

**REGULATORY COMMISSION OF THE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION**

**BETWEEN:**

**The Football Association**

**v**

**Oliver Jepson**

**&**

**Tom Pope**

**&**

**Aaron Woolrich**

**&**

**Shaun Rhodes**

**&**

**Kidsgrove Athletic FC**

**CONSOLIDATED WRITTEN REASONS OF THE COMMISSION**

**Regulatory Disciplinary Commission (the ‘Commission’):**

Jeremy Summers (Chair) – Independent Legal Panel Member.

Tony Allen – Independent Football Panel Member.

Brian Talbot – Independent Football Panel Member.

**Secretary:** Conrad Gibbons, FA Judicial Services Assistant Manager and Paddy McCormack, FA Judicial Services Manager.

**Hearing:** 13 February 2026 (Liability) and 23 February 2026 (Sanction, papers only).

**The Football Association (‘The FA’)**

- Gabriele Watts – Regulatory Advocate, The FA- Representative.
- Sam Parnaby – Referee – Witness.
- Lee Corns – Assistant Referee – Witness.

**Kidsgrove Athletic FC**

- Ian Cooper – Club Official – Representative.
- Tom Pope – Manager.
- Shaun Rhodes – Player.
- Aaron Woolrich – Player.
- Oliver Jepson - Player.
- Chris Holmes – Witness (Mr Woolrich only).
- Linda Gillan – Assistant Club Secretary – Observer.

## Background

1. This matter arose out of a match between played between Avro FC and Kidsgrove Athletic FC (the 'Club' or 'Kidsgrove') on 18 October 2025 (the 'Match').
2. The Match was abandoned in or around the 84<sup>th</sup> minute following an incident involving several players and supporters. At the time of the abandonment the score was 6-0 and red cards had been issued to two Kidsgrove players. The Club's player/manager (Mr Pope) had also been dismissed from the Technical Area.
3. This is the reasoned decision of the Commission. Each member contributed to it, and it represents our conclusions. It is necessarily a summary. It is reached after appropriate consideration of all the evidence, submissions and other material placed before us. Nothing is to be read into the absence of specific reference to any aspect of the material or submissions before us. We considered and gave appropriate weight to it all.

## Charges

4. The following charges were issued against the participants:

### **Mr Jepson**

#### **INCIDENT OF MISCONDUCT – NON-STANDARD CASE**

*Avro FC v Kidsgrove Athletic FC  
Northern Premier League – West Division  
18 October 2025*

### **Charge**

*You are hereby charged with misconduct for a breach of FA Rule E3.1 in respect of the above fixture.*

1. *It is alleged that in or around the 82nd minute, you acted in an improper manner and/or used violent conduct and/or threatening and/or abusive behaviour.*

### **Mr Pope**

#### **INCIDENT OF MISCONDUCT – NON-STANDARD CASE**

*Avro FC v Kidsgrove Athletic FC  
Northern Premier League – West Division  
18 October 2025*

### **Charge**

*You are hereby charged with misconduct for three breaches of FA Rule E3.1 in respect of the above fixture.*

- 1. It is alleged that in or around the 79-81st minute, you acted in an improper manner and/or used abusive and/or insulting words and/or behaviour towards a Match Official(s), leading to your dismissal.*
- 2. It is further alleged that following your dismissal, you acted in an improper manner and/or used abusive and/or insulting words and/or behaviour towards a Match Official(s).*
- 3. It is further alleged that following your dismissal, you acted in an improper manner and/or used violent conduct and/or threatening and/or abusive and/or insulting behaviour.*

**Mr Woolrich**

**INCIDENT OF MISCONDUCT – NON-STANDARD CASE**

*Avro FC v Kidsgrove Athletic FC  
Northern Premier League – West Division  
18 October 2025*

**Charge**

*You are hereby charged with misconduct for a breach of FA Rule E3.1 in respect of the above fixture.*

- 1. It is alleged that in/or around the 82nd minute, you acted in an improper manner and/or used violent conduct.*

**Mr Rhodes**

**INCIDENT OF MISCONDUCT – NON-STANDARD CASE**

*Avro FC v Kidsgrove Athletic FC  
Northern Premier League – West Division  
18 October 2025*

**Charge**

*You are hereby charged with misconduct for a breach of FA Rule E3.1 in respect of the above fixture.*

- 1. Following your dismissal earlier in the fixture, it is alleged that in or around the 82nd minute, you acted in an improper manner and/or used violent conduct and/or threatening and/or abusive and/or insulting behaviour.*

Kidsgrove Athletic FC

**INCIDENT OF MISCONDUCT – NON-STANDARD CASE**

*Avro FC v Kidsgrove Athletic FC  
Northern Premier League – West Division  
18 October 2025*

**Charge**

*Kidsgrove Athletic FC is hereby charged with Misconduct in respect of a breach of FA Rule E20.1 during the above fixture.*

*It is alleged that in or around the 82nd minute of the fixture, Kidsgrove Athletic FC failed to ensure that its players and/or technical area occupants did not behave in a way which is improper and/or provocative and/or violent and/or threatening and/or abusive and/or insulting.*

*The Football Association has designated this as a Non-Standard case as the particular facts of the alleged Misconduct are of a serious and/or unusual nature.*

*Please note that this charge has been consolidated with the charges against Tom Pope, Oliver Jepson, Aaron Woolrich and Shaun Rhodes, pursuant to Regulation 13 of the Disciplinary Regulations 2025/26 at page 167 of The FA Handbook Season 2025/26. The hearings will be conducted together, and the charges shall be determined at a joint hearing.*

Documentary material considered:

5. The Commission fully and carefully considered the FA Charge Letters dated 9 December 2025 issued against each participant and their respective responses.

