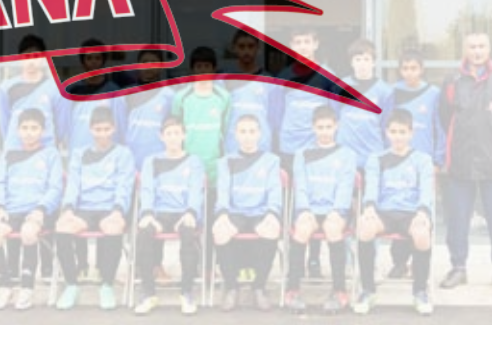


# Report of Racism and Resistance: Nirvana Football Club





**LEICESTER NIRVANA**

This report provides an overview of Nirvana Football Club. The club was established as a means of providing an outlet for young Black and Asian footballers from the inner city areas of Highfields and St Matthews, Leicester. This report provides a narrative based on individual experiences of racism and discrimination and concludes by making a number of recommendations.

## Key Messages

- Many individuals have a lack of confidence with authority due to the handling of historical experiences
- A subliminal pattern of the acceptance of racism in football
- A psychological and sociological effect on young individuals leading to behaviour and confidence issues
- The level of discrimination and racial abuse being experienced at all level

## Key Recommendations

- The FA to invest in co-created solutions by working with grassroots clubs to tackle racial discrimination in all it's forms
- The Leicestershire County F.A to develop and maintains a transparent procedure to address racial discrimination/abuse and take accountability of the disciplinary process
- A compulsory module to be integrated in all FA coaching, manager and referees qualifications that provides a greater understanding of working within a multicultural context and where they are able to develop their cultural intelligence
- The FA to provide diversity breakdowns and distribution of facilities and funds at a National, regional and local level
- The FA to commit that racial incidents will be addressed and referred to the police and that repeat offender's have a zero tolerance approach taken against them



## Introduction

This report is particularly timely given that over the last year, a number of high profile racial incidents have highlighted the on-going depth and breadth of the inescapable realities of twenty-first century racism in English football. Despite the Football Association's (FA) poor management of the Luis Suarez and John Terry racial abuse cases, derisory fines and match bans for on- and off-pitch racism, degrees of tolerance for inflammatory chanting; the under-representation of black and Asian supporters; the under-representation of black managers; the absence of Asian professional players; and the continuing presence of overt racism within the grassroots game, football governing bodies have – as Kick It Out chair Lord Herman Ouseley has expressed – collectively failed to provide both moral and professional leadership on the issue of racism in football.

Embedded in the culture of football is the notion that a zero tolerance stance on racism will somehow irrevocably harm the essence of the game. This is a fallacy. Black Minority Ethnic (BME) players and spectators, from the grassroots to the professional ranks, remain vulnerable to racism and ensuring that on- and off-pitch spaces are safe, non-violent and free of racial abuse is a basic human right.

## History

Nirvana Football Club was established in 1982 when an over 18 team was entered in the local league. In 1984 a youth team was developed and entered into the Central Midland league, which provided a higher level of competition equivalent to step 3 of today's non-league pyramid system. This team gained promotion after its first season, but unfortunately they have been unable to take its place in a higher division due to facilities and resource requirements.

Within three years of entering this league Nirvana had established a record of success, but league restructuring and the inability to meet the demands placed upon them in terms of the requirements of enhanced facilities, forced the club to drop out of the league. Throughout that period, numerous attempts were made to progress, which was systematically hindered by numerous bodies including the local authority. This was evident when the Football Investment Strategy supported 7 local clubs to upgrade



their facilities bringing £11.2 million pounds of investment into grassroots football. Nirvana was the lead club in terms of campaigning for an investment in the City, however when the funding was allocated to the 7 partner clubs, Nirvana received the least amount of funding and facilities across the 7 sites.

