



South Australian Little Athletics Association Participation Review

Final Report March 2015

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks must go to the Little Athletics community who supported this review with their involvement in the consultation phase through attending the various forums, responding to the on-line surveys or being available to be interviewed. The excellent response has contributed significantly to enabling this report to be a very comprehensive summary of the current status of participation within the sport.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Little Athletics is a uniquely Australian sport for children aged between 3 -17 years enjoyed each year by over 100,000 girls and boys throughout the country. It is based upon the sport of athletics (track and field) and the events are specially modified to suit the ages and abilities of children. The emphasis is on fun, participation, performance, technique and getting involved with your family in physical and healthy activity. The motto of Little Athletics is 'Family, Fun and Fitness.' Little Athletics is one of the few sports where parents can become fully involved in their child's sporting interests and centres rely very heavily on the assistance of parents and other adult volunteers each week in fulfilling the many and varied duties required.

The South Australian Little Athletics Association was formed in South Australia 42 years ago, so it is still a relatively young recreation/sport in comparison to the other traditional Associations. There are 58 affiliated centres located through the state catering for in excess of 8,000 participants, and they are grouped into 8 separate geographical regions with 4 in the metropolitan area and 4 in the country.

The sport faces a major issue with its retention of participants for the longer term. In an attempt to address this issue Little Athletics SA secured state government funding to conduct a project aimed at the development of growth and retention strategies for the future of the sport. Whilst there was a view about the perceived dropout rate from the sport there had been little factual information gathered to support this view as much of the data had been anecdotally based information.

With the outcomes of the project Little Athletics SA is now in a position to better determine the future direction for the sport by creating better pathway opportunities for the athletes, greater ownership by all key stakeholder groups and better identification of the issues that the sport must address to achieve its objectives.

The methodology used for the review included a series of forums conducted at selected regional centres across the state, an on-line survey to current and past members and stakeholder and community engagement.

In order to gather a picture of participation in Little Athletics in South Australia and nationally, data was sourced from a number of different reports. 30,000 children nationally join Little Athletics centres every year but despite these large numbers, the retention rate in the sport is on average only 4 years per athlete which means that many children on joining at an early age around 4 or 5 do not maintain an involvement into their high school or late primary school years. The sport has only experienced a slight growth in the past 6 years but this has been amplified particularly in an Olympic year when numbers increase dramatically but then fall away quite alarmingly indicating retention is a major issue. In South Australia the same retention pattern is evident.

Generally participation in the sport is very low when compared with other major competitors such as Cricket, AFL, Soccer, Netball, Swimming, Basketball and Hockey. Nationally Little Athletics Australia has a growth plan which includes lifting membership numbers over the next 5 years which will elevate the sport into a top 10 provider in terms of numbers participating in junior sporting activities.

A key focus of the project was to broadly consult with both current and past Little Athletics participants to determine the factors that lead to the perceived drop-out from the sport. A range of consultation methods was employed to gather the relevant information.

Regional forums were conducted across the state providing participants with an opportunity to provide their comments/feedback on the issues facing the sport in relation to addressing the drop-out rate. The following set of questions was asked at each forum:

- What are the current issues facing the sport?
- What makes Little Athletics appealing?
- What are the barriers impacting on participation?
- What are the major causes of the perceived drop-out rate?
- What are some possible solutions/strategies to address the drop-out in the sport?

Of the 8 forums that were scheduled only 5 were conducted as the others were cancelled due to lack of numbers or lack of a suitable venue to host the forum. In total, representatives from 23 different centres were involved as participants at these forums.

Two on-line surveys developed using the Survey Monkey tool, were distributed to different target groups. The first survey was designed to capture information from the Little Athletics community and was disseminated to every Little Athletics centre in the state. The survey was open for a period of approximately 6 weeks from mid October to end of November and the timing of the survey distribution ensured that the current season had commenced and so people were in "little athletics" mode. The 836 responses received represented the views of participants from 50 individual centres.

The second survey was specifically designed to capture those participants who were no longer involved in the sport as their views were particularly relevant to this project. This survey was open for a much shorter period of only two weeks closing also at the end of November when the first survey closed. The 230 responses received represented the views of participants from 54 individual centres.

The aim of both surveys was to ascertain from people involved in the sport, their views on the current issues facing the sport in relation to participation trends.

Feedback from the forums and surveys highlighted the most significant barriers to children staying involved in the sport were identified as:

- Choosing to play another sport
- Too much standing around during events
- The sport is no longer enjoyable
- The quality, or lack of coaching available
- Parents had lost interest

A range of suggested solutions and ideas were put forward to address these barriers including:

- Improving the quality and quantity of coaching
- Making the conduct of the events more suitable, appropriate and relevant for all ability levels

- Increasing the pathway opportunities internally within Little Athletics and externally with senior athletics
- Reviewing the appropriateness of the Little Athletics brand for older participants
- The quality of the coaching must be addressed
- Ensuring all centres are well administered and with good quality facilities and equipment
- Increased focus on better engaging and educating parents in support roles
- Improving the overall communication processes within the sport including from head office and from centre committees to their members
- Establishing stronger links with key stakeholders such as neighbouring schools and local senior athletics clubs
- Identifying increased opportunities to better recognise the achievements athletes of all ability levels

The project committee determined that in conjunction with the views of the Little Athletics community, including past participants, it was also important to seek the views of key stakeholders for a different perspective on the drop-out issue.

Interviews were held with key staff from both state bodies, selected senior athletics clubs, and school sport units seeking responses to the current issues facing Little Athletics SA, the reasons why there appears to be limited transition from Little Athletics to Senior Athletics, and the opportunities to develop stronger relationships between the two athletics bodies.

A number of issues were identified as follows:

- Relationship between senior athletics and little athletics needs strengthening as past history highlights there was very little interaction between the two bodies
- Senior athletics clubs need to better align with their local Little Athletics centres
- Limited pathways exist between Little Athletics centres and senior clubs
- Where current relationships exist that are working well there is a greater opportunity for retaining athletes
- Little Athletics centres need to be more creative in addressing such issues as - inactive time at events, inflexible conduct of events and lack of skill development
- Critical age to target for attention is the 12-17 year cohort
- Providing quality coaching is a key factor in retaining participants in all levels of athletics
- There is a need for greater exposure of the sport

The final section of the report provides a synthesis of the various consultations, surveys and data gathered to assist the Little Athletics centres in the development of growth and retention strategies for their future. In compiling the findings of the research and consultation stages the issues and concerns were identified and outlined under key headings that were nominated as the major areas for consideration in this review. The recommendations are aimed at providing possible solutions to develop long term strategies and changes that will ultimately see improved retention across the sport.

## **Competition**

Despite the benefits of the competition structure, an analysis of the consultation data highlights significant issues that have been critical factors in why Little Athletics participation is being impacted. There is too much time wasting with athletes standing around waiting for

their turn, group sizes being too large increasing the amount of time between active participation and waiting to participate, and inflexible event administrators not prepared to make changes to provide more attractive meets/programs.

*Recommendation 1*

*That the planning and conduct of the regular competition structures be reviewed to ensure increased opportunity for athletes to be more active.*

*Recommendation 2*

*That centres are encouraged to provide more flexible programs to create a more enjoyable/attractive environment which has more appeal to both athletes and parents.*

*Recommendation 3*

*That consideration be given to allowing athletes over the age of 13 to specialise in the event(s) of their choice.*

*Recommendation 4*

*That a greater focus on skill development is adopted by offering specialist skill development days in lieu of competition days on a regular basis (e.g. once every 4-6 weeks) through the competition season.*

*Recommendation 5*

*That more interclub competitions are conducted on a home and away basis to allow athletes the opportunity to compete against other athletes more regularly than currently exists where they are only competing at their home centre apart from state/regional championships.*

## **Coaching**

One of the most critical factors in addressing the drop-out rate in the sport is improving the quality and quantity of coaches passing on skill development to the athletes. As coaching is the key to improvement there is an issue with many centres not having sufficient qualified coaches to provide the quality environment athletes need and so many centres rely on parents many of whom have little or no knowledge of the skills and techniques required but are willing to offer their time and commitment. Where a positive coaching environment is experienced there is greater likelihood of attracting and retaining athletes.

*Recommendation 6*

*That the lack of quality coaching needs to be addressed as a critical element of future planning by the SA Little Athletics Board*

*Recommendation 7*

*That centres are encouraged to increase their focus on skill development rather than running competitions*

*Recommendation 8*

*That centres use some of their older athletes who have left the sport or are contemplating their future involvement to be supported with relevant training to become mentor coaches*

*Recommendation 9*

*That the concept of paying skilled coaches be explored instead of relying on using parents who feel obliged to offer their support*

*Recommendation 10*

*That Little Athletics SA and Athletics SA explore establishing a Coaching Fund through the establishment of a coaching levy to annual membership registration from which centres/clubs can apply to seek funding to pay for specialist coaching clinics conducted by senior athletics clubs or to engage specialist coaches*

*Recommendation 11*

*That approaches be made to potential sources of recruitment to find skilled coaches. These sources to include tertiary institutions with a connection to training graduates in sport related courses, secondary schools offering PE and Sport to their senior students and senior athletics clubs*

*Recommendation 12*

*That the current scheme being implemented by Western Districts Athletics Club where senior athletes are being linked to neighbouring Little Athletics centres as roving coaches be adopted as a pilot project*

*Recommendation 13*

*That SA Little Athletics seek interest from any skilled coaches to establish a pool of coaches that Little Athletics centres could access when required*

*Recommendation 14*

*That individual centres increase their focus on better educating and upskilling and inducting those parents who are interested in taking on a coaching role*

**Pathways/Transition**

There is very little evidence of clearly defined pathways that are promoted by either Little Athletics SA or Athletics SA or their member clubs and centres. There is an internal focus from the members clubs/centres appearing to only be concerned with their own interest and agendas rather than promoting what is best for the sport overall. Historically there have been some issues between the two athletics bodies working cooperatively and this is likely to have impacted on creating smooth transition programs.



*Recommendation 16*

*That every Little Athletics centre throughout the state be aligned to a senior Athletic club whereby the Little Athletics centres are feeder clubs and strong relationships can be established between the senior club and the feeder centres.*

*Recommendation 17*

*That both athletics organisations work together to produce a document which details the pathways/transition opportunities for all new Little Athletics participants and their parents*

*Recommendation 18*

*That prior to every season a forum is held between the senior club and their feeder centres to plan pathway/transition opportunities for the coming season*

*Recommendation 19*

*That each senior club hosts an Open Day event at least twice a year where their Little Athletics feeder clubs are invited to attend and participate in a range of coaching sessions conducted by senior athletes and coaches. This provides an opportunity for the senior clubs to promote themselves to the broader Little Athletics community. Tennis Australia has a similar day.*

*Recommendation 20*

*That a standard Exit Survey be developed for use by Little Athletics Centres to track those participants who do not register for the new season to determine if they have dropped out or have continued on as a senior athletics club member*

## **Parent Engagement/ Education**

The involvement of parents as key volunteer helpers is a vital component of the Little Athletics culture. A major issue is the ongoing engagement of parents as many felt pressured to get involved and this demotivated them to continue their involvement thereby impacting on the participation of their children. For others who were prepared to get involved in a support role there was little support or induction made available to assist them in performing the allocated task.

*Recommendation 21*

*That centres investigate ways to better engage with their parents through increased social activities, reducing the reliance on parents as event volunteers and making their involvement less focussed on how they need to help*

*Recommendation 22*

*That an Induction manual be developed for use by centres in inducting new parents who are willing to take on a support role*

## **Branding/Profile**

Given the sport has limited exposure through the media and it is not well promoted in schools Little Athletics is very dependent on word of mouth and local centres doing their own promotion and advertising. The name Little Athletics was a discussion point in the forums and surveys but despite the name being a barrier it did not rate highly as a factor in causing a significant number of athletes to drop out

### *Recommendation 23*

*That promotion of the sport to attract new participants in the older age category needs to adopt a more appealing catch phrase such as Junior Athletics and highlight the more social aspects of participating in the sport at this age along with the opportunity to become a paid mentor coach*

### *Recommendation 24*

*That where any future promotional campaigns are conducted centres better plan for the increased interest*

### *Recommendation 25*

*That a targetted campaign be developed that focusses on increased promotion in schools and is conducted with the support of and recognition by the school's local Little Athletics centre*

## **Communication**

The initial take up of the survey through the mediums of Little Athletics SA weekly newsletters, Little Athletics SA facebook and twitter sites was very poor and highlighted the low interest level from centres in these communication processes. Further follow up research on the Little Athletics SA website highlighted a site that is not user friendly and has limited relevant information for new users and is not engaging for parents who are the main target group seeking information.

### *Recommendation 26*

*That Little Athletics SA review their current communication strategies in order to better inform and engage with their stakeholders and members*

### *Recommendation 27*

*That the existing website be reviewed to make it more user friendly and engaging as the major connection tool with the broader Little Athletics community*

### *Recommendation 28*

*That Little Athletics SA develop a template for use by every Little Athletics centre to provide new members upon registering with a centre Information sheet which details all the relevant club and athletics related information*

## **Relationships**

The pathways in the sport are not well known and this has been a factor in children dropping out. Previously the relationship between the two sports has not been strong and there seems to have been little encouragement, motivation or incentive for Little Athletes to continue in the sport given the portrayal of two separate entities rather than partners in the same sport.

### *Recommendation 29*

*That Little Athletics SA and Athletics SA establish every opportunity to develop a stronger relationship than previously existed so that the sport of athletics is seen as a united coordinated sport with two strong and supportive partners*

### *Recommendation 30*

*That Little Athletics SA implements strategies that creates more effective relationships with their member centres particularly in country regions*

### *Recommendation 31*

*That senior athletics clubs provide opportunities for their feeder Little Athletics centre athletes to participate in shared activities such as coaching clinics for specific events, open training sessions and invitational competition days*

### *Recommendation 32*

*That the Board review the conduct of the Annual State Conference in order to make it more attractive to those centres that currently do not attend*

## **Governance**

The overall success of every state sporting organisation is very dependent upon creating successful member clubs. Ensuring their member clubs are well run should be a priority for the Little Athletics SA Board and this requires assisting and supporting member centres with their governance and operational issues.

### *Recommendation 33*

*That Little Athletics SA develops strategies that will create better administered centres by increasing their focus on club development initiatives, improved facility development and satisfying customer service needs*



## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 History

In October 1963, three young boys turned up at a senior athletics meet in Geelong, Victoria but were turned away because they were too young to compete with senior athletes. Several months later at an athletics coaching camp for secondary school students a number of primary school students attended. A decision was taken to set up a Saturday competition for younger children and the first competition was on 3 October 1964, in Geelong. It was advertised as follows:

*"Also starting this Saturday, will be the special morning meeting for boys and girls. These will commence at 10:30 a.m. each Saturday and will be open to any school age competitor. It is intended that boys and girls not old enough to compete in the afternoon will take part in these special meetings. Anyone interested in the sport may attend, including parents, while the one-hour of athletics is conducted. All of the standard athletic events will be conducted and boys and girls will be graded in each event."*

And so from that simple beginning Little Athletics was born.

In May 1967, the Victorian Little Athletics Association (VLAA) was formed. The first Western Australian meet was in February 1968 and in March 1968 a Western Australian association was formed. Competitions in New South Wales started in October 1968. In 1972, the Australian Little Athletics Union (ALAU) was formed. Victoria, New South Wales, Northern Territory and Western Australia were the founding members. Tasmania, South Australia, Australian Capital Territory and Queensland joined shortly afterwards.

Little Athletics evolved, like most voluntary community organisations, through the mind and conscience of one man. Trevor Billingham followed the pattern set by many pioneers in the field of community service - he recognised a need and introduced an idea designed to meet that need.

### 1.2 Background

Little Athletics is a uniquely Australian sport for children aged between 3-17 years enjoyed each year by over 100,000 girls and boys. It is based upon the sport of athletics (track and field) and the events are specially modified to suit the ages and abilities of children. A wide range of running, jumping, throwing and walking events are conducted. Little Athletics promotes that it is important to "Be your Best"®. The emphasis is on fun, participation, performance, technique and getting involved with your family in physical and healthy activity. The motto of Little Athletics is 'Family, Fun and Fitness.'

It is primarily a summer activity, generally running from October through to late March however some centres also conduct cross-country during the winter months, taking place during April to the end of July. There are approximately 500 Little Athletics centres in Australia. Each of these centres conducts weekly activities at local venues. These centres may compete at different times of the day/week.

Little Athletes will generally do a range of athletic (track and field) events in any given weekly program. The number and combination of events will differ from centre to centre, and usually work on a rotational basis throughout the season. Some of the events include: Sprints, Hurdles, Middle Distance, Race Walking, Relays, Shot Put, Discus, Javelin, Long Jump, Triple Jump, and High Jump.

Because Little Athletics is a totally voluntary sport, centres cannot operate without the assistance of parents and other adult volunteers each week in fulfilling the many and varied duties required. These include officiating at an event; managing an age group; recording results; and working in the canteen. Most centres have parent duty rosters in order to share the load. Additional assistance is always required on the committees and all parents are encouraged to become involved. Little Athletics is one of the few sports where parents can become fully involved in their child's sporting interests.

The South Australian Little Athletics Association was formed in South Australia 42 years ago, so it is still a relatively young recreation/sport in comparison to the other traditional Associations. There are approximately 58 centres affiliated in South Australia. Registered Athletes in those Centres/Clubs are in excess of 8,000. The Association is made up of delegates (parents) from each affiliated centre/club. Each centre/club has a Management Committee and has a monthly meeting to administer its respective centre/club; in effect there are in excess of 12,500 parents who assist on a voluntary basis.

### **1.3 Project scope**

Despite Little Athletics attracting over 8,000 children every year in South Australia, the sport faces a major issue with its retention of participants for the longer term. Little Athletics SA secured state government funding to conduct a project aimed at gathering data to assist its clubs and centres in the development of growth and retention strategies for the future of the sport. Whilst there was a view about the perceived dropout rate from the sport there had been little factual information gathered to support this view as much of the data had been anecdotally based information.

In order to address this issue funding was provided to enable the sport to conduct a major audit process involving key stakeholders from across the sport. One Eighty Sport and Leisure Solutions were engaged as the project consultants because of their extensive industry knowledge and experience in delivering similar projects.

