

Athletics and Running: For Everyone, Forever

England Athletics has a vision for athletics and running to be the most inclusive and popular sport in England, led by a network of progressive clubs and organisations and supported by a sustainable, respected and trusted governing body.

This is driven by a strategic priority to sustain and increase participation and performance levels in our sport.

To deliver this strategic priority, England Athletics provides the following activity focussed on Track and Field Athletics, valued by athletes, coaches and clubs across the country:

- We support clubs through our 12 Club Support Managers on important issues including the growth and retention of athletes and facility development
- We have delivered education courses and development opportunities to c.6,000 coaches (excluding LiRF and CiRF) and c.2,000 officials in the last 12 months
- We invest in competition at a National (our own champs across different age groups and disciplines) Area and County level each year as well as English Schools championships
- We employ a team of national coaching and athlete development managers across all event groups and regional coaching leads to organise activities for track and field athletes
- We deliver 100 national, regional and local coach development opportunities each year engaging over 1,000 targeted athletes and coaches
- We manage over 40 international teams each year to compete for England
- Commonwealth & Commonwealth Youth Games every 4 and 2 years respectively
- We have developed a new Event Management System and Event Provider API to support the delivery of events.

The sport is growing, athlete registration is increasing, and the number of affiliated clubs is higher than ever before. However, the growth is primarily a result of a boom in running.

There are 7 million people in England over the age of 11 who run at least twice a month. This has increased by over 60% in the last 15 years. Diversity of participation has broadened significantly.

There are currently c.180,000 registered athletes in England. The number of registered athletes has increased by 18,000 in the last two years at an average annual growth of 5% per annum. Most of the growth is in athletes from clubs that focus on running and off-track provision.

The number of affiliated clubs currently stands at c. 1,400 and has grown by 5% in the last 12 months. Of the c.75 new clubs that have affiliated in the last 12 months, 90% either do not offer Track and Field or are marketed as running clubs.

Track and Field participation is starting to decrease

There are 51,868 people in England over the age of 11 that have a competitive Track & Field performance recorded in Power of 10 during 2018. This represents a slight decrease in the last 12 months (0.5%). The decrease since 2016 is 2%. The table below shows the trend across age groups in the last 12 months:

Track and Field Participation- Research Summary

Age	2017	2018	% Total	Change	% Change
11 and 12	10,261	10,280	20%	19	0.2%
13 to 16	22,861	22,273	43%	-588	-2.6%
17 to 19	5,623	5,524	11%	-99	-1.8%
20 to 22	2,428	2,418	5%	-10	-0.4%
23 to 34	4,523	4,630	9%	107	2.4%
35+	6,454	6,743	13%	289	4.5%
TOTAL	52,150	51,868		-282	-0.5%

Participation is dominated by younger athletes, but this is where greatest decrease/ drop- out exists

73% of all recorded performances are from athletes aged between 11-19 with 43% aged between 13-16. There has been a noticeable decrease of c.600 (-2.6%) in the number of 13-16 athletes in the last 12 months.

Of the 22,273 athletes aged 13-16, 15,835 (71%) are members of the 309 England Athletics affiliated clubs that compete in Track and Field athletics leagues. This has reduced from 16,188 in 2017, a decrease of 2%.

Whilst participation levels seem to be decreasing, drop-out rates are also high. Most significant churn exists amongst athletes aged 15, 16 and 17. An analysis of 24,854 athletes aged 13 to 19 who competed in track and field in 2016, revealed that 10,611 (43%) of them did not compete in 2017. The same churn rate existed between 2017 to 2018 too.

We know that athlete registration from those club members under the age of 17 is down year on year. Churn rates of registered athletes are highest amongst 16 and 17-year olds at over 30% each year.

Some clubs have waiting lists in place

Research conducted in 2016 found that 18% of England Athletics affiliated clubs have some sort of waiting list in place, two thirds of which are within clubs offering track and field. 80% of waiting lists are for those aged 17 or below. The average waiting list is 32 people. The younger the age group the greater the average size of waiting list. Despite recent growth in the number of licensed Coaching Assistants, Athletics Coaches and Event Group Coaches, all those clubs with some form of waiting list have it in place owing to lack of a coach or volunteer capacity. Half also cite lack of facility space as a contributing factor.

