

Rt Hon Oliver Dowden CBE MP  
Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport

Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP  
Secretary of State for Education.

OXFORD  
BROOKES  
UNIVERSITY



Sunday 7<sup>th</sup> February 2021

Dear Mr Dowden & Mr Williamson,

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

We are writing in response to press reports this week of the launch of a Concussion Summit at parliament. We would be grateful for information as we have been unable to find its the terms of reference. From the press reports it seems that the summit is concerned only with ex-professional players and the important topic of risk of injury and concussion in the youth and school sport is not going to be addressed.

Given the urgent need to prevent injury and concussion from contact rugby in school children we are writing to ask you to address this as a priority. A high proportion of injuries and concussions occur in school-age rugby as a result of the tackle. Please find attached our letters and written evidence on the harms of tackle sent to all four chief medical officers in [2016](#), [2017](#) and [2020](#).

Concern about injuries and traumatic brain injury in youth sport is of growing international concern, including in rugby union and rugby league. Currently, reducing exposure to repetitive head impacts is the only strategy for reducing concussion and preventing the long-term associated risks (such as Dementia and Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy). Mez and colleagues (2020) showed that among 266 deceased American football players, 223 of whom had CTE, there was a dose-response relationship between years of play and both odds of disease, which doubled with every additional 2.6 years of play, and odds of severe disease among those with CTE, doubling every 5.3 years of play (Mez et al., 2019).

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. Indeed, there are even calls to reduce heading in training for professional athletes, yet more needs to be done for school sport.

[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.

Worryingly our 2018 survey 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 Rugby Football Union have implemented a number of voluntary initiatives, such as the Headcase concussion education course and the Activate programme. [The Rugby Football Union](#) has reported an increase in concussions in the school game and lack of adherence to the return to play protocols following a concussion, with many athletes returning before the minimum timeframes. Alarming, the rates of concussion are higher in the school game than the adult community game.

The Department for Education should take responsibility for protecting children in the physical education and school sport context. 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 UK government is exposing children to significant risk.

We ask you to review the evidence of harms and and act in the best interests of childrens' health by removing the tackle from rugby in compulsory school physical education.

**Dr Adam J White**

**Professor Allyson Pollock**

**Professor Eric Anderson**

**Graham Kirkwood**