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Reconceptualising Performance Lifestyle: A qualitative investigation from British Olympic and Paralympic sport World Class Programmes

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Abstract

In the UK, Performance Support Teams (PSTs) are integral to the World Class Programme which is a strategic initiative funded by UK Sport to deliver success at Olympic and Paralympic Games. PSTs are defined as teams that comprise individuals from diverse perspectives, skillsets, and areas of expertise who work collaboratively to optimise athlete(s) performance to achieve an overarching objective. PSTs in British Olympic and Paralympic sports typically include Performance Lifestyle (PL) Practitioners (PLPs) who support athletes to develop skills to cope with the demands of high performance (HP) sport and transferable competencies which augment sustained success beyond competition, while prioritising holistic wellbeing. Conversely, PL is underused by athletes and practitioners report a lack of disciplinary understanding and respect, and poor PST synergy. Underpinned by a relativist ontology and constructivist epistemology, eight WCP leaders participated in semi-structured interviews. Reflective thematic analysis constructed three main themes. 'An imperfect world' describes challenges, conflicts and environmental issues that influence how PSTs are structured and which contrast with WCP objectives. 'Maintaining control' explores how participants strive to meet program needs and associated tensions in aligning PST and PL provision. 'A system problem' represents concerns regarding cultural and climate issues which impact current delivery and represent cause for concern. Findings provide new perceptions from British WCP leaders developing a deeper understanding of PL provision and issues which impact disciplinary delivery and WCP objectives. Actionable implications to develop provision include giving WCPs increased control over and accountability for PL services alongside operationalising delivery within performance strategy.

Keywords

Athlete support, career assistance, leadership, mental health, multidisciplinary teams, wellbeing

Reviewer: Jane Holden (Women's Super League Football, UK)

Introduction

In the United Kingdom (UK), Performance Support Team (PSTs) are integral to the World Class Programme (WCP) which is a strategic initiative funded by UK Sport to deliver success at Olympic and Paralympic Games.[1] WCP funding is provided directly to a sport's national governing body to provide PST services, alongside coaching, training, and competition support.[1,2] The WCP typically supports 'Podium' and 'Podium Potential' athletes, i.e., athletes with realistic medal-winning potential at the next Games (within 4 years) and those who could win medals at the subsequent Games (within 8 years), respectively.[2] Funding is also provided to athletes in the form of athlete performance awards (APAs) which support living and training costs. A PST has been defined as 'a team that comprises individuals from diverse perspectives, skillsets, and areas of expertise who work collaboratively to optimise athlete(s) performance in order to achieve an overarching objective'.[3] Elite level athletes, defined as those competing at the 'competitive elite', 'successful elite' and 'world-class elite' classifications of the Swann et al.[4] model, have been considered

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reliant on such support with provision indicated as influencing success or failure.[5] Research continues to echo the importance of support teams to elite athlete success,[6,7] with athlete performances dependant on an integrated team of coaches, sports medicine (SM), sports science (SS), and technological disciplines to achieve results.[8] The pursuit of success has led to growth in the PST over the past decade and now often consists of numerous SS specialisms (e.g., physiology, nutrition, psychology, performance analysis, S&C), SM roles (e.g., physiotherapy, rehabilitation, soft tissue therapy, athlete health) and other support staff (e.g., engineers, innovation specialists, financial advisers, legal advisers, and branding consultants).[9]

PSTs in WCPs now typically include Performance Lifestyle (PL) Practitioners (PLPs) who aim to support athletes to develop skills to cope with high performance (HP) sport demands and transferable competencies which augment sustained success beyond competition, while prioritising holistic wellbeing.[10,11] PLPs mainly, although not exclusively, support Olympic and Paralympic sports, and can be found within many HP sport systems globally including in the UK, Australia, and New Zealand amongst others. Similar, yet perhaps nuanced roles, exist in other sports such as 'Player Care' in Football[12] and 'Player Development Managers' in Rugby.[13] Until late 2025 PL in the UK was centrally funded by UK Sport, with practitioners deployed by the UK Sports Institute, ensuring that all funded elite athletes have access to relevant support.[9]

PL contributes several positive impacts,[10,14–16] supports mental health and wellbeing strategy[11] and is aligned with UK Sport's 'win well' strategy.[17] Welfare issues in HP environments remain topical given findings of the Whyte Review[18] including that until 2017 UK Sport prioritised medals above athlete wellbeing and the Duty of Care in Sport Review which recommends uptake of PL by athletes.[19] Despite these benefits, research highlights several issues which impact PL delivery.[9,20,21] Specifically, PLPs experience challenging work environments characterised by limited understanding and support from coaches and disciplinary deprioritisation. Practitioners also report a lack of respect for their expertise, and poor synergy with the PST.[9,21] PL relies on athlete testimony to evidence impact[10] with the discipline currently lacking quantitative data to demonstrate athlete progression.[9] Despite athlete testimony, PL is underused by athletes[15] which may be due the dominant performance narrative of HP environments (i.e., pressure to perform), coach-athlete power dynamics, and deprioritisation of non-sporting life domains.[20] Furthermore, PLPs indicate potentially suboptimal high athlete caseloads, and limited capacity and time to deliver.[21] Poor synergy and collaboration across a PST could limit success highlighting the importance of integration, interdisciplinarity, teamwork, capacity, role clarity, and equal expertise to successful outcomes[8,22–25] suggesting that current PL delivery is suboptimal.

Previous PL research has investigated athletes and PLPs,[9,10,21] while perspectives of key performance leaders remain unexplored, and given the challenges discussed, obtaining perceptions from those responsible for structuring WCP PSTs is warranted. Performance leaders include roles such as a Performance Director (PD) who are responsible for the "strategic leadership of the performance programme and strategic leadership of the performance team"[26] and Heads of Performance Support (HoPS) who lead SS and SM teams.[27] Leaders in each sport are responsible for defining performance questions with clear alignment to What it Takes to Win (WITTW) models facilitating performance planning and operational delivery,[28] and are therefore uniquely placed to provide perspectives on how PSTs are structured and associated considerations. Furthermore, this study can establish perceptions regarding PL's place within a PST, alignment to a performance narrative and explore identified operational issues. Additionally, PST composition within HP environments is not well documented across literature, likely due to variation of provision across organisations, allowing this study to shed light on contemporary structures. Therefore, the current study allows a deeper understanding of how PSTs are resourced, associated considerations, and decision-making processes, fostering improved alignment of future PL provision. Research findings are used by other countries to base their athlete career assistance programmes (CAPs) upon[29] which highlights an opportunity for the present study to improve PL services within UK WCPs, and to support the implementation and impact of CAPs globally.

