



# ASP Research Report:

Investigating Behaviours and Influences of Athlete Support Personnel on Clean Sport

March 2022

Version 1.0

# Contents

<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Background</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>How UKAD Gathered Insight</b>	<b>7</b>
Phase 1 – The ASP Survey	7
Phase 2 – Focus Groups	8
<b>What ASP told UKAD</b>	<b>9</b>
Phase 1 – The ASP Survey	9
Phase 2 – Focus Groups	16
<b>Summary</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>Next Steps for UKAD</b>	<b>26</b>

# Executive Summary

UK Anti-Doping (UKAD) provides education and support for athletes which is reinforced by simultaneous and sustained commitment to clean sport from the network of Athlete Support Personnel (ASP) across the UK. This influential group of multidisciplinary practitioners have a vital role in promoting clean sport behaviours and preventing athletes, coaches and themselves from committing any of the Anti-Doping Rule Violations (ADRVs) listed in the [World Anti-Doping Code](#) (the Code). Previous research conducted by UKAD centred on the importance of tailored education for coaches as a subsection of ASP and therefore, the current report focusses on those practitioners in other supporting roles.

ASP are included in UKAD's Performance Sport Education Programme, with particular focus around those ASP selected to support athletes at a Major Games. UKAD produced a [Clean Sport Essentials](#) information booklet designed for Performance Lifestyle Advisors and Athlete Support Personnel to complement UKAD's introductory eLearning course, highlighting reasons for an athlete to dope and the signs to look out for in the interest of preventing intentional and unintentional doping.

UKAD recognise the need to build a curriculum focussed on the needs of this group in order to provide the most effective and engaging programme of support. Subsequently, UKAD commissioned a research project to glean insight and understanding from the network of UK-based ASP regarding:

- Their perceptions of how important clean sport values are to them, their sport(s) and their immediate line manager
- Anti-doping knowledge levels and approaches to seeking relevant information and advice
- Confidence in advising athletes on clean sport matters and in reporting doping-related concerns
- Experiences of interacting with UKAD, and
- Views on the most useful ways to target their education and learning

Practitioner observations and perceptions, from across the four Home Nations and most athlete support disciplines, were captured through a survey and focus group discussions. There was an overwhelming acknowledgement of the influential role that all ASP have to reinforce the clean sport message. Practitioners felt that confidence in themselves and others to deliver consistent messaging about clean sport and support to athletes would be enhanced by sharing their experiences and hearing the challenges faced by others, both within their discipline and across the multidisciplinary teams within which they work.

The recommendations from those supporting Performance athletes, at the Olympic/Paralympic and Professional level were clear. The opportunities for ASP to engage with clean sport topics needs to become more diverse to suit the high-paced and the often informal



nature of their roles and interactions with athletes. Such opportunities will encourage them to collaborate and share experiences, ensuring they remain motivated to achieve consistent best practice and maintain a doping-free culture. Engagement from national governing bodies (NGBs), performance institutes and academic institutions will be critical to ensuring continued development of a positive, forward-thinking ethos around clean sport.

In response to these findings, UKAD is engaging with key stakeholders to ensure recognition of clean sport behaviours as a professional duty to athletes and to secure a commitment to maintaining awareness of these across all practitioners. UKAD is also investing in expanding the tailored resources, engagement opportunities and support mechanisms available to practitioners to ensure they remain capable of

supporting athletes through continued demonstration of best practice. Finally, UKAD is committed to driving the research agenda and enhancing knowledge in matters related to clean sport and anti-doping, building its reputation as a leading National Anti-doping Organisation (NADO), and will continue to engage with ASP on such research.

We thank colleagues from the [Clean Sport Alliance](#) - Dr Laurie Patterson (Leeds Beckett University), Prof. Susan Backhouse (Leeds Beckett University), Dr Ian Boardley (University of Birmingham) and Prof. Andrea Petróczi (Kingston University London) – for conducting the survey phase of this project; the Education Team at UKAD, particularly Claire Lane for leading the focus group phase; as well as all participating Athlete Support Personnel for their involvement in the research project and their valuable contributions throughout.

## Background

UKAD is the national organisation dedicated to promoting clean sport. As such, UKAD is responsible for ensuring that sports bodies in the UK operate in line with the Code through the implementation of the UK's National Anti-Doping Policy.

Through engagement with a range of stakeholders, including athlete support personnel (ASP), UKAD aims to protect the right of everyone to enjoy doping-free sport. This is achieved through several key areas of activity, including intelligence-led athlete testing across more than 40 Olympic, Paralympic, and professional sports, investigations and results management for the determination of Anti-Doping Rule Violations (ADRVs), as well as the delivery of an extensive education programme.

Under the Code, ASP are held to account if they violate any of the seven anti-doping rules that apply to them, with unequivocal sanctions which could potentially prove career-ending for practitioners. Therefore, to uphold their role in protecting clean sport, ASP need to be aware of what the rules mean for them and the actions they need to take to fulfil this duty. Consequently, there's an assumption that ASP will take the opportunity to be educated on anti-doping matters either through their NADO, their NGB, sports institution or professional association. Educated ASP should then be in a position to lead conversations around clean sport within their sporting environment and encourage regular engagement in clean sport activities and events.



**The Code states the roles and responsibilities that ASP have in relation to anti-doping, meaning ASP must:**

- Know and comply with the Anti-Doping Rules, policies and practices that apply to them as well as those that apply to the athletes they support
- Co-operate with the testing programme for athletes
- Use their influence on athletes positively to foster clean sport values and behaviours
- Inform UKAD and their International Federation if they have committed an ADRV in the last 10 years
- Co-operate with any doping investigation when asked to do so
- Not use or possess any prohibited substance or prohibited method without a valid and justifiable reason

To help ASP comply with these rules, UKAD provides comprehensive education and information on their roles and responsibilities under the Code. Current education is in the form of face-to-face and/or virtual workshops, social media messaging, online education programmes (eLearning) and through influencing the curricula of professional bodies. Supplementary resources are also available through the [Support](#) section of the UKAD website. Education is an integral part of promoting clean sport and UKAD is committed to the development and delivery of a world-leading education programme.

Previous research around ASP and clean sport has explored knowledge and awareness of anti-doping rules and regulations, beliefs, education experiences and the effectiveness of education through a range of questionnaire designs. Published research so far has included ASP in their roles as sports physiotherapists, physicians, pharmacists and pharmacy & kinesiology students, with a notable emphasis on the sports medicine practitioner roles within the athlete support network. UKAD acknowledge that this does not cover the breadth of practitioner roles held by ASP and would like to expand upon prior research to encompass the broader network of ASP.

