



OFFICIAL REPORT
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Health, Social Care and Sport Committee

Tuesday 23 September 2025

Session 6



The Scottish Parliament
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Tuesday 23 September 2025

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HEALTH, SOCIAL CARE AND SPORT COMMITTEE

24th 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:

Neil Doncaster (Scottish Professional Football League)

Neil Gray (Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care)

Ian Maxwell (Scottish Football Association)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Alex Bruce

LOCATION

The Sir Alexander Fleming Room (CR3)

Scottish Parliament

Health, Social Care and Sport Committee

Tuesday 23 September 2025

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:15]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Clare Haughey): Good morning, and welcome to the 24th meeting in 2025 of the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee. I have received apologies from Joe FitzPatrick and Sandesh Gulhane.

The first item on our agenda is a decision on taking business in private. Does the committee agree to take items 5, 6, 7 and 8 in private?

Members indicated agreement.

Welfare and Sustainability in Scottish Youth Football

09:15

The Convener: Our next item is oral evidence from representatives of the Scottish Professional Football League and the Scottish Football Association, on welfare and sustainability in Scottish youth football. I welcome Neil Doncaster, chief executive, Scottish Professional Football League, and Ian Maxwell, chief executive, Scottish Football Association.

We will move straight to questions. Can you set out the Scottish football youth development system and how it operates?

Ian Maxwell (Scottish Football Association): From a player's perspective, development starts at the earliest age. We have programmes in place for four-year-olds—what we call fun fours—upwards. We want to engage young Scottish children as early as possible in football and in sport generally, because everybody is aware of the benefits.

In the early stages of children's football engagement, they go from four-a-side, to five-a-side, to seven-a-side and then to nine-a-side. We have programmes, processes and coaching techniques in place for developing players over those years. They then move to 11-a-side at the under-13 stage.

Up to that point, the young people have been under the jurisdiction of the Scottish Youth Football Association and Scottish Women's Football. We are involved in those processes and programmes and make sure that, from a coaching perspective, things are being done in the way that we feel they should be done.

At 13, the young people move either into club academy Scotland in the boys' game or stay in the SYFA and play more in the grass-roots scheme, and that process continues until the age of 16 or 17, when players either turn professional or continue their football development in a grass-roots context, moving on to amateur football and suchlike.

Development spans every age. We have players at four and we have players at 96, who play walking football. All of them are part of the football pathway—the player journey, as we see it.

The Convener: You have touched on the player journey. You launched a new document on that in February. Will you update the committee on progress with implementation?

Ian Maxwell: The player journey is changing and evolving as football and life evolve. Whereas, traditionally, there has been a desire to have

players in clubs and playing for teams, we are now seeing that players just want to play. They want to play with their friends and they want to be involved in football in a social context—it is less about the competitive element.

A recent big focus of ours has been on making sure that there are opportunities, pathways and places for those players who do not think that they will be footballers, and do not want to be footballers, but who love playing with their friends, being part of a team, the physical challenges and everything else that being part of a sport involves, albeit that they do not really enjoy the competitive element. In conjunction with the SYFA and other partners, therefore, we are looking at those opportunities.

We are running a number of programmes up and down the country, at various age groups, which use football as the hook—as a chance to engage young people, for example, to improve their attainment at school. Our extra time programme gives kids breakfast in the morning, a bit of physical activity before they go to school and a bit of after-school care. The results from that are huge, with attainment and attendance up, and the impact on the individuals has been significant. It is all about looking at football from a wellbeing rather than a purely competitive perspective.

We want to develop good players, and we do so. Developing good players is important, because the successful performance of the men's and women's national teams is a key driver for a lot of what happens across the country. We have a big part to play in that respect, but there is just as much of a focus on developing individuals and giving them tools that they will use for the rest of their lives, and not only in a footballing context. That has been a focus of our player journey—we want to make sure that those opportunities are available.

The Convener: How do you evaluate and monitor progress on the plan?

Ian Maxwell: In effect, we do that through participation numbers, which we monitor annually. Those numbers are continuing to grow, and we are seeing participation in every element of the game. There has been long-standing participation in the boys' game; participation in the girls' and women's games is pretty much in its infancy by comparison, but participation is growing in boys' football, women's football, para-football and all the various disciplines, too. Participation is continuing to increase, because there is such engagement across the country.

That leads to other challenges, because everyone who wants to play needs somewhere to play. We undoubtedly face a challenge in relation to facilities across the country. We have launched

our pitching in facilities fund, through which we aim to raise £50 million over the next five years to upgrade existing pitches, build new pitches and address the issue of changing facilities in community spaces. The facilities that I would have used when I was a youngster are not fit for purpose to meet the needs of those participating in the girls' and women's games and the para game, so we are looking at the sporting infrastructure across the country. We will raise our own funds, and we will put them to good use across the country by making those improvements, because, as I have said, everybody who wants to play needs somewhere to do it.

We are really keen to fix the facilities challenge that we face across the country, and it would be good to get the committee's views on how we can bring that work to life and what else we can do in that area.

The Convener: You mentioned the funding that you want to raise. How much do you currently invest in Scottish youth football?

Ian Maxwell: That is a very good question. There is the direct investment that goes into the affiliated national associations, but more of the investment that we put in goes towards the 70 regional staff up and down the country who spend all their time engaging with grass-roots and local community clubs. It is a significant figure. I can come back to you with a definite number, but we invest millions of pounds annually in youth football up and down the country.

The Convener: Are those 70 regional staff your own staff?

Ian Maxwell: Yes, they are Scottish FA staff.

The Convener: How much direct funding do you provide to the Scottish Youth Football Association?

Ian Maxwell: I think that we give the SYFA a cash subsidy of about £35,000 a year. In addition, it uses the offices in Hampden and receives in-kind support to help it function as an organisation.

However, as I have said, the vast majority of the support that we give Scottish youth football is provided through our regional staff, who spend a huge amount of time dedicated to grass-roots clubs. Their sole focus is grass-roots clubs and grass-roots football development. Therefore, although that funding is not direct funding for the SYFA, it goes directly into the youth game across the country.

The Convener: Thirty-five thousand pounds for the governing body of youth football does not sound like a great deal. It is probably less than the cost of one full-time employee.

Ian Maxwell: I think that that is a very particular view. As I have said, we have 70 staff, who produce programmes that they help the grass-roots clubs to run. Therefore, the sum that is invested by the Scottish FA in youth football up and down the country will be millions of pounds. I can come back to you with the figure—off the top of my head, I do not know what it is.

The Convener: I am focusing on the governing body, as opposed to youth football more widely. Thirty-five thousand pounds does not sound like a great deal of money to invest in the body that governs all of that activity right across the country.

Ian Maxwell: The governing body will generate its own income; it has the option to do so through commercial partnerships. Clubs will pay a fee to affiliate with the national association. As a body, the SYFA will generate significantly more than the income that we give it. As I have said, instead of looking at the amount that is directly invested in the SYFA, we need to look at the bigger picture of the broader investment that goes into youth football as a whole across the country.

The Convener: It is still quite a small figure for the governing body. I imagine that your organisation gets much more investment than £35,000 a year and that you are able to generate money elsewhere.

Ian Maxwell: What do you mean by “getting investment”? We generate the vast majority of the income that we have, whether it be through the men’s and women’s A teams or commercial partnerships.

