

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE



# A review of safeguarding in grassroots football: Children and young people's perspectives

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## Abstract

In 2021, Birmingham County Football Association (BCFA) in partnership with Newman University carried out a quantitative online review to assess coaches, volunteers, parents and young people's understanding of safeguarding information, policies and procedures in relation to football. This paper examines the findings from the children (aged 5–11) and young people (aged 12–17) using the Six Principles of Safeguarding to assess the current safeguarding measures in place to protect children and young people (CYP) playing grassroots football. The review found that whilst most CYP felt safe when playing organised football, there were some concerns raised from the young people in relation to angry parents, abuse and racism. Most children in both groupings had heard of the term safeguarding, but fewer had heard of the term welfare, and struggled to explain what welfare meant. A key finding and concern is that many CYP are not aware of the role of the Club Welfare Officer at their football club or that this might be someone to whom they can disclose issues concerning them. Furthermore, it became evident that further research, awareness raising and implementation of listening to and acting on children's voices needs to be fully embedded into safeguarding practice in children and young people's organised football.

## KEYWORDS

children, football, listening, safeguarding, young people

## Key Practitioner Messages

- Tools need to be developed to help young people understand the principles of safeguarding.
- Consideration needs to be given to measuring how effectively CYP are listened to.
- CYP need to be empowered to take control of safeguarding practices within their own spaces.

## INTRODUCTION

### Background to the study

Following the publication of *Every Child Matters* (DfES, 2003) and the Children Act 2004, there was a fundamental shift from reactive practice of Child Protection towards an integrated practice of Safeguarding to avoid crisis points, (HM Government, 2006; Koubel, 2016; Parton & Berridge, 2011; Purcell, 2020). Such safeguarding practice needed to encompass all children and young people (CYP), across all aspects of their lives (Purcell, 2020), including organised sports (Hartill & Lang, 2018).

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In realising that abuse against CYP occurred in sport (following high-profile incidences, in both England and internationally, in swimming, rowing and gymnastics – see for example Hartill & Prescott, 2007; Garratt et al., 2013; Whyte, 2022), the Football Association (FA) Child Protection Policy was launched in 2000 (Brackenridge et al., 2007), followed by the establishment of the NSPCC's Child Protection in Sport Unit (CPSU) in 2001, funded by Sport England.

Subsequently, the FA commissioned Brackenridge et al. in 2001 to carry out a longitudinal study to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of their Child Protection programme. They audited existing child protection provision, welfare problems, numbers of child protection trained staff and levels of awareness (Brackenridge et al., 2004). Moreover, one of the core research questions was 'what voices or discourses are heard?' (Brackenridge et al., 2004, p. 33). Children were qualitatively included as 'stakeholders' within research but it did not include anyone under 8 years old. Parents and carers views were quantitatively explored to gauge their understanding of child protection measures adopted by their club. The focus of the report, however, seemed to be on parental *behaviour* at matches.

O'Gorman and Gough (2016) explored under-10s' experiences of playing 'mini soccer' (p. 810) in England. This was a progressive step for sports organisations in terms of seeking the views of children in what is deemed to be an adult-organised sport. The research is useful in terms of understanding the experiences of children as they play an adult-organised sport, but it did not explore how *safe* they feel when playing.

Everley (2020) explored the opportunities given by Sport's National Governing Bodies (NGB) to children to have a voice in identifying abusive situations. This was a quantitative study targeting adults with safeguarding responsibility within those NGBs, rather than seeking children's views. The findings highlight the challenges facing sports organisations in seeking the views of their young sports players, with issues such as time, resources and geography being a factor. Interestingly it also raises the idea of the need to challenge 'organisational culture' (Everley, 2020, p. 122) in persuading clubs to seek the views of their young players.

