

Safeguarding Children in Grassroots Football: Under 18s Referees

Written by Ceri Travers (Parent of a 14 year old Referee)

January 2020

With the support of Refsupport.co.uk

Contents

1. Introduction
2. Research Overview
3. Policies/Procedures/Definitions
4. Reports from Under 18s Referees
5. Reports from Parents
6. Reports from Referees' Associations
7. Reports from Junior Football Leagues & Clubs
8. Summary and Findings
9. Recommendations

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the age of 10, my son has talked about becoming a Referee and passed his Referee course in August 2019, when he was 14, and refereed his first game on September 8th 2019. This was an under 12s match in our local league in the North West of England. He was subjected to a barrage of abuse from two adult coaches from as early as the 10th minute, after missing an offside. These coaches were very aggressive in their manner and questioning many of the decisions my son made. They were saying things like *"How did you not see that"* and *"how was that not offside, Jesus Christ!"*. These comments were said in a very aggressive tone whilst waving their arms about in an intimidating manner. One of the coaches also said *"what a joke"* aimed directly at my son. This continued into the second half of the match, which made my son feel extremely nervous and intimidated and he made a number of mistakes due to this. At one point, I saw one of the coaches angrily kick a water bottle and a goal post saying *"He is fucking useless"* about my son.

Once the game ended, we approached the league co-ordinator to ask advice on how we report the coaches in question. They also approached the co-ordinator, at which point I told them they were both a disgrace.

I then fully expected that once we reported the incident, there would be support from our County FA. This was not the case and my dealings with the CFA actually made the whole incident much worse. This prompted me to research how abuse towards young Referees is investigated and dealt with.

After our experiences with the CFAs poor investigation and lack of welfare support, my son would not feel encouraged to report this type of abuse and poor practise in the future, as neither of us have any confidence in the CFA and the processes and systems that are currently in place.

2. RESEARCH

Research conducted to compose this report includes:

- Grassroots football safeguarding policy and procedures
- Definition of a Child: United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)
- Definition of a Child: NSPCC
- FA Disciplinary procedures document (2017/18)
- FA guidance notes (7.3) Personal Hearings Guidance for under 18s
- 'The English Football Association's Respect Campaign: the Referees view' from Loughborough University 2015
- Reports, e-mails and questionnaires from:
 - 6 Referees under the age of 18 (with their parents' permission)
 - 5 Referees Associations
 - 5 parents or child Referees
 - 3 Junior football clubs/leagues
- Reports from 3 junior leagues showing the % of their Referees who are under 18:
 - Greater Manchester: 75%
 - Cheshire: 75%
 - Midlands: 80-90%

(All Referees names, teams and the names of CFAs have been removed in this report, to protect the anonymity of the children I have spoken to.)

3. POLICIES/PROCEDURES/DEFINITIONS

- Grassroots football safeguarding policy and procedures:
 - Section 1: The child's welfare is and must always be, the paramount consideration.
 - Section 5, Poor practise and abuse: Poor practise includes any behaviour that reflects a failure to fulfil the highest standards of care. The FA states *"it is unacceptable in football and will be treated seriously with appropriate action taken."*
- The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) defines a child as everyone under 18 unless *"under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier."*
- The NSPCC states *"In England a child is defined as anyone who has not yet reached their 18th birthday."* Child protection guidance points out that even if a child has reached 16 years of age and is for example, living independently, a member of the armed forces, in hospital etc. they are still legally children.
- The FA Disciplinary Procedures document (2017/18) which references children at personal hearings and treats differently those children aged 13 or under, 14-16 year olds and 17 year old children.
 - However the FA guidance notes (7.3) Personal Hearings Guidance for under-18s does not differentiate the age of the child, and in appendix 3 states *"If you cannot, or fail to, appear (at a personal hearing), the case may go ahead in your absence and you could have disciplinary action taken against you."* This is a direct contradiction to the safeguarding policy which states *"The child's welfare is and must always be, the paramount consideration."*
- 'The English Football Associations Respect Campaign: the Referees view' from Loughborough University 2015.
 - The report examines the potential efficacy of the FA's approach by drawing on whether the Respect Campaign has altered the experiences of a sample of practising Referees. The report highlights concerns of the 14-18 age band which shows the highest levels of recruitment, but also represents the highest levels of dropout.

4. REPORTS FROM UNDER 18s REFEREES

In this section, I will give an overview of the incidents/situations that led to a report being sent to the CFA and their experiences of what happened. The reports are the words of the children themselves. They come from a wide geographical area, Cheshire, Wiltshire, Lancashire, Sussex etc.

