

Statement to parliament: Sports Minister Mims Davies oral statement on racism in football

The Government is concerned about the recent rise in racist abuse in football, which threatens to overshadow everything we love about our national sport.

Last weekend The English Football League said it was “saddened, disappointed and angered” after a weekend of fixtures were blighted by four separate incidents of alleged racism against players.

At the same time, in the Premier League, Crystal Palace’s Wilfried Zaha reposted an online tweet calling him “a diving monkey”.

This all happened on the very same weekend that the Premier League’s new “No Room for Racism” campaign was visible at grounds up and down the country.

Late last year – the unthinkable occurred – a banana skin was thrown on the pitch in the direction of a player during the North London derby. Around the same time, we saw the abuse Manchester City forward Raheem Sterling suffered at Stamford Bridge.

We all witnessed the appalling scenes of racism directed at several of our England players in Montenegro. Homophobic and anti-semitic chanting both here and abroad has also been prevalent in recent times. English football is revered across the globe for its excitement and passion. No other sport or country opens its doors and embraces so many different nationalities. We simply cannot have millions of people, in particular our young people tuning in, or witnessing first hand, the type of vile abuse that has been apparent of late. Abuse directed at our players; our managers; by opposing fans.

Messrs Zaha, Sterling, and Rose deserve our respect for speaking out about the abuse that is happening now, but ultimately they deserve our support. They need clear demonstrations that zero tolerance of this behaviour means just that. Be it player, manager or supporter nobody who goes to games should have to tolerate discrimination of any kind, whether playing or attending.

We welcomed the Football Association’s call for UEFA to take strong and swift action following events in Montenegro. However if this country is going to show the rest of the world that this behaviour is intolerable, then we need to ensure we are making all efforts to combat discriminatory behaviour domestically.

I want to put on record that there is some fantastic work being done by many of our clubs to stand up to the challenge of racism and intolerance, and it must also be said that the majority of football fans behave impeccably, creating a fantastic atmosphere which is a major part of the experience of

watching live football.

Racism is not of football's making, but sadly it is being used by certain individuals and groups to spread hate. This extends to the grassroots with Kick it Out reporting a rise in racist incidents at this level too.

It cannot be right for clubs to be fined for players taking action and walking off the pitch if they are receiving racist abuse. It is vital that players are supported. This fine sends out the wrong signal. The FA must review whether their rules and the guidance they give to clubs is effective in these situations.

Putting a stop to this is a challenge to all fans, all clubs or agencies at all levels. This government is determined to help them tackle this problem.

On the 25 February I brought all the various administrators, campaign bodies, fan group representative, players, managers and their representative organisations together for a summit to discuss this issue, and collectively decide on what steps must be taken to help eradicate it.

At that summit it was agreed that a number of areas needed to be examined further. These were:

To review if football's current sanctioning regime goes far enough, and if not, what more is needed to act as a deterrent to this type of behaviour. To ensure the partnership between football authorities and the police is close enough to improve the identification and sanctioning of offenders at matches; To ask, do we give enough support to stewards? Can we improve their capacity to deal with discrimination consistently throughout the football leagues? Can football improve the information flow of incident reporting on the pitch, and support players? How can we double down efforts to ensure match officials, stewarding operations, coaching and academy staff are all able to fully engage in their responsibilities to maintain an open and inclusive sporting environment. I also want to see initiatives to help increase the numbers of people from BAME background into football professions beyond playing. Transparency and opportunities around the recruitment process are central to this.

Government will now work with those key groups to deliver clear, tangible actions in the areas I have just described.

My intention is to announce these in partnership with football before the end of summer. If we are able to deliver these before then, even better.

I want to see change ready for the next season.

The ongoing cross-government sport strategy 'Sporting Future: A New Strategy for an Active Nation' seeks to ensure that access to sport is equal for all. It is vital that the atmosphere and environment in which sport and physical activity takes place in our communities – be it grassroots or at the elite level – is safe, supportive and free of discrimination.

The experience of players, staff and fans therefore at football games both

home and abroad will prove the ultimate test of success in this area, but I am confident that the appetite is there to accept this challenge and working in partnership, we will quash this disturbing ugly recent trend of racism across our beautiful game.