



**By email/post**

Tam Baillie  
Scotland's Commissioner for Children & Young People  
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Dear Tam

**Improving Youth Football in Scotland**

Further to the above and to our previous letter of 24 August (which should be read in conjunction with this letter) the Working Group referred to in that letter has now met on three occasions. During these deliberations it has considered the various recommendations from your submission of May 2015 and has come up with a number of proposals (highlighted in red below) having given appropriate consideration to the rights of children and young people.

As part of this work we also undertook our own anonymous survey of players within the Club Academy Scotland ("CAS") system (a copy of the survey is attached as **appendix 1** to this letter) in which the view of the players in the system were sought. From the 198 player responses, 71 players were 10 – 11 years old, 60 were 12 - 13 years old, 48 were aged 14 – 15 years old with the remaining 19 players aged 16 years. Relevant findings from the survey are referred to throughout the various recommendations however, please find some comments from their views:

*"They allow you to make your own choices but still push you to your limits and they just keep encouraging you to do well". (2000/01 player)*

*"...training is so much fun...it's hard but fun. All the coaches and other staff are extremely pleasant to talk to and always having a laugh with you...The pitches and equipment is perfect and all you need to become a professional". (2002/03 player)*

Turning to the specific recommendations from your report:

### **Recommendations 1 – 3**

These recommendations were very much made against the backdrop of a viewpoint that clubs did not take into account the rights of children and young people. In addition a view was expressed that there required to be an attitudinal change within youth football in Scotland.

In this regard we would respectfully suggest that a greater understanding of what clubs do is required and, in this respect, we sought examples of good work done by clubs. The following are some of the things that clubs currently do which we believe show that the rights of children and young people are very much respected by them and, indeed, are very much at the forefront of everything they do:

Wellbeing – completion by players on a daily basis of an online questionnaire measuring how they are feeling, how they have slept, readiness to train etc. If certain indicators are triggered then appropriate members of the clubs coaching, sports science medical and welfare staff are immediately notified and take the necessary precautions.

Lifestyle Education – clubs provide lifestyle education on a variety of topics including drugs and alcohol, sexual health, gambling, sectarianism, money handling and budgeting, media training, diet and nutrition, cooking lessons, road safety, social media (in particular around child protection) and laws of the game. The Scottish FA with the encouragement of the Scottish Government has supported the appointment of the football chaplain Mark Fleming. Mark has worked closely with numerous club chaplains with specific focus on the academy players and the lifestyle issues faced by them.

Academic Education – clubs exchange information with the schools of the children and young people to ensure that their best interests are always looked after; for example this may lead to assistance with behavioural or motivation issues in school and a carefully planned diary leading up to exams. Homework classes are operated by the clubs (staffed by teachers and qualified tutors) to ensure that the boys complete their homework; based on research gathered by one club over a ten year period, evaluations completed by teachers at the schools of the boys demonstrate either an improvement or maintenance of their anticipated academic outcomes.

Football Education – youth players together with their parents/carers meet with clubs at player assessments and are encouraged to take part in that process. Players are also encouraged during training and post matches, to discuss their performance with the coaches. Players are encouraged to speak freely about how they see their development and what areas they consider they can improve. Once agreement is reached a bespoke training plan is issued for the player to work on individual skills. Clubs also provided numerous examples of where players have come through their academy ranks and now play for them or another club within Scotland at a professional level.

Child Protection – clubs have undertaken a series of educational workshops to improve safeguarding practices. Parents/carers, players and coaching staff have participated in these workshops. Clubs also have child protection panels to review policies and training needs for staff, players and parents/carers in this important area – the views of the players are sought for these forums.

Parents Nights – Many clubs have parents' nights on a more regular basis than schools have. Players and parents/carers attend these nights where there are good two way exchanges of information and feedback.

