

Interview with Fiona Jackson, Radius Consultant, and Donna Fraser, Equality, Diversity and Engagement Lead, UK Athletics

Names	Commentary
FJ	Thanks Donna for joining us today. I really appreciate you spending some time with us. It'd be really useful for us and for the people currently on the ENLP to understand what's the value of networks to your business and why do you have them?
DF	So network we haven't got a specific, which actually that's a lie. We've just set up an LGBT network within UK Athletics, the first of its kind but with my experience and background that I established at EDF Energy I was able to bring that to the sporting arenas which has, wasn't, not apparent, you know, it wasn't something that they thought about. They're very much engrossed in delivering the sport so having networks wasn't something high on their agenda. I was the first ED&I lead to be appointed at UK Athletics so for me it was just to understand the landscape of UK Athletics before going with my size 10 feet in to establish a network. But what was really useful for me once we established our ED&I advocate group was to feed into that, but look at a broader view so not have specific networks. We've got this group in place to look at all the nine protected characteristics and deliver initiatives against that. What has been key for me and for all networks is it is about that connectivity. It's being vocal, giving the staff members a voice, a platform to bring any issues and just raise the awareness of ED&I has a whole so it has then catapulted into our first LGBT network which is thriving. Again you know there's no point in putting a network in place if there's not a need or a want and there was a need and a want for LGBT+ so who knows, we don't know where it's going to go. There may be other networks but absolutely they are valuable and staff who are involved both as an advocate and the APN which is the Athletic Pride Network, they value it completely.
FJ	So this is really exciting actually because you're really spearheading the way with networks in a whole new sector that's not had them before.
DF	Absolutely and when we launched our Athletics Pride Network, other sports were saying oh I wish I had this, I wish I had that, that would be brilliant. So yeah, we are definitely leading the way in that space but as I said, it wasn't just me saying this is what we want to do, it was our athletics family that said this needs to happen and they're loving it.
FJ	Yeah, yeah, so it was a voice that you heard and then you helped, so you help set up.
DF	Absolutely.
FJ	So how, how's it resourced and what training or anything, does it work very similarly as it would do in another organisation or have you, are you doing something different with that?
DF	Yeah, you know Fiona that there's no set script as it were. I've very much given the membership, the ownership to deliver. I oversee it, give direction and I'm the centre point as it were between the NGB and them but they are owning it, they're driving the agenda and I just literally give my little thumbs up or thumbs down. It's mainly thumbs up and give that direction. But yeah, in terms of the set up of it all, we literally just went out and I'm specifically talking about the LBGT network, is we went out to our athletics family and said look we're looking to set this up, who's interested. It did in fact start from an initial conversation with a smaller group, we called it Let's Talk LBGT+ and from then the network was born. So that first initial group it was just those tangible conversations that understand what is needed from us as an NGB and what they want from us and then we've built from there. But yeah, in terms of the plans, I guess the framework is very similar but it's the content that maybe different.

- FJ And interestingly I've learnt this morning that you were, have been on the ENLP which we reckon, three years ago. So are you finding some of the things that you learnt there you're still applying?
- DF Absolutely and interestingly enough a lot of us are still in contact. We've got a WhatsApp group and anything that's happening in our own spaces we share and that's what is key about networks, it's sharing knowledge, sharing best practice and then you can implement that in your own spaces. I think for me, I learnt a lot about how people are but I was able to give something too from my own knowledge and experience.
- FJ That's really interesting to hear you're still connected and still learning from each other so a brilliant opportunity to network and meet people as well.
- DF Definitely.
- FJ Wonderful. And what do you think are the biggest challenges in the athletics world that your network members from an LGBT+ are experiencing then that makes them want to have this network?
- DF So the initial conversation we had back in December with that smaller group was, it's the visibility for LGBT+ people within athletics and just the recognition of them as individuals. You know they don't want to be known as oh I'm the gay athlete. It's not about that. It's just understanding terminology, language that is used around these individuals and the awareness of it so from that we are going to be working with clubs and also our officials as well which we've done a huge amount of work around language and terminology. It's just that whole awareness piece so knowing that each person is an individual and each person is different.
- FJ So in terms of the reach that you have, when you say that you're working with clubs, do you reach across athletics clubs across the whole of the UK? So this week ... the impact or ...
- DF Yeah, athletics is quite complicated so UK Athletics is the NGB, the National Governing Body, for athletics in the UK and then you have your home country's so England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and they really focus on the connection with clubs and we're more the governance side of things.
- FJ OK.
- DF I do have colleagues in equivalent ED&I leads within each of the home countries who I work with. So what we're doing at the moment, UK Athletics and England Athletics, we're working towards the equality standard for sport which is a framework for sport where currently at the intermediate level. I'm working towards the advance level, similar to what we had at EDF Energy but in the sports arena. So it's literally holding up a mirror against yourselves and seeing how you're performing as an organisation against that set criteria. So it's a real opportunity for us to look at areas that we're not doing so well at but also at the same time celebrate the good stuff that we're doing. So we do have a reach but we do work closely with our home countries to make sure that we're catching everyone within the athletics community.
- FJ So yeah that's really interesting that you're sort of looking at it from a wider ED&I perspective and what role do you think this network and future networks potentially are going to have in helping you deliver moving forward on your agenda?
- DF Yeah so, excuse me. One of the things that has come out of the APN is around our policies and practices and the impact it has on them and its understanding that. So that's my job to actually work with policy holders again going back to language and terminology and how it impacts the wider community. Particularly around transgender, that's an area obviously that is in the press quite a bit especially within sport so we're governed by world athletics which clearly obviously has just male and