The Convener: So, you do not get any money from sportscotland or any other organisation.

Ian Maxwell: We do. It is not a lot, but we do get it.

The Convener: How much do you get?

Ian Maxwell: We get £1.3 million a year from sportscotland, which is invested in various elements of the game up and down the country. That £1.3 million has been static for close to 10 years now—it is, in real terms, a lot less than that now. Again, looking at our direct investment in the SYFA, the number of players, the amount of engagement and the number of individuals with whom we connect up and down the country, I would say that that £1.3 million, by the same measure, does not feel like a significant number.

The Convener: It is a lot more than £35,000.

I call David Torrance.

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): Good morning, gentlemen. Will you set out your position in relation to the issues that Realgrassroots and the Children and Young People’s Commissioner

Scotland raised in their complaints concerning Scottish football’s treatment of young players?

Neil Doncaster (Scottish Professional Football League): Thank you for the question. I reiterate that Ian Maxwell and I are extremely grateful for the opportunity to speak with you all and to correct some of the misinformation that has been presented to the committee in the past.

In our submissions, we set out in detail our position on the four rules that Realgrassroots and others questioned, and I am happy to set out that position now. The first of those rules is the SPFL rule that requires clubs to pay a development contribution when a youth player moves from one club to another. As we have made clear on numerous occasions, and to the best of our knowledge, no development contribution has ever been paid under SPFL rules, and that is because SPFL rule F36 makes it clear that

“no development contribution”

is

“payable ... where ... the Scottish FA”

has rules in place for

“reimbursement of training costs for youth players.”

As the Scottish FA has always had such rules in place over the 27-year history of the SPFL, no SPFL development contribution has ever been due. However, for the avoidance of any doubt, the SPFL has now removed from its rulebook all rules on development contribution. I hope that that deals with the first issue.

The second point of contention was on the no-approach rules. There are actually two sets of rules. The first is the Scottish FA rule that prohibits club academy Scotland players from approaching another club. At the committee’s meeting on 17 June 2025, there was somewhat inaccurate commentary about fines of £10,000 for breaching that rule. To be clear, Scottish FA rules do not allow for fines of £10,000 to be imposed; in fact, as far as we are aware, no fine has ever been levied on a young player under the no-approach rule. However, following consultation with its stakeholders, the SFA intends to remove that rule. The SPFL has a similar rule, which has been amended so that it now applies only to professional players.

Separately, a Scottish FA rule forbids clubs from approaching a CAS player without complying with the SPFL’s rules on commitment letters, and those rules require that clubs conduct approaches through the player’s existing club in the first instance. That system serves legitimate public interest objectives by helping to prevent the exploitation of young players and by preventing undue pressure from being placed on them. The

Scottish Youth FA, whose chair is the Realgrassroots co-founder Scott Robertson, has a very similar rule in its rulebook, as do many other sports.

In short, we believe that the rules regarding approaches by clubs are both proportionate and necessary. However, going forward, no rule will prevent youth players or their parents from approaching another club to seek a transfer to it.

09:30

The third area of contention was the so-called no-poach rule, which prevents elite-level CAS clubs from signing more than one player from another CAS club in the same age group in the same or the immediately preceding season. The Scottish FA has now started a consultation with stakeholders to establish whether that rule should remain in its current form.

The final area of contention was the so-called unilateral extension element. There was an allegation that CAS clubs are able to unilaterally extend the registration period for their players. However, the rule that allowed that to happen was removed from the Scottish FA rulebook in August 2022, and the committee was informed of that change then.

A player who signs a registration form with an elite-level CAS club at age group 15 can enter into a 24-month fixed registration; that can be terminated only with the agreement of both the player and the club. All other registrations last for 12 months. To be clear, and contrary to what has been previously suggested to the committee, CAS clubs cannot unilaterally extend the registration period of young players. I hope that that deals with the four areas of concern that have been brought to the committee.

David Torrance: What is your response to the claim that children are seen as economic assets? Children have rights. How are human rights protected and how is that governed?

Neil Doncaster: Some people—perhaps people in the CYPCS—do not recognise the importance of having a system of training compensation in place. The training compensation regime that exists in the Scottish FA's rulebook is entirely within the statutes of the Union of European Football Associations and FIFA regulations. It enables clubs that spend a lot of money on the development and training of young players to be reimbursed for that expense, but only at the point when a player who has moved to another club signs professional terms. That is entirely within the remit of FIFA statutes.

David Torrance: How do the rules in Scotland concerning the development contributions and the infrastructure that is in place to facilitate transfers between youth academies differ from those in the rest of the United Kingdom? Why do those differences exist?

Neil Doncaster: As I have set out, as far as we are aware, no development contribution has ever been paid in the 27-year history of the SPFL because, in that time, the Scottish FA has always had its own rules in relation to training compensation. However, to avoid any doubt, we have now removed that rule from the SPFL's rulebook. Minor differences will always exist between regimes in different parts of the world, but the regime that exists in Scotland is entirely consistent with what applies in the majority of countries within FIFA jurisdiction.

David Torrance: Have you considered adopting FIFA's compensation and solidarity contribution model? If not, why not?

Neil Doncaster: That question is probably more for Ian Maxwell, given that the Scottish FA is the FIFA member.

Ian Maxwell: The FIFA system is what we have, and that is the model that it has. FIFA governance looks at cross-border movement of players—for example, from the Scottish FA to an English or French association, or wherever it might be. FIFA concerns itself with that. The system that it has in place is that, once a player moves, a training contribution is paid at the point of that move. Nowadays, that can happen only when players get to 18, because of European Union law, Brexit and all those things.

Scottish football has the same system. Under our previous system, a training compensation fee was due when a player moved from club A to club B. After consultation with the committee, we removed that rule and brought it in line with the FIFA statutes, so that the fee triggers only when the player signs his first professional contract. If a player who is under 13 moves from one club to another, no fee is due at that point.

Under the solidarity model, if a transfer fee is paid for a player, FIFA takes 5 per cent of that and spreads that round all the clubs that have developed that player at any point in his player journey. That model is in our rulebook. It applies only to Scottish domestic transfers, so it would be triggered only if a Scottish player moved within Scotland from one Scottish club to another Scottish club.

Foreign players are captured under the FIFA solidarity contribution. I will give an example of a Scottish player who went to England. When John McGinn transfers from Aston Villa Football Club to wherever he goes next, a solidarity element of the

transfer fee will come back into the Scottish game, because that transfer has happened outside Scotland, if you see what I mean.

There is a bit of a misconception that we have developed our own system and are just doing what we want to. Our system is identical in terms of when the training contribution is paid. On your point about other countries, everybody has a slightly different system for various reasons—there are, for example, cultural and economic reasons why every system needs to be different.

Everybody talks about England, but most of the time that is not the right comparator because, from a footballing perspective, it is miles ahead of us. However, under its system, a fee is paid at the point at which the player moves. In recent history, 13, 14 and 15-year-olds have moved club in England, which has triggered a training compensation payment to be made at that point. We have moved away from that approach, which has obviously been in conjunction with the committee.

We are comfortable with the processes and the regulations that we have in place, and with the fact that they mirror the FIFA set up.

David Torrance: Thank you. I have no further questions.

The Convener: I will rewind a wee bit to the no-poach rule and an issue that was raised with us in the evidence session with Realgrassroots and other witnesses. If I am reading this right, elite CAS clubs can sign one player per age group from another CAS club per season. Those are the rules.

