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## Aiming high: how, where and why should UK Sport invest?

**UK Sport has undertaken a consultation on whether its focus on investing in performance needs to be reconsidered. Wayne Allsopp was happy to respond but his take on the future of sport asks some searching questions regarding the balance between elite performance and participation.**

UK Sport's current investment strategy focuses on medal success, which has prompted the question of whether this should continue to be the primary focus of their investment. It is an interesting debate.

The various sectors of the sporting landscape have their distinctive responsibilities, whether that be elite sport, community sport or school sport. It is important that this remains to enable success at all levels. The major improvement required with the system is the connectivity and the collaboration. We currently have horizontal alignment of strategies when vertical alignment is clearly called for, a golden thread that can capitalise on the sporting success and turn that Olympic bounce into meaningful participation for those that are not elite performers. Personal podiums in community sport and school sport are equally as important, and the inspiration created by success plays a major part in improving these sectors of our sporting landscape.

Elite sport can only be measured in one way and that is by how successful we are. Rewarding underperformance can create the acceptance of the underdog mentality, something that British sport has been associated with too often. Elite sport is not just about high-level competition: it is about competing with a chance of success. Some would say that just having a national side is inspiring and creates role models that in turn enables sport to have a bigger impact on society. I would say that while this might be the case, the remit of UK Sport is not the cross-cutting social agendas and increasing sports participation. The impact that successful elite performance has on the other areas is recognisable but should not be the driving force behind elite sport funding. The ultimate goal for UK Sport is delivering success.

Accepting that the medal haul from the last two Olympics is largely made up of athletes competing in individual sports rather than team sports does raise an interesting question: is UK Sport rewarding sports associated with private schools and therefore are the majority of our Olympians coming from privately educated backgrounds? If so, are we not creating a culture where that to stand any chance of being an Olympic medallist you have to be from within a certain sector of society?

This would suggest that to be equitable medal success cannot be the only focus of UK Sport investment policy. Is a different outcome required that determines success or are individual measures of success on a sport-by-sport basis required? I would suggest that the ability to deliver medals for some sports is absolutely right but for other sports where the dynamics are different, namely team sports, some thought needs to be given to alternative measure of success. The 'no compromise' approach needs to remain whatever that definition of success looks like. UK Sport and Sue Campbell had it right with the no compromise approach and the only tweak needed is in terms of the definition of acceptable success for all sports competing at international

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level. Medals should not be the only success measure but an aspirational target is a must for elite sport funding, a simple and transparent model for all concerned.

Why we need to review UK Sports investment policy is simple: to stay ahead of the game. We have two Olympic cycles of learning and soon a third in terms of the no compromise approach. There is a phenomenal amount of information from what will be a 12-year period of successfully delivering what it was asked to deliver: medals. However, whether the delivery of medals is the only outcome we want to see from the investment is worth considering. Some sports would say that medals as an outcome would not represent a realistic goal. Basketball has been the most vocal and argumentative regarding how the current financial model works but you would be if you had all your funding withdrawn as a result of not showing medal potential. The key question is: do they have a balanced argument?

Can UK Sport realistically ask sports to demonstrate their medal potential four or eight years hence? For some sports this is going to be easier to forecast than others. Looking back at the medal haul from 2008 and 2012, team sports have not produced medals and have suffered the biggest financial penalties. Taking basketball as an example, there are some key questions.

First, is the Olympic podium a realistic vision for them; and if so, do they have the necessary plan and expertise to deliver that vision? Second, should we expect them to medal given any investment or should their success measure be different? Third, is bringing home a medal the only reflection on value for money or do we consider the value of the inspiration created by a national basketball team competing in an Olympic Games?

I do not believe that just taking part at international or Olympic level is value for money when it comes to elite sport funding. The argument that it inspires others to play the sport is an argument that needs to be directed somewhere other than UK Sport. This is probably why the reprieve for basketball is being funded largely by Sport England as they recognise the impact a national basketball side as on participation figures and I am pleased to see that they have put in a performance measure regarding the success of the national teams (the senior women's team will target a top 12 position in the 2015 European Championship finals and the senior men's team qualification for the 2017 European Championship finals).

