectiveness of the governance structure of England Athletics.

2. The Consultation

The 2013 spring consultation took two key forms, designed to elicit the views of as wide a range of volunteers, athletes and other stakeholders within the sport as possible. Ten consultation events were held, with an event taking place in each of the 9 EA regions and two in the densely populated South East. At the same time, an online survey was devised and promoted via the EA website and through ebulletins, social media and Athletics Weekly.

Both the consultation events and the online survey were split into two parts; first, Registration and Affiliation and second, Governance.

Consultation events were carried out in different formats that varied depending upon the preferences of attendees, although all 9 events were led by Regional Chairs and attended by both regional councillors and EA paid staff. The events in London, the East Midlands and the North West took the form of a single group debate/discussion, while the other 6 events saw attendees split into smaller groups to discuss the issues under deliberation.

The questions that were asked of attendees and the ensuing debates can be found in the appendix to this report.

The online survey was designed to largely mirror the questions asked at consultation events. The survey questions can be found in the appendix, but they can be summarised as asking firstly, which areas of expenditure were most valued by respondents and whether respondents wished for levels of expenditure to change, followed by, in light of the views expressed, how they would like the registration fees to be priced and collected. Questions on Governance followed (see below).

Consultation Events

Consultation events were largely well supported in terms of attendance, although compared to the overall size of the membership of EA only a small fraction attended. The London event attracted the largest number of attendees, with approximately 50 attending. The numbers attending other events varied from more than 40 in the North West to as few as 3 (not including regional councillors or paid employees) at the East Midlands event. Attendees were almost exclusively members of club committees, although many attendees occupied multiple roles within the volunteer structure of the sport (as coaches, officials or county association committee members, for example).

Online Survey

The online survey was started by 1852 unique respondents. These respondents were asked to self-identify as belonging to a number of participant roles within the sport, with no restriction on the number of roles they could select.

Total who started survey	1852
Athlete	1055
Coach	474
Official	370
Club volunteer	651
Parent of athlete	462
Teacher	45
Other	245

Respondents came from across the 9 EA regions.

Where from	
North West	189

North East	84
Yorks & Humberside	191
West Midlands	144
East Midlands	109
South West	224
East	163
London	283
South East	464
Total	1851

North West	10.2%
North East	4.5%
Yorks & Humberside	10.3%
West Midlands	7.8%
East Midlands	5.9%
South West	12.1%
East	8.8%
London	15.3%
South East	25.1%
Total	100.0%

3. Aims of this report

The aim of this report is to synthesise the responses made at the consultation events and via the online survey and to present the themes that have emerged and the widely held views, alongside some potential courses of action, to the EA board.

4. Communication

Aside from the specific issues related to registration and affiliation (discussed below), the issue of communication was a general theme that emerged from the consultation process, particularly from the consultation events.

At the London event in particular, a widespread view was expressed that in the past, EA had failed to communicate well with clubs and stakeholders.

“Clubs need to know exactly what they are paying for to consider how we improve and maximise the effectiveness of our communications – to reach all those who should receive them. Based on the meeting, the communications EA are sending out often do not reach those who should be receiving them.”

Club Comment at London Event

“Better communication required – the whole affiliation issues needs to be sold to the membership.”

Note from East Midlands event

“Communicate the governance structure better – who does what – what is the relationship between EA and the competition providers?”

On the issue of future consultations:

“We should do this regularly. Communicate, communicate, communicate!”

Comments made at West Midlands event

It seems that these comments were not necessarily aimed at the way in which EA disseminates general, everyday information (for example, the E-newsletters and the EA website), and more at the way in which the reasoning behind strategy and key decisions are communicated. A lack of consultation when making key decisions on the way the sport is run (i.e. governance issues – see below) was highlighted and is indicative of a sense that the EA board and even the regional councils are remote and far removed from those volunteering at clubs.

When asked about consultation, the overwhelming response from attendees at events was that regular consultation events, at which EA staff and representatives from clubs and other stakeholders could meet to discuss the issues affecting the sport, should be instituted. Such events needn't be described as “consultation” and might better be termed as “engagement” to better reflect the open agenda that such meetings might have.

The issue of communication undercuts both of the main topics under consultation. In terms of governance, the feedback from attendees at events shows that the workings of the current governance structure are not widely understood (and have therefore not been communicated effectively to the grassroots), while the overwhelming consensus was that communication between the various elements of the structure, particularly between regional councils and member clubs/stakeholders, was not effective. Attendees suggested that regional councils could do more to engage with clubs (and the same was said about EA staff in some locations).

