

A TOOLKIT FOR THE PREVENTION OF SEXUAL INTIMIDATION IN SPORT

The Netherlands Olympic Committee and Dutch Sports Confederation

This description comes from the study commissioned by the European Commission on gender-based violence in sport ([Mergaert L., & al., Study on gender-based violence in sport – final report, European Commission, 2016](#)). It was updated within the framework of the European Union-Council of Europe joint project [Pro Safe Sport + "Put an end to sexual harassment and abuse against children in sport"](#), by collecting more recent information from the organisation responsible for the project.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PRACTICE

Background

In 1996, a high-profile case of sexual violence in Dutch sport prompted the Netherlands Olympic Committee and Dutch Sports Confederation (NOC*NSF) to take action to prevent sexual intimidation in organised sport. To ensure that the action taken was underpinned by evidence, the NOC*NSF commissioned a study on the risk factors for sexual intimidation in sport. The findings of the study were used by the NOC*NSF and sport federations to develop a series of measures aimed at preventing and managing incidents of sexual intimidation in sport.¹ The toolkit for the prevention of sexual intimidation brings together many of these measures to help sports clubs implement a strategy against sexual intimidation. The toolkit was developed in cooperation with some sport federations and the Dutch Association for Voluntary Work (NOV).² The toolkit is regularly updated to improve its content and ensure it remains current.

Developing a roadmap for tackling sexual intimidation in sport

The aim of the toolkit is to help local sport clubs develop and implement their own strategy to prevent and manage sexual intimidation in sport. To this end, the toolkit provides seven steps or actions that clubs need to take:

1. Putting the issue on the agenda

Sexual intimidation should be put on the agenda of board meetings, staff meetings, parent meetings, etc. The toolkit provides tips on how to raise the topic sensitively. The toolkit advises to establish a working group on this topic, to consider collaborating with nearby sport clubs and advises the club board to sign a commitment statement.

2. Audit the club's current position

Clubs should audit their current position by taking an inventory of existing risk factors for unacceptable behaviours within their club. A template risk assessment for this is provided in the toolkit. Clubs are encouraged to discuss the outcome of the audit with stakeholders, including board members, sports personnel, athletes and their parents.

¹ Cense, M. & Brackenridge, C. H., 2001. Temporal and developmental risk factors for sexual harassment and abuse in sport. *European Physical Education Review*. 7 (1), pp. 61-79.

² *Nederlandse Organisaties Vrijwilligerswerk* in Dutch.

3. Appoint a Local Confidential Counsellor

Clubs should appoint a Local Confidential Counsellor. These individuals are the first point of contact for anyone within their organisation who would like more information about sexual intimidation or who wishes to make a complaint about sexual intimidation. These individuals are also responsible for referring reports of sexual intimidation to counterparts at a national level, known as National Confidential Counsellors. The toolkit provides a job description for the Local Confidential Counsellor role and the NOC*NSF offers specialist training to these individuals. The Local Confidential Counsellors are trained by experienced National Confidential Counsellors on communication skills and risk factors and signs of sexual intimidation. The training provides detailed information about the policy tools, developed by the NOC*NSF, that are at the club's disposal. On a regular basis, the NOC*NSF National Counsellors organise an update course for all trained Local Counsellors.

4. Implement a code of conduct for sport leaders

Clubs should implement a code of conduct for sport leaders that covers the prevention of sexual intimidation in sport, and club board members are responsible for enforcing this. The NOC*NSF has developed such a code of conduct, which covers appropriate coach-athlete behaviours and relationships. This code serves as the basis for a blueprint disciplinary law in sport federations.³ Having a code of conduct is mandatory. The club is free to choose whether to write its own code of conduct, or to use the code of conduct that is part of the disciplinary law.

5. Create house rules

Clubs should develop a set of house rules that formalise the values of the club and its members. For example, these rules might include statements such as, 'I accept and respect everybody and do not discriminate' and 'I do not harm other people'. These rules should be created in collaboration with all stakeholders to encourage ownership and acceptance.

