

Bowls England Performance System Review

Report & Recommendations

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Jon Austin Introduction

I have been involved personally in sport for most of my life as an athlete, coach and volunteer, and professionally for over 20 years, since the early stages of the national lottery investment into sport. I have gained a breadth of experience within national governing bodies and elite sport, including:

- Performance Director at GB and England Badminton (Olympic & Paralympic).
- CEO of Pentathlon GB
- Performance Adviser at UK Sport working with 10 Olympic and Paralympic sports
- Olympic/Commonwealth Team Leader

Over the past four years, as a consultant I have applied much of my lived experience working with a number of UK Sport/home nation funded nation governing bodies, who have invited me in to support them in a variety of ways. I am also currently the senior independent non-executive director on the Badminton Wales Board.

Project Approach

In recent years steps have been taken to put in place a long-term performance strategy (Inc. talent & performance), however for a variety of reasons this work has stalled. I was invited to pick up the reins with the aim of enabling the task to be completed. I was guided by the “Performance Strategy Brief”, which states:

“Bowls England has never had a long-term performance strategy. It has had planning documents and funding submissions for the Commonwealth Games and has an established way of working”

Within the brief there were also a number of areas to be explored encompassing but not limited to:

1. National Programme – training and events
2. Talent ID and selection
3. Player Pathway
4. Domestic competition
5. Culture and people

The desired outcome from the review was a set of recommendations that could significantly inform a written Bowls England performance strategy including a number of underpinning tactics.

In October 2019 the then Performance Director produced a “High Performance Plan Outline Strategy & Budget” document. This document included a number of observations and recommendations that I believe are still relevant and overlap with what is proposed in this report.

The review focussed on abled-bodied bowls with consideration of disability bowls, recommendations can be viewed as potentially relevant to both.

Contributors

Alongside reviewing the various documents and reports listed below, I have spoken with a variety of people associated with Bowls England (BE) including staff, players and volunteer officials. A survey was also circulated to a number of participating clubs and counties inviting comment and opinion. I have also met with senior figures within Sport England (SE), Commonwealth Games (CWG) England and Bowls Australia. ***See Appendix 1 for a full list of contributors.***

Documents reviewed included but not limited to:

1. High Performance Plan Outline Strategy & Budget 2019
2. Performance Strategy Brief
3. Fit for the Future Strategy 2021-26
4. Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games Report
5. Performance Summary Brief
6. Performance Summary Notes
7. Bowls Development Alliance (BDA) Strategy 2022-27
8. Disability Bowls England Strategy and Objectives (website page)

Initial Comments & Observations

1. At first glance bowls is a traditional sport fundamentally based within a club and county system. This system relies on the goodwill of a relatively small group of highly dedicated volunteers to function at all levels
2. The current talent and performance system is led and administered by a committed and experienced team of volunteers. It is clear there is pride, loyalty and an emotional connection to everything that the team delivers
3. The club and county structure is a key strength which should be protected, however it was stated to me that the tradition and history of bowls in England has hindered on occasions the ability to make change as the sport evolves internationally, most notably in the areas of talent and performance
4. England's top players appear to play a lot of domestic competition some of which is questionable in terms of it supporting their development and preparations for major championships. It was also noted that capacity to practice and train away from competition was limited due to the need to work and also the amount of weekly competition
5. It was mentioned at the outset that there is no widespread coaching culture across the sport. Whilst this may be the case, through my conversations it is clear there is some coaching taking place but it is not necessarily recognised as such
6. Indications are that other countries most notably Australia continue to be making progress and are investing heavily compared to England. In the case of Australia, they have developed over time a successful commercial model that enables the highest performing bowlers to train and compete full-time
7. There are a number of emerging nations including Malaysia and Ireland that are making strides and closing the gap on the leading nations including England. Further research would be needed to establish the specific reasons for the progress made, however indications are that investment has increased, performance principles are being more rigorously applied and there has been a step change in the approach taken to identify and progress players to the podium.

Current Strategy

The current "Fit for the Future" Strategy 2021-2026 is the overall strategy covering all aspect of the sport and organisation with a primary goal of getting more people playing the sport. There is reference to performance, in terms of growing the profile of the sport through medal achievement and a success measure which also states "*consistent medal achievement at world level*". In addition, mention is made to introducing a "*Performance Pathway to stretch our talented athletes and retain more young people in the sport*". Subject to the outcome of this review and if recommendations are taken forward, it might be appropriate to consider expanding the references to performance and talent within the strategy and also to include a success measure for talent development.

I have reviewed the Bowls Development Alliance (BDA) Strategy 2022-27, it does not reference the desire to raise the standard of bowls being played or progressing players on to the next level. These areas may not be within the remit of the BDA, which raises the question as an observer, as to who is responsible for attracting people into the sport, retaining and improving playing levels to increase the competitive base and producing a pool of players who might have the ability and ambition to progress onto the performance pathway.

I have also reviewed the strategy and objectives statement on the Disability Bowls England (DBE) website. There is mention of a supporting a “high performance programme” with some description of what the content of such a programme would be.

Governance

As an outsider, my view of the overall bowls governance landscape is that it appears complex. There may be justifiable reasons for different organisations having responsibility for various aspects of the sport, however it could be argued that the current situation is less than optimal in terms of creating clarity of direction and a streamlined, efficient pursuit of goals to grow participation or pursue medal success.

