

# Small-sided Football Insight Report: Informing Local Football Facility Plans

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**SPORT  
ENGLAND**



**Premier  
League**

**Football  
Foundation**



Department for  
Digital, Culture  
Media & Sport

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.

LEVEL OF COMPETITIVENESS TENDS TO DECREASE



## Covers:

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.*



## Covers:

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.*



## Covers:

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.*



This document focuses on all types of small-sided football (anything that is **NOT 11-side**)

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**.

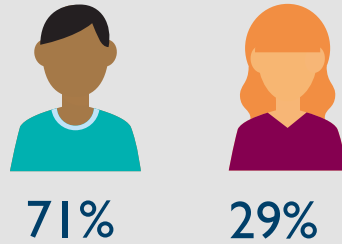
**With or without pitch hire**

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**.

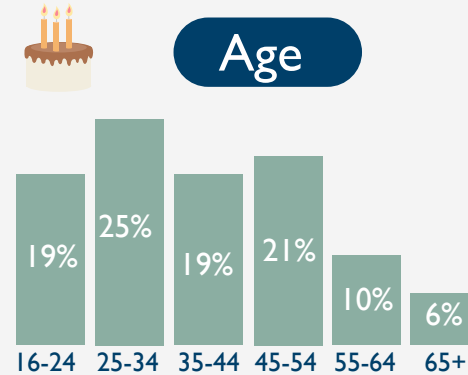
It may still have a **competitive element** (e.g. leagues) but **majority is recreational and informal**.

