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## The Football Association's Child Protection in Football Research Project 2002–2006: rationale, design and first year results

Celia Brackenridge, Joy D. Bringer, Claudi Cockburn, Gareth Nutt,  
Andy Pitchford, Kate Russell and Zofia Pawlaczek

*Celia Brackenridge Ltd, Coalheughead Cottage, Harburn, By West Calder, West Lothian  
EH55 8RT, UK*

In common with most sport organizations, the English Football Association has come relatively recently to the issue of child protection. Abuses of various kinds have been known about in the sport for many years but, until the late 1990s, very little systematic work was undertaken to address them. The launch of a Child Protection Strategy by the English FA in May 2000 reflected recognition by those in authority within the sport that child abuse and protection were properly the subject of football policy and should become embedded in all aspects of the affiliated game. In addition to adopting child protection, the then-Chief Executive Officer of the FA made a commitment to evidence-based policy in his strategic plan for the game. In line with this commitment, the FA commissioned a 5 year study of the impact of child protection on the game, the first year of which constituted an audit of the state of child protection in the affiliated game. Data were collected through 11 internet surveys, 32 club case studies, over 200 interviews with various stakeholders and an analysis of 132 case files for child abuse referrals. This paper sets out the context of child protection in sport more generally and the background to the FA's child protection research project in particular. It also presents selected first year results for key stakeholder groups.

### INTRODUCTION

Events over recent years have been characterized by heated and contradictory debate about both the nature of the problems and what should be done. As a consequence those who are given responsibility for doing something about child abuse, particularly [The Football Association], have found themselves practising in an area which is increasingly complex, ambiguous, [and] where they have to finely balance actions and interventions which may be constructed as doing too little too late (thus putting children at risk ...), or doing too much too early (and hence being seen as undermining the rights and responsibilities of [coaches] and interfering unwarrantably into the privacy of the [football club]. (Parton in Thorpe, 1994, vii)

Except in a few countries, such as Canada (<http://www.caaws.ca>) and Australia (<http://www.ausport.au>), child protection is not yet widely recognized as an issue for sport and leisure managers. The UK, however, has led international efforts in this field since the mid-1990s and is the only country to have established a dedicated national office and resource centre for child protection in sport (<http://www.thecpsu.org.uk>). Several high profiles convictions of coaches in the early 1990s, such as British Olympic swimming coach Paul Hickson and Canadian professional ice hockey coach Graham James, fuelled a moral panic (Cohen, 1972; Thompson, 1998) about paedophilia in sport that was a symptom of the obsession with risk

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(Beck, 1992) and surveillance (Foucault, 1979) that characterizes the late modern social condition.

In common with most sport organizations in England, the Football Association (FA) has come relatively recently to the issue of child protection. Abuses of various kinds have been known about in the sport for many years but, until the late 1990s, very little systematic work was undertaken to address them. The launch of a Child Protection Strategy for Football in May 2000 reflected recognition by the FA that child abuse and protection were properly the subject of football policy and should become embedded in all aspects of the game. In line with the then-Chief Executive Officer's commitment to evidence-based policy, the FA commissioned a longitudinal research study (2002–2006) of the impact of child protection on the game.

This article sets out the context of child protection in sport more generally and the background to the research project in football in particular. It also describes the research design and presents an overview of selected results from the first year.

### CHILD PROTECTION IN SPORT

Child protection policies are concerned with reducing the risk of all types of abuse (sexual, physical, emotional), bullying and neglect. Not surprisingly, however, the responses of many people in sport have focussed on sexual misdemeanours because of a small number of very high profile sexual abuse cases (Brackenridge, 2001a). There are four dimensions of protection that child protection policies and procedures in sport should account for (adapted from Brackenridge, 2001b):<sup>1</sup>

1. *Protection through referral*: that is, recognizing and referring an athlete who has been subjected to misconduct, whether *inside* sport (by another staff member

or player) or *outside* sport (by someone in the family or peer group).

2. *Protection through leadership*: that is, observing and encouraging good practice when coaching or working with athletes in order to avoid perpetrating abuse.
3. *Protection against false accusations*: that is, taking precautions to avoid false allegations by athletes, their peers or families.
4. *Protection of the sport*: that is, safeguarding the good name and integrity of the sport.

Different stakeholders focus on different aspects of this model. Coaches, in particular, are anxious about the possibility of false allegations (despite very little evidence of these), parents are most interested in the quality of leadership that their children experience and administrators are most anxious to preserve a positive public image for their sport.

Policy development for child protection in sport began only in the past decade with most initiatives arising from the aftermath of litigation, usually against sports coaches (Brackenridge, 2001a, 2002; Kirby *et al.*, 2000). In the UK this work was given a major boost by the establishment of a Child Protection in Sport Unit (CPSU) in January 2001 (Boocock, 2002).<sup>2</sup> Prior to the establishment of this Unit, various piecemeal CP initiatives had been promoted by individual sport organizations, most notably the Amateur Swimming Association (Myers and Barrett, 2002), coaching groups such as the sports-coachUK (formerly the National Coaching Foundation) and child welfare organizations such as the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) (Brackenridge 2001a). Some anti-harassment schemes have been introduced elsewhere, such as a website for abuse prevention in ice skating, run from the USA (<http://www.silent-edge.org>), a whistle blowing campaign in ice

hockey called 'Speak Out!', run in Canada (<http://www.hockeycanada.ca>), and a police-originated educational workshop in England called Child Safe (<http://www.childsafe.co.uk>) but the FA's strategy is arguably the largest and most comprehensive child protection initiative in a single sports body.

