

IN THE MATTER OF THE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION INDEPENDENT REGULATORY
COMMISSION

BETWEEN:-

THE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION

and

MR RICHARD BONE

WRITTEN REASONS AND DECISION OF THE INDEPENDENT REGULATORY
COMMISSION FOLLOWING THE HEARING ON 22 JANUARY 2026

1. These are the written reasons for a decision made by an Independent Regulatory Commission which took place via Microsoft Teams on 22 January 2026.
2. The Regulatory Commission (“the Commission”) members were:
 - a. Miss Elahe Youshani, Chair and Independent Legal Panel Member,
 - b. Mr Daniel Mole, Independent Football Panel Member,
 - c. Mr Aishnine Benjamin, Independent EDI Panel Member.
3. Mr Paddy McCormack of the FA Judicial Services Department acted as Secretary to the Commission.
4. The charges in question arose out of a match which took place on 9 August 2025 between Reading FC ('RFC') and Huddersfield Town FC ('HTFC'), a Football League 1 fixture.
5. By letter dated 11 December 2025, the Football Association ('the FA') charged Mr Richard Bone with:

“You are hereby charged with Misconduct in breach of FA Rule E3 in relation comments you made regarding the Match Official during Reading FC’s fixture with Huddersfield Town FC on Saturday 9 August 2025.

It is alleged that you acted in an improper manner and/or used insulting and/or abusive words, contrary to FA Rule E3.1.

It is further alleged that this breach of FA Rule E3.1 is an “Aggravated breach” in terms of FA Rule E3.2, as it includes a reference, whether express or implied, to sexual orientation”.

6. At all the relevant times on 9 August 2025, Mr Richard Bone ('RB') was the First Team Kit Manager at RFC. The factual allegation is that towards the end of the first half, RB made the following comment about the match referee, Matt Corlett ('MC'): *“he should be in the National League. He has sucked dick to get to this level”*. This remark was heard by the fourth match official, Harrison Blair ('HB') who was stood close to where RB was positioned at the time of making the said statement. The incident was reported after the match by both HB and David Parker ('DP'), the Head Safety Steward for RFC, who wrote down the exact language used. RFC conducted an internal investigation as to the events which occurred.
7. In his Reply Form to the charge signed and dated 17 December 2025, Mr Bone admitted the charges and did not request an opportunity to attend a Commission for a personal hearing. The charges were therefore dealt with at a paper hearing.

Relevant FA Rules

8. Rule E3.1 provides that:

“A Participant shall at all times act in the best interests of the game and shall not act in any manner which is improper or brings the game into disrepute or use any one, or a combination of, violent conduct, serious foul play, threatening, abusive, indecent or insulting words or behaviour”.

9. Rule E3.2 provides that:-

“A breach of Rule E3.1 is an “Aggravated Breach” where it includes a reference, whether express or implied, to any one or more of the following: ethnic origin,

colour, race, nationality, religion or belief, gender, gender reassignment, sexual orientation or disability”.

10. The burden of proving a breach falls on The FA on the balance of probabilities.

11. An FA Appeal Board helpfully considered the approach to Rule E3 cases in John Yems, stressing that the relevant tests are objective. It said:

“59. The correct approach to such cases is not controversial. The test for breach of Rule E3.1 is objective. The question is simply whether the words and/or behaviour are objectively abusive or insulting. This is a matter for the Regulatory Commission to decide, having regard to all the relevant facts and circumstances of the case. It is not necessary to prove that the alleged offender subjectively intended his words or behaviour to be threatening, abusive, indecent or insulting.

60. Further, in respect of an ‘Aggravated Breach’ contrary to Rule E3.2 it is a question of fact whether a breach of Rule E3.1 includes a reference to a protected characteristic. That too is to be answered objectively and no question of subjective intention arises.

61. When determining liability in a case involving an ‘Aggravated Breach’ the Regulatory Commission (or indeed Appeal Board) is not required to determine whether the Participant is or is not, for example, a racist. It is not uncommon for Commissions to express such an opinion. It is not required to do so. Nor often will it be well placed to do so as it would require Commissions to engage in an exercise of assessing and judging an individual’s personal beliefs or prejudices. Further, to do so risks leading the Commission into serious error, in respect of the correct approach to liability or sanction or both. Instead of expressing such views, Commissions must at the liability stage focus solely on whether, assessed objectively, each of the ingredients of the Rule E3.2 breach is proved so as to establish liability...”.