The outcomes of the project will mean Little Athletics SA will be in a position to better determine the future direction for the sport by creating better pathway opportunities for the athletes, greater ownership by all key stakeholder groups and better identification of the issues that the sport must address to achieve its objectives.

### **1.4 Methodology**

In order to gather the relevant data for this report a number of different processes were adopted to ensure the most current and detailed information was available.

The methodology used for the review included the following:

- Initial briefing meeting with Little Athletics SA staff to determine project objectives, methodology and timelines associated with the review
- A project working party/steering committee to use as a sounding board/reference group
- An examination of data from ABS (Australian Bureau of Statistics), Little Athletics Australia, Little Athletics SA and other relevant sources relating to past and current participation rates
- Presentation to the annual State Conference to introduce the project and seek support and commitment from member clubs
- A series of forums conducted at selected regional centres across the state catering for both metropolitan and country centres
- An on-line survey to all member centres seeking information on the key participation issues and solutions to address such issues
- An on-line survey to selected past participants seeking information on why they are no longer involved in the sport
- Stakeholder and community engagement consultation meetings with targeted individuals and organisations including Little Athletics SA Board, Athletics SA CEO, targeted Athletics SA member clubs, Athletics Pathways Officer and school sport agencies
- Analysis of the findings from the consultation process
- Final report with key findings and recommendations

## 2. CURRENT STATUS OF LITTLE ATHLETICS

### 2.1 Governance of Little Athletics in SA

The South Australian Little Athletics Association oversees 58 affiliated centres catering for in excess of 8,000 participants. There are also 2 other affiliated clubs that are the Officials Club and Coaches Club. Membership of these 2 clubs is in excess of 600.

It is governed by a Board of Directors consisting of 7 Directors responsible for specific portfolios. These Directors work from the Constitution and within guidelines and policies set by the Association at the Annual General Meeting and the annual State Conference.

Each affiliated centre is managed by a Centre Management Committee made up of volunteers who are generally parents, dedicated to the three principles of the sport; Family - Fun – Fitness. In Little Athletics the scope for the Family to “Play Together” is greater than in almost any other contemporary community activity as a large number of parents are required to operate a Little Athletics centre and this provides the basis for the close family involvement.

Participation in Little Athletics involves centres providing opportunities to athletes of all ability levels ranging in age from 3 to 17 years through the following activities:

- Centre training (not compulsory) one night a week
- Individual centre competitions once a week (generally on either Friday night, Saturday or Sunday)
- Regional Days
- Personal Best Days
- State Relay Championships
- State Individual Championships
- State Multi-Event Championships
- State Cross Country Meets and Championship
- Holiday Coaching Clinics
- State Team

#### 2.1.1 Affiliated Centres

The 58 affiliated centres are located through the state and they are grouped into 8 separate geographical regions with 4 in the metropolitan area and 4 in the country as detailed below.

<b>EYRE PENINSULA REGION</b>	
Centre	Location
Central Eyre	Wudinna
Far West	Ceduna
Pt Lincoln	Pt Lincoln
Whyalla	Whyalla
Pt Augusta	Stirling North
Tennant Creek	Tennant Creek



<b>NORTHERN COUNTRY REGION</b>	
<b>Centre</b>	<b>Location</b>
Broken Hill	Broken Hill
Mid North Clare	Clare
N.Y.P. Kadina	Kadina
SYP - Minlaton	Minlaton
Adelaide Plains	Pt Wakefield
C.Y.P – Maitland	Maitland

<b>SOUTH EAST COUNTRY REGION</b>	
<b>Centre</b>	<b>Location</b>
Millicent	Millicent
Mount Gambier	Mt Gambier
Naracoorte	Naracoorte
Penola & Dist.	Penola
Bordertown	Bordertown
Limestone Coast	Kingston SE

<b>NORTH EAST COUNTRY REGION</b>	
<b>Centre</b>	<b>Location</b>
Barossa Valley	Nuriootpa
Lyndoch & Dist	Lyndoch
Riverland - Barmera	Barmera
Riverland - Loxton	Loxton
Riverland – Renmark	Renmark
Waikerie	Waikerie
Gawler	Gawler
Mildura & Dist.	Mildura

<b>NORTHERN METRO REGION</b>	
<b>Centre</b>	<b>Location</b>
Elizabeth	Elizabeth Vale
Golden Grove	Surrey Downs
Ingle Farm	Ingle Farm
Munno Para	Smithfield
Salisbury	Parafield Gardens
Salisbury East	Salisbury South
Tea Tree Gully	Banksia Park

<b>CENTRAL METRO REGION</b>	
<b>Centre</b>	<b>Location</b>
Adelaide Eagles	South Parklands, City
Campbelltown	Paradise
Eastern Districts	Glenunga
Enfield	Clearview
Henley Districts	Henley
Magill	Magill
West Lakes	West Lakes Shore
Woodville	Findon

SOUTHERN METRO REGION	
Centre	Location
Flinders	Flinders University
Hallett Cove	Hallett Cove
Noarlunga	Noarlunga
Plympton	Mitchell Park
Reynella East	Reynella East
Southern Districts	North Brighton
Southern Hills	Flagstaff Hill

METRO FRINGE REGION	
Centre	Location
Callington	Callington
Hills	Heathfield
Mannum	Mannum
Mid Coast	McLaren Vale
Mt Barker	Mt Barker
Murray Bridge	Murray Bridge
South Coast	Victor Harbor
Strathalbyn	Strathalbyn
Torrens Valley	Torrens Valley

## 2.2 Participation Data

In order to gather a picture of participation in Little Athletics in South Australia and nationally, data was sourced from a number of different reports. The tables below highlight the range of data gathered.

In general, the sport has an influx of new participants annually with many parents keen to see their children involved in an activity that promotes fun, fitness and a family oriented environment. A major positive of the sport is that events are specially modified to suit the ages and abilities of children and parents are involved as volunteers each week fulfilling the many and varied duties that are required.

### 2.2.1 Little Athletics Australia Data

Data from the Little Athletics Australia AGM report for 2012/13<sup>1</sup> indicates that some 50,000 adults are involved as volunteers.

The same report highlights that 30,000 new children join every year but despite these large numbers nationally, the retention rate in the sport is on average only 4 years per athlete which means that many children on joining at an early age around 4 or 5 do not maintain an involvement into their high school or late primary school years.

<sup>1</sup> Little Athletics Australia Annual Report 2012/13

- **Registrations - National**

The following table shows the registrations nationally from 2007/2008 to 2012/2013. There was a decline in each of the three years since 2008-09 which was an Olympic year, followed by a record year in 2012-2013 following the 2012 London Olympic Games.

The sport has only experienced a slight growth in the past 6 years but this has been amplified particularly in an Olympic year when numbers increase dramatically but then fall away quite alarmingly indicating retention is a major issue.

Table 1 – National Registration figures from 2007/8 to current

Season	2007-08	2008-09*	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13*
Little Athletics National	89840	98073	91169	89107	86614	104062

\*Olympic years

- **Registrations – State**

Athlete Registrations for 2012/2013 were very healthy with a new record number of 8004 athletes. This was due to an increased interest of the public following the Olympic Games and also an improved retention of athletes from the previous 2011/12 season.

Table 2 – South Australian Registration figures from 2007/8 to current

Season	2007-08	2008-09*	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13*
Little Athletics SA	6398	7338	6602	6621	6322	8004
Number of centres	No record	No record	No record	58	58	59

\*Olympic years

- **Current ALA Strategic Plan**

The data from the current Australian Little Athletics Strategic Plan<sup>2</sup> indicates the sport has a market share of around 4-5% of available clientele and is very low when compared with other major competitors such as Cricket, AFL, Soccer, Netball, Swimming, Basketball, Hockey, Surf Lifesaving (Nippers), and non-structured activities such as skate boarding (minor competitors).

While membership fluctuates, overall it remains fairly static and data suggests whilst recruitment figures are high so is the loss of members through drop out.

Nationally Little Athletics Australia has a growth plan which includes lifting membership numbers from 90,000 to 500,000 over the next 5 years so the sport will become a top 10 provider in terms of numbers participating in junior sporting activities by 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Australian Little Athletics Strategic Plan 2008-2013

## 2.2.2 Australian Bureau of Statistics - General participation

The Australian Bureau of Statistics has released the results of its Children's Participation in Cultural and Leisure Activities survey<sup>3</sup>, which collected information on participation in sport, cultural activities and use of technology for children aged between 5 -14 and it is noted that Little Athletics does not feature in this list of the top 11 sports.

### TOP CHILDREN'S SPORTS

- Swimming (17.7%)
- Soccer (14.3%)
- Australian Rules football (8.1%)
- Netball (8%)
- Basketball (7.9%)
- Tennis (7.4%)
- Martial arts (5.8%)
- Gymnastics (4.8%)
- Cricket (4.7%)
- Rugby league (3.9%)
- Rugby union (2.1%)

## 2.2.3 Little Athletics SA Registration Data

Table 3 below represents the registrations for each participating centre in South Australia as reported in the SALAA Annual Reports for both the past 2 seasons and the current season. Some centres have not provided their registration figures for the current 2014/15 season but these will be recorded in the 2014/15 Annual Report.

Whilst there are concerns that many of the centres show a decrease in registration numbers for the current summer season this is more likely to be because accurate registration details are not possible until the end of the season as many new participants have yet to register until they are certain of their continued longer term involvement.

Table 3 – Participating Centres Registration data since 2012/13

<b>METRO Centres</b>	<b>2012/13 (Annual Report) Registrations</b>	<b>2013/14 (Annual Report) Registrations</b>	<b>2014/15 (as at 03/11/14) Registrations</b>
Adelaide Eagles	217	217	148
Campbelltown	93	86	74
Eastern Districts	390	291	248
Elizabeth	86	88	59
Enfield	197	176	153
Flinders	139	140	76
Golden Grove	246	255	193
Hallett Cove	110	151	141
Henley Districts	437	373	305
Hills	206	202	197
Ingle Farm	87	85	80
Magill	191	137	140
Munno Para	98	101	65

<sup>3</sup> 4901.0 - Children's Participation in Cultural and Leisure Activities, Australia, Apr 2012

Noarlunga	148	147	110
Plympton	184	158	71
Reynella East	169	152	141
Salisbury	83	65	51
Salisbury East	231	199	158
Southern Districts	339	242	209
Southern Hills	233	219	159
Tea Tree Gully	279	273	217
West Lakes	254	308	285
Woodville	214	200	181
<b>Sub - Total</b>	<b>4631</b>	<b>4265</b>	<b>3461</b>

<b>COUNTRY Centres</b>	<b>2012/13 Registrations</b>	<b>2013/14 Registrations</b>	<b>2014/15 Registrations</b>
Adelaide Plains	16	21	n/a
Barossa Valley - Nuriootpa	194	151	151
Bordertown	52	60	41
Broken Hill	51	28	n/a
Callington	22	6	n/a
Central Eyre – Wudinna	45	62	n/a
CYP – Maitland	100	77	36
Far West – Ceduna	84	90	74
Gawler	140	137	83
Limestone Coast	90	52	45
Lyndoch and Districts	179	128	129
Mannum	71	44	15
Mid Coast	119	140	151
Mid North – Clare	81	89	n/a
Mildura and Districts	206	189	182
Millicent	110	64	52
Mount Gambier	184	167	165
Mt Barker	180	175	133
Murray Bridge	112	95	48
Naracoorte	130	135	103
NYP – Kadina	172	151	126
Penola	138	99	93
Port Augusta	119	130	136
Port Lincoln	55	61	20
Riverland – Barmera	44	20	n/a
Riverland – Loxton	60	49	47
Riverland – Renmark	53	43	n/a
South Coast	125	124	177
Strathalbyn and District	43	56	n/a
SYP – Minlaton	62	43	n/a
Tennant Creek	29	29	n/a
Torrens Valley	95	97	49
Waikerie	56	83	n/a
Whyalla	90	80	70

<b>Sub – Total Country</b>	<b>3307</b>	<b>2975</b>	<b>2126</b>
<b>Sub - Total Metro</b>	<b>4631</b>	<b>4265</b>	<b>3461</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>7938</b>	<b>7240</b>	<b>5587</b>

### 2.3 Implications of data

- The sport enjoys a significant influx of new participants each year but it also suffers large numbers that do not remain in the sport.
- Nationally growth has been steady over the past years with key events such as Olympic and Commonwealth Games leading to a greater than normal increase due to the exposure of the sport through media promotion particularly television coverage of Athletics and the interest it generates in children aspiring to become involved.
- Unless the retention rate issue is addressed Little Athletics Australia's vision to dramatically grow the sport is not achievable.
- Of the top 11 sports according to ABS Participation rates<sup>4</sup>, all but two (Martial Arts and Gymnastics) are team sports which suggests Australian children may have a preference for participating in team sports.
- Little Athletics more than any other junior sport has a huge reliance on parental engagement. In 2012/13 over 50,000 adults nationally were involved as club administrators, committee members, volunteer coaches, event chaperones etc. The heavy reliance on parents impacts negatively on their willingness to be continually involved so jeopardising the participation of their children for the long term.
- In South Australia there has been no significant increase in participation numbers since 2007/08 apart from the interest sparked by Olympic Games exposure leading to a spike in registration numbers for the following summer season but this drops again in the following season.
- Of all South Australian centre less than 10 of the 59 have registered any noticeable increase since 2012/13 with many centres recording a noticeable decline in participation numbers.

<sup>4</sup> 4901.0 - Children's Participation in Cultural and Leisure Activities, Australia, Apr 2012

### 3. CONSULTATION DATA

A key focus of the project was to broadly consult with both current and past Little Athletics participants to determine the factors that lead to the perceived drop-out from the sport. A range of consultation methods was employed to gather the relevant information and a summary of the information is detailed below.

#### 3.1 Regional Forums

It was agreed that a series of regional forums should be conducted with invitations to every centre to be represented at one of the forums. This was an opportunity for centre representatives to provide their comments/feedback on the issues facing the sport in relation to addressing the drop-out rate. Of the 8 forums that were scheduled only 5 were conducted as the others were cancelled due to lack of numbers or lack of a suitable venue to host the forum. Despite this, additional information was gleaned from one region conducting its own internal discussion group and an observation visit to a regional meet. In total, representatives from 23 different centres were involved as participants at these forums.

- Host centres
  - Mt Barker
  - Hallett Cove
  - Loxton
  - Salisbury
  - Eastern Districts
  - Pt Lincoln – internal
  - Gawler – regional meet

#### 3.1.1 Summary of forum discussion groups

Each forum consisted of a series of discussion questions workshopped through a facilitated discussion group. From each of the forums a number of common themes emerged and these are summarised below.

##### **What are the current issues facing the sport?**

- Online registration as too much being pushed onto the centres who cannot cope because of their limited volunteer resource
- Timing of the State Conference
- Quality of coaching
- Lack of volunteers
- Parent engagement is very limited
- Lack of transition opportunities creating impression that U13 is end of the involvement
- Limited exposure of the sport
- Older athletes have little interest in participating in "Little" Athletics
- The sport is not sexy!
- Very little sharing between centres or knowledge of what other centres are doing

- No flow of information from old to new committee members
- Handover of the sport has not been as smooth with the new SALAA management
- Low numbers competing in the older age group categories
- Too many little athletics clubs in a small region
- Ability to maintain older athletes
- Struggle to attract the sponsorship dollar
- Parents treating Little Athletics as an activity rather than a sport
- Not a mainstream & high profile sport
- Poor quality facilities/tracks
- Communication within the sport
- Current website is of little value as doesn't engage the participants (children/youth)
- Schools not promoting athletics in their curriculum
- Current culture of the sport

### **What makes Little Athletics appealing?**

- Fun way to keep fit & learn fundamental skills of movement
- Individual & non-contact sport appeals to people who don't like rough play
- It is a fun and cost effective sport and a sport that parents can get involved along with their children
- Is a great avenue for tiny tots to get involved in all round physical development activities
- Provides athletes with the opportunity to see how much they are improving
- Provides the opportunity for children to find something they are good at with the range of different events
- The focus is on achieving your Personal Best not about winning or beating others
- Is good for children with a disability
- Appealing for very young children as they are unable to participate in other sports at such a young age
- It is a stepping stone to involvement in school sport
- Offers a long term involvement opportunity from 4 – 17 years occurring at same place and same time so great for family management

### **What are the barriers impacting on participation?**

- Not being a team sport
- Prior commitments which create clash with other activities
- It appears many go into Little Athletics without thinking about any long term commitment to the sport rather it is a one or two year involvement
- If parents lose interest they will withdraw their children
- The culture of Little Athletics does not encourage the social aspect of team sports
- Some poor quality facilities
- Lack of coaching
- The branding 'Little' Athletics
- Parent involvement – many people are put off when they realise the high level of commitment that is required of the parents
- Lack of knowledge about the sport by people running the member clubs
- Ignorance of club people about links to senior athletics
- No personal encouragement to children to stay in the sport as it relies on self motivation



- Lack of promotion/advertising
- Coaching only focussed on talented athletes
- Having to offer mandatory number of events
- Centres not having direction on how to operate

**What are the major causes of the perceived drop-out rate?**

- Move to other sports
- No flexibility to modify rules so don't accommodate athletes needs
- Parents lose interest
- Too much waiting around – time involved v's actual participation
- Not focussed on skill development/coaching but conducting events
- No longer want to be associated with "little athletics"
- Lack of transition/pathway knowledge
- Commencing the sport too early lead to burn-out/boredom
- Same old same old re competition
- Lack of competitive opportunity if athlete is of limited ability
- More opportunity for inter-club competitions/events
- Training day instead of competition day
- Greater social networks for parents

**What are some possible solutions/strategies to address the drop-out in the sport?**

- Better education/induction of parents/volunteers and unskilled coaches
- Rebrand to remove "Little Athletics" stigma for older age groups
- More focussed promotion on benefits the sport offers
- Review costs for elite country athletes to attend metro competitions
- Regional coaching clinics
- Improved alignment with senior athletics
- Conduct less events per day to reduce waiting time
- Paid coaches
- Raise profile
- Sport ambassadors/high profile visits
- Stronger links with schools
- Better pathways for less talented athletes
- More social aspect for older athletes
- Exit surveys for when children leave the sport
- Use of senior secondary students/older athletes as coaches and mentors
- Coaching pool
- Handicapped events for U13 upwards
- Greater focus on relay events

### 3.2 Surveys

Two on-line surveys developed using the Survey Monkey tool, were distributed to different target groups. The first survey was designed to capture information from the Little Athletics community and was disseminated to every Little Athletics centre in the state. Each centre President was emailed initially requesting them to forward the survey to club members including current athletes, committee members and volunteer coaches and parents. Following a slow response, head office emailed the survey link to every currently registered athlete and this created an immediate and successful response. Further advice about the survey was posted on the Little Athletics SA Facebook site and in the SALAA regular weekly newsletter to centres.

