

“... so what?”  
**Attitudes of the voluntary sector  
towards child protection in sports clubs**

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## **Abstract**

There is both growing concern about ethical standards in sport and also rapid expansion in the number of local and national schemes designed to encourage youth sports development. Child abuse in youth sport has become a 'moral panic' in British society but there is evidence of a child protection policy vacuum between national and club level. Sport club child protection schemes are rarely informed by the work of their respective national governing bodies but there is an almost complete absence of empirical data with which to support or challenge claims about child safety in voluntary sector sports clubs. The research reported addresses this knowledge gap. It was designed to explore the extent to which one English midlands county had made provision for child protection and to assess the main issues confronting the county in its efforts to enhance child protection in voluntary sport. Voluntary sector junior sports clubs (N = 396) were sent a postal survey; 129 responded. 19 junior sports focus groups and selected county officers and staff were invited to participate in group or individual interviews during the second half of 1999 (prior to the establishment of the NSPCC/Sport England Child Protection in Sport Unit). This paper reports the survey and interview data from the voluntary clubs. Results show an extremely varied pattern of awareness of the main child protection issues in the various sports clubs. One common theme emerged, however: there was a clear misapprehension that children are safest amongst those whom they know best and most at risk from those currently outside their sports clubs. This view is firmly contradicted by research statistics on sources of child abuse. The paper argues that the unwillingness of club personnel to challenge their own assumptions is causally linked to a culture of complacency about child protection in voluntary sport.

**Key words:** Child abuse, child protection, voluntary, sport club

**Words:** 7,504



## Introduction

There is growing concern about ethical issues in sport including cheating, doping and child abuse (McNamee and Parry, 1998; Shogun1999; Kirby *et al.* 2000). At the same time, the number of local and national schemes in Britain and elsewhere designed to encourage youth sports development has expanded rapidly on the assumption that sport contributes to the citizenship, autonomy and welfare of young people (Mason, 1995; Roberts, 1996; English Sports Council, 1999; Collins and Buller, 2000). Such programmes include: the Millennium Youth Games (Brackenridge, 2000), Champion Coaching (Rowe and Champion, 2000), the Millennium Volunteers sports leadership initiative (Youth Sport Trust, 2000), the establishment of a network of designated Sports Colleges (Youth Sport Trust, 1999) and the government's School Sports Co-ordinator programme ([www.sportengland.org](http://www.sportengland.org)). For these schemes to be successful the quality of leadership in child protection is paramount, for there is no point in enticing more young people into sport if they cannot be guaranteed a safe and enjoyable experience. Many of these schemes function within the voluntary sector or in partnerships between voluntary, public and charitable bodies.

Accountability for child protection and welfare is much clearer in statutory bodies, which not only operate within the legal child protection framework but which also have easier access to the expertise of social services departments than do voluntary bodies. Many voluntary sector sport organisations are grappling with how to demonstrate financial and ethical accountability and have yet to come to terms with the most recent legal requirements for child protection and abuse of trust such as the UK Home Office guidance on abuse of trust (Home Office, 1999) and the Sexual Offences (Amendment) Act, 2000. From January 2001, with the setting up of the Child Protection in Sport Unit (CPSU) by Sport England and the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to



Children ([www.sportprotects.org.uk](http://www.sportprotects.org.uk)), National Governing Bodies of sport (NGBs) in England have come under closer scrutiny from government. Notwithstanding this development, knowledge of the precise state of child protection in 'grassroots' voluntary sport clubs remains elusive. At an operational level, then, it is not possible to say whether voluntary sport demonstrates a *laissez faire* or an effective child protection culture. This paper explores the extent to which voluntary sport within one midlands county in England has developed and implemented child protection initiatives.

### **Policy development for child protection in sport**

With a few notable exceptions (such as Kirby and Greaves 1996; Brackenridge, 1997; Cense and Brackenridge, 2001; Leahy *et al.*, 2002), relatively few research studies have been conducted on the subject of child abuse in sport. Despite this, child abuse and protection in sport have become a 'moral panic' in British society in recent years, characterised by many assumptions and little in the way of empirical support (Brackenridge, 2001). Several high-profile cases of child abuse, and specifically sexual abuse, resulted in legal prosecutions in leading sporting nations during the 1990s, drawing attention to the issue in a dramatic way. The policy response to these prosecutions varied in each country with some, such as Canada (Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women in Sport, 1994) and Australia (Australian Sports Commission 1998a,b,c,d), taking a generic approach to anti-harassment; and others, such as The Netherlands (Cense, 1997) and England ([www.sportprotects.org.uk](http://www.sportprotects.org.uk)), focussing more closely on child abuse *per se*. (For a full discussion of the implications of policy divergence on this issue see Brackenridge 2001, Chapter 9.)



