



Standing up for youth football

Scott Robertson,
The Rowantrees,
5 Mid Road
Biggar
South Lanarkshire
ML12 6AW

Monday 22nd January 2024

Clare Haughey
Convener of Public Health & Sport Committee
Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh

Dear Convener & Committee Members,

Committee Meeting – Tuesday 19th December 2023

I wished to write after watching the evidence session where Scottish Football Association (SFA) Chief Executive Ian Maxwell addressed the Committee.

By way of some background, I have been involved in the running of youth football teams for 35 years. I have predominately coached teams at School level and boys' club. I am now President at Musselburgh Windsor FC which caters for young players ranging from the age of 5 to 17 years. Along with William Smith, I founded the Realgrassroots campaign, and we lodged a Public Petition (PE1319 – Improving Youth Football) back in 2010. This became the longest-running Petition in the history of the Scottish Parliament.

In terms of the Petition, a couple of headline points regarding our campaign. It took seven years of campaigning, countless letters, meetings, sessions at Holyrood, and media articles to drag the Scottish FA to change one rule. That was to abolish a rule that prohibited youngsters from playing for their school football team. Yes, the SFA and their member clubs prevented talented young players from playing football with their school friends.

It took a further two years for them to finally stop the compensation system for Under-16-year-olds. The then Commissioner for Children and Young People, Tam Baillie described the system as a 'transfer market in children'. The Scottish FA oversaw and felt it entirely appropriate for member clubs to buy and sell children.

More recently, they have amended regulations that permitted clubs to register a young player for three years. Professional football clubs could sign/register a young player for one year and

then hold the player for a further two years if the club wished. The player had no escape clause and could effectively be put out of football if he were to fall out of favour with his team or club. Again, The Children's Commissioner blasted this one-sided agreement as an outrageous power imbalance.

During the life of our Petition, the Scottish FA introduced a Player Protection and Well-being officer and instigated a Well-Being Panel, as well as a Scouting Protocol. All these steps should have been taken years before.

The Scottish FA is resistant to change and intransigent to progress. It clings to outdated practices designed to give the member clubs maximum control of young players. After a decade of campaigning, it is clear this governing body, custodians of our national game, must be dragged uphill kicking and screaming before any changes are introduced.

However, I wanted to comment on the evidence given by Mr. Maxwell and perhaps give the Committee an insight into the hard facts faced at the real grassroots of Scottish youth football.

Independent Regulator

It came as no surprise that Mr. Maxwell and the Scottish FA are opposed to this. They argue that the issues in England do not apply to Scotland. I agree. Two entirely different leagues, but with two different sets of issues.

Scottish football has been plagued by the scourge of bigotry and sectarianism, yet failed to eradicate it. The SFA has the lightest of touches when it comes to dealing with its member clubs. Perhaps a regulator would be a more successful weapon in the fight against these issues that blight our game.

The Scottish FA has historically failed young players and the ongoing Child Sex Abuse inquiry is well-known and high-profile.

The Scottish FA continues to allow the power imbalance between club and youth players. Youngsters in the highest tier of youth football can still be tied to a club for 30 months, with no right of release.

The governing body, despite receiving millions of government funding, therefore taxpayer money operates in secret and is accountable to no one. No Minutes of Board meetings are ever published.

Mr. Maxwell states the Scottish FA governance is robust. I would disagree. I very recently had to complain to the SFA regarding over a dozen breaches of the rules over five years involving a professional club. Despite providing proof beyond question and the club admitting their guilt, the Scottish FA took no action against them. Hardly robust and provides no deterrent to other clubs to simply ignore the rules.

MSP Gillian Mackay raised Project Brave and specifically cited two clubs Livingston and Greenock Morton. These two clubs were operating out with the SFA rules. In the Livingston FC case, Realgrassroots supported a young player and his father at a Judicial Panel Hearing which found the club guilty of rule breaches. The whole complaint process was, as the father described it 'daunting and designed to put anyone off complaining'.

Finally, a Regulator could potentially have the power to move the Scottish FA to become a more open and transparent organisation. If you accept millions of pounds in public surely you should be accountable and transparent to the country's taxpayers?

Youth Parliament Study

Mr. Maxwell states that 90% enjoy football. This is great. He went on to say that a player's biggest fear is getting injured. I am not clear who they surveyed. It would be beneficial if Maxwell made the clear distinction between youth players who play their football at local clubs i.e. for teams in membership of the Scottish Womens Football (SWF) and Scottish Youth Football Association (SYFA). I am not aware of players in these realms worrying about becoming injured. If he is talking about players in the Club Academy Scotland system (i.e. players identified and signed by professional clubs) then I can imagine that they might worry about injury as they will believe they are on the path to fame and fortune. However, this is less than 2,500 players. The SYFA and SWF account for over 80,000 players. So again, what players were surveyed?