The survey was open for a period of approximately 6 weeks from mid October to end of November and the timing of the survey distribution ensured that the current season had commenced and so people were in "little athletics" mode.

Final response data was as follows:

- 836 responses from 50 individual centres with 7 centres not being represented
- 73.9% female respondents and 26.1% male respondents
- Age breakdown of respondents – 45% were 40-49, 40% were 30-39, 7% were over 50 and 6% were under 30

The second survey was specifically designed to capture those participants who were no longer involved in the sport as their views were particularly relevant to this project. This much smaller target group was contacted through the SALAA email registration list for members who had not re-registered for the 2014/15 season. A different set of questions was asked of these respondents primarily seeking their views on why they had ceased participating in the sport.

This survey was open for a much shorter period of only two weeks closing also at the end of November when the first survey closed.

Final response data was as follows:

- 230 responses from 54 individual centres with 4 centres not being represented
- 53.5% female respondents and 46.5% male respondents
- Age breakdown – 65.2% under 10 years, 27% between 11 and 14, and 7.8% over 15 years

The aim of both surveys was to ascertain from people involved in the sport, their views on the current issues facing the sport in relation to participation trends. Information gathered in this process included:

- A rating on the effectiveness of Little Athletic centres in their operation and administration
- The positive and negative factors of Little Athletics participation
- Factors which contribute to the perceived drop-out rate in Little Athletics
- Possible solutions to address the drop-out issue
- Opportunities for stronger links between Little Athletics and Senior Athletics
- General issues with the sport

### 3.2.1 Summary of survey responses

#### 3.2.1.1 Survey 1- Little Athletics community

The majority of the survey participants were parents, aged between 30 and 49, predominantly female with registered Little Athletes between the ages of 5 to 13. The lowest return rate came from athletes themselves but this is not surprising given the age of most Little Athletes is under 13 years of age and the initial contact was made with the parents. Almost every centre operating in South Australia was represented in the survey responses.

Respondents were generally very happy with the overall administration of their Little Athletic centre and the environment in which their children participated which included the facilities available and the weekly activities. Participants were not as supportive about the quality of the coaching offered by centres, the volunteer support shown by parents or the range of social activities available to engage parents and athletes.

Little Athletics was seen as an appealing activity because it provides opportunities for children to participate in a sport that is fun and healthy, can be enjoyed as a family and with friend, and promotes skill development and personal improvement over winning as the key motivators.

However the negative aspects of Little Athletics were considered to be the lack of coaching and the lack of volunteer support mainly from parents not willing to get involved in any support role.

The perceived drop -out from the sport is the key issue that needs to be addressed and to this end respondents identified the following as the most significant barriers to children staying involved in the sport.

- Choosing to play another sport
- Too much standing around during events
- The sport is no longer enjoyable
- The quality, or lack of coaching available
- Parents had lost interest

A range of suggested solutions and ideas were put forward to arrest this decline which seems to occur during and at the end of every season and these have been categorised into major areas including:

- Improving the quality and quantity of coaching
- Making the conduct of the events more suitable, appropriate and relevant for all ability levels
- Increasing the pathway opportunities internally within Little Athletics and externally with senior athletics
- Reviewing the appropriateness of the Little Athletics brand for older participants
- The quality of the coaching must be addressed
- Ensuring all centres are well administered and with good quality facilities and equipment
- Increased focus on better engaging and educating parents in support roles
- Improving the overall communication processes within the sport including from head office and from centre committees to their members

- Establishing stronger links with key stakeholders such as neighbouring schools and local senior athletics clubs
- Identifying increased opportunities to better recognise the achievements athletes of all ability levels

More work needs to be done on developing stronger links between Little Athletics and senior athletics clubs as evidenced from the survey results which highlighted that generally there is a lack of knowledge about senior athletics opportunities as well as a chance for both groups to become more pro-active in building a stronger relationship.

### 3.2.1.2 Survey 2 – Past Participants

The majority of the survey participants were mainly female, and parents of athletes aged between 5 and 13. The lowest return rate came from the age group 15 – 18 but this is likely to reflect the low numbers of athletes who had still been involved at this age. As with Survey 1 almost every centre operating in South Australia was at least represented in the survey responses.

For this cohort of past participants when asked what was the appeal of Little Athletics that saw them get involved their responses were evenly divided between parental encouragement, a personal interest in athletics, a desire to learn athletics skills and because other friends were already involved.

However the most common negative aspects of Little Athletics were the lack of coaching and an issue with the time and day the events were held.

In relation to why these respondents have now dropped out of the sport, the main reasons were as follows:

- There was too much standing around during events which created inactivity and boredom (45.7%)
- The lack of, or poor quality coaching (27%)
- They opted to play another sport (25.2%)
- The time and day of the events was no longer suitable/favourable (22.6%)
- The sport is no longer enjoyable (21.7%)

Having discontinued their involvement in the sport these respondents made a number of positive suggestions on what is needed to ensure others do not follow their path in future years and as with Survey 1 have been classified under key areas some of which are common themes from Survey 1 .

- Increased focus on better engaging and educating parents in support roles being mindful that unless parents are better trained for such roles they are likely to withdraw their support
- Improving the quality and quantity of coaching and accepting that payment for coaching may be necessary
- Making the conduct of the events more enjoyable for all ability/age levels by reducing the size of the groups to increase the time participants are more actively involved
- Providing greater flexibility and choice of events particularly for the over 13 year athletes

Again there was agreement that stronger relationships should be developed between Little Athletics and senior athletics clubs as a number of respondents felt that if such links had been in place for them they may still be involved in the sport of athletics.

The majority of respondents stopped Little Athletics because they chose other sports which had more appeal, were team sports, were available at a more suitable time slot and provided better quality coaching and skill development.

Many recognised the value of their time in Little Athletics as it provided an introduction for their involvement in other sports.

Many chose to leave the sport because as they entered the older age group category there were very few friends left and the regular competition was not challenging with only a few athletes to compete against.

A more detailed analysis of the two surveys is included as Attachments.

### 3.3 Interviews with key stakeholders

The project committee determined that in conjunction with the views of the Little Athletics community, including past participants, it was also important to seek the views of key stakeholders as they present a different perspective on the drop-out issue. A list of the stakeholders for consideration was presented to the committee and those selected were consulted in face to face interviews in which their views were sought on a range of topics.

#### 3.3.1 Senior Athletics

Club	Contact	Position
Athletics SA	Adam Bishop	CEO
Western District	Debbie Meich	Club Coach
Salisbury	Simon Moran	President
Port Adelaide	Kathy Nelson, Karl Schwarz	Past President, President
Southern	Jason Stevens	President

The interviews obtained responses to the following questions:

As a stakeholder with Little Athletics SA what do you believe are -

- the current issues facing Little Athletics SA?
- the reasons why there appears to be limited transition from Little Athletics to Senior Athletics?
- the opportunities to develop stronger relationships between the two athletics bodies?
- any examples/case studies of current good practices?

##### 3.3.1.1 Summary of club responses

**Western District Athletics Club** – has recognised the importance of having quality coaches as a key factor of a successful club. As such its current focus is on developing a sustainable model that encourages and rewards coaches who in turn create a positive environment leading to increased opportunity for recruitment of athletes and pathway development within the sport. The club also has been building relationships and creating pathways with its neighbouring Little Athletics clubs by supporting them in the provision of coaches at training sessions and competition meets.

**Salisbury Athletics Club** – believes the main factor in retaining membership is the provision of quality coaching. Considerable evidence was provided of the impact that the coaching courses and clinics conducted by the club through Simon Moran were having on attracting and retaining athletes. There is a need for Little Athletics clubs to be linked to senior clubs but not just for increasing the senior club's membership rather than enable children to stay involved with the sport. Ideas for addressing the drop out rate included the roving coach concept at Little Athletics centres, reducing the time wasted by offering alternate activities e.g. skill development in between events, greater flexibility in the rules to allow children to participate in both senior athletics and Little Athletics.

The club has introduced a Fun Run concept for adults/parents whilst at same time offering Little Athletics events/activities for their children on same time at same venue –

<https://salisbury-runs.eventbrite.com.au>

**Port Adelaide Athletics Club** – has enjoyed a significant turnaround of fortune in the past few years after looking as if the centre would fold. Such initiatives as scholarship scheme for talented athletes, allowing Little Athletes to compete with senior athletics club, shared training between both groups and closer alignment with local Little Athletics clubs has made the difference.

There are still issues which impact on the drop out from Little Athletics and these include – not enough interaction by Little Athletics clubs with the senior club, past history where Little Athletics was not encouraged to get involved with senior athletics, limited knowledge of the pathways within the sport, the current Tiny Tots program structure needs reviewing.

There should be more focus on developing the sport rather than a narrow view of what only suits our Little Athletics club. There should be more interclub competitions.

ASA needs to commit funding to senior clubs to enable them to pay coaches to cater for Little Athletes to progress on the pathway.

**Southern Athletics Club** – whilst not one of the bigger senior clubs in Adelaide it has been steadily growing again after a period where it almost closed down. The club consistently attracts new members from the Noarlunga LA centre.

During this period the club has had limited involvement with the local Little Athletics centres but it is very keen to establish more effective links as it recognises the benefit for both groups. Sees the opportunity for the older Little Athletes who may be members of the senior club to put back something to the club and if payment was available for them to coach at Little Athletic centres this would be a motivation.

Some issues of note about Little Athletics – only the more talented athletes receive quality coaching which discourages less talented ones which does not encourage long term involvement; parents and athletes have little or no idea of the pathways into senior athletics; the name Little Athletics has created a barrier for recruiting older athletes.

The club is confident its current crop of coaches could provide more assistance to neighbouring Little Athletics centres if some process was established for them to do so. Would be good if the senior club was aligned formally to neighbouring Little Athletics centres and it is hoped the new appointment of a Pathways coordinator can facilitate this opportunity. Some plans had been put in place to develop stronger relationships with the local little athletics clubs but lack of time has been the issue.

There is a need for more interclub activities between Little Athletics centres to encourage more opportunities for talented kids to compete against different opposition. Need to promote that senior athletics is not just for the talented athletes but this view may be coming from the Little Athletics philosophy of having to qualify to compete at major state events.

### 3.3.2 School Sport Units

Pam Marston	SAPSASA School Sport Unit	Primary School Sport Manager
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In seeking a response from the School Sport Unit it was evident that SAPSASA has a relationship with Little Athletics SA but Secondary School Sport SA does not. SAPSASA has an arrangement with Little Athletics where they assist with the conduct of the SAPSASA Athletics

Championships by providing event officials, equipment & assist with set up. Little Athletics SA provides support to SAPSASA with the identification of 2 coaches to travel with the 12 & Under Athletics team to School Sport Australia Championships each year.

Over the past 2 years the number of Little Athletics officials assisting at our combined SAPSASA / SSSSA Cross Country Championships has increased whereas previously there had not been any relationship with Secondary School Sport SA. When SAPSASA host a School Sport Australia 12 & Under Championship, Little Athletics SA assists by providing event officials, equipment & assistance with set up.

Anecdotal evidence from the School Sport Unit and its association with Little Athletics highlights that numbers fall away quite dramatically in secondary school athletics participation when compared with the pre-teen year's involvement which mirrors the participation rates in Little Athletics for the same age cohort.

Other issues for the sport that are reflected through feedback from the School Sport unit's involvement with athletics are:

- younger students like to be active and engaged and find there is too much "inactive" time at Little Athletics and this is also an issue for athletics events conducted by School Sport
- parents take children to local Little Athletics clubs however Senior Athletics clubs are not as readily accessible or maybe not known about.

School Sport is very keen to link in with Little Athletics SA particularly at primary school level as the SAPSASA Athletics program offers athletics experience where athletes can represent their school, district or state.

### 3.3.3 Athletics Pathways Coordinator

<b>Bridget Senyszyn</b>	<b>Athletics SA/Little Athletics SA</b>	<b>Pathways coordinator</b>
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Athletics SA and Little Athletics SA have signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), confirming a partnership to develop strong relationships between its clubs and centres with the aim of providing a strong pathway for South Australian athletes, coaches, officials and administrators within Athletics. This has culminated in the appointment of a Pathways Coordinator to improve membership and participation in South Australian athletics. The main goal for the new role is to not only build strong relationships with the centres and clubs around South Australia, but to also increase the participation levels of athletes within the 12 - 17 critical transition age group.

Much of the focus of the role will compliment the findings and recommendations for this project as the Pathways coordinator will be liaising with Athletics clubs and Little Athletics centres around the state to determine what barriers currently exist that prevent athletes from continuing with athletics, and what areas are currently working effectively.

It provides a great opportunity to use the project recommendations to assist in shaping the strategy for the Pathways Coordinator role which in turn will hopefully contribute towards improving the quality and quantity of athletics participation in the state.



### **3.4 Implications from stakeholder consultations**

- Relationship between senior athletics and little athletics needs strengthening as past history highlights there was very little interaction between the two bodies
- Good support from senior athletics clubs to align with Little Athletics centres within their region
- Limited pathways exist between Little Athletics centres and senior clubs
- Where current relationships exist that are working well there is a greater opportunity for retaining athletes
- Little Athletics centres need to be more creative in addressing such issues as - inactive time at events, inflexible conduct of events and lack of skill development
- Critical age to target for attention is the 12-17 year cohort
- Providing quality coaching is a key factor in retaining participants in all levels of athletics
- There is a need for greater exposure of the sport

## 4. RECOMMENDATIONS

This final section is presented as a synthesis of the various consultations, surveys and data gathered to assist the Little Athletics centres in the development of growth and retention strategies for their future. The information gathered has provided the factual information necessary to assess whether the perceived drop out from the sport is cause for concern.

In compiling the findings of the research and consultation stages the issues and concerns have been identified and outlined below under key headings that were nominated as the major areas for consideration in this review. The subsequent recommendations are aimed at providing possible solutions to develop long term strategies and changes that will ultimately see improved retention across the sport.

Key areas for consideration:

### **Competition**

Little Athletics introduces children to the fundamental skills of running, jumping and throwing that form the basis for other sports. While no one event or activity participated in at Little Athletics provides this foundation, collectively the events which comprise Little Athletics do. Athletes compete in running, throwing and jumping events in various programs suited to the age and development of those participating. Centres offer their competitions generally on a weekly basis (usually Friday night, Saturday or Sunday morning) and ideally this is supported with training nights where athletes focus on skill development.

Little Athletics views participation in competitions as providing a range of benefits including the opportunity to compete against and interact with other athletes from a wide range of geographical, social and ethnic origins; the opportunity for athletes to achieve their best performance and a goal to work towards throughout the Little Athletics season. For more talented participants championship competition provides additional rewards for participants to aspire to: making a final, winning a medal, setting a state or Australian Best Performance or being selected for their state team.

Despite the benefits of the competition structure, an analysis of the consultation data highlights significant issues that have been critical factors in why Little Athletics participation is being impacted. There is too much time wasting with athletes standing around waiting for their turn, group sizes being too large increasing the amount of time between active participation and waiting to participate, and inflexible event administrators not prepared to make changes to provide more attractive meets/programs. Whilst the emphasis of participation in Little Athletics is on involvement in a wide range of events rather than specialisation at an early age there is scope for allowing specialisation and providing choice to older athletes who have no interest in continuing certain events which are no longer suitable to their body size or ability.

It is evident that many centres focus their efforts on organising and conducting the competition day whilst skill development and coaching on these days is a much lower priority.

#### *Recommendation 1*

*That the planning and conduct of the regular competition structures be reviewed to ensure increased opportunity for athletes to be more active.*

#### *Recommendation 2*

*That centres are encouraged to provide more flexible programs to create a more enjoyable/attractive environment which has more appeal to both athletes and parents.*

#### *Recommendation 3*

*That consideration be given to allowing athletes over the age of 13 to specialise in the event(s) of their choice.*

#### *Recommendation 4*

*That a greater focus on skill development is adopted by offering specialist skill development days in lieu of competition days on a regular basis (e.g. once every 4-6 weeks) through the competition season.*

#### *Recommendation 5*

*That more interclub competitions are conducted on a home and away basis to allow athletes the opportunity to compete against other athletes more regularly than currently exists where they are only competing at their home centre apart from state/regional championships.*

### **Coaching**

One of the most critical factors in addressing the drop-out rate in the sport is improving the quality and quantity of coaches passing on skill development to the athletes. As highlighted previously many centres simply conduct their events as competition opportunities with little or no coaching provided to athletes on the day or at a training session mid week. Where any child is involved in a sport and there is no provision for the child to improve their performance with skilled coaching it is likely they will not improve or stay involved as other athletes with more natural ability leave them behind. The nature of athletes participating in an individual sport is that if an athlete is being continually beaten regardless of the personal best philosophy they will lose interest. Coaching is the key to improvement.

There is an issue with many centres not having sufficient qualified coaches to provide the quality environment athletes need and so many centres rely on parents many of whom have little or no knowledge of the skills and techniques required but are willing to offer their time and commitment. Whilst this is to be commended it does not address the issue.

The evidence from the forums and survey responses was overwhelming in highlighting that the lack of quality coaching was a key barrier the sport is facing. Where a positive coaching environment is experienced there is greater likelihood of attracting and retaining athletes.

