REFS

Inspiring the Next Generation of Sport Officials in Europe



European Research Report on Children and Young People in Sport Officiating

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Executive Summary

Executive Summary

This report presents the research findings from the REFS project, an initiative funded by the European Union with the full title "Inspiring the Next Generation of Sport Officials in Europe". It focuses on young people aged 14-20 and examines how they enter sport officiating, how they develop confidence and identity, what challenges they face, and what sporting organisations can do to improve recruitment, retention and long-term progression.

The research draws on three sources of evidence; a literature review of academic and sector sources and desk research undertaken by REFS project partners, interviews with 27 young officials across eight European countries and twelve sports, and a European survey of young sport officials. The survey generated 533 usable responses.

Findings show that for many young people, sport officiating is a way to remain connected to a sport they love, develop life skills, build confidence, form a valued identity and contribute to organised sport. However, this potential is undermined when young officials encounter disrespect, abuse, unclear progression pathways and conflicts with school, work, travel and playing commitments.

Key findings

- **Officiating is closely linked to wider sport participation.** Most respondents also played sport (90.6%), while 30.4% coached or trained others, suggesting officiating often extends an existing sporting identity.
- **Intrinsic motivation is a key driver.** Of those answering the motivation questions, 88.1% said they became an official because they loved their sport, while 78.5% viewed officiating as a way to stay involved.
- **Encouragement helps drive recruitment.** Almost two-thirds (64.0%) were encouraged by someone they respected. Clubs, families, coaches, friends and schools all influenced participation, alongside strong self-motivation.
- **Officiating supports personal development.** Young officials reported gains in confidence, communication, leadership, decision-making and resilience. Three-quarters (75.6%) felt confident managing games and difficult situations.
- **Poor treatment is a major recruitment and retention barrier.** Lack of respect was identified by 69.0% of respondents, while 67.7% cited fear of abuse or criticism.
- **Abuse remains common in young officials' experiences.** Overall, 61.1% reported at least one form of abuse or negative treatment, with verbal abuse the most prevalent (56.6%).

Executive Summary

- **Physical and online abuse remain safeguarding concerns.** Physical abuse was reported by 8.0% of respondents and online or social media abuse by 5.7%.
- **Belonging and recognition strengthen retention.** More than two-thirds (68.0%) felt part of an officiating community. Belonging was strongly associated with pride, advocacy and intentions to continue.
- **Short-term retention is strong, but long-term commitment is less certain.** While 83.4% planned to continue for at least another year, only 61.5% saw officiating as part of their longer-term career, volunteering or lifelong involvement. Continued participation therefore depends on support, recognition and accessible pathways.
- **The evidence base on young officials is limited.** The literature review reinforces the need for the REFS project and further research with and about young officials.

The interviews provide rich insight into lived experience. Quotations throughout the report illustrate young officials' real-life experiences and perceptions of officiating.

> *« Refereeing is incredibly beneficial—not just in sport but in daily life. It builds confidence, communication skills, and helps with public speaking and school oral exams. »*
> Tennis official, 17, France

The findings point to the need for clear and visible recruitment pathways, early and continued mentoring, protected match environments, peer communities, recognition, transparent progression routes and flexible support during important educational and life transitions. Recruitment and retention should therefore be understood as connected parts of the same pathway, rather than as separate organisational challenges.

The report findings are organised into short, medium and long recommendations (see details on pages 65 - 72). All the recommendations are aimed at increasing understanding around young official recruitment and retention and providing real-world solutions.

Executive Summary

1 Short-term recommendations: actions within 6-12 months

1. Make entry routes visible
2. Introduce early mentoring or 'buddy' support
3. Strengthen matchday protection and reporting
4. Recognise young officials publicly and routinely
5. Clarify payment, expenses and practical expectations

2 Medium-term recommendations: actions over 1-3 years

1. Build young official's communities and peer networks
2. Develop scenario-based training for difficult interactions
3. Map and communicate progression pathways
4. Use clubs, families and coaches as recruitment partners
5. Design flexible appointment and support systems

3 Long-term recommendations: structural and cultural change over 3+ years

1. Position officiating as a recognised youth development pathway
2. Create a sustainable safeguarding framework for young officials
3. Invest in workforce data and retention tracking
4. Shift sport culture towards respect for officials
5. Develop young official leadership and ambassador programmes

Overall, the report shows that the recruitment and retention of young officials is a pathway issue. Young officials need to be attracted into the role, but they also need sustained support, recognition and protection if sport officiating is to become a valued and long-term part of their sporting identity.

1



Introduction

Background

Sport is increasingly recognised as a significant contributor to both social and economic development. Consequently, the European Union and national governments have placed greater expectations on the sport sector to support broader public policy objectives, particularly in the areas of education, health, social inclusion, and economic growth.

The sector is widely acknowledged for its capacity to improve public health and wellbeing, stimulate economic growth and regeneration, strengthen community development and social cohesion, facilitate the integration of migrants, and support the educational, personal, and social development of young people. Furthermore, sport plays an important role in creating employment opportunities and enhancing employability, particularly among unemployed and disadvantaged youth.

The effective delivery of organised and competitive sport across the European Union depends on the contribution of qualified sport officials who ensure that competitions are conducted fairly and in accordance with the rules of each sport. These officials, including referees, umpires, judges, timekeepers, and stewards, perform a range of critical functions that require observation, interpretation of events, and timely decision-making. The ability to make accurate, impartial, and consistent judgements is fundamental to maintaining the integrity of competition. As such, sport officials are essential to ensuring fair play, safeguarding the application of rules, and upholding the credibility of sport at all levels, from grassroots participation to elite competition.

A sustainable officiating workforce is essential to the future of organised sport. Without enough officials, opportunities to participate, develop skills and benefit from sport's contribution to physical health and wellbeing would be reduced, particularly for children and young people. Wider benefits would also be affected, including social connection across communities and generations, the inclusion of marginalised groups and employment within the sport sector. Officials are therefore central to the delivery of organised sport, helping to ensure that competition is safe, fair and consistent at every level.

Despite their critical role, sport officials have historically received limited strategic attention within many sporting organisations. Until relatively recently, officiating has often been overlooked in organisational vision statements, strategic plans, budget allocations, and workforce development programmes. However, the continued delivery of organised sport across Europe depends upon the recruitment, development, and retention of a sufficiently skilled officiating workforce. This need is made more pressing by the widespread and persistent problem of officiating attrition (Aliende at al., 2025), which has been identified as a global challenge across a range of sports.

The effective recruitment and retention of young officials is essential for successful sporting environments. Many officials are recruited at a younger age, and historically through school, college, or university. Young officials form a large demographic group due to the sheer number of youth sport participants that require qualified officials for organised competitions (Ridinger, 2015; Tingle et al., 2025). Sport organisations aim not only to recruit young officials but also to retain them and support their progression through structured officiating development pathways, enabling them to reach their full potential (Webb et al., 2023). Despite the importance of this workforce, research examining sport officials remains limited, particularly in relation to their recruitment, retention, and development across different age groups, levels of competition, and stages of expertise.

Young people, sport and officiating

Despite the critical role that young officials play in the successful delivery of competitive sport, there remains a limited understanding of the factors influencing their recruitment, development, and retention. A recent publication suggested an increased focus and understanding around young officials, and other different groups within sport officiating was required (Webb et al., 2025). There are complexities in researching and gathering data from young officials. Ethically it is more complicated for researchers to focus on younger age groups, however this does not mean that groups such as young officials should be overlooked. Understanding the current situation regarding young officials is essential to better understand their contribution to the wider officiating workforce.

Youth and sport are important topics at European and national levels, and there are many initiatives which aim to increase participation in sport and physical activity among children and young people. As part of the European Year of Youth in 2022 a Flash Eurobarometer survey found that 24% of young people participated in a sport club over the last 12 months. One of the key topics of the EU Work Plan for Sport 2024-2027 is the creation of adequate opportunities for sport and physical activity for all generations, which includes developing the place and impact of sport in children's life, to which the REFS project contributes by promoting positive values through the role of the sport official.

The REFS project focuses on children aged 8 – 13 and young people aged 14 – 20. Young sport officials are vital to the future of the whole sport sector in Europe and therefore the rationale for the REFS project is that sport officiating should be developed as an attractive choice for young people who want to take part in sporting activities, equivalent to roles of player/athlete or coach. A child or young person who does not wish to participate in sport as an athlete/player can still be involved in sport as an official and they can gain many new skills and benefit and have fun from the role in several ways.

The REFS project actively promotes the benefits of sport officiating and raises its status, image and standing among young people as a valid and attractive option for pursuing an involvement in sport. Given the high level of drop out, there needs to be an ongoing "pipeline" of younger officials coming through the system to replace those who leave or retire and prepare the next generation of sport officials.



Overall aim of the REFS project

The overall aim of REFS is to inspire the next generation of sport officials in Europe. This is achieved through intensive phases of research and consultation, followed by the development of guidelines and recommendations, tested in the real world through collaboration with schools, sport clubs and engagement of children and young people.

The project has three focus areas:

- Improving the image and perception of officiating among children (Indicative age group 8 – 13)
- Attracting/recruiting young people to officiating roles (Indicative age group 14 – 20)
- Retaining young officials (Indicative age group 14 – 20)

The project research phase and this resulting research report are focused on attracting/recruiting young people to officiating roles and retaining young officials (age group 14 – 20). The REFS project comprises six key deliverables. This research report represents one of these deliverables and contributes to the project's overall objectives by providing an evidence-based examination of the experiences, challenges, and development needs associated with young sport officials.

- **Deliverable 1: European Research Report on Children and Young People in Sport Officiating**
- **Deliverable 2: Compendium of Good Practice Examples in the Perception, Recruitment and Retention of children and Young People in Sport Officiating**
- **Deliverable 3: Guidelines for the Engagement of Children and Young People in Sport Officiating**
- **Deliverable 4: Series of Video Clips to Inspire the Next Generation of Sport Officials**
- **Deliverable 5: European Conference on Engagement of Children and Young People in Sport Officiating**
- **Deliverable 6: Strategic Sustainability Action Plan towards better Perception, Recruitment and Retention of Children and Young People in Sport Officiating**

The REFS Partnership

Coordinated by the European Observatoire of Sport and Employment (EOSE), the REFS project brings together eight partner organisations representing a range of stakeholders across six countries. These partners include national and international organisations for sport officials, sport federations, a national sport council, a national Olympic committee, and a university. Through this diverse partnership, REFS combines expertise, sector knowledge, and established networks to deliver the project's aims, objectives, and activities, while supporting the dissemination and promotion of project outputs across the wider sport officiating ecosystem.

The partnership gathers a mix of organisations with strong interest and expertise in sport officiating. This consortium ensures the innovative outputs are developed in line with the realities and expectations of the sector and can be sustained in the long term.

Partners

COORDINATOR OF THE REFS PROJECT

France / Europe
European Observatoire of Sport and Employment (EOSE)

France
Association Française du Corps Arbitral Multisports (AFCAM)

Denmark / Europe
Badminton Europe

United Kingdom
Coventry University

Belgium / Europe
EuroHockey

Netherlands / International
International Federation for Sports Officials (IFSO)

Netherlands
Dutch Olympic Committee Dutch Sports Federation (NOC*NSF)

Malta
SportMalta

Barriers to the attraction, recruitment and retention of young sport officials

There is limited published research on the motivations to start officiating, and the barriers to recruitment and retention of young officials. These barriers include the negative image/perception of officiating, support mechanisms and the real or perceived levels of abuse of sport officials.

There has been considerable coverage of abuse towards sport officials (see for example Brick et al., 2022; Dawson et al., 2022; Downward et al., 2024; Webb et al., 2020a; Webb et al., 2020b). Abuse towards sport officials is a significant and persistent threat to their wellbeing, mental health, retention, and the effective organisation of competitive sport, while also highlighting the need to better understand stakeholder interactions, cultural norms, perceptions, and organisational conditions that normalise abusive behaviour. While there is limited research around sport officials as a wider group, there is even less research focused specifically on abuse towards young officials (particularly those aged 18 years and under). This is despite abuse being detrimental to their wellbeing and mental health, a significant issue and a safeguarding concern (Everley, 2025).

In Canada, Radziszewski et al. (2024) interviewed 27 officials aged between 14 and 20 years old across numerous sports to document and analyse abuse specifically. The results identified the need to understand the reality of young officials operating in grassroots sport, with these young officials experiencing frequent, low intensity, mostly psychological abuse, from coaches and parents. Everley (2025) interviewed under 18 football referees across three English County Football Associations, adults who were working with these referees (such as Referee Development Officers, Referee Mentors, Youth Representatives and Allocation Officers) and parents. Findings identified that young officials routinely experienced verbal and physical abuse and that this abuse was largely normalised, with young officials actively prepared to anticipate and manage abusive situations.

Firek et al. (2020) focused on the quality of referee-player interactions in youth sport. Although not specifically focused on young officials, they considered emotional support, game organisation, and instructional support. Twenty-five soccer referees who refereed matches for children aged 9–12 years were recruited. They found that referees were usually unaware of their pedagogical function and the complexity of their responsibilities, and that they needed to be trained in educational methods and techniques appropriate to the age and needs of the child they were officiating. This would subsequently enable referees to take actions to prevent negative behaviour of players on the field and to encourage prosocial behaviour.

Płoszaj and colleagues (2020) focused on handball, and the quality of referee-player interactions in competitive youth fixtures. They recruited 25 referees who officiated children aged 9-12 years. Despite not necessarily being young officials, findings presented the need for officials to be trained to develop positive climates on the field of play, through enthusiasm and joy of interactions, as well as being able to monitor and knowing how to respond to the psychological and health needs of players. These studies extend concerns about abuse in officiating into youth sport, revealing an underdeveloped evidence base around officials aged 18 and under, whose exposure to verbal and physical abuse raises questions concerning safeguarding and wellbeing, while also pointing to the importance of training and support systems that help officials manage interactions and foster positive playing environments.

A position and commentary piece sought to shine a light on the tensions and interactions between young officials and parents in youth sport (Webb & Knight, 2024). The paper advocated for increasing awareness, stimulating research and enhancing applied practice which targeted the interactions between officials and parents in youth sport, with limited coverage given to the bi-directional interactions between parents and young officials, or to the steps that could be taken to improve any such interactions. Similarly, an expert statement identified the importance of further research with young officials and a better understanding of their specific environments and challenges (Webb et al., 2025).

The research report

Dr Tom Webb, based within the Centre for Resilient Business and Society at Coventry University, led and managed the research phase of the REFS project. In his role as Work Package Leader for this project deliverable, Dr Webb was responsible for overseeing the development of this research report and is the author of the document.

Research which led to the development of this Research Report is derived from the following sources:

- Literature review of academic and industry sources and REFS partner desk research template
- European survey of young sport officials
- Interviews with young sport officials

Literature Review/Desk Research

The literature review involved extensive searches of academic databases, synthesis of the literature, analysis of the literature and a 'desk research' phase where project partners were asked to contact their networks and provide any policy related information, and details on any relevant initiatives related to youth sport officials.

To examine the literature from a variety of methodologies and sources an integrative review was determined as the most appropriate method of collecting and assessing the literature and identifying a research agenda. This flexibility enables the synthesis of evidence while maintaining a structured and transparent process. Given the scarcity of research on young sport officials evidence was used from quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods research.

This review was carried out according to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 checklist (Page et al., 2021). Five databases (PsychInfo, PubMed, Scopus, SPORTDiscus, and Web of Science) were searched using terms split into four categories. The searches were conducted individually, selecting one term from each of the "Age term", 'Official term", and "Experience term" category, in order to ensure a more specific strategy in finding relevant literature, and is specific to the young officials. An additional search was also conducted with the "Sporting level term" included, to capture the levels at which young officials might officiate, for example within youth sport.

Initial searches revealed limited data and that young official populations involved multiple age-ranges and groupings, and as such, the age range employed for the literature was 12-29 years of age (European Commission / Council of Europe, 2025; European Union/Council of Europe, 2019).



Procedure

The initial search total was 430 articles. Firstly, article titles were ordered alphabetically in the Excel workbook and duplicates deleted. The remaining articles were moved to a new sheet in the workbook, with 163 articles being present following the deletion of duplicates. Next, articles that were deemed to have a relevant title (N = 15) were moved to a new sheet in the Excel workbook, where abstracts were assessed. Following full-text review (N = 8), four articles were deemed to meet the inclusion criteria, which were screened in order to identify other potentially relevant articles. 15 additional articles were identified from checking references lists of included articles and from other sources. Appendix 1 summarises the search process.

