



## WELSH ATHLETICS ATHLETAU CYMRU

### CONTEXT

Welsh Athletics (WA) is the governing body for the sport of athletics in Wales. It was set up as a limited company in 2007, replacing the former Athletic Association of Wales. Welsh Athletics is part of UK Athletics, the national governing body for the sport in the United Kingdom and currently has more than 100 affiliated clubs, and more than 11,000 athletes take part in WA competitions.

There have been significant changes within WA since 2018/19 having completely re-structured their board to have the ability to appoint skill-based directors instead of the traditional member election process. This work was led by the Governance Director including significant engagement with the membership, who approved the proposed changes at the AGM that year. The overhaul of the board was driven by a skills matrix audit with the board becoming much more strategic with appropriate sub-groups linking both staff and board members. This led to each department within WA becoming far more accountable for their work and clarified the decision-making process.

A new CEO was appointed in June 2020 which led to the restructure of the management team into 4 key departments aligned with the 7-year strategy that was launched in 2019. The Governance Lead on the board has seen a significant change in the way WA work with greater openness and transparency and involving members in proposed changes. The process changes over the past few years have enabled WA to review their ways of working with the aim of transforming the culture within the organisation.

### GOVERNANCE

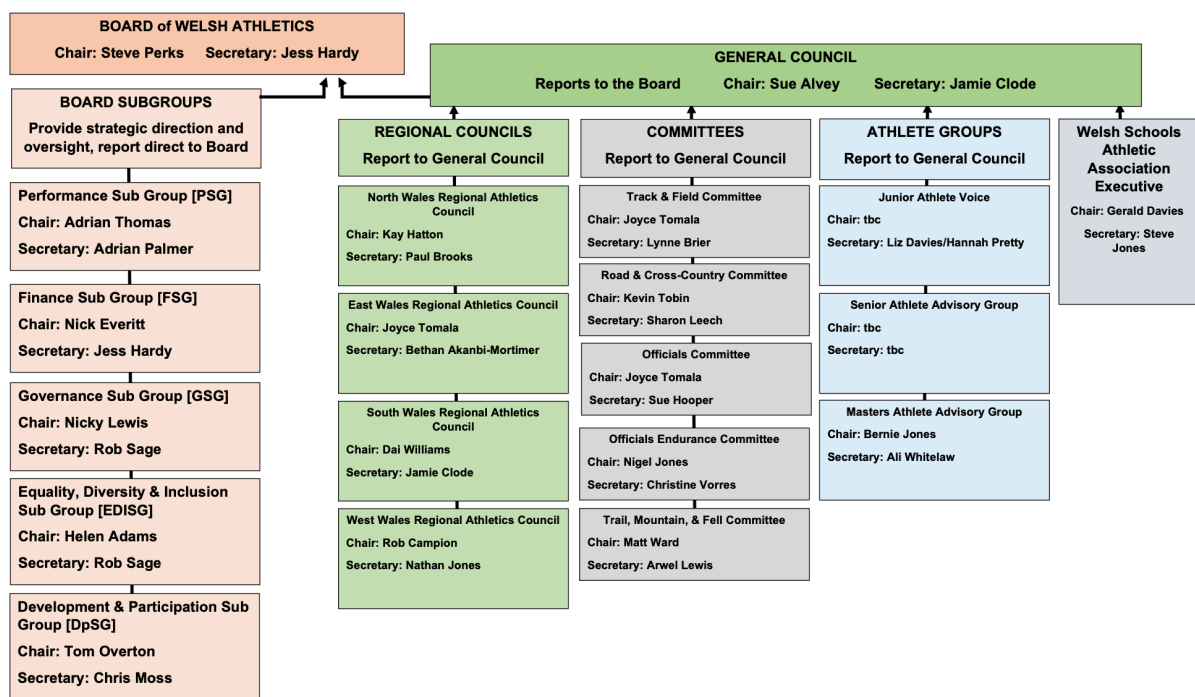
The Sport and Recreation Alliance (SRA) supported WA through a review of their articles in 2018 with the significant change being the appointment of directors as referenced above. Previously, the membership felt they owned the board from an election perspective, and this proposal would take that away. Effective engagement with the membership meant they understood and supported the decision to move to an appointed, skill-based board, with the Chair of the General Council becoming the voice of the membership (*BEST PRACTICE*). WA still require all board members to have a “passion for the sport” though they might not directly come from within the membership. The role of the Chair of the General Council, who is elected by the membership is a crucial as part of the appointments panel and again represents the membership in appointing all skill-based directors.

