



# YOUTH LEAGUES



**THEIR GAME**  
Youth Football Development

# YOUTH LEAGUES



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## A GUIDE TO YOUTH LEAGUES

Youth leagues in England have provided organised football for young people for decades, enabling them to experience pulling on a shirt, playing in a team of friends against another team and the thrill of scoring an important goal near the end of a close match.

The dedication that an army of volunteers put into running these, not for financial gain or reward, or status or recognition, but for the love of giving young people that taste of playing the national game is incredible.

Thousands of hours per year are spent registering players, organising fixtures and end-of-season celebrations. It is not often enough we thank those volunteers.

This resource sets out to support leagues as we enter a changing time for youth football, where we look to move the game forwards into a new era.

This is a bespoke resource for leagues that will support the guides for different age groups.

The quality of the information in this resource increases as we share best practice across the country.

Our goal is to share best practice where leagues talk to each other in a more meaningful and structured way. Engaging in a discussion about the new ideas they are trying out which will improve the player experience in the hope that others will consider them too.

**THIS IS A BESPOKE  
RESOURCE FOR LEAGUES  
THAT WILL SUPPORT THE  
GUIDES FOR DIFFERENT  
AGE GROUPS**



# THE FA YOUTH DEVELOPMENT REVIEW

## GRASSROOTS FOOTBALL

In 2010 The Football Association launched The FA Youth Development Review; a document spanning 25 recommendations based on research and feedback from across the country.

These proposals spanned everything from developing the player pathway for our youngest players all the way through to mandatory release of players for international fixtures.

The two main proposals that will affect grassroots football will be the player pathway and competition strategy.

Both of these have been developed following extensive consultation.

This took part across the country over two and a half years and included:

- 350+ youth leagues
- 4,000+ grassroots coaches
- 50+ groups of young players
- 16 regional road shows
- Overseas information
- Research from child development experts

The purpose was to listen to the views of the grassroots game and the key factors they thought needed to be developed within local football.

The proposals shifted and evolved throughout the period as more information and feedback was gained.

All this shaped the final plans.

## THE TWO MAIN PROPOSALS THAT WILL AFFECT GRASSROOTS FOOTBALL WILL BE THE PLAYER PATHWAY AND COMPETITION STRATEGY







PUTTING CHILDREN ON FULL-SIZE PITCHES AT THE AGE OF 10 WAS NOT WHAT THEY WANTED OR ENJOYED

SUMMARY OF NEW PLAYER PATHWAY

The new player pathway will see a journey for young people that builds and progresses their learning and development as they head towards the adult version of the game. In the past we have had a tendency to rush them towards the 11v11 game, mistaking children for mini-adults and putting them into adult environments too early.

From season 2013/14, the following pathway will be in place. The format changes centre around the maximum number of players permitted in a game:

U7	5v5
U8	7v7
U9	7v7
U10	7v7
U11	9v9
U12	11v11
U13+	11v11

From season 2014/15, this pathway will be the maximum format and the final structure:

U7	5v5
U8	5v5
U9	7v7
U10	7v7
U11	9v9
U12	9v9
U13+	11v11

Leagues are allowed to move towards the final structure proposed before these come into place as mandatory maximum formats and in fact many will already have done so.

By the 2012/13 season it is forecast that 9v9 will already be a more popular format for young players across the country than the 11v11 version of the game.

These formats are based upon all the academic research, evidence about child development and player development that has been gathered throughout the extensive consultation process.

Put simply, smaller versions of the game will enable players to:

- Have more touches of the ball to develop technique
- Have more dribbling opportunities and 1v1s
- Have more shots and score more goals
- Have more involvement in the game
- More involvement means more enjoyment through playing football.

The feedback from children was that they come to play football to be involved by touching the ball. Putting them on full-size pitches at the age of 10 was not what they wanted or enjoyed.

They found it impossible to defend a goal the same size as those used in the Premier League.

They also wanted a pitch size that didn't mean the game became all about stamina and fitness rather than technique and skill.





The new pathway puts the development and retention of players at the heart of the process.

Ultimately, The FA and all of those involved in the game want to see more young children playing football.

We know we have a national drop out of players at the transition from Mini-Soccer to 11v11 and then again from U14 onwards and this must be addressed.

