



Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them.

Proposed Framework for Supporting and Managing Sanctioned Athletes

1. Purpose and Scope

This document presents a proposed framework to guide sport organisations in how to support, manage, and engage with sanctioned athletes during the period in which they are excluded from competition and formal sport structures. It responds to a recognised gap between sanctioning processes and the lived experiences of athletes during this phase, which is often characterised by uncertainty, isolation, and a lack of structured support. This corresponds to a critical phase in the athlete pathway that is often under-structured and unsupported, yet essential for:

- safeguarding athlete welfare;
- ensuring compliance with anti-doping rules;
- enabling meaningful rehabilitation;
- protecting the integrity of clean sport.

2. Background and Rationale

Sanctioned athletes are often excluded not only from competition, but also from the formal structures, guidance, and support systems that shape everyday sporting life. Yet the sanction period is not a neutral or inactive phase: evidence shows that it is frequently marked by uncertainty, isolation, stigma, confusion about rules, psychological distress, and a lack of structured institutional support. At the same time, this period is critical for safeguarding athlete welfare, ensuring compliance with anti-doping rules, supporting meaningful rehabilitation, and protecting the integrity of clean sport. A framework for supporting and managing sanctioned athletes in the sport system and its peripheries is therefore needed to address this under-structured phase in a more coherent, humane, and effective way. By treating the sanction period as a structured and supervised transition rather than passive exclusion, such a framework can

help reduce avoidable harm, support behavioural change, and lay the foundations for credible reintegration, while strengthening the fairness and legitimacy of anti-doping practice.

3. Evidence Sources

The framework is grounded in qualitative evidence from the Erasmus+ and WADA-funded TALE – *What About Us?* project, complemented by a participatory sense-making process using a World Café method. In detail, evidence came from qualitative interviews with sanctioned athletes, capturing their lived experiences and support needs as well as stakeholder perspectives from a World Café process, reflecting their expectations. The World Café brought together diverse stakeholders, including:

- sanctioned and non-sanctioned athletes
- representatives from national and international sport organisations
- legal experts
- representatives from human rights institutions

Together, these perspectives underline a key message: Sanctioned athletes are not outside responsibility of anti-doping organizations. They remain part of a managed transition phase that requires structure, guidance, and support.

FRAMEWORK STATUS – PROPOSED MODEL

This framework represents a proposed structure based on current evidence.

It identifies key components that may inform practice, while allowing for adaptation and further development in subsequent project phases.

4. Conceptual Approach

The proposed structured transitional rehabilitation framework for managing the sanction period and preparing for reintegration draws upon reintegrative and restorative logic, transitional or liminal governance, and rehabilitation- and desistance-oriented approaches. It treats the sanction period as a planned and guided process – as a transitional phase to help an athlete return to sport. In that sense, it acknowledges not to reject the person but the person's behaviour i.e. their actions were wrong but that doesn't equate to them not belonging anymore. Finally, it suggests treating the sanction phase as a period for behavioural change and rebuilding trust, to ensure the athlete is ready to come back to sport and reintegrate successfully.

It is based on three core ideas:

1. Enforcement of the Regulations without exclusion

Sanctioned athletes must respect clear restrictions on sport involvement and competition eligibility. At the same time, interviews highlight that complete isolation can lead to significant harm, including psychological distress, loss of identity, and disengagement from sport and society.

2. Structured and supervised transition

Rather than a passive period, the sanction phase should be understood as a structured and supported transitional period in which athletes may be moving either toward eventual reintegration into sport or toward life beyond sport. In both cases, it is not simply "waiting time", but a managed

phase in which rules are clear, responsibilities are defined, appropriate support is accessible, and preparation is directed toward a credible future pathway.

3. Preparation for reintegration

All measures during the sanction phase should contribute to readiness for reintegration by supporting understanding and trust building, reflection, and learning, and—where the circumstances of the case indicate intentional rule violation or negligence—meaningful behavioural change.

INSIGHT BOX

The sanction period is not “dead time”. It is a critical window for rehabilitation and prevention of repeat offences.

5. Key Challenges Identified

Experience of Sanctioned Athletes

Based on the findings from interviews with sanctioned athletes, they consistently described a lack of structured institutional support, reliance on family, friends, and external actors, strong psychological burden, stigma, and identity loss, and confusion about legal processes and rules.

