

Trinity College Dublin

An exploration of the understanding and  
perceptions of a Swim Ireland Club Children's  
Officer to protecting children

for partial fulfilment of the

Postgraduate Diploma in Child Protection and Welfare

Author: Kate Hills

Tutor: Paul Sargent

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## **Abstract**

The creation of a safe environment for children to participate in sport requires adults to understand the risks and control measures required. Risk in sport may be related to the environment, athletes, coaches or other leaders involved with children.

In Swim Ireland the Club Children's Officers work in their clubs to create an environment that minimises risk and encourages protective elements for children. They are also responsible for representing children's views in the club.

Six Club Children's Officers were interviewed to explore their understanding of this voluntary role. The Club Children's Officers were also asked for their perceptions of risk and how they communicate with the young people in their clubs.

The findings from the interviews were linked to the literature that evidences the extent of abuse within sport, at the same time identifying risks for the individual athletes. There is an increasing vulnerability of athletes as they progress through their sport becoming more individual and isolated, which has its own challenges for leaders in protecting children at all levels.

Swim Ireland has its own child welfare and protection policy, developed specifically for the aquatic disciplines embracing the right for children to take part in activities without harm or danger. The outcomes of the interviews are discussed with this policy development in mind. Recommendations are made which focus on listening to children, developing sport policy and effective auditing to improve the safe involvement of children in sport at all levels.

# **Acknowledgements**

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## List of Abbreviations

Club Children's Officer	CCO
Department of Health and Children	DoHC
Irish Amateur Swimming Association	IASA
Irish Sports Council	ISC
National Children's Officer	NCO
National Governing Body	NGB
Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs	OMC

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# Chapter One: Introduction

## Introduction

This chapter sets out the aims of this study and explains the rationale for the study by examining the historical context of abuse in Swim Ireland.

## Aim of the study

This study aims to explore the perceptions and understandings of volunteers appointed to protect the welfare of children in Swim Ireland. The role of the Club Children's Officer (CCO) is appointed to every Swim Ireland club with under-18 membership and is responsible for the implementation of the child welfare and protection programme in the club. This study will research the CCO's understanding of and challenges in this role, including their perception of risk for children in sport. The study will also seek the CCOs viewpoints for the skills considered important for the position and how children's views are represented in sport. In researching this topic the literature lacked information on the value of this role in sport. The findings from the study will provide information on the implementation and compliance to the child welfare and protection programme required by Swim Ireland. The outcomes will be interesting to Swim Ireland, given the voluntary nature of the role and the possible variety of skill sets of those appointed as CCO.

## Rationale for Study

Since 1998 there have been significant reforms in the child welfare and protection programme within Swim Ireland due to the disclosures of sexual abuse (Murphy Report, 1998). One former national coach was convicted for child sexual abuses occurring between 1967-92 (Murphy Report, 1998: 8) and the Supreme Court stopped proceedings against another previous national coach (Murphy Report, 1998:48-50). Further retrospective allegations<sup>1</sup> were disclosed in 2004, allegedly relating to the early 1990's, involving another high profile

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<sup>1</sup> Conviction in January 2009 of another former national coach in Wexford, subsequently successfully appealed and awaiting retrial for charges of child sexual abuse (appeal hearing 14<sup>th</sup> February 2011, correct as at 30<sup>th</sup> April 2011).

coach. The prevalence of abuse within sport is illustrated by various studies and sources (David, 2005; Fasting et al., 2004; Nielsen, 2001; Brackenridge, 2001, 1997; Bowker, 1998).

The Murphy Report (1998) emphasised the need for organisational reforms to protect children. Two other major publications, *Children First* (Department of Health and Children (DoHC), 1999) and *The Code of Ethics and Good Practice for Children's Sport (Code of Ethics)* (Irish Sports Council (ISC), 2000) set parameters for child protection and welfare policies and procedures. Swim Ireland now had three definitive publications to drive organisational change in child protection from the backdrop of abuse in the 90's.

The Murphy Report (1998) identified failures and the lack of reporting processes in the organisation. The resulting recommendations included restructuring to allow direct membership with the national body and reorganisation of governance to recognise reporting and regulation responsibilities. The structure of Irish Amateur Swimming Association (IASA), now known as Swim Ireland since 2004, hindered the reporting of concerns and any child welfare and protection policies were inconsistently implemented across the regions without national regulation. Two other relevant recommendations include the appointment of a National Children's Officer<sup>2</sup> and a Children's Officer in every club. These roles were defined in the first publication of the *Code of Ethics* (ISC, 2000). Since then the role descriptions have been included in Swim Ireland's own child welfare and protection publications (Swim Ireland, 2006; 2008; 2010). This study explores for the first time the understanding Club Children's Officers have of their role, a position in place in Swim Ireland since 2005.

## Conclusion

The aim of and the context for the study have been described. Chapter 2 give a brief background of Swim Ireland, including a description of role of the CCO, the subjects of this study.

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<sup>2</sup> Now a dedicated full time member of staff in Swim Ireland; only three of the sixty five National Governing Bodies employ a full time National Children's Officer: Swim Ireland, FAI and GAA.

# Chapter Two: Agency Profile

## Introduction

This chapter gives a brief introduction to Swim Ireland and introduces the subjects of the chosen study.

## Agency profile

Swim Ireland is the National Governing Body<sup>3</sup> (NGB) for aquatic disciplines in Ireland operating a Club membership system throughout the thirty-two counties with 19 full time operational staff governed by a volunteer board. Swim Ireland is partly funded by the ISC and partly funded by revenue from membership fees and aquatic education and participation programmes. Swim Ireland is responsible to its members for the national aquatic strategy and policies<sup>4</sup>, which include child welfare and protection, from participation programmes to elite/Olympic standard involvement.

Member clubs are managed and run by volunteers who are mostly parents of children in clubs. Currently Swim Ireland is responsible for just over 12,000 members in 152 clubs, ranging in age from 7/8 years up to adulthood<sup>5</sup>. All levels of ability are catered for from 'learn to swim' programmes up to swimming competitively or for fitness/leisure.

