

THE FA & KICK IT OUT - JOINT ACTION PLAN

# SERIOUS MISCONDUCT IN GRASSROOTS FOOTBALL

NOVEMBER 2023



**FOR ALL**



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the 2022/23 season, The Football Association ("The FA") and Kick It Out ("KIO") commissioned a piece of research to better understand serious misconduct in grassroots football. The intention was to use this insight to develop a joint, co-owned action plan to ensure we are taking effective action in response to the specific issues and challenges raised.

For the purpose of this action plan, the term "grassroots" refers to Step 5 and below of the men's pyramid, and Tier 3 and below of the women's pyramid.

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**There are three broad objectives in this plan which have been derived from the research:**

- 1. Increasing awareness & knowledge of serious incidents**
- 2. Improving reporting of serious incidents**
- 3. Tackling specific 'problem areas'**

**For each objective, this plan sets out the current challenges and the actions we'll take to tackle them.**

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It is important to note that this action plan is part of a broader approach taken by The FA to tackle poor behaviours in the grassroots game. Poor behaviours have a negative impact on everyone involved and can lead players, coaches and referees to drop out of the game for good.

The FA will continue to use a broad suite of interventions to improve behaviours throughout the 2023/24 season, including campaigns and communications to set clear expectations around behaviours, use of education tools, sanctioning and discipline (where appropriate) as well as supporting County FAs, clubs and leagues with resources.

This approach is also supported by the recent launch of The FA's new referee strategy, which commits to ensuring the safety and continued enjoyment of referees at all levels by reducing abuse and making referees feel truly valued on and off the pitch.

These issues are not ones that The FA and KIO can solve alone. We will rely on the continued close working with County FAs, clubs, leagues and broader partners in the football family to make progress in these areas.



Together with our partners at Kick It Out, we are committed to creating a game that is safe, welcoming and free from any form of discrimination. Building a good understanding of the challenges we face is very important – and this new research provides us with valuable insight that will help us to focus on the key areas where we can make a positive difference.

Each season, over 100,000 teams participate in over one million fixtures across the country, and whilst reported incidents of discrimination are not commonplace, we know from this research that the number is growing and can often go unreported. To help tackle this, The FA and Kick It Out have developed a joint action plan to ensure that perpetrators face consequences for their actions, with stronger sanctions already in place, whilst also making the reporting of incidents easier and helping to build trust in the process.

**Tim Foster**  
Head of Grassroots Operations



It's clear that discrimination remains a serious issue in grassroots football and that several barriers still exist which prevent participants, particularly ethnic minorities and women, from reporting incidents.

It's vital that we find solutions to removing those obstacles and this research gives us invaluable insight into what is happening at a grassroots level, as well as equipping our grassroots team with the knowledge to tackle the issues identified head-on.

We commend The FA's commitment to addressing serious incidents in grassroots football and will continue to work closely with our partners across the game to ensure that tackling discrimination is at the top of football's agenda.

**Tajejan Hutton**  
Head of Grassroots Football

# WHAT IS SERIOUS MISCONDUCT?

Under FA rules, there are 3 types of offences considered serious misconduct, that trigger the serious case management process:

## DISCRIMINATORY ABUSE

**Discriminatory abuse on the grounds of:**

- Ethnic origin
- Colour
- Race
- Nationality
- Religion or Belief
- Gender
- Sexual Orientation
- Gender reassignment
- Disability

## OFFENCES AGAINST A MATCH OFFICIAL

**When directly against a match official, incidents of:**

- Threatening and/or abusive language
- Physical contact or attempted physical contact (e.g. grabbing the referee's cards)
- Assault or attempted assault

## ASSAULT BY A PARTICIPANT AGAINST A PARTICIPANT

**Incidents of assault, such as:**

- Striking or headbutting, against another participant

2022/23 saw a 10% season-on-season increase in serious misconduct allegations, with a 9% increase in allegations relating to discriminatory abuse. Please refer to the 2022/23 Annual Disciplinary Review for more information.

# HOW IS SERIOUS MISCONDUCT REPORTED?

There are 4 mechanisms for reporting serious misconduct in the grassroots game, including 3 specifically for discrimination:

## MATCH OFFICIAL



**Match officials must report any incident of serious misconduct as an 'Extraordinary Incident' in their post-match report.**

During a match, incidents should be reported to the match official.

Where the official has not witnessed an incident of discrimination themselves, they should take a statement from the player to include in their report.

