

## THE CODE OF ETHICS AND GOOD PRACTICE FOR CHILDREN'S SPORT

### *Sport Ireland and Sport NI*

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

Several high-profile cases of child sexual abuse in sport in Ireland in the 1990s evidenced that abuse occurs in this context. Consequently, in 1996, an expert committee of representatives from sport, child protection, and government departments launched the Code of Ethics and Good Practice for Children's Sport.<sup>1</sup> In 1998, the committee reconvened to update the Code. The revised Code was issued in 2000 by Sport Ireland and the Sports Council for Northern Ireland. It was updated in 2003 and again in 2006, and is reviewed every three years to ensure it aligns with Irish legislation. Implementing the Code is voluntary but sports organisations must demonstrate adherence to it to receive government funding.

### A holistic strategy to safeguard children

The Code is based on principles that relate to the importance of childhood, the needs of the child, integrity and fair play, and relationships and safety in children's sport, and is underpinned by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.<sup>2</sup> It contains a series of principles, policy and practice guidelines for everyone in children's sport. These fall into five areas, known as the '5Ps': 1) Principles, 2) People, 3) Policy and procedures, 4) Practice, and 5) Protection.<sup>3</sup> There is also an appendix that includes a flow chart of procedures for managing incidents in and beyond the organisation, plus template policies, a template job application form and an incident reporting form. While organisations do not have to use these templates, providing them in the Code's appendix makes it easy for organisations with limited knowledge and experience in this area to adopt policies and procedures for managing and preventing harm to children in Irish sport.

### Designated Liaison Persons to oversee implementation

A key recommendation within the Code is that sports organisations appoint national and club children's officers to assist with implementation. National Children's Officers (NCOs) sit within national governing bodies of sport. Among other things, their role involves: disseminating the Code to clubs and affiliates; liaising with clubs to ensure their regulations are child centred; helping National governing bodies of sport develop sport-

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<sup>1</sup> These include sports leaders and stakeholders from NGBs, and The National Coaching and Training Centre, child protection experts, and officials from the then-departments for Tourism, Sport and Recreation; Health and Children; Justice, Equality and Law Reform; Education and Science.

<sup>2</sup> See: <http://www.unicef.org.uk/UNICEFs-Work/UN-Convention/>

<sup>3</sup> 'Principles' emphasises the importance of developing and maintaining relationships characterised by integrity within a positive and harassment- and abuse-free environment. 'People' outlines the key roles and responsibilities of everyone in children's sport, creates the posts of NCO and CCO, and identifies how appropriate adult-child and child-child relationships can be nurtured. 'Policy and procedures' relates to how the Code informs sport constitutions, structures and regulations, and outlines procedures for recruiting/training staff for managing allegations. A database of people who have undergone safeguarding training is maintained by, among others, NGBs. 'Practice' provides template codes of conduct on various topics, including transporting children and adult-child physical contact. 'Protection' identifies potential risks for abuse in children's sport, and provides advice on identifying and reporting concerns.

specific resources; and co-ordinating safeguarding training for staff. A network of Club Children's Officers (CCOs) also exist alongside NCOs. These work at club level to promote child-centred practice, provide information about the Code to children and represent them in the club, and monitor how policies impact on children. Statutory guidance also requires National governing bodies of sport and clubs to have a Designated Liaison Person who is responsible for managing child protection concerns.

#### Promoting the Code and preventing gender-based violence through technology

The Code is available as a free app available to download online called Safe Sport. The aim of the app is to raise awareness of the Code and increase understanding about safeguarding and best practice in children's sport in Ireland. The app provides safeguarding guidance for various stakeholder groups – coach/leader, parent/guardian, club/organisation, and child/young person - and has links for people to quickly and easily report safeguarding concerns. It also allows parents to track their child's location to and/or from sports events. Feedback from clubs is that parents find the location tracker useful and it has been credited for the app's high download rate. The Sport Ireland website contains links to the Code and its guidance manual,<sup>4</sup> as well as a video that runs through the features in the Safe Sport app.<sup>5</sup> Embedding the Code within a freely available app that can be downloaded and accessed on a mobile device enhances the visibility of the Code and has the potential to raise awareness about it and about safeguarding issues and how to manage these within sport. Sport Ireland run events to promote the Code and to encourage stakeholder buy in. Survivors of child sexual abuse in sport speak at these events on the importance of listening to children.

#### OUTCOMES AND STRENGTHS

The creation of a network of national and club children's officers has been one of the Code's key successes. All national governing bodies of sport funded by Sport Ireland have appointed an NCO, a number of whom are paid staff from national governing bodies of sport, and a network of CCOs has also been established. The contact details of NCOs are published on Sport Ireland's website so they can be easily accessed by anyone. The establishment of these roles ensures there are people in place to champion the Code and its principles, provide a central point of contact for information, and assist with implementing the Code within sports organisations, such as encouraging the development of integrity and a harassment- and abuse-free environment in sport, embedding safe recruitment practices and safeguarding training for staff and volunteers, and implementing codes of conduct on, for example, appropriate physical contact with child athletes. Having these roles is particularly useful given that safeguarding children is a relatively new responsibility for sports organisations so many sport stakeholders lack expertise in this area.