REFEREE 1

I am a 16 year old Referee wearing a Yellow Arm band to identify I am under 18. A manager shouted at my performance and threw the match fee to the floor. I reported this via the WGS and the CFA wrote informing there would be an appeal and I would be questioned on my report at a personal hearing. I am on the autism spectrum that is heightened when in pressured situations that I am not in control of. My parents informed the County FA that hearing would cause issues for me. They informed us that I must attend, it was not an option. It is agreed when brokering via the Refs Association that the hearing could be done over the phone and it would take 10 to 15 mins max. The Refs Association were present when the call was in place and with them I did the call. The call lasted 40 minutes, filled with constant questions which I felt were intrusive, forceful and seemed to challenge everything I had put in the report. The questions asked about the report were about little issues i.e. where people were stood, which direction was I stood, was the money thrown or dropped, how far was I stood away, and many other little points. The report was over a manager shouting at me and the way the payment was given. It felt like I was on trial. I latterly found out that the case against the manager was not proven due to my answers to the questions. We were informed that no additional witness statements were gathered. No help or support was offered from the CFA. If it was not for the local Referee Society I would have been left on my own.

REFEREE 2

I witnessed a coach assault a child and I reported it to the CFA. The coach requested a personal hearing and I had to attend. During the personal hearing I was made to feel that I was the guilty party and it felt like the CFA wanted to 'hush up' a serious incident.

REFEREE 3

At 14, I was Refereeing a cup match between two U11 sides. Early on in the match I reversed a throw in and one of the managers started shouting abuse at me for it. I carried on with the game in the 2nd half and when I gave a free kick against his team for a foul and he came on to the pitch and was in my face screaming at me and shouting. The other manager got in between us and pushed him away. I told him if he did it again he would be sent off. He started shouting at me again with 2 minutes to go regarding a change of goal keeper. I explained to him I would not kick off until his keeper was ready. He told me it wasn't *"in the fucking laws of the game to wear gloves."* When the match ended and we were preparing for penalties he went to his parents and got a phone and came back on to the pitch with it waving it in my face saying *"it's not in the fucking laws of the game to wear keepers gloves"* and said I was wrong with what I done. He continued shouting abuse and swearing at me even after the other manager tried to pull him away so I red-carded him at this point. I again told him the match would not continue until he left which he did.

My CFA didn't tell me how to report it but my RDO was very good at talking me through everything and reading my report before it was sent in. My CFA didn't explain anything to me at all, it was Ref Support that told me what would happen next. Once I completed my report I heard no more from the CFA until my mum contacted them to find out what was happening and they said he had denied it and it was going to a hearing. I was expected to attend the hearing or I could be disciplined for not attending the letter stated. Until Ref Support got involved I had no support. I have not to this day heard from the child protection or welfare officer at my CFA. After Ref Support got involved I was appointed a rep from the CFA. At the hearing I was asked to explain what had happened on the day in question in my own words. The manager wasn't allowed to talk to me directly he had to speak via the chair of the committee. The chair asked me questions and then went over a report on my conduct as a ref and how long I have been Refereeing. When he

had finished questioning me, we were then told we could leave whilst he continued to talk to the manager. The whole experience was very uncomfortable and made me feel intimidated and like I was on trial. I was told due to data protection I couldn't be told the outcome of the hearing. I later found out from another manager with the same club that a ban and fine had been issued.