## COUNTY FA



**Victims and witnesses can report cases of discrimination directly to their County FA.**

Contact details can be found on the County FA website.

## KICK IT OUT



**Victims and witnesses can report cases of discrimination directly through Kick It Out via:**

- The Kick It Out app
- [Online reporting form](#)
- Calling 02039678989
- Email [report@kickitout.org](mailto:report@kickitout.org)
- X, Facebook or Instagram

Kick It Out will then liaise with the County FA and person raising the report.

## THE FA

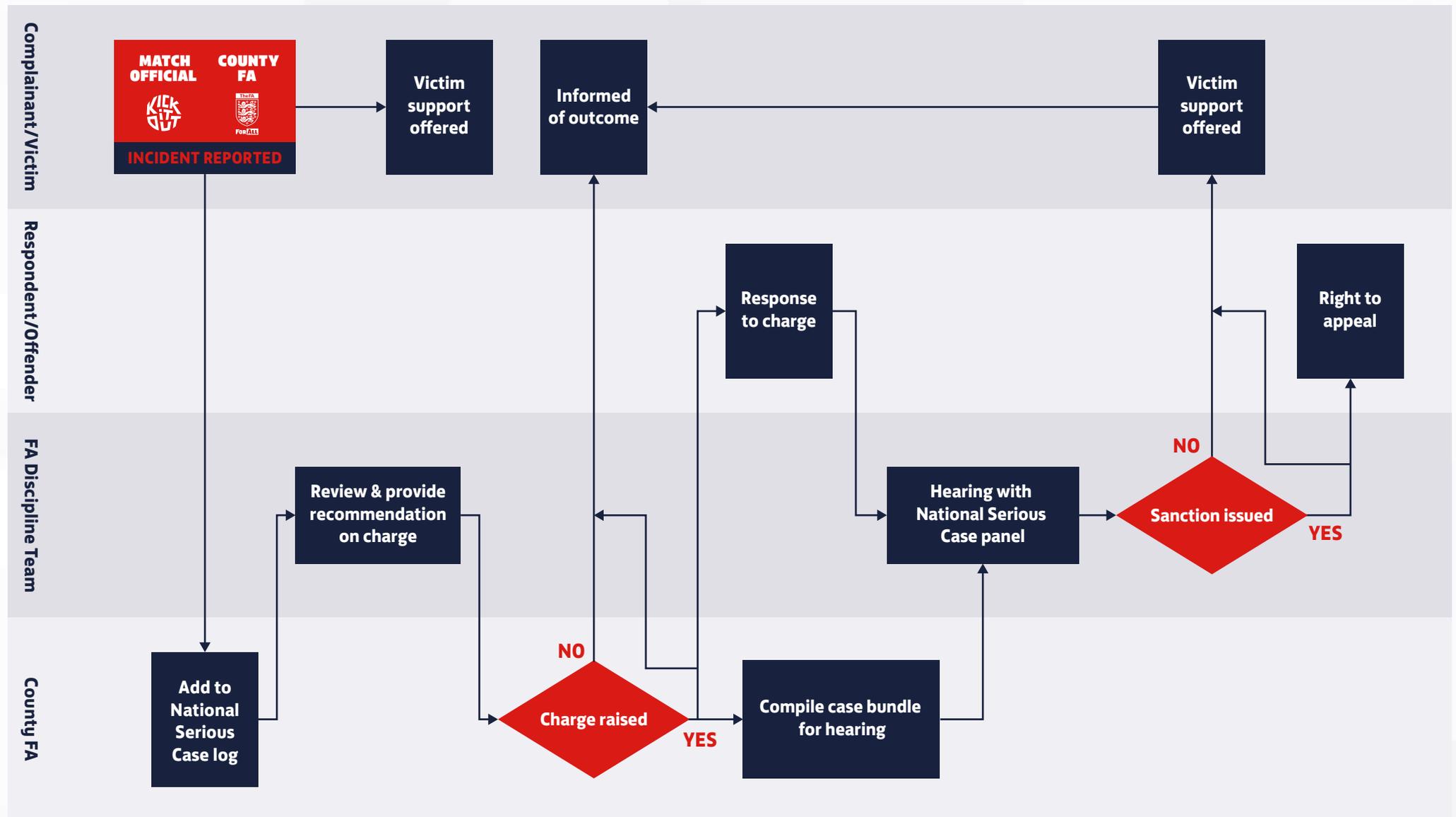


**Victims and witnesses can report cases of discrimination directly through the [Grassroots Reporting Form](#).**

This form has been designed to capture all the information required to pursue a charge, minimising back and forth with the person raising the report while compiling a case.

