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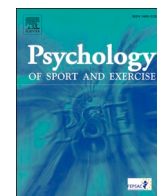
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Citation:

NEWMAN, James and RUMBOLD, James (2026). “Turning around an oil tanker”: Recommendations for a safeguarding program in football. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 82: 103004. [Article]

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“Turning around an oil tanker”: Recommendations for a safeguarding program in football

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Culture
Interpersonal violence
Maltreatment
Professional football
Welfare

ABSTRACT

Despite increasing awareness and reports of wrongdoing in sports such as professional football there remains a lack of safeguarding education targeted at adults to address this behavior. Thus, there is a need to develop safeguarding education programs based on the experiential knowledge of adults in football. The present study explored knowledge users' recommendations, as a means to co-produce a safeguarding education program to address maltreatment in football. Guided by a social constructivist approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 19 safeguarding and welfare personnel (nine who identified as females and ten as males) who work within British clubs and organizations ranging from English Premier League (EPL) through to the English Northern Premier League Division One. The participants' roles ranged from Chief Executive Officer; Vice Chairman; General Counsel; Club Development Officer; Head of Safeguarding; Designated Safeguarding Officer; Safeguarding Case Officer; Academy Safeguarding Manager; Head of Education and Welfare; Player Care and Welfare Officer; Head of Education and Player Care, and Coach. Through a reflexive thematic analysis, knowledge users discussed *shaping safeguarding education in professional football, and the best way to deliver safeguarding education*. Knowledge users highlighted the need for safeguarding programs to be designed and delivered at individual, club, and systemic levels to be effective. Furthermore, these programs need to be underpinned by a cultural intervention to safeguarding education in professional football. From a research perspective, the present findings emphasize the value of collaborating with underrepresented groups to create meaningful change in safeguarding in sport. Lastly, the present study provides the foundation for future research to evaluate the effectiveness of a safeguarding education program in football in practice.

1. Introduction

Recent research and media reports highlight the prevalence and impact of abuse, bullying, maltreatment, and interpersonal violence in sport (BBC, 2021; Hartill et al., 2023; Willson et al., 2022), with the findings highlighting that psychological harm is the most prevalent of all forms of interpersonal violence and maltreatment.¹ However, it is noteworthy that neglect, physical, and sexual violence have been experienced at least once by more than 10 % of sporting participants (Hartill et al., 2023; Willson et al., 2022). Furthermore, research has demonstrated that various forms of maltreatment in sport are linked to negative outcomes, for example: poor self-esteem; reduced satisfaction;

a disempowering motivational climate; eating disorder and self-harm indicators (Parent et al., 2024; Willson et al., 2025). These findings are concerning, as safeguarding education designed to address such wrongdoing in sport, remains limited (Newman & Rumbold, 2024). As the FEPSAC position statement on safeguarding athletes outlines, developing safeguarding programs to tackle interpersonal violence and maltreatment in sport should be a priority (Khomutova et al., 2025).

1.1. Safeguarding defined

Safeguarding encompasses proactive and preventative methods to protect people's safety and human rights (Kerr & Stirling, 2019).

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¹ Various terms are often used to depict harm in sport, but for the purpose of this paper, maltreatment has been used, given research (Newman & Rumbold, 2024) which demonstrates it is an overarching concept for these behaviors.

Historically, definitions of safeguarding in sport emphasize protecting children and young people (NSPCC, 2025). However, sport federations have acknowledged that young people over the age of 18, women and persons with disabilities are also vulnerable groups that need to be better protected (FIFA, 2022). Similarly, other findings corroborate that equity-denied individuals and groups (e.g., based on sexual orientation, gender identity/expression or sex variations, race and ethnicity, and disability) do not experience the full benefits of safeguarding (Gurgis, Kerr, & Darnell, 2022). More recently, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) have defined safeguarding in sport as “all proactive measures to both prevent and appropriately respond to concerns related to harassment and abuse in sport as well as the promotion of holistic approaches to athlete welfare” (Tuakli-Wosornu et al., 2024, p. 2). This reinforces the importance of appropriate educational initiatives in this space. Although safeguarding approaches should protect athletes of all ages and backgrounds, FEPSAC’s position statement (Khomutova et al., 2025) argues that anyone in sport (e.g., coaches, parents, referees and others working within sport organizations) can experience forms of maltreatment. Therefore, while protecting the welfare of adult athletes on an individual level is important (Willson et al., 2022), a socio-ecological approach (Bronfenbrenner, 1999) suggests that safeguarding interventions, including educational programs, need to consider the various system levels that may interact to enable maltreatment in sport.

1.2. A socio-ecological approach to safeguarding

Bronfenbrenner’s Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) model suggests that human development is shaped by psychosocial proximal processes, personal characteristics, interrelating nested systems, and temporality (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006, pp. 793–828). As such, contextual determinants that may facilitate successful safeguarding initiatives include the interrelationship between different micro- (e.g., peer interactions within a sports club), meso- (e.g., between psychologists and other key personnel such as coaches), exo- (e.g., a club’s enactment of care directives from a sporting organization), macro- (e.g., societal explanations around appropriate behavior in sport), and chronosystems (e.g., changes in views of maltreatment over time) within an ecological sporting system. In applying a socio-ecological perspective to developing safeguarding education program, it is therefore necessary to consider the perspectives of sport actors who operate within the various nested systems of sport that may intentionally or unintentionally enable maltreatment (Khomutova et al., 2025).

Currently, international evidence for exploring how to promote safeguarding in sport has focused on improving safer sport experiences for youth such as promoting athletes’ (children’s) voices (Bode et al., 2023; Hartill et al., 2023) and changing the discourse regarding how their voice is empowered (Everley, 2022). Though this is an important step forward, behaviors such as maltreatment are systemic issues occurring at individual, relational and organizational levels (Brackenridge & Rhind, 2014; Mountjoy et al., 2015; Rhind et al., 2015). This is problematic as efforts to educate about safeguarding have focused on individuals’ experiences, individuals’ interactions with others (e.g., children), or organizational systems (Brackenridge & Rhind, 2014), but only in isolation. Subsequently, the interdependent nature of the functioning of different levels of behavior has been somewhat neglected. Recent research highlights an issue with safeguarding frameworks which predominantly focus on interpersonal rather than systemic organizational violence, as they only protect individuals who conform or align with conventional norms (Bekker & Posbergh, 2022). As such, there is a need to develop multilevel safeguarding education programs to tackle the problematic behaviors that give rise to maltreatment, rather than targeting specific levels of problematic behaviors in isolation (Nite & Nauright, 2020; Owusu-Sekyere et al., 2022). This is consistent with the FEPSAC position statement on safeguarding, which identifies meso- (e.g., sport club environments) and

exosystem (e.g., sport governing body/sport federation policies and procedures) factors that enable maltreatment, which in turn can increase vulnerability to this on a micro-level (Khomutova et al., 2025, p. 5). Therefore, due to the interactional nature of maltreatment that could occur at multiple levels, there have been calls to educate about organizational culture and norms to safeguard against harms and promote positive safe sport values which could be targeted towards adults in sport (Gurgis & Kerr, 2021).