Swim Ireland's responsibilities, as an NGB, do not extend to unregulated non-member participation in many leisure and private facilities running aquatic programmes throughout Ireland<sup>6</sup>. The club/national organisational structure is similar for most sport national governing bodies in Ireland (Irish Sports Council, 2010).

All NGB's are required to appoint a National Children's Officer (NCO). In 2004 Swim Ireland appointed a voluntary committee to act as the first NCO. In 2006 this became a full-

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<sup>3</sup> [www.irishsportsCouncil.ie/Governing\\_Bodies/NGB\\_Overview](http://www.irishsportsCouncil.ie/Governing_Bodies/NGB_Overview)

<sup>4</sup> Swim Ireland aims to achieve its mission to foster and develop swimming, diving, water polo and associated aquatic disciplines, both competitive and otherwise and to promote the development of physical and social qualities that come from swimming and associated sports through education and competition programmes.

<sup>5</sup> All membership data from Swim Ireland was access through SIMMS (Swim Ireland Membership Management System) in April 2011

<sup>6</sup> There are over 600 private/council leisure facilities with swimming pools in Ireland, providing activities outside the regulated programmes by Swim Ireland.



time dedicated position on the staff. The responsibilities of the NCO include developing and implementing policy throughout the organisation at every level, including supporting the children's officers in the clubs. The NCO works with the National Designated Person where concerns or allegations of abuse are reported<sup>7</sup>.

## The Club Children's Officer (CCO) – The Subjects

The Club Children's Officer, the subject of this study, is a voluntary position in every club with membership under the age of 18. The CCO is recruited by the club committee, meeting the mandatory pre-requisites for the position including child protection training<sup>8</sup> (Swim Ireland, 2010:12-13). The job description for the role is detailed in the publication: *Swim Ireland Safeguarding Children Policies and Procedures 2010*. The CCO is not permitted to be on a club committee<sup>9</sup> and is responsible for implementation of the Swim Ireland child welfare and protection policy requirements in a club. These policies intend to fulfil the recommendations of the Murphy Report (1998) and the *Code of Ethics* (ISC, 2006) to protect young people involved in sport. CCOs became mandatory for clubs in April 2005.

## Conclusion

This chapter has given some basic background information on Swim Ireland<sup>10</sup> and the context for the study.

Chapter 3 will review research and literature on the risks for children involved in sport and explore the roles to protect children's welfare.

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<sup>7</sup> Both National Children's Officer and National Designated Person roles are detailed in *Swim Ireland Safeguarding Children Policies and Procedures 2010*:19-20.

<sup>8</sup> Basic child protection training lasting 3 hours (course was 4 hours pre January 2011) is mandatory and advanced CCO training lasting 6 hours is mandatory for at least one CCO in a club. Only these two Irish Sports Council training courses are acceptable for clubs in Ireland, both being specific to sport.

<sup>9</sup> Additional position – the Designated Person (DP) – responsible for reports to Statutory Authorities and is appointed to a club committee; the CCO and the DP work together in line with their role descriptions in *Swim Ireland Safeguarding Children Policies and Procedures 2010*:15-17

<sup>10</sup> Further more detailed information is available via the website: [www.swimireland.ie](http://www.swimireland.ie)

# Chapter Three: Literature Review

## Introduction

This chapter will explore volunteer involvement in sport and the welfare and protection risks for children involved in sport. It will review studies examining the protective measures to reduce these risks for children in sport. Finally it will present studies investigating how children voicing their views is linked to their safe involvement in sport.

## The Volunteer Environment

Various Irish organisations provide activities for young people today, e.g. scouts, guides, youth clubs, sports clubs, etc. relying on a predominantly voluntary workforce though some organisations have small teams of mostly administrative professional staff (Wylie, 2009). In the Irish sports sector unpaid volunteers make up 97% of the workforce involved in junior sports (Walsh et al., 2010). Despite the lack of any formal pathway into volunteering the typical volunteers are usually parents and are expected to be skilled, appointed to several roles and prepared to engage in further education. These demands are time rich, challenging the volunteer's goodwill, whilst one of the motivators for volunteering is previous sporting experience (Walsh et al., 2010). A Scottish study, a similar sized population<sup>11</sup> and volunteer sports structure to Ireland<sup>12</sup>, looked specifically at the impact of legislatively required police checks. The study found such authoritarian requirements provided a catalyst to general improvements in areas of volunteer management by providing up-skilling opportunities (Nichols and Taylor, 2010). The same study found volunteer commitment to child protection was varied, 86% of Scottish sports clubs appointed a CCO (or equivalent position). Similar figures are not published for Ireland, however Swim Ireland, with prescriptive demands of its volunteers (Swim Ireland, 2010:12-13), has an appointed CCO in 97% of clubs (with under 18 membership)<sup>13</sup>.

Children's involvement in sport is rising, 83% of primary children and 64% of post-primary children take part in extra-school sport (Walsh et al., 2010). This indicates the level of sports involvement in children's lives and also that volunteers are largely responsible for sport

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<sup>11</sup> [www.scotland.org/facts/population](http://www.scotland.org/facts/population) and <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ireland>

<sup>12</sup> Scottish Swimming: personal communication with colleagues involved in nationwide sport

<sup>13</sup> SIMMS, Swim Ireland May 2011

activities. For volunteer sport run by an NGB, *Children First*, the *Code of Ethics* and the organisations own policies will guide regulations for children.

Volunteers have mixed reactions to child protection regulations; for some it's a challenge in cost and time, and their integrity, whereas others see it as a small price for children's safety (Brackenridge, 2001). What is the balance between being too prescriptive, risking being obstructive or being too permissive risking infiltration by potential abusers. For Swim Ireland past history laid the foundation for dictatorial regulation for those involved in the sport, tipping the balance towards prescriptive, resulting in increasing compulsory implementation of child protection and welfare policies and procedures<sup>14</sup>. The Swim Ireland policies were underpinned by the collaboration of the Irish Sports Council and Sport Northern Ireland to publish *The Code of Ethics* in 2000, based on *Children First* (DoHC, 1999). The *Code of Ethics* also embraces the right of children to participate in leisure activities (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), 1989: article 31). The *Code of Ethics* provides child protection guidelines for volunteer workforces and confirms the child centred approach as a key feature in sport.