To identify patterns, a reflexive thematic analysis process was employed. The approach reflects the six-phase process (Braun & Clarke, 2021), consisting of familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, identifying patterns, reviewing themes, defining and naming of themes, and presenting the themes in this report. In line with established review methodologies, the identification of the additional 15 studies was undertaken through a process described as systematic snowballing. Specifically, backward citation tracking was employed, and the systematic screening of the reference lists of included studies was employed to identify potentially relevant work. Through the synthesis of 19 studies, four interrelated themes were identified: officiating environment and interpersonal dynamics, psychological and emotional wellbeing, skill development and training, and retention and continuity. The 19 studies spanned six different sports (football/soccer, rugby, handball, basketball, floorball, and ice hockey) and nine countries (Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, the United States). The ages of young officials ranged from 12 to 29 years, and the specific age range within this categorisation was often classified differently depending on research in question. Both male and female participants were represented, although female officials were underrepresented in several samples, mirroring the wider underrepresentation of this group in officiating research. The research papers were published in 16 different academic journals between 1993 and 2025, with 15 studies published between 2020 and 2025.

In addition, desk research was conducted with the partners of the REFS project. The partners provided insights related to initiatives, policy interventions and the current issues concerning young sport officials in different countries and sports. This ensured that there was an underpinning of understanding of the current environment for young officials and also provided content for this research report.

Interviews

A qualitative research methodology was deemed most appropriate to understand the developmental process from the perspectives of the young officials. Participants were invited to share their stories and accounts with a researcher, through individual semi-structured interviews, conducted over Microsoft Teams. The sample included 27 young officials aged 15-20 across eight European countries, who officiated 12 different sports. Interviews lasted between 22 and 43 minutes.

Procedure

Participants were contacted by either a gatekeeper known through personal contact, via e-mail or through project coordinator EOSE to invite them to participate in an interview. Following this initial contact, a suitable time was arranged for an interview to take place. Participants were interviewed by Microsoft Teams due to their varied geographical locations around Europe. As part of the interview process, rapport was established with the interview participants, involving the provision of information related to the project and the interviewer's background, as well an opportunity to ask questions. Questions were focused on the aims and objectives of the REFS project. Questions were also informed by the initial findings from the literature review and desk research. The interviews were recorded in their entirety, and the audio recordings were then transcribed.

Data analysis

The interview transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2016). Initially, the transcripts were read several times. Subsequently, codes were generated and then clustered into themes, with each theme having a central organising concept. Themes were then reviewed against the coded data and, where necessary, revised to ensure that the data were correctly represented. The next stage in the analysis involved colleagues independently reviewing the proposed themes to ensure they were consistent. The themes were then finalised and amended to appropriately reflect the content. The final stage in the analysis process involved compiling the report of the findings.



Survey

In addition to the other phases of research for the REFS project, a mixed-method online survey was adopted. This incorporated open and closed questions, along with Likert scale questions. The survey was designed and distributed using online software, "SurveyMonkey". Collecting large-scale quantitative and qualitative data through online surveys has been an increasingly successful methodological tool in sports literature (Cleland et al., 2018; Hong et al., 2019; Webb et al., 2020b).

The online survey was accessible through a URL web link, distributed via email, databases held by federations and organisations who are partners in this Erasmus Plus project, social media and personal contacts of the project partners. The survey was designed in English and subsequently translated by the project partners into Spanish, French and Dutch. The survey was then disseminated in different URL links where respondents selected the language in which they wanted to complete the survey. The survey was distributed to young sport officials in sports and countries around Europe. The incorporation of free text format (open) questions and Likert scales in particular, ensured a detailed and rich body of data, enhancing results, with the inclusion of open questions aiding understanding of the participants experiences, which quantitative data alone cannot provide.

The quantitative data from the closed questions provided numerical data of totals and averages across the survey responses from the surveys in different languages. Graphical analysis of Likert Scale data provided a visual representation of the response distribution, in addition to the calculation of totals and averages of the responses for each scale question. In addition, descriptive data is presented and further insight is derived from additional analysis on some questions/themes pertinent to the wider project. The use of these analyses was appropriate due to the focus upon the participant's perspective, the project's aims/objectives, and producing findings that are easy to interpret (Braun et al., 2016). This method of analysis has been widely used and is evident in recent literature (Aragão e Pina et al., 2018; Webb et al., 2020b). Responses are presented in the sections that follow and are grouped depending on the focus of the questions.

2



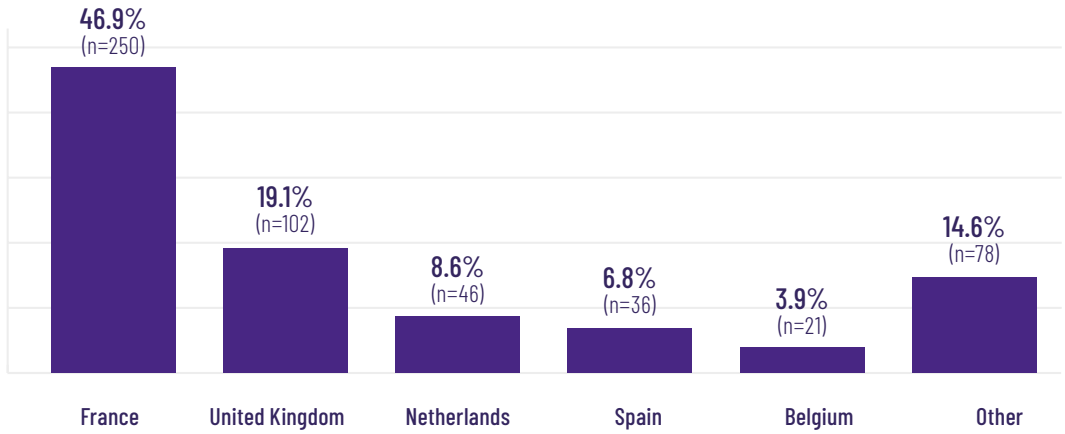
Survey Demographics

In total there were **533** usable responses to the survey after partial responses and incomplete surveys were removed. Numbers of responses to some questions varied due to respondents skipping questions and are reported where applicable.

The responses are organised under the emergent themes from the entire research process. As each theme is reported, examples are used from each phase of the research. Initially the demographic information from the survey is reported in order to contextualise the young officiating workforce.

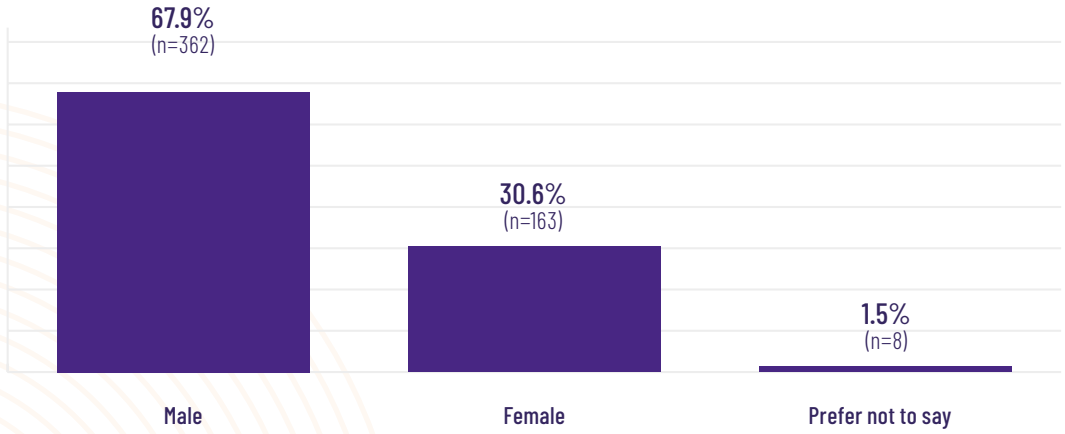
The survey had extensive reach. There were responses from participants representing 25 different countries. The responses from the top five countries are listed below in Figure 1. As can be seen from the chart, **46.9%** of the total number of responses came from France, **19.1%** from the UK, **8.6%** from the Netherlands, **6.8%** from Spain, **3.9%** from Belgium and **14.6%** from a total of 20 other countries in Europe.

Figure 1: Survey responses by country



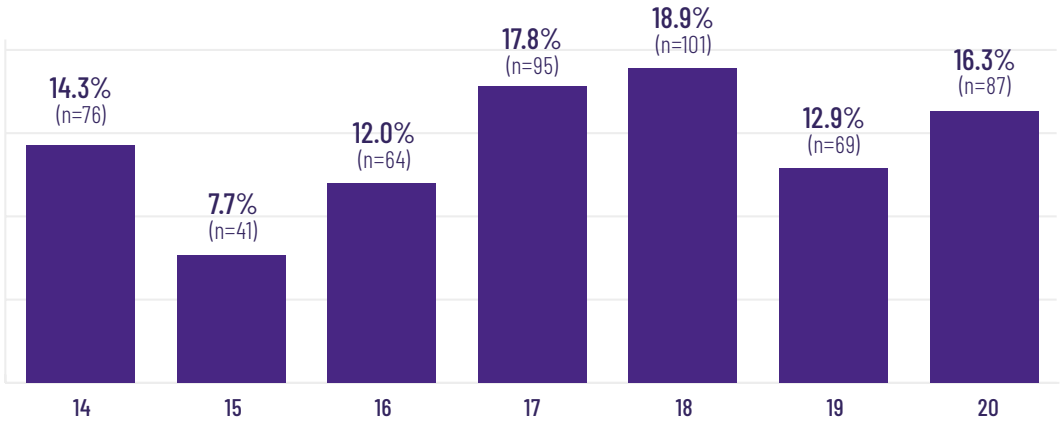
The survey respondents were predominantly male **(67.9%), 30.6%** of the sample was made up of responses from female officials (Figure 2). This is a good level of representation when compared to other research and literature involving sport officials.

Figure 2: Gender of respondents



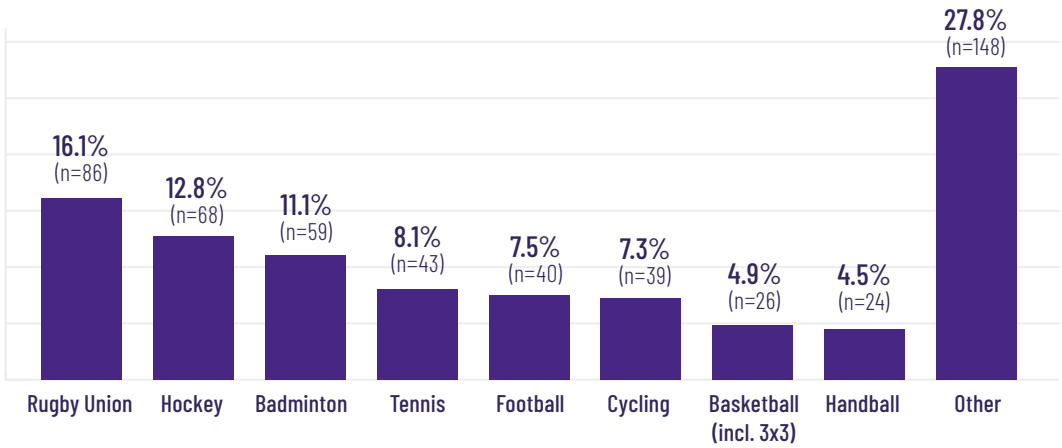
The young officials who responded to the survey demonstrated a range of ages. Ages of 17 and 18 had the most responses (**18.9% and 17.8%** respectively), but **16.3%** were 20, **14.3%** were 14, **12.9%** were 19 and **7.7%** were 15.

Figure 3: Age of respondents



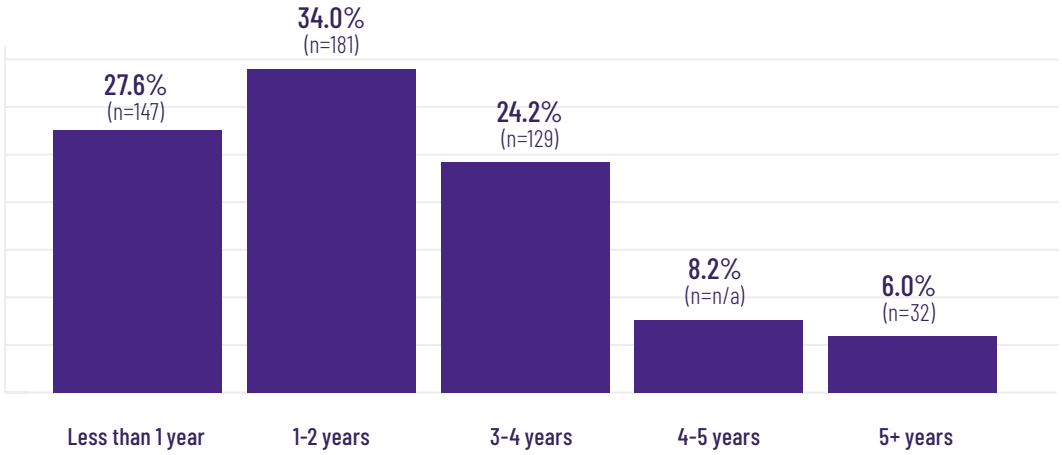
The young officials in the sample officiated a number of different sports. The primary sports are reported in Figure 4, with rugby union (**16.1%**), field hockey (**12.8%**), badminton (**11.1%**), Tennis (**8.1%**), and football (**7.5%**), the sports most represented. There were also **27.8%** of respondents who officiated a total of 24 other sports.

Figure 4: Sport officiated by respondents



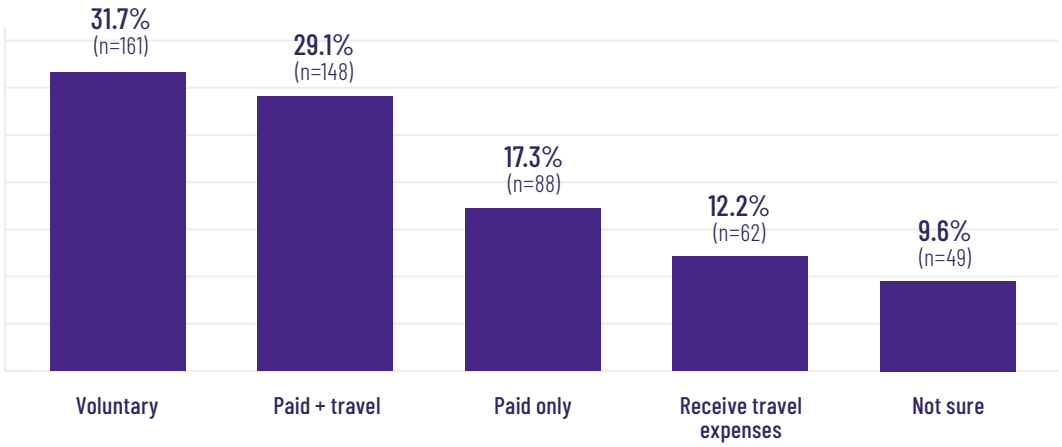
As would be expected from a young and relatively inexperienced part of the officiating workforce, most of the officials reported that they officiated at youth level (**31.9%**). Interestingly the level of officiating experience was quite split, with **15.2%** of respondents officiating in adult sport, **25.5%** in regional competitions, **21.8%** in national competitions and **5.6%** in international fixtures.

Figure 5: Years of officiating experience



The experience of the officials was predominantly either less than 1 year (**27.6%**), 1-2 years (**34%**) or 3-4 years (**24.2%**). However, **8.2%** of the referees had been officiating for 4-5 years and **6%** of the referees had been officiating for 5 or more years.

Figure 6: Current remuneration arrangements



The following sections are arranged under the overarching themes that have been developed following the analysis of the data from the desk research, literature review, interviews and survey. In terms of the survey responses all variables measuring perceptions, motivations, and environmental factors utilise a standardised 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree). Mean scores close to 5.00 indicate agreement, scores near 3.00 denote neutrality, and scores approaching 1.00 signify disagreement.

3



Pathways into officiating: staying connected to sport

The first theme involves how officials got into officiating, what their motivations and pathways were and how they stay connected to their sport.

The survey data demonstrates that entry into officiating is rarely a randomised or disconnected life event. Instead, youth officiating operates as an extension of an existing, deeply embedded sporting identity. Young sport officials are very often integrated within the fabric or community of their respective sports before starting on their officiating journey.

Dual-role identity

An overwhelming **90.6%** of the sample reported that they actively play sport alongside their officiating duties and of those officials that play sport alongside officiating, around **82%** of that group played the same sport that they regularly officiate. Only approximately **9.4%** function exclusively as officials without an active playing role.

