

Katie Simpson Review

Key Learning for Sports Organisations; Volunteer Now

July 2026

Introduction

"The primary objective of this Review is to provide a clear and accurate account of agency responses and missed opportunities, and to identify changes required to strengthen safeguarding and to protect vulnerable individuals more effectively." (2026:2)

The Katie Simpson [Review](#) was commissioned by the Department of Justice following the murder of 21-year-old showjumper Katie Simpson in August 2020.

Katie Simpson was a 21-year-old showjumper from Tynan, County Armagh, Northern Ireland. She was well known in the local equestrian community and had been involved with horses from a young age.

As a child, Katie met Jonathan Creswell, a well-established horse trainer within the local equestrian community. The Katie Simpson Review found that he began grooming and controlling her when she was around 10 years old. Over the following years, he exerted coercive control over many aspects of her life, subjecting her to emotional, financial, physical and sexual abuse. The review concluded that Creswell subjected Katie to a "brutal regime of grooming, coercive control, verbal degradation and physical abuse (2026: 14).

Katie died several days after being admitted to hospital with serious injuries. Although her death was initially believed to be the result of suicide, subsequent investigations established that she had been subjected to prolonged coercive and controlling behaviour and domestic abuse by Jonathan Creswell. In 2024, Creswell was charged with her murder but died by suicide before criminal proceedings concluded.

This paper, produced by Volunteer Now, focuses on the sport related safeguarding findings from the Katie Simpson Review. Throughout this paper, the term "Review" refers to the main Katie Simpson Review commissioned by the Department of Justice. This paper highlights key learning for sports organisations, particularly in relation to recognising risk, strengthening organisational culture, and improving governance and decision-making processes to better protect athletes and participants.

The Review identified that safeguarding failures rarely arise from a single decision or isolated incident. Rather, they develop over time when warning signs are not recognised, information is not connected, professional curiosity is lacking, and organisations fail to respond to patterns of escalating harm. As the Review states;

"Safeguarding must be attuned to patterns of harm, not just individual events" (2026:132)

Reinforcing the importance of understanding abuse as a cumulative process rather than a series of unrelated incidents.

The Review also identifies the broader organisational learning that extends beyond the actions of individual practitioners. It concludes that;

"The failure to identify and act on the warning signs/red flags was the result of systemic gaps in policing, risk assessment, and safeguarding practice" (2026:165)

These findings emphasise that effective safeguarding depends upon organisational culture, leadership, governance, and the ability of agencies and organisations to work collaboratively.

Although the Review is rooted within the equestrian sector, its findings are relevant across all sports. Coaches, volunteers, officials, committee members, and safeguarding leads occupy positions of trust and influence. Sports organisations therefore have a responsibility to ensure safeguarding policies, procedures and culture enables concerns to be recognised, recorded, assessed, and acted upon in a timely and proportionate manner.

1. Grooming, Control and Exploitation Through Sport

The Review describes prolonged and escalating pattern of grooming, coercive control and abuse that began when Katie was only ten years old. Rather than occurring as a series of isolated incidents, the abuse developed gradually over many years, allowing the perpetrator to establish trust, dependency, and authority before exercising increasing levels of control;

"The pattern of coercive behaviour and abuse... started when Katie was just 10 years old." (2026:13)

The Review identifies a range of controlling behaviours used by Creswell, including:

- Removed Katie from GCSE classes to work with him
- Restricted her friendships
- Monitored her phone
- Controlled her work and finances
- Publicly shouted at and physically assaulted her
- Promised her a future as a successful jockey (2026:13–14)

The Review demonstrates how sporting opportunities, including coaching, employment, and

progression pathways, can be exploited by perpetrators to gain power, dependency, and control. By positioning himself as both a mentor and gatekeeper to Katie's sporting success, Creswell was able to exploit Katie's aspirations and commitment to the sport. Her aspiration to progress within the sport became a means through which coercive control was established and maintained.

Why this matters for Sports Organisations

The Review describes Creswell as "*a serial abuser*" who exploited both his position within the equestrian community and the widespread acceptance of his behaviour to abuse young riders while hiding in plain sight (2026:19).

The Review illustrates how perpetrators can use their reputation, expertise and perceived sporting success to gain credibility and discourage others from raising concerns. It found that Creswell's behaviour was known, tolerated or dismissed by some within the sporting environment, allowing him to continue abusing young people over an extended period. By normalising or minimising controlling and abusive behaviour, the sporting environment failed to challenge his actions effectively, enabling the abuse to continue in plain sight.

2. Culture within the Equestrian Community Enabled Abuse

Creswell's reputation as a successful trainer and jockey, together with the culture within the equestrian community in which he worked, enabled his abusive behaviour to go largely unchallenged.

"His grooming and abusive behaviour was hidden behind a charming façade... and exploited his role and status as a trainer / jockey. His behaviour toward Katie (and others) was accepted in the equestrian community where he worked." (2026:19)

Witnesses described Creswell regularly kicking doors, throwing objects, and striking horses, behaviour that occurred "*two or three times a day*" and had become accepted as normal within the yard (2026:77). Following the investigation, 37 additional victims came forward alleging abuse, many of whom had been young riders beginning their involvement in equestrian sport (2026:19).