## Sport as a Safe Environment?

Risk in sport should conjure up the idea of an injury, e.g. a slip on a wet pool floor or clash of heads on the football field. Sport for children is supposed to represent "all that is best in life" (Brackenridge, 2006). Unfortunately, since the 1990's, risk in children's sport has become synonymous with abuse (David, 2005:42; Fasting et al., 2004; Nielsen, 2001; Bowker, 1998; Brackenridge, 1997). For Irish swimming these risks are detailed in the Murphy Report (1998). Much of the work done in the area of risk in sport involves research of sexual abuse or harassment, and there is little research on monitoring other forms violation, e.g. overtraining, doping, physical or emotional abuse (David, 2005:ch2)

Risk management has encroached into many aspects of our lives (MacDonald and MacDonald, 2010) where risk assessments have become the norm. In predicting what might happen, the emphasis shifts towards future actions to create a safer environment (Munroe, 2004). Studies in sport have identified risks for children where information and opportunity should provide for change and effective monitoring to ensure policy does not become a 'tick

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<sup>14</sup> Swim Ireland policy guidelines over years 2000 to 2010 contain increasingly mandatory requirements in the 2010 version see pages 12 and 13.

the box' exercise. There is a lack of research to evaluate this effective monitoring in sport. Cense and Brackenridge (2001:63) identified risks based on work with sexual abuse survivors and related this to Finkelhor's Four Factor Model of sexual abuse (Brackenridge, 2001:103). This theoretical model describes four pre-conditions for abuse: a perpetrator's motivation, overcoming internal (self) and external (environment) inhibitions and athlete (victim) resistance. Contingent risk factors in sport can be attributed to the sports coach<sup>15</sup> (abuser), the athlete (victim) and to the sports organisation (Brackenridge, 1997). For the coach the variable risks included being male, physically strong, good qualifications, an excellent coaching reputation, unknown or ignored previous criminal records, trusted implicitly by parents with ample opportunity to be alone with athletes. The build up of trust often is part of the grooming process, which begins to overcome internal inhibitions. This individual can be hard to control when motivated to abuse, but the risks areas can be minimised. The variable factors for athletes included being female, low awareness/understanding of sexual harassment, low self-esteem, the potential to achieve at elite status and complete dependence/devotion to the coach. For the sports body the contingent factors included opportunity for physical contact (type of sport), frequent trips away, weak recruitment and code of behaviour policies and no/little opportunity or facility for children to voice concerns. Targeting policy implementation will control the risks for sports organisations and help minimise the coach risk. The use of education programmes to empower athletes will help reduce their vulnerabilities (Brackenridge, 2001:137).

Another risk area in sport is the "stage of imminent achievement" when athletes are thought most vulnerable to abuse (Brackenridge and Kirby, 1997). Maturation in sport with regard to peak performances occurs at different chronological ages in different sports, e.g. in female gymnastics peak performance occurs at seventeen (average age), whereas in tennis this age is twenty-six<sup>16</sup>. The "stage of imminent achievement" is considered to be the three-year period prior to reaching the peak performance age.

Sport also has a culture of authoritarian leadership where there is a power imbalance between coaches and athletes with the potential for abuse (Cense and Brackenridge, 2001; Brackenridge and Kirby, 1997). Inappropriate social behaviour, including grooming, by a

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<sup>15</sup> Most of the studies isolate sports coaches as the perpetrator; however athletes are vulnerable to any adult in authority in sport (Brackenridge, 2001) – the term coach should be read to include all sports leaders with authority

<sup>16</sup> Brackenridge and Kirby, 1997:409, Table 1 – various sources

coach was 'quietly' accepted and became normalised as part of an athlete/coach relationship (Nielsen, 2001).

The children's home environment provides insight into extended away trips where athletes tend to live with coaching staff, mirroring the environment where close relationships can develop between adults in authority and children. The summary recommendations for policy and practice (Clarke, 1998:110-118) provide guidance by putting children's needs first to create that safe environment. These can be transferred to any setting, including sport, involving extended care of children.

These studies have provided some predictive models for identifying high-risk periods and environments in sport.

## Prevention or Cure?

Munroe (2010) argues for an adaptive systems approach to child protection services by taking into account professional judgments on the well being of children rather than measuring the success or improvement in child protection just in terms of greater compliance with procedures and rules. This requires an educated skill-based workforce, which may be achievable with qualified personnel in mainstream child protection services, but sport is reliant on a volunteer workforce where judgements in the best interest of children may have no informed basis. Stagner and Lansing (2009) suggest a similar 'prevention through a practice framework' that focuses on strengthening the protective family and social networks, i.e. in the sport context, educating the sport family.

Child abuse inquiries readily report on deviances from recommended practices whereas an adaptive systems approach would require us to understand why this happened rather than focussing on control and monitoring (Munroe, 2010). This can be applied to the sport sector which, whilst not a child 'protection' service, still has a moral duty to provide a safe environment for children and should understand why abuse happens. In the last forty years there have been developments of best practice rules, guidance and systems where compliance has been the 'key focus of appraisal', whereas we should be asking 'are these the best way of protecting children' (Munro, 2010). In sport the risks identified through inquiries such as the Murphy Report (1998) have indeed influenced the subsequent policies and procedures (ISC, 2006; Swim Ireland 2006-2010).

Programmes based on education and awareness of good practice disseminated to coaches (leaders), athletes and parents are thought a successful mechanism to improve athlete

protection (Brackenridge, 2001). It is this monitoring and effectiveness of implementation of such programmes within sport that is not apparent, especially in the identified opportunistic risk areas (Abuse victim<sup>17</sup>, 2009; Murphy Report, 1998; Brackenridge, 1997).