6. Refine recruitment procedures

Clubs should check the background and experience of sport staff during their recruitment process. This could be done through interviewing prospective candidates, checking the credentials of coaches from previous clubs, and asking for a curriculum vitae. Clubs are also encouraged to:

a. Check the criminal record of all applicants

A criminal record check is a statement from the Ministry of Justice that certifies whether an applicant has previously committed any criminal offences that might suggest they are unsuitable to take on the position for which the certificate has been requested. Sports club administrators can request an individual's criminal record check from the Ministry of Justice free of charge on the condition that the club implements a minimum set of prevention measures.

b. Check the register of individuals convicted of perpetrating sexual intimidation in sport

The so-called 'register of individuals convicted of perpetrating sexual intimidation in sport'⁴ is a sports-wide register that records the name of individuals who have a disciplinary record of sexual intimidation in sport. The register, which is approved by the Data Protection Authority, also records the type of offense and the duration

³ This is an example of a disciplinary law on sexual intimidation in sport, provided by the NOC*NSF. The blueprint provides a definition of sexual intimidation, information on the sanctions for infractions of the law, and establishes rules for reporting allegations of sexual intimidation in sport. See: <https://www.sport4all.nl/media/paginas/6.1%202e%20blauwdruk%20seksuele%20intimidatie.pdf>

⁴ See: <http://www.nocnsf.nl/registratiesysteem-tuchtrechtelijk-veroordeelden-seksuele-intimidatie>

of the penalty handed down. With the assistance of their sport federation, sports clubs have been able to check since 2015 if an individual is listed on the register,⁵ although only sport federations that are affiliated to the NOC*NSF and that have a code of conduct in place are able to use this service.

7. *Inform and involve all stakeholders about the strategy*

All stakeholders should be informed about the club's strategy. The toolkit provides tips on how to communicate the strategy to stakeholders, suggesting for example that clubs organise a parent meeting to discuss the strategy, disseminate educational materials about the strategy, and use social media to promote and raise awareness about it.

OUTCOMES AND STRENGTHS

Evidence of the usefulness of the toolkit can be found in a 2015 study that asked representatives of Dutch sports clubs about their engagement with the toolkit.⁶ In total, 87% of the 25,000 Dutch sport clubs participating in the survey said they had used at least part of the toolkit, and 7% said they were familiar with the whole toolkit. With regard to some of the specific measures contained within the toolkit, 55% of sports clubs said they were familiar with criminal history checks, and 42% had a Local Confidential Counsellor. When there is a complaint of sexual intimidation, 96% of sport administrators said they take action, including contacting the Local Confidential Counsellor, issuing warnings or suspensions against (alleged) perpetrators, or reporting incidents to the sport federation and/or police. Equally, in 2012, a study of users' satisfaction with the sexual intimidation prevention instruments found that while only a minority of club administrators said they had used the measures, those who had were satisfied with the quality of these.⁷ Although this study did not focus specifically on the toolkit itself, some of the instruments included in the toolkit were positively evaluated by their users.

The toolkit is freely available on the NOC*NSF website, making it easily accessible to all clubs in the Netherlands. In addition, the fact that the toolkit includes clear steps that are required in order to develop a strategy on sexual intimidation in sport, and the inclusion of practical guidance, templates, and educational resources to facilitate this, simplifies what could otherwise be a complex process. This makes it easy for clubs to implement a strategy to prevent sexual intimidation, even if they lack experience or expertise in this area. It also ensures there is some standardisation in the strategies in place. Setting the toolkit out in this way also means sports organisations are able to devise tailored strategies that are appropriate for their specific culture.

After two decades of policy work to tackle sexual intimidation in sport, the NOC*NSF has developed a broad mix of measures in this area. As a result, the toolkit is embedded in a broad, holistic framework of measures and is thus complemented by other tools. One of the most useful and innovative of initiatives is the pool of National Confidential Counsellors who are experienced in counselling perpetrators and those affected by sexual intimidation in sport. Having individuals in these positions at national and local level ensures that there are key contact points for advice and support across all levels of sport, and that individuals occupying the Local Confidential Counsellor role have a network of support. This is vital given that individuals with expertise in sexual intimidation in sport are often limited in number.

⁵ See: <http://www.nocnsf.nl/registratiesysteem-tuchtrechtelijk-veroordeelden-seksuele-intimidatie>

⁶ No study has investigated use of the toolkit specifically, but a study on the 'Safe sports climate' programme, of which the toolkit is a part, included questions about the use of the toolkit. See: Romijn, D., Kalmthout, J. van & Breedveld, K. (2015). *Safe sport climate monitor 2015. Progress report Action plan 'Towards a safe and respectful sport environment'*. Utrecht: Mulier Instituut.