# How is small-sided football typically played?

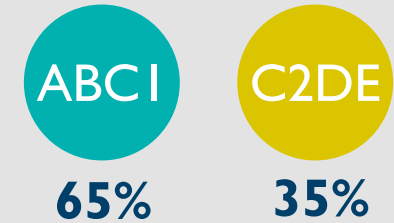
## Gender



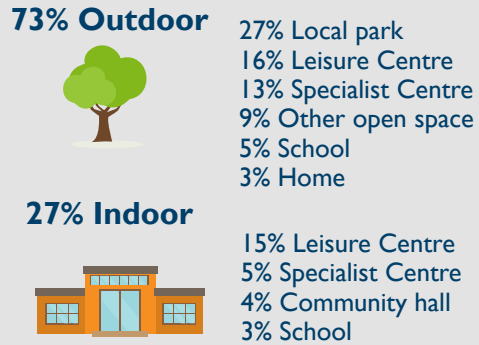
## Age



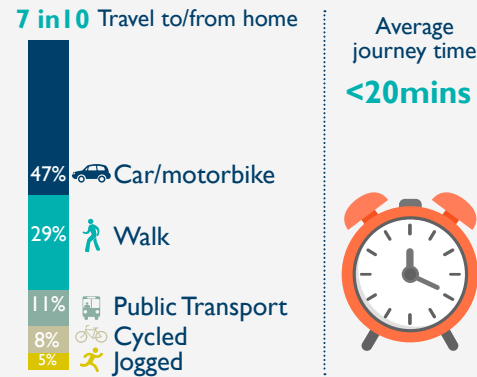
## SEG



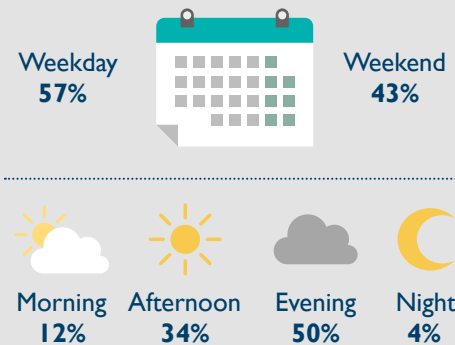
## Where



## Travel



## When



## Cost



## 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”



87%



13%



68%



32%



67%



33%



86%



14%



49%



51%



54%



46%



50%



50%



54%



46%



32%



68%



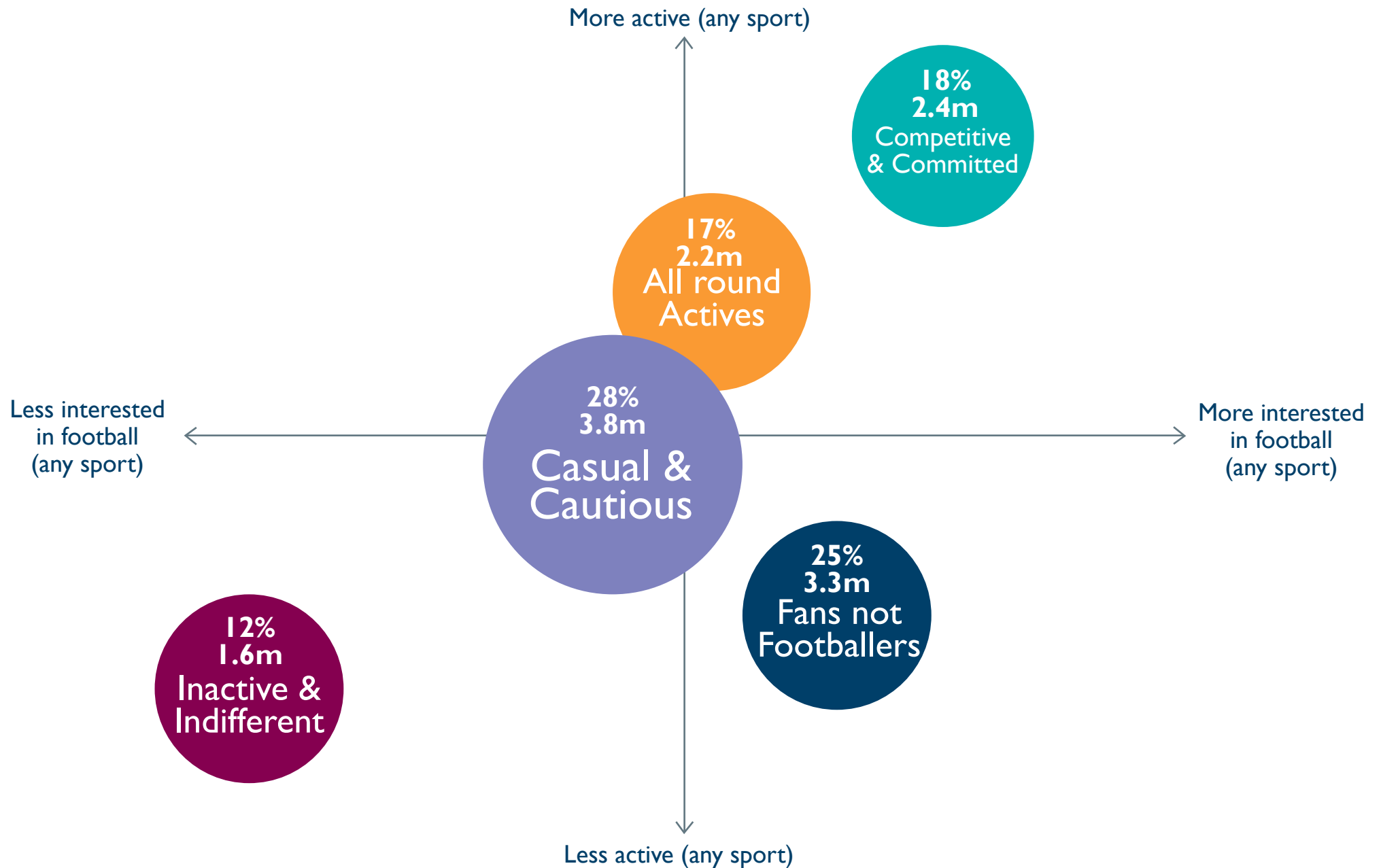
64%



36%

# 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:

## Barriers

## Example Solutions



### Lack of perceived time

Other sporting activities and life commitments compete for their time.  
*More pronounced in urban areas and with **All Round Active** and **Casual & Cautious** segments.*

Opportunity to offer shorter activity sessions



### Bad weather & early darkness

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.*

Clear signposting of suitable venues and ancillary facilities during these months



### Self Conscious

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 & Cautious & Fans not Footballers** segments.*

Offer an inclusive atmosphere that caters to different ability levels with appropriate activators



