



1 August 2018

UK SPORT CONSULTATION ON THE FUTURE OF ELITE SPORT FUNDING
RESPONSE FROM THE BOARD OF GREAT BRITAIN WHEELCHAIR RUGBY

1. Great Britain Wheelchair Rugby ("GBWR") welcomes this opportunity to contribute to and help guide the debate on the future funding of elite sport. This paper represents the formal response of GBWR.

Background

2. Wheelchair Rugby (WR) is a unique sport with a unique set of challenges. In order to fully understand our position in respect of elite sport funding it may be helpful to provide some background to the sport.

3. WR landed on these shores in the early 1980s, when the USA team flew over to give an exhibition at Stoke Mandeville. Soon after this the first three clubs were established in the UK and the number had grown to 7 by 2010. Globally, the sport was first seen at the World Wheelchair Games in 1990. It was demonstrated at the Atlanta Paralympic Games in 1996 before being adopted as a medal winning sport at the Sydney Paralympic Games in 2000. GBWR has qualified for, and competed at, every Paralympic Games, World Championships (held every 4 years) and European Championships (held every 2 years). Its best results to date are a 4th position at the World Championships in 2006 and 4th at the 2004 and 2008 Paralympic Games. It is the top ranking WR team in Europe and the current holder of the gold medal which it has won on 5 occasions. Its current world ranking is 5th.

4. WR was specifically created to provide a physically demanding and competitive team game for those with a high level of disability. To classify to play the Paralympic discipline of the game requires an individual to have some loss of function in all 4 limbs. This has meant that a large number of those who play the sport have had some sort of spinal trauma in the neck. As the sport has evolved and become more professional at international level, great efforts have been made by performance staff to find and attract individuals with a wide range of different disabilities in order to achieve the highest level of individual and team functionality whilst remaining within the classification parameters.

5. All of the above means that there will only ever be a relatively small number (compared to most able bodied sports) of individuals who qualify by function to play the Paralympic version of the game. Fortunately, largely because of improvements in safety measures, especially in motor vehicles, the number of serious spinal injuries have significantly reduced which is a further reason for performance staff seeking individuals whose loss of function is a result of other factors eg genetic disabilities, illnesses such as meningitis. A number of athletes have come into the game because they have incurred a loss of function through sporting accidents, typically rugby, diving and horse

Great Britain Wheelchair Rugby Limited

T: 020 8831 7645 | **F:** 020 8892 9816 | **E:** info@gbwr.org.uk | **W:** www.gbwr.org.uk | **Twitter:** @GBWRNews

Registered Office: Rugby House, Twickenham Stadium, 200 Whitton Road, Twickenham, Middlesex, TW2 7BA

Registered Company: 6108379 in England & Wales | **Registered Charity:** 1130038



riding. Numbers playing the sport have also increased as a result of programmes GBWR initiated and now delivers in military rehabilitation centres and this year we have had our first Afghanistan veteran to be internationally classified and to represent GB at the 2018 World Championships.

6. WR is a 2012 legacy success story. From the 7 clubs at paragraph 2 above it has grown to 22 clubs and 24 teams. In addition GBWR has created a non Paralympic discipline for those who are disabled but whose functions exceed the Paralympic classification limits. GBWR runs mainstream programmes in all military rehabilitation centres, spinal injury units and in many schools and rugby foundations. The sport is continually growing and an important factor for many is the knowledge that if they are good enough and if they work hard enough they may have the opportunity to represent their country at international level. For some this ambition is the driving force for their very existence. It is much more than an ambition, it is a focus for their lives, enabling them to look beyond their significant daily personal challenges and feel a sense of purpose and worth.

7. Sport England has recognized the value of the sport to a particular disability cohort and awarded GBWR £1.75m. £300k of this is for Talent and the remainder Core Market funding. All other forms of NGB income comes from fundraising, sponsorship, partner agreements and membership fees. Currently the entire elite programme is self-funded through sponsorship and fundraising but this position is not sustainable in the long term.

Our Position

8. Against the background above, as an NGB we would wish to make the following points:
- The existing approach to National Lottery funding of Britain's Olympic and Paralympic sports has created a two-class system that runs counter to Olympic ideals and that medal targets alone should not be the sole criteria for funding
 - GBWR believe that UK Sport has a moral responsibility to ensure that all our Olympic and Paralympic athletes are encouraged to achieve their potential and that a system of development opportunities should be there for all of them
 - GBWR strongly support the concept of baseline (NOT equal) funding of all Olympic and Paralympic sports and we consider the current system to be unfair and divisive. Already fewer sports are being funded than was previously the case and, thus, finding it increasingly difficult to demonstrate that they have the potential to succeed at the highest level, and this could easily lead to no alternative sports being considered as realistic options for funding. We think there is a real risk of diminishing returns for UK Sport as proportionately larger shares of the "funding pot" could go to fewer and fewer sports
 - A 'baseline funding' model could also include provision for sports to receive additional investment beyond the baseline based on medal potential.