Nirvana Football Club was created in response to the lack of opportunities for young BME players. In the early stages they recruited young people who were at that time primarily from the inner city areas of Leicester and worked to enhance and to develop them as footballers. Nirvana Football Club focused much of its early attention on a wide range of minority groups, offering and providing a platform to play football locally in a competitive league. It sought to provide a route for players who were disadvantaged, supporting them to access football with the aspiration of breaking into the professional and semi professional game.

The youth team was initially set up due to the lack of opportunity in the professional game for black youth, and the hope that the youth team would create an opportunity to showcase their talent. This was particularly crucial in challenging stereotypes about Asian young people, who were not provided with opportunities to play football as a result of discriminatory racial assumptions that have hampered the progression of Asian players in the professional game. This form of discrimination has been well documented and was highlighted by the 2005 report *Asians Can Play Football* report amongst others.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Report by the Asians in Football Forum



The Premier League draws players from every continent, yet there remains an absence of south Asian players, even though they are significant group in most other areas of life in the UK.

In order to achieve this objective, Nirvana Football Club had to become conversant with existing systems and conform to the requirements established by the FA and other regulatory bodies. One such requirement was ensuring that the facilities, coaches and players could compete at the relevant levels.

The non League systems operate on a pyramid system, which means that in order to progress specific criteria must be satisfied at each level. Over a period of 30 years, many structures and pathways have been established which specifically link Nirvana and players to professional clubs and other areas of the game.

Nirvana Football Club has provided schemes that have fostered, stimulated and developed talented players, some of who have gone on to play at semi-professional and professional levels including clubs such as Leicester City FC, Burton Albion FC, Derby County FC, Nottingham Forest FC and more.

After reviewing the ability of the players at Nirvana and noticing that scouts from local professional teams did not visit the matches, or other clubs where a significant proportion of the players were from multiracial teams, Nirvana initiated a scheme that would take the young players out to the county so that other professional football clubs could give them the chance to play in their academies.

Nirvana Football Club currently has approximately a dozen players at professional academies and a number of players who are taking scholarships. Some players who started with or played for Nirvana have represented England and other international countries. Many have the ability to play at such levels; there are at least fifty players from Nirvana who have now gone through professional football academies.



Cleveland Taylor who now plays for Burton Albion FC and has also represented Jamaica at international level.

Keanon King who had spells with Nirvana has been offered a contract at Leicester Football Club and he also represented England U17's recently.

Nirvana operates on a set of principles both on and off the field. This includes fair play within the club and during game. However, despite seeking to work from these principles of developing a sense of pride, belonging, developing cultural understanding and community cohesion, the Club has had to provide a mechanism to both manage and contain the anger, frustration and the rage that comes from the many injustices that have been thrust upon the club.

Although Nirvana has not collated each incident or wrong decision that has gone against them over the years, the injustices have included unfair treatment and blatant racism at every level. Many of the members of Nirvana Football Club conclude that racism is a major plausible part of the explanation. This discrimination is often done through processes or lack of processes when dealing with governing bodies and local authorities. Often the conflict of interest of individuals that are affiliated to other local clubs, restrains an unbiased decision.

The Club retains its aspiration to develop as a social entity as well as providing a safe space for children and young people from our communities to participate equally.



## The impact of Racism

Nirvana Football Club has been in existence for over thirty years, it reflects the multiracial community from which its members are drawn. Throughout the Club's existence it has endured different forms of discrimination, in the form of physical, verbal, and racial abuse from opponents and their fans. During games players, parents, and fans were subjected to all kinds of racial taunts; this abuse came from their rivals and their rival's fans. This would include blatant disapproval, for example there have been many occasions in which the team arrived at matches only to be confronted with disdain, horror and hate etched on the faces of the opponents.

“ *If an opponent or their fans are discriminative towards me, I aim to be better than them on the pitch. For me, it drives me on...* ”  
- (Male player NFC)

The sustained and blatant abuse from opponents and their fans led to the inevitable backlash where some of the younger players retaliated, refusing to accept the constant abuse. Moreover, the abuse was compounded by the failure of FA officials to act by challenging the abuse and implementing a zero tolerance response. It was often perceived that self-defense was an act of aggression. The FA officials took action to discipline those who were victims whilst at the same time ignoring or condoning the actions of the real aggressors.