A potential means of addressing the problem of the ‘elastic’ and often misunderstood phenomenon of safeguarding by adults (Fyson, 2015; Graham, K. et al., 2016) is through educational programs in sport. Currently, some recent studies have implemented and evaluated such provision (MacPherson et al., 2022; McMahon et al., 2018; McMahon et al., 2023; McMahon et al., 2023). MacPherson et al.’s (2022) evaluation of safeguarding education in Australia, the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States of America (USA), highlighted that while maltreatment and its reporting is broadly addressed, key areas such as equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) are omitted and need to be covered. Research has also identified the need for safeguarding education to be culturally specific, responsive to different forms of maltreatment, trauma aware/informed, and delivered by appropriate personnel (McMahon et al., 2023; McMahon et al., 2023). Furthermore, despite these encouraging advances, evidence-based safeguarding education remains limited in sport (McMahon et al., 2023), particularly within professional sports, in which efforts have focused on the voices and experiences of athletes and coaches. As such, Gurgis and Kerr’s (2021) work is relatively rare in considering the perspectives of leaders of national and international sport and coaching organizations. These authors described various ways a safeguarding culture might be advanced, including the importance of advancing safe sport education *for all* and shifting to a safer sport culture that addresses sport’s hypermasculine roots. Although these recommendations offer encouragement, they have not been explored in contexts such as professional football, where problematic behaviors concerning welfare have been highlighted and a culture which is skeptical to such education persists (Newman, Warburton et al., 2022b; Newman & Rumbold, 2024).

1.3. The current safeguarding context in English professional football

In England, the Football Association (F.A.) has implemented a nationwide network of Designated Safeguarding Officers (DSO) to focus on education and welfare from the recreational through to the Premier League level (The F.A., 2024). Yet at a similar time, media stories of abuse and bullying (BBC, 2021; Morgan, 2021) have documented a culture of racism, discriminatory and threatening behavior, where staff do not address concerns appropriately within English football academies. Such findings highlight that education programs designed within the exosystem continue not to effectively micro and meso system interactions in professional football, insofar as FIFA lacks clear safeguarding expectations for this population (FIFA, 2022). Moreover, individuals within the mesosystem who are in place to safeguard welfare remain marginalized (Oliver & Parker, 2019).

1.4. The present study

Given the marginalization of personnel responsible for safeguarding, the present study embraced a participatory turn to empower different voices (e.g., chief executive officers, player care leads, safeguarding leads, and education/welfare leads) at varying levels of the football system (Everley, 2022; Willson et al., 2022). This furthered the focus on adult, ‘knowledge user’ staff whose experiential knowledge and professional practice insights have been underrepresented in research, whilst being underpinned by the Making Safeguarding Personal (MSP) participatory approach to adult safeguarding (Cooper et al., 2015). By focusing on staff who are chiefly responsible for overseeing safeguarding and welfare, this study answered calls to collaborate with policymakers

and others involved in the policy-making process to increase the utility and impact of intervention programs (Bekker & Posbergh, 2022). Situating the present study within the broader field of safeguarding research in sport, we sought to advance education towards developing a safe culture in sport (Gurgis & Kerr, 2021) by gaining the perspectives and recommendations of knowledge users. Thus, the present study explored safeguarding personnel's (e.g., chief executive officers, players care leads, safeguarding leads, and education/welfare leads) recommendations for an effective safeguarding education program to address maltreatment in football. Specifically, we sought to collaborate with these personnel to co-produce a safeguarding education program to address maltreatment in football.

2. Method

This study was part of a broader program of research, guided by the Double Diamond model (Design Council, 2025) which explored maltreatment and safeguarding within professional football.² Consistent with the current study's purpose, the Double Diamond model has been found to be effective in developing an intervention (Johnson et al., 2024).

2.1. Research design

This qualitative study drew on co-production typologies which overlapped integrated knowledge translation (iKT) and experientially informed approaches³ to guide the collaboration between the researchers and knowledge users (e.g., football personnel) involved (Leggat et al., 2023; Smith et al., 2023). iKT, for example, is regarded as a collaboration between communities (e.g., academics and practitioners) to produce useful relevant knowledge (Straus et al., 2013). In the present study, the knowledge users and the authors problematized the issue of safeguarding education through professional discussions and consultation with the authors. This conceptualized the present study's research purpose and its interview questions (Graham, I. D. & Tetroe, 2007). Then, these knowledge users (and others) participated in the interviews. Here we attempted to gain experiences from a range of essential and different participants to respect different opinions and potentially marginalized populations in football, such as women, to address power inequalities (Smith et al., 2023).

Consistent with research of this type, and studies seeking to explore safe sport to address maltreatment (Gurgis & Kerr, 2021; Gurgis, Kerr, & Battaglia, 2022; Willson et al., 2022), we took a social constructivist position. As such, this study was positioned on the ontological assumption of the multiple realities of the participants, dependent on the context and individual holding those constructions, as well as epistemologically, the participants' interpretation and meaning making in social contexts (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Therefore, a constructivist approach was beneficial, given the present study aimed to explore experiential knowledge and perceptions (Charmaz, 2014) of a

safeguarding education program with relevant staff in football. This approach has been shown to produce recommendations for safeguarding developed between researchers and participants (Gurgis & Kerr, 2021).

