



Hockey for Life - an integrated, holistic and longitudinal framework for all

Executive Summary

Background

As part of the long-term ambitions of their '2020 vision', and following an extensive review of the performance strategy and structures, Hockey Wales appointed the Sports Science and Training Group Ltd (SSTG) to conduct a comprehensive review of the existing hockey pathway in Wales. The methodology employed an online survey (completed by 86 participants) and 3 focus groups (one in South Wales, two in North Wales involving 9 participants) to ensure that the views of key stakeholders were included. Desk research on approaches employed in other sports and a thorough examination of pertinent research literature were also central to the review.

The specific aims were as follows:

- To review the structure of the existing pathway & associated processes.
- To assess participant perceptions & experiences of the existing performance pathway & associated processes.
- To gauge desired aims of a Hockey Wales framework (from a range of perspectives).
- To integrate this information with both empirical & theoretical findings to produce a comprehensive framework proposal.
- To design and define a framework that can meet the desired aims.
- To identify any deficiencies in the existing pathway and highlight any necessary changes.
- In conjunction with the framework management group, to propose a detailed plan for staged implementation of the new framework.

At the completion of the project SSTG were able to highlight strengths and weaknesses of the existing approach, identify how these relate to the recommendations from the literature and bring to life the way in which the current pathway is experienced by many of those embedded within it.

From this work a 'Hockey for Life' framework has been established to allow all participants (players, coaches, officials, umpires, volunteers, educators and administrators) to engage with the sport and help Hockey in Wales to grow and excel. Within this framework, a detailed pathway model is offered to demonstrate a clear pathway for involvement in (and development through) the sport.

Context

The current Hockey Wales player pathway is a traditional pyramid structure, which is competition and talent identification led (talent Identification (TID) places emphasis on measurement and prediction of performance over specified periods of time). The pathway builds from school and/or club to county level delivery, through to regional and then junior or senior international stages. Selection in this format is reliant on 'snapshot assessments' relative to age groups and organisational timelines. In these circumstances, players may only progress if they demonstrate abilities at pre-determined times of the programme.

Within the current structure an unnecessary dual system is in operation, reflecting a failure to effectively combine historical pathways (county) and parts of the English 'single system' approach. The latter was established for a very different environment to Wales, therefore attempts to mirror it heightened the challenges within the pathway, resulted in inconsistent routes and provision for players (in terms of both gender and geography), and created an overburdening of resources such as the coach and volunteer workforce.

Similarly, the elite performance/international structures of the hockey pathway have also struggled to achieve their objective aims. Results of an independent review highlighted a number of concerns with regard the system's ability to produce high performing international teams or athletes capable of performing at GB level. The assessment, conducted by Wharton Consulting in 2010, identified deficiencies illustrated by the following outcomes:

- An irregular supply of quality players to Great Britain squads, totaling just 3 individuals in the past five Olympic cycles.
- Consistently poor World level performances from Wales and inconsistent Commonwealth Games qualification.
- World rankings hovering around 27 in the world
- European mid-table performances

Several recommendations were presented within the report, these include:

- Directing resources in areas where the organisation can have the most impact and control
- Placing a focus on talent development
- Refining the management of aspiring athletes with a holistic and longitudinal approach

The findings of the Wharton report were explicitly referenced and considered throughout the present review alongside exploration of the wider developmental aspects.

Literature review

In addition to collating the views of key stakeholders, and integrating the performance review findings, a comprehensive review of research literature was also conducted. Within the extensive review, four key theoretical approaches to the issue of talent development and talent identification were appraised (Balyi, 1996; Cote, 1999; Abbott and Collins, 2004 and Bailey and Morley, 2004) in conjunction with a pertinent Sports Coach UK academic review (Bailey, Collins, Ford, MacNamara, Toms and Pearce, 2010).

