Small-sided Football Insight Report: Informing Local Football Facility Plans
May 2018
This is an insight summary of small-sided football in England. Not every player or potential player shares the same needs. This document helps to understand the small-sided football audience, the growth opportunities and inform local facility plans.

In total, we spoke to 6491 people; aged 16 to 65yrs across an inclusive spread of gender, region, ethnicity, SEG and ability (a mix of qualitative and quantitative research) conducted between 2016 - 2018 by 2CV Ltd (an independent research agency)
There are many different types of small-sided football being played in England: from Teams & Leagues to Recreational and Informal.

**Teams & Leagues**
- Football played in competitive league structures, typically with players registered to teams (affiliated to leagues and their County FAs).
- Example: Small-sided affiliated leagues, other non-affiliated leagues, commercial small-sided leagues, futsal.

**Recreational**
- Football played where facilities are typically booked and there may be someone to help organise (shin pads/boots may be worn too but not always).
- Example: Small-sided (non-affiliated), walking football, FA Just Play, casual pitch hire.

**Informal**
- Football played in local parks and greens spaces – not organised, free and open access. Often played spontaneously (normal clothing worn - jeans and trainers).
- Example: Kick-about, casual games.

**LEVEL OF COMPETITIVENESS TENDS TO DECREASE**

This document focuses on all types of small-sided football (anything that is NOT 11-aside)
This encompasses a broad spectrum of play, competition, format and size of team.

It might be 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9 aside and also include walking football and futsal.

**With or without** pitch hire

Can be played in a number of different environments (indoor/outdoor) – from local parks and green spaces to leisure centres, schools and specialist 3G facilities.

It may still have a competitive element (e.g. leagues) but majority is recreational and informal.
How is small-sided football typically played?

There are big differences between men and women;

**MEN:**
- Have personal experience of playing and talking about football they know the game and how it's played.
- More likely to have a ready social circle they can call upon to play but require help to organise and coordinate a game.

**WOMEN:**
- Less likely to have personal experience of playing (didn't play at school) or talking about football. Still feels like a man's game and a man's world.
- They respond positively to a strong activator to help motivate and mobilise a chance to play.
Within small-sided football we have 5 audience segments

**Competitive & Committed**

“Sport is part of my everyday life, it's my social life and I love watching and playing football. I play a lot of football and I am passionate about the game, I love to win!”

**All round Actives**

“I love exercising, it makes me feel good, look good, and it's a great way to socialise. Football definitely helps with this but it isn't my only sport, I'm not that into following a team and probably prefer taking part in other sports.”

**Casual & Cautious**

“I'm relatively active and I play football but feel quite self conscious about my fitness, age and ability. I don't take it very seriously or get competitive! I play because I want to improve my health, have fun and spend time with friends.”

**Fans not Footballers**

“I love watching football and following my team, but I usually prefer to stay on my sofa and watch a match rather than get on the pitch myself! I could be tempted if it involves my team and my friends were there to kick about with”

**Inactive & Indifferent**

“There's a lot hype around football, it can feel intimidating. I don't have time to keep up a fitness routine and I am reluctant to sacrifice my spare time to start one, but a friendly kick-about could be fun to join in with”

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**Demographics**

- **16-34 yrs**: 54%, 35+
- **35+ yrs**: 46%, 50%

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- **Total Male**: 87%, 13%
- **Total Female**: 68%, 32%
- **Total 16-34 yrs**: 67%, 33%
- **Total 35+ yrs**: 86%, 14%
- **Total 16-34 yrs**: 49%, 51%
Our 5 audiences are pulled apart by level of sport ‘activeness’ and football ‘interest’

Total universe: **13.1m** (English adults 16+). This figure includes male and female current players, lapsed and non-player considerers.
What barriers need to be overcome to get more people playing small-sided football?

To get more people playing and playing more regularly, it’s critical to think of the different needs and challenges facing each customer. Though facilities can play a key role, there are bigger logistical and personal barriers to consider:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Barriers</th>
<th>Example Solutions</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of perceived time</td>
<td>Opportunity to offer shorter activity sessions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other sporting activities and life commitments compete for their time. More pronounced in urban areas and with All Round Active and Casual &amp; Cautious segments.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bad weather &amp; early darkness</td>
<td>Clear signposting of suitable venues and ancillary facilities during these months</td>
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<tr>
<td>Many want to play outside but without sports lighting it’s difficult between Oct-April evenings. Most apparent in North of UK and among females.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self Conscious</td>
<td>Offer an inclusive atmosphere that caters to different ability levels with appropriate activators</td>
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<tr>
<td>Perceived skill level, age, fitness and body shape can lead to self consciousness and embarrassment (especially if observed by others). More prominent among females, lower social grade, Casual &amp; Cautious &amp; Fans not Footballers segments.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fear of injury</td>
<td>Ongoing maintenance of surfaces; access to first aid / medical facilities</td>
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<tr>
<td>Perceived injury from poorly mained pitches and surrounding metal fences. Most evident among Competitive &amp; Committed and All Round Active segments</td>
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<tr>
<td>Public safety</td>
<td>Caretaking of sites; community engagement to instil pride and help self-policing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Intimidating youths on pitch, anti-social behaviour in parks and vandalism. Most apparent in urban areas</td>
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</tbody>
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Opportunity to offer shorter activity sessions
What other considerations are there to encourage more people to play small-sided football? **Universal Considerations**