Participation levels can impact of performance

Although the focus of this research is participation, the concern is that a decrease in the base of the sport will impact on performance in the long-term. There are already areas of concern. Over the past 12 months the number of athletes reaching top 10 performance thresholds has declined across some event groups and age groups and longer-term trends show decline too. *More detailed analysis is underway to update performance thresholds and reporting of performance trends across all event groups and findings will be published in due course.*

ACTION TAKEN: Research by England Athletics

England Athletics commissioned a piece of research between July and December 2018 to understand the reasons why athletes are dropping out and to think about solutions to address the concerning trends.

The focus of the research was participation and targeted current and lapsed athletes aged 16-25- the age group where the largest drop-out and decline is seen. An independent research agency spoke to n=60 coaches, officials, clubs, facility providers, statisticians, technology providers from across the sport. This was followed by in-depth qualitative video auditions and interviews with n=30 current and lapsed athletes. The project finished with a quantitative survey with n=523 current/ lapsed athletes to ascertain the scale of the issues, hypotheses and potential solutions.

The appeal of Track and Field Athletics

In particular, the sport meets young people's need for visible progression / achievement, which has a positive impact on their self-esteem. The main reasons for participating are:

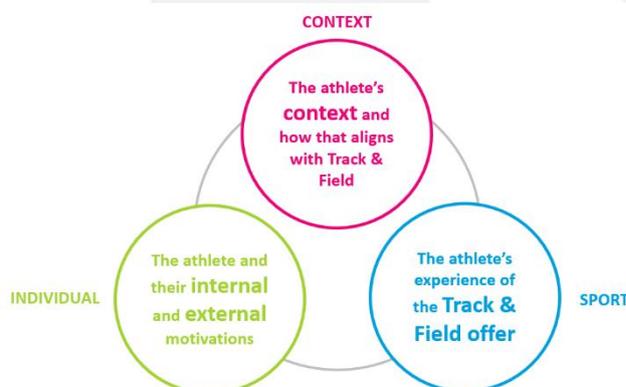
- 85% to keep improving and getting better
- 83% enjoy the competitive nature of the sport
- 76% for fun
- 71% for the confidence the sport provides, and it make one feel good

Athletes also cited the importance of having a strong support system in place consisting of:

- Strong family support to help them with training commitments and to provide momentum and encouragement
- Supportive teachers at school who provide entry to the sport and fuel enthusiasm
- Consistent and enjoyable coaching support- a good relationship that leads to real achievement.

Reasons for drop-out

There is not a single reason why young athletes drop out. The reality is much more complex, and challenges occur at an individual, contextual and sport level:



Track and Field Participation- Research Summary

It is often a combination of factors that cause young athletes to drop-out from the sport. The main factors include:

- 45% time constraints from studying
- 30% injury
- 22% performance wasn't improving
- 21% training required to much time
- 17% training got boring
- 17% not as fun/ exciting as other sports

Following a TURF analysis, to identify which 'unique' factor is has most impact, it was concluded that time constraints from studies as the most crucial influencer on lapsing. Therefore, aiding young athletes through the high-pressure experience of balancing exams and training is paramount to future retention.

Despite having a similar entry into the sport, during the latter years of primary school, after being encouraged by parents or teachers, lapsed athletes are more likely to train less frequently and compete in a narrower range of events.

To stay within track and field, athletes need a blend of internal and external motivations. If the sport stops providing the value that creates internal motivation or if important parts of the support system are removed it increases the chances of drop-out.

Coaching practices could improve

Despite the athlete development model being central to coach education and evidence that many coaches create an environment for athletes to prosper, many young athletes involved in the research cited coaches who are not supportive or encouraging as a reason for not continuing their involvement. The lack of support usually manifests itself in two ways:

- Either feeling pushed too hard and being forced to specialise too early so the sport is no longer enjoyable or they get injured
- Or ignored when the coaches focus is on the 'elite' rather than them.