The purpose of the study is, therefore, to explore perceptions of how WCP leaders interpret, prioritise and operationalise PST support, and if/how PL fits within these discussions. Exploring the lived experience of decision makers in elite programmes, and perspectives within their specific contexts, will aid future athlete support provision.

Methodology

Research strategy and philosophy

Given this study aims to explore perceptions of stakeholders, an interpretivist strategy was adopted, composing a relativist ontology and a constructivist epistemology. This philosophical position recognises that knowledge is not objective, however, it is constructed by interactions of participants and researchers.[30] Using this approach allows the researcher to explore and uncover explanations, gain an insider's perspective, and to try to understand the subjects 'from within'.[31] Interpretivism results in an inherently subjective research process with knowledge understood as contextually situated.[32]

Participants and sampling

A criterion-based sampling approach[33] ensured a sample with highly relevant experience to gain rich and contextually situated data. Inclusion criteria defined boundaries

and thereby allowed appropriate participants to be identified. Participants were required to have: (i) current experience as staff in an Olympic or Paralympic sport, (ii) responsibility for managing and resourcing the PST within that sport, (iii) hold at least one year's experience within this setting and (iv) be over the age of 18. Additionally, (v) the sport must be in receipt of UK Sport WCP funding for the current cycle. The inclusion criteria restricted eligibility to sports which received WCP funding from UK Sport as this indicated full financial support for performance goals at the highest levels of HP sport. This study was undertaken during the summer months of 2025 while PL was still centrally funded by UK Sport which is reflected in the nature of the quotations provided in the results section.

Eight leaders (Male n = 6, Female n = 2) agreed to participate and fully met the inclusion criteria. Despite efforts to recruit an equal number of male and female participants, a higher proportion of invited male leaders agreed to participate. Two further leaders agreed to participate however cancelled due to unforeseen circumstances and a new date could not be arranged within appropriate timeframes. Care was taken to recruit participants with a variety of job titles (Table 1), including PD and HoPS. One participant worked within two different sports, resulting in perceptions from nine different WCPs, representing 21.43% of all UK Sport WCP funded sports (42) for the current winter and summer Olympic and Paralympic cycles. Additionally, participants provided details of PST composition within their WCPs (Table 1). One participant did not provide full PST details and was therefore omitted leaving the remaining eight WCPs presented. Efforts were made to ensure inclusion of summer, winter, Olympic and Paralympic programmes, allowing the data to exhibit a comprehensive and representative sample. Participants represent a high quality sample of performance leaders currently operating in elite sport.

Ethics

All participants completed an informed consent form prior to taking part. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, details of individual participants role titles, nature of employment, and associated sports, are not included alongside participant data.

Procedures

Following ethical approval, potential study participants were established from industry contacts and contacted via LinkedIn®. Snowball sampling was encouraged where individuals met the inclusion criteria. Qualitative methods were chosen using semi-structured interviews to gather perceptions of individual participants. Interviews were appropriate as these aligned with interpretivism and facilitated inductive inquiry. Furthermore, interviews allowed for identification of emotional components within discussion[34] allowing advancement of inquiry. Semi-structured interviews applying considerations from Gill et al.[35] were used allowing participants to guide discussion. Prior to interviews, participants were asked to share contextual details of their PST to support discussion and further the interview schedule. Details included which athlete disciplines were included within the PST, associated number of disciplinary staff and the full-time equivalency (FTE) (Table 1). Interviews ranged in duration from 47 to 95 min ($M = 71$), were conducted remotely using Microsoft Teams, and were automatically transcribed verbatim with transcripts manually reviewed by the lead researcher to correct any errors and amend the flow of the text. All participants were anonymised through coding to ensure anonymity. Only this affiliated letter is referenced in the results.

Data analysis

Interview data was analysed inductively using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) which allowed for identification of commonalities within the data, driven by participants perceptions.[36] RTA was selected due to its alignment with the research objectives. RTA is concerned with themes, rather than content, enabling focus on 'where we're aiming to get to',[37] i.e., applied recommendations for future PL provision. NVivo 14 was used for analysis and followed the six-stage model by Braun & Clarke.[38] Specific quotes were coded with descriptions that captured the essence of the data. All codes were thoroughly reviewed, refined, and grouped into themes that reflected 'patterns of shared meaning underpinned or united by a core concept'.[36] Second and third authors acted as 'critical friends'[39] enhancing reflexivity and interpretative depth, generating insights from nuances in the data.[36] Researchers discussed their observations and repeated the analytical process to develop final themes that were mature and reflective of the data set.[40] Additional methodological, analytical, and data-related information is provided in the supplementary materials to enhance transparency and openness, including details of study procedures, data analysis, themes, and deviant cases.[41–44]

Quality considerations

The study seeks to evidence rich rigor through a coherent research methodology combined with an appropriate sampling method. Interpretivism recognises that interactions and biases of researchers are unavoidable and are an inseparable part of knowledge construction.[32] Therefore, knowledge is viewed as co-constructed between researchers and participants. It is accepted that researchers' experience and qualifications in the subject matter may influence constructed themes, however, this is considered to improve, rather than invalidate, the depth of findings through supporting the analytical process.[45] The lead author is a trained PLP and has over ten years of experience supporting elite athletes which

Table 1. Participant job title and associated WCP PST composition.