Ian Maxwell: Yes.

The Convener: We are talking about children here. They might well have parents who move around the country for work or for whatever reason. If a transfer has already taken place in a season, what mechanism is there to protect, say, a child who plays in a CAS club in Glasgow should their parents move to Aberdeen?

Ian Maxwell: The child would be allowed to move.

The Convener: The child would be allowed to move.

Ian Maxwell: The clubs can agree to do that. That rule is in place—it was implemented when we moved to the training compensation payment being due only when the first professional contract was signed.

I do not remember, but I think that it is written in the rules that clubs can agree to such a transfer. Although only one player can go from one club to another, if both clubs agree, a transfer can take place. That is exactly what would happen in the

case that you described—indeed, that happens. If anybody thinks for a minute that Scottish football clubs are not letting a player whose family are moving from Glasgow to Aberdeen move club, that is pure fantasy. There is no world in which that would be allowed to happen.

The Convener: That is good to hear. That is why I wanted to get you to put something on the record. Although I appreciate that we are talking about a business—the clubs are businesses—at the end of the day, we are talking about children and children's welfare.

Ian Maxwell: Absolutely.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): It strikes me that that rule prevents a bigger club from coming in and hoovering up a whole load of players to sit on a bench. Am I wrong about that?

Ian Maxwell: No—it does prevent that situation. We have to find the right balance when it comes to the movement of players. The number of players that an academy can have is capped. If we did not have that cap and an SYFA club that was doing really well lost all its players every year to a CAS club, your question would be the opposite, and you would be asking us to put a cap on that, because it is disruptive.

The focus of all our regulations is on preventing disruption to the player. For example, say club A has an under-13s squad and it takes a number of players from club B, which is a better team. What happens to the other guys? We need to look after them as well. It is about finding a balance, recognising that players will need and want to move for different reasons. The reality, which is what we see, is that players move regularly.

I think that a perception has been created that clubs are holding players against their will. Again, that does not happen. The reputation that a club has in any setting is key because, if it wants to attract players, its reputation for looking after players must be really good. It is football; it is sport—parents talk, players talk, everybody talks. If somebody finds out that something is not quite right, the footballing world finds out about it very quickly, so it is in everybody's best interest that the movement of players is allowed to happen as much as we need it to.

The set-up in club academy Scotland is that players get excellent provision—the best and most qualified coaches, diet and nutrition help, and educational support. All those clubs have full-time child wellbeing and protection officers. We have a raft of measures to ensure that the experience that those players get in a club academy Scotland setting is the best in the country, and we can send you information about those measures or talk through them now.

It is logical that there would not be a lot of movement, because players are getting a really good experience and are enjoying being there. If there is a problem, they have a conversation with their clubs—the clubs and the parents meet at least twice a year, and clubs have exit strategies in place to look after players when it comes to the end of their footballing journey with a club. We have a range of measures that are designed to protect the child, look after the player and ensure that their experience is as good as it can be. That is worth remembering.

It would be worth while for committee members to come to Hampden or visit an academy club to understand exactly how the system works and see it for yourselves. The issue has been on the go in Parliament committees, and we have been talking about this, for a long time. Over that period, I do not know how many committee members have gone to an academy and sat down with players, parents, coaches and clubs to talk to them and understand from their perspective what the experience is like. I absolutely urge anybody who wants to do that to let us know, so that we can facilitate that at any academy around the country; the clubs will be delighted to have you.

The perception is not the reality. We cannot argue with an anecdotal, “We know players are being held against their will,” and, in our experience, that does not happen. If it is happening, those players need to come and speak to us, and we will sort the problem for them.

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): We have heard in the evidence in other committees that the issue is the power imbalance with families. If you are saying to us that you are against those things and that the welfare of children is uppermost in your mind, how do we ensure that we right that power imbalance? Families might feel pressure from clubs because they do not want to disadvantage their young person.

Ian Maxwell: It is more about the processes and practices both in the club and in the association and making parents and players aware of their first port of call when there is an issue. In an elite academy set-up, there will be a full-time child wellbeing and protection officer in each club. We do a lot of training and monitoring with those officers—they can come to us if they need any support or advice on any issues that they deal with.

The parents have regular contact with coaches, who, at the start of a season, will set out a level of expectation about where they see the player in the squad and what their journey might look like over the course of a year. Coaches need to have at least two parents nights over the course of a season to continue that engagement.

If players are unhappy at their club, they will speak to the association, and we can then have conversations with the club to understand what the problems are and try to find a remedy. Ultimately, if the player is unhappy, we have a child wellbeing panel process in place. We have used it only three times since its inception; each time, the panel has found in favour of the player, and the registration has been terminated. There is experience and evidence of the processes that we have in place, and of how they look after and focus on the child and the player.

I accept the point that there is that power imbalance, for want of a better expression, across sport—that is a challenge that sport must face and deal with. However, our approach is to ensure that, when a player signs for a club, they understand what the regulations are and what the obligations that they have taken on are, and what the club’s obligations are to them. It is about making that process as user friendly, child friendly and understandable as possible.

We have done a lot of work on our website; we now give, and ask clubs to give, information to players and parents as soon as the registration process begins and as soon as clubs start to show interest in any sort of player. We set that out as straightforwardly as possible, so that everybody knows where to go when things do not go the way that they want them to.

09:45

Carol Mochan: How much time and effort has gone into implementing the recommendations from the Public Petitions Committee’s 2020 report? You have said that the rules are working for young people and that you are committed to that work. How much work have you done right through the system to ensure that everybody understands that that report was valued and that you want its recommendations to be implemented?

Ian Maxwell: That will always be a work in progress. With the best will in the world, it is challenging, and part of the challenge is that some parents will want to understand more than others. Some parents will see that a club wants to sign their child and go, “Right, this is brilliant, he’s going over there”—we regularly see pictures of parents sitting at a boardroom table, and the family are all there and everybody is delighted because their son signed a registration with a CAS club. It is about increasing awareness. As I said, we ensure that the parents are aware of parents nights and we give players the information at the point at which they are registering with a club. It is about keeping those awareness levels up, giving people opportunities to ask questions and giving them somewhere to go if they have a question

about registration processes. It is a constantly evolving piece of work.

Carol Mochan: Do you give priority to ensuring that the clubs continue to do that work?

Ian Maxwell: Absolutely.

Carol Mochan: Although the Competition and Markets Authority did not undertake an investigation, it wrote to you with recommendations. Have you made them public?

Ian Maxwell: No, we have not. The legal advice that we got was that that process is confidential. That said, we sent the committee an update on the correspondence that we have had with the CMA. In the letter that it sent us, it was very clear that it had not formally found that any competition law rules had been breached. What it asked us to do was to carry out a self-assessment against competition law, to take legal advice from a competition law perspective, to review our company law risks regularly and to make any changes that we saw fit off the back of those discussions, which is what we have done.

We are in regular dialogue with our legal experts on the matter. The Scottish FA board has gone through competition law training for the first time, which was really interesting, because we had never done that as a board and we learned a lot from that training, not only in relation to youth registrations but more generally across football.

We are continuing to engage with the CMA. We met it very quickly after it got in touch with us and we set out a plan with regard to the rules that we are working on. We have let it know about the changes that we have made, which Neil Doncaster talked about earlier, and we will continue that dialogue with it.

