

**From:** simon.preston@fc-utd.uk <[REDACTED]>  
**Sent:** 10 April 2026 15:40  
**To:** 'Angie Firth' <[REDACTED]>  
**Subject:** Stockton Town Fixture - Process, Decision and Governance Concerns

Dear Angie,

Further to my earlier note, and having now consulted fully as a Board, we are writing to set out our position following receipt of the League's Written Reasons at 11:41 yesterday.

We recognise that the Written Reasons set out the League's stated factual and evidential basis for the decision as taken.

We have undertaken a detailed review of both the decision and the rationale provided, and we attach our full response addressing the specific points raised by the League.

Given the League's stated intention to publicly issue the Written Reasons, and the fact that this matter is now firmly in the public domain and subject to significant and sustained media, League, club and supporter interest, the Club considers it necessary to publish its response. This is to ensure accuracy of public understanding, transparency of process, and to mitigate any risk of misrepresentation of the Club's position.

It is important to be clear that our concerns are not limited to individual points of disagreement. Rather, they fall into three overarching areas: the process followed, the substance of the decision itself, and wider issues relating to governance, independence and neutrality.

Taken together, these issues give rise to serious concerns regarding the robustness of the decision-making process and the framework within which it was reached.

We would also note that, as a volunteer-led, member-owned organisation, we are currently managing a significant volume of supporter and media enquiries in relation to this matter, and this is placing considerable operational pressure on the Club.

## **1. Process and procedural fairness**

The Club was not informed that an application had been made by Stockton Town, nor that the League was actively considering a change of venue, until after the original decision had been taken.

This represents a fundamental failure of process. The Club most directly affected by the decision was not given the opportunity to provide input, evidence, or context at the point at which the decision was being formed.

This is despite the fact that the League engaged with Stockton Town on multiple occasions during the same period. That imbalance is material. It is difficult to reconcile with any reasonable interpretation of fairness, equality of arms, or natural justice.

We were subsequently invited to submit a counter-proposal. However, this occurred only after the decision had been taken, and without any clarity on the evidential basis or criteria applied at the point of decision. That cannot reasonably be described as meaningful participation in the decision-making process.

We also reject the attempt to draw a distinction between “operational matters” and “disciplinary matters”.

The League’s own reliance on “sporting integrity” demonstrates that this decision goes far beyond administration. It is:

- materially punitive in effect
- financially significant
- competitively impactful (including clubs other than the two involved in the fixture)
- and directly relevant to supporters

In substance, it engages the same expectations of fairness and due process as any other regulatory intervention affecting a member club.

The distinction therefore does not address the underlying issue: the absence of fair process before a materially adverse decision was taken.

We also have serious concerns regarding the composition of the decision-making body itself.

The voting Board members involved in the determination include individuals with formal affiliations to clubs competing within the same league structure. Whilst we do not suggest that any individual acted improperly, the presence of decision-makers with direct or indirect club affiliations in a matter with clear and material competitive consequences gives rise to an obvious and legitimate concern regarding both actual and perceived conflicts of interest.

In circumstances where a decision has a direct impact on competitive balance, fixture integrity, and the financial outcomes for member clubs, it is a fundamental principle of good governance that decision-making structures must not only be impartial in fact, but must also be demonstrably and transparently free from any reasonable perception of bias.

No information has been provided to the Club as to how such potential conflicts were identified, managed, or mitigated within the process. In the absence of such safeguards being evidenced, confidence in the independence of the decision-making framework is materially undermined.

This concern is not advanced lightly, nor is it suggested that affiliation alone equates to bias. However, where those affiliations exist within a closed competition structure, and where no clear conflict management framework has been articulated or disclosed, it is reasonable and necessary to raise this issue as part of the wider governance assessment of the decision.

We also note that several substantive questions raised by the Club remain unanswered or have been reframed rather than addressed. These include:

- the criteria applied in reaching the decision
- the evidential basis for concluding the ground was unsuitable
- the interpretation and application of Rule 8.7.2
- and how competing considerations were weighed

## **2. Engagement with League Officials**

Following the original decision, we engaged extensively with the League Chair and expressed our concerns in detail.

During those discussions, the Chair presented himself as providing guidance and coaching, which the Club understood as engagement in good faith to help navigate the situation.