In addition to the above and, as stated in our previous letter of 24 August, the Scottish FA have a full time Child Protection and Safeguarding Manager who works closely with clubs to assist them with any issues that they may have in this area. In our national document "Children's Wellbeing in Scottish Football" as approved by our board in February 2015, the policy statements include Children's Rights and Child Protection. <http://scottishfa.co.uk/resources/documents/DigitalDepartment/Wellbeing-pdf.pdf> Articles within the UNCRC are referred to throughout the document to demonstrate where children's rights are reflected in our practices and the new 3 hour coach education workshop includes a highlighted section on children's rights with the principles thread through all of the content. The Children's Parliament, Together Scotland and the GIRFEC team within the Scottish Government all contributed and commented on the development of the document, with the Children's Parliament training staff within the Scottish FA on children's rights as well as contributing to the development of the coach education workshop content. Already, CAS clubs who are at the stage of updating policies and procedures are adopting our national document and have been included in the pilot delivery of the children's wellbeing training workshops.

Furthermore, the response from the players in the survey in contributing their experience of playing football in professional clubs includes:

- 76% of players rated their experience of training as excellent or very good
- 82% of players rated their experience of playing in games representing their club as excellent or very good, with no players commenting on a poor experience
- 73% of players rated their coaches as excellent or very good
- 74% of players rated the support staff (doctors, physios, education & welfare officers, sport scientists) as excellent or very good

#### **Recommendation 4 – 7**

We agree that any future changes to the youth registration process should be informed by the views of children and young people who play youth football in Scotland. One of the Academies that participated on the Working Group considering your recommendations has already recognised that parental and child participation in developing effective policies and procedures is important and will be introducing parent and player forums. These groups will have a number of remits which will ensure that players and parents/carers are more involved in decision making and make sure that the children's voices are heard.



Responses identified in the survey in relation to players currently being given the opportunity to be heard in their club was shown at 81% of players and, although high, we would want to increase this. Through the Scottish FA's Child Protection and Safeguarding Manager we will ensure that, where we make changes to our rules and regulations that impact on children and young people, their views will be taken into account whether that is through surveys and/or forums that we are currently setting up. It is intended that the Youth Congress in particular will have a voice through a formal link with the newly established Scottish FA Congress.

Recommendations 5-7 were very much focussed on the way in which children and young people are registered with clubs and the information that is provided to them (and their parents/carers) as part of the process. Currently, 56% of players commented that their club explained to them and their parent/carers what signing the registration form meant, where examples of the information provided from clubs vary.

The Scottish FA will look to pull together and implement (through the clubs in CAS) a standard "pack" to be provided to children and young people and their parents/carers during the process of registration to ensure consistency. This will include for example FAQ's, reference to the Scottish FA website (possibly including explanatory videos) and/or a "children's/young person's version" written in an appropriate manner. We will look to introduce this for the new and continuing registrations that take place during the summer of 2016.

This along with the new complaints/mediation mechanism (see response to recommendation 13 below) will allow the Scottish FA as the Governing body of Scottish football to more closely regulate this area of football as suggested in terms of your recommendation 12.

### **Recommendation 8**

While 80% of players rated their overall experience in working towards becoming a professional football player at their club to be excellent or very good, 92% commented that they knew what to do if they no longer wanted to play football at their club. Only 4% suggested they would not have someone to speak to if they were not happy about their football. This still however highlights the need to make sure that clubs provide this information within the standard pack that will be collated and implemented as stated above.

In relation to the "28 day" rule which is very much part of recreational football, we will look to introduce a new rule which would allow a player to leave a CAS club on 28 days' notice if he wishes to return to the recreational game. This rule will require additional measures (for example around reimbursement costs kicking in if the player returns to CAS within a specific time period) to ensure that it is not abused by clubs, parents/carers and/or intermediaries who move a player to a recreational club and then back to another team within CAS.

In addition and subject to the above new rule, given the commitment of the child to the club for a one year period (between 10 and 14 age bands) we will look to introduce a new rule to the effect that clubs must also commit to the child for the full one year and may only release him during this period where there is mutual consent or, for exceptional reasons such as breach of discipline/code of conduct etc.



