

PROFESSIONAL FOOTBALLERS AUSTRALIA



SAFE FOOTBALL PROJECT

2024 SNAP REPORT



SUPPORTING THE PLAYERS | BUILDING THE GAME

SUPPORTING THE PLAYERS BUILDING THE GAME



Professional Footballers Australia

2/55 Walsh Street,
West Melbourne VIC 3003
1300 650 497 / info@pfa.net.au

www.pfa.net.au



In the spirit of reconciliation, Professional Footballers Australia acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia.

We also acknowledge and pay our respects to the Traditional Owners and Elders past, present, and emerging throughout Australia, and recognise their continuing connection to land, waters, laws, and culture. They hold the memories, traditions, cultures, and hopes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of Australia.

The PFA is a NoCO2 business certified by the Carbon Reduction Institute (CRI).



The PFA is a proud member of the Welcome Here Project, which supports businesses and services throughout Australia to create and promote environments that are visibly welcoming and inclusive of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ) communities.



This work is copyright. The Copyright Act 1968 permits fair dealing for the purposes of research, news reporting, criticism or review. Selected passages, tables or diagrams may be reproduced for such purposes, provided acknowledgement of the source is included. Major extracts may not be reproduced by any process without written permission of the publisher.



SUPPORT

Trigger warning

This report contains information relating to incidents of abuse in football. The references are included to provide an accurate representation of the challenges faced by players, so that all those responsible for protecting them understand the scope and scale of the problem.

While the report does not contain detailed or first-hand accounts of abuse, we acknowledge that its findings, including those highlighting the scale of abuse and institutional failures to act, can be distressing and triggering.

We encourage those directly or indirectly impacted by abuse to be kind to themselves and exercise self-care when reading the report. While the voices of those with lived experience should always be included in building solutions, it is ultimately the responsibility of governing bodies to deliver on those. Please do not feel obligated to read on if you feel triggered and seek support if needed.

Support is available through the following avenues:

PFA Mental Health Referral Network

This service ensures that PFA members and their immediate family members can access confidential counselling services from psychologists with the costs associated with this service covered by the PFA. Players can access this service through their Player Development Manager or directly via the network: intake@themindroom.com.au. Simply identify yourself as a PFA member, and they will schedule a consultation with one of their psychologists.

The PFA

All the PFA's Player Development Managers have completed the World Players Association's Ready to Respond training, a course designed to equip player association staff to exercise a 'duty of care' for athletes suffering the effects of trauma and/or disclosing abuse or harassment in sport. PFA Members can contact their PDM via <https://pfa.net.au/player-development-managers/>

1800 Respect

1800 Respect is the national domestic, family and sexual violence counselling, information and support service. Call 1800 737 732, text 0458 737 732, chat online or video call via <https://www.1800respect.org.au/>

Additional Resources

World Players Association: Ready to Respond Handbook. A players association guide to support athletes through abuse, harassment, and trauma. Access via: <https://files.cargocollective.com/c520687/CARE-handbook.pdf>