2.2. Participants

We recruited nineteen knowledge users ($MAge = 44.21$, $SD = 10.03$, range = 28–70 years) from clubs ranging from the English Premier League (EPL) to the English Northern Premier League Division One,⁴ as well as organizations such as the English Football Association (FA) and the EPL. Nine of the participants identified as females and ten as males, and the participants also identified as a mixture of White, White British, Mixed-British Asian and Mixed Race – Black Caribbean and White British ethnicities. At the time of the interview, a range of appointments in football were held (ranging from 0.5 to 15 years in post) including Chief Executive Officer; Vice Chairman; General Counsel; Club Development Officer; Head of Safeguarding; Designated Safeguarding Officer; Safeguarding Case Officer; Academy Safeguarding Manager; Head of Education and Welfare; Player Care and Welfare Officer; Head of Education and Player Care, and; Coach. This mirrors previous research, which has found that collaborating with various personnel provides practical recommendations for change at an individual and organizational level in sport (Rumbold et al., 2018). Moreover, the present study made an original contribution by extending beyond administrators alone (see Gurgis & Kerr, 2021) to interview participants at the forefront of designing, delivering, monitoring, and enforcing safeguarding strategies.

2.3. Procedure

Following institutional research ethics committee approval (ER41451626), a purposeful snowball sampling was used to approach participants who could help meet the study's aims via emails and direct LinkedIn messages (Newman & Rumbold, 2024). Interested participants were then provided with an information sheet and completed a consent form before the interview commenced. The participants were assured of their confidentiality and anonymity (through the use of pseudonyms), given their positions of authority within their club or organization (Gurgis & Kerr, 2021).

Semi-structured interviews lasting between 54 and 83 min ($MDuration = 68.00$, $SD = 9.05$) were conducted with each knowledge user to explore their recommendations for developing a safeguarding education program. Initial rapport-building questions were asked before the participants were then asked questions about safeguarding (e.g., "What would the ideal safeguarding program to address maltreatment look like?"; "What would the structure of any educational programs or delivery look like?"). We developed the semi-structured interview guide in terms of structure and content from existing research linked to safeguarding in sport (Newman & Rumbold, 2024) and amended this based on the areas of interest raised by the knowledge users (Charmaz, 2014). All the interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams, audio recorded and transcribed verbatim before being analyzed.

2.4. Data analysis

Our study, like others (e.g., Pearson et al., 2025) illustrated how a relativist ontology and constructivist epistemology aligns with reflexive thematic analysis by acknowledging how the multiple social realities, were constructed by the participants within their context of professional football. Moreover, this approach allows for the co-production of

² To date, a previous research article focusing on understanding in football using a different research question has been published from this research project. Aligned with the Double Diamond model, this discovered and defined maltreatment in professional football. The data presented in the present study are unique and separate from this previously published research as is the focus of this work. This study addressed separate research questions about the safeguarding education program itself, and the data were separately analyzed. It should also be noted that separate applied work is now being undertaken to translate and deliver findings from the current study into safeguarding workshops in professional football.

³ In labelling our approach we acknowledge the challenge in providing a single label for our co-production approach, due to the natural overlapping and contrasts of typologies, and therefore we believe it is of the utmost academic and practical importance that we reflect on where we have employed iKT and experientially-informed research approaches.

⁴ The English Premier League (EPL) is the top tier (level 1) of the English football pyramid, whereas the English Northern Premier League Division One is the seventh tier (level 7). The tiers are separated by the three levels of the English Football League (EFL) and two divisions of the National League.

knowledge where, we played an active role in the sense-making with our knowledge of safeguarding and the professional football population (Pearson et al., 2025). Therefore, we employed Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA; Braun & Clarke, 2019), amalgamating the steps set out by Braun and Clarke (2006) with more recently published Reflexive Thematic Analysis Reporting Guidelines (RTARG, Braun & Clarke, 2024). Firstly, we familiarized ourselves with the completed transcripts. Secondly, we systematically analyzed and interpreted meaningful segments of texts (for example the participants discussing the need to have conversations to challenge wrongdoing), adding labels to generate initial codes for safeguarding education recommendations (Jackman et al., 2022). Next, the first author reviewed, combined, interpreted, and mapped the codes to form themes to make sense of shared patterns of meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Newman & Rumbold, 2024). For example, various participants discussed the need to have a form of “check and challenge” as part of individual conversations within the design of safeguarding education. At this point, the second author acted as a “critical friend” to challenge and offer alternative perspectives on the themes from an organizational systems and process evaluation perspective (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Once this process was complete the themes were further analyzed, defined and, written up (Jackman et al., 2023). In undertaking the previous steps, we were cognizant of research on education programs in sport, where it was important to accurately reflect the shared perceptions of football’s personnel. Therefore, themes were inductively generated in the participants’ (rather than the researchers’) language (Dorsch et al., 2019). Lastly, the themes were developed in line with deductive reasoning, where relevant concepts were incorporated into the theme labels (e.g., psychological safety and whistleblowing), to support categorizing themes based on the research literature (Higham et al., 2022).

2.5. Research quality

The present study was guided by recommendations that a criterionological approach to data quality is problematic in qualitative research and instead drew on relativism (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Through a reflexive approach, we identified our positions as researchers who have published maltreatment and safeguarding studies in professional football. The first author also acknowledged their role as a practitioner with significant experience engaging with professional football clubs, whilst both authors are also regular media contributors on the psychology of football. This awareness led us to consider our assumptions about the multi-layered football context (Newman et al., 2021). Moreover, by shaping the initial research question for the study, as well as co-producing the recommendations and subsequent dissemination of the findings with the participants, we were able to better reflect on our own positions to propose potentially more impactful future interventions (Smith et al., 2023).

Additionally, the present study drew on relevant criteria (Smith & McGannon, 2018) from similar safe sport studies (see Willson et al., 2022). For example, the study made a significant but novel contribution (Tracy, 2010), as although safe sport initiatives are on the rise for youth athletes, safeguarding education programs for adults in English professional football are limited. We were also sensitive to the participants’ context, given the potential vulnerability of their roles (Newman & Rumbold, 2024; Yardley, 2017). Furthermore, given we drew on typologies of co-production, related judgement criteria were used to ensure research quality (Smith et al., 2023). For example, various football personnel contributed to the study to ensure that different knowledge bases were valued and blended. Similarly, diversity was prioritized, by a relatively even spread of male and female participants, as research has demonstrated that female voices can often be marginalized in professional football (Higham et al., 2024).

