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Friday, 18<sup>th</sup> December 2020

Dear Chief Medical Officers,

### **Open Letter: Removal of the tackle in School Rugby**

We are writing to ask you to take the necessary steps to review the evidence on risks of injury and harms from rugby in school children and having done so to advise the UK government to remove the tackle from the sport. We refer you to our previous letters and written evidence to all four chief medical officers in [2016](#) and [2017](#).

Concern about injuries and traumatic brain injury in youth sport is of growing international concern, including in rugby union and rugby league. The [Concussion Legacy Foundation](#) has launched the [Tackle Can Wait](#) campaign in the United States to reduce children's exposure to these repetitive head traumas, and its [Safer Soccer](#) campaign helped U.S. Soccer delay heading until age 11. The England, Scotland and Northern Ireland Football Associations have delayed heading the ball for children until 12, and strictly limited it from age 12.

[Recent research funded and conducted by the Rugby Football Union](#) has highlighted the lack of evidence for any discernible physical health benefits from full contact rugby union compared with non-contact codes of rugby, such as touch rugby. This RFU scoping exercise concluded that,

*“Across the spectrum of participation, contact rugby union has high injury and concussion incidence rates relative to other sports”.*

It is now well established that young players under the age of 18 are particularly vulnerable to concussive injuries because of the maturing and the dynamic neurophysiological state of the adolescent brain. Despite this our 2018 survey of a sample of 288 state secondary schools found:

- 76% of boys in English state-funded secondary schools are required by their school to participate in contact rugby in Physical Education lessons as part of the curriculum.
- Most Heads of Physical Education perceive contact rugby to be the highest risk activity delivered in Physical Education.

The situation whereby the RFU determine the rules of play for children including in schools cannot continue. We are concerned that in failing to act to protect children from the tackle in the school game and by allowing the sport's governing bodies to decide what, if any, information to collect, the British government is exposing children to significant risk.

We call on you to advise the Ministers for Education, Health and Sport in all four nations to remove the tackle from the school game.