

IFRCS47 James Williams, Chief Executive Officer, Welsh Athletics

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[Effaith Gostyngiadau Cyllid ar Ddiwylliant a Chwaraeon | Impact of Funding Reductions for Culture and Sport](#)

Ymateb gan: James Williams, Prif Swyddog Gweithredol, Athletau Cymru |
Evidence from: James Williams, Chief Executive Officer, Welsh Athletics

Welsh Athletics, the National Governing Body of Athletics and Running activities across Wales has been a recipient of funding via Sport Wales for a significant period.

As per all National Governing Bodies for sport in Wales, we receive a mix of lottery and exchequer funding, and use the funding to support a large number of activities as requested in the funding agreement from Sport Wales.

To provide some context of the impact that the funding has had in recent years, the sport is listed as the number one form of physical activity in the Sport Wales School Sport Survey (71% - 221,412 young people), and the number one form of physical activity in the Sport and Active Lifestyle Survey (283,000 adults).

Through our investment and partnership work with the likes of parkrun (81 free running events across Wales) and the Daily Mile (550 primary schools signed up across Wales), we are providing free running opportunities to hundreds of thousands of people across Wales.

Welsh Athletics also licenses over 400 events each year, as well as educating over 1600 coaches and 400 officials. The sport is underpinned by over 100 affiliated clubs, and 60 registered social running groups.

1. What impacts has reduced funding had on your organisation and sector so far?

Welsh Athletics has received funding cuts amounting to £131,000 since 2018 (excluding one off grants aligned to specific Capital projects or COVID related funding).

The impact of the reductions to investment in the sector, coupled with increased costs of delivery aligned to inflation (£238k in cost increases since 2021), and the challenge of minimum wage increase has meant the ability to deliver growth across our activities has been challenging.

As a NGB, we have specific requirements to enable the sport to function in a safe and assured way – this means that we have had to protect our investment into areas such as safeguarding, coach and officials licensing and facility operating standards.

The organisation also has to ensure that it utilises Sport Wales investment to deliver against the funding requirements – this has seen areas such as governance and EDI being prioritized.

The most recent funding cuts that came into effect in the 2024/25 funding cycle led to a staffing restructure, leading to 2.5 FTE staff (8% of staffing) leaving the organisation. Welsh Athletics was also not able to offer a consolidated cost of living increase to staff (a one off cost of living amount equivalent to 1%, 2% or 3% annual salary was offered, with staff at the lower end of the pay scale being prioritised).

The impact on salaries is also having a significant bearing on the ability to retain and recruit staff to help the organisation fulfill its strategic aims. Remuneration continues to be a common theme for staff who are exiting the organisation, and in the Welsh Athletics annual staff engagement survey – with cost of living challenges being highlighted as the number one form of non-work related stress.

Welsh Athletics has not been able to offer a salary uplift that is in line with inflation since 2018, with an average uplift during this period of 1.8%.

The impact of cuts on UK Governing Body is also being felt, with UK Athletics unable to continue its grant support to the Home Countries (reduced from £80k per annum in 2019 to zero in 2022). Additionally, UK Athletics have had to charge for previous in kind support, as well as requesting that the Home Countries take on additional responsibilities. This has meant an additional expenditure to support the sport across the UK of over £20k in the current financial year.

2. What measures have you taken in light of it, such as changing what you do and how you do it?

Given the level of uncertainty, Welsh Athletics has been working to minimise the dependency on Sport Wales investment, and the significant risk attached to further cuts.

Albeit a greater emphasis is being put on securing the support of commercial partners, and in securing grant funding from alternative sources, the organisation has had to increase the fees it charges for membership, coach and official education.

The sport continues to be the most accessible and cost effective sport for all communities to engage with, we are mindful that even the smallest increases in fees may have an adverse effect on some areas of Wales.

The number of events that the organisation supports (both directly and indirectly) has also been reduced. Many external competition providers have relied on our support as they navigate their own challenges dealing with inflationary cost pressures, including costs being imposed by Local Authorities for aspects such as road closures and other services.

