

Anne Tiivas: safe in her hands

As director of Child Protection in Sport Unit, Anne Tiivas is at the forefront of the development and application of a new approach to safeguarding and child protection. The Leisure Review spent some time with her to explore the implications of the vetting and barring scheme for the sport, leisure and culture sector.

The day after The Leisure Review met Anne Tiivas, director of the Child Protection in Sport Unit (CPSU), Jeremy Vine spent twelve minutes of his lunchtime talk show on Radio 2 winding up listeners about the new vetting and barring scheme, focusing his attention on the claim that parents who “drive other people’s kids to sports and social clubs” will “risk £5,000 fines” if they are not registered under the new scheme. The fact that he opened his programme by playing a Michael Jackson song may have been an ironic admission that this type of tabloid radio is far from helpful. After four times as many minutes spent in Tiivas’ company than Vine committed it is hard to do anything other than take the threat very seriously but recognise that sensible precautions and an open approach, rather than hysterical headline-making, probably serves the children who come to sport for fun, companionship and challenge a good deal better.

After twenty years in child protection work in local authorities Anne Tiivas was recruited into the NSPCC and the Sport England-funded CPSU by its first director, Steve Boocock. Along with an administrator, the two were allocated what Tiivas refers to as “a cupboard” in the NSPCC’s national training centre in Leicester and began what she refers to as “the journey”.

“In the nineties a number of sports swimming, football and sailing came to the NSPCC consultancy services and said, ‘Can you help us because we’ve had a [child protection] case; can we put things in place to not be in that position again?’ Fairly quickly the NSPCC said, ‘Let’s be proactive rather than do things when things go wrong’ and they held a cross-sport conference for all stakeholders. From that came the idea to develop the unit. Sport England did a benchmarking exercise to find out what sports organisations had in place, principally governing bodies and the emerging Active Sport partnerships. Basically the audit showed there were holes all over the place. A set of standards were developed for NGBs [national governing bodies] and sports partnerships and a task group was set up to develop a frame of reference for the unit.”

Boocock and Tiivas were recruited and soon the unit in England had been joined by one in Northern Ireland, a unit in Wales two years later and a parallel unit in Scotland set up through Children First. Tiivas reflected on progress: “Over the last few years the unit has developed and developed and developed. Now we go beyond the initial remit into providing resources, and training and maintaining a very good website to ensure we are communicating better with the outside world.”

So has safeguarding become part of the culture of sport? “It’s becoming that way but it’s not there everywhere. One of the key shifts is a move away from it being all about the scary stuff that put people off and frightened people. The government agenda has moved to the Every Child Matters agenda about creating positive and supportive environments for children. Sport has really latched on to that and seen what it can contribute. All our training resources and everything we do with organisations is now about having good practice. You are far less likely to have scary stuff if you have a really good child-centred environment for children.”

The change has been noticeable and any industry veteran brought up on ‘child protection’ will have tracked, if not understood, the move to ‘safeguarding’. “Safeguarding is the umbrella of everything you do for protecting children,” Tiivas explained, “whereas child protection is what you do for particular children. Part of the shift is that sport has realised it



The way forward: sensible precautions and an open approach

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Anne Tiivas: director of the CPSU

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is not just about keeping its own house in order, and the recognition that coaches and other people in clubs are equally well placed to identify children who are struggling or who might need some extra help; or indeed where there might be a child protection issue for them at home or in their community.” And is that a moral responsibility? “Well, they have a moral responsibility but they also have a statutory duty. The document Working Together 2006 says that all organisations have to do X, Y and Z to safeguard children.”

These changes have impacted on sports clubs as well as on the sport and leisure profession as a whole, prompting questions regarding the extent of the support from practitioners for such a revolution in attitude and behaviour. “On the whole sport has really embraced it and become much more professional, with a small ‘P’,” Tiivas said. “There has been a lot of emphasis on improving governance and for the most part they have come on the journey with us; from being scared, to seeing the value of it and then to actively working to improve. There are still some pockets where people really don’t get it and sometimes there can be quite a gap between senior management and safeguarding officers.” She leant forward to emphasise the point. “One of the things we have really been trying to build on over the last few years is exactly the same issue that has come out of all the social care reports, which is that senior management have to take ownership and buy in. So much so that we have developed a package of management and executive training that we can run with organisations, which has been very effective in countering this problem.”