Despite the limited studies in the area, evidence indicates that ASP perceive they have poor knowledge of anti-doping practices and policies (such as The Prohibited List), with limited confidence to disseminate and signpost others to relevant information. However, these studies were conducted outside of the United Kingdom (notably in South Africa, Australia, Croatia, Japan, Korea and Pakistan) and therefore should not be taken as representative of the experience and confidence levels of ASP in the UK.

To strengthen education programmes for ASP, UKAD commissioned this research project in January 2021. Following a tender process, the Clean Sport Alliance (CSA) was selected as a group of practitioners who work together to foster high quality anti-doping research and evidence-informed doping prevention. The group's experience in working with the complexity of the doping problem, prioritising collaboration and co-ordination in moving anti-doping policy and practice forward, meant they were ideally placed to investigate and gather insight into the behaviour of UK-based ASP and their influence upon clean sport.

# How UKAD Gathered Insight

To maximise engagement with ASP and based on prior research in the field, a survey-based approach was deemed the most effective means of gathering data in the first instance. Academics from the CSA, led by Dr Laurie Patterson, conducted this survey in the early part of 2021. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and preparations for the delayed Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games, a lower than anticipated response rate to this survey formed inconclusive findings. Therefore, UKAD undertook supplementary focus groups with ASP to delve deeper into the themes that were identified from the survey responses<sup>1</sup>. All data is presented as mean ± standard deviation.

## Phase 1 – The ASP Survey

Upon consultation with an advisory group formed from the ASP target population, a cross-sectional survey was drafted to address all elements of interest. The final survey gathered responses focussed on the ASP perceptions around the importance of clean sport, confidence in themselves and others as well as their experience of clean sport education (using a scale where 1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree). The survey also included a knowledge check regarding the anti-doping rules and their application to athletes and ASP (comprising ten 'true/false' questions).

UKAD and the CSA worked together to maximise the reach of the survey ensuring that data was captured from a range of elite sporting contexts (i.e., Olympic, Paralympic and Professional) across all four home countries (i.e., England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland) and a diverse range of ASP, such as Performance Directors, Performance Lifestyle Advisors, Sport and Exercise Nutritionists, Sport Scientists, Physiologists, Psychologists and Biomechanists), Strength and Conditioning Coaches, Physiotherapists, Sport Therapists, and Sports Doctors.

<sup>1</sup>Technical sport coaches were not included in this brief as UKAD acknowledged in the call for proposals that there was sufficient existing evidence for this target population. UKAD has recently conducted research with the coach population to provide an evidence base for a revised curriculum for coaches, alongside gathering justification to work with professional bodies to embed clean sport education within qualifications and training. This report can be found on UKAD's website – [Coach Education: Creating an Evidence-Based Clean Sport Curriculum for Coaches in the UK \(September 2021\)](#)



## Phase 2 – Focus Groups

Initial findings from the ASP survey were presented at the 2021 edition of UKAD's Clean Sport at the Front Line virtual event and attendees were then invited to express an interest to partake in one of a series of forthcoming focus groups. This invitation was also shared via UKAD's social media platforms, UKAD's Education Delivery Network (National Trainers and Educators)<sup>2</sup> and through known contacts based within performance institutes and other relevant stakeholders across the UK.

In order to fulfil the ambition of delving deeper into the themes which had been gleaned from the survey data, UKAD drafted a series of open-ended questions to create a semi-structured framework whilst also allowing discussions to flow freely within each group. Focus groups were conducted in a virtual environment led by UKAD with recorded discussions transcribed after the event.



<sup>2</sup>National Trainers are UKAD's contracted remote workforce who are deployed to deliver education programmes with a focus on Major Games, whilst also supporting wider programmes and the Education Delivery Network. Educators are nominated by their organisation, trained and accredited by UKAD and then deployed by their organisation to deliver education to athletes and ASP.

# What ASP told UKAD

## Phase 1 – The ASP Survey

A 12-week survey window garnered significant interest (151 individuals), however over half of the responses had to be removed prior to analysis due to being only partially completed. Given the remaining sample size (n=67), these analyses should be interpreted with some caution.

### ASP Demographic

Despite the relatively small sample size of responders, a wide range of ASP roles were captured (Figure 1). Over a third of all respondents were in roles which span across the sporting landscape, with 70% of ASP working in professional sport, 48% in Olympic sport and 31% in Paralympic sport, with an average of 13±9 years of experience in their current position.



Figure 1. Proportion of survey respondents representing ASP roles



Almost two-thirds of the respondents held a postgraduate qualification with several respondents in the process of attaining their PhD or other postgraduate qualifications. In addition, two thirds of this ASP group were members of one or more professional body. Multiple sports were represented by the ASP survey respondents (Figure 2), with some working across multiple sports. Most were employed full-time (61%), whilst there was also a mix of self-employed/contractors (24%), working on a part-time (8%) or voluntary (3%) basis<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>3</sup>Further demographic data are available upon request to UKAD



Figure 2. Sport representation within the ASP survey respondents

## The Importance of Clean Sport

Responses to the survey suggest that ASP support the anti-doping organisations' purpose (6.7±0.6, on a scale of 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). On average, ASP also see it as their **professional responsibility** to undertake anti-doping actions (6.5±0.8) and reported that undertaking anti-doping actions aligns with their personal values (6.3±0.9).

Corroborating their **commitment to clean sport**, all except one respondent agreed to some extent (from slightly to strongly) that they intend to comply with the anti-doping rules and regulations throughout their career as ASP (6.8±0.6). Moreover, ASP reported being committed to maintaining their anti-doping actions in the long term (6.5±0.8) and planning to undertake consistent anti-doping actions (i.e., their actions will remain the same over time, 6.3±1.0).

Thinking about the **influence** of those around them, ASP 'slightly agreed' that people in positions of authority in their environment (e.g., manager) remind them of

their anti-doping role and responsibilities (5.1±1.7) and talk about how important anti-doping is (5.0±1.7). Similarly, respondents 'slightly agreed' that ASP in their environment (5.2±1.7) and ASP colleagues (5.0±1.6) talk about how important anti-doping is.

With regards to others initiating or reacting to ASP's anti-doping actions, lower average ratings were provided for people in positions of authority (e.g., manager, superiors) regularly prompting ASP to undertake anti-doping actions (4.7±1.7, where 4 = neutral). Several items also indicated varying opinion across ASP in terms of receiving positive recognition or reinforcement for their anti-doping actions, with five ASP reporting having experienced negative reactions from others (e.g., disapproval).

Data represented in Figure 3 reports that ASP undertake anti-doping actions with several **goals & emotions** in mind, with protecting athletes' health and wellbeing being the primary motivator, followed by preventing unintentional doping and protecting the integrity of sport.