Resisting, and defending themselves from the racial and violent abuse contributed to the Club and its members as being associated with a negative reputation, a stereotype that has formed a significant aspect of the demonisation of BME communities across the UK.

In other words officials were in actual fact acting in regard to the stereotype, the exaggerated depiction of Black people as demonic or possessor of strength and qualities that invoked fear in others. The FA officials acting from this depiction sought to protect themselves and the opponents from the mythical creature that they had created. Examples of this study can be found in Bradbury, S. (2010)<sup>2</sup>

In one particular scenario the official's actions (or lack of action in response to the abuse inflicted on Nirvana Football Club) are consistent with a sub-conscious desire or objective of breaking them or

<sup>2</sup> 'From Racial Exclusions to New Inclusions: Black and Minority Ethnic Participation in Football Clubs in the East Midlands of England'.





having them removed from the league. It was now routine and it seemed that match officials seemed to side with the opposition, they all appeared to be fearful of the presence of Nirvana Football Club.

Standing up for themselves has evidently contributed to tension that would at times culminate in fights, Nirvana was always seen as the aggressor, even though their response was measured, a direct reaction to the unabated racial abuse in physical and verbal forms. This was amplified in the following comment:

“ *This form of overt racism from official bodies is very antagonistic towards players. Unfortunately too many times young ones don't understand what's happening and lose all confidence in fair play and the officials.* ”  
- (NFC member, 2012)

Over time Nirvana football club realised that physical retaliation was counter-productive; confiscating their ambition and desire to play football and represent their communities in a positive manner.

The realisation that they were on their own, and that they could not depend on the match officials to protect them impacted further as it tested their character; they had to re-evaluate the situation and find other ways to demonstrate their ability and worth.

The primary objective was to build a club that would enable children and young people to gain access to football. Thus the emphasis was placed on playing, whilst finding ways to support young players and their communities.

Coaching staff developed intensive training methods about not only playing but also maintaining discipline on and off the field, the impact of this was enhanced performances and success on and off the field.

Despite this relative success, Nirvana Football Club was somewhat isolated and they perceived that the FA and many of their opponents had found a way of sabotaging their efforts. It was in this climate that the Club decided to respond to the abuse by being successful. It could be argued that their resilience and their success were born in the challenging situations that they encountered.



On the 21st October 2012 whilst playing in a local under 15's match, Nirvana players were subjected to a vile form of racism. The officials allowed the game to continue.

At the end of the game, the young players were subjected to further abuse in the form of gestures and threats. This was reported to both the Leicestershire Police and the FA. Both of these agencies undertook enquires resulting with an adult male being charged by the Police. The FA has postponed the hearing twice which in itself could raise further questions of inconsistent practices. However the match official has now been charged with misconduct. This is a most unusual outcome, since normal practice has allowed match officials to get away with mismanagement or misconduct, a dereliction of their duties in pursuance of fairness.

The issues on the football pitch remain unresolved and with the ease of access to communication devices some players from both teams have engaged in a misguided exchange, worsening the already tense situation.

On the 30th November 2012 the Leicestershire County FA provided its verdict charging one player from Blaby and Whetstone with two counts and two players from Nirvana for comments on Social Media. This outcome was consistent and reflects what the club perceives as bias and unfair treatment by officials and those responsible for managing the game locally and nationally. It would seem ironic to some that England U21's were defended by the National FA in an incident similar to the case of Nirvana, referring to the England team as victims after responding aggressively to the racism that was directed at them. FA general secretary Alex Horne said:

*“ It is The FA's vehement belief that its players and staff acted correctly in the face of provocation, including racist abuse and missiles being thrown. We are therefore surprised to see that two of our players have been given suspensions. ”*



## Condoning, colluding and playing by the rules (institutional racism)

Nirvana Football Club's experience of racism has led to a severe lack of confidence in those who have been entrusted with managing the game and ensuring that fair play is accorded to all participants. It could be argued that the lack of leadership and accountability has contributed to a growing distrust among the players and members of Nirvana Football Club and has left them feeling unable to accept many of the decisions that have been made against them.

