

A future vision for track and field athletic competition

Background

This remit of this review is athletic competition for young people. Senior competition (over 20) has not been included. However, during the consultation process many have requested expanding the remit of the review to include senior competition. The principles applied to young people's competition could equally be applied to the adult arena. The priority placed on competition for young people reflects the current retention issues for (particularly) U20s in our sport. Younger athletes rely more heavily on the competition framework to guide their programme.

In December 2006, UKA published a document that analysed the current state of athletics competition within the UK and outlined some principles that should inform and guide competition change.

It is now necessary to outline a detailed vision for athletics competition and make specific recommendations for change. The following vision and recommendations are based upon the research conducted last year.

The Vision

For all athletics competition the aim should be to create a single unified pathway that sees young athletes graduate seamlessly from school/club to sub-regional to national/regional¹ to UK level competition. At all levels, that the competitive experience should be motivating, aspirational and appealing to young people, and the standards required to qualify for the higher levels should be transparent.

This pathway should be communicated both within and beyond the sport with a particular emphasis on developing synergies between schools and club networks. Wherever possible schools and clubs should combine to provide bigger events that are more motivational to larger groups of people.

The vision for athletics competition is to provide by 2009:

- Co-ordinated events linking all levels of ability to provide a **simple and logical athlete pathway**, with **transparent criteria for progression** to the next level
- At every level **vibrant and motivational** competition that **encourages recruitment, retention and performance improvement**.
- Contemporary events that have **flexible, innovative shorter formats** with **easy entry methods** and **improved communication** reflecting the lives of young people.

¹ Throughout this report, the terms 'nations and regions' and 'national / regional' are used when referring to Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and the regions of England, namely East, East Midlands, London, North East, North West, South East, South West, West Midlands and Yorkshire

Members of the sport should have online access to a database of all their performances from permitted events, should receive email / text notification of competition opportunities with “one click entry”, and should be able to print a bespoke annual competition programme, derived from their age / event / previous season’s best, that maps out their opportunities for the season and the performances that will be necessary to qualify.

The Five Levels of Competition

In this new vision of athletic competition there would be five levels:

Level 1 – local schools / club competition

Level 2 – sub-regional² competition

Level 3 – national / regional competition

Level 4 – UK competition

Level 5 – international competition

The following section looks at the key recommendations for change at each level. The implications of implementing these changes are then discussed in detail.

Key Recommendations for competition change

In order to achieve the vision for athletics competition there must be significant changes to the current structure of competition at all levels. The following are recommendations to achieve a more vibrant sport for young people.

Level 1 - local schools / club competition

At the entry level for athletics competition there should be increased opportunities to compete and improve performance, including:

- More open meetings in evenings and in short formats
- More event-specific competitions e.g. jumps / throws / sprints meets for athletes based on ability not age.
- Greater partnership between schools and clubs in competition provision
- Innovative club scoring methods based upon standards and placings achieved by athletes
- Common entry methods and publicity of opportunities through membership

² The sub-regional division will vary, as each nation / region is different and must therefore develop a competition programme that reflects its specific characteristics. In some regions of the country, this will be counties, in others cities or city divisions. The driving force should be the creation of appropriate competition opportunities for young athletes, not *per se* the preservation of historic entities.

- A new team game for 12-14 year olds that combines sprint, jump, throw and endurance (see appendix 1)

Level 2 - sub-regional competition

The experience at this level of competition should motivate young people to want to compete outside their local area for the first time and to continue to improve their level of performance.

Team competition is critical in the early years of athletic development and formats should be encouraged that provide young athletes with the confidence to move from the team to the individual environment.

To achieve exciting and meaningful events:

- School and county (or equivalent) championships consider combining to form a single event run by a single organisation
- A review of League athletics including the provision of a single age group League structure (possibly integration of YAL and JAL.)
 - Meeting lengths should be significantly reduced.
 - Minimum standards of performance must be achieved to gain points. Therefore the practice of competing for “a point” would cease.
 - Meetings should be within the region wherever possible
- More event specific activity within shorter competition formats. Evening open meetings should be encouraged and there should be an increased use of relays

Level 3 – National / Regional competition

Except in the Celtic nations, this level of competition is underdeveloped at present, in contrast to the over-cluttered Level 4 in England.

