

Wednesday 16th September 2015

David Torrance
Public Petitions Committee
Scottish Parliament
Holyrood
Edinburgh

Dear Convenor,

Public Petition PE1319

Realgrassroots warmly welcome the report produced by the office of Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People (SCC&YP) published in May of this year. The independent study undertaken by Mr Tam Baillie and his staff brings great insight and expertise to the debate and fully validates the work undertaken by Realgrassroots and indeed the Public Petitions Committee over the last 5 ½ years.

As a result of the report being published a meeting was held at Hampden Park in Glasgow on 12th August which was attended by Scottish FA Chief Executive Stewart Regan, Scottish Professional Football League (SPFL) Chief Executive Neil Doncaster, MSP Chic Brodie and his assistant Paul McLennan. Mr William Smith Realgrassroots founder was in attendance but his presence at the meeting was objected to, however MSP Brodie insisted and Mr Smith was permitted to attend but was prohibited from speaking. We do not believe that this is conducive to the process of dealing with the issues and Realgrassroots were extremely disappointed in the stance taken by the Hampden hierarchy.

Throughout the meeting it must be noted that Mr Doncaster resolutely defended the actions and rules of his organisation and member professional clubs and failed to acknowledge there were any problems, issues or matters of concern in the way his member professional clubs treat young players.

The contents of the Commissioner's report was the focus of the meeting and the many serious matters raised therein. The Scottish FA have decided to form a panel to look in detail at the recommendations made by Mr Baillie. This Youth Football panel comprises range of people involved in youth football with Andrew McKinlay, Director of Governance at the Scottish FA as chairman.

We must register our disquiet that the panel did not include a more broad-based representation from such organisations as schools football, a representative from the SCC&YP or indeed Realgrassroots. Clearly a panel which overwhelmingly consists of professional club representatives with their own vested interests will toil to seriously change current practice beyond a superficial makeover.

We have written to Mr Regan and asked that our letter, which details our grievances, is passed to all members of the panel for consideration.

Turning our attention to the specific issue of a '*children's transfer market*' (a term used by Rangers FC Academy Director Jim Sinclair in his evidence to the Committee on 11th January 2011), a view supported by Chris McCart, Head of Youth at Celtic FC at that session. We take the opportunity to remind the Committee of the exchange that took place at that oral evidence session:

Jim Sinclair: In our experience, the whole thing can turn into a transfer market or end up in a bartering situation if, despite the fact that the level of compensation is actually X, the club with the player demands X plus Y. I am sure that you will agree that that is reprehensible.

The Convener: Does that happen?

Jim Sinclair: I am not sure how commonplace it is. All I am saying is that it has happened to our club.

The Convener: What sort of money was involved?

Jim Sinclair: It got to £35,000 or thereabouts when it should have been, I think, £20,000.

The Convener: How old was the youngster in question?

Jim Sinclair: He was an under-14.

The Convener: So the figure got to £35,000 for an under-14.

Jim Sinclair: That is right.

Payment in excess of the actual costs of training the young player are in breach of the European Court of Justice judgment as defined by the Olivier Bernard ruling on 16th March 2010.

The above evidence taken by the Committee can be corroborated by former headteacher, Mr Derek Hannan of Braidhurst High School, which is one of the seven Scottish FA Performance schools. Mr Hannan has expressed grave concerns regarding the trading young players in Scotland. Mr Hannan has offered to appear at Holyrood to provide valuable insight into the transfer market which sees talented young players such as Kieran McGrath and Josh McPake both of whom were pupils at Braidhurst High being bought and sold for sums in excess of the Reimbursement for Training fees set out by the Scottish FA.

This would appear to be blatant profiteering by clubs in Scotland at a time when Her Majesty's Revenue & Customs is conducting an investigation into potential breaches of National Minimum Wage legislation. Realgrassroots has evidence that there are professional clubs in Scotland who are engaging youngsters on contracts and paying as little as £1 per week.

Finally, we would draw your attention to a very recent article in the Daily Record¹ (10th September 2015) whereby their manager Mr Alan Stubbs provided the view that the football club academy players were producing robots and that any flair and individuality is being coached out of the young player. This followed the previous publicised² claims by former Hearts player and Falkirk manager Steven Pressley stating that Academy football is more about the coaches than the kids. He said '*coaches are using it to advance their careers rather than those of the kids they are meant to be nurturing.*' It does seem that despite the claims of the professional clubs, their system has after 20 years failed to produce the talent it promised and yet continues to infringe children's rights.

We are grateful to the Committee for continuing to look at our petition and hope you will continue to examine the issues.

Yours faithfully,

William Smith
(On behalf of the Realgrassroots team)

Scott Robertson

cc. MSP Chic Brodie

www.realgrassroots.co.uk

¹ <http://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/sport/football/football-news/alan-stubbs-football-academies-produce-6413913>

² <http://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/sport/football/football-news/its-more-coaches-players-kids-6175519>