I believe basketball has instigated a necessary debate but social and moral issues should not have been the grounds for the raising of concerns regarding elite sport funding. Basketball would have been better weighting its case towards the fact that the dynamics of team sports do not allow them to demonstrate the medal potential as easily as individual sports.

Surely any sport wanting to compete in international competition should be aspiring to be successful? Where the Olympics are concerned, that must mean aspiring to bring home a medal. If sports believe that this is a step too far in four or eight years' time they need to put forward a strong case for what reasonable success would look like. Suggesting that just competing is sufficient as it inspires others is not a suitable argument for our elite sport funding body.

It is disappointing that one sport has managed to lobby the right politicians to bring into question an element of the sporting landscape that has worked. What about the majority of sports this is working for and the fact that this is the formula that placed us third in the medal table in 2012? It is absolutely correct to review; others will be catching us up and let's consider what future success looks like. Let's also reflect on the success it has delivered and applaud those responsible for it.

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Let's fire some questions back to basketball. Why is it that they have not been successful in 2008 or 2012, and why do they not have any potential for 2016? This would surely be valuable information in helping them improve. The vision of success is all very well but without a plan it is nothing more than illusion.

If the focus for elite sport funding changes without any additional resource then we can expect a slide down the medal table back to the days of Atlanta. This would not be an accolade that any minister would want to be associated with; neither would it be that inspiring.

The only sports currently eligible for consideration for UK Sport performance investment are those sports on the Olympic and Paralympic programme, which prompts UK Sport to ask whether this investment approach should continue or whether the approach should be broadened to include other UK-level sports or disciplines.

The distinct remit of UK Sport was initially to improve the standings in the Olympic medal table, which they have done exceptionally well. In Rio Team GB will have an additional edge owing to two cycles of sustained success. To equal or better the 2012 medal count in 2016 would be an unrivalled achievement; no other host nation has done it.

There is obviously a clear difference between the sports that Sport England fund in order to increase participation and the sports that UK Sport funds in order to bring home medals. Those sports that benefit from both should be providing a seamless transition on to a pathway toward success.

Sport England investment does try and bridge the gap between community and elite sport by providing national governing bodies (NGB) with a small percentage of funding to improve talent through their whole sport plans. However, for non-Olympic sports this financial support will probably only scratch the surface because Sport England's main driver is increasing participation. Having two independent bodies in UK Sport and Sport England operating in isolation is the reason for a lack of joined-up thinking. A Department for Sport holding both accountable would create synergy.

How we support our elite athletes in non-Olympic sports needs to be given careful consideration. As with medals for Olympic sports, the outcomes for elite sport funding would need to be aspirational. Given its expertise, UK Sport should be working with non-Olympic sports and funding them to achieve success. Clarity would be required, with UK Sport working alongside Sport England to establish which sports provide the international-standard competition that warrants elite sport funding. If this can be achieved then the outcome measure of medals alone would need to be reviewed and tailored outcomes created for each sport. Additional investment would be required to ensure that Olympic chances were not diluted.

The Olympic Games continue to represent the pinnacle for a number of sports. For these sports the same level of support needs to continue to make sure that the level of success that we have become accustomed to is sustained. There needs to be some discussion between UK Sport and Sport England regarding the sports to focus on in terms of improving participation and elite success. Some joined-up thinking and collaboration is called for, along with some recognised value-for-money performance measures for all the sports that we would want to see succeed in competition.

Ongoing success in high-performance sport is not easy to measure. Medals in relation to Olympic sports seems to be a sensible performance measure and most have delivered on that or have demonstrated potential. Sports that have not delivered or do not show

any potential to deliver are not going to be happy and will make a plea for alternative success measures. However, I am afraid a nice summer holiday in Rio is not a demonstration of being successful. If I were a betting man with £350 million to invest, I would be putting it into sports that can demonstrate their ability to deliver success. Thirty-six sports have done that and seven have failed to do so. That such a high percentage of sports can demonstrate their ability to medal in 2016 or 2020 is hugely encouraging. It creates optimism and raises aspirations. More importantly, it is a proven formula and the end result has been a proud nation.