Maxwell then agreed with Committee member Tess White that players are fearful and hate it when coaches shout at them and parents shout, argue or fight at the side of the pitch. This is understandable. I've witnessed it. Mr. Maxwell states this is for the SYFA & SWF to address. Let's be clear the SYFA (circa 68,000 registered players) is run by a small team of employees. 99.5% of youth football is delivered by unpaid volunteers. The SYFA has no resources to monitor the behaviour of supporters and parents at the side of pitches. The Scottish FA with local staff in every region takes no responsibility and does not engage in any type of club monitoring. SYFA complaint systems are weak as there are no staff to undertake investigations. Therefore, appalling sideline behaviour across Scotland continues unchecked and with no punishment. Mr. Maxwell's response is utterly disconnected from reality.

Scottish Youth FA and SFA Relationship

Mr. Maxwell lauds how the relationship between the two organisations has 'grown immeasurably'. It sure has. The unpaid volunteer coaches of the SYFA are rule-bound to undertake Scottish FA Coach Education courses starting at £45 and rising to £60 for the following level. There are over 3,000 coaches in SYFA alone, so the income generated for the Scottish FA is considerable.

In contrast, the Scottish FA gives an annual grant to the SYFA. In 2023 this sum was £55,574. This is approximately, 81 pence per player for one year. This is pitiful. Only last month the Chief Executive Officer for the SYFA resigned. There has been no communication to the members as to the reason, indeed the member clubs have not been

officially informed at all. In the same week, two Directors also resigned from the SYFA. Clearly, something very wrong is going on. For Mr. Maxwell to inform the Committee all is well only 8 days after these resignations is astounding.

I should also point out that the company listed as SYFA Limited (Company number SC196565) has five active directors. The SYFA Articles of Association require a minimum of seven. To date no replacements have been installed and therefore for over a month, SYFA has been in breach of its own Articles.

Coincidentally, the SWF lost two employees last month as they moved on.

The Scottish FA seems to have an arms-length relationship with the organisations that provide football for the vast majority of children and young people in Scotland.

The Convenor touches upon a previous Committee report which criticised the Scottish FA in 2017. Mr. Maxwell states 'we have very stringent protocols in place in terms of coaches PVG and coaching qualifications'. Let me be clear, it's SWF and SYFA staff that process PVG applications and it is people like me who collect new coach applications, references, complete forms and send to either SWF or SYFA. The Scottish FA does zero (as far as I am aware) in this process. I would estimate I spend some 10-15 hours a week completing the 20-plus steps required. The Scottish FA does not pay me and does not provide any training.

Compensation Payments

The Convener questioned Maxwell regarding these payments, and he confirmed that the SFA changed their rules to bring them in line with FIFA guidelines. I would make the point that Realgrassroots campaigned for this for several years and the Scottish FA refused point-blank to move. I have letters and there is documented evidence from oral PPC evidence sessions that confirm both Neil Doncaster, Scottish Professional Football League CEO and former SFA CEO Stewart Regan refused to change the rules, thus allowing the transfer market in children to exist. It was ultimately, the pressure exerted by the Scottish Parliament that dragged the Association to make the change.

Player Registration

In terms of this point, Mr. Maxwell is misleading the Committee at best. For players under the age of 16 years of age, it has always been the case that the player, parent and club are required to sign the registration form. There is no improvement here as claimed. More importantly and crucially, only the club can cancel the registration. The parent and player have no power to exit from the registration. As this is a registration, not a contract the club has no obligation to pay the player a single penny. Therefore, the club simply registers the player, and they can have his footballing services for free for 30 months. At the end of this term the player could be 17 or 18 years of age, earned no money and ultimately be released from the club.