Discipline	Participant 1: Head of Performance Support	Participant 2: Deputy Performance Director	Participant 3: Sports Science and Sports Medicine Director	Participant 4: Head of Performance Support	Participant 5: Head of Performance Support	Participant 6: Head of Performance Support	Participant 7: Performance Director	Participant 8: Head of Performance Support
Biomechanics		2 (2) 1 Consultant (~100 days/year)	1 Contractor (0.2)					
Data Science	1 (0.5)	1 (1.0)						
Doctor		2 (1.4)				1 (0.05)	1 (0.05)	1 (0.05)
Head of Performance Support	1 (1.0)	1 (1.0)		1 (0.8)*	1 (1.0)	1 (0.5)		1 (0.5)
Innovation			3 (3.0)					
Medical	1 (1.0)	1 (1)	1 Contractor (0.6)	2 (0.2)	2 (0.5)			
Nutrition	1 (0.6)	1 (0.8) 1 Consultant (25 days/year)	2 (1.2)	1 Consultant (~11 days/year)	1 Consultant (~15 days/year)		1 (0.1)	1 Consultant (~20 days/year)
Performance Analysis					2 (2.0)			1 (0.5)
Performance Data			1 (1.0)					
Performance Lifestyle	2 (1.6)	3 (1.4)	3 (1.8)	1 (0.4)	1 (1.0)	1 (0.3)	1 (0.2)	1 (0.4)
Performance Science			1 (1.0)					1 (0.5)
Performance Statistician			1 (1.0)					
Performance Support Lead							1 (0.2)	
Physical Performance Coach				1 (0.8)				
Physiology		1 (1.0)	2 (1.8)					
Physiotherapy	5 (4.6)	3 (3.0) 2 Contractors (0.4)	6 (5.2)	2 (2.0)	2 (2.0) Contractors (40 days/year)	1 (1.0)	1 (1.0)	1 (0.4)
Psychology		2 (1.8)	3 (1.2) 3 Contractors (1.0)	1 Consultant (project based)	2 (1.3)	1 (0.4)	1 (0.2)	2 Contractors (50 days/year)
S&C	4 (2.7)	2 (2.0)	5 (5.0) 3 Contractors (0.5)	3 (1.8)*	4 (4.0)	1 (0.5)	1 (0.4)	1 (0.4)
Soft Tissue		1 (1.0)	1 Contractor (0.1)					
Sports Physician			1 (0.4)					
Sports Science	4 (4.0)							
Total staff:	19 (10 FT, 9 PT)	24 (13 FT, 7 PT, 2 Contractors, 2 Consultants)	37 (17 FT, 11 PT, 9 Contractors)	11 (4 FT, 5 PT, 2 Consultants)	15 (10 FT, 4 PT, 1 Consultant)	6 (1 FT, 5 PT)	7 (1 FT, 6 PT)	10 (7 PT, 2 Contractors, 1 Consultant)
Total FTE	16	17.8	24.8	6	11.8	2.75	2.15	2.75
Number of Athlete Performance Awards	75	100	126	20	41	20	6	32

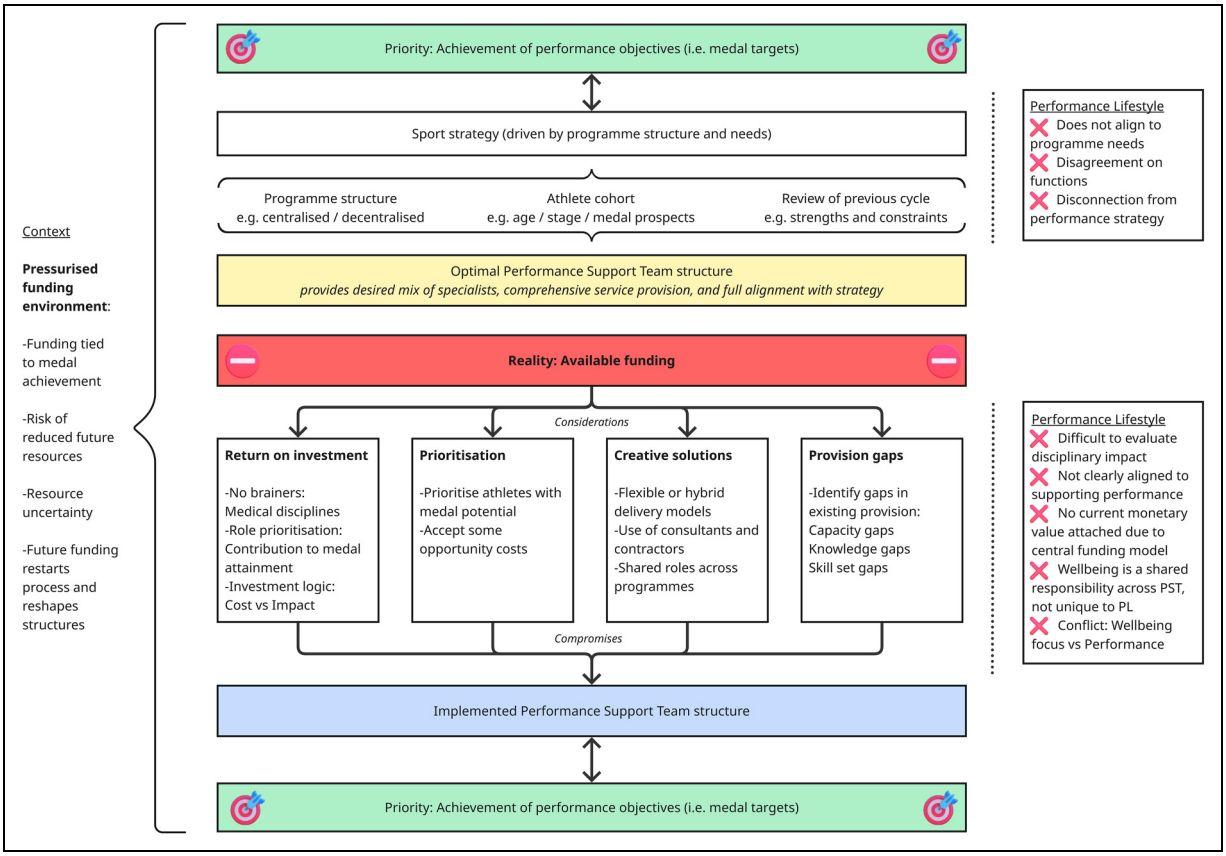


Figure 1. Thematic map and workflow outlining HP leader considerations for PST structuring.

aided study recruitment and added interpretative knowledge and was deemed valuable. Second and third authors offered triangulation and confirmability of initial study themes,[46] encouraged deeper reflection, highlighted identified biases and developed further interpretations of the data. Both co-authors are familiar with qualitative studies and have vast experience in elite level sport. Researchers recorded and tracked the development of coded data throughout the reflective process. Final themes were presented with a variety of examples from different participants evidencing consensus and resonance.