Furthermore, historic cases of child abuse in youth football have recently caught the media's attention (see De Menzies, 2016; Taylor, 2016, 2017). This led to a public inquiry (Sheldon, 2021) and a three-part BBC documentary aired in April 2021 (BBC, 2021). Such reporting highlights the role that sporting bodies have in ensuring that not only do CYP feel safe when attending training or matches but that adults involved are suitably trained and qualified in recognising signs of abuse, neglect, discrimination and knowing how to deal with the matter.

## Aims and objectives

In 2021, Birmingham County Football Association (BCFA) with Newman University carried out a quantitative review to assess coaches, volunteers, parents and young people's *understanding of safeguarding information, policies and procedures in relation to football*. This review evaluated the *proactive* practice of safeguarding practices across BCFA-affiliated clubs. Previous studies have omitted the young person's voice in the research in relation to assessing how *safe* they feel. Therefore, in line with the United Nations Conventions of the Rights of the Child which promotes the voice of the child, and the child's right to be heard (see Unicef, n.d.); section 9 of the Children Act 1989 which legislates that the child's interest must be paramount; section 53 of the Children Act 2004 which legislates that a child's wishes must be ascertained; Working Together to Safeguard Children guidance which promotes a 'child-centred approach to safeguarding' (HM Government, 2018, p. 9); and a growing body of evidence around listening to the voices of children and young people in relation to child protection matters (see e.g. Sanders & Mace, 2006; Smith, 2010; Tucker, 2011; Everley, 2020 and of course, Jay, 2014), this Review specifically included CYP participants to explore how *safe* they felt when attending their chosen club.

The findings in this paper concentrate solely on the findings from the children (aged 5–11) and young people (aged 12–17). Given the size of the original dataset all the findings cannot be discussed in a single paper. Furthermore, the importance on disseminating children's voices in safeguarding in sport is currently of paramount importance if changes are to be made in safeguarding players in grassroots football to prevent history repeating itself.

## METHODS

### Research design

A survey approach was adopted comprising four questionnaires. The questionnaires for the adults were written first, and then adapted for CYP (see Scott, 2008) (the findings from which forms the focus of this paper). In particular, the questionnaire for the children (5–11-year-olds) was piloted with 20 primary school children from years 3, 4 and 5 supported by a teaching assistant. Some changes were subsequently made. For example, asking children if they had previously heard a term (e.g. 'safeguarding') was fine, but followed up with a reflective question (e.g. 'Where have you heard the term before?') proved problematic due to issues of memory (see Rocha et al., 2013). In addition, open-ended

questions requiring a more qualitative explanation (e.g. ‘what does safeguarding mean to you?’) seemed to cause disengagement with the process. As Scott (2008) highlights, it is imperative that questions posed to children are unambiguous and avoid best guess type questions. Overall, seven questions were removed from the final questionnaire for 5–11-year-olds. All responses were tick boxes; either yes or no, or a short multiple-choice list, with an ‘other; please specify’ option (see Rocha et al., 2013). Likert scales were not used to avoid ambiguity and subjectivity between responses (e.g. the difference between ‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree’) (see Mellor & Moore, 2014; Rocha et al., 2013).

It is often deemed that quantitative approaches are not the most effective when seeking CYP views, but ‘children are social actors in their own right’ (Scott, 2008, p. 88) and are much better placed to answer questions about themselves, especially if the subject matter ‘is meaningful to their lives’ (Scott, 2008, p. 88). Stafford et al. (2003) found that CYP prefer questionnaires because they could not be talked over, and children do not have to express their views in front of others. Furthermore, for expediency a quantitative survey was the most efficient approach for gaining a snapshot of CYP’s understandings in relation to safeguarding.

CYP were asked questions relating to length of time playing football; how many clubs they had attended in previous years (to identify if CYP were leaving any particular club for reasons unbeknown to BCFA); questions relating to how often they played and relating to whether or not CYP had a voice in the organisation of training/matches; questions around understanding safeguarding and welfare. These questions aimed to find out what CYP understood about the processes of being able to tell someone, and who that person might be rather than their understanding abuse per se. For example, the question ‘if you were being hurt, either at the club, or outside of it (e.g., At home or school), would you know who at the club you could talk to?’ was included to understand who the CYP might talk to, and to identify how many said the Club Welfare Officer (the delegated safeguarding person within BCFA affiliated clubs).

