

Complaints over police investigation into alleged abuse at Stoke

Lawyers acting for the former Stoke apprentices have written to the Independent Office for Police Conduct about Staffordshire police's handling of the case

exclusive

[Matt Lawton](#)

, Chief Sports Correspondent

Wednesday October 25 2023, 7.50pm, The Times

Law



The allegations made by former Stoke City apprentices centre on a period in the mid-1980s

PA

Share

A number of former footballers have complained to Staffordshire police about the force's handling of an investigation into allegations of "historic sexual, mental and physical abuse" at Stoke City.

As The Times reported last year, the police launched an investigation into new claims that apprentices at the club in the 1980s had been subjected by senior players to a ritual known as “the glove”, which they said involved a gloved finger covered in a stinging muscle massage cream being inserted into their bottoms.

Lawyers acting for a group of former Stoke apprentices have written to the Independent Office for Police Conduct to raise concerns that officers have not sought to include their previous claims as part of their new inquiries. The IOPC has responded by confirming their correspondence has been “reconsidered and is now being treated as a new complaint”.

- **[Police investigating new sexual assault claims at Stoke City](#)**

In July last year a Staffordshire police spokesman said that officers had received “two reports of sexual assault earlier this year”. The spokesman added: “This new information is being examined in the context of the overall case.”

ADVERTISEMENT

However, in August this year police told the lawyers representing the former Stoke players that earlier allegations “do not form part of the current investigation”.

The Times revealed last year that a group of eight former footballers were calling for police to open a new investigation into allegations of abuse at Stoke. This followed an attempt, in 2015, by George Blackstock to sue the club’s former goalkeeper, Peter Fox, and the club for the abuse that he claims to have suffered when he was an apprentice at the club between 1986 and 1988.

Blackstock said he was subjected to a ritual he and other former Stoke apprentices alleged was called “the glove”, which they have said involved Fox using one of his goalkeeping gloves. Blackstock’s civil claim was dismissed at Preston county court, and he was ordered to pay costs to Fox and Stoke.

But Kevin Winters, a leading lawyer acting for Blackstock and other players, wrote to the police in May 2022 asking them to reopen the investigation.

SPONSORED

Winters is acting for one of the players who made a new complaint to the police last year but the identity of the other is not known to Blackstock and the others.

While the allegations have been made by players who say the abuse happened when they were trainees at the club, they were in different year groups.

Some never went on to enjoy professional careers. But one complainant who waived his right to anonymity, Ian Gibbons, represented Stoke's first team in one game and another former player, who has not yet been to the police but has claimed to The Times that he too experienced "the glove", made multiple professional appearances for the club.

Last year Fox, now 66, referred the matter to his solicitor, who said the case had "already been litigated" and it was found that there was no claim.

ADVERTISEMENT

In a letter to the IOPC, sent last week, Winters stressed the need for the police to revisit the claims of Blackstock and others in the context of the new complainants.

"We say that the circumstances to facilitate a revisiting of his [Blackstock's] previous complaint are now in place and have been for some time," wrote Winters. "Mr Blackstock is not alone. There are other victims whose complaints have not been added to the new investigation.

"Please be advised this complaint relates specifically to the ongoing decision of Staffordshire Police to decline to take a fresh complaint statement from our client together with other victims."

When asked last week why the claims of others were not being considered as part of the new investigation, a spokesperson for Staffordshire Police would confirm only that “the investigation is ongoing”.

But the IOPC has responded to Winters, a leading criminal and human rights lawyer based in Belfast, to say: “Your correspondence ... has been reconsidered and is now being treated as a new complaint.

“Our role is to forward your complaint to the relevant police force, which must decide whether to record the complaint. Recording means that a record is made of the complaint giving it formal status as a complaint under the Police Reform Act 2002.

“Additionally, I have raised this matter internally with our Assessment Unit, who look into complaints which are referred to the IOPC by the appropriate authority.”

ADVERTISEMENT

As the IOPC explained, it is its responsibility to make sure the police complaints system works effectively and fairly. The IOPC will now forward the complaints to the Staffordshire force, who must then decide whether to take further action.

Additionally, the IOPC has raised the matter internally with its Assessment Unit, who will determine whether the Staffordshire force needs to refer the case back to the IOPC “prior to the commencement of any investigation”.

Now in their fifties, the former Stoke apprentices allege that in the 1980s, as teenage boys, they were terrorised by senior professionals at the then second division club, living in constant fear of a punishment. They say they would be dragged into the first-team dressing room and held, face down on the physio bench before having their shorts pulled down and being subjected to the “glove” ritual.

It allegedly involved Fox, a goalkeeper at Stoke from 1978 to 1993, penetrating them with a gloved finger dipped in a muscle-massage cream that comes with a warning not to be applied to sensitive areas.

In court in 2015 Fox denied such a ritual existed, as did George Berry, who at the time was the club captain and now the commercial director for the Professional Footballers' Association.