### **Recommendation 9**

The 15-17 year old registration period took up the vast majority of our discussion time within the working group. As stated in our letter of 24 August, this is a critical age group in relation to the development of elite sports participants. This is the time when the clubs invest significantly in the welfare of the player for example in relation to sports science and the level of coaching that is available to the player. In addition the clubs are acutely aware that this is a critical stage in the young person's educational life and any upheaval during this period is likely to be detrimental in this respect. It is also recognised from the player survey responses that this is an area that needs to be explained more fully to young players and this is something that we will do through our response above re the "standard pack".

It was the view of many in the working group that removal of this rule would have a negative impact on the health and wellbeing of the young persons involved. In particular the upheaval (of young people and their families) both to England and within Scotland would be disruptive for family life and education. In addition, there are numerous examples of players moving to England and not succeeding at the same level as they were likely to have succeeded in Scotland. Competition in England is obviously more acute and, we do not see how this can possibly be in the best interests of the young person.

If this rule were removed and replaced by the one year registrations of ages 10-14, our top talent would likely be taken by clubs within the English Premier League who, following recent changes in FIFA regulations, would only have to pay compensation at a level that would not be prohibitive to them given the vast wealth of the English Premier League. This would have a knock on effect within Scotland as the clubs losing talent to England would look to "backfill" this talent from other clubs within Scotland and indeed many clubs may feel that it is not worth them investing in academies which would in turn reduce the opportunities for young players. Again, we do not see how this would be in the best interests of the young person.

Having said this we acknowledge that it is not in the best interests of clubs and more importantly young people to keep players with them who they are not utilising. Accordingly, we will look to introduce a rule to the effect that, if a player does not get "appropriate game time" (this will need to be clearly defined) in a particular season he would be allowed to exercise a right to walk away at the end of the season without any compensation being due.

In addition and, similar to the change above re the club providing the same commitment to the player as the player does to the club, we would look to introduce a rule whereby clubs must also commit to the young person for the full three year period and may only release him during this period where there is mutual consent or, for exceptional reasons such as breach of discipline/code of conduct etc

### **Recommendation 10**

We agree that, subject to appropriate welfare considerations, if players within CAS wish to play for their school teams, there should not be any restrictions placed on them. Accordingly, we will seek appropriate changes to this rule to reflect this.



### **Recommendation 11**

We would re-iterate a number of points that have previously been made in relation to the reimbursement of training costs matrix:

- it is a FIFA requirement to have such a system (see reference in letter of 24 August;
- the mechanism will only apply where a club has offered to re-register a boy (accordingly, he is not being frozen out of CAS football);
- the mechanism does not apply if the boy wishes to move to any club that is not in the SPFL (ie the vast majority of clubs within Scotland);
- if another club within the SPFL wishes to take a boy following him coming out of registration with another club, under relatively new SPFL rules, that club must give a commitment to take the boy and also a commitment to pay the appropriate reimbursement of training costs in accordance with the matrix.

In addition to the above, during our working group discussions, clubs provided numerous examples of where they had forgone either all or some of their financial rights (in terms of the matrix) to ensure that a young person was not frozen out of the game. By way of a specific club example, over the last 15 months, one senior club represented on the working group only triggered the re-imburement of training costs mechanism for less than 30% of the players moving onto other CAS clubs, these being for the players that the club believed had a realistic chance of progressing to first team football.

As previously mentioned, we are aware of a small number of instances where a player has not been able to move to a club of his choosing because that club does not wish to pay the reimbursement of training costs and, in all of these, we have managed to find a solution that has been agreed by all parties. The introduction under recommendation 13 of a new complaints/mediation mechanism will assist this process in the future.

### **Recommendations 12-13**

We agree with these recommendations and believe that the introduction of a new "complaints/mediation mechanism" will allow us to more fully regulate this area of football.

We will look to introduce a clear "complaints/mediation mechanism" (this will form part of the information provided pursuant to our response to recommendation 4) which will bring into place a clear escalation process where a child and/or parents/carers concerns have been raised with and not resolved by the club. Amongst other things we would expect the new complaints "body" to:

- comprise representatives of clubs, CAS administration staff and individuals who understand the rights of the child and young person within this context;
- investigate any issues that are raised with it; and
- mediate to find a solution between player and club(s).