Regional level competition should be introduced in England. These would be new events providing an appropriate level of competition between Level 2 (often county) and Level 4 (national).

Ideally, each region should be able to support vibrant regional championships, but in the short term as the competitions pathway is reorganised, it is possible that not all of the nine English regions would be able to support nine regional championships.

The fixture planning process outlined on Pages 6 and 7 should allow logic to prevail through combining regional championships to provide composite events (supra regional) with the characteristics outlined in this report. There is a role for the territorial (area) competition providers to work closely with the English regions and adapt their current championships according to plans developed by England Athletics.

The same principles should be applied to this new level of competition as elsewhere – widely communicated entry criteria, scoring systems based upon performance, open entry methods from a wide variety of sources, open entry through schools and clubs.

There should be a network of event specific competition emerging through Levels 2 – 4. Clubs should be credited for the performances of their athletes in event specific competition therefore providing motivation for clubs to develop athletes in their chosen events.

Level 4 – UK competition

At Level 4 and Level 5, the best interests of an individual athlete's development should determine competition choices. There will be UK level competition, but outside that the athlete/coach should determine the competitive programme, rather than the club.

Access to championship open competition (Level 4) should be solely determined by entry standards. These entry standards should be widely communicated and understood.

All Level 4 events should accept qualifying standards from any competition – for example athletes should be accepted into school events through achieving entry standards in club or open meetings.

Level 5 – international competition

This report does not seek to make recommendations on international competition for obvious reasons. However, it is pertinent to stress that international competition is the ultimate stage for senior athletes and an aspiration for many rising young athletes, and thus the domestic competition structure should be structured to:

- Help athletes to achieve qualifying standards
- Receive, wherever possible, continual challenge in domestic competition to ensure that they remain stretched
- Avoid over competition in the run-up to international competition
- Give a clear calendar at the start of the season to allow the athlete / coach to plan together

Implementation and process

Introduction

This report proposes the most radical changes in athletics competition for generations. These changes will only be delivered through a partnership between the all those working in the sport, volunteers in schools associations, leagues, clubs, territorial and other competition providers, and the staff of UK Athletics, the home nations and the regions of England. Structures are emerging to promote change at the local, regional and national levels.

Ignoring the conclusions of this report could further marginalize the sport of athletics. For too long athletics competition has resisted the sporting and social changes identified in the research published in December 2006. Young people are not going to slow down, stop using modern technology or turn their back on consumer choice. Either we embrace the world today or else our sport declines yet further.

This report will have implications for many existing competition providers such as the schools associations, the territorial competition providers, event specific organisations and athletic leagues. These are all valuable organisations that achieve great work on behalf of athletics with limited resources. At the same time athletics has suffered because of the fragmented nature of competition providers and provision.

This report envisages all these organisations working closely with the fixture planning process outlined here. This does not mean fighting over dates but working to achieve the objectives of this report. Athletics needs all the current competition providers to work together within the governing bodies' framework for the sport.

Competition providers will need to adapt existing events to fit within the new framework. Existing championships will have to be changed but the overall vision for athletics is an increase in fixture provision particularly at Levels 1 and 2. Existing competition providers such as the territorial competition providers and event specific organisations are ideally placed to implement the findings of this report and it is hoped they will work closely with the process to deliver an improved competition structure for athletics.

It is vital that volunteers, who bring a wealth of experience, knowledge and dedication are retained. There will be new formats to deliver, new titles for competitions, new technology to be embraced, but these will be all the better for the input from those with a track record in staging successful events.

If athletics is to recover it will require creativity and energy to revitalise competition. Level 2 and Level 3 competition provision is critical to the revitalisation of our sport. All competition providers have a role to play in improving this situation so long as they can stage events that meet with the proposals outlined in this report and are fully integrated within the vision of the sport.