Procedural Issues:

6. All charges were issued on 9 December 2025. As above, the Charge Letters made it clear that each matter would be heard together at a consolidated hearing.
7. Lengthy dialogue followed between the parties in an effort to find a date for the hearing convenient to all. Due to the number of participants and witnesses only two possible dates were identified, being 13 and 27 March 2026.
8. The matter was initially listed for 10 am on 13 February, and a further complication then arose when two of the participants, Mr Woolrich and Mr Jepson indicated that they could not attend before 1pm and 3 pm respectively. Mr Jepson however also indicated that he could attend for part of the time between 1 and 2 pm using his lunch break.
9. Taking all factors into consideration, the Chair directed that the hearing of all matters should commence at 1pm, and the parties were asked to agree a running order with time estimates.
10. In their written responses to the FA dated 13 December 2025, each participant had denied the charges brought against them.

11. At the hearing, the Chair explained the procedure to be followed in the context of FA Regulation 9, and save for Mr Rhodes, the participants then changed their pleas to accept the charges and indicated that they wished to mitigate the sanction. Mr Jepson's pleas was however limited to an acceptance of improper conduct.
12. The change of pleas was accordingly made over two months after Charge Letters had been issued and at the very last opportunity.
13. An in-person hearing was held by video conference on 13 February 2026, following which the Commission made findings of fact as to the basis upon which the participants would be sanctioned. To assist the parties, these findings were released and written submission on sanction were subsequently sent to the Commission.
14. With the agreement of the parties, the Commission reconvened (again remotely) on 23 February 2026 to consider sanction on the papers alone.

Written evidence in support of the charge:

15. The Referee's, Mr Sam Parnaby, official Report Form stated:

*Report Details*

*I have to report that I, as the Referee sent off Thomas John Pope of Kidsgrove Athletic FC Under Law 12 section: Using offensive, insulting or abusive language and/or gestures Aggressive behaviour shown throughout the game which lead to clear offensive, insulting and abusive language being shouted towards myself on multiple occasions in a short period of time.*

16. This was further amplified in an email sent by the Referee to the FA dated 21 October 2025, which indicated:

*I can confirm that Thomas Pope was sent off whilst he was a technical area occupant (manager).*

*Please see my statement below. Let me know if you need anything else.*

*Tom Pope had been spoken to by my AR1, Oliver Holland, on a couple of occasions prior to this incident regarding his aggressive outbursts. Then in the space of a 2-minute period (79 to 81), the following further aggressive outbursts were noted by myself.*

*'Ref do your fucking job'*

*'Absolute garbage'*

*'He's a fucking idiot'*

*'Oi you're a fucking shambles you, fucking shambles'*

*It was at this point (straight after the final outburst) when the ball was out of play that I proceeded to go over and dismiss him from the technical area. He reacted incredibly aggressively to this, getting quite close to me and making hand actions. I quickly moved away from the situation but he continued to shout 'fucking garbage' and 'you're a fucking disgrace' in my direction. He then started to head towards the changing rooms which ultimately led to*

*the incident that caused the game to be abandoned in the 84th minute in which Tom Pope was heavily involved. Further details of this incident are in my match report.*

17. The Referee also completed an Extraordinary Incident Report Form with the following detail:

*In the 82nd minute as the away team (Kidsgrove) number 17, Tom Pope, was heading to the changing rooms after being sent off he was clearly extremely agitated. His reaction to being sent off from myself was incredibly aggressive, as he had been for most of the game. I believe a comment was made from a member of the crowd towards him and their club secretary appeared to be pushed by this spectator which led to him reacting by running into the crowd and throwing a punch at the spectator. I am unsure as to why the Kidsgrove club secretary was initially confronting the spectator but he did not touch him. Away team (Kidsgrove) number 5, Oliver Jepsen, was seen to follow Tom Pope into the crowd and also throw what appeared to be a punch towards the same spectator. This led to more spectators, club officials and players getting involved. During this period of time I also saw the away team goalkeeper, Aaron Woolrich throw a punch which struck a different spectator. This punch was not thrown in the stands like the other two, but from the field of play immediately behind the goal over the barrier. In this instance, I am unsure as to whether it was the goalkeeper or spectator who initiated the aggression. The incident lasted for around 2 and a half minutes in total and turned into what can only be described as a brawl between players and fans. I decided that there was no way that the game could continue in a safe manner and with player and also spectator safety in mind I decided to abandon the game in the 84th minute when the score was 6-0 in Avro's favour. Red cards were not shown to Oliver Jepsen or Aaron Woolrich as I didn't deem it appropriate after abandoning the game and believe it would have further added to the aggression being shown towards match officials, Avro players and spectators from the Kidsgrove players and officials. However, for the avoidance of doubt I can confirm that they both clearly committed red card offences. Kidsgrove would not have been down to 6 players had they been shown red cards as Tom Pope was sent off from the technical area. I would add that whilst this incident was occurring it was the only time I have ever felt unsafe on a football pitch. This incident did not come out of nowhere and was an accumulation/representation of the complete lack of respect that Kidsgrove showed towards particularly the match officials during this game. Even before this incident, the conduct of the Kidsgrove players and technical area occupants was of a completely unacceptable level towards all three match officials. There were comments made behind my back for much of the game referring to the match officials as being 'corrupt', 'biased' as well as many other abusive phrases and foul language. Due to the offender not being recognised no action could be taken on these occasions but it felt like the comments were constant throughout the game and there was really no way of talking to any of the players on even a remotely respectful level. I would regard my tolerance level as being very high when it comes to dissent/foul language but the line was crossed on numerous occasions during this game from the Kidsgrove players/officials and was by far the worst experience I have encountered on a football pitch and was incredibly hostile. My assistant referees, Lee Corns and Oliver Holland, will also be reporting on the incident that led to the abandonment of this game.*