Athlete voice

“Psychologically [...] I would have liked support... everything just piled up.”

Stakeholder Expectations

In the World Café discussions, stakeholders further emphasized the need for clear rules and conditions, the importance of accountability and trust, the role of mental health support and athlete voice, and the need for better integration of practice and evidence. At the same time, it was recognised that ADOs occupy a challenging dual role: they must both enforce the World Anti-Doping Code and provide support to athletes. It is therefore important to clearly distinguish between these two functions, even when they are delivered by the same organisation. This distinction should be communicated to athletes, emphasising that due process must be followed, while also acknowledging the organisation’s responsibility and duty of care at a human level.

6. Framework Components

The following components outline areas that may form part of a structured and supportive approach to managing the sanction period.

Immediate actions: Supporting athletes early

Goal: Ensure fairness, clarity, and early support

- ✓ Athletes understand the process, rules, and their rights (clear, accessible communication)
- ✓ Timely access to legal, psychological, and financial support is signposted
- ✓ Early welfare check-in and guidance is ensured
- ✓ Opportunities for trusted advice or peer support are available

Why this matters:

A fair and transparent start creates the foundation for trust, compliance, and future reintegration.

The period immediately following notification is critical. Athletes often experience uncertainty, isolation, and distress.

Sport organisations should therefore:

- ensure a welfare check-in within three days
- provide clear access to:
 - legal support
 - psychological services
 - financial guidance
- explain processes in accessible, non-technical language

Athlete voice

“I didn’t understand half the legal language— - they expected me to just accept it.”

Structured peer support opportunities can further support understanding and coping, provided appropriate training is in place. In detail, this could be provided by formerly sanctioned athletes who are willing to share their experiences but are at the same time trained to do so with an appropriate (i.e., trauma-informed) approach.

INSIGHT BOX

Clarity is not just helpful - it is protective. Unclear information increases both stress and risk of further violations.

Governance and Clarity: Provide clear, consistent, and accessible guidance

A recurring challenge identified in interviews is the lack of clarity regarding rules, rights, and responsibilities.

Athlete voice

“No one could clearly tell me what I was allowed to do - I was scared of making things worse.”

This framework proposes that organisations:

- must provide clear and accessible guidance on:
 - allowed and prohibited activities during the sanctioned period
 - rules on association and engagement during the sanctioned period
- must ensure that athletes receive:
 - understandable explanations of legal processes at the time of notification
 - timely and continuous communication throughout the sanctioning process and before returning (where applicable)
- should make arrangement for independent legal aid (one initial consultation provided free of charge to the athlete)
- must designate a clear contact point for guidance and support within the organization
- must establish formal, transparent reintegration pathways

- should provide guidance to teams and federations on managing reintegration

PRACTICAL TAKEAWAY BOX

Clear rules are not restrictive - they are enabling. They allow athletes to remain engaged without risking further violations.

Athlete Support and Welfare: Address psychological, social, and practical needs

Athletes often face considerable confusion immediately after notification. Interviews consistently highlight that athletes experience this phase as highly challenging, with many reporting a lack of structured institutional support. Athletes felt de-humanised and described interactions as “dealing with robots rather than people”. They expressed the need to be heard, treated as individuals, and supported beyond the purely legal process. This supports informed early decisions and reduces inequalities between athletes from different sports and countries. This framework proposes that organisations should ensure that athletes have access to:

- psychological support and counselling
- legal advice, particularly in early phases (e.g., curated list of pro-bono legal services)
- financial guidance where needed

Communication and Public Exposure: Support athletes in managing visibility and public perception

Sanctioned athletes frequently face intense media and social-media scrutiny combined with uncertainty about what they are allowed to communicate, leading to challenges related to public perception, stigma, and fears of breaching confidentiality or association rules. However, complete isolation tends to increase risks rather than reduce them, highlighting the need for organisations to provide clear guidelines and targeted support for managing media relations, public communication, and social media during the sanction and upon return. The goal should be to help athletes navigate their visibility and narrative more confidently, complemented by structured peer-to-peer exchange—an area also emphasised in the World Café discussions. These discussions further emphasised the need to better understand and support this area.

Athlete voice

“You’re told not to speak - but then everyone else is talking about you.”