## Participants

BCFA circulated the questionnaires to the corresponding members in their database. Details of total numbers of circulation were unknown. Questionnaires were circulated to parents/carers for the CYP to complete, with parental support where necessary. In addition, further support was drawn from BCFA’s Youth Council to promote participation among CYP.

## Data analysis

Data were collected using Jisc Online Surveys. Descriptive statistics were used to summarise the data in relation to each of the corresponding groups (CYP, parents, coaches and volunteers). As this is the first study specifically reviewing safeguarding practices in grassroots football, and seeking CYP views on safeguarding, there is a lack of research with which to make comparisons. Therefore, the Six Principles of Safeguarding were applied as a *lens* through which to evaluate BCFA’s safeguarding practices.

The Care Act 2014 specifies six principles that should be embedded in safeguarding practices within health and care settings (see SCIE, 2020). The six principles are:

1. Empowerment: whether people are enabled and allowed to make their own decisions.
2. Prevention: the proactive approach of taking action to prevent harm occurring.
3. Proportionality: the action taken is in proportion to the risk presented.
4. Protection: the support available for those who need it.
5. Partnership: the role that communities play in preventing abuse.
6. Accountability: safeguarding processes are transparent, fair and denote responsibility.

As Walsh (2014, p. 533) states, ‘one must analyse before one can explain, predict or act’. Therefore, following the principles of exploration and emergence within Grounded Theory (see Glaser & Strauss, 1967), once the descriptive statistics were examined, the six principles were applied as an analytical lens through which to allow concepts and relationships to emerge from the data.

## Ethics

BCFA commissioned the review. Ethical clearance was granted by the researcher’s own institution. A research contract was signed between the CEO of BCFA and PVC at Newman University. Thereby consent was given to the researcher

at Newman to use BCFA's contacts and conduct the review on their behalf. However, at no time would the university have access to the contact list. Any contact made with participants was via BCFA.

A participant information sheet was included on the first page each questionnaire which informed all participants of the purpose, the partnership between Newman and BCFA, issues of anonymity, and so on, so that participants were aware how their participation fitted into the study (Denscombe, 2017). Limits of confidentiality were stated clearly upfront. For example, whilst the questionnaires were focused on understanding and awareness of safeguarding, and training, the researcher acknowledged that it could indirectly affect someone who may have experienced a safeguarding issue. The questionnaires, therefore, included support information for anyone affected by the issues. Furthermore, it was clearly stated that if anyone offered a response which suggested that they or someone else was at risk of harm then the researcher would alert the BCFA Safeguarding Officer (Webster et al., 2014). Such information allowed participants to make an informed decision on whether to complete the questionnaire.

For children under the age of 16, the questionnaire was first distributed to parents/carers. If the parents' consented to their child (ren) participating, then they could pass to the child (ren) and the child could then make an informed decision as to whether s/he wanted to participate (Lewis, 2003).

## RESULTS

This paper concentrates on the findings from CYP. There were 21 responses from 5–11-year-olds and 15 responses from 12–17-year-olds; 26 of the participants were White, and 27 were male. Seven respondents were female and two ticked *prefer not to say*. In the 5–11-year-olds category, the greater number of responses ( $N = 12$ ) were from 8- and 9-year-olds, and in the 12–17 years category the greater number of responses ( $N = 11$ ) were from 16- and 17-year-olds.

Out of the children, six had experience of playing at another club prior to their current football club. By contrast, 11 young people had attended other clubs before joining their current one. All children except one (in the 5–11-year category) attended training as well as matches, thereby playing at least twice per week.