The implementation of these changes should be led by UK Athletics, in conjunction with the home country associations. The principles and vision should be applied to the current provision of athletics competition within the UK.

Fixture planning will be organised through a UKA led strategic competition group. This group, including representation from T & F PST, will be responsible for all Level 4 and Level 5 fixture planning.

Additionally, each nation and region should set up a competition group that works with all the competition providers in the region to provide a co-ordinated programme that matches this report. These groups would be responsible for Levels 1 – 3 fixture planning.

The national and regional competition groups should include: counties, leagues, schools associations, territorial competition providers (England), Youth Sport Trust competition managers (England), clubs, event specific and other competition providers including Sportshall.

This group should develop a regional calendar to Level 3 as identified in the report.

The regional competition groups would work in co-operation with the UKA competition group that is responsible for Level 4 and Level 5 fixture planning.

These groupings should be given significant authority. This would include:

- **Implementation of this report**
- **Responsibility for annual fixture planning**
- **All funding decisions for competition by UKA and the home country organisations should be routed through these organisations**
- **'Power of 10' should be used to monitor progress towards improved standards of competition and events encouraged that achieve a high level of standard.**

Age Groups – a proposal for change

The current situation for age groups within athletics is confusing. The age groups are not well understood and are poorly communicated. As competition is re-organised it is appropriate to re-consider age groups within the sport.

The recommendation is to adopt standard age groups as follows: Under 14, Under 16, Under 18 and Under 20. The age group deadline would be the 1st September for Under 14, Under 16 and for Under 18 and Under 20 the age group deadline would be 31st December. (See Appendix 3)

The advantages of the new age groups include:

- Simple to understand and communicate across schools and clubs
- The top year of competition is outside year 2 for GCSE and A level courses (when other key life decisions are also being made).
- Appropriate competition would be opened up to 12 and 13 year olds – analysis of Power of 10 shows that these are the age groups with the most athletes, yet they struggle to compete (for understandable reasons) in the U15 age group and may then drift away.
- For the Under 14 and Under 16 age groups competition would still be within school years therefore providing social and organisational cohesion for schools athletics.
- For Under 18 and Under 20 competition the UK would be aligned with the rest of the international athletics world.

Under this system all competition up to and including the Under 14 age group would be to Level 3 only. This would further reduce travel for younger athletes.

The arguments against change should also be acknowledged:

- The historical records would need to be rescheduled. Advice from leading athletics statisticians suggests that this can now easily be done by computer, creating historical records for the new age groups, and maintaining records for the old age groups if required.
- For Under 18 age groups, the academic year group is split but many young people are already competing more in club sport than within their college or school and hence effect is lessened.

On balance, it is felt that the advantages outweigh the disadvantages. Although this change has been driven with track and field at the forefront, UK Athletics would recommend the rule change be adopted for all disciplines.

Negating the impact of Age Groups

Whatever decision is taken on age group change in the UK, research has demonstrated that *any* age group deadline will inherently disadvantage some athletes as they develop through the sport. This was identified in a recent report by Sportsnation (A Sporting Chance³). The report highlighted the inequity of the single age group deadline. Young people in the second half of any year group are significantly disadvantaged.

When the new age groups identified in this report are clearly established, athletics should offer some more creative and flexible competition opportunities to address the relative age effect.

This should be done in the context of a clearly understood and communicated competition calendar as this report has continually emphasized.

Once new fixture groupings have been established with an annual planning process, UKA should then lead on event formats that address the relative age effect through an alternative age group deadline for some events.

Changing the competition pathway and the age groups will be an incentive for young people to stay in athletics. However if athletics really wants to address the post-16 decline identified in the first stage of this competition report further action is necessary. Appendix 2 outlines some further alternatives to make athletics attractive to young people over the age of 16.

UK Athletics will be proposing a rule change for the next rule book based on these recommendations.