In terms of registration and affiliation, a direct link between effective communication about expenditure and the willingness or otherwise to pay a registration fee (and the size of that fee) emerged. At the events it was clear that attendees, again, despite information posted on the EA website about *where* expenditure was directed, were not well informed about *why* expenditure in certain areas is necessary. As the online survey demonstrated, when areas of expenditure are clearly outlined and linked to the registration fee, the responses overwhelmingly indicate the view that the EA registration fee provides value for money and that a rise in fees is “fairly reasonable” (see below).

Clear communication about expenditure and why the registration fee is necessary should therefore be a priority, especially when communicating with clubs and athletes primarily involved in road running (again, see below).

5. Governance

On the issue of governance, the consultation period identified the fact that amongst many volunteers within the sport, there is a great deal of confusion. There is confusion as to where responsibility for strategy/expenditure lies (i.e. between EA and UKA) and widespread misunderstanding of the relationship between governance and provision (such as competition provision, amongst other areas). This is largely because the governance structure of the whole sport is complicated and not communicated effectively (see above).

“A lot of discussion on Regional Boundaries although competition issues seemed to be clouding discussion around geographical boundaries.”

Note at West Midlands Event

Nevertheless, it is possible to see governance in three, related ways. As part of the consultation, attendees at events were asked what they felt the governance structure of EA should look like, while the online survey asked respondents to identify the organisations/bodies that they felt should form part of the governance structure.

In the case of the survey, “governance” was directly linked to bodies/associations (such as County Associations or competition providers) that perform specific roles within the sport, while at the events there was an additional focus on the regional aspect of governance (i.e. the way in which EA’s governance is carried out, at least partly, in 9 regions). Feedback around governance therefore focused on which entities should form part of the structure and whether the geographical regions were appropriate.

However, overriding both of these aspects of governance was the broader, arguably more important, issue of democracy, or, more accurately, the ways in which the volunteers within the sport can influence strategy and implementation within the governance structure.

Despite the calls for a greater voice for clubs/volunteers, many people fed back at events that change to the governance structure is not necessary at this time. Indeed, with a democratic system for electing regional councillors, some of whom then form the national council and who then go on to take two places on the EA board, there is a strong case for arguing that the current structure provides clubs with a means to affect strategy at a national level and to have their views expressed.

“We have more important things to worry about. Whatever you come up with won’t please everyone and will not be perfect. Make what is in place work”

Comment at the South West event

However, broad (albeit not unanimous) satisfaction with the structure is not an endorsement of how it works in practice. It is not clear as to how the National Council are able to affect strategic decision-making within EA, while the role of regional councils was commented upon by attendees at consultation events.

Regional Councils

One area of communication that was identified as in need of attention through both the events and, to a lesser extent, the online survey, was communication associated with the regional councils, which feeds directly into the issue of governance. At the consultation events, it was clear that, despite information being posted on the EA website, attendees were not familiar with the role of regional councils and, in some cases, the identities of their regional councillors. This was reflected in the responses to the online survey, where regional councils were among the areas of work considered least important by respondents.

This suggests that while the current system of governance (as outlined in the appendix) is in need of at least some attention. The notion of regions themselves was not particularly disputed, although there were some views expressed that wanted a return to previous structures (such as a return to territorial associations), but instead there is a clear sense that clubs/volunteers do not feel that regional councils are engaging sufficiently with the clubs within their regions. This has the effect of lowering confidence in the effectiveness of the structure as a whole.

A theme that emerged from the events and the online survey was the fact that many clubs/respondents felt that they had a greater affinity with their local county association than they did with their regional council. Indeed, of all the bodies respondents were asked to judge as being important to include in the governance structure, county associations were rated as most important. From comments made at events, this is partly to do with greater familiarity with the individuals involved and a historic relationship that clubs have with their county.

However, this was by no means a unanimous view, with some individuals feeding back that they do not feel that county associations should be made part of the governance structure.

On the issue of making the current system, particularly the regional councils, work better, there are a range of options available. These include better publicising the work of regional councils and ensuring that they engage more effectively with the clubs in their regions and even changing their composition to include county association members from the counties within each region.

On balance, however, given that there is a sense that the current structure has the potential to work, a clear desire from some quarters to integrate county associations but reluctance from elsewhere, the most sensible, and recommended, course of action would be to encourage regional councils to meet regularly and perhaps more formally with county representatives. This is already current practice in some regions.