Nirvana Football Club feel that it has been subjected to institutional racism manifested primarily by the actions of F.A match officials and the leagues; this kind of racism is very overt during matches but can be very subtle during official dealings such as disciplinary hearings with the F.A.

The Club feels that their voices have not been heard or adequately represented; rather they have been continuously reprimanded with sanctions that have affected their capacity to progress. Specifically they indicate that match officials always seem to listen to and take actions that give the appearance of them taking sides with their opponents. They feel that vital decisions were made against Nirvana, which cost points and games. A former Nirvana player reflects the sense of being gagged:

“ *What I was going to say is yeah I played for Nirvana and I've played for other teams. People from outside just think, oh it's them just moaning. It's them moaning, but I've experienced it from both sides, and I've played in a team when it's predominantly mixed and predominantly white where I was probably the only Black person on the pitch and how I have been treated in different teams is totally different. Even when I have gone to disciplinary hearings with Nirvana I weren't even allowed to open my mouth I had to sit there and listen to what they had to say. When I tried to talk they would butt in and not let me say anything. When I've gone there on a disciplinary hearing with other teams they've sat there listen to my case and I got to say what I wanted to say and the end of the day the end decision went my way with the other teams but didn't go my way when I was playing for Nirvana* ”

- (Male player NFC, 2012)

Nirvana Football Club found that the lack of opportunity to present their case and have a fair hearing has further impacted on them in terms of them not bringing significant issues to them because their experiences have been so negative.

For example they if they made a complaint about a referee not dealing with racism on the pitch, the formal processes did not communicate about what actions were taken to address the situation.

# Playing by the Rules

This pattern was also evident when complaints were made against the behaviour of opponents, where it was felt that officials never took appropriate action.

Nirvana Football Club is adamant in what they also perceive as further examples of institutional bias or racism from other public organisations. For example concerns have been raised with regard to difficulties encountered whilst dealing with local authority representatives. These organisations often have the capacity to impact positively or negatively on smaller community based projects. One small act could make or break a project.

Nirvana Football Club has provided various accounts where they felt that the actions of local authority personnel have hampered the progress of the Club in terms of facilities and funds that was necessary in order for them to progress to the next stage of their development. This is reflected in comments such as

“ *Lack of funds and facilities is what has arrested our development as a club* ”  
- (NFC member, 2012)

Nirvana football club feel that they have been over looked and other clubs have been facilitated to progress with direct funding and enhanced facilities. As indicated above the non league systems operate on a pyramid, progress is determined not only by the ability on the pitch but also on the basis of football clubs satisfying other criteria, without which a club that is successful on the pitch could lose many of its members who are ambitious but who have reached their ceiling within the club due to the clubs inability to progress.

Nirvana Football Club have many accolades in football, they have won leagues and should possibly be higher up the non League system, but the lack of certain facilities such as floodlights, clubhouse have prevented Nirvana from progressing to higher leagues. This is highlighted with the following examples:

- In the season (84/85) Nirvana football club entered the Midland Youth Flood Light league using St Margaret's pastures artificial turf, the facilities were not appropriate. This was the highest league available for the young people to play in, outside of the professional league.



# Playing by the Rules

- Although Nirvana football club was successful they were prevented from playing at this standard and their progress impacted due to a lack of facilities. Their inability to fulfil the ground requirements meant that they had to resign from this league.
- In the season (1995-1997) Nirvana Football Club re- entered the Midland Youth Flood Light league (Saffron Lane facilities). After a successful period (2 years) progression affected due the ground criteria and repeated racial incidences and retaliation.

Numerous representations have been made to the local authority; however, they always appeared to have some reason to arrest the development and the enthusiasm of the members.

The lack of progress affected players, as it was rumoured that professional club scouts avoided Nirvana and looked elsewhere. Some football clubs had an attitude that suggested that they wanted to see the Club fail so that they could recruit the Nirvana players.