3. Results and discussion

The present study explored football personnel’s recommendations for an effective safeguarding education program to address maltreatment. Pseudonymized findings reinforce the importance of safeguarding programs combining individual, interpersonal, and systemic elements to be truly effective (Rhind & Owusu-Sekyere, 2017). We felt that an ecological systems model (Bronfenbrenner, 1999), provided a suitable lens through which to explore the findings, given its focus on how environmental systems interact (Bronfenbrenner, 1999) and recent application in safe sport and maltreatment research (Gurgis & Kerr, 2021; Newman et al., 2024). Several references were also made to addressing the culture of safeguarding in football, underlining that this is a suitable holistic approach to address maltreatment (Owusu-Sekyere et al., 2022), rather than focusing on the delivery content or individual parts of the safeguarding system alone. As such, two dimensions (e.g., Fig. 1) provided overarching recommendations for the effective design of a safeguarding education program to address maltreatment in football: *Shaping safeguarding education in professional football*, and *The best way to deliver safeguarding education*. Our findings extend models promoting a safeguarding culture in sport (Owusu-Sekyere et al., 2022) by highlighting how culture must be focused on within education programs. Similarly, we echo the need for values and practices to be contested and challenged, viewing organizational culture through everyday practices, ideas, events, structures and processes, as well as where phenomena are grasped and found meaningful (Alvesson, 2002; McDougall et al., 2020).

3.1. Shaping safeguarding education in professional football

To address the maltreatment of adults in professional football, participants outlined a range of ideas to shape the delivery of safeguarding education. Most notably, they discussed that safeguarding education needs to be shaped by a cultural intervention. This intervention needs to be focused across ecological systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1999), whilst also being mindful of capturing the interaction across these systems.

3.1.1. Focusing on individuals

According to the participants, one of the primary considerations of a safeguarding education program centered on developing a culture of “check (for any inappropriate behaviors) and challenge (any potential wrongdoing regardless of severity).” Through “check and challenge”, the participants articulated how all voices within the football context can be empowered, consistent with findings from the adult safeguarding literature (Montgomery et al., 2017):

On an individual basis (...), you see good practice when you get a group of staff who are together as a team and want to work for the greater good and they challenge each other. So for me, good practice is challenging low-level concerns individually. (Keeley).

This account revealed the need for the process of check and challenge to focus on microsystem level day to day interactions between individuals (Bronfenbrenner, 1999). Moreover, Keeley’s specific reference to challenging “low-level” concerns demonstrated the detail and depth of the cultural intervention needed as well as the need to attend safeguarding education programs to empower change in sport (Kavanagh et al., 2023). Therefore, safeguarding education needs to facilitate opportunities for individuals to challenge each other about contentious issues related to maltreatment. This might be exemplified by exploring the dividing line between banter and bullying using example quotes from professional football (see Newman, Warburton et al., 2022a). This may also address concerns about the problems of ‘sharedness’ (McDougall et al., 2020), as these discussions may offer individuals the opportunity to challenge each other’s assumptions about wrongdoing.

A culture of “check and challenge” needs to be coupled with

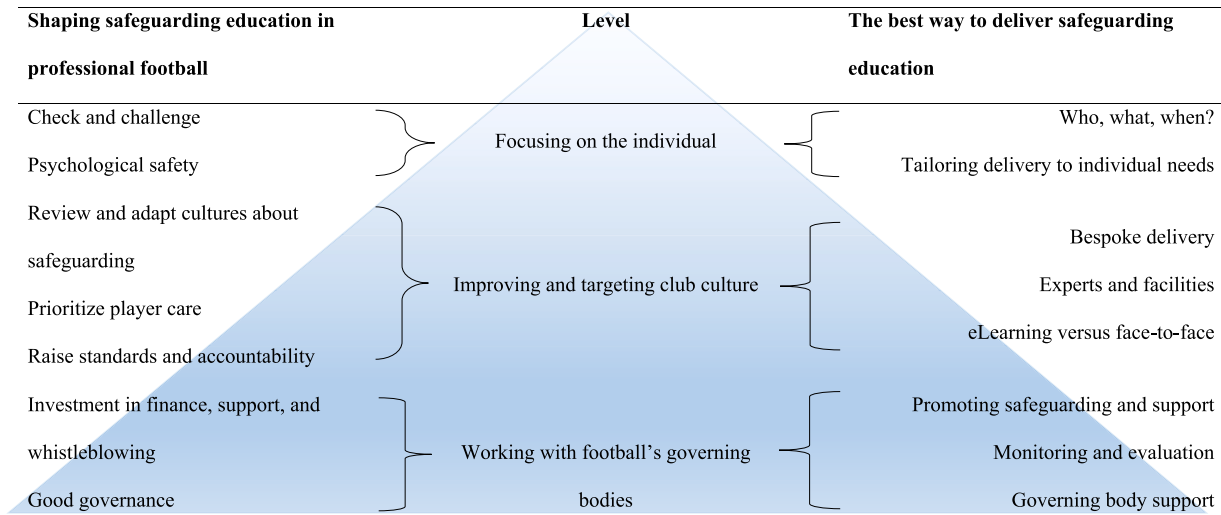


Figure 1. Recommendations for Safeguarding Programs

Fig. 1. Recommendations for safeguarding programs.

individuals feeling psychologically safe (Edmondson, 2004) in the professional football context, as Claire outlined:

I think people are worried about what will then happen, (...), am I going to be penalized? Am I going to be, is everyone going to know? What are the consequences for that individual or the other individuals perpetrating that maltreatment, depending on who they are and the positions of power and everything that's going on there? I don't think it's easy for people to come forward and say this is how I'm feeling.

We highlight that mesosystem level interactions, where multiple stakeholders such as players, coaches, and others in power may interact (Bronfenbrenner, 1999), need to be considered in the design of safeguarding education, so that individuals can feel comfortable discussing challenging topics such as maltreatment. Likewise, the underlying authoritarian culture in football (Newman et al., 2022b) given Claire's reference to the consequences being different depending on who individuals are.