*Recommendation 6*

*That the lack of quality coaching needs to be addressed as a critical element of future planning by the SA Little Athletics Board*

*Recommendation 7*

*That centres are encouraged to increase their focus on skill development rather than running competitions*

*Recommendation 8*

*That centres use some of their older athletes who have left the sport or are contemplating their future involvement to be supported with relevant training to become mentor coaches*

*Recommendation 9*

*That the concept of paying skilled coaches be explored instead of relying on using parents who feel obliged to offer their support*

*Recommendation 10*

*That Little Athletics SA and Athletics SA explore establishing a Coaching Fund through the establishment of a coaching levy to annual membership registration from which centres/clubs can apply to seek funding to pay for specialist coaching clinics conducted by senior athletics clubs or to engage specialist coaches*

*Recommendation 11*

*That approaches be made to potential sources of recruitment to find skilled coaches. These sources to include tertiary institutions with a connection to training graduates in sport related courses, secondary schools offering PE and Sport to their senior students and senior athletics clubs*

*Recommendation 12*

*That the current scheme being implemented by Western Districts Athletics Club where senior athletes are being linked to neighbouring Little Athletics centres as roving coaches be adopted as a pilot project*

*Recommendation 13*

*That SA Little Athletics seek interest from any skilled coaches to establish a pool of coaches that Little Athletics centres could access when required*

*Recommendation 14*

*That individual centres increase their focus on better educating and upskilling and inducting those parents who are interested in taking on a coaching role*

**Pathways/Transition**

Little Athletics is an opportunity for athletes to be involved in the sport from 3 to 17 years of age yet the widely held perception by many parents and athletes is that involvement in the sport ends when children leave primary school. Others see the sport as a 1 or 2 year

opportunity for children to enjoy some athletic endeavour rather than a long term commitment as is more common in traditional team sports. This view is exacerbated by Little Athletics not being a team sport and therefore not offering the perceived culture of the team sport with the long term commitment to a club.

There appears to be a greater emphasis at primary school level on a broad approach to athletics through school sports days and SAPSASA athletics when compared with the secondary school involvement.

There is very little evidence of clearly defined pathways that are promoted by either Little Athletics SA or Athletics SA or their member clubs and centres. There is an internal focus from the members clubs/centres appearing to only be concerned with their own interest and agendas rather than promoting what is best for the sport overall. It was not unusual for Little Athletics administrators at many clubs to have little or no knowledge of where the nearest senior athletics club was located or how to contact them.

Historically there have been some issues between the two athletics bodies working cooperatively and this is likely to have impacted on creating smooth transition programs. It is unlikely that Little Athletics centres track those members who do not continue in the sport to see if they have transitioned into a senior athletics club. Some documented evidence needs to be established rather than an ad-hoc anecdotal approach that currently exists.

*Recommendation 16*

*That every Little Athletics centre throughout the state be aligned to a senior Athletic club whereby the Little Athletics centres are feeder clubs and strong relationships can be established between the senior club and the feeder centres.*

*Recommendation 17*

*That both athletics organisations work together to produce a document which details the pathways/transition opportunities for all new Little Athletics participants and their parents*

*Recommendation 18*

*That prior to every season a forum is held between the senior club and their feeder centres to plan pathway/transition opportunities for the coming season*

*Recommendation 19*

*That each senior club hosts an Open Day event at least twice a year where their Little Athletics feeder clubs are invited to attend and participate in a range of coaching sessions conducted by senior athletes and coaches. This provides an opportunity for the senior clubs to promote themselves to the broader Little Athletics community. Tennis Australia has a similar day.*

*Recommendation 20*

*That a standard Exit Survey be developed for use by Little Athletics centres to track those participants who do not register for the new season to determine if they have dropped out or have continued on as a senior athletics club member*

## **Parent Engagement/ Education**

The involvement of parents as key volunteer helpers to chaperone, conduct events, look after the bbq, do the recording etc. is well known and a vital component of the Little Athletics culture. A major issue is the ongoing engagement of parents as feedback from the consultation highlighted that parents felt pressured to get involved and this demotivated many to continue their involvement thereby impacting on the participation of their children. For others who were prepared to get involved in a support role there was little support or induction made available to assist them in performing the allocated task.

### *Recommendation 21*

*That centres investigate ways to better engage with their parents through increased social activities, reducing the reliance on parents as event volunteers and making their involvement less focussed on how they need to help*

### *Recommendation 22*

*That an Induction manual be developed for use by centres in inducting new parents who are willing to take on a support role*

## **Branding/Profile**

Given the sport has limited exposure through the media and it is not well promoted in schools Little Athletics is very dependent on word of mouth and local centres doing their own promotion and advertising. There was evidence that the NOVA promotion raised public exposure of the sport but many centres were not able to cope with the high demand at the time and the success of the exposure was undermined where centres could not meet the demand. The name Little Athletics was a discussion point in the forums and referred to often in the survey responses as an issue worth raising. Most common link was with older athletes in the 13+ age group who felt uncomfortable participating in Little Athletics. Despite the name being a barrier it did not rate highly as a factor in causing a significant number of athletes to drop out. It is recognised that to recommend a name change is too difficult given the national significance of the title.

### *Recommendation 23*

*That promotion of the sport to attract new participants in the older age category needs to adopt a more appealing catch phrase such as Junior Athletics and highlight the more social aspects of participating in the sport at this age along with the opportunity to become a paid mentor coach*

### *Recommendation 24*

*That where any future promotional campaigns are conducted centres better plan for the increased interest*

#### *Recommendation 25*

*That a targetted campaign be developed that focusses on increased promotion in schools and is conducted with the support of and recognition by the school's local Little Athletics centre*

#### **Communication**

The initial take up of the survey through the mediums of Little Athletics SA weekly newsletters, Little Athletics SA facebook and twitter sites was very poor and highlighted the low interest level from centres in these communication processes. Further follow up research on the Little Athletics SA website highlighted a site that is not user friendly and has limited relevant information for new users and is not engaging for parents who are the main target group seeking information.

#### *Recommendation 26*

*That Little Athletics SA review their current communication strategies in order to better inform and engage with their stakeholders and members*

#### *Recommendation 27*

*That the existing website be reviewed to make it more user friendly and engaging as the major connection tool with the broader Little Athletics community*

#### *Recommendation 28*

*That Little Athletics SA develop a template for use by every Little Athletics centre to provide new members upon registering with a Centre Information sheet which details all the relevant club and athletics related information*

#### **Relationships**

As discussed earlier the pathways in the sport are not well known and this has been a factor in children dropping out. Previously the relationship between the two sports has not been strong and there seems to have been little encouragement, motivation or incentive for Little Athletes to continue in the sport given the portrayal of two separate entities rather than partners in the same sport. This attitude is also evident with many of the Little Athletics centres operating in isolation, little evidence of centres sharing their knowledge or successful program ideas with other centres, not attending the State Conference and not understanding their place in the bigger picture of athletics. Issues with the Little Athletics SA administration communicating and connecting with centres about this project, the lack of commitment of certain centres to participate in the regional forums, the ignorance of centres about the project despite regular updates and promotion through recognised communication channels highlights that work needs to be done on developing more effective relationships with centres throughout the state. A number of regional centres feel isolated and believe that a greater commitment from the state body is required for the sport in country areas.

*Recommendation 29*

*That Little Athletics SA and Athletics SA establish every opportunity to develop a stronger relationship than previously existed so that the sport of athletics is seen as a united coordinated sport with two strong and supportive partners*

*Recommendation 30*

*That Little Athletics SA implements strategies that creates more effective relationships with their member centres particularly in country regions*

*Recommendation 31*

*That senior athletics clubs provide opportunities for their feeder Little Athletics centre athletes to participate in shared activities such as coaching clinics for specific events, open training sessions and invitational competition days*

*Recommendation 32*

*That the Board review the conduct of the Annual State Conference in order to make it more attractive to those centres that currently do not attend*

## **Governance**

The overall success of every state sporting organisation is very dependent upon creating successful member clubs. Ensuring their member clubs are well run should be a priority for the Little Athletics SA Board and this requires assisting and supporting member centres with their governance and operational issues. A concern is the loss of several centres in the 2014/15 season due to various factors including membership numbers being too low to make it worthwhile operating, and not having enough volunteers to run the centre. There did not appear to be any strategy to work with these centres to assist them in addressing their concerns and as a result the participants from those centres were denied an opportunity to stay involved.

*Recommendation 33*

*That Little Athletics SA develops strategies that will create better administered centres by increasing their focus on club development initiatives, improved facility development and satisfying customer service needs*





## 5. APPENDIX

- Forum results
- Interviews/consultations
- Survey results

### Regional forums

Host centre	Date held
Naracoorte	Not held
Kadina	Not held
Mt Barker	Thursday 23 October
Hallett Cove	Sunday 26 October
Loxton	Tuesday 28 October
Salisbury	Wednesday 29 October
Whyalla	Sunday 9 November
Eastern Districts	Sunday 16 November
Gawler	Sunday 16 November
Pt Lincoln	Sunday 23 November

#### Regional Forum No. 1 – Host Centre – Naracoorte

Forum was cancelled due to lack of interest in the Naracoorte centre hosting the forum as there was little interest from the regional clubs in attending

#### Regional Forum No. 2 – Wednesday 15 October Host Centre – Kadina

Forum was cancelled due to lack of interest as only 1 centre (Kadina) had responded by the due date

#### Regional Forum No. 3 - Thursday 23 October Host Centre – Mt Barker

Participants:

Mt Barker - David Usher, Natalie Narvey

Hills – Stephen Morris, Alice Windle

#### Meeting summary

##### Introductions

Participants introduced themselves and their current role. An overview of the project was presented along with the purpose of the regional forums

##### Current issues facing the sport

- The current SALA newsletter “Around the tracks” is not regular.
- Online registration is an issues as too much being pushed onto the centres who cannot cope because of their limited volunteer resource. Centres can appreciate the value of these systems but are unable to cope with the demands from SALA

management. It would be better to have a staged approach when introducing new systems.

- Timing of the State Conference creates issues being so close to when centres are trying to get organised for the new season and introducing new systems at this time is a problem.
- Lack of exposure for the sport although the current NOVA promotion has been very good there is still more opportunity for increased exposure/promotion.

### **Appeal of Little Athletics**

- It is a fun and cost effective sport and a sport that parents can get involved along with their children
- Provides the opportunity for general skill building for other sports.
- Is a great avenue for tiny tots to get involved in all round physical development activities
- Provides athletes with the opportunity to see how much they are improving from year to year

### **Barriers impacting on participation – recruitment/retention**

- The drop off seems to commence around the 13 year age group although it can be cyclical depending on friendships and peer groups in the 13-18 year age bracket
- Not being a team sport has its barriers
- Prior commitments which create clash with other activities – eg Mountain Bike and Cricket clash with Friday nights
- Time of the day is an issue
- It appears many go into Little Athletics without thinking about any long term commitment to the sport rather it is a one or two year involvement
- Lack of parent engagement means if parents lose interest they will withdraw their children
- The culture of little Athletics does not encourage the social aspect the team sports are able to create amongst their parent groups as they gather to watch whereas in Little Athletics they are spending little time socialising during the competition events as they are busy with their children's activities.
- Need to show the parents " what's in it for me" and hope they see the value
- Quality of facilities has negative influence on athletes

### **Major causes of the perceived drop-out rate**

- Schools specialising in other sports so limited exposure to the sport of athletics
- Not being a team sport and more recognition in other sports
- Very little exposure of the sport in the media apart from major events and so the impact means there is no effective role modelling that athletes are exposed to
- School athletics days are run in isolation to little athletics and SAPSASA days are not held with any consideration of best time to link in with Little Athletics centres schedules
- The sport promotes a "too competitive attitude too early" and there needs to be more flexibility regarding rules interpretation to encourage greater enjoyment factors
- Parents take it too seriously diminishing the enjoyment factor for the children
- State Day officiating is too officious for many parents
- Development squads should have a focus not just on 13 – 137 year olds

- Too much waiting around for athletes
- Not enough focus on coaching as too few attend the training sessions where coaching is provided
- Little Athletics name is an issue particularly for older athletes

#### **Possible solutions and strategies to address issues**

- Introduce team relay concept into regular event schedule
- Training nights for officials to educate and train them
- Better education for parents so they have a better understanding of the sport and the outcomes to be achieved
- Coaches course for parents
- Improved alignment with senior athletics
- Maintain closer contact with older athletes to encourage them to rejoin the sport or become mentors and or chaperones to put back into the sport
- Greater focus on extrinsic outcomes
- Consider holding less events per day
- Ensure the centre is well run as a strong committee represents a strong club meaning a positive outcome whereas poorly run centres tend to lose members who go to other more successful centres.
- Come and try days are great but cannot accommodate the numbers that are turning up without increased human resources. Perhaps the promotion is too successful but it does not help retention.
- Consider timing of come and try days in the future.

#### **Regional Forum No. 4 – Sunday 26 October Host Centre – Hallett Cove**

Participants:

Hallett Cove – Jacob Kranz, Wendy Stockton, Kim Carlin, Iain Carlin

Reynella East – Mark Potter, Denis Bowden

Southern Districts – Steve Camilleri

Southern Hills – Graham Catt, Leanne Gluyas

#### **Meeting summary**

##### **Introductions**

Participants introduced themselves and their current role. An overview of the project was presented along with the purpose of the regional forums

##### **Current issues facing the sport**

- Quality of coaching
- Lack of volunteers
- Parent engagement is very limited
- Very few athletes get involved in the training component because of lack of interest of participants and lack of available coaches to conduct the training

- Lack of transition opportunities creating impression that U13 is end of the involvement
- Limited exposure of the sport
- Older athletes have little interest in participating in “Little” Athletics
- The sport is not sexy!
- Cost is prohibitive to for dual registration with Athletics SA for 12 and 13 year olds
- Very little sharing between centres or knowledge of what other centres are doing

### **Appeal of Little Athletics**

- Need to find another incentive for those kids who are never going to find success apart from the personal best achievement
- Need to promote Personal Best concept more effectively

### **Barriers impacting on participation – recruitment/retention**

- Not being a team sport has its barriers
- Little Athletics culture does not create much appeal for parents
- Lack of parent engagement means if parents lose interest they will withdraw their children
- Poor communication/promotion to parents selling the sport benefits
- Not enough excitement in the sport
- The name “ Little Athletics”
- Poor/ineffective links with local schools
- Competition from other sports and other interest activities – e.g. part-time work for older athletes
- Quality coaching and/or mentoring not being available

### **Major causes of the perceived drop-out rate**

- Not being a team sport and more recognition in other sports
- The current activities/competitions don't accommodate the needs of the athletes
- Parents uncertain of what is required from them as chaperones so lose interest and remove their children
- Too much down-time during events
- Too much waiting around for athletes
- Not enough focus on coaching as too few attend the training sessions where coaching is provided
- Little Athletics name is an issue particularly for older athletes
- Parents are the decision makers in determining their children's participation
- The weather factor and after Christmas holiday period
- Lack of link/transition with senior athletics

### **Possible solutions and strategies to address issues**

- Parent education/induction
- Paid coaches
- Some type of recognition program
- Rewarding volunteers
- Consider attracting grandparents as helpers
- Increased exposure of the sport
- Identify potential Sport Ambassadors to visit centres as promotional tool

- Alter program to be more flexible
- Consider name change
- Review the competition structure to make more appealing
- Consider conducting intra-centre regional days

### **Regional Forum No. 5 – Tuesday 28 October Host Centre – Loxton**

Participants:

Loxton – Brett Tschirpig, Deanne Lange, Christie

Barmera – Sharon Schrapel, Tricia Hallam–Shearer

Renmark – Michael Schuetze

Waikerie – Steven Shiers

### **Meeting summary**

#### **Introductions**

Participants introduced themselves and their current role. An overview of the project was presented along with the purpose of the regional forums

#### **Current issues facing the sport**

- Lack of volunteers for the committee and running the events
- No flow of information from old to new committee members
- Handover of the sport has not been as smooth with the new SALA management
- Limited parent involvement in the sport
- Low numbers competing in the older age group categories
- Lack of quality coaching
- The severe impact of the weather which has caused numerous cancellations and loss of interest
- Too many little athletics clubs in a small region

#### **Appeal of Little Athletics**

- Appealing for very young children as they are unable to participate in other sports at such a young age
- It is a fun and cost effective sport and a sport that parents can get involved along with their children
- It is a stepping stone to involvement in school sport
- Provides basic skills for other sports.
- Offers a long term involvement opportunity from 4 – 17years occurring at same place and same time so great for family management

#### **Barriers impacting on participation – recruitment/retention**

- The name of Little Athletics
- Parent involvement is a significant factor
- Keeping kids interest past a one year involvement

- It is an unknown sport with limited media exposure
- If parents have not been exposed to the sport as a child less likely to encourage children to take up the sport
- Lack of interest from local school in promoting the sport through their communication channels
- Not enough older athletes to attract others to stay involved
- Other options such as part-time work, school study commitments
- Little Athletics is something to do rather than being a passion for many children
- The lack of success from Australia athletes
- Lack of coaching knowledge
- The sport is not exciting enough

#### **Major causes of the perceived drop-out rate**

- Children required to compete in every event discipline means limited opportunity to specialise
- Too much of a focus on trying to create heptathletes
- Schools specialising in other sports so limited exposure to the sport of athletics
- Children commencing the sport too early
- Other sports in the region more appealing
- Too much waiting around
- Boredom doing the same events over and over against the same competitors
- Not being able to receive any coaching
- No perceived future so why stay involved

#### **Possible solutions and strategies to address issues**

- Greater rewards
- Alternate week concept where no results recorded but used as a training day
- Develop greater social networks for parents to engage them longer
- Increased opportunity to educate parents as coaches
- Visits from senior athletes
- Better education for parents so they have a better understanding of the sport and the outcomes to be achieved
- Inter-town meets as a means of offering different competitions/competitors

#### **Regional Forum No. 6 – Wednesday 29 October Host Centre – Salisbury**

Participants:

Salisbury – Gaynor Garnish

Salisbury East – Jenni Dansie

Elizabeth – Hubertus Janssen, Cheryl Janssen

Tea Tree Gully – Di Ferguson

#### **Meeting summary**

##### **Introductions**

Participants introduced themselves and their current role. An overview of the project was presented along with the purpose of the regional forums.

