

Grove House
14 Edward Grove
New Barnet
Herts EN4 8BA

Telephone: 020 8441 6908

Malcolm Wallace
Eastern Region and Watford Harriers

4th November 2006

Dear Malcolm,

HERTFORDSHIRE ATHLETICS S DEVELOPMENT PLAN

The enjoyment I gain from athletics is based on its simplicity. It is a sport without barriers. The more you put in, the more you can get out. It is a positive activity, and it is not my wish to engage in negativity.

I therefore applaud all the people who contribute to make the wheels turn.

For the last 2 years I and others have explained our concerns about the changes, and in response we have been asked to "just go with the flow" by people who have not had the time to talk, or even possibly think through the issues. Everyone welcomes support and investment into the sport, however the conditions attached to the Sport England investment into athletics are damaging. At this moment our sport needs people to safeguard its values rather than hold up wadds of money as though the cash itself represented success.

When we originally spoke about the changes being imposed onto the sport, I described the Development Plan as being a process in engineering the sport towards becoming something it is not. Our core activity is athletics. We should be promoting the enjoyment of the sport as widely as possible. Athletics must not become diluted by other objectives, however worthy those other objectives might be.

You assured me that the Development Plan was an original Hertfordshire Athletics drafted document, yet it appears to have embraced all the social engineering objectives being imposed by Sport England, such as welfare, diversity and inclusion. Athletics already contributes a huge amount towards these objectives, so to force them onto clubs is counter-productive.

My concern is that the social aspects of the Development Plan have become the objectives, and athletics merely the mechanism for achieving these objectives.

Enclosed please find my comments about the Hertfordshire Development Plan. It is my belief that sooner or later Sport England will move the goal posts for the 9 regions, and it is important that a sustainable culture of Clubs, Counties and Regions organising Road, Cross Country and Track & Field championships as a pathway from grass roots to elite level, be maintained and supported. I will be seeking to contribute to this stability and look forward to working with anyone else who is focused on supporting and developing the same thing.

Yours sincerely

C.Zacharides (Zac)

Herts Development Plan - Section 1 - £200 Leadership and Management Structure

The first section of the Development Plan is all about unquestioning acceptance of Sport England's take over of our sport. The AAA of England and the South of England Athletic Association might have been poorly run and ineffective, but when analysed much of the responsibility for this can be attributed to an over reliance on the Government funded quangos who have proven to be unreliable partners.

With hindsight it is clear that Sport England forced the pointless Regional Development Coordinators (RDC) network onto us, and wasted hundreds of thousands of pounds of Club's money, with no return. It was Sport England that wanted this RDC structure in place and promised that it would be a self funding network that would be able to tap into the huge grants that were available from the lottery. The only income that materialised developed non athletics objectives and the Club's money held by the AAA of England shrunk from nearly £2,000,000 to less than £500,000.

As the saying goes, "fool me once, shame on you, fool me twice, shame on me". It is important that clubs retain the skills to organise themselves at grass roots level by promoting local competitions, and organising local training opportunities. It is my belief that the top-down structure being rolled out through England Athletics and the Eastern Region, and now the Hertfordshire Development Plan, is damaging because it undermines the club culture for self sufficiency, and seeks to centralise power at the top of the pyramid.

The £2,717,000 paid by Sport England to England Athletics which is, to be paid to the 9 regions in approximately £300,000 wadds, does not represent real value. If we were to quantify the voluntary time invested in the sport, a value of £40,000 per club per annum might be considered a conservative estimate of the time committed by an average club committee. Based on 900 English clubs, this calculates at £36 million pounds of voluntary labour per annum. The sums of money being invested by government are trivial in comparison.

In addition, anecdotal evidence suggests that most of the 900 clubs each have a healthy bank balance that exceeds an average of £3,000. The belief that these resources can be harnessed from above, without significantly reducing the value is naive in the extreme.

Item 1b of the Development Plan says "Support development of clubs in Herts...". I would have been happy with this goal, except it goes on to say "... via Clubs:Future programmes and Clubmark." These two Sport England inspired programmes can be summed up as social engineering.

As regards items 1c (raising awareness of the Eastern Hub), 1d (raising awareness of the County Sports Partnerships - CSP's) and 1e (engage with the Eastern Hub athletics structure), these items all feed my concern about a top down structure. Clubs organising themselves at grass roots level, and driving the energy upwards is the only sustainable way for our sport to develop. I therefore question whether Section 1 of the Development Plan will benefit the sport in Hertfordshire, or anywhere else.

