Safe Sport International

# Safeguarding in Sport: 13 Steps for Safer Recruitment

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# Executive Summary

## 13 Steps for Safer Recruitment

Safer recruitment helps organisations decide who should be entrusted with access, authority and responsibility in sport. It is essential to creating environments where people's rights are upheld and each person can participate, belong and thrive in and through sport.

This paper presents 13 practical steps that can work together as a proportionate system to strengthen safer recruitment. It offers guidance and provides areas for organisational reflection and action.

Informed by the International Safe Sport Principles and the International Safeguards for Children in Sport, this guidance applies proportionately to employees, coaches, volunteers, officials, medical personnel, contractors and other associated personnel across sport, from small volunteer-led clubs to national and international bodies. It focuses on safeguarding-specific vetting and should be adapted to the organisational role, context and applicable local law.

## The 13 steps

### Prepare and assess

1. Assess the safeguarding risk of the role
2. Make safeguarding clear from the start
3. Require a full application and self-declaration
4. Include safeguarding-focused questions in the interview

### Check and decide

5. Verify identity, qualifications and registration
6. Obtain and verify safeguarding references
7. Complete any appropriate national background checks
8. Look across borders
9. Check sporting and professional history
10. Assess all the information, not just the certificate

### Support and review

11. Induct and train
12. Observe and supervise
13. Keep suitability under review

No process can guarantee that a person is safe. However, considering all 13 steps alongside the safeguarding risks of the role and the organisation's context and capacity can support a lawful, fair, evidence-based and proportionate assessment of suitability.

# 13 Steps for Safer Recruitment

## Introduction

Safe Sport is about creating sport environments where everyone's rights are upheld and every person can participate, belong and thrive in and through sport. Safeguarding is the practical work that helps make this possible. Safer recruitment is one important part of that work: it helps organisations assess whether people are suitable to hold roles involving access to, authority over, responsibility for, influence over or dependency relationships with anyone who participates in, works in, volunteers in or interacts with sport.

Safer recruitment is a system of safeguards, not a single check or one-off event. The International Safe Sport Principles and the International Safeguards in Sport identify safer recruitment, training and clear communication of responsibilities as essential measures for protecting children, young people and adults in sport.

Vetting for safeguarding purposes goes beyond a criminal-record check. It is a structured process for assessing whether someone is suitable to be given access, authority, influence or responsibility in relation to children, young people or adults. This paper focuses on safeguarding-specific vetting. In sport, "vetting" is often used more broadly to cover wider fit-and-proper-person or integrity checks that are not safeguarding-specific. Organisations should consider whether such broader background checks are also relevant to a given role, as a complementary exercise to the safeguarding-specific checks addressed in this paper.

Recruitment pressure, event deadlines or urgent staffing needs should not be used to bypass essential safeguards.

Athletes are central to safer recruitment, but they are not the only people it should protect. Their experiences alongside those of others who participate in, work in, volunteer in or interact with sport show how safety, trust, power, dependency and professional boundaries are experienced in practice. People affected by recruitment and safeguarding arrangements should therefore be meaningfully involved in their design, implementation and review.

> ***"Safeguarding is not just about what we do for athletes, but how we partner with them."***
>
> SSI Athlete Voice Group at SafeSport26

Safer recruitment must protect participants while also respecting the rights of applicants, including their right to privacy. Candidates must be told what checks will be carried out, why they are needed, how information will be used, who will have access to it, what criteria will be applied in assessing candidates from a safeguarding perspective, and how concerns or inaccuracies in respect of the recruitment process or decision can be challenged.

## The 13 Steps

Each step uses a short, action-oriented heading followed by a practical explanation of what organisations should consider and why it matters. Examples, questions and suggested benchmarks are included where they may help organisations translate the principle into practice. The steps are not a rigid checklist: they should be read together, revisited when circumstances change and applied in proportion to the role, the environment in which it is carried out, and the access, authority, power, dependency, isolation and opportunity it creates.

The steps apply, according to the risk presented by the role, to employees, coaches, volunteers, officials, medical personnel, contractors and other associated personnel working on behalf of a sports organisation. They are intended for organisations at different stages of safeguarding development, from small volunteer-led clubs to national and international bodies.

