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acting against abuse



Spotting the Signs:

The Domestic Abuse in Sport and Activity Toolkit

Awareness, Response & Good Practice.

Thank you for their support and contribution



Sport and physical activity can be a lifeline for people experiencing domestic abuse. It can provide a safe space, a trusted community, and time away from coercive control.

Not only can domestic abuse affect anyone – participants/athletes, coaches, staff, volunteers and supporters – but coaches, staff, volunteers and teammates are in a unique position to notice signs and provide support too.

Despite the fact sport and activity can provide this safe space, it is also true that:

- Abusers may restrict access to sessions or isolate victims
- Victims may be reluctant to disclose due to stigma and/or fear
- Coaches, staff, volunteers and teammates may be unsure how to support or what to do when noticing signs.

The Purpose of this Toolkit

This toolkit should help people in the sport and activity sector to:

- Have confidence in talking about domestic abuse both broadly and in response to specific cases
- Acknowledge that domestic abuse can and may be happening within their sport, helping to avoid the 'it doesn't happen here' mindset
- Recognise signs of domestic abuse
- Respond safely to disclosures or concerns
- Understand referral pathways
- Embed good practice into safeguarding frameworks
- Consider how to manage a situation if they suspect that a club member or participant may be an abuser.

Who Is This Toolkit For?

- Sport & activity clubs
- Safeguarding Leads & Welfare/Safeguarding Officers
- National Governing Bodies (NGBs)
- Active Partnerships (APs)
- Leisure/Gym providers
- Coaches
- Volunteers
- Anyone taking part in sport or physical activity.



Understanding Domestic Abuse, and Domestic Abuse Legislation

Domestic abuse is any incident or pattern of controlling, coercive, threatening, degrading, or violent behaviour — including sexual violence — between individuals aged 16 or over who are personally connected.

It can include:

- Emotional and psychological abuse
- Coercive and controlling behaviour
- Financial or economic control/abuse
- Online or digital abuse
- Stalking and harassment
- Sexual abuse
- Physical violence.

It can also include 'Honour' based abuse (HBA). According to Karma Nirvana, HBA is "a form of domestic abuse which is motivated by the abuser's perception that a person has brought or may bring 'dishonour' or 'shame' to themselves, their family, or the community".



Domestic Abuse Legislation

In recent years, there have been significant steps taken to increase awareness, understanding and support for victims of domestic abuse.

The primary legislation in England and Wales is the [Domestic Abuse Act 2021](#). In Scotland, it is the [Domestic Abuse \(Scotland\) Act 2018](#).

There are also other relevant measures such as:

- [Domestic Violence Disclosure Scheme](#) (DVDS in England and Wales – sometimes known as ‘Clare’s Law’).
- [Disclosure Scheme for Domestic Abuse Scotland](#)
- Civil Protection Orders ([Family Law Act 1996](#))
- Various Protection Notices/Orders that can be put in place ([some within the Crime and Security Act 2010](#))

It is good to have a basic awareness of such legislation and measures to increase your confidence in supporting those who have, are or may be experiencing domestic abuse. Some of these measures can be used as early intervention, precautionary measures, but this kind of detail and action should ideally be discussed with an individual by a specialist.

It may be that you as a professional wish to contact a local support service for advice before mentioning such matters to an individual, and we would encourage this to ensure the correct and most appropriate guidance is shared. Individuals are sometimes unaware of the support options available to them, so knowledgeable signposting is important.

For more information on how to manage your professional involvement, see later sections on Supporting Someone After a Disclosure and Referral Pathways.



Why Domestic Abuse Matters in Sport

Of course, domestic abuse matters in any setting, and anyone impacted should always be offered appropriate support.

But there are reasons for which it is important to understand the specific context of domestic abuse in sport:

- Sport and physical activity settings are trusted spaces where staff and participants often build close relationships
- Team dynamics and morale can be a key part of a sporting environment and therefore changes in this dynamic can quickly highlight signs of abuse
- This puts coaches, staff, and teammates in a crucial position to offer support, within appropriate boundaries.

At the same time, sport and activity settings can also make it harder to spot the signs of domestic abuse. And in some cases, sport and activity settings can even enable domestic abuse:

- Sport and physical activity can put coaches, staff and teammates in a unique position to exploit a power dynamic
- Competitive performance matters to people and this can cause vulnerability to abuse, or even be a catalyst for abuse
- Those striving to succeed in sport may overlook indicators of abuse, begin unhealthy relationships within the sport, or fear isolation from a sports' group/club by raising matters
- Individuals can become very absorbed in a sporting world. Depending on whether the abuser is within, or external to, the sport or activity, this can either be a significant protective factor, or it can be hugely isolating.