### **Current issues facing the sport**

- Ability to maintain older athletes
- Struggle to attract the sponsorship dollar
- Having to compete with other sports for recruitment
- Lack of exposure for the sport
- Parents not treating Little Athletics as a sport rather an activity
- Children using the sport as a training opportunity for winter sports without any real commitment to staying involved over long term in the sport

### **Appeal of Little Athletics**

- It is such a cheap sport that the whole family can get involved with
- In the local area the cost has appeal for low income families
- Provides the opportunity for children to find something they are good at with the range of different events
- The focus is on achieving your Personal Best not about winning or beating others
- Is good for children with a disability
- Can miss several weeks of competition and it does not matter
- Opportunity to develop skills through the weekly training sessions

### **Barriers impacting on participation – recruitment/retention**

- Lack of knowledge about the sport
- Lack of promotion
- Poor publicity about the sport has a detrimental effect
- Limited exposure of the sport in the local schools
- Not being a team sport has its barriers
- Other social interests particularly for the older athletes
- Lack of parent engagement means if parents lose interest they will withdraw their children
- Parents no longer interested and so not encouraging their children to continue
- The name "Little Athletics" is not cool for bigger kids

### **Major causes of the perceived drop-out rate**

- Too much standing around can be a factor but not so in smaller centres
- Parents losing interest and they determine the involvement of their children
- Parent intensive sport and parents drive the agenda
- Limited knowledge of any pathways

### **Possible solutions and strategies to address issues**

- Provision of roving coaches at competition meets to offer extra coaching assistance
- Increase exposure of the clubs by linking in with promotional opportunities in Messenger Press, local Christmas Parade, shopping centre displays
- Training nights for officials to educate and train them
- Offer more intra-club events so athletes can compete against other clubs



- Better education for parents so they have a better understanding of the sport and the outcomes to be achieved
- Change the name or brand it differently
- Improved alignment with senior athletics – consider Little Athletics ceasing at age 14 years
- Create stronger links with local schools and ensure when Little Athletics visits occur in schools the local Centre is informed
- Create more social opportunities to engage/involve the parents to keep them interested

### **Regional Forum No. 7 – Sunday 9 November**

Host Centre – Whyalla

Forum was cancelled due to lack of interest as only 2 centres (Pt Lincoln and Pt Augusta) had responded by the due date so **Pt Lincoln centre** conducted their own internal forum on 23 November.

### **Regional Forum No. 8 – Sunday 16 November**

Host Centre – Eastern Districts

Participants:

Magill – David Dew, Olivia Becker

Adelaide Eagles – Julie Hargreaves

Henley – David Huddy, Lara Cesh

Eastern Districts – Deb Gayen, Kendal Sellars

### **Meeting summary**

#### **Introductions**

Participants introduced themselves and their current role. An overview of the project was presented along with the purpose of the regional forums.

#### **Current issues facing the sport**

- Lack of coaches available to the sport
- Lack of professionalism within the sport
- Limited quality tracks
- Communication within the sport
- Current website is of little value as doesn't engage the participants (children/youth)
- Impact of other sports being more attractive
- The sport is too fragmented
- Lack of exposure/profile for the sport as there are very few high profile athletes to relate to
- Schools not promoting athletics in their curriculum

- Current culture of the sport
- Athletics is a difficult sport

### **Appeal of Little Athletics**

- It does engage families
- Always being at same venue, same time is good where families have number of different aged children involved
- Is a low cost option
- Provides the opportunity for children to find something they are good at with the range of different events
- The focus is on achieving your Personal Best not about winning or beating others
- Is good for children with a disability
- Can miss several weeks of competition and it does not matter

### **Barriers impacting on participation – recruitment/retention**

- Parental engagement
- Lack of knowledge about the sport by people running the member clubs
- Ignorance of club people about links to senior athletics
- No personal encouragement to children to stay in the sport as it relies on self motivation
- Lack of promotion/advertising
- Poor or limited coaching provided to develop athlete's skills/abilities
- Coaching only focussed on talented athletes
- Having to offer mandatory number of events
- Centres not having direction on how to operate
- Poor publicity about the sport has a detrimental effect
- Limited exposure of the sport in the local schools
- Not being a team sport has its barriers
- Lack of parent engagement means if parents lose interest they will withdraw their children
- Parents losing interest and not encouraging their children to stay involved
- The name "Little Athletics" is not cool for bigger kids
- Other sport's demands re pre-season commitments

### **Major causes of the perceived drop-out rate**

- Too much standing around/waiting time can be a factor but not so in smaller centres
- Parents losing interest and they determine the involvement of their children
- Parent intensive sport and parents drive the agenda
- Limited knowledge of any pathways
- Older athletes don't want their parents still heavily involved in chaperone duties

### **Possible solutions and strategies to address issues**

- Create better pathway opportunities for less talented athletes
- Provision of coaching for parents
- Increase exposure of the clubs by linking in with promotional opportunities
- Better links with local schools
- Create more of a social aspect for older athletes

- Better promotion of all round skills that can be achieved through the sport
- Initiate exit surveys to determine why children drop out/leave
- Use of senior school students as possible coaches/mentors
- Paid coaches from increased club membership
- Creation of a pool of possible coaches that clubs could access
- Offer more intra-club events so athletes can compete against other clubs
- Change our thinking of how we run events and cater for different needs/interest/motivation for athletes over 14 years
- Empowering older athletes
- More appropriate timing of coaching sessions offered by SALAA
- Clubs working together for older athletes given current limited numbers across clubs
- Better collaboration between both athletics bodies and School sport organisations
- Affiliation with other traditional sports to use a pre-season training opportunity
- Consider handicapped events for U13 upwards
- Focus more on relay competitions
- Relay Day review of points system to take into account field events
- Review conduct of Multi events at state championships to stop single competitor events

### **Regional Forum No. 9 – Sunday 16 November**

I visited a regional meet held at Gawler Little Athletics Centre for centres involved with the North East Country region and included representatives from the following centres:

- Mildura & Districts
- Gawler
- Lyndoch & Districts
- Loxton
- Barossa Valley
- Waikerie
- Barmera
- Renmark

During the morning I enjoyed the opportunity to speak with parents and volunteers and observe athletes in action. Each Centre was provided with a promotional flyer which highlighted the link to the on-line survey which the Centre representatives were encouraged to get their members to complete.

### **Regional Forum No.10 Pt Lincoln internal 23 November**

Present: Kazia Kemp – President  
Tair Vaidenfeld –Vice President  
Jennie-Lee Te Wano –Secretary  
Tina Knight – Treasurer  
Colin Whillas – committee member

### **Current issues facing the sport generally**

- Not a mainstream & high profile sport in our area.

### **Appeal of Little Athletics**

- Athletes can start as young as 3. Great for all those pre-schoolers who have so much energy to burn. Most other sports require kids to be 7, 8 or older.
- Fun way to keep fit & learn fundamental skills of movement.
- Individual & non-contact sport appeals to people who don't like rough play.
- Can easily see & measure individual improvement with each event which is very encouraging.

### **Barriers impacting on participation – recruitment**

- Cost- The association raised its fees slightly this season & our centre also added a 'fund-raising levy' meaning our fees have risen \$20 this year. Some people have commented about the increase.
- Lack of coaching – we do not have quality coaches involved in the club. Some athletes & parents feel it is a waste of time if they are not being offered qualified coaching.
- The branding 'Little' Athletics. Has a hugely negative effect on older kids. We have noticed kids as young as U11 who have previously enjoyed the sport, suddenly have a problem with being associated with Little Aths. I have also found some people assume LA is only for primary school children, because the name suggests the sport is only for younger kids.
- Parent involvement – Many people are put off when they realise the high level of commitment that is required of the parents. Often families will have 2 or 3 children who are all involved in different sports & activities. So if the parents are not able to leave the athlete it makes it very difficult to get the other kids to their activities.
- Competition & Opportunities- Being so far away from Adelaide makes it very hard for regional athletes to take part in state competitions such as Individual Champs, Multi Events, Personal Best day, Holiday coaching clinic.... There are also many great initiatives on offer by the association such as Squad LA & other coaching programs but we are not able to promote these as drawcards due to the inaccessibility.

### **Barriers impacting on retention**

- Tiny Tots often get bored. If they join as a 3 year old they don't want to stay in the TT group for another whole season.

### **Major causes of the perceived drop-out rate**

- Branding- becomes an image problem for older kids
- Bored – Little Aths is one of only a few sports that allow kids to join at only 3 years old. This is a great drawcard for recruiting younger kids but some of these athletes have been involved with LA for many years and by the time they reach age 10 or so, they are bored with it & simply want to try a new sport.
- Kids were just doing LA until they were old enough for cricket, basketball, softball etc...
- If a member is not a 'gifted' athlete they may get 'sick of always coming last' or feel as though they are 'not good at it' & may seek another sport.
- Some members who might consider themselves as quite 'talented' get bored if they feel they are not being challenged enough.

### **Possible solutions & strategies to address issues**

- Do away with the fundraising levy & try to raise money with social functions, quiz nights etc.
- Seek out ways to upskill committee members, get our coaches certified. (club & assc)
- Re-brand the intermediate age groups. (association)
- Promote sport as a great way to keep fit during football/hockey/netball off season. (club)
- Provide more funding for regional athletes to attend state comps. \$50 travel grant is not enough to attract them when the costs of travel, accommodation etc are so high. (assc)
- Offer coaching clinic & competition (similar to clinic in January prior to PB day) in a regional centre such as Whyalla. (assc)
- *Why is SAPSASA & WASSAC so popular in regional towns & not LA??!! After being involved with SAPSASA athletics this year, I can't understand why so many great athletes (who obviously enjoy the sport) do not want a bar of LA. Is it the Port Lincoln clubs bad reputation still hanging on? Is it the LA name? There is huge potential for the club if we can attract some of these kids.*

## Survey Summary

A key aspect of the consultation process for this project involved the conduct of two on-line surveys using the Survey Monkey Tool. The first survey was distributed to the broader Little Athletics community through a direct email to every current member and an initial email to every centre President. The second survey was distributed to an email distribution list of past participants who had not registered for the current season.

Each survey was introduced in the following manner;

### Survey 1

*Little Athletics SA has commissioned a review to investigate the perceived dropout rate facing the sport. The review is designed to focus on current issues, future directions and strategies to address retention in the sport*

*The review will involve extensive consultation with the Little Athletics community throughout the state. An opportunity has been provided to **all those involved in Little Athletics** to participate in an on-line survey. Following the consultation and information gathering from the survey process, a report addressing the findings and recommendations will be prepared for the Little Athletics SA Board.*

*Thanks for taking part in this survey. Your contribution is really appreciated.*

### Survey 2

*Little Athletics SA has commissioned a review to investigate the perceived dropout rate facing the sport. As a past participant in Little Athletics we are very keen to hear from you as to the reasons you are no longer competing. An opportunity has been provided for you to participate in an online survey and once we have gathered the results from this survey, a report addressing the findings and recommendations will be prepared for the Little Athletics SA Board.*

*It is vital that we **hear the views of those no longer involved in the sport** as well as those currently involved as this will give us an accurate picture and a better opportunity to address the sport's future participation needs.*

*Thanks for taking part in this survey. Your contribution is really appreciated.*

An analysis for both surveys is detailed below. In total over 1,000 responses were received from the Little Athletics community which is a very good response rate.

## Survey results

### General survey sent to all member clubs/centres

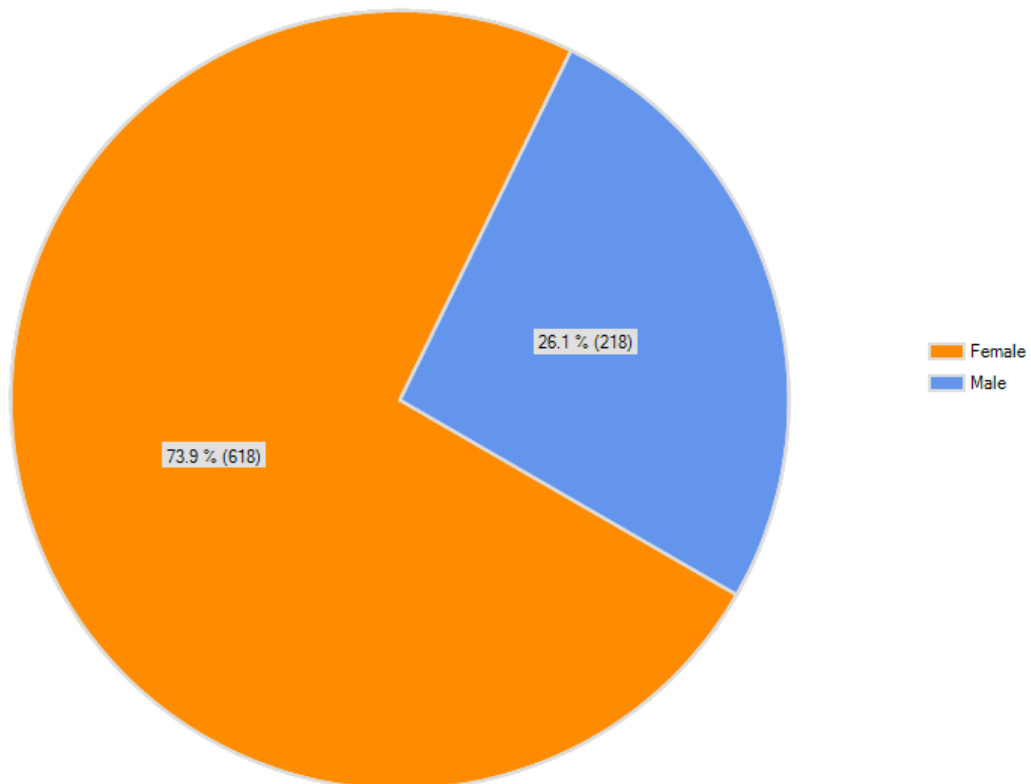
**Total number of respondents = 836**

Q1. Postcodes

There was a wide distribution of postcodes highlighting that responses came from all across the state.

Q2. Gender demographic

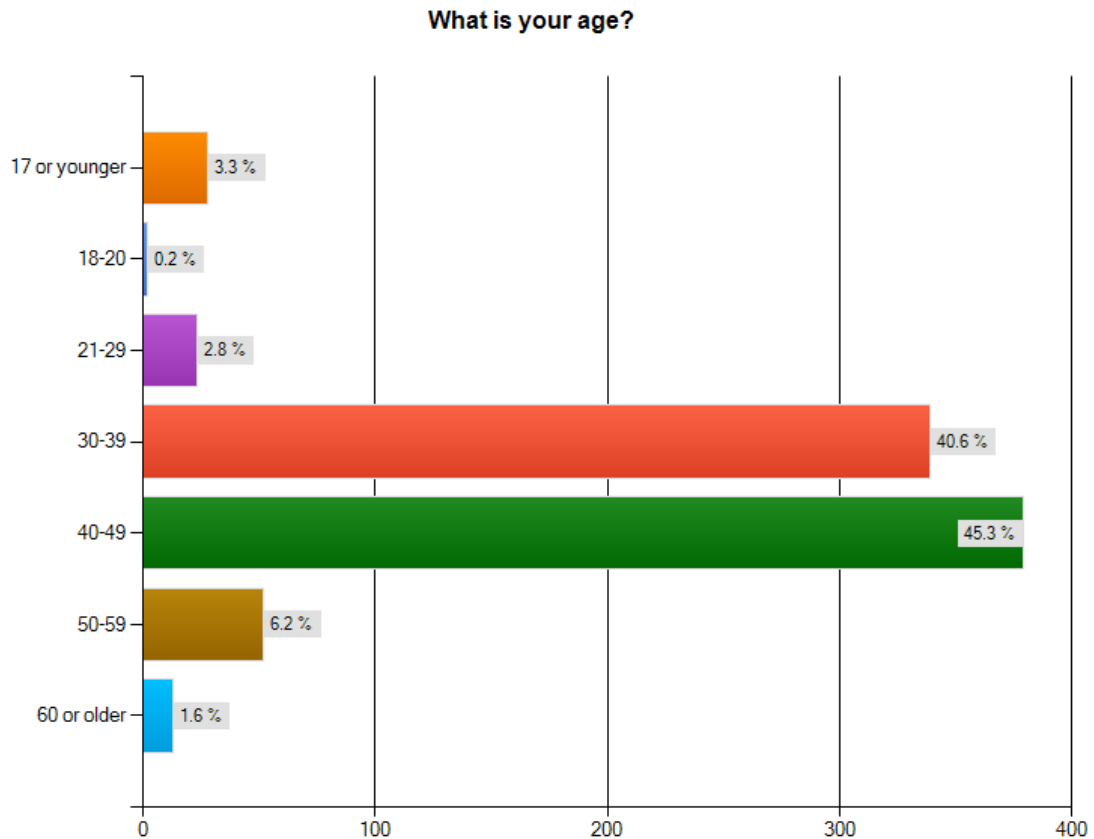
#### What is your gender?



Comment:

There is no discernible reason as to why the survey responses were predominantly completed by women.

## Q3. Age demographic

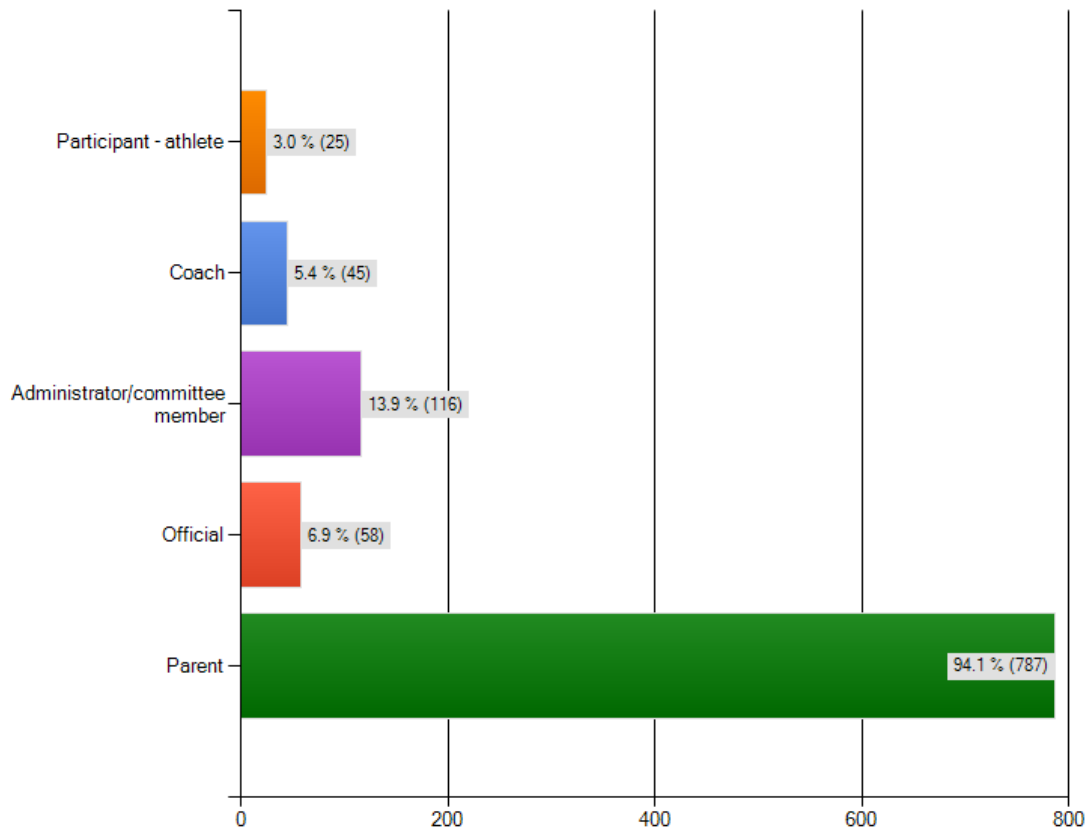


## Comment:

The majority of the surveys were completed by the age groups between 30 and 49 which is consistent with the survey being completed by parents of the athletes. A very small percentage of the respondents (3.5%) were under 20 indicating that very few athletes responded in their own right. Of note then is the views expressed in the survey are those of the parents which hopefully reflect the views of their children accurately.