When asked why the Regional Associations and each individual club have a vote at the AGM and whether this would have the potential for “double voting”, WA stated that this was a legacy vote but guard against this by ensuring no individual member votes twice. There have been no issues to date, but work is ongoing to clarify the role of Regional Associations. WA will be reviewing their articles again in 2021 and may wish to consider the addition of a statement allowing them to conduct their AGM virtually in the future.

An excellent and very comprehensive Annual Report is produced by WA highlighting the key achievements and challenges faced over the past 12 months. A positive addition to the Governance section is publishing the attendance percentage of each board member over the course of the year, this not only helps hold board members to account, but also helps demonstrate to the membership the commitment of directors (*BEST PRACTICE*).

Though board members are made aware of their legal and fiduciary duties, WA do not have a formal induction process for their directors, neither do they have a Directors Handbook. Having reviewed numerous documents shared by WA, I am confident they have all the required information needed to compile the Director’s Handbook and have enlisted the support of Cobalt HR services to assist them with the induction process. This has been identified as an area for development but has been delayed due to Covid.

WA have done considerable work on aligning everything to their strategy, including their board and committee structure. A governance structure map (see image below) clearly shows accountability and is used during staff inductions to help them identify how all the work of WA ties in together. There is a clear “Golden Thread” running through the organisation with the Strategic Document central to it all. The map below also shows the importance of the role of the General Council Chair in representing the membership and newly established athlete voice fora.



Each sub-group/committee has clear terms of reference, and plans are afoot to introduce an annual chairs/secretary meeting to evaluate the role of all committees in an effort to create consistency in approach and culture across all groups, including introducing template agendas and minutes (*BEST PRACTICE*).

Through appropriate terms of reference and regular engagement with staff, there is a clear division in responsibility between board and staff, and an obvious effort to distinguish between the strategic nature of the board and committees and the operational role of staff. Governance is seen as an important element for all WA staff and not only for board and senior management, and this is demonstrated by having the Sport Wales Governance Lead delivering a governance session for all staff. There is an obvious commitment to culture change within the organisation by embedding the values and behaviours from top to bottom. There is currently a measured approach to implementation with the current priority sitting with establishing the board, prior to feeding all good practice and values down throughout each level. By considering processes, behaviours, culture, expectations and respecting the subtle differences at each structure/level, WA are developing a uniformed understanding of “how things should be done” with the membership at the heart of everything.

Even though WA is a Director of the Social Enterprise Run 4 Wales, there is no direct financial liability on WA. WA and R4W are currently working on a long-term service level agreement to clarify their relationship over the next 4-8 years. WA are not reliant on R4W funding for any of their core costs. With the recent change in CEO for WA there is now no direct conflict of interest between both organisations.

## **BOARD COMPOSITION**

WA have very detailed role descriptors for all board members with a specific skills-based focus. All board members other than the General Council Chair as referred to above are appointed based on skills and passion for the sport. An appointments panel has been established to oversee all recruitment and make recommendations to the board. Apart from the appointment of the Chair, the Chair and GC Chair (representing the members voice) sit on all panels with one other Director, the CEO and an independent member. The independent member will be chosen based on the skills requirements of the post i.e., if recruiting a Finance Director, an individual with financial/accounting skills would support the panel. WA consider “independence” in relation to the process they follow for recruiting, and not whether an individual has any attachment to WA.

WA are almost meeting the Sport Wales Gender Parity Policy and have a Board Diversity Action Plan in place. They believe that board diversity and the “Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion” agenda as a whole is an integral part of their work and are actively reviewing all wording related to gender/identity/biological sex in their policies and documents. They have identified a lack of BAME representation on the board (due to 2 unfortunate resignations) and are also conscious of the need for Welsh Language speakers and a balance of representatives from all corners of the country. A recent appointment to the board was an EDI Director who will lead this area of work alongside a diverse and skilled EDI sub-group. Their aim is to have all members who can identify themselves with a board/sub-group

member. Furthermore, and to their credit, WA are looking to address EDI across each level of the organisation and not limiting themselves to the board only.