REFEREE 4

I was 14 when I Refereed this game and from the start of play, both the manager and his assistant began to criticise me, complaining throughout that I wasn't using my whistle, and shouting at me that I wasn't Refereeing correctly. At one point after approximately 15 minutes, they both began to shout comments which I found intimidating, one stating that I must use my whistle at throw ins, and the other continuously shouting for fouls, unfortunately I didn't see who was shouting what, as I felt uneasy at being challenged relentlessly. However, from somewhere I summoned up courage and spoke to both these individuals, advising them that I was ok and didn't need their input, as players from both teams could clearly hear my instructions. Approximately 20 minutes had gone, a challenge occurred against a player, I tried to play advantage (wait and see), but then blew my whistle and pulled the game back, as there was no clear advantage. This incident occurred in close proximity to the halfway line, I told the players what was happening, and the free kick was quickly taken. This team scored from the following play. The scoring of the goal infuriated both the managers, with them continually shouting at me, this caused me to become very nervous. At halftime, I went to speak to the managers, to try to explain that I was just doing my job, the assistant manager was more vocal this time, shouting that I should use my whistle more and that they couldn't hear me, I replied that all the players could fully hear me and they understood every decision I made, because I was constantly speaking to them throughout the game. The assistant manager was again rather loud and intimidating, causing me to back off, the manager pulled the Assistant away and told him to leave it. This incident knocked my confidence, leaving me on the verge of crying, my parents who were in attendance, both could see that I was visibly upset, and spoke to me to assure me that everything I had done was good from their perspective. Following this reassurance, I decided to carry on. I then restarted the game for the second half, early in the half, approximately 9 minutes in, there was a coming together along the touchline, with both players battling shoulder to shoulder for the ball, the challenges were fair from both sides, but the (Team 1) player had lost the ball. As the (Team 2) player was returning to play, the (Team 1) player kicked out at him from behind causing the (Team 2) player to fall to the ground injured. He was obviously in pain, as he was crying. I stopped the game and immediately called on the manager to treat his player. Whilst the injury was being dealt with I called the (Team 1) player to one side (towards the centre of the pitch, away from everyone) to deal with the incident which had just occurred, at this point the (Team 1) manager came on to the pitch and said something to the (Team 2) manager, which I didn't hear. I asked the (Team 1) player his name and advised him that I would be sending him from the field of play, at this point his manager came closer and stood next to his player asking *"What's it going to be Ref, a yellow?"* Again, I felt intimidated by his words and him approaching me on the pitch. I then pulled out the red card and asked the player to leave the pitch, at this point the manager began to shout at me again, advising that the card should have been yellow, I advised that it had to be red for kicking out. He continued to argue, stating that I couldn't give a red and that all his players were saying it wasn't a red. I advised him that in my opinion it was red and my decision stands. Following more shouting he eventually left the field of play, returning to the technical area. I restarted play, and both (Team 1) managers continued to shout things at me throughout the remainder of the game, continually challenging my decision, shouting at me for not giving fouls and commenting on how I paced out the wall for a free kick. I blew my whistle for full-time and being upset went straight over to my parents. I knew that I needed to get their names and asked my dad to come with me, who agreed. We both approached the (Team 1) managers and advised that I would be reporting them for their behaviour, my dad asked for their names, they both refused, asking my dad who he was, and refused to tell us their names, advising that we should go through the proper channels. With this, I then asked them both for their names, and they again refused to give them to me. I advised that I would be submitting reports on their conduct, as we walked away the assistant manager again became abusive, repeatedly shouting *"Tell me what I have said then, tell me what I have said"*.

This again caused me further significant upset, as I got to the car with my parents, I began to get emotional.

My mother was in constant email contact with the Referee development officer and he explained the process very well and clearly. The RDO kept us constantly updated with what was happening with regards to the personal hearing and invited us to see the room and go through the process. They also gave me the option of doing it by phone. I did attend the hearing with my parents. Very nervous going into the hearing. I didn't want to have to see the managers again, but I had the support from the development officer. It also made me not want to do it anymore because I felt like they might try to intimidate me. I was very scared. I was asked questions by the chair and the chair asked questions that the managers had wrote. My father and mother were then asked questions shortly after. The case was proven, and we got a phone call in the following morning.

REFEREE 5

I was 17 and the game was an U15 Sunday League match. The home team had just given away a penalty in the last couple minutes of the game. Unsurprisingly the home team players, spectators and manager all vocally disagreed with my decision, as they did with every decision that went against their side the entire game. However, in this incident, the home team manager ran on to the pitch to confront me, screaming and shouting in my face. The shouting included a barrage of swearing directed towards me. As soon as I got home I wanted to report the incident but wasn't overly sure how to. I tried to contact CFA (specifically the Referee development officer) however I couldn't get through to either him or anyone within the CFA on the Sunday or the Monday. I managed to work it out for myself however my CFA provided no explanation as to how I can report. My statement was taken, and I was not made aware of any investigation or action that was taken against the home team manager until I was invited to a personal hearing. The CFA sent me a PowerPoint explaining what the hearing entailed. They ensured the date of the hearing was a day that I could attend. I was only given the option of attending the hearing in person. I was kept in a separate room until the hearing had started and the home team manager was seated. I was allowed to have a parent sit in with me as I was under 18 at the time, so my dad sat with me during the hearing. The seating arrangement was set out so that the home team manager was seated at a table that was to my left and the table was about 4-5 feet further forward of my table so that he wasn't able to see me unless he turned around, which the hearing panel instructed him not to do so. The hearing panel also instructed him he must not talk directly to me but talk to the panel and they can talk to me. The home team manager was very defensive of his actions and at one point denied that the whole incident occurred and claimed I was making up the incident. The manager didn't look at me or directly talk to me but when talking to the panel he was very critical of my performance, calling me a weak Referee etc. The panel asked me quite a lot of questions regarding the content of my report. At some points it felt like the questions they were asking me were leading questions that lent towards me giving an answer that was favourable to the home team manager. It made me feel like I was under trial and that I had done something wrong by reporting the issue. The panel seemed like they didn't really want to be there and had better things to do. It made me feel that it doesn't seem they are taking this serious incident of misconduct against an U18 Referee seriously. I was never told the outcome of the hearing despite asking numerous times.