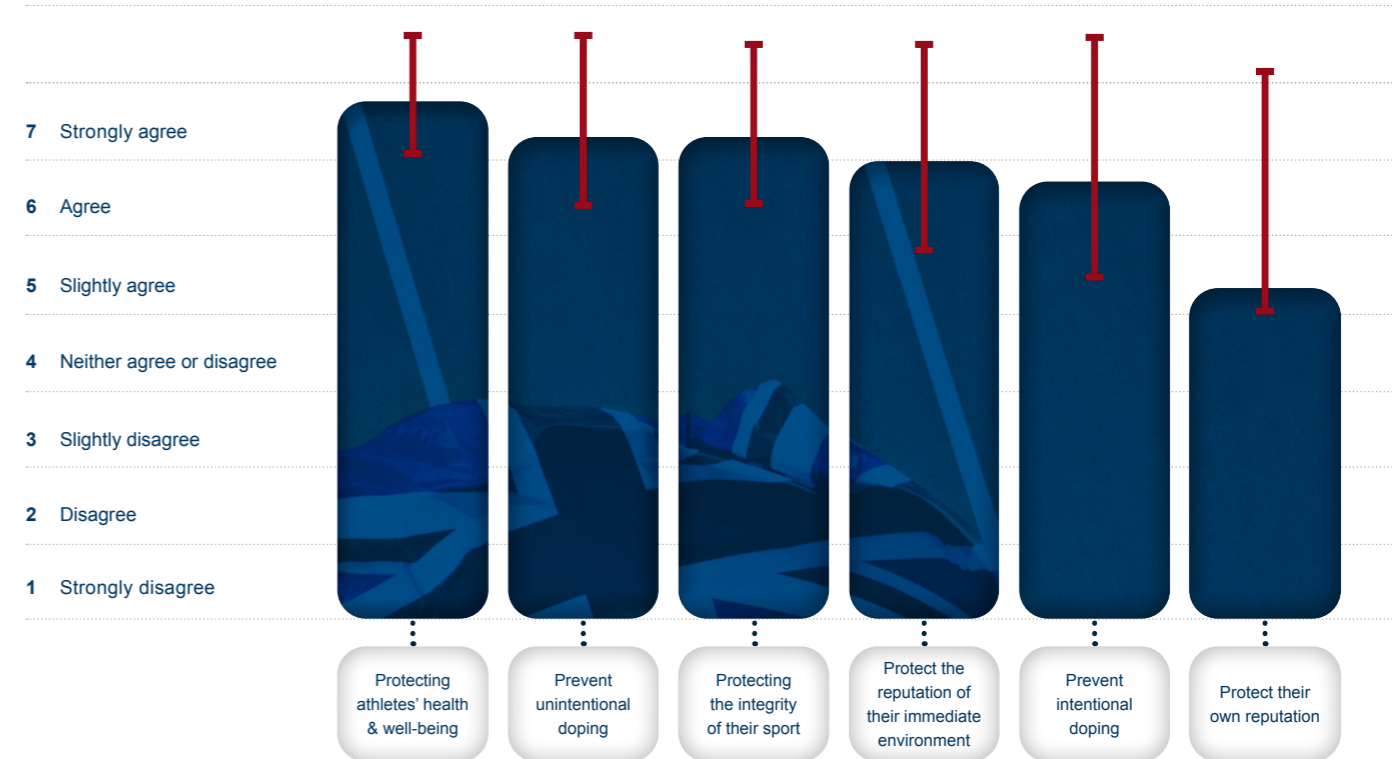


Figure 3. Mean ratings (± SD) of ASP motivation to undertake anti-doping actions

Similar levels of consensus were evident for **negative emotions** tied to undertaking anti-doping actions. Specifically, ASP agreed that they would feel guilty if they did not undertake anti-doping actions (5.6±1.5), but do not associate undertaking anti-doping actions with other negative emotions such as anxiety (2.5±1.6) or worrying about giving incorrect information (2.7±1.6). In contrast, there was a lack of consensus regarding how the undertaking of anti-doping actions evoke positive emotions such as pride (5.1±1.35) and happiness (4.7±1.3); approximately a third of ASP were neutral in their response to this.



Focussing on what ASP do to **promote and support** clean sport, a separate behaviour scale<sup>3</sup> comprised five subscales (Figure 4). All items were rated based on the frequency at which ASP performed them, from 1 = never to 5 = very often. Average ratings for each subscale demonstrate that many ASP reported undertaking a range of clean sport behaviours, with caring behaviours being undertaken 'often', encouraging athletes to ask questions and seek support whenever they need it.

<sup>3</sup>Adapted from Patterson et al., 2020. Patterson, L & Staff, H (2020). Understanding and influencing global coach anti-doping education through the development of an international framework. Project report. World Anti-Doping Agency. Available at: <https://eprints.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/id/eprint/7517/7/UnderstandingAndInfluencingGlobalCoachAntiDopingEducation-PATTERSON.pdf>



Some ASP also engaged in values-setting behaviours, particularly demonstrating their values in their actions and reminding athletes to take responsibility for themselves. Specific to doping, many ASP worked to **minimise the risk** of inadvertent doping by prompting athletes to check supplements, carefully monitor what they put in their bodies and comply with anti-doping processes such as testing and Whereabouts submissions. Furthermore, ASP educated athletes to reduce intentional doping, by stating that doping is against the rules and not accepted in their environment, as well as teaching athletes how to enhance their performance via permitted means. However, despite performing the aforementioned anti-doping behaviours, a quarter of ASP do not keep track of how often they have undertaken anti-doping actions nor regularly reflect on the effectiveness of their anti-doping actions.

In terms of **influence**, ASP 'slightly agreed' that doping cases in their sport ( $5.2 \pm 1.5$ ) and the nature of their sport (i.e., physical demands,  $5.1 \pm 1.5$ ) play a part in prompting ASP to take anti-doping actions. More variation in ratings was present for items related to physical prompts in the environment (e.g., posters, emails) ( $4.8 \pm 2.0$ , where 4 = neutral) and critical events in athletes' lives (e.g., injury, career termination) ( $4.5 \pm 1.6$ ), meaning these factors appear to influence some people but not others.