In England, a National Task Force for Child Protection in Sport in October 1999 was established, in large part as a response by Sport England to lobbying and pressure from 'grass roots' sport for a central, one-stop-shop to co-ordinate child protection enquiries and information. Key stakeholders in this lobby group included: national governing bodies (NGBs), local authorities, sports development officers (SDOs) and other bodies such as the police and youth groups.

In a survey of Exchequer (government treasury) funded NGBs carried out by the English Sports Council in the summer of 1999 only an estimated half had in place a written child protection (CP) policy (White, 1999). By the time of a repeat survey, carried out by Sport England in December 2000, this had risen to 55 out of 58 organisations (Sport England, 2001a). This rapid growth in policy provision reflected not only a growing awareness and concern about the welfare of young people in sport but also a response by sport groups to the introduction of a new funding criterion by the Department for Media, Culture and Sport (DCMS). From April 2001, grant aid for an NGB became contingent on it demonstrating to Sport England that an active CP policy was in place. Minimum operating standards for child protection were also introduced (Sport England 2001b), as they have been for both gender and race equity (Sporting Equals, 2000). Not surprisingly, the policy 'lever' exerted by the funding criterion had a dramatic effect on policy activity at the national level in voluntary sport. It remained unclear, however, whether NGB policies were effectively implemented at the *local* level. Indeed, in her research into child protection policy development and implementation amongst NGBs and their local clubs, Summers (2000) found a policy vacuum between national and club level, with club child protection schemes rarely informed by the work of their NGBs.



By the start of the new millennium very few NGBs had undertaken any systematic research into the issue of child protection and welfare. Most relied on assistance from external agencies, such as the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) and the National Coaching Foundation (NCF, now Sportscoach UK), in order to design CP policies and procedures. If the NGBs themselves developed policy without prior empirical knowledge then it seemed unlikely that the voluntary network of sports clubs would itself have developed evidence-based policy.

As part of the culture shift accompanying the move from Compulsory Competitive Tendering to Best Value (Sport England/Local Government Association, 1999), local government departments had to provide factual evidence to underpin their strategic planning and to demonstrate financial and social accountability (Leat, 1995; Coalter, 2000). There was almost a complete absence of empirical data, however, with which to support or challenge claims about child safety in voluntary sector sports clubs, both for non-disabled and for disabled participants. The study reported below was intended both to address this knowledge gap and also to provide one English local authority with assistance in targeting more effectively its resources for child protection work with its voluntary sector partners. The research was conducted in the summer and autumn of 1999, prior to the establishment of the National Task Force for Child Protection in Sport, the Child Protection in Sport Unit (CPSU) and the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB). At the time of the study, it was mooted by the Home Office that a £10 fee might be attached to checks on volunteers carried out by the proposed CRB: clubs were asked to give their views on this proposal.

## **The study**



The study was commissioned by Midshire (pseudonym) County Council (MCC), a local authority with a strong reputation for its proactive work in sports development. MCC's Leisure Services Department set up an Action Group to develop more effective measures for child protection in its voluntary sector sports clubs. Before the Action Group could suggest improvements and/or new proposals it first needed to understand the existing pattern of provision and the efficacy of the various stakeholder roles within this (see Figure 1). This audit of child protection measures in the County's voluntary sector sport clubs was thus seen as one more step towards improving the safety of junior sport in MCC.

**- Figure 1 about here –**

The research project was designed to explore the extent to which the voluntary sport club sector in the County had made provision for CP and to assess the main issues confronting the County Council in its efforts to enhance child protection in the voluntary sport sector.

### ***Aims***

The aims of the project were:

1. to define the nature and scope of child protection policies and practices in the county's voluntary sports sector;
2. to define what constitutes good practice in CP in the county's voluntary sports sector;



3. to assess the main issues confronting Midshire County Council in its efforts to enhance child protection in voluntary sport in the county.

In order to understand the context of CP in Midshire the Area Child Protection Committee (ACPC) CP guidelines and practices for the voluntary sector were consulted. Key Sports Services staff, including sport-specific SDOs, were also interviewed for this purpose. This paper reports only the results from the club consultation (survey and sport group interviews). The results of the expert consultation are reported elsewhere.