REFEREE 6

During a match the away manager was becoming verbally aggressive towards me as a ref during an U13s match. He started to raise his voice at me and shouting aggressively, stating that all my decisions were wrong and I was missing clear and easy decisions. I then calmly proceeded to attempt to quieten him down, to no avail. At this point as a 14 year old, female ref around 5'7" I was beginning to feel intimidated by this taller, bigger and older man. By the end of the match he had called me inconsistent and argued with almost all of my decisions. I had become visibly upset and annoyed by his actions. At the end of the match I spoke to the home managers who were very understanding and helped me talk about the situation as by this point I was in tears. The away manager came over and weakly apologised, using the excuse that he gets "very heated and

intense” during the game as his team were losing and he wasn’t getting his way. Leaving the pitch, I felt scared and intimidated by the manager and felt in danger of my safety throughout the match. Both teams, managers and parents witnessed me crying. The situation of reporting went well, but mainly because I wasn’t the first to complain about the manager. The main person who really pushed to get the ball rolling and keep the investigation alive was our league Referee appointments officer and he handled the whole investigation better than anybody I could’ve asked for. The manager got stripped of his position and is not allowed to be involved in junior football for a number of years. His team disbanded. Nobody contacted me to ask how I was doing especially not from the CFA, it was just my RA that contacted me to help me and check how I was.

5. REPORTS FROM PARENTS

In the following instances, it was the parents of an U18 Referee who contacted me to give a report.

PARENT 1

Parent of a Referee from the North West. September 2019, 16 year old Referee for an U14s game. He was told before the game that this was a bit of a grudge game, so his Dad went with him. Some of the parents started to be abusive and make comments towards the Referee, so his Dad asked them to stop and reminded them that he was young. He was asked "*Who the hell are you?*" and he just said that he was there to support the Referee. They stopped after that. During the game, one of the managers ended up fighting with a parent, and the father & couple of other parents had to go and split it up. The Referee was very shaken and intimidated by what happened. This was reported to the CFA by the other coach/parents and the Referee was asked to complete a questionnaire/report. No one from the CFA contacted the 16 year old Referee to ask how he was. He completed the report and the CFA came back with some more questions, but yet again didn't ask after the Referee's welfare. This is still on-going (January 2020), but there has been no update from the CFA.

PARENT 2

Parent of a 15 year old Referee, who was Refereeing an U11s game in December 2019. The coach was shouting at his players and saying things like "*I'll rip you off the pitch.*" The Referee asked the coach to please not speak to the players like that and was backed up by the opposition coach. The coach called the Referee a "*fucking bellend*" so the Referee showed him a red card. The coach walked off with his team. The Referee reported the incident to the CFA, but has heard nothing back to date. No acknowledgement of the report or a call from the CFA to check on his welfare and see how he is. His father phoned the CFA at the start of the new year, but got no feedback. They both feel that there is no incentive to report abuse and/or poor practise as nothing ever gets done.

PARENT 3

I thought I would let you know about a similar issue that occurred some years ago now with a Referee who was around 14 at the time. She was a Referee under the guidance of a CFA in the North of England. During a match she was verbally abused by a Manager of a team and the issue was reported to the CFA. The manager was brought before the CFA and subsequently banned for a number of years I believe. At no point was she asked to stand before the FA in the presence of the Manager who caused the offence. This is how it should be.

PARENT 4/5

Received two e-mails from the parents of Referees who had previously reported abuse from adults whilst they were under 18. However, neither Referee wanted to complete a questionnaire as one is a core Referee now and the other is allocated a lot of academy games and both felt that by taking part in the research, it would jeopardise these with their CFA.