**Herts Development Plan - Section 2 - £750
Communications Networking**

With reference to the £250 being proposed to support the County Web Site shown in item 2a of the Development Plan, I would hope that this does not have the strings attached which seeks to turn the county's web site into another Sport England social engineering tool. By this I mean that the web site should pay equal respect to those Hertfordshire Clubs who do not wish to engage with the "Clubmark" and "Clubs:Future" programmes. All Hertfordshire affiliated clubs must be equally recognised as "fit for purpose", unless evidence emerges to suggest otherwise.

Section 2e of the Development Plan describes the "Annual club support visits". It is difficult to avoid comparisons with the Ofsted School Inspections. I am keen for clubs to invite non-members to attend committee meetings as a mechanism for sharing information, and generating co-operation, however inspection visits will not sit comfortably in a voluntary environment. Voluntary activity in the community can only exist in a positive environment, and engaging with inspectors, whose purpose is to monitor clubs will, over time, erode the ability of the clubs to function effectively. For clubs to become dependent on England Athletics for approval is not a healthy way forward for our sport.

If higher authorities wish to monitor the activities of clubs, then the starting point should be that of observing results in competition, and developing an understanding of the trends for each club in terms of participation levels, and quality of performance. Monitoring and publishing participation levels, in competition, by Hertfordshire clubs could be a helpful long term development.

In summary, Section 2 of the Development Plan only appears to address the vertical networking from clubs to the higher bodies. I would have preferred more imaginative ideas which encouraged the Hertfordshire clubs to interact locally, possibly by sharing coaching experiences, stabilizing the competition opportunities and joining forces to cut the costs of travel.

Herts Development Plan - Section 3 - £2,700
Club Development - Welfare - Volunteer - Diversity

This was the most disheartening section of the Development Plan. It represents all that is bad about the engineering of our sport which is taking place at the moment.

Sport England have a Key Performance Indicator (KPI) of ensuring that 150 clubs have acquired the clubmark award by 31st March 2007. The Hertfordshire objective to "support five clubs to achieve clubmark" indicates to me that Sport England have engineered the Hertfordshire Development Plan. Giving a £500 prize to clubs for compliance in achieving the Clubmark award is not a healthy way to develop athletics.

The entirety of this "Club Development" section, is about engineering the sport. For the record I list each of the planned actions taken from the Development Plan, and include my comments in brackets :

- 3a) Support 5 clubs to achieve Clubmark**
- 3b) Visit all Clubs:Future clubs to assess funding as required**
- 3c) Encourage Clubs:Future audit.**
 (Individuals who join together to form an athletics or running club, must not be labelled as less safe simply because they decline to engage with bureaucracy. I challenge anyone to bring together 5 leading officials from a Clubmark club, and from an independent Club, and identify the more decent, responsible or capable group of people. I suspect the only difference between the two clubs will be that one group will have the Sport England logo stamped on their foreheads.)
- 3d) Support regional and national awards process, linked into HSP's awards.**
 (Our County Championships are the mechanism for meaningful awards, and the same should apply at regional and national level. Recognising effort, personality and other subjective qualities should be secondary to athletes drawing attention to themselves by winning. We must differentiate between awards that recognise achievement, and awards that allow those giving the award to draw attention to themselves. If we are going to allow the quangos to exploit athletes in this way, then they must be made to pay for the privilege in terms of sponsorship of the athlete, the club or the competition.)
- 3e) Develop county welfare targets in line with UK Welfare Implementation Plan.**
- 3f) Collate Welfare Officer contacts for each club.**
- 3g) Provide information on opportunities for training of Welfare Officers**
- 3h) Welfare Officers to be in place in all Clubmark clubs.**
 (If I was required to set welfare targets, my instinct would be to understand what has occurred in the past that might be prevented, or better handled in the future by implementing such welfare targets. This context of risk assessment appears to be lacking, which suggests to me we are creating an enormous, pointless and expensive welfare bureaucracy. Is the Welfare Officer's role to liaise between the Police and the Club, or the Parents and Club, or the Athlete and the Coach, or maybe the Social Services and everyone else. Is the role of the Welfare Officer to bring things into the open, or keep things hidden? It is not complacent to suggest that these matters are best handled by the professional agencies such as Police, Schools and Social Services.

- 3i) **Develop county volunteer targets for April 07 in line with the national strategy.**
- 3j) **Encourage clubs to have a volunteer coordinator - all Clubmark clubs to have one.**
- 3l) **Encourage clubs to have a volunteer section in Development Plan.**

(A volunteer is more than an anonymous body which enables a box to be ticked in the "job filled" column. "Voluntary", is an appropriate word to use when discussing the work which underpins athletics, however it is not a word that sits comfortably when applied to individuals whose commitment to the sport goes far beyond the meaning of a word like "volunteer". Another Sport England Key Performance Indicator is to deliver "a 1% increase in volunteers actively supporting the sport by 31st March 2007". Considering they have no idea the about the current number of volunteers, this is a good example of how Sport England are managing to massage their own KPI's to make themselves appear more successful to government than they actually are.)