Carol Mochan: You talked about sport in general and about the fact that children should be doing sport for health and wellbeing. We understand that you are trying to train players for the future—of course, we love sport and competition as well. How much interaction have you had with sportscotland and other national agencies about the complaints that have been made against you? How will you ensure that you work together more positively in that area?

Ian Maxwell: We speak to sportscotland regularly—I have regular catch-ups with Forbes Dunlop, its chief exec. We have a partnership manager in the organisation and we have regular engagement about the funding that we get, how we are spending it and what it focuses on. Sportscotland is aware of the CMA correspondence and we have told it as much as we can about it.

With club academy Scotland, we start to get into competition law at the more elite level of the

game, which is less of a focus for sportscotland. Sportscotland is more focused on grass-roots development, player development and the younger age groups, so we have a slightly different relationship with it and cover different topics. However, it is obviously very aware of the correspondence.

The Convener: You spoke earlier about the consultation that you will do on rule changes. Who will you consult?

Ian Maxwell: Clubs and players. We have various club meetings and consultations—we consult our clubs on a lot of things, as you can imagine. A competition working group exists, which sits under the SPFL remit; we attended it earlier this month to talk about those rule changes. The no-approach rule, which Neil Doncaster talked about, will be changed—there is absolutely no reason why it will not.

We then need to work out the consultation with the players. Through our child wellbeing team, we have been doing more consultation on a more regular basis, particularly in recent years. That is because the young player's voice is critical in understanding the environment that they live in and play football in. Neil Doncaster and I, and our governance department, can sit and work out what a rule should look like, but, with the best will in the world, how can we know whether it will work in practice or what it means for the young players? There has to be engagement. We do that regularly.

Our most recent engagement was through the Children's Parliament, which was commissioned to undertake a survey, mostly of grass-roots football, but it did include some club academy Scotland clubs. The feedback from that was, unsurprisingly, that the players love playing football, they love playing sport, they love being out with their friends and they love being part of a team. Then we looked at the negatives, and every negative was, "We do not like it when our parents shout at us", "We do not like it when our coaches shout at the other coaches", "We do not like it when the parents shout at the ref", and so on—everything that they did not like involved an adult, a parent or a coach. That is a big part of our work at the moment.

We have a let them play campaign and a let them ref campaign. In the let them play campaign, we are trying to get parents to do exactly what it says on the tin: that is, stand at the side of the pitch and just watch. The players have coaches who will make them better players, and having too many voices confuses things. A lot of parents stand at the side of the pitch who have never played a game or got a coaching badge, and, with the best will in the world, will sit and dissect tactics until the cows come home. So the question is, how

do we dull that noise and get everybody on the side of a pitch to behave appropriately? Behaviour at grass-roots football and in senior football can be a problem, and it is not a Scottish issue—every time I am in UEFA company, the big thing that comes up is the behaviour within the grass-roots game and the behaviour of adults. We have a campaign to try and positively impact that, because we want the experience to be right for the players.

We have a let them ref campaign, which does the same thing, because everybody knows the scrutiny that referees are under, and that translates right down to the very early stages. We have referees aged 14 to 16 who are walking away from the game because of the abuse that they get at the side of a pitch. That just cannot happen. It is embarrassing in this day and age that we are seeing such instances. The question is how, through those campaigns, we can raise public awareness and positively impact on that negative behaviour.

The Convener: I do not think that anyone on the committee would disagree that behaviour should be appropriate on all sides.

Ian Maxwell: It is probably a wider sport thing—I do not think that it is specific to football. So, again, what can we do as a country to improve that?

The Convener: It is heartening to hear that you have done some consultation via the Children's Parliament. You mentioned your consultation on the rules with clubs and players. Have you given any thought to widening the stakeholders that you engage with? I am thinking of organisations such as the children's commissioner, youth advocacy services and legal experts.

Ian Maxwell: A legal expert will always be required to give advice on any rule change that we want to implement—that is just the world that we live in. The primary stakeholders are the clubs and the players, and it is important that we engage with them. We have not really thought about anything wider than that. That is not to say that we will not take it under consideration. We did not think of it this time, but we are happy to look at it.

The Convener: Given the concerns that have been raised over numerous years about children's welfare, expanding the stakeholders that you engage with further, particularly to include the children's commissioner, may well be something that you should consider.

Brian Whittle: I should have declared an interest when asking my last question: I have a grandson who is in the CAS system—and loving it, by the way.

I will follow up on something that my colleague Carol Mochan mentioned. She brought sportscotland into the conversation. What interests me, or rather, worries me, is not the fact that very few will ever get to a position of earning a living from elite sport and that there is a lot of drop-out; these kids have talent, physical literacy and ability. Rather, my concern is about how you manage that disappointment from their perspective. I am interested in your relationship with sportscotland, because I think that it has a bigger role to play; I have said that to Forbes Dunlop as well. Between the two of you, how can you better manage that disappointment, because it is inevitable that 99 per cent of the kids in the CAS system will not make it?

Ian Maxwell: That is a good question. However, I do not agree that 99 per cent will not make it. I get it when it comes to elite sport, but in Scottish football, we have four SPFL leagues, a Highland league, a Lowland league, east of Scotland leagues and west of Scotland leagues. All those leagues include players who are paid for playing football. When we talk about making it, people such as John McGinn and Scott McTominay are obviously among the very few—in every country, such players are the very few—but Scottish football is full of players who have come through the club academy system primarily, although some will have come through grass-roots football and will be late developers. Those players are making a living from playing football, which we need to celebrate. That is a positive. People get fixated on the very small number who make £100,000 a week, but there are a lot of people who make a good living playing football daily or at the weekend.

Dealing with the disappointment is key. I have been at a club and I understand that, when you are sitting down players of 16 or 17—or even 25-year-olds—and telling them that you are not giving them a professional contract, you have a duty of care to those individuals. From a club academy Scotland perspective, I touched on the engagement that parents have with clubs over the course of a season. At the point at which the club recognises that it is not going to keep a player, whatever the reason might be, it then engages quickly with the parent and has a conversation with them. The first question is, “Who's going to tell the player?” Does it come from the club, or does it come from the parent? They have that conversation, and then the club looks at what the next step is for that player. If it is a club academy Scotland elite club, it will have a conversation with the parents and the player about whether they want to try to stay at elite level, move down to progress their performance or go back to grass-roots football and just play with their pals. They

are asked what is best for them and where they think their football journey needs to go.

Depending on the outcome of that conversation, the club will then engage with either other club academy Scotland clubs or grass-roots clubs to try to find a club for that player. The club will send out medical data and sports science data to club academy Scotland's clubs, because club academy Scotland's understanding of players and the information and technology that it has are significant, so it can pass all that on.

There is an offer of wellbeing support, particularly at elite level—that comes through the full-time child wellbeing and protection officers. There are other things that clubs will do. I know that a number have a relationship with one or two companies that deal with sports scholarships in America, which is a fairly popular destination for some of our players who are not going to make it. They go over to America, they get a scholarship, they continue or start a university education over there, and they use their football as the means of achieving that.

Once you ask the question, have a discussion and get under the bonnet of it, there is a lot that happens that people are probably not aware of—they are not in that world so there is no reason for them to be aware of it. That all goes against the perception that clubs get a squad of 17-year-olds, pick one and say to the other 22, "Right, thanks very much, see you later." That is not how it works at all, and clubs will do a lot to make sure that they look after the players.