**CONVENIENT LOCATION**

The ideal venue is close to home (under 20 minutes)

And… easy to find and book

Accessible via cars and public transport

Easy to find others players or facilities that actively help people connect

Consider proximity to food/drink opportunities when selecting sights to encourage socialising (e.g. bar/cafe)

Welcoming and family friendly environments

Even the most engaged segments (Competitive & Committed) will only consider travelling short distances

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**COST/VALUE**

A large proportion ‘play for free’ so need to keep free places available

Cost is a leading barrier; a tiered pricing model can help

Price / value is more critical to Casual & Cautious and Inactive & Indifferent segments.
What other considerations are there to encourage more people to play small-sided football? **Facility Specific Considerations.**

**ANCILLARY BASICS**

Even when recreational football is being played at local parks, there are basic ancillary expectations:
- Access to toilets should be a key focus
- Showers and changing rooms are a secondary expectation

**PITCH BASICS**

To play small-sided football, there are minimum requirements to consider:
- Surfaces should be clear of debris and protected from dog fouling
- Dedicated football spaces ideally with basic markings

**PITCH FEATURES**

The pitch can make or break the experience:
- Equipped with ‘proper goals’ (frames and nets)
- Lighting available for darker months
- Preference for (playable) grass surfaces and/or 3G

**Competitive & Committed** and **Fans not Footballers** segments place most emphasis on an ‘authentic’ experience and high quality surface.
There are opportunities for each segment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Segment</th>
<th>What makes them an opportunity?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Competitive &amp; Committed Actives</td>
<td>Though sporting ‘all-rounders’ by nature, they play a lot of football and value the way it helps them fulfil their health/fitness goals. The challenge is for football to give them additional benefits over other sports.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casual &amp; Cautious Fans not Footballers</td>
<td>The biggest segment in size and with a high proportion of current players (albeit in a casual form), this is a key segment to effectively serve and engage.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Inactive &amp; Indifferent</td>
<td>Massive football enthusiasts, and yet not playing anywhere near as much as they could (and potentially would like to) even though they appreciate the benefits of doing so.</td>
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**Suggested Facilities Intervention**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Competitive &amp; Committed Actives</th>
<th>Casual &amp; Cautious Fans not Footballers</th>
<th>Inactive &amp; Indifferent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Focus on structured organised sessions at leisure/sport centres and specialist facilities</td>
<td>Focus on accessibility and fun</td>
<td>Priority is overcoming their barriers to exercise and football</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilities should have high quality surfaces (3G), goals, markings, multiple pitches, refs, lights</td>
<td>Offer Informal and Recreational play; indoor or on properly drained grass</td>
<td>A key target for more accessible venues (e.g. schools, leisure centres, local parks) and pop up goals</td>
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<tr>
<td>Offer competitions and socials</td>
<td>Consider the availability of friendly social spaces</td>
<td>Consider the availability of family friendly social spaces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offer variety of skills and session types through multi-sports facilities</td>
<td>Promote local venues</td>
<td>Informal facilities (grass areas/parks) with car parking</td>
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<tr>
<td>Offer women only and mixed sessions (ideally with an Activator) to target women</td>
<td>Focus on accessibility and fun</td>
<td>Age/fitness is a barrier so facilities must be accessible and not intimidating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would respond well to an Activator to help mobilise play</td>
<td>Offer club related rewards (e.g. televised games to appeal to their fandom)</td>
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There are opportunities for existing facilities to better meet needs

**Local parks**
- High awareness and where the most informal play takes place
- Affordable, fun, and accessible but lacking in quality facilities and playing surfaces
- Key priorities are keeping pitches clear and usable, especially in the summer months
- Consider parks/open green spaces as hubs, with pop-up facilities (e.g., goals) with activation to stimulate activity and community ownership

**Schools**
- Schools provide ready made local facilities but are under used
- Among users, satisfaction is perceived as ‘neglected’
- However, school sites feel inclusive and accessible to more distant segments and provide a cost effective option

**Leisure centres**
- Leisure centres are well established in local communities
- Perceived to be friendly and well equipped
- Indoor leisure centres typically have superior quality to outdoor, where playing surface is poorer and access to ancillary basics is reduced
- Consider how to maximise availability and opportunities to play

**Specialist facilities**
- Among users, satisfaction is high but low awareness among a wider audience
- Appeal and usage skews to core, more ‘serious’ footballing segments and can feel intimidating to distant segments (especially females)
- Look to promote these facilities as friendly, inclusive, and accessible, with provision for all types of player (not just Competitive and Commited)
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