



PUBLIC PETITION NO.

PE01319

Name of petitioner

William Smith and Scott Robertson

Petition title

Improving youth football in Scotland

Petition summary

Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to investigate the (1) legal status and appropriateness of professional SFA clubs entering into contracts with children under 16 years; (2) audit process and accountability of all public funds distributed by the Scottish Football Association to its member clubs; (3) social, educational and psychological affects and legality of SFA member clubs prohibiting such children from participating in extra curricular activity; and (4) appropriateness of 'compensation' payments between SFA member clubs for the transfer of young players under the age of 16 years; and to (5) increase the educational target from 2 hours curricular physical activity to four hours per week; and (6) develop a long-term plan to provide quality artificial surfaces for training and playing football at all ages across all regions.

Action taken to resolve issues of concern before submitting the petition

In 1995/96 the Youth Development Initiative started with players aged 14 and 15 years and was run by the Scottish Premier League.

In 2003, the Scottish Football Association took over the operation and co-ordination of the initiative; this led to the banning of participants in the scheme representing their school football teams.

Grassroots representatives raised concerns with the National Secretary, David Little of the Scottish Youth FA.

At this time letters of concern were sent to SFA Chief Executive David Taylor and then Minister for Sport and Culture, Frank McAveety MSP.

Also, concern regarding the change in Registration Procedures and use of unsanctioned SFA documents were raised. This led to Mr Sandy Bryson, SFA Registrations Secretary, writing to all SFA member clubs instructing them to stop the use of what was referred to as the 'T' form.

MSP Kenny McAskill was involved and in 2007 in his capacity as Constituency MSP, following the continued growth of the Youth Initiative programme, a meeting was held with him and then Sport and Culture Minister Stewart Maxwell MSP. The Minister acknowledged there were issues and agreed to address these with the main stakeholders.

Correspondence was entered into with Dr Bill Wilson MSP and SFA Chief Executive

Gordon Smith, regarding the legality of contracts prohibiting the freedom of movement for youth players. MSP's Johann Lamont, Trish Godman and Iain Gray were also contacted and advised.

HM Revenue and Customs were contacted in relation to the 'compensation' payments between SFA member clubs for youth players.

Several meetings have been entered into with SFA staff at Hampden Park including attending the Youth Forum at Glasgow on 30 August 2009.

A meeting with Tam Baillie, Scotland Children's Commissioner was held to discuss the legal, moral and general impact on child welfare for those who entered into the youth initiative scheme.

Petition background information

The SFA developed a programme some 15 years ago aimed at developing talent and producing players capable of improving the standard of Scottish football with the ultimate affect of raising the national team's performance and therefore improving the squad's participation at international tournaments. This programme was for elite young footballers.

This scheme was initially administered by the Scottish Premier League, but was taken over by the Scottish FA around 2003. With this move came several fundamental changes, perhaps most controversially, the introduction into the programme's Terms of Reference (Section 4.4) prohibiting young players participating in the Performance Tier of the programme from representing their school football team. This led to an outcry from those involved in the educational arena and was commented on, at the time, by the Scottish Government (the 'sports' Minister Frank McAveety MSP) that it 'did not agree with this policy'.

This fundamentally changed the relationship between children and sport. Youngsters are isolated from their peers as a result of being banned from enjoying a more relaxed game of football with their friends.

Youngsters and their parents are often misled or misunderstand the real possibility of becoming a professional footballer. This leads the child to neglect school work or their attendance falter as they can unfortunately perceive their education to be secondary to their football. This undermines the teaching staff. Youngsters should be permitted the freedom of choice and be free to make their own decisions without fear or pressure of being released by the SFA member clubs.

It is understood that children as young as 8 and 9 years of age are being required to sign 'Commitment' forms for SFA member clubs. These forms are unrecognised by the governing body and mislead the player and parent. The use of these forms should be ceased immediately.

At the age of 15 years players, should they wish to continue to participate in the Initiative Programme, must enter into a one year contract with an SFA member club, with the club retaining the right to 'hold' that player for a further two years. Being mindful that the child does not reach the Age of Legal Capacity until 16, can he commit to such an agreement? It would appear that allowing the club to retain the player for a further two years, restricts freedom of movement and there is an imbalance in the concord.

As per the answer the parliamentary question S3W-26317, can the public funds provided to the SFA be traced and accounted for? Can member clubs provide an audit trail to satisfy the Scottish Government that the taxpayer's money is being spent on providing the support and equipment for their young players and not used to finance other aspects of the football club?

Compensation payments are being paid between member clubs for youngsters with sums calculated by an SFA formula. This equates to approximately £3,000 per season. For example, if club A has trained and registered a player for 3 seasons and the player

is no longer being selected for match play, or some issue arises hindering his progress at club A, club B must pay £9,000 for his release and allow him to continue to participate in football. These sums of money and the likelihood of the player being prohibited from playing football appear to restrict the player's freedom of movement.

Can the SFA confirm if these payments are subject to any VAT or tax payments and these payments are being made?

The youth initiative programme has grown steadily over the years, increasing the number of SFA member clubs who participate with a rise in the age groups and therefore numbers of teams and players involved. For season 2009/10, 30 clubs operating 139 teams. This equate to 2,780 players. Does Scotland have nearly 2,800 elite players?

Scotland has a population of approximately 5.1 million and we operate 30 football academies. Holland with a population of 16 million has 12 academies.

Presently the education system provides for 2 hours of physical activity per week for pupils. This target is rarely met and the lack of activity by our nation's children has a detrimental impact on their general health, but also prohibits their physical development, motor skills and basic physical literacy. By increasing this target twofold for our school children, supported by the SFA, we hope to improve the health and condition of Scotland's youngsters.

SFA member clubs do not commit to a player's development as they can be released from their registration at anytime. This has the effect of failing to provide security for the young player and gives the clubs the opportunity to 'harvest' hundreds of players.

The alteration of the SFA Registration Procedures introduced the '7 day rule', which allows member clubs to force the release of youth players from their recreational club. This and the aforementioned issues have led to the breakdown in relationship between the professional clubs and the recreational clubs in membership of the Scottish Youth FA.

Finally, the Scottish climate appears to be getting wetter every year. The number of postponed training sessions and matches across the country has risen due to the grass pitches being water-logged, frozen is simply unplayable. This results in weeks of inactivity for our young players.

We call upon the Scottish Government to introduce a long-term plan to provide for every region in this country an artificial surface capable of hosting football training and matches.

In summing up, the Youth Initiative programme has benefited from taxpayers money, alterations to Registration Procedures and been afforded time to meet its objectives. It would appear that the programme has failed to meet the original aims.

This petition gives the Scottish Government the opportunity to seriously tackle the issues affecting our national sport across a number of strands. Football is Scotland's most popular sport – its time for us to aggressively resolve its problems and provide a platform for the nation to start achieving results.

www.realgrassroots.co.uk

Unique web address

<http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/GettingInvolved/Petitions/PE01319>

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