³ 'A Sporting Chance - Enhancing opportunities for high-level sporting performance: influence of 'Relative Age' by Sportnation and Loughborough University published in Nov 2006
<http://www.thelssa.co.uk/Issa/sportnation/ASportingChance-RelativeAge.pdf>

Implementing the Recommendations

The following sections take each level of competition, and examines the current situation, the changes that are sought and the process / timetable to achieve the changes.

Level 1 - Where are we now?

There is a huge cultural leap to be made for young athletes from the fun and colour of the team-based Sportshall athletics to the serious world of 'real athletics'.

There is a perception that taking athletics seriously as a young person means a commitment to travel considerable distances and/or sit through a very long competition with only a short amount of activity. This demands a commitment that is beyond many potential athletes and/or their families.

There is a disconnection between school and club athletics – creating a primary barrier to a compelling and logical pathway through the sport.

Team competitions are primarily determined by placings not performances. Points are scored for club by simply fielding an athlete – leading to athletes being pushed to compete in the wrong event to complete a team.

Level 1 - Where do we want to go?

- More open meetings in evenings and in short formats
- More event-specific competitions e.g. jumps / throws / sprints meets
- Greater partnership between schools and clubs in competition provision
- Innovative club scoring methods based upon standards achieved by athletes, not placings
- Common entry methods and publicity of opportunities through membership
- A new team game for 12-14 year olds that combines sprint, jump, throw and endurance (see Appendix A)

Level 1 - How will we get there?

- A reduction in Level 2 events frees time within the calendar to develop more open meetings and shorter formats

- The National/Regional competitions group should co-ordinate the overall calendar to identify weekends and evening when open meetings could take place once the UK calendar has been determined.
- As with all levels of competition communication of the calendar and entry methods through on-line systems will stimulate interest in athletics at the local level
- The networks identified for Level 2 competition can deliver Level 1 competition when a clear fixtures calendar has been established

Level 2 - Where are we now?

The organisational disconnection between schools and clubs is evidenced at both Level 1 and Level 2. Level 2 is most obvious with two separate county championships that take place on separate weekends in May and June. This means that many of the same athletes compete against the same competitors at the same level. As long as schools and clubs competition is separate the opportunity for athletes who succeed at schools competition to join a club is often missed. It is recognised that there is considerable complexity and history around these two pivotal events: boundaries are often different, selection issues exist and the impact on senior events in the clubs county championships. But now is the time to consider what benefits could flow from integrating the two events. At a minimum there should be improved co-operation and communication and it is hoped that some counties will have the courage to combine completely.

Level 2 - Where do we want to go?

- A single Level 2 competition with large numbers of athletes and full events
- Clubs and schools working together to encourage recruitment and retention of athletes through these events
- Communication of other competition opportunities around this event
- Athletes enthused by the sport of athletics.

Level 2 - How will we get there?

- Schools athletic organisations should be integrated with the club structure for competition purposes as identified earlier in this report.
- Networks should be established using local resources to provide compelling Level 2 events. These would include: schools associations, clubs, YST competition managers and Schools-sports partnerships.

- A single Level 2 sub-regional (often county) championship should provide a motivating and focal point early in the athletic season.
- Once this event has been established and the Level 2 networks are working to their potential further Level 2 events should be developed. For example, a second sub-regional event to capitalise on the impact of major games through a relays format in September.

Level 3 – 5

These higher levels of competition are closely linked. Changes in one level have a knock on effect to other levels of competition.

Therefore they are considered together.

Level 3 and above - Where are we now?

- Level 3 competition is largely non-existent. Athletes can compete in a Level 2 event and then compete in a Level 4 event with no intermediate tier. This means travel times are increased.
- There is too much competition striving to be at Level 4. A limited number of athletes are often forced to compete too frequently in events that sometimes conflict with each other.
- At Level 4 developing athletes can over-compete and become disenchanted with the sport with too much travel.

Level 3 and above - Where do we want to go?

- A structured and well communicated calendar providing competition which encourages athletes to progress.
- Every athlete competing at Level 3 and above should understand the competition opportunities and how they link to his or her personal objectives.
- A championship calendar that is understood by every athlete and coach.
- Appropriate opportunities for athletes to develop within their own event area of expertise and learn from others.