Eighty per cent ( $N = 30$ ) of the CYP indicated that they enjoyed playing football with their current club. Qualitative responses from the 5–11-year-olds included 'winning, playing with friends scoring goals', 'enjoy playing the matches' and 'being with my friends'. Qualitative responses from 12–17-year-olds 'I can meet new people and challenge myself', 'competing', 'getting out, getting fit, touches off the ball, playing with mates', 'being part of a team'.

In relation to the elements of football which they did not like, qualitative responses from the 5–11-year-olds included 'losing', 'getting hurt'. By contrast responses from the 12–17-year-olds were rather more concerning, with responses including 'the bullying by some of the Black girls', 'the stress of it all', 'angry parents getting loud' and 'racism, abuse'.

Eighty-six per cent of children ( $N = 17$ ) and young people ( $N = 14$ ) ticked that they felt safe when training or playing matches, but 6 % (children  $N = 1$ , young people  $N = 1$ ) ticked that they did not feel safe. Two children aged 5–11 years ticked 'sometimes' they feel safe, and one was not sure.

In relation to the term 'safeguarding', 57 per cent ( $N = 12$ ) of children and 93 per cent ( $N = 14$ ) of the young people had heard of the word 'safeguarding'. Qualitative definitions from the young people included 'keeping perverts away', 'making sure people are protected from harmful things', 'keeping people away from harm/bad situations', 'ensuring a safe an inclusive environment for everyone involved', 'making sure I'm safe when doing things', 'making sure people that are around you are safe, no dodgy people around, no name on kits u18s making sure players don't have managers number to text and call'. In terms of where they had heard the word, most indicated either at school/college or at their football club.

In relation to the term 'welfare', 43 per cent ( $N = 9$ ) of children and 87 per cent ( $N = 13$ ) of young people ticked that they had heard this term before. The young people defined it as 'money when you are not working', 'being "good" in general', 'safety of u [*sic*] and others', 'how someone is looked after', 'it's like when someone in life is struggling with money the government or whatever help you out a little bit'. In contrast to the term safeguarding, the main place many of the young people thought they had heard the term 'welfare' was in school/college followed by on television.

The CYP were asked if anyone at the club had ever spoken to them about 'safeguarding' and the club's role in ensuring their safety when at the club. Of the 5–11-year-olds 48 per cent ( $N = 10$ ) ticked yes someone had spoken to them, 43 per cent ( $N = 9$ ) ticked said no, and 10 per cent ( $N = 2$ ) ticked they did not know or could not remember. Fifty-three per cent ( $N = 8$ ) of the 12–17-year-olds ticked yes someone had spoken to them, in contrast with 27 per cent ( $N = 4$ ) who said no, and 20 per cent ( $N = 3$ ) who said they did not know or could not remember.

CYP were asked what they would do if they were being hurt by someone at the football club (an adult or another young person), 57 per cent ( $N = 12$ ) of 5–11-year-olds stated that they would tell either a parent ( $N = 12$  or 57 per cent) or a teacher ( $N = 11$ , 52 per cent). For the 12–17-year-olds, whilst most said a parent or relative ( $N=12$ , 80 per cent), the second highest number suggested they would prefer to tell a friend ( $N=8$ , 53 per cent). In relation to the 'other' responses given by the 5–11-year-olds, these were 'it depends who it is' and 'The Ref'.

In relation to the question regarding whether they had ever reported anything to their CWO, nearly all the CYP ( $N = 34$ ) said no. One in the 5–11 age group said they did not know/could not remember. One in the 12–17-year age group said yes, they had reported something to the CWO. When they asked how helpful the CWO was in responding to the young person's concerns, they ticked 'quite helpful – they seemed to have some idea of what they needed to do'.