6. REPORTS FROM REFERESS ASSOCIATIONS

The following reports cover 5 different geographical areas of England.

RA1 – Derbyshire area
The CFA disciplinary process should follow a national protocol and therefore be similar across the country. In short, I don't believe that CFAs truly consider any impact on u18 year old Referees called to a hearing.
RA2 – South East area
From my own personal experience, our CFA are very supportive of all match officials irrespective of age; continually checking the welfare and mental health of any official involved in any form of abuse.
RA3 – London area
<p>In my experience what CFAs and their disciplinary commissions holding hearings do, and what they are supposed to do, do not necessarily match the FA Disciplinary Regulations (introduced a few years ago).</p> <p>Sometimes commissions are well controlled and conducted, but not always. It depends largely on the ability of commissions, in particularly the chairman, to follow the FA regulations. I have come across one case where there was an inadequate investigation by not consulting witnesses who would have supported the Referee alleging that he was assaulted during the game by a player who he was sending off. At the hearing the player was represented by a solicitor who questioned the Referee directly. The case was not proven and the Referee resigned from the league and I believe later resigned his dual affiliation to that CFA. The player was later tried in the Crown Court I think for attempted GBH for driving his car at the Referee in the car park after the game. The Referee jumped out of the way and the player was not hurt, but it was hugely unsettling for him. In my experience the personal hearing run broadly in accordance with the regulations.</p> <p>Sometimes strong characters including the chairman, players or representatives can dominate proceedings, which is fine provided the regulations are adhered to, which depends substantially on the strength of the chairman. It is probably better than it once was but mistakes in the investigations still happen and have a profound effect on what happens at the hearings. I believe greater protection is afforded to persons charged than to witnesses. Various support is provided to U18s appearing at personal hearings under the regulations, but not all is written into the regulations.</p>
RA4 – Cheshire area
<p>Our CFA follows the national procedures: The Referee reports on the WGS and the CFA contacts the Referee and talks them through the process. The CFA should also contact the welfare officer of the CFA or RA. If this goes to a personal hearing, the CFA will ask the Referee to attend and be advised they can bring a parent and may also ask witnesses to attend to help his/her case.</p> <p>When attending a hearing, U18s Referees will be asked to wait in a separate room and the secretary of the commission will go and talk to them and explain the procedure. The Referee will be told that only the Chairman will talk to the Referee and everyone else can only ask questions through the Chair. The Referee decides if he or she will answer the question or if the parent or guardian will speak on their behalf. Once the Chair is satisfied that the matter involving the Referee s complete, they are escorted by the secretary from the building. The safeguarding of the U18 is paramount and the club representatives will be kept in a separate room and brought in by the secretary once the Referee is seated.</p> <p>Referees are told they should attend personal hearings and may be sanctioned for not attending without good reason. They are expected to attend but WebEx can be used if the situation warrants it.</p>

RA5 – Merseyside area

Such an offence of abusive and or threatening behaviour to a young person (someone under 18) is under FA rules a case of serious misconduct. Consequently, this should be referred to the National FA for them to investigate. Depending on the alleged words and or actions with which the U18 was subjected to this should also be reported to the Police by the CFA safeguarding officer. The National FA should then appoint suitable independent personnel who are not from the CFA in which the offence took place to hold any subsequent hearing.

In my experience the CFAs that I have knowledge of do not investigate such incidents effectively or correctly. It is also my experience that the National FA fails equally as badly. I know of a case of serious misconduct investigated by the FA apart from the panel being assembled they failed to ask for any evidence from independent witnesses. In over 50 years of Refereeing I have never known of any CFA actively speaking to parents or seeking evidence other persons not involved in the incident unless they were those named in the report. It is my understanding any Referee can be accompanied by someone of their own choosing at a hearing but that person has no right to give or make any contribution.

In terms of personal hearings, I understand if the case is heard at CFA level by its own disciplinary panel it is based on the evidence in the Referee's report. The panel will then decide if there is a case to answer and then inform those who have been named of their offence and what penalty has been sanctioned against them. Anyone who does not accept the charge and or punishment can then ask for a personal hearing. The CFA then sets up a personal hearing and it is normal for the Referee to (although he or she is not guilty of any offence) to attend in case the panel hearing the case wish to ask Referee for any clarification not evident in the original report. Many managers, players and some panel members try to use a personal hearing to 'try' the Referee. At CFAs I have been involved with in recent years they have made it mandatory for any Referee under 18 to be accompanied by an appropriate adult. My Referees' society also offers any Referee asked to attend a personal hearing including those under 18 the support of member of the society who is a CFA mentor. This mentor is also able to support the Referee immediately after the match and at any time up the personal hearing.