Because legal definitions, criminal-record systems, safeguarding obligations and cultural expectations differ between countries and communities, organisations should adapt these steps to local law while keeping the same underlying principle: recruitment decisions should be lawful, evidence-based and proportionate to the safeguarding risk of the role.

The organisation remains responsible for recruitment decisions and for keeping each person's suitability under review.

# 1. Assess the safeguarding risk of the role

Before recruitment begins, determine the safeguarding risk associated with the position.

Consider how the role will operate in practice, including whether it is based in community or grassroots sport, high-performance or professional sport, disability or Para sport, a residential academy or boarding environment, an international team or touring programme, a major event, a remote or isolated training setting, a volunteer-led club or an online or digital coaching environment.

Assess matters such as actual and perceived power; dependency; direct or unsupervised contact with children or adults; travel or stay overnight with athletes; access to changing, accommodation or treatment areas; provision of medical treatment or physical contact; communication privately or online with athletes; access to personal or confidential information; financial or accommodation provision; mobility or personal assistance needs; visa applications; actual or perceived authority over selection, funding, scholarships, competition or career opportunities.

The greater the role, environment, access, authority, power, dependency, isolation and opportunity, the stronger the vetting, supervision and other safeguards should be.

No single check can establish suitability, but a set of proportionate checks and ongoing safeguards can significantly reduce risk.

Determine whether there are legal requirements, or limits, on the checks available in the relevant country where your role is based. There are often strict national criteria on the types of roles that qualify for more intrusive vetting like criminal records checks. There may, conversely, be statutory duties to carry out specific checks when you select a candidate for certain roles. Sport organisations should take care in establishing their processes and selecting suppliers.

## 2. Make safeguarding clear from the start

Include safeguarding responsibilities and expected standards of behaviour in the role description and advertisement.

Role descriptions should also make clear that safer recruitment will be carried out fairly, transparently and with proper respect for privacy and personal data.

You should make sure that there is a compliant privacy notice available to applicants, ideally from the page where the job is posted, setting out what checks will be carried out, why they are needed, how information will be used and how concerns or inaccuracies can be challenged.

This sends an important message: *"Safeguarding is a condition of working in this organisation, not something introduced after appointment."*

## 3. Require a full application and self-declaration

Require candidates to provide a complete employment, coaching and volunteering history and explain significant gaps.

Where a person has worked across countries and with other sporting organisations, ask for enough information to understand where they have held relevant roles and where further checks or references may be needed.

Require an appropriately drafted self-declaration, subject to local law, concerning relevant criminal, disciplinary, safeguarding and professional matters and any necessary consent to lawful checks.

Health, disability or fitness information should be requested only where it is lawful, necessary and directly relevant to the essential requirements or safety of the role.

A self-declaration should supplement rather than replace independent background checks.

The process should be accessible and non-discriminatory throughout. Application information, communication, interview arrangements, assessment methods and screening processes should avoid unnecessary barriers, allow reasonable adjustments where required, and use clear language that applicants can understand.

## 4. Include safeguarding-focused questions in the interview

For roles involving significant access to children or adult athletes who may be affected by power, dependency or other factors that may increase risk, use at least two interviewers where practicable.

Do not simply ask:

*"Do you understand safeguarding?"*

Explore the candidate's attitudes, judgement and behaviour. Ask about professional boundaries, power, authority, discipline, athlete autonomy, responding to disclosures and challenging inappropriate behaviour by colleagues.

Use scenarios such as:

*"A 15-year-old athlete tells you that another coach is making them uncomfortable but asks you not to tell anyone. How would you respond?"*

*"You see a highly successful senior coach repeatedly humiliating a young athlete. What would you do?"*

*"An athlete begins messaging you privately late at night. How would you manage this?"*

Watch for observable behaviours, responses and patterns that may require further exploration, such as

- evasive or inconsistent answers
- unexplained gaps or repeated moves in employment, volunteering or sporting history
- seeking unnecessary one-to-one access
- attitudes towards power and authority
- resisting supervision

- bypassing communication protocols
- normalising secrecy
- unusual focus on a particular age group or gender
- inappropriate boundary testing
- attempts to create dependency
- an inability to explain how they would maintain safe professional boundaries.