## USING THE SIX PRINCIPLES OF SAFEGUARDING AS A FRAMEWORK FOR DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

### Empowerment

Freire's critical pedagogy theory can help to understand how marginalised people, such as CYP, when given the opportunity, can transform their social spaces through negotiating with those who generally prevent them from having a voice, usually adults (Freire, 1996). Giving them greater decision-making over the organisation of the game not only teaches the CYP that their views are valued but gives ownership of what takes place within their club. This also contributes to developing confidence to speak out when they feel unsafe within their club. In relation to organising the training, however, 62 per cent ( $N = 13$ ) of 5–11-year-olds and 40 per cent ( $N = 6$ ) of 12–17-year-olds felt that they had a say in how training was organised. Furthermore, less decision-making seemed to be given in relation to the organisation of match days with only 43 per cent ( $N = 9$ ) of 5–11-year-olds and 13 per cent ( $N = 2$ ) of 12–17 years olds feeling that they were involved.

However, 53 per cent ( $N = 8$ ) of the 12–17-year-olds claimed that they did not want to be involved in decision-making in relation to training or matches. By contrast, 71 per cent ( $N = 15$ ) of 5–11-year respondents indicated they wanted more decision-making in how their games were organised. These findings align with the findings of Brackenridge et al. (2007) on empowerment and marginalised voices, which might suggest that grassroots football has not made progress in terms of empowering children. Furthermore, Van Bijleveld et al. (2020) highlight that, in child protection practice, whilst the intention to facilitate child participation exists in theory, the reality in practice is still minimal. This is in line with the work of Freire who argued that the 'oppressed' need to realise their role as the 'Subjects of the transformation' (Freire, 1996, p. 108). If CYP are not *informed of* their right to have a say, or *how to* have a voice, and thus remain 'ambiguous beings' (Freire, 1996, p. 108), then they are not going to realise that they can have an impact on their own football experiences. O'Gorman and Gough (2016) found that children aged under 10 playing organised football had little decision-making authority in organising their football. They advised, however, that 'if the intention of those who organize and administer it are concerned with providing children with positive and meaningful experiences which maximize their participation in the short and longer term' (O'Gorman & Gough, 2016, p. 823) then children's experiences would be tantamount to attaining success.

### Prevention

Prevention closely aligns with empowerment, and if children are empowered to understand abuse and to speak out then ultimately this might work towards preventing it (see e.g. Andrews et al., 2020; Fouché et al., 2019; Wissink et al., 2015). CYP playing grassroots football within BCFA affiliated clubs are aware of, if not overly familiar with, a definition of, the word *safeguarding*. Given the qualitative responses given (as noted in Section 3), it might be that they had a broad idea that safeguarding related to keeping them safe from harm.

In relation to whether someone at their club had spoken to them about 'safeguarding', there was almost an even split with half of the CYP saying yes. There could be a number of factors for this uncertainty, but it might be that the CYP did not understand what was taking place, if it did. Equally it may be that the idea of safeguarding has not been discussed with the CYP at the club. Everley (2020) highlighted issues for clubs in having the resources but also adults who are trained in and comfortable in having those discussions.

In addition, when the CYP were asked if they thought that someone at their club should talk to them about the club's role in keeping them safe, 62 per cent ( $N = 8$ ) of the 5–11-year-old respondents and 71 per cent ( $N = 5$ ) of the 12–17-year-old respondents actually said that they did not know. Of course, this might simply link back to the uncertainty around the term *safeguarding*. Despite this it must be highlighted that the professionalisation of sports coaching and the implementation of a Code of Conduct for coaches has had a positive impact on child protection developments in sports (Everley, 2020; Garratt et al., 2013). Garratt et al. (2013, p. 624) further point out that sports coaches are no longer simply concerned with sports performance but have become 'the moral guardians of child welfare'. However, this assumes that it is wholly an adult's responsibility to safeguard CYP. Everley (2020) concluded that there is a need, and even a cultural will now, to engage children's voices in sport to protect them. Adults attending grassroots football

clubs have a requirement to complete safeguarding training. Building on Everley's (2020) findings therefore, I would argue that there could be a need to offer such safeguarding training to the CYP to educate them and raise awareness in order to both empower them and help them prevent abuse within grassroots football.

