

ann craft trust
acting against abuse

**Spotting the Signs:
The Domestic Abuse in Sport and
Activity Toolkit**

Awareness, Response, and Good Practice

With thanks to



for their support and contribution

Introduction and Purpose of the Toolkit

Sport and physical activity can be a lifeline for people experiencing domestic abuse. It can provide a safe space, 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 physical 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

This toolkit therefore helps the sport and physical 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 club/sports setting (i.e. 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 a club member/participant may be an abuser



Who this information is for:

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

Understanding Domestic Abuse

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
- 'Honour' based abuse ("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" – Karma Nirvana)



Legislation

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

The relevant 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 laws such as the [Domestic Violence Disclosure Scheme](#) (DVDS – sometimes known as ‘Clare’s Law’). It is good to have an awareness of this, but this kind of detail should ideally be discussed with an individual by a specialist. Even if it is a case of contacting local support services for advice, this is a good way to explore and understand the relevant legislation (see later sections on “Supporting Someone After a Disclosure” and “Referral Pathways”).

Why Domestic Abuse Matters in Sport

Of course, domestic abuse needs to be identified in any setting, and the individuals impacted should always be offered support, but there are reasons for which it is important to understand the specific context of domestic abuse in sport. To expand upon the introduction above:

- 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)
- Alternatively, sport and physical activity can also put coaches, staff and teammates in a unique position to exploit a power dynamic
- Competitive performance matters to people and this can become a vulnerability to or 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/physical activity, this can be a significant protective factor, or hugely isolating

Supporting someone in a sporting context could be their first step towards safety.



Recognising Signs of Domestic Abuse

These indicators are signs of concern, not confirmation.

Behavioural:

- 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 / Psychological:

- Distressed when receiving text/social media messages
- Constant self-blame, self-criticism or minimising their experiences
- Appearing overly apologetic or fearful of mistakes
- Isolation from teammates or staff

Economic:

- Late payment for club fees/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:

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

Whilst it can be challenging to remain alert to possible signs/indicators without unintentionally passing judgement on an individual's life circumstances, it is important not to shy away from engaging in some level of critical thinking to safeguard effectively.

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

If someone discloses abuse, your response can make a critical difference.

DO:

- ✓ Listen calmly and without judgement
- ✓ Believe the person and thank them for sharing
- ✓ 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”)
- ✓ Do your best to ensure it is clear you are also there to support them, even though you have a duty to share certain information
- ✓ Follow safeguarding or referral procedures (and review them as soon as possible if you are unsure of the detail upon first disclosure)
- ✓ Reassure them it's not their fault
- ✓ Remember that the individual concerned may not view the behaviour as abusive – it is important to remain sensitive and aware of this whilst still questioning appropriately (whether this is with the individual themselves or with a third party who is reporting)

- ✓ 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 and statistics suggest that risk can heighten when a victim tries to end an abusive relationship – you must still act even if you are being told the relationship has ended
- ✓ Remember that forensic timescales are relevant, particularly in terms of sexual/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)/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 they have [Mental Capacity](#) and this is appropriate)
- ✓ Refrain from engaging in detailed conversation about what has happened – bring the conversation back to signposting and connection with specialist services when it strays from this path

DO NOT:

- ✗ Investigate the situation yourself (there may need to be a club/organisation level investigation, but it is not your role to decide this alone)
- ✗ Confront the abuser
- ✗ Promise confidentiality you can't keep
- ✗ 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/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.”



Supporting Someone After Disclosure

After disclosure:

- Ask what immediate support they need (and consider whether the situation is an emergency)
- Record what was said factually, using their words
- Provide national or local support information
- Reach-out to national or local support services for advice if you are concerned about next steps, or just feel you need some advice
- Follow up appropriately — your role is to connect, not counsel

- Inform your Safeguarding Lead or Club/Safeguarding Officer if this is relevant to your position/organisation
- If you do not have formal recording procedures in place, consider who you could discuss this with and where to record for the time being (consider GDPR carefully – think password protected, lockable cabinets and/or a secure system)

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. Whilst the situation is likely to be complex and needs to be considered on a case-by-case basis, here are some suggestions of how to act appropriately:

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...
- ✓ Refer to the appropriate organisations for support with safety planning (for example, 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 ongoing investigation. While it isn't your role to get involved in an investigation, this is useful information to have (i.e. 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/how the risk may increase depending on your actions – risk could increase if you approach the accused or alert them to the concern
- ✓ Consider whether the accused is in a Position of Trust and whether this changes your position/response – whilst this legislation is around 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/proven, breach the Code of Conduct (and as a review exercise, ensure your Code of Conduct outlines the processes that would 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/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/innocence
- ✗ Handle the situation alone – even if you have spoken internally about the situation, if you feel unsure about risk or your level of knowledge as a collective, seek external support

Helpful phrases:

To the victim:

- “I can see that this individual’s presence is really causing you distress”
Or mirror the language they are using around their emotions. 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”.
- “We are keen to ensure you get professional support to consider your safety”
Similarly to the above, if they seem to be using the word ‘wellbeing’ rather than ‘safety’, you could focus on wellbeing instead – these things can help the conversation feel more relatable. It is true, however, that you should not avoid direct conversation about risk and safety, if there is a physical threat.

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, and depending on the victim's desire to report/prosecute, it may be difficult to ascertain the appropriate next steps.

Additionally, a couple may choose to stay together in an abusive relationship, and/or both parties may be a part of the same sports club/group.

These hypothetical scenarios highlight 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

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 6 principles of trauma-informed practice (safety, trust, choice, collaboration, empowerment and cultural consideration) and this approach is key to responding appropriately to domestic abuse

Culture & Communication:

- Promote wellbeing and respect throughout your daily interactions, and consider your organisational culture – there are so many factors that 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 ([Consent Coalition](#) is an example from Nottingham)

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 and may be able to assist with several of the above points



Key Messages

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 between 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.suzylampugh.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

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/Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO)
- 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:

- 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

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.

Action Reminder

Ensure your safeguarding policy includes:

- Directions about the most important safety considerations
- Suggestions for signposting to support
- Advice about how to record information
- Clear internal reporting steps
- Direction of how to manage a situation where a child or legally defined ‘adult at risk’ could be at risk of harm