Figure 7: Young officials who also play sport

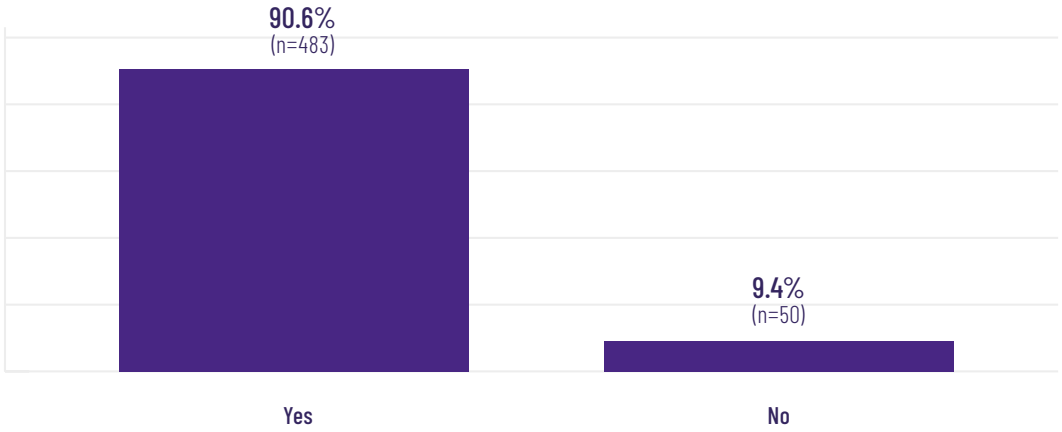
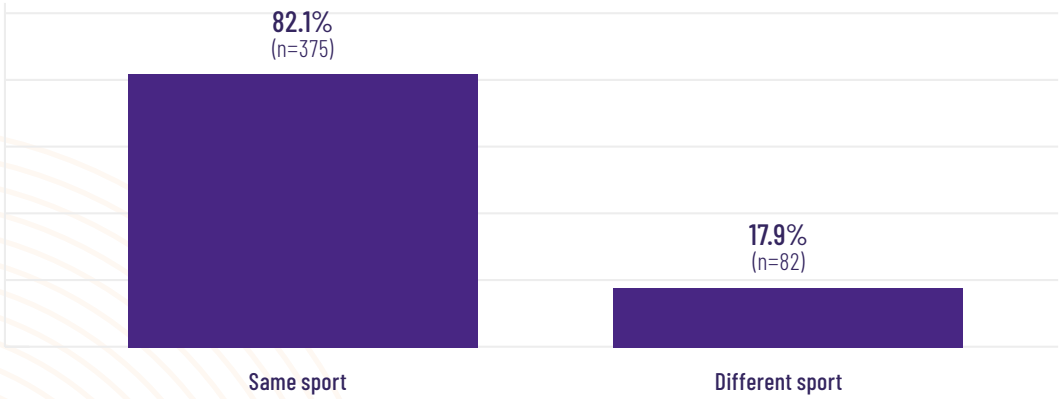


Figure 8: Sport played most often by young officials who also play



In addition to officials being involved in playing sport, and in particular the sport that they officiate, **30.4%** of these young individuals simultaneously fulfil responsibilities as a coach or trainer within their sport, and of those that do coach or train, **93.6%** do so in the same sport that they most regularly officiate. This demonstrates a sense of belonging and commitment to their chosen sport, although clearly young officials are more likely to play rather than coach or train in their sport.

Figure 9: Young officials who also coach or train

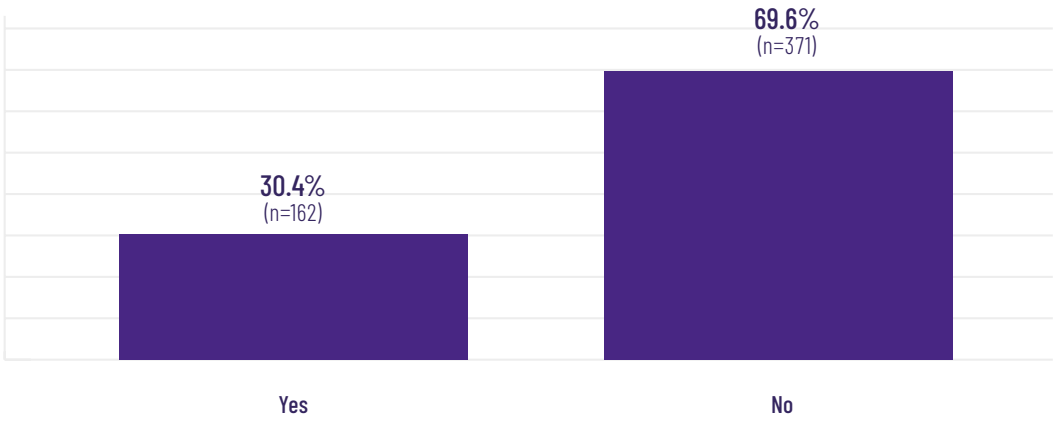
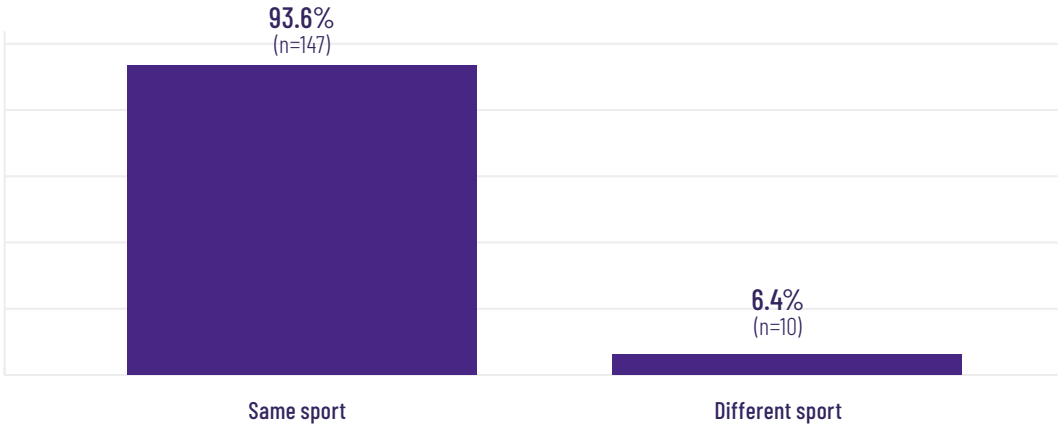


Figure 10: Sport coached or trained most often



This sport engagement highlights that the youth officiating pipeline is dependent upon the much broader sporting participant system. Rather than recruiting outsiders, federations are very often drawing from an internalised talent pool of «dual-role» participants who occupy multiple spaces concurrently, often in the local club environment. This provides both opportunities for further recruitment and retention within sport, and also raises the question why drop-out rates remain an issue across sports in Europe (see for example the UEFA '**Be a referee**' campaign).

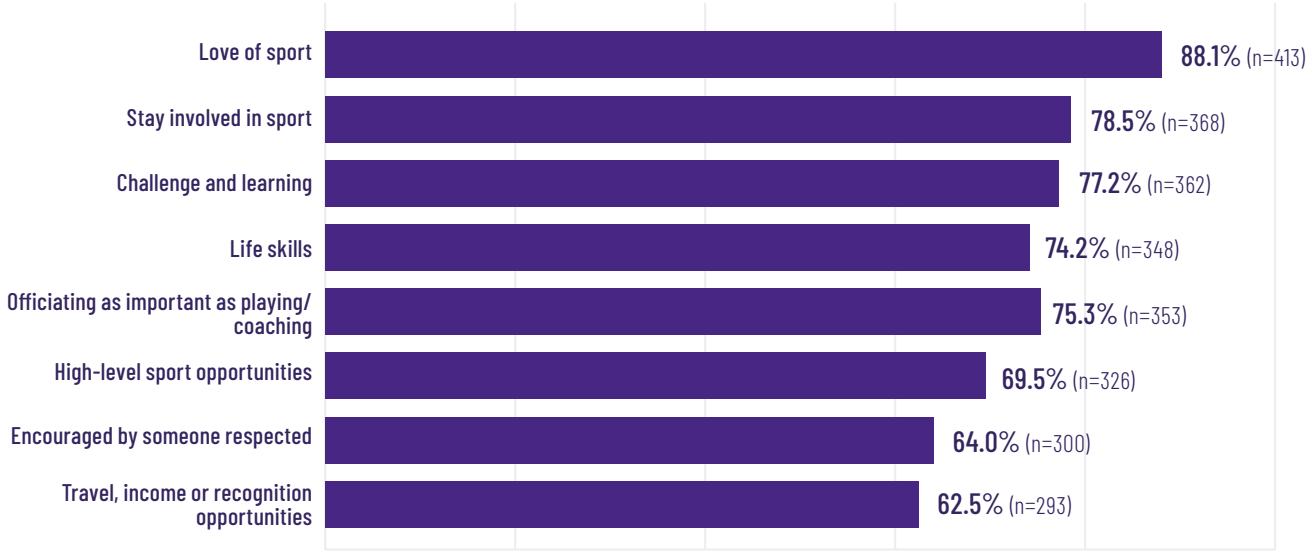


Motivation to begin

When considering the initial reasons for starting to officiate, intrinsic factors seem to be more important to the officials than extrinsic rewards (such as match fees for example).

88.1% of officials agreed or strongly agreed that they became an official because of the love for their sport; **78.5%** saw officiating as a way to stay involved in sport; **69.5%** believed it could keep them involved in high-level sport beyond playing/coaching opportunities. When they started, **47.6%** of officials were mainly playing sport and **38.8%** were studying.

Figure 11: Entry motivations (agree or strongly agree)



Officials felt like they had an affinity to their sport, not just from playing, but they were also looking for more ways to be involved, and this started their officiating journey;

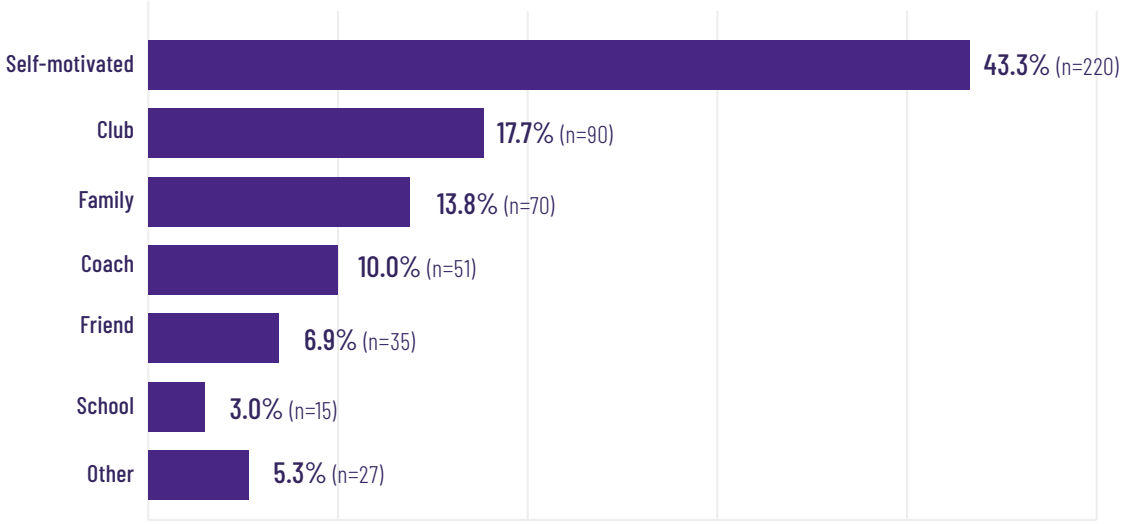
> *« I play volleyball as a player, and I wanted to get more involved in my sport. »*
> Volleyball official, 15, France

Alongside this continued and additional involvement and love of their sport, young officials also need to be recruited, and the visibility of this recruitment and the methods that are used to get young officials involved in officiating are clearly important;

> *« I got interested from the post they [the federation] posted... for the referees to join and also because I love the game of football...I love watching a beautiful game of football. »*
> Football referee 17, Malta

Not only do officials have an emotional connection to their sport that seems to be a strong motivational factor for staying involved and embarking on an officiating career, there are also other reasons for the young officials starting. When asked who most encouraged them to become an official, personal self- motivation (**43.3%**), the club that the official is involved with (either through playing or family involvement) (**17.7%**) and family (**13.8%**) were the three most popular reasons given.

Figure 12: Main source of encouragement to become an official

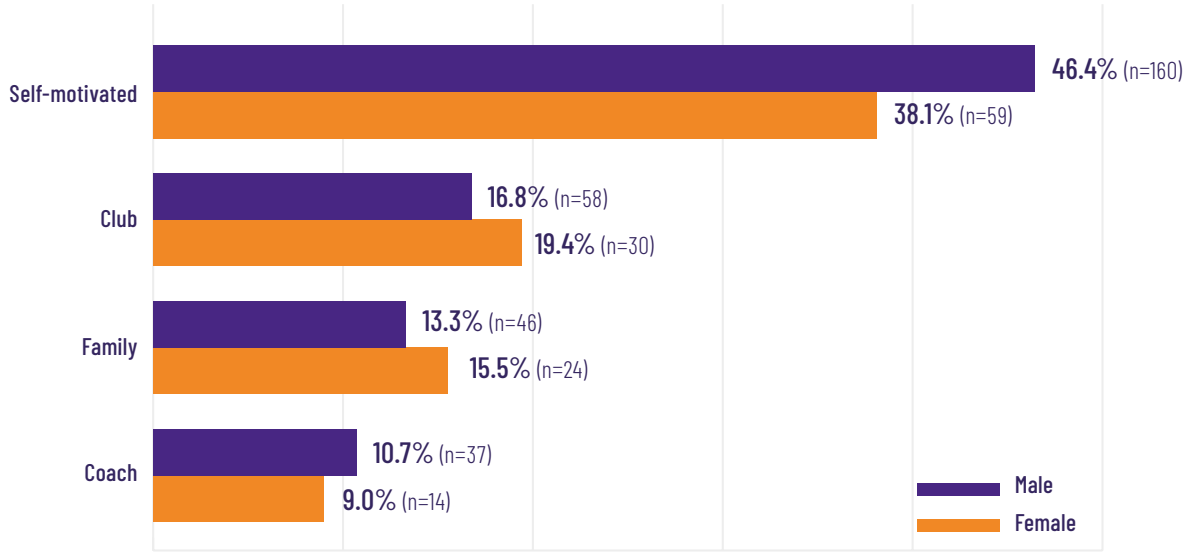


The interviews also outlined the importance of motivation, but more specifically the role of family at the start of a referee's career, and in their continued involvement. A football referee aged 15 outlined how this can work, "my dad supports me in refereeing and keeps me involved". Similarly, another official connected his entry into umpiring to existing relationships within the sport and, more specifically, to the example provided by his older brother;

> *« I know a lot of people in the sport so I wanted to stay in, and also my older brother is an umpire so mostly the umpiring came from him because I've seen him. He told me about how it works. »*
> Badminton umpire, 17, Czech Republic

These accounts show how family members can help officials to start and continue, making officiating visible, understandable and achievable for young people. There are also differences between young men and young women officials and their initial motivations. For example, **46.4%** of male officials stated they were entirely self-motivated to start, whilst comparatively **38.1%** of female officials cite self-motivation, with their local club (**19.4%**) and family (**15.5%**) playing a larger role in recruiting them into the officiating pipeline compared to males.

Figure 13: Main encouragement sources by gender



Officials were also asked to agree or disagree with a series of statements about their initial motivations for starting to officiate. The strongest motivation was love of sport: 413 of 469 respondents (**88.1%**) agreed or strongly agreed that this influenced them. Staying involved in sport was also important, with 368 respondents (**78.5%**) agreeing or strongly agreeing. Challenge, learning and life skills were also prominent, while encouragement from someone respected (300 respondents, **64.0%**) and opportunities linked to travel, income and recognition (293 respondents, **62.5%**) were relevant but less dominant entry motivations.

It is also important to understand what might prevent young officials from starting their officiating careers. Among respondents who answered the barrier question, lack of respect from players, coaches or spectators was the most selected barrier, chosen by **314 of 455 respondents, 69.0%**. Fear of abuse or criticism was a close second, selected by **308 respondents, 67.7%**, suggesting that concerns about respect, abuse and criticism are interlinked. Other perceived barriers were selected less frequently but remained important, with **186 respondents, 40.9%** selecting that officiating required too much time or clashed with school or work, **183, 40.2%**, selected lack of awareness or information about how to start, and **182, 40.0%**, selected lack of friends or peers who officiate. Because this was a 'tick-all-that-apply' question, percentages exceed 100% across response options. The report considers some of these barriers in more detail in subsequent sections, but it is important to identify these initial barriers to young officials starting.

The findings show how family and close networks can shape the earliest stages of officiating, before young people have developed a strong officiating identity or perhaps a formal connection to officiating communities. The results from the survey and the interviews also show the importance of being involved in sport in some way as a starting point. Most officials highlighted that they played their chosen sport, or perhaps coached the sport, and that this led to them starting to officiate. In addition, the love of their sport and their personal motivation to officiate were also seen as important motivational components.

4



Officiating, personal development and identity

The young officials, both through the survey and the interview process, were clear that officiating serves as a major driver of personal growth, character development, and identity formation. This recognition of the additional value and personal development opportunities that officiating can provide could be a significant driver for recruitment and retention of officials, given the wider life skills that officiating can provide. Officiating is a process of career development and the formation of identity within officiating, which leads to the clarity of the role, and subsequently improvement within the role. Young officials learn skills around authority, communication, confidence and emotional control through their early match experiences.