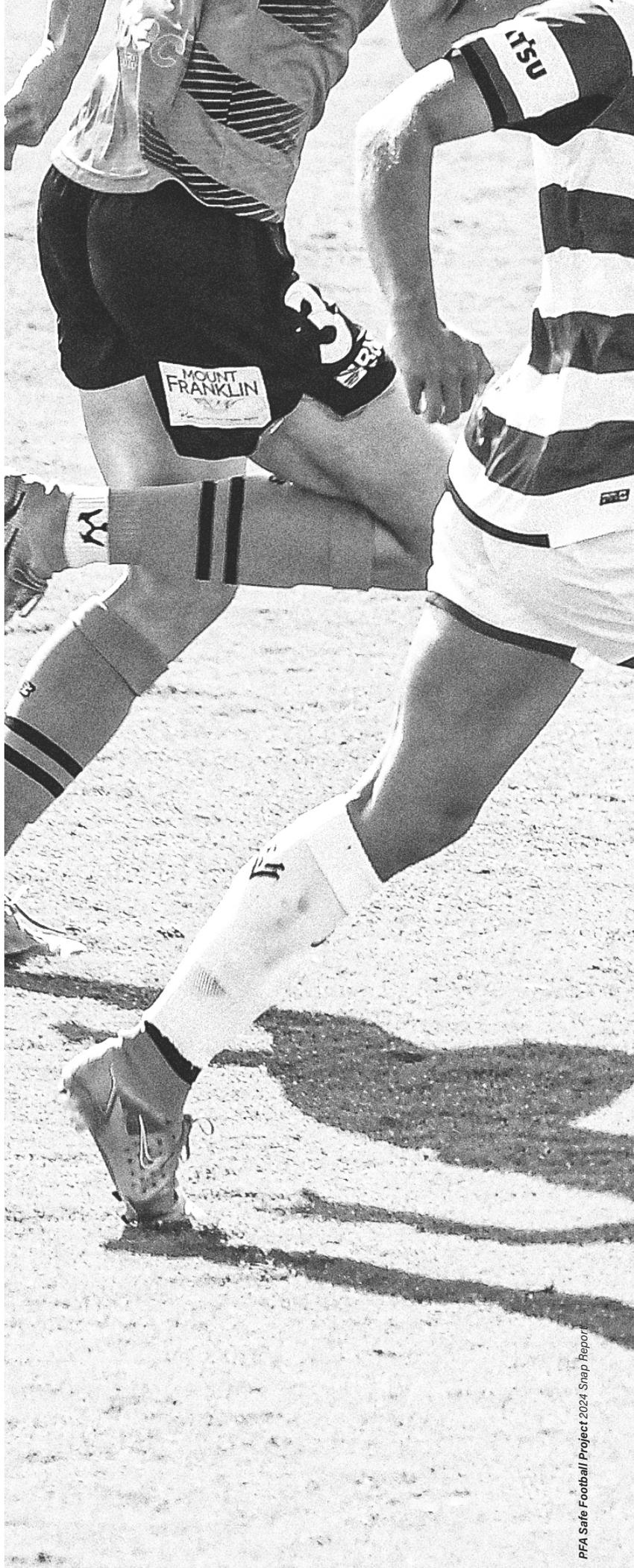
UNESCO: Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls in Sport. Access via: https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-07/3343_unwomen_unesco_vawg_handbook_6a_singlepage.pdf

World Players Association: Establishing Safe Sport Entities. Access via: <https://uniglobalunion.org/wp-content/uploads/WPA-Establishing-Effective-Safe-Sport-Entities-Guidance-2022.pdf>

FIFPRO: Abuse in Football. Lessons Learned, Calls for Action and FIFPRO's Commitment. Access via: <https://www.fifpro.org/media/qxuhr0av/no-more-silence-action-against-abuse.pdf>

CONTENTS

05	<i>Foreword</i>
06	<i>Player Consultation Group Message</i>
07	<i>Abuse in Football</i>
08	<i>The Safe Football Project</i>
10	<i>PFA Survey Results</i>
12	<i>Player Engagement and Feedback</i>
13	<i>Routes to Remedy</i>
14	<i>PFA Recommendations</i>



FOREWORD



A safe workplace is a universal human right

A safe workplace is a universal human right.

However, professional football has often fallen short of protecting and respecting this right, by exposing athletes to a range of health, safety, and wellbeing risks.

Football demands a physical workload that stresses the body and mind and operates in a hyper-masculine and hyper-competitive environment. Its win-at-all cost mentality often places the needs of its people below the pursuit of trophies and results.

Whilst safeguarding frameworks have evolved, this culture of prioritising success over safety remains entrenched, resulting in serious harm to players.

Sport has largely failed to respond effectively to both the emergence of high-profile abuse cases globally, and the day-to-day challenges players face.