## Proportionality

Of course, what cannot be deduced from this quantitative questionnaire is how well, or *how effectively* the CYP are listened to when at the club. One young person raised issues in this questionnaire regarding racism and bullying – both of which are forms of emotional abuse – yet highlighted ‘but no one does anything’. This is clearly an issue that is affecting this young person, yet in their mind it is not being dealt with by the relevant adults. This aligns with Ness (2022) who found that emotional abuse is problematic to define and difficult to act on, but not acting has consequences for the target of the emotional abuse. In the longer term this will affect the confidence of this young person to seek help (see Tucker, 2011) and equally sends the messages to the perpetrator of the emotional abuse that such abuse is acceptable. It may also be the case that this young perpetrator is a victim elsewhere and is repeating the behaviour (see Nwafor et al., 2020; Saroyan, 2019; Shannon, 2013). It should, therefore, be imperative that these young people are listened to, and action taken in proportion to the incident to prevent longer term psychological distress (Arseneault, 2019; Ness, 2022; Shannon, 2013). More importantly, it is not just how well are they listened to, but also how well are they *believed* by the adults to whom they may be disclosing (Tucker, 2011). This is not only important in terms of empowering CYP voices, but also in having confidence that someone will then act proportionally on their behalf.

## Protection

Nearly all said they enjoyed playing at their current club and that they felt safe when playing matches or training. However, one child and one young person ticked ‘no’ they did not feel safe. When examining this further, it seems that there may be incidences of racism and bullying occurring within girls’ football. One respondent in the 12–17-year-old category noted: ‘At school and at football there are a number of black girls who bully the White and Asian girls but no one does anything’. Further comments were stated elsewhere in the questions: ‘The bullying by some of the Black girls’, ‘Racism, abuse’. The recipients of the abusive language are being subjected to emotional abuse, as well as discrimination. As noted previously, however, it must also be borne in mind that the young perpetrator of the emotional abuse could equally be a victim of such emotional abuse elsewhere in their lives, and may themselves need equality and/or safeguarding measures.

CYP respondents were asked if they knew who the CWO was at their current club, 95 per cent ( $N=17$ ) of respondents in the 5–11-year-old category and 47 per cent ( $N=7$ ) in the 12–17-year-old age group said that they did not know who the CWO was. Despite this, Rhind et al. (2015) evidence how important the CWO is in alerting a safeguarding issue with the Lead Welfare Officer within the relevant NGB, with the CWO being second to a Criminal Records Check. By contrast, the recent Whyte Review (Whyte, 2022, p. 17) highlighted the ‘volunteer’ nature of the CWO in British gymnastics, and the ‘onerous’ safeguarding responsibilities with which they were tasked, often with no previous safeguarding background. Linking back to the ideas around understanding what safeguarding is, it may be that these CYP are unaware of the role of the CWO in relation to safeguarding. There is clearly a need for further education and awareness of safeguarding in relation to making it clear what the purpose is of having a CWO, empowering CYP with that knowledge and preventing abuse (including racism and discrimination) in football.

## Partnership

When asked if they were being hurt at the club or outside of it, who would they talk to at the club, the greater number of CYP said they would either talk to the coach, or their parents. Therefore, whilst CYP might not be aware of the CWO, they identified that there would be someone at the club who they might feel able to talk to. This is further evidence of the importance of the role of the coach as a safeguarding authority, and the necessity that the coaches fully understand their role in safeguarding CYP. Rhind et al. (2015) highlighted the importance of the positive relationship developed between CYP and adults in sport to enable CYP to disclose abuse outside of the sport. However, where this might falter is in situations in which the coach is the perpetrator of the abuse or in smaller clubs in which the coach is *also* the CWO. Similarly, Brackenridge et al. (2005, p. 269) also highlighted the issue that ‘child protection standards are not necessarily exemplified or defended best by a child’s own coach’. This is a greater issue in other sports where the coach works on a one-to-one level with a young athlete (e.g. swimming, tennis), or the coaching may require

physical support (e.g. gymnastics, ballet). To overcome such issues, it is imperative to return to the issue of empowering CYP in safeguarding matters and put them in control of their own preventative and protective measures. Such awareness raising and reversion of power from the adult to the CYP should be *co-constructed* with CYP to ensure that it is age appropriate, engaging and accessible.