female competitors but domestically we can, we can literally allow anyone and we are trying to be as inclusive as possible as much as we can. So we have embedded nonbinary guidelines with road race organisers, and that was actually a need and a want from Scottish Athletics but we've embedded that within the whole sport. So it's entirely up to the race, road race organiser whether they want to have another category to allow a wider reach to the community. So we're trying to put little things in place to make sure that we are inclusive but at the same time we have to be mindful that the governance from world athletics doesn't allow trans athletes to participate.

FJ And do you think this network's going to be useful to have a voice to change?

DF Absolutely and the wider group. The whole ED&I group the conversations we've had. Of course now at the moment everyone's talking about the race conversation so that as well has come to the forefront but the fact that we have the platform of the ED&I advocate group is really useful because they're, I hate using this term, but they're my foot soldiers as it were because I can't get around everyone and that's the beauty of a network is having people around the whole organisation who can be there as a listening ear and feeding to the group so we can have a wider conversation.

FJ OK. I look forward to seeing some of that and then that changes. It sounds like you're already having an impact in a, in a, I mean I suppose in a minor way but a massively recognition way. Just there are, there being guidelines makes a big difference to the individuals concerned that they therefore feel that there is something for them.

DF Absolutely. And within Athletics Pride Network that's exactly what our core members have said you know I wish this had happened years ago when I was in the prime of my athletics career. But also it's not just the athletes it's our support staff as well, our officials, and whether they are from an LGBT community or not, you know they can be allies as well and that's the message that we want to relay. That you know you don't have to fit in that box. You can be an ally as well and have that voice and feed into the wider conversation.

FJ So how do you think you're going to measure or how are you measuring success in this, in what you're doing?

DF Measuring success as you know is really, really difficult. We haven't got a measuring success tool but the good thing is this equality standard in sport. If we achieve that that's number one, but also as the code for sport governance we have a diversity action plan and that's a requirement from UK Sports for All NGBs. So those are the two main things that we can measure success against and our diversity action plan has a RAG status against it. We set those objectives. If we're not reaching them then we have to work a little bit harder. So those are the two areas that we can measure those successes.

FJ OK, useful, useful tools. So let's move on to the impact that Covid is having on the network and on your ED&I group. So how's it changed since lockdown? And what, has there been more challenges, opportunities? How's that threat coming out?

DF Yeah, it's a mixed bag in all honesty. Unfortunately, some of my staff who were part of the advocate group have been furloughed, so that's difficult. What has been interesting is you know during lockdown everyone's having to stay at home, working from home, different ways of working but what we developed within UK Athletics is a connected together group and senior leadership led on that so what I've been able to do is look, bring together a whole programme of activities that engages with our staff during this difficult time but at the same time embed our ED&I messages into that. So we've gone out to athletes, coaches to tell their stories, what they've been up to, to keep our staff motivated and engaged and that's more of an inclusion perspective just to make sure people still feel valued even though we're not seeing you and help them tell their stories as well. So we've done for example the day in the life of a staff

member. What they do from the minute they get up on the morning to when they finish work. So you're getting a little bit more of an insight as to your own colleagues that you probably wouldn't have this opportunity to have that insight before lockdown. So we've tried to change the dial but it's not an negative situation, it can be a positive one as well.

FJ And have you found your, you said some of your staff are on furlough, but has it impacted your LGBT+ network, your Pride network?. Are they ...

DF No.

FJ What are they doing? Not at all?

DF Funnily enough, tonight we've got one of our membership meetings. We've got an audience with and you will know Fiona, me and my audiences, an evening with and all of that. So I'm bringing a lot of what did at EDF Energy to this table so yeah they're fully engaged and you know the beauty of lockdown and using virtual and technology is that everyone can join you don't have to travel anywhere. No matter where you are demographically around the UK so the fact that everyone feels that they can take part has been an absolute plus and we're using this as an opportunity moving forward that we don't always have to be in the same room all the time. It sounds like however having said that, it's the new membership, we haven't been able to engage with them face-to-face and ideally I would've liked to have had a workshop with the new members but we haven't done that yet but so far we're coping but everyone's still very much engaged.

FJ And are you thinking about maybe doing the new membership workshop virtually as well? Is that, or it is a pause until you can get together?

DF I really want to do one at the end of the year with everyone face-to-face and get everyone moving around and talking with each other better than in a virtual format but at the same time this is what we have. We just have to make it work so tonight's our first an audience with and it's around our transgender member so it's going to be interesting hearing her story.

FJ Wonderful. So it's your own network membership talking to other people who want to hear the story, story telling back what it's like to, to be them.