Through extensive education and training, good practice measures that challenge abuse and harassing practices are gradually becoming accepted in English sport. On balance, though, sport organizations have encountered a very steep learning curve in relation to abuse prevention, and are still trying to come to terms with proscriptions on their freedoms in the name of improved child protection. The complex and dynamic interaction of state and voluntary sector (Smith *et al.* 1995) is well illustrated by the way in which some national governing bodies of sport have struggled to implement child protection at club level and by the resistance of some sports administrators to the issue (Malkin *et al.*, 2000; Brackenridge, 2002).

### CHILD PROTECTION IN FOOTBALL

The FA clearly benefited from the experiences of other organizations in developing its own CP Strategy. However, it would be misleading to suggest that CP work began in football only as a result of the reaction to cases in swimming and other sports. A commitment to CP and welfare work more generally was in evidence in the FA for some years before the formation of the CPSU, through initiatives such as the Charter for Quality (The Football Association, 1997) and through occasional innovations by individual clubs. Charlton Football Club, for example, developed and promoted CP procedures long before most other professional clubs. The FA Academy and Centre of Excellence systems also took forward child welfare work but it was not until the advent of the CP Strategy that an integrated approach to CP

throughout the Professional and National (i.e., amateur) Games became possible.

The FA made a commitment through their Child Protection Policy, published in May 2000, and the FA Procedures and Practices Handbook, published in October 2000, to develop a comprehensive child protection system throughout the affiliated game. This was brand named *Goal* (to incorporate ethics and equity in subsequent years). The 2001 FA Strategic Plan for CP made it clear that child protection and welfare would become embedded in all activities of the organization as part of its drive to 'use the power of football to build a better future'. The FA's aims for education, delivered with and through strategic partners, include ending cruelty to children. Child protection specifically, and player welfare more generally, permeate the work set out for all sections of the revised FA structure.

The FA Child Protection Strategic Plan represents a vision of The Football Association creating an enjoyable and safe environment for all children, young people ... to participate in affiliated football. (The FA, 2002)

The FA CP Strategy sets out the rationale for CP in youth (i.e., under 18) football. It specifically includes referees aged 16–18 who may referee within the adult game and also highlights the fact that some players as young as 14 are playing in the adult game. It also explains the legal context of the FA's CP work, although this is constantly changing as new legislation is introduced or existing legislation revised.

### THE RESEARCH

By 2000, many other governing bodies in the UK had set up policies and procedures for CP but, at that time, few had successfully implemented these or collected evidence of their impact or effectiveness (Brackenridge, 2001a). Also, whilst there were examples of evaluation and monitoring work on anti-

**Table 1** Key principles of The FA Child Protection Policy (Source: The FA, 2000)

## Key principles:

- The child's welfare is paramount
- All children have a right to be protected from abuse regardless of their age, gender, disability, culture, language, racial origin, religious beliefs or sexual identity
- All suspicions and allegations of abuse will be taken seriously and responded to swiftly and appropriately

## Aims:

- To develop a positive pro-active policy to protect all children and young people, who play or participate in football, enabling them to do so in an enjoyable and safe environment.
- To deliver quality assured Child Protection Training and build a network of accredited Child Protection tutors to facilitate this delivery, supported (where appropriate) by the National Coaching Foundation (NCF).
- To demonstrate best practice in Child Protection.
- To promote ethics and high standards in football.

racism in some other sport organizations (such as cricket) the FA is believed to be the first such organization in the world to commission such research on child protection. This was, then, an initiative congruent with the FA's strategic aim to 'be seen as the leading sports governing body in the world' although this investment in child protection was the outcome of protracted internal negotiations.

The research brief was to measure the impact of the CP Strategy/Goal campaign on the culture of football by addressing the following questions.

*What are the facts?*

What CP provision is already in place at the different levels of the sport? This included: all tangible elements of CP provision such as policies, procedures, training, systems for

dealing with disclosures, level and treatment of CP referrals to the FA.

*What are the feelings?*

What do the different stakeholders/people feel about the issues? This included: positive/negative experiences, barriers, fears, concerns, anxieties, attitudes, value added/subtracted elements or intangibles associated with the programme roll out, perceived cultural changes within different stakeholder groups.

*What are the actions required?*

What do the various stakeholders want done, achieved, changed or improved? How can this be fed back into the annual CP action planning process?

*What voices or discourses are heard?*

What is said by and heard from different stakeholders? What consistent messages are given out? Who agrees or disagrees with the FA's CP initiative?

