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Northern Athletics – the future

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You will all be aware that for many years now Northern Athletics has tried to balance its professional approach to our sport in the North with the need to provide excellent competition for all our athletes on all surfaces whilst trying to bridge the gap between the clubs and our national governing body England Athletics.

Although the areas have been given annual grants by England Athletics, they have proved insufficient and have resulted in annual deficits since 2007 when governing body status and the income produced from that along with road race levy fees passed to England Athletics. We have over the past two years made great strides to balance the books by cutting costs and becoming increasingly efficient. We have repeatedly suggested that England Athletics contribute a more sustainable and fair amount by giving us a small proportion of the registration fee paid by athletes each year.

Progress has been very slow and is now being discussed against a back drop of a reduction in funding for England Athletics from Sport England for the next four years resulting in an indication from England Athletics that area grant funding for 2018/19 and beyond will reduce even further. The areas have not sought to take money from that source but continue to press for a small share out of the registration fee athletes pay. If that was to happen then Northern Athletics could give so much more than at present back to the clubs and the counties and in so many different ways.

We continue to discuss matters with them but they are only able to commit to funding for this current year in the sum of £41000 with a promise of reduced funding for 2018/19. In the absence of agreement on a share of the registration fee to us our minimum aim had been to obtain a four year grant commitment to ensure we can plan ahead, consider new projects and develop fresh ideas. Unfortunately England Athletics will not commit to guaranteed grant funding beyond 2018/19 something which is vital for our longer term security and have indicated that their plans currently only include the possibility of a reduced level of grant for 2019/20 and 2020/21.

We believe that without sufficient funding we cannot build on the brilliant and strong foundations we have. Without some assistance we may not be able to survive long term. On the other hand without area competition there would be a huge vacuum in our sport and once lost it could never be revived nor could it be replaced. We cannot even be sure our national governing body or its Board either understand or accept this possible sad scenario.

All of us at Northern Athletics, established in 1879, believe we truly represent our sport in the North and we want to continue to do that. We have an office in Dewsbury permanently staffed on a full time basis by our secretary Judith Temperton which provides the link for all our clubs and counties to information and news about our sport. We believe that the work we do results in us being trusted by the grassroots.

We have had to take difficult decisions recently in the absence of long term commitments from England Athletics. It is not for the want of trying to argue that our athletes in the North pay into the system but many are frustrated and sceptical about how much they get back. One of the decisions made was to again approach our clubs and athletes in the North by way of a survey. One was carried out in 2014 and again in late 2016 after a failure to negotiate the right deal with England Athletics to pass on a proportion of the registration fee paid by athletes in the North to us each year. We needed to reach out again but we wish to emphasise that now we do intend to act upon the message given to us by those surveys.

We received 1320 responses (65% male and 35% female) across a good representative mix of ages. 966 of the respondents were athletes across all disciplines with the remainder split between coaches and /or officials. Almost 93% were club members.

Regarding the future of Northern Athletics 99% said that the area should continue to provide competition beyond 2017 and this was up from 97% in the last survey of 2014. Over 96% supported a proportion of the athlete registration fee, currently £14, being directly routed to grassroots competition & development of the sport.

Over 95% (1256) supported a proportion of the athlete registration fee being directly routed to support the areas. Of those 1256, 803 respondents quoted the figure they thought should go to the area as follows:

13% stated £1 – £3

41% stated £3

32% stated £3 – £5

14% stated over £5.

We had hoped to secure long term funding from England Athletics to enable the area to have a sustainable future. This has not been achieved despite athletes paying over £2.2 million (2016/17 England Athletics budget figures) to their national governing body every year through registration fees of which only 18% is spent on competition. England Athletics spend the remainder in a variety of areas such as coaching, officials, participation and international teams as well as administration costs.

However, by way of example, we currently have just short of 50000 paying athletes in the North contributing almost three quarters of a million pounds to England Athletics. This year Northern Athletics will only receive £41000 (equating to 85p of the £14 paid per athlete) whilst putting on sixteen championship opportunities as well as providing that vital link for athletes, officials and coaches to national level.

If we cannot secure our future via a funding strand, the survey results show that 45.8 % wished us to introduce an area affiliation fee whilst 37.4% invited us to increase entry fees. The other almost 17% had other and varying constructive ideas for us to consider.

Thank you for the overwhelming support that you have shown for both Northern Athletics and area competition. We now intend to write to the clubs, counties, officials and coaches in the North to get a direct response following the overall survey results. We will ask you some very clear questions requesting some clear answers including the possibility of athletes within the clubs each paying to the North via the clubs a small affiliation fee to ensure our survival.

We want to provide some additional services and opportunities for athletes, clubs, counties, officials and coaches. This will be done with the finance being made available every year. We also will look at increasing the accountability of Northern Athletics by having more direct representation to input into the way we work and share ideas for the area.

We know from your responses so far we are both trusted and wanted. We hope with your support we can form a strong organisation in the North to speak for you here in your heartland as well as at national level and to put into action projects and competitions that really reflect what athletes want. This is a crucial time in our history and with your strength and support we can not only survive but prosper.

Tony Wood

Chairman

Northern Athletics

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