The research in this area raises a great deal of questions regarding the predominance of Talent Identification (TID) rather than Talent Development (TDE) systems across sporting organisations (as stated previously, the traditional ‘pyramid’ system currently employed in Wales is an example of a TID approach). The literature is consistently critical of TID approaches and the requisite ‘snapshot’ (rather than longitudinal) approaches to selection that tend to accompany them. A range of specific weaknesses associated with TID approaches are highlighted across the literature, these include:

- *Early talent does not necessarily lead to later talent* – there is little anecdotal or empirical evidence to support the assumption that those athletes who demonstrate early talent go on to become successful senior athletes. Like many others, the Hockey Wales pathway relies upon snapshot assessments of young performers that are designed to determine the investment in those who show early signs of talent.
- *TID doesn’t analyse all factors of performance* – performance is multi-faceted in nature yet existing TID models tend to assess only a small proportion of the relevant factors. There is a tendency to evaluate performers on a relatively small range of attributes and failure to recognise the ‘peaks and troughs’ that an athlete may go through (getting better at some aspects while others flat-line for a time).
- *Player development is not a linear process* – yet the existing TID centred model employed throughout Wales does not allow for the easy inclusion of athletes who may peak late or experience a performance slump. The current system does not recognise that players may need to drop out and re-join and there are very few opportunities for athletes to join late in the process or transfer from other sports.
- *Relative Age Effect* – research also shows that grouping and assessing athletes in exclusively age-defined groups can limit the development opportunities of many potential elite performers. This allows age group teams to be dominated by athletes born early in the

selection year, potentially discarding the talent of athletes who develop to their age potential months after selection dates.

The literature recommends a focus on Talent Development (TDE) (defined as “providing athletes with a suitable learning environment so that talent can be realised” Williams & Reilly, 2000) over Talent Identification methods. A TDE approach will embed opportunities for ‘deeper practice’, which can lead to significant gains in the skill development of athletes. In addition, TDE structures would permit a holistic and longitudinal focus on player development, as recommended in the Wharton Performance Review. This focus encompasses all areas of player development supporting technical and tactical, such as physical conditioning, sport psychology and lifestyle over a period of time, which enables talent to develop.

Review Findings

Through involvement in online surveys or focus group sessions, participants from the hockey community shared their understanding and experiences of the existing pathway in Wales. One of the key findings demonstrated a consistent desired aim for the pathway – namely the development of senior international performance. Hockey Wales may benefit from emphasising this when communicating any alterations to the existing model that may better serve the common aim. Participants perceive a number of existing strengths including: development opportunities, strong coaching at regional academies, identifying and developing talented players and providing a route to international squads. Respondents also highlighted deficiencies such as: aspects of the administrative burden of the pathway for the NGB, schools and volunteers – not a surprise given the dual system in operation in some regions. The workload which falls on key volunteers is also an influential issue and is considered to have reached breaking point; to illustrate - of the 95 respondents, 52% of key volunteers actually held three or more roles within the current pathway structure. Resource, structure and administration were held as the predominant areas of weakness within the current pathway and should therefore be key areas of focus when looking to re-develop the framework.

One of the key concerns highlighted by the review was the lack of understanding around the current pathway in its entirety. This highlighted the fact that the current system is poorly understood but also indicates the necessity for the new pathway to be communicated clearly and cohesively to all hockey members.

Hockey for Life Framework

Aims, model overview, any concerns/considerations (caveats)

Following extensive consideration of the performance review, research literature and the views of pathway participants, SSTG proposed a detailed replacement framework. This offers a coherent philosophy, structure and long-term vision to hockey participation at all levels. This holistic framework demonstrates how everyone can be involved in the sport of Hockey including players, coaches, officials, umpires, volunteers, educators and administrators.

Input from the current hockey community in Wales indicated that any new framework must reduce the burden on resources including the workforce, communicate a clear message regarding both aims and implementation and ensure consistency in delivery content and standards.

As with any framework, the design must also be closely aligned with the overarching aims of the organisation and, based on all the preceding information in this paper, suggested aims are provided below:

1. Create a holistic framework for all (players, coaches, officials, umpires, volunteers, educators and administrators) to engage, grow and excel in Hockey, one system for all.

2. Establish and promote a bespoke ‘Welsh Way’ of playing and delivering hockey, providing a shared vision for players, staff and parents and ensuring greater consistency in delivery.
3. Create a player-centred, development driven and competition supported system, designed to permit talent to thrive. Prioritise Talent Development (TDEV) over Talent Identification (TID) developing the foundations of technical, tactical and ‘bio psychosocial’ elements of performance based on ability not age, reflecting the dynamic nature of player development
4. Provide a longitudinal development framework for both domestic and international talent

There are two detailed models that underpin the achievement of framework objectives (1-4).

