

Sports associations and clubs – keeping children safe from sexual abuse – Lessons learned from the Sheldon report

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He had been appointed by the FA back in December 2016 to carry out an independent review into allegations of sexual abuse by coaches and scouts working in youth football between 1970 and 2005. Over 200 individuals gave evidence to the investigation.

Understandable delay

It recorded that the vast majority of complainants made no contemporaneous disclosure of the abuse they suffered. The reasons, which would be familiar to many of those dealing with claims for sexual abuse were:

- Feelings of shame and of not being believed.
- Fear of rocking the boat and ending their dreams of playing professional football.
- Concern that their parents would take the law into their own hands and get into trouble.

Not seeing the signs

Nevertheless, the report concluded that the abuse was allowed to happen for much of the relevant period because stakeholders were unaware of child protection issues. They had no training and even if they did pick up on the potential signs of abuse they did not examine them with curiosity or suspicion. Staff and officials at clubs were naive about the possibility of abuse. Some clubs allowed youth teams to be run “almost as fiefdoms” meaning that there was no meaningful supervision of the behaviour of those running the youth set up despite people considering their behaviour to be “odd” “weird” or that they had favourites.

People felt that they needed hard evidence and nothing could be done on the basis of rumour alone. We expect that that sentiment will be echoed across sports clubs and social societies all over the United Kingdom and beyond.

So what next

The report identified three themes each leading to a number of recommendations. They were:

- Training at all levels
- A child first culture
- Transparency and accountability

Detailed recommendations were made under each of these headings.

Lessons for individual clubs and sports associations

The report called for well-crafted regularly repeated training at all levels. Clive Sheldon QC recommended:

- The FA should make arrangements to encourage all parents and carers to receive safeguarding training.
- The same arrangements should be put in place for all players and young people - to protect not only themselves but one another.
- Training should be given to the FA Board and senior management team on every three years.

This sort of training is readily available. All clubs and societies who have children and young people as members should take these recommendations to heart, and act on them. Your insurers may be insisting on it.

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