However, during those same discussions, the Chair stated that there were individuals involved in the decision-making process who “do not like FC United” and “that’s the problem you face in this process”. While we recognise that personal views may exist across any organisation, such a statement is highly concerning in the context of a process that must be demonstrably impartial.

Following rejection of our proposal, the Chair advised us on the prospects of an FA appeal, indicating that:

- the likelihood of success was low
- and that there may be material cost implications

We are not suggesting this advice was improper. However, given the Chair’s senior position within the game and proximity to the process, it was a material factor in our decision not to pursue the only formal appeal route available.

This is particularly significant given that we are a volunteer-led organisation without immediate access to independent legal advice at that time.

Subsequently, we understand that the Chair is now the subject of a complaint relating to an abusive email sent to a supporter in an related matter. While separate from this decision, it inevitably heightens concern about governance standards and perceived neutrality.

We also note multiple reports from individuals within the game suggesting negative preconceptions about FC United among those involved in decision-making. We cannot independently verify all such reports, but their consistency is concerning.

## **3. Material inaccuracies and omissions in Written Reasons**

We wrote to the League on Tuesday seeking clarification on several substantive points. These remain unanswered in full.

The Written Reasons then present selected extracts of our correspondence as though they are direct questions or verbatim statements. This does not reflect the actual content of our email and appears to selectively reframe our concerns.

More importantly, the responses provided contain substantive inaccuracies:

### **(a) Pre-decision engagement**

The assertion that the Club was engaged via “observations surrounding the postponement” is incorrect in substance.

The only engagement prior to the decision related to Stockton Town’s travel claim for a separate fixture. There was:

- no discussion of a venue change for the April fixture
- no indication that this was under consideration

- and no invitation for input prior to the decision

We were only informed after the decision had been taken.

### **(b) Post-decision observations**

The reference to FC United providing observations on 2 April relates to post-decision correspondence. This cannot be used to suggest prior engagement or justify the absence of consultation at the decision-making stage.

### **(c) Selective presentation of postponements**

The Written Reasons present postponements in a manner that does not reflect context or causation.

Each postponement arose from clearly identifiable external factors:

- 18 Nov – Storm Claudia
- 16 Dec – widespread rain (multiple fixtures affected including Gainsborough v Leek)
- 6 Jan – league-wide freezing conditions
- 27 Jan – Storm Chandra (multiple postponements across division)
- 24 Feb – pitch damage caused by prior fixture played in torrential conditions
- 24 March – the pitch was confirmed as playable at 5.00pm; however, exceptionally heavy and unforecasted rainfall thereafter rendered it unplayable. Importantly, this was the only occasion on which Stockton Town had already travelled to the fixture.

On four of the six occasions, the adverse weather conditions were extreme or unprecedented, affecting fixtures across the wider geographical area and amounting, in practical terms, to force majeure events.

At all times, FC United acted to fulfil fixtures at the earliest possible opportunity and within League rules. In addition, the Club has consistently worked with both Stockton Town and the League to facilitate pitch inspections at the earliest possible opportunity, with the express aim of minimising disruption to Stockton Town.

In March, the Club undertook significant investment in pitch improvement works. We do not consider that these works have been adequately reflected in the League's assessment, even though the pitch is now materially more resilient.

We also took proactive steps to reduce pressure on the pitch by removing the women's team fixtures from the stadium for the remainder of the season.

At the point referenced in February, we had played 15 home fixtures — the same as the majority of clubs in the division. As of April 10th, we had two home fixtures remaining, consistent with a number of other clubs.

The suggestion that we have a structural issue with fulfilling home fixtures is not supported by the data.

#### **4. Flawed application of Rule 8.7.2**

We do not dispute the League's power under Rule 8.7.2. However, that discretion must be exercised:

- consistently
- reasonably
- and with proper regard to relevant considerations

We do not believe that standard has been met.

The League cites precedents but provides no detail. On our understanding, those precedents differ materially, typically involving:

- grounds already declared unsuitable
- ongoing safety concerns
- or infrastructure issues affecting multiple fixtures

That is not the case here.

Following the decision, Broadhurst Park was used for our fixture against Hednesford Town without issue and our fixture against Hyde United is expected to proceed with no issue next Saturday. No determination of unsuitability was made in respect of either match.