(Note that 3k does not appear in my copy of the Development Plan. I speculate that it was accidentally deleted when Sport England decided to remove any references to athletics events)

- 3m) **Develop diversity targets to be included from Oct 06.**
- 3n) **Club Development Plans to have diversity targets included and specifications detailed.**
- 3o) **Encourage clubs to work actively with priority groups.**

(I enquired about a definition of "Priority Groups" and Sport England advised me that they are: People on low income / Black, Asian and ethnic minority communities and people with a disability).

- 3p) **Clubs to be identified to work with disability groups.**

- 3q) **Training and support for coaches in disability delivery**

(It cannot be acceptable to put all disability groups into a single box marked "disability!". This is a good example of how the solution might compound the problem. We are all aware of individuals with a disability who have been accommodated and welcomed into our sport in the past. There is a danger that we are creating a dumping ground for non elite athletes with disabilities.)

- 3r) **2 CRB (Criminal Records Bureau) verifiers per club**

(I presume someone has considered the implication for this role after the imminent introduction of ID Cards).

In summary, my feelings about this section, intended to develop clubs, is that it is a huge bureaucracy that does not contribute to the development of athletics clubs in any way! I believe that the clubs which choose to reject this bureaucracy will be a happier and consequently a safer environment for athletes, from all sections of the community. It is possible that this Development Plan is already driving a wedge between the 5 prospective Clubmark clubs, and the other clubs in the county, and that would be a tragedy. I hope that the Hertfordshire Running and Athletics Clubs will recognise the negative impact of such separation.

Herts Development Plan - Section 4 - £13,700**Participation - Schools -Community Athletics - Competition - Monitoring and Evaluation**

Section 4 - Participation, talks about investing in Teacher Education, the Shine Awards, Talent ID and Startrack delivery.

I was disappointed to note that the Sport England jargon of "links" was used when discussing schools. Is it links we want, or is it cooperation we want? As always, the devil is in the detail.

We need to evolve a sustainable interface with the schools, which means we understand what we are giving to the schools and what we expect in return. Cooperation with schools must be addressed in this "give and take" way. If we simply march a Coach into the school to deliver an athletics session once or twice per week, or march the children to the track to receive athletics coaching in school time, then we are falling into the same old unsustainable links of the past. Schools are happy for such cosmetic links, because it meets their physical activity obligations cheaply.

Athletics links with schools need to be targeted in an imaginative way to ensure the children are given a pathway to club competition and club training sessions. I understand that Herts Phoenix have operated a very successful model developed from a grass roots initiative.

I hope similar initiatives will be targeted in a way to assist Clubs preparing teams for the Summer and Winter seasons. The joint Club/School activities should be promoted in the schools as an opportunity for the children with parents to engage with the club, outside of school time. We must not shy away from expressing this as our objective. If schools need safeguards that the club is a responsible organisation, then schools must ensure that teachers attend the Club activities. Paying schools to send teachers into the clubs with pupils and parents in tow, might be a more effective way forward.

Currently the Development Plan proposes to spend £12,000 of the Hertfordshire money by targeting 5 clubs (St.Albans AC, D&T, Stevenage, Watford and Herts Phoenix) to deliver athletics into 12 schools. 20 Teachers are to be offered athletics training in two courses to be held in Ware and Watford. Putting Hertfordshire Athletics money into schools in this way, will not provide the return hoped for, it will simply provide cheap PE lessons until the money runs out.

Putting athletics into the schools is important, but spending Hertfordshire Athletics money in this unsustainable way is not the wisest way to invest £12,000. It is the responsibility of the education system to fund the education of teachers, not community athletics clubs.

The Shine Awards have been allowed to kill off the wonderful 10 step and 5 star awards, and have proven to be a complete failure. I have never met an athletics person who has a good thing to say about the Shine Awards. To include the Shine Awards in the Development Plan signals to me that this plan is not a serious effort to grow the sport in Hertfordshire. It appears to be an effort to fit into a new structure which has no long term sustainability and has no athletics criteria on which to judge its success or failure. Such a definition of success and failure needs to be established, so a meaningful assessment can be made.

If individuals are to be tasked with Talent ID, then those people must be held responsible for the failure of athletes that were wrongly identified as being talented. If such a judgement is considered harsh, then we must challenge the very concept of Talent ID.

