



GUIDANCE NOTES NO:

10.5

BEST PRACTICE IN OPEN-AGE ADULT FOOTBALL

FOR CLUBS AND LEAGUES

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OVERVIEW AND INTRODUCTION

Overview:

This guidance note provides safeguarding best practice for open-age adult football clubs and leagues, including disability settings and players aged 16-17, covering choice/capacity, trust boundaries, physical contact, use of facilities, travel arrangements, media, online conduct, recordkeeping and available resources.

Introduction:

Safeguarding best practice means doing the everyday things that prevent harm, creating an inclusive, safe and positive environment, and reducing the risk of poor practice, lower-level concerns and abuse.

This starts with respecting adults' rights, promoting choice, and making sure everyone's voice is heard. [The FA Grassroots Code](#) can help you set clear standards for behaviour.

Best practice also means being clear about boundaries and responsibilities. Coaches and anyone in a position or relationship of trust must understand their influence, stay professional, and never misuse power.



KEY PRINCIPLES (WHAT GOOD LOOKS LIKE)

- Put safety, dignity and inclusion first every session, every time.
- Promote choice and support decision-making (including reasonable adjustments).
- Maintain clear boundaries and professional behaviour, including online.
- Plan for higher-risk areas: facilities, travel, filming, and digital communication.
- Record key information securely and report concerns promptly via the Club Welfare Officer (CWO)¹ or County FA Designated Safeguarding Officer (CFA DSO).

Remember:

Open-age football can include players from 16 years old and it is important to remember that 16-17-year-olds are still children. Players aged 16 and over self-consent to participate, which includes playing football, photography and social media.

Every affiliated football club that involves under-18s must ensure appropriate safeguards are in place. The FA Safeguarding Children Policy applies wherever under-18s play. This means that where there are under-

18s in open-age adult teams the club/league must adopt the Safeguarding Children Policy and ensure those working with 16-17-year-olds have a DBS Check.

Every open-age adult football setting is unique. Some contexts are specifically for disabled participants: pan-disability where players have a range of different disabilities, or impairment-specific where all players have the same disability. Many other disabled players play in mainstream football settings.

Therefore, best practice will look different for each team and will depend on factors like:

- The abilities and vulnerabilities of participants;
- The level and format of football;
- Whether there are any under-18s involved;
- The location and environment.

¹Each club or league has at least one Welfare Officer (CWO/ LWO). There are C/LWOs who focus on different areas of the game:

- Club/League Welfare Officer (Youth)
- Club/League Welfare Officer (Adult Disability Teams)
- Club/League Welfare Officer (Adult Teams)

In smaller clubs/leagues the same person may oversee all these functions. In large clubs there will be a team of CWOs and deputies. League Welfare Officers are sometimes also known as Competition Welfare Officers.



THE IMPORTANCE OF CHOICE

All adults have rights including the right to self-determination – that's the right to make choices and decisions about their own lives.

In practice for clubs and leagues:

Explain choices clearly, check understanding, and record what has been agreed (especially where reasonable adjustments are needed). If a player may be at risk because of an unwise choice, share the concern with your Club/League Welfare Officer (C/LWO) promptly.

Adults should be supported to make their own choices in football whether it's a small choice like choosing what to eat or drink after a game or a life-changing choice such as whether to accept a place on a talent pathway.

When making any choice or a decision people need the mental capacity to be able to:

- Understand the information;
- Remember the information for long enough;
- Weigh up the information;
- Communicate their decision.

Staff and volunteers can support players to make choices and decisions, when necessary, by getting to know and understand their players. This is particularly

important in disability football where players may have specific learning and communication needs.

Think about:

- The person's preferred ways of communicating;
- How much time a person may need to understand an issue;
- Whether you need to involve someone else who knows the person well;
- What additional support you can offer.

It's important to note that we all make unwise choices sometimes – it's part of how we learn. However, if you feel someone is making unwise choices and is at risk of harm as a result, talk to the C/LWO who can seek support from the County FA Designated Safeguarding Officer (CFA DSO).

If a player seems unable to understand/communicate a decision:

Slow down, use their preferred communication, and involve someone they trust (with the player's agreement) where appropriate.

If you think someone is being pressured or exploited:

Record what you have seen/heard and tell the C/LWO.

If there is an immediate risk of harm:

Follow your club's emergency procedures first, then report to the C/LWO and CFA DSO.

