

## Are Sports Polls and Questionnaires designed to deceive?

### A new UK Sport initiative is announced

**Background.** On the 29<sup>th</sup> October 2014 UK Sport announced it would be reviewing its funding policies for sport for the 2018 – 2022 funding cycle. Plenty of time you might think to analyse recent support programmes and formulate new strategies.

After much criticism of non accountability It is now considered good practice for Government quangos to invite the views of the public at large. And, sure enough UK Sport has done just that. Tucked away in their press release is a link to a questionnaire inviting individuals to provide commentary and suggestions for a future approach. ([Click here](#)). But hurry up because the consultation will be closed in 6 weeks time. (10th Dec 2014). Clearly this timescale is totally inadequate and we would hope that wider consultation with organisations and pressure groups will take place in the coming year. ABAC stands ready to garner grass roots athletic clubs' views and ideas. We await the invitation.

But, there is a more serious side to this. What value can you attribute to the views of a casual observer asked questions designed to elicit a particular response? The answer clearly is **not much**.

Polls can distort, misrepresent, and submerge informed opinion. To see how polls can be used to justify unpopular decisions we need look no further than the England Athletics poll conducted through their web site earlier this year which claimed to show that athletic clubs supported a rise in Affiliation Fees. This Poll was misleading and the result misrepresented the general view that fees should not be increased in 2015. So let us look at the circumstances surrounding the recent England Athletics decision to raise Affiliation fees.

**England Athletics.** England Athletics(EA) are under financial pressure and are predicting a shortfall of £1.2million in the 2015-2016 financial year. There is a lack of a top tier sponsor and income is projected to shrink as Sport England cuts back on its funding to EA. One easy way of increasing income is to raise the Affiliation Fees of clubs and athletes. **ABAC Fact File 18** looked at this problem two years ago and suggested that the scope for increased income from this was limited. Nonetheless EA attempted to get clubs' approval for a rise through a series of consultative road shows held between March and May this year. By far the biggest attendance was in London with more than 100 clubs represented. Asked the specific question 95% of those present rejected a proposed rise in fees. This was not recorded in the meeting minutes.

Undeterred EA went ahead with an online survey inviting comment on a proposed increase. This survey, and its conclusions, is now recognised as being seriously flawed, because:

- Anyone could log in and complete the survey.
- Anyone could log in as many times as they wished. Multiple entries have been indeed been made with individuals recording such actions on blogs.

Recently EA have published the detail results of the survey which they have used as indicating support for their more recent decisions to double annual club Affiliation fees to £100 and raise athlete fees to £12 from April 2015. [Read the EA report here.](#)

**Are such Polls valid?** The recent Scottish Independence referendum attracted a massive 95% participation rate. In a good year a General Election will attract around a 70% turnout. How did the EA survey compare.? Let us take a rounded figure of 120,000 current fee paying runners. How many did the survey attract? Here is what EA's own figures show.

- 1576 **attempted** the survey. (No indication how many were able to).
- 800 were athletes. (These had a specific interest in the level of fees)
- Nearly 800 were coaches, officials, volunteers, parents and teachers. (Not subject to fees.)
- 28.8% voted for no change.
- 32.7% voted for the increase which is going through (£12)
- 32.8% voted for the fees to go up to £15 but held till 2017.

So, disregarding the fact that some people responded more than once, and disregarding the fact that we do not know how many spoiled their votes, we can look at the percentage of athletes in this country who supported the increase.

The percentage of athletes **supporting** the increase is :  $(0.327 \times 800 / 120,000) \times 100 = \underline{\mathbf{0.22\%}}$ .

The percentage of athletes **against** an increase is **0.19%**

The percentage of those **not participating** in the study but affected by it is therefore **99.59%**

**ABAC Comment.** It is clearly ridiculous that EA can claim to have a mandate for an increase in Affiliation Fees from such a small sample when clubs at Consultation meetings rejected the proposals. It will be for Club Secretaries to inform members and collect payments. Many will not rush and we can see a net fall in funds to EA as a result. Fact File 18 may well prove prescient.

**And back to the start of this article, UK Sport are embarking on a similar exercise. Let us hope that reason will prevail and they consult with "stakeholders" in a much more meaningful way.**

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