XC Equalisation of Distances; Statement from the ECCA and 3 areas

The Cross Country representatives of the Northern, Midland & Southern Areas and the English Cross Country Association held their inaugural meeting, on the 14th January 2021. This is the first of a series of meetings aimed at delivering a unified response on behalf of the sport of cross country through the sport’s major competition providers and in particular within the coming discussions with UK Athletics and England Athletics over the controversial issue of equalisation of cross country distances.

It is worth emphasising that these organisations have been organising the Area and National championships for the sport of cross country for many years. They do this without any support or input from either UKA or England Athletics. None of the athlete registration fee income or the club affiliation fee income paid to England Athletics is routed directly into the sport of cross country.

The events, the selection and development pathway for athletes and representative teams are all organised by volunteers and funded by event entry fees. The people involved also voluntarily organise and deliver local leagues and County Championships in their areas. The sport is in the ascendancy in terms of numbers and local events.

We know, from contact with our championship competitors, that the vast majority have made it clear over the past two or three years that they are not in favour of equalising distances. Northern Athletics will be carrying out its own survey over the coming weeks to ascertain the views of its affiliated clubs and their athletes.

Our unified group look forward to considering the results of the recent UKA survey but we are, however, convinced that that survey is flawed and the questions skewed to obtain a certain result. Both the ECCA and the Areas had been asked to comment on the proposed survey prior to its launch. Our concerns regarding the questions were sent to Donna Fraser and requests were made that the survey be sent only to the people involved with cross country. The detailed e mail on the questions from the ECCA was not acknowledged and no reply has yet been received. The reply to Northern Athletics from Donna Fraser stated that equalisation was not a matter of whether but how. The survey then went out without our concerns being considered. We are concerned this unfortunate approach may be indicative of the future.

The survey is biased, as it only allows respondents to state how equalisation should be achieved not whether it should happen. We know that this has caused many of those, who wish to state their views, not to complete the survey.

We are also concerned that, in the first week or so of the survey being live, it was possible to make multiple submissions; and whilst this now appears to have been corrected, we believe this could invalidate the survey results.

We also know that many of the athletes who we would have expected to have received the survey link have not done so.

The above reasons justify our position that the survey is flawed.

It is apparent, from the extensive views expressed on social media, that the “pro and anti-equalisation” camps do not agree but we are encouraged that many successful and experienced cross country runners and coaches have outlined genuine concerns, about athlete welfare, retention and development, as these are key concerns for us - particularly for female athletes.

We accept, as is their right, that some organisations (Scottish Athletics and Essex County) have taken the decision to equalise distances to 10Km. However, many other organisations and leagues have decided, after consulting all their members, to retain the unequal distances for Senior, (including European Athletics) Junior & U17 age groups. Early indications are that both Wales and Northern Ireland are not yet convinced by the equalisation aims. In addition, emerging analysis, which compares the results and performances of equalised distance events with the unequal distance events, shows that the equalised distances impact adversely on the performance of the female athletes and as such appear unfair to female performance.

We urge all those who love the sport to complete the survey and make your views known especially in the box provided for further comments.

Our unified group will continue to represent the majority views of those in the sport and we look forward to the open debate and discussions as promised over the coming months. We will continue to discuss at subsequent meetings the need to ensure our sport of cross country does not have imposed upon it rules which are against the wishes and feelings of the majority.

ECCA and the Area Associations