Supporting someone in a sporting context could be their first step towards safety. And working towards a positive sporting culture can help dismantle the toxic environments that can enable abuse.



Recognising The Signs of Domestic Abuse in a Sport Setting

It's important to remember that these indicators are causes for concern. They are not, in themselves, confirmation that abuse is taking place.

It can be challenging to remain alert to possible signs/indicators without unintentionally passing judgement on an individual's circumstances. But at the same time, effective safeguarding depends on some level of critical thinking. So, if you spot something that does not seem right, it is important to act on your concerns.

Behavioural Signs

- Sudden withdrawal from team/events/tournaments or social activities
- Unexplained anxiety, fearfulness, or changes in confidence
- Overly controlling partner or family member present at training or events
- Reluctance to speak or train without checking in with someone else.

Emotional and Psychological Signs

- Signs of distress when receiving text or social media messages
- Constant self-blame, self-criticism, or a tendency to minimise their experiences
- Appearing overly apologetic or fearful of mistakes
- Isolation from teammates or staff.

Economic Signs

- Late payment of club fees or other expenses
- Difficulty paying associated costs (i.e. sports kit/equipment)
- A change in financial position (i.e. the above becoming commonplace)
- Financial behaviours, such as the above, not correlating with known life circumstances.

Physical Signs

- Unexplained bruises, injuries or clothing chosen to cover marks
- Fatigue, loss of concentration, or frequent illness that affects performance or attendance.

Action Reminder

If something doesn't feel right:

- Provide a safe, confidential space to talk
- Ask open, gentle and caring questions (e.g. 'It seems as though things are difficult at the moment – how are things feeling for you?')
- Listen without judgement
- Know your safeguarding procedures and referral pathway.

Responding to a Disclosure of Domestic Abuse in a Sport Setting

If someone reports a concern to you, your response can make a critical difference.

DO:

- Listen calmly and without judgement
- Believe the person and thank them for sharing their concerns
- Explain your duty to share information in certain situations and if someone's safety is at immediate risk. Hypothetical examples may help you here. 'For example, if I feel a child is at risk of abuse, or an adult who is unable to protect themselves...'
- Follow safeguarding or referral procedures (and clarify your understanding of procedures as soon as possible if you are unsure)
- Make it clear you are also there to support them, even though you have a duty to share certain information
- Reassure them it's not their fault
- Remember that the individual may not view the behaviour as abusive
- Consider the family situation. Are there others at risk? Your duty to report changes if a child is at risk, or if the situation involves an adult who is legally defined as an 'adult at risk'.
- Remember that separation isn't necessarily the end of the abuse. Statistics suggest that risk can heighten when a victim tries to end an abusive relationship.
- Remember that forensic timescales are relevant, particularly when it comes to sexual or physical abuse. Rather than exploring this with a victim yourself, it would be good to encourage contact with the Police, [Rape Crisis](#), or a local Sexual Assault Referral Centre (SARC) or domestic abuse service as soon as possible.
- Remember your professional boundaries. Signposting quickly is crucial, and it is unhealthy for an individual to become reliant on you
- Support the individual to contact services themselves, providing it is appropriate to do so, and that they have the capacity.

[Read more about capacity to make decisions here.](#)



DO NOT:

- Attempt to investigate the situation yourself. There may need to be a club/organisation level investigation, but it is not your role to decide this alone.
- Engage in detailed conversation about what has happened. If your discussion goes off-track, bring the conversation back to signposting and connection with specialist services.
- Confront the abuser
- Make promises you cannot keep, particularly involving confidentiality.
- React with shock or disbelief
- Minimise or dismiss what they tell you
- Pressure them to take specific actions.

Helpful phrases if responding to the individual being abused:

- 'I'm really sorry this is happening to you.'
- 'You can talk to me, and I can help you find support.'
- 'It's important that we support you to stay safe.'
- 'This behaviour towards you isn't ok.'

Helpful phrases if responding to a third-party reporting:

- 'I imagine/I can see you're very concerned about them.'
- 'It's important that we try and empower them to reach-out to specialist services.'
- 'There is a chance they do not see this as abuse, and it's important we provide support in a carefully considered manner.'

How To Support Someone Following a Domestic Abuse Disclosure

If someone shares a concern with you, here's how you can support them following the disclosure.

- Ask what immediate support they need, and consider whether the situation is an emergency.
- Record what was said as accurately as possible, using their words.
- Provide national or local support information.
- If you are unsure or concerned about the next steps, or just feel you need some advice, reach out to national or local support services.
- Follow up appropriately. Remember that your role is to connect, not to counsel.
- Inform your Safeguarding Lead or Club Safeguarding Officer if this is relevant to your position or organisation.
- If you do not have formal recording procedures in place, consider who you could discuss this with, and where you can safely store your records in the meantime. Consider GDPR and other data privacy laws. So, think password protection, lockable cabinets, and so on.