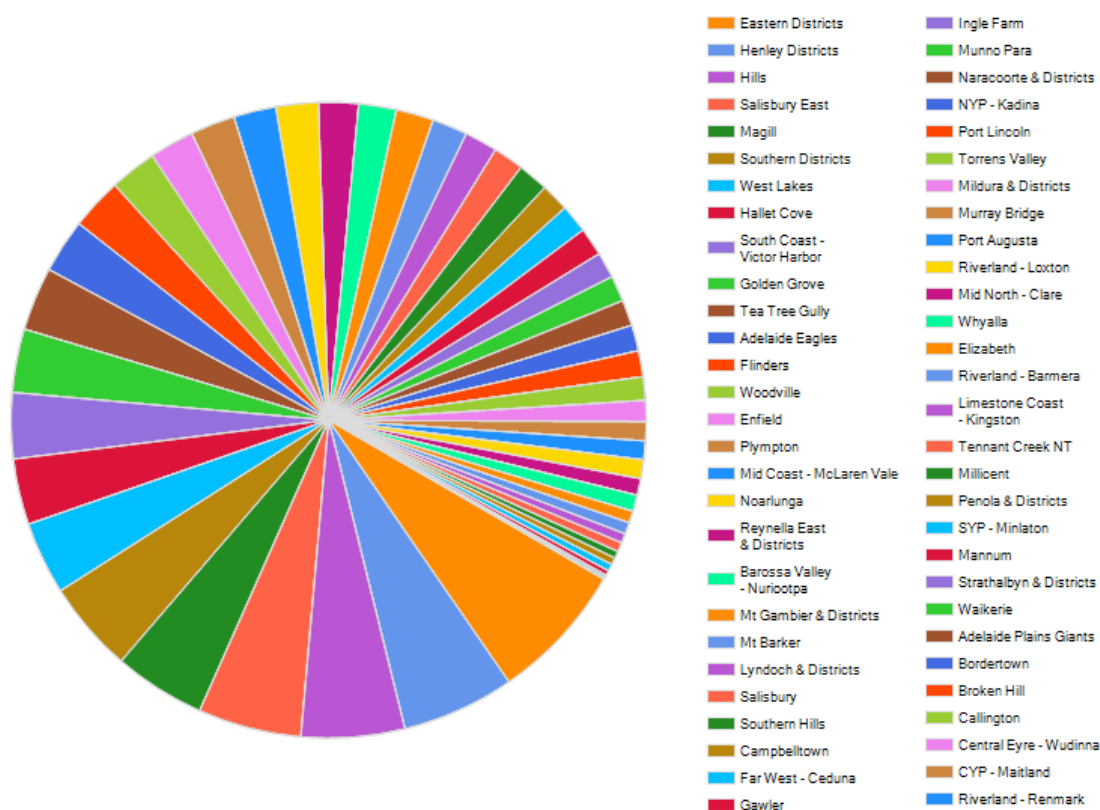
Q4. Current connection with the sport



Comment:

Further evidence that the surveys were completed by parents is detailed in this summary. It is likely too that many of the parents may also play another role as a coach or committee member.

Q5. Participating Centres



Comment:

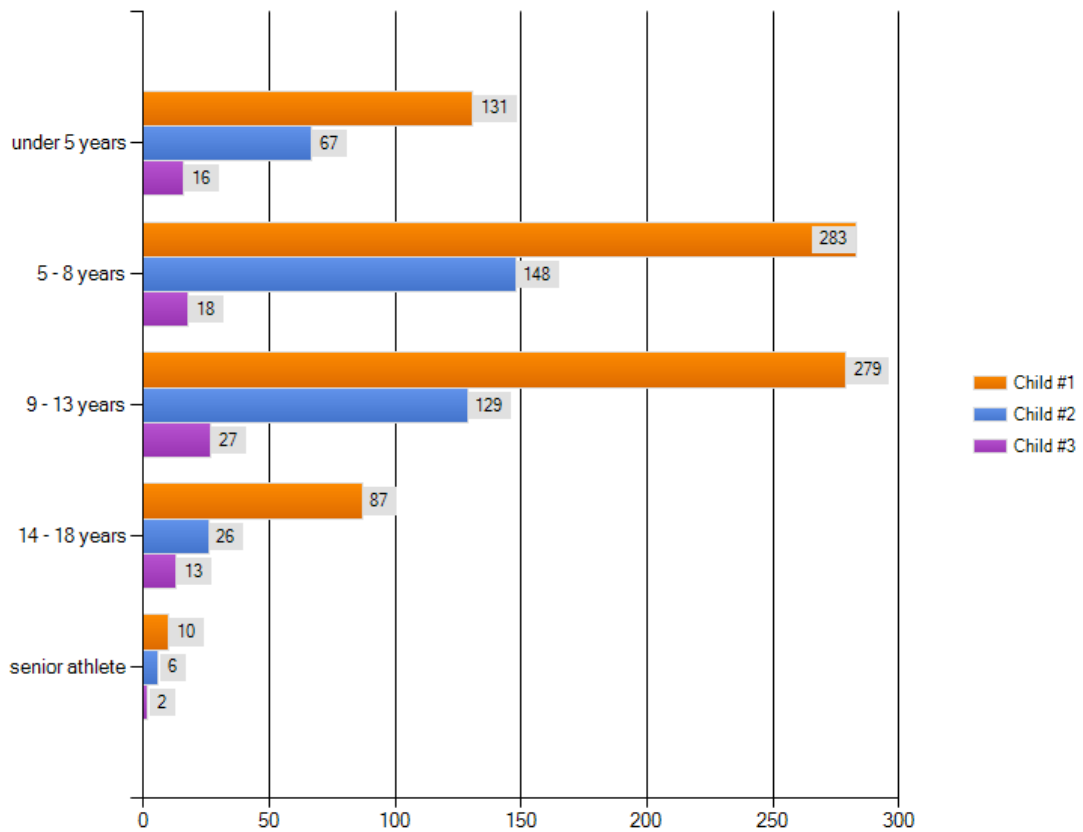
Of all the Centres that are affiliated all but 7 were represented in the survey responses. The Centres that did not participate were as follows:

- Adelaide Plains Giants
- Bordertown
- Broken Hill
- Callington
- Wudinna
- Maitland
- Renmark

The lack of response from these centres is disappointing given the extensive communication sent to all centres but it may highlight where centres are no longer operational or committee changes have yet to be finalised and contact details not yet been advised to state office.

The significant contributions from some of the clubs may have been because of their large numbers of registered athletes or the promotion of the survey by their committee. The top contributors were Eastern Districts (59), Henley (48), Salisbury East (44) and Hills (44).

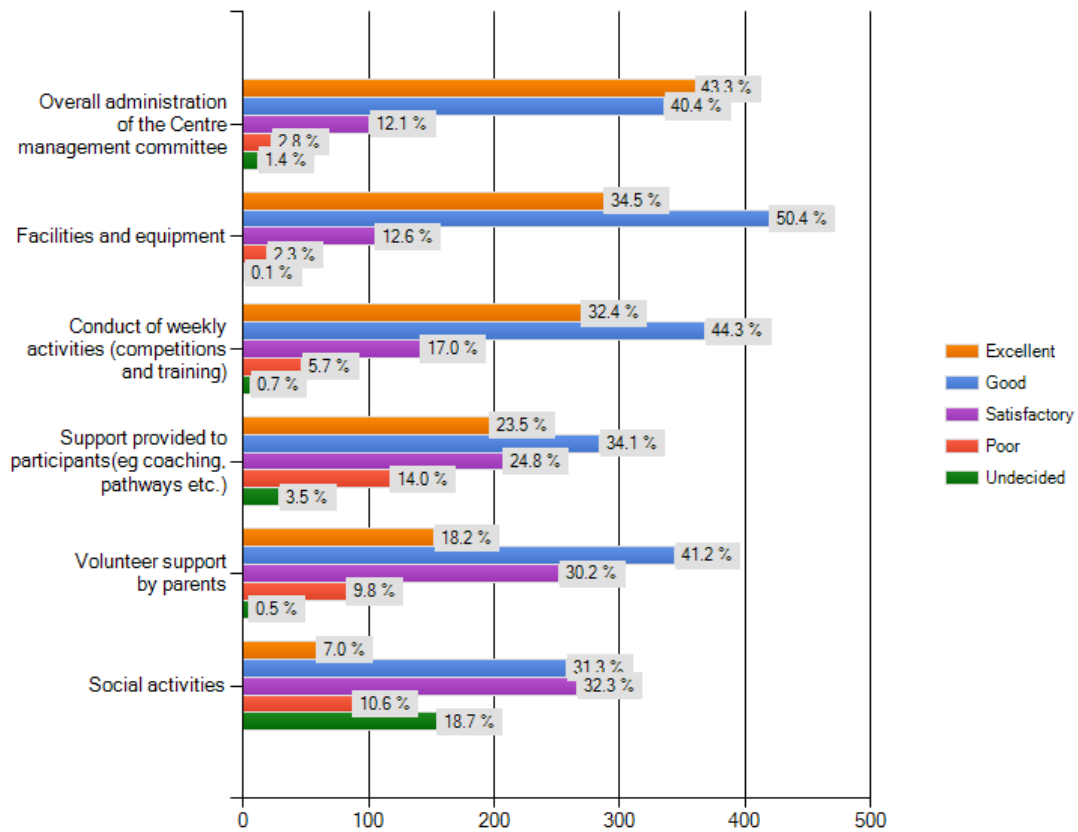
Q6. Age category of athletes



Comment:

This table highlights a fairly even spread across all the age group categories although participation diminishes once the athlete reaches the secondary school/teenage years with an alarming drop off once eligible for senior athletics. Of concern is the issue that so many children involved in the sport do not transition into senior athletics.

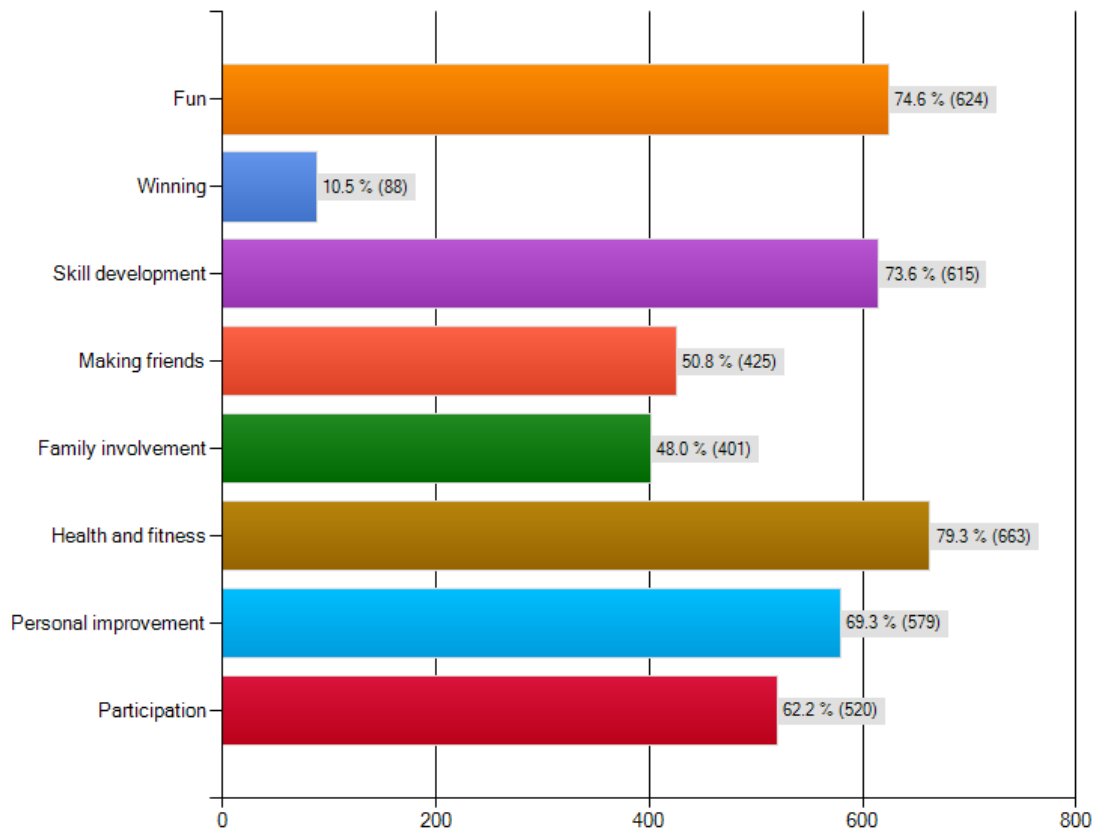
Q7. Centre Ratings



Comment:

Overall respondents rated their centres positively in the key criteria listed particularly in the Centre administration, facilities and weekly competition conduct with the more noticeable areas where more could be done given the satisfactory rating were not enough social activities offered, volunteer support by parents, and support provided to participants in matters such as coaching and pathways.

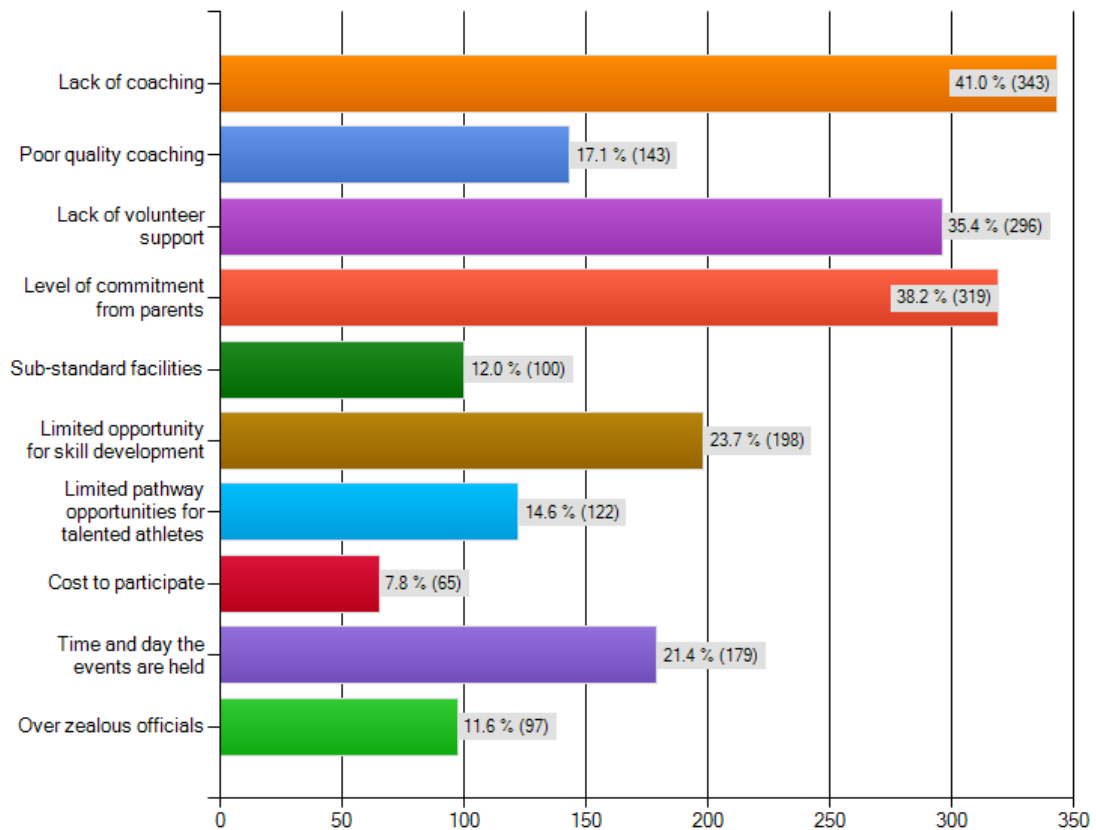
## Q8. Appeal of Little Athletics



## Comment:

Respondents highlight the broad appeal of Little Athletics with a number of factors receiving a high rating. The motto of Little Athletics is Fun, Fitness and Family and all three factors rated very highly showing the message is being supported. Respondents are less concerned about the winning aspect in Little Athletics and this again matches the philosophy of athletes striving for their personal best rather than focussing on winning.