### ***Postal survey***

The first and second aims were addressed through a postal survey of the voluntary sports sector that mapped current practice with regard to policies and procedures for CP. Voluntary sector junior sports clubs (N = 396), representing 27 different sports, were selected by the County Council Leisure Services department from the full range of listed clubs. In the case of football, every tenth club was selected in order not to skew the overall findings since there were over 1,000 football clubs in the county. A questionnaire comprising 26 closed and open questions was sent by post to each club secretary. A reply-paid envelope was enclosed. Reminder letters were sent to all clubs one month after the initial mailing.

**- Table 1 about here -**

Seven weeks after the survey had been posted a 30% return (n = 129) had been achieved, satisfactory for postal surveys of this type (see Table 1). Returns were received from 23 of the 27 sports (one 'sport' was labelled 'aquatics' for purposes of analysis but included four distinct sub-disciplines), giving a good cross-section of those



contacted. Survey data were coded and entered into SPSS.X Version 10 for statistical analysis. Respondents were invited to give their contact details at the end of the survey if they were prepared to be telephoned by MCC at a later date for further discussion of the issues or to describe good practice examples. These details were catalogued and passed to the Sports Development Manager under separate cover.

### ***Sport group remote interviews***

Blank cassettes, a reply-paid envelope with interview guidelines and a schedule of questions were sent to the convenors of 19 junior sports interview groups (see Table 2) in order to address Aim 3. From these, 9 tapes were returned, a response rate of 42%. The tapes were transcribed and analysed against the framework of questions, using hierarchical content analysis (Berg, 1998).

**- Table 2 about here -**

### ***Ethics, consent and confidentiality***

All respondents gave voluntary informed consent to be involved in the project and all were guaranteed anonymity. An undertaking was also given that the raw data from the recorded tapes would be destroyed on completion of the project.

## **Presentation and discussion of results**

### ***Survey of clubs***

Table 3 provides a summary the descriptive data derived from the survey, selected aspects of which are discussed below.

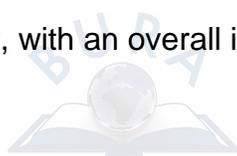
**- Table 3 about here -**



Of the 130 responding clubs, 121 (93%) were affiliated to a higher body, mainly at county and/or national level. Whereas 56 clubs (43%) replied that they had a code of ethics/practice, 70 (54%) did not. Since this project generated baseline data that will provide a future benchmark for child protection policy development in sport, it is not possible to make comparative judgments about this figure. However, at best it indicates that there is a great deal more work to do on the development of club-level codes of ethics/practice in sport and, at worst, it reflects a low level of concern for ethical conduct. Fewer than half of the codes in existence were from the clubs' own NGBs, indicating that a greater lead could be taken at national level to assist with and promulgate such codes.

Fifty of the clubs (39%) had a child protection policy. As with the codes of ethics/practice, 30 (23%) of the child protection (CP) policies had been adopted from the NGB. Again, it is difficult to judge these figures since no previous data exist but they do appear to reflect the Sport England assessment at that time (White, 1999) that something less than half of sports at national level had such policies in place. A small number (10 = 8%) had adopted child protection policies from the County Council or social services. The subsequent introduction of a set of NGB standards for child protection by Sport England (Sport England, 2001b) should have a considerable impact on the future uptake of both codes of practice and policies for child protection at club level.

Seventy eight clubs (60%) issued 'written expectations' to members but, in the main, these were given to parents and or children and virtually no clubs (2 = 1.5%) issued them to coaches or volunteers. The most recently formed and the longest formed clubs were less likely to have a CP policy, with an overall inverted U distribution, which



supported the perception expressed in the qualitative data that child protection is less embedded in newer clubs (see Table 4).

**- Table 4 about here -**

Thirty two clubs (25%) had no minimum age for junior members. Almost half the clubs (48%) specified a minimum age of 6 years and 97% specified 12 as the minimum age. At this point, relatively little is known about age-related risks of abuse in sport but these data may well be of use as research into this issue develops. It has been hypothesised, for example, that pre-pubertal children (around 12-15 years) may be of greater risk of sexual exploitation by authority figures in performance level sport (Brackenridge and Kirby, 1997) but this has not yet been demonstrated empirically.