Funding

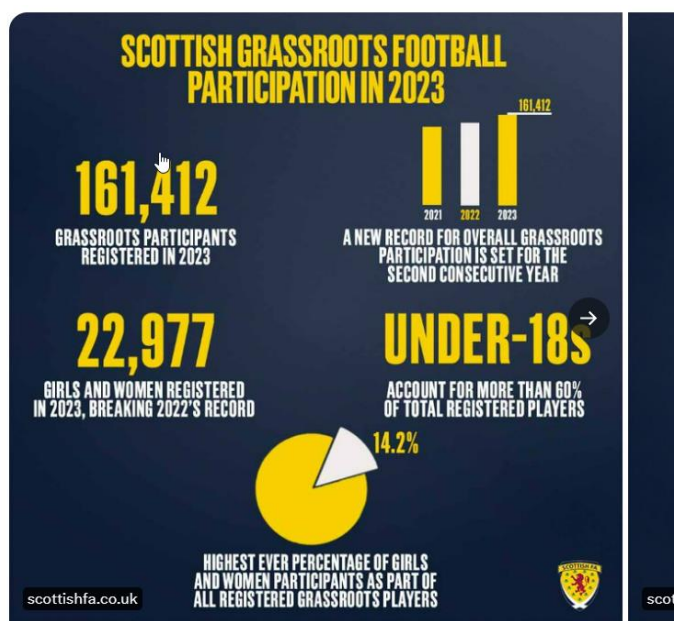
Mr. Maxwell when questioned stated that *'the vast majority of the income that we bring in goes back out to the clubs or to do the excellent work that Scottish football does across the community'*. When he says 'clubs' he means the clubs in membership of the SFA. These are limited companies and businesses i.e. Hearts, Hibs, Celtic Rangers etc. The Scottish FA does not give money to all the real grassroots clubs in Scotland i.e. those in membership of SWF and SYFA.

Between the Scottish Schools FA, SWF and SYFA some 105,000 young players (24,000 + 13,300 + 68,5000 respectively) participate in football. In Club Academy Scotland there are 2,400 players (this is an estimated figure). The Scottish FA money is given to member clubs which accounts for 2.3% of the young people playing football. Hardly something to be proud of.

I would be interested to learn more of the 'excellent work' being done across the country by the Scottish FA.

SWF Player Numbers

Mr. Maxwell stated that there are 22,000 registered female players across the country. This was echoed in an SFA Tweet posted on 19th January –



From scottishfa.co.uk

However, the SWF CEO Report before their AGM on 3rd February 2024, Aileen Campbell writes **'Nov 23 – 13,303 (still to complete year end figure) Dec 22 - 12,739 2021 – 11,243 2013 – 4,454 (to illustrate growth over the decade).**

It seems somewhere over 9,000 female players are missing!

It may be of interest to note that one of the stipulations of funding from Sportscotland for 2023-24 is to *'Increase female participation to 23,000 registered players by 31st March 2024'*. Is the Scottish FA massaging figures?

I would take this opportunity to draw your attention to the funding received from Sportscotland over the years:

| | | | |
|---------|-----|---|-----------|
| 2013-14 | SFA | £ | 1,919,121 |
| 2014-15 | SFA | £ | 279,868 |
| 2015-16 | SFA | £ | 1,580,112 |
| 2016-17 | SFA | £ | 1,410,541 |
| 2017-18 | SFA | £ | 1,439,956 |
| 2018-19 | SFA | £ | 1,364,949 |
| 2019-20 | SFA | £ | 1,483,253 |
| 2020-21 | SFA | £ | 1,721,493 |
| 2021-22 | SFA | £ | 1,777,452 |
| 2022-23 | SFA | £ | 1,670,046 |
| 2023-24 | SFA | £ | 1,347,000 |

TOTAL - £15,993,791

By way of some perspective

SFA Grants to SYFA

2016 - £36,250

2017 – £67,954

2018 - £63,626

2019 - £73,361

2020 - £70,736

2022 - £61,802

2023 - £55,574

Total - £429,303

If we add up the Sportscotland funding for the same years – the total is £10,437,238.

This means that the Scottish Youth FA which accounts for some 68,500 players in Scotland has received just 4.1% of the funding provided by Sportscotland.

I would ask the Committee to give some thought to the Scottish Government's (via Sportscotland) continued funding to an organisation that has failed its young players, is not

open and transparent, is stubborn and resistant to change and dismisses any outside interference which would potentially disrupt the power and control enjoyed by its member clubs. Why should the Scottish taxpayer and its future taxpayers fund this organisation when it fails on so many levels?

I have recently become involved with the Scottish Football Supporters Association and if the Committee feel it would be of benefit I and representatives from the organisation would be willing to provide oral evidence at a future session.

I thank you for your patience and attention.

Yours sincerely,



William Smith

(On behalf of the Realgrassroots team)



Scott Robertson

cc.

Paul Sweeney
Sandesh Gulhane
Emma Harper
Gillian Mackay
Ruth Maguire
Carol Mochan
Tess White