Performance Leadership and Management

Currently all able-bodied performance activity is overseen by an interim volunteer Performance Director (PD) who has extensive experience within bowls. Whilst the strategic lead, the PD is also heavily engaged in the administration and operation of programme activity. This situation is less than ideal but is necessary due to the limited resources available across the organisation.

DBE is responsible for performance activity for classified disabilities. A volunteer team manager is appointed who leads and supports the team leading up to and at major championships. This manager also coordinates with BE when a combined England team compete together internationally. This situation is also less than ideal but is necessary due to the limited resources available.

Overall, for able-bodied and disability bowls, management of squads and representative teams, is very much reliant on the good will and commitment from a small group of identified volunteers.

Performance Operational Structure

Currently the structure is made up of a number of squads (age group, senior and para/disability), these squads act as a cohort of players to be considered for selection on an annual basis to represent England. All players are located across the country and come together periodically once selected to prepare for major events, most significantly the WC and CWG.

Overall, the guidance and support provided to players is limited with the exception of those selected to compete at the CWG. A two-year award from SE, has historically made it possible to establish a more performance focussed approach, to best prepare players and support staff to be able to perform under maximum pressure.

In advance of and through the CWG of 2022 there was a step change in the approach taken to support the team, including the engagement of expert services from Loughborough University. Whilst a number of the lessons learnt in 2022 have been taken forward by those individuals involved, it has not been possible to build on the momentum and create systematic change due to limited resources post games.

Coaching

As mentioned, coaching appears not to be viewed by the wider sport as fundamental to identifying talent, accelerating development or raising the overall competitive standards. Whilst this may not be unique across sport, evidence shows that coaching in some form does positively impact on all aspects of performance and the wider sport.

Conversations with a number of current English international players confirmed that at some point through their careers they were able to identify a person who had the greatest impact on their success. Each player described the support they received and without exception the examples they gave demonstrated they had been coached in a variety of ways.

The Coach Bowls link from the BE website, provides details of an extensive range of coaching courses and explanations of the value of coaching. I have not assessed the coach education offering, however I noted the level 3 course that is being developed which references “developing high performance bowlers”.

Recommendation Themes

I have identified through this review a number of themes with underpinning recommendations that in some cases will be challenging, however I believe they are achievable if there is a will and commitment to make positive change. I have been pragmatic to highlight where I believe there could be the greatest short to medium term impact to point those involved with talent and performance in the right direction:

1. **North Star**
2. **Governance**
3. **Performance Leadership**
4. **Performance Operational delivery**
5. **Building a coaching culture**
6. **Commonwealth Games legacy**
7. **Harnessing existing structures**
8. **Competition**
9. **Relationships and collaboration**
10. **Standards & Criteria**
11. **SSSM**
12. **Investment**

1. **Our North Star**

As a starting point, and intended as some food for thought, I have proposed a number of statements with the aim of giving greater depth and understanding to what the ultimate goal is for BE and a sense of what the experience will look and feel like:

Aim = Consistently medal competitive at world level events

Mission = To create an accessible clearly defined transparent pathway through to the pinnacle of the sport

Purpose = To maintain a performance system that enables bowlers to explore what they could be capable of

Delivery principle = Player centred (coach lead)

Hopefully all of the above are self-explanatory, however it may be beneficial to explain some of my thinking behind each point:

Aim = The WC and CWG have been highlighted as the “world level events”, if there are others they should be added when informing what makes up the list. A final list can be incorporated into an operational plan and reported against. Being medal competitive in my view demonstrates that BE is supporting players to perform to their best. The outcome success measure will be a medal target but should not be the exclusive determinant of success or failure. Sport is unpredictable and whilst players can be world class, on a given day in a certain set of circumstances a medal may not be achieved. To have a system that develops and supports players to be consistently medal competitive in my view is a more rounded and healthy perspective on success.

Mission = This statement is intended to highlight the wish to be transparent with a defined set of standards and the commitment to provide opportunities wherever you may be from across England.

Purpose = This is intended to capture the intention to have a high-quality system and positive culture that supports bowlers to stretch and push themselves to be the best they can be. This statement is also designed to capture that even if you do not reach the pinnacle, you will still have opportunity and a place within the sport.

Delivery principle = It is important that it is understood that the player is central to the decisions that are taken and those individuals should be listened to, respected and their welfare taken into account when decisions are made. In sports where coaching is established the coach is the expert lead and should direct the technical aspects of player/athlete development and preparation. At present this is not the case in bowls, hence I have stated in brackets as a consideration.

2. Governance

As previously mentioned, the governance structure appears complex, it was mentioned to me that it is likely a hinderance to creating an aligned, integrated and efficient approach to delivering consistent medal success.

Whilst not formally part of the scope of my work, it would be remiss of me not to take this opportunity to recommend that all of the NGB's and organisations that are currently responsible for bowls in England should come together ideally to merge. If it is determined that this is not a possibility, I would still strongly recommend uniting to develop a single overarching performance strategy that recognises each aspect of the sport but ensures agreement to a number of specific goals.

I understand discussion is ongoing about the possibility of DBE integrating within BE. If this were to happen it would simplify the governance structure, improve alignment and increase the operational efficiency across the sport. From a player development perspective, this would potentially create the opportunity to establish stronger ties between the players and support staff leading into major championships and also ensure consistent performance principles and behaviours at every stage of development.