*What is the impact of The FA's CP strategy on football?*

How does all of the above change quantitatively and qualitatively over the 5 year time span? What type and extent cultural change is achieved in the organization, attributable to the CP programme, in relation to the FA's overall strategic vision?

**DESIGN AND METHODS**

In order to achieve successful implementation of the new CP system in football, it was first necessary to map the current situation through an audit of existing CP provision and training, welfare problems, levels of awareness and concern and so on. Only then could progress towards CP targets be measured in any meaningful way. Secondly, for monitoring and evaluation to be specific, and to provide reliable quantitative and qualitative data, targets for CP had to be specified for both outputs (quantifiable data) and outcomes (experiential data). The for-

	Quantitative research	Qualitative research
<b>Phase 1: Audit (2002)</b>	Mapping of current CP facts and figures in football through questionnaire surveys of key stakeholders, analysis of head office data and existing football archives and records	Mapping of views and experiences of CP from key stakeholders through interviews, focus groups and on-line media
<b>Phase 2: Review (2003-06)</b>	Collection of evidence about changes in facts and figures as the CP strategy rolls out, through repeat questionnaire surveys, tracking of helpline data, case records, etc.	Collection of evidence of personal and cultural changes in football as the CP strategy rolls out, using case studies, interviews, focus groups, e.mail diaries etc. with individuals and groups of key stakeholders

**Figure 1** Overview of research design

mer would give the FA a platform for specifying and re-specifying annual targets over time. The latter would assist with a programme of cultural change in the organization that would have to be confronted if child cruelty and abuse were to be eradicated from the sport.

The project thus comprised two major stages (see Figure 1):

**Phase 1 (Audit):** An independent audit of current CP provision throughout English football, from the Premier League down to local leagues (excluding non-FA affiliates) during 2002.

**Phase 2 (Review):** A longitudinal study to monitor and review the impact of the FA's CP strategy from 2003–2006.

In line with the FA's own strategic directives for research, both quantitative and qualitative monitoring was required in both phases of the research (see Table 2). The main purpose of the Phase 1 was to provide evidence about the need for the FA to change or maintain its policy plans for child protection in the year 2003. The research project also examined progress in the delivery of 299

**Table 2** Research methods

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- Self-completion 'bracketing' interviews with key FA Ethics and Equity Department staff responsible for child protection, all researchers, members of the FA's Child Protection Working Party and staff at FA headquarters in London to set out expectations and to predict concerns and outcomes.
  - Selected literature reviews to place the work of the FA within the context of CP provision in world sport and to identify relevant sources.
  - Internet surveys of 11 key constituencies, hosted by the internet survey company Mercator using their SNAP survey software.
  - Case studies of 32 clubs in six different of the FA's 42 counties, selected to represent geographic spread.
  - E-mail diaries from a purposive sample of twelve CP Officers and workshop tutors.
  - Analysis of existing 132 CP-related case management files.
  - An audit of progress against the 2002 Action Plan;
  - Spot-checks of child protection content on TheFA.com web site.
  - Individual and group interviews with key stakeholders.
-

**Table 3** Internet survey groups

1	Young players (12–17 years)
2	Referees
3	Coaches, managers and teachers
4	Scouts and agents
5	Medics & Sport scientists including physios
6	Welfare/Child Protection Officers
7	Administrators
8	Parents
9	School based helpers
10	Football Development Officers
11	Players over 18

actions across all seven sections of the FA's 2002 Child Protection Action Plan, viz.:

- Policy, procedures and practices
- Workshops and resources
- Tutor management
- Communication
- Infrastructure
- Quality assurance
- Case management

The survey instruments were designed between December 2001 and May 2002 using SNAP software for survey design from Mercator (see Table 3). Sample populations were tested using both pencil and paper and on-line versions. These samples included school children, sport students and groups of coaches and Football Development Officers (FDOs). Interview schedules were designed and tested between November 2001 and February 2002. Clubs and stakeholders from two FA counties, not in the eventual sample of six, were recruited to assist with pilot testing. Particular care was taken to exclude the under 12s from the internet survey. Approaches to very young children were informed by advice from teachers and from the document 'Children are Service Users Too—Consulting Children' (Save the Children, 2002). Both the survey instruments and the interview schedules included items from the main research questions listed

above. Tables 4 and 5 show the sample populations for the club case studies and the stakeholder interviews.

Because of the sensitivity of the data, tailored ethics protocols were designed for the project. These covered issues such as media relations, security of data handling and storage, and referral of any abuse that the researchers might uncover.

### PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS FROM PHASE 1 (AUDIT)

Presented below are the headline results from Phase 1 of the project, drawing on data from the bracketing interviews, surveys, case studies and stakeholder interviews (see Tables 3, 4 and 5). Summary findings for eight of the major stakeholder groups are presented: Children and Young People, Parents/Carers, Coaches/Teachers and Managers, Referees, Administrators, Football Development Officers, Child Protection/Welfare Officers and the Professional Game.

