



OFFICIAL REPORT
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Health, Social Care and Sport Committee

Tuesday 17 June 2025

Session 6



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HEALTH, SOCIAL CARE AND SPORT COMMITTEE
19th Meeting 2025, Session 6

CONVENER

*Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Joe FitzPatrick (Dundee City West) (SNP)

*Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con)

*Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP)

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green)

*Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab)

*David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)

*Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)

*Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Nick Hobbs (Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland)

Mahesh Madlani (gunnercooke)

Scott Robertson (Realgrassroots)

Alexander Waksman (gunnercooke)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Alex Bruce

LOCATION

The Sir Alexander Fleming Room (CR3)

Scottish Parliament

Health, Social Care and Sport Committee

Tuesday 17 June 2025

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:30]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Clare Haughey): Good morning, and welcome to the 19th meeting in 2025 of the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee. I have received apologies from Patrick Harvie and Joe FitzPatrick. Sandesh Gulhane is attending online.

The first item on our agenda is a decision on whether to take items 5 and 6 in private. Are we agreed to do so?

Members indicated agreement.

Welfare and Sustainability in Scottish Youth Football

09:30

The Convener: The next item is evidence on the topic of welfare and sustainability in Scottish youth football. Our evidence session takes place in the context of the separate complaints that the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland and the campaign group Realgrassroots made last year to the Competition and Markets Authority concerning the human rights implications of the Scottish Football Association and Scottish Professional Football League rules that govern young players in Scotland.

I welcome Nick Hobbs, head of advice and investigations for the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland; Mahesh Madlani, associate at gunnercooke; Alexander Waksman, partner at gunnercooke; and Scott Robertson, co-founder of Realgrassroots.

Yesterday, gunnercooke LLP provided the committee with a checklist that sets out the SFA and SPFL rules that are at issue in the complaints that the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland and Realgrassroots made to the Competition and Markets Authority. The list has been published on the committee's web pages.

I understand that Scott Robertson would like to make a brief opening statement.

Scott Robertson (Realgrassroots): That was unexpected.

Alexander Waksman (gunnercooke): Actually, convener, I am going to give the opening statement on behalf of Realgrassroots, as their counsel, if that is okay.

The Convener: That is fine, Mr Waksman.

Alexander Waksman: Thank you. It is 15 years since the Public Petitions Committee began looking at issues with the rules governing youth football. Since then, there have been 40,000 registrations of children going through the system, and, during that time, the state of the youth game has continued to worsen. In a report last year, the SFA described academies with what it called "notable failings", including "elite" clubs that did not even have a gym, boards that were unwilling to invest in their academies beyond the bare minimum, a lack of indoor training facilities, and insufficient coaching staff.

Scotland's youth system is falling behind peer country systems on virtually every conceivable metric, including the game time that under-21 players are getting and the values that are

attached to players when they eventually turn professional and are transferred. To put it simply, the system is not working.

However, none of that is surprising. The rules that we are here to talk about lock youth players into their club academy Scotland clubs. That shields the clubs from competitive pressure to invest in their training facilities and improve training for youth footballers, and it creates incentives for clubs to hoard players to whom they do not intend to give a professional contract instead of releasing them. All of that leads to a situation where talent is being wasted, being mothballed and falling out of the system.

When the Public Petitions Committee looked at the matter, it identified what it called “significant, systemic issues” that were undermining children’s footballing ambitions and that had to change for the good of the game. What has been the response of the SFA and the SPFL? It has been broken promises and smokescreens. They promised to change the rules on compensation when a player moves from one youth academy to another, which, in effect, penalise the club that takes them on, but that change has not happened. They promised to end a system of unilateral contract extensions that locks players in, but they have kept in place rules that have exactly the same effect.

In some instances, they have put out outright falsehoods—for example, claiming that players do not face any kind of ban for approaching other clubs about the possibility of a transfer while maintaining rules to that effect in black and white in their public rule books. We note that, when the Public Petitions Committee looked into that issue, a member suggested that the SFA and SPFL had been

“perhaps even less than truthful”—[*Official Report, Public Petitions Committee*, 9 February 2017; c 14.]

in their engagement with the committee, and we do not believe that their playbook has changed.

Why do we care about the issue? It is not purely a matter of what is good for Scottish football as a whole, of governance, of competition law, or even of human rights. It is also about the message that we send to young people who are entering the world of work for the first time. I think that we can all agree that, whether they turn professional or not, children who turn up for training week in, week out and day in, day out for hours after school, balancing that training with their academic work and participating in matches at the weekend, have shown themselves to have the grit, energy and mindset to be the entrepreneurs, community leaders and even elected officials of tomorrow. Do we tell them that there is a market in which they can ply their trade, develop their talent and take all

the opportunities that are available to them, or do we tell them that work is run by distant institutions operating a tight cartel that can simply terminate their prospects at will?

Where do we go from here? Our experience has been that the SFA and SPFL are not willing to make changes voluntarily—that point has clearly passed. Unfortunately, we also have a competition regulator that is unwilling to act. However, these remarks should not be taken as a counsel of despair. What we are talking about here is four simple rule changes to the SFA and SPFL rulebooks that we believe would largely resolve the issue. With the right political impetus, that can be done, which is why we are particularly grateful to have the opportunity to come and speak with you today.

The Convener: Thank you, Mr Waksman. We will move straight to questions.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): Thank you for your opening statement, Mr Waksman, which laid out what is happening. I was quite surprised to read that the petition was lodged in 2010. I am not sure whether David Torrance was on the Public Petitions Committee at that time—I know that he is a member of the current committee.

The language of tight cartels and terminating contracts at will is interesting. Will you give us an overview of the provisions of United Kingdom competition law that the SFA and the SPFL have violated?

Alexander Waksman: Of course. Section 2 of the Competition Act 1998 sets out a prohibition on

“agreements between undertakings ... which have as their object or effect the prevention, restriction or distortion of competition”,

provided that the agreements would have an effect on markets in the UK. That is subject to an exemption under section 9 if the agreement contributes to the production or distribution of goods or economic value, delivers a fair share to consumers and is necessary and proportionate to achieve those ends.

That is a lot of technical legal language, but the classic case of what we are talking about is agreements between operations, businesses or institutions that should be competing with one another yet, instead, agree to co-operate. An example that has come to the fore in recent years is agreements between organisations about recruitment in what are called no-poach cartels. Rather than competing for the supply of labour, they agree that they will not compete for particular workers or that they will put in place arrangements that soften that competition. Only a couple of weeks ago, the Competition and Markets Authority handed out fines to a series of broadcasters for

doing exactly that with independent contractors who work in televising games. Exactly the same principles apply here.

Also relevant are the provisions on abusive dominance. In a long series of cases, the European Commission and the European courts have held that institutions that have the role of regulating and governing sports—whether in formula 1 racing, football, tennis or other sports—are deemed to be dominant because they set the rules of the game and that, if they abuse that dominant position by imposing exploitative terms or excluding competitive pressure, that is an abuse and is unlawful unless it can be justified.

That is an overview, but I would be happy to answer any further questions.

Emma Harper: How do rulings by the Court of Justice of the European Union apply to youth football compared with professional football?

Alexander Waksman: I think that they apply with equal force. The recent Diarra case might be a good example. The rules that were in place restricted professional footballers who were out of contract from moving to another club. Lassana Diarra was out of contract with his club and wanted to move to a Belgian team but, due to a dispute that he was having with his previous club, he was not given the necessary certification to move, even though he was out of contract and, in principle, he should have been free to do so. The European Court of Justice said that that type of restriction was a by-object restriction, which is a restriction that is so obviously harmful to competition that there is no need even to do an analysis of the effects on the market. The ECJ said that, *prima facie*, it did not seem that there was a justification for the rule but it would ultimately end up going back to the Belgian courts for a determination.

If that is the case for professional footballers who might have been playing for many years, have agents representing them and are very high-earning individuals—if even they are deemed by the Court of Justice to be being exploited by those rules—it should surely apply with equal or stronger force to children who do not have agents, are not earning a meaningful salary and do not have the same power that high-profile professional players have. We think that those principles can be mapped one to one.

Emma Harper: You mentioned that four rule changes would need to be introduced. Can you tell us about those and how they might help to support youth football in Scotland?

Alexander Waksman: The first existing rule is what we call the no-poach rule. It says that an elite CAS club cannot take on more than one youth player from another CAS club, either in the current

season or in the previous season. For example, if Celtic Football Club had, last season, taken on a youth footballer from the Hibernian Football Club youth academy, they could not take on another one in the next season, and they could not take on more than one in the same season. In effect, clubs are limited to hiring one player from another club every two years.

That means that, rather than the clubs continually competing to attract youth talent and to make their facilities as good as possible to bring in the best youth players, each club has a certain level of protection, whereby they can say, “Okay—Celtic or Rangers managed to attract someone from us this year or last year; we’re immune from them doing the same again this year.”

From the player’s perspective, it means that, if one of their friends went to the club last year or this year, that route is now blocked to them. That is the no-poach rule, which we think is the most obvious example of a breach of competition law. It is really no different from the no-poach rules that the CMA and the European Commission itself have challenged in recent cases.

The second rule, which reinforces that, is what is called the development contribution. It says that, each time a youth player—we could be talking about 13-year-olds here—moves from one youth academy to another, the receiving youth academy has to pay a certain amount for them at the time of the transfer.