Critically, a player pathway cannot operate successfully without integration in to the broader context of the governing body operations and an overarching framework. The hockey for life framework model provides this overarching structure, illustrating the role of all hockey partners in the successful delivery of hockey. Moreover, the framework demonstrates the fundamental importance of developing effective partnerships to ensure the provision of a range of hockey-based activity. Crucially, the framework model also demonstrates the number of links and strong partnerships required across the sector to achieve the ambition of Vision 2020.

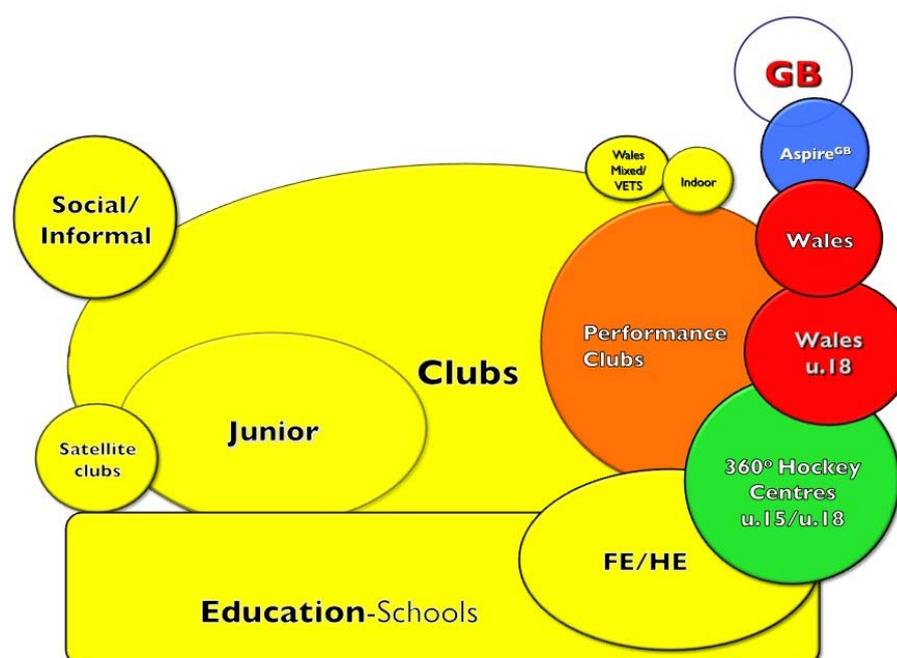


Figure 1 – Hockey for Life framework model

The model recognises the wide variety of drivers for individual involvement in hockey, and the fact that all areas of the game are important to the development of hockey for all.

Within hockey there will be people who will be participating for wellbeing involving taking part in physical activity in order to satisfy needs other than progression (social, informal, club, schools and FE/HE environments). Others will be achieving ‘Personal Referenced Excellence’ which is experienced in the form of participation and personal excellence for oneself (club, indoor and mixed hockey environments). Finally, some will be in the sport for Elite Referenced Excellence (ERE) which is a high level sporting performance where achievements are measured externally with a view to

winning at the highest possible level (360° Hockey Centres, Performance Clubs, International teams, Aspire^{GB} and Great Britain).

An effective pathway model provides opportunities for these to be developed independently or concurrently. The hockey for life framework model will allow participants to move freely through a continuum related to their age, ability, social circumstance or preference. This holistic approach suggests that investing finances in to small pools of ‘apparent’ talent may not be the ideal solution for elite development. Instead, a broader approach will serve to improve player, officials and workforce standards throughout all levels of ability and give everyone in the sport the capacity and competencies to choose to be physically active, achieve PRE or, if their capabilities and motivation permit, to strive for ERE.

The recommendation is for Hockey Wales to use this model alongside the longitudinal player pathway to develop a robust and achievable implementation plan.