Responding to Internal Allegations

It can be very challenging to manage a situation where a member of your sports organisation has been accused of domestic abuse, whether or not the person being abused is within the same organisation.

The situation is likely to be complex, and you need to consider all disclosures on a case-by-case basis.

Here are some suggestions:

DO:

- Act on the information. Even if nothing is clear or proven, you are in a pivotal position at this point and must take some form of action.
 - Consider the safety of those involved as per the usual risk factors involved with domestic abuse, but also whether there is risk posed within your organisation.
 - Consider safety and refer to the appropriate organisations for support with safety planning, such as local support services and an Independent Domestic Violence Adviser (IDVA).
 - Try and ascertain whether or not the matter has been reported to the police, and whether there is an investigation. While it isn't your role to get involved, this is useful information to have. For example, if there has been an arrest and there are bail conditions, this information can be key to understanding risk. In such circumstances, multi-agency working with a domestic abuse support service would be crucial.
 - Consider whether the risk may increase depending on your actions. Risk could increase if you approach the accused, or if you alert them to the concern.
 - Consider whether the accused is in a Position of Trust and whether this changes your position or response. While this legislation concerns the safeguarding of children, we would encourage you to consider that all coach/athlete relationships involve a complex power dynamic.
 - Refer to your Code of Conduct and consider whether any actions that have been witnessed, or proven, breach this code. Ensure that your Code of Conduct does outline the processes that should be followed if a breach has occurred.
 - Seek specialist support if you are unsure how to manage the situation.
- 

DO NOT:

- Promise that the accused individual will be automatically removed from the club or organisation
- State that there is nothing you can do if there is no proven guilt. Even if it feels like this, this will be very disheartening to hear, so you should choose your wording carefully.
- Approach the accused immediately without considering risk
- Begin investigating, or try to prove guilt or innocence
- Handle the situation alone. Even if you have spoken internally about the situation, you should seek external support if you feel unsure about risk or your level of knowledge as a collective.

Helpful phrases:

To the victim:

- 'I can see that this individual's presence is really causing you distress.'
- 'We are keen to ensure you get professional support to consider your safety.'

It can be helpful to mirror the language the victim uses about their situation. For example, if their chosen phrase is 'I feel so low when they talk to me like that', you might choose to say, 'I can see that their presence makes you feel really low'.

To the person reporting the concern (if this is not the victim):

- 'We appreciate this must be really concerning for you, and whilst we can't advise you exactly what action we will take, we will consider this report seriously.'
- 'You may want to reach-out to professional services yourself for advice.'

To the accused (if the accused has to be informed, but this will depend on the case):

- 'We recognise this must be really challenging to hear.'
- 'We aren't here to investigate, but we do take the safety of all individuals very seriously and we can't ignore this report.'



Perpetrator Services and Self-Disclosure

While it is not a common scenario, an abuser could self-disclose, or confess to certain abusive behaviours.

Additionally, a couple may choose to stay together in an abusive relationship. This example scenario highlights the complexities of adult safeguarding, and one in which a sports club/community could be instrumental in supporting these individuals.

If you have handled all necessary safeguarding concerns, including signposting to victim or mental health support services, and if there is no immediate risk to anyone's safety, then signposting to perpetrator services could be another crucial step in offering support.

Remember:

Support services for individuals using abusive behaviours do exist, and you should signpost to them when necessary.

Such support services vary significantly from area to area, so a good place to start is with [Respect](#), who run a support helpline for perpetrators: 0808 802 4040

Embedding Good Practice

How to approach domestic abuse at a policy level, in your training, and in your partnerships. A positive safeguarding culture can assist in tackling domestic abuse. From policy to daily interactions.

Safeguarding Policy & Training:

- As a minimum, include domestic abuse in your organisation's safeguarding policy, with links to local domestic abuse services and local Sexual Assault Referral Centre (SARC)
- Add domestic abuse awareness and training to your organisation's induction process, and include regular domestic abuse awareness sessions for all staff, members, participants, coaches, volunteers and board members
- Where possible, use scenarios and case studies in your training, to help people understand the key considerations and complexities that might arise during a disclosure or investigation
- Provide [trauma-informed](#) training. There are six principles of trauma-informed practice: Safety, trust, choice, collaboration, empowerment, and cultural consideration. This approach is key to responding appropriately to domestic abuse.

Culture & Communication:

- Promote wellbeing and respect throughout your daily interactions. Also consider your organisational culture. There are many factors that can impact an individual's capacity to reach out for support
- Consider your organisation's approach to equity, diversity and inclusion. Tackle sexism, misogyny, discrimination, and harassment at every level.
- Display helpline posters in private spaces
- Share support information regularly at all levels of the organisation.
- Develop and communicate clear codes of conduct for everyone involved in your club, including family members and partners
- Aim to have safeguarding contacts of different genders accessible to your club members/participants, if possible.