An example of this would be due to the successes of Nirvana's teams and players and numerous individuals moving into the semi/professional game saw a dramatic increase in the number of BME players now being welcomed into other local clubs. These clubs quickly identified the strengths of these BME players and how they could potentially improve their current teams.

Some of the players found this to be somewhat perplexing and concluded that there was some animosity that could be found on and off the field of play. It was perceived that if the Club lost its players due to lack of progress to the higher leagues they would disband.

In 1999 Hamilton (an area on the north west of the city) was identified as a suitable ground for Nirvana to establish itself in relation to its overall aims and objectives. In 2005 a conference entitled Asians in football was held at Leicester City Football club. Questions about the lack of progress of Asians in football were linked to facilities, attitudes and exclusionary practices. Peter Kaye the CEO of the Football Foundation asked Nirvana to contact them to explore the issues further. Following representation to the Football Foundation, a site visit was organised to explore various possibilities, this resulted in an agreement that the land that had been previously identified on Hamilton estate could be used if a suitable lease could be agreed with the local authority.



The local authority was now an essential player, the development of the facility was now determined by the local authority who sought the opportunity to alter the original agreement to suit their own objectives and funded a number of other clubs that were outside of the area that was specified and agreed with the Football Foundation. Although the club was the main driver in bringing this funding in to the city, they received the lowest level of facility out of all the partner clubs in the investment (regardless of the standard and ability of the players). To this date there has been no official criteria as to the methodology of how the funds were distributed. The present situation is one in which Nirvana has a facility that remains inadequate, where a lease has not been issued and where the Club is still at risk of halted progression. The local authority has consistently undermined the efforts made at the community level, choosing instead to manipulate the situation to their own desired objectives.

The development and management of The Football Investment Strategy project was delivered through the local authority. It has taken more than thirteen years (2012) to deliver the facilities in terms of a Service Agreement, clubhouse with changing facilities and pitches.

Nirvana Football Club began to raise questions and reflect on possible reasons why they had not been supported by the local authority when they had the capacity to do so in terms of funding, advice or specialist staff.

“ *Not having the opportunity to develop as a football club as other local clubs have, made us question and look at what was going on.* ”  
- (NFC member, 2012)

Reflection on the questions and the lack of progress over the years has led the members to conclude that there has been a systemic attempt to disrupt their progress; they have named this as 'indirect Institutional racism'. They have acknowledged that there were no specific comments that explicitly made reference to their ethnicity; however over the years, the actions of the local authority and FA officials have left them in no doubt that they have been subjected to institutional racism.