Level 3 and above - How will we get there?

- There should be two focal events at Level 4.

- These would be the core national events that aspiring athletes target as their objectives for the summer. All events would be ability based with clearly communicated entry criteria.
- The two Level 4 events would be:
- **A UK schools weekend delivered by the four home country schools championships in July – English, Scottish, Welsh and Northern Ireland schools championships**
- **A UK-wide ability based championship in August**
- Of these two events, the single event that does not logically fit within the new competition pathway is the English Schools. The other Celtic events are essentially equivalent to Level 3 events with the additional prestige of a national title. The English Schools Championships are caught between Level 3 and Level 4. However this report recognises the huge impact the English Schools Championships has had upon the development of young athletes. An even bigger and better English Schools championships containing the characteristics identified in this report – more open and better communicated entry criteria, acceptance of athletes qualifying from a diversity of events, entry from either school or club, would continue to transform the lives of young athletes. A second alternative would be to make the English Schools a UK-wide event, creating a UK schools championship. This could be a consideration although this report recognises that issues of national identity are a concern to some within the sport.
- There would be no other championship Level 4 events with the exception of a national club final at the end of the summer and the UK schools games – a representative fixture for a specific Level 4 age group. This event provides an additional late-summer elite level competition opportunity, potentially superceding the Home country schools international fixture. The UK Schools Games can be further integrated into the competition calendar especially if the Level 3 regional championships develop as envisaged by this report.

As the new calendar is implemented a number of traditional events currently striving to offer Level 4 competition would not fit in their current format within the pathway for young people as described. These events include territorial championships, territorial representative fixtures, and the home country schools international. It is proposed that these events are adapted according to the principles outlined in this report. The organisations responsible for staging these competitions are asked to work closely with the fixture process outlined on Pages 6 and 7.

- The reduction in Level 4 events and the combination of Level 2 events provides the opportunity for a new level of competition at Level 3. This would be a regional championship and would be an early focus for the regional competition groups. This event would fit within the calendar during late June to early July between the Level 2 and Level 4 events during the summer. In the short term the existing territorial

championships could be adapted to fulfil this demand, as it is unlikely the nine regions of England could support nine separate championships with the characteristics outlined in this report.

- The new championship pathway would form the spine of an athletics summer. There are two further forms of competition that need a clearer pathway.
- Event specific competition has a key role in athletics development. There should be an increase in event specific competitions at Level 3 and Level 4. There would be 2 event specific weekends geared to the needs of developing age group athletes during the summer at Level 3 and 2 at Level 4. Where possible these should be combined with existing Level 4 events to ease the fixtures congestion at this level. For example combine a Jumps or Throws fest with an event like Loughborough or the Bedford Games.
- League competition is also an important aspect of an athlete's development. However there is too much league competition where athletes travel long distances for sparsely attended events. There should be a single national age group League
- A maximum of 5 weekends should be devoted to league athletics for young people. These should be 4 events to Level 3 – within a region and a single Level 4 final.
- As the sport implements these proposals a fixtures calendar should be developed with a "two step" rule where on each weekend competition can only happen at Levels 2 stages apart. Therefore weekends could either offer Levels 1, 3 and 5 for competition or Levels 2 and 4 competitions. This will offer athletes a much clearer pathway with a wider range of appropriate competition. Towards the end of the summer athletes who do not qualify for Level 4 competition could therefore compete in local events at Level 1 or 2.
- Entry to level 3 and above events should be through standards. For example an athlete could achieve a qualifying standard for the new English Schools event in an event specific regional meeting.
- Scoring systems should also be based on standards. The practice of "running for a point" should therefore disappear.
- Composite clubs should be encouraged where appropriate to provide progressive competition opportunities for young people.

The Priorities

This report is unashamedly far-reaching and radical. However, in every such process there is evolution during implementation and there has to be flexibility. This is accepted, as there is nothing to be gained from driving through changes if circumstances have changed, or a better proposal has emerged.

