Learning from inquiries about safeguarding practice in sport
Sports-sector national governing bodies and funders briefing

Introduction

The aim of this briefing is to help national governing bodies (NGBs) and those who fund the sports and physical activity sector strengthen their child protection and safeguarding practice by learning from previous reviews into sports organisations.

Findings and recommendations for improvement in this briefing are taken from inquiries and investigations into safeguarding practice within the sports sector from 2017 to 2021 (see ‘References’ for a list of reviews considered). Some of these reports cover both child safeguarding and adults at risk concerns but contain relevant learning for all sports governing bodies and those agencies that fund sport. Most of the learning is from the sports sector in the UK, but the findings and best practice may be applicable to all sports sector organisations worldwide at grassroots and elite levels.

Terminology

In this document we use the following terms:

- **athlete** – any child in sports regardless of the activity or if it is at elite or grassroots level
- **athlete first** – that an organisation or sports official ensures that the welfare and mental health of the individual athletes is placed to the forefront of the priorities set by the sport and coach
- **children and young people** – used interchangeably to refer to any person under the age of 18
- **concern** – a worry about an individual’s or organisation’s behaviour, or a suspicion that a child has been or could be harmed
- **incident** – a specific event that has child protection implications
- **thresholds** – the boundaries between more serious and lower-level concerns

Section A – Key findings from the inquiries for the sports sector

The following 6 points are a summary of the collective areas of concerns raised when the different safeguarding reports where reviewed. The headings chosen are based on the most consistent themes identified.

1. Prioritising safeguarding and child protection responsibilities

Child protection and safeguarding is a broad issue that may not be viewed as the core business of those who run sport and physical activity. Though there is a clearly stated commitment from all sports governing bodies in the UK to do everything to ensure that the welfare of the child is paramount, the reviews listed in the reference section of this document would indicate that there is a gap between the production of policies and their implementation.

Child protection and safeguarding do not always appear to be prioritised within sports organisations at board or senior management level. The importance of developing a safe, enjoyable culture within the sport requires a true commitment to embed safeguarding in the practice of both high-performance and grassroots sport. Staff and volunteers with leadership responsibility for safeguarding have limited time or resources to impact any cultural change. The reviews raised concerns that safeguarding does not have the priority that it should
have to maintain athlete welfare. While sports sector groups may now react to safeguarding incidents, the reviews do not show evidence of them proactively working to minimise risk and ensure sport is a safe, inclusive and fun activity for all.

Concerns have been identified about a focus on a ‘medals first’ approach. One review suggests the culture within the sport was perpetuated by a funding focus on elite athletes’ performance leading to medals and not focusing on the athletes’ wellbeing or safety, highlighting that any change in culture would not occur unless it was monitored by its funders. Therefore, issues need to be addressed throughout the sport structure.

2. Safeguarding policies

Most sports organisations now have adequate child safeguarding policies and procedures in place. These include procedures for reporting and recording concerns. However, the reviews indicate there still exists a culture in some sports that restricts adults or young people from feeling confident enough to report a concern because of the risk of repercussions.

Concern was expressed that UK-wide sports did not have a clear central safeguarding policy that acknowledged any specific variation in the home nations jurisdictions. Sports governing bodies require central reporting structures to ensure a consistent robust approach and enable the sports organisation to have a clear understanding of complaints and breaches of the sport’s rules and standards. The creation of complex reporting systems that prevent the governing body from knowing about concerning practice at grassroots level means a sport does not know about lower-level concerns unless they have escalated into something more serious.

Sport and physical activity organisations need to explore how well safeguarding and child protection policies and procedures are being followed to know the true impact upon clubs and activities in their grassroots. There is a structural gap in an NGB if there are not systems in place to check and challenge how well these procedures are communicated and implemented.

3. Training

Staff and volunteers are not always required by sports organisations to attend tutor-led safeguarding training to enable them to learn from their peers or from experienced tutors. Consistent messages in the reviews highlight the importance of safeguarding training to raise awareness and understanding of roles and responsibilities, and that it must be made compulsory as part of club affiliation and coach award. The fact that tutor-led safeguarding training is not compulsory undermines its priority and adds to an inconsistent approach across the sector. Training or information to raise awareness of safeguarding was not made available to all stakeholders, including, children, parents, officials and NGB board members.