Results

Contextual information of PST composition in sample WCPs has been presented in Table 1. Data analysis constructed 3 themes which are presented below with direct quotations. A thematic map and workflow outlining HP leader considerations for PST structuring is shown in Figure 1. Summarised theme definitions are available within the supplementary materials.

An imperfect world

'An Imperfect World' represents challenges, conflicts and environmental issues that influence how PSTs are structured and which contrast with WCP objectives. Participants indicated that PST structures were typically dictated by a WCP senior leadership team (SLT) which varied in membership, with larger programmes having more staff involved compared to smaller programmes. SLTs were typically stated as comprising the PD, HoPS, and Head Coach, with some programs including other roles (e.g., finance) for governance purposes.

PST structures are driven by performance strategy as the first consideration: "*Decision making around roles and how we're structured is based upon and driven firstly by our strategy"* (Participant 4). Finance is equally important as budget dictates how well you can resource against performance goals: "*Everything is budget led, that is a real starting point"* (Participant 1). All participants emphasised a need to resource efficiently, with a focus on how PST roles impact on sporting needs: "*The critical issue isn't about always resourcing in absolute terms, but about efficiency and clarity of priorities*" (Participant 8). There was however broad recognition that it is not possible to do everything that may be desired: "*We're never going to have enough to do everything for every single athlete at the level it needs to be done*" (Participant 2).

Conflict between sport strategy and available finance leads to a focus on identifying gaps in existing PST

provision, including practitioner capacity and skill sets, taking into consideration developmental needs of the athlete cohort:

> "Being really clear around what the performance requirements are for the sport and what success looks like at the pointy end. And essentially from that you've got to do gap analysis, whether that's at an athlete level or strategic level to understand where we stand and where do we need to plug resources or create skill sets in certain areas that we're lacking" (Participant 5)

Finances constrain PST delivery with participants considering how much FTE is necessary to achieve sufficient support thereby creating a focus on value and return on investment. Participants contextualised value as impact to performance. Concerns for value result in prioritisation regarding how well disciplines are resourced and which athletes are prioritised for engagement. Participant 1 stated "*We base it on needs. If there's going to be a change, then which areas would have the biggest impact to performance?".*

Participants discussed how resources and the need for efficiency leads to seeking creative solutions. Participant 6 indicated considerations for delivery stating, "*how can we mitigate some of that in how we set up our training environment which means we can have a bit less over here*". Participant 2 took a more strategic view of athlete support reflecting "*We've shifted away from [an issue] being our responsibility to is there a solution and how can that solution be addressed?*".

Other considerations which influence PST resourcing include the structure of the sport itself. Decentralised programs were indicated as having less regular contact time between athletes and PST staff, while programs with numerous facilities were suggested as having higher overheads, both of which had implications for how PSTs can be structured to deliver effective support. Participant 2 provided a reflection on staffing and program structure stating, "*When there's been a change of staffing, we very much consider what is the program trying to achieve in this decentralised way*?". Furthermore, most participants indicated that current performance needs for their programs did not relate to their PSTs but rather to operational needs such as facilities or attending competitions: "*The first thing we'd do is get them to more competitions*" (Participant 6).

Participants described how PL is used within their programmes, which generated a common strand in providing support to transitioning athletes. There was however a common disconnection from performance strategy itself: "*One thing that is a challenge is how do you get that golden thread between their [PL] objectives and how it influences performance strategy. Currently it tends to operate as a bit of a service on the side"* (Participant 8). Disconnection from strategy results in PL support being deprioritised. Participant 2 provided a practical example:

> "Where do you have opportunities for full-time athletes to learn about themselves and understand themselves? It's probably on training camps, but we don't take our PL staff on training camps. At one point we were planning on it but then that's fizzled out and it's because of budgets and prioritisation."

Participant 3 explained that PL operates differently to traditional performance priority:

> "Performance level doesn't necessarily dictate the [PL] challenge. Actually, a lot of the [athletes] with PL are the lower priority ones because they're people that are leaving, which are clearly a low-performance priority".

This study was undertaken while PL was still centrally funded by UK Sport. Only one WCP in this study paid for additional PL time beyond their core allocation, equating to a half a day per week. Most participants do not consider funding PL roles: "*We've never talked about funding it because it's been free*" (Participant 2). Consequently, PL may only be considered regarding performance strategy and associated impact, and not in relation to finance, highlighting the imperfect alignment of PL in traditional PST structuring decisions.

Maintaining control

'Maintaining Control' explores how participants strive to meet programme needs and associated tensions in aligning PST provision, and specifically PL, to programme objectives. All sample WCPs used an intentional mixture of NGB employed staff and home nations institute staff to deliver athlete support services. Practitioners indicated a general preference to employ through institutes for three main reasons. Firstly, access to facilities was considered a key benefit with Participant 8 summarising "*We invest in the time of the practitioner, but we get access to facilities. So, we can deliver in any region and all we have to invest in is the practitioner*". Secondly, staff development, technical expertise and the institute network was highly valued. Participant 8 exemplified this when stating, "*When you invest in an S&C for example, you're buying into 44 of them*". Finally, another key benefit was governance and quality assurance, particularly in medical disciplines: "*As a line manager of sports physicians, I need to have some level of checks and balances from people in the background that can protect me and the sport in terms of medical governance"* (Participant 5).

Despite the benefits identified, participants expressed that benefits from employing via institutes may be on a case-by-case basis:

> "Previous experience of UKSI practitioners wasn't all that positive. It didn't help. Our feedback to UKSI has been that different services have given different levels of engagement and

different experiences. It's not been consistent. Theres been some good examples of support and others where it was actually a bit of a hindrance." (Participant 2).

Participants described role flexibility and cost being the key considerations to hiring directly through the NGB. Several participants mentioned using a 'specialist generalist' allowing them to create a tailored role which works across several support disciplines: "*The [specialist generalists] do a combined role of physiology and biomechanics which is why they're employed directly by [NGB] rather than UKSI who stick to their traditional disciplines*" (Participant 1). Participant 6 discussed how cost is an influence: "*It's actually cheaper, so when resource is tight and you can have either half a day through the institute or a day if you go [NGB], you're always going to go for a day."*

WCP funding climate, the need to evidence disciplinary impact, and institute restrictions drive a need to explore precise solutions to program needs:

"We almost want there to be competition within the market rather than the institute thinking that because they deliver something they've got a god-given right to do it. Well, in this climate, we can't afford to just invest in anything." (Participant 7).

