

National Council Select Committee on the Constitution

The Select Committee has had a number of meetings and carried out a great deal of work in connection with the Constitution and the effects that the changes in the Constitution have made following the Portas Report. Included in this has been interviews with Sandra Deaton, Susie Venner and Sara Sutcliffe who have assisted the Select Committee with the production of this report.

Introduction

Working in accordance with the Terms of Reference agreed by Council, the Select Committee has had several Committee meetings and held interviews with the Chairman, Deputy Chairman and CEO of Table Tennis England and have produced the report below.

We believe that there are several important points that have been discussed within our report and it will be of significant assistance to the new CEO, plus the Board as part of their planning processes going forward and we are pleased to submit these recommendations to Council.

1. The Board's attitude regarding the interests of the members as the priority in their decision makings process.

The reply that we received from Sandra Deaton was to the effect that the members were simply one of the stakeholders and had to be considered by the Board alongside other stakeholders including Sport England, sponsors and other people who were not members who play the sport inside the competitive affiliated membership structure such as youngsters in junior leagues who are not affiliated.

This reply was surprising as it is not in line with the Associations Articles, in that quite clearly the members are effectively key stakeholders who make financial contributions to the Association on a compulsory basis including in the case of bankruptcy or similar, are responsible for contributing to any financial loss and are the ultimate owners, not just another stakeholder.

The members also have the last word as the Articles allow the members to pass a special resolution at AGM or EGM which can change the articles and overrides any decision made by the Board. In view of the reply received from the Chairman this point needs to be emphasised.

This was the understanding when the former Members Association changed to a Company Limited by guarantee and nothing has changed so far as the ownership of the company is concerned.

We appreciate that the requirements of Sport England, in the way that the Board operates, is key and that the requirements that are associated with Sport England grants need to be delivered. Also, the Association needs to support the requirements of any significant sponsors that the Association attracts and needs to attract new players. But nevertheless all

of this should be delivered in the context of looking after the members' interests as opposed to regarding the members interests as less relevant in the overall decision making in the Association.

Recommendation

National Council requested the Board to confirm that they understand that the Members are the key stakeholders and that the above understanding remains in place.

2. Problems associated with the appointment of senior staff as part of Senior Management Team who have little knowledge of table tennis and head up the departments where this knowledge is essential.

That lack of knowledge and experience in the sport has led to some very poor decision making and implementation of those decisions within our sport. It is clear that this is across the sport but is most evident in the performance and competition sections as detailed below.

2.1 The most damaging aspect is the policy to replace knowledgeable volunteers who were in the decision-making roles at the top of the sport, with professionals who lack the required knowledge of the sport. This was the most valuable and important asset that the Association had in the first 90 years of our history, and this has been largely lost.

For many years, the Association ran very well with only limited staff when most of the work in the top sector of the sport was carried out by very experienced voluntary officials working as members of the Management Committee and Board or on the Associations network of key committees.

The result of this, not just the poor decision makers as referred to above, but also the lack of opportunity and training for talented and enthusiastic volunteers coming into the forefront of our sport.

The cost of the well-paid professionals in our administration is much higher than the minimal cost of expenses only with the committee structure incorporating the key volunteers. What is even more worrying is that in the event of the Government and Sport England significantly reducing or withdrawing its funding the sport would be in a much worse position in that it would be difficult to see how the structure as we know it, would be able to continue except in a very modest and minor way.

2.2 Lack of good decision making regarding the running of our competitions has had a serious detrimental effect on our competitions, although there has been less competition over the last 3 years due to the Coronavirus.

Some examples are

- 1) Senior British League Premier Division title in 19/20
- 2) U10-U13 National Championship 2021
- 3) Junior and Cadet National Championship 2021
- 4) Veterans British League 2021/22
- 5) Senior National Championship Qualification Event 2022

Evidence of mistakes that have been made are available if required.

Another example of problems in this area are the Wolverhampton GP and National Regional Finals

The Wolverhampton Grand Prix scheduled for 12/13 March has been cancelled. This has not been well received by the tournament players as there are fewer Grand Prix than there used to be, and the Wolverhampton tournament was one of the most popular due to its location as it could be reached by players from North and South without excess travel. Apparently, this was because of a lack of resources in terms of finance and personnel.