Again, it comes down to the reputational piece. Clubs want parents and players to be talking about how, although it did not work out for certain reasons, the club helped the player to move and helped them to continue their footballing journey. There is a lot that happens.

The sportscotland point is interesting. I will talk again about sport more widely because there will be things that happen in other sports. Rugby is a big sport, and there will be grass-roots or elite rugby players who will get to that similar age and face the question of what happens with them. As Brian Whittle said, given the resilience that they develop and the physical literacy skills that they have, it is about how we make best use of them. I feel that that is something that gets lost.

In a club academy Scotland setting in particular, because of the provision that it gets, we are not just developing players; we are developing people. They have an understanding of health, nutrition and fitness and they understand what it is like to be in a team and to take instruction. They also understand what it is like to deal with disappointment and how to be resilient. We are giving them people skills that others who do not

participate in sport may not have. We should think about how we can use people who have been in a sports environment to help to improve society. That sounds like a big target, but you get the point. We are developing better people as a result of the provision that has been made for them and the experience that they have had, and we need to use that. I am happy to have a conversation with sportscotland or someone else about how we best do that.

10:00

Neil Doncaster: That is a good question about managing players' disappointment, but the reality is that Ian Maxwell and I are not involved at the coal face in those sorts of conversations. It would be enormously valuable for members of the committee to visit club academy Scotland clubs to see how they work in practice and to talk to the players and the coaches who are having to do very difficult work.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): Good morning. I have a couple of questions about children's welfare and mental health and wellbeing. What oversight procedures are there in the academy system to monitor young players' wellbeing? We have touched on that a little bit, but are those procedures adequate, and how might they be strengthened or improved?

Ian Maxwell: I will talk you through the provisions for child wellbeing. As I said, each club academy Scotland club must have a child wellbeing and protection officer. At elite level, it is a full-time post, but the further down the club academy Scotland structure you go, the more likely it is to be a part-time post, which is reflective of the number of teams and, therefore, the number of players at each level.

Club processes and their child wellbeing and protection provisions are assessed by our wellbeing and protection team against our Scottish FA board directive, which was established in 2016, as well as the eight minimum standards that are set out by sportscotland. Child wellbeing and protection officers need to attend mandatory events during the course of the season. We send out newsletters a couple of times a year and we regularly send information. We have a child wellbeing and protection officer WhatsApp group that links directly into the team at the Scottish FA, and we engage regularly because, with the best will in the world, children's mental health and wellbeing is a difficult and sensitive area and it is a key focus, particularly nowadays, given the other challenges in the world.

We want to support individuals at the clubs as much as possible, so that, when there is a problem, we can signpost them to the right places

and give them the right advice and support. The players need to understand where they can go if they have an issue that they want to discuss.

A participation officer in our child and wellbeing team engages annually with players at club academy Scotland clubs and our performance schools. One of the questions that they will ask is, “If you have a problem, who do you speak to?” Some players will be happier speaking to the CWPO, some will want to speak to their coach, and others will be happier speaking to their parents; it depends on the individual. There are definitely opportunities for players who have any sort of issue to speak to someone at the club or a parent, who can then get in touch with us at the association. It is not a one-size-fits all approach, because every individual is different and people might be more comfortable speaking to somebody different. The player needs to understand that, if they have a problem, they can speak to A, B or C, who can help them to fix it.

Emma Harper: Are there specific mechanisms in place to enable a parent or a child to seek support through various methods?

Ian Maxwell: Yes, and it is primarily through the child wellbeing and protection officer, who is a regular fixture at the club—every player should know who they are. They would be the first point of contact.

Emma Harper: Are the wellbeing officers mostly full time?

Ian Maxwell: They are full time within the elite club academy Scotland set-up. There are nine CAS clubs at the moment, but every team, even in the grass-roots game, has a child wellbeing and protection officer. That is part of a directive that the Scottish Football Association board set out in 2016. Every club in the country has someone with that remit and responsibility. Obviously, a grass-roots team that involves one age group presents a different challenge to a grass-roots club that has a lot of teams, which will tend to have more CWPOs. It is a defined position within the regulations.

Emma Harper: What registration issues typically lead to a referral to the young player wellbeing panel, and are there any common themes or patterns in the disputes that have reached the tribunal stage?

Ian Maxwell: Only three cases have reached the panel in the close to 10 years for which it has been in operation. That is not a huge number, so there are no trends.

In my club experience, reasons for disputes are straightforward—for example, a player thinks that they should be playing more than they are, they think that they are not getting enough game time or they think that the coach does not like them.

Conversations are had between the coach, the player, the parents and the club. As I have said, we always tend to find a way. Either a conversation goes on between the parties that are involved and a resolution is found, or the player will move on to find another club.

That happens at every level of sport. Even in the grass-roots game, there will be players who think they should be playing more and are not happy because they got only 15 minutes at the end of the game. That is sport. That is the world that we live in. However, there are always opportunities, and the evidence that we have is that players are moving. There is a perception that, because of the registration period, players do not move during the season, but the evidence and the numbers that we have tell us that that is absolutely not the case and that movement takes place.

Emma Harper: Going back to the let them play and let them ref campaigns, just to be clear, are you saying that those things are required in international football or at all levels and also in other sports? Are people behaving in that way even in rugby, for instance?

Ian Maxwell: Yes. I think that it is happening across sport. Football is the biggest sport in the country by a considerable distance. More people play it on a pitch, of a weekend, and family and friends will be watching the game. As I said, it is not solely a Scottish problem. I have a UEFA meeting later this week, at which one topic will be behaviour at football matches and how we positively influence that, because it is having such a negative impact on the experience of the young players.

Every country is—“fighting” is a terrible word to use—dealing with the same issues around how we can positively influence behaviour around the pitch so that players can just play football and have fun and so that the first question that somebody asks them is, “Did you enjoy it?” rather than “Did you win?” It cannot be about that; that is the fundamental problem. The first question that my dad would ask his grandson was, “Did you win, son?”—not whether he had had a good time and enjoyed running about with his pals. Those are the questions that we need to ask. We need to stop and change things.

Culturally, across football and across the world, there are challenges around behaviour and the engagement between supporters, players on the pitch and referees. That starts at the top end, and the behaviour that people see at that end of the game then translates down into grass-roots football on a Saturday morning at your local pitch.

At Euro 2024, UEFA implemented a captain-only approach rule, so that only the captain could speak to the referee if there was a contentious

issue on the pitch. That has been really well received, and we have now implemented it across all football in Scotland. It is having a real impact, because players understand that, although they might be upset with a decision, they need to keep that to themselves and let the captain deal with it. It is about how we think through similar creative solutions that we can implement through our UEFA or FIFA position at the top end of the game and see the benefit and behavioural change further down.

As I said, we have taken that on ourselves because of the issues that we see particularly in grass-roots football at the weekend. We need to do something to deal with that.

The Convener: I will take you back to the wellbeing panel. I appreciate that there have been only three cases in 10 years. Will you talk me through the process of what happens?

Ian Maxwell: In very high-level terms, we will receive some sort of communication—from a parent, primarily, or a player—and then we will discuss with the player and the parent, gather information and speak to the club.

The Convener: Who does that?

Ian Maxwell: The Scottish FA.