For further information, take a look at our briefing paper Training recommendations from inquiries into safeguarding cases in sport.

The importance of safeguarding training in building confidence and providing clarity of responsibility is highlighted by Edge Hill University:

‘Increases in self-perceived confidence were higher among the tutor-led cohorts compared to the online cohort, particularly in understanding safeguarding. The impact of training on learner confidence was also stronger within the tutor-led cohorts for those with no prior training or experience.’  
(Hartill M. et al, 2021; p.6)¹

4. Engagement with parents and children

The reviews highlighted very limited engagement with parents by sports organisations, and, in some cases, there was an identified risk of sports leaders manipulating parents and reducing their ability to take steps to protect their child. The promotion of private coaching arrangements, without parents being present, adds to a lack of external controls on a coach’s behaviour. The use of social media can be a powerful engagement tool, but it has also been used to isolate young people from protective family and friends, therefore the safeguarding implications must always be considered when it is used.

Due to what is perceived as the power imbalance between coaches and parents, there is a normalisation of poor coach behaviour such as aggressive language, bullying or acceptance of forcing a child to train through an injury. Some reviews stated that abusive coaches who built friendships and trust with parents made it harder for the parents to challenge poor practice. Coaches then exploited their trusted relationship to groom parents and their children for their own sexual gratification.

Concern was expressed in the reviews that parents were powerless in response to the authority of those in power within sports organisations because there weren’t mechanisms for them to raise concerns or they saw those in authority as above challenge. Not communicating children’s rights or seeking their views was highlighted in the reviews as an area of weakness. The rights of children to be communicated with, consulted or listened to were not considered as a responsibility of the sports.

5. Understanding risk and when to report

Sports NGBs are not always aware of all the risks specific to their members. They do not know what is not reported to them by those dealing with concerns at grassroot clubs. Reporting procedures can be confusing and are split between club, regional and national organisations. There can also be confusion around the different thresholds used by different organisations about who takes a lead in responding to concerns. One review referred to a culture of ‘deny and defend’ when concerns were raised within an organisation, implying that the NGB would not accept that any of their staff or volunteers would behave in a way to cause risk to children.

The perceived power and status of members, coaches and officials within sports organisations is often a barrier to reporting concerns about their behaviour. This, along with the normalisation of poor practice, means adults do often not recognise the risk. This can be due to several factors:

- the status of perpetrators and their ability to reduce the effect of other safe adults (for example, parents and other protective coaches) from intervening to protect children
- expectations within the sport about the need for physical contact can enable abuse by those seeking to use sport to harm children without others identifying the behaviour as risky
- structures that normalise working in isolation from other coaches and parents reduce the opportunity to understand how this creates vulnerability
- indicators of harm that may not be noticed (due to insufficient training) or may be ignored (when there is no confidence in an organisation to deal with the issue); this in turn reduces confidence in others to come forward, and the cycle is repeated

These risks are greater for those young people at the elite or high-performing end of the sport, where sport is a larger part of their life and those in positions of power have more contact with, and hold over, them.

6. Organisational culture

Concerns have been expressed, in several of the reviews, about the culture that has evolved in sport, particularly focused on:

- a ‘win at all cost’ style of coaching
Learning from inquiries about safeguarding practice in sport

- the need for a substantial power imbalance between coach leader and child and/or parent
- a culture of tolerance in response to lower-level inappropriate behaviours by adults towards children;
  the acceptance of breaking small rules and there being no consequences enables a person to test
  the tolerance and strength of the organisation’s safeguarding processes
- preserving the organisation’s reputation

It has been acceptable for coaches and volunteers to be within an athlete’s personal space for the requirement of the sport. This may be a necessary requirement for instruction or safety, but has also, on occasion, been manipulated to give perpetrators the opportunity to assert control and carry out abuse of the athlete.

Boards of governing bodies may not have a full oversight of safeguarding, instead relying on safeguarding lead officers to carry out procedures correctly with limited monitoring or internal reporting.

Section B – What we can learn from safeguarding in sport reviews

The following 6 points are a summary of the reports’ suggested solutions to the concerns raised in the previous section. The headings chosen are to reflect an appropriate response and areas for NGBs and funders to focus their attention on.