The only acceptable Talent ID is where athletes identify themselves in competition by winning recognised Championships. Any opportunities or rewards given to athletes based on the subjective opinions of talent scouts, is unfair on those other athletes who miss the cut. Creating an athletics pathway based on opinions, or random performances set in closed competitions undermines the values of fairness in our sport. I am not comfortable with Talent ID because the criteria for selection is not transparent.

Herts Development Plan - Section 5 - £5,800**Workforce Development - Volunteers - Coaches - Officials - Teachers**

Section 5a of the Development Plan refers to supporting and developing "high quality coaches", and then refers to coaching courses as a mechanism for delivering this objective.

In athletics a "high quality coach" can only be defined as someone who consistently delivers high quality athletes into the sport. This means that the coach must demonstrate an ability to retain athletes over several seasons, and those athletes must become progressively more competitive in County, Regional and National Championships.

I am disappointed that the Development Plan does not recognise the importance of judging a coach based on the performance of the athlete. Again this section appears to be playing the Sport England box ticking, numbers game, without any intention of measuring the success or failure of coaches in the competition arena.

I would hope that the education of Coaches, Officials and School Teachers will take place during club time, in club competitions and training sessions. This will allow for a seamless pathway into regular athletics, and might also encourage parents to become involved. It might also test the enthusiasm of some of those Teachers who are keen to spend athletics money on padding out their CV with an athletics qualification, but not so keen to set aside their free time putting the new qualification to use within an athletics club.

Herts Development Plan - Section 6 - £4,200
Nurturing Talent and Developing Performance
UK World Class - Regional Potential - Emerging Talent
Regional Development - County Level - Local Level

Under Section 6a of the Development Plan, the intention is to invest £3,000 into "County Squads". It is well understood that high quality training squads are of enormous benefit to athletes. This obvious fact has been sieved through so many interpretations it has become dogma. Groups of high quality athletes who are invited to participate in group training with other high quality athletes, cannot simply be labelled as a squad in the hope that such a label will create all the squad benefits, without the necessary shared experiences. It is not squad training, and there is very little evidence to demonstrate that athletes who have attended such manufactured sessions benefitted from the isolated experience.

This is a complex issue, but true squads evolve, around athletes who have bonded over many training sessions. This bond motivates athletes to support each other through the uncomfortable training sessions during the cold damp winter nights.

Bringing together athletes from around the county once a month is not the same experience. That is not to say it does not have a value, or it is not beneficial. For some athletes who do not enjoy a close training group, it might be extremely beneficial.

However it is important to recognise that true squads need to evolve within the local communities, which means within the clubs. I would have hoped that a strategy to build club squads would have been more worthy of consideration for funding.

Section 6c refers to "Lead Coaches" attending County Championships to carry out Talent ID. This was described on page 34 of the Foster Review, as persuading athletes to change coaches, and offering them financial incentives to do so. Such a strategy naturally targets the most successful of young athletes who are most receptive to opportunities which imply they are on an upward path. My view is that if it ain't broke, don't spend money on systems rushing around fixing it. I can provide a list of athletes who have demonstrated their talent in the recent past, and might now benefit from being identified by a "Lead Coach" and supported. Tristan Anthony, Anthony Lovett, Carl Saggars, Matthew Thurgood, Steve Murphy, and Neil Gamester might be some good names to start with.

Herts Development Plan - Section 7 - £4,700 Development Staff Required Plus Support Services for Implementation of Plan

Section 7, sets out the funds necessary to enable the Development Group to deliver the plan.

Sport England and UK Athletics have already said that the quality of the people delivering the Development Plan is the key to the success or failure of the plan. This is complete nonsense. The fault is in the design of the plan, not the ability of the individuals who are seeking to deliver it.

The flaws in the design of the Development Plan

An inflexible labour force

When tasked to do jobs that they do not wish to do, volunteers will simply evaporate. Funds need to be diverted to provide cover for the evaporated voluntary labour, and the plan is not sufficiently flexible to accommodate this adjustment.

Measuring the success or failure of the plan

The only meaningful measurements of success or failure are participation levels and the quality of the performances. The plan seeks to avoid this harsh reality by counting coaches, counting volunteers, counting money spent. The plan counts everything except the easiest and most meaningful thing to count, which is the number of participants listed in a set of results.

Talent ID undermines successful athlete development

The consequence of Talent ID is to pluck a successful flower from its natural environment. Not only does this action risk leaving a demoralised group behind in the club environment, it also implies a special promise to the talented athlete that cannot be honoured.

The generic nature of the Development Plan

The Hertfordshire Athletics Development Plan, could be a football development plan, a basketball development plan or a cricket development plan. Sport England require uniformity across all the different sports, so the Key Performance Indicators can be compared on a like with like basis. Comparing team games with a performance based sport like athletics is like comparing apples and pears.