But what of the seven sports that have failed to demonstrate their ability to deliver medals? Do we simply cast them adrift in terms of their elite/performance programmes? If not a medal, what does success at elite level look like for them? Should we be financially penalising them for not being able to medal in 2016 or 2020?

These are thought-provoking questions but these sports will continue to have elite performance opportunities and we surely need to be supporting all sports in their elite performance aspirations. I believe we need a tiered system for sports to apply for elite sport funding. This should include Olympic sports with the level of investment related to the level of the demonstration of success. Categories would need weighting alongside other performance measures associated with elite sport, with a transparent formula applied to demonstrate the funding that can be applied for at each level.

Let's take basketball as an example again. The recent bail-out by Sport England introduced key performance indicators for the national sides (the senior women's team will target a top 12 position in the 2015 European Championship finals and the senior men's team qualification for the 2017 European Championship finals) but it prompts the question of whether that goes far enough and whether that is a reasonable expectation or measure of success for £1.18 million.

The key is getting the right balance of investment and success for it to be deemed value for money; and this is all to be done within the constraints of what is likely to be a tighter budget in the future.

The UK Sport consultation also seeks responses to the issue of whether 'deeper' investment might underpin success in the longer-term. The current investment approach only supports sports and athletes that can demonstrate a realistic chance of medal success in either the next, or the following Paralympics or Olympics, ie within the next eight years, while home nation sports councils also invest public and lottery money to support sports and athletes at community and development levels.

It can be a long journey towards winning at the elite level in sport and there will be many milestones and set backs along the way. Some sports and individuals will achieve success and others will fail; that is the nature of the business. There are no guarantees but sports must have a plan that demonstrates relevant progress over time with relevant timescales and the resources required to enable that progress to happen. For some sports and individuals this will take longer than others but the process and the brief should be the same.

Using the Olympic cycle as the basis of a timeline, sports should demonstrate when they believe they have the best chance of delivering their definition of success. This timescale should span no more than 12 years; if you cannot demonstrate how you are going to be successful in 12 years then you have something wrong. Any framework for sustainable success should include: clarity of purpose, values, vision, strategy to achieve that vision, key relationships, definition of success and high-quality performance management.

After the Rio Olympic and Paralympic Games sports should be asked to

rethink their strategies in terms of the performance aspect of their sport. Some will already have in place plans for Tokyo but may need to realign them to any new way of working for UK Sport. UK Sport should align its resource accordingly within the next 12 years, making awards to sports on the basis of their demonstration of how and when they believe they will be successful.

While there is no magic formula for success, UK Sport has the expertise and the knowledge to support sports in addition to any financial investment. Basketball is a great demonstration of that.

In the current four-year investment cycle UK Sport is investing a total of £380 million of lottery and exchequer income directly in 45 summer and winter Olympic and Paralympic sports. With finite resources it is important that the criteria for funding does not become too woolly. The more you dilute it, the less impact it will have.

After Rio sustained success should be the top investment priority for UK Sport. It is difficult to plan beyond any government cycle but UK Sport should still plan the outcomes for the next 12 years. The focus should be on delivering success in a number of sports at a number of events, which would be a slight change in direction. The work on the Gold Event Series needs to continue. Hosting high-profile events not only raises the profile of the nation as world-leading home for sport; it also has a huge economic impact on the country.

The only way of improving our sport system is to encourage better collaboration between the sectors. I do not buy into the idea that UK Sport is a UK-wide funding body that does not have the same geographical boundaries as the home country sports councils. Where there is a will – or should I say a directive – there is a way. Basketball England created the debate between Sport England and UK Sport as to who should provide them with a reprieve. Thankfully UK Sport stuck by their criteria and demonstrated that basketball having a national side is more aligned to encouraging participation rather than demonstrating any reasonable chance of success at Rio.

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