## Kicking it out - The silence is deafening

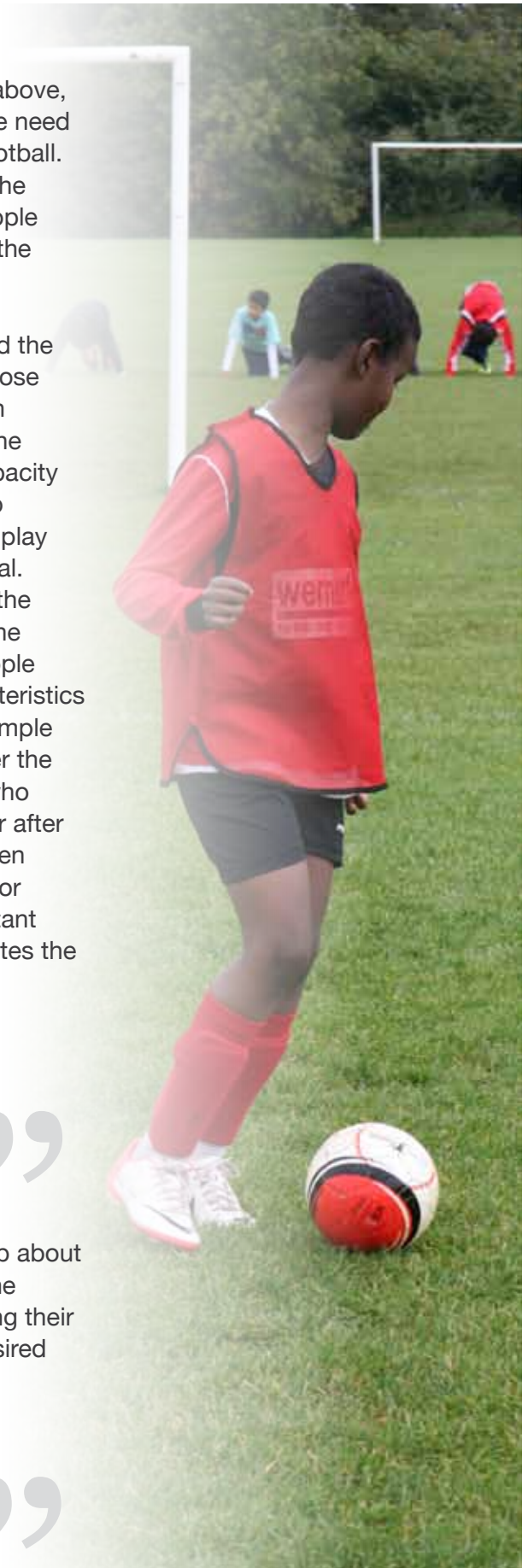
Based on many of the issues and experiences referred to above, it seems imperative that all those associated with the game need to give some urgent attention to the impact of racism in football. For years racism in football has been accepted as part of the game, some might even suggest that it is banter and if people have a problem with it then perhaps they should not be in the game.

This would suggest that these people couldn't comprehend the damage that is done. This damage affects all of us even those who do not play or support the game. Football is now seen as part of the national game, a reflection of the culture of the nation. In a similar way to the 2012 Olympics it has the capacity to reinforce certain values and principles. Football can also provide a lens an indication of what those who administer, play and those who support the game come to accept as normal. The denial of racism does not mean that it does not exist; the silence allows others to interpret this as a non-issue. But the psychological damage impacts and is manifest in how people think of themselves finding or constructing specific characteristics to be used as the basis of discrimination. Consider for example the psychological effects of being racially taunted; consider the impact of observing a car crash, a stabbing where those who witnessed these events decided not to get involved then or after the event. This may be a reflection of a society that has been anaesthetised, a society that leaves some groups to fend for themselves and is then shocked, when in the face of constant abuse they fight back. The following comment communicates the sense of hopelessness that some players feel:

“ *After years of the same shit most players start to accept it as part of the game* ”  
- (Nirvana Member 2012)

During a discussion with members of Nirvana Football Club about why they have not complained there was incredulity and the members were unanimous when they expressed that raising their concerns through official channels did not produce the desired outcomes:

“ *It was felt that always fall on deaf ears time & time again* ”  
- (Nirvana Member 2012)



Nirvana asks the question, How is the most productive BME club in Leicester, a club who has produced a number of professional players and youngsters who have represented their country's at ALL levels and scores of youngster's attending academies, still after a 30 year struggle does NOT have the required facilities to be part of a non-league system or facilitate the number of teams their community requires?

Research of how racism has impacted on Nirvana Football Club has revealed, that significant numbers of members feared challenging decisions made by the match officials and other representatives, such as the FA or the local authority.

“ *Although we as a club did not have much, we still feared that if we pushed to hard that we may receive even less support* ”  
- (Nirvana committee member)





# Conclusion

Football, as the most popular sport in the world, can be a powerful vehicle for positive social impacts, as witnessed by the London 2012 games that proactively cultivated notions of social inclusion, diversity and cohesion. However, the beautiful game is also a fertile ground for intolerance, social exclusion and racism, which has detrimental effects on BME players, BME communities and the larger national psyche.

On constant theme that emerged during this research was that challenging was a waste of time, often players felt that if they complained, they would make themselves vulnerable and this could impact on their ability to progress in the game, it would cause tension or difficulties with team mates or other teams. This is reflected at the top levels of the game as was witnessed in the John Terry V Ferdinand. It was vehemently argued that complaining was a waste of time as nothing will change.