While there may be work to be done ‘in the back office’, is the message getting through at the sharp end of sport? “Gradually, gradually, gradually. It depends on the sport and it depends on the organisation. Most people out there have an awareness that sports should do something but in some sports it’s been possible to embed things much more deeply. There’s no absolute recipe for that because it depends on where each sport is on its journey and how well resourced they are. That’s not dependent on size because a huge sport such as football has a huge human resource to deal with, while a small sport with far less funding can be proportionately more affective. But there are still some sports and some organisations that have to see something go wrong before they do something.”

If that’s where we are, the obvious question is what happens next? “We are currently working with those organisations that have been meeting safeguarding standards and with county sports partnerships on what happens once they have reached the first tranche of standards. We’re looking at how we really embed standards so that they are meaningful at a local level, at club level. An awful lot of work has been done within sports on the infrastructure, which allows training to be delivered and to have designated people in place but what really shows that this has happened? We’ll be launching the result of that work in February. And we’re working on finding ways that those concerned can better work together. Government departments are working together looking at all of the ways that children access sport and trying to ensure that the standard they receive is the same wherever they go, be that a school project, a sports club going into a school or somebody going into a leisure centre. It doesn’t make any difference to the children who those people are. Whether they are volunteers or paid staff, the standard of their care should be the same.”

And does this need to fit within central and local government frames of reference pose any problems for industry colleagues? “In my experience – and I worked down in London – leisure services departments always worked well within their local authority’s approach to child protection but when I moved up here to this job I found that this is not uniform. We need to bridge the gap between sport and statutory agencies, and help sport realise how it contributes to the Every Child Matters agenda.”

Sitting in the NSPCC centre it is hard to avoid returning to the grassroots and the question of whether sport has a problem with child abuse. Tiivas is honest: she doesn’t know the statistics. “Each sport collects its own data in its own way. There is no one place where it all comes together and that is a challenge for the future. We have a research group looking into children’s experience of sport and that research will be published within the next year. Each sport can tell you now through its own case management system but we don’t have a comprehensive study of the extent of the problem in sport. We do know that each sport is dealing with cases and we can tell you what the journey is for a sport.” The

journey? “As a sport develops its policies and procedures, as it trains people, as it publicises to people that they can report their concerns, that sport will generally see an increase in cases. The historical cases and the most concerning cases tend to come out first. Then the number of concerns about poor practice really start to go up and will reach a peak. Not many sports have reached that peak yet but when they do the number of reported concerns start to go down and reported concerns are generally about poor practice with only a trickle of the high-end stuff. It’s not that there is any more abuse, it’s just that people didn’t have anyone to talk to before.”

Is there any danger that we’re taking a hammer to crack a nut? “Is our approach disproportionate? That’s very hard to tell. Sports have varying proportions of reporting of concerns and it’s difficult to know absolutes. But” and she pauses, “since what we are aiming for is a situation where we get less, if not any, reports and what we are about is creating very positive experiences for children in sport and not just preventing high risk situations a simple measure of the number of the latter isn’t enough. We should also seek to measure how sports are recruiting proper people into jobs, having the right job descriptions, proper recruitment processes, creating codes of conduct so people are clear on the expectations of their behaviour, having complaint and disciplinary processes if things do go wrong and so on. And there are increasingly, through accreditation schemes, bench marked clubs doing all these things.” So is she a fan of Club Mark? “Oh yes. There is work still to be done but it’s a way of giving parents and young people some confidence to say, ‘I know I can go to this club because it is accredited’.”

Finally it was time to raise the issue of vetting and barring, which, even without Jeremy Vine’s input, was an issue on the sides of all pitches, courts and pistes in the country. Whom and when will it impact? “It starts to impact now as people are having to plan for the elements of its introduction in October. From this October people can actually refer through the new scheme and if your organisation encounters someone who is not suitable to work with children or has caused harm to children you must refer their names for consideration. From next July ‘regulated activity providers’ – and that includes sports clubs and leisure centres, anybody who provides activity to children – must make sure that the people working with those children are members of the scheme. There’s more detail but essentially if you are a sports coach working with children you must become a member of the scheme.”