Many of the cultural forces (Johnson and Scholes 1993) that characterize organizations faced with implementing change were experienced by the researchers. Indeed, all the outcomes predicted from their bracketing interviews eventuated, including clashes between older/conservative and younger/liberal elements in the game in relation to their commitment to the *Goal* campaign, resistance at county level to perceived top-down edicts about CP, and fears at club level about whistle-blowing. Access was one of the most difficult issues and, as predicted, many officials in the game were fiercely protective of their autonomy and initially reluctant to allow researchers in, despite all the measures taken by the research team (to carry photo identity badges, letters of authority, to be background-checked by the FA and to seek entry via the County Secretary as gatekeeper).

Elements of 'occupational closure' (Witz, 1992) were also evident, especially within

**Table 4** Distribution and type of football club case studies

County FA area	Types of club approached	No. of clubs responding from those approached
North East	Professional, U18s (boys), U9s (mixed), U16s, U8s, Disability	6/6
North West	Professional, School-based, Junior solo, Junior in large club, Women's	3/6
Midlands 1	Professional, 2 x Junior in bigger clubs, Solo, Charter Mark, Multi team junior	6/6
Midlands 2	Professional, School/college, Mixed, Girls', Junior solo	5/5
East	Professional, School, Girls & women's (in Youth club), Junior in senior set up, Junior solo, Disability	6/6
South	Professional, Junior, Disability (deaf), Girls, Mixed large, Small	6/6
	<b>Total</b>	<b>32/35</b>

**Table 5** Sources of stakeholder data

Stakeholders	Survey responses	Interviewees
Children and young people	387	70
Parents/carers and guardians	319	39
Referees	592	4
Coaches, managers and teachers	1154	32
Administrators	151	28
Football Development Officers	46	18
Child Protection/Welfare officers	35	5
The Professional Game	—	10

the Professional Game, where researchers were met by some traditionally robust masculine attitudes and failure to accept the relevance of CP to that level of the game. Gaining credibility and establishing trusting relationships were considerable challenges, especially where researchers were unable to present credentials as current or former football players.

### Children and young people

Only one in ten of the survey respondents had heard of the *Goal* campaign but a third knew of the helpline number. In interviews,

however, only one of the 70 young people knew of the helpline number. Of the survey respondents, reported 47.4% being 'very happy' with the way they were treated by their football coach or teacher and two thirds assessed their parents/carers as positively supportive. About one in six, however, replied that their parents/carers were negatively 'over-involved' (Hellestedt, 1987), for example by exerting undue pressure on them, shouting, swearing or interfering with games.

Encouragement, fun and being listened to were rated as the top three factors that

make up a good coach in the eyes of the survey respondents, who also reported mainly positive experiences in the game. Negative experiences were more common than the FA would want, however, with verbal bullying (41%), swearing at coaches or referees (40%), physical bullying (23%) and having kit or possessions stolen (20%) all featuring. Only 19% of children and young people answering the survey had heard about the FA's plans for their welfare, or had been informed about abuse and bullying. Although this was never intended to be a prevalence study, it was nonetheless encouraging that no serious child abuse was uncovered during the fieldwork.

In summary, young people enjoy a range of positive and some negative experiences in football. It is also clear that the prevailing culture among the agencies delivering the game prevents children from having an effective voice. High quality coaching, supportive club environments and innovative educational programmes were reported but most young people appeared to be unaware of the FA's attempts to protect and promote their own interests. The FA's five year CP Strategy targets children and young people in its second and third year so their awareness should grow commensurately.

### Parents and carers

Although many of the stakeholders interviewed for the research tended to see the position of parents/carers in football as problematic, there was also a tendency to generalize about the actions of parents and thus to underestimate their central role as volunteers in the management and administration of all levels of the game. It is also clear that there is a range of motives for parental involvement, manifested in a variety of approaches to coaching, refereeing, spectating and administration. Many respondents, for example, referred to the 'over-involvement' or 'over-commitment' of other parents, which resulted in either excessive

pressure on young people to perform, or confrontational attitudes. For a number of referees, Football Development Officers (FDOs), coaches, and indeed parents/carers themselves, this was perceived to be *the* key issue facing the youth game. Equally, some respondents were concerned about the under-involvement, or even negligence, of parents/carers who appeared either to treat the game as a form of childcare or to misunderstand the level of support and preparation required in order for a child to play safely and successfully.

A major issue for football clubs has thus been to identify the best ways of handling these often conflicting motives and energies. Some of the clubs in the sample appeared able to harness the enthusiasm of appropriately motivated parents/carers, while also managing the excitement of those who would otherwise be over-involved. Some clubs even claimed to provide support mechanisms for young players whose home lives or personal circumstances were unstable, although these mechanisms were rarely linked explicitly to CP practices or welfare policies.

Evidence of the FA's success was also apparent in the high proportion of survey respondents who felt that they were very/fairly satisfied with the treatment of young people in football (82.6%) and who thought that the FA was handling CP very well or quite well (59%). Some aspects of the CP message, however, were yet to be fully assimilated. Only 10.3% of internet respondents, for example, recognized the *Goal* campaign. As with the children and young people themselves, parents/carers who replied to the survey demonstrated very low levels of knowledge and awareness of FA CP provision for their children.