We can take the example of a 15-year-old player who has been at a youth academy for four years. If they were to move, the receiving academy would have to pay around £20,000. That is fundamentally different from the set-up under the Fédération Internationale de Football Association rules, whereby FIFA says, “Yes, the training club should be entitled to compensation, but that happens once the player has turned professional.” By that point, the player has come good and is generating value, and the clubs that trained them should get a share of that value.

The rule that the SFA and the SPFL have imposed—it is really an SPFL rule—says that the money has to be paid up front, whether the player turns professional or whether they stop playing within a minute of joining their new club. Most clubs will simply not pay £20,000 for someone who is a totally unknown prospect, so that reinforces the no-poach rule in deterring movement, and it is out of line with the way in which the FIFA rules are set up.

The third rule is what is called the no-approach rule, which says that neither players nor parents can approach a different CAS club about engineering the possibility of a move. Let us say that a player is currently playing for Celtic and their

family is moving to Aberdeen, and they want to see whether Aberdeen Football Club would be willing to take them into its youth academy. They are not allowed to do that—they and their parents cannot do it, and other youth players cannot do it on their behalf. If someone cannot even approach a club about a move, how will the club even know that they are looking, and how can they even become available to it?

The fourth rule is called a unilateral extension rule. It has changed slightly in the latest version of the handbook, but it previously said that, when someone who is in the 14 to 15-year-old age group is registered with a club, that club can, at will, unilaterally extend their registration for two more seasons. In the latest version of the handbook, that has changed to become a fixed two-year period of registration, but it still means that, at the critical age of 14, 15 or 16, they are locked into their current club, even though it is approaching the time when they would normally be looking around for professional contracts, which can be signed at age 16.

Those are the four existing rules that we are talking about.

Emma Harper: Is there room for collaboration in order to alter the approach that is currently being taken under those rules?

09:45

Alexander Waksman: Absolutely. The irony for us is that we have been spending a lot of time on the rules when the issues are easily solvable with fairly modest amendments.

On the funding side of things, we think that there is a very good way to ensure that training clubs get funding, which is that they should be entitled to a share of any transfer fees once a player turns professional—that is the FIFA standard. They should also be entitled to solidarity contributions, which FIFA supports. Under that approach, when a player moves, 5 per cent of the value goes back to the training club. There are definitely ways to ensure that training clubs get a return on their investment.

We think that the no-poaching rule simply has to go—it is just straight-up cartel behaviour, and no good can come of it.

With regard to improving the Scottish game overall, there is room for ensuring that standards in elite level academies, performance (progressive) level academies and performance level academies reflect those classifications. There could be improvements in coaching and training. Improvements could be made in many areas, and none of that would be jeopardised by changing the rules that we say are harmful.

Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): I declare an interest in that I am the former head of medicine for Queen's Park Football Club.

What is the Scottish Youth Football Association doing and saying in this space?

Scott Robertson: Good morning. I thank the committee for inviting me along this morning. I suppose that I should declare an interest, too, as Willie Smith and I established the Realgrassroots campaign in 2010 and I have recently become the chairman of the board of the SYFA, as well as being the president of Musselburgh Windsor FC, a local club that is based not far from here.

Quite frankly, the SYFA has done very little prior to me coming into post. I came into the SYFA just after Willie and I engaged the services of Mahesh Madlani and Alex Waksman from gunnercooke.

The SYFA is not pushing on this issue; it is really Realgrassroots that is doing that. I am sure that you can appreciate that my sitting at Hampden brings about a difficult dynamic. It has been brought to my attention by the Scottish Football Association that my being the chair of the SYFA represents a conflict of interests, given what might be seen as my campaign against the SFA. I am mindful of the need to try to keep the two roles a little bit separate, and that is why I am here today under the banner of Realgrassroots.

Sandesh Gulhane: We have heard an eloquent description of the reasons behind your position and the law that is being breached. I am a fan of Arsenal, and I have seen two youth players come through and play for the first team, and I have seen two youth players get poached by Manchester United for next to nothing, despite all the money that had gone into training those two young professional footballers. What is the balance here?

Alexander Waksman: I think that the balance is the system that FIFA supports. If a club trains a youth player who then goes off and becomes a professional player for another team, the team that trained them should be paid training compensation. That is in the FIFA rules at the moment. People may debate the amount that is paid and say that it should be higher, but we do not take a particular view on that.

The other way of compensating training teams is through the solidarity contribution, which involves the training club getting 5 per cent of the value of the transfer any time that player is transferred onwards. It might take some time to see a return on investment through that method, but the return should be there. We say that the model that FIFA has set out, and which the SFA seems reluctant to follow, is the right one and that it strikes that balance.

We have heard the argument made a number of times that, if a club cannot get development contributions and charge a fee as soon as a player moves, it will have no incentive to invest in training players. I respond to that by saying that the SFA's own report suggests that the current system does not incentivise investment, because of the dire state of CAS academies, including elite academies, which the SFA itself recognised as a failing only last year.

Sandesh Gulhane: I have a final question for now; I will come back in on another theme later in the meeting.

On the non-poaching rule, how do we stop the big clubs taking the best players from around the country? I hear what you say about the idea of making improvements to training academies, so that things are as good as possible for our children—let us be honest: they are children—and that they have access to the best opportunities. However, what is to stop the big clubs coming in, poaching players, sitting them on their bench and saying, “We’re massive, so you’ll want to play for us rather than for a lower-league team, but you are going to ride our bench”?

Mahesh Madlani (gunnercooke): The first point is that they can take only so many. There is a cap on the number of players that each club can have, so the big clubs are going to go after only the best ones or—especially at youth level—the ones who can travel, because a brilliant player is not going to travel for four hours after school to train for five minutes before travelling four hours back.

The second point involves what I would call the fan experience and the right to be able to tell players what to do. At the end of the day, in any area other than football, you would not be able to tell someone that they could not move. For example, in medicine, you could not say that to a doctor, because they are entitled to move their services wherever they feel like. The hospital that employed the doctor cannot ask for a fee when they move, and it cannot stop them going or mothball them. As a lawyer, if I want to leave my firm, I can go—I can just hand my notice in. I am sure that that is the case in almost every industry in this country, so why should it be different in football?

However, even if we decide that that different approach should apply to adult footballers, why should it apply to 13-year-olds? They sign one-year registration forms—which, quite frankly, are contracts, but that was a contentious topic in the Public Petitions Committee. If the registration lasts only one year, why should anyone be entitled to a fee for them the following year? There is no reason why that should be given. They should be able to go wherever they need to go. Often, they

move because their family has moved. Why are we killing the career of a young person because we need a few thousand pounds for a football club that is not going to invest in a failing market?

Alexander Waksman: Again, we have heard the SFA and the SPFL arguing that additional obligations are imposed on big clubs because they have the elite academies, and the current approach is designed to protect the smaller clubs. The irony of that is that there might be a smaller club that is not in the premier league but invests in its youth academy as a competitive strategy, in order to bring the best players through and either earn money from them when they turn professional and go elsewhere or to generate players for the first team. However, precisely because they have created a great academy, they are classified as elite and are then subject to the same restrictions as the biggest clubs.

For example, Hamilton Academical is not one of the biggest clubs in Scotland, but it has one of the academies that is classified as elite and is, therefore, subject to all the various rules and regulations that are imposed on clubs with elite academies. It is being regulated under the current rules as though it is a big club, even though it is not. So, if the objective of the rules is to protect smaller clubs, they are not designed in a way that achieves that.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): Good morning. I should declare that I was part of the Public Petitions Committee in the previous session of Parliament, and I did not get on particularly well with the SFA and the SPFL. I should also declare that I have a couple of grandsons who are in an academy, one of whom has moved from a smaller club to a bigger club.

I have to say, Mr Waksman, that I do not recognise the picture that you are painting. I think that the situation is a lot better than it was previously, and it is certainly not as bad as you say.

One of the issues that I have is that you talked about how, if a player moved from Hibs to Celtic, Celtic could not then take on another in the next year or the same year. That is restriction of trade. Why on earth would you not allow a player to move if they wanted to move?

Alexander Waksman: That is exactly our argument. Players should be allowed to move. It is a restriction of competition. It was called a restraint of trade before the Competition Act 1998. It is a clear violation of competition law. It is a no-poach agreement between two institutions to prevent youth players from moving between them. If this was any other industry, we would immediately identify it as a cartel. For some reason, the SFA and SPFL do not seem to believe that the same

rules apply to youth football. That has no basis in law or in reality. That restriction is exactly what we are saying should not be in the rules, even though it is today.

I am glad that the experience of your grandchildren is not the experience that I have been setting out today, but we have also spoken to youth footballers, parents and coaches of boys' clubs who have seen that exact pattern. To give one example, a family who were thinking about moving told their current club that they were thinking about the young player moving to another club and they were keeping their options open. Their current club told them, "You're not, because there's a fee to be paid and, by the way, in the meantime, you're not getting game time," and they were sat on the sidelines. Under the current rules, absolutely nothing can be done about that.

I am glad that the experience is not universal, but it is still live and it exists today. Again, we have heard various suggestions that the rules are on the books, but they are not necessarily enforced and maybe people do not think about them. A player at an SPFL youth academy today is potentially liable for a penalty of up to £10,000 if they even speak to another club. Many people will not take the risk, even if it is not enforced 100 per cent of the time.

Brian Whittle: If they are breaking the law, as you suggest, why has it not been taken to court?