These indicators should prompt proportionate follow-up and should not be treated as proof of unsuitability in isolation.

## 5. Verify identity, qualifications and registration

Confirm identity using appropriate official documentation.

Where lawful and relevant, ask whether the person has used previous names and ensure checks are completed against the names required by the relevant vetting system.

Where relevant or required, check the person's legal right or authorisation to work or volunteer in the country concerned.

Where driving is an essential or safeguarding-relevant part of the role, verify the person's licence, entitlement to drive the required vehicle, relevant restrictions, insurance and, where lawful, material driving disqualifications, suspensions or serious offences.

Verify coaching licences, professional qualifications and registrations directly where possible rather than simply accepting what appears on a CV. This is particularly important for doctors, physiotherapists, psychologists and other regulated professionals in positions of high trust, authority and dependency.

Identity checking is important because someone seeking access to vulnerable people may provide false information or identity. You may also have legal obligations to verify identity, particularly for right to work checks.

## 6. Obtain and verify safeguarding references

Obtain at least two appropriate references for higher-risk roles where practicable, preferably including organisations where the person previously worked with children and/or adult athletes.

Contact referees directly. Do not rely solely on testimonials or open references supplied by the applicant.

Subject to applicable law, and bearing in mind that privacy and employment laws may restrict what former employers can disclose, ask conduct-focused questions such as:

*"Do you know of any reason why this person may be unsuitable to work with children or adult athletes?"*

*"Were any safeguarding or professional-boundary concerns raised?"*

*"Have there been any patterns of concerns, such as poor boundaries, unprofessional contact, inappropriate communication, or behaviour that did not lead to formal disciplinary or criminal action but may still be relevant to safeguarding suitability?"*

*"Would you employ or engage this person again in a position of trust involving children?"*

References should help establish conduct and suitability, not simply confirm dates of employment.

Record who was contacted, how they were contacted, the questions asked, the answers received and any follow-up action taken.

## 7. Complete any appropriate national background screening checks

Determine what relevant background screening checks are legally required, or otherwise available and appropriate in the country concerned.

Do not assume that a generic police certificate or standard identity check is necessarily the fullest available or most appropriate check for your role, particularly if the role will involve substantial supervision of children. Access to enhanced checks is often tightly restricted, however, and not all sports roles, even those involving contact with children, will necessarily meet the relevant thresholds.

The examples below are a non-exhaustive illustrative selection of checks that may be available for certain roles.

| Country/jurisdiction | Examples of available/required criminal record checks |
|---|---|
| **Australia** | States and territories require Working with Children Checks for eligible child-related roles. A National Police Check is separate. |
| **Brazil** | The Federal Police issues an online Criminal Record Certificate. It may not include all state-level records and is not a child-specific safeguarding check. |

| | |
|---|---|
| **Canada** | A Vulnerable Sector Check may supplement a criminal record check for eligible roles. Sport Canada requires checks for coaches in positions funded through its Sport Support Program. |
| **Denmark** | Sports associations must obtain a børneattest before engaging a person who will have direct contact with children under 15. The organisation requests it from the Danish Police with the person's consent. |
| **England and Wales** | Roles meeting the legal definition of regulated activity with children can be eligible for an Enhanced Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check with Children's Barred List check. The requirements apply to eligible paid and unpaid roles. |
| **Egypt** | The Ministry of Interior issues a Criminal Record Certificate showing final criminal convictions or confirming no prior criminal record. It is not a child-specific safeguarding check. |
| **Fiji** | The Fiji Police Force may issue police clearance. Organisations should confirm current eligibility and scope; it is not a child-specific safeguarding check. |
| **Ghana** | The Ghana Police Service provides Police Clearance and Employment Vetting through its criminal-record checking service. These are not child-specific safeguarding checks. |
| **India** | Police clearance, antecedent-verification and character-verification services vary by state and purpose. There is no nationally consistent child-specific check. |
| **Ireland** | Relevant organisations must obtain National Vetting Bureau disclosures before permitting people to undertake qualifying work or activities with children or vulnerable persons. |
| **Kenya** | The Directorate of Criminal Investigations issues a fingerprint-based Police Clearance Certificate, commonly called a certificate of good conduct. It is not child-specific. Sports organisations can also request a check against the Convicted Sexual Offenders Register. |
| **New Zealand** | Authorised agencies can request Police vetting. Statutory safety checks apply to children's workers in specified government-funded services and are generally renewed every three years. |
| **Northern Ireland** | Criminal-record checking operates separately through AccessNI. This has an enhanced level of check for certain regulated roles with children or certain adults. |
| **Scotland** | Scotland operates a separate criminal records checking system to England and Wales through Disclosure Scotland. Its equivalent to the Enhanced check is the PVG (Protecting Vulnerable Groups) Scheme. |