In summary, parents/carers were the least informed and least active group in the study in relation to CP. Despite the positive light in which football is seen by the majority, it is clear that more work needs to be done on communicating what is expected of parents/



carers at youth football games, and on harnessing their energies appropriately.

### Referees

There is a crisis in the recruitment of referees in England. Indeed, it was reported by one of the Regional Managers of referees that, in most areas of the country, the FA is up to 50% short of the numbers required to cover games, with little evidence that young people are being attracted to officiate. The main concern appears to be the abuse that referees receive from the touchline. Young referees, who may be involved in refereeing senior games, suffer verbal abuse and intimidation from both players and spectators and may therefore require both protection during matches and also further support and professional development. Some are reluctant to caution players for foul language or illegal play for fear that their refereeing career may be compromised. Conventional power dynamics that afford authority to a referee over a player therefore appear to be inverted where the referee is relatively young.

It was suggested that young referees also feel intimidated when attending personal disciplinary hearings. Despite efforts by the referees' associations to offer young referees a voice, very few had the confidence to talk about their experiences, thinking that they may have done something wrong. Despite these difficulties, there was a clear commitment from the associations to protect young referees from harm, whether verbal or physical.

Overall, there was little evidence in the interviews that referees were aware of the FA's CP policy or the *Goal* campaign. This was supported by the survey data with only 13.9% of referees knowing anything about the campaign. Perhaps it was not surprising, therefore, that young referees were no better informed. Until such time as young referees share the benefits of the FA's CP initiatives, it is difficult to see how referees' associations

will overcome the current shortfall in numbers and the apparent ambivalence of young people towards becoming referees.

### FA Coaches' Association/Coaches/Managers/Teachers

The 32 interviews were collected from coaches in league clubs, academies and clubs at grass roots level, from school teachers and those working in boys, girls and disability football. The coaches were supportive of the FA's CP strategy with many affirming that the FA was doing all it could on the issue. Some, however, wanted more information from the FA about implementation and promulgation of good practice. This shift in demand, from policy to practice, is unsurprising and marks a natural progression in the policy implementation process.

The majority of coaches cited enjoyment and safety as the key issues for young people in football and, when asked to explain what was meant by the term 'child protection', most often mentioned the welfare of the child. Specific knowledge of the FA's CP policy, helpline and the *Goal* campaign varied and knowledge of designated persons for child protection appeared to be low. Most knew about the FA's policy but were unsure whether or not their own club had adopted a policy, and fewer had actually read their club's policy. Few knew about the FA's helpline or the *Goal* campaign. It was even rarer for coaches to indicate that the players on their own teams knew about the helpline.

The majority of coaches reported that they would not tolerate swearing or bullying from players, who would be taken off the pitch or verbally warned for such actions. Again, bad behaviour by parents on the sidelines was a frequent complaint but only a few coaches provided strategies for dealing with this. They therefore need additional help with practical methods for coping with parents who exhibit bullying and inappropriate behaviour.

Coaches were directly asked about children's access to alcohol at social events. Whilst most noted that alcohol was available for adults, some reported that parents were allowed to purchase it for children. Coaches appeared to be uncomfortable with this question. This perhaps highlights a cultural attitude towards the acceptability of alcohol within sport settings and also uncertainty about the confusion of ages of consent that applies to young people in the UK (Hamilton and Fiddy 2002).

In general, coaches were supportive of the FA's child protection policies and procedures. However, some felt as though it was something they *had* to do rather than *should* do as part of best practice. Some still harboured myths about child abuse. For example, one coach was only concerned about having a second adult present if he was working with a girls' team implying, wrongly, that child protection should be differentiated by gender. Another said he thought that he should not touch players. Education and awareness raising is the first step in the cultural change process so these misperceptions about child abuse and best practice in coaching football are most likely to be dispelled through the FA's own ongoing programme of workshops for coaches. These workshops were regarded as an effective method for raising coaches' awareness about child abuse and about the need to eliminate poor practice. However, there was also a feeling among some coaches, especially those who were also workshop tutors, that coaches say one thing in the workshops and do another thing on the pitch. In summary, the coaches, managers and teachers interviewed for the research reflected positive feelings and commitment to CP but had yet to transform these consistently into action.

#### **Administrators (including FA County Secretaries and Directors of Academies)**

The administrators ranged from County Secretaries with major responsibilities to volun-

teers running small junior clubs or individual teams. This group was very homogeneous in terms of ethnicity (98.7% white) and age (66.9% over 41) and one County Secretary himself admitted: 'Traditionally the FA has been an organization run by middle aged white men and - it's still an organization run by middle-aged white men'. Along with all other stakeholder groups, securing criminal or background checks was the top priority for 2003 for these administrators. However, problems and delays with the recently-established Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) (<http://www.crb.org.uk>), which was intended to provide background checks, dogged some clubs. The self-declaration system (by which individual coaches and volunteers have to provide information about their own criminal records) was also causing problems, especially because someone about whom there were suspicions or allegations could not be tracked from one sport to another. The CRB struggled to adapt to such concerns and, at the time of the data collection, was not seen as a solution. In addition, the *team* registration system was seen as a potential weak spot:

... by accepting these teams into the league [The FA are accepting] that they are credible organizations, without any kind of checks whatsoever, absolutely no investigation of who we are and why we are doing it and what our background is.

