

Health, Social Care and Sport Committee
Tuesday, 17 June 2025
19th Meeting, 2025 (Session 6)

Welfare and sustainability in Scottish youth football – Note by the Clerk

Background

1. At the Committee’s business planning day on 1 April 2025, Members had indicated their desire to explore issues around welfare and sustainability in Scottish youth football, particularly from a children’s rights perspective in the context of recent complaints to the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA).
2. In December 2024, the Children and Young People’s Commissioner Scotland (the Commissioner) and campaign group RealGrassroots (RG) [filed complaints](#) with the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) concerning rules governing young players in Scotland.
3. The complaints stated that the Scottish Football Association (SFA) and Scottish Professional Football League (SPFL) rules restricted youth players’ freedom to move between club academies, violating UK competition law, and potentially constituting economic exploitation of children, in breach of human rights.

The Club Academy Scotland Programme (CAS)

4. The Club Academy Scotland Programme (CAS) is a performance based youth development programme organised and managed by the Scottish FA for clubs in membership of the SPFL. The SFA website states that CAS is the –

“structure that defines, operates and partially funds the Academy system in this country, alongside a games programme. It governs the development of players from the age of 11 to 18.”
5. CAS academies are divided into categories according to [Club Academy Scotland Regulations](#), with different rules applying for how many children and youth players can be registered in each category.

The rules for youth football players in Scotland

6. When submitting a registration form for the CAS programme, a player must agree to be bound by and subject to –
 - the [Registration procedures](#),
 - the [Judicial Panel Protocol](#) (“JPP”),

- [Articles of Association](#) (“Articles”) of the Scottish Football Association (“Scottish FA”), and
- the rules and regulations of any recognised football body including the SPFL Code of Conduct for U18 Players (contained within [the Rules of the Scottish Professional Football League](#)) in so far as these are applicable.

7. The SFA has also published [CAS Regulations](#).

The complaints

8. It is important to note that, though working in tandem, two distinct complaints were made to the CMA – one from RealGrassroots and one from the Commissioner.
9. RealGrassroots argued that the rules prioritise the commercial interests of football clubs (who make up membership of the SFA and SPFL) over the interests of youth players. They further argue that the rules limit competition for young footballers in Scotland, violate competition law and restrict children’s rights.
10. The Commissioner complaint raises concerns around the rights of children and over the harm it sees being inflicted upon children. The complaint makes the case that, without intervention, the SFA, SPFL and their member clubs will continue current practices and to breach the rights of children.

The rules under dispute

11. The RG complaint argues that the SFA and SPFL have imposed:

- a ‘no-poach’ rule that restricts clubs’ ability to sign youth players from rivals;
- a ‘no-approach’ rule that prevents youth players and their families from asking other clubs about a move, and vice versa;
- implausibly high fees that a transferee club would have to pay a transferor club in the unlikely event that a move was allowed; and
- unilateral rights for clubs to extend a player’s ‘registration period’, thereby forcing the player to stay with their current club for up to three years during the critical 15–18-year-old stage when youth players would typically look to secure a professional contract.

12. The complaint asserts that the rules:

- Allow clubs to ‘hoard’ youth players as a safeguard against the risk of undervalued players.
- Prevent youth players from leaving a club and restrict movement between youth academies, resulting in less competitive pressure to invest in facilities and enhance the quality of the training they provide.

- Create a financial incentive to sign up and ‘hoard’ large numbers of youth players, rather than releasing those that want to leave.

13. The RG complaint also asserts that Scottish football clubs have harmed young football players and committed alleged acts of retribution against them for attempting to move between clubs.

14. The complainants urged the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) to intervene, to eliminate unfair restrictions on, and ensure a fair environment for young players.

Previous Scottish Parliament action

15. RG lodged petition [PE1319](#) in 2010, calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to investigate six areas in relation to youth football in Scotland.

16. Following a decade of scrutiny, over multiple sessions of the Scottish Parliament, the Public Petitions Committee published its report in 2020: [PE1319: Improving youth football in Scotland](#). The report raises concerns around the rights and wellbeing of the children and young people involved in the Scottish Youth Football system, and recommends several changes, including to the registration period referenced in the latest complaints.

17. The complainants argue that, despite concerns raised by the Scottish Parliament and other stakeholders, the SFA and SPFL have failed to implement promised changes to improve the system.

Status and timeline of the complaints

18. The [CMA announced earlier this year](#) that it would not be pursuing the complaints due to resource constraints. However, [it has been reported](#) that the CMA undertook to write to the SFA and SPFL to remind them of their legal obligations under UK competition law.

19. The following is a brief timeline in relation to the complainants’ action –

March 2010: [PE1319](#) lodged (during Session 3 of the Scottish Parliament) by Scott Robertson and Willie Smith on behalf of Realgrassroots.

June 2020: The Public Petitions Committee published its report: [PE1319: Improving youth football in Scotland](#) recommending changes to the Scottish Youth Football system, including on the registration period, and raising concerns around the rights and wellbeing of the children and young people involved in the system.

Pre 2024: Ongoing advocacy by RealGrassroots and the Commissioner's office to reform youth football in Scotland, citing concerns over children's rights and restrictive practices in club contracts.

December 2024: The Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland and RealGrassroots submit formal complaints to the CMA.

January 2025: The CMA informs complainants that it will not launch a formal investigation, citing administration prioritisation and resource constraints.

Early 2025: Anas Sarwar MSP [writes to the CMA](#) urging reconsideration of the case, calling the youth football rules "exploitative"

March 2025: James Dornan MSP submits Scottish Parliament motion [S6M-16977](#) which recognises the work of RealGrassroots in this area.

20. The complainants continue to engage with the CMA to encourage them to reconsider their decision not to investigate, arguing the case is not resource-intensive and is of high public interest.

Today's meeting

21. At today's meeting, Members will have the opportunity to pose questions to both RealGrassroots and its legal representatives from the law firm gunnercooke LLP, and representatives from the Children and Young People Commissioner's office.
22. It should be noted that the Committee had intended to hear from both the SFA and SPFL at this meeting, but a suitable date could not be arranged. The intention is now to hold a session with both SFA and SPFL after summer recess.

Clerks to Committee and SPICE June 2025