## Accountability

A question for wider debate is what safeguarding messages CYP should have or need to have. It must be highlighted that under the Children's Rights Agenda, Article 17, children have the right to information and Article 13 is the right to expression. Having safeguarding information available can empower CYP, thereby opening avenues to be able to disclose, but also to protect their peers and being accountable for each other.

One of the key roles in terms of safeguarding practice at grassroots level is the CWO. However, what became evident through this review was the seeming lack of awareness of CYP of the purpose and function of the CWO in relation to issues of safeguarding and welfare. Reporting procedures in safeguarding policies therefore need to be made clearer for CYP. Furthermore, it would be interesting to examine whether such policies are written in child-friendly format, whether CYP know that they exist and how to access this information. Whyte (2022) recently highlighted how, within gymnastics, parents, coaches and gymnasts were unaware of welfare-related policy and Standards of Conduct. This equally calls into question policy dissemination strategies and education within a sporting community.

## CONCLUSION

This paper examined the quantitative findings from CYP which formed part of the review commissioned by BCFA in relation to assessing coaches, volunteers, parents and young people's understanding of safeguarding information, policies and procedures in grassroots football. The paper used the Six Principles of Safeguarding to evaluate the findings and assess the level of safeguarding.

## Recommendations for practice

First, in relation to improving empowerment of CYP and prevention of abuse, football clubs (with support from their NGB) need to develop the tools to help their young players understand the principles of safeguarding. This not only enables them to protect themselves but also to act when they perceive that fellow players may be in harmful situations. In addition, it would give the CYP greater ownership of the tools if they were codeveloped with CYP to ensure they are fit for purpose.

Secondly, to improve proportionality and ensure that any action taken is in proportion to the risk or issue presented, it may improve safeguarding practice in football if tools were developed to *measure how effectively* CYP are listened to and believed, and what action is taken in relation to concerns raised by the players. This could reduce adverse effects of CYP feeling that they are not listened to, or believed, when they raise issues both on and off the pitch.

Regarding improving protection and the support available for safeguarding CYP when playing organised football, much greater emphasis and awareness need to be made to CYP around the role of the CWO, the role of the CWO in safeguarding, who the CWO is and how to contact them. In addition, where clubs are small and the coach is also the CWO, further signposts need to be offered to external sources such as the NSPCC, Childline or contacting the BCFA Safeguarding Team. Equally this also links back to the point around empowering the CYP to enable them to take control of safeguarding and protection matters within their own club, to be empowered to act against any adult or peer over whom they may have concerns.

Finally, regarding accountability and ensuring that safeguarding practices are transparent, examining whether the clubs' safeguarding policies are written in child-friendly format might offer some insight into the messages available to CYP. Additionally it would be helpful to talk to the CYP about what they understand from the policy and guidance and how this might be improved and made more accessible.

## Recommendations for further research

In line with improving empowerment, further qualitative research needs to be conducted on how effectively CYP are *listened to* and *believed* at the club, in matters relating to the game, welfare and well-being. Additionally, a discourse analysis would be useful to assess how child-friendly the safeguarding policies and information are at sports clubs.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

None.

## ETHICS STATEMENT

The study was commissioned by Birmingham County Football Association. Ethical clearance was granted by the researcher's own institution. The CYP questionnaire was sent to parents/carers in the first instance. IF they consented to their child participating in the survey, then they could pass the questionnaire to their child who could also make an informed decision about participation.

A participant information sheet (which included issues such as voluntary participation, anonymity albeit with a safeguarding caveat, right to withdraw, plus support information for anyone affected by the content of the questions) was added to the front page of the online questionnaire, with a statement saying that by clicking to continue with the questionnaire the person was consenting to participate in the survey.

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