Alexander Waksman: Competition litigation is very expensive, as I am sure you will appreciate. You are talking about hundreds of thousands or even millions of pounds.

Brian Whittle: Not in Scottish youth football.

Alexander Waksman: Even for smaller cases under the Competition Appeal Tribunal's fast-track process, competition litigation does cost that, because you have to have economic experts and barristers, who do not come cheap, and ultimately you have to have someone who is willing to foot the bill for the litigation.

Brian Whittle: It is employment law.

Alexander Waksman: It is not. It is competition law. It would be an employment law issue if what we were discussing here was, for example, unfair dismissal. A restriction that is agreed between two employers is not the same as a restriction that is agreed between one employer and the employee. We are talking about an agreement between two separate clubs. That is a cartel and it is a matter of competition law, and that takes a lot of money.

As you know, we filed a complaint with the Competition and Markets Authority. Its response was not to cast doubt on any of the substantive complaints that we were making but to say that it was a matter of prioritisation and it did not have

the resource to take it on, partly because it believed that it would be too resource intensive.

Mahesh Madlani: I am going to add a couple of stats about transfers, and then I am going to talk about exactly what the CMA has said about this. Elite clubs can have 105 players in their academy, so, once we add up what each club is allowed, we see that about 2,856 players can be in CAS in any given season. In 2022, the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland and, I believe, Natalie Don MSP were told that there were 645 movements over three seasons. In effect, that is 210 a year out of nearly 3,000 players.

When you crunch that down, that means that seven players per club moved per season. There are seven age groups, so that means that one player per age group per club moved. That is the no-poach rule—that is what that says. That is the cap. The cap happens.

On the second point, about whether we are talking about competition law or employment law, the Competition and Markets Authority accepted that it is competition law. It issued advisory or warning letters to the SFA and SPFL. On the CMA's website, it says that the authority issues those letters if there is a concern that there is a breach of competition law in its view. It is not employment law at all. This is fully—100 per cent—a competition law issue and we have a competition regulator for it. There is no hiding for the SFA and SPFL on that point, if I am honest.

Brian Whittle: But nothing is happening—I am not arguing with you; I just need to understand. If there is a breach of competition law and warning letters have been sent out and they continue to breach competition law, surely there must be some kind of penalty for that.

10:00

Alexander Waksman: Yes. This is where the ball is being hidden. The CMA wrote back to gunnercooke and told us, "We hear your complaint—we're not prioritising it primarily because of resource reasons, because we also have to look at reviewing mergers and doing markets work and digital regulation and all these things. But don't worry—we've sent a letter to the SFA and SPFL setting out our concerns, and they have written back to us telling us the steps that they're going to take."

We said, "Okay, that's very nice, but can we have a copy of that letter, please?", and we sent the CMA a request under the Freedom of Information Act 2000, asking to see the letter that was sent out and asking for the SFA's and SPFL's response so that we could see what was being done. The CMA came back to us and said, "We can't give you that under the 2000 act, because

it's information that's come to us in an investigation and is therefore exempt, so we're not going to give it to you." We think that that is nonsensical. We think that, if it is a letter that the CMA has generated, the letter is its material—it is not information that has come to the CMA in an investigation—so the CMA should be disclosing it, and, of course, we are going to appeal.

However, there seems to be an outcome where the CMA, the SFA and SPFL are having discussions that we are not privy to, that this committee is not privy to and that youth footballers are not privy to. We are being told, "Don't worry—something will be done behind closed doors, but you're not going to know what it is." We are here because that is deeply unsatisfactory and we would have thought that the SFA and SPFL, as institutions that get a lot of public money, should be more transparent than that. Frankly, we think that the CMA's decision not to investigate is wrong. We do not see this as a resource-intensive investigation; we think that it is a very open-and-shut case, and we think that it should be prioritised.

We understand the CMA's view. It might say, "Well, it's only a relatively small number of kids who are in the system at any one time." However, over the 14 years or so since this was brought to the Public Petitions Committee, we are talking about a hell of a lot of children who have been subject to these exploitative contractual conditions, so we think that the CMA has got this wrong.

Brian Whittle: Allegedly.

Alexander Waksman: Well, you might say "allegedly" at the competition analysis—

Brian Whittle: It is allegedly.

Alexander Waksman: But the rules are in black and white.

Brian Whittle: Sorry—at the end of the day, my position is this: I want kids to be involved in sport as much as possible. My argument with the SFA last time was that we need a pathway for these kids. Wherever they end up, there needs to be a station for them to continue to play football or sport. That is my position.

However, what I am hearing here are allegations that are not substantive.

Alexander Waksman: We have given you a copy of our complaint, which has—

Brian Whittle: But it is not substantive. It is your opinion. The SFA will come here and say something completely different.

The bottom line is that all I am interested in is kids being able to play sport and have a good time. That is what I am interested in.

Alexander Waksman: We say that the rules say one thing. The SFA and SPFL say that the rules say another thing. We have given you the rules to look at and we have shown you the exact provisions that are there. The SFA and SPFL have written to us and to the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland saying, "No, there isn't a ban on approaching other clubs. Of course, we've never had that." We have gone back to them and said, "Here it is—this is the clause in your rules that says it," and what is the response? Crickets. Someone is not telling the truth. We have put the evidence in front of you. I think that the inference is pretty clear.

I agree with you—we want as many kids playing a sport as possible. However, we also want those kids to have a fair chance to succeed without being subject to these restrictions, which are publicly available. There is no hiding here. There is no secret. I am frankly staggered that the SPFL and SFA think that they can get away with trying to tell people that they do not have rules on the books when they are there in black and white on their website.

The Convener: The English youth football authorities are covered by the same rules as there would be in Wales and Northern Ireland. What is the difference between how they treat their young people who are playing football and how the SFA and SYFA treat them, or is there no difference?

Alexander Waksman: That is a really good question. There is a difference. There are some similarities in the rules, but the difference is that, in the English system, there is a whole infrastructure to facilitate transfers between youth academies. Based on public information, they seem to have appointed a global law firm, DLA Piper, to act as a clearing house so that, when a youth player wants to move from one academy to another, the request is processed through that law firm. The firm checks that all the right measures have been put in place and that there is no unlawful bribery or inducements or anything improper like that. The public reports that we have seen suggest that the whole process takes around 25 days. An infrastructure has been built out specifically to enable transfers from one youth academy to another. There are fees between the transferring clubs, but the difference is that the fees are set at a level that English clubs can well afford. You will know how much money is generated in the English premier league and how much cash is flowing through that system at any given time. There is no issue with affordability.

Dr Gulhane gave examples of that happening in practice—for example, when youth players move between Arsenal and Manchester United. We have seen examples of 16-year-old players who, in England, cannot be professional, because they

can be professional only when they are 17, unlike in Scotland, where the age is 16, moving, for example, from Southampton to another club. That system enables those transfers to happen, and it enables the training clubs to get compensation for the work that they have put into the players so far.

The Convener: I am hearing that there is a different structure for some of the issues and some of the rules that you feel the SFA and the SYFA need to address. Are the rules in the English system similar to the Scottish ones? Obviously, that is about transfers, but there are many other issues in the four points that you have raised.

Alexander Waksman: The one where there is similarity is the development contribution, which is the payment that is made when a player transfers from one academy to another. The English clubs can well afford that, and there is also a clearing-house system that makes sure that transfers can happen. That is the key difference. There is a development contribution under both systems, but in Scotland there is no infrastructure set up to facilitate those transfers. Plus, there are rules such as the no-poach rule that set a hard cap on how many players can move.

The Convener: Down in England, do they have that no-poach rule?

Alexander Waksman: I do not think that England has the no-poach rule.

Mahesh Madlani: It is just about the contribution. We have not checked every country in Europe or in the world, but we might say that it is unique to Scotland for a reason that I am sure Ian Maxwell would be able to speak to.

The Convener: That is the nub of the issue. Is it a Scotland-only issue, or is it an issue in youth football around these islands?

Mahesh Madlani: No, it is a Scottish issue from as much as we can see. We are limited in that we can only read the rule books. We have been through all the evidence that was given at the Public Petitions Committee. It would be very helpful to speak to Neil Doncaster, Murdoch MacLennan, Ian Maxwell and their in-house lawyers, but I noted from the clerk's brief that they have not come today, which is pretty consistent with my experience of this file.

The Convener: To be fair to them, the committee has issued an invitation to them and we are in negotiations about a date. They are not here today because it did not suit their diaries, for balance.

Mahesh Madlani: I speculate whether that is because Mr Waksman and I are here, because, the minute they received a letter from us, they sent falsehoods in a letter to the commissioner's office

and then sent that to our client just after boxing day without us in copy, completely in breach of their legal office's professional obligations. Knowing that there were legal representatives on the file, we sent a response back saying, "You are wrong on these rules—can we have a discussion about it?" Ian Maxwell had a meeting arranged with Scott Robertson and found out that we might attend over Teams. That was put to him up front, and he ducked the meeting and will not speak to us. We then received a letter marked as private and confidential. We asked them whether that could be published and responded to in an open court, and they just ignored us. That is why, among the letters that we have given to the committee, you do not have that one.

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): Good morning, gentlemen. My questions are on children's rights and the complaints system. I will come to you first, Nick Hobbs. What engagement have you had with children and families on the rules that underpin the existing Scottish youth football system?