I do not think any CFA insist or put pressure on any young person who does not want to attend a personal hearing, especially if their parents will not permit it. This should not distract from the facts of the case which should be in the Referee's report and this should stand as correct evidence and taken as such by any reasonable personal hearing panel. My understanding is the only support an U18 Referee will receive from a CFA is the requirement for an appropriate adult to accompany them to a personal hearing.

I have been told of cases where an U18 Referee has been told they could face disciplinary action if they do not want to attend a hearing but have never been involved with one myself. In such a case I would expect the CFA to report to the National FA and the local Police for child abuse. However, getting the National FA to take an interest in what is happening at grass roots level in CFAs is very difficult.

An example of how young Referees can be treated: Two years ago my Referees society was contacted by a parent of one of our young members (15 years old) as he was waking in the night after youth games at the weekend having nightmares from the comments and abuse he had received during recent games. Most of this was from parents of players and some from team managers/coaches. We as a society offered to follow this up but his parents declined saying decided the best course of action was for him to quit Refereeing. An all too common result. Consequently, we were keen to offer our services a mentors and now work closely with the new secretary of one of local youth leagues. The league now have a number of adult officials who regularly attend matches and work proactively to support their young Referees. The secretary attends our society meetings and is keen to seek help and encourage the leagues young Referees to attend training sessions and seek assistance.

Unfortunately, the disgraceful behaviour of many of the managers and coaching staff in the Premier league and the rest of professional football continually sets extremely poor examples. The National FA do little to tackle this and do not set appropriate and effective punishment to stop this. The consequence of this is some managers and coaches involved with junior football think they can do the same and get away with it. The same applies to most professional players who constantly abuse Referees and this is replicated many thousands of times on local park pitches. When coupled with the appalling behaviour and constant abuse from fans at premier matches it not surprising this prime example of yob behaviour is replicated by parents attending junior football.

7. REPORTS FROM JUNIOR FOOTBALL CLUBS/LEAGUES

JUNIOR LEAGUE 1 – Gloucester area

I don't feel our CFA investigates and deals with abuse well. I once attended a CFA session where a man had entered the field of play in a senior game to stop his 17 year old son from being punched and kicked. The 17 year old's club was fined over £100 while the player who punched and kicked was given a two week ban and fined £20. In terms of personal hearings, the CFA will have a panel of officials and a Disciplinary Secretary who will hear both sides and decide, but I don't know how well this is managed for children (U18s Referees and players). I wouldn't allow a child (U18) to go before a Disciplinary Committee without representation. The CFAs I imagine offer very little support in these situations.

JUNIOR FOOTBALL CLUB 2 – Greater Manchester area

An U18 player was assaulted by an adult coach. He was expected to attend the personal hearing in person, but felt too intimidated to do this. He was told by the CFA that his statement would not hold as much weight if he did not attend. As the police were also involved, it was not appropriate for him to attend in person or his father. The player and the coach admitted to being in a scuffle and rolling around on the floor (this followed a head-butting incident by the coach) and the player's father admitted to using foul language as he was upset at seeing his son being attacked. Despite both the player and manager admitting to a scuffle, the manager's case was not proven, but the U18 player was fined and banned and his father fined for foul language. Both clubs were fined. The welfare officer for the player's club was appalled at the lack of a duty of care by the CFA towards the U18 player and made some excellent points to the CFA regarding FA's safeguarding children policy, which states "*The child's welfare is and must always be, the paramount consideration.*" The child in this instance was deemed to be the aggressor and the adult manager's case was not proven (despite him admitting to the scuffle).

JUNIOR FOOTBALL CLUB 2 – Cheshire area

I am a club secretary, who also happens to be a Referee. Our U14 team at the time were playing a cup game that we had been expected to lose but had gone to extra time and the opposition were getting agitated to say the least. There was 'banter' on the touchline between the two teams and I will admit that our players were not entirely blameless however it culminated in the opposition manager dropping his tracksuit bottoms to briefly expose himself to our players. Fortunately both I and our welfare officer were present at the game and we immediately notified the league and the CFA about the incident. Statements were taken from all players and parents who had witnessed the incident, however the CFA would not proceed with the case unless our players were present at the hearing. Naturally our welfare officer (and the club) refused to let our 14 year old players be present in the same room as this person and the CFA said they weren't prepared to proceed as it would be unlikely to be proved without them attending. I feel there is little or no thought to the welfare of these young people and to this day we are convinced they may have come out of that hearing thinking they had done something wrong by reporting it and having to face this person face to face.