The survey results show that managing competitive sporting fixtures acts as a means for the development of critical life skills that extend beyond the boundaries of the pitch or playing area. **79.8%** felt proud to be a sport official, **77.2%** of the officials wanted to challenge themselves and learn something new, **75.6%** currently feel confident managing games and difficult situations and **74.2%** believed officiating would help them learn useful life skills. The interview responses further reflect the strength of feeling around the benefits of officiating, and the impact that the skills learned through officiating can have on wider life experiences.

One tennis official from France talks about the building of confidence, communication skills and the development of public speaking skills and the benefit to exam preparation and performance in education settings. A fencing official from France also refers to the communication element, as well as the skills gained from managing fixtures and people in a sporting setting, even identifying an experience with a referee when a player that has helped to shape their approach to dealing with people;

> *« Refereeing is incredibly beneficial—not just in sport but in daily life. It builds confidence, communication skills, and helps with public speaking and school oral exams. »*
> Tennis official, 17, France

> *« Fencing helps me understand what behaviours I can change to be a better referee—communication, match management... a referee once spoke to me in a way I didn't like, I know I won't do that as a referee. »*
> Fencing official, 18, France

Further to these sentiments, another official from handball in the Netherlands highlighted the confidence that officiating instils in individuals, and how positive affirmation can help to develop confidence;

> *« I do notice that officiating makes me feel stronger and more confident... they always thank you at the end... I like that too. »*
> Handball official 18, Netherlands

The survey responses demonstrate the extent to which young officials endorse the developmental value of the role. In total, 362 of 469 respondents (**77.2%**) agreed or strongly agreed that they wanted to challenge themselves and learn something new, while 348 (**74.2%**) agreed or strongly agreed that officiating could help them learn useful life skills. By placing themselves in positions of responsibility and authority, these young people appear to see officiating as a route into confidence-building, communication, judgement and personal development, not simply as a weekly job or a way of making money. Financial and practical opportunities were also relevant though. 293 respondents (**62.5%**) agreed or strongly agreed that officiating could provide opportunities such as travel, income and recognition, compared with 89 respondents (**19.0%**) who disagreed or strongly disagreed. This suggests that income and opportunity-based messaging may be useful, provided it is framed alongside the wider developmental and social benefits of officiating.

Figure 14: Personal development and identity formation



The open responses from the survey support the sentiments and focus on financial payments and opportunities. More specifically, the young officials identified that being paid for fixtures and receiving expenses are important;

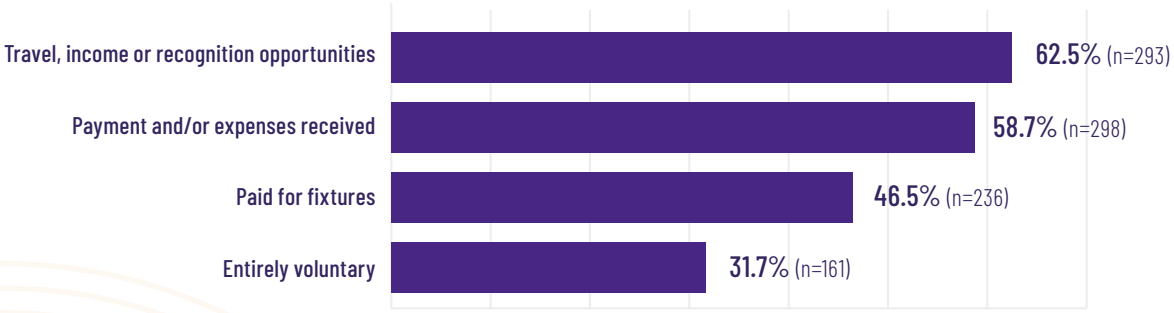
> *« ...getting expenses covered because due to traveling etc. It is quite expensive, but also having support after a game at times helps. »*
>
> *« Right now I get paid for matches and reimbursed travel costs (which do not always fully cover them), but payment is about 30 to 35 euros per game with a game usually lasting 2 to 3 hours. We also need at least an hour to prepare for the game. This does not even include all the time and money invested in extra courses, training and keeping up with rule knowledge. I love the game and see it as an investment in my future umpiring career, but I can understand why this discourages people. It is a lot of work and requires dedication if you want to do higher-level games, but you cannot expect much more money for that. There are not many young people willing to do this, especially while studying. Paying more would make it interesting as a side job, and I think more young people would do it. Besides, if more money were paid, professionalism expectations for umpires could also increase, which would be a good thing. »*
>
> Baseball official, the Netherlands, aged 19

There are differences between sports and countries in terms of what officials are paid. For example, the quote above from a baseball official in the Netherlands outlines their experiences of payment and the quotes below from two different rugby officials from the UK show the differences between sports – with the country that the official operates within also a point of difference:

> *« Without a doubt, if rugby union officials were paid a fee on top of expenses it would encourage more young people to officiate. This is because working 5 hours at a local job may earn £50 but as an official you could potentially give up the same amount of time and get nothing for it. Nevertheless, this is not an issue as long as players remain respectful at all times... »*
>
> Rugby union official, UK, aged 19

> *« The main difference between rugby and football is that other forms of refereeing and officiating come with payment on top of travel expenses, which often attracts people to pursue them. I also believe greater awareness should be encouraged at club level because too often players are too focused on playing to realize they could reach a higher level through officiating than through playing. »*
>
> Rugby union official, UK, aged 18

Figure 15: Financial and practical aspects of officiating



The findings suggest that, despite some of the challenges and barriers identified elsewhere in the report, most young officials remained positive about their role and intended to continue. In total, **336 of 421 respondents, 79.8%**, agreed or strongly agreed that they felt proud to be a sport official, while **334 respondents, 79.3%**, said they would recommend officiating to other young people. This suggests that young officials attach personal value and meaning to officiating, even when they also encounter pressures, abuse or uncertainty around progression.

Retention intentions were also positive in the short term. **351 of 421 respondents, 83.4%**, agreed or strongly agreed that they planned to continue officiating for at least another year. By contrast, **116 respondents, 27.6%**, agreed or strongly agreed that they sometimes think about stopping because of time, stress or abuse, while **239 respondents, 56.8%**, disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement. This indicates that, although a notable minority are considering stopping, most young officials in the sample were not currently thinking about leaving. Overall, the results point to a positive short-term outlook but also highlight the importance of addressing the pressures that might weaken longer-term retention.

Young officials showed some awareness of the wider opportunities that officiating can provide, including travel, income and recognition. In total, **293 of 469 respondents, 62.5%**, agreed or strongly agreed that, before they started, they thought officiating could provide these kinds of opportunities. However, almost one in five respondents, **89 of 469, 19.0%**, disagreed or strongly disagreed.

This suggests that opportunities linked to officiating are recognised by many young officials, but they are not yet universally visible or necessarily clearly understood. There is therefore scope for federations, clubs and officiating organisations to communicate these benefits more clearly at the recruitment stage. This should not mean presenting officiating only in financial terms, but rather showing young people that officiating can offer wider value, including travel, responsibility, recognition, personal development and continued involvement in sport.

Through the interviews, officials demonstrated an awareness of their personal development and evolving identity as an official, as well as the importance of supporting other young officials once they are more established as officials themselves;

> *« My development is going well, and I'm reaching an increasingly interesting level... Now I'm in a talent program with the KNVB, I'm being recognised and mentored. That gives me positive energy...if there's a young referee, I try to be there and give positive feedback at halftime: 'It's going great, but pay attention to this.' Not too much information, but making sure they feel valued and want to develop. »*
>
> Football referee, Netherlands, aged 19

This football referee shows understanding around their personal development and also the development of other young officials. They talk about mentoring and this mentoring seems to have had a positive effect, because they are also supporting other young officials to progress and develop. A waterpolo referee from the Netherlands summarised their development and journey since they took the initial training course, and how this experience, alongside other training and development opportunities, has led to them want to progress and develop further;

> *« I first took the Basic Referee courses, then I took my follow-up course to become a full-fledged referee... I still have to take another course and then I'll officially be a referee...I would like to take things further afterward. At the end of the season, there are the play-offs. If things go well and everyone is positive, I would like to be a referee there too...I learned everything because I received a lot of guidance from my trainer and mentor. »*
>
> Waterpolo official, Netherlands, aged 18

The mention of a positive outlook and the support received from the trainers and mentors reinforces the sentiments from the football official in the Netherlands. The open responses from the survey also show the importance of opportunities for new, young officials so that they are made aware of the benefits and opportunities before they become an official;

> *« Highlighting the opportunities. Refereeing abroad, refereeing as a route to elite sport, refereeing at different tournaments. »*

Other officials further highlighted the need to promote these opportunities and for sporting federations to communicate more effectively so young people are aware of the possibilities that officiating can provide. This could lead to more young people training and qualifying as officials, and the evidence within this report suggests that once the young officials are included and part of their chosen sport, they are aware of the benefits and the value that officiating can bring. One young official identifies the importance of communication;

> *« Maybe better communication because I think most young people do not even know they can become referees. This is not the case in my league, but maybe better consideration of referees would help. »*

This communication should be directed to young people, and particularly those young people involved in sport. Evidence here suggests that the majority of young officials come from within sport, and have experiences of their chosen sport, so they provide a captive audience for any enhanced communication or promotion. Two young officials believed that this increased visibility was important;

> *« Recognition of the referee role, more well-known and publicised training courses. Putting it [officiating] more in the spotlight, showing its importance and that without referees there is no game. »*
>
> *« ...more visibility for referees in youth categories. Adult-category referees are promoted on social media but that does not motivate young people to start. If a young person sees someone their own age at the highest levels, they can identify with them. »*

The use of social media is an important tool, particularly when trying to attract young people to become officials and increasing the visibility of officials and the associated benefits is something that the young officials believe would lead to increased numbers.

The following section focuses on the match/fixture environment and some of the challenges that the young officials have reported in these settings.

5



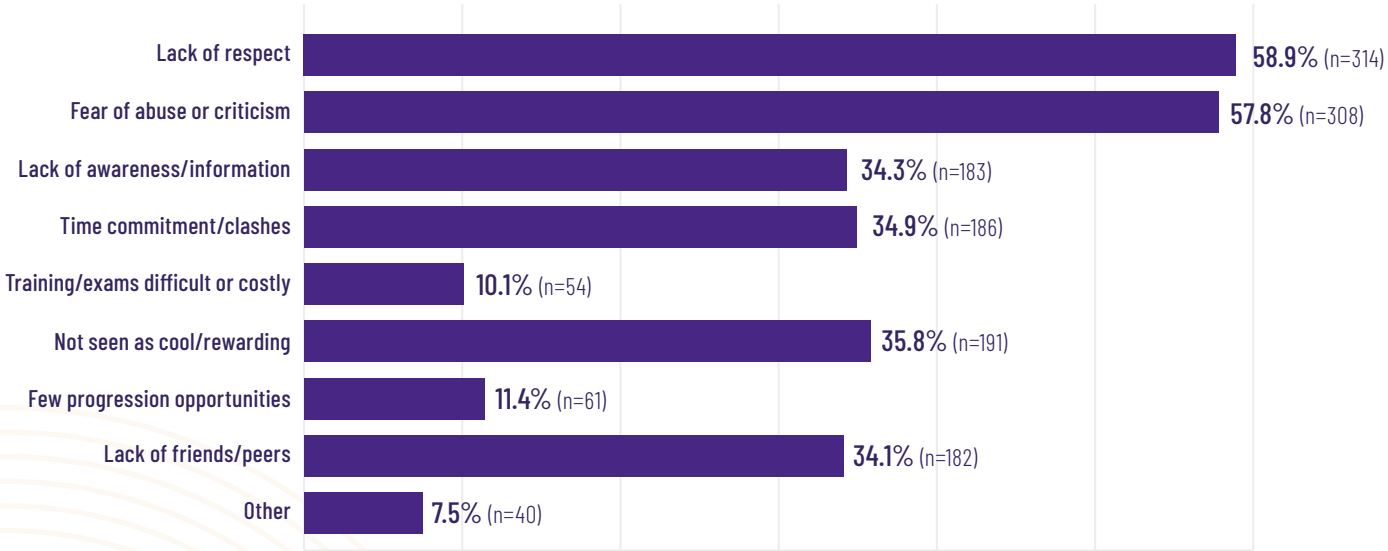
The match environment: respect, abuse and legitimacy

Despite the positive developmental identity built by young officials, the competitive match environment remains the main source of stress. The survey data reveals that match-day hostility from adult stakeholders forms a toxic environment that challenges the legitimacy of young officials. Previous research has identified the importance of understanding interactions between young officials and adults as spectators in youth sport (Webb & Knight, 2024), and the results from the survey and interviews suggests that there is a pervasive culture within sport, creating a landscape that young officials have to understand and navigate if they are to continue in their role.

Overall, **266 young officials out of 435 respondents** reported experiencing at least one form of abuse or negative treatment during or after officiating (**61.1%**). This includes those who agreed or strongly agreed that they had experienced at least one of the following: verbal abuse, physical abuse, online/social media abuse, or other negative treatment such as being ignored or undermined.

Lack of respect was the most selected factor that respondents believed might discourage young people from becoming officials, with **314 respondents, 58.9%**, selecting "lack of respect from players, coaches or spectators". Fear of abuse or criticism was a close second, selected by **308 respondents, 57.8%**, suggesting that respect, abuse and criticism are closely interlinked concerns in how young officials perceive the role. In terms of current experience, **199 of 435 respondents, 45.7%**, agreed or strongly agreed that they had experienced verbal abuse from players, **182, 41.8%**, from coaches, and **181, 41.6%**, from spectators. These figures are substantial, although they vary by sport and should be interpreted in light of the sample composition. They appear lower than some wider cross-sectional studies of officials across broader age ranges, but direct comparisons should be made cautiously because this study focuses specifically on young officials.

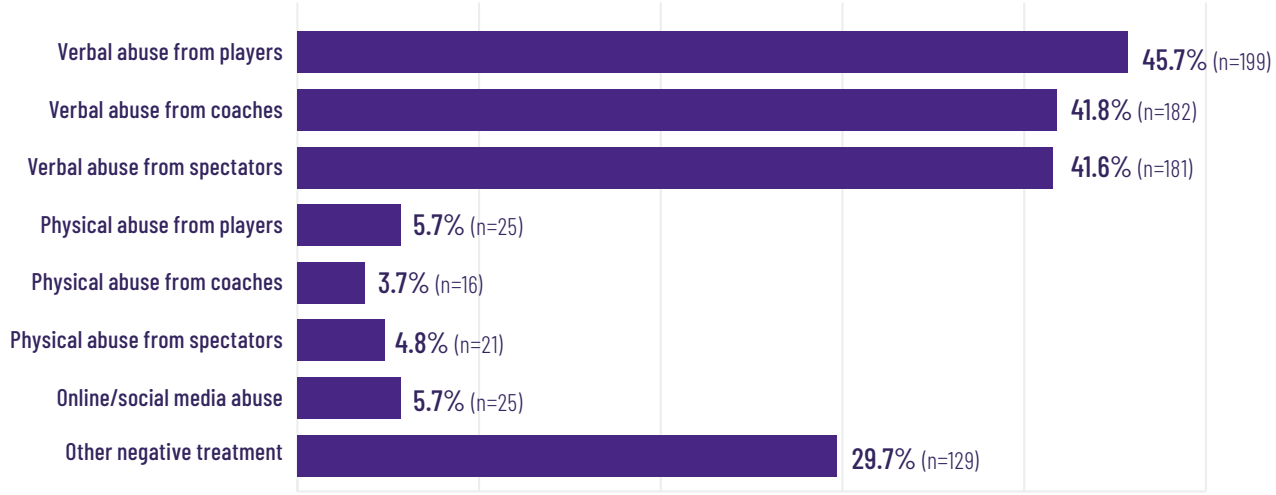
Figure 16: Perceived barriers to becoming sport officials



Although direct comparison across studies is complicated by differences in sport, country, sample composition, and measurement period, consideration of previous research does provide a guide. Existing research consistently shows that abuse of sport officials is widespread, particularly in larger adult and cross-sectional samples. In English association football, Cleland et al. (2018) found that 22.1% of referees reported verbal abuse every match, 37.6% every couple of matches, and 18.9% had experienced physical abuse. Similar patterns have been reported internationally, with Webb et al. (2020b) finding that 68.1% of French football referees and 51% of Dutch football referees had experienced verbal abuse, while 16% and 14.6%, respectively, had experienced physical abuse. Abuse is also evident beyond football. Webb et al. (2019) found that 49% of rugby union officials and 45% of cricket officials experienced abuse at least twice every season.