## Children's Voices

There is growing evidence that young people's perceptions on issues provide valuable contributions to policy and practice that impact directly on them (Hine and Wood, 2009). Young people seek to be valued members of clubs with opportunities to express their own views on policy, including decisions that affect their leisure activities (Catholic Church, 2009; Walsh et al, 2010; ISC, 2006; Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, 2003))

Children involved in sport tend to be better travelled, better disciplined in relation to training, school-work and dietary needs and have a broader view of their own desires than children of a similar age. For athletes this 'putting the rest of our lives on hold' and effectively separates them from a normal social life outside sport with an increasing reliance on support systems within the sport. Without an advocate or monitored support network their vulnerability to exploitation from authority figures within the sport increases (Brackenridge and Kirby, 1997). The extent of this violation in sport is largely un-researched and unknown, however David (2005:11) attempts to quantify the problem, thought to extend to several tens of thousands of children worldwide.

Children's have limited awareness and knowledge of risk in terms of abuse and often fail to recognise actions that are unsafe (McAuley et al., 2010). A child isolated by their talent, or an abuser, can be left with few social resources or networks to confide their concerns. Victims did not talk about their abuse for years, and fear of not being believed contributed to their silence, with no adult as an advocate, (Cense and Brackenridge, 2001). Such advocates are appointed by some organisations mainly as contact points to report concerns of abuse<sup>18</sup> (Catholic Church, 2008; Church of Ireland, 2008; Department of Education, 2001). In sport the role of a children's officer has a wide remit including acting as a voice for children (ISC, 2006).

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<sup>17</sup> Abuse victim account of needing to shut the box (policy) so tightly around an abuser, a coach, that they suffocate.

<sup>18</sup> Church of Ireland appoint a panel; the Catholic Church appoints a parish rep; Department of Education appoint school principals

## Conclusion

Much of the work done in the area of risk and policy development in sport involves research of sexual abuse or harassment – this was the platform from which Swim Ireland developed its own protection policies. The research uncovered a lack of evidence on monitoring or evaluation of child protection policy or the effectiveness of advocacy roles in sport.

Across sports organisations there is commitment to reshape child protection policy using studies from abuse victims to highlight the potential risks to young people. However the implementation of policy through understanding risk and communication with young people is largely the remit of volunteers in sport, and again there is little research on this in the sport sector.

The literature review has identified some key themes for this study to explore through the perceptions of volunteers working as children’s officers in Swim Ireland. The methodology used for this research is described in Chapter Four.

# Chapter Four: Methodology

## Introduction

This study aimed to explore the CCOs perception and understanding of their role. The literature review has shown the need to identify risk, implement policy and provide the opportunity for children to voice their views in sport. This chapter looks at the methodology used for this study.

## Research Design

The study design concentrated on being able to explore volunteer views which were expected to be diverse given the possible varied background and experience of volunteers (Walsh et al, 2010). The use of quantitative techniques would not allow for the respondent's views on what they consider relevant and important (Bryman, 2008: 437). A qualitative approach was chosen based on taped semi-structured interviews as the main data collection tool. An initial structured questionnaire, similar to one used for a quantitative study, was included to provide basic background information.

## The Subjects

The subjects of the study are volunteer club-appointed Club Children's Officers. The role of the CCO is specified in Chapter 2 – Agency.

## Sampling Strategy

One Swim Ireland region was chosen for the basis of the study as having largest concentrations of clubs with under-18 membership. The clubs were listed alphabetically, given a random number using a random number generator<sup>19</sup> and then re-ordered numerically. The first ten clubs were approached with the expectation that not all CCOs would participate. Six clubs was considered a suitable sample given the required size of the study (McGarry, 2011). Qualitative interviews may be viable even when based on small sample sizes (Bryman,

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<sup>19</sup> [www.random.org](http://www.random.org)



2008). A CCO in a separate club from the sampling frame was chosen to conduct a pilot interview.

## Informed Consent

Written approval was obtained from the CEO of Swim Ireland for the study.

The CCOs received a letter by post requesting their participation in the study. This was accompanied by information on the research, a consent form (two copies – one to return and one to keep for information) and the short information questionnaire<sup>20</sup> (Bell, 2005). Each CCO was contacted by phone four days later to verbally explain the study and answer any queries. An interview date and time was arranged if they were willing to participate (the pilot interview was arranged first). A choice of venue was offered to the CCO to minimise their inconvenience.

At the interview all respondents completed the short questionnaire and signed the consent form to indicate they understood and agreed to the conditions, having already received the information in writing (Bell, 2010).

In line with social research ethics the CCOs were informed that participation was voluntary, they were free to refuse or withdraw at any stage before, during or after the interview and they were welcome to a copy of their transcript. This information was sent in writing to the selected respondents prior to my phone call, when this was re-iterated. Each interview began with a recap of the purpose of the research and reaffirmation on their consent (Bryman, 2008).

## Bias

My role in Swim Ireland involves interaction with CCOs. I recognised as the researcher the responses may be critical of areas of my responsibility and national policy. The CCO may feel pressured to ‘give the right’ answer. I encouraged the CCOs to answer questions freely and honestly, emphasising that criticism, non-participation or withdrawal at any stage from the study would not have repercussions for themselves or the club.

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<sup>20</sup> See Appendix A

I was aware of the possible influences of my expectations, as the NCO, when identifying and coding themes in the transcripts. To avoid bias I ensured a true transcription of the taped material, plus read and reread the data for accuracy.

## Confidentiality

The participants were advised their information was confidential. Any identifiable information, i.e. transcripts, voice files, were in a password protected folder on my personal computer, protected with a secure login process. Once the study was accepted this information would be deleted and any paperwork destroyed. Permission was given by the respondents for anonymous quotes to be used within this report.

## The Interviews

A face-to-face recorded verbal exchange interview is usual for qualitative research (Bryman, 2008: 438-456). The semi-structured approach allowed for varied responses and flexibility to ask follow up questions depending on the respondent's replies. From the literature review I identified a number of themes to explore and compiled an interview schedule<sup>21</sup> as a guide.

## The Pilot Interview and Findings

The pilot interview allowed for a complete run through of the constructed interview schedule, plus ensured familiarisation with the equipment and interview technique. The flow of the questions and timing of interview were noted to advise the main interview format.