WA have an excellent recruitment policy with a wide-ranging list of recruitment partners/organisations representing the diverse nature of their membership (*BEST PRACTICE*).

As referred to in the previous section, board induction is an area under development, and plans are in place to include an informal/social element to board inductions by integrating directors at awards, competitions and events. Prior to Covid there were proposals for a board away-day integrating board, senior management and members of the General Council. It is also worth noting that the Board and the General Council host a joint board meeting once a year, again demonstrating WA commitment to member engagement.

Along with the support of Cobalt HR, WA have developed a comprehensive annual board evaluation including sections on self-assessment, training and development, board performance, skills and experience, behaviours, relationships and board role (*BEST PRACTICE*). The behaviours are strongly linked to their organisational values, and though it is appreciated that directors are volunteers and time commitment has been taken into account, it would be useful to capture live examples of how directors have demonstrated those behaviours and lived the values (not a score only). The second stage of the evaluation process would see each board member discuss their submission in a 1-1 meeting. This would be another opportunity to capture live behavioural examples.

WA make effective use of their sub-groups to help develop future board members by allowing them to attend board meetings as observers. This gently exposes them to the work of the board and provides them with an insight in order to develop and integrate them over time. This is especially the case with members highlighted as future chairs of the General Council with plans also in place to offer similar opportunities to members of the athlete's fora. The flexibility of the Articles to allow directors to extend their term of office for up to 12 months is beneficial for succession planning, which is also complemented by the regular updating of the skills matrix. WA should consider integrating their skills/diversity/terms of office analysis into one document in order to identify to totality of their loss when a board member is to leave.

## **STRATEGY**

The WA 7-year (2019-26) strategic plan is the document that glues the organisation together. All work areas are clearly aligned to the 6 key strands of: - Unite; Engage; Own It; Inspire; Innovate; and Lead the Way. Some further work is required to align all key documents to the strategy, but this has been identified and is underway. The strategic document is concise, clear, and to the point. It includes the vision and values, and most importantly is "strategic", and is the starting point for the golden thread that runs throughout the organisation. It is great to see a key strand of the strategy related to governance (Lead the Way).

As can be seen from the Annual Report, key sub-groups take ownership of different strands of the strategy and progress is monitored at sub-group meetings with highlight reports presented to the board. The Annual Report then clearly shows progress against each of these areas on an annual basis.

WA were keen to share that even though they are aware of Sport Wales' priorities and the Well-being Goals of the Future Generations Act and are able to align their work to report against both, their strategy has been developed by and for their membership and not focussed purely on drawing down funding. This is to be applauded, as is their ambition to reduce the percentage of their income that comes from Sport Wales / Welsh Government. Extensive consultation and engagement with members were a key part of the strategy development, as is the ongoing monitoring and evaluation against its key strands.

The newly developed Operation Plan is very comprehensive and shows clear alignment to key strategic areas and objectives, and clear ownership and accountability against each area. In a further step, WA have aligned their budget/resources against each of these areas and are able to produce reports clearly showing how much investment is going in against each key area of the strategy through their operational plan. This is an excellent and innovative approach that also allows dashboard reports to be produced and should be shared across the sector (*BEST PRACTICE*).

## LEADERSHIP

Declaration of interest forms are completed by all directors annually or on appointment and are included on all board and general council agendas.

As mentioned above, through their board appraisal, WA will aim to capture evidence of board members leading by example, living the organisational values, behaving with integrity as well as actively promoting it themselves. One example of this already shared is their willingness to publicly report on board member attendance at key meetings. It was noted that since changing the articles to allow the appointment of skill-based directors, these behaviours and skills will be apparent in the recruitment process and less work is required to try and mould these key behaviours into individuals. This was also noted in the way the board has significantly developed over the past 12 months and regularly have healthy debate and challenge. A recent example of this includes board members joining the finance committee as observers to gain a better understanding of its role and the detail of the discussion at the sub-group. This allows board meetings to remain strategic with succinct risk-based reports.

The values of the organisation, as stated in the strategy, are implicit within all board/staff appraisals, recruitment/HR documents, and the Code of Conduct. As plans are in place to develop a joint Code of Conduct with other UK Home Nations, it is important that the WA values are not lost within this and are clearly represented.

