

# **A Review for the Board of United Kingdom Athletics into the UKA Classification of Para-Athletes.**

**March 2017**

## **1. Background**

### ***What is classification***

Classification is the cornerstone of Paralympic sport and is an essential structure for elite competition between disabled athletes. It groups athletes into competition categories, known as Sport Classes.

The aim of classification is to minimise the impact of eligible impairments on the outcome of competition. To do this, athletes are assessed by qualified classifiers and allocated a Sport Class according to how much their impairment affects sports performance.

Athletes with impairments that have a similar impact on sport performance will compete in the same Sport Class. The system ensures that athletes do not succeed solely because they have an impairment that causes less of a disadvantage than their competitors, but because of their skill, determination, tactics, fitness and preparation.

Classifiers work in panels of 2 and reach a decision by consensus. A typical panel for athletes with a physical impairment would be made up of a Medical Classifier (usually a physiotherapist, or medical doctor) and a Technical Classifier (usually a Coach, Exercise Scientist or Biomechanist). All panels are overseen by a Chief Classifier.

Prior to undergoing a classification evaluation, an athlete must submit an official Medical Diagnostic Form and supporting medical information. The Chief Classifier will review that paperwork and ensure the athlete has met the minimal eligibility criteria, before carrying out a battery of functional tests on the athlete in order to assign the athlete to the appropriate class. The classifiers may wait until they have observed the athlete in competition before agreeing an athlete's Sport Class.

Athletes with a stable condition and who are comfortably within the parameters of their class are given a Sport Class Status of "Confirmed" by the classifiers. Athletes with a progressive condition and/or are considered borderline between two classes are given a Sport Class Status of "Review" (which means they need to be evaluated again at the next competition) or "Review with a Fixed Year" (meaning they will need to be evaluated again after a set time).

The classification process for each impairment group is different and each has minimum disability criteria (MDC) that athletes must meet to be eligible for classification. Only authorised classifiers can determine whether an athlete meets the MDC.

### ***UKA's role in classification***

UKA's role in classification is to manage the national classification system across all impairment groups (visual impairments, physical impairments, and intellectual impairments) in the sport of

athletics. This includes providing regular national classification opportunities for athletes, the delivery of national classifier training courses, and ongoing development opportunities for its national classifiers, and managing internal processes for British athletes going through international (World Para-Athletics (WPA), formally IPC Athletics) classification.

These activities are overseen by a Classification Advisory Group, led by UKA's Futures and Talent Manager and delivered by UKA's Classification Coordinator. UKA's national classification practices mirror that of WPA.

National classification in athletics is performed by qualified UKA classifiers according to the classification rules of the sport, as published by WPA. The purpose of national classification in athletics is to determine an athlete's eligibility to compete at a national level by allocating eligible athletes a national Sport Class. It is important that national classification practices and outcomes of UKA mirrors those of WPA to allow athletes competing in the UK to benchmark themselves against international standards

National classification allows eligible athletes to compete in all National Disability Sports Organisations (NDSOs) and UKA competitions (including Parallel Success events), in addition to any mainstream club and open competitions (which athletes can enter without a classification), and go on the UK Disability Rankings (Power of 10). Athletes must be at least 11 years old and training in a club for a minimum of 3 months before they can be classified within the UK. UKA currently has 23 national classifiers, 14 of whom are medical, and 9 are technical. There are also 4 British International Classifiers; 3 of whom are medical and 1 is technical. The 4 British International Classifiers also classify at UKA National Classification Clinics and sit on UKA's Classification Advisory Group.

UKA is also responsible for preparing and reviewing the medical documentation for athletes attending international classification which is undertaken by WPA, and where required, the UKA medical team will complete an athlete screening prior to attending classification. An international sport class allocated by WPA supersedes a national sport class allocated by UKA.

## **2. Purpose of the review**

The UKA classification review was undertaken under the following Terms of Reference (TORs)

1. To ensure UKA's procedures relating to the national classification of athletes with a disability are robust and consistent with best medical and sporting practice, and are fully compliant with WPA regulations.
2. To assess whether the UKA's national classification procedures are effectively documented, well understood by those involved, and consistently followed in practice to ensure stakeholders have confidence in the system
3. To seek to provide assurance to the UKA Board on UKA's classification system and procedures, and to identify whether there is evidence to suggest that any groups or individuals have sought to manipulate the classification system to gain a performance advantage
4. To consider whether UKA is on course to meet the objective that every classified British athlete has a classification that is supported by full medical documentation and meets the current IPC Athletics Classification criteria.

Note: This review only focussed on UKA's national classification of athletes, and not that undertaken by WPA for international competition.

## **3. Methodology**

The UKA classification review was conducted over a period of more than 3 months (November 2016 – February 2017) and analysed UKA's written materials, both public and internal, relating to classification procedures. It also identified those with a direct experience of the UKA classification system and a cross-section of these individuals were invited to participate in an interview to allow members of the review panel to gain an informed perspective and understanding of the procedures in practice.

