

Running a nutrition service in high performance sport: Challenges and opportunities

The delivery of nutrition services in high performance sport is a dynamic and rapidly evolving field, central to enhancing athlete health, well-being, and performance. Operating within a multi-sport organisation presents a unique set of challenges and opportunities that require strategic planning, adaptability, and strong cross disciplinary collaboration.

A key challenge lies in meeting the diverse nutritional needs of athletes across different sports, each with distinct physiological demands, training loads, and competition schedules. The complexity of delivery can be further compounded by medical considerations as well as cultural background and athlete preferences. The integration of nutrition services into multidisciplinary performance teams requires clear communication pathways and mutual respect and understanding for each discipline's expertise. This collaborative approach is essential for delivering cohesive support to athletes.

Logistical challenges include managing nutrition support during travel, ensuring food safety and quality at remote venues, and coordinating with catering services to provide appropriate menu options. Additionally, resource constraints, such as limited staffing and budget, can impact the ability to deliver individualised support and maintain service consistency across all sports.

Access to a well-structured learning and development programme is vital for practitioners. It enables ongoing growth in technical, professional, and leadership capabilities, while enhancing problem-solving skills and the ability to generate performance-focused solutions. Practitioners need access to a network of expertise and regular clinical supervision to address the complex medical issues that can arise for individual athletes. This can be challenging to deliver and requires a well-defined infrastructure to achieve.

Opportunities for cross-disciplinary knowledge sharing and collaboration within strong communities of practice can drive innovation and continuous improvement across the system. Implementing effective operational strategies such as standard operating procedures, evidence-based frameworks, and robust governance structures helps ensure quality, compliance, and consistency. Embracing technology further enhances service delivery and efficiency.

This presentation will share insights and experiences from operating a performance nutrition service within the UK Sports Institute (UKSI), currently the UK's largest provider of world-class science, medicine, technology, and engineering services to Olympic and Paralympic sports.