Great Britain Wheelchair Rugby Limited

T: 020 8831 7645 | **F:** 020 8892 9816 | **E:** info@gbwr.org.uk | **W:** www.gbwr.org.uk | **Twitter:** @GBWRNews

Registered Office: Rugby House, Twickenham Stadium, 200 Whitton Road, Twickenham, Middlesex, TW2 7BA

Registered Company: 6108379 in England & Wales | **Registered Charity:** 1130038



- GBWR fully understands and supports the position that funding of sport has to be seen within the context of other government funding priorities and accepts the likelihood that the total “funding pot” available for the Paris cycle will be no more and potentially less than that for the current Tokyo round. Following the withdrawal of funding by UK Sport for the Tokyo round, GBWR has had notable success in achieving alternative sources of funding through sponsorship and fundraising but the level of funds required to meet the costs of maintaining an elite squad (circa minimum £600k pa) means that finding this level of income year on year is not sustainable. Neither will the numbers involved in the sport (as explained above) ever be large enough for the membership to meet fully the cost of maintaining a modern professional infrastructure which is able to ensure the highest standards of governance and probity
- WR is the only team sport available to athletes with quadriplegia. The majority of such athletes are also at the bottom of the socio-economic divide. Due to their disability most are unable to find employment and survive on minimum welfare benefits. The Athlete Performance Award system allowed such athletes the means to compete but without it GBWR is currently providing a minimum top up to their benefits through fundraising and access to grants but this is not a sustainable position. Already some athletes have left the sport because they cannot afford to compete because we are unable to support them financially
- UK Sport will understand that for GB to compete on an equal footing with the top nations in the world it has to play the best in the world and compete in the top international competitions. In WR the top ranked nations are: Australia, USA, Japan and Canada. As such all involve overseas travel to train and compete. A minimum contingent for an event is 20 – the squad comprising 12 athletes and a minimum staff of 8 – GB is already accepting some risk with this small number of staff who have to manage athletes with high levels of need as well as the logistics of travel with high levels of equipment. But the costs of such endeavours are high. For example the total cost for the squad to participate in the World Wheelchair Rugby Championships in Australia was circa £100k and that is doing it as cost-effectively as possible. As a comparison, Canada had 17 paid professional staff and 12 athletes compared with a GB staff numbering 8 (6 who were volunteers including the coaches) and 12 athletes
- WR is an exciting, popular and very watchable sport, as evidenced by the high level of media coverage achieved at the London Paralympics. UK Sport, the BPA and many others have been pleased to be associated with the positive profile and publicity generated by such an evidently popular sport whose athletes have inspirational life stories. There has been a genuine dismay felt by large numbers of the public by the decision in December 2016 to completely cease all UK Sport funding for the sport, especially when its potential to medal is still clear. The decision has led to UK Sport’s reputation for its commitment to fairness and

Great Britain Wheelchair Rugby Limited

T: 020 8831 7645 | **F:** 020 8892 9816 | **E:** info@gbwr.org.uk | **W:** www.gbwr.org.uk | **Twitter:** @GBWRNews

Registered Office: Rugby House, Twickenham Stadium, 200 Whitton Road, Twickenham, Middlesex, TW2 7BA

Registered Company: 6108379 in England & Wales | **Registered Charity:** 1130038



equality of treatment being damaged and its funding philosophy being fundamentally questioned

- GBWR accepts that to a degree medals 'inspire a nation' but argues that this is but just one factor. The 2012 Paralympic Games has been widely credited for changing the perception of disability in the UK as people were inspired by the performances of those taking part and not merely the medal winners. The nature of WR's physicality has always seemed at odds with the limited function the majority of its participants have. The public find this inspirational along with the 'back stories' of those who participate. It is no coincidence that the 2012 GB WR Captain is now a mainstream presenter for the BBC of such programmes as 'Countryfile' and 'Nature Watch'; nor that another 2012 WR athlete is employed by the Foreign Office and other organisations to deliver programmes overseas; nor that the current athletes present in schools and colleges. One of the current GB athletes is used by his local council to support asylum seekers because he is a British born Muslim from a strict Pakistani Muslim family. Not one of these athletes have won a medal but are nonetheless attractive because they inspire others with their human stories and achievements.

Finally

9. GBWR believe there is sufficient resources within the UK Sport system to provide a base level of funding for all Paralympic and Olympic sports with sports which perform well against agreed performance criteria being considered for additional funding where there is a need. A sport such as WR needs a modest investment compared to the investment UK Sport is currently making in a number of sports who by their very nature have other significant sources of commercial and membership income. Moreover, there are other areas such as EIS where savings could be made to enable government and lottery money to go where the public believe it is intended – at the sports themselves. GBWR is asking for equality of opportunity for a unique group of Paralympic athletes.

Great Britain Wheelchair Rugby Limited

T: 020 8831 7645 | **F:** 020 8892 9816 | **E:** info@gbwr.org.uk | **W:** www.gbwr.org.uk | **Twitter:** @GBWRNews

Registered Office: Rugby House, Twickenham Stadium, 200 Whitton Road, Twickenham, Middlesex, TW2 7BA

Registered Company: 6108379 in England & Wales | **Registered Charity:** 1130038