18. An Extraordinary Incident Report Form was also submitted by Mr Leo Corns, one the Assistant Referees at the Match, who reported:

*On or around 81st minute of the game, match referee Sam Parnaby approached the Kidsgrove bench following a foul mouthed and aggressive outburst from a member of the technical team, something along the lines of (you're a fucking disgrace referee) but this wasn't the first instance of this happening. It was at this point that Tom Pope, Kidsgrove number 17 was shown a red card by Sam. This was the 3rd red card of the game with all 3 going against Kidsgrove. As Tom Pope was leaving the field, walked around the perimeter of the pitch, he continued to use foul and aggressive language towards officials, players and fans. At this point he was too far away for me to pick out word for word other than aggressive and foul mouthed. As he approached the tunnel area several fans were chanting towards him (cheerio, bye bye) and it was at this point where what at best can be described as mayhem broke out as Tom Pope along with other Kidsgrove players (notably number 5, Oliver Jepson) entered the stand to confront the fans. What appeared from my position on the halfway line to be a scuffle, grew and grew until what seemed like 30 plus fans, players and technical team members were involved. Several minutes went by before the situation calmed down with players team officials and fans being on the pitch at this point. I had joined Sam and Oliver at this point and was informed by Sam that he would be abandoning the game. We remained on the pitch for a good ten minutes before feeling it was safe to make our way towards the changing room. I have to say that this is the first time that I have felt unsafe on a football pitch as a player or referee. Thankful members of the Avro technical team had joined us, and they also escorted us to the changing room and offered us after the game refreshments.*

#### Oral Evidence

19. The Commission also fully considered a detailed written response from the Club, which read as follows:

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

#### **1. Inaccuracies within the Referee's Report**

*The referee's report records two on-field dismissals, which we believe are not supported by the available evidence:*

- Shaun Rhodes – Dismissal for a 'last man challenge.' VEO footage clearly shows no contact between Shaun Rhodes and the Avro player, calling into question the factual basis of this dismissal.*
- Josh Thorpe – Dismissal for foul and abusive language. This allegation must be considered within the wider context of the match, during which the referee was heard using inappropriate language towards players. This is not referenced in the report.*

*Additionally, the referee's report notes no cautions issued throughout the match, which does not align with the description of the game presented in the same report and raises further concerns regarding its overall accuracy.*

- *Tom Pope – Technical Area Dismissal. The report suggests ongoing misconduct; however, VEO footage shows that the referee neither warned nor approached the Kidsgrove Athletic technical area until the 81st minute. If the conduct were as serious as described, it is unclear why it was not addressed earlier in the match.*

*As a club, Kidsgrove Athletic takes its responsibilities seriously and confirms that we imposed an internal four-match touchline ban on Tom Pope following his dismissal from the technical area.*

*[REDACTED] personal abuse he received from an individual who has since been identified as a banned [REDACTED] supporter, now following Avro FC. This individual appeared to specifically target Tom Pope and Matt Rhead due to their respective associations with Port Vale and Lincoln City.*

## **2. Omitted Incidents Involving Player Assault**

*There is no reference in the reports to the assault on Kidsgrove Athletic goalkeeper, Aaron Woolrich, by Avro players, despite this incident occurring during the match. Notably, the relevant footage is missing from the submitted video evidence. We have however forwarded screen grabs along with Aarons response for review.*

*Furthermore, there is no mention of a punch thrown by an Avro supporter at Aaron Woolrich, an incident that later resulted in a reaction from the player.*

*[REDACTED] Also included in response to Aaron Woolrich charge.*

## **3. Assault on Kidsgrove Athletic Vice Chairman**

*The reports fail to mention the assault on the Kidsgrove Athletic Vice Chairman by an Avro supporter, an incident which directly contributed to the escalation of events. This omission is significant and materially impacts the understanding of how the situation developed.*