Partnership:

- Link with local domestic abuse charities and safeguarding boards, so you can effectively signpost when necessary. You may want to start by connecting with charities associated with your Local Authority, so you can be confident in their credibility.
- Invite charities and other groups to host awareness-raising sessions at your club.
- Collaborate with community safety partners. These differ from area-to-area, but you are likely to discover more information after connecting with local services. For example, [Consent Coalition](#) work within the Nottingham area.



Key Considerations For Organisations With Limited Resources

The Ann Craft Trust are aware that some sports organisations have limited safeguarding resources. This could be due to a number of factors, but it is still crucial that your approach to domestic abuse is considered, and that questions are raised to begin the journey of educating all around the topic.

So, while we strongly encourage you to consider the above, you may want to start by taking some more immediate and appropriately proportionate actions. Here are some areas that you may want to consider in the first instance:

- Would your staff/volunteers/members be able to find domestic abuse support services through your organisation's resources, whether online or in-person?
- Do the venues used by your organisation display information for domestic abuse support services? The back of toilet doors are a useful, private space to display this information. You can order resources [here](#).
- Could staff and volunteers be trained in domestic abuse? Places such as the [National Centre for Domestic Violence](#) offer free training and resources
- Connect with your local domestic abuse services. They may also offer free training.



Key Messages For Sport and Activity Organisations

In sport and activity settings, we can all play a vital role in spotting signs, providing safe spaces, and signposting people towards the support they need.

Creating safe, supportive spaces in sport can change lives. Every conversation, awareness session, and act of empathy helps make sport and activity safer and more inclusive for all.

Remember: You do not have to deal with this alone.

Do not underestimate the power of signposting in domestic abuse situations. [SafeLives](#) suggests it can take victims of medium to high-risk domestic abuse situations up to three years before they get the help they need. Effective signposting could help them get support much sooner.



If you are unsure how to handle a situation, **seek advice**.

Speak to a professional you trust with safeguarding knowledge or responsibilities, whether this is a Club Welfare Officer or Lead Safeguarding Officer.

Or you can seek advice from an external local or national domestic abuse organisation.



Referral Pathways and Support Directory (UK)

Emergency: 999 – Police (if someone is at immediate risk)

National Helplines:

- National Domestic Abuse Helpline (England): 0808 2000 247 | www.nationaldahelpline.org.uk
- Men's Advice Line: 0808 801 0327 | www.mensadviceline.org.uk
- Galop (LGBT+): 0800 999 5428 | www.galop.org.uk
- Rape Crisis: 0808 500 2222 | www.rapecrisis.org.uk
- National Stalking Helpline: 0808 802 0300 | www.suzylamplugh.org
- Karma Nirvana (Forced marriage and 'Honour'-based abuse): 0800 5999 247 | www.karmanirvana.org.uk
- Samaritans (24/7 mental health support): 116 123 | www.samaritans.org
- NHS Urgent Help for Mental Health: 111 (select the mental health option)
- Shout (24/7 mental health support): Text 85258 | www.giveusashout.org

Remember: In certain 'low-risk' situations, it is possible to seek advice about a situation whilst keeping the details of those involved anonymous, until you are sure about consent to share and/or whether you need to break confidentiality.

If you need support in making decisions about whether you should break confidentiality, it would be helpful to call a trusted, specialist service.



Referral Pathways and Support Directory (UK)

Local Support:

- [Bright Sky](#) is an NHS recommended app that provides support and information to anyone who may be in an abusive relationship or is concerned about someone they know. Whilst it is nationally available, it also provides information about nearby support.
- [A Sexual Assault Referral Centre \(SARC\)](#) offers confidential medical and practical support to people who have recently been raped or sexually assaulted. Trained professionals can collect forensic evidence without the individual needing to report to the police (i.e. giving them time to consider their wishes).
- Local Safeguarding Adults Board (and the best place to start if you have a PiPoT concern)
- Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO – similarly to PiPoT principles, you should contact a LADO if the individual you feel is breaching a position of trust, also works with children and young people)
- Local mental health services are accessible through GPs, but it may be useful to signpost to the NHS website – [How to find local mental health services – NHS](#)

Sport-Specific Support:

You could also signpost individuals to:

- Club Welfare/Safeguarding Officer
- NGB Lead Safeguarding Officer
- Active Partnership Lead Safeguarding Officer
- Sport Welfare Officer
- Medical staff who may have useful knowledge of multi-agency working and local support

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If you would like more information or to discuss training requirements or if you're a practitioner looking for safeguarding advice, please get in touch.

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