

**PE1319/V**

7<sup>th</sup> November 2011

Anne Peat,  
Clerk to the Public Petitions Committee,  
c/o Public Petitions Clerks,  
Room T3.40  
The Scottish Parliament,  
EDINBURGH EH99 1SP

Dear Anne

**Scottish Parliament Consideration of Petition PE1319**

Thank you for your letter of 12 October 2011 in which you ask for the views of the Scottish Schools' FA on the matters raised in Petition PE1319.

The Association's views on these matters are set out in the enclosed paper.

I hope that this provides useful information for members of the Committee. However, if the Committee would wish to follow this up with a request for oral evidence, then the Association would be pleased to provide that.

If you have any queries arising from this, please do not hesitate to contact myself in the first instance.

Yours sincerely,

Rod Houston  
President

**Scottish Schools Football Association  
Response to request from Scottish Parliament Public Petitions Committee**

**Petition PE1319**

The Association's Views are given in relation to each of the six headings as follows:

1. Legal Status & Appropriateness of professional SFA clubs entering into contracts with children under 16 years

**The Scottish Schools Football Association (SSFA) is keenly aware of the legal context for children under 16 years of age. It offers no comment on legal status, other than to note the advice previously given by the Child Law Centre and provided to the Petitions Committee. The SSFA is clear in its view that any form of contractual arrangement is not acceptable for young people under 16 years of age.**

**However, while it recognises that registration of young players with the Scottish FA does not form a contract, a number of delegates to the SSFA Council have reported a noticeable volume of anecdotal information that the term contract is in widespread vernacular use. The SSFA has also received many enquiries from schools and parents as to whether or not this is the case.**

**With regard to appropriateness, there are further issues regarding anecdotal information reaching the SSFA of clubs telling players what they are allowed to do in their curricular as well as extra-curricular time at school. This suggests a 'contractual' mentality on the part of clubs and, schools might well contend, unacceptable interference in a child's education.**

2. Audit process and accountability of all public funds distributed by the Scottish Football Association to its member clubs

**The SSFA feels that this matter is beyond its purview and it would be one which is best addressed by the appropriate public bodies.**

3. Social, educational and psychological affects and legality of SFA member clubs participating in extra-curricular activity

**This heading raises a number of questions relating to the type of activity that may take place and its appropriateness, as well as the background and aptitude of those providing the activity. There are concerns that such involvement becomes little more than a screen for player recruitment and schools would wish to be appropriately reassured on such matters prior to any involvement, especially in view of other issues relating to club-player-school relationships.**

**However, the SSFA does carry an underlying concern relating to a commonly-held view by professional clubs that they possess a monopoly of expertise when it comes to developing young players. There is an implicit suggestion that schools lack the**

expertise to provide such activity when, in fact, it happens in a variety of ways in a variety of contexts. This is rarely expressed outright, but is often conveyed in informal discussions between club, parents and schools. It is also a reflection of the manner in which many clubs regard many of their players as 'theirs', this notion of ownership again being transmitted informally and yet again suggestive of a relationship that is contractual in nature.

The matter of players being registered with SFA Youth Initiative Clubs and not taking part in schools football is a recurrent complaint from SSFA affiliated schools. Notwithstanding any debate on football matters, the SSFA is deeply concerned regarding social issues such as the separation of players from their peer group and consequent re-integration when, as is the case for most players, they are released by the club.

4. Appropriateness of 'compensation' payments between SFA member clubs and the transfer of young players under the age of 16 years

The SSFA is clear in its view that these payments are inappropriate, not only because they relate to children but also that it results – deliberately or not – in young players becoming commodities as clubs seek such 'compensation' if a player looks to become registered elsewhere. The original notion of 'compensation' is one of those that seems worthy at face value. However, it has become less so in implementation.

In addition, taking part in YI football has, for many players and their families, involved a significant financial commitment – e.g. the cost of travel to training and games. It seems rather discordant that the club at which such a player attended then receives financial gain while the family may be significantly out of pocket.

Also, there are issues in situations in which there is an impasse between a player's family and a club – e.g. when there is a request for release and a club being reluctant to do so lest it loses out on 'compensation'.

In fact, there is a case for obviating these issues by limiting professional club involvement in elite youth development. Why not create a network of elite development groups run by the Scottish FA, at least until players reach 16 years of age?

This sort of arrangement happens elsewhere in Europe and would take all the club related issues out of the matter. The Scottish FA certainly has the resource and expertise to establish such a network. However, it would involve the clubs accepting such change and, cynics might argue, giving up possible financial rewards.

One of the advantages of such an arrangement would be the capacity to really focus on elite youth players, thereby reflecting more realistically the proportion of young players likely to progress to professional football. One of the current issues relates to the thought that, in a country of some 5 million people, there are simply too many players in Youth Initiative football. Consequently, many are in place simply to make

**up squad numbers with concomitant risk of disenchantment and loss to other parts of the game following release from a club.**

5. Increase the educational target from 2 hours curricular physical activity to four hours per week

**The SSFA is definitely in favour of this educational target, because the Association's Constitution states that:**

**'The object of the Association shall be to foster the mental, moral and physical development and improvement of pupils through the medium of Association Football and to help charitable funds and purposes.'**

**The SSFA strongly subscribes to the health-promoting agenda that has been developed in schools and considers that it has a key role to play in achieving those aims. The view is that we all have a responsibility for fostering the habits of regular physical activity in the nation's children and doing so from primary school age is essential to life-long health and well-being. This can be incorporated into the 10,000 hours of activity often promoted as a requirement for developing sporting talent. However, the SSFA is clear in its view that it should incorporate a range of activities towards the overall development of sporting aptitude prior to more specialised involvement.**

6. Develop a long-term plan to provide quality artificial surfaces for training and playing football at all ages across all regions

**The SSFA is wholly in agreement with the development of such a plan. It would assist access to facilities as the proportion of time required for maintenance and recovery is reduced to the margins of time. It would also allow the opportunity to challenge the notion that school playing fields are underused, when in fact they are heavily used for curricular and extra-curricular purposes for a number of sporting activities. There is a need for grass surfaces to have a substantial amount of recovery and repair time each year. Indeed, there are already noticeable problems for summer football organisations having access to sufficient pitches at a time of year when Local Authorities have other priorities. There is a case for the plan looking to locate these new artificial pitches in proximity to schools, thereby maximising opportunities for daytime use alongside evening and weekend use by the community.**