The FA workshop tutor training programme was also causing administrators some frustration since it took so long for tutors to become fully accredited and because there was a mismatch in supply (of tutors) and demand (for training) in the larger counties.

Of all the types of abuse, the administrators were least confident about recognizing sexual abuse, perhaps reflecting a general, and unjustified, preoccupation with sexual abuse when other forms of abuse are much more prevalent (Cawson *et al.* 2000). Few commented on sexual abuse problems in

interviews although a small number had come across Schedule I (serious sexual or violent) offenders being screened out of the game.

Knowledge of the various aspects of the FA's CP work was patchy among many of the administrators interviewed, although about two thirds of the survey respondents knew of the helpline number, had designated people for CP at their clubs, had incorporated the FA's CP policies and procedures and thought the FA was managing the issue either quite well or very well. Fewer than half of survey respondents had received written clarification of their responsibilities towards CP. Some respondents revealed worrying assumptions about safety and a lack of understanding of the issues, for example:

Fortunately, I think, boys in this area tend to be at less risk than girls because we live in quite a 'backward' area, a rural area and it is a close community. Everybody knows everyone else. It's not like living in a city.

This is directly at odds with the research of Finkelhor and Williams (1988) who found greater levels of sexual abuse (in day care centres) in rural than urban areas and argued that this was explained by the greater intensity of surveillance in cities.

Despite acceptance that bad practice and abuse could still be found readily, a strong message to emerge from this group was that things had changed for the better in recent years but this did not necessarily apply at the more senior levels of the game. There appears to be a paradox, therefore, that the higher up the game one looks the more poor behaviour (swearing, drinking, foul play) is tolerated yet it is here where most role models are found for children and young players. Charter Standard, the FA's kitemarking scheme for clubs, was often mentioned as being a lever for the introduction of CP, since it was a mandatory part of the eligibility criteria.

Some CPOs were perceived by administrators to be over-reacting to the issues:

A lot of the [CPOs] have jumped in and tried to implement this as best they can, but I feel that in certain instances they take the jobsworth title a bit too far. They are there to police it and notify the problems, not to act as judge, jury and executioner.

... and referees were thought by some administrators to be hostile to CP measures.

I would have thought his biggest problem would be getting child protection mandatory in referees' course, 'cos if we are going back to the reactionary forces referees are the most reactionary people.

As with coaches, administrators felt that dealing with bad behaviour, especially by parents, was very difficult 'Mums and Dads on touchlines, screaming and ranting and raving at their kid'.

In summary, the administrators gave rather mixed messages about CP, professing commitment but not always accurate in their understanding. Given the range of administrative roles represented here, from senior paid employee of the FA to local voluntary club secretary, this mixed response is perhaps understandable. None the less, administrators are very important gatekeepers for the CP work as they often act as conduits for information and resources. Their support for the CP Strategy should not be underestimated, not just as the 'police force' for poor practice and abuse but also as advocates of best practice.

#### **Football Development Officers (including Football in the Community)**

Football Development Officers (FDOs), who have responsibility for the development of football in local communities, were generally very positive and well-informed about CP despite that fact that only 54% claimed to have received a written job specification about their CP responsibilities. They had the highest scores for recognition of all forms of abuse and bullying, higher even than their CP Officer counterparts, and were the most

positive about the CP work of the Football Association.

Community schemes appear to be one of the major success stories of football. They reach into many parts of society, particularly urban life, that are inaccessible to other sports schemes. Where these are linked to or based in local government/authorities they have adopted CP without demur and some have had operational CP policies for many years.

As with the football administrators, FDOs expressed frustration with the perceived lack of consultation and speed of introduction of the CP strategy and with delays in the tutor training system. Many FDOs had responsibility for CP training and some doubled as CP Officers. In that capacity, they echoed the concern of the CP Officers to have more feedback about case resolution and to hold more case information themselves.

There was high praise from FDOs for many aspects of the work done by the FA's CP staff, including very positive comments about the quality of the CP materials and the overall initiative:

I think what the FA is doing is exceptional. Full marks ... It shows they actually care.

To be honest, anything that comes out on the protection of children has been good.

As a counter to this, there were also comments from FDOs about the need for the FA to be more flexible in its requirements for authorization and registration and a view from some that the CP work had been hurried 'Why bring all this child protection work in a rush? They panicked'. Many FDOs said that they had had to work very hard to convince people in their area of the need for CP.

There are those clubs out there, and within any county, that have been doing the same thing for 30 years and it's worked for them so 'We don't need the FA'—that sort of attitude.

A common theme to emerge from the research audit was that of emulation and the need for good role models because of the immense impact of the Professional Game on young people. Changes in the approach to selection of role models will require a unified effort throughout the FA since they are frequently chosen 'more for public relations and media headlines than for their status as moral guardians of the game. The subsequent adoption of Alan Shearer and Sir Bobby Robson (famous football personalities in the UK) as ambassadors for the *Goal* campaign was perhaps a step in the right direction.

