

## **NSPCC Child Protection in Sport Unit – Written evidence (NPS0159)**

The Child Protection in Sport Unit (CPSU) is part of the NSPCC and is funded by Sport England, Sport Northern Ireland, Sport Wales, and UK Sport. (In Scotland, there is a similar partnership between Children 1st and sportscotland.)

The CPSU was founded in 2001 in response to a series of high-profile cases of abuse of young athletes. Our aim is to help improve safeguarding and child protection practises within sport organisations, to ensure all children and young people are safe while participating in sport.

The unit plays a strategic role in the landscape of sport in the UK. We work directly with UK Sport Councils, National Governing Bodies (NGBs), Active Partnerships (APs – previously known as County Sports Partnerships) and other organisations. We support organisations to implement and maintain safeguarding practices, to minimise the risk of abuse and ensure that sport stays safe and enjoyable for all those involved.

Our work was recognised internationally in 2016 when the CPSU won UNICEF's Safeguarding in Sport Award.

### **1. How would you rate the Government's progress over the last 5-10 years on strengthening safeguarding and duty of care in sport and recreation at both elite and grassroots levels?**

The landscape for safeguarding in sport has changed greatly over the 20 years that the Unit has been funded to work with national governing bodies of sport and active partnerships (county sports partnerships as they were known). Most sports have taken their safeguarding responsibilities seriously and worked on building clear and robust safeguarding procedures.

A breakthrough over the last few years is that sport and physical activity was mentioned in the Government guidance - Working Together to Safeguarding Children 2018. Sports organisations, within this document, are also now listed as relevant agencies. This means that local sports organisations may now be called upon to join safeguarding partners in their formal arrangements, and if so are required to comply. In most instances, the relevant agency is likely to be an organisation which is large enough to support local strategic safeguarding plans and developments e.g., APs, leisure providers or some larger professional sports clubs.

Some of the developments to improve safeguarding in sport have been slower than we would have wished for. An example of this is the government's response to the NSPCC's Close the Loophole campaign that was largely driven by the sports sector. The agreement to extend the law will protect many 16- and 17-year-olds, it just should not have taken 4 years to get to this stage – and it is not finalised yet.

The UK Governance code is another area that has strengthened safeguarding in sport but did not go far enough in being explicit as to the safeguarding requirements of the sport at a senior level. It covers areas like structure, people, communication, standards and conduct where safeguarding is implied throughout but needs to be stronger to motivate organisations to do better for both children and adults.

One of the frustrations and delays that has not been helpful is the government response to the Duty of care report. Its contents have not come to fruition despite appearing to be welcomed by the sector and there has been no official government response as we went straight into purdah and Brexit.

The government and the sport sector have been slower to recognise the need for stronger safeguards at the elite level. The CPSU was initially funded to look at grassroots sport and the focus on elite sport was not there until much later despite the unique vulnerabilities of the athletes.

The sports councils have included safeguarding as part of the funding agreements for NGBs and APs but there is no regulatory body or clear process about what would happen if they were not meeting their safeguarding requirements.

One of the obstacles for sport is the cost of safeguarding training. While other training, such as training around mental health, is freely available, there is a cost for safeguarding training. It is important that those involved within sport and physical activity understand and recognise what a concern is and what they should be doing about it.

### **1a. Is it helpful to think about safeguarding and duty of care together or does this run the risk of one over-shadowing the other?**

Wider athlete welfare is more important than the terms that are used. It is important to be clear about what these terms mean if people are using them and for them to be consistent in their use and meaning attached to them.

### **2. Is current legislation fit for purpose to protect children and adults at risk in sport and recreation settings?**

The NSPCC Close the Loophole campaign demonstrated significant safeguarding loopholes around the position of trust status of coaches. This can be exploited when guidance is a bit more ambiguous, as within sport and physical activity, and needs to be strengthened.

There are concerns about information sharing in terms of criminal records checks, including Disclosure & Barring Service checks, and statutory information. Sports have experienced a hierarchy of information sharing as they are not perceived as having the 'right' to the same level of information that other bodies have. This then leaves them having to make recruitment and case management decisions without all the information that would support them make better choices. Greater clarity from government would be welcomed.

Mandatory reporting is a controversial area and research into this area is ongoing. When we look at other countries that have implemented this there has been little evidence, at this time, that children are safer for it. Further work still needs to be done to educate all stakeholders and build confidence to raise concerns along with how to challenge if they do not get the response, they should have received. This is not a panacea that will solve the issues.

