

PE1319/GGG

Scottish Government Letter of 20 June 2016

Dear Catherine

Thank you for your letter of 18 March 2016 in relation to the Public Petitions Committee consideration of Petition PE1319 on improving youth football in Scotland.

I note your initial deadline of 13 May 2016, but which you kindly extended following discussion with my officials to allow me to consider this issue following the Scottish Parliament elections.

I fully appreciate concerns about this issue, underlined by the Committee's ongoing interest. Football needs to recognise the interests of the child and place these at the heart of its activity – and I believe that can be achieved without a significant adverse impact on the investment clubs make in young players.

My officials have discussed these concerns extensively with the Scottish FA, SPFL, PFA Scotland and a number of individual clubs. They have also shared a copy of this response with Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland.

The Scottish FA and the SPFL have, as the Commissioner acknowledged, made a number of improvements in the approach taken to children in youth football. The views of children and young people have been sought, there is a clear commitment to provide more information and I am pleased the football bodies have engaged with children's organisations. The Scottish FA has also appointed its first ever Safeguarding Manager, which I also believe is a signal of its intent in this area.

Within Club Academy Scotland (CAS), clubs will be able to commit to a player for a one year period. This represents a significant improvement – although we agree these players must have the same access to training and development as other players.

The proposed '28 day rule' will allow players with professional clubs under CAS to exercise notice and leave the club to return to recreational football. If the child wants to return to the CAS set-up with another club, then the matter of compensation would arise. This seems a common-sense approach, giving the child the opportunity to enjoy recreational football outwith the CAS set-up. I understand that there will also be no restrictions placed on children to play for their school teams, which is another welcome development.

These are just some of the changes made by the football authorities since the petition was initially raised. I believe this package of measures represents an encouraging step forward from where we were when this issue first came before the Committee in April 2010.

In discussions with officials, the Scottish FA and SPFL have emphasised that they will keep this issue under review and carefully monitor the impact of the new measures to ensure they are as effective as possible in safeguarding the rights of

children in youth football. A new complaints / mediation mechanism will be introduced which will assist this.

I recognise the Commissioner still has some concerns. However, I believe there would be merit in giving these new measures some time to take effect before considering whether any further action may be required.

I therefore intend to work with the Commissioner to determine the timeframe and ensure that his office is satisfied that the corrective measures put in place sufficiently protect young people. I am not ruling out external regulation, but would prefer to assess the effectiveness of the voluntary steps the Scottish FA and SPFL have put in place first.

I hope this is helpful.

AILEEN CAMPBELL
Minister for Public Health and Sport