There was a very heavy social class bias in respect of transportation for junior sport, with private transport being by far the most common means of getting children to and from the club (in 119 cases or 92%). According to the clubs, virtually no young people used bicycles or foot to get to and from their sports sessions. Private transport might well be an effective means of protecting children from unknown risks in public places but it also carries costs in terms of children's independence and autonomy, their health and fitness, social exclusion from sport of non car-owning families, and diversity in sport. Most of the clubs responding provided for both boys and girls (104 = 80%).

With respect to provision for disabled young people, 69 clubs (53%) provided no sport for young people with learning disabilities, 33 (25%) provided for such participants at junior (under 18 level) and 20 clubs (15%) provided for both over and under 18s. Fifty one clubs (39%) provided sport for disabled young people of both sexes. CP in disabled sport is at a relatively early stage of development (Kerr, 1999). Whilst it might be argued



that those working with disabled young people would have greater awareness of the need for CP, there is no available evidence that young disabled people in sport experience more effective protection from abuse than do their non-disabled counterparts. Importantly, professional opinion supports the view they face greater risk of abuse (Boocock, 2001; Kerr, 1999).

Advertising for new sports leaders or helpers in the clubs was mainly done by word of mouth (97= 75%), with appointments also made informally in 97 cases (75%), and 57 clubs (44%) making only informal enquiries into someone's background before appointing them. Only 6 clubs (5%) used evidence of police checks, references *and* informal enquiries before appointing someone. Typical comments on this issue were:

*Almost all are long standing members or associates: well known and respected.*

*Normally people are known to us prior to being asked as helpers.*

*(Take up) reference only if unknown: coaches are interviewed – helpers are appointed informally.*

These responses reflect a view that known people are not likely to be problematic in terms of CP, a dangerous assumption (Gallagher, 2000) that was also evident in the focus group discussions.

Two thirds of the responding clubs did not give representation to junior members or vulnerable adults in committee decisions, reflecting an exclusionary stance towards such members. Given the importance attached to the development of children's



autonomy in rationales for youth sport programmes, wider representation might well be advisable. Since child abuse often stems from young people feeling powerless and adults assuming power over them, any measure to empower sports participants will help towards the protection of children and vulnerable adults from abuse.

The vast majority of clubs involved parents or carers in their activities (120 = 92%): a small but worrying minority (9 = 7%) said they never did so. This is of great concern since openness is one effective measure of CP: parents and carers should be encouraged to drop in unannounced and to become involved in supporting their child's involvement as far as possible (Finkelhor and Williams, 1998; Brackenridge, 1998).

Coaches and instructors (28 = 22%) in junior clubs settings were almost twice as likely as club volunteers (15 = 12%) to *always* be given CP training, information and materials and, in general, were better trained and informed about CP. Large numbers of volunteers operate within sport (encouraged by government schemes such as the Millennium Volunteers programme) but CP training provision for volunteers is much less widely available than it is for sports leaders and coaches. This is clearly an area for urgent attention and investment by both local authorities and NGBs.

Ninety three (72%) clubs said that they felt very confident or fairly confident about handling disclosures from children about abuse at home and a similar number (97=75%) said the same about handling disclosures about abuse by sport staff or volunteers. Around a fifth to a quarter felt not at all confident in these situations. Set against the previously reported lack of information and training on CP, especially amongst volunteers, these figures indicate a rather complacent attitude towards handling disclosures. However, it is interesting to note that clubs with a code of



ethics/practice and those with a CP policy were *more* likely to be confident about handling disclosures, whether these related to staff/volunteers or to problems at the child's home. Codes and written policies have sometimes been criticised as being limited in their powers and effects (McNamee, 1997) but these data give some weight to their importance as awareness-raising and confidence-raising tools.

In response to the question about general concerns, clubs ranged from those who were in denial or dismissive about CP to those who were confident. Examples of the former included:

*We have never discussed the issue at club committee level or at any other level ... I'm afraid I have never given the matter any thought at all [this was from a sport whose NGB does have a set of policies and procedures]*

*... it does not happen at our club ... try to use my experience as a father of six to recognise any children at risk.*

On the other hand, some responses reflected confidence, with responses such as:

*No real concern ... our coaches have been members for many years ... all the children known to members because of the nature of the village.*

*In 45 years I have had no experience of this. I am secretary of a long-established well-run, 'family-style' club whose sole aim is to promote and foster the game in the local community.*