The CCO responses at the pilot interview based on questions from the prepared interview schedule followed a natural conversational path, where each theme was interwoven with the next. The pilot interview helped me to identify as a researcher, rather than as advisor in my everyday position. I learnt to listen. The timing of the interview was as expected, with the equipment and subsequent uploading of data file working satisfactorily.

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<sup>21</sup> See Appendix B

## The Main Interviews

The findings from the pilot interview results were considered to allow for the natural flow of conversation to facilitate informative responses. The respondents were asked the initial question and the conversation was allowed to develop. The interview schedule was used to ensure all areas were covered. Voice recordings were saved as password protected MP3 audio files and transcribed prior to analysis.

## Analysis

There are three suggested methods of qualitative data analysis (McGarry, 2011). Thematic content analysis, although considered not to have ‘an identifiable heritage’ (Bryman, 2008), was deemed appropriate for this study. The transcribed interviews were read and reread identifying patterns or recurring themes (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). The themed responses were coded and organised into core themes and subthemes using a simple spreadsheet as a framework (Bryman, 2008). This identified connections and repetitions within the data. Some common threads were paraphrased, with direct quotes included to help illustrate and emphasise the responses.

## Limitations and Concerns

### Limitations

Time and resources would not permit a larger sample, that may have reached theoretical saturation<sup>22</sup> and allow for wider comparisons. The sample is too small to draw any statistical inferences, but will be useful to inform future research.

The volunteer skill set may influence the club’s choice for CCO, e.g. a social worker or guard. This can be considered as an influential factor for future studies.

### Concerns

Time constraints might affect the willingness of the CCOs to participate.

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<sup>22</sup> Theoretical saturation – where further data collection will not alter the outcomes, little information on criteria for qualitative research (Bryman, 2008:461-462)

It was indicated that concerns relating to child protection raised during the interviews would be followed up.

## Conclusions

This chapter has identified the methodology and associated considerations. The next chapter will present and discuss the findings of the study.

# Chapter Five: Findings and Discussion

## Introduction

This chapter looks at the findings from the initial basic questionnaire and the interviews and then discusses the implications of these findings in light of the literature review.

## Respondents

Six CCOs were willing to participate in the study. The other four CCOs felt unable to participate, three cited limited time being available and the fourth failed to respond. All respondents were given the information as detailed in the methodology.

The CCOs are referred to as CCO A, B, C, D, E and F to maintain anonymity.

## Background Questionnaire Findings

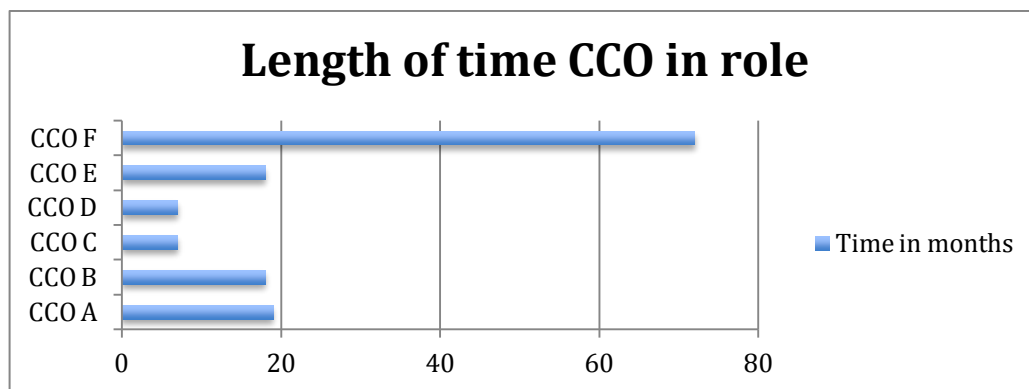
The data collected from the questionnaire was not considered statistically significant and was used for background information.

Four CCOs were female and two were male; four CCOs were asked to take up the position, and two volunteered however there was no correlation with gender.

None of the respondents work in the area of child welfare and/or protection in their employment, and all were parents of children in the Club. One respondent noted previous work in residential adventure centres and found this helpful in their role. There were no other apparent protection or welfare skills brought to the role.

All CCOs attended the mandatory basic child protection training and three attended the follow on CCO training.

Table 1: Length of time CCO in role



Five of the CCOs have held the position between 6 and 18 months. Only one CCO has held the position for longer, covering for six seasons. All CCOs were appointed after the mandatory requirement for the role was introduced in 2005 (Swim Ireland, 2005).

## Interview Findings and Discussion

### Themed Analysis

The themed analysis approach complimented the dialogue discovered during the pilot interview where there was a clear synergy between the interview topics. The findings are discussed under the following themes:

- CCO role
- Skills
- Support
- Communication with children

The reader is reminded of the regulatory standards detailed in the literature review imposed on Club Children’s Officers by Swim Ireland.

### CCO role

All six CCOs described the role as being central for children in their club. CCO A reported no understanding of the role when first appointed, having “grown into the job” through experience. Three CCOs thought there was not much to the role when they were first asked to take it on. All four agreed they felt differently now, even though none had entirely read the

Swim Ireland policy (Swim Ireland, 2010), they referenced a checklist<sup>23</sup> as being a useful quick guide for understanding their role.

I'm the face they can come to raise it [any issue, worry or concern] I am a neutral person (CCO F)

I have learnt now my role is completely utterly child orientated. I am the adult there for the swimmer, [I am] an adult who is nice to them (CCO A)

The respondents used terms such as “to safeguard children” and “be the voice of the children” throughout their responses. This terminology reflects that used in the documentation, and this echoes in their understanding of the role.

The respondents linked the question of recognising risk to their role. The type of risks recognised were: public access to changing rooms, away trips requiring coaching/training staff, supervision, and various risks were identified as observations of the children during a session - all six respondents cited the requirement for a session to be halted if there was no adult supervision of the coaches on the poolside.