Performance Leadership

My view is that for BE to genuinely be able to develop and implement a sustainable long-term performance strategy, it will be important to have dedicated leadership in this specialist area. I would recommend the appointment of a salaried Performance Director (PD) who has practical experience at

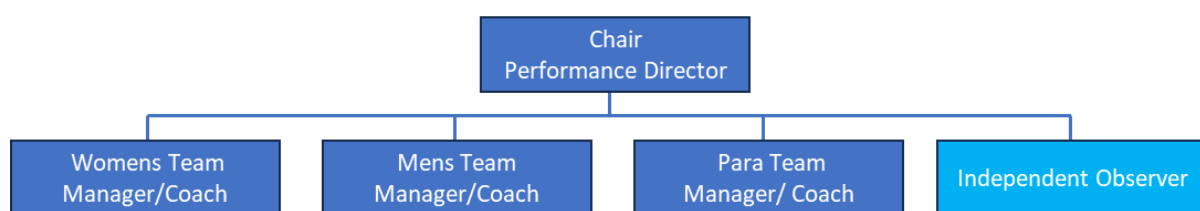
a strategic level working in a pressurised high-performance environment. Ideally such an individual would have a background in sport but I would suggest an open mind, should someone come forward with relevant transferable skills and experiences.

My recommendation is made on the assumption of the PD being full-time, however I recognise this might not be possible from the outset. It may be necessary to appoint part-time with the aim to increase to full-time in the medium term. Should it only be possible to appoint part-time, it would be important to set timescales to achieve strategic aims in line with capacity and communicate externally to manage expectations.

When making recommendations, I would comment that I have been impressed by the knowledge and commitment of those who have led and driven the medal success to date. My recommendation of a salaried PD is not a reflection of what has gone before but a need to have professionalised leadership to establish a strategy and drive through the implementation without distraction.

Selection

Team and Squad selections are critical responsibilities that should fall under the remit of the PD as they are the accountable officer. Any selection should be informed by a clearly defined and published selection criteria, process and policy. There are a number of examples of ‘best practice’ for the constitution of a selection panel, below is an illustration of an established structure that I have adapted aligned to possible selection for a future CWG team:



Notes:

1. In this illustration the PD is the Chair, an alternative would be to appoint an independent chair, with the PD moving to join the rest of the panel
2. There are four voting members with the independent observer being non-voting,
3. The chair has the deciding vote should there be a tie. if, however the PD moves from the chair to join the rest of the panel, they would still retain the deciding vote as an independent chair would be non-voting
4. The independent observer’s role is to monitor and ensure that the published criteria and process is followed throughout
5. There are examples of selection panels, where additional voting members and non-voting observers have been added. Examples have included; an independent legal advisor, an athlete/player representative and a member of the board
6. I would suggest that the constitution of the panel when carrying out squad selection be consistent with the illustration shown, however the panel should be able to call on any individual(s) they choose to contribute to the process where their input will provide increased insight and understanding before final decisions are made.

7. Performance Operational delivery

Inevitably to deliver a performance strategy there will remain a heavy reliance on a volunteer workforce. This I see as a strength on the basis that there is a wealth of expertise and a number of highly motivated and committed people to be able to call upon. Whilst this may be the case it will still

be important to have some dedicated administrative/operational support to underpin the leadership of the PD. I understand there is a level of such support available at present, however moving forward I would suggest this be more clearly defined. It will be important to ensure the PD has the head space to be strategic and maintain oversight, whilst accepting that everyone in a small team needs to roll their sleeves up and get stuck in as necessary.

I would recommend in the first instance a part-time Performance Coordinator who is responsible for the day to day administration of everything related to talent and performance, supported by identified volunteers. This role may be enhanced leading into a CWG to account for the increased workload and as the delivery of the performance strategy takes shape consideration should be given as to whether this coordinator role should increase, if possible, to full-time.

5. Building a coaching culture

The process of establishing a coaching culture within a sport where it does not currently exist is not easy and there is no quick fix. My view is that as a starting point it would be beneficial introduce a small number of specific coaching interventions alongside an internal and external communications plan to raise the profile and benefits of being a coach receiving coaching:

Coach Development

Develop and launch two coach development programmes for a select number of people who through assessment demonstrate they have enthusiasm and aptitude to be high-level coaches. At launch it will be important to attract people who are respected within the sport and are credible. Most likely this will align to players who have achieved at a high level and possibly individuals/coaches who are respected as forward thinking and keen to bring new and fresh ways to improve the overall playing standards.

Development programmes can be tailored to the needs of any sport but as a guide for refinement, I would recommend two programmes in stages:

Stage 1 - A Performance Coach Development Programme with the aim of establishing a cohort of coaches (2-4) who have a detailed appreciation of what it takes to harness talent and maximise the capabilities to succeed as a bowler at the pinnacle of the sport.

Stage 2 – A Pathway Coach Development Programme with the aim of establishing a cohort of coaches (4-6) who have a detailed appreciation of what it takes to identify and nurture the most talented young bowlers

Both of the above programmes would be a maximum of one year and involve exposure to world class talent development and performance. This could be within the bowls international community and also within other sports from across the high-performance community in England and the rest of the UK. There are various organisations including Sport England, UK Sport and private providers who have significant expertise in this area to support the creation of syllabus and also to deliver some content.

The recommendation is that both initiatives should be advertised to invite applications followed by interviews/assessments prior to selection. There should be minimum criteria of relevant experience to be considered but this should not hinder attracting the best individuals with the potential to become highly capable coaches. It will also be important through the selection process to ensure those under consideration are ambitious to develop themselves and wish to engage and work with BE.

Through the above programmes not only will BE begin to introduce and raise the standard of coaching, it will also produce a cohort of potential ambassadors who will have the credibility and expertise to be able to influence and shape the view of coaching across the wider bowls community.