12. Later, the Appeal Board confirmed that all that needs to be factually decided as to liability on an aggravated breach charge under Rules E3.1 and E3.2 is:

“a. What was said and/or the behaviour displayed;

b. Whether that which was said and/or the behaviour displayed was objectively (one or more of) violent conduct, serious foul play, threatening, abusive, indecent or insulting; and if it was

c. *Objectively did the words and/or behaviour include a reference to any one or more of the protected characteristics (ethnic origin, colour, race, nationality, religion or belief, gender, gender reassignment, sexual orientation or disability)."*

13. The Appeal Board considered that subjective intent, irrelevant to liability for breach, may be relevant to the culpability of the individual for the proved misconduct for the purposes of sanction (paragraph 81). As an example, the Appeal Board said that, where a person commits a Rule E3.2 breach with clear hostile, racist intent, that person's culpability will be greater than an isolated comment made by a person from different linguistic and cultural background who is oblivious to the objective meaning of such a comment in British society (paragraph 80).

14. It appeared to be common ground before us that the approach in John Yems with regard to liability for breach, is appropriate in the present matter and we respectfully agree, and shall adopt it in this case.

Evidence

15. The FA included the following evidence it intended to rely on in support of the Charge:

- a. Extraordinary Incident Report Form of Match Referee, Matt Corlett, submitted on 9 August 2025.
- b. Handwritten note of Match Referee, Matt Corlett from 9 August 2025.
- c. Extraordinary Incident Report Form of the Fourth Official, Harrison Blair, submitted on 10 August 2025.
- d. Emails from David Parker, Head Safety Steward at RFC dated 9 August 2025 and two emails dated 27 August 2025.
- e. Undated handwritten account of Matt Foster, Tunnel Steward at RFC, provided by David Parker.
- f. Witness Statement of [REDACTED], the FA Integrity Investigator, dated 14 October 2025.

- g. Witness statement of Matt Corlett, Match Referee, dated 27 August 2025.
- h. Witness statement of Harrison Blair, Fourth Official, Assistant Referee dated 27 August 2025.
- i. Copy of Transcript of FA interview with Richard Bone, conducted 16 September 2025.

16. MC's Extraordinary Incident Report form records:

“Following full time, it was brought to my attention by Harrison Blair, the fourth official, and the safety steward, that an incident had occurred just before half team off the field of play, near the technical area.

Richard Bone a staff member of Reading FC used homophobic language towards myself that was heard by Harrison Blair. Richard Bone was not on the teamsheets as a team official but was stood in the vicinity of the fourth official.

Harrison Blair confirmed that Richard Bone said the following towards me, "he should be in the National League. He has sucked dick to get to this level".

The incident was not reported until after the game. Myself and the safety steward wrote down the exact language used, and the safety steward informed us that he would let Richard Bone know that a report would be being submitted by the refereeing team.

Mike Jones was called following the game, to make him aware of the homophobic language used towards myself.”

17. MC's witness statement goes on to state:

“7. The first time I became aware of the alleged homophobic comment was after the game, while I was in the referee’s changing room. The Head of Safety at RFC, who I know as “Dave” came into our room and was speaking to HB. I overheard them talking and one of them say, “the words used in the incident before half time”, so I interrupted and said, “sorry gents what are we talking about here”. HB then informed me that just before half time that he heard someone from the RFC staff team, who was standing in front of the tunnel and just behind him, say towards me, “he should be in the National League. He has sucked dick to get to this level”.

8. It was Dave who confirmed the identity of the man who made the alleged comment as Richard Bone. RB was not listed on the RFC team sheet and therefore should not have been situated by the tunnel anyway, and even if

he had been listed on the team sheet he should have been in the technical area itself and not stood behind HB.

9. I made a note of the exact words that HB relayed to me, and I am 90 percent sure that Dave also made a note. I have provided a photograph of the note I made, which I will exhibit as MC/01. Also present in the changing room, when I received the report from HB and Dave were my two assistants, Andrew Bennett and Greg Read. After HB finished relaying what happened, we confirmed that this would be reported given the homophobic nature of the comment and the fact that this sort of incident requires us to make the necessary departments / individuals aware.”

18. HB's Extraordinary Incident Report form records:

*“Just prior to halftime, Richard Bone (not listed on the Reading team sheet) was stood on the steps of the tunnel. Matt (referee) made a decision that Richard didn’t agree with and Richard said “he should be in the national league, he’s probably sucked dick to get to this level”.
I reported this to Matt & the safety steward at full time”.*

19. DP's email dated 9 August 2025 confirms:

“In the 40th minute of today’s game there was an allegation of a homophobic comment being made by our ass kit man Richard Bone aimed at the referee – “He should be in the National League he sucked dick to get to this level.” [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

At 3.10pm [REDACTED] brought Richard to my office, and we discussed the matter

[REDACTED] He admitted to saying the comment in line 1 but stated that it was only made to [REDACTED] and not aimed at anyone. He further stated that he should not have made it and regretted doing so. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

He added that he did not believe his

comment was homophobic but admitted that this is down to perception.