I don't know whether I am over the top or what, but I look on every kind of area as being a risk, no matter what, we have a check-in and a roster for poolside.....there's nobody going missing for 5 minutes, and wondering where they are. They [the children] are being monitored (CCO D)

I would rather a risk or concern landed on my doorstep rather than nobody deal with it (CCO E)

...seeing changes and to notice behaviour; there's different forms of risk, a child pulled into themselves, isolating themselves. There's not enough emphasis on a child that removes himself, team spirit is huge in swimming (CCO A)

CCO A spoke about the difficulty of authority, being an adult, regarding this as a possible impediment to interacting with young people as a CCO. CCOs should be aware of this power imbalance of an authority figure, as between a coach/sports leader and athlete (Cense and Brackenridge, 2001; Brackenridge and Kirby, 1997).

Four CCOs were clear on the reporting procedure (Swim Ireland, 2010:47-50); the other two stated they would tell their Designated Person.

...if it [report or concern] was serious enough it would have to go to the Designated Person who would then report it to the authorities (CCO F)

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<sup>23</sup> Checklist for Club Children's Officers, part of the information pack given out to CCOs

Whilst sports organisations are not child protection services they do provide services (sports activities) for children using volunteers with minimal training. Given that no CCO had a child welfare and protection background they drew on their understandings of policy plus using their personal values to make decisions. Whereas the CCOs were not aware of their role or policy on their appointment, it was useful to discover their willingness to refer to policy information when uncertain. This has relevance for a number of reasons, it shows an understanding of their responsibilities once informed; and indicates the importance of access to and presentation of policy information for the future.

The literature identified risk factors connected to the coach (perpetrator), the athlete (victim) and the sports body. From the CCO responses there seems a clear understanding of the sports body policy to control risk. There was evidence of the CCOs recognising athlete vulnerability created by the environment, e.g. lack of supervision, however no CCO recognised the vulnerability within the athlete i.e. their stage of development within their sport (Brackenridge, 1997). Checks on club staff for qualifications, training or vetting were also not raised as risk factors (Cense and Brackenridge, 2001:63).

The lack of an advocate for young people featured throughout the reviewed research, and this aspect of the role was clearly articulated in the interviews. This study did not explore the views of children<sup>24</sup> and how freely they feel able to interact with a CCO. This is clearly a question for young people to respond to. The findings show the concept of the CCO role is functioning, however this study did not discover its effectiveness for young people.

## Skills for CCOs

The skills for a CCO are detailed in the role description<sup>25</sup>, however volunteer positions are not always mindful of required skill sets (Walsh et al., 2010); some volunteer roles e.g. coaches do require more obvious formal qualifications. The respondents were clear on the skills needed:

..be a good listener, approachable, non-judgemental, no point being shy, ability to communicate (CCO B, C, D, F)

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<sup>24</sup> This would require a quantitative and qualitative approach with young people and was considered beyond the scope of this research, given the restraints on the size of the study

<sup>25</sup> *Swim Ireland Safeguarding Children Policies and Procedures 2010* p15-16



you must be open, not be closed when they [the children] come to you, not a closed stance, they must see this (CCO A)

..confidential, you must be confidential, they need to know its not a club issue (CCO D)

These skills were described by all the CCOs in terms of interacting with children, whereas three CCOs reported these skills were needed to interact with parents as well.

These skills all match the expected requirements and concentrate largely on the interaction between the CCO and children, however there is no monitor or measure of effectiveness of this for children. Fahlberg (1994) expresses the importance of knowing a child before we can adequately represent their views. Although Fahlberg (1994) concentrates on children in care placements, there is merit in understanding this importance in any setting with children.

When the subject of child protection training was discussed the CCOs stated the training was largely responsible for their confidence to perform their role. Three of the CCOs linked the training to the skill set required for the role.

lot of it [the course] was using your common sense (CCO E)

that stuff turns on a light, stuff that is dormant and it triggers [it] (CCO C)

when I was appointed I had no training and that was causing me stress and when you think I'm in charge of children, god, what if I do something and how do you deal with it.....the last workshop I did was brilliant (CCO D)

This study is the first time any formal response has been researched on the benefits of the sports specific training. Three CCO's stated they would not have continued in the position without some sort of training.

All CCOs mentioned having difficulties prior to attending the training, not being clear about their role. Since attending the training they felt better supported. One CCO reported their concern prior to the training was how to cope if a child had been physically or sexually abused:

...now I know I would have it in me to deal with it, the bit I would find most distressing would be if it was the child disclosing to me (CCO A)

I was like a rabbit in the headlights, I didn't know which way to turn, I wish I knew then what I know now (CCO E)

I was going – oh my god what does that involve because I was kinda thinking I don't want to take something on I know nothing about. I was very anxious but

you do your best for the club. I was very anxious then, I better do that course [child protection training] because I don't want to do something I don't know – I'm the children's officer (CCO B)

Looking at what is expected of volunteers today (Walsh et al., 2010), this research suggests there is a skill set required for CCOs prior to their appointment where training will inform their knowledge base

An understanding of the CCO role and these identified skills would be helpful for potential volunteers to make informed choices prior to appointment. Despite the training being mandatory, it does not seem a barrier to recruiting volunteers, it has actually aided their retention.

The four respondents who felt uninformed about the role at the outset have all remained. Whilst this is admirable, it raises the question: what risk were young people exposed to prior to these volunteers gaining the skills and understanding needed for their role.

## Support

Support is vital for the retention of volunteers, (Walsh et al., 2010), and in such a crucial role it might be suggested even more so. No CCO expressed concerns regarding support from the club committee, which is now backed up by a ruling that CCO's attend 50% of club meetings during the year to ensure child welfare is on the agenda<sup>26</sup>. One CCO commented on a previous experience:

the club had a major issue, which you and I [CCO and NCO] dealt with, before that my voice was zero, when I tried to implement child protection I was very much shot down, they didn't see it (CCO A)

Four CCOs were clear there was a route to the NCO for advice. Three CCOs reported a lack of understanding from parents, especially around poor practice and abuse, expecting every complaint about their child to be treated as abuse, whilst four CCOs regularly used the policy document to back up their decisions.