26 individuals were selected based on their experience of the classification system in the UK, with no regard for their prior views on the UKA classification process, and invited to attend an interview with members of the review panel.. Of the 26 individuals contacted, 20 people accepted the invitation to be interviewed and completed an interview with the panel between December, 2016 and February, 2017.

Any specific allegations of Intentional Misrepresentation or other deliberate malpractice that were identified during the review were to be flagged immediately to the UKA Board for separate investigation if required.

Panel members previously unfamiliar with the classification process attended a UKA National Classification Clinic for athletes with a physical impairment.

The purpose of this national classification review was to formulate recommendations and actions to be considered for periodic review by UKA

## **4. Findings**

*Following the interviews that were conducted by the review panel, the following key findings were established:*

A significant majority of the interviewees evidently believe that the current UKA national classification system is comparable with or better than that of most, if not all other nations.. UKA staff showed a strong desire to be ethically above board and see the sport's classification rules implemented consistently and without favour.

The Panel did find that there was some lack of confidence in the UKA national classification system amongst a small number of non-UKA staff, and some concern that the system is open to exploitation. However where this was found to be the case, much of the frustration appeared to be due to lack of appreciation of the different responsibilities of the national and international classification systems.

The Panel was provided with some anecdotal evidence of exploitation of the UKA national classification system by a minority of athletes which in some instances may not have been intentional.

There was wide consensus that the current UKA national classification system could be abused, should an athlete or support personnel be sufficiently motivated, have an understanding of the classification process and have an impairment that lends itself to exaggeration. This issue is not exclusive to athletics but reflected across Paralympic sport. Para Athletics is a relatively 'young' sport where records are being broken frequently, sometimes by large margins. This makes it difficult to detect abuse based on performance data only. In addition, classification itself is a developing discipline. There is an ongoing need for vigilance and a regular review, check and challenge of all classification processes to ensure it continues to keep pace with the development of Paralympic sport and to mitigate the risk of exploitation. Methods which could be used for intentional misrepresentation are as follows:

- Athletes with neurological conditions arriving at classification evaluations with prior fatigue; and,
- Athletes altering their Medical Diagnostic Form and/or supporting evidence prior to submitting it to UKA
- Athletes presenting medical reports from doctors who are sympathetic to the athlete

Although the review found that the national classification system could be exploited, there was no substantive evidence to suggest that this is the case. The Panel is not able to comment on those cases that have already been reported to UKA and WPA.

Uncertainties were raised about how well coaches and athletes within the network understood both the UKA and WPA's classification systems and what communication avenues already existed to improve the understanding of classification and the processes involved. Many expressed their opinion that the appointment of a designated classification coordinator at the end of 2014 has resulted in significant improvements in communication and the UKA classification system as a whole.

The Panel were presented with a range of views on ways that the processes and communication of key issues relating to the classification system could be enhanced, namely;

- No forum or format exists to explain why an athlete has been allocated to their national Sport Class.
- The process for an individual raising a concern about another athlete who they think may have been allocated to an incorrect national Sport Class, is not well known.
- There is some lack of confidence that concerns raised around an athlete being allocated an incorrect national Sport Class will be followed up.

- There is no 'appeal' process for national classification which is independent of UKA
- Concerns were raised about the lack of a formal script or step-by-step process for classifiers to follow during the national classification evaluation.
- Limited pool of national classifiers without a conflict of interest (technical classifiers specifically)
- Although national classifiers sign up to a Code of Conduct that requires them to declare any actual or perceived conflicts of interest, there is no formal process for logging or managing declarations of Conflict of Interest.

Although the UKA Classification system reflects that of WPA, some concerns were raised over potential discrepancies between the UKA and WPA systems that may result in changes to an athlete's classification at international level. However the Panel were re-assured by data showing that only a very small percentage of re-classifications occurred between the UKA and WPA (12 athletes, of a total of 186 classified by WPA), and when these did arise, no trends that gave cause for concern were observed.

The consistent management and storage of medical data was identified as an area of concern. However, the Panel did not believe it was necessary to review individual athlete's classification files to verify that sufficient evidence had been provided. The rationale for this was twofold. Firstly, the Panel were not investigating specific individual cases of classification. Secondly, it was strongly felt that viewing medical data in isolation would yield nothing, and not add to the review. During national classifications, medical data is used alongside comprehensive functional assessments conducted by a group of classifiers. Panel members attended classification sessions, observed the classification of a number of individual athletes, and were satisfied that viewing medical data which in many cases was confidential, would not be required or of value.

It was highlighted to the Panel that during the national assessment process there is currently no process which enables **independent** clinicians to review medical data, (where necessary), and to engage in the classification process. It was also suggested that the national classification system should focus less on technical ability, and more on the clinical condition of the athlete. Some lack of clarity over the roles of individual members of the medical classification team was also identified.