At the same time, the important role of counties could be recognised by expanding their remit from being solely competition providers to, for example, also taking more direct responsibility for the training of officials at a local level.

Providing a greater voice for members

“The Grass roots of the sport need more of a say in how the sport is run.”

Comment at the South East (Crawley) event

It should be acknowledged that the current structure of governance is, in many ways, democratic and provides a pathway for the views of EA members to inform national strategy. Indeed, the EA articles of association make clear reference to the fact that regional councils should represent the interests of volunteers and contribute to the formulation of national strategy. Regional councils should, therefore, be able to represent the interests of clubs and other volunteers.

Nevertheless, the system of election and the structure in place does not currently enjoy the wholesale confidence of those who participated in the consultation. Likewise, while the structure is broadly democratic, the influence of the democratically elected members is not perceived to be effective at EA board level, so there was a clear desire for the grassroots of the sport to have more direct representation. It is therefore desirable for the EA board to include directly elected members from the wider EA membership to complement the national council members and to ensure that the volunteer sector is adequately represented (see recommendations, below).

6. Registration and Affiliation

The issue of registration and affiliation, including how the system should work (such as the continued existence of the competition licence), the costs to athletes and clubs and the expenditure of income raised, was the topic that instigated the current consultation process.

In order to elicit views from members as to how the system should work and what the appropriate registration fee should be, EA asked a series of questions at the consultation events and via the online survey, which included a proposed course of action for discussion, that involved the registration fee rising from £10 by £2 per year over a 4 year period (see appendix for both).

The Survey

The survey began by asking respondents to assess current areas of expenditure and to rate the importance of each area. It also asked whether respondents wished for expenditure to be increased or decreased on each of the areas and to assess whether the current £10 fee offered value for money.

The responses to the survey show that respondents generally saw EA as providing good value for the registration fee and all areas of expenditure, with the exception of regional and national councils and awards, were rated as important and as of requiring at least a maintenance of current spending levels.

With that in mind, it is not surprising to see that respondents to the survey broadly supported EA's proposal to raise the registration fee for individual athletes from £10. 54.6% of respondents saw a £2 per year increase as “fairly reasonable”, with a further 12.4% suggesting that a larger increase would be preferable. 33% did not want the fee to rise.

Consultation Events

The results of the survey contrasted heavily with the responses at consultation events, where the overwhelming response was that a further increase to the £10 fee could not presently be justified (although there were some comments at events that matched the survey results, most notably in the East Midlands and North East).

Show of hands taken - Majority felt that it should stay at £10 in 2014 and that we should look to everyone to register their club members across the piece based on the number of members they have. Keeping individual records and details is still important though.

Note from North West event

There were a variety of reasons given for the adoption of this stance, including a potential lack of affordability for young athletes and low income families. The most frequent reason given for not supporting a rise, however, was that EA had failed to justify the need appropriately. While it was generally accepted that a fee was necessary and that EA's budget required greater income, the general view was that EA had failed to sufficiently explain how the fee was spent (beyond headline areas of expenditure) and why more money is needed. Whereas respondents to the online survey suggested that EA does provide value for money, the views commonly expressed at consultation events were that EA had not clearly demonstrated value for the fee, especially to road running clubs and road runners themselves.

This difference in feedback between the online survey and the events is clearly problematic and leaves EA with a choice of which view to adopt. The difference could be explained by the differing roles within the sport that survey respondents hold, compared to the event attendees. While there is a lack of certainty as to the primary role held by those completing the survey, it is much more certain that it was largely club membership secretaries and committee members who attended the events. It could therefore be argued that it was those with direct experience of collecting the registration fees that were least in favour of it being increased.

An appropriate fee

With the above in mind, it would make more sense, for the time being at least, to freeze the membership fee at £10 for at least the next year. The survey has shown that when direct links are made between expenditure and the fee, respondents are willing to accept that athlete registration plays an important role in funding key activities, such as coaching and officiating. It is EA's task in the next 12-24 months to better demonstrate to the wider sport and to clubs (in particular road running clubs) *how* the fee is spent and *why*.

What is a sensible and realistic membership fee in 2014 onwards?

- Value for money – need to communicate more effectively.
- Freeze it for another year.

Responses at the East event

Linked to this is the issue of governance discussed above. If EA provides clubs and volunteers with a governance structure that works, as well as a voice that directly informs key strategic decisions, then it will be in a better position to collect fees from a trusting membership.

Expenditure

Question: What do you feel you £10 should be spent on?