Participants described that current PL delivery does not align well with specific program needs and expressed a desire for further disciplinary control. Participant 2 summarised this well "*What it [PL] does is not what we'd 100% like it to be doing*".

Disconnection was attributed to disagreement in PL functions: "*I think there's just a disconnect between what sports think should be supported and what the institute thinks should be supported and that's the primary issue"* (Participant 4). Participant 5 provided further detail:

"I have tried to bring PL back to those two points which is about how are we optimising an athlete's journey when they're in the sport, the decisions they make inside and outside the sport, and then what are we providing them in terms of opportunities to develop themselves when their journey ends. The battle I have is that I don't think PL as a discipline views itself in that space".

Tensions were partly attributed to PL being core-funded which led participants to simply accept whatever PL allocation with which they are provided and work around misalignment issues: "*In terms of accountability, I have almost let them off and crack on. Wrongly. Because it was a battle that I just didn't bother fighting. We don't pay for them; they come free of charge"* (Participant 5).

Participants expressed a preference to bring PL under their control:

"I personally now don't see a clear reason why PL should be protected more than psychology or medicine for example. All sports are struggling with psychology and medicine, but they don't get centrally funded. So, it's almost like now PL is in a state of maturity where it has to be put in the mixer with everything else and sports will have to make decisions about what they'd want." (Participant 3).

"There would be an opportunity and a benefit to having them [PL] directly employed as a member of staff that we then have because that gives us control, influence and brings it totally within our team. We see that as quite a big opportunity actually." (Participant 7).

A system problem

'A System Problem' represents concerns regarding cultural and climate issues present across WCPs which are impacting on current delivery and represent cause for concern.

Concerns discussed in this theme are situated within a pressured funding climate with practitioners feeling under pressure: "Across the disciplines a similar picture would be painted. Most services are overstretched. There's not enough time to do what you want with all the athletes that you've got" (Participant 3). Participants expressed concerns regarding programme size and shape, sustainability and constant change. One participant indicated that these concerns take up considerable time which detracts from directly supporting program staff:

"It's constant in how do you navigate a system and the challenges and pressures that the sport can be under. It may be very different in professional sports where maybe resources aren't quite the same challenge or whatever, but it certainly is in Olympic and Paralympic sports. I spend a lot of time thinking about those things." (Participant 7).

Participants described how performance outcomes are the key priority: "*I'm employed to try and put athletes on podiums. That's my sole focus"* (Participant 5). Changes in culture and climate within WCPs however are stifling such outcomes:

"The narratives have gradually shifted and maybe it's swung a bit too far the other way now, it needs to come to more centralised. We were always win at all costs, if you want that kind of language. Then there was all the scandals and now it's gone. Actually, now we just need to look after everyone's needs. So, we need to find a middle ground that can do both things that needs to be system driven." (Participant 4).

Several practitioners suggested discordance in WCP priorities and a need to ensure clarity: *"Whose agenda are serving here?"* (Participant 6). Participant 8 provided further detail:

"I think we're in dangerous territory. There's a risk that we're fighting the sport and trying to protect the athlete for certain things when actually it's their role, their job, they're getting an APA. Their role, their central purpose is, is to play the sport."

PL was expressed as a key contributor to WCP issues due to disagreement about disciplinary roles and responsibilities:

"I don't think the system as a whole would be clear on where we want bang from buck. They [PL] have done some pillars in terms of what they believe their discipline to look like. I have argued that one or two of those pillars, I don't particularly think they should be spending time in." (Participant 5).

Wellbeing was a specific area of disagreement:

"They're [PL] certainly not there to just be a duty of care function. And that's absolutely what we don't want. Wellbeing is one of the UKSI [PL] pillars, whereas we've not identified that as one of our unique ones. The reason for that is that it's not unique to them. Wellbeing is everyone's business." (Participant 3).

Participants reflected concerns that current support in WCPs may institutionalise athletes, hinder development and make transition out of the sport more difficult:

"For me we haven't got something quite right within the way we manage people through the Olympic sport systems, so if you've got to provide a two-year transition to someone leaving [Sport], we've done something wrong or something isn't quite right in terms of how we've worked with that person through. And that's not just a PL thing I think". (Participant 4).

PL specifically was connected to the concept of over supporting athletes, creating dependency and removing athlete autonomy:

"You see lots of athletes coming into this system and handing over responsibility to others, thinking that's the right thing to do because there's others there to help. But then when you zoom out over the long-term, athletes they leave programmes not able to navigate their next steps." (Participant 2).

Traditionally, elite sport organisations value measurable performance outcomes through statistics and tangible progress. Participants typically stated that PL is evaluated against set objectives and athlete engagement, however, these are considered assessments of what practitioners do rather than its impact. Consequently, PL relies on more subjective evidence. One practitioner suggested prioritising a more holistic view of evaluation:

"We embrace the concept of evaluation as opposed to measurement. So, does that person seem to have a presence? When we looked at trying to get some information out of the athlete group to inform the strategy, did we have it? And what on earth would we do if we didn't have this?" (Participant 7).

Discussion

The purpose of the study was to explore perceptions of how WCP leaders interpret, prioritise and operationalise PST support, and if/how PL fits within these discussions. Findings indicate that leaders structure their PSTs in line with programme strategy and prioritise performance impact against budgetary restrictions. Performance impact was framed as a measure of value with participants keen to ensure resource efficiency and return on investment. PL is typically not considered within structuring conversations due to a lack of control over disciplinary roles and absence of connection to strategy. Findings facilitate novel insights to current literature by illustrating views of WCPs leaders developing a deeper understanding of PL and WCPs.