The second model is the player pathway (figure 2), this proposes a longitudinal, player-centred approach, which frames the pathway for players and workforce of every level within Wales. This is an improved framework, which provides repeated opportunities for selection points along the way, and will reduce the number of players (some with potential talent) de-selected from the system at the various stages. Given the limitations in terms of player numbers in Wales, the player pool at the base of the ‘pyramid’ is not large enough to withstand frequent de-selection of players and still maintain a wide enough talent pool to cope with the impact of factors as social, geographical, age bias or luck.

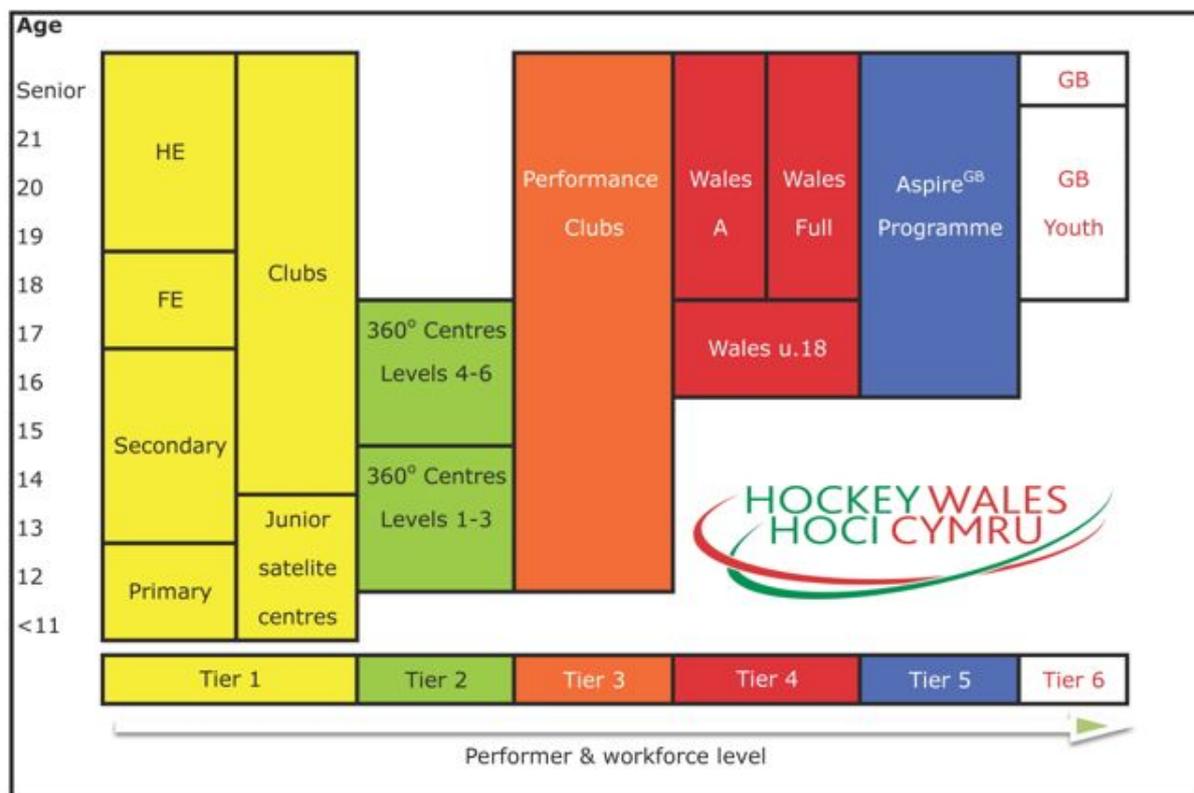


Figure 2 - Longitudinal player pathway model

If resources (administration, coaches, facilities, players, parents, fiscal) can permit, a more longitudinal structure would be advantageous to compensate for constraints (such as above), which can influence performance at various stages (opportunity, late developers, later birth dates and various bio psychosocial constraints and factors) and allow both improved development and more efficient talent identification.

Tier 1

The base of the model relies on links with the education sector (primary, secondary, Further Education & Higher Education) and clubs as these agencies become key delivery agents for the beginner, recreational and developing hockey performers.