## **2a. What can you tell us about the relationship between sport and recreation and law enforcement and/or social services?**

I reference this in our answer to the above questions. Despite sport and leisure being recognised as a partner or relevant agency, disciplinary or employment decisions are often made without having access to the full picture. We have sports organisations telling us that statutory agencies will not share information with them that would help and support them make sound safeguarding decisions. This is also sometimes linked to geography and where the club is that determines whether information is shared or not, which is unacceptable. Consistent guidance from central government is important here.

The relationships between the sectors are improving but it needs direction from a much higher level to encourage these relationships and allay any fears and barriers.

## **3. Do national governing bodies take safeguarding seriously enough? Are they are being sufficiently supported but also held to account for any shortcomings or failings?**

The recognised and funded sports, overall, take their safeguarding seriously and have named safeguarding leads to support the work that needs to happen. Despite the safeguarding leads' hard work, sometimes the block is at a senior level where safeguarding is not seen as so much of a priority – this is demonstrated when there are financial issues and safeguarding is often one of the first areas to be cut. Senior leadership must recognise their role in prioritising safeguarding and to create a culture that values it within the whole organisation – it must be led from the top.

Support is there for the recognised and funded bodies through organisations like CPSU, but where do the sports and physical activity providers that are not funded or recognised go to? We must acknowledge there are millions of children taking part in activity outside the traditional sport structures. This needs to be resourced too.

The standards and annual reviews that the CPSU provide for the recognised sports demonstrate that sports see this as an important part of their work but there is a limitation to what a team of 7 consultants can do in terms of an in-depth assessment. Support is there for various parts of safeguarding but being held to account is difficult, as mentioned previously in connection with a regulatory body.

### **3a. Are there any national governing bodies leading the way with good practice in safeguarding and duty of care?**

There are number of sports that do a lot of excellent work around safeguarding – Lawn Tennis Association, British Wheelchair Basketball, British Mountaineering Council to name a few. Sometimes it is not about size or resource that an organisation has but about the drive and commitment to safeguarding. For example, Basketball England appear to do good work especially as they are often working in quite challenging areas.

On the elite side of things British Para Olympics really recognise their role in safeguarding and GB Snowsport appears to have created a good culture and good leadership from our observations.

A lot of sports rely on good lead officers who can drive and challenge but there needs to be buy in across all the organisations.

### **4. Do we need a national register of coaches? What impact would this have and who should be responsible for it?**

Yes – this has been discussed for many years and nothing has moved on this. This would help information sharing for coaches who coach in multiple sports. It would also help ensure that they have the right qualifications etc

It is important to distinguish between a national register of coaches and a list of banned coaches. There needs to be a clear distinction between these two lists.

There is a significant gap and inconsistencies between sports as some have a register of their own coaches and others do not. This would be addressed if this scheme were introduced.

There would need to be a professional regulatory body running this register. This would be responsible for hearing concerns and making judgements about criteria, quality assurance, monitoring and updating this list.

Costs would need to be considered as coaches already have to pay for training, DBS, registration for certain sports and many coaches are volunteers and should not be financially penalised for that.

### **5. Do elite athletes face greater or different risks to those playing sport at the grassroots level?**

**These factors can make some elite athletes more vulnerable to all kinds of harmful behaviours from themselves, their coach, parents, or members of the entourage:**

- Win at all costs approach
- Narrow athletic identity
- Over training and training whilst injured
- Intensity and dependency of relationships

- Focus on weight and body image
- Time spent away from support networks
- Repeated poor practice and a lack of leadership to tackle it
- Negative culture where athletes or staff not able to voice concern
- Fear of losing a place on programme

Build in information around intersectionality – Brendan

More vulnerable to abuse at elite – put up with more behaviours that would not normally be acceptable

## **6. Looking forward, what are the top three priorities for strengthening safeguarding and duty of care in sport and recreation settings?**

The top 3 would be:

1. Consistent regulation of sport and physical activity organisations grounded in legislation to ensure safeguarding is a priority for all bodies. The coaching license would be one way towards this.
2. Education and support around the importance of listening to the voice of young people and engaging with them in planning activities.
3. Specific funding for safeguarding within sports organisations to ensure that it is given priority and is safeguarded.

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