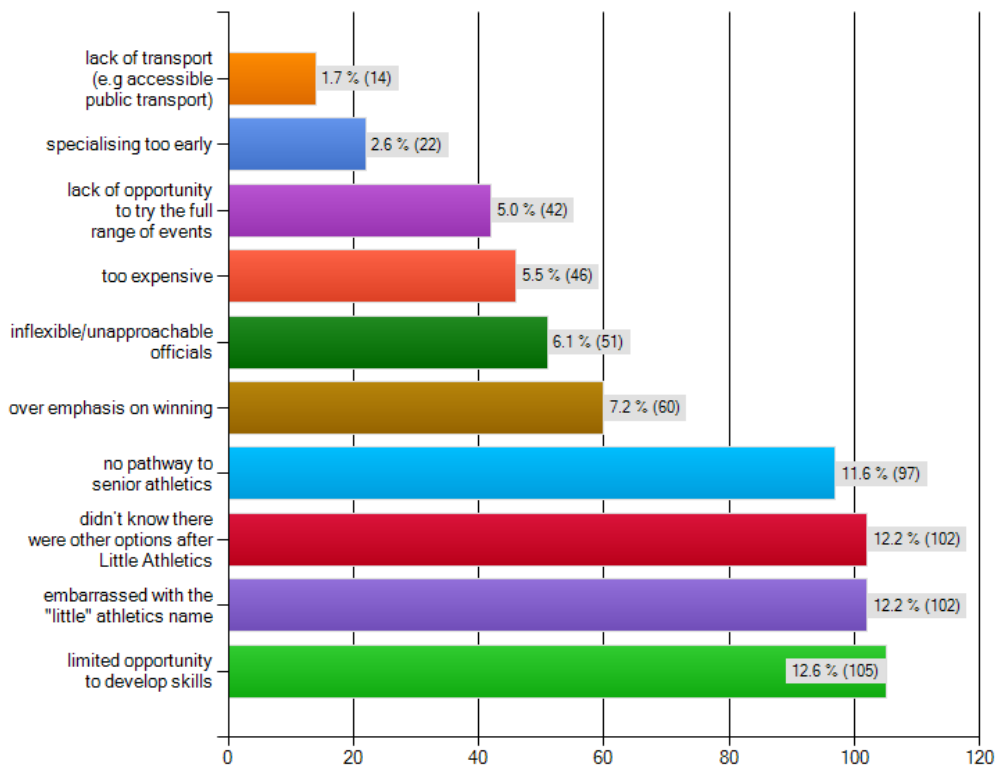
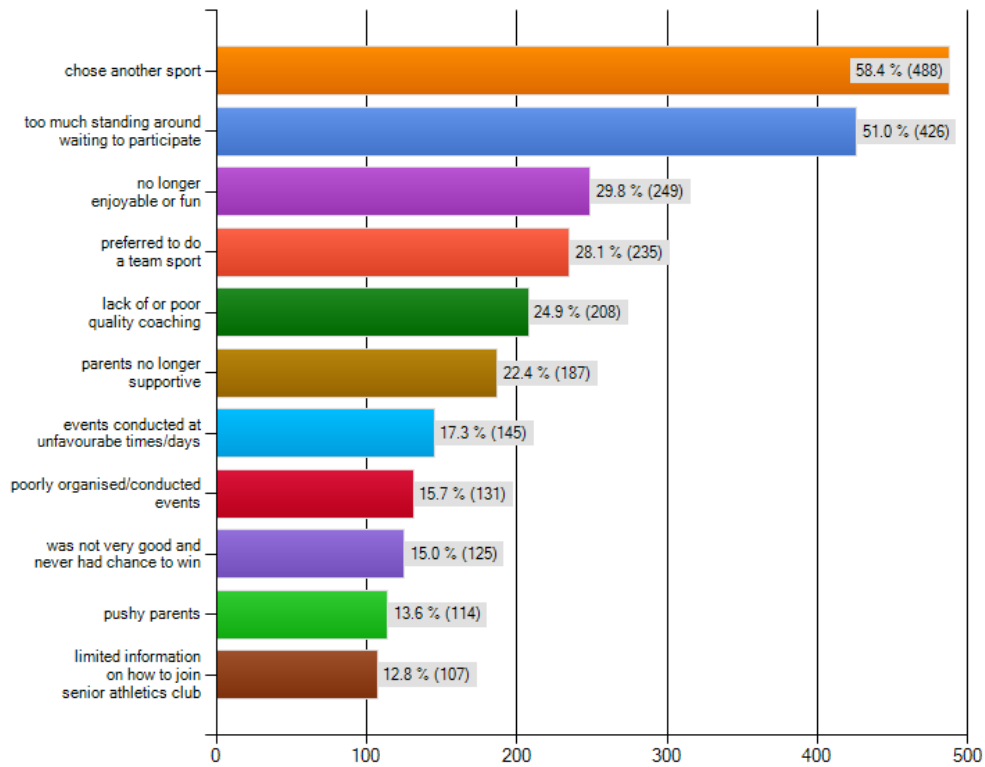
## Q9. Non-appeal of Little Athletics



## Comment:

There are three key factors that respondents have highlighted that make Little Athletics less appealing and this impacts significantly on the drop-out rates as evidenced in later questions. These factors are lack of coaching, lack of volunteer support and the parental engagement. These three factors will need to be addressed in the future solutions section.

Q10. Factors leading to drop-out



Comment:

There were many factors that contributed to participants dropping out of the sport and each of these factors that can be controlled or modified needs some careful consideration by the sport's administrators. For almost 60% of respondents their Little Athletics participation ended when they chose another sport. Whilst this may not be something Little Athletics can control it does highlight that the sport may not offer enough appeal to retain their interest and 28% preferred to be involved in a team sport rather than the individual nature of Little Athletics. Of more concern, as it relates more directly to how the sport is run, is the issue of over 50% of participants dropping out because too much time was spent not actively participating. Coaching was also an issue with around 25% indicating poor quality coaching or the lack of any coaching offered at Centres was a negative for them.

Another factor which impacts is the how and when centres conduct their competitions. As there is no set time or day when competitions must be run some centres program does not meet participants' needs as their circumstances change through the years.



#### Q11. Future changes to reduce likelihood of participants dropping out

The following provides a summary of the key points reflected in the survey responses. They are not listed below in any priority order rather as a collation of key suggestions under the areas identified as major changes that need to be addressed to arrest the drop-out from the sport. In some cases they are solutions for individual centres to consider and in other cases they are more relevant for the state body.

#### **Coaching**

- Provide mentor coaches to attend other centres
- Provide a state-wide pool of coaches available for centres to engage
- Conduct more coaching clinics in the country
- Introduce payment for coaches
- Encourage recently retired athletes to stay in the sport through coaching beginner and younger age groups
- Provide more assistance to parents keen to get involved in coaching
- More support and training generally for coaches
- Senior athletics clubs to supply qualified coaches to neighbouring centres
- Use time wasted in standing around waiting for events as coaching/skill development opportunity
- More focussed coaching in field events
- Provide more tools for beginner or learner coaches
- Recognise the value of coaching
- Conduct event days with alternate weeks devoted to skill development/coaching rather than competition events
- Focus more on coaching athletes to improve than on just doing their events
- Reduce load on uninformed parents with limited knowledge/experience to be coaches
- Don't just coach the talented athletes
- Introduce roving coaches who are not assigned to one station/event all day

#### **Events**

- After U13 no requirement to do all events and allow opportunity to focus on events of interest
- Consider reducing number of events per meet
- Provide more opportunities for intra club/centre and regional events
- Better scheduling of events so youngest age group are not left until last
- Better use of waiting time between events particularly for every young children who lose interest quickly
- A standard schedule of events template produced by national or state body
- Reduce group sizes to save time and standing around
- Handicapped events for older age groups to encourage less talented athletes to stay involved after years of never winning events
- Reduce time of meet as no other junior sport competition lasts as long ( e.g. netball/soccer/football/basketball matches)
- More relay/team events

### **Pathways**

- More knowledge on pathways to senior athletics
- Better alignment with senior athletics
- Each senior club being aligned with 3 to 4 neighbouring Little Athletics centres
- Better communication of pathways to parents and athletes

### **Branding/Image**

- No longer appropriate to use Little Athletics for older athletes over 13+
- Stop Little Athletics at 13 and join senior athletics after this

### **Organisation**

- Better organised clubs
- Better organised meets
- Improved facilities as poor quality equipment/facilities is negative influence

### **Parents**

- Less reliance on parent coaches without the skills/knowledge to back it up
- Greater focus on engaging parents and families in social activities
- Accept that parents are the key decision makers on whether children remain in the sport
- Encourage parents to be more committed for the sake of their children
- More effective rostering of parents
- More support and information/induction for parents so they have better understanding of the importance of their role
- Welcome pack for parents

### **Communication**

- Improved communication from head office to member centres
- Improved communication from the club to its members
- A central website with links to every club so it becomes a one stop shop for interested parents/potential new members(athletes)
- Reduce amount of time spent on pre-meet announcements

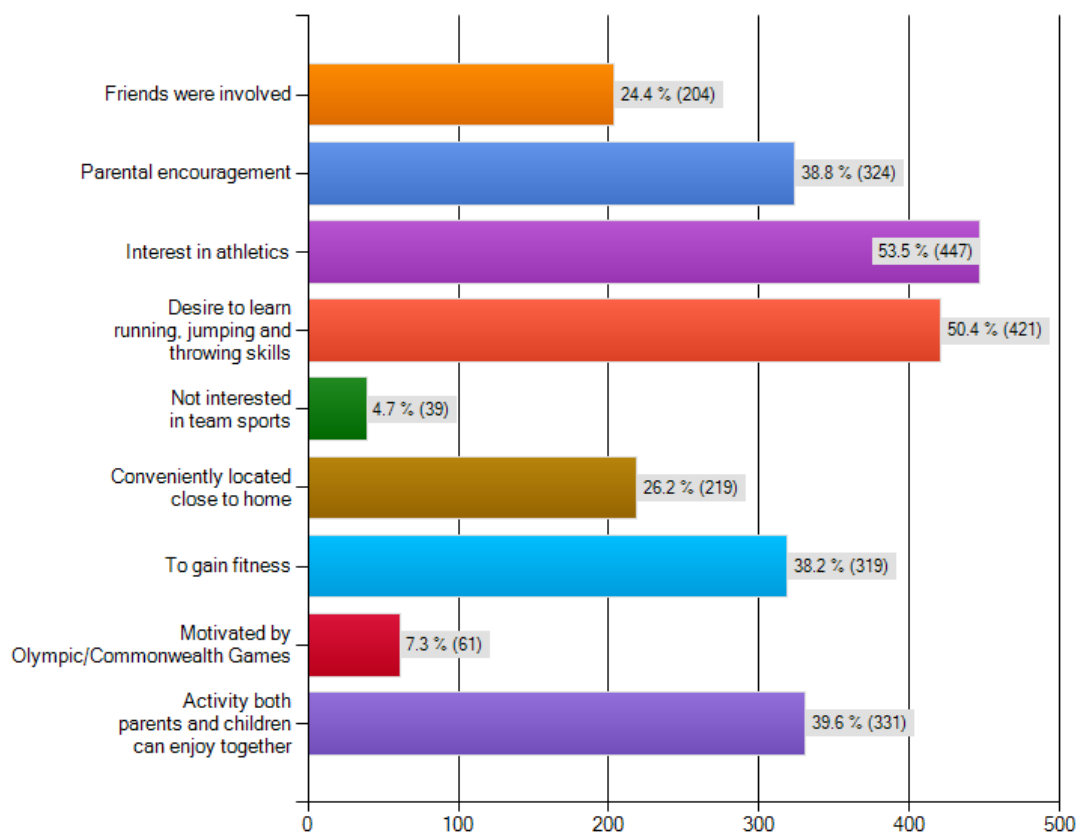
### **Schools**

- Establish stronger links with local schools
- Promotion of Little Athletics at school sports days/SAPSASA carnivals

### **Recognition**

- Not just recognising most talented athletes
- Development squads for less talented athletes
- Development squads for younger athletes
- Continue focus on Personal Best philosophy

## Q12. Reasons for joining Little Athletics



## Comment:

It is evident that there are a number of motivating factors that create an interest in why participants commence their involvement in Little Athletics and this is a positive opportunity for the sport. The interest in athletics may be sparked by school sports days, exposure to the sport around Olympic Games and Commonwealth Games and the desire of most parents wanting their children to learn to run and jump and throw. Another key motivation is the opportunity for families to enjoy a shared involvement as the sport is very reliant on parental involvement in a support role.

What must be addressed is the sport's capacity to manage this motivation to become involved by doing what it can to retain this interest for the longer term. It is evident that much of the motivation stems from parent driven agendas.

Q13. Suggestions on improving relationships between Little Athletics SA and Athletics SA

Comment:

- High profile visits by senior athletes
- Mentoring by senior athletes to Little Athletics clubs
- More information on how to get involved with senior athletics
- More information on pathways
- Combined events
- Provide senior athletes as coaches to Little athletics clubs
- Modify dual registration fees
- Combine ASA and SALAA Youth Development programs particularly for country children
- Organised transition plan into senior athletics for all Little athletes participants
- Reducing the price of coach accreditation courses
- Increased profile/promotion of athletics
- Relaxation of barriers restricting little athletics doing senior athletics
- Reduce stigma of little athletics
- Align little athletics centres with senior clubs
- Non-duplication of events by both bodies
- Conduct single focused clinics for athletes from each organisation

Q14. General issues with the sport of Little Athletics

Comment:

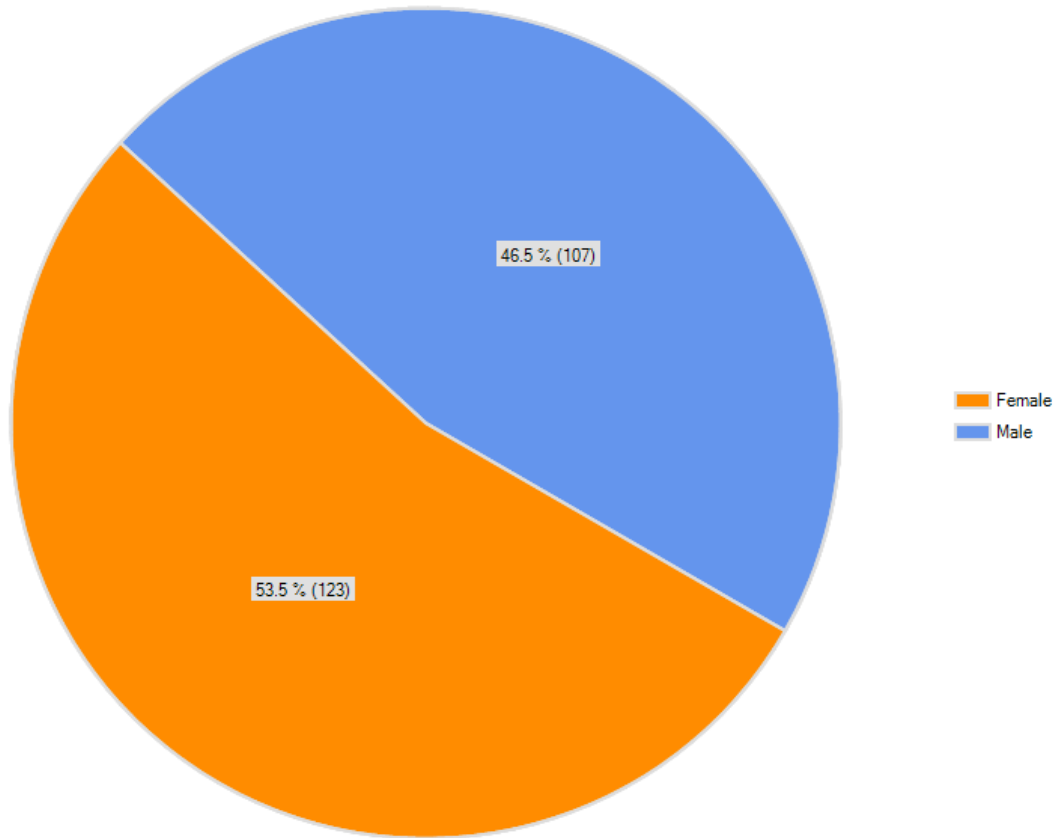
On analysing the many comments on general issues the following common themes emerged:

- Lack of parental engagement
- Parents coaching without the necessary skills/techniques
- Too much time wasting during events
- Lack of quality coaching
- Poorly run events
- Limited knowledge about pathway opportunities
- Ignorance about Senior athletics opportunities
- Limited appeal for older athletes

**General survey sent to targetted selection of past participants**

**Total number of respondents = 230**

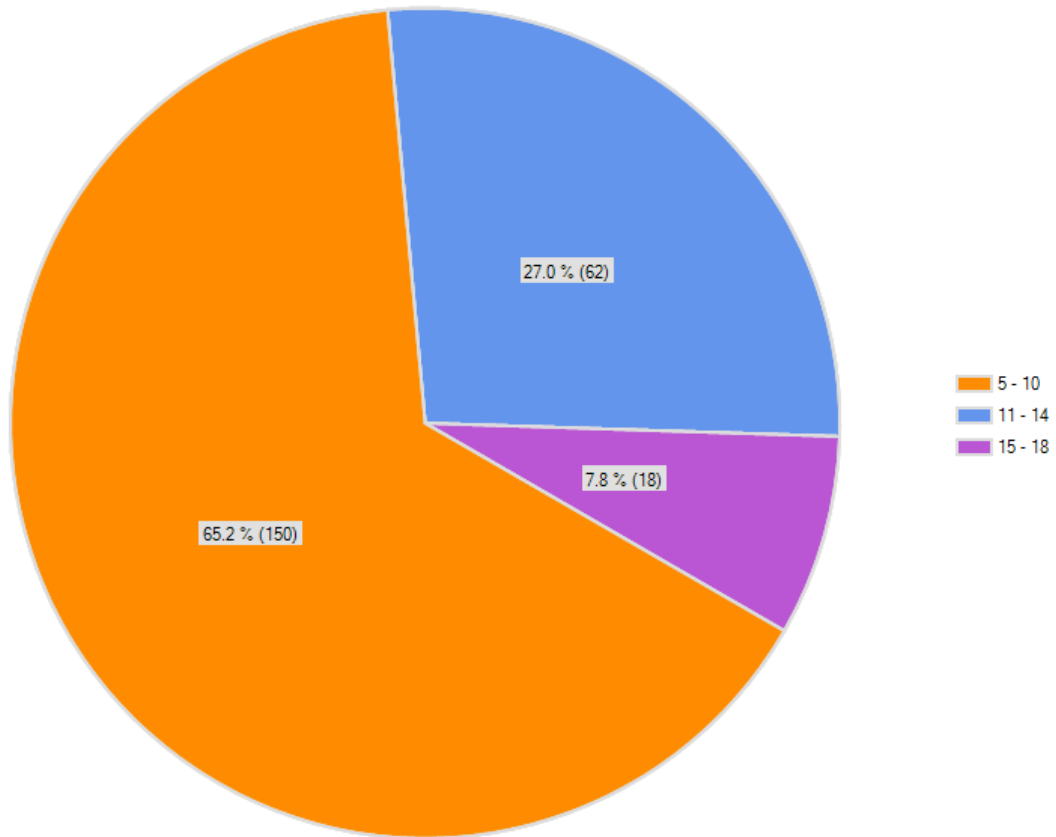
**Q2. Gender demographics**



Comment:

A very even spread of responses with slightly more females than males highlighting there is no apparent trend from our targetted sample of which gender has ceased participating in Little Athletics.