## WELLBEING

WA have reviewed all HR policies over the past 3 months (6-month review usually) with support from Cobalt HR, and all polices are kept and shared using the People HR online

portal. The staff handbook is available online and there is a personal responsibility on staff to read any new or updated policies once these have been highlighted to them. Line managers and senior staff are aware of the content of policies and are able to signpost staff.

One significant change in response to Covid-19 is the development of a Home Working Policy. Cobalt HR conducted focus groups with staff and completed an equality impact assessment. Desktop assessments for home working stations were completed with additional funding for laptop raisers and office chairs. In November 2020, WA also undertook a wellbeing survey of its staff. This was important, particularly given the circumstances surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic. Employees were asked to consider the state of their health and safety, working from home, lifestyle choices and any concerns regarding returning to the office. This work was led by the head of corporate services specifically to look out and care for their staff. They set up a buddy system where members of staff could pick up the phone and chat about anything, work related or not. There were regular staff check-ins and when regulations allowed, opportunities for staff to work from the office via a booking in system. A conscious decision was also made that no meetings would be held between 9am-12, to allow staff flexibility around home-schooling. There was an overwhelming positive response to this work as captured in the staff survey and though they are still consulting on the future, there is likely to be a permanent cultural shift with greater flexible working arrangements. Staff contract changes will reflect the new policy. This is a great example of WA living their values and making a genuine effort to improve the well-being of their staff (*BEST PRACTICE*).

Staff induction processes are in place and an appraisal system similar to that of board members, clearly aligning to organisational values and behaviours. Staff development is integral with an allowance of at least 24 hours CPD for each member of staff annually. The appraisal system is well documented and allows for a consistent approach across all staffing teams and will clearly tie into the Operational Plan and hence the strategy.

## **STANDARDS, SYSTEMS & CONTROLS**

All required policies and procedures are in place and included on a comprehensive policy schedule, highlighting date of next review, who is accountable, and which board sub-group it ultimately sits with. This again is a document that should be shared as best practice across the sector (*BEST PRACTICE*).

All membership data is stored on a UK-wide system held by UK Athletics with all coaches licensed to British Athletics and all data controller/processor contracts in place.

The Home Countries recently commissioned a safeguarding review with a view to developing consistent policies that will be formally adopted by all home nation governing bodies. WA stated it has been good to work collaboratively with other home nations and further work is planned to consider a 12-year unified athletics strategy and collaborative work around EDI and communication (in response to UK Sport Review of UKA). The WA CEO is now part of the re-established UKA CEO Forum and is currently engaging with members around planned proposals from UKA to review the power base of their membership with 5

different options being considered. Though partnership working and collaboration is encouraged, it is important that WA maintain their independence during the process.

## **RISK**

Risk was an area that WA felt had been neglected over recent years and perhaps considered a tick-box exercise. Nowadays, each risk holder (as identified in the risk register) meet on a quarterly basis to review/highlight risks, update mitigations and subsequently update the risk register. The risk register is now included as a standing board agenda item where any “red” risks are discussed. The risk register is also presented to the governance and finance sub-groups. Having risk as a standing agenda item has allowed the board to reflect on risk and helped drive decision making. Board members drove the need to discuss risk and lead by example with bi-weekly meetings during the Covid restrictions.

Though the risk register is extremely detailed, it may be one of the very few documents that doesn't clearly align with the strategy, and though this is no criticism of WA, it may be beneficial for that mapping work to be completed.

There is currently no legal director on the board of WA and following a refresh of the skills matrix, the next round of board recruitment has identified the need for legal and communications/marketing skills.

## **ETHICS AND INTEGRITY**

WA are making excellent progress against both Safeguarding (Level 3) and Equality Standards (intermediate panel March 2021) and are aiming to progress with the advanced standard during the next 12 months. Both areas are fundamentally embedded into the strategic plan and will be driven by the EDI sub-group.