This may have a significant impact on the ability for charities to use mass participation events for fund raising as well as the obvious loss of activities supporting physical and mental wellbeing.

The indirect impact of funding cuts is seen with nearly all facilities in Wales increasing hire costs significantly, whilst also reducing opening hours or facility staffing. Schools Athletics has seen the greatest impact of these charges, with many schools association unable to raise additional income and choosing to reduce the number of events it delivers each year.

From a performance perspective, Welsh Athletics has had to re-asses how it best supports its athletes. The number of athletes receiving cash grants to support their activities has reduced from 19 in 2022 to 5 in 2024. For context the highest amount that any athlete/coach pair receives is £5,000 per annum – Paris 2024 Olympic Marathon runner Clara Evans is one of these athletes – the grant does not enable her to train full time and therefore has to work part-time to cover the cost of her training camps.

The risk of the performance gap between Welsh Athletes and those in other parts of the UK and the World increasing is very real. This is likely to be seen at future

Commonwealth and Olympic/Paralympic Games, with the number of Welsh athletes competing at the highest level will likely fall.

3. To what extent will these impacts be irreversible (e.g. venues closing, or specialist skills being lost rather than a temporary restriction in activities)?

Performance

The performance gap between Welsh based athletes and the rest of the UK (and indeed globally) World is already developing. We have seen European U23 Champion Jeremiah Azu relocate to Italy in order to continue his progression. We run the risk of talent having to relocate to England to access World class resource and facilities or stopping altogether if they cannot afford to relocate.

The fear is that the performance gap will grow to a point where Welsh athletes performances at World or Commonwealth level will drop off significantly. It could be argued that no able body Athletics medal at the Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games is an indication of the emerging trend.

Another impact of the inability to invest in our performance programmes may also see performance sport become inaccessible for large parts of society due the inability to afford travel to access facilities or competition – especially as the Governing Body needs to rationalise its offer to fewer locations across Wales.

Wales is desperately lacking in World Class athletics facilities, with the National Indoor Athletics Centre now approaching 25 years old, and at capacity, we are at the limits of what is possible for a Welsh athlete hoping to achieve World class performance whilst being based here in Wales.

Participation

The Governing Body will be forced to pass on more costs to its members if it does not cut some of its programmes to maintain a balanced financial position.

This will mean that in certain parts of Wales, the sport will become unaffordable, and therefore inaccessible. As the largest participation sport in Wales, the impact will be significant especially in areas of social deprivation.

Health and wellbeing

If funding cuts continue, then the Governing Body may have to begin a process of rationalising its offer and retracting back to its core function. This may mean that

it can no longer invest in many of the health and wellbeing initiatives that it currently invests in. These could include;

- Mind Mental Health Partnership – the training of 320 Mental Health Champions, 2 in each club and group across Wales. These Champions to deliver a run and talk programme, ensuring that every participant across Wales can access some form of mental health support.
- The Daily Mile programme – currently being delivered in nearly 550 primary schools across Wales. The designated staff from Welsh Athletics are supporting teachers in establishing the initiative and in building confidence in teachers and pupils across Wales to become physically active.
- Starting Blocs – a physical literacy programme for children aged 4-9 – helping to develop fundamental movement skills

Facilities

The increase in costs of using facilities is already leading to a reduction in usage – this has the risk of creating a spiral effect where facility operators in an effort to maximise income may see usage drop. The ultimate risk is a facility being deemed too expensive to operate and being closed by an operator – for many this may make it impossible to travel, due to cost, in order to access specialist facilities or equipment.

4. What interventions would you like to see from the Welsh Government, beyond increased funding?

The impact of sport and physical activity is immense. The ability to harness this impact across areas such as health (physical and mental wellbeing), education, as well as tackling inequalities should be at the heart of Welsh Government thinking and future policy.

The sector needs investment that enables Governing Bodies and other National Partners to meet its aims and ambitions.

