



Tuesday 14th September 2021

To: The Wider Football Community,

RE: Open Letter Regarding the Retention of Match Officials

Thank you for taking time in reading this note; whilst it may appear lengthy, it is important that we provide an update to all participants within the game on the current challenges that we face on refereeing within Kent. This correspondence follows from our first open-letter back in March 2021, when football was given the green-light to restart.

During the pandemic we tried supporting match officials, having provided online training and development opportunities as well as mental health and well-being support. This time also allowed us to re-focus how we forward plan, with several working groups established to concentrate on the recruitment, retention, and development of referees. Listening to our volunteer workforce is important and is something we must continue with.

Given many grassroots competitions have now commenced, it is exceptionally upsetting and worrying that there is a severe shortage of match officials; not only a concern for us in Kent but one shared Nationally. The number of games that appear to not have had a referee over the weekend in our County are, without doubt, at an all-time high.

To provide some context to this, what is most concerning is that we closed the 2020/2021 season with over 1,634 match officials affiliated; the most we have ever received. Ensuring transparency, at this present time of the 2021/2022 season we have 1,247 affiliated match officials, representing almost a 24% loss. This number of affiliations includes almost 200 new trainee referees since May 2021. To put this 25% loss into footballing terms, if each of those 400 referees lost were to referee approximately 20 games a season it results in approximately 8,000 matches being played without a referee; a referee who is independent, who will uphold the integrity of the game and who will look to objectively enforce the laws of the game with their experience.

So why is this? Covid will have naturally impacted us, as it will have done with other voluntary roles and commitments. However, it would be a naive statement if this was attributed as the sole reason. The mistreatment of referees, the abuse they receive and the behaviour of participants within the game towards match officials are having a detrimental impact on our retention levels. From this weekend alone, I have already have phone calls with:

- 2 trainee referees who have received a torrent level of abuse, resulting in them walking away from continuing their qualification.
- 2 grassroots referees receiving verbal abuse causing them to leave the game.
- 1 referee being followed back to his changing room to be confronted by an aggressive manager and verbally attacking within this referee's personal space.
- 1 experienced Football League official, operating on a local-league fixture to gain some fitness, being physically punched in the face.
- 1 referee receiving social media threats.

This is not acceptable. It is a weekly occurrence, and only builds to the catalogue of similar stories we have had in recent seasons; referees being hospitalised, an under-18 referee being physically punched by an adult player.

"These situations are rare". "These events a result of a wider society problem". "It's only a minority who commit the offences". These 'excuses' are irrelevant; they should not be happening at all. How long will it be before a referee becomes severely injured, incapacitated, or perhaps worse? Strong, possibly; a reality in the current environment, absolutely.

Whilst the conduct and behaviour of the minority is not the sole reason for this shortage of referees, it is a fundamental one; why would these referees who (i) are human, (ii) who have families to go home to, (iii) who give up their time for minimal recompense, (iv) who love the game just as much as players, managers, coaches, spectators, club officials, (v) who simply want to give something back, possibly want to continue sparing hours of their weekend when all they receive is grief? This is no advert to prospective referees looking to complete a qualification, nor is it one that will retain the limited numbers we currently have.

Football is a passionate game; believe it or not our referees understand this too. They draw on their experiences both from within football and life, to try and manage a positive environment at the weekend. We, as referees, make honest decisions; yes, we make mistakes, just like players, coaches and managers do. This is football. This is life. A decision will go against your team during a game, during the season, and may not be one you expect. But understand this, and trust me, that nobody is more disappointed at making an incorrect decision than a referee.



A significant number of our referees are under the age of 18; in fact, 322 are U18 (approximately 26%). They should be clearly identifiable with a yellow armband. It is totally inappropriate to engage or offer any abusive comments to a young person/minor. As a County FA we have a zero-tolerance approach to this and should any participant be found guilty then this will be reported into The FA's Safeguarding Department, as well as being dealt with in-line with FA Regulations by the Discipline Team. We have a zero-tolerance approach to any misconduct towards any of our referees and ask that all participants and stakeholders support in addressing this.

For most clubs, teams and players who support our referees; please keep doing what you do! It is only fair to say that we have thousands of games taking place each month, where everyone has a positive experience. Hopefully this continues and helps everyone enjoy the game at the weekend.

To be fully transparent, referees are also held accountable for their conduct when it comes to how they engage, speak and act; we fully investigate any accusation raised by a club/stakeholder, albeit they are rare. Referees who happen to make a 'footballing' decision and perhaps do get something incorrect, are unfortunate but this is part of the game.

Quite simply, WE MUST CHANGE how we behave. Those who abuse referees (either with low-level verbal dissent or through the extreme physical assaults), to those who do respect match officials and ensure a safe environment for us all; OUR GAME NEEDS TO CHANGE. We have a collective responsibility to protect the image of our beautiful game, and we must challenge and eradicate poor participant behaviour. Quite simply, if you cannot act with respect, act with decorum and act within the spirit of the game to a fellow human-being then stay at home.

Please consider how you engage with referees. We are not asking for preferential treatment, but simply treat us respectfully and as a human-being. Please think about any comments you make during or after the game, and that if you are lucky enough to have a referee for your game, for your son or daughter's game, then they have given up their time. We are not perfect, and will not get everything correct, nor please everyone all the time; this is not possible, but they will work hard and have absolutely no interest on who wins or loses. Just because you do not agree with a decision, does not give license to be abusive.

Look after that young referee who wears the U18 yellow armband; they are the next generation!

Look after the 'steady' pair of hands who covers a game every weekend; they want to support football.

Look after the more 'experienced' referee, who may not be as agile; they've years of experience and may use to manage a game.

Look after the referee who may be getting things 'wrong'; how is screaming, shouting and being abusive ever going to help?

It is time for action. Over the coming weeks and months, it is likely that our local games will not have referees. Teams will need to agree on someone to referee that game themselves and, whilst this is not ideal, we continue to work tirelessly to address this matter and hopefully the situation will improve. If you are lucky enough to get a referee this weekend, then perhaps engage with them with positive comments and take an interest in their day.

Thank you to all our referees who have signed up for the 2021/2022 season, and who go out week-in, week-out, to cover games of football in what can be challenging circumstances. I know you do your best, and you will always be supporting when you have the best intentions for the game. We, at the County FA, work tirelessly to ensure you feel valued and get enjoyable experiences. Like referees, we do not always get it right but, we will continue to work hard in supporting every single one of you to ensure we make continued improvements to refereeing.

Kind Regards

Nick Dunn
Referee Development Officer
Kent County Football Association