Wider cultural misunderstandings existed within parts of the equestrian sector regarding abuse, violence, and coercive control. Harmful behaviours were often misinterpreted or excused as necessary discipline, high standards or the pursuit of sporting excellence. This not only obscured the reality of abuse but enabled perpetrators to operate without challenge.

Addressing these misconceptions requires a cultural shift that prioritises participant wellbeing above reputation, tradition, or sporting success (2026:136).

The Review found that Creswell's reputation as a highly skilled trainer and jockey contributed to a lack of appropriate scrutiny, allowing his abusive behaviour to continue unchecked. Witnesses described him as someone who *"could train up horses that no one else could work with"* (2026:77), and his specialist expertise made him highly sought after by riding yards. His reputation and perceived value to the sport enabled him to secure employment and continue working with young riders despite his conviction for domestic assault.

This demonstrates how sporting success, specialist expertise and community standing can undermine effective safeguarding when they result in individuals not being appropriately scrutinised or held to account.

Why this matters for Sports Organisations

Creswell's reputation, status and acceptance within the equestrian community created an environment in which abusive behaviour was normalised rather than challenged:

"This points to an urgent need for safeguarding reform and cultural accountability within all equestrian environments." (2026:20)

Safeguarding decisions must never be influenced by an individual's reputation, popularity or sporting achievements. The Review found that, following his release from prison, Creswell's return to the riding yard was accepted and even celebrated by members of the local equestrian community, despite his conviction for domestic assault. Rather than prompting increased safeguarding scrutiny, his previous offending was overlooked, and his reputation as a successful trainer enabled him to continue working with young riders.

The Review examines how sporting success, specialist expertise and community standing can create barriers to effective safeguarding when they discourage appropriate scrutiny and can lead to concerns about risk being overlooked. It reinforces that previous offending, particularly offences involving violence, domestic abuse, animal abuse or coercive behaviour, should always prompt a robust safeguarding risk assessment.

Decisions about an individual's suitability to work with children or adults at risk must be based on safeguarding principles and evidence based assessments of risk, rather than personal relationships, reputation, specialist expertise or sporting success.

3. Lack of Safeguarding Measures

The Review identified significant weaknesses in safeguarding governance within the riding yard where Creswell worked. Following his release from prison for domestic abuse, he returned to coaching and training young riders without appropriate oversight.

The Review states that *“there were no safeguarding measures in place”* and that Jonathan Creswell did not complete an AccessNI check or undertake safeguarding training at any stage during his employment (2026:26).

Concerns were also raised about unaffiliated equestrian facilities operating without consistent safeguarding policies, vetting procedures, designated safeguarding leads, reporting mechanisms, or quality assurance arrangements (2026:26–28).

Why this matters for Sports Organisations

The absence of effective safeguarding governance enabled Creswell to continue working closely with young riders despite concerns about his behaviour.

While the Review makes a number of recommendations specific to the equestrian sector, the safeguarding measures it highlights reflect good practice that should be embedded across all sports organisations. Robust safeguarding arrangements help create safer environments, support the early identification of risk, and ensure concerns are recognised, reported and acted upon.

4. Abusive Behaviour Was Normalised

A culture of bullying, intimidation and public humiliation had become accepted. Behaviours included:

- Belittling comments
- Persistent criticism
- Hostile tone and demeanour
- Dismissive or demeaning treatment (2026:20)

Witnesses described Creswell regularly shouting at Katie, calling her degrading names in front of others, and physically assaulting her, including hitting, pushing and, on one occasion, beating her with a riding crop (2026:12–13).

Domineering personalities, entrenched hierarchies, competitive pressures, fear of reprisal and poor organisational oversight contributed to these behaviours becoming accepted:

“Inappropriate conduct was frequently dismissed as ‘just part of the culture,’ reinforcing silence and complicity.” (2026:20)

And,

“This culture of ‘seeing but not believing’ allowed Creswell’s behaviour to continue unchecked.” (2026:20)

Why this matters for Sports Organisations

Where harmful behaviours become normalised within a sporting culture, opportunities to identify, challenge and report abuse are significantly reduced, allowing harmful conduct to continue unchecked.

When aggression, intimidation, bullying or controlling behaviour are dismissed as part of the sporting environment or accepted as the price of success, individuals are less likely to recognise these behaviours as safeguarding concerns or feel confident raising them. This creates a culture of silence in which abusive behaviour can persist without challenge.

Sports organisations should promote cultures in which respectful behaviour is expected, concerns can be raised without fear of reprisal, and inappropriate conduct is consistently recognised, challenged, and addressed, regardless of an individual's status, reputation, or sporting success.