One way to do this is through engaging football's leaders to be proactive in "creating space, safe space, and one-to-one zones" that might be within or linked to any safeguarding educational delivering as Laurence described. Laurence's reference to the responsibility of all those on the business side was congruent with all leaders needing to cultivate a culture of psychological safety to enhance the safeguarding culture in sport (Fransen et al., 2020; Owusu-Sekyere et al., 2022). At the individual it would appear that the present findings support the need for committed leadership to reinforce an organizational identity linked to safeguarding (Owusu-Sekyere et al., 2022). Moreover, developing leaders' understanding of psychological safety may benefit safeguarding education congruent with findings that this can transform practice connected to welfare (Kavanagh et al., 2023). Therefore, we suggest that figures such as sport psychologists may play a pivotal role within the mesosystem, in educating leaders and others (e.g., players) about psychological safety and act as key individuals to speak to about maltreatment concerns (Bronfenbrenner, 1999; Newman et al., 2024).

3.1.2. Improving and targeting club culture

Within the exosystem (see Bronfenbrenner, 1999) a need to review and adapt cultures about safeguarding, prioritize player care, and raise standards and accountability. Inevitably, this accountability needs to be demonstrated by clubs allocating specific roles to individuals:

Everybody has to have a named person at board level for whistleblowing, for safeguarding, for mental health, but [if] it's just a named person and there's no meaningful drive or input, it's always managing up[wards] in this area ... so good practice where it's driven from the top. (Gemma).

It was notable how Gemma outlined the need for the process to be driven through the exosystem of the football club where accountability for safeguarding education is managed by naming proactive individuals to drive this. These individuals appear to be a key conduit in ensuring that a healthy safeguarding culture is embedded within the subsequent delivery of an educational program. We highlight one such figure who could be pivotal in this process is a sport psychologist if they are empowered to address wrongdoing (Fisher & Dzikus, 2017). These authors have described how sport psychologists can facilitate educational efforts, with similar findings outlining the value of such figures providing psychologically safe, ethical environments for clubs to deliver this work (Newman et al., 2022b). Laurence, however, saw this differently, describing safeguarding, across ecological systems but defined this within the exosystem as everyone's "obligations, it's part of our responsibilities ... Whether you're the chief exec or [someone else] it's all part of our responsibility to varying degrees." As such, a different expectation needs to be communicated through safeguarding programs where individuals need to take ownership of guarding against maltreatment, which moves beyond raising awareness to a broader level of accountability (Gurgis & Kerr, 2021). Crucially though Keeley noted that "people make mistakes, but we don't need to throw them under the bus" which provided an important reminder that support is needed to make effective behavioral changes to address wrongdoing in sport (Gurgis & Kerr, 2021). This also reinforced that people will make mistakes and this needs to be embedded into the delivery of workshops and/or other educational materials that football participants receive.

One way to enact behavioral change is through incentives as part of a safeguarding program, as Seb described:

I know it's not an option for everyone, but I think you've got to look outside of the box and if you've got the resources to do it, you know, somewhere nice, food, it's the little things, do you know what I mean?

This practical recommendation aligned with emerging safeguarding research in sport which promotes this approach (Komaki & Tuakli-Wosornu, 2021; Owusu-Sekyere et al., 2022). For example, Komaki and Tuakli-Wosornu (2021) discussed how rewarding clubs for

cultivating a constructive culture demonstrates that they care, empowers users' voices and averts abuses. Embedding incentives may also offer the benefit of developing a safeguarding culture at the organizational (to protect the professional reputation) and individual (to protect people from a moral perspective as well as to preserve integrity) level (Owusu-Sekyere et al., 2022).

Lastly, another cultural element for consideration in designing a safeguarding education program is the need to prioritize care, where employed staff may help deliver such programs. Such views highlighted the value of staff who are independent of management structures and can focus on the needs of players in a person-centered fashion (Oliver & Parker, 2019). For Giles, this was in the form of player care:

We've previously had a really good player care department at XXX. Unfortunately, the two individuals have recently left the football club. The pastoral practice was fantastic. They definitely facilitated young people to have a voice and that was (...) you know, not just children (...). Up to the 23s as well. The testament to that is, is how much these young people value that. Through the messages that they continue to send and they are appreciative messages. Years after.

Giles's perspective indicated support for player care at the club level (interacting between meso- and exosystems) to enhance the safeguarding culture and education within a football club. In terms of an education program itself, it appears that these individuals may be both useful in facilitating players to speak within the delivery of any sessions, and a point of contact if individuals need to speak after any delivery, given how Giles described how they enable individuals' voices. Therefore, the wide-ranging and long-lasting benefits of this player care work were evident, and is potentially more effective than other personnel who can be marginalized in football, such as chaplains (Oliver & Parker, 2019).

3.1.3. Working with football's governing bodies

Although the participants made individual and club-level design considerations clear throughout their accounts, they also pointed to how safeguarding education needs to link to link across football's clubs within the exosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1999). As Laurence summarized, "you don't create a culture with a piece of paper and a strategy. You create a culture by living things day-to-day and that's the hardest thing." We feel this view encapsulates the cultural underpinning of systemic-level considerations for safeguarding education, in that policies and procedures are only effective if individuals are fully committed to change and tackling difficult issues. Thus, education programs need to raise awareness of these policies and procedures within their delivery (e. g., workshops), and show how these difficult issues can be discussed and treated. Importantly, finance, support, and whistleblowing (reporting) are needed to support safeguarding education:

Man, you're trying to turn around an oil tanker there. [In the National League] I think you need funding for staff because an expectation on the first team manager and coaches to do that is unrealistic; it should be embedded in practice, but to expect that to happen organically is unrealistic. So I think there has to be an investment in more staff in support positions. (Simon).

Simon captured how sparse resources in the lower leagues of professional football, such as the National League, mirror issues with the wider competitive balance of the game (Plumley et al., 2018) which ultimately challenges the delivery of safeguarding education. However, by using the analogy of turning around an "oil tanker", we suggest Simon used his knowledge to construct a view of football that reveals deeply ingrained cultural issues surrounding funding, support, and a lack of priority for education and welfare (Newman et al., 2022b).

Alongside finance, the notion of reporting was a consistent theme across the participants' data, as Robert described:

But [reporting] it's very difficult because often men and certainly male football players may tend to hide things from us, so we're not

necessarily aware of things until they choose to open up to us about those issues or indeed others were to tell us those issues on their behalf.