I just don't think the adult members [parents] understand that terminology or the role of the children's officer, I just had to sit down and understand what my role was, I was getting sucked in by Johnny's dad fighting with such 'n' such dad, complaining 'whatch ye going to do about it' (CCO C)

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<sup>26</sup> *Swim Ireland Safeguarding Children Policies and Procedures 2010* p15

without the basics [the Swim Ireland policies and procedures] to support me, this would be very difficult. (CCO E)

the policies are great, I find great to use as a reference, the chairperson would ask me on maybe going away and I can dip in, check, double check and get back to her (CCO D)

Providing information<sup>27</sup> and training as support is important for volunteers, enough information to be informed, rather than being overwhelming and a barrier to volunteer retention.

As limited as this study was, the findings suggest the lack of information and training received prior to the role is challenging to the CCOs, supported by their previous responses about remaining in the role. The CCOs responded to their experiences and used their skills (learnt and personal) to respond pre-emptively to challenges and possible issues. The task for Swim Ireland is to challenge parents in raising awareness and prepare succession planning that leaves no gaps in the continuation of the CCO role.

## Communication with children

All CCOs used the club noticeboard to display their contact information (four have their photograph posted up) to help children recognise them as CCOs. Five respondents reported having regular meetings with the children, either weekly or monthly.

I visited them on the bank [poolside], I told them I was the CCO and there was a bit of a giggle, and then when you say if they have any problems, they all look and laugh (CCO C)

Poolside was too formal, I wasn't getting any response, the odd grunt, now I meet when we all have Saturday morning bagels, much more informal.....and they are dressed (CCO A)

CCO F did not think it was necessary to go looking for issues and had not made any formal arrangements to meet with young people<sup>28</sup>. The immediate identifiable difference between

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<sup>27</sup> CCO pack contains Swim Ireland Policy and Procedures 2010, CCO checklist, Poster for noticeboard, Counseling Helpline leaflet, 4 booklets on internet safety; Parents FAQ leaflet, Club visit checklist, Handbook on bullying – this is sent out to all CCOs when Swim Ireland is notified by the club.

<sup>28</sup> The CCO felt the children were able to feedback their views through their parents and the coaching staff – this was followed up after the interview with the CCO, as being a possible barrier for children to raise issues.

these two responses is CCO F has been a CCO for far longer, however it would be unwise to draw this conclusion as significant.

The CCOs all report the children's views or club issues to the club committee in a general way and would expect the club to act where necessary. Five CCOs stated they would deal with specific children's issues by checking the policies or with the NCO for guidance, only taking the matter back to the club if there was impact for the club. One CCO reported they had no issues to deal with.

The literature showed there was little or no communication between adults and athletes plus there was the perception that young people would not be believed (Cense and Brackenridge, 2001; Brackenridge and Kirby, 1997). The isolation of athletes increases as they progress through their sport – their social network being garnered from within the sport structure built up around their potential for success. The findings of this study support an understanding by the CCOs of the value of listening to children – by offering the opportunity to speak the athletes will feel less isolated and more empowered about their sport and their club. It is an important step, taking children's views to the committee for action – this is how the children know they are heard. To draw satisfactory conclusions from these findings the contrasting viewpoint needs to be gathered – that of the athletes.

## Conclusion

This study from six respondents has explored their understanding of their role. The CCOs showed compliance with the mandatory requirements stipulated by Swim Ireland to achieve what is considered as best practice for children in sport. What still needs to be explored is the effectiveness of these measures for children, each of the areas examined having been identified by the literature as potential risks for young people in sport.

The study found a consistent understanding that young people's views should be listened to and represented to the club management. These results need further research to examine young people's perceptions of this type of representation.

This chapter presented and discussed the research leading onto areas for recommendations presented in the next chapter.

# Chapter Six: Summary and Recommendations

## Introduction

This chapter provides a summary of the study and suggest some strategic recommendations and policy considerations from the findings.

## Summary

An adaptive system as suggested by Munro (2010), is informally in operation, dependent largely on the skill set of the volunteer in the CCO role. Swim Ireland need to establish these findings as representative, through further research. However, as the first exploration of a role, required in 1998 by the Murphy Report (1998) there are well-established volunteer guidelines in use for protecting children. Volunteers were encouraged by the mandatory and discretionary mix between the policies finding that the mandatory elements were supportive rather than a barrier to voluntary participation. The discretionary elements such as communicating with children were embraced and rather enjoyed by the CCOs. It is, however, difficult to obtain a complete picture as to the effectiveness of the CCO role without the views of those for whom the programme is designed, young people in sport.

## Recommendations

### Children's Views

Future formulation of policy to incorporate the effect of welfare and protection policies in sport requires an understanding of such from a child's perspective. The findings from this study identified with this need, to obtain their view and to evaluate the effectiveness of their interaction with the CCO.

Children's views on policy can be achieved through both quantitative and qualitative methods, using questionnaires and focus group/individual interviews to give a representative view and the opportunity to follow up on issues brought to light. By identifying some key areas designed specifically for the protection of children, i.e. supervision of leaders, use of codes of conduct and disciplinary processes, training and appointment of specific roles for children, the impact of sport policy on young people in sport could be analysed. This analysis would inform the effectiveness of structures designed solely for the protection of children.

## Comprehensive Sport Policy

A study by Nichols and Taylor (2010) concludes with the emotive power of child protection whether by way of guidelines, legislation or mandatory implementation, it is impossible to balance the benefits of providing more sport opportunities through less regulation for volunteers against a more regulated voluntary sector providing less opportunity for young people. This reinforces the argument for ensuring protection policy is working for children in sport, and reducing risk throughout sport. We explored the variable risks for children, and some theory behind these, have begun to measure the impact of child protection training and identified, with this research, the risks perceived by those acting for children. These risks and controls, e.g. the question of authority, power balance, parent awareness, etc. need to be included in policy documents to guide those using them. Further research of the CCO role would ensure views in this study are representative.

Sport policy currently has its pedigree derived from Children's First, with reference to the UNCRC. However sport policy should embrace all policy documents for children, to fully represent how sport can help protect all children's rights. The Agenda for Children's Services (OMCYA, 2008) and the National Children's Strategy (DoHC, 2000) should all be reflected in future policy development. This will achieve the permeation of child centeredness throughout sporting policy, covering education, development, high performance, governance, etc. so child welfare and protection is not just an 'add on' policy or afterthought department.