It needs to be clear that the new formats are maximum numbers and therefore if a league, via the member clubs, wanted to play 4v4 at U7 or 7v7 at U12 this is absolutely fine.

## THE NEW PATHWAY PUTS THE DEVELOPMENT AND RETENTION OF PLAYERS AT THE HEART OF THE PROCESS

With regards to squad numbers, many clubs that have been playing 5v5 have been running two teams with a squad of 12-14 players.

This has then become one team at 7v7 and one at 9v9, with the odd change of player along the way as some leave and some join.

Leagues who have been piloting these different formats of the game have seen an increase in the number of children and teams playing the game, not a decrease.

There were concerns expressed that it would lead to fewer teams if the search for volunteers was unsuccessful. Evidence so far has shown the opposite!

## REFEREE DEVELOPMENT

This pathway also offers a great opportunity for the development of young referees.

As the 9v9 format includes offside, refereeing these games can count as part of their minimum number of games to qualify as a full official.

This format provides an ideal introduction to refereeing the game.



## FACILITY ADVICE

One of the short-term challenges we face when bringing in the new pathway is ensuring we have facilities that meet the pitch and goal requirements. There are many examples of good practice from clubs and leagues that have embarked on alternative formats. The next few pages outline some solutions for you to consider:

### PURPOSE-MADE PITCHES

For those that are setting up a new pitch, The FA Facilities Department will provide specific resources outlining everything that you need to know in terms of pitch size, penalty area size and all markings.

These diagrams can also be found in the age group specific resources that have been developed alongside the leagues guidance resource.

### MULTI-LINING AND MARKING

Many clubs across the country have used different coloured lines on existing pitches to mark out the dimensions of a smaller pitch – including blue, red and yellow lines.

Depending on the size of the 11v11 pitch they might be multi-lining. This might mean marking different coloured lines from six yard box to six yard box and playing within this area using portable goals.

Some clubs have put two 9v9 pitches across an 11v11 pitch – if the width of the pitch is 64 yards for example, they have set the goal areas back eight yards on either side and played across the pitch.

Some adults have been concerned that children will get confused playing on a pitch marked with different colours – absolutely untrue! You only have to go into a secondary school sports hall and see the six different court markings on one area. The children are fine!

Some clubs have put portable goals on the top of the 18 yard box, use flat markers to bring in the side of the pitch by ten yards and played across it.

These options may not work for every pitch as there will be drainage issues and the composition of the land is different across the whole country.

## PORTABLE GOALS AND MARKERS

The simplest way, especially with 5v5 pitches, is to find a piece of flat grass that is the right size and use markers to form the boundary.

This method is used by professional clubs across the world every day and is perfectly acceptable for young children.

Many clubs use flat markers, ones that the ball can roll straight over and these

are perfectly adequate for children's football.

Adults need to try and move away from the mindset that every pitch needs to be marked out perfectly like Wembley and be like a carpet! Where possible, yes, definitely, but this should never be a reason to stop the playing the game.

## TOWN APPROACHES TO PITCH PROVISION

Through County FAs and local authorities, many clubs and leagues have set up meetings to look at the provision of facilities across an area in relation to the number of teams and demand.

For example, one town noted from their research that they had an over-provision of adult 11v11 facilities and a deficit of youth pitches available, and therefore they have realigned these resources appropriately.

Another town decided to look at their pitch allocations and on the sites across their locality where they had Mini-Soccer, youth and adult football on every location.

They decided to give up the youth and Mini-Soccer pitches on site A and designate that one as adult football, and then turn site B into youth football and site C into Mini-Soccer.

## FIND A PIECE OF FLAT GRASS THAT IS THE RIGHT SIZE AND USE MARKERS TO FORM THE BOUNDARY

## ARTIFICIAL GRASS PITCHES

Across the country there are a large number of all-weather pitches which are on school sites or run by local authorities. These are an excellent resource for youth football, many of which have been funded by the Football Foundation.

Whilst they are incredibly busy midweek from 6-10pm, weekends are often a quiet time for them, providing a great opportunity to use these for matches.

In one league, offering some sensible flexibility, the matches kick off at 9am, 10.30am, 12.00pm, 1.30pm, 3.00pm and 4.30pm and they play six matches on one site.