This finding corroborates previous research (Newman et al., 2022) where an inherent masculinity within football's culture acts as a barrier to reporting maltreatment concerns. Safeguarding education must address this hypermasculinity. This might occur through workshop delivery coupled with supporting resources that challenge the hypermasculinity found in bullying and banter behaviors in professional football (Newman, Eccles et al., 2022; Newman et al., 2022a). Additionally, EDI in football may be addressed in such programs to address a shortcoming with safeguarding education currently (MacPherson et al., 2022).

In practice, any reporting driven by safeguarding education needs to be underpinned by good governance within the exosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1999), as Sarah summarized:

I think if we were to say, well FIFA, F.A., EFL are developing something that's going to help us be able to pump those messages out. Certainly, from my perspective that would be great. It gives me a platform to jump off from and say "right, if you guys are going to cover the basics then I can spend my time doing other stuff".

At the exosystem level of football's infrastructure governing bodies and clubs, must interact to drive these programs, as part of a whole systems approach to address the structural issue of safeguarding maltreatment in football (Bekker & Posbergh, 2022).

3.2. The best way to deliver safeguarding education

Aligned with the need for a culturally informed safeguarding program at the individual, club, and systemic levels, the participants discussed similar delivery considerations.

3.2.1. Focusing on the individual

Within this theme, the participants offered recommendations for how the timing of the sessions, who is delivering, and the degree to which they are tailored to individuals might best meet their needs. In general, the participants coalesced on a periodized form of delivery across the season to enable individuals to benefit most from this work. Anna outlined how "we need to be thinking about delivering in the quieter points of a season, whether that's over the Christmas period or, (...) getting towards the end of the season if things are kind of dying down.". Yet even this approach offers challenges for engaged participants such as Alice:

I don't think a one-off workshop or one-off presentation works if I'm being honest. However, from a practitioner point of view, if you're coming to me and saying, you know, "there are five workshops we need to deliver", I'm looking at you and going, I realistically don't know how I'm going to fit that in.

Even though Alice supported the delivery of safeguarding education and provided guidelines for implementing it, she showed the continued disregard football has for certain educational provision within its wider macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1999; Parker, 2000), that any future delivery still needs to address.

Concurrent with their views of how and when safeguarding education might be best to deliver this work, Giles highlighted how "it might be ex-players [who] could do it." This was a view elaborated on by Alice who described how survivors of abuse could provide the 'kudos' required to engage those in football (Mountjoy et al., 2022):

It would need to be someone that has a little bit of kudos ... I think it needs to be someone that coaches would look and go "oh, actually, that looks quite decent, or you know that they understand they've been where I am and whatever else.

Drawing on survivors of abuse offers potential benefits to the individual for them to recontextualize their experiences and feel valued, whilst also benefiting organizations by highlighting vulnerabilities with their safeguarding systems and reporting (Mountjoy et al., 2022). Yet such this may also reveal football's hidden curriculum (Cushion & Jones, 2014), whereby safeguarding education may become a cultural reproduction from those already in the game, with the added risk for survivors of abuse that they may be retraumatized (Mountjoy et al., 2022). We therefore suggest the need to be trauma-informed in a way that was absent from Alice's account (McMahon et al., 2023). To counteract this Anna, suggested that outside agencies such as the police could assist with this work by "talk[ing] really frankly and giv[ing] really good real-life examples of what that looks like and make it so that they understand [it might happen to them]."

While inviting in these professionals may benefit some within a football club, safeguarding education also needs to be even more tailored to individuals at times. This was summarized by Alfie, "we do bespoke (tailor) everything to those individual needs and even within its cohort and each group we differentiate as much as we can." Therefore, a delivery approach which makes context-specific considerations may better reflect the dynamic and continuously evolving nature of safeguarding culture (Gurgis, Kerr, & Battaglia, 2022). Furthermore, the present findings suggest that an extension of the MSP into professional football may be beneficial to empower people, build confidence and improve decision-making to tackle issues such as maltreatment (Manthorpe et al., 2014). Specifically, any safeguarding delivery would need to be mindful of the needs of different individuals in football and go beyond just players and coaches (Gurgis & Kerr, 2021), to appeal to these people as Giles summarized.

If you're an executive, you'll be looking at your (...) reputation long [term], you know the [safeguarding] strategy will be more (...) for you around the club than the individual. You're the coach, you just want to use what your team [needs] to succeed because you're going to get losses and you're going to get wins. And then if you work in the world of wellbeing, welfare, safeguarding you're going to be more in tune with the potential vulnerabilities [in football].

3.2.2. Improving and targeting club culture

Despite the participants outlining how safeguarding education needs to retain a bespoke element, it is important to point to the need for all individuals to be educated to a minimum threshold. As recent research has highlighted, this need stretches across mesosystem interactions at a football club, as even individuals expected to safeguard welfare, such as sport psychologists, may have been socialized to inappropriate behaviors in sport or may not know where to report their concerns (Kerr & Stirling, 2019; Newman et al., 2024). Keeley provided an example of a "baseline, what they need to know. What it looks like, what I can do, what I can't do and who the hell do I go to when I've got a problem with it." Yet she also outlined challenges that clubs need to resolve with some of the standards defined within the wider exosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1999) from governing bodies:

It's like the EFL standards. We've now matched pretty much well with the Premier League but you've got sets of standards, you've got a funding issue because Premier League clubs have loads of funding, no problem ... EFL clubs, we've got 72 clubs trying to do the same standard. So, I've got colleagues in League Two who work part-time trying to apply the same standard that I'm audited against. So that can be a little bit challenging.

As a result, an alternative approach which might resolve some of the issues related to resources at a club level is sharing best practices:

The recent iteration of the EFL course is Paul Stewart's⁵ course (...). In Paul's course, one of the documents that's produced on it is [football club] safeguarding policy as a piece of good practice. And you go, "oh right, OK, so that's useful, isn't it?" (Sarah).

Extending upon research recommendations (Higham et al., 2022) Sarah described how sharing best practices may allow less-resourced organizations to draw from others concerning safeguarding education. By furthering that this would not involve sharing "state secrets" she illustrated how safeguarding education may be collaborative within the exosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1999) despite the sport's typically competitive nature.

