

Peta Bee – Written evidence (NPS0014)

Peta Bee (coach and team manager)

Organisation: Cookham Running Club, England Athletics-affiliated road, track and cross country club in Berkshire

Background: Our athletics club, situated on the Berkshire/Buckinghamshire border) was founded in 2010 (by myself) with a junior section added in 2015. We currently have around 180 members (around 120 junior under 18 members). We participate in county, regional and national championships as well as track and field leagues. Our junior section is highly competitive and includes numerous county level athletes, several of whom we expect to achieve international honours in forthcoming years.

LOCAL DELIVERY OF SPORT

Our athletics club established its junior section six years ago because existing local clubs were already stretched beyond full capacity had long waiting lists. We affiliated to England Athletics and had some good support from the governing body in setting up the club and getting coaches qualified. Our local borough (Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead) sports development team has been supportive in terms of some individual funding and grants for athletes (via a local charity trust).

However, prior to 2020 and the pandemic, local athletics clubs did not work together at all. Ironically, this has improved significantly during lockdown as several clubs, led by ourselves, have worked together to provide competition for athletes whenever lockdown has been lifted.

Lockdown competition

On behalf of Cookham RC, I organised, funded and staged a series of cross country races – the Junior Performance Cross Series – in October -December 2020. All events were held out of National lockdown, on private ground owned by local landowners and we were able to accommodate a total of 100 young athletes aged 11-19 at the Covid-secure events. Athletes of county level and above were invited to complete and we had 4-5 national champions at each event.

The success of the series was in spite of having NO HELP, SUPPORT OR RECOGNITION of the events from England Athletics, our governing body. We applied to EA for a competition licence but were informed we needed qualified officials, starters and timekeepers at a time when this was impossible. In Bucks/Berks, most officials are elderly and were either self-isolating or shielding due to the pandemic. For insurance purposes we obtained a licence from the Association of Running Clubs and used DBS-checked parents and coaches as timekeepers and marshals. Barriers to competition at a time when it was much-needed were immense, even from our sport's own governing body.

The events were eventually to be among only a handful of cross country races to be staged in the UK in the 2020/21 season and yet we were made to jump through hoops to get them off the ground. Because we had not used the number

of qualified officials required by EA, the results were not published on the sport's 'official' results website Power of Ten and athlete's achievements went unrecognised.

I feel very strongly that England Athletics has a stranglehold on the sport that is threatening to destroy it at grassroots level. As we move out of the pandemic and national lockdown, it will prove impossible for most clubs and organisations to stage an event subject to EA demands and breakaway groups of clubs are already forming and doing their own thing.

At elite level, track and field and cross country events need higher levels of officiating, but at a local level we need clubs to feel they have the means to organise competition themselves, not to be warned (as we were) that athletes should not participate in non EA-licensed events for fear of unwanted consequences.

It is – or should be – relatively straightforward to stage a running-only meeting, even on the track. Yet we are told by EA that track events require even more timekeepers and officials even when electronic timing is available. Things need to change – and fast. Clubs need to be given more support and autonomy so that they can work together locally to provide opportunities for young athletes.

As a result of our experiences during the pandemic, 3 or 4 local clubs are now planning summer events that are not in line with EA protocol. We are working together to move the sport forward and yet face a backlash from the very governing body that is funded to do the same (but failing).

PARTICIPATION IN SPORT AND ACTIVE LIFESTYLES

In terms of athletics, I don't feel that the government is capturing anything like an accurate picture of how people participate in sport. In its Active Lives survey, Sport England bases data on running participation which includes recreational running (including parkrun events) and is not an accurate reflection of athletics participation.

There is a sharp drop out from under 15 age groups (in both boys and girls) upwards in athletics and no clear pathway for helping clubs to avoid this. This is not represented in the available government data. Anecdotally, this drop out is worse during 2020/21 as young athletes have lacked direct contact with coaches and competition has been all but non-existent.

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