1. Prioritise safeguarding roles and responsibilities

A consistent message across the reviews is a call for more management board ownership of safeguarding, with the need for board safeguarding training and a priority for appointing a board champion. This board champion should play an active role in driving and championing athlete welfare and have a direct link to the safeguarding personnel within the organisation.

There needs to not only be clear visibility of safeguarding policies and procedures for members, parents and children but these need to be proactively shared with all stakeholders in a meaningful way.

Improving the visibility, accessibility, compliance with, and understanding of safeguarding-related policy and procedures means all stakeholders will have a better understanding of their role and response to a concern. Creating a culture within the sport of developing good governance at NGB and club level will nurture improvement in safeguarding practices rather than just focusing on spot checks and negative criticism. However, some check and challenge throughout sports organisations will pick up any concerns about non-compliance with procedures and support reviews of systems by ensuring procedures are understood and meaningful.

2. Develop robust policies and procedures

All sports sector groups should ensure they have robust safeguarding policies and procedures that are regularly reviewed and updated. These should include:
- clarity about what to do in response to a concern, including who to contact, and how, when and what the governing body procedures are going forward
- codes of conduct to define what is not acceptable behaviour – these must be communicated to all stakeholders to ensure poor-practice behaviour is not minimised or ignored
- clear thresholds to define who should respond to and manage different levels of concerns
- where a governing body has a UK-wide remit, there is a need for them to have one UK-wide policy with consistent regional variations included
- safer recruitment practices when hiring new staff or recruiting volunteers that not only include vetting checks and references but test the value base of the individual joining the sport and their ability to engage with children
Learning from inquiries about safeguarding practice in sport

- a review of safeguarding policies and procedures every 3 years (or earlier if there is a specific need to amend because of further learning or changes in legislation); reviewed documents should be brought before the organisation’s board for robust scrutiny

Centralised safeguarding standards should be a requirement of organisations affiliating to a wider governing body or funded by them. These could be enforced through, for example:

- appointment of a club lead for safeguarding
- linked to insurance to facilitate local competitions
- stated requirements for all away trips
- requirement for safe recruitment practices
- links to coaching awards

It is the adults in sports organisations’ responsibility to respond appropriately to concerns and to create a safe culture to prevent abuse from happening in the first place. The requirement for strong safeguarding practice needs to be embedded into partnership working, including ‘due diligence’ checks.

3. Develop a training plan to include all stakeholders

All staff, coaches and volunteers should receive safeguarding training relevant and proportionate to the role they fulfil for the sport. This training must clarify what procedures to follow and help attendees understand their role in protecting children, regardless of whether they work directly with children and young people or not.

For anyone in a role with regular or significant responsibility for children (for example, coaches, club welfare officers, team managers and chaperones), initial safeguarding training must be interactive or (as a minimum) include a significant interactive element. This guidance is informed by research from Edge Hill University commissioned by Sport England.

The training needs to focus not only on how to recognise and respond to child protection concerns, but also assist in the development of a safe culture within the sport and how to communicate with young people. The focus of coach education should not only be about the sharing of skills and knowledge but how to retain young people in sport.

Appropriate training and/or information should be provided for:

- parents and carers, from grassroots through to elite level
- young people
- the board and senior management – every 3 years and focusing on their strategic role in implementing safeguarding procedures
- all those in regulated activity or work with a requirement to refresh their knowledge (continuous professional development) as a condition of their affiliation or their coaching award

4. Have consistent, appropriate communication with parents and children

Alongside the training and education resources for volunteers and coaches, information from sports organisations needs to be clearly communicated with parents and children. This should include communication appropriate to the age of the audience. Online safety was highlighted in some of the reports as a specific area where communication to young people and their parents is important, including information about expectations around the use of social media, behaviour while using social media, and safeguarding issues across the online environment.

There should also be systems in place to engage with and listen to children and their parents. By regularly involving children and parents through, for example, consultations into how best to communicate with them and seeking views on areas of development, a listening culture will be nurtured within the organisation. This
can lead to more concerns being reported due to an increased confidence in the organisation to listen to and respond to these concerns.