Where appropriate, athletes may be supported in sharing their experiences (e.g. testimonials or video formats), provided this is voluntary and accompanied by guidance.

This framework proposes that organisations should:

- provide guidance on communication and public visibility, supporting athletes in managing visibility
- support athletes in navigating;
 - media interactions
 - public perception
 - digital environments

Compliance and Monitoring: Ensure rule adherence while supporting learning

While compliance is essential, both sanctioned athletes' interviews and stakeholder discussions highlight the importance of clarity, transparency, and proportionality. This framework proposes that organisations should:

- Establish transparent and proportionate monitoring mechanisms
- Clearly communicate expectations, responsibilities and consequences
- Ensure that compliance mechanisms are understandable and not unnecessarily complex

Rehabilitation and Development: Support meaningful behavioural change and personal development

Interviews demonstrate that many athletes actively engage in reflection, reorientation, and personal development as part of coping with their situation. Some also expressed a desire to “give something back” and contribute to sport through their experience. This framework proposes that organisations should support:

- education on rights and responsibilities in anti-doping
- opportunities for structured reflection and learning
- provide information to athletes to support their sense-making (especially for unintentional cases without significant fault or negligence)
- engagement in prevention or awareness activities (where appropriate)

Environment and Risk Management: Address contextual drivers of behaviour (where ADRV is intentional use of prohibited substances and/or methods)

Evidence highlights the importance of the athlete's environment, including the influence of support personnel and structural pressures. This framework proposes that organisations should, before a sanctioned athlete returns to sport:

- assess exposure to high-risk environments
- support necessary changes *within* the environment the athlete returns to (if relevant), to minimise the risk of reoffending.
- provide access to mentoring and personalised guidance to help athletes navigating competing demands and value conflicts

Connection to Reintegration: Ensure continuity toward reintegration

The sanction period plays a critical role in preparing athletes for reintegration. It should be directly linked to reintegration outcomes. Interviews show that athletes benefit from planning ahead, preparing for return and developing alternatives. This framework proposes that organisations should:

- link sanction-phase activities to reintegration pathways
- support athletes in:
 - planning for return (if applicable), or transition out of competitive sport
 - developing dual career options
 - building a life beyond sport

System-level measures: Strengthening systems mid-term

Stakeholders proposed exploring an EU or international athlete protection fund to address financial disparities, particularly for athletes from lower-income sports or countries. Such a fund could help cover legal defence, translation services, and education and reintegration programmes, reducing the pressure to return prematurely to potentially harmful environments.

Over time, organisations should:

- explore possibilities for “athlete protection fund”
- develop anonymised case databases
- improve training of decision-makers
- enhance consistency across cases

System-level measures: Strengthening considerations long-term

While beyond immediate implementation, broader structural questions should be addressed, including:

- the application of burden of proof and strict liability
- ensuring objective decision-making and equality of arms
- clarifying or reassessing rules on prohibited association

CORE ELEMENTS FOR SUPPORTING SANCTIONED ATHLETES

- ✓ Clear and accessible information at the beginning of the sanction relating to rules and procedures
- ✓ Right to pause and seek legal advice (provided independently, free of charge for one initial consultation) before responding to the notification letter
- ✓ Identified contact point for continuous guidance within the organization
- ✓ Access to peer support or structured peer-to-peer formats
- ✓ Consistent interpretation of rules across contexts
- ✓ Access to mental health and counselling services
- ✓ Access to financial guidance where needed
- ✓ Structured welfare check-ins
- ✓ Recognition of the athlete as a person, not only a case – they are treated as individuals and given the opportunity to be heard
- ✓ Transparent compliance expectations (i.e., what needs to be done to remain Code compliant)
- ✓ Proportionate and transparent monitoring
- ✓ Systems designed to support compliance, not only enforce it
- ✓ Access to mental health and counselling services
- ✓ Participation in education programmes
- ✓ Opportunities for reflection and personal development
- ✓ Optional contribution to prevention initiatives
- ✓ Identification of high-risk environments
- ✓ Support for environment change to safe alternatives where needed
- ✓ Access to mentoring and guidance

- ✓ Clear guidance on “what can be communicated”
- ✓ Support in managing public exposure
- ✓ Access to communication guidance or training
- ✓ Early preparation for reintegration
- ✓ Support for dual career pathways
- ✓ Structured transition planning