8. SUMMARY AND FINDINGS

POLICIES/PROCEDURES/DEFINITIONS

It is concerning that the United Nations and the NSPCC defines a child as someone under the age of 18 and despite the FA's safeguarding policy stating the child's welfare is and must always be, the paramount consideration' that children are expected (even at the age of 14) to attend a personal hearing. They are being treated as a witness, rather than a victim of abuse/poor practise. Children are being put in a situation where they are in the same room as the very people who abused them or showed very poor practise toward them and it is clear from the reports and feedback from young Referees, that this is very intimidating, stressful and makes them feel like they are on trial. The Youth Justice and Criminal Evidence Act 1999 (YJCEA) provides a range of special measures that can be used to facilitate the gathering and giving of evidence by most witnesses, including any child or vulnerable witness and witness in fear. This includes: giving evidence in private, video recording of evidence and examination of witness through intermediary.

'The English Football Association's Respect Campaign: the Referees view' from Loughborough University 2015 found that the abuse Referees receive at youth level has definitely caused them to stop. One youth league takes on about 20 Referees each season and in their experience after 5 years, there will be only 5 of them remaining. This pattern has continued despite the introduction of Respect. Across the data from this research was a recurring theme that both the National and County FAs need to be stronger with clubs and players who fail to adhere to the Respect Campaign and support Referees more effectively than they currently do. The research found that a number of Referees felt that within their own cases, the FA and County FA did not effectively utilise the tools at their disposal in the form of dealing with improper and abusive behaviour.

REFEREES' AND PARENTS' REPORTS

It is clear from the feedback that each Referee went through a very different and inconsistent experience with their CFA. Some of the key findings are:

- Referees feeling like they are being put on trial at personal hearings and being made to feel like the guilty party
- Poor investigations by CFAs
- Lack of welfare support for U18s Referees by the CFA and them having to turn to RAs, Ref Support and league appointment officers for support
- Children being made to feel scared and intimidated
- Poor or non-existent communication regarding the outcome of a personal hearing.
- When comprehensive support is offered, the outcome is more positive
- More consistency is needed when U18s are dealt with by panels at personal hearings.

REPORTS FROM REFEREES' ASSOCIATIONS

Again a 'lack of consistency' was evident in the reports from the Referees' Associations. An example of this was parents being allowed to speak on behalf of their child at a hearing, some put pressure on Referees to attend, others don't, some offer WebEx and some don't and some commissions are well conducted and some are not.

Other findings are:

- Lack of consistency across panels/commissions – some good, some poor
- No consistency in the way that CFAs support U18s Referees
- Inadequate investigations
- Lack of clarity on the reporting and hearings process across RAs.

REPORTS FROM JUNIOR FOOTBALL CLUBS/LEAGUES

It is very clear that junior leagues rely heavily on Referees who are under the age of 18 (75%-90%) and one league has reported that they are unable to cover between 100-150 games each weekend due to a lack of Referees. Whilst there are initiatives to attempt to reduce the abuse and poor practise that Referees face, the reporting process, lack of consistency from CFAs and attendance at personal hearings is an issue.

Clubs feel there is a lack of a duty of care by the CFA towards the U18 player, little or no thought to the welfare of these young people and a lack of consistency.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is clear that a fundamental change needs to happen in terms of the way children are treated when they report abuse and poor practise in grassroots football.

It needs to start with 'Grassroots football safeguarding policy and procedures' taking priority over every other procedure that the FA has ever produced or is likely to produce in the future.

- **The child's welfare is and must always be, the paramount consideration.**
- Poor practise and abuse – Poor practise includes any behaviour that reflects a failure to fulfil the highest standards of care. The FA states 'it is unacceptable in football and **will be treated seriously with appropriate action taken.**

The discussions around reporting abuse and poor practise must not sit within a disciplinary committee, but start with the safeguarding team.

Ref Support Statement:

We agree and it is clear that there needs to be a change in how referees, who are under the age of 18, need protecting and supporting. The lessons of the Max Ormesher Case appear to not have been learned with similar decisions being made that does not protect the young referee first.