As with training about anti-racist and anti-sexism in the 1980s, there seems to be a need to remind people that child protection is an issue that requires a mindset of constant vigilance and self-critical good practice. Some respondents demonstrated very stereotyped views of abusers, resembling the stranger-danger myth that many parents also subscribe to. One said:

*Paedophiles can easily penetrate sports clubs as no real vetting takes place ...  
my main concern with my sport is some of the adult characters the game attracts.*

Other general concerns that emerged were the financial and time costs involved in any new systems for vetting or CP training, for example:

*In an ideal world where all youth sport is funded and you can provide a welfare officer that's great. We would all wish for this. But it's not and 90% of youth sport is run on a shoestring like my club. Real people have to earn a living not 9-5 [sic] and attend evening courses.*

County councils like Midshire might try to lift some of the perceived CP burdens off sports clubs by developing pooled systems of CP support and training.

Emotional and physical pressures on children were also raised as concerns, with examples given of over stretching, over-training, parental pressure for success, dependency on the coach, using adult-sized equipment or having to travel home very late at night. Many of these concerns have been examined in previous research into youth sports (for example, Hellestedt, 1987; Grisogono, 1991; Donnelly 1999) but few studies have linked them to child abuse or to protective measures. Indeed, even though



policy documents for CP in sport include physical and emotional abuse and neglect, the child protection discourse in sport is almost invariably focussed on *sexual* abuse, part of the moral panic discussed earlier.

Finally, a range of concerns were mentioned about lack of knowledge and awareness, and screening and guidelines/policies. Many respondents felt that there was a difficult balance to be struck between doing too much, and thus scaring people off, and doing too little, and thus ignoring risks. This is the real challenge for advocates of CP in sport nationally and locally. Many NGBs and clubs are clearly trying hard to develop fully comprehensive systems of CP, which places a considerable emotional and resource burden on them: others are doing nothing and see no reason to change.

A very wide range of good practice examples was offered, which are presented in Table 5. Many of these related to practices promulgated through NGB policies and codes; some had been developed locally and others were transferred from cognate areas of work such as school teaching or the youth service.

**- Table 5 about here -**

### ***Sport group remote interviews***

The interviews were designed to provide data about the awareness, attitudes, feelings and experiences of the different stakeholders in relation to child protection in voluntary sports club in the county. Selected responses are summarised below.

***CP awareness:*** Club members appeared to accept that things could happen in sport that would never be tolerated in educational settings:



*... the education system is a far bigger more complex system and more well guarded because it is a public system ... there's a lot of things that happen within sport within the (training venue) that would never be allowed to happen within the education system but nobody's there ... there is no one to go to check it ... everybody has to be accountable.*

Where procedures had existed for a relatively long time (2-3 years) respondents accepted them somewhat unquestioningly: this could mean that they were satisfied or that they had become blasé. In general, the clubs felt relatively uninformed and parents/carers were thought to be less knowledgeable on the issues within sport than outside it. Access to information was problematic and documents were thought to be too complex and bulky. Information seemed to be more readily available through professional non-sport or local authority sources than through governing bodies. Legal knowledge was scarce. The clubs wanted continuous awareness raising work through dissemination of a range of different materials, recognising that “...it's a drip, drip process.”

Interviewees perceived that parents needed more information from the County Council as current CP work was very coach-orientated. Similarly, respondents thought that children were unsure of where to go for help, which made it difficult for them to report concerns. Young people were seen as very trusting and in need of greater education on CP.

***Policy co-ordination and effectiveness:*** There was thought to be a lack of co-ordination on CP, especially with regard to the County Council/NGB interface. Clubs



wanted MCC to mesh its own policies and procedures with those of its governing bodies since these did not always agree.

*... the principles of it should be exactly the same for every sport so really a lot of work's being duplicated here.*

*... it's not pushed ... hasn't reached the grassroots ... lack of communication*

The view was strongly expressed that macro plans (across all sport governing bodies) should exist, with micro scale alterations tailored at local level. In comparison with business environments, sport was thought to be disorganised with regard to CP.

*... [As a business person], with regular plans and structures, I can't believe... this thing couldn't be dealt with for all organisations very simply and every organisation should have its own statement and its own policy which should be readily published on the wall. It should be part of your business statement, should be in your development plan.*

This is something that the recently established CPSU will pursue as part of the national Action Plan. It was thought that all local clubs or bodies should, like most NGBs, have a CP policy and a register of who was qualified to coach in their particular sports. Again, both suggestions appear to be in concert with the remit of the CPSU and the recent requirements of Sport England (Sport England, 2001). It remains to be seen whether such practices are adopted widely at local level where turnover in the management structure of clubs, and in membership, often mitigates against the stability needed for effective CP.