5. Have clear reporting procedures

Sports organisations would benefit from a central case-management structure, with an element of independence, to support their regions and clubs in response to safeguarding and child protection concerns. This would reduce the risk of complaints falling through gaps in a sport’s over-complicated system.

As a minimum:

- all child-protection concerns and incidents should be reported, recorded, and forwarded centrally to the governing body to manage through a central database of cases or a complaints log
- while sports will develop their own case management groups involving experienced individuals, there is also the need to know when and how to seek external, independent expertise if required
- procedures for reporting concerns and incidents should be easy to follow and accessible to all staff, volunteers, and parents
- people who report concerns and those impacted by harm or abuse should be communicated with throughout a case while maintaining confidentiality for others involved
- sports organisations should ensure there is support and protections in place for those reporting concerns and incidents, and for whistle-blowers, to build confidence within the sport in reporting a worry
- safeguarding incidents should always be reported to the relevant local authorities or police services once the organisation has established the threshold of the incident
- there should be engagement with young people to establish reporting procedures and awareness-raising about when and how to raise a concern – this could be through child-friendly interactive literature and/or social-media messaging

6. Embed safeguarding practices into the governing body’s culture

Changes in a sport’s culture require monitoring by those who fund sport and set the goals or targets for that sport. Funders and organisations should ensure those responsible for safeguarding have adequate resources. Funding organisations should develop a longer-term safeguarding strategy to include measuring impact that is linked to funding cycles.

Sports organisations should develop 3- to 5-year safeguarding strategies, with the resources and senior ownership to ensure their implementation.

The board and senior management should ultimately be held accountable for everything an organisation does, including handling safeguarding concerns. However, the sport may benefit from a safeguarding advisory board to oversee and monitor the developments within the sport. Such a board would benefit from an independent chairperson.

There is a need to examine the style of coaching practice that sports and those who fund sport want. What does ‘athlete first’ mean to all the different stakeholders in sport if the reviews tell us athletes are encouraged to train or play while injured?

Organisations should build on current affiliation requirements and introduce club-development visits to engage directly with club volunteers, parents and young people. This should be supported by an internal club self-auditing process to enable clubs at a local level to review their own possible gaps. To monitor the sports organisations’ progress, they should publish an annual safeguarding report with contributions from young people.
Sports need to move from a culture of just focusing on increasing participation of young people to one of increasing retention of those young people to ensure a life-long involvement in and love of sport. This can only happen by increasing the focus on making the activity inclusive, safe, fun, and enjoyable for all.

References

  Sydney: Australian Human Rights Commission

  Nottingham: British Canoeing and UK Sport

  London: UK Sport

- **British Gymnastics Whyte Review Interim Report Commissioned by UK Sport and Sport England (2021)**: Anne Whyte QC, whytereview.org/news-and-resources
  London: UK Sport and Sport England

  Walsall: British Judo

  London: Football Association

- **Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (2020)**: IICSA Research Truth Project Thematic Report Child sexual abuse in sports, Dr Andrea Darling, Laura Pope, Dr Jamie-Lee Mooney, Dr Sophia King, Grace Ablett, iicsa.org.uk/document/truth-project-thematic-report-child-sexual-abuse-sports
  London: Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse

  London: Sport Resolutions UK

- **Manchester City FC Mulcahy Review (2021)**: Stage One – Review into Non-Recent Child Sexual Abuse Associated with Manchester City FC, mediacd.mancity.com/cf/media/04sdjmmv/review-into-non-recent-child-sex-abuse-associated-with-manchester-city-fc-final-v2-16-3-21-003.pdf
  Blackstone Chambers London | Pinsent Masons Manchester

- **Manchester City FC Lime Culture Audit (2021)**: Stage Two – A review of the current safeguarding arrangements across MCFC-related operations to assess their suitability as well as making recommendations for enhancing provision and minimising risk where necessary, mancity.com/mulcahy-report
  Manchester: Manchester City FC
Glasgow: Scottish FA

Birmingham: UK Athletics

UK Athletics – Edgehill University commissioned by Sport Resolutions (2021): Safeguarding Education in Athletics – A comparative evaluation of training effect in three modes of entry-level safeguarding training delivered by UK Athletics, research.edgehill.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/46307207/TrainingEvaluation_EHU_FINAL_REPORT.pdf
Birmingham: UK Athletics