Sometimes a player may choose to involve a family member, carer or personal assistant to support them with things like completing club registration documents.

If players let you know they have additional needs, you can work together to make reasonable adjustments to facilitate their participation. You can talk to your CFA DSO/EDI/Disability lead for advice.



BOUNDARIES AND THE RELATIONSHIP OF TRUST

Volunteers and staff may be seen as role models who are trusted and looked up to. Coaches, managers and officials hold a position of authority and influence, which creates inequality in the relationship. Coaches, managers and officials need to be aware of this power imbalance as it puts them in a position or relationship of trust.

In law a “position of trust” has a specific meaning under the Sexual Offences Act 2003 and applies to certain roles involving responsibility for 16- and 17-year-olds. While not all roles in football will fall within this statutory definition, The FA applies safeguarding standards which recognise that coaches, managers and officials may occupy positions of trust in relation to 16- and 17-year-old players.

Although the age of consent in England is 16, the law recognises that 16- and 17-year-olds remain vulnerable to exploitation by adults in positions of trust. Where a role meets the legal definition, it is a criminal offence for an adult to engage in sexual activity (in person or online) with a 16- or 17-year-old. In all cases, such conduct is a serious breach of The FA’s safeguarding regulations and must be reported to the C/LWO, CFA DSO or The FA without delay.

A **relationship of trust** (also known as a position of influence) is a relationship where there is a power imbalance between two adults over the age of 18. While sexual activity between consenting adults is not in itself unlawful, The FA may consider such relationships between a player and an adult in a relationship of trust to be inappropriate.

If sexual relationships do develop between someone in a relationship of trust and an adult participant, the C/LWO should be informed and should have a confidential conversation with The CFA DSO. Any such situation will be approached on a case-by-case basis.

Relationships that predate the volunteer/ player relationship do not fall within the relationship of trust. Where this is the case, the C/LWO should still be informed.

If you have any concern that a position of trust or relationship of trust may have been breached, you must report it to the C/LWO.

Whether you’re in a position of trust or a relationship of trust, the principles of not misusing power apply.

Volunteers and staff in a position of trust or relationships of trust in open-age football should:

- Maintain clear, professional boundaries, including online;
- Maintain a healthy, positive and respectful relationship with all participants;
- Comply with all relevant codes of conduct;
- Ensure all players know how to raise any concerns.



PHYSICAL CONTACT

Some people find it difficult to recognise, describe, or report sexually abusive or exploitative behaviour.

Follow and promote these guidelines to help keep everyone safe.

- Physical contact should take place in an open environment and not in secret or away from others.
- Encourage independence and avoid doing things for adults that they can do themselves.
- Use physical contact to treat an injury, develop skill or prevent an accident – but ask permission first if possible.
- Ask if the individual is open to any physical contact, for example when celebrating or consoling the adult. E.g. an arm around the shoulder may be welcome in these circumstances.
- Remain sensitive to how physical contact is received and be mindful that some players may actively avoid or seek touch.
- Where touch is required to help with mobility, ask for advice on how best to do this. The player will usually be the expert.

The behaviours below can make abusive behaviour harder to see or give confusing messages and so should be avoided.

- Taking part in horseplay, rough, physical or sexually provocative games.
- Touching in a way that could be seen as sexual.
- Doing things of a personal nature that the person can do for themselves.



INVOLVING AND LISTENING TO PLAYERS

Research shows that an open environment, where everyone can speak freely about their concerns and where there is a culture of no secrets, will be safer for all.

- Engage players in club processes and decision-making – this might be small things such as what to sell in the club snack shop or strategic decisions about starting a new team or how to ensure players are represented fully on committees.
- Find ways to listen to participants' views – simple things such as comment boxes and surveys can help.
- Ask how new joiners heard about the club and ask people when they leave why they are moving on. This way the club is informed about the player experience.



RATIOS AND RECORDS

Ratios:

Most environments benefit from having at least two helpers in case of illness, injury or crisis and to minimise the risks that occur in lone working.

In open-age adult disability football, the ratio of volunteers or staff to players will need to be determined based on the needs of individual participants.

Consider:

- The facilities, including security, spectators, access arrangements, location of changing rooms and toilets;
- The support needs of players;
- The number of under-18s playing and the support they need;
- Emergency evacuation procedures at the venue;
- Any known health or communication needs;
- Any other needs such as the need for quiet time out.