Studies in Gaelic games report particularly high levels of exposure, with Brick et al. (2022) finding that 94.29% of officials had experienced verbal abuse and 23.06% had experienced physical abuse during their officiating career. Similarly, Lishman et al. (2025) reported that, during the previous season, 88.11% of Gaelic games officials experienced verbal abuse, 7.59% physical abuse, and 17.16% social media abuse. In Canadian amateur hockey, Ackery et al. (2012) found that 92.1% of referees had been recipients of aggression and anger, while Hancock et al. (2024) reported that 92.9% of Canadian officials across 14 sports had experienced abuse at some point in their careers, including 24.9% who had experienced physical abuse. These studies suggest that lower levels of abuse reported in a young-official sample may be positive in terms of their experiences, but might also reflect shorter exposure time, lower cumulative officiating experience, different competition contexts, or different measurement windows. Nevertheless, the fact that reported abuse is lower than in some wider samples is encouraging, while still requiring careful safeguarding attention given that the sample is focused on young people.

Figure 17: Abuse and negative treatment reported by young officials

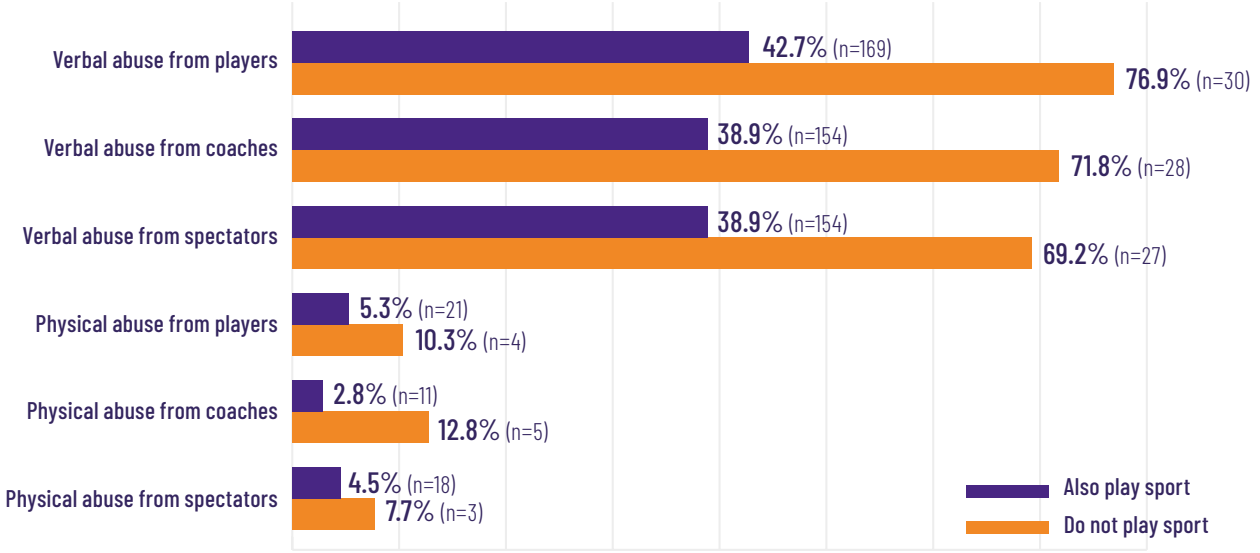


As the figure above demonstrates, the young officials suggest that verbal abuse was the most commonly reported form of abuse experienced by officials. Almost half of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they had experienced verbal abuse from players during or after officiating (**199 officials, 45.7%**). Similar levels were reported in relation to coaches, where **182 officials, 41.8%**, agreed or strongly agreed, and spectators, where **181 officials, 41.6%**, agreed or strongly agreed. Physical abuse meanwhile was reported by a much smaller proportion of officials. **25 officials, 5.7%**, reported physical abuse from players, **16 officials, 3.7%**, from coaches, and **21 officials, 4.8%**, from spectators. Online or social media abuse was also more uncommon in this sample, with **25 officials, 5.7%**, agreeing or strongly agreeing that they had experienced this. However, almost one-third of respondents, **129 officials, 29.6%**, reported experiencing other forms of negative treatment, such as being ignored or undermined.

Notably, most officials felt that their organisation takes abuse or disrespect towards officials seriously, with **300 officials, 69%**, agreeing or strongly agreeing, compared with only **60 officials, 13.8%**, who disagreed or strongly disagreed.

It is also worth comparing young officials who also play sport with those who do not, and how this relates to reported levels of abuse (see Figure 18 below).

Figure 18: Abuse by whether young officials also play sport



Young officials who did not also play sport reported higher levels of verbal abuse than those who were also players. Among officials who also played sport, **42.7%** reported verbal abuse from players, **38.9%** from coaches, and **38.9%** from spectators. In contrast, among those who did not play sport, the equivalent figures were **76.9%, 71.8%, and 69.2%,** respectively. Physical abuse was much less common across the sample, but was again reported more frequently by officials who did not play sport, particularly physical abuse from coaches, reported by **12.8%** of non-playing officials compared with **2.8%** of playing officials. However, the non-playing group was relatively small (**n = 39**), so these differences should be interpreted cautiously.

The interviews and the open responses from the survey provide further information related to the experiences of the young officials. The young officials outlined the experiences of abuse to which they had been subjected, and despite the lower levels evident for this cohort, it was still perceived as an issue;

> ***« What I like least is when I get shouted at...***
> ***coaches can be a challenge when they are shouting at me. »***
> Football referee, UK aged 15

Other young sport officials also identified that abuse was a particular challenge for them. Another football referee from the Netherlands described hearing what parents shout from the touchline at under-11 and under-12 matches and stated that these interactions can be a problem for the motivation of officials;

> *« Negative experiences can definitely affect your motivation. After a string of bad matches or a lot of criticism, you can start to doubt whether you want to continue…I understand that some young referees drop out because of this, especially if they don't feel supported by the association or their environment. But if you also see on social media what sometimes still happens around youth matches, it's not always a safe environment for referees to develop…when I hear what parents shout at matches for the under-11s and under-12s, where I started out as a referee, and you hear the criticism of referees now, I think it's truly appalling and something needs to be done about that. Because that's the environment where they're taking their first steps and encountering refereeing for the first time at the youth level, and if there's no respect there at all, people aren't going to like it. »*
>
> Football referee, Netherlands, aged 19

This official is reflecting on his initial experiences, and the scenario for young officials today as they enter sport at 14 or 15 years of age. Research regarding the abuse of young officials suggests that comments from the sidelines can be detrimental to their wellbeing, also raising safeguarding and child protection concerns (Everley, 2025; Radziszewski et al., 2024). The quote above connects these concerns directly to recruitment and retention, arguing that if experiences of officiating occur in an environment with no respect, young people will not want to continue. Another official believed that the main issue was supporters who didn't understand the rules or laws of the game;

> *« What I don't like is sometimes there are supporters who have minimal ideas about the game and they're just shouting towards you… quite a bit of the time, especially from one person. Usually, I go to the match delegates and I tell them, because this year they tried to focus a lot more on defending the referee. »*
>
> Handball official, Malta, aged 20

This is one of the few areas in which formal organisational support becomes required as match delegates and federations begin to focus on offering young officials protection. It should also be noted that despite the wealth of evidence regarding abuse, this response appears to be reactionary rather than taking steps to prevent abuse in the first place. This abuse can have a negative impact on the wider sporting environment and produce an environment that is detrimental to the young officials and their development (see Radziszewski et al., 2024; Webb & Knight, 2024).

The open responses from the survey showed that the young officials identified parents in youth sport as a particular concern on the sidelines;

> *« Parents are an issue. They cared more than their children, about what was happening on court and took it out on officials. I know several officials felt the same way – parents not agreeing with a decision and mouthing off at them. We just follow the rulebook and do the best we can... decisions have to go one way or another. It is not a personal attack, we are not biased at all, we are just doing our jobs and that is hindered by parents hovering around shouting at you. »*

Another young official argued that better protection is required for both young women and young men, and the abuse that they encounter comes from spectators, but also players and coaches as well;

> *« ...something that better protects especially young women, but of course men too, against aggression and abuse. Everyone – players, coaches, spectators – needs to show more respect toward officials regardless of age, gender or anything else. »*

The cross-tabulations suggest that abuse is not evenly distributed across sports or countries. Verbal abuse was the most reported form of abuse, with **246 young officials, 56.6%**, reporting verbal abuse from at least one source. Rates were particularly high in rugby union, basketball, field hockey, football, American football and tennis. Although it is important to acknowledge that some of these findings are based on small sample sizes.

Table 1

Sport	Response No	Verbal abuse No	Verbal abuse %
Rugby Union	80	64	**80.0%**
Basketball	14	11	**78.6%**
Field Hockey	53	41	**77.4%**
Football	35	25	**71.4%**
American Football	14	10	**71.4%**
Tennis	34	23	**67.6%**

Country-level differences were also evident, with the highest rates of verbal abuse reported in the United Kingdom, Belgium, Ireland, the Netherlands and Spain, while France reported a lower rate. Again, some of these findings should be interpreted with caution due to the small sample size.

Table 2

Country	Response No	Verbal abuse No	Verbal abuse %
United Kingdom	92	69	**75.0%**
Belgium	17	12	**70.6%**
Ireland	10	6	**60.0%**
Netherlands	36	21	**58.3%**
Spain	26	15	**57.7%**
France	198	85	**42.9%**

Physical abuse was much less common overall, reported by **35 young officials, 8.0%**. Social media abuse was also relatively uncommon, reported by **25 young officials, 5.7%**, with no strong or consistent pattern by country or gender. Gender differences were most apparent for verbal abuse, which was reported by **61.0%** of male officials compared with **47.3%** of female officials. Physical abuse and online abuse were broadly similar across males and females.

Table 3

Gender	Response No	Verbal abuse No	Verbal abuse %	Physical abuse No.	Physical abuse %
Male	300	183	**61.0%**	25	**8.3%**
Female	131	62	**47.3%**	10	**7.6%**

Officials described that being young makes them more vulnerable to criticism and disrespect. This hostility is tied not just to mistakes, but to how others within their sport react to their age and credibility. Young official's authority and legitimacy are challenged rather than recognised. A fencer from France outlined in the interviews how people can react to him as a young official;

> *« ...he's just a kid, he doesn't understand fencing. »*
> Fencing official, France, aged 18

This suggests that there is a denial of legitimacy, not because of his abilities as an official, but because of his age. A field hockey umpire further notes the issues for a young official managing players far older than him, particularly in gaining their respect:

> *« ...earning the respect from the players is important, because if they're in our first league, if the players that are playing for 30 plus years, you have to earn your respect with them first so that they really respect you as the umpire and really know you are good, you know what you're doing...I think that's one big point. »*
> Field hockey umpire, Austria, aged 18

The issue of respect and legitimacy is something that the young officials are aware of, and it is an issue that they seemingly need to overcome as they progress as an official. The interviews outlined how this questioning of legitimacy occurred and what this means for them as officials;

> *«...being young means people question your legitimacy, even if you're trained and qualified. »*
> Powerlifting official, France, aged 19

> *«...the challenges are because, as I'm still 19 years old, there could be players older than me. »*
> Football referee, Netherlands, aged 19

This sentiment was also supported through the open responses from the survey, with the age of the officials a recurrent theme;

> *«Despite my ability, my young age causes players to treat me like a child. I strongly believe that if I looked 30 years older players would not treat me this way. Although most players are respectful there are always a few who are not. »*

The age issue applies to the wider stakeholders in the game, such as players, coaches and spectators, but it seemingly also applies to other officials as well, with these officials sometimes dismissive of the knowledge of their young colleagues;

> *« As a young referee, people may not take me seriously because I am still just a child, even though the uniform makes me look older. Coaches can argue with me about rules even when I know perfectly well that I am right, and even older referees think they are right even though sometimes I know the rules better than they do despite my age. »*

Young officials believed that they are likely to be tested, doubted, or challenged because authority is not automatically granted to them. They have to work for any authority, more so than older individuals. These quotes reinforce the importance of identity. When young officials are recognised as legitimate, their officiating identity is strengthened; when they are repeatedly questioned because of age or experience, their commitment becomes more fragile. This situation is summarised in the survey open responses, with one young official outlining the challenges that young officials face and how this impacts officiating numbers;

> *« ...unfortunately you cannot control people's emotions or what they say. However, if the amount of abuse toward referees was reduced, you would find more people officiating »*

There is a further issue, related to abuse, specifically around behavioural hostility. The officials identified that there was a perceived lack of respect from players, coaches and spectators (58.8%) whilst 57.8% of officials identified that there was a fear of abuse of criticism. These two behavioural elements outweigh structural concerns such as exam difficulty (10.1%) or poor progression paths (11.4%), confirming that safety and respect are an issue when determining the health of the youth officiating network.



6



Support, belonging and recognition

Young sport officials depend on the protective systems provided by their federations. The survey shows that while general organisational support is highly valued, there are clear gaps in mentoring delivery and pathway transparency. Similarly, the interviews demonstrate the importance of training, support and mentoring for young officials. We examined the importance of family in terms of support networks in the 'pathways into officiating' section of the report, but these relationships are also important in terms of the ongoing support required by young officials, as are relationships and communications that occur with coaches and other stakeholders within the sporting environment.

In terms of headline findings, **72.6%** of young officials feel supported by their organisation/federation; **71.5%** of the officials receive appropriate training or mentoring; and **62.8%** understand what is required and how to progress to higher levels, although this was one of the lower aggregate responses suggesting some confusion between young officials about what is required for them to progress. The open survey response analysis demonstrates that officials identify the need for better mentoring, more youth-specific courses, more consistent feedback and greater federation visibility.

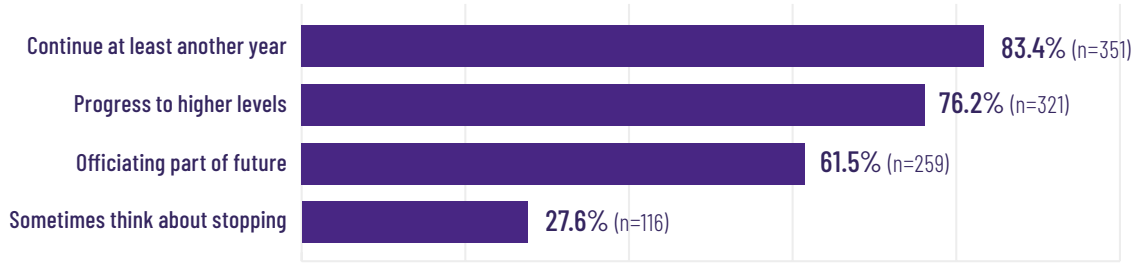
Increasing understanding around the role of an official and their position within the framework of competitive sport is essential for the ongoing participation of young officials. The young officials highlighted the importance of support from their family and friends as part of their entry into and motivations for officiating, but the officials also recognised the importance of support from other stakeholders within sport as vitally important to any continued involvement.

Figure 19: Community, belonging, recognition and organisational response



This recognition can help young officials feel valued and legitimised within their chosen sport. An issue that was raised as a problem for young officials in the previous section. Furthermore, the survey showed that the young officials generally felt supported by their federation or governing body, that they believe they receive adequate training or mentoring and that the majority believe that they know what it takes to progress to higher officiating levels within their chosen sport (see figures 19 and 20).

