

Dr Tom Webb – Written evidence (NPS0011)

Increasing the recruitment and retention of sports officials – The importance of sports officials in any new sport and recreation strategy

Dr Tom Webb is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Portsmouth. His research focuses on sports officials from a number of disciplinary perspectives and he is the founder and coordinator of the Referee and Match Official Research Network. This evidence is submitted to raise the profile of sports officials, to ensure that sports officials are included as a priority group in any forthcoming strategy and to begin to address recommendations from the published research for sporting organisations to work together to tackle the issues identified in this evidence.

1. Sports officials (referees, umpires and match officials) across sport are essential for the organisation and structure of competitive sport at all levels, from elite sport to grassroots/mass participation sport. Yet, despite the importance of sports officials to almost every competitive sport that is played in England, these individuals are often the group in sport that is forgotten and underfunded, particularly when compared to groups such as players and coaches (Nevill, Webb, & Watts, 2013; Webb, 2017). This is an historic issue and something that has continued to be a concern for those working with sports officials for a prolonged period of time, leading to sports officials effectively becoming an 'outgroup' within their chosen sport (Webb, 2014; Webb et al., 2020a).
2. Despite the fact that sports officials are often the group in sport that are neglected, at the majority of levels of sport, they act as facilitators of sport and physical activity; put simply without these individuals, it is far more difficult for sporting fixtures to occur (Gorczyński & Webb, 2020). This means that any reduction in the numbers of sports officials can have a negative impact on the sport in question through the cancellation of fixtures and the associated reduction of participation rates/statistics. This cessation can also have a wider impact, over a longer period of time. Not only are the sports officials that discontinue not participating in sport/physical activity, the players and participants of the sport that they have left are also potentially less active, as fixtures have to be cancelled due to the limited availability of sports officials (Webb et al., 2020b). The specific inclusion of sports officials in any future sport and recreation strategy should be undisputable.
3. The current COVID-19 pandemic has created a 'perfect storm' for the cessation of sports officials, irrespective of the sport in question (Webb, 2020). COVID-19 has created an uncertain environment for sport, when sport is permitted to take place given restrictions imposed by the government since the onset of the pandemic in the United Kingdom. This uncertain environment is daunting for sports officials that face returning after the enforced absence imposed by the government restrictions, but this also creates a very difficult environment in which to recruit new sports officials and for those sports officials, if they are recruited, to begin their officiating journey (Webb, 2020). This means that the recruitment of sports officials is increasingly difficult and there are also associated challenges given that the initial courses for sports officials often involve practical aspects which cannot be delivered when government COVID-19

restrictions are in place. The recruitment of sports officials was decreasing in some sports prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, with the very real prospect that this reduced recruitment will continue in any post-COVID-19 world.

4. Alongside these recruitment concerns, the retention of sports officials is also becoming more difficult. COVID-19 has meant that there have been enforced, unnatural breaks in the seasons of many sports in England (Webb, 2020). Sports organisations and governing bodies lose a number of sports officials every season during the off season, this is expected, and it is hoped that the recruitment of new officials mitigates any drop out and, if recruitment goes well, increases the overall numbers. However, even before COVID-19 many sports have struggled to maintain the numbers of sports officials, with the overall number of sports officials decreasing in many sports. This ongoing issue presents very real problems for governing bodies and for sport and physical activity participation rates in England (Webb & Gorczynski, 2020).
5. There are challenges outside the current COVID-19 situation. These concerns are issues which governing bodies have been grappling with, predominantly related to the recruitment and retention of sports officials. One of these issues is the abuse to which sports officials are subjected from players, coaches/managers and spectators, leading to issues around recruitment and retention. Research has been conducted across different sports and also in different countries and abuse towards sports officials transcends individual sports and is also evident in sports in different countries (Webb et al., 2020a; Webb et al., 2019). This is a considerable concern in England where research suggests incidents of abuse are more prevalent (Webb et al., 2020a).
6. Funded research has been conducted in other countries, such as France and the Netherlands (Webb et al., 2020b). The research was funded through the UEFA Research Fund and involved collaboration with the KNVB (Dutch Football Association) and the French Football Association. The research findings suggest that there are trends, particularly related to the abuse of sports officials, the isolation that they face, issues surrounding the erosion of support networks and the impact that these trends have on the recruitment and retention of sports officials (Webb et al., 2020b; Webb et al., 2017). Moreover, there is evidence from countries around the world that the abuse of sports officials is a wider societal issue and therefore requires a concerted, joined up focus across sports in order to address the endemic issues that have been identified here (Webb et al., 2020a). In England these trends are also evident. Research has shown that there are an increasing number of sports officials who are suffering verbal abuse and physical abuse whilst officiating (Webb et al., 2019; Webb et al., 2020).
7. Despite the existence of this abuse towards sports officials, there have been examples within England, and also from other countries, of how sports officials can be supported, leading to increased recruitment and retention. Examples from hockey in Australia, from football in the Netherlands and from football in England. For example, Hockey, Australian Capital Territory (ACT) has launched a number of initiatives designed to promote the role and support umpires in hockey. Hockey, ACT has introduced a "season of respect", targeted toward reducing the abuse of umpires, promoting fair play and raising awareness of appropriate