The Convener: Someone from the SFA makes contact?

Ian Maxwell: Yes. In the association, we have a governance department. Someone from that department will speak to the player and the parents, understand what the issue is, have a conversation with the club and see if we can find a remedy without the issue going to the wellbeing panel. If we cannot, it will go to the panel.

The panel has defined processes and timescales, and everything is done with not the safety but the protection of the player in mind. A player can decide whether to give evidence at a hearing or to do that outside a hearing and have us submit that verbally. We are very aware that that environment would be really intimidating and daunting for a young player. We have to go through the process to understand the outcome, but we must do that in the best interests of the child. That would be an incredibly difficult position for an adult to be in, never mind a kid, and we do not want to put them through anything that is unnecessary.

The Convener: That sounds like quite a formal process.

Ian Maxwell: It has to be, because that is the reality. It is effectively a dispute between the player and the club, so we need formality and regulation. We have to do it as swiftly as possible because we do not want it to drag on when the

player cannot play in the meantime—we must always look after the player.

As I said, we have had only three such hearings, and each one has found in favour of the player, whose registration with the club has been cancelled.

The Convener: I acknowledge that that can be intimidating for parents. I have sat where you are sitting and know that it can be intimidating to sit in front of a committee. What support is put in place to help young players and their families, so that they can participate in that process?

Ian Maxwell: We will sit down initially with the parents and the player to talk them through the process. We have a child wellbeing team at Hampden, and the player and family will be signposted to engage with that team if they need any support, want to talk through anything or are unhappy about anything. Although that team is part of the association, it is separate from the wellbeing panel process, which means that there is someone different that the family can speak to about any concerns. There are provisions in place for that.

Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): I will spend some time exploring issues for the youngest children—those under 11. The youngest category in the CAS programme is the under-11s. How confident are you that development centres have sufficient protections and support in place for the youngest players? Are there any specific rules and regulations that apply to that group of kids?

Ian Maxwell: There is the club academy Scotland, but that is at the crossover point between grass-roots football and the SYFA. We tend to find that there is some sort of engagement between club academy Scotland clubs and grass-roots clubs. In the under-11 age group, clubs are looking for talented players in their local area, and we tend to find that they have not necessarily arrangements but an understanding with a grass-roots club, so that its players can come and get involved in training with the club academy Scotland club as a way of starting what you might call the embedding process. That will give the player an understanding of what the club that he might move to looks like.

Players would do both things at the same time—participating in their grass-roots team while starting their engagement with the club academy Scotland team. We try to make that as welcoming and easy as possible, because we understand that changing club is a difficult thing for any player at any time, for a variety of reasons.

That is the process. I can get back to you with more detail, because it is not something that I am particularly close to. The grass-roots clubs and the

club academy Scotland clubs that players go to all have child wellbeing and protection officers in place, so there is provision for the child's wellbeing.

Elena Whitham: There is a club that starts working with children at the age of five, which is quite young—you imagine that, at that age, they will be running around their local pitches with small local teams. To what extent do you think that young children are mentally and physically ready to engage in the CAS programme? From what you said, I understand that dual engagements happen with their local club and the CAS programme at the same time. Also, are there any specific safeguards or protections in place to protect children from overenthusiastic parental influence? You already touched on that in terms of what happens on the sidelines, but I think that a lot of pressure can be placed on wee kids at that stage.

10:15

Ian Maxwell: Obviously, it is really difficult for us to get involved in the parental relationship, because, with the best will in the world, we do not know what the relationship between a parent and a child is. We see parents who can get overenthusiastic when a club academy Scotland team shows interest in their player, and there are many frustrated footballers out there who are living their lives through their kids and their grandkids—there is probably one sitting at the end of this table.

How we deal with that issue is a good question. It goes back to my earlier point about ensuring that any player in the club academy Scotland system knows who their first port of call is if they have concerns about anything. The child wellbeing and protection officers are there for that reason, and that is how we engage with the players. Also, you should not forget that all of those players are still at school and they will have a relationship with a teacher, so there are opportunities within the school setting for them to go and talk about something that is happening outside their school life if they feel more comfortable talking to a teacher or someone else in that setting. I get that that is not a football provision as such, but it is part of ensuring that there are a number of places for children and young people to go to if they have concerns.

I take the point that you make. It is a difficult question to answer, but we have child wellbeing and protection policies and officers in place who are a port of call for players.

Elena Whitham: Do they have due regard to the needs of those youngest kids? If someone is hotheaded from a very young age with the aim of

them progressing from there, that can be quite an intensive setting.

Ian Maxwell: I do not know for sure, but I do not think that many clubs take on players who are as young as four and five. The clubs will recognise that, at that age, the approach is about development and that young people will develop into better players if they are happy and are enjoying their football. At that age, in particular, it is about them playing with their pals.

I am happy to come back to you on the issue, but I do not think that the club environment for someone who is that age will be as structured as it will be when they are 14, 15 or 16. At that young age, it is about enjoyment and making sure that a player has somewhere to play where they can have a good time and develop properly. They should just be touching the ball and having fun. At the very early stages of their development, it should be about enjoyment.

Elena Whitham: It might be quite helpful if you could give the committee a bit more information about what understanding the clubs' wellbeing and safeguarding officers have of the youngest children. The position of a five-year-old or an eight-year-old is different from that of a teenager in terms of their agency.

Ian Maxwell: Absolutely. No problem.

The Convener: The committee has heard some examples of the involvement of very young children, such as Celtic having a five-year-old, Motherwell having a seven-year-old and Rangers having an eight-year-old. Do you think that five, six, seven or eight is too young to be signing on to an academy training programme?

Ian Maxwell: They will be in some sort of development programme, but it will not be an academy programme. They are at the very early, formative part of a player's development journey.

Clubs are looking to identify players at increasingly younger ages—we see that across Europe. However, I am of the view that there is no way to tell whether someone who is five or six—or even 12 or 13—is going to be a good player when he gets to 18, 19 or 20. That is really difficult to do.

When we investigate the countries that develop players well, we see that they have a wide base of players. If you think about the elite football pyramid, you can see that the wider the base is at the bottom—the more engagement that goes on and the more players that clubs are aware of—the more chance clubs have of identifying good players later in their career. Therefore, clubs are committing more resources to those very young age groups, but that involves just going out and seeing who is there; they are not making decisions on players. They might get a player along to

specialised training nights, or training nights specifically with one club, but he will be allowed to go and play with his grass-roots team on a regular basis, because that is where he is going to develop.

As I say, because of the way in which football is evolving, clubs are trying to identify talent at a younger and younger age. Again, there are provisions in place for that and for player movement, and that all sits within the SYFA.

The Convener: I appreciate that a very young child will not be involved in the kind of formal training programme that a 15-year-old or 16-year-old would be engaged in. Do you think that there should be a lower age limit? Should there be a ceiling at which we should not engage children—if they are below the age of five, six or seven, say?

Ian Maxwell: Let me check what the regulations are; I am not close enough to that at this point. We may well have protections in place for those age groups, but I do not know. I am not even too sure what young people at that age do with regard to registering with a team. We would want them just to be able to turn up and play and to go wherever they want.

Let me come back to you on the formalities of registration. I do not want to speak out of turn on it.

The Convener: Thank you—I would appreciate that.

Brian Whittle: I have been listening with great interest to what you have to say, gentlemen. I am particularly interested in youth development standards. That really means the development of coaches, because they are the ones who interact with players and work at the coalface.