Figure 20: Retention, progression and future intention



Interview responses showed a similar sentiment when it came to the importance of training and support. The young officials identified their relationships with stakeholders as vital to their ongoing participation and feeling valued as an official, as demonstrated by this fencer from France;

> *« A compliment that really stayed with me was from a coach, after his fencer lost. He came over, shook my hand, put a hand on my shoulder and said, 'You refereed really, really well.' That warms your heart when it comes from someone whose athlete has just lost... people think, 'he's just a kid, he doesn't understand fencing.' So it's about earning legitimacy for me. »*
>
> Fencing official, France, aged 18

This compliment clearly made the official feel part of the sport and valued, something which is not always evident towards officials. Other officials also acknowledged the importance of praise and recognition from within the sport. A handball official highlighted the positive feedback and informal encouragement he received from others within handball;

> *« I do get praise. There are certain coaches who do thank me and do give me some advice on how I can improve. It does really help to keep me officiating games. It really does help. »*
>
> Handball official, Malta, aged 20

The praise and support shown by the coach contributes to this official continuing to practice. As such, the impact of the support from internal stakeholders within sport should not be underestimated. This legitimisation and support from within sport is an area of continued organisational socialisation that contributes to a sense of belonging, and therefore sustained involvement and potential progression. Contributing to increased retention. It also reflects identity verification, because praise, respect and being taken seriously verify feelings around being a credible official. These interactions help young officials fit into the culture of officiating rather than simply perform officiating as a technical task. One official outlined why the comments are important to them on their officiating journey;

> *« ...the community who mainly support me, no matter what team they are with. Often after a game I will get supportive comments or conversations about my refereeing journey so far. »*

The official outlines that the support from the sporting community is important to them, and that this support comes from the teams they officiate. A tennis official identifies the fact that they provide a service, and a supportive environment for the players within competitions as important to them, and that they contribute to the standard of competition in younger age group fixtures and tournaments;

> *«I enjoy the fact I can provide players with a supportive environment within competitions that makes them want to continue competing. The standard of tennis even at younger levels is always good to watch especially during close matches. »*

Being involved with sport, dealing with players and ensuring the sport is played according to the laws or rules is a particular draw for young officials. Furthermore, the knowledge that the young officials acquire, and the ability to translate their knowledge to other stakeholders is seen as an important part of their role and development;

> *« Having an opportunity to be involved in sport and matches. I enjoy managing situations on court and dealing with problems and players. I enjoy being in charge. »*
>
> *« I love being able to put my knowledge of the sport to good use and I love meeting new people through refereeing, but most importantly I love getting the opportunity to teach players the laws of the game. »*

Officials identified that mentoring could be improved in a number of sports and that this would lead to improved retention of officials. One official outlined the importance of good mentoring, but that mentoring provision can be ad hoc and dependent on the existence of good mentors in a local or regional area;

> *« I have been lucky to receive incredible mentoring from national-level officials living near me. However, not all young officials have such skilled mentors nearby. If a young official is mentored by someone less skilled or ambitious, the role may seem boring, and they may never realise the opportunities it offers. »*

The improvement of mentoring provision for young officials would be something which young officials would value. The officials believe that better training and longer-term support, as well as more in-person training, improved and cheaper training courses, coaching, feedback, and support beyond the first few games would all be beneficial. Some young officials believe that mentoring could be extended so that young officials receive mentoring for longer, with some schemes evidently not lasting as long as the officials would like;

> *« I think they could assign mentors for the season. Older experienced referees could observe matches and provide feedback, which would be very useful for young referees. »*

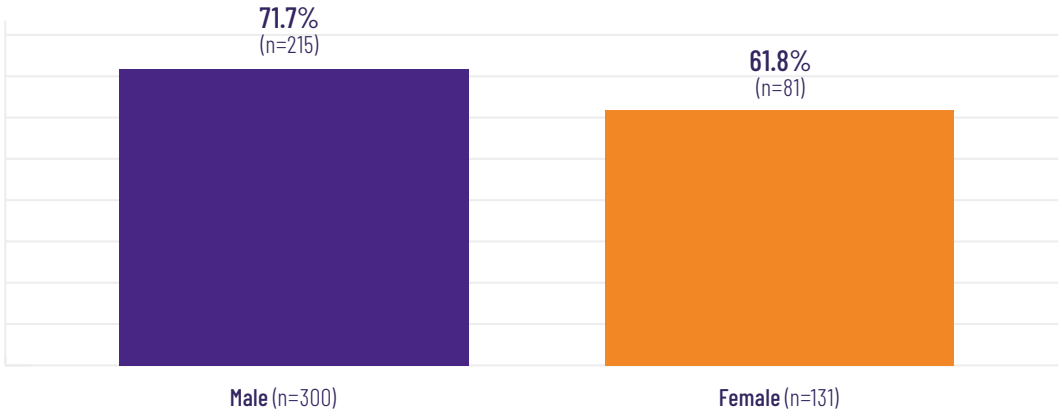
This demonstrates that while federations and governing bodies are successful at conveying broad policy support, they are less effective at providing clear, localised guidance. A significant portion of the youth workforce feels isolated, unsure of how to navigate their long-term career progression or secure a dedicated mentor for their weekly fixtures.

Community, belonging and recognition emerge as important dimensions of young officials' experiences. The survey suggests that officiating is not only a technical or regulatory role, but also a social identity shaped by peer networks, encouragement, organisational support and recognition from others in sport. Across the sample, 296 of 435 respondents (68.0%) agreed or strongly agreed that they feel part of a community of officials. A further 87 respondents (20.0%) were neutral and 52 respondents (12.0%) disagreed or strongly disagreed. This indicates a generally positive but uneven sense of belonging.

Playing status appeared to shape how young officials experienced belonging, but the group who did not also play sport was relatively small. The finding is therefore retained only as a cautious signal: for some young people, officiating may provide a particularly important source of sporting connection, especially when they are not embedded in a playing environment.

There were also gender differences. Male respondents reported a stronger sense of community than female respondents: 215 of 300 males (71.7%) agreed or strongly agreed that they felt part of a community of officials, compared with 81 of 131 females (61.8%).

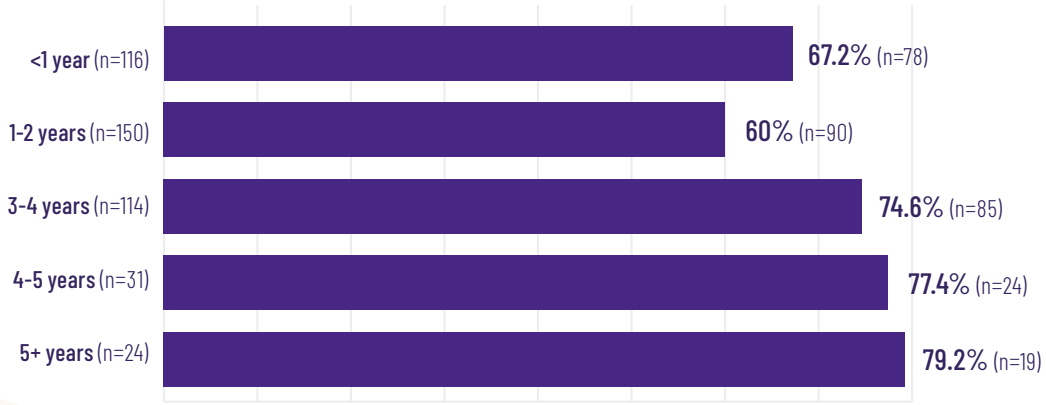
Figure 21. Sense of community by gender



This suggests that belonging may be less consistently experienced by young female officials, although further analysis would be needed to understand whether this reflects differences in sport, country, pathway, mentoring access or wider gendered experiences within officiating environments.

Length of experience also appears relevant. Officials with 1-2 years of experience reported the lowest sense of community, with 60.0% agreeing or strongly agreeing. This increased among those with 3-4 years of experience (74.6%) and remained high among those with 5+ years (79.2%), though longer-serving groups are smaller and should be interpreted cautiously.

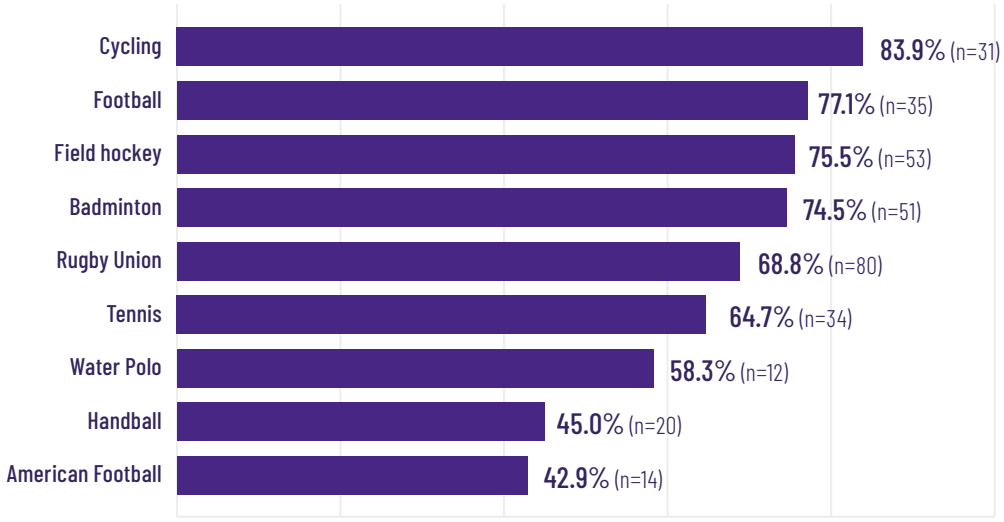
Figure 22. Sense of community by officiating experience



This suggests that belonging may strengthen once young officials survive the early transition into the role, develop relationships and become more familiar with officiating structures. The first two years may therefore be a critical period for community-building interventions.

Sport-level differences in sense of community were reviewed, but most sport-specific subgroups are too small to support firm conclusions. The revised interpretation therefore treats sport-level findings as descriptive signals only.

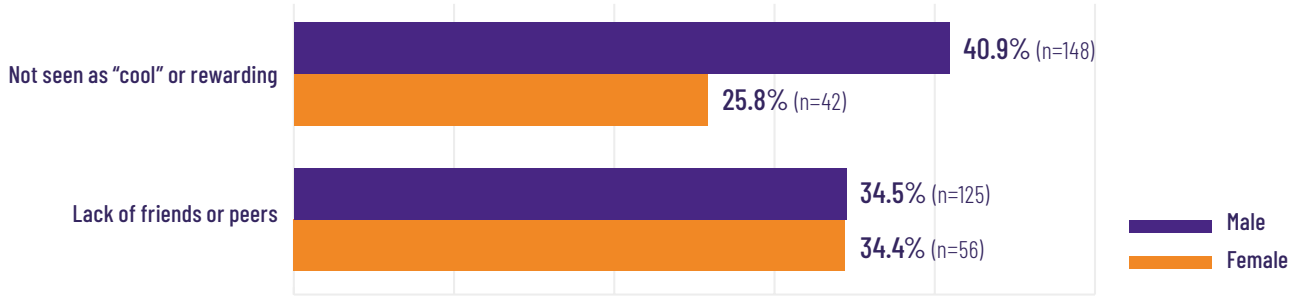
Figure 23. Sense of community by sport



However, given the small number of responses by sport when broken down, the stronger conclusion is that community building is important across the sample and should be strengthened through young officials networks, mentoring groups, recognition opportunities and peer support.

The findings also highlight a problem of peer appeal. When asked what might discourage young people from becoming officials, **191 respondents** selected that officiating is not seen as "cool" or rewarding (**35.8% of 533**), while **182 respondents** selected lack of friends or peers who officiate (**34.1%**). These barriers suggest that recruitment is not only about awareness, payment or training, but also about social visibility. Young people may be reluctant to begin officiating if they perceive it as isolated, socially unattractive or disconnected from their peer group. We can also consider by gender. There are minimal differences between males and females when considering the impact of a lack of friends or peers, but the fact that 40.9% of males believe that officiating is not seen as 'cool' or rewarding compared to 25.8% of females, could be a factor when trying to retain young sport officials.

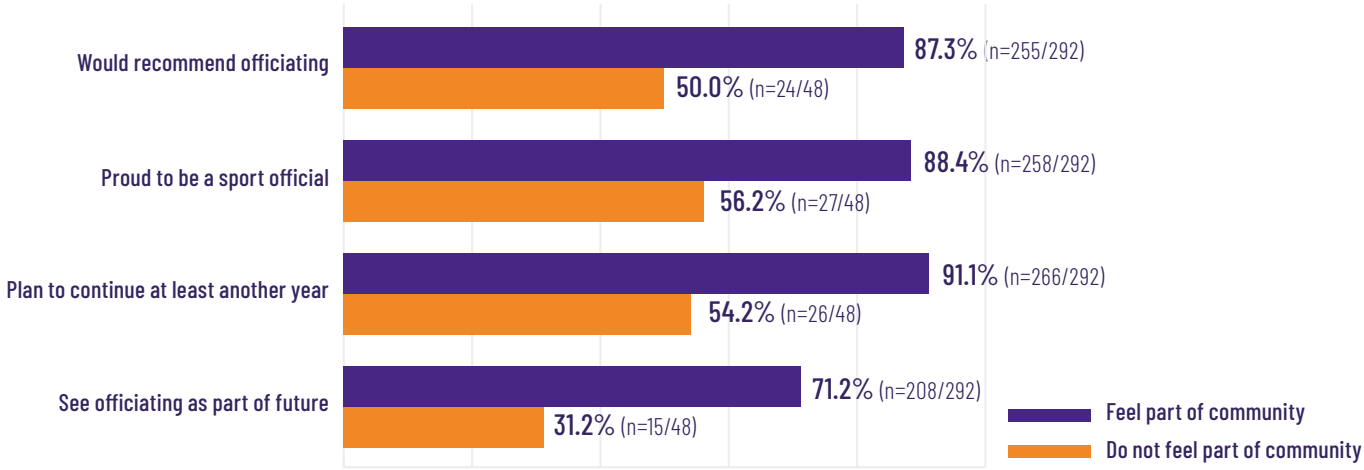
Figure 24. Peer appeal barriers by gender



The peer appeal issue was evident across the sample and should be interpreted as a general recruitment and retention concern rather than as a firm subgroup difference. Young people may be reluctant to begin or continue officiating if they perceive it as socially isolated, less visible than playing, or disconnected from peer networks.

Similarly, **88.4%** of those who felt community belonging were proud to be a sport official, compared with **56.2%** of those who did not. The same pattern appears for retention: **91.1%** of those who felt part of a community planned to continue officiating for at least another year, compared with **54.3%** of those who did not. In addition, **71.2%** of those with community belonging saw officiating as part of their future, compared with **31.2%** among those without community belonging.

Figure 25. Community belonging and positive officiating outcomes



These findings indicate that community belonging is strongly associated with pride, recommendation, perceived reward and intention to continue. Community and recognition should therefore not be treated as "soft" or optional aspects of officiating. They appear to be important mechanisms through which young officials develop role identity, confidence and longer-term commitment.

Overall, the findings suggests that young officials are more likely to value and recommend officiating when they feel recognised, socially connected and part of a wider officiating community. The policy implication is that recruitment and retention strategies should move beyond individual training alone. Governing bodies, federations and clubs should invest in young official networks, mentoring circles, peer groups, recognition schemes, ambassador programmes and visible pathways that make officiating feel socially meaningful, respected and connected.

7



Retention, progression and life pressures

The long-term health of sport depends, in part, on moving young officials from short-term volunteers to lifelong officials. The survey data suggests that while short-term commitment remains high, it faces constant pressure from lifestyle changes and time conflicts.

The survey presents a broadly positive picture of young officials' short-term retention intentions, but also highlights important pressures that could affect longer-term continuation. Among respondents who answered the retention items **(n = 421), 83.4%** agreed or strongly agreed that they plan to continue officiating for at least another year **(351 respondents)**, suggesting that most young officials remain committed in the short term. However, longer-term commitment appears less secure with **61.5%** indicating that they see officiating as part of their future career, volunteering or lifelong role (**259 respondents**), while **19.0%** disagreed or strongly disagreed. This gap between immediate continuation and longer-term identification indicates that some young officials are willing to continue for now, but fewer have fully embedded officiating into their future.

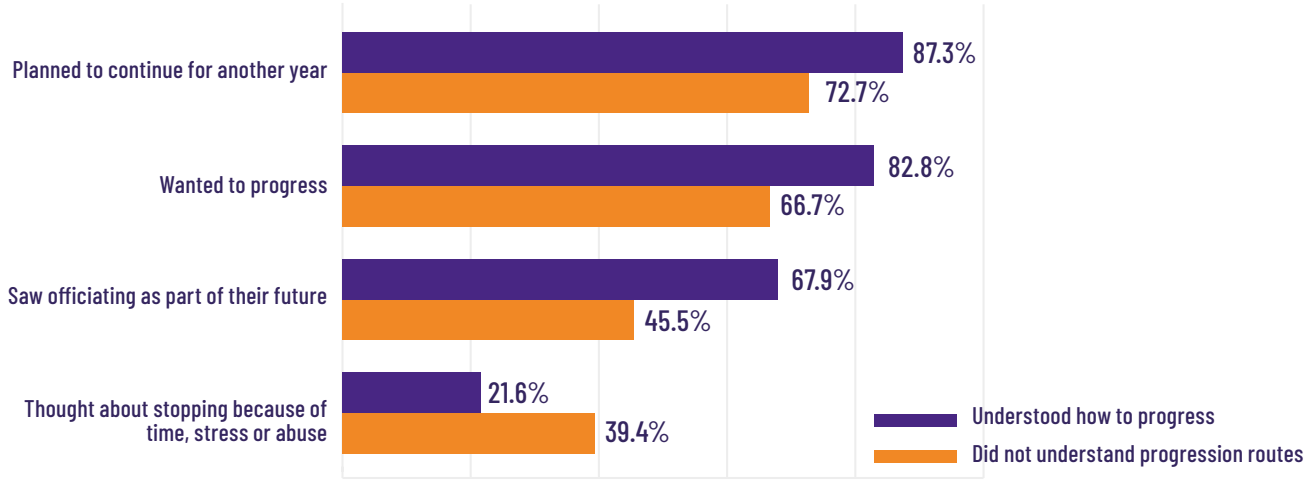
Progression aspirations are also strong. **76.2%** of respondents would like to progress to higher levels of officiating **(321 of 421 total respondents)**, indicating that many young officials are ambitious and see officiating as a pathway rather than a short-term activity. However, this ambition is not always matched by clarity. In the current experience items **(n = 435), 62.8%** agreed or strongly agreed that they understand clearly how to progress to higher levels **(273 respondents)**, while **16.6%** disagreed or strongly disagreed. This suggests a potential progression gap - many young officials want to advance, but a smaller proportion clearly understand how to do so.