## Effective Auditing

David (2005:7) states:

“Some 70% of children involved in competitive sports greatly benefit and are empowered by their activity; 20% are potentially at risk from different types of abuse.....; and 10% are victims of some sort of violation.....”

Although David (2005) admits this is rough estimate, thirty per cent of children are a lot of children to ignore. The measure of success of any framework designed to protect children in sport will need to confront the risks for these thirty per cent of children. Monitoring the implementation of such programmes by recording compliance with the regulatory requirements will not measure the effectiveness of these programmes. This needs analysis, and there is little work done in this area in any sport. We are in an age where greater accountability and transparency is expected from public services (Munro, 2004), and this should extend to all services working with children – even into the voluntary sports sector – to

the benefit of the children involved. Sport can then represent “all that is best in life” for children (Brackenridge, 2006).

## Conclusion

The study has opened up a number of discussion points for the agency, Swim Ireland. Together with the above recommendations and further research this can only better inform policy makers in the best interests of children in sport.

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# Appendix A – Information sent to CCO

## Sample Introductory Letter



March 2011

### Research Study

Dear,

I am writing to ask you if you would be able to assist me with a research study I am currently undertaking to help support the role of the Club Children's Officer in Swim Ireland.

I am studying for a Postgraduate Diploma in Child Welfare and Protection at Trinity College, Dublin and as part of the course I am undertaking a research project.

The aim of the research is to explore the role of the Club Children's Officer in Swim Ireland and it is intended that the results will help volunteers involved as Club Children's Officer in Clubs.

The sampling area for the research is the XXXX Region and 10 randomly selected Clubs with under 18 membership have been asked to take part in this study. I have asked just one of the appointed CCO's from each Club selected.

I would be grateful if you would be willing to be interviewed as part of the study. I have outlined your involvement necessary and the research details in the accompanying sheet – Research Information and Consent. I have enclosed two copies of this and if you are willing to take part please return one signed copy in the stamped addressed envelope by date/month 2011. Also enclosed is a short questionnaire requesting some basic information, which would be helpful prior to the interview. This can be returned with the consent form if you are agreeing to take part.

My contact details are below; please feel free to contact me to discuss this request further.

Thanks very much for your consideration -

Yours sincerely,

---

Kate Hills,

National Children's Officer

Swim Ireland

Mobile number: 086 8560672

# Sample Research Information

## Research Information and Consent

Re: Research by Kate Hills, National Children’s Officer for Swim Ireland as part of the Postgraduate Diploma Child Welfare and Protection course at Trinity College, Dublin.

### **Study Topic**

The research will examine the role of the Club Children’s Officer (CCO) in a number Swim Ireland Clubs from the XXXX Region.

### **Your Participation**

Each Club Children’s Officer (one per Club) is under no obligation to take part; participation is completely voluntary and it will not affect your role or your Club if permission is not given.

I am intending to visit each willing CCO at a suitable venue (convenient to the CCO) and conduct an interview that will last for approximately one hour. At the interview I will ask a number of questions to help gain an idea of your understanding of your role and responsibilities as a CCO in a Swim Ireland Club.

The interview will be taped in order to preserve the legitimacy of your answers, however the transcriptions will not be included in the write up of the study. You are welcome to a copy of the transcribed information. The information from the interview will only be available for the purposes of this study and will be stored on file under password protection. The tapes will be kept until all aspects of the study are completed satisfactorily and will then be destroyed.

You are free to withdraw from the study, without repercussions, at any time, whether this is before, during or after the interview.

### **Confidentiality**

Any information you give will be confidential and any references used in the study will be anonymised. Neither you, your Club or persons referred to in the interview will be identified.

Any names and times referred to will be changed. The study will be submitted to Trinity College, Dublin as part of my course assessment.

Any information disclosed that might be considered a cause for concern about a child will be disclosed to the relevant Statutory Authorities.

Thank you for your consideration

Kate Hills

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### **Consent Form**

I agree to participate in the research study in the manner described above.

I have read and understood the purpose and nature of the study and I am participating in this study voluntarily.

Signed.....

Date.....

Print Name.....

Club.....

Please return one signed copy to: Kate Hills, Swim Ireland, Sport HQ 13 Joyce Way, Parkwest, Dublin 12 in the stamped addressed enveloped enclosed. The other copy is for your information.

# Sample Short Questionnaire

## **The Role of the Swim Ireland Club Children's Officer**

Re: Research study by Kate Hills, National Children's Officer, Swim Ireland

### Your Information

**Role:** Club Children's Officer

**Gender:**

**Parent of swimmer:**

(Are you currently a parent of a swimmer involved in a Club)

**Training:**

(What child protection training have you completed – include any sport teaching/coaching or child welfare training outside sports specific courses)

**When were you appointed as CCO**

(What date or month/year)

**How were you appointed as CCO**

(Were you asked or co-opted at a meeting, or did you volunteer for the role)

**Is your current occupation involved in child welfare and protection?**

(If so please specify your role)

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Thank you for completing this short questionnaire. All answers are confidential to the research study as per the Research Information and Consent form.

**Please return this form with your consent in the supplied stamped addressed envelope.**

Thank you,

Kate

# **Appendix B – Main Interview Schedule**

## **Exploring the role of the Swim Ireland Club Children’s Officer**

### 1. Understanding role/policy

What is your understanding of your role as CCO?

What is your understanding of the Safeguarding Policies and Procedures 2010?

### 2. Skills for role

What skills are required for this role?

How did any child protection training prepare or assist you?

### 3. Thresholds of risk

How do you respond to a concern or an allegation of abuse?

What would you consider to be a risk for young people involved in Swim Ireland?

### 4. Supervision/support

What worries do you have in your position?

What difficulties have you encountered in your position?

### 5. Communication

How do you communicate with young people in the Club?

How are the views of young people in the Club represented?

### 6. Challenges in role

What impact does your role have for young people?

What do you consider to be the main challenges for your role?