Coach Education

I have not delved into the detail of the content of the current coach education offered, however I would suggest that in line with the need to raise the profile and standard of coaching it may be wise to review the content to ensure that the technical element at every stage/level of coach education is aligned, overlaps and that the content is up to date and informed by what is happening at the top of the sport.

As referenced, there is a level 3 course being developed aimed at “developing high performance bowlers”. Assuming the content is informed by what is happening on the world stage, I would recommend promoting this course alongside the two development programmes. It would also be beneficial to have the endorsement of some of the high-profile players, to strengthen the courses credibility and to potentially generate increased interest in being a coach.

To commence the process of building a coaching culture, I would recommend appointing an individual to lead and drive through the process. By way of example a Head of Coaching that oversees all levels and areas of coaching would be beneficial, whilst not reporting to the Performance Director they would work closely with them to ensure consistency and alignment throughout the player and coach experience. This role could be introduced in a number of ways including salaried, part or full time or contracted to both lead and deliver aspects of the plan.

When making recommendations, I am conscious that Coach Bowls are the training company supported by BE, responsible for the delivery of Bowls Coach Education. This arrangement does not necessarily change what might benefit BE in educating and developing coaches, however consideration will be needed as to how recommendations can be introduced in a coordinated and aligned way between BE and Coach Bowls.

Team Manager Role

At present in both able-bodied and disability bowls there are a number of team managers. By way of example in terms of raising the profile of coaching I would suggest including a reference of coaching within the title. I suspect at present there is already coaching in some form taking place by those fulfilling these positions. An adjustment to their role plus an amendment in title will potentially clarify the function and also the importance and relevance of coaching.

The coaching section of the BE website is comprehensive in terms of the benefits and opportunities to become a coach, I would recommend alongside my recommendations that a communications campaign be developed that states that BE is ambitious to promote and build a coaching workforce to provide opportunities for players to accelerate their level of play and/or for those with an interest there will be a coaching pathway that they may wish to pursue.

See Appendix 2 for a suggested Performance Personnel Structure

6. Commonwealth Games legacy

There was a step change in the preparations leading to the CWG of 2022, which was highlighted by a number of people I have spoken to including players who were members of the team.

Whilst there was a desire to take forward the lessons learnt from the Games, for a number of reasons this proved not to be possible for the most part. Significantly the SE award that supported preparations reached its conclusion, resulting in an inability to engage services and provide the necessary expertise and leadership to build on the success and embed within a broader talent and performance strategy. An illustration of the consequences of this situation, was that in the lead up to and through the recent WC in Australia, support for those competing was unrecognisable compared to Birmingham and possibly was reflected in the results compared to Birmingham.

For many of those involved with the CWG 2022 campaign the experience of what was wrapped around them was new and to a number unfamiliar. Whilst there may have been many benefits there was a performance risk exposing experienced players to different approaches to preparation. Understandably not all took full advantage of what was on offer and therefore the return on investment was not as positive as it could have been.

Moving forward it would be highly advantageous to begin building the performance foundations and professional culture from the outset for all players who enter the performance pathway. Not only would this potentially accelerate and improve standards, it would also enhance the ability to maximise the support provided to those competing at the highest level, without the need to educate and/or persuade people to engage with what is on offer.

I would recommend taking forward the lessons learnt from the CWG 2022 and:

1. Establish what is expected of any player who joins the performance pathway and then subsequently goes on to represent England. There should be a formal element to this in the form of a player agreement, which includes a code of conduct and the expectations of a player who chooses to take up the opportunity. Not only should such an agreement reference actions and behaviours conducive to being an 'elite athlete', it should also include requirements to support BE to attract, retain and inspire future generations to take up and pursue bowls. Sitting alongside this agreement there should be clarity about what specific support a player will access, plus the culture and positive experience they will have should choose to accept an invitation to join the squad/team.
2. Include performance foundations and culture into the Coach Development Programmes and potentially the level 3 Coach Education course
3. Reconnect to Loughborough University to potentially discuss how it might be possible to maintain a partnership to be able to tap into their expertise to enhance the pathway and to be consistently involved in preparations for major world level events
4. Consideration should be given to developing educational material that is informed by what was put in place for Birmingham that could be made available to the wider bowls community e.g. nutrition, hydration, physical preparation, periodisation and warm ups cool downs. Not only might this begin the process of opening peoples minds to steps they could take to improve and prolong their competitive play. It also may begin to break down some of the perceived 'mystery' or 'secrecy' around those that are selected to represent England.

A topic that was raised on a number of occasions, was the quality of the greens and the difference in the greens in the UK compared to those in the southern hemisphere. I am not qualified to make recommendations about the greens in this country. However, in terms of performance it is important that those selected to represent England to compete in the southern hemisphere, understand and have sufficient familiarisation prior to an event to be able to adapt and be confident they can perform at their best. Leading into Birmingham there was ample opportunity to access and familiarise with the playing conditions, however at the most recent WC this was not the case. Clearly it was easier to access

the greens in England compared to Australia, therefore I would suggest that in future steps are taken wherever possible, to build time into a schedule and/or to strengthen relationships wherever they may be needed, to ensure access to the specific competition green in advance.

I have been advised that it is not possible to replicate the playing conditions of the southern hemisphere in the UK, therefore I would recommend that there is at least one training camp per year for selected players to train and possibly compete in the southern hemisphere. I believe this is the minimum requirement for England's best players and the most talented in the pathway. When making such a recommendation I appreciate many of the barriers there may be for such a camp to take place including finance and also the availability of players, however I still believe it is a recommendation that should be explored.