I am looking at an SFA report, which has a list of issues and concerns that have been raised about CAS academies. It states:

“Academy coaches often spend more time coaching the ‘worst’ players than top players.”

That is a massive red flag for me when it comes to coaching. Guess what? The best coaches should be coaching the developmental players. It really worries me that people are still thinking that way—and that applies across the whole of sport. We have to get the fundamentals right, and the best way to do that is by having the best coaches work with the developmental players.

My question is really about coaching structure and coach education; it is not just about what, practically, they should be doing. How do you work with coaches? How does coach development work in relation to how they should interact with five-year-olds right the way through to 18-year-olds?

Ian Maxwell: That is a good question. We have a coach development pathway, which starts with level 1.1 or 1.2 licences. We tend to find that it is parents who become coaches, particularly in the very early stages at grass-roots games. I was one, although I played football and had a bit more of an understanding. Someone might end up getting roped into helping to coach their son’s team, because somebody has to do it.

For our coaching requirement, levels 1.1 and 1.2 are not really about coaching; they do not tell people how to put on a coaching session or set up a passing drill. Instead, they describe how to organise the players. Coaches are required to do a mental health and wellbeing module, as they are looking after the players’ welfare in those very early years. It is less about developing skills; it is more about ensuring that the environment is right, that players will enjoy what they do and that players know what they are getting.

The coach can look out for issues. If a player’s attitude or behaviour has changed, what might the reasons be for that? In the early years, the concern is more about child wellbeing and protection rather than with coaching. There will be an element of coaching, because we want people to have the basics, but it is just the very basics at that age.

We are always reviewing the coach education and development journey, and the way in which we develop players. We are always looking for other ideas, including from countries that are developing players better than we are. What can we take from them? We need to be careful always to have a Scottish solution, however, because we cannot just transfer what happens in Brazil over here and expect us to be as good as Brazil in 20 years’ time. As much as we would love that, it is not going to work that way, culturally.

Our approach is under constant review. We have a successful national team at the moment: we have a really good chance of qualifying for the world cup, and we have been to back-to-back Euros. Our focus at the moment, however, is to consider what the national team will look like in 20 years’ time. Those players are starting at club academy Scotland. Those 10, 11 and 12-year-olds have 10 years in which to develop into top footballers. That helps the national teams, which helps the country in turn, with all the joy that football brings to Scotland. We are always thinking about that.

You are aware of the transition phase report that we released recently. It refers to the co-operation agreements that are now in place, and there has been a good take-up of them at the start of this season. They mean that younger players—17, 18 and 19-year-olds—are getting competitive football

at an earlier age than was the case previously, because of the changes that we have made.

We are pushing clubs to become more strategic about how they develop Scottish talent in particular. Our obligation is to make sure that clubs are developing Scottish players. Do we have enough Scottish players playing in the premier league at the moment? No. Can we do more to get Scottish players playing? Yes.

How we do that is the million-dollar question, but clubs need to be more strategic. Some countries are really successful at developing their players. For example, Portugal has clubs like Benfica and Sporting Lisbon that get players into the first team and then sell them abroad for tens of millions of pounds, which is then reinvested back into the Portuguese footballing ecosystem. It is about how we get our clubs starting to go down that road of thinking more strategically and thinking about development from that perspective. We will soon publish a youth review that talks about a lot of that and about the changes that we feel that we need to make in order to ensure that we are developing players.

Within club academy Scotland, we have 150 players who are covered by a growth and maturation exemption. Some players, particularly in younger age groups, develop more quickly physically than others. Therefore, rather than saying, "You're an under-14 player. You need to play under-14s", if someone is 7 feet 2 inches, we are saying, "You can go and play under-15s, because you'll develop better there", or "You're 4 foot 2. You can go and play at under-13s, because you'll develop better there."

We need to develop players in lots of different ways and make sure that everybody has opportunities. However, the coaching point is key. From a Scottish FA perspective, under our coach education system, we coach coaches. The best players will only be as good as our coaches, and we need to make sure that we are coaching the coaches to be the best that they can be.

Brian Whittle: That is really my point. Yes, we want to have the greatest players in the world. We have had them in the past—we might get to that, if we have time. However, I am interested in the coaching: how you coach, how the instruction in coaching works and how we develop our coaches.

One of the things that has been levelled against you in the past is the number of people who are in the queue waiting to get a protecting vulnerable groups check in order to get a coaching licence. Let me tell you that, from my perspective, it is getting harder and harder to get a coaching licence.

Correct me if I am wrong, but the last time that we had a discussion, around 2,000 coaches were

waiting to get PVG-checked in order to get their coaching licence. Are those coaches still coaching, or are they stopping before they get to the point where they understand that coaching is not only about setting a session—as you have rightly said—but about developing the person? Where are we in terms of the queue?

Ian Maxwell: As I said, we very much have a focus on that through the coaching courses that we have.

Every coach that has been through any Scottish FA coaching badge has gone through a mental health and wellbeing module. It is paramount that everybody does that, particularly the coaches who are involved with the youngest age groups.

We want to develop coaches as much as they want to be developed. Some coaches are there only because they are helping out as a parent. They are not really interested in being a coach but are doing it because their son or daughter wants to play and they want to facilitate that.

Brian Whittle: Do they still need a qualification to do that, even at level 1?

Ian Maxwell: They still need the basics, because it is about the environment. Even if you have been a professional player for 25 years, you still need to go and do the basics, because being involved in professional elite sport at the top end of the game is fundamentally different to coaching five, six and seven-year-olds. It is a completely different landscape.

We are therefore very clear that there has to be a level of coaching provision. We are signed up to the UEFA coaching convention, which sets out the requirements for national associations in relation to the coaching provision that is in place across the country. UEFA also comes and assesses what we have on a regular basis, and approves it—or not. If UEFA did not approve what we provide, that would not be a great place for us to be in. However, it is very comfortable with the coaching provision that we have in place, and with our courses and their content.

Brian Whittle: I have a final question. Let us get to the seniors and their transition out of CAS into the senior ranks. That is the hardest thing in the world: if you are looking for good coaches, look for the ones who have managed to make that transition. How are we developing our coaches to do that? You mentioned giving consideration to the approach of other countries that are doing it more successfully than we are. Where are we with that learning experience?

10:30

Ian Maxwell: As I said, the picture is constantly evolving, because everybody does it slightly

differently. There is a danger in getting too caught up in what other countries do and of not having a Scottish solution, so we have done a lot of work on the issue. As I said, a youth review will be published, I hope, before the end of this year. A new strategy is coming out, which will talk about player development, how we do it and the lessons that we have learned from other countries.

It is difficult to ensure that we are doing it right. With sport science and growth and maturation studies, we are finding more and more evidence of the physical impact that repetitive training has on those players who are aged 12, 13 or 14. As a result, we need to change what we have been doing, because, with the best will in the world, we cannot continue to just plough ahead. The evidence shows that training must look and feel slightly different depending on the age and stage of the individual to ensure that they are benefiting from that.

Are we doing enough at the younger age groups? Do we have structures in place for four and five-year-olds? Are we developing players as well as we possibly can? There is evidence that the input that you get and the number of touches on a football that you have between the ages of four and 10 will determine what type of player you will be when you are 25. Are we doing enough in those early stages? Should we be doing more from a development perspective?