We have different reporting mechanisms as we know different approaches will work for different people. ALL reporting mechanisms trigger the serious case management process detailed on the next page.

# THE SERIOUS CASE MANAGEMENT PROCESS



We aim to resolve all serious cases, within a 60-day period; commencing from when the initial allegation is first reported to the County Football Association. We will in any event, aim to conclude all cases within a 90-day limit, as prescribed within the FA Regulations subject to any regulatory exceptions.

# RESEARCH KEY STATISTICS

**26%** have experienced or witnessed discrimination in the last 12 months

**42%** have experienced or witnessed discrimination in their time in grassroots football

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Respondents who have ever experienced or witnessed discrimination on the basis of:

<b>Race</b>	<b>37%</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>19%</b>
<b>Colour</b>	<b>31%</b>	<b>Sexual Orientation</b>	<b>16%</b>
<b>Ethnic Origin</b>	<b>26%</b>	<b>Disability</b>	<b>5%</b>

Source: 2CV Serious Incidents Survey, 2022. Base: 3,417 respondents

# RESEARCH KEY FINDINGS

- Abuse is not only classed as verbal, but also **less overt forms of discrimination**. For example, there was a greater perception among women and ethnic minority groups that they were more likely to not be picked for teams or face decisions going against them based on protected characteristics. Not being welcomed at a club was the second most common form of discriminatory abuse experienced by Asian participants.
- More than half of women (56%) who have experienced discriminatory abuse stated that they experienced it **based on their gender**.
- A reporting gap exists, with potentially more than twice as many incidents occurring as reported. **Under-reporting is believed to be a particular challenge with ethnic minority groups**, despite the majority of incidents meeting sanctioning thresholds.
- Several **barriers to reporting were identified**, including fear of the consequences after reporting an incident, a desire by victims to put incidents behind them, low confidence that action will be taken, uncertainty around the seriousness of an incident, and a lack of awareness of the reporting process.
- There's a widespread perception among grassroots participants that action would be not be taken if discriminatory abuse was reported. However, the **percentage of reports leading to a charge is much higher** than believed by those surveyed: 34% of respondents believe that incidents lead to a charge, whereas this figure is actually 62%.



## **OUR ACTION PLAN OBJECTIVES**

- 1. Increasing awareness & knowledge of serious incidents**
- 2. Improving reporting of serious incidents**
- 3. Tackling specific ‘problem areas’ in the game**

# FOCUS AREA ONE

## INCREASING AWARENESS OF SERIOUS MISCONDUCT

### THE CHALLENGES

The number of cases of serious misconduct are increasing and our research shows there is a fear that behaviours are worsening, with aggressive and/or discriminatory behaviour being normalised in the grassroots game.

There is a perception existing sanctions are not tough enough and that The FA needs to do more.

Verbal abuse is the most common form of discriminatory abuse, but other forms of abuse such as gestures, physical contact/assault, not being welcome at a club and decisions being made on the basis of protected characteristics are also experienced in the game.

For many participants, it is not clear what The FA mean when they talk about serious misconduct and there is a lack of understanding about what constitutes discrimination and when it should be reported.

### KEY ACTIONS WE WILL TAKE

1. Ahead of the 2023/24 season The FA introduced points deductions for repeat offences of serious misconduct. This sanction was launched with large scale promotion as part of the Love Football Protect the Game campaign.
2. The FA will create guidance to better define serious misconduct. This will be made readily available for participants, clubs and leagues on our website.
3. KIO have expanded their grassroots team and are working to increase the number of clubs and leagues they interact with through the [Kick It Out Equality Charter](#).
4. The FA and KIO will develop education resources for participants, clubs and leagues to drive an inclusive culture in clubs and build understanding of what discriminatory behaviour looks like. We will signpost existing resources, such as those available on the [Kick It Out Academy](#) and work with The FA's Equality, Diversity and Inclusion team to identify gaps in education materials.
5. The FA will hold a series of misconduct events for clubs, targeting the worst performing clubs and leagues from a disciplinary standpoint to provide a more localised view on case numbers and raise awareness of reporting mechanisms.
6. The FA has launched a new hard-hitting campaign in 2023/24, Enough is Enough, to raise awareness of the issue of discriminatory behaviour and to demonstrate it will not be tolerated in the game.