7. Harnessing existing structures

As mentioned earlier in this report the club and county structure and domestic competition programme are key strengths which should be protected, however I would recommend that steps are taken to strengthen ties and integrate more talent and performance activities across the country.

There are a number of ways to of strengthening ties one of which might be to potentially integrate and enhance the current "Coaching Centres of Excellence" initiative, by including some further elements and benefits, by way of examples:

1. Expand the initiative to include a club mark system where clubs potentially apply to become a 'Performance Centre', based on a set of criteria directly linked to talent and performance needs:
 - a. Quality of greens and available facilities
 - b. Track record of producing players
 - c. Resident coach who is actively educating or developing themselves and who it is agreed is identifying and nurturing talent and/or maximising the capabilities of the highest performers
 - d. Demonstrated a desire to engage with and work with BE

There should be a more extensive list of requirements plus the benefits to the club by having this partnership, benefits could include:

- a. Recognition of the club's status by BE, potentially assisting with recruitment and retention of members and possibly strengthening the level of play within their teams
 - b. Possibility to be prioritised as a base for holding training and preparation camps for England pathway and performance squads
 - c. Possibility to be the club of choice to host exhibition matches that promote the sport and raise the profile of the highest performers
 - d. Possibility to be the venue of choice for Coach Education and Development activities
2. Alongside the Performance Centre club mark scheme, introduce a simple programme of talent identification hosted within the network of Performance Centres. For example, these could be called 'Discovery Days' led by BE but hosted within a club. It may be that there already exists a suitable template for the skills and activities that those that take part will experience, if not this will need to be developed. The sessions should be fun and tailored for example to young people who are considering which sport they wish to pursue, older people who may be looking at options having been active sports people in the past and disabled individuals who may not know if bowls is suitable for them and if it is assessable. Such sessions may identify a fresh

route for people to get involved in bowl and also highlight some raw potential that could be harnessed. For the club there would be the prestige but also the recruitment opportunities from those who attend.

Given more thought I am sure there are more ways that could be explored with the clubs and counties that increase partnership working with BE and also brings the membership closer to the activities and people involved with talent and performance.

My final comment would be to advise that at the outset, work with those that are positive, open to new ideas and who value a relationship with BE. I believe if you begin in this way others will start to see what is happening and want to get on board over time.

8. Competition

A theme was highlighted to me throughout this process about the amount of competition that people play. This is fantastic in terms of participation and I imagine hugely beneficial to the clubs and those organising competition. With regards to developing talent and maximising capabilities of the highest performers I would advise that the current level of competition is too great and does not support a player's ability to train, practise, prepare and rest. In addition, it was highlighted that many of the competitions England's best are competing in are not of the necessary level and are played using different formats to those they will experience at major events.

I would recommend that the amount of competition that those who have been selected for squads should be reviewed. It may be that selection criteria should be revised to be more targeted to a small number of competitions and also consideration could be given to a number of exemptions for players of a specific level who are at a certain point prior to a major event where they will be representing England.

I understand a competition review is either imminent or is underway, I believe there is awareness of the points I have made here and would suggest they are included within the review.

The amount of international competition that the best players compete in, is in my view surprisingly low, some of this is due the volume of competition domestically, but also cost and capacity to travel when majority of players have work commitments. Whilst recognising these challenges, in performance terms it would be highly beneficial for players to compete more abroad against international high calibre opposition. I would recommend consideration be given to strengthening ties with a small number of identified nations including the strongest and emerging nations where they have demonstrated significant progress in recent years. In the first instance it may be possible to arrange periodic international matches both hosted in England and also with a team traveling (consideration should be given to the size of the team). It might be possible through such an initiative to offset some of the cost through selling tickets and possibly gaining sponsorship for such a profile event. When recommending strengthening ties, consideration could also be given for English players to relocate to the southern hemisphere permanently or for extended periods supported by the partnership nation, this option could be established as an exchange that benefits both nations. I would view relocation as an option that for some would be appealing and gives them choices as to how they pursue their careers. It is possible but unproven, that in pure performance terms living and competing in the southern hemisphere is the best option.

I appreciate my recommendations if adopted, would have consequences for the current domestic competition structure. My wish is not to undermine but rather to add to the discussions that will take

place when thinking about how to improve and increase the possibilities through competition of achieving BE's strategic performance aim.

See Appendix 3 for the Player Development Pathway

9. Relationships and collaboration

Within this report, there is a common theme to build and enhance relationships across a wide selection of people, groups and organisations. I have not listed any specific recommendations here, however it is hopefully clear that the area of relationships and collaboration will be a key factor to success. Specifically, I feel that many of those I spoke to would greatly benefit from being exposed to different ideas, approaches and innovation. This could open up the possibilities to both be more creative about what is possible, and how the team might get there.

I also believe BE needs more people outside of the sport who understand and appreciate both the challenges and opportunities that exist. I can see some progress has been made in this area but would suggest that this continues to be able to get more people involved and engaged who can assist with the delivery and influence behaviours and actions that would be beneficial to BE. Specifically, I would encourage continued strengthening of relationships with SE, Commonwealth Games England (CGE), Loughborough University and Bowls Australia.

Linked to the point above, I have observed from my previous experiences that the bowls team at the CWG, appears not to be quite as integrated into the Team England family as the majority of other sports. I do not believe this is intended, more that many of the other sports are connected through the British system resulting in relationships that follow through into Team England. Establishing relationship with performance leaders and staff from a number of other sports would be advantageous both in terms of shared experience and also a support network that can be called upon if needed when under maximum pressure.