## **4. Exaggerated and Inaccurate Characterisation of Kidsgrove Athletic Supporters**

*The condemnation of Kidsgrove Athletic supporters is both exaggerated and inaccurate. The individuals present were limited in number due to previous incidents of abuse from the same Avro supporter referenced above.*

*[REDACTED]*

[REDACTED]

*Video footage clearly shows one of our spectators (in orange) repeatedly calling for calm. No other Kidsgrove Athletic supporters were present on the day.*

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

***Mitigating Context***

*While Kidsgrove Athletic acknowledges that players must accept responsibility for their actions, it is our firm view that had the Avro supporter been appropriately challenged or removed by Avro club officials or stewards when concerns were raised, the subsequent incidents would not have occurred. At the time, Tom Pope was being escorted around the pitch by Kidsgrove Athletic staff specifically to de-escalate the situation and prevent further issues. This crucial mitigating context is absent from the reports.*

***Conclusion***

*For the reasons outlined above—namely factual inaccuracies, significant omissions, selective and edited video evidence, and the failure to consider clear mitigating circumstances—we respectfully submit that a personal hearing is essential to ensure all parties receive a fair and just outcome. Kidsgrove Athletic Football Club remains committed to upholding the standards of the game and welcomes the opportunity to present full and accurate evidence in person.*

Oral evidence

20. In presenting the case, Ms Watts for the FA briefly reviewed the facts of the incidents and then called the match officials to give evidence. She also took the Commission to the four separate videos containing footage of what had occurred.
21. The Referee confirmed his written statements as above, which he wished to be admitted in evidence.

22. In response to cross examination from Mr Jepson, he confirmed that he had not been 100% sure that Mr Jepson had thrown a punch and was clear that his evidence was that he was only saying that he had seen what *appeared to be* a punch thrown by Mr Jepson.
23. He was then subject to quite hostile cross examination from Mr Rhodes in relation to his statement that he had never been so scared in a game of football. The Referee confirmed that no aggression had been directed to him as the melee developed, but that he had felt that there had been the possibility of something happening at that time.
24. It was put to him by Mr Woolrich that he had been punched by an Avro supporter, but the Referee indicated he had not seen this.
25. He had refereed over three hundred games at a broadly similar level and had never experienced anything like this in terms of continuing problems and abuse over the duration of a game.
26. He was challenged on this by Mr Copper on behalf of the Club who asked why, if that had been the case, he had not taken any action until the 81<sup>st</sup> minute. In response, the Referee stated that he was responsible for getting the game to its conclusion, and so he had tried to ignore a lot of the comments. Many of these had also been made behind his back and he had been unable to determine who had made the comments. He had spoken to the captains as the game progressed. He thought that comments had been made by three quarters of the (Kidsgrove) team and he had just been trying to get to the end of the game.
27. In response to questions from Mr Cooper, the Referee also stated that he not seen the Avro FC 6 leave the field. He accepted that Avro players were in the crowd, but he had not seen any incidents of misconduct.<sup>1</sup>
28. The Assistant Referee also gave oral testimony, confirming his written report and asking that it be admitted in evidence.
29. In response to a question from the Mr Pope, he confirmed that he had been on the other side of the ground and so had not been spoken to by Mr Pope in the lead up to his dismissal.
30. Oral evidence was also received from the Club's goalkeeping coach, Mr Chris Holmes. This was only in support of Mr Woolrich.
31. Mr Holmes noted that Mr Pope had disagreed with some of the Referee's decisions and had been sent off. As he had been walking off a general melee developed in the crowd. He did not how it started but also pointed to the previous involvement of a very vocal Avro supporter. He had seen a Kidsgrove person get attacked. He had not seen what had happened with Mr Woolrich or Mr Pope, but Mr Woolrich had been grabbed by two Avro players, and he had put his arms around one of them to stop him.

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<sup>1</sup> At this juncture an unidentified member of the Kidsgrove participants was heard to say, "fucking.biased". It was unclear if this comment was directed at the Referee or the Commission. The Chair noted that the remark had been heard, but in the interests of concluding what had already become somewhat heated proceedings to a close, opted not to take further action at that time.

32. He described Mr Woolrich as quiet, thoughtful and highly committed to the Club. Through his dedication and assiduous training, he had become the Club's primary goalkeeper.

33. He rejected any suggestion that the Club had tried to get the Match abandoned.

#### Submissions

##### Mr Jepson

34. In advancing his own case, the Player noted he had been playing for 23 years and had never been involved in anything like this.

35. He had seen Mr Cooper being lunged at by the large and aggressive Avro supporter. He had reacted and jumped over the fence to protect Mr Cooper. He had not punched anyone and was not trying to fight.

36. As soon as Mr Cooper had been moved out of the way he had jumped back onto the pitch.

37. He had not been there to fight. At no stage had his fist been clenched and he had not thrown any punches.

38. On behalf of the FA, Ms Watts noted that the Player had partially admitted the charge. Jumping into the crowd was improper conduct. She however noted that the Player's arm had reached out towards a fan in what had looked like a swinging motion, which could have been an aggressive act.

##### Mr Pope

39. Mr Pope referred to two incidents in the first 15 minutes of the Match (a red card and a penalty), which he felt the Referee had got wrong. He accepted he had been irate at this point, although stated that this had been more with his players than at the Referee.