Nick Hobbs (Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland): Our office's engagement on this, as you know, is of relatively long standing. It principally stems from the Public Petitions Committee's work. Our engagement with the SFA following on from that was a series of discussions and a round-table discussion that took place around Christmas 2020.

The information that we have had about the experience of the rules from children and from footballers has come principally through Realgrassroots. It has been able to identify families to speak to for its legal representatives as well.

We have had some indication from that of how the rules are experienced directly by children and young people; however, there has also been a real inconsistency in how those rules are articulated and explained by the SFA. You will have heard that one of the points of contention in relation to some of the rules is an assertion by the SFA that they do not exist, when, in fact, they appear in black and white. Another approach that the SFA has taken is to say, "Well, it's okay because we don't actually apply them," but then there have been cases in which those rules have been applied. The fact that the rules exist and are tied to the contractual terms that children and young people sign up to means that they exist as a mechanism to condition people's approach and people's behaviour, regardless of whether in any individual instance a club chooses to apply them.

There is also an inconsistency in that the SFA has often said—members who were on the Public Petitions Committee throughout that process will remember this, I am sure—that the rules are both

hardly ever used and essential to the effective operation of Scottish youth football. Those two things cannot both be true. There is a real “have your cake and eat it” approach going on.

David Torrance: What oversight procedures are there in the academy system to monitor young players’ wellbeing? Are they adequate, and how might they be strengthened or improved?

Mahesh Madlani: I can certainly speak to the young player wellbeing panel that the SFA put in place, ostensibly to deal with issues around youth player registrations. I think it worth noting, as an overarching point, that the wellbeing panel, when it determines an issue, is required to take account of the child’s human rights. However, given that the SFA does not make public what happens in there—which is quite right, as the cases involve individual issues and individual children—I do not think that we are even aware of the number of issues that are raised. We can only tell you that there were, say, 100 hearings or just one hearing in this or that year.

What I do have is a summary of a call that I had with a parent who had to go through the process. I have had to anonymise it, because the parent said that they were scared that their son’s career would be affected if it got out who he was. The player was 13 at the time. He was on the second rung; it was not elite; and he wanted to move clubs, because they were having to drive about an hour and a half a day. When the parent spoke to the head of academy at the club and said that they were exploring options—the son was in the room, too—they were both immediately told that his game time would be cut. This was said to a 13-year-old, by the way—it was not said just to the parent in a back room.

Everything then became very formal. When they contacted the SFA for help, its first response about the development contribution was to say, “Well, only Celtic and Rangers can pay that, but they don’t like to pay it for 13-year-olds, so there’s not much that we can do here. They prefer to sign older players.”

The player then got indications that another club might be interested in him, but it could not contact him because of the no-approach rule and the potential for a four-figure fine to be issued to the child, which is astonishing. Eventually, they got hold of the Professional Footballers Association Scotland, which put them in contact with Realgrassroots, and Realgrassroots helped them apply to the wellbeing panel. The child had to give two witness statements, I believe, and he was then interviewed by the SFA, which the parents described as being akin to an interrogation. The whole process took so long that it went beyond the end of the current season, at which point back

channelling had to be done to allow the player to move, even though he did not have a contract.

As for what can be done to replace that system, it can be thrown in the bin, with an entirely new system brought in that is akin to the English system, in which disputes are resolved in four weeks. In that system, independent parties are appointed, paid for by the Premier League in England. It is not the clubs or the parents who have to pay; the league that gets all the money pays. The law firm independently interviews the player, the parent, the new club, the old club, and everyone else involved, and it ensures that nothing untoward has happened. It manages to do all that within days—these things do not take months or years to sort out in England. There is no reason why the SPFL and the SFA cannot simply import that system and get on with it.

There is a department that addresses these things, and there are people ostensibly assigned to deal with welfare, too, yet we hear from parents that they do not know about it and are not told about it. They have to hunt through nearly 1,000 pages of rules to find it and then, at the end of the process, they have to go through something that is effectively akin to litigation anyway. As a lawyer, I am used to going before decision makers and giving evidence. Are we really expecting 13-year-olds to do that?

10:15

Nick Hobbs: The wellbeing panel is a good example of the approach and the attitude underpinning all of this. We talked to the SFA about the panel when we had the round table about five years ago. On the surface, it looks and sounds like a positive mechanism for facilitating movement between clubs where necessary. However, when we asked the SFA for an example of circumstances in which a wellbeing panel, which is required to take account of the child’s best interests and their human rights, would refuse permission for a child to move from one club to the other, it was not able to give us one. That strongly suggests to me that the wellbeing panel exists not as a mechanism to facilitate that movement for children, but as a procedural obstacle to prevent it from happening.

A lot of research on children’s access to complaints mechanisms has flagged up an imbalance of power between children and adults, and children and organisations. Children tend not to raise complaints when there are significant administrative processes that they have to go through or other barriers that they have to jump over. Indeed, Mahesh Madlani has just given you an example of how that works in practice.

I think that, in fact, the wellbeing panel acts—and has maybe even been designed—to restrict the movement of children between clubs instead of facilitating it.

David Torrance: Is there no mechanism other than the wellbeing panel that children or parents can use to approach a club, or an individual in a club, about looking after a child's rights and wellbeing? Do they have to go to the wellbeing panel?

Nick Hobbs: For the issues that we are talking about—that is, the legal relationship between the child and the club, and the ability for a child to move from one club to the other—the wellbeing panel is the mechanism.

When it comes to safeguarding, mental health or education issues, I believe that there should be wellbeing officers in each of the clubs who would be expected to take on some of that role. However, that goes a bit beyond the specific scope of the complaint to the CMA.

David Torrance: How effective is it to have the wellbeing officers in the clubs and academies? Are they effective in that role?

Nick Hobbs: We have not looked at that issue specifically within that broader context. Mahesh Madlani, Alex Waksman or Scott Robertson might be able to talk about the extent to which wellbeing officers have been involved in the example cases that have been brought to Realgrassroots, but I am not aware that that has happened. Often, the role might not be well resourced or might not be given the priority in the club that would allow it to really challenge decision making, but we have not looked at the matter in any depth or detail.

Mahesh Madlani: In its transition report of May 2024, which I have just referred to, the SFA admitted that it had overseen a failed market, because Scotland was behind all of its peers. The word “wellbeing” does not come up once in that 114-page report—the SFA did not consider it. It purports to have done a wide-scale review of the failings of Scottish youth football, but, according to that report, it did not even look at wellbeing.

David Torrance: I have one more question. For the record, are you saying that the wellbeing panel obstructs the process and is there to slow it down? If so, could that be got round by bringing in independents?

Mahesh Madlani: I will let others answer that, as they might be closer to it.

Scott Robertson: Yes is the short answer. I have attended a wellbeing panel hearing, and I can identify with the story that Mahesh Madlani told about it. I found it a tortuous process. In our initial contact with the SFA, it said, “Don't go to the wellbeing panel. It hardly ever meets—you'll be

wasting your time.” The family found it difficult to go through that process and attend the meeting at Hampden park.

In fairness, the young lad was there and acquitted himself remarkably well—he was very impressive. However, I felt uneasy about that young child sitting right next to representatives of the club—maybe as close as we are sitting now—that had stopped him playing football and had told him, “You'll no longer be the captain. You'll no longer be playing for this squad. We're going to move you into a different squad.” It was not a positive experience.

As with a lot of these things, there is a strong argument for bringing in someone independent to look at the situation. We have been talking about these issues in Parliament for 15 years now; it took seven years just to get the SFA to remove the rule banning children from playing for their school football team. The SFA does not come round easily to anyone else's way of thinking, or to giving up any control over these young players. Maybe it is time that we had some kind of tsar or independent regulator who could look at these things and come to a decision quickly, for the benefit of all these young players.

Nick Hobbs: From our engagement over the past six or seven years, we would reflect that the underlying issue has always been, and still is, the fact that the clubs view these children principally as economic, or potential economic, assets, and they want a set of rules and processes in place that allows them to be squeezed and monetised. The SFA has consistently approached the issue and made rules in the interests of the clubs, not in the interests of children and young people.

David Torrance: On the point about the wellbeing panel, you said that the young gentleman acquitted himself well, but how many 13-year-olds would be able to put themselves in that position, given the stress that they are put under? Does it not contradict the point of having a wellbeing panel if a young person's wellbeing is affected by having to turn up to those hearings?

Scott Robertson: I totally agree. It was difficult for the family in that case; the dad had the care of three children, and it was uncomfortable—that is for sure. There was a good bit of support and a lot of talking in the weeks and days before we even got to Hampden that evening for the hearing. It took preparation and a lot of confidence building so that he could sit there. We always said, “Look—if you're not comfortable, you can get up and leave. Nobody's controlling you here.” He did well.

I was just looking over the report by the Children's Parliament for the SFA, “Getting it Right for Every Child in Scottish Football: Young players

have their say”, and I saw that a boy in the 16 to 18 age group said:

“Bullying culture exists in academy football but ignored as just being the way of football. Players are written off as disposable commodities.”

That document contains a number of quotes that reflect on the existing culture. Without going on about it, I would say that my view is that the club academy has not been a huge success in the 28 years for which it has been running.

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): It is quite hard to listen to what is being said—we are speaking about children, and it is important that we are clear about that. I come back to a point that Mahesh Madlani made. Did you say that a 13-year-old could be fined a four-figure sum?