It is therefore unclear how the ground could be considered suitable for those fixtures but unsuitable for the Stockton Town fixture weeks earlier.

The League also relies on "fairness" in rejecting our proposal due to timing.

However, we note that in other recent cases, the League has permitted:

- venue changes within 24 hours of kick-off
- same-day reversals of fixture location
- and late operational amendments

This demonstrates inconsistency in the application of decision-making principles.

Finally, the League places weight on:

- previous postponements
- and perceived inconvenience to Stockton Town

While we do not dismiss those impacts, they are not relevant to the decision being made under Rule 8.7.2, which is strictly concerned with ground suitability. This is based on objective determination; a ground is either suitable or it is not. The identity of the opposition is not material to that determination.

Furthermore, at no stage was a Groundsman's report or independent pitch assessment undertaken prior to the decision being made. Given that the decision resulted in the removal of a home fixture, with clear sporting and financial consequences, the absence of any contemporaneous, expert assessment of pitch conditions is difficult to reconcile with a fair and evidence-based process.

The Club put forward a clear, practical and proportionate alternative proposal which we do not believe was properly or fairly considered. This proposal was designed to meet the interests of all parties — FC United, Stockton Town, the League, and wider competition integrity considerations — while directly addressing the concerns that had been raised.

The proposal was to stage the fixture at Broadhurst Park as the primary venue, supported by a pre-booked contingency arrangement at Curzon Ashton. The intention was that a final joint decision with the League on the match venue would be made approximately 24 hours prior to kick-off, informed by referee inspection, groundsman assessment, and prevailing weather conditions and forecasts.

Both venues are located within the Greater Manchester area, approximately three miles apart, and would have been clearly communicated in advance to supporters. There would have been no material difference in travel arrangements for Stockton Town players, officials, or supporters. The approach therefore provided flexibility and operational certainty while maintaining fairness and protecting sporting integrity.

## **5. Sporting integrity and proportionality**

The League repeatedly references sporting integrity. However, the practical application of the decision appears to prioritise completion of fixtures by a fixed date over competitive balance.

This is particularly important given the recognised importance of home advantage, including in prior League and Appeal Board findings.

The removal of a home fixture has:

- significant financial consequences (tens of thousands of pounds)
- clear sporting disadvantage
- and wider implications for competitive integrity

It is therefore difficult to reconcile the decision with the principle it purports to protect.

We also note that concerns about this approach are not isolated to FC United, with other clubs having publicly expressed similar views.

## **6. Wider governance and emerging concerns**

Separately, additional issues have emerged which raise broader governance concerns.

We are currently reviewing a complaint that an individual connected to the League may have accessed FC United member-only communications under a false identity. If substantiated, this would represent a serious breach of conduct and trust.

We also note the wider communications context, including extremely short notice of public statements and departure from previously understood expectations regarding coordinated messaging.

## 7. Reconsideration of decision

It is clear that circumstances have moved on significantly since the original decision.

The Written Reasons do not resolve the concerns raised and, in several respects, amplify them.

We therefore believe the only appropriate course is for the League to reconsider this decision, *ab initio*, through a properly structured, transparent and procedurally fair process.

## 8. Next steps and publication

In light of the League's departure from the previously understood approach to coordinated and mutually agreed communications on this matter, as stated above, the Club considers it necessary to publish relevant correspondence and supporting documents.

This step is being taken in order to ensure:

- accuracy of public understanding
- transparency of the process followed
- and protection against misrepresentation of the Club's position

This is not a step we take lightly. Our clear preference has consistently been to manage communications jointly and constructively in line with established expectations.

However, in circumstances where that approach has not been maintained, and given the wider public interest in the governance and fairness issues engaged by this matter, we consider it appropriate and responsible to ensure that the full context is properly available in the public domain.

We will, of course, remain open to continued dialogue with the League.

We look forward to your response and trust the League will give urgent and serious consideration to the concerns raised and, in light of those concerns, reconsider the decision — *ab initio*.

Kind regards,

Simon Preston  
Director  
FC United of Manchester Football Club

Broadhurst Park  
310 Lightbowne Road  
Moston  
Manchester  
M40 0FJ

T: 0161 769 2005

M: [REDACTED]

[www.fc-utd.co.uk](http://www.fc-utd.co.uk)