40. In contrast, between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 60<sup>th</sup> minute Mr Pope thought the Referee had officiated well.

41. After the 60<sup>th</sup> minute the Referee's game had become poor again in his view. He accepted that he had shouted abuse at him but felt that the Referee's report was very one sided.

42. In respect of what had happened after his dismissal, he stressed the highly abusive behaviour of a very large and aggressive Avro fan. He understood that this individual had been banned from [REDACTED] for similar behaviour.

43. He had been subject to relentless abuse from this fan. His captain had spoken to a steward about the behaviour at half time but had been ignored.

44. As he had been walking towards the tunnel, he had seen Ian Cooper get shoved by that fan. There was no one with Mr Cooper and he had a split second to react.

45. He had just wanted to protect Mr Cooper and stop any escalation. Whilst there has been some wrestling down the steps no punches had been thrown, and it was just “handbags”. He had then been pulled away by fans.
46. He complained that none of the videos showed the start of the incident (and the Club was concerned that they may have been improperly edited).
47. In his view nothing would have happened without the actions of the Avro fan. He believed that two Avro fans had been arrested by the police, but no one from Kidsgrove had been arrested.
48. The incident had not been pleasant, but no one had been hurt and he needed to explain why it had happened.
49. In response, Ms Watts for the FA noted that Mr Pope had accepted the charge. She relied on the Referee’s evidence to show that Mr Pope had been aggressive throughout the game.

#### Mr Woolrich

50. Mr Woolrich stated that said he was being verbally abused throughout the game but accepted that he had been trying to waste time given the overall Match situation.
51. He had seen Mr Jepson go into the crowd. A fan had thrown a punch at Mr Jepson but had missed.
52. Another fan had then punched him, to which he had reacted by punching that fan. This had been totally instinctive. His gloves had still been on, and he did not know if any injury had been caused.
53. He had then walked away from the incident for his own safety.
54. In response, the FA noted that the charge had been admitted and that self-defence was not a defence, just mitigation if accepted.

#### Mr Rhodes

55. In advancing his case, Mr Rhodes accepted that he could be seen in the footage. He had gone in but had not struck anyone and was just trying to stop the fight as Avro 6 had done.
56. He had been assaulted by at least 4 or 5 punches to the back of his head, and he had just been trying to stop the fight, which had involved one of his friends of over 20 years.
57. He had been watching the game from the side of the tunnel (having previously been sent off). He did not accept that he had knocked over a 70- year old fan as had been claimed, but he agreed that by going in he had added another person to the confrontation. He had, however, not been fighting.
58. In response the FA noted that the Player was denying the charge. Self-defence was not a defence and, at the very least, his getting involved was improper and violent conduct.

### Kidsgrove Athletic FC

59. On behalf of the Club, Mr Cooper repeatedly stressed that the incident had been caused by abusive behaviour, which had continued throughout the game, from a large [REDACTED], drunk and aggressive Avro supporter.
60. This had gone well beyond what is acceptable banter at a football game. He made the point, quite reasonably, that people and in particular Mr Pope to whom much of the abuse had been directed, should not have to go to work and be abused in that way. [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]
61. He noted that similar abuse had occurred previously at Avro, in consequence of which very few Kidsgrove fans had travelled to the Match.
62. He (Mr Cooper) had been assaulted twice by the large fan he had been referring to. This had been in response to his having tried to calm the individual down to allow Mr Pope to leave the pitch without further incident.
63. He complained that no one at Avro had done anything to stop the abuse and noted that when a steward had been spoken to about the problem, he had just laughed.
64. It was not possible to get from the Avro dugout to the tunnel without walking on the pitch in front of the crowd. He had asked the team kitman and also the goalkeeping coach to escort Mr Pope off the pitch, and he did not know what more the Club could have done to have prevented the incident that followed.
65. In response, the FA noted that there had been a mass confrontation involving players and fans. It relied on the Referee's evidence in particular the fact that he had felt unsafe.

### Findings of Fact

66. The Commission carefully reviewed all the evidence, including video evidence provided by Kidsgrove at the hearing itself with no objections from The FA, and submissions and came to the following unanimous findings in respect of each respective participant:

#### Mr Jepson

1. Mr Jepson had improperly jumped over the barrier into crowd.
2. He had reacted to a push on Ian Cooper by a large and aggressive Avro supporter, and the Commission accepted that Mr Jepson had wanted to try and protect Mr Cooper.
3. Having pulled Mr Cooper away from the confrontation that involved a number of Avro supporters including the large individual who had pushed Mr Cooper, Mr Jepson had then gone back to rejoin that confrontation.
4. He had reached out towards one supporter and, at least in part, contributed to that individual being pulled to the ground. In respect of this finding, and without limitation,

the Commission had regard to the footage with the labelling beginning '*OBon*' from 0:04 to 0:06.