Finally, I would note that there are many organisations and people who are or have been in the position that BE finds itself in. By tapping into those people, BE may be able to learn and possibly accelerate some of the ambition it is seeking to put into action.

10. Standards & Criteria

To achieve the goals within the performance strategy, it is important to understand what it will take for a player to develop and progress through their career to the podium.

I have been advised that selection criteria and performance standards are based on competition results. Whilst this is a logical and a straight forward approach, I would recommend that consideration be given to other factors that could have a significant bearing on whether a player will develop to be or is able to perform, at the highest level under maximum pressure. These other factors are particularly important for players who are developing where through circumstances such as geography they may not have had the same competitive opportunities as others.

I would recommend expanding the criteria for selection onto squads to include progression in both subjective and objective areas, for example:

1. *Personal character* - including such topics as work ethic, embracing the physical challenge, personal values and beliefs, lifestyle, taking responsibility and desire to succeed.
2. *Technical skills* – progression and ability to deliver identified fundamental skills

3. *Physical capabilities* – including such areas as physical robustness, flexibility and functional movement
4. *Mental capability* – including performing under pressure, emotional control, ability to reset, ability to communicate when stressed and can focus on the present.

In addition, there should also be *performance criteria*. I would recommend that when considering results, a weighting be including to account for the possibility that at the early stages of the pathway results may be less of a factor in determining future potential.

With specific regard to standards within para-bowls, there is a pressing need in the first instance to establish a comprehensive and systemic approach to classification. Robust classification will enable the development of tailored pathways, the creation a competition structure that interlinks with the existing or revised BE domestic competition programme and increased confidence in the integrity of selection.

The specific content of these recommendations should be viewed as an illustration of how criteria and standards can be made more robust, and also allow for the expert coach/selector views to be more clearly defined. When taking forward this process, I would recommend that in the first instance a group of coaches/experts from within BE, develop the content with the support of others. It may also be beneficial to include external expertise at some point who may be able to offer specialist knowledge and insight to help define the content.

11. Sport Science & Sports Medicine (SSSM)

As mentioned, there was a step change in terms of SSSM support leading into the CWG 2022. I would recommend building on what was delivered by carrying out analysis to begin to identify what the need is. I believe some insight and information is available as a good starting point and also the Standards & Criteria content raised in the previous section should assist to build a picture of what the need might be. Research suggests our main international competitors and those who are immerging are now exploiting the performance advantage that could be achieved through SSSM expertise and intervention. It is important not to be left behind, however my view is that it can be introduced simply and expanded as evidence is gathered and/or if further resources become available.

At a basic level I would recommend at the outset the following examples of support that could be introduced:

1. General physical preparation = Include strength/endurance, flexibility, core stability and warm up/cool down routines
2. Nutritional guidance = Include preparation and recovery strategies, hydration pre and post training and competition and general dietary education and advice
3. Mental capability = Include preparation and competing strategies to manage critical moments, performing under pressure and ability to tactically think clearly under pressure
4. Performance analysis = Through analysis video, review and critique players performances and develop tactical strategies to be applied against opponents

Loughborough University would be ideally placed to support this project but it would be important that BE remain in control as you know your sport and the people within it better than anyone and also this area of support can become over complex if not managed carefully.

If resources at the outlet do not allow for this project to be progressed as described, I would still recommend producing literature that provides advice and guidance that can be given to players and coaches. In addition, I would recommend including within the coach development and education

packages, content that could broaden the knowledge and capability of coaches to be able to deliver some of this additional support.

I have not included recommendations around medical or physiotherapy, only on the basis that whilst important the focus from the outset should be on the education of players to take responsibility for their own development having been given the information, guidance and possibly practical support.

Consistent Investment

The current funding model for talent and performance has been developed around a base level of funding from BE with the addition of a CWG award from Sport England, normally two years in advance of each Games. For BE to deliver a long-term performance strategy (for the first time) that can ensure players are consistently medal competitive at world level events, this model needs to change. Such a change would enable BE to take forward the lessons from each CWG and build momentum that could create systemic change at all levels of the sport

What I am proposing within this report would require a level of investment on an annual basis above what is current, most notably when BE are the sole investor. The recommendations I have made are pragmatic and scalable, however, whilst scalable the need for professional, sustained leadership with capacity is essential from the outset, if BE is to effectively implement an performance strategy.

Initial timeline of Implementation

When compiling this order of actions, they should be viewed as a guide that may require amendment based on the levels of investment available. The timeline and order should also be kept under review through implementation, as inevitably lessons will be learnt that could adjust how things will be done and when.

