



THE INDEPENDENT  
FOOTBALL OMBUDSMAN



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**IFO COMPLAINT REF: IFO924**

**A six-month sanction imposed by AFC Bournemouth**

**The role of the Independent Football Ombudsman (IFO)**

1. The office of the IFO has been established by the three English football authorities (The Football Association, The Premier League and The English Football League) with the agreement of Government. The IFO has been designated as the final stage for the adjudication of complaints which have not been resolved within football's complaints procedure. The IFO is an Approved Alternative Dispute Resolution Body and its findings are non-binding. IFO Adjudications will normally comprise two parts: an impartial assessment of the substantive complaint and a review of the procedure by which the complaint was handled. The IFO's role is to investigate the complaint and judge whether it was dealt with properly and whether the outcomes were reasonable for all parties concerned. Under the procedure agreed by the Football Governing Bodies, the adjudication of the IFO is final and there is no right of appeal against IFO findings.

**Introduction**

2. This is the adjudication of the Independent Football Ombudsman (IFO) following a complaint submitted by the Claimant regarding a six-month suspension issued by AFC Bournemouth (the Club) following an incident at the pre-season friendly against Real Sociedad on 9 August 2025.

3. The Claimant disputes the allegation that they used abusive language towards a member of the Club's security staff and contends that the process followed by the

Club was flawed, disproportionate, and failed to take proper account of independent witness evidence and other contextual factors.

4. The IFO has reviewed the extensive evidence submitted by both parties, including written statements, Club documentation, CCTV footage, the Claimant's phone video, policy documents, Incident Panel minutes, correspondence, and has conducted direct discussions with the Claimant, the Club, and the independent witness.
5. This adjudication sets out the complaint, the Club's position, the evidence considered, the IFO's findings, and the IFO's recommendations.

### **The Complaint**

6. The Claimant denies using any abusive or foul language towards Club staff and states that the accusation arose only because of provocative and inappropriate behaviour by a security operative stationed approximately 25–30 metres away.
7. The Claimant submits that:
  - they did not swear, gesture, or behave aggressively at any point;
  - the independent witness seated beside them, unknown to them prior to the match, corroborated their account;
  - the stewarding team failed to record or consider the provocative behaviour of the security operative, including exaggerated gestures and blowing a kiss;
  - the process adopted by the Club lacked transparency, and failed to demonstrate that the evidence had been genuinely weighed;
  - the ultimate sanction was disproportionate, particularly in light of the absence of previous disciplinary history.
8. The Claimant also contends that the matter has had a significant adverse impact on their wellbeing and on their long-standing relationship with the Club spanning several decades as a supporter, season ticket holder, shareholder, and corporate hospitality customer.

### **The Club's Response**

9. The Club maintains that on the balance of probability the Claimant directed offensive language towards a member of staff and behaved in a confrontational manner when approached by stewards.
10. The Club relies on contemporaneous notes by a steward supervisor stating that the Claimant said "f\*\*\* off" in response to instructions from the security operative. A second security officer also reported hearing a similar phrase.
11. The Club further states that CCTV confirmed persistent standing, which the Claimant initially denied and subsequently partially admitted during their educational session.
12. The Club asserts that the phone footage submitted by the Claimant demonstrated their aggressive behaviour when asked to produce their match ticket.

13. The Club informed the IFO that it had concerns regarding the independence of the witness because the statement was supplied to the Club via the Claimant.

14. The Club is satisfied that it followed a fair process: it notified the Claimant of the sanction, offered an appeal, convened an Appeal Panel of senior staff not involved in the original decision, invited the Claimant to attend an education session, and informed them of their right to refer the matter to the IFO.

### **The Chronology**

15. In the closing minutes of the match on 9 August 2025, a steward approached the Claimant and accused him of swearing at a security operative positioned in the corner of the East Stand.

16. The Claimant denied the allegation immediately. An independent witness sitting three seats away confirmed to stewards at the time that he had not heard any abusive language and that the security operative had behaved provocatively.

17. After the match, the Claimant spoke to police officers. The Club have noted that their body-worn video recorded the Claimant as calm and cooperative. Officers advised them to put their concerns in writing to the Club.

18. On 29 August 2025, the Club's Incident Panel issued the Claimant with a six-month ban for a Level 5 offence, citing abusive/aggressive language or behaviour towards a member of AFC Bournemouth staff.

19. The Claimant appealed and subsequently provided additional material including phone footage and a detailed written statement from the independent witness.

20. On 11 September 2025, the Claimant attended an educational behavioural session and signed an Acceptable Behaviour Contract co-signed by Dorset Police.