Mahesh Madlani: Yes—we have the hard copy of the relevant document, and we can circulate it to the clerks. The SFA has a document entitled “Judicial Panel Protocol 2024/2025”, which is ostensibly the overarching disciplinary regime that is used if clubs or players are misbehaving. There may well be drug offences or things like that—I am not suggesting that that is happening in the cases that we are discussing—so there is a wholesale regime to deal with those things, and the wellbeing panel sits within that.

There is a fining guide in that document that sets out, when a decision is made, how much each club is fined. Rule 522, on page 130 of that document, refers to rule 5.2 of annex 9 of the SFA’s registration procedures—which is the “no approach” rule. Under it, parents and players cannot approach other clubs, and it applies to SPFL premiership players, SPFL Scottish championship league 1 and 2 players, and what are called “Other players”. So, with the elite clubs—I should say that not all the premiership clubs are elite, and some clubs below the premiership are; I am just using that term as a proxy—the maximum fine is £10,000. In the other leagues—the other versions of CAS, as it were—£5,000 is the maximum. Finally, for other players—players at Mr Robertson’s club, ostensibly, because they are not part of CAS—the maximum is £2,500.

The rule could also apply if, for example, a player had been at a CAS club the previous year. In other words, they might have been at a CAS club; they left, because they did not want to stay at that club; and they cannot find a new club to take them on, because they are not allowed to speak to any. Because they have said that they want to leave, they are not getting any game time. How is a scout going to watch them play if they are not playing? Moreover, no one is prepared to pay the fee, as the SFA has admitted—it has just blatantly admitted that no one will pay it. If that is the case, why is it in the SPFL’s rule book?

So, the player goes back to grass-roots football, because they want to stay fit and they still love football. We all want sports participation at whatever level we can get it—but we want it at the best level. Then, they might be playing again, and they might get scouted again, but if they speak to that club, they will get a £2,500 fine. Obviously, I am from England, but would I have known that I had to spend £2,500 of my parents’ money on a fine for breaching a rule that I did not know about?

We can certainly circulate the information to the committee afterwards, but it is all there.

Carol Mochan: I am interested in the notion that we have a legal relationship with 13-year-olds and under, so anything that you might have on that issue that could help us would be very helpful. Thank you.

Emma Harper: I want to pick up on Nick Hobbs’s comment about wellbeing officers and how we do not really know how many there are or what they do. Is it more of a job on top of another job? Does it account for, say, two hours out of their six-hour day or whatever? Is there a ratio depending on the number of kids? After all, it sounds as if there are lots of young people in different academies. I am interested in finding out who does an assessment of wellbeing officers, what they do and how they support young people.

Brian Whittle talked about young people having fun playing football, but all of this reminds me of the draft in America. I lived in Los Angeles for 14 years and followed American football. It was all about business; it was all about money; it was all about commodity. How do we support the wellbeing of young people and assess the officers who are supposed to be helping them?

Nick Hobbs: I think that we all agree that participating in sports—in this case, football—can be a really important part of realising children’s rights. It can be hugely beneficial to their rights to physical health, mental health, socialisation and development; it can help them build relationships; and it can help them become more resilient. All of that can have broader social benefits beyond the individual. However, for that to happen you need a kind of rights-respecting structure and model that achieves what Brian Whittle wants to achieve—that is, children who want to play football getting to play football in an environment that allows them to really enjoy it.

Obviously, versions of this committee have looked at various long-standing and historical issues related to Scottish football, ranging from the issues raised in the previous petition to things such as bullying and the ability to play for your school team while also playing for one of the club academies. Indeed, at the very extreme end, the Parliament has also looked at really significant

concerns about safeguarding and child protection. I might not have got the job title correct before, but the existence of those specific job roles in each of the clubs is a response, I think, to all those things.

I do not know whether anyone has done an assessment of whether that structure is in place, whether the roles are sufficiently well resourced, sufficiently senior, sufficiently independent and sufficiently supported to challenge practice, and I think that it would be really useful for the committee to consider that. As for whether there is evidence available from the SFA or whether it has conducted any kind of internal evaluation, I do not know. That would be a really useful question to ask it if and when it appears before the committee in due course.

10:30

Emma Harper: I have another really quick question, which is for Scott Robertson. You said that kids are allowed to play for their school teams now. Is that happening and why would anyone want to ban kids from playing for their own school team?

Scott Robertson: That is an excellent question that we have asked many times. The argument was always that, if kids got injured playing with school friends or for their school team, they would not be able to play for the professional club at the weekend or on the Sunday. The stock argument was always about what would happen if they got injured, but that made no sense whatsoever. Kids who are growing up should play with their friends. Only a tiny percentage will make it to any kind of professional level, so why should they sacrifice playing with their friends in childhood or having the freedom to play and enjoy schools football?

I have been involved in schools football and it is a different environment altogether. Kids are free to try skills and tricks that might not be allowed in a more formal or professional environment. Why would you not let them do that?

I hear stories about club academy coaches saying, "If you're playing for your school, you might not play for us at the weekend." There can be pressure and an imbalance of power. Pressure is put on kids not to play. I need to have a conversation and a catch-up with my colleagues at the Scottish Schools Football Association.

Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): Good morning. I want to spend some time focusing on the youngest players. I am going right back to that early age and thinking about my own son when he was a wee mini-kicker. He decided that he did not really like football, but some of his friends liked it and went on to play for local youth teams in Ayrshire, where I live. I am thinking about those kids and about the

fact that some of them were being recruited to development centres as a precursor to the academies when they were as young as five. I can understand how seductive and exciting it would be for a family to have a scout come down to see a young player and decide that that person might be good for the club and that they want to sign them up to a development centre.

What do the panel members think about children as young as five becoming involved? If that is when they set out, they might end up in a system in which the club that takes them on when they are five or six signs them up to the CAS programme when they are 10 or so and have never experienced the ability to play anywhere else. They might not play for their school or local team during that time, but they are very young. I am interested in what you think about that, starting with Nick Hobbs, who can speak from the perspective of the children's commissioner.

Nick Hobbs: We have touched on international comparators. As part of our engagement on the issue, we have done a bit of work to find out what rules and processes exist in other countries around Europe.

Norway is one of the most interesting examples. It has a population of a similar size to Scotland's and is consistently right at the very top of any per-head-adjusted league tables of medals won at the summer or winter Olympics. It is a hugely successful sporting nation and is very good at the moment at developing young footballers.

Norway does things very differently from how we do them in Scotland. It incorporated the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child into its law significantly before we did that in Scotland and is an instructive example, given where we are in the incorporation journey. The Norwegian Olympic and Paralympic Committee and Confederation of Sports adopted a set of principles about children's rights in sport, basing that on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and grounding it in the idea that sport should be fun and enjoyable. When you are a child, sport should be something that you enjoy doing and should be pleasurable.

Norway has applied those principles to football and has none of the rules that we have. I spoke to the former legal director of the Norwegian Football Association, who was able to confirm that. Children in Norway participate much more in sport. They are much more able to try out different sports. They do not get locked into a pathway at an early age. In Norway, 85 per cent of children aged two to 15 participate in sport at least once a week, whereas the figure is about 65 or 66 per cent in Scotland. They are significantly better at getting children involved in sport, keeping them involved and then developing them to a high or

elite standard. That is a useful and instructive example for Scotland to consider.

Elena Whitham: Are you confident that those development centres have enough protections and support in place for youngsters? Is their wellbeing protected and looked after enough?

Nick Hobbs: For me, it goes back to the question about how the whole process works. The clubs see that and have been very open about it in the meetings that we have had. They were very open in the evidence that they gave to the Public Petitions Committee that this is fundamentally about money. It is about moving children through a system so that, at the end of it, they can take a relatively small number of them and make money out of them somehow, by either bringing them into the first team and therefore saving the money that they would spend on transferring a player in—Alex Waksman talked about the SFA's report, which suggests that clubs are not very good at that—or by getting some sort of fee for them from another Scottish club or maybe from an English club when they are 16 and they move. It is about seeing them as economic assets all the way through the process, and that starts from the very beginning. It is about selling to a very young child the dream of playing for their childhood club or their mum or dad's childhood club.

It is about the way in which the legal relationships are constructed. They are contracts, as a matter of law, although the SFA disputed that before the committee. You will not find a lawyer who will come to this committee and say on the record that they are not contracts, because they are contracts, and writing "This is not a contract" on them does not change that. The entire process is based on putting children into an unequal and disadvantageous legal relationship early on that then allows the club to treat them in a particular way when they start to become more valuable or their value becomes clearer.

A few years ago, the Centre for Sport and Human Rights produced a white paper in which it argued that the involvement of children in elite sport should be considered as labour exploitation under the International Labour Organization conventions, for exactly some of those reasons. The CSHR identified issues around the risk of injury that children get from training more extensively and the impact on their education. I have heard, and I believe that some committee members have also heard, anecdotal concerns about the ways in which the clubs impact on children's ability to access education, on their social life and their interaction with peers and on family life as a result of the elevated training threshold.

When we get to the later stages, we get into the question of commercial exploitation or,

increasingly these days, the monetisation of data. I have heard concerns expressed about betting companies and data analytics firms having access to the personal information of children who are in the youth academy system and then monetising it in ways that children will not understand or be able to protect themselves against.