# FOCUS AREA TWO

## IMPROVING REPORTING

### THE CHALLENGES

We know that incidents are more prevalent than reporting data shows, with around 60% of people surveyed stating they had witnessed or experienced an incident of serious misconduct.

Reasons for under-reporting include:

- A lack of awareness of how to report incidents and who should report them
- A lack of consistent reporting behaviour amongst non-match officials
- Victims/witnesses feeling they do not have enough evidence or remember enough details to submit a report
- Victims fearing the consequences of taking action or just wanting to put the incident behind them
- A lack of clarity and understanding of the process once an incident is reported
- A lack of trust and confidence that the report will be taken seriously

### KEY ACTIONS WE WILL TAKE

1. The FA will develop a new standard, Discrimination 365, for County FAs, to improve consistency across the network by communicating the best practice regulations and policies to support the game in handling cases of discrimination.
2. The FA will raise awareness of the different mechanisms available for victims and witnesses to report incidents and highlight the collective responsibility we all have to report. By promoting the different mechanisms available, we hope to make reporting more accessible.
3. The FA and KIO have enabled anonymous reporting to encourage people to come forward without fear of any perceived consequences.
4. The FA will continue to promote the victim support offered through Sporting Chance once an allegation is received.
5. The FA will develop additional resources to improve understanding and transparency of the disciplinary process. This will include information about what to expect throughout the process once an incident is reported, and what to expect from a hearing.
6. The FA will publish, on an annual basis, reporting statistics on cases of serious misconduct in our Annual Disciplinary Review to improve transparency and confidence in the process.
7. The FA will reduce the time taken for sanctions to be issued to perpetrators and have halved the regulatory time limit between notification and hearing in the serious case management process from 180 to 90 days.

# FOCUS AREA THREE

## TACKLING SPECIFIC PROBLEM AREAS

### THE CHALLENGES

Ethnic minority groups experience more incidents and are less likely to report them. Research shows that 90% of incidents involving ethnic minority groups are likely to be deemed serious and these groups are most likely to experience the less overt, non-verbal forms of discriminatory abuse.

There is a general perception of a lack of parity in the way the women's game is perceived and handled, whether that be through the experience of referees appointed for games, or the prevalence of sexist attitudes. Women also experience more incidents of low-level discrimination and are hesitant to report them.

Match officials play a crucial role in reporting cases of serious misconduct, and can be victims as well as witnesses. There is often inconsistency in handling incidents during matches, especially amongst inexperienced referees who can be nervous dealing with conflict.

### KEY ACTIONS WE WILL TAKE

1. The FA will pilot an Equality, Diversity & Inclusion Community of Practice (CoP) to develop connections and build trust with communities, such as ethnic minority groups, that are currently underrepresented across the game. In 2023/24 the CoP will consist of 31 local ambassadors, deployed across 7 County FA regions where we believe we can add the most value.
2. The FA will continue to promote our Equal Game supported by Barclays to educate and inspire clubs to make changes to their governance, workforce, marketing, finances and facilities to provide a more inclusive environments for females and drive parity. We will use our #LetGirlsPlay campaign to drive Equal Access and change perceptions.
3. The FA will increase awareness among match officials around their role in reporting incidents of serious misconduct. We will develop resources to support match officials to improve understanding of their role in the discipline process. Where a match official is a victim of discrimination or assault, we will continue to ensure first-line support is offered through the Referee Development Officer network within 24 hours of the incident.

# MEASURING SUCCESS HOW WILL WE KNOW WE'VE HAD AN IMPACT?

We know the actions contained in this plan will not solve all the challenges detailed overnight. Our focus in the 2023/24 season will be to reduce the number of unreported incidents of discriminatory abuse by encouraging everyone to report. We will monitor progress this season by aiming to:

# DOUBLE

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**the number of allegations of discrimination received  
in the 2022/23 season by the end of 2024/25**

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During this season, The FA will be developing our 2024-28 Grassroots strategy and the next Equality, Diversity & Inclusion strategy. As part of this we will work together with Kick It Out to agree our longer term plan to continue addressing the issues identified in this action plan.



The Football Association  
Wembley Stadium  
London HA9 0WS  
T: +44 (0)800 169 1863  
F: +44 (0)800 169 1864  
W: TheFA.com



T: 020 39678989  
E: [info@kickitout.org](mailto:info@kickitout.org)  
W: [kickitout.org](http://kickitout.org)