Burden of proof

21. As noted above, as a starting point, the burden of proof is on the FA. The applicable standard of proof is the balance of probability. The balance of probability standard means that the Commission is satisfied an event occurred if the Commission considers that, on the evidence, the occurrence of the event was more likely than not. If the Commission found the charges were proven the Commission would have to move on to consider sanction.

22. On the basis that the charges were admitted, the Commission finds the FA's charge is proved, and that what was said was objectively insulting and amounts to a breach under Rules E3.1 and E3.2. The Commission therefore proceeded to consider the appropriate sanction.

Relevant Rules and Guidance

23. Appendix 1 to the FA Handbook states (Standard Sanctions and Guidelines for Aggravated Breaches) states:

“SANCTION RANGE

A finding of an Aggravated Breach against a Player... will attract an immediate suspension of between 6 Matches and 12 Matches (“Sanction Range”).

A Regulatory Commission shall take all aggravating and mitigating factors into account, including but not limited to those listed in these guidelines when determining the level of sanction within the Sanction Range.

The lowest end of the Sanction Range (i.e. 6 Matches) shall operate as a standard minimum punishment (the “Standard Minimum”)...

EDUCATION

Any Participant who is found to have committed an Aggravated Breach shall be made subject to an education programme, the details of which will be provided to the Participant by The Association.

OTHER PENALTIES

A Regulatory Commission may impose any one or more of the other penalties as provided by paragraph 41 Part A to the Disciplinary Regulations" (this includes fines and warnings)."¹

Decision on Sanction

24. We are required to apply the sanctions guidelines set out Appendix 1 to Part A of the Disciplinary Regulations (see paragraph [23] above). That requires an immediate suspension of 6-12 matches, six matches being the "Standard Minimum" punishment.
25. When contemplating the relevant sanction, the Commission took into consideration the evidence submitted by the FA and Mr Bone.
26. It is at the Commission's discretion to vary a sanction where there are aggravating or mitigating factors present. In assessing where, within the guidelines range, this case falls we are required to take into account all aggravating and mitigating factors, including those specifically listed in Appendix 1. We have taken all the factors relied upon by each party into account, and particularly the following.
27. It was noted that in the current and five previous seasons, there is no history of any previous misconduct offence.
28. The Commission took into account the following aggravating factors:
 - a. The public setting in which the comment was made.
29. The Commission considered the following mitigating factors:

¹ The FA Handbook 2025/2026, p174-175.

- a. He admitted the charge at the first opportunity immediately after the match, and at all stages thereafter.
- b. He has expressed remorse for his actions.
- c. It was a one-off incident, with no evidence or indication of premeditation.
- d. He has co-operated fully with the investigation and these proceedings.

30. In all the circumstances, we consider that, in terms of culpability and consequences, this breach falls towards the lower end of the guideline range but not the lowest point. Cases can easily be envisaged which are less serious than this, but nevertheless subject to the minimum suspension of six matches.

31. In this matter, given the nature of the comment made, the Commission considers the appropriate starting point in terms of sanction is seven matches. However, applying the aggravating and mitigating factors described above, the Commission considers a six match suspension is justified in all the circumstances.

32. This sanction reflects the seriousness of the misconduct, the aggravating factor (the circumstances in which the comments were made) and number of mitigating factors noted above, and the seriousness of the language used. Appropriate credit was given for RB's cooperation and admission. The Commission nevertheless concluded that, although the mitigating factors carried weight, they did not justify a sanction at the absolute minimum.

33. Accordingly, RB is sanctioned as follows:

- a. A 6 match suspension starting on 23/01/2026. To be served at "Category 1".
Prohibited from "Ground/Stadium". The terms are as follows:-
 - i. Richard Bone is immediately suspended from participating in any domestic club football until such time as Reading FC have completed six (6) First Team Competitive Matches (Category 1) in approved competitions.

ii. This six (6) match suspension shall be a Standard Ground Ban Sanction (see enclosed guidance for more information) 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 Reading FC team are participating, whether home, away or a neutral venue, until the above requisite amount of First Team Competitive Matches have been completed.

- b. A Fine of £ 200.
- c. An Education order to be completed by 22/05/2026. The terms are as follows:-
 - i. The Commission orders you to attend a mandatory face-to-face education programme, the details of which will be provided to you by The Football Association.
 - ii. That programme is to be completed within a four-month period commencing with the date of this Decision Letter ie by 22 May 2026.
 - iii. If you fail to satisfactorily complete the programme in that period, you will be immediately and indefinitely suspended from all football and football-related activity until such time as the mandatory programme is so completed to The FA's satisfaction.

34. The Commission considers that that sanction, when looked at as a whole, is in all the circumstances reasonable and proportionate to the breach we have found proved.

Costs

35. The Commission made no order as to costs.

Right to Appeal

36. There is a right of appeal against this decision in accordance with the relevant provisions set out in the rules and regulations of the Football Association.

Elahe Youshani

Aishnine Benjamin

Daniel Mole

22 January 2025