Views of the effectiveness of CP in club sport at the time of the study ranged from the critical to the complacent. Despite some sports feeling fairly ignorant on the issue – “*We are off the pace...*” “*Everyone is rather behind on the issue...*” others reported that they felt reasonably knowledgeable, especially in those sports that had had first-hand experience of dealing with problem cases. Hardly anyone reported having awareness about CP in other sports. Some said that parents/carer and volunteer labour was so desperately needed in their sports that CP frequently took a low priority because “... *more common than not you are begging parents to help with transport.*” There was evidence of complacency about team sports being safer than so-called “one-to-one” sports. Previous research on child sexual harassment and abuse in sport, however, indicates that there is unlikely to be such a thing as a safe sport (Fasting, Brackenridge and Sundgot Borgen, 2000).

One group suggested that most abuse occurred outside the actual training or competition setting, within vulnerable areas and activities such as toileting and changing, and travel to and from venues. This group perceived added responsibilities and potential vulnerabilities for both parties when staff or helpers had to go on overnight trips with young people. Previous risk analysis in sport has identified four locations of particular risk – national and international competitions, the coach’s home, vehicles and overnight stays in hotels (Kirby and Greaves, 1996). This research was based on elite rather than club performers: further studies of risk in recreational sport are needed in order to confirm effective risk management strategies. Respondents also suggested that before and after training sessions constituted vulnerable times for young people they reported that parents/carers did not want to do ‘double shifts’ (taking the child to practice or competition and fetching them home again afterwards). Sport sessions that



operated outside the club system were thought likely to be the most vulnerable of all, a view that most CP experts would concur with since these are beyond the jurisdiction of even the NGBs. Individual entrepreneurs who are non-affiliates of an NGB may set up and run sports or activity sessions and use these as a means of access to children, as did Thomas Hamilton prior to perpetrating the Dunblane massacre in 1996. Lack of accreditation by a recognised NGB is also a potential hazard in a voluntary setting since poor practice is likely to pass unnoticed and/or unchallenged.

**Handling disclosures:** In general, referral systems for reporting disclosures or suspicions were not well known. In addition, clubs reported that the internal relationships that develop in sport clubs made it very difficult to report someone known closely over many years. Some people even felt under pressure because confidentiality requirements about disclosures meant that they carried ‘guilty knowledge’ (Fetterman, 1989). A mechanism for supporting them and the whistle blowers was requested. One such option is a telephone helpline: both the Amateur Swimming Association and the Football Association currently operate these and CPSU has plans to introduce a national cross-sport one in England. An experimental telephone helpline for abuse in sport was successfully run for two years in the Netherlands following a research study (Cense, 1997).

**Training:** External support and training was seen as both costly, in time and money, and a low priority:

*... [in] more than 50% of clubs ... a lot of them would think “Child protection, so what. Hang on a second, I am a normal person – what do I want to know about that” Well, that’s the way I would feel.*



*[Parents might say] ... "I brought up two children, what do I need to know about child protection?"*

Respondents felt that volunteers and coaches should also have access to information and training about their own safety and that this would be a more positive way to sell the issue than focussing simply on child protection. Even so, only the very committed were thought to take an interest "*How well informed is the ordinary volunteer or coach ... who is not here?*"

There was also wide variation in how far the sport groups felt supported by the County Council in respect of child protection issues. Some were completely unaware that help was available or unsure of whether the Council could really help effectively when cases arose.

*In fact ... turned a blind eye to a lot of these things 'cos you just accepted it ... I mean thirty years ago you had a little bit of abuse from the touchline but perhaps not so much as there is today.*

Respondents said they would welcome more training and workshops, especially if these were delivered on an outreach basis through a personal contact or through a cascade system whereby two or three people from one sport could attend a course and then relay the content down through their local unpaid staff and volunteers.

*It would be handy if there was somebody who was in charge of this area or somebody who takes responsibility for this area for the County Council to go to*



*the clubs and go to see them, visit them and say "This is what we need to look at. Can you find me an hour or two in the next few weeks and I will give a lecture or seminar to your coaches".*

Without this kind of approach, CP courses and materials were seen as a time burden and "... just another letter, just get lost in the filing system."