Table 4

Retention / attrition item	Response No	N	%	Mean
Plan to continue for at least another year	351	421	83.4%	4.33
Would like to progress to higher levels	321	421	76.2%	4.19
Would recommend officiating to other young people	334	421	79.3%	4.16
See officiating as part of future	259	421	61.5%	3.67
Sometimes think about stopping because of time, stress or abuse	116	421	27.6%	2.48
Feel proud to be a sport official	336	421	79.8%	4.23

The importance of clear progression is reinforced by cross-tabulation. Among those who understood how to progress, **87.3%** planned to continue for another year, **82.8%** wanted to progress, and **67.9%** saw officiating as part of their future. Among those who did not understand progression routes, these figures fell to **72.7%, 66.7%, and 45.5%**. Those without clear progression were also more likely to think about stopping because of time, stress or abuse **(39.4%)** compared with those with clear progression **(21.6%)**. This suggests that progression clarity is not only a development issue, but also a retention issue.

Figure 26: Progression routes and officiating outcomes



Wider life pressures are also part of the decision making of young officials, with **34.9%** of the full demographic sample selecting "too much time commitment / clashes with school or work" **(186 of 533)**. This shows that retention is affected not only by match-day experiences, but also by the broader life stage of young officials, who are balancing officiating with education, employment, sport participation, family commitments and social lives.

Gender differences are particularly important. Female officials were more likely to select time commitment or clashes with school/work as a discouraging factor **(44.8%)** compared with male officials **(30.4%)**. Male respondents, however, were more likely to select fear of abuse or criticism as a discouraging factor **(61.0%)** than female respondents **(51.5%).** These findings suggest that life pressure and stress may not operate in the same way across gender groups.

Age was also a factor. Officials aged **17–18** reported the strongest short-term commitment, with **89.2%** planning to continue and **83.4%** wanting to progress. By contrast, those aged **14–16** were less likely to see officiating as part of their future **(49.6%)**, while those aged **19–20** were more likely to think about stopping **(34.1%).** This may reflect different transition points. For example, younger officials may still be forming their officiating identity, while the older young officials may face increasing pressures from exams, employment, university, travel and adult responsibilities.

Experience level shows a similar pattern. Officials with **1–2 years' experience** appear to be at a critical retention point. While **82.8%** planned to continue, only **56.7%** clearly understood how to progress, and **39.8%** selected time pressure as a barrier. This suggests that the first two years after entry may be where early enthusiasm starts to meet the practical demands of officiating. More experienced officials generally showed stronger future identification, although

The interviews also show the importance of progression to the young officials and how this is a consideration for them in terms of their decision making around continuing their officiating career. Officiating becomes more than something young officials enjoy doing, and it becomes part of their potential future;

> ***« ...the opportunity for growth in the game and getting up the levels and umpiring a higher standard, and being around people like the assessors who are national umpires you can learn from, provides you chances to improve. »***
> Cricket umpire, UK, aged 17

There was an understanding of the role of the federation in some of these development and progression processes. The young officials believed that the federations could have done more in some cases, and this is an area which requires careful management because it has potential to escalate and for the young officials to become disenchanted with the opportunities;

> ***« I would like to progress and I think I can, but I sometimes think the federation is reluctant. »***
> Volleyball official, France, aged 15

The open survey responses further supported this view of the opportunities for promotion from the national federations;

> ***« I'd like to see a faster pathway to national level and beyond. Progression is slow. »***

One official identified that there could be an increased focus on the initial course and the associated training. There is an idea that following qualification, the consideration of the next steps in the journey of the officials should be part of the process and that officials should be fully aware of what is required;

> ***« Give a clear post-course pathway to engage in immediately. After qualifying there should be next steps to join communities and move to higher levels. »***

Further to this, young officials believe that there should be more opportunities to progress and that this is a problem for some young officials who want to progress. The provision of courses, for example, is a concern for ambitious young officials;

> *« They need to provide more qualification opportunities – there are no national or regional referee courses available for me right now. Greater support for young referees. »*

Clearly a lack of training, development and progression opportunities for officials is a barrier to not only their continued advancement in the talent development pathway, but it also presents a retention barrier if young officials become disenfranchised with the situation in which they find themselves. Despite these concerns, there are also examples of programmes that are supportive, that bring young officials together and that have clear goals and outcomes, as explained by this young official through the open survey responses;

> *« Within our French Cycling Federation, the "Generation Referee 2027" programme was created, a really interesting programme because 74 young people (girls, boys, all disciplines and all regions) will be trained together at the highest level of officiating, with the goal of participating in the 2027 Cycling World Championships in France. It is very rewarding and important because it creates real cohesion among young people. »*

Young officials balance officiating with other commitments and identities, including playing, education, work and social life. Retention strategies therefore need to accommodate and consider dual-role commitments as well as those officials who do not also play their chosen sport without assuming that one pathway is inherently more committed than another. The broader conclusion is that retention pressures can coexist with high commitment, and that sporting organisations should focus on flexible support, progression clarity and respectful environments across all settings.

The findings show that retention and progression are shaped by more than motivation alone. Most young officials want to continue and many want to progress, but their longer-term commitment depends on whether they feel supported, understand progression routes, can manage the life pressures that they are dealing with, and can operate in respectful environments. The strongest implication is that sport organisations should treat retention as a pathway issue, with flexible training and progression routes, clear development information, mentoring, recognition, and support during key transition points.

The retention findings show a tension between short-term commitment and longer-term uncertainty. Young officials are generally positive about continuing in the immediate future, but they are less certain that officiating will remain part of their long-term future. This distinction is important for policy and practice because short-term continuation does not automatically translate into a stable, elongated officiating career. The practical implication is that retention strategies should include flexible appointment systems, sensitivity around examination periods, travel support, staged progression, mentoring after difficult fixtures, and clear routes back into officiating if young people take temporary breaks.

8



Making officiating more attractive: visibility, value and practical support

The final theme brings together evidence on recruitment, retention and the social value of officiating, with a particular focus on how to make officiating more attractive for young officials. Across the earlier sections of the report, young officials were shown to enter the role through existing sport participation, encouragement from others, family and club networks, and an attachment to the sport itself. Young officials also described officiating as a pastime or career that can provide development in confidence, communication, academic work, responsibility and personal development. However, the same data also show that attraction and retention are weakened when officiating is not visible, socially undervalued, practically difficult, or associated with abuse and disrespect. Making officiating more attractive therefore requires a pathway that is visible, valued and manageable for young people.

The central finding from this final theme is that young officials can be powerful advocates for officiating, but that their advocacy depends on whether they feel supported and able to imagine a future as an official. **334 of 421 respondents (79.3%)** agreed or strongly agreed that they would recommend officiating to other young people. This is an important finding because it suggests that, despite the challenges, many young officials still see officiating as meaningful and worthwhile. The policy challenge is to convert this positive experience into a more visible and reliable recruitment pathway, while also addressing the conditions that make some young people reluctant to begin or remain involved.

Visibility, peer appeal and the social image of officiating

Visibility is a recurring issue across the report. Young people cannot choose officiating if they do not know how to enter, what the role involves, what support is available, or how officiating can fit alongside school, work, playing and social commitments. When asked about barriers in the survey, **183 of 533 respondents (34.3%)** selected lack of awareness or information about how to start. This finding indicates that recruitment cannot rely only on passive information placed on websites or occasional course announcements, rather entry routes need to be made explicit through clubs, schools, federations, youth sport programmes and existing participant or friendship networks. In short, recruitment of young officials should be part of a detailed, considered and structured recruitment programme. Young officials are often dealing with significant and profound changes to their wider life, and if officiating is to be made more appealing to these young people, they need to understand what is required of them with relevant information provided so that they can progress individually and advocate their experiences to other potential young officials.

However, officiating has to be visible as a valued and credible form of sport participation – or as a valid alternative to playing and coaching. A substantial proportion of respondents identified peer appeal as a barrier, with **191 of 533 respondents (35.8%)** selecting that officiating is not seen as 'cool' or rewarding, while **182 (34.1%)** selected lack of friends or peers who officiate as a potential barrier. Equating to over a third of the respondents for these questions, the responses show that attraction to officiating is somewhat shaped by how the role is perceived within young people's peer groups. For some young people, officiating may appear isolated, adult-controlled, low-status or disconnected from the social identity of sport. This matters because sport participation in adolescence and early adulthood is often sustained by friendship, belonging and shared experience.

The interviews and open responses further support these headline figures from the survey. A young official aged 17 who officiates tennis in France outlined the importance of shared experiences and how making friends within the sport can help them feel integrated;

> ***« What I like most is doing a week-long tournament, being with lots of referees. They were really good moments. »***
> Tennis umpire, France, aged 17

Another young official explained how building a community is really important to them, and is something that is missing in their county, although once they get to regional level this seems to be less of a concern;

> *« I'd like to see more of a community and family feeling in refereeing as it isn't a big thing in my county society (this is different at my regional board). »*

It is also important for other young officials. Officials go further and state that specific training with other young people should be prioritised to reduce isolation and improve feelings around community;

> *«We should know that there are other young people! Meetings where all young referees meet could be good, so they do not feel alone. In addition, few people know that young people can be referees; there is a lack of information. »*

The importance of community is further explained by another young official who values being around more experienced officials and learning from these officials. The young official outlines how being an official, and feeling supported by more experienced officials allows them to experience sporting events in a different way to when they are a participant or spectator. Furthermore, another young official detailed that despite their sport being less popular than it was, they want to give something back and support the next generation of young officials – particularly those who have come into sport from a similar route;

> *« I appreciate being useful and helping referees who have more experience than me during competitions...it is a pleasure and a job that allows me to take a break from training weeks or classes. It allows me to experience competitions in another way without being a runner or spectator.. »*
>
> *« I like to teach, play, and try to promote my sport even though it is not as popular as it was before. It's nice to see someone start the same journey as I did when I started playing the game. »*

As well as a focus on community and ensuring young people feel comfortable when training and after they have passed the initial training required, a focus on promoting that young people can be officials is something that has been identified as important. The interviews also support this point, with one badminton umpire identifying that their view of an official in their sport was that of a middle-aged person;

> *« When I think of a badminton umpire, I thought of a middle-aged person. I don't think that a young person like me could officiate a match. I think that's also what many others think. »*
> Badminton umpire, Denmark, aged 18

This view of what an official looks like is a message that should be addressed. If young people do not believe that officiating is a viable career path for them, or even a viable pastime, it becomes even more of a challenge to recruit them in the first place. The fact that this young official believes that this is also the view of many other young people, underscores the need for the focus on the image of refereeing and ensuring that it appeals to young people. The open responses also support this view;

> *« ...better communication because I think most young people do not even know they can become referees... »*

Across the survey responses, **296 of 435 respondents (68.0%)** agreed or strongly agreed that they felt part of a community of officials. Community belonging was strongly associated with positive outcomes. Among those who felt part of a community of officials, **87.3%** would recommend officiating to other young people, **88.4%** felt proud to be a official, **91.1%** planned to continue for at least another year and **71.2%** saw officiating as part of their future. These associations indicate that social connection and recognition are central to how young officials value the role and provide a good platform for sports organisations and officiating administrators to plan and develop policy. To enable such policy to be developed, an understanding of the entry routes, their visibility and the practical support is essential.

The report shows that encouragement from others is a major part of the recruitment process. In terms of the initial motivation, **300 of 469 respondents (64.0%)** agreed or strongly agreed that someone they respected encouraged them to try officiating. When asked further about who most encouraged them to become an official, the largest group selected self-motivation **(220 of 508; 43.3%),** followed by clubs **(90; 17.7%)**, family **(70; 13.8%)**, coaches **(51; 10.0%),** friends **(35; 6.9%)** and school **(15; 3.0%)**. These findings show that recruitment is not simply an individual decision, it is often socially prompted in some way, and legitimised and supported by people and organisations that young people already trust.

This has practical implications. Clubs, families, coaches and teachers in particular are not peripheral to recruitment, they are part of the pathway for a young person into officiating. Young people often need someone to make the role seem possible, legitimate and worth trying. Recruitment campaigns should therefore target the people around young participants as well as the young participants themselves.

Financial and practical value

Financial and practical arrangements also shape whether officiating feels attractive and sustainable. Among the **508 respondents** who answered the remuneration question, **161 (31.7%)** reported that their officiating was entirely voluntary; **148 (29.1%)** were paid for the fixture and received travel expenses; **88 (17.3%)** were paid for the fixture only; **62 (12.2%)** received travel expenses only; and **49 (9.6%)** were not sure. These findings suggest that payment and expenses are inconsistent, and that some young officials may not fully understand what support they should expect in terms of payment. This also differs from sport to sport, and county to country. As such, standardising payment of expenses or payment for officiating itself is difficult to achieve;

> *« I wanted to stay in this environment, see my friends, and refereeing brings in a bit of money and lets me go to competitions even when it's not my category. »*
> Fencing official, France, aged 18

> *« They could show young people how fun refereeing really is and everything you learn, and help referees more financially. »*

Whereas another official identified that the pay they receive from their federation in tennis is not as generous as it could be, and that they believe it falls below the minimum wage in some situations;

> *« Higher pay (at least minimum wage) – current tennis governing body pay is below minimum wage for some competitions. »*

This difference between payments for events was also identified by another young official. They believed that any payments for the officials should be dependent on a number of factors, and that officials should have some sort of contract of employment for payment that protects them;

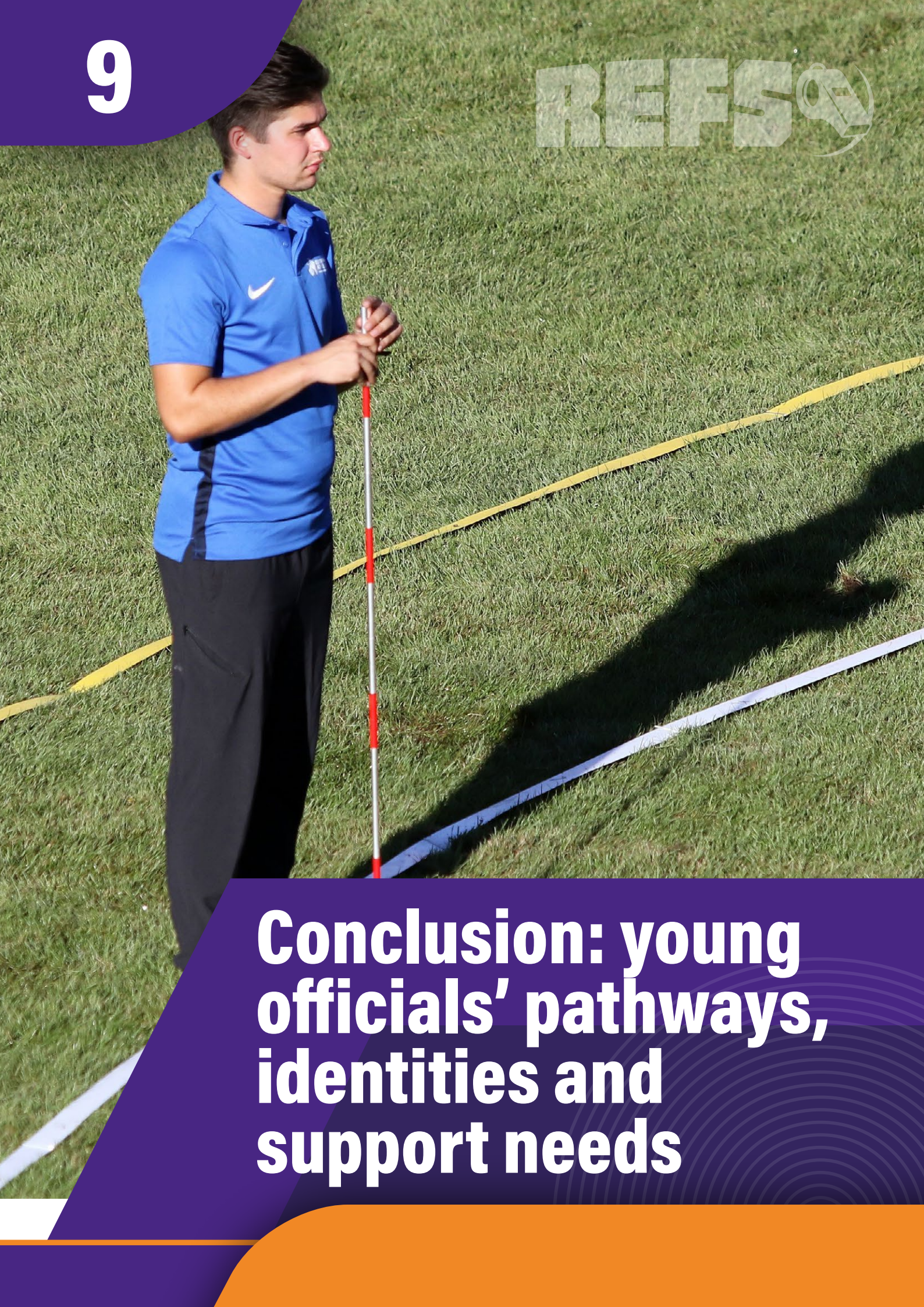
> *« ...concrete match payments depending on distance, weather, match duration, schedule and day of the match (it is preferable to referee another day rather than the day before returning to school, such as a Sunday).*
> *A real contract that protects referees with fixed payment from the federation. »*

However, the findings should not be interpreted as meaning that young officials only start due to financial reasons. Earlier findings showed that intrinsic motivations were stronger than financial or opportunity-based motivations. **413 of 469 respondents (88.1%)** agreed or strongly agreed that they became an official because they loved their sport, while **293 (62.5%)** agreed or strongly agreed that officiating could provide opportunities such as travel, income and recognition. However, practicality still matters. Young officials often have limited income, depend on transport from family members, balance education or work, and may have to balance playing, studying or social time to officiate. Financial recompense, clarity over expenses and practical support are therefore not merely transactional, they are part of whether the role is accessible and sustainable.