Offering this flexibility in modern times is fantastic to meet the needs of teams and we may need to move away from 'all football is 10am kick off', in order to get more flexibility in future years.

Artificial pitches are the best surface young players will ever learn to play the game on. The ball always rolls straight, many are floodlit and games are never called off unless there is lots of snow on them!

They aren't like the 'plastic' pitches of Oldham Athletic and Luton Town from the 1980's.

If we can play World Cup qualifiers and Champions League matches on them, they are good enough for youth football.





## CENTRAL VENUE AND MULTI-VENUES

Many leagues have used central venues as an option for their fixtures. All the teams travel to one place and play all their games here.

One league worked out that with the 12 teams they had playing, they only needed three pitches, as not every team had to have a home pitch. Sensible planning!

**IT IS ESTIMATED THAT 55% OF GRASS FIELDS ARE ON EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS**

## SCHOOL PITCHES

Countless pitches across the country are on school sites. It is estimated that 55% of grass fields are on educational institutions and many of these are not available to the community at weekends.

A new strategy launched by the government – Creating a sporting habit for life – involves a funding stream to enable these to be open and accessible at weekends.

## INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

Often public schools have some fantastic facilities that are closed during the weekends, either because clubs haven't approached them to be used or because the school doesn't have local links into the community.

Many of these independent schools are now applying for charitable status which requires a link with local partners and offers a great opportunity for teams and clubs to use these sites.





## FUNDING FOR GOAL POSTS

There are a variety of different options available for funding goal posts that should be considered. The Football Foundation has ring-fenced monies to fund 9v9 goal posts as part of The FA Youth Development Review. This scheme will be launched for the coming season.

Many leagues have looked to part-fund goal posts as well. For example, one league decided to put 50% funding towards goal posts, with the matched funding raised from other sources.

Some clubs have been able to raise money and fund a set of their own, working in partnership with the local league to donate towards them.

Furthermore, some County FAs have ring fenced funding to put towards the cost of goals.

Across the country, some leagues spent over £25,000 a season on trophies and medals and some clubs spent over £6,000 a season.

There may be a need to prioritise where funding is spent in the short-term to support player development for the long-term!

Every County FA has a County Development Manager whose role is to support leagues and clubs with the brokering of discussions with local authorities, schools and other facility providers.

Please make sure you utilise their expertise where possible.

Feedback from local authorities and boroughs shows that discussions need to be started early for best results.

If a league goes to a pitch provider at the end of the season with some requests for the coming season it is unlikely they will be able to help.

Use the support of the County FA staff to broker those conversations as early as possible.

When Mini-Soccer was brought in during 1999 people claimed it wouldn't work as there weren't the pitches and goal posts available.

It has been proved that adults with a positive attitude can make change happen.

The FA believes these new formats will provide the best route for children to enjoy and get better at the game and we have a responsibility to ensure this meets the needs of our young players.

**THE FOOTBALL FOUNDATION HAS RING-FENCED MONIES TO FUND 9V9 GOAL POSTS AS PART OF THE FA YOUTH DEVELOPMENT REVIEW**



## SUMMARY OF NEW COMPETITION PATHWAY

Following the research around the country, including focus groups with young people and child development experts, it was found that the adult pathway of an eight-month long season wasn't necessarily the best mechanism to support player development and enjoyment.

It was found that the views children have on their game compared to what adults assume that children want are quite different. These are detailed further in the age specific resources by The FA.

Based on our research a new, modern and child-friendly approach has been developed that builds competition as players get older.

This dismisses the notion that there is such a thing as "non-competitive" football. In every children's match, even with U7s, the two teams want to try their best to win!

However, the most important aspect is the nature of the environment we put children in.

If we want to develop technically proficient, creative, decision-making players then having 40 adults standing round a pitch screaming and shouting at the players if they make a mistake is unlikely to be productive.

There needs to be a continual education process to support coaches and adults involved in youth football about exactly that – children's football.

Watching Match of the Day on a Saturday night and then acting out the role of a Premier League manager on a Sunday morning is not in the best interests of the development of young children.

Signing up to The FAs Respect Programme will provide your league with ideas and resources to help ensure a child centred and fun environment for children.