They provide education and awareness around anti-doping with a focus on elite athletes and have identified the need to embed this across all national programmes. There have been some recent cases of doping highlighted within the sport that have been handled by Sports Resolutions and WA have supported athletes through the process. Feedback from safeguarding concerns highlighted that WA policies always ended with a sanction and there was nothing in place in relation to duty of care to their members. WA are now considering changes to their policies with consideration for duty of care in their processes i.e. supporting an athlete who loses a coach, or re-integrating those found not-guilty of any breaches.

As highlighted above, there are movements to bring together a UK-wide Code of Conduct for “partakers” of athletics, so no-one slips through the gap when considering different groups involved in the sport. There have been no issues in relation to gambling as the sport itself prohibits betting and the market is not readily available.

## **GLFW**

WA have focussed their governance action plan on the Capability Framework. This is not to say that they are not delivering against further elements of the GLFW, but when



time/resource allows, they are encouraged to map out their achievements across the 7 principles of the GLFW. Based on their CF submission, it is predicted that they will meet a large proportion of the requirements and should be aspirational within their current capacity/resource to further improve what is already a very sound governance foundation.

## SUMMARY / RECOMMENDATIONS

WA have been through significant change at a board and senior management level over the past 2 years, and this has given them the opportunity to reflect and realign themselves with their values and strategic aims. They clearly appreciate the need and benefits of good governance and this is implicit throughout their work, and not a by-product of having to complete/meet the requirements of the Capability Framework.

It has been very encouraging to listen to talk of positive culture change, values and behaviours, and a commitment to embed these throughout the whole organisation. Their approach to having a golden thread running from their membership driven strategy right the way through their key documents and working practices is to be congratulated.

Achieving positive culture change will take time and WA are encouraged to do just that, though should keep the current momentum going. They should aspire to consolidate against the Capability Framework and thrive against the remainder of the GLFW, as it is well within their reach.

Conducting the review with WA has been a breath of fresh air and I look forward to seeing the fruits of their labour over the coming years.

The list of recommendations below are listed with the potential of the organisation in mind and should be considered based on their capacity to do so.

WA should consider the following recommendations: -

**R<sub>1</sub>**. Following the changes made to board recruitment in 2018/19, WA should recognise the importance of the role of the General Council Chair, being the representative voice of the membership on the board. The importance of this role should be considered and communicated to the membership prior to each election process.

**R<sub>2</sub>**. Clarify the role of the Regional Associations and consider whether they should receive a vote at the AGM, as each club from within the Regional Associations already have a vote.

**R<sub>3</sub>**. Addition of a statement allowing WA to conduct AGM virtually either to articles or bylaws.

**R<sub>4</sub>**. Formalise a Directors Handbook and induction process for all board directors, including informal/social activities. A brief annual refresh of the induction may be useful for all board directors.



**R<sub>5</sub>**. Do not rush culture change as the process for embedding positive change throughout organisations takes time but be careful not to lose momentum. Each tier of the structure should be completed prior to moving onto the next.

**R<sub>6</sub>**. Recruitment for the 2 vacant board positions should consider positive action in relation to representation from under-represented groups, especially when considering the diverse nature of the athletics community.

**R<sub>7</sub>**. Capture live examples of board and staff living and breathing the organisational values (values/behaviours log) as part of their annual evaluation/appraisal. “Walking the walk” as well as “talking the talk”.

**R<sub>8</sub>**. Integrate skills audit, board diversity, and terms of office analysis to inform future recruitment and succession planning.

**R<sub>9</sub>**. WA to ensure their values are not lost within a shared Code of Conduct developed with other Home Nations and are clearly referenced within it. It is also important that other key areas of work reviewed in partnership with other UK Home Nations do not dilute or interfere with WA’s independence and that wording of documents are consistent i.e., if there is a shared code of conduct that refers to a disciplinary process/sanctions, does this align with WA policies? How does the board code of conduct fit in to this?

**R<sub>10</sub>**. Align risk register with strategic aims. Also consider renaming it as an organisational risk register and not a “financial” risk register. Though ultimately everything does have an impact on finance, there are numerous well-being/personal risks included within the register and there may be a very small risk when considering the culture that it could be considered that “finance” takes primacy over all else, which is evidently not the case with WA.

**R<sub>11</sub>**. Review relevant policies with due regard to Duty of Care, especially in relation to sanctions.

**R<sub>12</sub>**. Map current achievements/working practices against the 7 principles of the GLFW.