Item	Action	Comment
1.	Initial budget	Establish an initial budget to kick start the project. The budget may not be a comprehensive but should provide enough investment to take forward a number of identified key strategic aims.
2.	Recruit a Performance Director	This role will be necessary to fully develop and implement the performance strategy and operation plan. The role could be scalable initially, informed by the budget
3.	Redefine the role of the Team Manager	Redraft the role descriptor and introduce this redefined role with reference to coaching and selection responsibilities. Appoint three Team Managers/Coaches
4.	Recruitment of a Performance Coordinator	This role will be necessary to enable the PD to lead and to take responsibility for all operational and administration activity within Performance. This role can be scalable initially informed by the budget
5.	Coach Development	Develop the curriculum and delivery plan for the coach development initiatives as recommended in this report. Consideration should be given as to whether these could be launched prior to or whilst PD is being recruited
6.	Establish the revised selection process	Review and establish revised squad and team selection policies and process. Appoint panels, publish documentation and communicate what will be implemented and the consequences
7.	Define the performance strategy and operational plan	Led by the PD, supported by identified people, informed by this report and other strategy/review documents as referenced in this report

8.	Implement operational plan	<p>There will be an extensive list of actions within the final Operational Plan some of which will likely come from this report. Whilst not wishing to pre-empt what the specific actions will be, I would suggest the following are important initial steps to be able to fully implement the plan:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Secure long-term investment to be able to understand the scale of what will be possible 2. Communicate and build relationships with all those who can support the delivery of the plan, many of which are mentioned in this report 3. Commence the process of integration of DBE
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Timeline	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
Initial Budget												
Recruit PD												
Redefine role of TM												
Recruit PC												
Coach Development												
Revised selection												
Performance Strategy												
Implementation Ops Plan												

Notes:

1. This timeline is pragmatic, in that ideally the strategy and operational plan would be agreed before action takes place. However, to avoid further delay, I have indicated a number of actions that could be progressed from day one that will likely contribute and inform the final strategy and operational plan
2. This timetable focuses on the more substantial requirements to begin building momentum, those recommendations not referenced should be considered and integrated during the planning phase
3. Whilst not referenced within the timeline, it is understood that the sport continues, this process should not hinder in the short-term current pathway and performance activity. Once appointed the PD will determine the process and timescale to transition to a potentially new way of operating in the knowledge that the foundations have been laid.
4. When referencing people and roles, consideration could be given where it may be possible to merge some functions. For example, a Team Manager/Coach could also potentially be a part-time Performance Coordinator and/or act as Head of Coaching. (See Appendix 2)

Final Comment

My wish when compiling this report has been to provide some, practical, thought provoking recommendations that can be considered as a whole or taken individually. I appreciate there will be alternative views to what I have stated and recommended, however by making the points I have, I trust it will focus minds to the decisions and actions needed to be able to deliver your future strategy.

I have been extremely impressed by many of those I have met and the commitment they have shown over many years. I sense there is acknowledgement that the sport in England needs to move with the times, adapt to the ever-changing world and match the progress other competitor nations are making.

I would encourage all involved to seize the moment and not be diverted by those who may inadvertently want to hold the sport back by maintaining the status quo.

Finally, I would like to say that I never lose sight of what a privilege it is to be invited behind the scenes of any organisation. Everyone I have spoken to has been enthusiastic, passionate and open to supporting the process I have undertaken. I would like to thank Bowls England for this opportunity and wish you every success as you navigate your way through to the next chapter.

Appendix 1 – List of those Consulted

Face to Face Interviews/Conversations

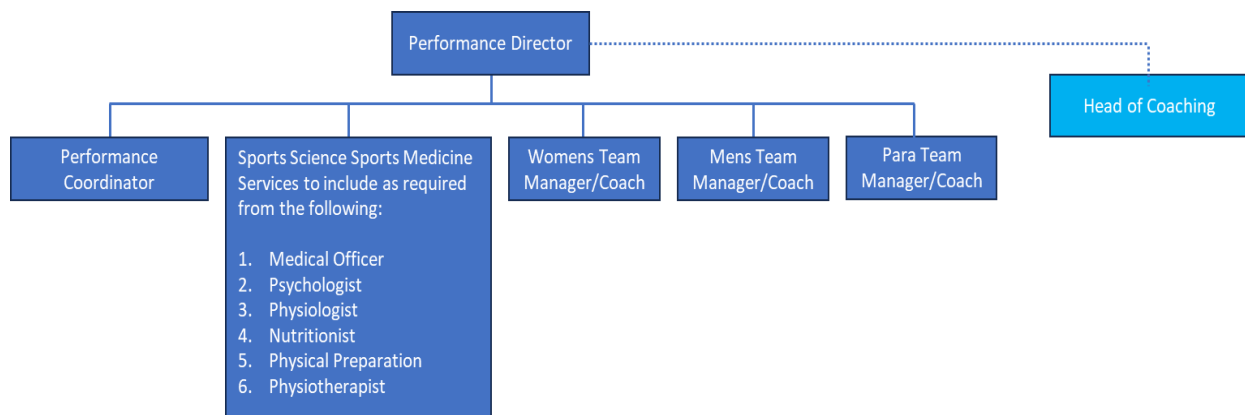
Name	Role
Jon Cockcroft	Chief Executive Officer
John McGuinness	Performance Director (taking a break)
Mo Monkton	Interim Performance Director
John Bell	Former Performance Director
Tony Alcock	Former Chief Executive Officer
Mal Evans	Director of Coaching
Gary Willis	Performance Director Australian Bowls
Alistair Hollis	Head of Sport Development
Steve Watson	Chair Disability Bowls England
Helen Wall	Disability Bowls England
Amy Pharoah	International Player
Natalie Chestney	International Player
Sam Tolchard	International Player
Nick Brett	International Player
Duncan Truswell	Strategic Lead – Talent & Performance Sport England
Frankie Kelly-Carter	Director of Sport and Performance Commonwealth Games England
Various	Performance Management Teams Call

Questionnaire

The following questions were also circulated to identified representatives from a number of clubs and counties:

<p>England historically is one of the leading lawn bowls nations in the world, with high participation levels, an extensive club and county structure and a comprehensive annual competition calendar. Whilst successful on the world stage, results indicate that our position as one of the leading nations is under threat from other major and emerging nations.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Please give your views on why England have historically been so successful and what actions might be required to maintain and improve our standing and reputation within the international bowls community. Clubs and counties across England have throughout our history been the cornerstone of our sport. When considering talent development and supporting our world class bowlers, what role, if any should the club and county structure play in this particular area of our sport moving forward? If you agree (as mentioned above) that clubs and counties have a role to play, what steps might be required to improve or enhance the club and county system to best support current and future world class success? Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: <i>Coaching should be an important factor in improving the standard of players across the country.</i> Yes/No If your response to the above was 'yes' how might accessibility and the standard of coaching be improved? Domestic competition plays an important role in talent development and preparing our world class players for major international events. Do you believe that the current domestic competition calendar effectively supports talent development and preparations for major international events? Yes/No..... How might Bowls England more effectively capitalise and learn from success at major events to grow the sport and raise standards for future generations.

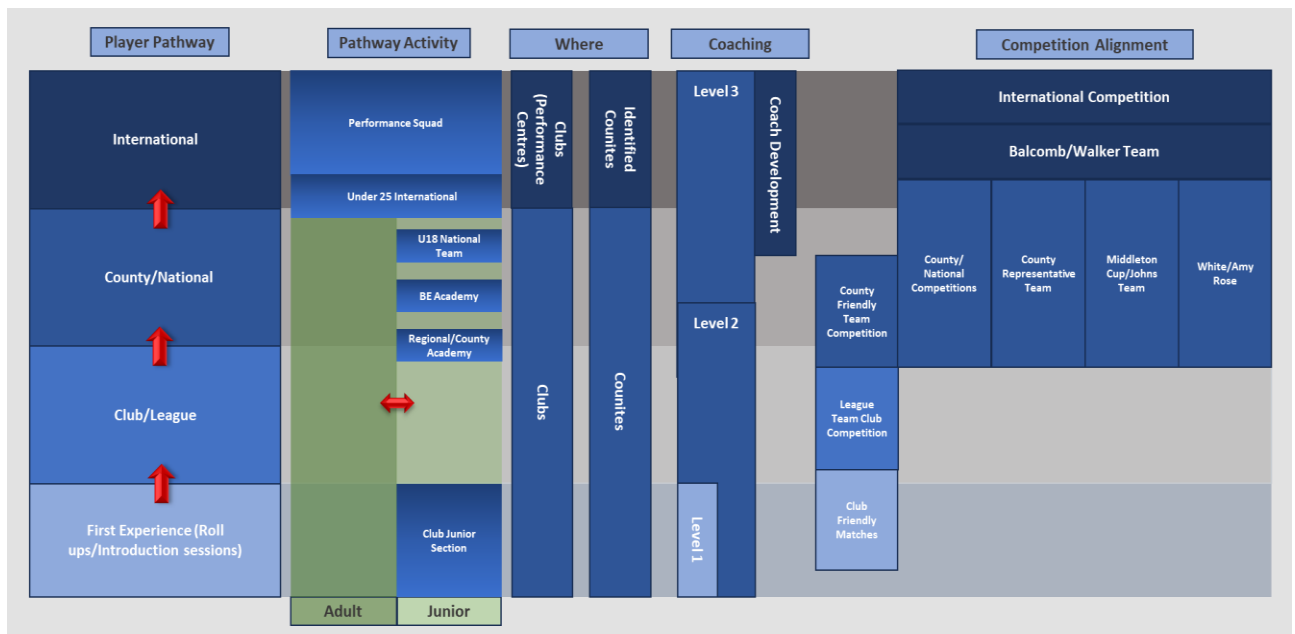
Appendix 2 - Proposed Performance Personnel Structure



Notes:

1. **Performance Director** - Strategic lead and accountability for Performance and Talent. This role would also have responsibility to ensure all coach education and development is informed and guided by the sport internationally. This role is salaried but scalable based on available resources
2. **Performance Coordinator** – Responsible for the administration and coordination of all Performance and Talent activity. This role is salaried but scalable based on available resources
3. **Team Managers/Coaches** – These roles could be either voluntary with an annual honorarium or contracted based on available resources. As stated, this role would include team management and responsibility for coaching their respective squads
4. **Sports Science Sport Medicine** – Following the identification of the need and specialism required, this support is scalable and adapted based on available resources. This support would be contracted either through an organisation or on an individual basis
5. **Head of Coaching** – This role is intended to drive the implementation of the organisations coach development and education plan. This role may not be line managed by the Performance Director but a close connection to ensure consistency and alignment throughout the player and coach experience. This role could be introduced in a number of ways including salaried, part or full time or contracted to both lead and deliver aspects of the plan.

Appendix 3 – Player Development Pathway



Notes:

1. This illustration is intended to show the Player Development Pathway as it currently stands with a number of additions based on the recommendations from this report
2. **The Player Development Pathway** - illustrates the route any player could take through the sport should they choose and have the ability to progress. It should be noted that in reality there is overlap in many areas, for example between club and county and national to international.
3. **Player Pathway** – The playing levels a player could transition through from a first experience up to becoming an international
4. **Pathway Activity** – Identified squads and activity outside of competition that supports player development and/or performance at various stages of a player’s career
5. **Where** – The primary partners who support and deliver activity and competition for players at every level
6. **Coaching** – Includes the current Coach education provision plus an indication of where coach development could have the greatest initial impact
7. **Competition Alignment** – Shows where competition supports players progression at the various levels and acknowledges that players do play a broad range of competition