- Supporting the clubs

Response at the Yorkshire and Humberside event

The issue of the payment of an appropriate fee is also directly linked to areas of expenditure. Both the responses to the online survey and the comments made at consultation events support the view that clubs/athletes want the income to be spent on areas that directly fund the sport in which they are engaged.

Clearly EA receives substantial income from Sport England that funds many recreational aspects of the sport, and it is the view of participants in the consultation process that the income from registration fees should be targeted at the more competitive (not necessarily “elite”) activities of clubs.

This is largely the case already and it again illustrates the need for EA to better explain to members how money is spent and how it provides value to members. This, again, is particularly relevant in relation to road running, where there is a perception that road runners gain little value from their fees. Clearly there are costs associated with governing road running, and it is these, as well as support at local levels through regional councils, that should be better explained to clubs.

Collection of Fees

On the issue of collecting registration fees from athletes, there was unanimity of voice from both the online survey and the consultation events, with both demonstrating a desire for responsibility to remain with clubs. While there were some contrasting views, 57.6% of survey respondents wished for collection to be made via clubs, while 15% did not express a preference. At the events, straw polls (such as the one in London) and individual comments expressed a desire for clubs to retain control over fee collection.

Question – Process to administrate the fee: club or athlete?

- Need for simplicity in all facets of the affiliation process.
- Clubs to continue administrating the fee as athletes won't do it.
- Athletes registering individually could threaten the existence of some clubs.
- Club ownership also gives more policing and ensures clubs can field teams in confidence.

Responses at North East event

There were some differences in views on how the fee collection should take place, however, which was linked to the current system of competition licensing. Currently, registered athletes receive a competition licence, which has given rise to the widespread view that only active, competitive members of clubs be required to register with EA. At many consultation events, there was support for the abolition of the competition license in favour of a “registered member” scheme, where clubs would be encouraged to register all members, regardless of whether they compete or not.

Consensus – definitely prefer an affiliation / membership fee over a competition licence.
Problem is demonstrating value for money.

Note from East event

Such a system would potentially result in a larger income from registration, due to the potentially greater numbers paying a fee. However, a number of comments made at events (such as in the North West), suggested that the notion of only competing members paying fees was so culturally ingrained, that persuading non-competing members to register would be very difficult. Likewise, the survey results show that when asked whether clubs should pay a fee based on the size of its membership, 38% expressed the view that only competing members should be included (compared to 18% for all members).

While in an ideal world it would be useful for all members of all clubs to pay a registration fee, in practice it is too difficult a system to effectively implement.

At the same time, the results of the survey and the views expressed at the consultation events demonstrate support for only paid-up, England Athletics registered athletes being permitted to compete as attached athletes (with almost 75% of survey respondents in favour).

EA should, therefore, continue to link payment of a fee for an athlete with the status of being “attached” for competition purposes.

Banded fees

An alternative to the system of individual athlete registration currently in place was proposed at the London consultation event and involved clubs ceasing to register individual athletes and, instead, paying a fee to EA based on its number of members. Such a system, whereby various “bands” of membership size would exist with clubs paying the fee associated with the band in which it is placed, was supported at the consultation events and also via the online survey.

However, as discussed above, the survey showed a lack of support for including all (as opposed to just competing) members, which somewhat negates some of the proposed advantages.

The drawback of the scheme would mean EA being less able to communicate directly (via email, principally) with member athletes. The advantages would include potentially a simplified system for club membership secretaries, with a reduced requirement to input individual athlete details into the Trinity database. Although, given that clubs are required to hold information about members, it is debatable as to how much effort would be saved.

Likewise, the desire for a banded system for paying athlete registration fees expressed in the survey and at events, contrasts with 50% of respondents to the survey expressing a preference for specific, named athlete registration fees to be connected to their “attached” status.

This therefore suggests that there is a general desire for clubs to make payment of registration fees simpler by clubs declaring the size of their competing membership and paying an appropriate fee, while at the same time linking named athletes with having paid fees in order to compete as “attached”. The two wishes are not easy to reconcile.

Given the widespread support for banding expressed both via the survey and at events, a detailed scheme should, perhaps, be presented to the AGM for voting, with the problems and advantages of both options clearly explained although practicalities need to be carefully considered when looking at this and how it could work to meet the needs of both clubs and EA timing wise.

Other ways of generating income

Throughout the consultation process, alternative means of generating income aside from individual athlete registration/competition licenses have been identified. One issue that was widely discussed at consultation events was the charging of different attached and unattached fees at road races and open track and field meetings.