One of the main comments that has been circulating is that the VETTS National Championship, which is to be held in May in the same venue, is going ahead and the information received from the VETTS Society is that it is likely to break even or show a small surplus. The question is why the VETTS Society with no staff can run the event profitably when TTE with a significant staff presence are unable to do so.

There is also some doubt about the finals of the National Regional tournament. All the regions are being asked to run qualifiers but are not sure whether the players will have an event to qualify for. This is negative and puts a dampener on the regional events that are being held this weekend (19th and 20th March).

2.3 Ranking System - Peter Charters is preparing a paper for National Council to consider serious anomalies within the ranking system whereby at junior and cadet level there is an ITTF override that gives higher ranking to players who participate in more international tournaments approved by the ITTF. This means that players with bigger personal budgets can gain more ITTF ranking points and players who are above them on the domestic list are relegated to a lower position.

More is being prepared from Berkshire and Peter Charters on this matter.

2.4 Performance – staff with knowledge and passion

It is clear from the propositions to the AGM and for the subsequent vote, which was 86%, that the members believe that the lack of table tennis knowledge within the senior management team is responsible for the dire position which our juniors and cadets have reached in international competitions.

The poor result of the U21 players in the Junior and Cadet events is clearly a direct result of this lack of knowledge in the senior management team. A further problem here is that it appears as if the Board have not accepted the recommendation of the 86% of the members at the AGM in giving decision making authority to the Talent and Performance Committee (TAP) which has been formed. Their argument has been that the Sport England guidance does not give them the authority to do this but this is clearly not correct, as demonstrated in the Tier 3 Mandatory Requirement 1.24 “The Board shall establish any further committees which it considers necessary to support its work” and 1.25 “Each committee established under 1.23 or 1.24 shall report to the Board and have clear terms of reference which

identify its responsibilities and any powers delegated to it by the Board". The more recent issue of guidance in 1.15d which says that the Board can establish any Committees that they wish and delegate any powers that they feel appropriate. Also, the Association Articles gives them this power in Paragraph 12.

The Board's position is that the Talent and Performance Committee has been established and is working with the High Performance team and we should see how it progresses. However, the request from the AGM was to set up a separate committee with the delegated powers and this has not been implemented.

2.5 Staff appointments - With previous administrations a priority when appointing staff has been that the successful applicant, so far as possible, should have knowledge of table tennis and a passion for the sport but this does not appear to have been priority since the PORTAS report, 8 years ago.

2.6 Recommendations -

2.6.1. To request the Board to consider ways that senior, knowledgeable and experienced volunteers can be included in the key roles in the management of departments of the Association.

2.6.2. Initiate a discussion with Sport England about the effects of the changes involved in decision making that they have made following the PORTAS report.

2.6.3. Employing staff with knowledge and passion for table tennis should be a priority within the skill sets required for staff appointments.

3) Greater Transparency

There has been calls, including from the MAG group, for there to be greater transparency with reports from the Board and financial information provided. Our understanding from the discussions with the senior Board members is that this has been recognised and will be revised so greater transparency, including the provision of quarterly accounts as was previously provided, will be restored and we are grateful for this improvement.

Concern has also been expressed about the way the Annual Report has been prepared in that it seems to be more like a report of the achievements for the year rather than a detailed factual report on the associations activities as was the case previously, which restricts members opportunity to be aware of the true position and to have the chance of asking questions in this section of the AGM agenda.

For many years, the association had a very useful address book. This is no longer produced and whilst there are some restrictions due to the Government regulations, they are overcome in the case of the County Championships which could also apply to the main directory, which should be re-introduced.

Recommendation

1. The Select Committee felt that the Annual Report should be reintroduced rather than the Review as this appeared to be a document where the main objectives are to satisfy Sport England and convince the membership that all is well in the Association.
2. To reintroduce the Address Book Directory, in accordance with the rules which require permission to be given by the people included.

4) Board Membership

Currently we have a position whereby the Table Tennis England Board is made up in a way that only three members are elected by nomination and ballot from the Leagues and Counties. Within the Board there is a requirement from Sport England for there to be three independent members and our articles including the CEO as a Board member. It has been felt for some time that the balance is not correct, and Peter Charters from Berkshire has proposed an increase from three to four elected members and this is to be discussed at the next AGM.