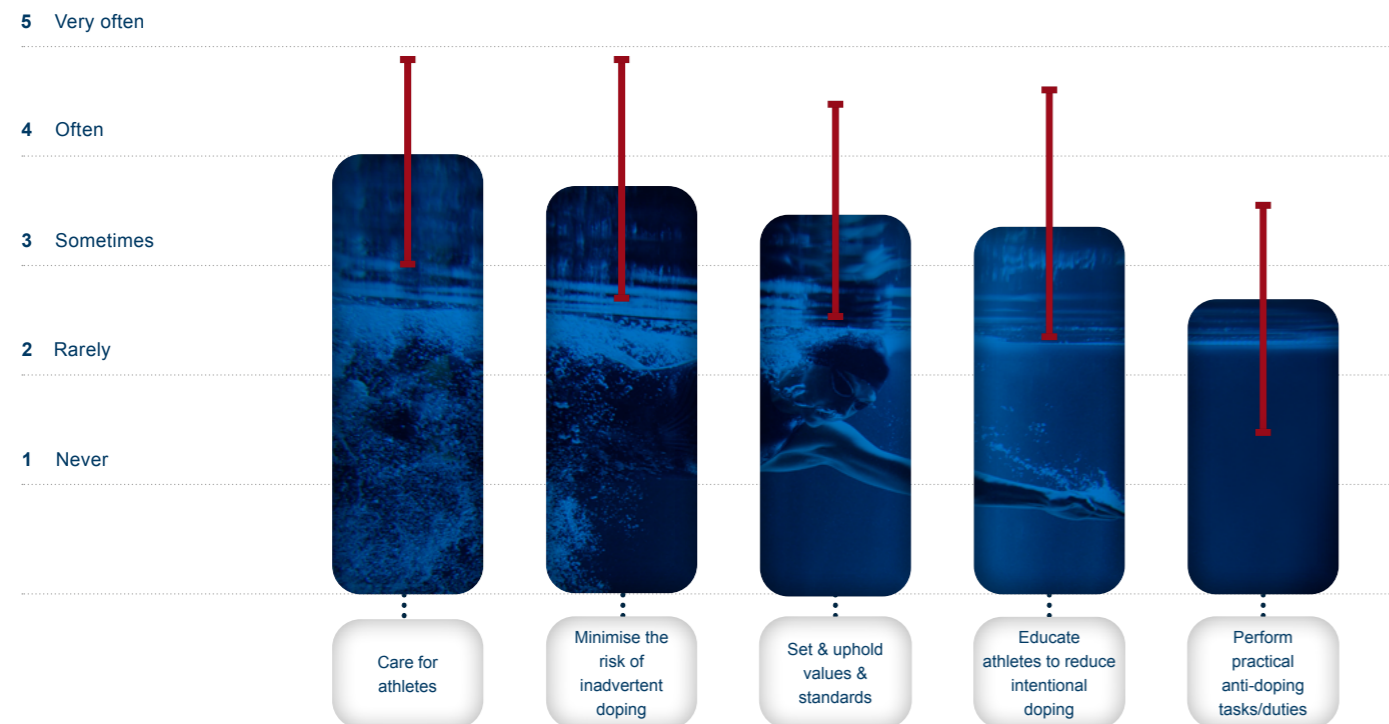
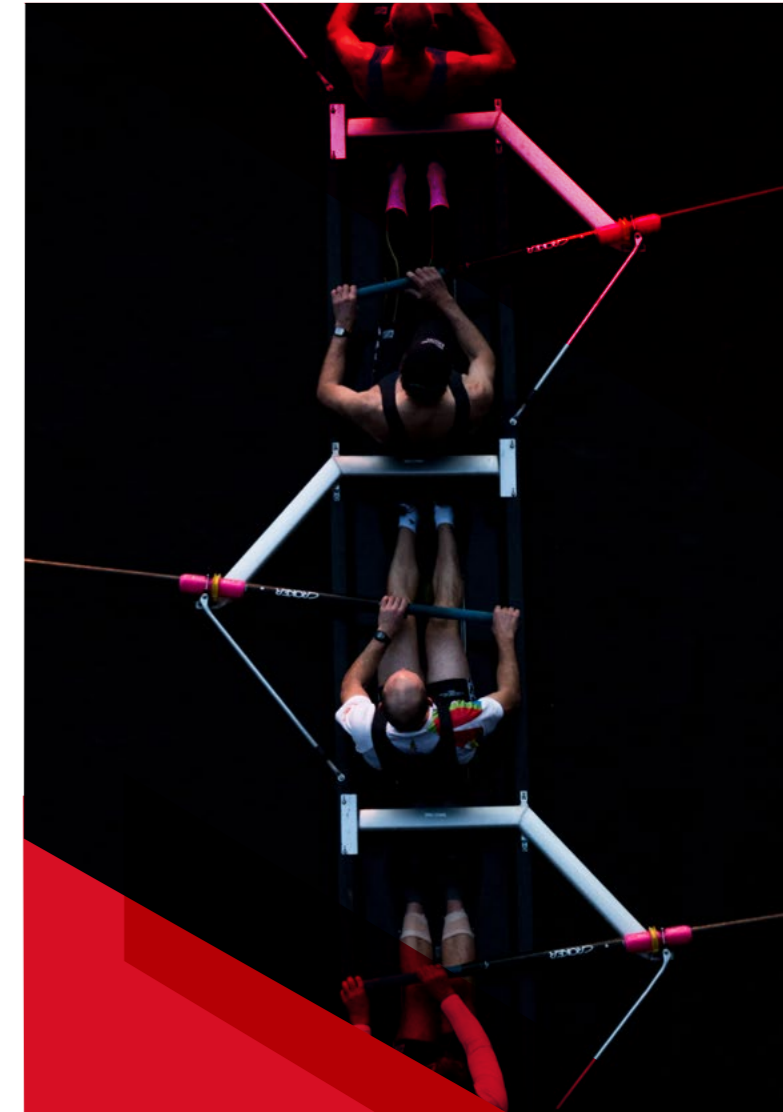


Figure 4. Mean ratings (± SD) by ASP across behaviour subscales

## Confidence & Knowledge

ASP agreed that they were confident to undertake anti-doping actions (6.2±0.9, on a scale of 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). In addition, they reported 'agreement' with finding it easy to adhere to the anti-doping roles and responsibilities ascribed to them by the Code (6.2±0.9) and being **competent** in undertaking anti-doping roles (6.06±0.9). Specific to reporting, most ASP (87%) agreed to some extent (slightly to strongly) that they would feel confident reporting doping in sport to the authorities, such as UKAD (5.9±1.2).

Many respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they know the anti-doping rules and regulations as they apply to them in their sport and their profession (6.2±1.2) and know their anti-doping **roles and responsibilities** as outlined in the Code (6.1±1.3). ASP also reported that their knowledge of anti-doping rules and processes in their sport is up to date (6.2±1.1). Perceptions of self-declared **knowledge** amongst the ASP were corroborated via the knowledge quiz whereby over 50 ASP completed part or all ten questions and the average score was 9±1<sup>4</sup>. Notably, one question (*When an athlete is notified for doping control, they must report immediately to the Doping Control Station*) was answered incorrectly the most times (n=27).