⁷ See: Serkei, B., Goes, A. & de Groot, N. (2012) *From blind confidence to responsible policy. Usefulness and effectiveness of NOC*NSF policy instruments sexual intimidation*. Utrecht: MOVISIE.

LIMITATIONS

A major limitation of this toolkit lies in the fact that only 7% of sport clubs say they were familiar with the whole toolkit. Rather, most sport clubs say they have adopted either one or only a handful of measures mentioned in the toolkit's seven steps. One of the toolkit's main strengths is its broad-ranging approach to tackling sexual intimidation, as adopting a holistic approach is most likely to offer the greatest safeguards against sexual intimidation in sport. When clubs select certain elements of the toolkit while ignoring others, the full effectiveness of the toolkit in preventing sexual intimidation in sport is inevitably reduced. Raising awareness of the toolkit and promoting its full adoption among clubs is therefore essential. In addition, research suggests that many clubs have not implemented measures because they assume sexual intimidation is not an issue in their sport. Therefore, making clubs aware of the reality of sexual intimidation in sport is crucial.

While some elements contained within the toolkit's seven steps are now compulsory for sports clubs, other measures are not. As such, there is no obligation on sports clubs to adopt the measures or, even if they chose to do so, to adopt these measures in their entirety. This results in the situation described above where clubs may implement elements of the toolkit in a piecemeal fashion, reducing the benefits of the toolkit.

Finally, while some independent research has been conducted to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of some of the tools the NOC*NSF has developed over the years, there has been no such empirical research to date on the toolkit or on the specific interventions it contains (such as the code of conduct, criminal history checks, the house rules etc.). Consequently, there is no actual evidence for whether the toolkit or its elements, individually or in combination, are effective or why. Regular, rigorous and independent monitoring and evaluation of the toolkit and its implementation is therefore urgently required.

LESSONS LEARNT

The Netherlands was one of the first countries in Europe to develop initiatives to prevent sexual intimidation in sport, starting in the 1990s. The NOC*NSF has not stood still in this regard, and continues to update their strategy and policy instruments. This commitment means measures and policies designed by the NOC*NSF are constantly updated based on the latest knowledge and ideas, and therefore remain current. The NOC*NSF has also recognised that encouraging sport stakeholders to take ownership of and buy in to tackle sexual intimidation in sport is key to effective implementation. To this end, the NOC*NSF has made significant efforts over the years to refine the way they promote their work in this area. The NOC*NSF believes that it is important to incorporate sensitive topics such as sexual intimidation within broader, more wide-ranging programmes such as those aimed at developing safe and respectful sports environments as this is more likely to convince sport stakeholders to take up the issue. The NOC*NSF believes that this is the most effective approach to creating long-term changes in the culture of sport.

FURTHER INFORMATION

The toolkit 'sexual intimidation policy': <http://www.nocnsf.nl/seksuele-intimidatie>

The policy framework 'a safe and respectful sport environment': <http://www.veiligsportklimaat.nl/home>

The NOS*NSF website on intimidation: <http://www.nocnsf.nl/grensoverschrijdendgedrag>

Free of charge criminal record check: www.gratisvog.nl

Campaign "Maak er een punt van" of the Ministry Safety and Justice: www.maakereenpuntvan.nl

Toolkit for all volunteer organisations: <https://www.inveilige handen.nl/>

Evaluation / monitoring 'a safe and respectful sport environment': Romijn, D., Kalmthout, J. van & Breedveld, K. (2015). Safe sport climate monitor 2015. Progress report Action plan 'Towards a safe and respectful sport environment'. Utrecht: Mulier Instituut.

Scientific articles:

Schipper- van Veldhoven, N., Vertommen, T. & Vloet, L. (2015). (Sexual) Intimidation in Sports: the Netherlands. In Lang, M. & Hartill, M (Eds): Safeguarding, Child Protection and Abuse in Sport: International Perspectives in Research, Policy and Practice. London: Routledge, pp. 40-48.

Serkei, B., Goes, A. and de Groot, N. (2012) From blind confidence to responsible policy. Usefulness and effectiveness of NOC*NSF policy instruments sexual intimidation, Utrecht: MOVISIE.