In their duty to protect players, player associations have played a central role in responding to abuse in football and ensuring affected players receive appropriate remedy.

In response to abuse revelations and non-recent assault allegations from Matildas legend Lisa De Vanna, the PFA initiated the 'Safe Football Project' (the Project) in 2021.

Leveraging expertise from the global football players' union FIFPRO and the World Players' Association – the leading voice of organised players in the governance of world sport – and other human rights experts, the Project aims to enhance the PFA's capacity to respond to abuse within football and proactively protect players.

The Project remains in development, but if successful, it may become a framework adopted by unions across the world to protect professional footballers.

This snap report provides a preliminary overview of the key areas of the Project, its purpose, and the areas where the PFA has developed its capacity to respond to abuse in football.

Whilst this topic is confronting, the absence of a safe workplace can be devastating for footballers. The PFA is committed to playing its part in ensuring football is the Australia's safest sport. That starts with transparently acknowledging the game's failings and then devising an effective response.

Kathryn Gill and Beau Busch
PFA Co-Chief Executives

PLAYER CONSULTATION GROUP MESSAGE

As players, it is extremely challenging to speak up and raise concerns in the football environment, especially given the significant impact this can have on our careers.

Since allegations were raised about abuse, bullying and harassment in Australian women's football, our union, the PFA, in consultation with the players, sought to better understand the problem and work proactively with experts to create and implement a framework that ensures we are operating in a safe workplace.

As interest in and awareness of women's football continues to grow, whether at the grassroots, community, or professional level, it is the responsibility of everyone involved in administrating and regulating the sport to ensure that the players operate in a safe environment.

As members of the Safe Football Project Player Consultation Group, we have sought to help shape the Project by ensuring that it is co-developed by the very people it is designed to protect, so that football is safe for current players and those who follow us.

To ensure this is the case, through the Project we have shone a light on the need for football to be more proactive in this space, honestly assessing where we have fallen short and having the courage to address our gaps and deficiencies.

We are all passionate about making a difference through this Project.

It is our hope that this report, drawing on player experiences and expert consultation and through its recommendations, will allow us to tackle the flaws in the current system to ensure that football can deliver a safer workplace for all.



ABUSE IN FOOTBALL

Football is a unique workplace environment. The high-performance culture can lead to abusive behaviour that can cause serious harm to players.

Even conduct that falls short of abuse, but nevertheless infringes workplace regulations, can have long-term negative impacts on players' health, wellbeing and performance. Conduct that would not be tolerated in workplaces outside of the elite sporting context is often overlooked or even encouraged in football.

Examples can include coaches making medical decisions on behalf of players without appropriate clinical input, players being forced to train alone as a form of punishment, clubs

withholding or delaying payments, contracts not being honoured, shouting at or ostracising players, holding private meetings or body shaming athletes.

FIFPRO, the global players' union, has assisted and continues to help multiple players who have suffered sexual abuse in professional football.

In 2021, FIFPRO released a report titled *Abuse in Football: Lessons Learned & Calls For Action*. The report summarises FIFPRO's analysis of the conditions that allow sexual misconduct, harassment, and abuse to manifest.

Among the report's findings were:

Unique features of the football industry place players at a higher risk of sexual abuse

This includes coaching techniques requiring physical contact and prolonged training hours – both of which can be used to disguise abuse.

The sports industry still lacks effective, transparent and accessible protection

While important steps have been taken, there is a lack of regulatory oversight and safe reporting mechanisms, and cases are often only brought to light once they have already reached a tragically high human cost.

FIFPRO advocates for a system of protection to be in place for all players

This includes safe and effective ways to report sexual abuse, assistance in resulting legal processes, and witness protection and support programmes for those who have been subjected to abuse.

The link to the report can be found [here](#).



For a long time, we had all convinced ourselves that these experiences were normal. I had assumed that this 'machista' environment built on exploitive control and degradation was the price a woman athlete had to pay to be a professional player.