Elena Whitham: I would also like to explore the CAS programme's responsibility to protect children from overenthusiastic parental influence. Parents want the best for their children, but it is easy not only for young people but for their parents to get excited about the prospects of what might happen. Should there be an additional layer of safeguarding in the academy settings so that clubs are alive to the possibility of pressure being put on those young people by their families?

Nick Hobbs: There is an interesting point to note about the registration documents and the contracts that are signed. The parent signs on the child's behalf the two-year registration that Alex Waksman and Mahesh Madlani have referred to when the child is roughly 14 or 15. An interesting legal complication arises from that, because if a 16-year-old signed a contract with terms that were as disadvantageous as the terms of the registration documents, they could apply to the court to have the contract set aside under the terms of the Age of Legal Capacity (Scotland) Act 1991. However, because, in this case, the contract will have been signed by the young person's parents, they cannot do that.

There is a question about whether parents understand the import and significance of what they are signing. In many ways, parents are just as open to the seductive promise of their child playing for their childhood club and turning professional one day, with the potential to earn significantly more money than anyone in the family would, historically, have been able to earn. There is a lot of pressure on parents. In the vast majority of cases, most parents will not have access to legal advice or representation when they sign such agreements, which is a huge issue.

Elena Whitham: The way that you have set that out is very helpful.

Mahesh Madlani: There is one registration form for everyone to sign—it is the same form whether someone is nine, 15 or 30. Kieran Tierney—a very good Scottish footballer who used to be the Celtic captain—has just returned to Celtic from Arsenal. He will have signed the same form that a nine-year-old would sign.

The form has changed over time—we have provided copies of various guises of it to the committee. The SFA is expecting nine-year-olds to read it and the SPFL's articles of association and memorandums from Companies House, as well as

1,000 pages of rules. They are expected to scan a QR code to access all of that—the SFA does not have to give them the documents to read, nor does it have to explain the documents to them. Celtic runs a development programme for children from the age of five. Should those documents be brought up as part of that programme? Should the clubs have sessions on those rules? Potentially.

Beyond the four people who are on the panel—and perhaps Mr Smith, who is behind me—has anyone read all those documents?

Mr Whittle, you said that you have grandchildren who play for a CAS academy. It is not on you to read them, as you are their grandparent, not their parent, but have their parents read all those documents? Have the players read them? Did you explain the documents to them? As you are on the committee, you would know more than most. Who explains those documents to children? There are some children sitting behind us. I appreciate that they have not been called to give evidence, but did they know what they were signing up for if they play for a CAS academy? Who explained more than 2,000 pages of intensive legal documentation to a nine-year-old and was comfortable with them signing a registration form?

Elena Whitham: My questions were designed to provoke such a response. I have looked at the documents that you sent to the committee, and they are rather complicated. We are all guilty of clicking through things, never mind articles of association, and not reading everything—we are not very good at that. To sign on behalf of a young person who is at such a young age or to get them to sign the documents themselves without fully understanding what that could mean for them is a huge issue with regard to safeguarding and protecting their wellbeing.

In asking my final question, I want to understand what the new player journey is supposed to look like, versus the player pathway that was in place before it. The player journey has been badged as something that will ensure that young people enjoy the game, because they will be able to participate without the extra pressure. It is supposed to take into account some of the things that we have been talking about. Do you think that that will be the case? Is that what the new player journey has demonstrated so far?

Scott Robertson: No. I would like to get some kind of formal consultation set up between the SYFA and the SFA before changes are made. We were not told about that particular wording change until after it had been made. There was no collaboration beforehand.

I will touch on a couple of your other points. After we lodged the public petition, the registration form was changed. The parent and the young

player used to have to sign the form in seven different places to acknowledge that they could not play schools football and that they were tied in and could not move clubs. They had to sign every line—they could not miss out any of them. Mysteriously, that form, which people had been required to sign in multiple places so that they were aware of the most important rules, disappeared without a word to anyone.

10:45

I agree with you. I am at Musselburgh Windsor, and I get emails from big SPFL clubs all the time asking whether, for example, little Freddie, who is six or seven, can come along to one of their training camps. He will be decked out in gear as soon as he arrives, and photographs will be taken in front of the press board, as though he is on the road to fame and fortune. It is very easy to get carried away when that sales pitch is made.

Inevitably, 99 per cent of the kids will be released or asked not to come back. The issue is how we handle that fall from grace. I would never say, “Don’t go,” because it provides the kids with more coaching and different techniques—I am quite happy to expose kids to more football—but we need to have a proper rethink about how we manage that process and how it is sold.

Elena Whitham: I grew up in Canada, and what you describe reflects the hockey system there. It is very seductive for young people to get that kind of recognition at a young age, but the long-term impact is significant. I am not suggesting for one moment that that should never happen, because we want to recognise when somebody has talent. We want to nurture that, because we want to get those players into our teams, including, we hope, our national teams, so that we have strong players in Scotland.

It would have been really good to hear directly from young people. I know that you are here representing their voices, but I am glad to see that there are some young people in the gallery. Those are really uncomfy benches to sit on, so I am amazed that you are not wiggling about more and that we are not getting more noise over here. It would have been fantastic to hear from them.

Scott Robertson: I hope that they are not used to sitting on the bench. [*Laughter.*]

Maybe I could fill that little gap for you by reading again from the “Getting it Right for Every Child in Scottish Football” report. A 12 to 15-year-old boy is quoted as saying:

“Academy coaches should rotate round grassroots clubs and share knowledge to coaches etc from younger ages then talent scouted at older age groups so that kids remain happy and playing at grassroots longer with less pressure until more mature to handle academy level.”

Brian Whittle: I listened intently to your point, Mr Madlani. On whether I know what my grandkids have signed, yes, I understand completely what they have signed. I appreciate that I might be in a different situation from most people, given that I was a national youth coach in the past, but I very much know what they have signed.

I find myself quite frustrated, gentlemen—I am going to be honest with you—because the SFA and the SPFL have questions to answer. I am hearing a lot of conflated evidence, and I am actually quite angry about it, because I do not think you have put your case across well at all. You brought the example of Norway into the discussion. I am well aware of what happens in Norway; I mention Norway quite a lot in the context of youth involvement in sport. You say that Norway is very successful at international level, but we need to understand why and where it is successful. We are not Norway—we are Scotland.

The other thing that gets to me is the fact that the situation in Scotland has been compared to the one in England. The two situations cannot be compared, because, from a financial point of view, England is miles ahead of us in its ability to throw cash at the problem. Scotland cannot have the same solution as England has. It is also a FIFA problem. That has not been mentioned once in this discussion.

Despite the talk about incorporating the UNCRC, that has not been done in 14 years, so there are questions for the SFA and the SPFL to answer.

On the idea that our youth football system is not working, I do not see that. What I see is that the system is very competitive at younger ages but that it falls away among the older age groups. That is why I want to talk about how we transition from youth football to adult football. There are 2,700 players in our academies, and 0.7 per cent of them end up in any kind of employment in football. That return is simply not good enough. What are your views on the new co-operation system for youth players in the transition phase? How are we transitioning our youth players from youth level to senior level?

Alexander Waksman: I will let someone else respond to that specific question, but I will pick up a couple of your other points.

On international comparisons, we are talking about countries with which the SFA itself has drawn comparisons. We have considered its report; it has drawn comparisons between Scotland and what it says are peer countries, based on things such as population size. The SFA did the analysis to look at things such as how much game time under-21 players are getting, whether a transfer value model is successfully

being adopted and how the clubs are generating revenue. Those are the SFA's comparisons. We are not making them up; we are taking its evidence and saying that, on its evidence, Scotland is performing badly against international comparators. That is the SFA's own conclusion.

Brian Whittle: You are talking about under-21s.

Alexander Waksman: Yes—under-21s. However, the SFA's conclusion was that there is a series of problems in the youth system in Scotland, based on comparisons that it has made with what it thinks are peer countries. That is not us saying that those are the right comparisons—it is the SFA that is doing that. We are taking its evidence and saying that, on the basis of its evidence, the system is not working.

Brian Whittle: Yes, but the evidence that gets to me is that one of the reasons why we are so poor is that about 2,500 coaches are still waiting to get accredited. That is a problem.

Alexander Waksman: There are reasons for that, one of which is that the SFA insists on all coaches going through its training programme, even if it is only an hour-long online course that involves watching a movie. It sets a restriction on which programmes coaches can go through. It would be absolutely wonderful if the SFA allowed other providers to come in and get more coaches accredited, but it does not allow that.

Brian Whittle: It is the same across all sports.

Alexander Waksman: That is fine. I am not making any judgments about other sports. I am responding to the point that you raised. The SFA itself imposes a restriction that acts as a bottleneck on how many coaches can get through, so it is up to the SFA to solve that.

Brian Whittle: That is a specific problem. If you had come here with that specific problem, I would have agreed with you. In my view, there are other major failings in the SFA and the SPFL, but you have not presented those today. My question was about the co-operation system.

Alexander Waksman: I have explained one of the points that you mentioned that you were displeased about. You mentioned England. We were asked a question about England, so we answered it. As for FIFA, I am not sure which specific FIFA problem you are referring to, but FIFA has a template for how clubs can make a return on their investment for training people—that is on its books. In its correspondence with us and the children's commissioner, the SFA endorsed that model, but it maintains a completely different model in its rules. Again, that is its evidence—

Brian Whittle: Have you approached FIFA on that? The SFA is a member of FIFA, so it has to adhere to its rules.

