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Safeguarding soccer from the Etihad to Urmston

With Manchester City sitting atop what we still like to call the First Division *The Leisure Review* went to Sport City to speak with Nic Scott, a man charged with delivering the four Cs of safeguarding for the league leaders.

Much has been said and written about who should use the Stratford Olympic stadium when next year's five-ring circus leaves town, with one argument being that allowing a professional football club to use it would benefit the money-makers in and behind that club but leave no tangible legacy. In East Manchester the behemoth formerly known as the City of Manchester stadium, built for the last major games the UK hosted, continues to support the counter argument that goes: "That depends which club." The deal done by Manchester City, the council, and Manchester City, the football club, continues, nine years on from the Commonwealth Games, to bring unheralded benefits to the local population and is one of the reasons why the Eastlands enclave of the city can genuinely be called a community.

One small cog in the not inconsiderable machine which is helping sustain the mostly unseen part of this revolution is the football club's head of safeguarding, Nic Scott, a man whose departure from a similar role in the entirely dissimilar Rugby Football Union was a leap into the unknown. "To come here was a new challenge," he says, "in part because it was a pure safeguarding role, and the scope of the role is just massive. You don't realise just how big these club operations are until you get here." His move from a governing body currently being described as the most dysfunctional in the country to a slick commercial machine which is delivering results in every aspect of its operation, and all with a different-shaped ball, was something of a culture shock but a not unwelcome one.

That Scott was tempted into football is remarkable given how much of a 'rugby man' he is. Having spent three years at Staffordshire University playing rugby, running the rugby club and, by his own admission, "not much else", he spent three years finding his feet in the sport and leisure industry before "taking a punt" with a new style of job. "I started working for the RFU as what was then a YDO [youth development officer], bag of balls in the boot doing schools every day. At that point the whole rugby development programme was changing under Andrew Scouler, the then new head of community rugby." It was under Scouler that youth development officers became rugby development managers with a more strategic focus to their work programmes, a development which suited Scott's skillset. He rose to the rank of regional manager in the West Midlands before moving into a role at the governing body's Twickenham headquarters, a post that "was equity, welfare and medical at that time".

Even when talking to a man who can be as guarded as Scott it is clear that in recent years the RFU has not been a comfortable place to be employed. The machinations at the very top of the Twickenham hierarchy have been well documented but less is known about how they affected the large staff team. As befits someone whose work can involve very sensitive issues Scott is a diplomatic man but his account of the background to his decision to move to the blue half of Manchester does shed some light.

On the retirement of Francis Baron, UK Sport's chief executive, John Steele was appointed and a restructure began. "That restructuring process was an interesting time – still is an interesting time – for people at Twickenham. There was a real re-focussing back on rugby and that would have left my areas of work, particularly the equity and inclusion – by then I was equity, inclusion and safeguarding manager – put to one side." Scott pauses and tries to be precise. "Equity and inclusion was always important to the RFU but not central to the delivery of programmes and, although 'rugby is a game for all', equity and inclusion was always something that was added on." Unsure of what the future held, when "five or six directors moved out on a Monday morning" he pre-

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empted any threat to his job and “in order to get some interview experience” he responded to an advertisement, was surprised to get an interview and was offered the job.

Asked to explain what his role now entails, Scott is succinct and enthusiastic. He must deliver in four areas, all of which happily begin with C: culture, checks, cases and courses. Of these, he emphasises the first and it is reassuring to hear the same sorts of messages coming from a big football club as are delivered by grassroots community clubs from across the sporting spectrum. A position statement called @cityandsafe appositely describes where safeguarding fits in the culture of the club, making the case that it should be seen as “a thread not a blanket”. This is explained with: “Good safeguarding practice takes many forms. It is a thread, not normally visible, that weaves through all activities that involve children and vulnerable adults. It is not a blanket that shrouds everything it covers; it should always be there but should allow the core business to flourish and not be impeded by unnecessary bureaucracy.”

It is when Scott lists the areas where the club touches the community and where safeguarding needs to be addressed that the size and reach of Manchester City becomes apparent. “I have a remit across the business, wherever the business comes into contact with children or vulnerable adults, to ensure that checks, the vetting of the workforce, which covers any new, full-time, permanent staff to any volunteers that work with us, takes place.” As he names the various people that have sufficient access to young people on a regular basis to warrant a CRB check, it is apparent that the tentacles of the City octopus spread far and wide. He lists coaches, in the community and in the academy, scouts who can be full-time, casual or volunteers, stewards in the stadium itself; it is apparent that “there is always somebody from the club in contact with children or vulnerable adults in one context or another”. In fact Scott estimates that his team will see more than 500 people having to be vetted in any one calendar year, and that number is increasing as the club’s profile grows.

Returning to his role, Scott touches on “cases” and speaks of the ever-present potential for a problem. “It’s dead easy for someone to slip up and before we know it we’ll be in the local, regional and national newspapers for all the wrong reasons. We want to be off the front page and on the back page, and for the right reasons.” When issues become “cases” it is Scott’s job to deal with them, although his current worry is that he risks becoming “rusty” as, and here everybody touches wood, he has not yet been called upon in this context.

Comprehensive vetting procedures alone do not keep Scott happily, if slightly warily, redundant: “Whereas the vetting procedures, the CRB checks, are a vital tool they deal with historical risk and they need to be twinned to a good safeguarding policy which covers all the bases and creates a culture in the club where the welfare of children and vulnerable adults is taken seriously by everybody.” Making sure everyone at the club knows how they can contribute to keeping the club a safe environment is part of induction and ongoing training processes – the ‘courses’ part of the four Cs – which mean Scott leads a team of eight designated safeguarding officers “across the business”. The commitment to resourcing this aspect of the football club matches, in its own way, the commitment of resources to the playing side, with the same end: “to be a world leading club in terms of safeguarding”.

Asked to comment as a significant player in the development of safeguarding in sport how we as a nation are doing, Scott first denies that he is and then references the NSPCC Child Protection in Sport Unit, which recently held a conference to mark its first ten years in existence. “The landscape has shifted a long, long way in that time,” he says, “and I have been very glad to be part of it. It’s been an uphill struggle always to fight for the resources to fight for the platform to get the message across. Sometimes you come across people who are fully committed, some people who say they are committed and are not and then those who are disinterested; and the further you can commit along that continuum the better. But there are a hell of a lot of people out there doing good work. Multi-agency working has been fantastic. I spent Friday afternoon talking to XCalibre, the police gang culture team in Manchester, for example, and that shows we have come such a long way in such a short time and it’s great to be part of that.”

Seeing behind the scenes of a major football operation is full of little surprises and a conversation with Nic Scott provides a few more but the reassuringly surprising thing is that despite his years specialising in safeguarding and its four Cs he remains a sports development officer with a passion for helping young

and not-so-young people access and enjoy sport. It is no surprise at all to find that he brings a fifth C to his new role: commitment. Of all Manchester City's big-name signings this one may provide longer term benefit for the community of East Manchester than all the others put together.

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