- Venezuela National Team Player

THE SAFE FOOTBALL PROJECT

In October 2021, former Matilda Lisa De Vanna disclosed details of alleged sexual harassment, indecent assault, grooming, and bullying throughout her career. De Vanna recounted the incidents, which occurred in 2001 when she was a member of the Young Matildas, via an interview with *ESPN Australia*.

De Vanna's revelations coincided with a wave of high-profile abuse cases in women's football, notably the systemic abuse in the National Women's Soccer League (NWSL) in the US, revealed by investigative reporting by *The Athletic*.

These cases followed decades of systemic abuse in football – with instances emerging in Gabon, Argentina, Venezuela, Sierra Leone, Spain, Afghanistan, Haiti and, most recently, Ireland.

In each case, a common theme was governing bodies' inability to adequately prevent, address and remedy the cases of abuse, and protect the courageous players who spoke out and sought systemic change.

This was reflected in Australia, where the PFA raised concerns about the shortcomings of Sport Integrity Australia's (SIA) investigation into abuse in Australian football, including the five-month investigation's restricted scope and narrow terms of reference. The PFA was not consulted during the investigation. SIA subsequently ruled that 25 of 27 complaints were out of scope. This only served to undermine and silence players, as well as potential future victims and survivors.

Prompted by these circumstances, the PFA recognised the need to review its processes for supporting and safeguarding players.

The following page lists actions the PFA implemented in response to the domestic and global prevalence of abuse in football.

CODE SPORTS

Australian football alleged toxic culture review: PFA boss Beau Busch responds to findings

Australian football's players union says the sport has "missed an opportunity" after 25 claims made during an investigation into an alleged toxic culture were unable to be looked into.

“*Football has missed an opportunity to make our sport safer... the current framework isn't good enough. If the reporting mechanism was unable to deal with the overwhelming majority of complaints, then its capacity to deliver a safer game was diminished.*”

- PFA Co-Chief Executive Beau Busch on the Sport Integrity Australia investigation, via Code Sports, 2021



All the PFA's Player Development Managers (PDM) have completed the World Players Association's Ready to Respond training, a course designed to equip player association

staff to exercise a 'duty of care' for athletes suffering the effects of trauma and/or disclosing abuse or harassment in sport.



The PFA has engaged Kat Craig, a human rights lawyer with significant experience in sexual abuse, harassment and trauma, to provide expert support for the development of the Project. Craig is the CEO and Founder of a not-for-profit consultancy specialising in sport

and human rights, with a particular expertise in discrimination and athlete activism. The PFA also drew on an extensive review of the complexities of Australia's domestic legal routes to remedy, conducted pro bono by global law firm Clifford Chance.



The organisation has enhanced the expertise and capacity of the PFA's mental health referral network to respond to bullying, abuse, and harassment more effectively.



The Project will develop player education programs focused on embedding player voice, expert support and insights, and co-creation of solutions, and will be player-centred and trauma informed.



In 2022 and 2023 the PFA surveyed A-League Women players. The results highlighted the prevalence of abuse in Australian domestic football, allowing the PFA to better understand their experiences and areas of concern.



The PFA recognised the need for a supplementary framework to existing reporting mechanisms within Australian football. As a result, the union sought guidance from its affiliation with FIFPRO. FIFPRO previously represented players in cases of systemic abuse.

They built a framework for protecting players' rights to ensure a safe environment free from sexual misconduct and harassment.

The Guardian
A decade of making a difference

Australia's football union announces plan to tackle abuse and harassment of players

- Study found quarter of female players experience harassment
- Professional Footballers Australia to improve safeguards



Ahead of the Women's World Cup the Professional Footballers Australia union has announced its plan to tackle abuse and harassment of players. Photograph: Socrates Images/Getty Images



This is a complex problem, and as such, we did not immediately have all the answers, but through global experts and the commitment of the players, we have been able to enhance the capacity and expertise of PFA to both respond and proactively prevent abuse, bullying and harassment.