5. Failure to Recognise Patterns of Abuse

Warning signs were repeatedly viewed in isolation rather than connected to form a wider picture of escalating abuse towards Katie;

"The fact that Katie's injury pattern was never identified and no safeguarding referral was made is a red flag." (2026:16)

Katie attended hospital on numerous occasions with injuries attributed to horse-related accidents. While her participation in equestrian sport provided a plausible explanation for individual injuries, the Review highlights that Katie's repeated presentations should have prompted greater professional curiosity and safeguarding assessment:

"Recognising and tracking patterns of injury over time is essential to assessing risk and ensuring appropriate safeguarding responses." (2026:17)

The Review also identifies failures to consider Creswell's previous conviction for domestic assault and known patterns of coercive control when assessing risk (2026:82). He had a long-term pattern of offending, including domestic abuse, dangerous driving, animal cruelty, indecent exposure, suspected fraud, and other criminal behaviour.

The Review concludes that repeated low-level offending should be recognised as part of a broader pattern that may indicate escalating risk (2026:20)

Why this matters for Sport Organisations

Repeated injuries, even where there appears to be a plausible sporting explanation, should always be considered within the wider safeguarding context rather than viewed as isolated incidents. While injuries are an expected part of many sports, recurrent or unexplained

injuries may indicate underlying concerns such as inappropriate training practices, excessive physical demands, neglect of a participant's wellbeing, or abuse.

Low-level concerns, including minor incidents or patterns of seemingly non-serious criminal behaviour, should also be recognised as potential early indicators of escalating risk. When viewed in isolation they may appear insignificant, but when considered together they can reveal a developing pattern that requires further scrutiny and professional curiosity.

Practitioners should remain professionally curious, considering factors such as the frequency, severity, timing, and circumstances of injuries, alongside the individual's behaviour, wellbeing, and any other safeguarding indicators. Identifying patterns over time is essential to recognising escalating risk, ensuring concerns are not dismissed as coincidental, and enabling timely intervention to protect participants from harm. Viewed individually, many incidents appeared relatively minor. Taken together, they reveal multiple missed opportunities to identify escalating risk and intervene earlier.

Conclusion; Learning for Sports Organisations

Safeguarding failures rarely result from a single mistake or isolated incident. Instead, they develop over time through a series of missed opportunities, fragmented information, weak governance, and a failure to recognise patterns of escalating harm. Throughout Katie's contact with services and those around her, warning signs were present, but they were not consistently recognised, connected, or acted upon. Individually, many incidents appeared explainable; collectively, they revealed a sustained pattern of abuse that went largely unchallenged;

"Safeguarding must be attuned to patterns of harm, not just individual events." (2026:132)

This requires organisations to develop systems that enable concerns to be recorded, shared appropriately, reviewed collectively, and assessed over time. Effective safeguarding depends not only on recognising individual incidents, but on connecting information from multiple sources to identify emerging patterns of risk.

At a minimum, sports organisations should have:

- Clear codes of conduct.
- Comprehensive safeguarding policies and procedures.
- Whistleblowing and anti-bullying policies.
- Clear, accessible and confidential reporting systems.
- Designated safeguarding leads.

- Mandatory safeguarding training for staff and volunteers.
- Appropriate safeguarding training for coaches and officials.
- Vetting checks (such as AccessNI checks, where applicable) for those working with children and adults at risk.
- Appropriate welfare checks and safer recruitment processes. (2026:157-158)

Safeguarding is a whole organisation responsibility. It cannot rest solely with designated safeguarding officers or rely on compliance with policies and procedures. Boards, senior leaders, coaches, volunteers, and committee members all play a role in creating environments where concerns are recognised, taken seriously, and acted upon promptly. Strong governance, effective leadership, and clear accountability are fundamental to ensuring safeguarding remains embedded within organisational decision making.

The Review highlights that abusive behaviour became normalised because it was tolerated, excused, or accepted as part of the culture within the sport. It emphasises that sports organisations should actively challenge environments in which aggression, intimidation, bullying or controlling behaviour are accepted in the name of discipline, performance or tradition. The Review also makes clear that no individual's reputation, status, influence or sporting success should place them beyond appropriate safeguarding scrutiny.

Rather than prompting increased scrutiny, Creswell's return from prison was accepted and normalised. For sports organisations, this reinforces that previous offending, particularly offences involving violence, domestic abuse, or coercive behaviour, should always trigger robust safeguarding risk assessment.

Decisions about an individual's suitability to work with children or adults at risk must be informed by safeguarding principles and evidence of risk, rather than personal relationships, reputation, popularity, or sporting ability.

Ultimately, the Katie Simpson Review demonstrates that safeguarding is achieved through culture as much as compliance.

Organisations that encourage professional curiosity, support challenge, connect information effectively and prioritise participant welfare are better placed to recognise abuse at an early stage and intervene before harm escalates. Katie Simpson's murder reminds us of the consequences when safeguarding systems fail to identify patterns of abuse, when concerns remain fragmented, and when harmful behaviour becomes normalised.

The Review concludes;

"Katie's death is a devastating reminder of what happens when safeguarding is treated as optional." (2026:136)



Volunteer Now
The Skainos Centre
239 Newtownards Road
Belfast
BT4 1AF
T: 028 9023 2020
E: info@volunteernow.co.uk
W: www.volunteernow.co.uk