One way resources may also be disseminated through club education is through the contentious issue of e-learning. However, in line with research in the educational domain, which has shown that students learned better in a face-to-face (Lin, 2022), the participants discussed that face-to-face delivery would deliver greater satisfaction. Sarah provided a compelling account of this feeling:

When COVID hit ... [there was] a massive shift to online and not live online but eLearning, and I struggle with that concept ... I've delivered it face to face, you can look around the room and you can hear the conversations that are being had directly to you or within the groups and you go, that person's got it, that person hasn't got a clue, yes. And so, either there's an ability to change that because you can make that challenge when you've got people in a room or a live online scenario ... [with] you can't do that with eLearning ... it becomes a tick box exercise.

By highlighting how this results in a "tick box exercise" Sarah cemented cultural challenges (Parker, 2000) which need overcoming in the delivery of safeguarding education, as there appears to be potential for eLearning to be seen as unimportant.

Thus, it seems apparent that if any online delivery is to be delivered it needs to be blended with a predominantly face-to-face approach as Gemma described, "I think blended learning, so some sort of self-directed tasks, a mixture of online [is ok, but] you can't beat in-person, that's key." This is unless online offers a clear function, as Layla also outlined:

Actually, in reality [face-to-face] it's really difficult to be able to do that. I know for the adults sometimes we'll do Zoom. Almost, not workshops because that's really difficult but certainly interviews and webinars to be able to deliver those messages so people can kind of sit and listen. Otherwise, it's within our academy.

The challenge of face-to-face learning was also considered here but the participants reemphasized that online delivery should only be for specific purposes (e.g., players who may be harder to reach). This was congruent with Lin's (2022) findings which showed that online live learning can deliver satisfying experiences in the absence of face-to-face provision.

3.2.3. Working with football's governing bodies

The participants outlined points which need to be considered to deliver a safeguarding education at the systemic level. Congruent with findings which established Owusu-Sekyere et al.'s (2022) safeguarding culture model, which highlights the need for individuals to know what they are looking for with safeguarding concerns, participants such as Kyle emphasized the need for education to promote raising awareness:

⁵ Paul Stewart was a former English Professional Footballer who was a victim of child sexual abuse in the sport. He works in safeguarding has his own company which provides safeguarding education in professional football to clubs and organizations such as the EFL.

We do training, we do internal training, and we have posters up around the building and we put things out on social media. We have the welfare officer's contact details on our website. Other than ad campaigns, as XXX we wouldn't necessarily run an ad campaign because (...) it wouldn't have that much gravitas, but a national campaign, you see impactful adverts and things, getting well-known, renowned players talking about these things is always quite impactful.

It was noteworthy that Kyle described the benefits of information campaigning at a national (or perhaps international) level to be truly impactful, as recent research has suggested this approach is limited in sport (Moustakas & Petry, 2023). Therefore, to advance safeguarding education, national and international sponsorship from football organizations is imperative to permeate from the exosystem of football clubs and governing bodies to the macrosystem of football as an institution (Bronfenbrenner, 1999). Laurence largely concurred, saying that "the textbook or, the academic side, while important ... is more [for] your strategic leads ... whereas for people that are working and living it, it's around awareness. And lived experience [would be] ideal [from a] training point of view." These points reinforced the need for work to be undertaken across a football network to resonate and share experiences rather than clubs doing this in isolation.

In support of promoting safeguarding education effectively, the participants also discussed how this type of work could be monitored and evaluated to ensure its effectiveness. For some, such as Robert, governing bodies at the exosystem level (Bronfenbrenner, 1999) have a key role to play in the delivery of safeguarding programs:

So, for example the EFL are kind of policing safeguarding in terms of, from a regulatory perspective, making sure that clubs do what they're meant to be doing on a safeguarding front. (...) I don't even know what the sanction would be necessarily. If you weren't to pass the safeguarding standards, I suppose you'd be given an opportunity to put things right and ultimately you might lose things like your academy status, so that would be the punishment.

From Robert's view, it was evident that a form of policing from the EFL was critical to ensure that standards were being met. Moreover, it suggested that these bodies could use their power to ensure compliance with safeguarding education for clubs in terms of their academy status.

Monitoring and evaluation in this form clearly offered one form of scrutinizing the effectiveness of safeguarding education and compliance. Some participants took this approach in a slightly different, though potentially complementary direction in the form of EDI, which would address shortcomings raised in safeguarding to date (MacPherson et al., 2022). This seemed critical given the specific context within which football is situated:

I think it's that kind of, I do think it's [maltreatment] unconscious on most people's part. If you look at the make-up of the club it's 70 % male, and it's very white, in terms of the corporate area of staff, which is not something I'm used to coming from local authority. I mean obviously, it's a factor [lack of diversity] in any organization but it's not this stark. Having said that, two members of the board are women, but I don't know, it doesn't necessarily translate into the business [safeguarding]. (Lucy).

Consistent with previous research (Collinson & Hearn, 1994), white, masculine make-up of environments such as football might create conditions where aggressive behaviors occur and maltreatment is missed, hampering the delivery of safeguarding. Thus, by engaging female participants (e.g., Lucy) with experience in other sectors, there is potential to change these conventions. Modeling safeguarding programs on established EDI work, outlined by Dave seems pertinent for future safeguarding education:

It's a requirement to have annual EDI training as well now, so that's good for all full and part-time members of staff. The equality

diversity inclusion training, which is very good at properly practicing and encouraging good practice.

Sarah again acted as a voice in support of this:

I think it's important because we're focusing on the men's game a lot, but I can imagine if you worked in a female footballing role you'd go, "oh here we go again". And the same with disability football, you've got to make sure you hit that diversity stream so that people see themselves reflected in that messaging ... But again, ...it's really difficult isn't it, because you'll get people going, "oh aren't we so woke?". You've got a black person doing this, you've got somebody in a wheelchair saying this and before you know it, it can get a little bit twee can't it?

At present safe sport itself may even be at risk of promoting white, male, ableist, and heteronormative views (Gurgis, Kerr, & Battaglia, 2022). Drawing on different perspectives, it was clear that moving EDI into safeguarding education appears critical across football to ensure maximum representation. It is paramount that a future safeguarding education program addresses issues of representativeness and promotes the voices of equity-deserving groups (Gurgis, Kerr, & Darnell, 2022). However, Sarah's point about the risks of how this might be seen as "woke" and a "little bit twee," struck a cautionary note from a cultural perspective regarding the delivery of these messages across the sport, and where further education might be needed to represent all voices.

