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Council red tape stops Hetton Lyons race in its tracks

Hundreds of runners will be denied the opportunity of competing in the North Eastern Road Relay Championships at Hetton Lyons Country Park on Saturday 16th February.

Council red tape has forced the North Eastern Counties AA to call off the event after talks failed to find a solution to the problem.

Sunderland City Council asked a representative of hosts Houghton Harriers to sign a Licence to Occupy, which placed unlimited liability on the signatory. The club declined to sign

The long-standing event is automatically covered by UK Athletics, who provide Public Liability insurance for £50-million for all licensed athletics events

The NECCA committee wrote to the council in October asking for a meeting after encountering considerable difficulties over the same insurance problem in the 2018 Road Relay. The letter went unanswered.

This would have been the ninth running of the event held at Hetton on a course that has proved ideal for road relay running.

This came about after a number of venues around the North East became redundant due to traffic issues.

It proved a very popular move as the venue saw record numbers of runners turn out to make it a top class relay race with many internationals involved.

Following the breakdown in talks, the North Eastern Counties have made the following statement:

“It is with regret that we have to inform you that the event on February 16, has had to be cancelled/postponed.

This is due to Sunderland Council taking a very unreasonable position, asking for individuals to sign documents accepting unlimited liability, ie the £50-million cover offered by the usual UKA Road Race permit, not being acceptable to them.

“A full statement will be issued in due course, explaining the background and possible re-arranged venue and date.”

North East Counties AA chairman Bill McGuirk said: "It's hugely disappointing that the North Eastern Counties Signals Road Relay Championships has had to be cancelled.

"The Association has had a good working relationship with Sunderland Council in the past as far as the relays are concerned, an event which attracts teams from all corners of the region. Houghton Harriers, who host the event on behalf of the Association, and particularly Peter Dodsworth, have worked extremely hard behind the scenes since getting the go-ahead in November but, alas, it has all been in vain."

Jim Alder MBE, 78, the 1966 Commonwealth Games Marathon champion, and a North East great said: "It is one of the most popular events with many clubs involved. This is a big blow to our club Morpeth Harriers and to others, who look forward to this relay every year."

Sunderland Harrier Andy Powell, who was looking forward to the relay after recovering from injury, said: "This has left the running community saddened and frustrated in a time when promoting fitness should be a key goal in a sport which is seldom invested in, yet is arguably the countries most successful. Our running community is furious and let down."

The relay was launched in 1920 and it was run, ironically, from Sunderland to Catterick over 10 stages. From 1934-38 the event became a marathon, before becoming a relay again in 1939.

Over the years it has attracted the cream of North East distance running, including Olympic medallists Brendan Foster, Steve Cram, Mike McLeod and Charlie Spedding. Next year it will be the event's centenary.

It is popularly known as the Signals Relay after the Royal Corps of Signals, who were affiliated to the Association and based at Catterick, presented a trophy to the Association in 1927, and it is still in use to this day.