Return on investment was considered crucial due to participants acute awareness of their funding climate. Until recently (from 2006–2021), WCPs received funding through the UK Sport 'No Compromise' strategy which required programmes to meet strict performance-related targets through medal attainment at major competitions (primarily Olympic Games).[47] 'No Compromise' contributed to significant improvements to Team GB success from a low point in 1996, after which the WCP was introduced, to now consistent successes averaging a 65-medal haul across four Games from London 2012 to Paris 2024.[48] Furthermore, investment per medal achieved significantly reduced over this time.[48] Yet, 'No Compromise' caused problems and was considered a contributing factor in high-profile athlete mistreatment scandals.[49,50] The Whyte Review[18] found that until 2017 UK Sport had prioritised medals above athlete welfare. Furthermore, 'No Compromise' created issues of legacy and sustainability with the funding model experienced by organisations as inflexible with immediate and severe cuts.[51] Strict requirements regarding performance outcomes may have reinforced the funding model used to provide PL support. PL lacks direct alignment with performance outcomes[9] which may be evidenced by the inconsistent inclusion of PL within WITTW models (Figures 2 and 3). Therefore, central funding for PL may have provided a 'cleaner' and simpler model for WCPs who can focus their resources and efforts on investing in disciplines which have a more direct and measurable performance impact. Additionally, performance focused funding pressures are likely to have influenced the limited funds available for PLPs enforcing the part-time nature of roles.[15,21] WCP funding is considered insecure, fragile and transient[47] with a growing dependency on UK

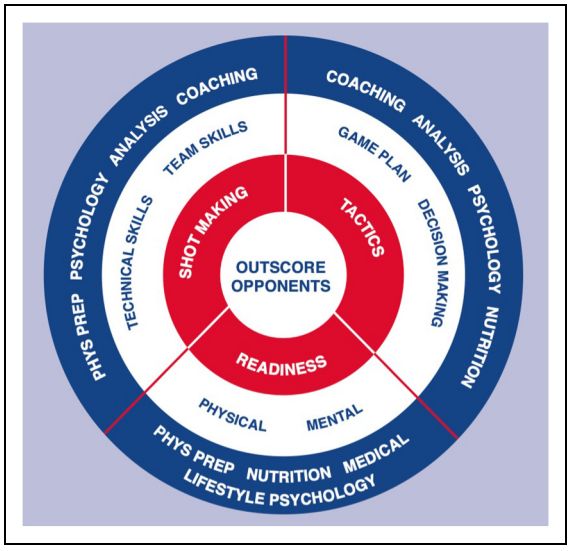


Figure 2. British Curling What it Takes to Win model.[52]

Sport funding underpinning a need to adopt prescribed structures.[51,52]

Perhaps influenced by the above issues, UK Sport introduced a new funding model during the Paris 2024 cycle which contains a focus on 'winning well' with funding awarded to programmes considered to have the 'right' culture.[53] At the time of data collection (June to September 2025), there were 42 WCPs receiving funding from UK Sport for the Milano Cortina 2026 and Los Angeles 2028 cycles,[54] five of which received a funding cut from the previous cycle.[55] Notably, UK Athletics and Paddle UK both received cuts despite increasing their medal counts across Olympic cycles[56,57] which may evidence the move away from 'No Compromise'. It has previously been suggested that there is an ongoing reframing of performance away from the dominant performance narrative to a more holistic view which balances performance with personal wellbeing.[15,58] A shift in operational climate may be evidenced by the change in UK Sport policy; however, study findings indicate that performance goals are still the outright priority.

UKSI literature states that the PL aim 'is to support athlete wellbeing'[59] and clearly outlines wellbeing as a key delivery strand.[60] Holden et al. (2025a) suggest PL to be structurally distinct, although not entirely independent, from the wider PST providing PLPs with autonomy within the system facilitating safe and confidential spaces for athletes and a perception of neutrality. The intention of this division may be to delineate between person and performance, allowing for more honest and meaningful engagements on issues which may be important to athletes e.g., retirement. However, such structural distinction is not without problems. Findings indicate that current PL delivery is misaligned with what WCPs leaders want. Furthermore, participants indicate disagreement with PL delivery strands with a specific example regarding wellbeing. Participants want PL to be anchored to supporting sports performance with wellbeing considered a shared responsibility for all WCP stakeholders which aligns with the recommendations of the IOC consensus statement on safe sport.[61] Participant perspectives appear to conflict with the view held by UKSI.

Disagreement on disciplinary purpose may explain the limited investment in additional PLP time beyond the core allocation as leaders do not envisage a return on investment, i.e., performance impact. Clarity in support staff roles is central to effective performance management in Olympic sport programmes[62] with clear role definitions enhancing overall team functioning.[63] Consequently, PLP role ambiguity may result in detrimental outcomes. Furthermore, participants may struggle to place a monetary value on PL support as they have never needed to do so. Participants have historically welcomed PL support without considering how much FTE could make a meaningful impact. Additionally, WCPs lack ownership over roles and responsibilities which further restricts impact. Empowering individual programmes with disciplinary responsibilities may lead to better integration in performance planning. Athletes have suggested that including career development into individual performance plans may support improved parity between performance and holistic development,[20] however, practitioners indicate limited adoption of this model.[9] An example is provided by British Diving whereby WITTW competences are mapped and rated out of 10 with gap analysis identifying focus areas for individual athlete plans[64] (Figure 4). Figure 4 indicates 'Identity and Awareness' to be the key development area for PL. Most participants in this study indicated integration of PL functions into individual athlete plans to support PLP appraisal, however, integration of PL to overall programme strategy was less common. Integrating PL support into performance planning, athlete reviews, and development discussions may help leaders and coaches to identify and address non-sport factors that influence training quality, decision-making, availability, and long-term progression. Furthermore, coaches indicate a desire to bring practitioners closer to their inner circle supporting shared accountability, commitment and involvement.[65]

Findings suggest that WCPs leaders perceive the current elite sport system to be fundamentally flawed with the move to the current operational climate, i.e., shift from strict performance priorities to holistic support and wellbeing, to be an overcorrection to historical athlete mistreatment and governance issues. Performance leaders are employed to win medals with challenges experienced within WCPs previously suggested as part of athlete development and expected be overcome through hard work, discipline and sacrifice.[66] Developmental sacrifice may therefore be expected with leaders mindful that a change in culture may upset a structured performance programme. Findings indicate that leaders also understand and value athlete