As the Code was conceptualised at a national level, supported by the government, it is underpinned by national child welfare legislation and statutory guidance. It is also generic in content and is intended for use across the whole of Ireland. This ensures that sports organisations that adopt the Code have a single, standardised approach to safeguarding children in sport, and that this is aligned with relevant domestic law.

The Code is written in user-friendly language, making it accessible to all. The inclusion of template documents serves to standardise regulations and makes it as simple as possible for sports organisations to follow the Code, even if they have limited expertise in safeguarding children. The Code also contains substantial information on how its elements can be implemented in practice, broken down by the different stakeholder groups. The tailoring of these requirements to different roles and the level of detail provided helps personalise the advice and make it more relevant to people occupying different roles in sport.

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<sup>4</sup> See: [http://www.sportireland.ie/Participation/Code\\_of\\_Ethics/Code\\_of\\_Ethics\\_Manual/](http://www.sportireland.ie/Participation/Code_of_Ethics/Code_of_Ethics_Manual/)

<sup>5</sup> See: [http://www.sportireland.ie/Participation/Code\\_of\\_Ethics/Code-Of-Ethics-App/](http://www.sportireland.ie/Participation/Code_of_Ethics/Code-Of-Ethics-App/)

The creation of a free app version of the Code is innovative and helps ensure the Code is widely available and readily accessible to the sports community, athletes' parents, and the general public. The inclusion within the app of links to authorities to whom safeguarding concerns can be referred makes reporting quick and easy. The harnessing of technology in this way is also likely to appeal to a wide range of sport stakeholders.

Finally, gaining the input of a wide range of stakeholders when the Code was first developed and in future reviews may have helped facilitate ownership of the Code and its contents among key sport stakeholders. Regular reviews also ensure the Code remains current and can respond to both changes in legislation and feedback from the sports community.

## LIMITATIONS

The Code is believed to have had a significant impact across sport in Ireland, raising awareness of safeguarding and developing a workforce of staff and volunteers who have undergone safeguarding in sport training. However, there has been no independent, peer-reviewed evaluation of the effectiveness of the Code as a whole or of any of the specific measures (policies, guidelines, interventions etc.) it contains. As such, whether or not, or and/or to what extent the Code or its elements have had a positive impact on preventing safeguarding and child protection violations in Irish sport or on raising awareness of these issues cannot objectively verified.

The fact that implementing the Code is voluntary for sports organisations represents another limitation. Although steps have been taken to address this by linking receipt of government funding for sports organisations to them demonstrating how they are adhering to the Code, some sports organisations may still choose to ignore the Code. This undermines the credibility of the Code and the commitment of Irish sport to safeguarding children. Indeed, although most people accept the importance of safeguarding children and preventing child abuse, there has been some resistance from within Irish sport regarding the need for and value of having such a Code in sport, and in relation to the practicalities of implementing the Code. The stakeholders interviewed about the Code for this study noted that high-profile cases of sexual abuse in and outside sport in Ireland have helped reinforce the case for having the Code.<sup>6</sup> While this growing acceptance is positive, it is regrettable that, in some instances, cases of abuse are the trigger for acceptance. More needs to be done to convince stakeholders of the benefits of the Code and safeguarding children in sport more generally.

While all Sport Ireland-funded National governing bodies of sport now have NCOs and CCOs, the development of this network is central to the implementation of the Code. Recruiting, training and supporting these individuals is a significant challenge given the relative newness of the role. Attracting and retaining volunteers with the necessary knowledge, skills and motivation to fill these roles represents a further obstacle to fully embedding the Code, particularly as some NCOs and CCOs are volunteers.

## LESSONS LEARNT

The creation of the roles of NCO and CCO represents one way of developing and disseminating knowledge on safeguarding in sport to organisations' members. These posts also serve to indicate that safeguarding children is a core, rather than peripheral, responsibility of sports organisations. In addition, the linking of government funding to sports organisations being able to provide evidence of their implementation of the Code is crucial. While there has been resistance among some sport stakeholders to the Code and to the argument that sport has a moral and legal responsibility to safeguard children, making receipt of funding dependant on

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<sup>6</sup> There have been a series of historical and recent child abuse scandals in Ireland over the past decade, including but not limited to the uncovering of cases of the sexual abuse and exploitation of children within the Catholic Church, church-run schools and children's care homes. See: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/may/20/irish-catholic-schools-child-abuse-claims> and <http://www.irishmirror.ie/news/irish-news/children-care-reveal-horrifying-allegations-5159483>.

implementation of the Code has compelled organisations to adopt safeguarding practices and to do so relatively quickly.

Creating a freely available app to disseminate the Code is innovative and has the potential to enhance the visibility of the Code as well as raise awareness of and contribute to the prevention of safeguarding issues within Irish sport. The use of an app is particularly useful because it can be downloaded to a portable mobile device (i.e. phone or tablet), meaning information contained in the Code (such as that on identifying and managing safeguarding concerns, following good practice guidelines on adult-child behaviour, and how to make safe recruitment decisions) is quickly and readily available to anyone who has downloaded the app.