People have been using Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks for years. What is new about the new system? “It’s the first time there has been a legal requirement, a statutory requirement on organisations for safeguarding and vetting. For the most part sports organisations have chosen to use the Criminal Records Bureau for checking people but not everybody does because it has not been a legal requirement. The vetting and barring scheme will be a legal requirement. And it will bring more people into the scheme than previously and more people in sport will have to be checked.” The inference is that everybody will need to be checked. “No, it’s not every role. You have to be delivering the regulated activity.” Like a hockey coach? “Yes. Anyone who has ‘frequent or intensive’ contact with children. There’s more detail and the exact definitions are in the briefing papers on our website.” *

What are the good and bad things about the change? “The good thing is that people will have to do it. It will bring everybody into the scheme. Those who have chosen to opt out of the system so far will at least have to do this. Our very strongly held view and the advice we are giving is that this has to be seen as a small but vital addition to safeguarding. You can’t work with children or vulnerable adults in a regulated activity unless you are a member of this scheme. You become a member by applying through the CRB either for an enhanced-level CRB disclosure and Independent Safeguarding Authority (ISA) checking or just ISA checking. Our strong view is you shouldn’t just get the ISA check done as that’s a fairly high threshold which only shows someone who is barred from working with children. When you apply the CRB check will be done and then ISA will decide whether you can become a member of the ISA scheme or not. If not, you are barred from working with children and it is an offence for an organisation to allow you to do so.”

So from July 2010 all of a football club’s coaches will have to apply for ISA membership. Do they just tick a box? “They can apply from July but they will have to apply to join the scheme from November and there will be a five-year phase-in starting with new starters in jobs in education.

When it does come to affect people there will be a box on the CRB check form.”

It doesn't sound too onerous? “We have worked really hard to make sure the checks can still be done through the governing body. It's good that clubs will be held to account and can't avoid doing it but it would be really, really difficult if they all started to do their own thing. Those football coaches' forms will still get processed by their NGB. The Football Association already says that coaches and officials must be CRB checked but now those that are eligible for this scheme will still get CRB checks done through the FA and get ISA checked.”

Is that going to produce a huge glut of people to be given another level of checks? “There will be more people who have to be put through the system but there will be a five-year phasing of that, with first priority being new entrants. Then it will be people who haven't been checked for a long time and so on.”

In terms of grassroots impact, won't this prove to be a barrier to volunteers? “When CRB checking came in there were a lot of teething problems and there were lots of delays. Nowadays they have a very high standard of service and a very quick turn around for most checks and it's a very efficient service that most people are used to.”

Are there any other wrinkles that the profession need to be aware of? “For sports organisations it will bring more people into the checking process and they are having to plan for that and provide guidance to their clubs on that. The other thing that's different surrounds how referrals occur and the guidance on that is out any minute. At the moment if someone is banned from one club they are banned from the whole of football and you would want that to be the same under the new scheme. But under the scheme the legal responsibility lies with the club and since they won't get enough relevant experience of the process so it makes more sense for the governing body to continue to take that role.”

So if a football coach is disciplined and barred from football can they still coach tae kwon do or table tennis? “Say I'm at the FA and we decide to ban someone from football because of their behaviour towards children. We will have to refer that information to the vetting and barring scheme so that the Independent Safeguarding Authority can make a decision about whether they should be barred from the children's workforce and if that happens they can't work anywhere with children. Subsequently, anyone like tennis or cricket who then registers an interest in using that person will get the information back that they are barred. And one other thing that is good about the scheme is that there are auto-bar offences where for the most serious offences people will get barred automatically. That's new.”

If you had one message for the sports system, volunteer and professional, what would it be? “Our message? See it as a small but vital addition to your processes. You still have to interview people, take and check references, have a probationary period and don't appoint people until you have the results of your test back. And keep it in context. We're positive about the scheme but it has taken a long time and that has caused a lot of worries.”

There's no doubt that child protection and safeguarding can be a vexed and worrisome subject when sports people come together but if more of them had met Anne Tiivas and had the chance to be reassured by her calm authority and expertise the levels of concern would be far less. But from her perspective, do the rigours of the job (on the afternoon we met Tiivas had just flown back from Belfast) and dealing with “the nasty stuff” not take a toll? “It is hard work and it is tiring but what really keeps us going is making a difference and seeing change at grassroots level.”

**Since our interview Children's secretary Ed Balls has announced a review of the vetting and barring scheme, asking Sir Roger Pontefract chair of the Independent Safeguarding Authority (ISA) to review the definition of 'frequent or intensive' contact with children and report back by December 2009. Anne Tiivas and her team at the CPSU will continue to keep the industry updated regarding developments.*

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