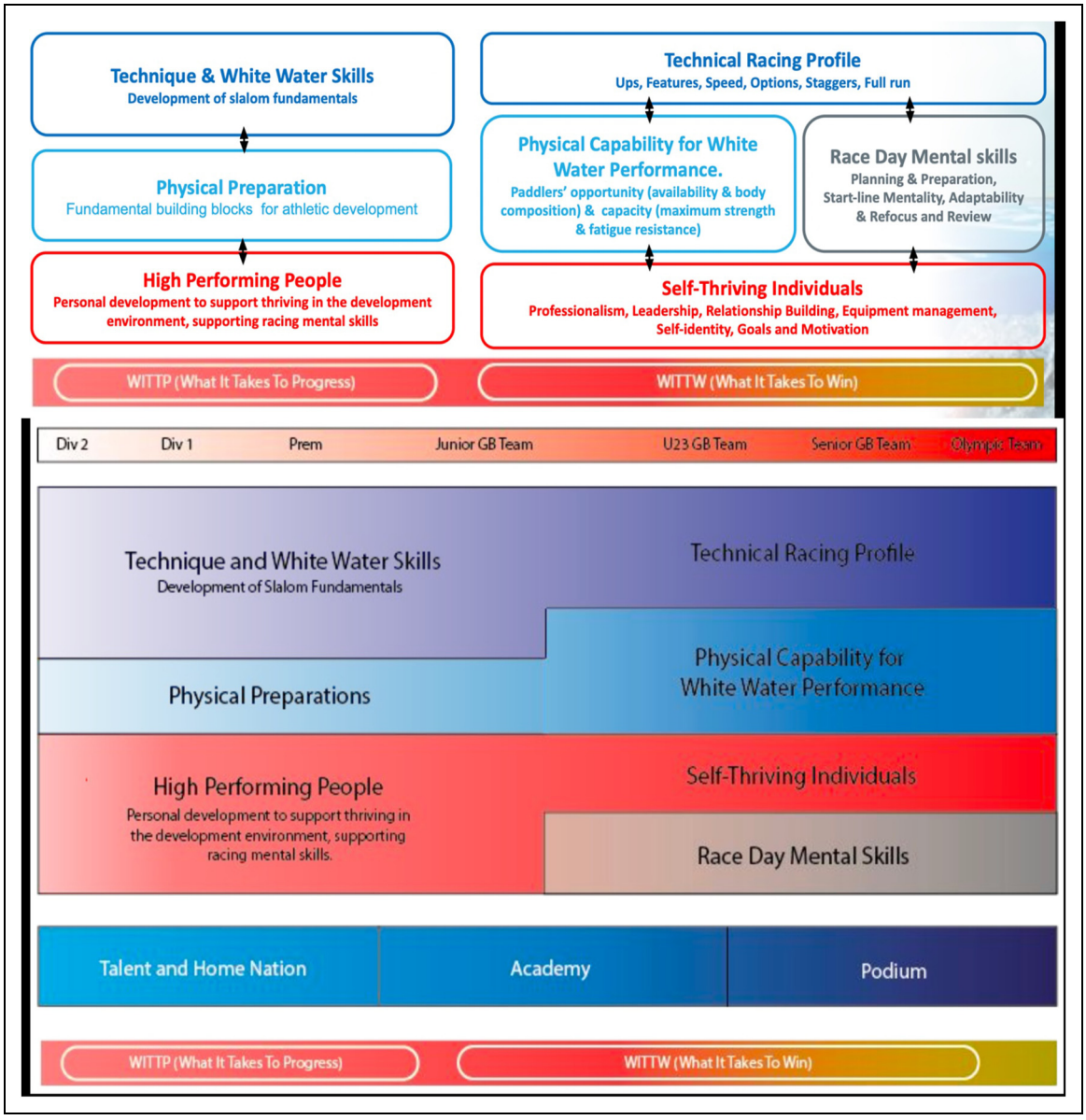


Figure 3. British Canoeing combined What it Takes to Win and What it Takes to Progress model.[53]

holistic development, suggesting that the inherent tension relates to how PL support is positioned, communicated, delivered and evaluated within the system. As an example, an associated and continued wellbeing dialogue was indicated by some participants as unhelpful, a cause of conflict, and a distraction from performance. Most participants conceptualised performance and wellbeing as being two sides of the same coin, inextricably interconnected and fundamental for one another. Therefore, if all PST postholders are fulfilling their job duties diligently then wellbeing issues should be identified naturally with support actioned in line with existing policies. Mandating PL responsibilities, without programme input, represents a challenge to programme autonomy and leaves programme needs unaddressed. Research in Australian elite sport indicates how the Australian Sports Commission and Australian Institute of Sport may hinder Olympic games preparations and reduce WCP autonomy despite financial investment.[67] Australian WCPs felt that they should be trusted to deliver intended outcomes on behalf of both organisations.[67] Findings in the current study present a similar sentiment from British WCPs. Reflecting on the differences between British and Australian systems highlights the role that core funding has played in PL's development and current issues. Central funding for PL in the UK was intended to ensure that all funded elite athletes had access to relevant support,[9] however, ringfenced funding may have resulted in reduced scrutiny, challenge and associated demand for