One group commented that the Council should offer incentives and/or travel expenses if they wanted club officials to attend CP training events. Tying CP training to the local community project funds (as a criterion for gaining an award) was thought to be useful, but only if it was then followed up. Further help with implementation of policies was requested, in order to make the most of information already held, as was a resource pack with common templates that could be customised locally.

***Vetting and the potential introduction of a £10 fee:*** Views here were divided. Some were strongly in favour:

*... you know you can't put a price on kids' safety and kids' health*

*... a sound investment.*

Others were 'against' on grounds of cost or time or because asking might insult coaches or volunteers and put them off helping.

*...you are almost asking people "You're alright aren't you?" I think you can get to know that by getting to know the people.*



*Volunteers are hard enough to find as it is and our sport is dependent on volunteers.*

*... if you lay down too many restrictions you just tend to frighten off people totally*

*... we'll end up without any volunteers.*

*... you haven't got many anyway that's almost like an added burden to your club.*

Others supported the idea of vetting but were uncertain about how this should be done, whether it was effective, who might pay or how frequently the checks might need to be repeated.

*Everybody should be checked ...*

*I think we [club] should pay for that ...*

*We've got to make sure we do things correctly.*

*What on earth is the point when it's not actually going to tell you anything ...*

Yet others were resigned to the introduction of police checks, despite their obvious flaws (cost, time delays, disincentive to volunteers, regional specificity, time-limited status).



*... you have a police check and that is the here and now it's not the future...if somebody offends in the future they won't have it on file that this person had a police check in (town).*

*... problem with police checking is it's regionalised so if you're police checked in Midshire and you move to coach somewhere else that police check doesn't go with you and that's why the (NGB) can't insist that every coach appointed by them has a police check.*

The view was expressed that someone refusing to comply with a check or self-declaration form should simply be refused a position in a club:

*... police checks just help as an official back up, that at least the club has gone through that particular channel.*

*... there is no reason to object ... no-one has got anything to hide so why should we object.*

Including the check (and the fee) as part of the accreditation process/licence fee/coach education was suggested, whereby applicants would be asked to get their own checks done before turning up for training or qualification courses, for example through the NCF (now Sportscoach UK). Under this approach, the individual would carry the financial burden but this would not cover volunteers for whom there is no formal qualification system. A national database of coaches would help in this regard although no functional cross-sport system is yet in place in the UK.



Parents/carers in the study thought that coaches were checked before their appointment:

*I'd also assumed as a parent that coaches were checked in some way: I was completely amazed to find that they are not.*

*It's an absolute minefield ...*

Employers were already responsible for securing police checks on paid workers but many of the sport focus groups responded negatively to the prospect:

*If you're a true blue volunteer within a sport organisations you want to go there because you love the sport and you just want to put a bit back in and you don't want to start paying out £10 for this and that ... if we continue to put barriers out there then we're never going to have anybody to run a sport.*

The implication was that people's integrity was being challenged. Even so, some felt that this should be a shared responsibility in the voluntary sector.

*The individual has the responsibility to say that I'm willing to be tested against a system and therefore that I can prove I've been through that system and I've been vetted ...*

Some sports reported that they were engaged in developing 'charter mark' schemes (by which prescribed standards for an award are met) that would address CP effectively



and that, in future, parents/carers could be encouraged check the charter mark status of a club before enrolling their child.

**Other issues:** Many respondents expressed concern for the protection of coaches as well as children.

*We've got to not forget also to protect the coaches ... not that the children aren't paramount but the coaches must never put themselves in a situation where they could be [accused].*

*They [coaches] set themselves up to be accused of things right, left and centre and maybe that has to come into their training a little bit more ...*

Some club groups said that children should never be left alone with a single adult, coach or volunteer, and adults should be told never to touch a child, or only to do so within prescribed technical parameters from the NGB. This was recognised as problematic, especially in certain sports that required physical support or where there were “one man bands”. With young disabled athletes the issue of touching was deemed even more sensitive but leaders and coaches were thought to be more used to preparing young people for touch in these settings than in others.