The self-declaration and background checking system was yet again an example of unpopular bureaucracy associated with CP: 'There's just so much paperwork', so the rationale for requiring self-declaration may require further emphasis if it is not to alienate these important advocates of CP in football.

In line with the comments of several other stakeholder groups, FDOs were acutely conscious of poor behaviour by both parents/carers and by children, and were concerned that a win-at-all-costs edge had crept into mini-soccer, a game originally intended as a development tool. Overall, the FDOs in the study were keen advocates of CP and closely in touch with its implementation on the ground.

#### **Welfare or Child Protection Officers (including Education/Welfare/Child Protection Officers in Academies) and workshop tutors**

This stakeholder group included Child Protection Officers, Education and Welfare Officers and those in voluntary roles acting as the 'nominated person' for CP, collectively described her as CPOs.<sup>3</sup> A surprising 49% of them did not know of or were unsure of the *Goal* campaign but they had the highest response for knowledge of the telephone helpline (86%) and were group the most

likely to have used it (23%). Of concern, however, was that almost one third of CPOs in the survey reported that they either had no written CP role specification or were unsure whether they had one.

Compared with all other stakeholder groups except FDOs, the CPOs were more confident of recognizing abuse and bullying. Around one in ten of survey respondents had no designated person for CP at their own club and replied that that FA CP policies and procedures were not embedded there, which indicates that their own advocacy may not extend as far as it could.

Not unexpectedly, the survey demonstrated high confidence amongst this group in responding to child abuse in football. Their confidence in the FA's handling of CP was higher than other stakeholder groups, with 83% replying that the FA was doing very or quite well.

Yet again, background checks and the self-declaration system were constant sources of concern for CPOs, as they were for the administrators and FDOs: 'We've got to get this self declaration thing sorted out, 'cos I think its an absolute nightmare'. The CPOs interviewed also echoed what other stakeholders said about abuse of referees and one even suggested that there should be an age bar on refereeing 'I do not think that 14 and 15-year-olds are sufficiently knowledgeable to referee football matches at any level'. It was also suggested that the higher one went up the game, the more tolerance was shown towards bad language on the field, which set an impossible task for those trying to develop high standards with young players.

Although the CPO survey respondents were far less concerned about poor parent/carer behaviour than their FDO counterparts, this issue did emerge from several interviews 'It's the parent. It's the parent living through the boy'. Several of those interviewed were former schoolteachers who appeared to be much more closely in

tune with the developmental and welfare needs of young people than those without formal training. The Academy Education and Welfare Officers, in particular, saw themselves as in the vanguard of CP.

The CPOs in Academies offered some searching insights into the past and current situation in Academies and had many ideas for future improvements. Their best practice included: welcome packs, awareness sessions for parents, personal development portfolios with targets and grade monitoring across a range of performance and other measures, courses for coaches, scouts and other staff, tours and tournaments policies, special noticeboards with FA CP material and a specially designed exit procedure for players who are released.

In summary, the CPOs interviewees appeared to be more proactive than the survey respondents, perhaps a result of being selected to participate in the research. Nonetheless they were clearly supportive of the FA's CP work and well-placed to be CP 'product champions'.

### **The Professional Game (including Professional Club Academies and Centres of Excellence)**

It is clear, that in various ways, the Professional Game has a huge influence over the ways in which young people experience football. The actions of professional players, coaches, scouts, agents and managers appear to have a direct impact on the approaches of their counterparts in the youth game. The motivational techniques, tactics and disciplinary strategies of top coaches, and the dominant attitudes towards opposing players and referees, are frequently mirrored by the key actors in youth football. Unfortunately, perhaps because of the ways in which this behaviour is presented by the media, or perhaps because this behaviour is replicated naively or inappropriately, the Professional Game is often perceived to have a negative

influence on the treatment of young people in the National (amateur) Game.

Many stakeholders who did not have a direct connection to the Professional Game, and even some who did, raised concerns about the motives and aspirations of professional clubs, whose representatives were viewed with suspicion. The dominant culture in the Professional Game was perceived to reflect an aggressive, masculine environment in which 'bad language, threatening behaviour, verbal abuse ... feature very highly because that's the way coaches coach'. One FDO argued:

I think at professional level, we need to change the whole culture of how they look at children, how they treat minors. It has been in the past, to use a football expression, a case of bawl, bark and bollock.

Closure and secrecy were perceived to be habitual in an environment where managers and coaches were anxious about their positions and about pressure for their teams to perform on the pitch. Furthermore, this insecurity appeared to make people in the Professional Game reluctant to engage with external expertise, and it also inhibited the promotion and sharing of good practice. Cultural change to increase awareness of the rights and needs of individual players is unlikely to flourish in such a scenario.