behaviour (Webb et al., 2020a). Another initiative, “play the whistle” was also introduced and this initiative was designed to identify junior teams that behave in a positive manner. “Play the whistle” encouraged players, coaches, spectators and officials to play in the spirit of the game, with umpires marking each team related to their behaviour after every fixture (Webb et al., 2020a). Also launched within hockey in Australia was a junior umpire programme, designed to provide a safe learning environment for the umpires. Hockey New South Wales (NSW) initiated the programme alongside a programme entitled “take the pledge” to empower the mentors/umpire coaches through training and education and to take action against any coaches, spectators or players that are abusing umpires and to champion the respect of umpires through signing up and pledging to promote fair play, accepting the decisions of the sports officials, controlling any negative emotions and thanking officials for their time and effort (Webb et al., 2020a).

8. Other examples of good practice can be drawn from football. In the Netherlands the KNVB has introduced a phonenumber for football referees should they experience abuse on the field of play. To provide the service the KNVB has partnered with 24/7, an organisation that specialises in aftercare for traumatic experiences, with the phonenumber operating 24 hours a day and is designed to support those referees who suffer a shocking event, particularly related to abuse. In addition, an assessment is made to ascertain what, if any, support the referee requires and what aftercare should be provided. The KNVB also run a violence prevention initiative, in partnership with an organisation called Halt. The violence prevention initiative targets young players, who are offered behavioural training, with attendance and engagement incentivised by the fact that if the programme of training is successfully completed, the young players can have their suspensions reduced (KNVB, n.d). The negative behaviour of the young players can be towards another player or a referee.
9. In England, some County Football Associations in English football have also begun to focus on the reduction of abuse towards their referees. Dorset County Football Association, for example, has initiated a scheme where under 18 referees wear a yellow arm band to show coaches and spectators that the referee is under 18. This means that coaches and spectators are therefore subject to child safeguarding measures and match day responsibilities operating with minors. Other County Football Associations have also launched schemes whereby referees under 18 wear armbands, with Cheshire FA, Essex FA, Hampshire FA and Staffordshire FA all subscribing to a similar approach (Webb et al., 2020a). These initiatives provide examples that can be introduced to increase the recruitment and retention of sports officials by the provision of targeted support in specific sports (Webb et al., 2020a). However, these programmes, both in England and further afield, are not widespread and are reliant upon more regionalised, localised sports official organisations, rather than governing bodies of sport. A more joined up approach, promoting information sharing, developing initiatives across sport is required in order to begin to reduce the abuse of sports officials and as a consequence address the associated recruitment and retention concerns. This formalised approach has not occurred across sports previously.
10. Below the specific questions raised as a part of this call for evidence are addressed, and related directly to the importance of the recruitment and

retention of sports officials, specifically regarding the facilitation of the participation in sport and recreation of millions of sports participants:

QUESTIONS

- 11. Q1** - A nationally coordinated approach concerning the targeting recruitment and retention of sports officials, sharing good practice and addressing issues related to the recruitment and retention of sports officials should be introduced and included in any forthcoming strategy. The reduction of both verbal and physical abuse towards sports officials would also assist with this approach and be part of a targeted, multi-sport focus. This would, at the highest policy making level, involve national governing bodies and other national sporting organisations and would have associated impacts on the recruitment and retention of sports officials across sport. Policy making at a national level will also empower and direct more localised organisations, such as local sports clubs, charities and regional sporting official related organisations to improve the provision and support for sports officials. This approach would ensure that there was increased numbers of sports officials and therefore increased opportunities for organised sport and for individuals to lead an active lifestyle.
- 12. Q2/Q3** - There would be associated increases in sport and physical activity levels for children, young people and adults from different backgrounds, both those who become sports officials and those who play the sport itself, if the playing area and the sporting environment around the playing area is improved. More sports officials would be recruited and retained and more young people and adults taking up or continuing sport would also transpire. These individuals would be more likely to enjoy the sport when participating, therefore potentially creating lifelong sport and recreation activity habits. The importance of sports officials in terms of the facilitation of sport and physical activity and helping to form lifelong habits for young people should be accentuating and explained in any future strategy. Examples of good practice in terms of the support required for sports officials have been shared from around the world within this evidence, and these examples can be utilised as a starting point.
- 13. Q4** - This evidence addresses and supports a number of the outcome priorities that existed in the Government's 2015 sports strategy, *Sporting Future: A New Strategy for an Active Nation*. Specifically, physical and mental health as well as individual development are addressed in this evidence and would be relevant for a forthcoming revision or any strategy, specifically linked to sports officials. The mental health of sports officials requires concerted attention, particularly when concerning the abuse to which they are subjected across sports. Moreover, the evidence here also addresses the physical health of sports officials and sports participants, who could not take part in organised competitive sport without the presence of sports officials. These previous outcome priorities, therefore, are appropriate in terms of a focus on sports officials, and individual development is also something that can be achieved through the training required to be a sports official. There should also be an explicit focus on the reduction of inequalities for those disadvantaged and marginalised groups in society in any forthcoming strategy.

- 14. Q6** - This evidence does not address the aspects of racism, homophobia, transphobia, misogyny and ableism directly, although through the research conducted in different sports/countries, evidence of homophobia and misogyny have been evident, particularly related to female football referees and their understanding of mental health and experiences of misogyny in football (Webb, Gorzycynski, Oftadeh Moghadam, & Grubb, In Press).
- 15. Q7** - As has been argued in this evidence, the duty of care for sports officials has been neglected and sports officials are often an underrepresented and forgotten group. Given the challenges that these individuals face (particularly related to verbal and physical abuse, and also isolation when officiating), they are arguably as reliant on a duty of care as any other sports participants. This duty of care should be targeted at those operating in elite sport and the reduction of verbal abuse on television towards sports officials (Webb, 2017), to those individuals operating in mass participation sport, given the issues that exists therein and have been identified in this evidence.
- 16. Q8** - Much of the evidence provided here applies across the different levels of sport. Research suggests links between behaviour and incidents in elite sport and grassroots mass participation sport (Webb et al., 2019; Webb et al., 2020). This can be the behaviour towards sports officials by players, coaches and spectators and it can negatively impact upon sports official numbers and therefore participant numbers, as fewer fixtures are able to be played. Over time, this will negatively impact upon sport and physical activity participation rates.
- 17. Q9** - Examples have been listed above from countries and sports in different parts of the world. Further examples are given in the recent book publication (Webb et al., 2020).
- 18. Q10** - There should be a national plan for sport and recreation and sports officials should be an important part of that plan. In the case of sports officials evidence suggests that there should be a more joined up approach between sports and governing bodies in order to address some of the shared issues that exist. Historically many sports operate in silos and the research and evidence suggests that this should change in order to address the issues that have been identified in this evidence.

In summary, sports officials face considerable challenges merely in undertaking their role. They face issues related to abuse, isolation and support and this means that there is a constant challenge for governing bodies of sport to recruit and retain these individuals. However, without sports officials facilitating competitive sport, participation numbers reduce. Concerns arise regarding further reductions in the numbers of sports officials and the impact that this reduction would have across sport, and therefore it is imperative that a joined up, coordinated approach to the issues identified here, is evident in any forthcoming sport and recreation strategy.

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