However, the history of competition reforms in British athletics is one of progressive recommendations being made, then conservative changes being reluctantly implemented. The challenge described in last year's research should prevent any complacency, but to be absolutely certain that this report does not gather dust, we believe that the following recommendations should be prioritised by those charged with implementation:

- **The extension of a UKA led fixture-planning process to adopt the five level model supported by the national and regional groupings outlined earlier in the report**
- **The investigation of integrating schools and clubs events into a single Level 2 pathway with combined competition**
- **The reduction in Level 4 events to allow a focus on the 3 national events**
- **A review of league athletics including the provision of a single age group league structure (possibly by integration of YAL/JAL)**
- **The establishment of a Level 3 and 4 framework for event specific competition**
- **The establishment of a new Level 3 championship**
- **Improved provision of open meetings and competition opportunities at Levels 1 and 2**
- **New ability based scoring systems modelled on the UK Challenge system which has been successfully piloted over 3 seasons**
- **Improved access and communication of all competition opportunities through a national scheme ideally based on membership**

Conclusion

The implementation of these changes should be led by UK Athletics in conjunction with the home country associations. The principles and vision should be applied to the current provision of athletics competition within the UK. The regional and national competition groups would then be charged with implementing these proposals.

Competition providers should support the implementation of the report and funding decisions by UKA and the home countries should reflect their integration into the overall vision for athletics competition.

The Power of 10 should be used to monitor the progress towards improved standards of competition and events encouraged that achieve a high level of standard.

Implementing these changes within athletics competition will lead to a very different sport. For the first time in the sport's history athletics will have a vibrant, logical and compelling competition pathway that will encourage more young people to take part in our sport and fulfil their potential.

Appendix 1

A new team-based athletics competition.

The future vision for athletics has concentrated upon improved and innovative delivery of the sport. This will improve the current situation but does not tackle all the fundamental challenges identified in this and the previous report. If we really want to increase participation and improve standards we need to go further. As part of the implementation process we need a new athletic product, targeted at Level 1.

The two reports have identified a gap between Sportshall athletics and standard athletics. Athletics should develop a new product for delivery to ages 12-14. This product should be deliverable by schools and clubs. It should be in a team game format incorporating the principles of LTAD.

It should be fun and involving, deliverable within a school lesson or a club training night. There should be versions as short as 45 minutes but no longer than 2 hours. This product should be developed and piloted in 2008 before launch in 2009. Over time this product could evolve different versions and allow the development to full, traditional athletics. Relays would feature and a creative, but simple scoring formula that allows a level of individual achievement within the context of a team environment should be mandatory. The vision for this product would be to revolutionise the early teenage athletic experience.

Appendix 2

The post 16 decline

Even with full implementation of this report more changes will be required to improve retention during the teenage years. Competition reform will not be enough to transform our sport with the over 16's. If our sport wants young people to commit to athletics after school ceases to be compulsory in larger numbers than at present, their needs to be a complete re-evaluation of the athletic experience for this age group. This includes competition but also wider aspects of athletic and lifestyle support.

The sport needs an open debate about how to do this. Here are some suggestions to fuel that debate: -

- Introduce the academy concept from other sports at a regional level. Each region would develop its own athletic academy targeted at athletes below the elite level who are currently supported by national level schemes. Athletic academies could work through the region to provide a full range of support services on an individual basis in co-operation with clubs and schools.
- Encourage event specific development by a single scoring system across all athletic competitions. This would permit athletes to compete for the club whilst simultaneously developing their own athletic potential. Clubs could be rewarded for individual athlete performances in event specific competition.
- Introduce minimum standards for some events alongside more clearly graded competition. This will ensure a relevant level of competitive experience for developing athletes.
- Extend the new version of athletics identified previously through the age groups. This would provide the social and team experience many young people seek in a more compelling format than current athletic competition. This would encourage greater numbers to participate in our sport therefore improving the overall physical conditioning of young people.
- Utilise 'Power of 10' as the inspirational framework for the sport. Expand the concept to include events, clubs, coaching events and other broader support structures particularly for this age group.