This report has demonstrated that many of the issues that impact on Black and Ethnic Minority people in the professional game are evident in the 'grassroots' game.

In the professional game we note that some Black professionals are fearful of standing up to racism publicly, due to the unknown consequences. This research has affirmed the importance of addressing these issues, fear, is perhaps the bigger enemy as a fear of challenging and the silence or lack of adequate response from the FA, the police, and the local authority provides its own narrative. Black and Ethnic minorities cannot depend on the authorities to do the right thing. They are not accorded the same level of protection on and off the pitch, thus their feelings of isolation is compounded leaving them feeling of despondent because racism is not taken seriously.

The issue of racial abuse is significant as in many ways it resonates with events that occurred within the international game between England and Serbia. During this game, players, fans, and footballing officials were engaged in what can only be described as violence. The monkey chanting that was witnessed during that international game was repeated at the local level when fans, parents and players from Blaby & Whetstone players decided to mimic such disgracing behaviour toward a Nirvana team of junior players. Nirvana Football club feel that it is time to tackle this issue once and for all. The feeling is that if they do not speak out now, this discrimination will continue. Racial abuse is a crime and authorities must be prepared to use every avenue available to tackle racial incidents on and off the pitch.

# Recommendations

The recommendations suggested here are based on the experiences of Nirvana football club and reflects aspects of issues that is having an adverse impact on both the local grassroots, the professional, national and international games. Nirvana FC recommends that:

- Leicester Nirvana Football Club, the FA, Minister for Sport, Sport England, Football Foundation, and the Local Authority convene meetings to tackle the issue of Institutional racism, facilities and sustainability and to discuss fulfilling current strategies i.e. Asians in football.
- The FA to invest in co-created solutions by working with grassroots clubs such as Leicester Nirvana to tackle racial abuse and providing advice and training at a grassroots level. The FA to provide statistical information around BME groups in football at a professional and grass roots level.
- An annual community event called 'Race for Football' to be hosted by Leicester Nirvana FC and supported by Leicestershire County FA to demonstrate communities working together.

## Recommend that Locally:

- The Leicestershire County F.A develops / maintains a transparent procedure to address racial abuse and take accountability of the disciplinary process and make the publication of those players and clubs that have been charged with racism displayed on the Leicestershire County FA website. These incidents/procedures to be recorded monitored and produced annually.
- At a grassroots level a compulsory module called "Football working with and in culturally diverse communities" course be integrated in all FA coaching, manager and referees qualifications. This must consist of the FA utilising clubs such as Leicester Nirvana FC to allow these individuals to work with personnel in BME clubs so that they can learn about the working practices.

- The FA to fund community based action research to provide further insights into the diversity breakdown and distribution of facilities and funds at a local level, which includes a staffing and representative breakdown of governing bodies.
- Initiate programs that target the hard to reach youth within a grassroots setting in order to build a relationship and a presence within communities.

## Recommend that Nationally:

- The FA review and reflect in the rules of the game their commitment to kicking racism out of football. Racist abuse is a crime and the FA need to create a structure to demonstrate that such incidents will be addressed and referred to the police and that repeat offender's risk being dismissed from football.
- Nirvana FC supports the development of an independent support network for Black players of African and Asian descent to support, advise and assist when they face discrimination or need help and to monitor how the FA deals with racial incidents.
- The FA to establish a training programme in which there is an accredited module that all those associated in administration, playing and officiating learns about working within a multicultural context and where they are able to develop their cultural intelligence.
- The FA, UEFA and FIFA to consult with young people from multi-cultural backgrounds to share ideas and encourage Black and Asian players and spectators to attend and participate at football matches at all levels.
- The penalties for racial abuse and other forms of unlawful abuse to be levied not only against the individual but also against the club where such an incident occurs.



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# Report of Racism and Resistance: Nirvana Football Club



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