Df Absolutely. And give the membership an opportunity to ask questions and as well as that give them the confidence to open up as well because you know the power of conversation you can't beat it. The power of true experiences you can't beat that either. I could write things all day long but I may not have had that personal experience so I think it's a good platform for the membership to hear, listen and give that confidence to go out there in their own societies and do the same.

FJ And wellbeing's been a big issue when it comes to lockdown and things like that. How's your network and your ED&I groups supporting your employee and member wellbeing at this time?

DF Well mental health is a huge thing for us at UK Athletics both from an athlete perspective and our staff and workforce. We've designed the Time to Change employer pledge a couple of years ago now – 2018 – which supports our staff around mental health issues. We do have mental health support in place through our employer and employee gosh, EAP, Employee Assistance Programme. That's it. I only always know it as an acronym. I can never remember. So yeah, so definitely that is really important to us. For, from a network perspective and especially with APN is we've got a support of MindOut, a supporting our network along with Price Sports and they are an LGBT+ specific mental health charity and again the membership was just so pleased to see them come on board knowing that they've got that support network outside of athletics. So again, it's not just the internal work

that we're doing, it's all about those external partnerships that help our voice and what we want to do and give that support to our membership.

FJ Yes, definitely, definitely. I can see how that would be useful and enabling your, that network to have that voice that isn't part of the internal network so they can you know really feel that they can be open.

DF Absolutely.

FJ Express what they're going through at this time.

DF Definitely.

FJ So, have you seen your networks innovating? Any examples of things that you've seen them do? You've mentioned obviously you're still running your audience with and you're going to be doing it virtually in a bigger. What other things are you seeing happening?

DF So what's in the plan. So you know it's so difficult because a lot of our core members are athletes themselves and the fact that we've been on lockdown, they haven't been able to compete but I know realistically when the season gets up and running again they're not going to be available as much so the enthusiasm within the core membership is just going off on all tangents. Things that are in the pipeline. So we're planning to work with diversity role models to get some training in place for our members so that they can then work with diversity role models and go out into schools. We've got the audience with, we're planning to do some podcasts as well. The personal stories obviously we'll be linking in with our own social media channels as well so it's not just internal. It will get that wider voice as well. We're planning to work closely as I mentioned before with our home country federations, England, Scotland & Wales, to ensure that we're getting out into clubs with the core members as well. So it will need to pull together a standardised script as it were so we're talking about who we are but also engaging within their own communities and their own clubs, coaches etc. So we do need to have a long term plan but also not keep them separate but part of that whole ED&I umbrella so that they're going with us. So at the end of the year we're planning to have a wider workshop hopefully face-to-face with the other advocates to sit down and look at what we've done for this year and then start planning for next year. But the pace that the APN is moving at it's a bit crazy but yeah, it's good to have enthusiastic people onboard.

FJ Yeah and one thing that just struck me there actually you know a lot of your membership being athletes and normally competing, not being able to compete and potentially not being able to take part in some of their sports when we've had the lockdown where you just couldn't do things. How are you finding that's really impacting on them, their mental health? Do you think that's a particular challenge?

DF It's huge. No-one envisaged how long this lockdown was going to be. You know goalposts keep moving as to when we can start competition again and it's managing those athletes, you know whether they're part of the network or not, it's the whole cohort of athletics. So the support team with my colleagues are working really hard to stay in contact, keep them engaged so that they're not too down about the Olympics being moved to next year and just look forward. It's something that we can't control and it's managing that. But within athletics and many other sports we do have that support network in place, psychologists, nutritionists, and then also it links back into our staff support as well. So the services are absolutely there within athletics which I'm proud of.

FJ That's good, that's good to hear. And when you're talking about your sort of diversity role models, is doing some of this outreach going to take some of these athletes and their diverse characteristics into schools and society? Because I think that they've got a big voice in terms of being visible in athletics and you know going to see

children who could then go and see them on the telly. You know, things like that. How do you see that working?

DF Absolutely. I think what is key for me with any network, it's not just for us to keep pushing people out there and listening and all of that. It's also about development. So it's a huge development opportunity for them as well to get out and about, tell their story, they're developing presentations skills and that's the way I'm seeing it. It's about developing them to be the best person that they can possibly be. Not just as an athlete but as an individual as well.

FJ Thank you very much. That's been really insightful into what you're doing at the Athletics BRA. British?

DF British Athletics but it's very confusing. There's British Athletics and UK Athletics. They are the same organisation.

FJ OK.

DF British Athletics is just the commercial side of things and UKA is the NGB. So either one.

FJ It's what you've been doing across the athletics industry in the UK.

DF Absolutely.

FJ Thanks ever so much for your time Donna. We're pretty much on time. One final question before I leave. Is there anything that you thought of that you're doing that you think is best practice and fantastic that I haven't ask you the right question to get back out?

DF No, I think you pretty much covered it. For me, it's just having that open mind and listen. You know, being available to anyone and getting out there so that people feel comfortable coming to you with issues, experiences and then you can take that forward.

FJ Yeah, good, good words of advice indeed. Thank you very much Donna. I really appreciate your time. And hopefully see you again soon.

DF Definitely. Thank you.

FJ Thank you.