Cross-sex coaching was raised as an issue in only a couple of sports but reflected assumptions about the safety or risk of such relationships. These assumptions are quite dangerous since they tend to focus attention in selected areas of sports practice and to distract from others. Comments were made about males pushing athletes more than females, for example, (especially in sports with professional prospects) and about



insufficient attention being paid to the problems of emotional abuse and shouting at children. The introduction of young (male) coaches into largely female sports was a concern for one sport where relationships between coaches and athletes were seen as problematic:

*... you know at the end of the day the young girls turn up ... they're wearing the short skirts, very pretty tops ... it's not like hockey or football where ... you know the girls aren't dressed as glamorously.*

This comment indicates a 'blame-the victim' attitude, putting the responsibility for proper behaviour unfairly onto the athlete when it should always lie with the person in power, who is most often the coach. Home Office (1999) guidelines now *proscribe* sexual relationships between 16 and 17 year olds with those in a 'relationship of trust', including coaches, of 18 or older. (A relationship of trust is defined by the Home Office as one in which "one party is in a position of power or influence over another by virtue of their work or the nature of their activity..." (1999, p. 4). ) It is not clear whether this is actually illegal under the Sexual Offences (Amendment) Act, 2000 since no test case from sport has yet been tried in the courts. It might reasonably be regarded as good practice to proscribe *any* intimate relationship between an athlete and coach, *whatever* their respective ages, as this would remove all ambiguity from the situation.

Finally, two sports mentioned the usefulness of requiring accreditation for those who take photographs or video at events. This practice was first adopted in swimming and is now incorporated as good practice in NGB guidance from Sport England and Sportscoach UK (Sport England/National Coaching Foundation, 2001). This practice is



intended to prevent potential paedophiles from amassing sporting images for pornographic and sexual fantasy purposes.

## **Summary and conclusions**

Overall, the responses from the voluntary sports clubs in Midshire indicated an extremely varied pattern of awareness of the main CP issues in their respective sports. Although the adults in this study perceived that young people and parents were very trusting neither of these stakeholder groups was provided with training or materials. Since the completion of the study and the establishment of the Child Protection in Sport Unit, however, the training needs of these two groups have begun to be addressed ([www.sportprotects.org.uk](http://www.sportprotects.org.uk)). Many respondents expressed concern for the protection of coaches as well as children and some felt that coaches needed whistleblowing support in order to have the confidence to deal with allegations.

Many respondents in the sport club interviews made assumptions about child abuse and child protection, for example that abusers are always male, that known adults are safe, or that police checks give security. It seems that once people are “in” the sports club they are trusted with children. The motivations of those engaged with youth sport could well bear closer examination. If the development of autonomy is one of the aims of youth sport, as claimed for some of the youth sport initiatives listed earlier, then it is necessary to ask whether practices that undermine autonomy constitute abuse. Clearly, further research is required with young people themselves to reveal the effects of child abuse on the development of their autonomy.



A need was highlighted for the County Council to mesh its own policies and procedures with those of its NGBs since these did not always agree. Clarity of guidelines was again a key issue since both support and knowledge levels were thought to be inconsistent. Some people were completely unaware that help from the Council was available. Respondents said they would welcome more training and workshops, especially if these were delivered on an outreach basis through a personal contact.

There was a clear misapprehension running throughout the responses to this study that children are safest amongst those they know best and most at risk from those outside sports clubs. Previous research and knowledge from outside sport indicates that this is not necessarily so. This view results in undue emphasis being placed on mechanisms like vetting (police checks) and self-disclosure, and a high degree of complacency about existing practice *within* sport. There was also evidence of complacency about team sports being safer than so-called “one-to-one” sports. Sexual abuse dominated respondents’ thinking but verbal, emotional and psychological forms of abuse were also mentioned as issues. In general, people felt relatively uninformed, unless they had specialist knowledge through other means, for example, school teaching. Cross-sex coaching situations were raised as an issue in only a couple of sports but, again, reflected strongly held and sex-stereotyped assumptions about the safety or risk of such relationships. Some sports were engaged in developing charter mark schemes, a mechanism which might offer a useful filter for local authorities when making recommendations about clubs to parents. One respondent said that that the very act of recording the research interview for their own sport was “... *very beneficial ... if we hadn’t done it ... certain issues may have been dormant for even longer*” which supports the assertion that the research process, in itself, can contribute to child protection.



This project provides one, local case study about child protection in the voluntary sport clubs. The aims of the study in relation to this subject – to provide an assessment of the nature and scope of club child protection policies and practices, to examine definitions of good practice, and to assess the issues facing the county council – were satisfied. The results cannot necessarily be generalised to other counties or, indeed, other cultures. They do, however, offer some benchmark data that should assist local authorities and NGBs in monitoring future developments in child protection policy and practice within voluntary sport clubs.