Alexander Waksman: Yes, and the SFA has told us that it adopts the training compensation model that FIFA endorses. It is silent on the fact that it also has the development contribution system, which FIFA does not endorse, so it is trying to—

Brian Whittle: But have you written to FIFA about that?

Alexander Waksman: We do not need to write to FIFA. Once—

Brian Whittle: Yes, you do, because the SFA is a member of FIFA. It has to abide by FIFA rules, so surely that is an avenue to—

Alexander Waksman: The FIFA rules do not preclude the SFA, legally, from having the development contribution. We say that competition law precludes it, but the FIFA rules do not preclude it. What we are saying is that the FIFA model for compensation is a good one, which the SFA seemed to endorse, but the SPFL maintains an additional separate system that locks players in. That is the evidence on that, but others might want to speak about the co-operation system for players transitioning to the adult game.

Nick Hobbs: The SFA is a member of FIFA, so it is open to the SFA to approach FIFA if it does not think that the money that clubs are getting through the FIFA model is sufficient, but I am not aware of whether it has done that. I believe that the Minister for Public Health, Women's Health and Sport wrote to FIFA twice on the issue. The second letter was not responded to, so she asked whether FIFA viewed some of those rules around the length of registration agreements and training compensation as acceptable. That question was asked two or three years ago and, despite having been chased on a number of occasions, FIFA has not responded to the minister.

Brian Whittle: I might have a go myself. However, the SFA and the SPFL have said in evidence that they have to adhere to FIFA rules.

Nick Hobbs: They do, but FIFA rules do not require them to have their own development contribution model.

Mahesh Madlani: I am glad that you raised the point about coaches, because it is also a competition law issue. We have had a case in the competition appeals tribunal concerning the issue of education providers not being able to restrict the market to themselves. The issue was actually to do with law firms, because a company called Socrates brought a claim against the Law Society of England and Wales over training for solicitors in certain areas—I think that the issue involved anti-money laundering legislation courses, which we are all required to do. The result was a ruling that an education provider cannot lock the market to

itself. The Law Society—which is analogous to the SFA in this example—was not allowed to do that. The court told it that it could not restrict the market in that way.

The issue with coaches is a similar competition issue, but it was brought up after we filed our complaint, which is why it is not in it. I am more than happy to write to you about that.

Brian Whittle: I am well aware of the situation that you describe. I am still a senior coach, and I have to renew all the time, so I am aware that the situation is very restricted with regard to where people can get their qualifications from. That is the case across the board.

I want to go back to the issue of the co-operation system that has been discussed. In your opinion, should that model apply to the younger age groups, too?

Mahesh Madlani: Is that the system that is going to be implemented in relation to the loans for the 18 to 21-year-olds?

Brian Whittle: Yes.

Mahesh Madlani: I believe that that is only just coming in, so we cannot speak to any evidence. Therefore, my remarks will involve speculation.

If not many of the 2,856 players in CAS academies—that is the maximum number; we do not think that the figure is quite that high, based on letters that we have seen from the SFA—are making it beyond the age of 15 or 16, what does it matter whether they are available to go on loan at 18? If they are not there, that does not matter.

I think that the SFA would accept that we need to give more game time to our younger players, maybe in lower leagues, to get them ready for first-team football. Accepting that that is the aim, our complaint says that game time is something that would be improved by deleting four rules out of a 400-page book.

I think that we can all agree that we want more game time for our young players. Everyone wants that; coaches, clubs and fans. I am a football fan and I want to see young players from my club play. It is great to see that. However, in order for that to happen, you have to ensure that the environment is there to let them play. We do not have that here.

Brian Whittle: I have a question on the revamped Scottish challenge cup, which is now known as the KDM evolution trophy. Do you endorse that new format? Is that a way forward?

Nick Hobbs: Scott Robertson can answer that.

Scott Robertson: I should say that the co-operation agreement, which you have asked about

a couple of times, will not come in until next season. It is an interesting development—

Brian Whittle: Have you guys been asked to be part of that?

Scott Robertson: Not at all. It will not involve SYFA players. It might give young people more opportunity to play, but let us see how that works out. However, I think that it was voted through only last Thursday at the SFA's annual general meeting.

Brian Whittle: You said that you had not managed to engage with Mr Maxwell, so I should finish by saying that I have done so, and I have put to him many of the points that I have put to you, and in the same manner. I say that so that you know that it is not just you guys who I am angry with.

11:00

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): Good morning. I thank our witnesses for attending today. I want to touch on the wider impact of issues on the Scottish football scene. Some of the issues have already been narrated, but I want to get the panel's take on the impact that the SFA and SPFL rules have on clubs' ability to recruit and develop talent.

Alexander Waksman: The rules limit clubs' ability to recruit, as they set hard restrictions on their ability to recruit players from a different academy. If a club is looking to recruit from a nearby academy where it thinks that there are talented players who are not getting game time and are not on the slate for getting a professional contract, it cannot approach them and they cannot approach it. If it has recruited from that club in the same season or the previous season, it cannot do so again. If, in some way, the club could engineer a situation in which it made its interest known and recruited a player, it would still have to pay a development contribution, which most clubs—possibly all clubs—are not going to pay. In addition, if they are within the two-year fixed registration period from age 15 onwards, there is a hard ban on the club getting them.

The impact on recruitment is clear. In particular, a club that was considering a strategy of investing heavily in its academy to attract the best players would find that all of those rules would stand in its way, because it could really only attract players who were under the age of 10 and were therefore not subject to all of those rules. That brings us back to the issue of recruiting players who are between the ages of five and 10, even though it is difficult to tell what the prospects of someone of that age are.

As I said, a club that is looking to recruit older players who it thinks are unlikely to get a professional contract at their club or are undervalued by their club would find that all of those rules would stand in its way. We therefore think that the rules have a strong negative impact on recruitment.

Paul Sweeney: On issues with the CAS system, the SFA's report states that clubs have admitted

"to notable failings within the academy, such as lack of access to training facilities throughout the season, or not having a gym which can be used by players, despite achieving 'Elite' status."

To what extent is the lack of investment in academies undermining the growth of talent in Scotland, and what needs to be tackled as a priority in that regard?

Alexander Waksman: The impact is severe, as is shown by the SFA's report, player testimonies and reports in publications such as *The Herald*, which published a discussion of old-fashioned coaching systems being used, with coaches emphasising fitness and saying, for example, "If you do all your fitness, we might get the balls out of the bag at the end of the session." Are youth players in Brazil going through the same system? They are probably not, which might explain the technical gap.

We are not here today to give you a list of specifications about exactly how each academy should run. What we are trying to say is that, if you correct the incentives, correct the model and create a system in which clubs have to invest in and develop great training facilities and give promising players game time in order to keep those players, because they have to compete to do that, that will create strong incentives for clubs to develop their players instead of relying on legal formulae and rules that the SFA and SPFL have imposed, which enable clubs to just hoard players regardless of whether the clubs deliver a good training experience.

Paul Sweeney: What is your assessment of the longer-term effects of the current regime on the competitive position of Scottish football generally? Obviously, Scotland is not a particularly competitive footballing nation internationally, and there are many theories about why that might be. Will you develop that point in greater detail?

Scott Robertson: I have been involved in football coaching since I was 17, which is almost 40 years ago. Scotland last went to a world cup in 1998. We instituted the pro-youth system in the 1996-97 season, so you can perhaps draw your own conclusion there.

Looking at recent results, we see that the Scotland under-21s lost 6-1 to Iceland in March.

All the kids who were in that blue jersey must have been in the CAS programme for eight to 10 years, yet we were thrashed by a country that has the population of Fife. That makes me think that it is not the success that it should be, given the money that is invested in it. I had a copy of a letter that the SFA wrote that said that, annually, about £10 million is invested in club academy Scotland. It does not seem to be bearing the fruit that we were promised.

At the tail end of last year, the *Daily Mail* published an article about Steve Clarke, in which the warning was given that

“Scotland will struggle to emulate the achievements of Croatia unless there’s a radical rethink on player development.”

Therefore, given the legal arguments, the lack of results and the issues that we are seeing in the system, the time feels right—I would probably broaden this out to the Scottish Youth FA as well—for this country to take a really hard look at what we are doing with our young football players.

Paul Sweeney: On that call for reform, have you benchmarked other regimes or other structures, and what do you think we could emulate to produce a more successful outcome?

Scott Robertson: No, I have not. It is very difficult to get that level of information. I do not have access to Scottish FA systems that would maybe allow us to get a pan-European view and do some analysis. At the end of the day, I am a volunteer who thought that he was just going to contribute a few hours every week, but it has turned into a lot more. I do not have the resources or the access to do that comparison. The nearest thing that we have is the SFA’s transition report, which compared us with other European countries.

Paul Sweeney: You feel that that does not sufficiently address the shortcomings of the system and that we need a more holistic and independent assessment of benchmarking against other nations. I am thinking of, say, the Olympics. Brian Whittle has more experience of that than I do, but Britain did not perform well in the Olympics in the 1990s, and there was a concerted effort to reassess completely how we approached elite talent development through the Olympic programme. That seemed to produce significant results, culminating in London 2012. I wonder whether a similar measure for football training is needed in Scotland.

Scott Robertson: I absolutely agree with you. This feels like a pivotal moment, given where we are with our football. We need to take a broader look at how we keep kids safe and developing and at how we fund our football. I agree with you 100 per cent.