For more information go to:  
[www.TheFA.com/Respect](http://www.TheFA.com/Respect)

From season **2013/14**, the following competition pathway will be in place:

U7	No League tables published. No single eight-month long season. Three trophy events allowed per mini-season.
U8	No League tables published. No single eight-month long season. Three trophy events allowed per mini-season.
U9	No League tables published. No single eight-month long season. Three trophy events allowed per mini-season.
U10	League tables allowed
U11	League tables allowed
U12+	League tables allowed

From season **2014/15**, the following competition pathway will be in place:

U7	No League tables published. No single eight-month long season. Three trophy events allowed per mini-season.
U8	No League tables published. No single eight-month long season. Three trophy events allowed per mini-season.
U9	No League tables published. No single eight-month long season. Three trophy events allowed per mini-season.
U10	No League tables published. No single eight-month long season. Three trophy events allowed per mini-season.
U11	League tables allowed
U12+	League tables allowed

From season **2015/16**, the following competition pathway will be in place:

U7	No League tables published. No single eight-month long season. Three trophy events allowed per mini-season.
U8	No League tables published. No single eight-month long season. Three trophy events allowed per mini-season.
U9	No League tables published. No single eight-month long season. Three trophy events allowed per mini-season.
U10	No League tables published. No single eight-month long season. Three trophy events allowed per mini-season.
U11	No League tables published. No single eight-month long season. Three trophy events allowed per mini-season.
U12+	League tables allowed





# WHAT IS A TROPHY EVENT?

The new approach to youth football will phase out the one ‘season-long competition’ for young players and bring in a mixture of learning opportunities. This will provide youth leagues with the ownership to run different approaches to competition that capture the attention of young players in modern way.

Leagues will have flexibility during the blocks of competition to organise different events that still promote the importance of winning and losing but build this progression as players get older.

Leagues cannot publish league tables throughout the season up to U11 as part of the new approach to a child-friendly competition. However, they will be able to promote and publicise the winners of the different competitions.

This will allow recognition of winners where appropriate but without the pressure of three points and goal difference on the children every week for 26 weeks.

The FA has found from research that one of the main reasons children drop out of football is due to increased pressure from adults on the expectations to win every week.

Being creative with competition and building development as the children get older is a great way to keep children playing football longer.

Furthermore, this variety will give children the excitement of looking forward to what happens next – the new format of the game and new competitions to play in! This becomes like an addictive computer game for children, “We have completed this level. What might I find on the next level?”.

Currently, we provide children with the same experience year-on-year and wonder why many drop out the game at 14-18 after six to ten years of doing the same thing over and over again!

## U7 AND U8

Even the youngest children will benefit from having the opportunity to play for a little cup, two or three times a season. Children of this age are very ego-centric and can only see the ‘here and now’ and certainly not the outcome of something in eight months time.

This competition can take place over a two-week period and, for example, can include a little knockout cup event. This means that over a typical 26-week season, six weeks of this will be focused competition.

## U9 AND U10

As children grow developmentally and cognitively, the periods of competition can increase a bit further as their views of the world start to widen. They can start to interpret results in a more meaningful way.

This competition can take place over a four-week period and, for example, can include group stages and a cup final. This means that over a typical 26-week season, 12 weeks of this will be focused competition.

## U11

Children can now start to understand whether a team beats them because they tried harder or they were better players, something they can’t often do before this age. As they prepare for secondary school, peer influences start to come into play.

This competition can take place over a six-week period and, for example, can include a Champions League style event. This means that over a typical 26-week season, 18 weeks of this will be focused competition.

## BUILDING THE FOCUS ON COMPETITION AS THE CHILDREN GET OLDER

Six weeks of trophy events in 26 week season

12 weeks of trophy events in a 26 week season

18 weeks of trophy events in a 26 week season



# EXAMPLES OF COMPETITION

## CHAMPIONS LEAGUE:

Today's generation of children have a different childhood to the one we experienced. Football is virtually 24/7 on multiple channels of television, beamed from around the world. Children now know more about European football and international players from playing FIFA on the PlayStation than we ever did!

