

ENGLAND COUNCIL AND BOARD: AGE GROUP RULES CHANGE OUTCOMES

Monday 30th October 2023 via Teams

Present

England Council

Matthew Dalton, Chair. EC Chair, Chair of East Council, EC Board Director (MD)
Paul D'Arcy, Chair of South West Council (PD)
Adrian Day, Chair of London Council (AD)
Janice Kaufman, Chair of North East Council, EC nominated Board Director (JK)
Ian Martin, Chair of Yorks & Humberside (IM)
Stuart Paul, Chair of West Midlands Council (SP)
Jane Pidgeon, Chair of East Mids Council (JP)
Gary Shaughnessy, Board Chair (GS)
James de Vivenot, Chair of South East Council (JdeV)

Board

Gary Shaughnessy, Board Chair, member of England Council (GS)
Adetunji Akintokun (AA)
Lorna Boothe, Member Elected (LB)
Matthew Dalton, England Council nominated (MD)
Janyce Holmes (JH)
Chris Jones, CEO (CJ)
Janice Kaufman, England Council nominated (JK)
Helen Kendall (HK)
Clive Poyner, Member Elected (CP)

Other

Sarah Benson, Head of Talent Development [EA] (SB)
Abbie Burton, PR & Comms Support [EA]
Dan Isherwood, Head of Operations [EA] (DI)
Harry Lane, Board Observer, (HL)
Sam O'Shea, Board & NED Secretary [EA] (SO)
Ben Skinner, England Council Secretary [EA] (BS)
James Williams, CEO Welsh Athletics (JW)

Apologies

Jim Buckle, Board Director (JB)
Jon Clarke, Chair of North West Regional Council (JC)
Leshia Hawkins, Board Director (LH)
Marilyn Okoro, UKA nominated Board Director (MO)

1. Declarations of interest

There were none.

Age Group Rules Change proposal

2. Background and consultation outcomes

The consultation concluded on 23rd October, and prior to this meeting detailed quantitative and qualitative data from the consultation was circulated to the Board and England Council. The views from the UK Jumps Advisory Panel and the UK Combined Events Advisory Panel were also circulated.

The paper confirmed the three options for consideration:

- 1) Option 1- Approve the proposal
- 2) Option 2- Approve the proposal with requirement for further consultation and revised timescale
- 3) Option 3- Withdraw support for the proposal

Consultation outcomes

DI gave a brief summary of the paper circulated. The consultation included webinars and surveys to gather feedback from clubs, member bodies, athletes and their parents. The outcomes show there is a clear difference in feedback from clubs and member bodies, where the majority are against the proposal, versus the athletes and their parents who are more supportive. The data shows that there is a link to exam pressure and changing the age groups from odds to evens would be a key mitigator to helping to address the drop out of ages 16-20.

UKA Advisory Panels

SB informed the group that the views of the UK Advisory Panels (Throws, Jumps, Combined Events) had also been sought and they were all generally supportive. Comments had been received stating that the change should improve retention and provide better transition through the technical events within the pathway. It would also align better with World Athletics. There was also support from the leads for Speed and Endurance.

SB added that the change would allow more time for 16 year olds to transition into the senior competitions. She highlighted that athletics was the only UK sport which has a 3-year age band, all others have 2-year bands.

Home Countries (HCAFs)

JW reminded the group that a consultation around the age groups was carried out in 2016 but there was concern around schools and Cross Country.

There is overwhelming support from Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. It was felt that this change would be a catalyst for wider, much needed, competition improvements. Concerns included uncertainty around coaches and the impact on historical records.

From a work perspective, a number of other countries have identified exam pressures being a cause for drop out and every other country adopts Even age groups. If the change is not made this year, the risk is that it would be 7 years before this could be considered again.

3. Discussion

England Council and the Board debated the detailed findings from the consultation and also took into consideration feedback via regional councils. There were views in support of the proposed change and also against and these included:

- Against the proposal
 - Exam pressure is not the only cause of drop out of this age group, we should understand all the reasons.
 - The change could cause additional work and disruption for clubs.
 - The costs could be significant.
 - If Schools are not included, this could cause further complications.
- In support of the proposal
 - We must put the athlete at the heart of our decisions.
 - We have a duty of care towards young people who have significant pressures.
 - Although we don't know the scale, the data does show that exams do add additional pressure. Education has changed significantly over recent years, with young people remaining in education/work placement until aged 18 and many more young people are progressing to university than previously.
 - Our sport should help towards mitigating society's wider issues of the mental health challenges for young people. We should do our best to alleviate pressures.
 - Other comments:
 - A Change Plan should be developed to support the changes.
 - Ideally schools would be included.
 - Option 2 would provide a longer lead-in time and support a smoother transition.
 - The research collected during the consultation should be published.

Following the initial debate, it was clear that a longer transition time would be preferable and therefore MD suggested, and the group agreed, that Option 1 should be discounted.

Option 2 was further discussed. Various implementation dates were discussed, aligning with different sections of the competition calendar. An implementation date of 1st April 2026 would give sufficient time to operationalise, to work with our athletes, clubs and providers for a smoother transition and to understand other causes of athlete drop out. It would also provide the opportunity for a 2025 pilot, and it aligned well with the start of the next rule book cycle.

4. Voting

Option 2 was reframed:

To approve the proposal with requirement for a revised timescale of 1st April 2026 implementation.

This will be in line with the 26-28 publication of the rule book.

This will require conversations with HCAFs and competition providers to ensure best alignment, but there will not be a requirement for a further consultation.

England Council members voted. (One vote had also been received via email). The majority vote within England Council was in favour.

Led by GS, Board Chair, the Board members voted. (Three votes had also been received via email). The majority vote within the Board was in favour.

The Board also agreed that a wider debate was required to further understand the reasons for athletes deciding to drop out of athletics. This should be a UK wide debate to take into consideration that many young people may move for university.

Resolved and Actions:

1.) England Council and the Board approved the proposal to support a joint HCAF recommendation to the UKA Rules Group, to change the current age groups (of U13, U15 and U17 to new proposed age groups of U12, U14, U16 and U18) with a 1st April 2026 implementation.

- The Executive Team will work up a communications plan taking into account the recommendations.
- JW will submit the HCAF decision to the Rules Group on 31st October. If the proposal is approved by UKA, EA will work with other HCAFs on the implementation plan.

2.) The Board also voted in favour to establish a UK-wide task force to engage with the whole sport on the broad drop out rate issue.