On reflection, incorrect responses may reflect a misunderstanding of the question, as there are valid circumstances for which an athlete *may* delay reporting to Doping Control assuming they remain within sight of the Doping Control Personnel (chaperone) during this time. Similarly, several ASP (n=12) incorrectly answered a separate question, related to them being held responsible for what athletes are doing, which could reflect a misperception of their responsibilities under the Code.

Related to keeping up to date, ASP agreed that they know how and where to find information on anti-doping (6.4±1.0) and are aware of when the **Prohibited List** is updated and where to find any updates (6.2±1.3). ASP also agreed that they know how to check if any product (e.g., medication, supplements) contains a banned substance (6.4±1.3) and agreed that they have the necessary practical skills (e.g., using online resources) to undertake such anti-doping actions (6.3±1.0). All but one ASP agreed to some extent (slightly to strongly) that they have the necessary interpersonal skills to undertake anti-doping actions (6.3±0.9).

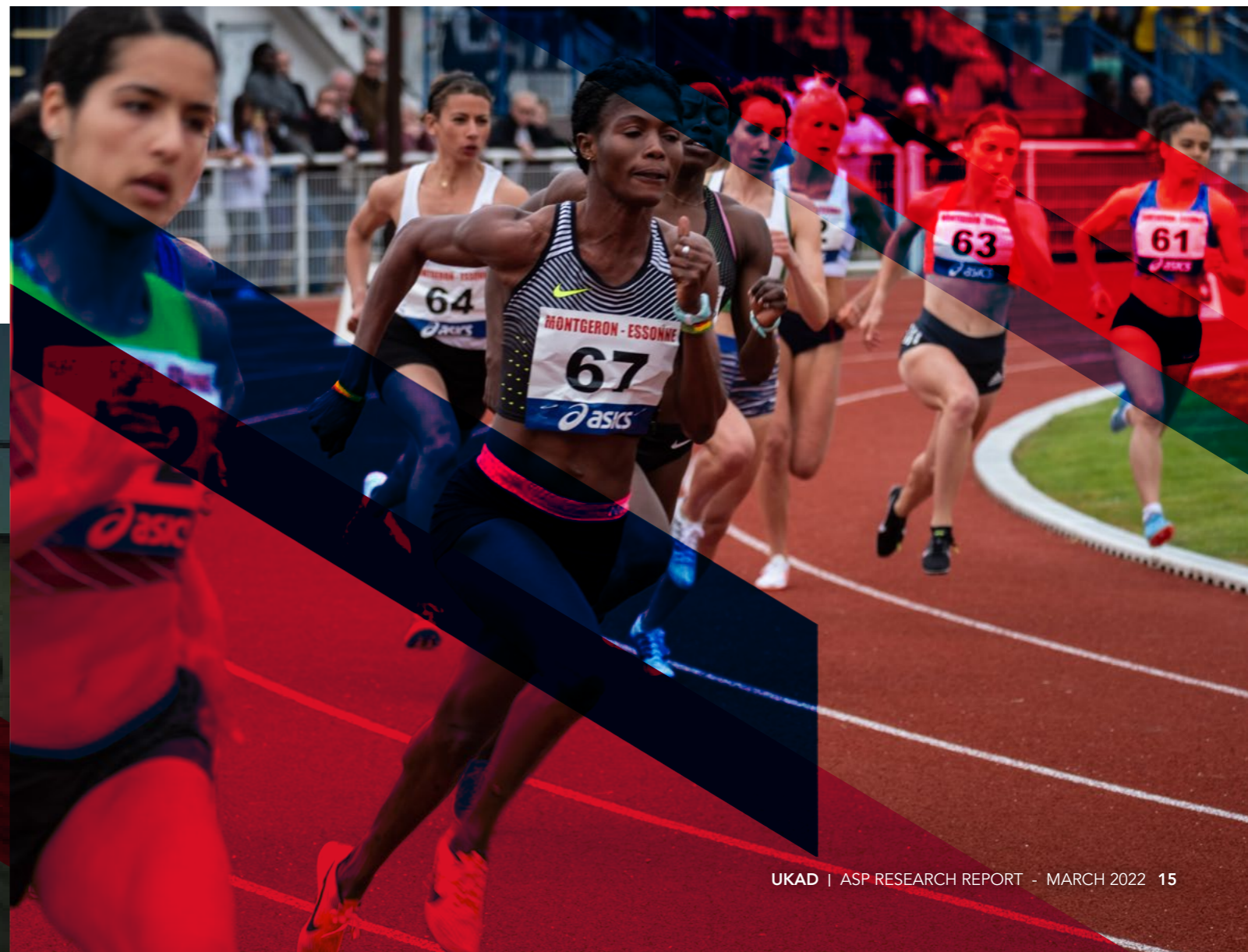
<sup>4</sup>Specific details of the knowledge quiz are available upon request.

## Resources and Support

Over a third of ASP respondents mentioned interacting with UKAD, including the Clean Sport Advisor Course (18%) and Educator Training (10%). Beyond UKAD, nine individuals reported receiving the **opportunity** to learn about clean sport (or seek anti-doping information) from the organisation with which they are affiliated (i.e., NGB, International Federation (IF), institute).

When questioned around the provision of clean sport information, ASP reported that additional resources (e.g., websites, leaflets) (5.6±1.5), policies (5.5±1.4) and protocols (5.4±1.6) were in place to support their anti-doping efforts. Beyond this, most ASP conveyed that the organisation to which they are associated provides opportunities for them to learn about anti-doping (5.6±1.5).

Respondents offered suggestions for future clean sport activities that may help UKAD create **tailored education**. Recommendations were diverse, spanning delivery methods, content, timing and other factors. For delivery methods, the most common suggestion was short, bite-sized, virtual interactive workshops. ASP requests focussed on tailored content, including sport-specific, real-life practical examples possibly involving former athletes in offering advice and sharing their own stories. Suggestions around timing indicated the need for regular prompts and ongoing support to ensure ASP remain up to date with their clean sport education.





## Phase 2 – Focus Groups

Following a four-week recruitment drive for practitioners to participate in the focus groups, six sessions were scheduled over a subsequent four-week period with each lasting 60-90 minutes. Ahead of the focus groups taking place, each practitioner was required to complete an online demographic survey and provide consent for their observations and recommendations to be

subsequently shared in a published report. The online discussions were designed to be free flowing with some guiding questions around their perception of clean sport, levels of confidence in themselves and others to deliver the clean sport message and their experiences of education and support, as well as proposals for what they would value as practitioners in the future.



