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The Report of the Independent Review of Sexual Abuse in Scottish Football

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

July 2020

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I. Currently, approximately 325,000 children and young people participate in Scottish football (UEFA European Benchmark – Kantar (2019)). This is an astounding number and makes football the leading participation sport amongst children in Scotland. It's benefit to the young people of Scotland is significant in improving and sustaining their physical and mental health and enriching the communities in which they live.

II. In consideration of the sheer scale alone, the protection and welfare of young people should lie at the heart of football delivery. This has not always been the case although in recent years important improvements have been put in place to ensure that children and young people are safe and healthy and derive enjoyment and success through participation in whatever capacity.

III. The Interim Report of the Independent Review of Sexual Abuse in Scottish Football was published in June 2018. It contained 95 recommendations for change and improvement in the protection of young people and the reduction of risk in Scottish football pending the Final Report. The Final Report was withheld for legal reasons until after criminal proceedings related to matters referred to in the Report concluded. The Review recognises the positive progress that has been made by the Scottish FA and its members since the release of the Interim Report in implementing (or planning for the implementation) of the recommendations.

IV. The focus of the Independent Review in its deliberations was in three main areas: -

- The allegations of non-recent sexual abuse and the period in which these events mainly are said to have occurred (the 1970's, 1980's, and early 1990's)
- The developments in 'child protection' in Scottish football between 2000 and 2013
- The current arrangements for the protection of young people and the reduction of risk in Scottish football

V. The Review invited individuals affected by sexual abuse in Scottish football during the period concerned to come forward and provide personal accounts and recollections to allow the Review to address three key questions set by the Terms of Reference:

    - Who in Scottish football knew of these allegations at the time?
    - What did they know?
    - What did they do as a result?

VI. The Review engaged directly with 240 individuals as part of the Review process.

A further 71 individuals who had been personally affected by sexual abuse in Scottish Football, including family members and friends, were identified and engaged with the Review.

33 individuals provided personal accounts including allegations of sexual abuse in Scottish football directly to the Review.

VII. The Final Report includes all of the recommendations which featured in the Interim Report (June 2018). Where these appear a short progress statement is given to allow the reader to see what action has been taken, or is planned, by the Scottish FA and its members in relation to that matter. One further recommendation is included in the Final Report concerning the issue of Acknowledgement and Apology (this was signalled in the Interim Report) since the personal accounts included allow the reader to have insight into why apology is considered an important issue.

VIII. Consequently, the recommendations contained in the Report cover a wide variety of fields within Scottish football (like the Interim Report) including governance; leadership: structure; resourcing; investment; football clubs; policies and procedures; quality assurance; compliance; etc.

IX. **The main findings of the Review** contained in the Report are: -

- The paramount concern always should be to reduce risk to young people and to ensure their protection and this should not be not to superseded by other considerations such as the reputational interest of the organisation, club or individuals. Organisational culture, processes and practices need to be subject to rigorous evaluation and change to ensure that the protection of young people and the reduction of risk are, at all times, the paramount considerations.

- Most of those who provided personal accounts which included allegations of sexual abuse in Scottish football did not confide in or report it to anyone else at the time. Many did not do so until very recently (from 2016 onwards). The Review concludes therefore that in the majority of situations reported to the Review no-one in Scottish football knew of these allegations at the time (in the sense that they had been in possession of concrete information concerning actual alleged incidents or witnessed events such as to confirm that sexual abuse was possibly taking place at that time or had recently taken place). Only three of the personal accounts given to the Review refer to young players having told someone else immediately or soon after an alleged incident of sexual abuse. In all three cases the young person concerned told a parent.

- However, the Review is of the view that there may have been variable degrees of 'suspicion' about individuals on the part of people involved in the game and some of these suspicions in some instances ran high. These were often founded on "hunches" or discomfort; unverified casual information such as banter and hearsay; witnessing concerning sexualised language or behaviour which were often aspects of desensitisation (grooming) of young players etc. Suspicion and certainty are of course two quite different things. The "threshold' between suspicion and concrete cause for concern was unclear or, possibly at times, obscured and therefore the impetus to take action minimised or dismissed where such suspicion existed or had accumulated. Clarifying "thresholds" therefore is a priority in helping staff and volunteers understand and identify concerns and take action in the right way at the right time.

