

PE1319/Y

**SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT CONSIDERATION OF PETITION PE1319 ON
IMPROVING YOUTH FOOTBALL**

**A RESPONSE BY AYR UNITED FOOTBALL ACADEMY ON BEHALF OF AYR
UNITED FOOTBALL CLUB**

We refer to the letter dated 12 October 2011 from Anne Peat, Clerk to the Public Petitions Committee and are pleased to respond to the 6 issues under investigation.

By way of introduction, Ayr United Football Academy (AUFA) is an independent company, a Scottish registered charity, a Community Sports Hub and a Social Enterprise company and Ayr United Football Club (AUFC) has outsourced the management of its youth development activity to AUFA. The activity is governed by means of a Service Level Agreement between the two organisations and has been in place for almost 5 years, since AUFA was established.

AUFA was established in 2005 and the SLA arrangement subsequently put in place by individuals who felt that it would allow AUFC's youth development system to benefit from a long term, more strategic, focus. They were aware also of the ongoing financial pressures experienced by football clubs, which in many cases has led to the abandonment of youth teams in order to protect the mainstream football activities of the football club. AUFA is wholly responsible for financing and resourcing youth development and youth development is its primary focus, along with community engagement. To date this model has proved to be extremely successful and AUFA currently participates at the top end of the Youth Initiative echelon of the Scottish FA's youth structure and is preparing to apply for Performance status for season 2012/2013.

AUFA welcomes the widening of the opportunity to participate in the debate, and the widening of the consultation process, following the input of representatives from Rangers and Celtic Football Clubs on 11 January 2011.

We consider the 6 areas of investigation in the order presented in Anne Peat's letter.

(1) legal status and appropriateness of professional SFA clubs entering into contracts with children under 16 years;

We do not feel qualified to comment on the legal status and look to the National Governing Body and/or Parliamentary input to procure independent legal advice and to provide guidance.

(2) audit process and accountability of all public funds distributed by the Scottish Football Association to its member clubs;

As a body which is committed to providing the highest standards for our young players, we welcome the independent audit of our activities and of those football

clubs receiving public funds. We understand fully the need for accountability where public funds are involved and are committed to achieving the targets and outcomes demanded. Additionally, we believe that independent scrutiny drives organisations such as ours to higher levels of achievement.

(3) social, educational and psychological affects and legality of SFA member clubs prohibiting such children from participating in extra curricular activity; and

AUFA's views regarding participation of children in schools football are age dependent. It is our firm belief that younger children should be encouraged to play schools football as part of their social development. However, their ability to do so becomes more difficult as they get older. AUFA currently offers weekly coaching sessions for talented younger players aged 12 and below, who remain with and play for their youth club and school teams and we believe that this is a reasonable cut off age, after which players need to exercise a degree of choice. It should be emphasised that all of our players are allowed to choose, regardless of age.

Players enter our youth development system at age 13 and become registered AUFC players. The Academy policy on Schools Football then applies and states:

"The Academy would prefer that its players do not participate in schools football as it is felt that this may result in over exertion and a potential to attract injuries which may hamper the progress of the player in his pursuit of a career at the top level of football.

The Academy invests heavily in providing a training and playing regime that demands a high level of commitment. The training schedule consists of a minimum of two nights training and one Sports Science session per week, in addition to a match played in the SFA's Youth Initiative League. This schedule imposes heavy demands on players and the Academy would prefer that players restrict themselves to the Academy's training and playing schedule.

However, it should be noted that this is a preference and that The Academy, nor any of its staff or volunteers, will not, in any way, attempt to prevent a player from playing for his school team. Nor will The Academy or any of its staff or volunteers, in any way discriminate against any player who chooses to play for his school team.

The Academy will not allow any player to take part in schools football, however, where that player is currently undergoing a programme of physiotherapy or medical treatment, until the doctor or physiotherapist has approved the player's return to training and playing.

The Academy will expect a player to represent the Academy in preference to his school".

(4) appropriateness of 'compensation' payments between SFA member clubs for the transfer of young players under the age of 16 years; and to

We note the extended debate during the session of 11 January 2011. It has always

been our understanding that the payments made by clubs who entice players to join them are compensatory payments, governed by Scottish FA rules, and made to compensate (mainly) smaller clubs for the investment expended in the young player during his period at the club which he is leaving. We believe strongly that our young players will benefit by remaining with AUFA throughout their period of youth development, playing for AUFC's first team and moving on to higher levels if they excel. However, we also accept that there is an argument that progression through an SPL, or English club, may be more beneficial. In all cases, if an approach is made by another club for a young player we will notify the player and his parents. We allow the player and his parents to talk to the interested club and if, after comparing the AUFA case against the interested club case, the player decides that he wishes to move, and then we act positively to ensure that the move is made smoothly and quickly.

Financial compensation is an important part of this process. It allows us to re invest the proceeds in the youth development system in the hope that it produces younger players who will choose to pursue their career through the youth development phase and into the AUFC first team.

If compensation is withdrawn, it would cause us to question why we would continue to invest when we would effectively become a "free of charge" youth development system for larger clubs.

We note the exchanges during the 11 January session regarding the level of compensation being applied and agree that, rather than the Scottish FA level of compensation being applied, there is a process of negotiation using the Scottish FA base as a starting point. It should be noted however that the amount paid does not always exceed the base level. We have experienced offers set at both below and above the base level. As an explanation of why the former arises, when a player decides that he wishes to leave his club, and there is no other club interested in him, then the interested club is aware that the player's current club is in a position where it is morally obliged to allow the player to leave. AUFA's belief is there is no point in insisting that a young player honours his contract in this situation as it is rightly seen by the player and his parents as being obstructive and will only lead to demotivation of the player. Club B can therefore afford to offer less than the base level – and we have experience of this.

In summary:

- AUFA believes that compensation payments are an essential element of the youth development process, without which, it would question the feasibility of continuing its youth development activity.
- AUFA would be happy to engage in a system which eliminates the bartering process by demanding strict accordance with the set levels of compensation.

(5) increase the educational target from 2 hours curricular physical activity to four hours per week; and

AUFA enthusiastically encourages any initiative which increases healthy activity in schools and would encourage support towards the expansion of the Schools of Football initiative which addresses this objective.

As part of our Community Programme, we create and source funding for a number of school based football activity programmes, the most recent of which is a Healthy Hearts programme funded by Heart Research UK and supported by the NHS, which will be delivered to Primary School children in their schools. Whilst we realise that the educational target above is secondary schools based, this pilot project, if successful, may be rolled out in secondary schools also.

However, whilst we will continue to introduce independent initiatives such as that above, we firmly believe that the curricular core physical activity hours should be increased.

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

AUFA supports strongly the development of quality artificial surfaces for football. The lack of provision of fit for purpose football facilities in our own local authority area is one of the largest obstacles to providing quality youth development activity. The small number of quality artificial surfaces available for high demand training times, i.e. winter and evening sessions, is under huge demand and funding must be found to improve the position to allow any real progress towards developing young players who will grow to compete successfully against other nations.

David Watson

Managing Director

Ayr United Football Academy

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