## ASP Demographic

ASP who agreed to participate in these discussions (n=14), covered a range of practitioner roles (namely from the fields of sports medicine, sport science, nutrition, strength & conditioning and athlete education) and represented all four home countries (England 64%, Scotland 21%, Wales 7% and Northern Ireland 7%). These practitioners work across the performance sport landscape (Olympic/Paralympic 57%, Elite International 64%, National 71% and Professional 36%) with over 85% reporting to also support athletes in the talent pathway. With an average of 14±8 years' experience of supporting athletes at these levels, these ASP were well positioned to discuss their insight into and their experiences of clean sport and offer suggestions on

how UKAD could frame the education offering for ASP in the future. Similar to the Phase 1 survey, the highest academic achievements were typically at postgraduate level (64%) with a further subgroup (29%) having obtained a PhDs. Two-thirds of the ASP involved in the focus groups were members of one or more professional body associated with their discipline. A broad range of sports were represented across the focus groups (Figure 5), many ASP indicating they work across athlete groups supporting individual athletes (79%), teams (93%) and cross/multi-sports (64%). Most of these practitioners work in a full-time capacity (64%), whilst others were either self-employed (21%) or in a voluntary capacity (14%).<sup>5</sup>



## The Importance of Clean Sport

There was agreement amongst the ASP in the focus groups that a crucial element in their supporting role to athletes is to remind them of their responsibilities, signposting to appropriate information where applicable. Hence clean sport was viewed as an inherent part of their profession whereby they should be empowered to support athletes as and when required. Furthermore, ASP need to be mindful of consequences which could impact upon them personally, in the event that an athlete violates an anti-doping rule. ASP recommended a drive to encourage as many practitioners as possible to engage with clean sport messaging and improve their own knowledge and awareness to ensure positive conversations occur with colleagues and athletes.

**“...a duty to keep up to date for the athletes...”**

Strength and Conditioning (S&C) personnel were highlighted by many as being ideally placed to reiterate the message around supplements. It was deemed critical that these practitioners remain a positive role model and encourage athletes to make their own informed decisions. This includes full acknowledgement of the importance in assessing the need and risk of taking supplements and the ultimate consequences associated with inadvertent consumption of a banned substance.

**“Saying that ‘a food first approach is important’ contradicts the physical action of handing out a protein shake as their players walk off the pitch”**



Furthermore, the dressing-room or gym conversations that a S&C practitioner may be privy to (where a Sports Nutritionist or Sports Doctor may not) were noted as potentially crucial points for intervention by a well-informed ASP. By their own admission, discussions around clean sport have historically proven challenging between athletes and ASP, or even avoided unless there’s a positive finding, which has created a taboo around the subject. Therefore, it is important for ASP to develop the confidence to openly lead positive discussion on clean sport matters as a critical part of their supporting role.

However, ASP also acknowledged that the importance of working with senior athletes and encouraging them to be role models to the junior athletes, creating a positive yet informal education experience.

Newly qualified practitioners are keen and interested to learn more about clean sport and so this was proposed as an ideal time to develop and instil a commitment to a positive ethos around clean sport; ensuring the required education and surrounding conversations are commonplace and viewed as a duty rather than an inconvenience. There was also recognition that staff can sometimes be quite transient working as new practitioners, so it’s important that clean sport messaging remains strong and at the forefront of athlete support. The additional challenge for UKAD is the perception amongst some ASP that clean sport is purely a concern for athletes at the top of the pathway. However, this approach fails to acknowledge the bigger picture whereby an athlete on the talent pathway may get called up to a national camp, for example, but have no knowledge on why/where/how to check supplements and could therefore find themselves inadvertently failing a doping test.

All ASP agreed that practitioners must commit to clean sport education and there needed to be a more effective delivery plan in place, not just from UKAD but professional bodies, performance institutes and NGBs and other sporting organisations to achieve this. In addition, practitioners based in universities recognised the need for clean sport to feature across academic programmes for those staff supporting sports scholars and student athletes, to avoid a situation whereby an athlete’s dream is over before it truly begins. Some ASP went on to suggest that when an athlete reaches a certain level of competition, their supporting team should be mandated to complete clean sport education in some form, regardless of age of the athlete or the ASP concerned, to avoid athletes falling through the gaps in the pathway in terms of their own clean sport awareness and knowledge.

**“If we’re serious about clean sport, then there needs to be that commitment to include such education as a mandatory part of professional training”**



## Confidence & Knowledge

Within Olympic and Paralympic performance environments, all ASP and support staff will typically have to complete clean sport education as a mandatory element of their role, as continuous professional development, or it may even be specified on their job description. Such information is often held on record by their employer, so they receive reminders when their clean sport certification is due to expire. Although it was noted that this may be different across professional sports as their multidisciplinary teams may work in different ways.

ASP primarily reported feeling confident that knowledge levels are equal across the multidisciplinary team, albeit they all disseminate it differently dependant on their level of interaction with athletes and their desire to be proactive in terms of clean sport. Indeed, for those working with elite athletes heading for a Major Games and/or in professional sports arenas, clean sport is undoubtedly at the forefront across the ASP teams. Conversely, in environments where clean sport education is not a mandatory part of an ASP role but merely encouraged (when working with talent squads for example), then there is an impetus to complete the necessary learning in the first instance, but this is perhaps not renewed when it expires. Subsequently, these ASP report that this leads to mixed confidence across the multidisciplinary team within which they work, as some colleagues lack the ability to practically engage with athletes and signpost effectively as they have not kept up to date with recent developments.

It was noted that in some university-based performance organisations, the mandate to complete clean sport education extends to temporary staff and/or placement students working in auxiliary ASP roles, as well as sports team captains. The importance of basic knowledge in these individuals was highlighted due to their proximity in age to the typical athlete population, whereby the ad-hoc conversations may be more likely to occur. This signifies recognition that all ASP are in a position of influence even if it is simply to signpost an athlete to further information or advise they speak to an experienced colleague.

**“...colleagues may not be aware to the same level but in a [performance] environment, coaches would seek advice and support from the nutritionist”**

Naturally, Performance Nutritionists are more aware of the processes in place to monitor supplement companies associated with the sports within which they work. However, there was agreement that colleagues across the multidisciplinary team may not always have this awareness and therefore do not routinely suggest athletes seek nutritional support or advice before accessing a supplement. This signifies, in practice, that clean sport is not at the forefront of all their colleagues' minds.

S&C practitioners were again highlighted as critical to ensuring the supplement message guides all that they do with athletes; with the added suggestion they could reiterate their support of this message by being an active participant in group athlete learning. Performance Directors were typically noted to have a good understanding that any supplement or product, provided to their sport or athletes, needs to be in line with clean sport messaging and indeed not contravene any element of the Prohibited List; in fact, the clean sport aspect was reported to be their primary priority over any financial incentive.