| | |
|---|---|
| **South Africa** | The Police Service issues Police Clearance Certificates. Child-facing roles also require checks against the Child Protection Register and National Register for Sex Offenders. |
| **United States** | The USA does not have one universal "working with children clearance" or police clearance certificate. The checks required depend on the state, the type of work and the employing organisation. These may include State criminal history check, FBI fingerprint-based background check, Child abuse and neglect registry check, Sex offender registry search, and Sport disciplinary and eligibility checks. |
| **Germany** | Eligible roles involving children and young people, including in sports clubs, may require an extended certificate of conduct (erweitertes Führungszeugnis). |
| **Japan** | The new child sexual violence prevention law (effective from 25 December 2026) introduces "Japan DBS" (日本版DBS) checks for specified sexual convictions for covered roles. Schools and certain other institutions fall within mandatory arrangements; eligible private providers, including children's sports clubs, can participate through government certification. Japanese police certificates are not normally issued for employment in Japan. |

Not every country has a criminal-record process that is available to employers or sports organisations, legally required for child-related work, or designed specifically for safeguarding. Access may depend on the purpose, the role, the applicant's residence or nationality, or a request from a foreign authority.

The important lesson is:

Ask *"What background screening is required and legally available for this particular role in this country?"* rather than simply *"Do we have a police clearance?"*

Where checks are not available, reliable or lawful in a particular country, the organisation should record that limitation and strengthen other safeguards rather than treating the absence of a check as evidence of suitability.

## 8. Look across borders

Sport is highly mobile. Coaches, medical personnel and volunteers may work in several countries during their careers. A clear check in a person's current country does not necessarily reveal what happened elsewhere, and a concern may not have reached a criminal or formal disciplinary threshold before the person left an organisation.

Where someone has lived, worked, coached or volunteered in another country or sporting organisation, determine what checks

can lawfully and reasonably be obtained and seek verified references from relevant former employers, clubs, federations, academies, schools, teams or professional bodies. Explore unexplained or repeated moves between organisations, while distinguishing verified information and substantiated concerns from allegation, rumour or inference.

A safeguarding finding or restriction imposed by one sports organisation will generally only be effective and visible within that organisation's own jurisdiction; it may not automatically be shared with, or binding on, other sports organisations in the same or another country, even within the same sport. For internationally mobile personnel, this is an additional reason to contact the relevant international federation directly, rather than relying only on the most recent club or employer.

Look back at least ten years when considering overseas work. That is a useful organisational benchmark, although national requirements should take precedence where they prescribe a different period.

## 9. Check sporting and professional history

Where lawful, check whether relevant sporting or professional bodies have previously imposed safeguarding or other disciplinary findings and/or sanctions.

A person may have been found unsuitable to coach without ever having been convicted of a criminal offence.

For internationally mobile coaches, organisations should consider contacting previous clubs, national federations, international federations and relevant professional regulators where appropriate. Other sports organisations' ability to share the details of a safeguarding finding may be limited, including to protect the identity of a victim or survivor; a brief or incomplete response should not automatically be read as evidence of a clean record. If you intend to seek references from third parties, this should have been made clear at the initial application stage, including, to the extent possible, the specific third parties or categories of third party that you might contact.

Care is needed to distinguish substantiated findings and restrictions from allegations, rumours or unverified information.

Incidents of concerning or poor practice should not automatically exclude a candidate, but they should be followed up and considered alongside all other information in a proportionate risk assessment.

In higher risk or ambiguous cases, an independent expert risk assessment is a further tool organisations may wish to consider, in addition to references and self-declaration.