Not surprisingly, insider accounts of the Professional Game presented an altogether more positive interpretation of current practice. Within the Academies, in particular, the appointment of Education and Welfare Officers was perceived to have legitimated an explicit focus on CP. Many of these officers in Academies are former teachers, comfortable with child-centred approaches and with the sharing of good practice, and they seem to have operated as significant change agents within the Professional Game. The Academies have also introduced a range of innovations including: the development and implementation of codes of conduct for

players, coaches and parents; the use of reflective diaries as a way of tracking personal and professional development; the management of players' conduct on the pitch; and protection of young people from an over-emphasis on results.

Some Academies and Centres of Excellence employ sports scientists, medics, fitness coaches and specialist technical coaches above the directed minimum, whilst a number of Centres also provide training and mentoring schemes for young referees. Some of the respondents felt that the Professional Game could play a more proactive role in disseminating good practice. Whilst this may indicate positive change within the Professional Game, others in the study were more cautious about the extent to which this cultural shift had happened. Much of the child protection work in the Football League (part of the Professional Game), for example, retains a narrow focus on the young people engaged in excellence programmes.

There is clearly an opportunity for the Professional Game to communicate its strengths much more effectively. Concerted strategies to relay good practice are likely to encourage more appropriate emulation by those engaged in the youth game, and would help to moderate and qualify the otherwise confusing messages sent out by the media about prevailing values and approaches within professional football.

## **SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS**

There are variations both within and between stakeholder groups in respect of attitudes towards child protection. There was consensus from the, however, that the main outcomes of the FA's Child Protection Strategy will be to increase safety for children in the game and improve practices and behaviours. There was also complete consensus across all stakeholder surveys that criminal background checks should be the first priority for the FA in the next year.

Given the difficulties thus far experienced by all national organizations with the Criminal Records Bureau, this may place an undue burden of expectation on the FA.

False allegations were another dominant concern for those stakeholders involved in delivering football to children and young people. The results from the case management analysis, however (reported in Brackenridge *et al.*, 2003), may help to ameliorate some of these concerns since only one of the 132 cases analysed was distinguishable as a false allegation.

Of greatest concern for every delivery group was 'maintaining high personal standards of child protection and welfare'. In this light, the education and communication elements of the FA CP Strategy continue to play a vital role. Communication and consultation are clearly vital in order to both inform participants and to ensure their full commitment to any new initiative. In particular, parents and young people in football have yet to be fully involved. Parent behaviour and support for referees also require further attention, as do the prescriptions laid down by the FA for education and training.

Wide ranging attitudes and practices towards child protection and welfare in the game were found, from those who were completely unaware of the issue to those for whom advocacy of child protection in football has become a priority. Some patterns were detected across different stakeholder groups and at different levels of the game. For example, Football Development Officers were, in the main, keenly committed and active in this area. Not surprisingly, others in more peripheral or voluntary roles, such as parents and volunteers in clubs, were much less well informed or engaged. Worryingly, and with a few notable exceptions, the higher up the hierarchy of roles in the game the researchers went, the less commitment was found to child

protection. In more than a few cases, very obstructive responses were met.

This article has set out the general context of child protection in football and the rationale for the commissioning of a longitudinal study to assess the impact of child protection on the game. Following the pioneering work of the Amateur Swimming Association (Myers and Barrett, 2002), the FA is now one of the world's leading sport governing bodies for child protection matters. It would be wrong to imply, however, that no further work is needed. In setting out a range of criticisms and opportunities for improvement it would be easy to give the impression that the FA attempted to do too much too soon with its CP work. But it should also be pointed out that the scale of the aspirations for the CP strategy was, compared with other sport organizations, immense. The findings from the first year research audit provide some benchmarks against which future progress can be monitored. Critical evaluation of the monitoring data will be essential if the successes of this first year are to be built upon.

One of the major dangers of any CP campaign like *Goal* is the possibility of stakeholders suffering from what might be termed 'welfare overload'. In other words, if people involved in football sense that they are being judged too harshly, or pushed too far too soon, then there may either be a backlash against CP (Myers, 1994) or boredom may set in as *Goal*, like any other product or service, reaches the end of its life cycle. It remains to be seen whether this happens with *Goal* and whether, in particular, the launch of further welfare-related initiatives (for race, disability and gender equity) might be perceived by some in the game as a step too far.

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### NOTES

1. Dimensions 1–3 are included in The FA's CP policy and procedures. In 2003 the FA launched an Ethics and Equity Strategy that is intended to address dimension 4.
2. The Child Protection in Sport Unit. It is co-funded by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) and Sport England. It has a UK-wide brief and works in conjunction with Sport Scotland, Children 1<sup>st</sup> (in Scotland), the Sports Council for Wales and the Sport Council for Northern Ireland. The Unit acts as a one-stop shop for advice and referrals in sport. Since April 2001, all Exchequer-funded governing bodies of sport in England have been required to have in place a child protection action plan in order to qualify for grant aid. The publication in 2003 of national policy standards for child protection in sport, with which all state-funded sport governing bodies will have to comply by 2005, is a further indication of the seriousness with which this issue is now being addressed (CPSU, 2003).
3. The designations have changed since Autumn 2002 but for the purposes of this research, the phrase Child Protection Officers was adopted as this term was current at the commencement of the surveys and club studies.

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