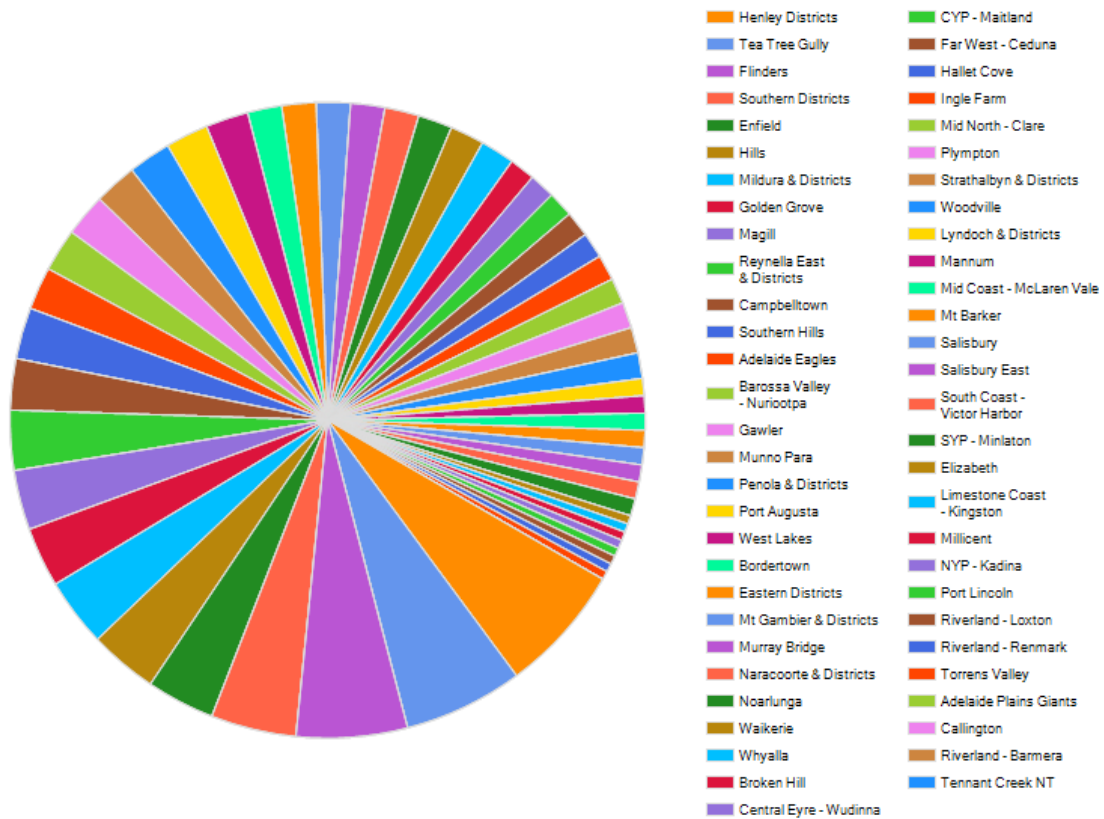
Q3. Age demographic



Comment:

This result highlights that 65% of past participants dropped out of the sport at a young age (5 -10 years) whilst at the older age category there were fewer drops outs primarily because there were fewer participating at this age 15 – 18 anyway. With such a large dropout rate in the 5-10 year age category it is likely that many of these only participated in the sport for one or two years in total.

Q4. Participating Centres

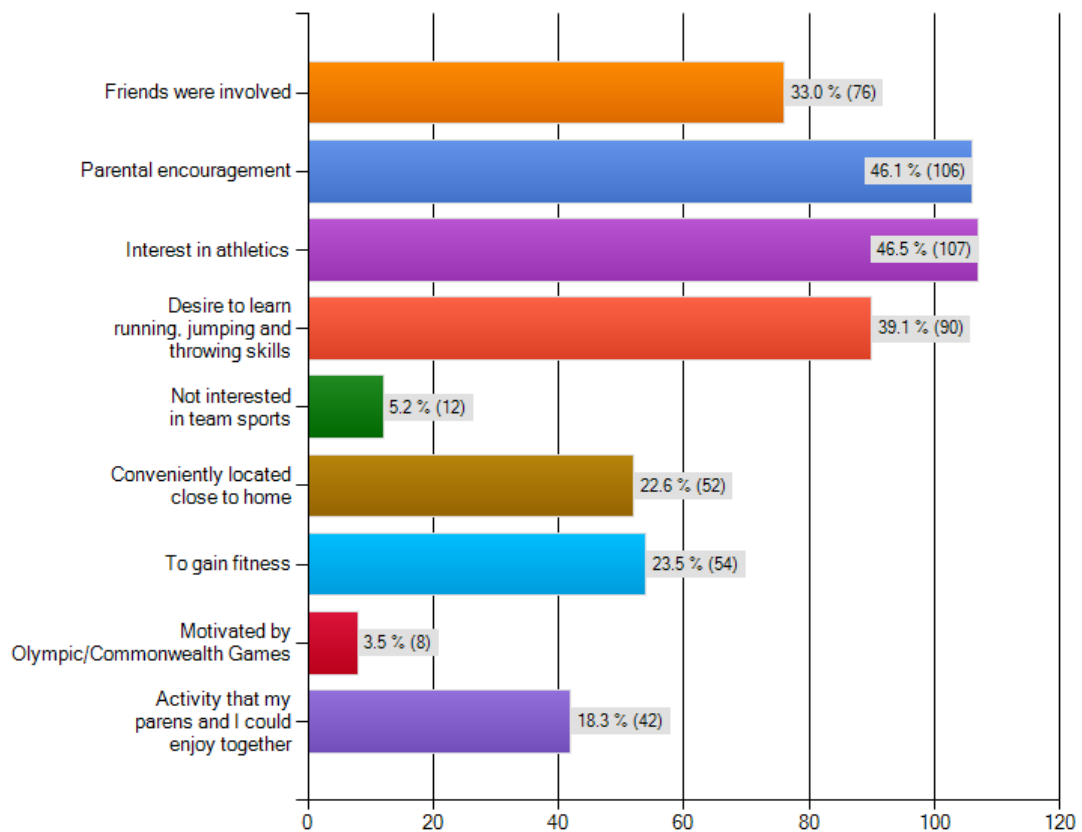


Comment:

This data highlights the broad cross section of responses received for this survey, as all but 4 centres are represented and these are Tennant Creek, Barmera, Adelaide Plains Giants and Callington.

Henley, Tea Tree Gully, Flinders and Southern Districts were the centres with most respondents.

## Q5. Reasons for joining Little Athletics

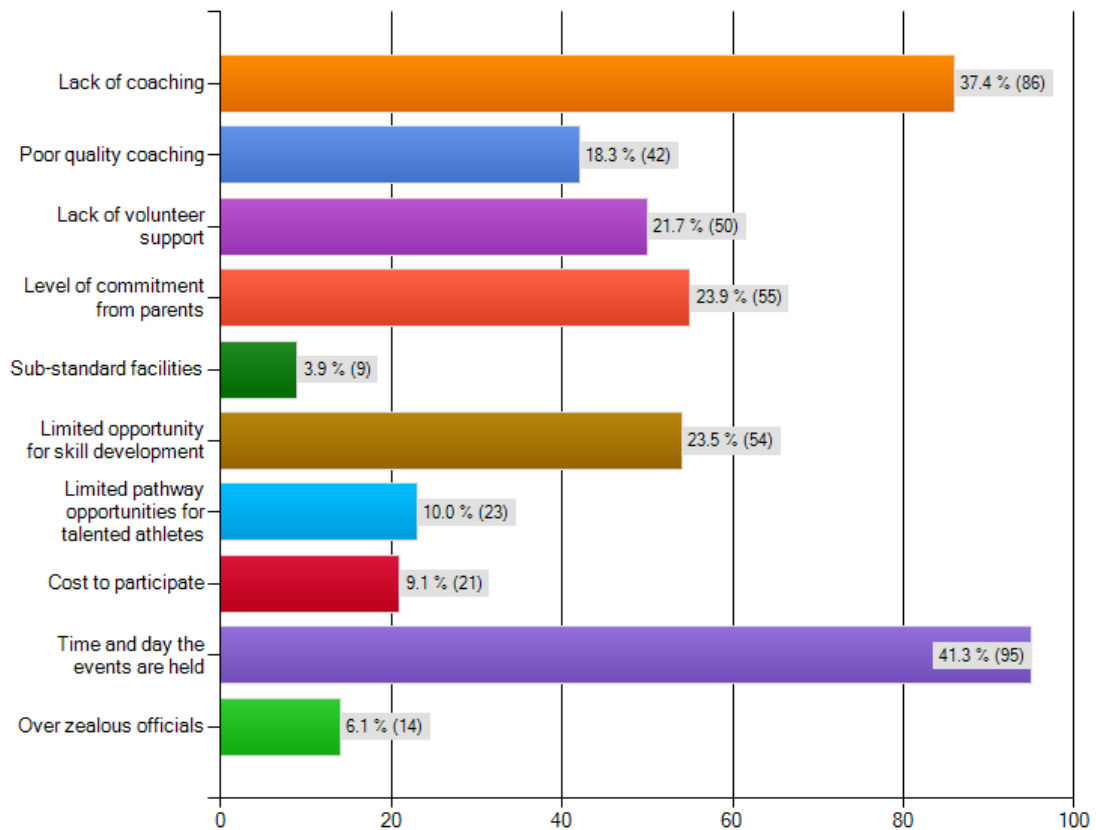


## Comment:

Participants were asked about their reason for commencing Little Athletics and as with the Survey no.1 Interest in athletics (46.5%) and parental encouragement (46.1%) were the key motivators closely followed by desire to learn the running and jumping skills (39.1%) and the fact that friends were already involved (33%).



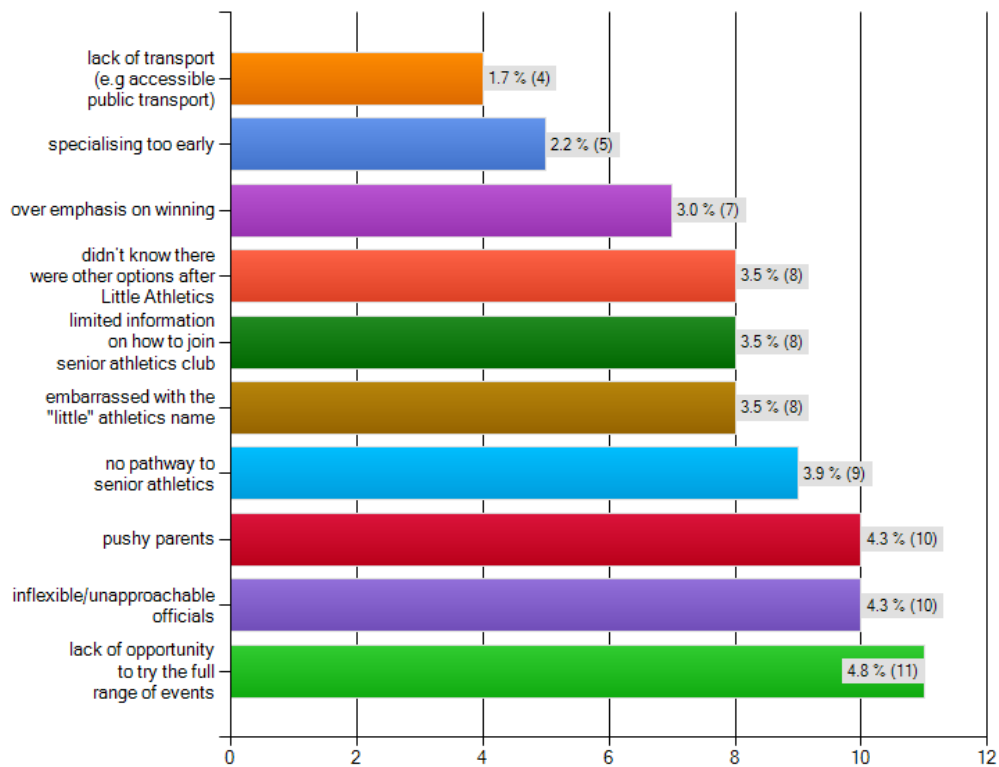
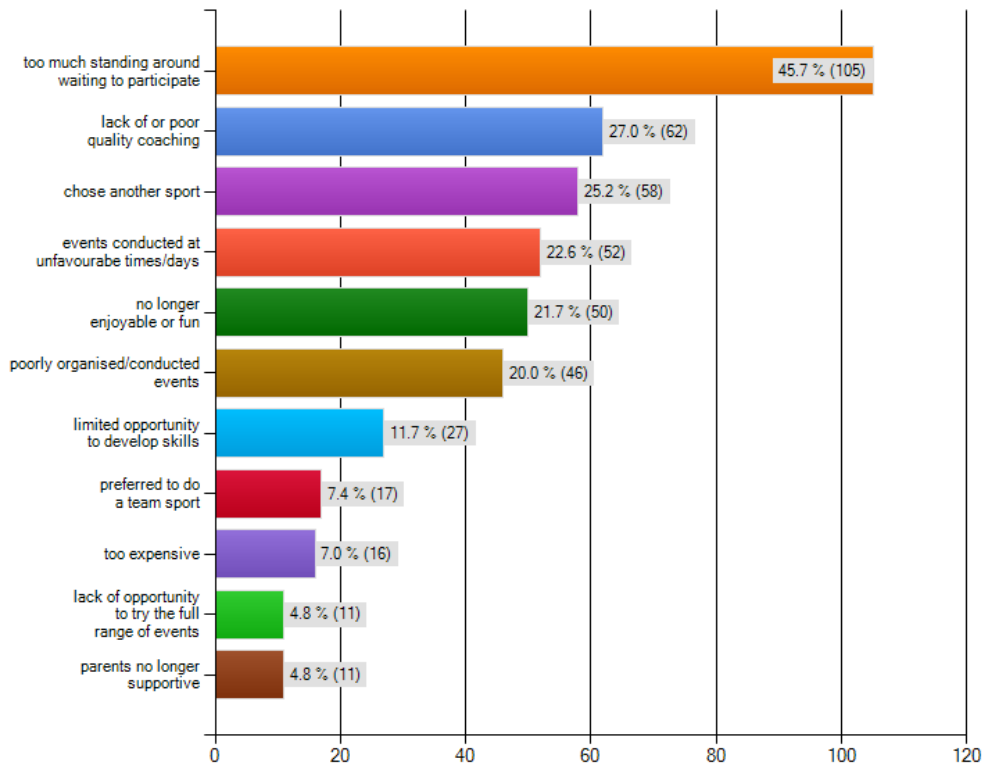
## Q6. Non-appeal of Little Athletics



## Comment:

Two major factors were identified by the past participants group those being the lack of coaching (37.4%) and the time and day events were held (41.3%). Other factors which were also negative influences on continuing in the sport included the level of commitment from the parents (23.9%), the limited opportunity for skill development (23.5%) and the lack of volunteer support given to the athletes (21.7%).

Q7. Reasons for dropping out



Comment:

The major reason for not continuing in the sport related to the boredom factor with too much standing around waiting to participate (45.7%) followed by the lack of coaching (27%). For another 25.2% choosing another sport was their reason for stopping. Once the fun and enjoyment disappeared for 21.7% of participants this marked the end of their Little Athletics involvement. The other major reason was related to poorly organised/conducted events (20%) and it is quite likely this was as a result of participants standing around and not receiving any coaching.

Q8. Suggested changes to reduce likelihood of participants dropping out in the future

Comment:

**Parents**

- Less demands placed on parents to get involved in support roles as many feel unqualified to take on a coaching role
- Seek more parental involvement to spread the load as too few do too much
- Stop parents coaching their own children
- Better trained parent officials

**Coaching**

- Use qualified coaches instead of parents as you would not expect to have your child learn music from an unqualified music teacher
- Improve standard of coaching
- Parents are happy to pay for good coaching
- Spend more time with skill development and coaching than just competing in events

**Groups**

- Reduce size of groups to limit waiting time at events
- Smaller groups in lower age groups
- Large groups create boredom and likelihood of poor child behaviour/bullying

**Events**

- Offer choice of events once athletes turns 13
- Provide greater flexibility in running events
- Better organised and conducted events

Q9. Suggestions on improving relationships between Little Athletics SA and Athletics SA

Comment:

- Specialised coaching days
- More opportunity to compete in ASA events
- Joint events
- Greater alignment between senior clubs and little athletics centres
- More publicity about how to join senior athletics
- More links on centre websites/promotion at Little Athletics centres

Q10. Any final comments

Comment:

The majority of respondents stopped Little Athletics because they chose other sports which had more appeal, were team sports, were available at a more suitable time slot and provided better quality coaching and skill development.

Many recognised the value of their time in Little Athletics as it provided an introduction for their involvement in other sports.

Many chose to leave the sport because as they entered the older age group category there were very few friends left and the regular competition was not challenging with only a few athletes to compete against. Added to this was the desire to specialise in a particular event which was not available.

The sport needs to be better organised with come and try days as a number indicated they attended come and try days and were disillusioned with the lack of organisation on the day which they believed was a possible reflection on the club being disorganised and poorly run.

Little Athletics should be about having fun, being active and improving with quality coaching/instruction not about standing around for as long and not being given any direction on how to improve.

The low cost of Little Athletics participation may be a negative factor as parents are less committed to the activity if they have not paid out much. If the cost was significantly higher it may be more valued.

The sport suffers from a lack of guidance. More direction /leadership needs to be given to centre administrators on how to function as more effective organisations – to parents who are willing to be involved as coaches but do not have the skills/knowledge - and to participants who are keen to pursue their athletics at senior level.