## 10. Assess all the information, not just the certificate

Do not make the appointment decision on the basis of one check.

Bring together:

- Application
- Identity
- Qualifications
- Employment history
- Interview
- Self-declaration
- References
- Results of relevant background checks
- Sporting disciplinary history
- Overseas checks

Investigate inconsistencies rather than automatically treating them as disqualifying.

Likewise, a criminal record or finding relating to sports disciplinary history should not be treated as automatically resulting in a disqualification for every role from a safeguarding perspective. Decisions should consider the nature, seriousness, relevance and timing of any matter, whether the information was volunteered by the applicant, the applicant's explanation and evidence of change, and the safeguards available in the role. Convictions or findings that are not clearly safeguarding-related, such as fraud or dishonesty offences, may still be relevant to an assessment of an individual's suitability to the role.

The decision taken as a result of the final assessment should be documented, evidence-based, lawful and proportionate to the safeguarding risk of the position. For higher risk roles, consider requiring the decision to be reviewed or countersigned by a second person, such as a designated safeguarding lead.

Keep a clear recruitment record showing what checks were completed, what information was considered, what criteria were applied, who made the decision, and why the decision was proportionate to the role. Be aware that this record may, subject to applicable employment and data protection laws, be something that an applicant might see in the future.

Background screening information should be treated confidentially, shared only with those who need it for the recruitment decision, and retained or deleted in line with applicable data protection law. It is common for the information provided as part of an official criminal records check to be subject to statutory protections, such as strict retention limits that require prompt deletion, and laws which may make sharing of the content of checks unlawful without appropriate authority.

Organisations should have a fair process for handling disputed or inaccurate information, including giving the candidate an opportunity to explain or challenge information before a final decision is made.

Where lawful, information about relevant investigations, indictments or filed charges may be considered, but it should not be treated as proof of wrongdoing. It should be assessed alongside all other information, with proper regard to fairness, proportionality and the presumption of innocence.

## 11. Induct and train

Appointment is not the end of wider vetting and assessment of an employee and their suitability from a safeguarding perspective. Induction, training, probation, supervision and review are part of safer recruitment, not optional add-ons.

Everyone engaged by the organisation should have a written contract, volunteer agreement or equivalent record of expectations that includes, attaches or clearly refers to a Code of Conduct and safeguarding requirements. Organisations should also consider how any offer of appointment addresses the position if a check or reference proves unsatisfactory after the offer is made, for example by making the offer conditional on satisfactory checks, subject to applicable employment law.

Require the person to:

✓ sign a Code of Conduct
✓ complete safeguarding induction and training
✓ understand professional-boundary expectations
✓ know how and to whom concerns must be reported
✓ understand the consequences of breaching safeguarding requirements.

Training should be proportionate to the role and completed within a defined timeframe. People in higher-risk roles should receive essential safeguarding information before they begin unsupervised work, including reporting routes, boundaries, supervision expectations and the code of conduct.

Codes of conduct and contractual terms should also make clear that no one may discourage another person from reporting a safeguarding concern in good faith or retaliate against them for reporting or cooperating with an investigation, and that everyone engaged by the organisation is expected to cooperate fully and promptly with any safeguarding investigation. Organisations should also consider providing an independent or external reporting channel, in addition to internal routes, particularly for concerns about senior figures or about the recruitment process itself.

Where lawful and appropriate, use a clearly defined probationary or initial review period to assess suitability in practice. Set the length, supervision arrangements, expected standards, review points, evidence to be considered and possible outcomes in advance, and explain these to the person at appointment. A period of at least three months may be a useful benchmark, but applicable employment law, fairness, contractual requirements and the nature of the role should guide the approach.

## 12. Observe and supervise

The organisation should observe how the person behaves in practice around athletes and others with whom they have access, authority, responsibility, influence or dependency relationships. Behaviour in practice provides information that no certificate can provide.

Good management and supervision are not only about identifying poor practice or warning signs; they are also about noticing when employees, coaches or volunteers are doing things well, reinforcing safe and respectful behaviour, and using everyday observation to build a positive safeguarding culture.