With 32 teams in a particular age group, one league decided to put

them into eight groups of four. They organised a series of round robin matches that led to the group winners being decided. The top teams went through to play in a Champions League competition and the other teams were organised into a Europa League format. The children and coaches loved it!

This provided the children with something new, varied and modern.

## PLACE COMPETITION:

Splitting 20 teams into four small groups, after a series of round robin matches provided the organisers with a 'place' for that team.

They put all the teams that finished in the top two of their group together to play for first to eighth place.

All the teams that finished third in their group, played off for ninth to twelfth.

The teams that finished fourth played off for thirteenth to sixteenth and the teams that finished fifth played off for seventeenth to twentieth.

This kept all the teams involved for a longer period of time, knowing that they were playing off for a position rather than their experience ending quickly when they got knocked out.

The feedback from the children was that they enjoyed this short-term competition format. They could go away and practice and look forward to trying to finish higher next time.

## FESTIVALS AND ROUND ROBINS

In some parts of the country, Mini-Soccer has proved successful where a number of teams have come together at a venue to play several matches, rather than two teams playing one match against each other.

With some clever planning the teams would get the opportunity to play both a hard game and an easy game.

This will alleviate any pressure felt about winning when only playing one match.

It is also a great opportunity to get young coaches and referees involved in football administration within a controlled environment.

## CUP EVENTS

If you are organising a cup competition that has a knockout element to it, why not try ensuring that teams can play more games by running a plate or a vase competition alongside this too?

This gives more teams the chance to experience the thrill of a cup final against teams of a similar level rather than getting drawn against a team three divisions higher.







## LADDER EVENTS

Depending on the organisation of fixtures, it is possible to arrange matches in such a way that teams can play against those near them several times a season, challenging the teams above or below them to swap positions.

This puts the emphasis on more equal games and avoiding the 26-0 scorelines we don't want to see. This has worked really effectively in tennis competitions. More information can be found via their resources online at: <http://tennisplayandstay.com/competitions/ladder-system.html>

## USING DEVELOPMENT MATCHES

In between the trophy events it is vital teams still understand the importance of playing development matches.

Feedback received from children indicates that they want to play a match every week.

Development matches are a valuable way to put all the skills learnt in the Youth League into practice.

Scores from these games can be kept and used to seed teams in different events or for future league tables.

Society has changed. Children don't organise their leisure time as much for themselves and everything becomes adult-structured and dominated.

We have a responsibility to ensure that what we organise for young players is what they want. That might not necessarily be the adult model of football we have provided for children in the past.

This new process puts the interests of the young person first, not only providing an environment that helps them fall in love with the game, but one that supports them to become better people.

Children will be the next generation of coaches, volunteers, officials and administrators and we have a responsibility to develop a lifelong involvement in football rather than turn them off our amazing game so early.

**WE HAVE A RESPONSIBILITY TO DEVELOP A LIFELONG INVOLVEMENT IN FOOTBALL RATHER THAN TURN CHILDREN OFF OUR AMAZING GAME SO EARLY**

# THINKING AHEAD

For those that like to plan ahead or who may be linked to a league development plan this is what the complete pathway will look like by the 2015/16 season for youth football in England.

This will be the complete pathway once all the changes have been phased in. This will provide a robust and child-friendly system that allows progression and enjoyment for all young people.

Age group	Maximum format	Recommended pitch size (yds)	Ball size	Ideal goal size	Approach to Competition
U7	5v5	40x30	3	12x6	3 x Trophy Events over two weeks each
U8	5V5	40x30	3	12x6	3 x Trophy Events over two weeks each
U9	7v7	60x40	3	12x6	3 x Trophy Events over four weeks each
U10	7v7	60x40	4	12x6	3 x Trophy Events over four weeks each
U11	9v9	80x50	4	16x7	3 x Trophy Events over six weeks each
U12	9V9	80x50	4	16x7	Any varieties inc. one season long league table
U13	11v11	90x55	4	21x7	Any varieties inc. one season long league table
U14	11V11	90x55	4	21x7	Any varieties inc. one season long league table
U15	11V11	100x60	5	24x8	Any varieties inc. one season long league table
U16	11V11	100x60	5	24x8	Any varieties inc. one season long league table
U17	11v11	110x70	5	24x8	Any varieties inc. one season long league table
U18	11v11	110x70	5	24x8	Any varieties inc. one season long league table

Whilst this will be the proposed pathway in 2015/16 season it is important that development systems continue to evolve and develop.