21. On 19 September 2025, the Appeal Panel upheld the original sanction, concluding again on the balance of probability that the Claimant used offensive language and exhibited confrontational behaviour.

22. Remaining dissatisfied, the Claimant referred the matter to the IFO.

### **Evidence Considered**

23. The parties have set out their positions fully in their respective forms and in the correspondence to which they refer. I have reviewed all the documents submitted by both parties, but I do not need to deal with each and every dispute of fact in this Adjudication. Of particular note, however are:

- The CCTV footage which showed the Claimant perched on the back of their seat, but did not capture the interaction with the security operative or the alleged abusive language.

- The Claimant's phone footage which showed frustration during an interaction with stewards, but did not clearly evidence aggression as understood under the Club's sanctions policy.
- The independent witness report which provides an overview of the interaction with the stewarding staff.

### **The Investigation**

24. The IFO spoke to the Parties.
25. The IFO interviewed the independent witness, who confirmed:
  - they had no prior relationship with the Claimant;
  - they observed the security operative engaging in exaggerated gestures over several minutes;
  - they saw the operative blow a kiss towards the Claimant;
  - they heard no abusive language from the Claimant;
  - they intervened because they were concerned about the disproportionate response by stewards;
  - they missed the Club's request for comment because their email landed in a spam folder.
26. The IFO contacted the Club to discuss the independent witness account and clarify how this evidence had been assessed in the Club's process.

### **The IFO's Findings**

#### **Persistent Standing**

27. The CCTV footage shows the Claimant leaning or propped on the back of their seat, rather than traditionally standing upright. Under the Club's Sanctions Policy, this behaviour constitutes a Level 1 offence ordinarily resulting in a written warning for a first offence.

28. There is no evidence that the Claimant has ever been previously sanctioned.

#### **Alleged Abusive Language**

29. The Club has been categoric that protection of its staff has been of paramount concern in this case. The IFO acknowledges that the Club were faced with a difficult decision as it was of the view that one of its own staff members had been verbally abused and, therefore, it might be a common instinct to stand with that person as opposed to the perpetrator. For this reason, the objectivity of independent persons who would not carry the same loyalty help to provide a balance to cases of this type.

30. The Club's case relies on the supervisor's note recording a phrase heard which was recorded contemporaneously. Another security officer also reported hearing the phrase which was categorised as foul and abusive language. The IFO notes that:

- the operative said to have been abused did not hear any abuse.
- the CCTV offered no audio evidence.

31. The independent witness who sitting only three seats away (as is evidenced on the phone camera and CCTV footage) gave a highly detailed, internally consistent account. They were clear that they heard no such language from the Claimant.

32. The IFO found the witness to be credible and the IFO is satisfied that they had no prior connection with the Claimant.

33. Where evidence is finely balanced, credible independent testimony can tip the balance. In this case, it tips in the Claimant's favour.

### **Conduct of the Security Operative**

34. The IFO is concerned that the security operative's exaggerated gestures and apparent act of blowing a kiss were neither acknowledged nor factored into the Club's assessment. This behaviour is consistent with the independent witness' testimony and was raised with stewards at the time as can be viewed in the Claimant's recording.

35. Such behaviour could reasonably be considered provocative and may have contributed to escalation, albeit the IFO acknowledges not to an extent that would ever justify aggressive behaviour or foul/abusive language, if such were sufficiently proven.

### **The Club's Process**

36. The IFO accepts that the Club followed its procedural steps; however:

- there is evidence that the independent witness testimony may not have been properly considered and the IFO considers this to be a key factor in this particular case;
- the Claimant's visible frustration when asked for their ticket does not objectively constitute aggression.

### **The Claimant's mitigations**

37. The Claimant has attended an education behavioural session and also signed an acceptable behaviour contract. Chronologically, this took place before the appeal hearing but does not appear to have been a significant factor within those deliberations. The IFO considers that more weight could have been placed on this when determining the appropriate level of any sanction.

### **Conclusion**

38. Having reviewed all available material, the IFO considers that central to the charge of the Level 5 offence in this case is the weighting of the evidence provided by the independent witness and the mitigating actions that the Claimant subsequently undertook. The IFO is, therefore, minded to make a recommendation that the Club review the sanction in light of the weighting of this evidence. The independent witness made themselves available to the IFO via video call and the IFO is certain that they would do so again, if the Club so required.

### **Recommendation**

39. The IFO recommends that the Club review the appropriateness of the sanction imposed on the Claimant, taking account of the independent witness testimony and the IFO's weighting of its credibility.