- PFA Co-Chief Executive Kathryn Gill, via The Guardian

PFA SURVEY RESULTS



In 2022 and 2023, the PFA conducted an anonymous survey of the experiences of A-League Women players in elite football.

Summary

2022

138 players completed the ALW end of season survey in 2022*

27% reported some form of abuse

* Not all surveyed answered questions related to abuse

2023

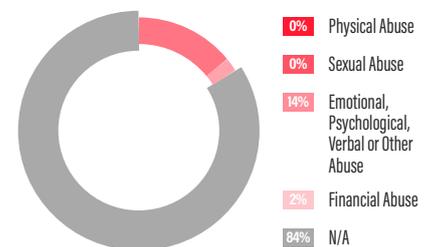
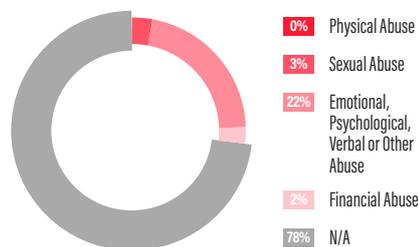
172 players completed the ALW end of season survey in 2023*

16% reported some form of abuse

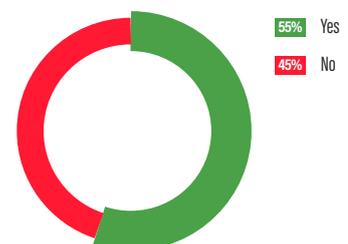
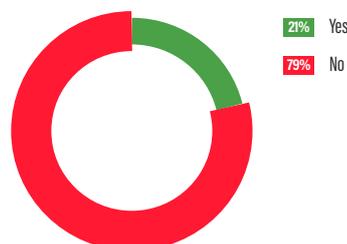
* Not all surveyed answered questions related to abuse

Survey Feedback

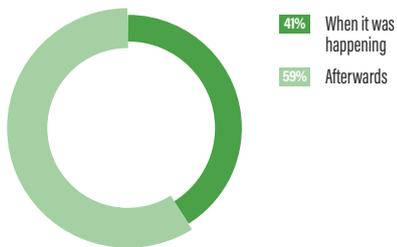
Abuse is increasingly common in women's football. Have you, or a player you know, ever experienced any of the following forms of abuse?



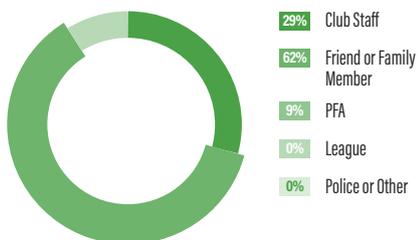
If you have experienced harassment or abuse, did you tell anyone about it?



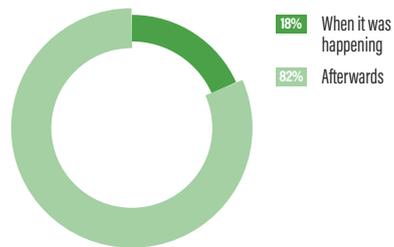
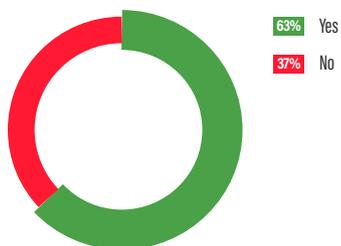
When did you tell someone about it?



Who did you tell?

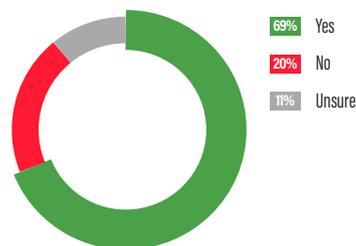


In terms of support, have you ever been informed, by a club, league or FA official, about who you should speak to if you have any concerns around abuse?