To summarize, the participants discussed how monitoring and evaluation needs some form of governance at the exosystem level (Bronfenbrenner, 1999). Football organizations were seen as important in implementing and enforcing compliance with the mandatory delivery of a safeguarding education program (Gurgis & Kerr, 2021). Sarah described how this could be in the form of international organizations such as FIFA forming a powerful partnership with English football organizations:

And I think with the label of FIFA or the FA, when you have labels like that, especially with players and with the coaching staff, that can resonate. Because they have respect for those organizations, they recognize those organizations as being important in football terms ... if it was a FIFA initiative that they get on board with the FA, the EFL I think conjoined initiatives between the big hitters is important.

Thus, the potential for FIFA to impact and monitor any safeguarding work seems crucial to make key personnel such as players and coaches take note of safeguarding work. On a cautionary note, this finding was indicative of the subservient nature of football (Parker & Manley, 2016), where players and coaches value the power of organizations such as FIFA, but do not recognize the current lack of information about adult safeguarding within this organization (FIFA, 2022). For Giles, the rigor of FIFA's involvement could progress further:

FIFA for instance, could say "right. If you want to have this level of coaching, you have to do this too as well as your first aid, and what have you." Safeguarding at the FA. The Safeguarding Workshop is currently advised. Advise the advisory. So it's moving next year to being a regulation, but even now you know a grassroots [club] and with professional sport, you don't have to do it.

Ultimately, this provided a clear final recommendation on where a safeguarding education may go in terms of monitoring. Currently safeguarding education is only available in a limited capacity to adults in the professional game and is not mandated at the national or international level (England Football Learning, 2024; FIFA, 2022). Yet Giles exemplified how placing safeguarding education on the same level as coaching, may shift the culture to truly valuing this work and providing it with a vital status in football.

3.3. Implications for practice

First, consistent with models within contemporary literature (Owusu-Sekyere et al., 2022), our findings highlight the need for safeguarding education to target individual, organizational (club) and systemic levels in professional football. Specifically, the present study extends Owusu-Sekyere et al.'s (2022) study by establishing the elements that would make a program to address maltreatment of adults effective. This includes being culturally specific to professional football (McMahon et al., 2023) where individuals can check and challenge potentially problematic behaviors in this sport, such as banter (Newman, Eccles et al., 2022; see Newman et al., 2022a). This could occur through workshop delivery, potentially with supporting materials to ensure the highest safeguarding standards by being responsive to the specific forms of maltreatment which occur in football (McMahon et al., 2023). Furthermore, such an approach could foster improvements in the democratic environment of a sports club (Moustakas & Petry, 2023) and move beyond the principles of 'sharedness' in organizational culture (McDougall et al., 2020). To enact this, equity-deserving individuals (Gurgis, Kerr, & Darnell, 2022) may drive this safeguarding education and address the hypermasculinity that still predominates professional football's culture.

While our findings are grounded in the need to develop a culturally informed safeguarding education program, harmonizing these findings with recent research linked to maltreatment may also offer important implications for delivering such a program. As an example, the program content may be anchored in research which outlines how maltreatment is understood in professional football (e.g., discussing topics such as resilience, the commodification of footballers) and provides guidance on how to identify the signs and symptoms of this behavior (Newman & Rumbold, 2024). Our findings also highlight how certain individuals may be key in the design and delivery of such programs. The need to embed psychological safety within safeguarding education (e.g., activities which allow individuals to discuss their concerns without fear or repercussions) aligns with research that suggests sport psychologists can play a key role in fostering such climates (Newman et al., 2024). However, this comes with an important caveat that these individuals are appropriately trained and empowered to deliver such work (Fisher & Dzikus, 2017; Kerr & Stirling, 2019). Sport psychologists and player care staff working in football, as highlighted by the participants, appear ideal as informed cultural insiders who can deliver this work and keep power relations limited (McMahon et al., 2023). We advocate those who are trauma-informed and follow best practices guidelines (see McMahon et al., 2023), otherwise even contemporary safeguarding education is at risk of culturally reproducing (Cushion & Jones, 2014) issues where wrongdoing continues.

4. Conclusion

While the present study offered a beneficial collaboration with knowledge users who have experiential knowledge of overseeing safeguarding education in professional football, it does present some limitations. Although considerable and sustained efforts were made to recruit various equity-deserving individuals, future research may expand on the range and diversity of the participants recruited. Representing such equity-deserving individuals (including players and coaches who may be recipients of safeguarding education), voices will augment previous research (Gurgis, Kerr, & Darnell, 2022), and enhance future safeguarding work by better highlighting the microaggressions and systemic barriers these individuals face.

Additionally, although the present study provided critical information about designing and delivering safeguarding education in professional football, any potential intervention remains untested. Future studies may implement and pilot recommendations from the current findings to design safeguarding education in professional football. Including questionnaires may also assess whether such education raises

awareness of maltreatment and affects reports of wrongdoing, whilst determining the impact of safeguarding education on the mental health and well-being outcomes of those in football. Furthermore, participatory qualitative approaches could also evaluate what works for whom and under what contextual circumstances (e.g., process evaluation), whilst being mindful of the funding and resource implications at different levels of English professional football. Lastly, such qualitative evaluations of safeguarding programs must also address concerns over educational provision, including those connected to wrongdoing in professional football (Newman et al., 2022).

Overall, the present study makes a pivotal contribution to practice in sport by addressing the limitations highlighted in previous research (Newman & Rumbold, 2024) linked to the lack of focus on safeguarding education in adult professional sport, and the need to develop evidence-based education about maltreatment in sport (McMahon et al., 2023). It also highlights the potential of a participatory turn to address these concerns. Furthermore, the findings provide recommendations for a safeguarding education program in professional football. Specifically, key personnel discussed how safeguarding programs need to be culturally informed and consider the individual, organizational (club), and systemic levels of professional football. Our study also highlights the role sport psychologists might play in delivering such safeguarding work if they receive adequate training and support from football's key governing bodies. Finally, these findings lay the platform for future studies to explore the efficacy of an educational safeguarding intervention in professional football.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

James A. Newman: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **James L. Rumbold:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this work the author(s) used Grammarly in order to improve the readability and language of the manuscript. After using this tool/service, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take(s) full responsibility for the content of the published article.

Declaration of competing interest

'Declarations of interest: none'.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the FIFA Research Scholarship. The authors would also like to thank all the participants for their contributions on a potentially sensitive topic matter.

Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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