**“Positive environments... where practitioners engage with clean sport... are supportive for both athletes and athlete support personnel...raising practitioner confidence in signposting athletes and colleagues correctly”**

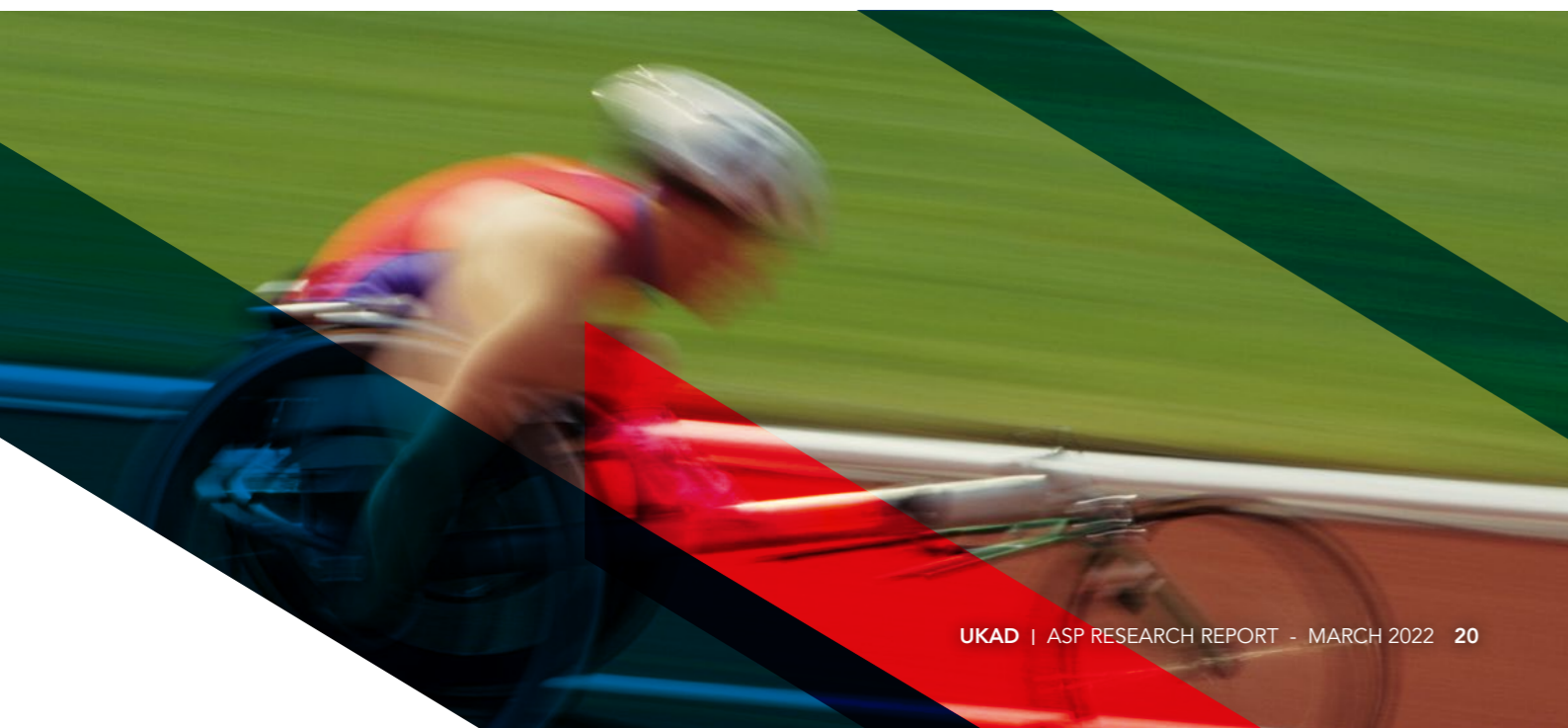
'Natural conversations' are reported to happen across multidisciplinary teams and with performance athletes regarding clean sport values and responsibilities. However, it was acknowledged that experience within professional sport demonstrated varying levels of knowledge in the professional team environment where non-batch tested supplements may be provided to athletes who were not encouraged to seek further advice.



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Such anecdotal evidence raises potential concerns over the awareness, knowledge and motivation of ASP to signpost their athletes to nutritionists for further advice.

With respect to reporting concerns, there was agreement across the focus groups that colleagues would typically speak to each other and/or the individual concerned in the first instance before deciding whether to take it further i.e., reporting to UKAD. However, they were confident that colleagues would undoubtedly try to do the right thing, albeit they may avoid reporting through formal channels for fear of damaging the reputation of the athlete, the sport or indeed themselves.



## Resources and Support



ASP advised that UKAD's current eLearning 'helps to piece the jigsaw together', empowering them to support athlete queries related to clean sport. Most ASP also reported using the available UKAD online resources in their efforts to support athletes. However, it was suggested that broader education on the physical health consequences could be a more effective way of engaging ASP. Similarly, extending knowledge of non-pharmaceutical products to overcome performance issues could be of greater interest to ASP than a pure focus on banned substances.

ASP stated that they look to UKAD as the expert in the field, and so any education and engagement opportunities should be primarily led by the UKAD brand, supported by the sports and institutions. Further recommendations included utilising UKAD Athlete Commission Members to convey messages, using positive storytelling, focussing on the support team that have helped them to navigate clean sport throughout their careers.

There was recognition that eLearning is the best format through which to deliver essential information, however some ASP admitted 'dreading' eLearning. Therefore, this crucial element needs to be retained, whilst remaining relevant to the audience and kept to a minimum where possible. Additional information and updates may be better delivered through regular posts via professional bodies, sport or institute channels.

Despite a widely positive and supportive environment for athletes and ASP, there were some reports that individuals are not always overly enthusiastic to complete ongoing clean sport CPD. However, this may be reversed if the focus shifted towards opportunities to discuss pertinent topics and bringing practical situations to life. Encouraging self-reflection and the understanding of their influence upon athletes, alongside the potential impact of an ADRV upon themselves as ASP, may offer a more attractive opportunity to develop as a practitioner.

## **“The opportunity to collaborate and interact with others in a group format would be far more effective than the traditional lecture, Q&A-type session”**

Acknowledging that they all have the potential to influence an athlete at some point, there was consensus across the focus groups that practical discussions, using real-life case studies from within their sport and/or discipline, alongside scenario-planning would be invaluable in being able to recognise where they can offer appropriate support to their athletes. However, ASP recommended there would need to be a balance with the time commitment and the value of the session which should be made relevant to the different roles within an athlete's support network. There was common agreement that practitioners relish the opportunity to share experiences within their discipline-specific groups and learn how others have faced similar challenges, which would again have a direct impact on future decision-making when similar challenges arise.