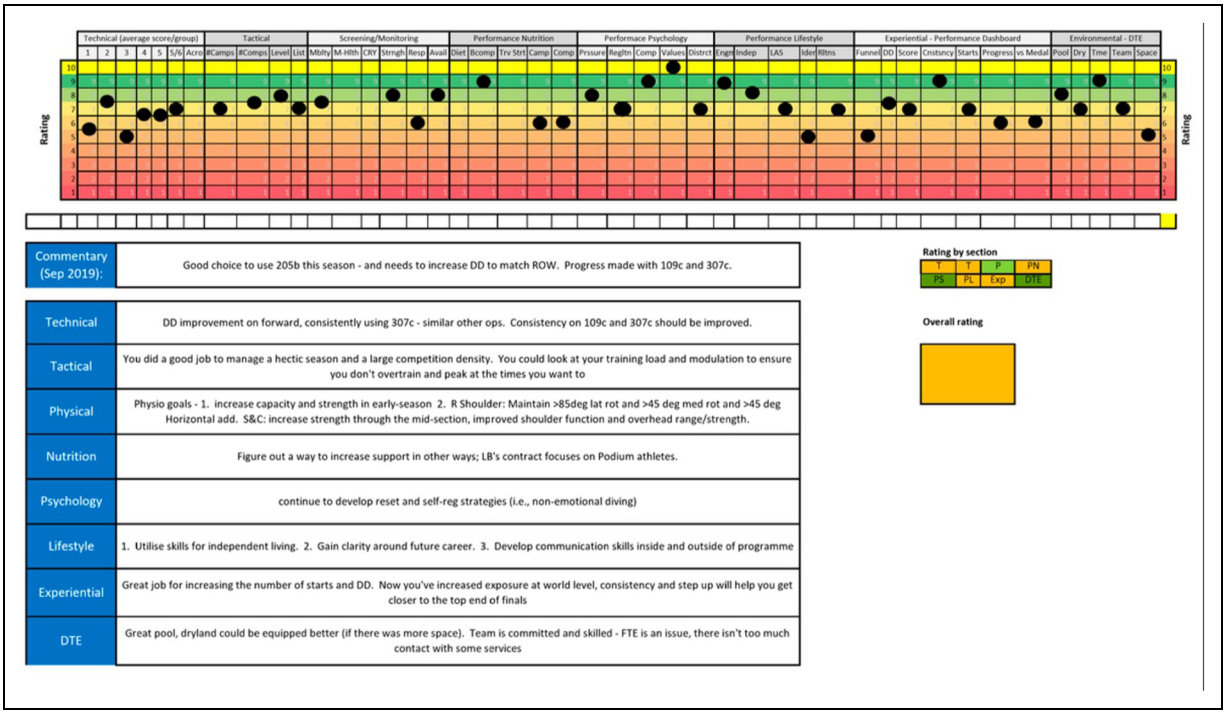


Figure 4. British Diving What it Takes to Win competencies rating example (Sotheran, 2019)[64] .

demonstrable impact from funders and performance leaders. Consequently, PL may have become unintentionally isolated within the broader system.

A recent review of PL indicated a reliance on practitioner or organisation authored literature, which may push related narratives, and a dependence on athlete or practitioner testimony of disciplinary benefit.[68] Therefore, it is recognised that there is limited empirical research which reviews or evaluates PL impact. Consequently, it remains unclear whether PL is in itself ineffective. Nevertheless, given findings in the present study which indicate issues of alignment and role clarity, alongside broader changes to funding which include considerations of athlete welfare and organisational culture, it is timely to consider whether PL in its current form is still necessary.[17,53] A potential new model may involve offering a common core of services and some form of oversight on wellbeing governance as part of an updated funding criteria and cultural assessment. Study findings suggest a common core of support for transitioning athletes, particularly athletes exiting WCPs as these are indicated as the most significant PL users. Study findings are timely given the recent UKSI organisational review held in late 2025 and removal of core PL funding.

Limitations

While the sample provided rich data and included a variety of postholders across varied sporting contexts, a larger sample may have offered greater diversity of experiences. Study participants may hold stronger views of PL provision with more moderate perspectives potentially absent. Gender imbalance within the sample is also recognised which may impact study findings. Future research should explore additional perceptions of female leaders. Participants were recruited from existing professional networks of the research team with the inclusion criteria limiting potential study participants. Sample size may therefore be considered a limitation. This study aimed to ensure the inclusion of summer, winter, Olympic, and Paralympic programmes, to develop an understanding of common considerations across WCPs. However, it would be interesting to extend this study further by obtaining additional perspectives allowing for comparison between programme types (i.e., summer vs winter). Study findings are situated with British WCPs and therefore may not be completely generalisable to other sporting systems.

Conclusion

British Olympic and Paralympic sport leaders highlight considerations which influence how WCP PSTs are structured to their strategic objectives, conceptualised as impact to performance, against funding restrictions. Findings indicate that PL, as a career assistance service, was not considered within PST structuring due to its status as centrally funded by UK Sport and lack of opportunity for alignment with strategic intent. Leaders perceive imperfections in WCP provision due to funding and sports specific issues

and seek creative solutions to address programme needs. Participants express a desire for increased control with precise solutions required to ensure return on investment. Participants indicate a preference for PL to be brought under direct control of individual WCPs. Findings indicate tensions in WCPs suggesting that the current climate has strayed too far towards wellbeing and distracting from performance. The present study is timely given recent changes in UK Sport funding which provides opportunity for WCPs to directly invest in PL services in future. Performance leaders are advised to develop new delivery approaches for career assistance services which are clearly aligned with programme strategy and operationally integrated with other PST disciplines and coaching practices ensuring programme and athlete need are met while providing UK Sport with appropriate governance oversight. PST accountability to performance is considered to support improved collaboration with coaches.[65] Coaches should therefore be considered critical stakeholders in the successful implementation of future PL provision as coach endorsement can legitimise engagement with PL as a performance-enhancing resource.[68]

Practical implications

Interview data from performance leaders provide new perspectives and fresh perceptions into PL and multidisciplinary PST functioning. Study findings offer several actionable implications for HP stakeholders which may improve the design, integration and delivery of PL services:

- A core priority is to explicitly and fully embed PL within programme strategy. Currently, PL is a supplementary service disconnected from performance leading to deprioritisation and suboptimal integration. Consequently, PL objectives must be explicitly stated within and integrated with performance plans, including aligning PL outcomes with relevant performance-related metrics.
- PL strategy must be operationalised. Participants gave the example of PL being excluded from training camps due to budget and prioritisation despite evidence that such events are key to building relationships and driving engagement. Therefore, PL connections to strategy must be operationalised with integration to key programme milestones.
- WCPs require increased control over and accountability for PL services. To fully meet programme needs, leaders require control in defining role responsibilities either through co-design of roles with UKSI or through direct employment with their programme. Increased control also facilitates clear accountability structures reinforcing PL connection to performance outcomes.
- Tailored PL roles must be supported by evolved evaluation frameworks which are currently subjective or activity based. More robust evaluation could focus on outcomes as indicators of disciplinary impact.
- Ambiguity is a consistent issue regarding PL purpose. To support clarity, programmes ought to develop role mapping frameworks which outline individual and shared responsibilities, and how these feed into strategic aims.
- Coaches are crucial to foster effective PST support with integration of PL into programme discussions, training camps, and planning processes supporting greater alignment to and accountability for performance objectives alongside athlete development needs. Coaches therefore may directly benefit from working more closely with PLPs rather than signposting athletes to services during periods of acute need.

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Ethical considerations

Ethical approval (BAHSS2 01352) was provided by the University of Lancashire Ethics Review Panel.

Consent to participate

All participants provided written informed consent for participation in this study.

Consent for publication

All participants provided consent for the use of anonymised quotations in publications arising from this research.

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Data availability

Study participants did not give written consent for their data to be shared publicly, and interview data could be attributed to specific individuals so supporting data is not available.

Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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