Records:

- Keep details of an emergency contact for each player.
- Keep relevant medical information for each player (see the Medical FAQs document downloadable [here](#) for more information).
- Consider using a 'player passport' to record communication and additional needs and preferences.
- Create a Medical Emergency Action Plan (MEAP) (see within the Medical FAQs document [here](#) for an editable MEAP template).
- Make sure you keep records securely and confidentially in line with club data protocols.



CHANGING ROOMS, TOILETS AND SHOWERS

The match, competition or activity organiser has responsibility to protect the safety and dignity of all participants in activities they organise, including taking reasonable steps to provide appropriate changing facilities for all players.

Individual, accessible, gender-neutral changing and toilet cubicles work well to meet differing needs. Where such facilities are not available, clubs should seek to ensure appropriate arrangements are in place to support privacy and dignity, which may include separate facilities or the use of staggered changing times.

Additional safeguards apply in relation to under-18s. Under-18s in open-age football need to be given a clear choice and it should not be assumed they will change at the same time as adults. Separate arrangements or time slots should be considered where appropriate.

There must be separate facilities for players and match officials. Under-18 match officials must not change with adults or with under-18 players to maintain impartiality.

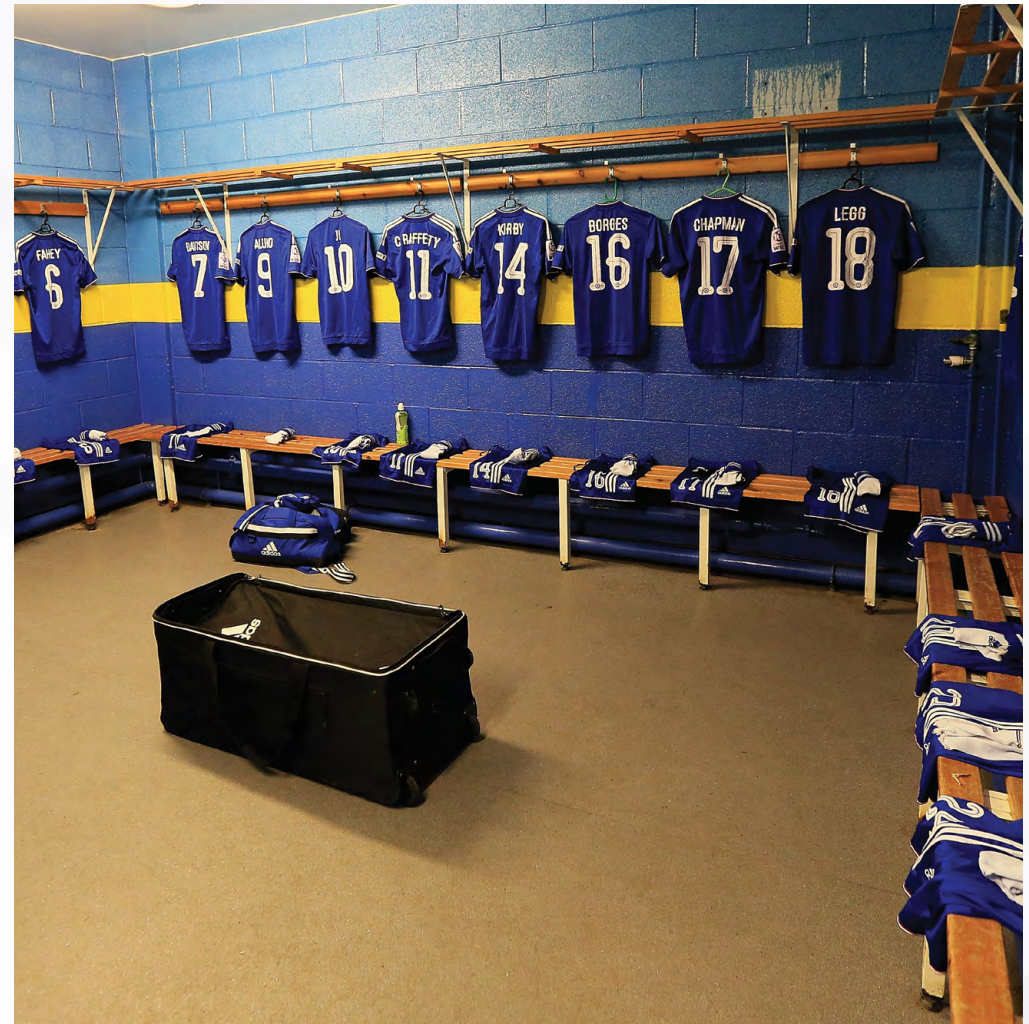
Transgender and non binary players should be supported sensitively on a case by case basis. Clubs should seek practical solutions that respect the needs of all participants, without placing anyone at a disadvantage.

