

## **Sport integrity and safeguarding within UK sporting organisations**

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### **Abstract**

This paper considers United Kingdom sporting organisations, such as National Governing Bodies of Sport and issues related to sport integrity and the wider safeguarding domain. Within the UK any organisations seeking state funding for sport since 2017 must meet standards of governance as defined in the Code for Sports Governance. The Code sets out the levels of accountability, transparency and financial integrity required. It sets targets around diversity in decision making, and requirements for greater transparency and updated constitutional arrangements. Specific examples of National Governing Bodies of Sport and issues of sport integrity or governance will be presented.

Sport organisations have a moral and statutory duty of care to protect the health and well-being of children, young people and vulnerable adults which they engage with. More recently the focus in the UK has also turned to elite athlete welfare and mental health issues. The duty of care responsibilities will be outlined with particular focus on safeguarding responsibilities. Issues faced include bullying, emotional abuse, grooming, physical and sexual abuse including historic allegations of abuse. Legislative and guidance frameworks in place in the UK to support NGBs with these issues will be outlined.

The paper will draw on the work of Brackenridge in applying the six reasons why sports organisations are susceptible to incidents of sexual exploitation. Focussing particularly on examples of hierarchy, coach obedience and power relations. Specific examples of National Governing Bodies of Sport within the UK and relevant contemporary issues related to safeguarding in sport will be presented.



welfare, injury, equality, diversity and inclusion. UK Coaching, the national organisation that are responsible for coach education responded to the Duty of Care in Sports report by creating an educational package for coaches which leads to a Duty to Care badge (UKCoaching, 2021a). The Duty to Care badge embraces five pillars which are; safeguarding, inclusion, diversity, well-being and mental health. By following this online education through the Duty to Care toolkit, coaches can achieve a digital badge indicating that they have undertaken the training.

An additional education package which is compulsory for all coaches is the Safeguarding and Protecting Children from Abuse workshop (UKCoaching, 2021b), again offered by UK Coaching and developed in partnership with the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) and their specialist Child Protection in Sport Unit (CPSU) (Everley, 2020). The Safeguarding and Protecting Children workshop covers five types of issue which may occur in a sporting context. These are; bullying, emotional abuse, grooming, physical abuse and sexual abuse.

### **Characteristics of the UK system**

In common with other nations The United Kingdom has a legislative framework surrounding these issues. A few the relevant acts are outlined in Table 1 below and include, for example, The Protection of Children Act, 1999 and The Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups Act 2006.

*Table 1: United Kingdom safeguarding legislative framework*

Human Rights Act	1998
Children Act	1989
Protection of Children Act	1999
Children Act	2004
Working together to safeguard children	2006
Data Protection Act	1998
Care standards Act	2000
Sexual offences Act	2003
Mental Capacity Act	2005
Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups Act	2006
Equality Act	2010
The protection of freedoms Act	2012

Mori at al (2015) identified eight characteristics of the UK system for child protection in sports. These were the comprehensiveness of the system, the division of abuse into five types, the modelling of good practise by sports coaches, the system checks governed by the Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS), the fact that child protection guidelines contain unique contents, the instructional guidelines for sports authority figures, the link to a certificated system for coaching and finally the protection of the sports authority figures themselves.

## **Example National Governing Bodies of Sport**

Two examples of sporting organisations which have faced challenges related to integrity and safeguarding are presented below.

British Gymnastics. During 2020 a number of high-profile gymnasts spoke out about shocking abuse within the British team. They use terms such as cruel behaviour and “so ingrained in our daily lives that it became completely normalised”. Two leading gymnasts who are sisters said that they had faced an environment of fear and mental abuse including questioning of their weight and attitude. They cite over training such that their bodies repeatedly broke down. The Chief Executive of British Gymnastics, Jane Allen faced calls for her resignation and told the member clubs that she was appalled and ashamed by the multiple stories of abuse that had emerged. In a statement, Allen said “any mistreatment of gymnast is inexcusable”. She went on to state; “It is vital that concerns are made public whether through the media or our processes, I pay tribute to those who have spoken out, their bravery will help drive change within gymnastics”. The British Olympic Association then announced that it will ban any gymnastics coach who is under investigation for abuse from appearing at the Tokyo Olympic Games the Chef de Mission for TeamGB for Tokyo, Mark England, affirmed that abuse has no place in sports at all.

The Football Association. The second example of a national governing body which has recently faced issues is the Football Association (FA). Several cases of historical abuse continued to emerge and these are often accompanied by reports of official complacency and obstruction. An independent inquiry into the sexual abuse scandal within English football found that eight clubs failed to respond to inquiries, these clubs may now face disciplinary action and the FA has the power to impose sanctions. One thing which is being seen is survivors waiving their right to anonymity in order to tell those stories. An example is former professional Andy Woodward who suffered years of childhood sexual abuse at the hands of Barry Bennell, a convicted paedophile who worked in football in the 1980s and 1990s.

### **Reasons why sports organisations may be susceptible**

When we consider the reasons why sports organisations may be more susceptible to incidents of sexual exploitation than other areas of the voluntary sector, the work by Brackenridge in 2001 perhaps provides some insights (Brackenridge, 2001).

Brackenridge suggests that the first reason is that sport exhibits hierarchical authority systems, secondly that sport demands total obedience and commitment to the commands of the coach, this obedience to hierarchy perhaps facilitates an environment where the coach can exhibit control. The third reason suggested is that sport has a propensity for isolating athletes from their families, peers and social support systems, clearly, isolating athletes again allows for an environment where abuse is possible. The fourth reason suggested is that the body project is one of the central features of sport whereby there is a focus on matters relating to the body. Brackenridge goes on to suggest that sport has a vast potential for the eroticisation of power relationships and that sport is structurally bound to zero sum outcomes.

Together these six reasons may offer some insights as to the root causes of a number of incidents of sexual exploitation found within sport.

## **Recommendations**

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) made several recommendations for sports organisations to implement. These were outlined by Mountjoy et al in 2016 the first of which is to implement and monitor policies and procedures for safe sport (Mountjoy et al., 2016). Next the IOC recommend that sports organisations deliver an education programme about how to engage in preventing nonaccidental violence to athletes and that qualified designated personnel are appointed and made responsible for athlete welfare and safe sport programming. It's recommended that the sports organisations seek to foster strong partnerships with the athlete's parents or carers and that they put in place structures to listen to the voices of athletes, this could include for example having an athlete subcommittee reporting through to the board. Finally, Mountjoy identified the recommendation that sports organisations partner with other expert groups in order to follow a multidisciplinary and multi-agency approach, this could include, for example, police and law enforcement agencies, the media, medical organisations, and child protection support groups.

## **Summary**

In summary this paper considered the sporting structure within the United Kingdom and the introduction of the Code of Sports Governance. The Duty of Care in Sports report to government was explained and the response from UK Coaching in the development of the Duty to Care training was outlined. The legislative frameworks within the UK along with the issues covered within the Child Protection and Safeguarding Children in Sport workshop were outlined. Mori's work explains the characteristics of the child protection system within British sport and examples from two national governing bodies were presented. Finally, the paper sought to identify reasons why sports organisations are susceptible to incidents of abuse and drew on the recommendations of the International Olympic Committee.

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