The Panel were also made very aware that the national classification process deals with individuals whose bodies are in a state of change, either as a result of physiological adaptations to training, or through the natural ageing process. It was evident that there could be a disincentive for some athletes to train to the best of their ability and risk a potential change to a higher classification, which could impact on success and livelihood.

The Panel recommends that the outcomes of this review are shared with WPA.

## **5. Recommendations**

As a result of the review's findings, the Panel have produced the following recommendations for consideration by the UKA Board:

### ***Communication***

- Communication should be improved to clarify national and international classification and UKA and WPA's differing roles in each process.
- On receiving a national sport class, athletes should be briefed by UKA on the rationale for the class that has been allocated, the types of impairments that make up that class and be available to answer any questions from the athlete.
- Classification workshops should be offered to clubs, coaches, athletes and parents on a national level, as well as improved online resources that are clear, easily accessible and communicate important information i.e. changes to the rules.
- In advance of the London 2017 Athletics World Championships, a public communications campaign should be launched to educate the media and general public about classification and the processes involved at both national and international level

### ***Medical***

- There is a need to improve the standard of medical documentation presented prior to classification to ensure that there is consistency between athletes, and at all classification sessions.
- The responsibilities and capacity of the UKA Chief Medical Officer (CMO) should be reviewed and their relationship with classification clearly established.
- The CMO should be an active member of the national Classification Advisory Group (CAG).
- The CMO and CAG to review the current medical processes, including the Medical Diagnostic Form to reduce the opportunity of information being manipulated, with a view to improving the consistency of data management and storage.
- Establish a panel of independent clinicians to support the classification process. However the Panel does not recommend that independent clinical input is required for every athlete classification.
- Current procedures should be reviewed with regard to the management of athletes with a fluctuating condition, training adaptations, and the timeframe between assessments.

### ***Misrepresentation***

- The new UKA protocols and consequences for intentional misrepresentation need to be communicated and reviewed to highlight the implications of athletes mistreating the system, and to act as a deterrent.

### **Whistleblowing**

- There is a need for an independent oversight committee, that is separate from UKA, to manage the national protest and appeal process.

### **Conflict of Interest**

- Conflicts of interest amongst national classifiers should be formally logged to prevent unintentional misconduct occurring and an official conflict of interest protocol introduced.
- Increase the national classifier pool (technical classifiers specifically).

### **Classification Process**

- CAG and the CMO to develop and pilot a 'classifiers script' to ensure consistency of the classification evaluation process.
- There is a need for an improved system that allows monitoring of athletes before, during and after national classification. Data should be used to monitor the performances of athletes, and this should be used to alert UKA to the potential need for a classification review. For example, athletes who demonstrate major improvements shortly after being classified, or whose performances change significantly, may be targeted for further review.

## **6. Conclusions**

Based on the Terms of Reference for this Review, the Panel offer the UKA Board the following conclusions:

*TOR 1. To ensure UKA's procedures relating to the national and international classification of athletes with a disability are robust and consistent with best medical and sporting practice, and are fully compliant with WPA regulations.*

**In the opinion of the Panel, the UKA system is robust and mirrors WPA's protocols for classification. Indeed, it was cited as one that is an exemplar of best practise, and one of – if not the – best in the world. However the Panel have identified some key areas for improvement which would further enhance the UKA classification process.**

*TOR 2. To assess whether the UKA's national and international classification procedures are effectively documented, well understood by those involved, and consistently followed in practice to ensure stakeholders have confidence in the system.*

**Although generally good, the Panel identified some areas for improvement in the documentation of medical information and in the communication of the classification process to key stakeholders, and these have also been addressed within the recommendations.**

*TOR 3: To seek to provide assurance to the UKA Board on UKA's classification system and procedures, and to identify whether there is evidence to suggest that any groups or individuals have sought to manipulate the classification system to gain a performance advantage.*

**In the opinion of the Panel, the UKA Classification system is recognised as one that is world-leading with a strong ethical culture and an exemplar of best practice in many areas. However, areas for improvement have been highlighted to ensure the system's ongoing integrity and improve understanding of classification. The only specific allegations of IM of which the Panel is aware are those made by individuals who have already made such allegations directly to both UKA and WPA.**

*TOR 4: To consider whether UKA is on course to meet the objective that every classified British athlete has a classification that is supported by full medical documentation and meets the current IPC Athletics Classification criteria.*

**The Panel is unable to provide complete assurance to the UKA Board that every UK athlete has full and consistent medical documentation. This was more apparent with experienced athletes who were classified prior to this requirement becoming mandatory, but the Panel is assured that the UKA system is on track to enhance this process, and we believe that greater engagement with the CMO will be critical in the achievement of this objective.**

#### **Review Panel members**

Professor John Brewer, St Mary's University, Twickenham,

Mr Iain Gowans, British Paralympic Association

Mr Peter Taylor

Ms Anne Wafula-Strike