Again, you need to do the research and the reviews to understand exactly what is happening out there in a wider context and to translate that back into a Scottish setting. Although very few make it to the very top level, when we look at club academy Scotland, around 20 per cent of players who have come out of the last age group of the academy over the past three or four years have been offered a contract with a professional club, which is a decent number—I know from my Partick Thistle days that if we signed three or four players from the academy to get involved in the first team, that was a fairly successful year. It is not easy to do and those are the types of numbers that we are seeing. Although everybody will talk about the 0.7 per cent of players who make it, that is at the highest elite international level; a lot more players than that make it across the country.

Brian Whittle: What I really want to hear is how you manage that learning. Have you got the structure in place to be able to cascade it down through the coaching structure?

Ian Maxwell: That is part of the work in progress. The first stage is that we need to do the learning and understand where we want to go. The next stage is about how we put the processes in place to ensure that we engage with clubs, players and stakeholders so that the processes are correct across the game.

Everybody wants a really successful Scotland national team and as many people as possible to play sport up and down the country. We are a sporting nation in as much as we love and watch sport; we are not a sporting nation in as much as we do not play any sport as much as we should and do not engage as much as we should from a sporting perspective.

We would be more than happy to come back to a committee hearing such as this one or to set up something externally that gets sports governing bodies around the table so that we can ask how we make sure that we can get access to school facilities, get the right provisions in place and get the right access to changing rooms after school, when traditionally they have been locked up. It cannot be difficult to find a way to unlock those things.

We are engaging with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities about how to get access to the school estate; we have been speaking to local authorities about how to ensure that every time that there is a development of 500 houses somewhere, a sporting facility sits alongside that, because it must. If we want to change the health and wellbeing of the nation, we must think outside the box, because what we are doing at the moment is not working.

The Convener: Thank you both for your attendance this morning and also for the offer to visit a CAS academy in Scotland—

Ian Maxwell: Please take us up on it.

The Convener: I am sure that some of the committee members will take you up on it.

I briefly suspend the meeting to allow for a changeover of witnesses.

10:34

Meeting suspended.

10:41

On resuming—

Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill

The Convener: The next item on our agenda is oral evidence from the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care and his supporting officials on legislative consent memorandum LCM S6M-62, which is on the Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill.

The purpose of the bill is to make provision for a terminally ill person who is living in England or Wales, aged 18 and above, with capacity, who has been ordinarily resident in England or Wales for 12 months, and who is registered with a general practice in England or Wales, to be given—on request—assistance to end their own life.

LCM S6M-62 relates to an amendment that was agreed during the House of Commons' report stage, which extends the scope of some of the provisions of the bill to Scotland.

Specifically, clause 43 makes provision requiring that

"The Secretary of State must by regulations make provision prohibiting ... the publication, printing, distribution or designing (anywhere) of advertisements whose purpose or effect is to promote a voluntary assisted dying service"

and prohibiting

"causing the publication, printing, distribution or designing of such advertisements."

Clause 43 also provides that any regulations

"May not amend this Act"

and

"must provide that any offence created by the regulations is punishable with a fine."

A VAD service, for the purpose of the clause, means the service as set out in accordance with the act, which means VAD services in England and Wales.

Although the analysis prepared for the bill's sponsor concluded that clause 43 did not trigger the need for the consent of the Scottish Parliament, the Scottish Government took a different view. It says that clause 43 appears to be for a purpose—namely, prohibition of advertising—that is within the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament.

I welcome to the committee Neil Gray, the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care; Ailsa Garland, solicitor and Susan Wilson, assisted dying shadow bill team manager, both from the Scottish Government.

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): I appreciate the opportunity to speak about the legislative consent memorandum that was lodged by the Scottish Government on 27 August, which recommends that the Scottish Parliament gives its consent to clause 43 of Kim Leadbeater MP's Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill.

Let me be clear that I am here due to the provision described in the LCM and my recommendation for it. It is not, in any way, a comment or opinion on Ms Leadbeater's Bill, which is for the UK Parliament to decide upon. The committee will be aware that nothing in Kim Leadbeater's bill has any effect on Liam McArthur's bill in the Scottish Parliament, which is going through an entirely different process. The LCM process is part of our constitutional settlement, and that is what I am here to provide information on, namely the effect of clause 43 in Scotland and why I am recommending support.

Turning to the LCM, clause 43 of the Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill imposes a duty on the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care in the UK to make regulations to prohibit the publication, printing, distribution or designing of advertisements whose purpose or effect is to promote the England and Wales voluntary assisted dying service. The purpose of clause 43 is stated to be to prevent pressure from being put on vulnerable people or the undermining of national suicide prevention strategies through the unethical advertisement of the England and Wales service.

By consenting to that provision, the Scottish Parliament would be agreeing that the service introduced could not be promoted in Scotland. That is the wish of the UK Parliament, which I believe should determine if and where the English and Welsh assisted dying service is to be advertised. The Scottish Government's view is that clause 43 is for a purpose that falls within the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament, considering the schedule 5, section C7 reservation in the Scotland Act 1998, which covers the regulation of, among other things,

"misleading and comparative advertising, except regulation specifically in relation to food, tobacco and tobacco products".

It does not reserve advertising generally. As such, we believe that the Scottish Parliament's consent is required for clause 43, and that it should be given so that we do not find ourselves in a situation where the English and Welsh assisted dying service can be advertised in Scotland but not in England and Wales.

I hope that the committee finds that explanation and outline of the Scottish position helpful, and I am happy to answer the committee's questions.

The Convener: I have not received any indication from members that they wish to ask questions on this item.

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): Sorry, convener, I was not aware that you had asked for a previous indication of desire to ask questions.

My question is not about reserved or devolved competence and the requirement for an LCM but about the content of the provision that the LCM covers. Cabinet secretary, are you confident that the provision will apply only to what would commonly be understood as advertising and would not prohibit the publication of, for example, arguments about the policy merits of the legislation or how services should be delivered or the provision of factual information regarding the service?

Neil Gray: That is my expectation. As it is legislation in the United Kingdom Parliament, it is not an area that I have control over—it is for members of the UK Parliament to determine—but my expectation would be as Mr Harvie has outlined. We have lodged the LCM to ensure that we are in line with other parts of the UK on advertising and promotion as opposed to the production of factual information.

The Convener: Apologies, Mr Harvie. I was not aware that you had a question.

Subordinate Legislation

Personal Injuries (NHS Charges) (Amounts) (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2025

The Convener: The fourth item on our agenda is consideration of the Personal Injuries (NHS Charges) (Amounts) (Scotland) Regulations 2025. The regulations amend the Personal Injuries (NHS Charges) (Amounts) (Scotland) Regulations 2006, the principal regulations, which make provision in relation to the amount of national health service charges that can be recovered from a person who pays compensation to an injured person where that injured person has received national health service treatment or ambulance services. The Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee considered the instrument at its meeting on 9 September and made no recommendations in relation to it. No motion to annul has so far been received in relation to the instrument.

As members have no comments on the instrument, does the committee agree that it does not wish to make any recommendations in relation to the negative instrument?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: At next week's meeting, we will begin taking oral evidence as part of the committee's inquiry into autism spectrum disorder and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder pathways and support. That concludes the public part of our meeting.

10:49

Meeting continued in private until 12:32.

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