5. In having acted in that way, Mr Jepson had been aggressive with his conduct going beyond simply improper and becoming threatening and/or abusive.
6. Mr Jepson had not however struck or otherwise assaulted any Avro supporter.
7. After approximately 8 seconds, Mr Jepson had jumped back over the barrier and onto the field of play.
8. In going over the barrier into the crowd, he had added to the scale and seriousness of the melee.
9. The Commission gave careful consideration as to whether Mr Jepson's actions had involved violent conduct but, on balance, concluded that they had not. The Commission was however satisfied, to the standard required, that his conduct had been threatening and/or abusive.
10. It follows that whilst Mr Jepson had accepted improper conduct, the Commission also found that he was guilty of threatening and/or abusive behaviour.

#### Mr Pope

1. Between the 79<sup>th</sup> and 81<sup>st</sup> minutes Mr Pope had directed the following words towards the Referee:

*'Ref do your fucking job'*

*'Absolute garbage'*

*'He's a fucking idiot'*

*'Oi you're a fucking shambles you, fucking shambles'*

2. In so doing he had acted in an improper manner and/or used abusive and/or insulting and/or behaviour towards a match official.
3. Following his dismissal Mr Pope had continued being aggressive and/or abusive towards the Referee and moved quite close to him whilst making hand gestures. He continued to shout at the Referee with words including:

*'fucking garbage'*

*'you're a fucking disgrace'*

4. In so doing he had acted in an improper manner and/or used abusive and/or insulting and/or behaviour towards a match official.
5. As he had walked off the pitch, Mr Pope joined the melee in the crowd, which had by that time begun behind the goal. It had been wrong, and wholly unnecessary for him to have done so. By doing so he had added to the scale and seriousness of the melee.

6. The Commission accepted that that Mr Pope had been subject to protracted and disgraceful abuse from a large and verbally aggressive Avro supporter throughout the Match. That abuse had continued as Mr Pope left the field, and Mr Pope had reacted to that abuse.
7. However, by the time of his joining the melee, which he did from some distance and at some pace, Mr Cooper had already been removed from the confrontation and the Mr Pope's assertion that he been acting to protect Mr Cooper was rejected.
8. Mr Pope had pulled an Avro supporter onto the floor with his conduct going beyond improper and becoming violent. See, without limitation, the footage with the label beginning "17Zb" at approximately 0:15.
9. Mr Pope had not otherwise struck or assaulted any other person.
10. On his own admission, the Commission found the charge against Mr Pope to have been proven.

#### Mr Woolrich

1. As the melee in the crowd commenced, Mr Woolrich could be seen on the field of play towards the right-hand goalpost.
2. He is then seen then move to behind the goal line and up to the crowd barrier, with there being no reason or justification for him to have done so.
3. He delivered a single punch, with some force, to the face of a supporter who was standing on the barrier.
4. Mr Woolrich had reacted to the actions of that supporter but had not been struck by the supporter as he claimed. The supporter had however directed one of his arms towards the body of Mr Woolrich, but did not appear to make contact, or any forceful contact, with him.
5. Mr Woolrich's assertion that he had been acting in self-defence was therefore rejected.
6. Even had self-defence been justified, the level of force used by Mr Woolrich in striking the supporter as he did was disproportionate and unnecessary. As above, Mr Woolrich also had no reason to have moved behind the goal and into the proximity of the crowd.
7. The Commission accordingly found that Mr Woolrich had acted in an improper manner and/or had used violent conduct, and on the Player's own admission, the Commission found the charge against the Player to have been proven.

#### Mr Rhodes

1. Mr Rhodes had previously been issued with a red card.

2. He became involved in the melee in the crowd in circumstances where he should not have done so.
3. Whilst the Commission found that much of the blame for the melee was attributable to the conduct of the large and verbally aggressive Avro supporter, the Commission also found that there had been no justification for Mr Rhodes to have become involved with the melee in the crowd.
4. He went into the confrontation at pace, and his assertion that he was purely acting as a peacemaker was rejected.
5. Having moved to the melee, and noting his size, the Commission concluded that the movements and posture adopted by Mr Rhodes were such that he had acted in a broadly aggressive and threatening manner.
6. He had not, however, struck or otherwise assaulted any other person.
7. From the footage labelled '17Zb' the Player can be seen to have been involved in the melee for in the region of 30 seconds, from approximately 0:10-0:40. The Commission, however, found nothing in the footage to support the assertion that the Mr Rhodes had pushed over a 70-year-old.
8. The Commission was satisfied to the standard required that the charge against the Player had been proved and that he had acted in an improper manner and/or used threatening and/or abusive behaviour.

#### Kidsgrove Athletic FC

1. The Club on its own admission was found in breach of FA Rule E20.1 in that on or after the 82<sup>nd</sup> minute of the Match, three players and the Manager had acted in breach of FA Rule E3.1.
2. The conduct of those in breach of FA Rule E3.1 led directly to the abandonment of the Match.
3. Whilst there had been significant abuse from at least one Avro supporter, this did not justify the subsequent actions of the Club's players and manager.

#### Submissions on Sanction

67. The Commission had careful regard to the written submissions on sanction helpfully provided by the parties. These are not set out in detail for the purposes of this judgement, and no discourtesy is intended in not doing so.