A greater alignment between Sport, Health and education needs to be fostered, creating a more effective and efficient way of providing physical activity opportunities at the heart of every community.

Within education, physical activity must become a core part of every schools daily requirements. Schools and teachers need to be given the investment and training to enable them to confidently deliver physical activity within the school day.

The school environment should also be available during weekends, with school ground and facilities being made available for local sport and physical activity provision. An example of this would be the potential of delivering junior parkrun events within schools grounds – ensuring local provision in a safe and familiar location, harnessing the local community through participation and volunteering.

A desire to engage National Governing Bodies for sport as part of development of new policy should also be explored. Current policies require NGB's to explore how they can tailor programmes to meet ambitions set out in policy such as Healthy Weight, Healthy Wales. Greater engagement at the development phase would enable greater ability to align to current activities and enable much faster engagement and delivery of activity.

Some consideration should also be given to direct engagement with bodies who currently are delivering activities in this area. Not once has Welsh Athletics been approached by any agency enquiring as to its activities and to understand how such growth in participation has been achieved. A missed opportunity to share learning and to accelerate alignment to wider social agenda across Wales. This would indicate a lack of understanding of current activity of sporting bodies across Wales.

5. To what extent do the impacts you describe fall differently on people with protected characteristics and people of a lower socioeconomic status?

The continued funding cuts in the sector is enforcing Governing Bodies to have more focused remits. Albeit a huge amount of progress has been made in recent years in ensuring under-represented groups are enjoying more opportunities to engage, the programmes that have been so effective will be significantly under-pressure going forward.

The ability to recruit sufficient staff to drive programmes in the initiation stages is already difficult to achieve. Welsh Athletics has had to restructure its Development and Participation team and create National coordinators as it was no longer financially viable to adopt a regional approach.

This requires additional demands on club volunteers to drive local programmes, and the ability for Welsh Athletics to ensure consistency in approach across all of Wales is especially challenging.

6. Do you have any other points you wish to raise within the scope of this inquiry?

The sector has done an amazing job in absorbing continuous cuts in investment, without impacting on the programmes its delivering. The scope of activities that each NGB, National Partners or the member clubs/groups has expanded significantly – all sports are playing a key role in improving physical and mental wellbeing, tackling poverty and loneliness as well as ensuring their activities are available to all who wish to participate.

Welsh Athletics has launched a number of programmes and partnerships to engage more people into social running, and since 2016 has seen the number of women and girls running increase significantly, as well as increasing the number of opportunities for those with a physical or visual impairment to enjoy the sport.

Physical activity partnerships with parkrun and the Daily Mile will see many thousands of people of all ages begin their physical activity journey, and in turn playing a key role in tackling obesity and mental health across Wales.

Without increases in investment in the years ahead, there is a real concern that the progress made by Welsh Athletics in participation levels will be significantly impacted. The organisation has made all available savings to manage the reduction in investment – any additional cut will lead to the potential of significant reduction in capacity and delivery.

This will lead to a catastrophic reduction in programmes such as The Daily Mile and starting blocs, whilst also impacting the ability to support ongoing partnership such as our partnership with Mind to create mental health champions in each club/group across Wales.

The ability to support volunteers and quality assure coaches/officials may also be compromised.

Sport has the ability to positively impact the lives of so many people across Wales and the local clubs/groups are at the heart of so many communities across Wales.

The sector needs the investment required to achieve this potential. We need a programme of investment in facilities and programmes that will enable adults and young people from all parts of Wales to enjoy Sport.

There needs much closer alignment between sport, health and education to ensure joined up programmes and research can have the greatest impact. This would enable programmes such as the Daily Mile and parkrun to grow and have a even bigger impact on physical and mental wellbeing whilst also tackling childhood obesity by ensuring that every child will be physically active during the school day.

Without a reversal in the funding cuts to the sector, then we run the risk of losing a generation of sportspeople and will continue to see even greater burden and strain on our health service.