For too many years youth football in England hasn't evolved at the same rate as the game has. There needs to be a commitment to embrace change and continually develop the game to suit youth football.

Changes to Laws of Mini-Soccer, 9v9 and 11v11 will continue as we constantly strive to afford young people the best opportunity to develop and improve.

All key people involved in the game need to embrace these developments in the best interests of young people, constantly putting children's interests before our own.

THERE NEEDS TO BE  
A COMMITMENT TO  
EMBRACE CHANGE  
AND CONTINUALLY  
DEVELOP THE  
GAME TO SUIT  
YOUTH FOOTBALL





# CHARTER STANDARD LEAGUES AND IMPLEMENTING THE YOUTH REVIEW



The Charter Standard League Development Plan and the process behind creating this provides an ideal framework for leagues to consult plan and deliver all elements of the Youth Review.

Youth/Mini-Soccer Leagues that have achieved the status (140 as at 30.4.2012) will be familiar with the Charter Standard League Plan with Better Players as a key goal within the template.

Indeed many leagues that have adopted 9v9, and flexible competition formats have placed these at the heart of their actions within the Better Players Section.

Charter Standard Leagues that are making decisions on when and how they plan to implement the Youth Review and have yet to include it in their League Development Plans should consider revising their plans in line with the Youth Review actions they are committing to.

This will give all the leagues' clubs clarity on how the league will deliver the key elements of the Youth Review and, importantly, demonstrating to the County FA the leagues commitment to the Review.

Although it isn't mandatory for County FAs to support Charter Standard Leagues with resource, in many cases they have provided financial and staff assistance to Leagues delivering aspects of the Youth Review.

A key requirement of such assistance was always that the league includes its commitment in the League Development Plan.

This assistance has taken a variety of forms including partially funding 9v9 goals, delivering CPD for coaches taking teams from 7v7 to 9v9 and 9v9 to 11v11 and CFA officer explaining to league club forums the benefits of the Review.

Youth Leagues that are intending to become Charter Standard Leagues in the near or medium term future need to ensure that implementing the Youth Review is a key element of their new League Development Plan.

Whether a league is an existing Charter Standard League or an aspiring one it is essential that it discusses its approach to implementing the Youth Review with its County FA team.

For Charter Standard League Documentation ask your County FA team or download from the CSL Section on [TheFA.com](http://TheFA.com)

## TOGETHER WE CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Being clear about expectations can avoid unnecessary problems; taking the lead as a league making use of The FAs Respect Programme and ensuring your youth league welfare officer works with the club welfare officers can only be a good thing.

Together we can make a difference, we don't need to sit back and watch poor sideline behaviour, we do need to collectively take responsibility to address it. For more information go to: [www.TheFA.com/Safeguarding](http://www.TheFA.com/Safeguarding)



# FULL-TIME

## The FA's Free League Administration System

Is your League using Full-Time, the FA's Free League Administration System? Over 600 leagues are and more are signing up every week. Full-Time offers all of the following features to leagues:

- Sign-up via: [www.TheFA.com/full-time](http://www.TheFA.com/full-time)
- Time saving (Essex Veterans League saved 800+ hours in their first season)
- Training sessions all round the country
- Easy setup, building season on season
- Multi-user access – share the workload amongst your league committee
- User guides, online helpdesk, monthly newsletter and online forum
- Fixture scheduling options – manual, basic fixtures and advanced scheduler
- Advanced fixtures – ground sharing, season calendars, re-arrangements
- Cups – round-robin, knockout, two-legs, external cup competitions
- Auto-email notification – full-time emailing clubs and referees with changes
- Respect marking – clubs marking for Respect
- Results – entering scores, recording marks and team sheets
- SMS scorelines – clubs sending instant results to Full-Time via text message
- People - adding players, referees, club and league administrators
- Registration and transfers; loading player details from spreadsheets
- Referee appointments and Referee marking
- Notices, news Items and photo albums – posting documents and pictures

If you want to know more, just visit [www.TheFA.com/full-time](http://www.TheFA.com/full-time) or contact your County FA.





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