It is felt elsewhere that a more equitable balance would be to have five or six of the Board members elected rather than appointed and this is a matter that should have further consideration.

There has been concern expressed about the Association's position of excluding volunteers who only have minor positions within some clubs, such as the Treasurer of the local YMCA Table Tennis Club, from being considered for roles on the Board as an independent member.

The Select Committee identified that other National Governing Bodies had a different approach to this and movement in the Boards position was apparent in the last round of elections. Our understanding now is that the only people who are likely to be excluded from being an independent are members of National Council, members of MAG and members of key committees which is clearly a big improvement.

Concern has also been raised about the Skills Matrix and the amount of table tennis knowledge included.

Recommendation

That a statement be issued by the Board giving a definition of the Independent Director in line with the above.

5) Board Targets

It was noted in our questions to the Board that the targets which had been set in 2013 with the PORTAS report and in the 2017 Independent Governance report and in the Associations 10-year plan issued in 2015, that many had not been met.

The Board members were asked why these targets had not been achieved and the reply was that the requirements of Sport England had changed, and that diversity was the key target, therefore, missing these targets was not important.

The Select Committee has carried out a great deal of work looking at targets and the results of the achievements, and a further document can be prepared if necessary to highlight this.

6) Publicity

At National Council it had been raised that the provision of advanced publicity for propositions or motions to the AGM was heavily biased to the Board's proposition or motions, and whilst the proposals were circulated together with rationale, promotions over the website and elsewhere was very much in favour to the Boards proposition with little consideration to the member's proposition. It was noted that this was not democratic and should be equal for all parties going forward.

Recommendation

Issue a policy to say that in the case of proposition's, submitted to AGM or EGM, that all proposers should be given the same access to the publicity vehicles available from the Association, and the Board will not use any other vehicles to promote their own views unless the alternative view is very clearly outlined as a counter argument.

7) AGM and Election Campaigns

Concern had been expressed that in addition to the website, several staff members had been given the role of canvassing for the proposals coming from the Board for the AGM. In previous administrations a direction had been given to the staff that they must not have any involvement in political matters including proposals to the AGM and elections. This had apparently not been the case in recent years. The neutral staff policy should be restored and the status quo re-established.

Recommendation

Board requested to confirm that a policy which requires staff members not to be involved in canvassing for candidates in the election and for or against propositions at the AGM.

8) International

It was noted that currently in our 100th year, our representation in senior positions within the International Table Tennis Federation was at its weakest ever as we had no members on the ITTF Executive Committee or on the Board of Directors or Committee Chairman and, therefore, our influence on the international stage following the last ITTF AGM held in November, is at its weakest at the time when it needed to be at its strongest.

Table Tennis England has had a representative on the ITTF Board of Directors for the majority of the second half of the last century and all this century up to the last meeting in Houston on the 27th of November 2021. The Board of Directors is the body that considers and legislates for much of the ITTF's rules and regulations.

Decisions by the ITTF and the WTT to reduce the number of teams participating in the World Championships to such a degree that most countries would be excluded had been implemented and similar decisions for the individual World Championships. Normally the British Isles could have expected to have around 20 players in the individual World Championships but in the event in Houston last November England were reduced to only 4 participants with more from the other home countries. In addition, the ranking system introduced by WTT has been heavily criticised. It favours players generally from affluent families or where significant financial support is provided and is to the disadvantage of talented players who do not have this level of resources available to them.

9) Promotion

A question was raised from the Select Committee to say that the involvement of Table Tennis England in television and, therefore, promotion was now very limited and that we had little impact. The reply to this is that the Board had some discussions with WTT with the intention to bring some international events to England soon, although there had been no English Open or Junior Open's since before the 2012 Olympics.

Alan Ransome OBE	Chairman	N Cllr Cleveland
Alex Murdoch	Deputy Chairman	N Cllr Bedfordshire
Peter Charters		N Cllr Berkshire
Chris Dangerfield		N Cllr Shropshire
Richard Hudson		N Cllr Yorkshire
Jos Kelly		N Cllr Somerset
Neil Le Milliere		N Cllr Kent