The default setting appears to be the acceptance that the young referee must appear in person, this needs to change and the remote attendance needs to be the preferred method of offering evidence if they indeed have to.

We also agree with the lack of consistency. This can be evidenced in the purple shirts/yellow sock, green shirt and yellow arm band initiatives that have been recently introduced by County FAs, there is no cohesive approach. The question needs to be asked as to why The FA have not stated a preferred method of identifying a ref who is 18 or under on a national scale. When these initiatives were first muted why didn't The FA take control and agree on a national plan of what to wear and what colour that would be?

National Referees Association statement

The National Referees Association have already stated: **All incidents involving U18s treated as a Safeguarding/Criminal Act concern first, then an FA reporting matter second.**

The following recommendations come from all areas of the research, however the first **six** come directly from the children (U18s Referees) themselves:

1. I think the process should be made easier and more support about the Referee's wellbeing should be put in place to help encourage young Referees to come forward about any experiences they have faced.
2. The child protection and welfare officer needs to keep in touch with the ref to make sure that they are ok after the incident and throughout the process. Also the ref and manger at a hearing should not see each other and be made to sit in the same room.
3. Not having to see the managers in person would have made me feel a lot more comfortable. It would be better overall if you didn't have to go through with this experience because it is on your mind weeks before and that's all you think about.
4. A whole overhaul of the system needs to happen in my opinion. I don't know whether other CFAs are the same as my parent one in terms of reporting misconduct.
5. I strongly believe that bodycams should be able to be worn by Referees as firstly a deterrent and secondly concrete evidence of any incidents that occur.
6. I think the whole idea of personal hearings should be scrapped, as should the whole idea of having to 'prove' something for any action to happen. In most cases Referees are at the game on their own, therefore won't have many, if any at all, witnesses that are prepared to go against the offender so it is therefore virtually impossible to prove anything happened if there is no video evidence and there are no other witnesses.
7. A simpler process must be introduced, that has had the input from young Referees and their parents, and this should be rolled out ASAP to all CFAs and they should adhere to it and ensure consistency.
8. The child's welfare must be paramount, which means that the child could have been given a different date to attend the hearing, where he/she would not have had to face the coach who attacked them. The coach could have passed on any questions to the Chair prior for them to be asked and then the coach get the answer after and attend on a different night.
9. Personally I believe that if the Referee has nothing else to add to their report - I would want CFAs to initially check - what the players/coaches reason for appeal is and on what grounds? This may mitigate any reason for the Referee to attend anyway. A check if the Referee has anything to add to their report and if not, no need to attend the hearing.
10. Referee could be available at the given time and contact able by the hearing panel for any questions that arise, and this can then conclude any additional information required and save on travel costs and time taken too.
11. As soon as a report is sent in from an U18 Referee (child) the CFA should contact the Referee to check on their welfare and see how they are as a matter of course. This should be done via a phone call or home visit. On-going support should be offered and an update on what is happening.
12. The Referee should not be treated as a witness, but as a victim of abuse and be covered by the safeguarding policy and not a disciplinary policy that is meant for adults.
13. They know that the coach may request a personal hearing and the Referee should not have to attend, as they were the victim of abuse and not a CFA witness. CFAs should safeguard young Referees and confirm their statement through a phone call, or they should be represented by an adult.
14. CFAs need to start listening to their Referees and their concerns.
15. The main one is the issue of children having to attend personal hearings and being in the same room as the people they have reported. It feels like 'bullying' when a CFA says that they will not proceed with a case unless the children attend. Their statements could be checked out by someone phoning them as part of the investigation or doing a home visit to ask questions about their statement.
16. Full training for CFA staff into investigation and compliance with FA Regulations.

17. Use some of the special measures from the Justice and Criminal Evidence Act 1999 (YJCEA) to facilitate the gathering and giving of evidence by child victims/witnesses, such as giving evidence in private, video recording of evidence and examination of witness through intermediary.
18. Follow NSPCC and UN guidance on a child being 'someone under the age of 18' and remove the age differentiator in the disciplinary procedures.

Some of these suggestions were made to the FA over 18 months ago and young Referees should not have to wait this long for change that will safeguard their welfare.

My last (and personal) recommendation, takes me back to the first 6 on the list.

On behalf of all U18s (child) Referees, I request that the Football Association meets with young Referees and listens to their accounts and recommendations first hand to show they can have the confidence in the FA to know that their **welfare is and must always be, the paramount consideration** and that they are committed to making improvements quickly and ensuring these are communicated.