Responses included:

- "Friends"
- "Family"
- "Head of women's football opps"
- "Other players - then told PDM in person"
- "Other players from the leadership group"
- "Players and coaches were aware of it but nothing happened"
- "Other players and some staff. Staff witnessed and knew but never stepped in/did anything"



PLAYER ENGAGEMENT AND FEEDBACK

The 2022 survey results provided a platform for direct engagement with PFA members and the opportunity to embed the players' experience and voice into the design of the Project.

The PFA established a Player Consultation Group (PCG), with workshops designed to engage players, gather information, and propose a framework co-created by players.

The players' feedback provided important insights to the survey findings and the most pressing areas the Project must address. These insights are listed below.

Insights



1

The players confirmed that, as younger players, they were often not aware that the workplace they operated in "was not the greatest". Many players simply didn't understand that the behaviour and conduct they were experiencing was not appropriate. This was in part because football is such a unique workplace as it brings teenagers – 14, 15, 16, and 17-year-olds – into a competitive and adult work environment. Players of all ages are expected to perform their duties at the same level as an adult.



2

The players identified a particular lack of support for players that are underage and inexperienced and a particular risk of them being exploited.



3

The players said that currently the culture and safety was far too dependent on the individual personalities running the club. This leads to inconsistency from one year to another.



4

The players suggested creating a regular safe space to discuss negative issues and raise positive experiences.



5

The players also said the PFA's Club Culture Index, developed in the PFA's ALW end of season survey, was a positive initiative to track feedback in relation to club culture, including honesty, respect, communication, togetherness and professionalism. The players thought this should be linked to player education so that players start asking questions like - Is my workplace safe? Is it a good environment? Am I going to have fun? Do I want to show up?



6

Through the PCG, the PFA plans to develop a player charter of rights, emphasising player-centric solutions.

ROUTES TO REMEDY

Clifford Chance Recommendations

As part of the Project, the PFA and lawyer Kat Craig worked with leading global law firm Clifford Chance to provide legal advice and assistance on the routes to remedy available for athletes who have experienced abuse in the course of their employment by an Australian professional league club.

Clifford Chance identified the following challenges within the current reporting structures:

Whilst abuse can be dealt with via the existing grievance mechanisms under the player contracts, the process is focused on sanction or disciplinary action of the perpetrator and not redress for the victim.

The scope of jurisdiction across the various codes and disciplinary bodies incorporated into the player contracts is complex and difficult to navigate. When combined with potential routes to remedy outside the contract, anyone trying to navigate their rights and remedies could be easily confused.

The player contracts do not provide for any compensatory damages for players who are victims of abuse.

Clifford Chance recommended that the PFA:

Advocate for changes to the player contract to incorporate:

- A contractual requirement for FA, Clubs and other organisational bodies to provide a safe place of work.
- An addition to the form of sanctions, to permit awards of compensatory damages to victims.
- An addition to the grievance process, to specifically provide for victims to submit a victim impact statement to the relevant disciplinary body and for this to be considered as part of the decision making on sanctions.

Consider ways for players to access independent legal advice regarding court and non-court routes to remedy via the PFA.

Assess means to gather historical data on claims made and sanctions imposed relating to abuse.

PFA RECOMMENDATIONS

The historical and systemic abuse cases that have emerged within football, the feedback from A-League Women players and the PFA's PCG, demonstrate that significant and urgent change is needed to deliver a safe workplace free of abuse, harassment and misconduct.

It should not be revolutionary that players wish to be treated in the same way an employee would be treated in any other functional workforce in line with core human rights standards.