At present rules of competition and road race licensing requirements state there is a minimum £2 discount on entry fees for athletes registered with their national association. The requirement for organisers to pay the £2 differential to the governing bodies was removed some years ago. However consideration should be given to increasing the size of the differential with the income split between the race organiser and the governing body.

Additionally, some comments have been made on the issue of the club affiliation fee and the potential scope for this to be increased. At present, clubs pay £50 per annum to EA to affiliate and are able to affiliate for as many disciplines as they wish (i.e. Track and Field, Road Running, Cross Country, Fell Running).

One option would be for the fee to remain at £50 per annum for the first discipline for which a club wishes to affiliate, with a surcharge for each additional discipline. The advantage of such a scheme would be to ensure that larger clubs, who compete in a range of disciplines, pay more towards the governance of the sport than smaller clubs who may only compete in single disciplines.

This suggestion did not form part of the 2013 consultation process, but was aired at one of the meetings and clubs would therefore need to be consulted on its merits prior to any adoption or proposal to the AGM.

7. Key Recommendations

Throughout this report, the main themes that have emerged from the 2013 consultation process have been outlined and the dominant views identified. Some recommendations have been made throughout and these are summarised below.

The issues of governance, registration and affiliation and improved communication are all inextricably linked. Better communication will lead to better governance and better governance will

potentially lead to the strengthening of relationships between England Athletics and its members and volunteer bodies. With strong relationships established, and the need for increased income better explained, there will be an improved chance of EA garnering the necessary support for increased fees.

The consultation process has therefore given rise to the following recommendations:

- There is a need and appetite for regular, on-going consultation and engagement between clubs, volunteers and EA, which directly inform strategy.

Such engagement need not be in the form of formal consultation, but EA must listen to its members and demonstrate that it is aware of their views when making strategic decisions.

- On the issue of governance, EA should ensure that clubs and volunteers are better represented by increasing the size of its board and allow clubs to directly elect two board members.

Directly electing members to the EA board would give a greater voice to volunteers and clubs and would help to ensure that their interests are further advanced at board level. They would supplement the national council members who already sit on the board.

The method of electing these members is for the EA AGM to decide, but a system of allowing any registered member of EA to stand (provided they are proposed, seconded and are willing to produce a short candidate's statement) and any registered member to vote, would be a useful starting point.

- There should be better communication to clubs on the role of regional councils and the councils should be encouraged to more formally engage with the county associations in their areas.

The consultation process has identified a lack of understanding on the role of regional councils and a lack of engagement between councils and clubs and councils and county associations. Some counties already meet regularly with county representatives, and this should be encouraged, especially in light of the suggestion that clubs hold an affinity with the county association to whom they were affiliated.

- On the issue of registration, the fee should remain at £10 per athlete for at least the next year.

Despite some support from respondents to the survey for the increasing of fees by £2 per year for the next 4 years, there was a clear message from attendees at consultation events that an increase would not be supported. Given that it is the people who attended these events who are generally tasked with fee collection, their views should not be discounted.

It is clear that EA need to better explain in detail, beyond headline expenditure, *what* the fees are spent on, *how* they provide value and *why* the fees need to rise before any further increase can be proposed and then supported. This is especially true for road runners, where there is a perception that their fees are being spent on activities that do not provide value to them. The income generated

from the registration fees should be exclusively spent on activities that benefit all members involved in competitive (as opposed to recreational/leisure and not elite) athletics.

There is no suggestion that EA are currently spending the income generated from fees inappropriately and it is evident that the sport needs to be financed, but the information needs to be communicated in a more accessible way.

- Further consultation on banded registration fees.

A system of banded fees, where clubs pay a bulk fee based on its number of competing members (or on its entire membership figure) has gained support. However, this desire is at odds with a wish for “attached” status to only be granted to athletes who have paid an individual registration fee. There needs to be further consultation on the prospect of a banded registration fee and how the system would work in practice.

In the meantime, the current system should be retained, although changing the name from “competition license” holder to “registered athlete” would help to change the perception that membership of EA is exclusively for those engaged in competitive athletics.

Closing remarks

As discussed above, all of the themes that have emerged from the consultation process are linked. Ultimately, the budgetary issues related to registration can be resolved through better communication and direct engagement with clubs and volunteer bodies, which will in turn generate a mandate to raise fees. Likewise, a more democratic governance structure will have the same effect and will hopefully result in a healthier, united sport.

Appendix

1. Slideshow from regional consultation events
2. Raw notes from consultation events
3. Online survey questions and results