### Fear of injury

Perceived injury from poorly maintained pitches and surrounding metal fences.  
*Most evident among **Competitive & Committed** and **All Round Active** segments*

Ongoing maintenance of surfaces; access to first aid / medical facilities

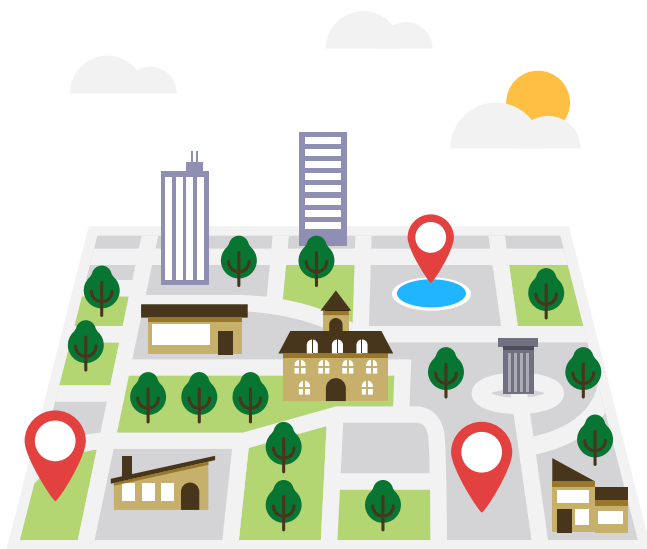


### Public safety

Intimidating youths on pitch, anti-social behaviour in parks and vandalism  
*Most apparent in urban areas*

Caretaking of sites; community engagement to instil pride and help self-police

# 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*

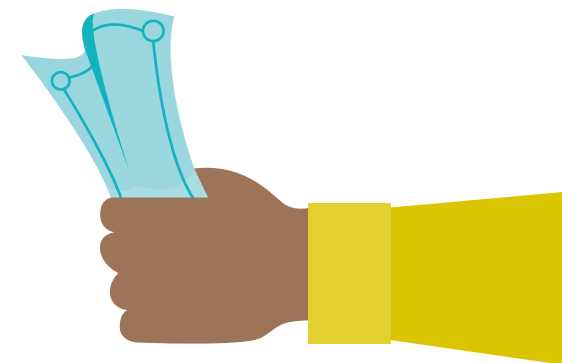
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## **COST/VALUE**

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

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## 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



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## 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

## Competitive & Committed

## All round Actives

## Casual & Cautious

## Fans not Footballers

## Inactive & Indifferent

### What makes them an opportunity?

The most enthusiastic and motivated football playing segment – they are the primary and most passionate users of current provision

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

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

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

Engaging this distant audience will become important in the long run, though they provide a number of challenges to overcome

### Suggested Facilities Intervention

Focus on structured organised sessions at leisure/sport centres and specialist facilities

Facilities should have high quality surfaces (3G), goals, markings, multiple pitches, refs, lights

Offer competitions and socials

Offer variety of skills and session types through multi-sports facilities

Offer women only and mixed sessions (ideally with an Activator) to target women

Promote local venues

Focus on accessibility and fun

Offer Informal and Recreational play; indoor or on properly drained grass

Would respond well to an Activator to help mobilise play

Consider the availability of friendly social spaces

Informal facilities (grass areas/parks) with car parking

Age/fitness is a barrier so facilities must be accessible and not intimidating

Offer club related rewards (e.g. televised games to appeal to their fandom)

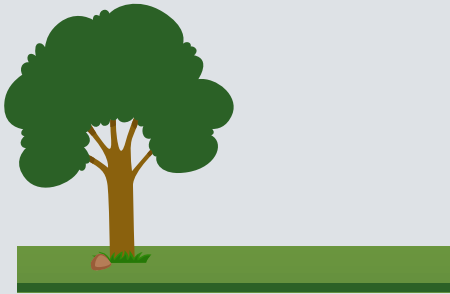
Priority is overcoming their barriers to exercise and football

A key target for more accessible venues (e.g. schools, leisure centres, local parks) and pop up goals

Consider the availability of family friendly social spaces

# 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/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 Committed**)

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