If an investigation discloses a breach of SPFL rules it would be referred to the SPFL to consider and, if it discloses a breach of Scottish FA rules the matter would be referred to the Compliance Officer.

We would look to have this mechanism in place as soon as possible and, in any event, by the Summer of 2016.

The working group has taken your concerns very seriously and we are of the view that great progress will be made within this very important area by the introduction of the changes highlighted in red above.

We would of course be happy to further discuss this matter with you and look forward to having an open and constructive debate on the matter at our upcoming convention which we are delighted that you are able to attend.

Yours sincerely

STEWART M REGAN  
CHIEF EXECUTIVE SCOTTISH FA

NEIL DONCASTER  
CHIEF EXECUTIVE SPFL

cc the Public Petitions Committee, the Scottish Parliament.

## appendix 1

### Survey Questions re “Young Players experiences in Professional Football Clubs in Scotland”

#### 1. Year of Birth: (please tick)

- 2004, 2005, 2006
- 2002, 2003
- 2000, 2001
- 1999

#### 2. What age did you first register with the club you are currently playing for?

- under 11 years old
- 11 years old
- 12 years old
- 13 years old
- 14 years old
- 15 years old
- 16 years old
- 17 years old

**3. As you probably know, when you join a new club you will complete a player registration form. At age groups 10 – 14 years, each year you will get the opportunity to sign a new registration form for the club you are with. At age groups 15 years and upwards, if your club wants you to stay with them you do not need to sign the registration form every year. Has this been explained to you before?**

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

#### 4. What words would you use to describe how it felt to sign and register with your club? (please tick as many as relevant)

- Exciting



- Worrying
- Pressure
- Great
- Scary
- Straight forward
- Confusing
- Achievement
- Dream come true
- No big deal
- Difficult
- Happy

**5. Did the adults at your club explain to you and your parent/carers what signing the registration form at that club meant?**

- No
- Not sure
- Yes

If yes, what does it mean to you?

**6. How would you rate your experience of training at your club?**

- Excellent
- Very Good
- Good
- Average
- Poor

**7. How would you rate your experience of playing in games representing your club?**

- Excellent
- Very Good
- Good
- Average
- Poor

**8. How would you rate the coaches at your club?**

- Excellent
- Very Good
- Good
- Average
- Poor

**9. How would you rate the support staff at your club? (Doctors, physios, education & welfare, sports scientists)**

- Excellent
- Very Good
- Good
- Average
- Poor

**10. How would you rate your overall experience in working towards becoming a professional football player at your club?**

- Excellent
- Very Good
- Good
- Average
- Poor

**11. Do you get the opportunity to speak to coaches or support staff at your club about how you are performing and developing?**

- No
- Yes

**12. If yes to no 11, are these opportunities (please tick as many as relevant)**

- planned so you know when
- as and when you want to
- hard to organise
- with parent/carers
- without parent/carers
- my choice on whether parent/carers attend

**13. How does your club let you know you are doing well with your training and performance in games?**



**14. How does your club support you to improve your training and performance in games?**

**15. Do you have someone to speak to at the club if you are not happy about your football?**

- Wouldn't speak to anyone
- Don't know who to speak to
- No
- Yes

If yes, which role are they in

**16. Do you have someone to speak to at the club if you are not happy about other things in your life?**

- Wouldn't speak to anyone
- Don't know who to speak to
- No
- Yes

If yes, which role are they in (please specify)

**17. If you knew another player who was maybe going to play and register at your club, what would you tell them are the best things about your club?**

**18. What would you tell them are the not so good things about your club?**

**19. Would you know what to do if you no longer wanted to play football at the club you are registered for just now?**

- Yes, speak to someone at the club to let them know I wanted to leave
- No, I wouldn't know what to do

**20. Do you have any final comments or suggestions you would like to make?**