- On those occasions where action was taken by organisations or clubs in response to information or concerns there were sometimes flaws in decision-making and omissions in the actions which were taken. Regrettably sometimes this meant that little or no action was

taken at all. On other occasions it seems that the actions that were taken did not take full account of the implications for young people beyond the club or organisation (and sometimes within it) so were incomplete. The main omissions which the Review identified included: -

- not sharing information with relevant parties within football
- not formally reporting concerns, suspicions or allegations to the investigating authorities
- not conducting due diligence in the appointment, re-appointment, or continued engagement of particular individuals to roles or positions in a club or organisation
- not anticipating or assessing risk in relation to the participation of young people in football activity particularly in respect of trips away, travel arrangements (to and from training, matches etc.)

The Review accepts that general knowledge and practices were markedly different during the period of concern than they are now. This meant that football (like many other aspects of life involving children and young people) had not, at that time, put in place a robust regime and arrangements to protect young people that nowadays would be expected. However, in individual instances where allegations were made, information received, or concerns identified a proportionate but effective response should have occurred whether or not formal protocols or policies were in place. Decisions on many such matters are made by individuals and, although perhaps informed by heightened awareness, to some extent depend on common sense. This was as much the case then as it is now.

- The Scottish FA should continue to assess and improve its capacity to respond to allegations of nonrecent sexual abuse and to facilitate access to support for those personally affected in the past.

- Following the Interim Report (June 2018) the Review is impressed by the speed and process whereby the Scottish FA and its members developed and put in place a comprehensive Chid Protection and Wellbeing Strategy which involved all relevant parts of the game beyond the governing body alone. The successful implementation and delivery of the Strategy and the achievement of good outcomes is dependent on improved investment, resourcing and support of child wellbeing and protection in Scottish football and on the confidence and competence of those engaged in football delivery.

- The role of “bystanders” in identifying risk and intervening to prevent sexual abuse occurring is of critical importance. In moving forward the Scottish FA and its members should emphasise proactivity and prevention in relation to the protection of young people and the reduction of risk. Crucially this must prioritise “bystander approaches” to ensure that early indicators of risk are effectively identified, risky behaviour is challenged and that the entire football community is empowered to be proactive and involved in the *prevention* of sexual abuse. Prevention messages also must include a focus on signs of risky thinking and behaviours in adults as well as concerning signs in children and young people.

- Culture change within football in Scotland is imperative. This includes challenging negative and harmful attitudes to mental health and distorted thinking about sexual conduct and sex/gender based violence; changing the ways in which power is held and distributed;

effectively and decisively challenging homophobic attitudes and behaviours which seriously reinforce the fears and silence of young men when faced with sexual abuse or exploitation; and increasing/embedding the participation of young people in respect of decision making and delivery of football in Scotland. Bringing about positive change in the culture of Scottish football requires education, influence, mentoring and leadership.

- The Review is aware that those most directly and personally affected by sexual abuse in Scottish football have an active role to play in assisting the process of improvement and urges the Scottish FA to work closely with them in relation to particular issues.

- It is vital that in undertaking the required improvements and the protection of young people in general that Scottish football is held to account. The Review believes that those who have been directly affected, football supporters, the Scottish Parliament, the media, the wider Scottish public and, most importantly, young people themselves should continue to play an active part in doing so. The Review is encouraged by the establishment of the Independent Advisory Board following the Interim Report and is confident that it will act to ensure continuous improvement and engagement to ensure the ongoing protection and wellbeing of children and young people in Scottish football.

- Public confidence can continue to be restored and the voice of those most directly affected can be genuinely heard if the lessons of the past are openly addressed and understood. Yet learning lessons is insufficient. A clear, unequivocal and permanent commitment to ensuring that such past events will not be repeated and that young people who participate in our national game in whatever way are protected from harm must be demonstrated by positive and lasting change.

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