Multidisciplinary teams often come together to discuss pertinent issues in performance sport settings signifying this may also prove an appropriate and familiar environment for clean sport discussions to be facilitated, especially where they share a common purpose or motivation – their athletes. It was noted that the opportunity to reflect on clean sport issues in the period following a Major Games could also be beneficial in terms of influencing behaviour going forwards. Essentially, there's the potential to ensure genuine impact on the working practice of ASP across the board by 'planting the seeds for further discussions' and ultimately for confidence to grow in themselves and their team.

There was a preference for face-to-face opportunities over virtual sessions, in terms of encouraging open discussion. However, where webinars are to be used for mass education of ASP, in the build-up to a Major Games for example as part of national team preparations, they need to have a purpose – “be clear in what is on offer and how it meets the needs of the ASP” – as webinars can still be great places for discussion.

Clean sport education delivered at training camps, conferences and even CPD in their own disciplines, often focusses on the athlete but this should be an opportunity to develop the ASP. There was suggestion that UKAD should utilise such events to place specific emphasis upon best practice and working scenarios to effectively develop those practitioners to in turn protect the athlete, the sport and themselves. ASP also highlighted that there is a surprising lack of anti-doping or drugs in sport related research currently presented at worldwide sport science and medicine conferences. ASP felt that UKAD should drive the promotion of research activity in the field whilst also having a presence at such events to further signify the underlying importance of clean sport. Simultaneously, this would also increase UKAD's accessibility to those practitioners who do not work within a performance institute but may support sports people through their private consultancy, therefore helping to minimise high-risk situations for the athletes.

## **“...make everyone think about the 'random' comments which could land in a way which lead to an athlete making a poor decision without due diligence”**

In terms of alternative ways of educating ASP, a common theme across all focus groups was the importance of hearing real-life case-studies through interview format, which could feature as a series of podcasts and may prove a popular engagement tool with ASP. As long as it is packaged appropriately, even a two to five-minute video could be an effective and impactful way of reinforcing clean sport messages. This may also lead to higher levels of engagement due to the bite-sized nature of delivery. This type of educational content could be included in a quarterly email to all who have completed the UKAD's eLearning with some additional and/or updated information, potentially followed by a brief knowledge check. Essentially this would be a simple form of ongoing CPD which isn't time-consuming but aims to 'keep clean sport at the forefront of the minds of ASP'.

Importantly, ASP requested a thematic approach to the schedule for such educational opportunities so that the content remains relevant and timely. ASP also suggested that a focus on how reporting a concern can produce a positive outcome may highlight the importance of UKAD's Protect Your Sport campaign messaging, breaking down the barriers over coming forward with information in the interest of protecting sport.

Position statements were also proposed as a useful signposting resource in terms of clarifying 'grey areas', particularly where certain types of supplements or functional foods are concerned. Summaries of such position statements in infographic format are useful and easily shared on social media channels, for example, which may prove more popular than a written update by email or newsletter especially if the focus is upon what it means for the ASP. Conversely, ASP warn that too many infographics can lose their impact so utilising a variety of media could be more effective.

Finally, ASP who find themselves working alongside a UKAD National Trainer (NT) and/or Doping Control Personnel (DCP), reported finding this an invaluable supportive resource. Therefore, there was a proposal that a regional network of NT/DCP across the UK, who could be available to respond to queries raised by ASP, could be a credible solution to ASP seeking further support (akin to an 'ASP Helpline'). This could also become the ongoing mechanism through which ASP could feedback their experiences of clean sport to UKAD which in turn could be collated and shared, alongside specific use of focussed social media campaigns aimed at ASP.

## Summary

The aim of the survey and focus groups conducted during 2021 was to investigate behaviours of athlete support personnel and their influence upon clean sport. Following an initial survey phase, focus groups explored the identified themes in more depth and consolidated the findings with specific focus on perception, confidence and recommendations for future educational support for this influential group of practitioners.

There has been positive engagement in both phases of this investigation from sport medicine practitioners; conversely it has been notably difficult to gather opinion from within strength and conditioning. This has been identified as an area within which UKAD will continue to build relationships, recognising the key influence these practitioners have upon athletes as part of the multidisciplinary team. It is also recognised that those ASP who volunteered to participate in either investigative phase are more likely to be of a positive mindset towards clean sport, thus the recommendations may be skewed towards this perspective.

### Key Findings

- **ASP have a commitment to clean sport and a professional responsibility to their athletes and the sports within which they provide support**
- **Their 'duty' focuses on behaviours and actions related to protecting the health & well-being and caring for the athlete**
- **Clean sport education should be a mandatory element of supporting athletes, embedded into their development as practitioners**
- **Some ASP have potential for greater influence upon athletes, however greater confidence in consistent clean sport messaging is sought across support teams**
- **Opportunities to engage in discussion with fellow ASP, within their performance environments and across the UK-wide network, are insightful and effective**
- **Any educational content needs to be specific to the needs of practitioners, remaining relevant to their working environment and the athletes they support**

In summary, the topical nature of any educational content, driven by the audience as opposed to didactic teaching methods, should encourage the greatest impact. Therefore, a multi-faceted approach needs to be considered when attempting to raise the profile and engagement of ASP in positive discussion around clean sport issues. UKAD is keen to embrace the support of performance institutes, professional bodies and academic institutions in this process; as well as

anti-doping leads within NGBs across the UK as they embark on the implementation of their own education strategies in line with the new UK National Anti-Doping Policy and Assurance Framework, launched in April 2021.

Empowering practitioners to develop as individuals through whatever means should effectively raise their confidence to utilise support mechanisms when broaching difficult conversations with each other and/or with their athlete(s).



# Next Steps for UKAD

What will it look like for Athlete Support Personnel?



Figure 6. Considerations when engaging with ASP around Clean Sport issues

Bringing together the insights gathered from across the survey and the focus groups, there are three components which are going to be critical in unlocking the desired behaviour in practitioners, which in turn should elicit a positive influence upon athletes (Figure 6).

1. **Commitment** – recognition from key stakeholders that clean sport is a professional duty to athletes through codes of conduct, ensuring consistent signposting in their support to athletes alongside efforts to keep it on the radar of all ASP.
2. **Resources & Support** – in alignment with UKAD’s Education strategy, engagement with tailored education, through opportunities to fulfill eLearning requirements, share best practice through collaboration with others, whilst also encouraging self-reflection.
3. **Leadership** – motivated by UKAD’s commitment to drive the clean sport research agenda and work to provide consensus statements in known ‘grey’ areas, ultimately building on its reputation as the expert in the field.

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Protecting Sport

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