Where reasonably practicable, no player should be required to use facilities in which they feel uncomfortable. A proportionate and pragmatic approach should be taken based on the facilities available.

Where facilities are limited, additional measures (such as arriving ready-changed) may be considered as part of a flexible and inclusive approach.

Also remember:

- Photography and filming are not allowed when people are changing;
- Volunteers and staff must knock if they need to enter an occupied changing room and only enter if it's essential to do so;
- Only hold a team talk in the changing room when players are fully dressed.



TRAVEL AND TRIPS

Travel:

Your club is responsible for making sure club-organised transport is safe and legal. This transport may include minibuses, coaches or taxis. You should be confident that:

- Transport companies are legitimate;
- Vehicles are road-worthy;
- Correct insurance is in place;
- Drivers are safe and suitable.

Transport to fixtures or training arranged by individuals is their responsibility. Your players should be happy that the driver and the car meet legal road requirements.

No one should feel pressured to travel with anyone they don't want to, for any reason.

Please be aware that under-18s may find it harder to speak up about their concerns with travel arrangements. So, ask them discreetly and ask more than once.

Accommodation:

Club-provided accommodation, such as overnight hotel stays, must be risk assessed. If possible, visit the place before the team's away visit to ensure it's safe and secure.

Consider any players with additional needs as part of the risk assessment. For example, a player with a hearing impairment may not hear a fire alarm. So, they would need a personal emergency evacuation plan.

If you're taking under-18 players on the road, have you considered how to meet the needs of these players? What might concern them? What would support and reassure them? You'll only know if you ask. Under-18s should not share rooms with adults or with staff.

In the past, abusers have used trips and overnight stays to perpetrate abuse. For that reason, it's vital that under-18s have a voice in the arrangements and that any concerns they express are followed up.



PHOTOGRAPHY AND FILMING

There is no legal power to prevent photography and filming in a public place.

If the club intends to take photographs or film at an event, it is good practice to inform people and ask them to say if they do not want to be on film.

If an individual is to be the main subject of a photo, for example for publicity purposes, it is best practice to seek specific consent and to ensure they are shown the image before it is used.

Only the individual involved can consent to having their photo taken or used. No one else can consent for them. It should be made clear how and where the image will be used. They should be advised who to contact if they wish to withdraw consent.

Be aware that sometimes inappropriate photos can be used to bully or blackmail people in person or online. Therefore, images of football should always be positive and respectful – and participants should be appropriately dressed.



RUNNING WEBSITES AND SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

Please be aware that you are responsible for ensuring all content is appropriate, whether hosted on websites, social network platforms and any associated message boards or blogs.

The FA rules on this will help keep your players and your club's reputation safe. For example, it is against FA rules to post comments that are or may be seen as:

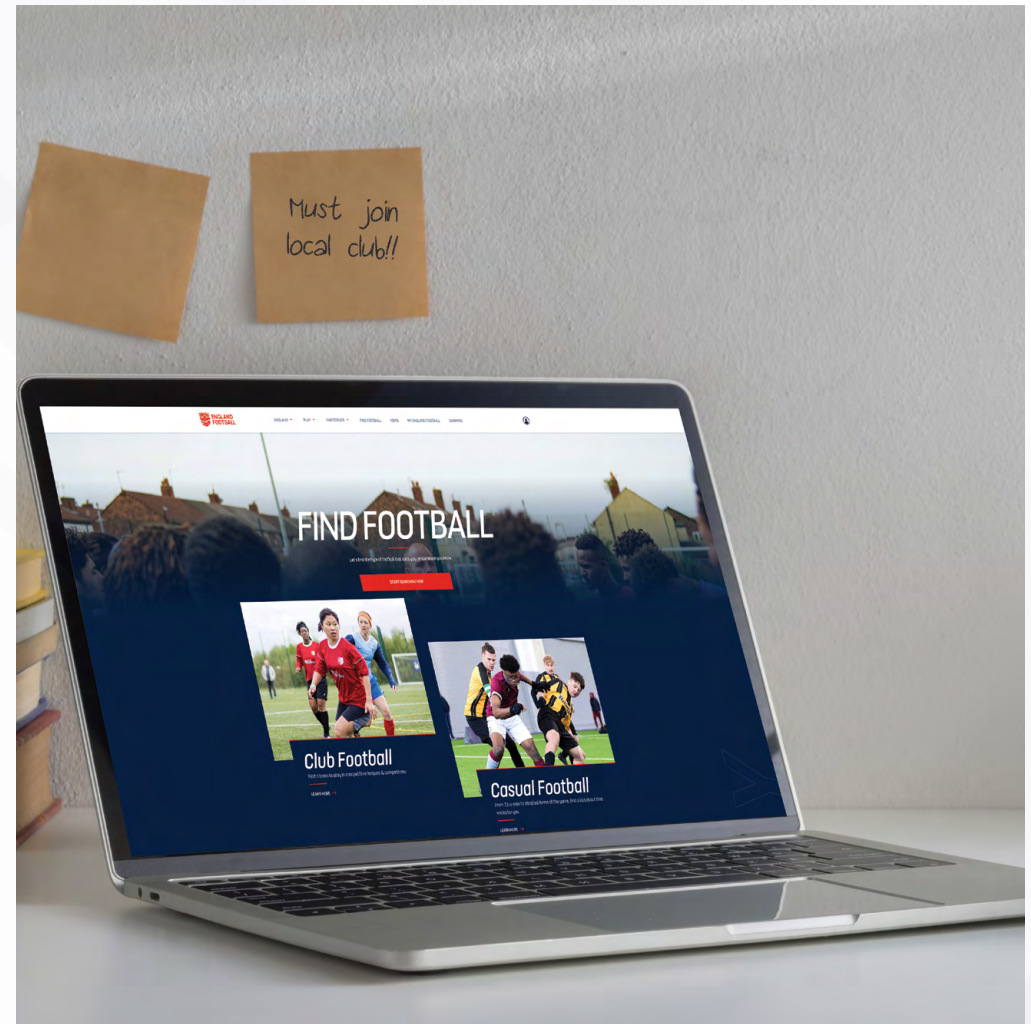
- Offensive;
- Insulting;
- Abusive;
- Threatening;
- Racist;
- Discriminatory;
- In some other way causing offence or harm to others.

Any such comment made on club or league websites or social networking sites may result in disciplinary action being taken in line with The FA's disciplinary policies and procedures.

Comments made on websites that are threatening or abusive could lead to legal action being taken against those responsible for posting or hosting them. Comments made may attract libel claims and legal action through the civil courts if they are defamatory.

Make sure everyone within your club knows who is responsible for monitoring the content of the website and social networking areas and how to contact them if they come across inappropriate content.

If you are moderating any online space, be prepared to respond quickly to any inappropriate content.



DIGITAL COMMUNICATIONS

Digital communication channels such as social media, texts and other platforms help clubs and teams communicate and are critical for the organisation of football.

However, it is important to remember that grooming, exploitation and abuse can happen online, and some participants, including under-18s and adults at risk, can be more vulnerable.

If a person is lonely or unhappy or isolated it is easy for messages to be misinterpreted and this can lead to misunderstandings about the nature of the relationship.

When communicating with players always:

- Remember your position/relationship of trust;
- Comply with your club's code of behaviour conduct;
- Focus on the football;
- Avoid pictures or language that could be considered insulting, abusive, threatening, discriminatory or that in any way might cause offence or harm to others;
- Consider whether another person needs to be copied in to ensure the player receives the correct information on dates/times/venues;
- Be ready to support and signpost players to other services if necessary (The FA [**Player Welfare Directory**](#) may be useful).

Remember:

If you are unsure, don't try to manage it alone. Speak to your C/LWO, who can seek advice from the CFA DSO.

Useful resources:

- [**The FA Grassroots Code**](#)
- [**The FA Player Welfare in Open-Age Football Course**](#)
- [**The FA Player Welfare Directory**](#)
- [**The FA Disability Training and Toolkit for Clubs: Journey To Inclusion**](#)
- [**The FA Policy on the Participation of Transgender and Non-Binary People in Football**](#)
- [**Child Protection in Sport Digital Apps Guidance**](#)



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