Some clubs could provide better environments for young athletes to thrive

There is outstanding work going on in affiliated clubs across the country. However, the research found that young athletes often don't see clubs as fun or social spaces to train and that politics, tradition and cliques often hinder development and importantly, young athletes have little ownership or representation within the club and thus have limited opportunity to influence improvements they might like to see.

Competitions can be demotivating and unenjoyable for many young athletes

Some competitions such as open meetings were highlighted as best practice but feedback from young athletes demonstrates that they feel competitions are often geared towards higher performing athletes rather than for everyone. For example, some league meetings were described as fierce and intimidating with little interaction between athletes. Young athletes also feel that competitions are generally very serious rather than fun social events and lack excitement and feel

Track and Field Participation- Research Summary

quite boring. Long travel times to competitions is commonplace, with athletes often only taking part in one discipline which is over very quickly, and some competitions take up the whole weekend meaning the athletes social lives become non-existent. In addition, many competitions clash with exam periods which adds to the athlete's stress greatly.

Life changes vs athletics competition

A young persons' life journey and athletics journey can conflict and create a 'perfect storm' of tension points. For example, from 14 years their lives change dramatically. They experience puberty and all that brings; change in body shape and feel more self-conscious; schools become a lot more pressured with a focus on GCSEs and they want to experiment more with socialising, spending time with their friends and meeting girls/boys of their own age.

At the same point, competition gets intense and it becomes all about winning; athletes no longer try everything and have to specialise in one or two disciplines; commitment is everything- one has to train 4 x 2hrs a week or more and it no longer feels fun; the sport can become quite lonely and boring when competitions last all-day on a Saturday or Sunday and 'Natural' talent often evaporates as everyone else catches up.

Summary

In summary, and as expected, there are deep rooted contextual barriers that affect young people who are experiencing significant life changes between the ages of 16-25. We have to accept that we will get some churn, but we need to look at our offer and see how we can align the sport to their needs.

Across most aspects of the sport, it seems that the wants and needs of the young person is sometimes forgotten and there must be a recognition that the sport needs to become genuinely athlete centred.

The structure of the sport, competition and way in which training it is delivered is geared towards helping the best get better rather than keeping participants of all abilities interested in the sport for longer. The intensity of the training, some coaching practice, the lack of appropriate levels of competition at a local level and the current use of data and drive for rankings and pbs becomes less appealing for most athletes who are not seen by the current system as 'good enough'.

Following, this research, England Athletics believe that the following key themes need to be considered when designing future interventions to better engage and retain young athletes:

- deliver to their internal motivations and help young people feel a sense of achievement by reframing success around personalised targets
- increase understanding and support for young athletes for their lives away from the track
- make Track & Field feel genuinely fun and social
- give young athletes a voice and a chance to influence clubs, competitions and communications
- better align the sport to the lives of young athletes by offering coaching qualifications, opportunities for paid work and links to University

Next steps

Following further consultation with our Regional and National Councils future actions will be implemented under the following work areas based on the research project:

- (i) **Competition Format:** length of meeting, travel times, appropriate level, enjoyment and engagement
- (ii) **Competition Scheduling and Structure:** right number of competitions at the right time for the right people
- (iii) **Competition Promotion:** greater clarity of what opportunities exist and improved visibility and event entry
- (iv) **Club experience and environment:** ensure welcoming, safe and sociable clubs help all athletes reach their full potential
- (v) **Coach Education, Coaching Practices and Coach and Officiating capacity:** minimise early specialisation, training 'too hard', win at all costs and focussing the 'best' athletes and making sure we have the right amount and level of officials to allow the delivery of effective competitions
- (vi) **Focus on individual performance and rankings:** reposition the data rich sport to focus on improvement and contribution
- (vii) **Enhance experience from an early age:** the entry route at U11s if still often over-competitive or 'traditional' with a lack of emphasis on fun
- (viii) **Transition to University:** improve the fractious nature of the journey from club to university