68. In summary, the FA argued that the following sanctions should be imposed:

- Mr Jepson - a playing ban including a stadium ban of not less than 4 weeks and a financial penalty [REDACTED]

- Mr Pope - a playing ban including a stadium ban of not less than 9 weeks (cumulatively for all three charges) and a financial penalty [REDACTED]
- Mr Woolrich - a playing ban including a stadium ban of not less than 10 weeks and a financial penalty [REDACTED]
- Mr Rhodes - a playing ban including a stadium ban of not less than 4 weeks and a financial penalty [REDACTED]
- Kidsgrove Athletic FC – a financial penalty of not less than £500.

69. The Commission was also referred to the decision in *The FA v Dier (2020)*

70. In response, the participants argued that the Commission should consider:

- *Admissions entered (save where determined),*
- *The non-league context,*
- *Financial realities,*
- *Mental health impact of isolation from football environments,*
- *Prior compliance and proactive disciplinary action,*
- *The absence of a documented stadium ban in the Eric Dier precedent relied upon.*

71. It further submitted that the sanction must:

- *Mark seriousness,*
- *Deter repetition,*
- *Remain proportionate,*
- *Be consistent with precedent,*
- *Avoid unnecessarily compounding punishment beyond what is required.*

72. In the Club's submission, the sanction should not include a stadium ban for the participants.

### Findings on Sanctions

73. The Commission noted that each case had been designated as non-standard and that accordingly sanction was a matter to be determined by the Commission with no set guidance being applicable.

74. In approaching its task with regard to sanction, in each matter the Commission identified the factors that represented the gravamen of the offending and then determined the appropriate starting point for the sanction. It next proceeded to consider any relevant aggravating and/or mitigating factors.

75. Applying that methodology, it came to the following findings and sanctions in respect of each participant.

### Mr Jepson

76. Mr Jepson had gone into the crowd and added improperly and unnecessarily to the disturbance that had already begun. In so doing he had increased the scale and seriousness of that disturbance. The seriousness of the offending in the view of the Commission required a sporting suspension of five matches.
77. The offending was aggravated by the fact that Mr Jepson has moved some distance beyond the barrier to join the melee. There was at least one child and other vulnerable adults whose safety was put in jeopardy by Mr Jepson having joined and added to the seriousness of the melee. His actions had, if only in part, seen a supporter be pulled to the ground. The melee had led directly to the abandonment of the Match.
78. There was equally mitigation available to Mr Jepson. He had only been involved for a short (8 seconds) period of time. He had not sought to fight and had no previous relevant matters recorded against him. He had, albeit belatedly, accepted the charge.
79. In the determination of the Commission these factors in effect were of equal weight and so whilst a further match could be added to the suspension, one could also be deducted to reflect the mitigation available to Mr Jepson.
80. Taking all factors into account, the Commission imposed a five-match playing suspension on Mr Jepson.
81. The Commission was not, however, willing to agree with the FA's submission that the suspension should be extended to include a full stadium ban. It noted that playing suspensions do not typically include a prohibition on attending stadiums. It had asked the FA to provide any relevant authority to support its application, and beyond a general reference to FA Regulation 41, no authority or previous case had been advanced.
82. The Commission nevertheless found that a financial penalty should be imposed in addition to the sporting suspension. [REDACTED] a starting point £160. This was reduced to £120 on account of Mr Jepson having accepted the charge against him.

#### Mr Pope

83. The Commission was aware that Mr Pope had served a four-match suspension following an internal disciplinary process that had related to the Match. However, that suspension was not relevant for the purposes any sanction to be determined by the Commission.
84. In respect of the first two charges arising out of the abuse directed at the Referee, the Commission determined that the appropriate starting point for each charge was a two-match suspension.
85. The aggravating factor of the offending being a continuing pattern of offending, was offset by the mitigation available to Mr Pope in respect of his plea and previous clear record for similar offences.
86. The Commission accordingly imposed a two-match sporting suspension for each charge.

87. Turning to the final charge against Mr Pope, this involved violent conduct. He had gone into the crowd and joined in the melee. Having done so he had pulled a supporter to the ground.
88. Again, aggravating factors were present in that there were vulnerable people in the crowd, the Match had to be abandoned, and Mr Pope had gone some distance to add to the Melee.
89. There was mitigation available to Mr Pope. The Commission had no hesitation in finding that Mr Pope had been provoked by the abhorrent conduct and abuse he had been subjected to by the large Avro fan. Again, the Commission noted Mr Pope's plea and previous record.
90. Taking all the above into account and, having regard to the totality of the sanction to be imposed upon Mr Pope, the Commission held that a sporting suspension of six matches should be imposed on Mr Pope in respect of charge 3.
91. This led to total suspension of ten matches, to be served consecutively, in respect of all three charges.
92. Reflecting the fact that Mr Pope is a player/manger, the suspension is to include both a playing suspension and an extended touchline extension.
93. Because Mr Pope has a managerial function, the Commission could see some force in the FA's submission in respect of Mr Pope that the suspension should be extended to include a stadium ban.
94. The Commission again considered totality and had regard to matters concerning Mr Pope [REDACTED] that had been drawn to its attention. Having done so, it directed that of the ten-match suspension imposed, the first half of that suspension, being five matches, should incorporate a stadium ban, but that the remaining five matches should then be limited to an extended touchline suspension.
95. The Commission also imposed a financial penalty of £120. As with Mr Jepson, [REDACTED] [REDACTED] with a reduction to take account of his plea.