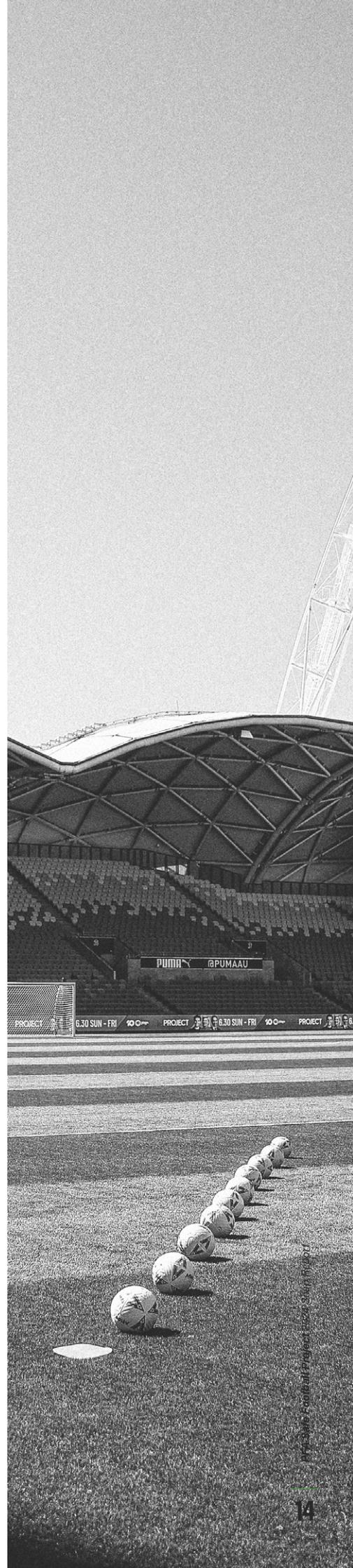
The Project is a vehicle for a safer workplace. To deliver on the Project's objective, the PFA recommends:

A Collaborative, Wholesale Review



A wholesale review of current safeguarding frameworks, co-managed by the PFA with key stakeholders (including the Government, Football Australia and the Australian Professional Leagues), focusing on power dynamics, organisational culture, player voice, coach education, remedy routes, policy review, and bystander intervention. We recommend that the scope of that review include:

- The efficacy and suitability of the autonomous regulation of sport, what responsible autonomy can and should entail, and suitable standards attached to Government grants and funding.
- A detailed reflection on how organisational leadership and culture can be shifted to a human-first focus, with associated KPIs.
- A focus on sustained inclusion and elevation of player voice.
- A review of coach education and qualifications to include a focus on self-regulation, human rights and gender dynamics.
- A review of the existing routes to remedy and their efficacy and accessibility from a player perspective.
- A review of all policies and procedures.



Interim Actions



In addition to a comprehensive review, we recommend that the following urgent interim actions be taken:

- Fund and create an independently operated “landing space”, run by trusted peers and representatives whose sole remit is to protect the players’ interests, where players can ventilate concerns, including on an anonymous basis.
- Create an emergency protocol to deal with concerns that fall short of complaints, or complaints of behaviour that fall short of disciplinary breaches, so that – from a safeguarding not disciplinary perspective – interim measures (such as supervision) can be implemented.
- Support player education initiatives that increase awareness of their rights and how to seek remedy where those rights are not respected and protected.
- Increased independent support for players when their experience falls below those standards. This includes both formal complaints and concerns in a pre-investigatory stage.
- Co-create and publish a charter of rights that can be placed in the locker room of each club, which all players can unite behind.



The objective of the work we have undertaken to date, and that which will follow, is to better equip the PFA to meet its mission of supporting the players and building the game whilst influencing the environment in which players work. Through this project, we aim to create real change and move sport beyond seeking to protect its own interests and reputation to focus on those most impacted by failures – the players and survivors.

– PFA Co-Chief Executive Beau Busch via The Guardian

COURAGE
WORLD CLASS
INTELLIGENCE
TRUST
RESPECT



Professional Footballers Australia
2/55 Walsh Street West Melbourne VIC 3003
1300 650 497 / info@pfa.net.au
www.pfa.net.au