Sandesh Gulhane: I will go back to the fact that this is about children. We are talking about kids as young as five and six who want to play a sport that they love. We are all talking about money and incentivisation, but it comes down to a game of kicking a ball that those children are in love with.

There is a balance, I feel, between children playing football and being coached and ensuring that clubs and others can protect their investment. From the point of view of children playing football—not from a club point of view or a financial point of view—what do you think is the position at the moment?

Alexander Waksman: I will start and will then maybe hand over to Nick Hobbs.

The best way to get children playing and enjoying football is to relieve the kids who are in the CAS system of certain rules, so that, when they are not getting game time or if they are not likely to turn professional, or if the club, for whatever reason, is not prioritising their individual development, they are free to play elsewhere, whether that is at another elite club or at a club that is lower down in the CAS performance levels.

Giving children the freedom that the rules currently restrict would obviously and inherently give them more opportunities to play football elsewhere. Even if they are not going to turn professional, children and their parents should have the autonomy to have a go and see whether they can make it. If they cannot, that is not the end of the world, but they will at least succeed or fail on their own footballing merits, rather than because another institution has told them that they are signed in or locked in. That would give children a lot more opportunities simply to play football, which is, of course, what they are there to do.

That will require a change of mindset. We spoke a little about the registration form, which asks players and their parents to commit to abide by all the rules and regulations of any recognised football authority. As we have discussed, that entails signing up to thousands of pages of rules, economic restrictions and all sorts of things that simply should not be part of the game.

We have focused on the rules that we think are anti-competitive, but we think that the broader impact of removing those rules would be to give many of those children more opportunities simply to play, rather than being locked into a club where they are not getting game time.

I will hand over to Nick Hobbs, to see whether he wants to mention any more children-specific issues.

Nick Hobbs: I do not have anything specific to add, but I will reiterate my earlier point. All of us around this table agree that sport and football can

have a positive impact on the lives of individual children and young people and on society more broadly. To achieve that, we need a rights-respecting model that is embedded throughout sport, including in football, but we are identifying a number of ways in which children's rights are not being prioritised by the football authorities and where the economic interests of clubs are given precedence. Until that is fixed, we suggest that that has, and will continue having, a negative impact on children's ability to play football at the highest level, to garner enjoyment from that and to exercise and enjoy their rights in the full way that we would all want them to.

Sandesh Gulhane: I will briefly touch on the issue of contracts. Is it right for children to sign contracts at that age? Do primary schools have contracts that say that children must abide by all the rules, and do five-year-olds have to sign those before they are allowed into primary school? What is the alternative? If I read all the ideas in a contract that someone gives me but do not agree with them, does that mean that my child is not allowed to play football?

Nick Hobbs: Those are legal agreements and are not open to negotiation. They are contracts as a matter of law, but they are not contracts that a child has any power to negotiate, because they are imposed on children by the SFA.

You raise an important point. The child's choice is to sign the contract and be bound to all the rules and regulations, with the consequences that flow from that, or not to sign it. They are presented with a really binary choice.

Sandesh Gulhane: I have a question that might be a little bit controversial. The clubs are not paying kids to play the game, so are we asking them to sign themselves into something that is akin to slavery?

Alexander Waksman: I am not sure that I would go quite that far, but it is certainly exploitative. Children are giving up a huge amount of their time. They go to multiple after-school training sessions every week, which they combine with their academic work. They probably do not get home until late at night and have to do much of their homework after that. They put in the effort week in, week out to try to get game time and to perform well for their clubs. They clearly represent a potential financial prospect for the clubs that they are assigned to and, as others have suggested, the prospect of succeeding in getting a professional contract is necessarily low, because not everyone can become a professional footballer.

That backdrop is combined with rules that do not even allow children to maximise their opportunity of succeeding, because they are

locked into whichever club they first sign up to. We think that that is all extremely exploitative. I would not go as far as saying that it is slavery, but it is exploitative of children who simply want to play football and to succeed or fail on their own merits.

11:15

Sandesh Gulhane: When I was with Queen's Park, we did very well. We won the league and got promoted from league 2 to league 1. That was a fantastic day. They were not professional footballers; we were an amateur club at that time. We basically had a brand-new squad at the start of the league 1 campaign. That is because the previous players did not have a contract and they were poached by everyone above and below us. After seeing that group of players come through, it was heartbreaking not to be able to keep them together because they did not have contracts.

Does it not seem that, for a child who has signed a one-year contract, the situation is exactly the same as it was for the players at Queen's Park when I was there, who ended their contracts and chose what they wanted to do at that point?

Mahesh Madlani: Yes, but that is a fundamental aspect of contract law in the United Kingdom, unless we are about to say that workers should not have contractual rights vis-à-vis their employers. I am not entirely sure what needs to change about that. At the end of the day, those players presumably had short-term contracts because the club was not prepared to risk carrying the liability of paying money to them in the event that it was not promoted.

You cannot have your cake and eat it, as is the case with the unilateral extension. From the player's perspective, it is one year with no certainty or control, but the club can renew the contract if it feels like it, whenever it wants, and that will be imposed by the rules. It is different for a professional footballer. Manchester United, in England, famously tried to insert a one-year extension option into every player's contract, which would let it renew the contract in the last year. However, that player would get to negotiate their contract; these children do not get anything.

That is at the very heart of why we say that it is an abuse of a dominant position and why it breaches the UK Competition Act 1998. There is no getting around it—an unfair trading term is imposed on those children, who have no say. It is not allowed under UK law at all; there are no exemptions. There is no case law that says that that is permitted in any industry whatsoever. Why should the exemption to that be children in football? It does not even apply to professional footballers—they have more rights than these children.

It is insanity that the current situation has been allowed to persist by the SFA, the SPFL and, to be frank, by the Competition and Markets Authority. It is a failed market, in the words of the SFA, which is meant to run it. The CMA has said, by issuing the letter, that it is concerned about a breach of competition law.

That is it—there is nothing else to that point, if I am honest.

Sandesh Gulhane: I am aware that we are running out of time, so I will keep my next question short. Football is tribal—it is probably the most tribal popular activity. If you are a fan of a football club, you think that it is brilliant beyond everything else and that the other clubs are pretty much rubbish, as I do when I am watching my team.

That is, in my view, the reason why clubs have the ability to do what they want, because they are so strongly supported—no matter what they do, a huge amount of people will back them, because they are just doing the best for the club. Is there another place where you are locked into doing something? Is there anything in society that is similar to what is happening in youth football?

Mahesh Madlani: Not to my knowledge. I am not aware of any market that has those features.

On the point about the support that players get, especially from fans, I note that I am a Liverpool fan. You said that you are an Arsenal fan, so I appreciate that it might not be great to hear a Liverpool fan speaking, given that we won the title. However, unless there is another Liverpool fan in the room, no one has experienced that heartbreak that you mentioned more than me. Our prized academy player Trent Alexander-Arnold has won everything for us. He said that he wanted to captain the club. He had been at the club since he was six and, when we won the UEFA champions league, he was pictured with Steven Gerrard—he was the anointed heir—but he left on a free transfer, regardless. As much as that upset me as a football fan, I recognise, as a member of the public, that that has to be tolerated in a country such as this. He was employed by the club: he agreed a contract with it and it finished. He should not have been forced—and he was not forced—to stay somewhere when he did not want to be there.

Why is Trent Alexander-Arnold allowed to have that right? Why can he, as an adult, do that—with all the advice that he can get from his family and from agents; he earns millions of pounds and can afford the best advice in the world if he wants it—but 13-year-olds in Scotland cannot? Nothing angers me more about this problem than the fact that that difference can exist. I appreciate that the players get support, but we all get support from the people who employ us. No one else is allowed to do that to their workers.

To touch on the slavery point, again, I would not at all suggest that the situation goes as far as slavery. However, last summer, when we were considering whether to make a complaint, I checked for the SFA's modern slavery statement and was struck by the fact that, at least as late as June 2024, it did not have one—and I am pretty sure that that was a requirement. The SPFL's statement is out of date. If we want an indication of how much those organisations care about this issue, I think that the fact that they cannot even comply with that requirement speaks volumes.

We need to do more to help Scottish children. The aim is not to make people more money. I know that the Governments of the day want economic growth, but that is not what this is about. I think that everyone in this room wants to see Scotland do well as a country in football tournaments—we want to see the team play and go far in a world cup. After all, Wales got to the semi-finals of the UEFA European championships in 2016. In the 1980s, Scotland had some of the best players in the world. I might have a bias as a Liverpool fan, because Liverpool's best-ever striker was Scottish—

The Convener: Sorry, Mr Madlani, but we have run over time.

Mahesh Madlani: Apologies.

The Convener: You have answered the substantive point.

I think that there is a final supplementary question from Dr Gulhane. Do you have any further questions?

Sandesh Gulhane: I am sorry, convener—I cannot hear you.

The Convener: Can we switch on my microphone, please? *[Interruption.]* It does not appear to be working. I briefly suspend the meeting.

11:22

Meeting suspended.

11:23

On resuming—

The Convener: I thank the witnesses for their attendance and their evidence today.

At the next meeting, we will take evidence on children and young people's participation in sport and physical activity.

11:23

Meeting continued in private until 12:06.

This is the final edition of the *Official Report* of this meeting. It is part of the Scottish Parliament *Official Report* archive and has been sent for legal deposit.

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