#### Mr Woolrich

96. Mr Woolrich's offending involved violent conduct of a grave kind given that he had struck a supporter in the crowd behind the barrier. Although he had only delivered a single blow, this had been delivered with real force to the supporter's face, and this had knocked the fan backwards. In the determination of the Commission, this offending warranted a lengthy sporting suspension of ten matches.
97. The offending was aggravated by the fact that Mr Woolrich had moved from the playing area by his goalpost to go behind the goal, in circumstances where there was no need, much less any justification, for him to have done so. Any suggestion of self-defence was rejected. If there had been any provocation, Mr Wolrich's response had been wholly disproportionate and unnecessary.

98. On the other side of the equation, Mr Woolrich was entitled to mitigation to reflect his plea, his previous record and the Commission accepting that he was remorseful.
99. The aggravating and mitigating factors were of equal weight in the Commission's finding, with the result that the suspension imposed remained at ten matches.
100. This was imposed as a playing ban. The Commission again did not consider that a stadium ban was justified.
101. A financial penalty was also imposed, [REDACTED] at £120 imposed. The Commission considered the gravity of Mr Woolrich's offending to be such that it was not appropriate to reduce that level of financial penalty, notwithstanding his plea.

#### Mr Rhodes

102. Mr Rhodes, having already been issued with a Red Card, became involved in the melee, when he plainly had no reason to do so. His actions whilst doing so, were threatening and went beyond mere improper conduct.
103. As with Mr Jepson, the Commission considered that this conduct warranted a four-match suspension as a starting point.
104. As with the other participants, aggravating factors were also present. He had come in at pace, and his involvement had lasted in the region of 30 seconds. As already noted, there were vulnerable people in the crowd that were caught up in the melee, the scale of which was added to by Mr Rhodes's actions. These factors in the finding of the Commission justified the suspension being increased by a further two matches.
105. Whilst Mr Rhodes did not have any previous relevant offending recorded against him, the fact that he had not accepted the charge despite the evidence against him being compelling and the fact that he had displayed an aggressive and unapologetic attitude during the hearing, led the Commission to find that he should not receive any credit by way of mitigation.
106. A six-match suspension was accordingly ordered. This is restricted to a standard playing suspension and does not include an additional stadium ban.
107. As with the other individual participants, the Commission also imposed a financial penalty. This was set at £120 [REDACTED]. This was not reduced given that Mr Rhodes had contested the charge.

#### Kidsgrove Athletic FC

108. The Commission had regard to the continuing pattern of behaviour during the Match, the fact that it had involved both players and the manager, the resultant abandonment of the Match and the damage to the image of the game caused by the social media interest in the incident.
109. The Commission considered that the appropriate starting point was a financial penalty of £1,000.

110. This was then reduced to £750 to reflect the mitigation available to the Club taking into account the acceptance of the charge and the absence of any previous similar offending.

#### Other orders

111. The hearing fee for each participant is to be forfeited.

112. The Commission had invited submissions on costs, but in the absence of any application then having been made by the FA, no order for costs was made.

#### Conclusion

113. For the reasons given above, the following orders were imposed:

##### **Oliver Jepson**

- Fine: £120.
- Suspension:
  - Mr Jepson is immediately suspended from playing all domestic club football until such time as Kidsgrove Athletic FC have completed five (5) First Team Competitive Matches (Category 3) in approved competitions.
- Hearing fee: £100.

##### **Tom Pope**

- Fine: £120.
- Suspension:
  - Mr Pope is immediately suspended from participating in all domestic club football until such time as Kidsgrove Athletic FC completes ten (10) First Team Competitive Matches (Category 3) in approved competitions in accordance with the following terms:
    - The first five (5) matches of this suspension shall be a “Standard Ground Ban Sanction” which precludes you from entering the Ground/Stadium or the land immediately surrounding the Ground/Stadium for a period beginning three hours prior to the scheduled kick-off time of the match and ending three hours after the conclusion of the match where any Kidsgrove Athletic FC team are participating, whether home, away or a neutral venue, until the requisite amount of First Team Competitive Matches have been completed.
    - The latter five (5) matches of this suspension shall be an “Extended Touchline Suspension”, until the requisite amount of First Team Competitive Matches have been completed.
- Hearing fee: £100.

##### **Aaron Woolrich**

- Fine: £120

- Suspension:
  - Mr Woolrich is immediately suspended from playing all domestic club football until such time as Kidsgrove Athletic FC have completed ten (10) First Team Competitive Matches (Category 3) in approved competitions.
- Hearing fee: £100.

**Shaun Rhodes**

- Fine: £120.
- Suspension:
  - Mr Rhodes is immediately suspended from playing all domestic club football until such time as Kidsgrove Athletic FC have completed six (6) First Team Competitive Matches (Category 3) in approved competitions.
- Hearing fee: £100.

**Kidsgrove Athletic FC**

- Fine: £750.
- Hearing fee: £100.

**Dated: 26 February 2026**

Jeremy Summers

Jeremy Summers

**Chair, for and on behalf of the Commission.**