7. System Risks Without Structured Management

Without such a framework, evidence indicates risks including:

- unintended and uneven harm escalation for sanctioned athletes
- unmanaged isolation and psychological harm
- confusion leading to additional rule violations
- lack of behavioural change (intentional rule violations or negligence) / understanding of what happened (unintentional cases)
- loss of trust in the anti-doping system among athletes (sanctioned – especially unintentional cases, and not sanctioned)
- inconsistent practices across organisations

8. Key Recommendations

Taken together, the evidence, conceptual framework, and areas of system risk outlined above point to a clear conclusion: the sanction period must be treated as an active phase of governance, support, and accountability rather than a period of passive exclusion. The following key recommendations translate these insights into practical policy priorities for anti-doping and sport organisations, with the aim of strengthening clarity, fairness, athlete welfare, and the credibility of sanction-period management.

Key recommendation 1: Embed the sanction period within anti-doping policy as a structured, supervised, and supported transition phase rather than treating it as passive exclusion.

Key recommendation 2: Integrate support and compliance within sanction-period management so that athletes are enabled to meet expectations through clear guidance, proportionate monitoring, and appropriate assistance.

Key recommendation 3: Develop formal management frameworks with clear, accessible, and consistently applied rules and communication processes governing sanctioned athletes’ rights, responsibilities, and permitted forms of engagement.

Key recommendation 4: Design sanction-period policies and procedures to address athletes’ psychological, social, legal, and practical needs in a systematic and coordinated manner.

Key recommendation 5: Integrate athlete experiences into the development, implementation, and periodic review of sanction-period policy and practice to ensure that frameworks remain fair, credible, and responsive to lived realities.

Key recommendation 6: Provide structured support for communication and storytelling, giving sanctioned athletes professional guidance on managing media and social media and enabling voluntary, fact-checked testimonials on official, trusted platforms, with clear rules on what may be shared.

Key recommendation 7: Reduce inequality of access to support through immediate legal aid, such as national-federation lists of pro-bono lawyers, and by exploring an EU or international athlete protection fund covering legal, translation, education, and reintegration costs.

Key recommendation 8: Designate independent reintegration support, such as an independent reintegration officer or expert, and actively involve national and international federations and professional teams in planning and managing return.

9. Contribution to Further Framework Development

This proposed framework provides a conceptual and practical basis for further development. It translates the current evidence base into an initial framework that can guide reflection, policy dialogue, and early implementation efforts, while recognising that further refinement will be needed as knowledge, practice, and stakeholder engagement evolve.

As a proposed model, its purpose is not to prescribe a final or fixed solution, but to identify the core domains that require attention if the sanction period is to be managed in a way that is fair, coherent, and effective. In this sense, the framework is intended to support organisations in moving beyond fragmented or informal responses by providing a clearer structure for how welfare, compliance, communication, rehabilitation, and preparation for reintegration might be addressed in a more coordinated way.

It is intended to inform discussion and refinement, support alignment across stakeholders, and contribute to the development of a more detailed and operational framework in subsequent project phases. Given the different expectations and responsibilities of athletes, sport organisations, anti-doping bodies, legal actors, and human rights stakeholders, a common framework can help clarify roles, reduce inconsistency, and create a more transparent basis for future policy development.

Importantly, this framework should be understood as an iterative contribution rather than an endpoint. Subsequent project phases may build on it by testing its practical applicability, identifying priorities for implementation, clarifying minimum standards, and further specifying which elements should be mandatory, recommended, or context dependent. Future development may also strengthen the framework by incorporating additional stakeholder feedback, comparative policy analysis, and lessons learned from practice.

In this way, the framework contributes not only to immediate discussion and refinement, but also to the longer-term development of a more detailed, operational, and evidence-informed model for managing the sanction period. Ultimately, its value lies in helping anti-doping and sport systems recognise the sanction period as a phase requiring structured governance, proportionate support, and clear accountability, rather than leaving it unaddressed between formal sanction and possible reintegration. As a direction for future research, the scope could be expanded to athletes' wider personal environment, including athlete support personnel, parents, and sport physicians, to inform dedicated policy recommendations for these groups in subsequent project phases.