Regular supervision should create opportunities to give constructive feedback, and address concerning behaviours early before they become accepted, repeated or harmful.

Feedback from athletes and, where relevant, parents or guardians should also inform supervision and ongoing review, consistent with the organisation's commitment to meaningful athlete partnership.

## 13. Keep suitability under review

Suitability should be regarded as a continuing safeguarding responsibility, not something completed before the person’s first day.

Set a review cycle for renewing statutory, criminal-record or safeguarding checks, following national law, regulator requirements or organisational policy.

Where a system of continuous or periodic screening is legally available, organisations should consider how it applies to people in roles involving regular access to, authority over, responsibility for, influence over or dependency relationships with others. The level of screening should reflect the role, environment, power differences, support or care relationships, isolation and opportunity for harm, rather than treating disability or adulthood as automatic indicators of vulnerability.

Reassess risk when someone's role changes. For example, when an assistant coach becomes a head coach, begins travelling internationally with children or gains unsupervised access.

Policies should also require personnel, where lawful, to disclose relevant subsequent criminal, safeguarding, professional and disciplinary matters.

And importantly, organisations should know whether they have a legal or regulatory duty to refer safeguarding concerns onwards. In England and Wales, for example, organisations providing regulated activity can have a legal duty to refer individuals to the DBS when prescribed conditions are met.

# Summary

A “clear” criminal-record check does not mean that a person has been certified as safe.

Ireland provides an excellent illustration. The National Vetting Bureau expressly states that it does not decide whether an applicant is suitable; that decision remains the responsibility of the recruiting organisation.

That distinction should underpin safer recruitment everywhere: checks inform decisions, but organisations remain responsible for judging suitability and managing risk.

Safer recruitment should be robust but workable. Smaller and volunteer-led organisations may need simple, practical systems, but limited resources should not mean abandoning proportionate safeguards.

Vetting reduces risk. It does not eliminate it.

The strongest system therefore combines:

- Role assessment
- Identity
- Qualifications
- Self-declaration
- Interview
- References
- National checks
- International checks
- Sporting history
- Induction
- Supervision
- Continuing review

The question is not simply:

*“Did they pass the background check?”*

It is:

*“Have we taken reasonable, proportionate and lawful steps to satisfy ourselves that this person is suitable to be entrusted with access to, authority over, responsibility for or influence over other people in sport?”*

# Some Helpful Resources

**Guidelines on Safer Recruitment in Sport: Human Rights-Compliant Screening of Professionals and Volunteers in Contact with Children**. Council of Europe, 2025. https://rm.coe.int/37-guidelines-on-safer-recruitment-in-sport-pool-of-international-expe/1680b6bef8

**Safe Recruitment: Tip Sheet for CSOs in Development and Humanitarian Settings**. Safeguarding Resource and Support Hub, 23 July 2021. https://safeguardingsupporthub.org/sites/default/files/2021-08/Tip%20Sheet_Safe%20Recruitment_Global_Final.pdf

**Safer Recruitment**. NSPCC Learning, last updated 4 September 2026. https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/safeguarding-child-protection/safer-recruitment

**Recruitment and Screening of Staff and Volunteers in Child-Related Positions**. Sport Integrity Australia, November 2023. https://www.sportintegrity.gov.au/sites/default/files/SIA216-0723-SG%20Recruitment%20and%20Screening-B-6%20%5BDIGITAL%5D.pdf

**International Child Safeguarding Standards**. Keeping Children Safe, 2024. https://www.keepingchildrensafe.global/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/KCS-ICS-Standards-EN-2024.pdf

**International Taskforce on Child Protection Safer Recruitment Checklist**. International Taskforce on Child Protection, February 2024. https://cdn.icmec.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Safer-Recruitment-Checklist-International-Taskforce-2024.pdf

**Misconduct Disclosure Scheme**. Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response and CHS Alliance, launched January 2019. https://misconduct-disclosure-scheme.org/

**Child Safeguarding Toolkit for Business**. UNICEF, January 2026. https://www.unicef.org/childrightsandbusiness/media/1681/file/Child-Safeguarding-Toolkit-2026.pdf

# Key Contact

For guidance on applying any of these steps, contact Neal Anderson, CEO of Safe Sport International.

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