Tier 2

The next tier of hockey delivery would take place at 360⁰ Hockey Centres, which would replace the current PDCs and RAs. The recommendation here is that players will be coached in mixed gender, homogenous ability groups. To do this there will be two general age block sessions, u.15 and u.18. Within each age block players will be placed in to one of three groups, based on their current ability level. Players and coaches will be able to move flexibly between the three levels, based on their performances over time. The primary function of the 360⁰ Hockey Centres is to introduce and develop core skill performance (the 'deep practice' referred to earlier) rather than preparing players for competition or selection.

The recommendation is to run the 360⁰ Hockey Centres on Sundays and develop a priority calendar to help clubs and schools work as part of the framework. Sunday delivery may alleviate some of the stressors (outlined above) of delivering on a weekday. This alteration may also serve to produce attractive roles for coaches and mentor coaches.

Tier 3

This tier signifies performance clubs, which will be developed as a piece of work in 2012-13.

Tier 4

Level 6 of Tier 2 360⁰ Hockey Centres should include all intended u.18 international athletes and so the monthly 360⁰ delivery should be linked closely with the demands, needs and expectations of international hockey. If this can be achieved then players should find the transition to the international scene a lot easier, as an international player's mentality will have already been embedded. For the International development in the proposed longitudinal player pathway there will be two age levels: u.18s and 18+. The international programme will adopt similar principles as those at 360⁰ Hockey Centres. Within the 18+ age group, the recommendation is for two ability groups at the 18+ training group. This could be labelled as Wales A & Wales B for clarification.

Tier 5

One of the key suggestions from the Wharton report (2010) was: to identify players with the potential to play for Great Britain, and to work with the "Nominated Country" for the specific development of these players. A small selection of exceptionally talented players will be invited to be a part of the Aspire^{GB} programme; this provision will include a service level agreement, which players and the NGB will adhere to.

Tier 6

Vision 2020 highlights the target for Wales to have 2-4 GB athletes by 2020.

Review processes and approval of the Hockey for life paper

A draft version of the Hockey for Life paper was presented to the Framework Management Group (previously the 'pathway TAG') and edited following extensive discussions around the research, proposed aims and philosophy of the framework. The Hockey for Life review was presented to the Board of Directors at the 12 April 2012 meeting where it was approved.

The 4 key principles of the review were approved along with a headline implementation plan, which is as follows:

Implementation Area	Timescale
Communications to membership & stakeholders	End May then ongoing
Competitions Review	April – Oct 2012
Aspire GB programme (Tier 5) implementation	June onwards
Tier 2 implementation	Sept onwards
Competition review implementation	Sept 2013 onwards (with some change to junior comps in 2012/13, e.g. 4689/activate)

Implementation

It must be stressed that this is an aspirational framework, which may take some time to be fully operational and has logistical and financial implications for Hockey Wales and its delivery agents.

The implementation of the pathway will a significant amount of work for a number of key stakeholders, which will more than likely be a phased approach over the next 2-3 years.

A number of Technical Action Groups (TAG) have been tasked with leading the implementation of the framework. These TAG's include Performance, Coaching, Officiating, Tier 1 (development/grassroots) and Competitions, each of the TAG's will report to the Framework Management Group. The Coaching and Officiating TAG's will eventually be represented by a Workforce TAG.

An extensive review and restructure of the existing competitions system is required to support the effective implementation of the framework. This competition review project and associated improvements are scheduled for implementation in September 2013.

Considerations/caveats

- The salient consideration for future framework design and implementation will be the support of, and investment in, the committed Hockey Wales workforce. This legion of hockey specialists is absolutely central to successful progression of the framework.
- The TDE focus will be highly impactful on the approach to hockey delivery in Wales since the shift from TID to TDE requires a transition in both practical and conceptual terms. The extensive change in the philosophy of TDE will require a significant investment by all. A culture shift will be required to develop an effective training environment and as part of the pathway delivery, coach, player and parent education on the multi-faceted aspects of development and athlete-focussed delivery is vital.

- As part of this implementation process the need for a coherent and consistent communication strategy, will be an essential task for Hockey Wales to deliver the integrated, holistic and longitudinal framework to it's full potential.