This was reflected in the qualitative data. One young official explained that match fees and travel support did not always cover the wider time and cost involved in officiating, including preparation, travel, training and course requirements. Another highlighted that being paid more would make officiating more attractive as a side role for young people. These comments do not reduce officiating to money, but they do show that young officials assess whether the role is valued in practical terms. If organisations present officiating as important but provide unclear, inconsistent or inadequate practical support, the perceived value of the role is weakened.

Overall, this final theme shows that attraction and retention are connected. Young people are more likely to enter officiating when the role is visible, socially encouraged and presented as worthwhile, and they are more likely to remain when they feel protected, recognised, supported and part of a community. The final theme adds an important policy layer to the overarching report, namely that youth officiating should be understood as a pathway that requires design, recruitment, training, mentoring, protection, community-building, recognition and practical support. All of which should not be treated as separate interventions. Together, they form the conditions through which officiating becomes attractive and sustainable for young people.

9



Conclusion: young officials' pathways, identities and support needs

This report has examined how young people enter, experience and remain involved in sport officiating across Europe. Drawing on extensive data taken from a literature review, desk research, interviews and a European-wide survey, the evidence shows that youth officiating is not a narrow technical function or a short-term volunteer activity. It is a developmental and social pathway through which young people remain connected to sport, build confidence and communication skills, assume responsibility, form a sporting identity and contribute to the delivery of organised competitions. At the same time, the findings show that this pathway can be fragile. Young officials can be deterred or lost when they encounter poor treatment and abuse, limited information, weak or inefficient mentoring, a lack of recognition, unclear progression routes, or conflicts with school, work, playing and wider life pressures.

The first major finding suggests that many young officials enter the role from within sport rather than from outside it. The survey showed that **483 of 533 respondents (90.6%)** also played sport, and most of those who played did so in the same sport that they officiated. This means that officiating often begins as an extension of existing sport participation. Young people become officials because they love their sport, want to stay involved, are encouraged by others, or see officiating as a way to contribute. Recruitment strategies should therefore begin from the reality that many potential officials are already in clubs, teams, schools and sport communities. The challenge is to make officiating visible and legitimate within those spaces so that these young people see officiating as a viable alternative or dual-pathway alongside playing or coaching.

The second major finding is that officiating has significant developmental value. Young officials described learning confidence, communication, judgement, authority, emotional control and resilience. These are not incidental outcomes. They are central to why officiating can be valuable for young people and for sport organisations. The report therefore supports a shift in how youth officiating is presented: not simply as a way of filling fixtures, but as a youth development opportunity that can build life skills, leadership and belonging.

The third major finding is that the match environment remains a critical risk point. Abuse and negative treatment were reported by **266 of 435 young officials (61.1%)**, with verbal abuse the most common form. Physical and online/social media abuse were reported by smaller proportions, but they remain important safeguarding and welfare concerns. The issue is not only the prevalence of abuse; it is also the effect that disrespect, intimidation and questioning of legitimacy can have on young people's confidence and willingness to continue. Young officials occupy a distinctive position: they are asked to exercise authority, but may not yet be granted authority by players, coaches, parents or spectators. Organisations therefore need to treat the protection of young officials as a safeguarding, workforce and culture issue.

The fourth major finding is that training, mentoring and organisational support are central to role consolidation. Early-stage officials need more than technical rule knowledge. They need practical scenarios, feedback, role modelling, emotional preparation and a trusted person to contact when difficult incidents occur. Training is most useful when it helps young officials understand how to manage the social realities of officiating, not simply the rules of a sport. Mentoring is also especially important in the first two years, when young officials are still developing confidence and deciding whether officiating is a role they can sustain.

The fifth major finding is that community, belonging and recognition are not optional extras. They are part of the mechanism through which young officials develop role identity and commitment. Feeling part of a community of officials was associated with stronger pride, stronger willingness to recommend officiating, stronger intention to continue, and a greater likelihood of seeing officiating as part of the future. Recognition can be formal or informal, but it needs to be visible and consistent. A thank-you from a coach, feedback from a mentor, acknowledgement from a club, or inclusion in a young officials' network can all help to make officiating feel meaningful rather than isolated.

The sixth major finding is that retention and progression are shaped by wider life pressures. Many young officials are also players, students, workers, family members and friends. Their ability to remain involved depends on whether officiating can fit around education, playing commitments, travel, costs, social life and changing aspirations. This means that retention cannot be addressed only by asking whether young officials are motivated. Organisations also need to examine whether fixtures, appointments, travel expectations, progression systems and communication practices are flexible enough for young people at different stages of life.

Taken together, the report argues that youth officiating should be treated as a structured pathway requiring coordinated support. The evidence points to the need for visible recruitment routes, social encouragement, peer communities, early mentoring, safer match environments, recognition systems, fair practical support and transparent progression opportunities. The task for federations, governing bodies, clubs and officiating organisations is not simply to recruit more young people into courses. It is to create conditions in which young officials can enter the role, feel legitimate, develop confidence, belong to a community, and see a future for themselves in officiating.



10



Recommendations

The recommendations are divided into short, medium, and long-term actions. The infographics that follow provide a brief overview, before each recommendation is explained in more detail. The recommendations are intended to help sport organisations, federations, clubs and officiating bodies develop a coordinated approach to recruiting young officials and supporting their retention and progression.

Organisations should identify clear measures of success for each action. These may include the number of young officials recruited, the proportion still officiating after 12 and 24 months, participation in mentoring, experiences and reporting of abuse, sense of belonging, and progression through the officiating pathway. Collecting these data will help organisations assess the effectiveness of their work and improve future initiatives.

Short-term recommendations (6-12 months)

Immediate actions to make entry into officiating clearer, safer and more supportive for young sport officials.

1



Make entry routes visible

- Youth-friendly guides, videos, social media and QR resources
- Clear information on how to start
- School, club and federation promotion

2



Introduce early mentoring

- Pair new officials with mentors or buddies
- Support first fixtures and early transition
- Include advice, debriefing and emotional support

3



Strengthen matchday protection

- Clarify who protects young officials
- Require safeguarding and reporting training
- Use trusted reporting routes and ensure follow up

4



Recognise young officials

- Thank-you protocols and visible acknowledgment
- Awards, social media features and event recognition
- Recognition linked to meaningful support

5



Clarify practical arrangements

- Explain fees, expenses and travel
- Set out cancellation policies and contacts
- Ensure young officials and parents understand expectations

In depth actions

1 Make entry routes visible

- **Evidence:** A lack of awareness or information about how to start was selected by 183 of 533 respondents (34.3%). Young people need clear information about how to become an official, what training involves, what support is available and how officiating fits alongside playing or school.
- **Implementation considerations:** Create simple youth-facing entry guides, short videos, QR-code posters, club information packs and school or club presentations. These resources should be supported by targeted social media activity that directs young people and their parents or guardians to local courses and a clear registration page. Digital recruitment should be timed around course dates and local need. Information should be sport-specific, age-appropriate and available in the relevant languages.

2 Introduce early mentoring or 'buddy' support

- **Evidence:** The first years of officiating appear to be a critical transition point. Officials with 1-2 years of experience reported lower community belonging than those with longer experience, suggesting that early support is essential.
- **Implementation considerations:** Pair new young officials with trained mentors or peer buddies for at least their first fixtures. Mentoring should include practical advice, emotional support and debriefing after difficult matches, not only technical assessment. Examples for implementation could include mentor allocation after qualification, structured debriefs after the first appointments, buddy systems or online mentoring.

3 Strengthen matchday protection and reporting

- **Evidence:** Abuse and negative treatment were reported by 266 of 435 young officials (61.1%). This is a retention, wellbeing and safeguarding issue.
- **Implementation considerations:** Clarify who is responsible for protecting young officials on matchdays, how incidents should be reported, and what follow-up will occur. Reporting processes should be simple, youth-appropriate and trusted. Examples for matchday protection implementation could include safeguarding contacts, reporting procedures, responsibilities of clubs and competition organisers, or minimum matchday protocols. Adults with responsibility for young officials should complete mandatory safeguarding and incident-reporting training. Clubs and competition organisers should be required to report abuse, discrimination or safeguarding concerns involving a young official and provide a timely update on the action taken. Responsibility for pursuing an incident should not rest solely with the young official.

4 Recognise young officials publicly and routinely

- **Evidence:** Community and recognition were strongly associated with pride, recommendation and intention to continue. Recognition can help young officials feel valued and legitimate.
- **Implementation considerations:** Introduce thank-you protocols, young official awards, social media features, post-match recognition and visible acknowledgement at events. Recognition should be linked to meaningful support. Examples for recognition implementation could include club recognition schemes, digital certificates or badges, milestone recognition, or opportunities for young officials to become mentors or ambassadors.

5 Clarify payment, expenses and practical expectations

- **Evidence:** Remuneration and expenses varied across the sample, and some young officials were unsure about their arrangements. Practical value affects accessibility and perceptions of whether the role is valued.
- **Implementation considerations:** Provide clear information on match fees, expenses, travel arrangements, cancellation policies and who to contact with payment issues. Young officials and parents/guardians should understand this before appointments begin.

Medium-term recommendations (1-3 years)

Development actions to strengthen belonging, skills, pathways and flexibility for young sport officials.

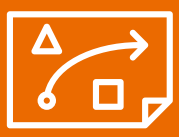
1



Build youth official communities

- Create local and online peer networks
- Use meet-ups, peer learning and shared events
- Ensure inclusion of female and non-playing officials

2



Develop scenario-based training

- Go beyond rules knowledge alone
- Cover communication, dissent and de-escalation
- Include reporting, reflection and emotional management

3



Map progression pathways

- Show routes into local and elite officiating
- Include mentoring, education and administration roles
- Present progression as varied, not only elite advancement

4



Use clubs, families and coaches

- Treat recruitment as socially supported
- Equip clubs and families with sharable social media content
- Encourage coaches to identify and support potential officials

5



Design flexible systems

- Fit appointments around school, work and playing
- Offer travel support and clustered fixtures
- Accound for exams and busy life transitions

In depth actions

1 Build young official's communities and peer networks

- **Evidence:** Across the sample, 296 of 435 respondents (68.0%) felt part of a community of officials, and community belonging was associated with stronger pride, recommendation and intention to continue.
- **Implementation considerations:** Create local and online young official groups, regional meet-ups, peer learning sessions and event-based communities. These should be inclusive of and potentially specific for young officials who do not also play sport and of young female officials, who reported lower community belonging than male officials.

2 Develop scenario-based training for difficult interactions

- **Evidence:** Young officials need support to manage authority, communication, emotional control and abuse. Training should therefore extend beyond rules knowledge.
- **Implementation considerations:** Include role-play, parent/coach communication, de-escalation, reporting, managing dissent, and post-match reflection. Training should be age-appropriate and should avoid making young officials personally responsible for managing abuse without relevant organisational backing.

3 Map and communicate progression pathways

- **Evidence:** Retention intentions were positive in the short term but less secure in the longer term. Young officials need to understand possible futures in officiating.
- **Implementation considerations:** Create progression maps that show different routes, including local officiating, elite progression, mentoring, education, observer roles, administration and lifelong volunteering. Progression should not be framed only as advancement to elite levels. Examples for implementation could include illustrations of transparent competency frameworks, assessment milestones or alternative development pathways beyond elite officiating.

4 Use clubs, families and coaches as recruitment partners

- **Evidence:** When asked who most encouraged them to become an official, respondents identified self-motivation, clubs, family, coaches, friends and school. Recruitment is socially mediated.
- **Implementation considerations:** Provide recruitment resources to clubs and families, including short videos and social media material that can be shared through club, school and federation channels. Digital content should link directly to relevant courses and registration pages. Officiating should also be integrated into youth sport environments, with coaches encouraged to identify and support potential officials. Messaging should emphasise legitimacy, development, belonging and enjoyment.

5 Clarify payment, expenses and practical expectations

- **Evidence:** Young officials balance officiating with playing, education, work, travel and social life. Retention is therefore shaped by whether the role fits with wider life pressures.
- **Implementation considerations:** Offer flexible available systems, clustered appointments, travel support, consideration of exam periods, and options for reduced involvement during busy life transitions. Flexibility should be designed into systems rather than handled informally.

Long-term recommendations (3+ years)

Strategic actions to embed safeguarding, leadership and sustainability in youth sport officiating.

1



Position officiating as youth development

- Recognise confidence, leadership and resilience gains
- Embed officiating in sport, education and volunteering strategies
- Present officiating as equal in value to playing and coaching

2



Create a safeguarding framework

- Set minimum standards for protecting young officials
- Require safeguarding training and incident reporting
- Ensure follow-up and review systems with young officials

3



Invest in workforce data

- Track recruitment, first appointments and retention
- Monitor wellbeing, mentoring, abuse and progression
- Report annually using anonymised data

4



Shift sport culture towards respect

- Address lack of respect and fear of abuse
- Use behaviour-change campaigns across the sport system
- Link awareness to enforcement, education and accountability

5



Develop leadership and ambassadors

- Create youth panels and ambassador schemes
- Support peer-led recruitment content and policy input
- Ensure inclusive participation across gender, sport and experience

In depth actions

1 Position officiating as a recognised youth development pathway

- **Evidence:** The report shows that officiating develops confidence, communication, leadership, responsibility and resilience. This value should be recognised in sport policy, youth development and education contexts.
- **Implementation considerations:** Embed officiating in youth sport strategies, leadership programmes, volunteering frameworks, employability initiatives and school-club partnerships. The role should be presented as equivalent in value to playing and coaching.

2 Create a sustainable safeguarding framework for young officials

- **Evidence:** Abuse and negative treatment are not only disciplinary issues; they affect wellbeing, identity and retention. Young officials, especially those under 18, need formal protection.
- **Implementation considerations:** Develop consistent minimum standards for protecting young officials, including reporting, follow-up, parent/coach conduct, sanctions, education and monitoring. Safeguarding systems should be reviewed regularly and should include young officials' voices.

3 Invest in workforce data and retention tracking

- **Evidence:** The report demonstrates the value of item-level and subgroup analysis but also shows the need to interpret small subgroups cautiously. Better longitudinal data would help organisations understand recruitment and dropout.
- **Implementation considerations:** Track recruitment, first appointments, retention at 6/12/24 months, reasons for leaving, abuse reports, mentoring access and progression. Progression should not be framed only as advancement to elite levels.

4 Shift sport culture towards respect for officials

- **Evidence:** Lack of respect and fear of abuse were among the strongest barriers to recruitment. Cultural change is therefore central to long-term retention.
- **Implementation considerations:** Develop long-term behaviour-change campaigns that target players, coaches, parents and spectators. Campaigns should be linked to enforcement, education and club accountability, not only awareness messaging.

5 Develop young official leadership and ambassador programmes

- **Evidence:** Young officials are credible advocates for the role and many would recommend officiating to others. Their voices should shape future recruitment and retention strategies.
- **Implementation considerations:** Create young official panels, ambassador schemes, peer-led recruitment content and opportunities for young officials to contribute to policy and training design. Participation should be supported, recognised and inclusive across gender, sport, country and officiating experience.

Cross-cutting implementation principles

Across all recommendations, implementation should be evidence-based, youth-centred and proportionate. Organisations should avoid over-interpreting small subgroup differences, but they should use descriptive patterns to ask better questions about gender, sport, country, experience and playing status. Young officials should be consulted directly in the design of recruitment, mentoring, training and safeguarding interventions. Finally, actions should be evaluated over time so that organisations can understand not only how many young officials enter the role, but whether they feel supported, recognised and willing to continue.



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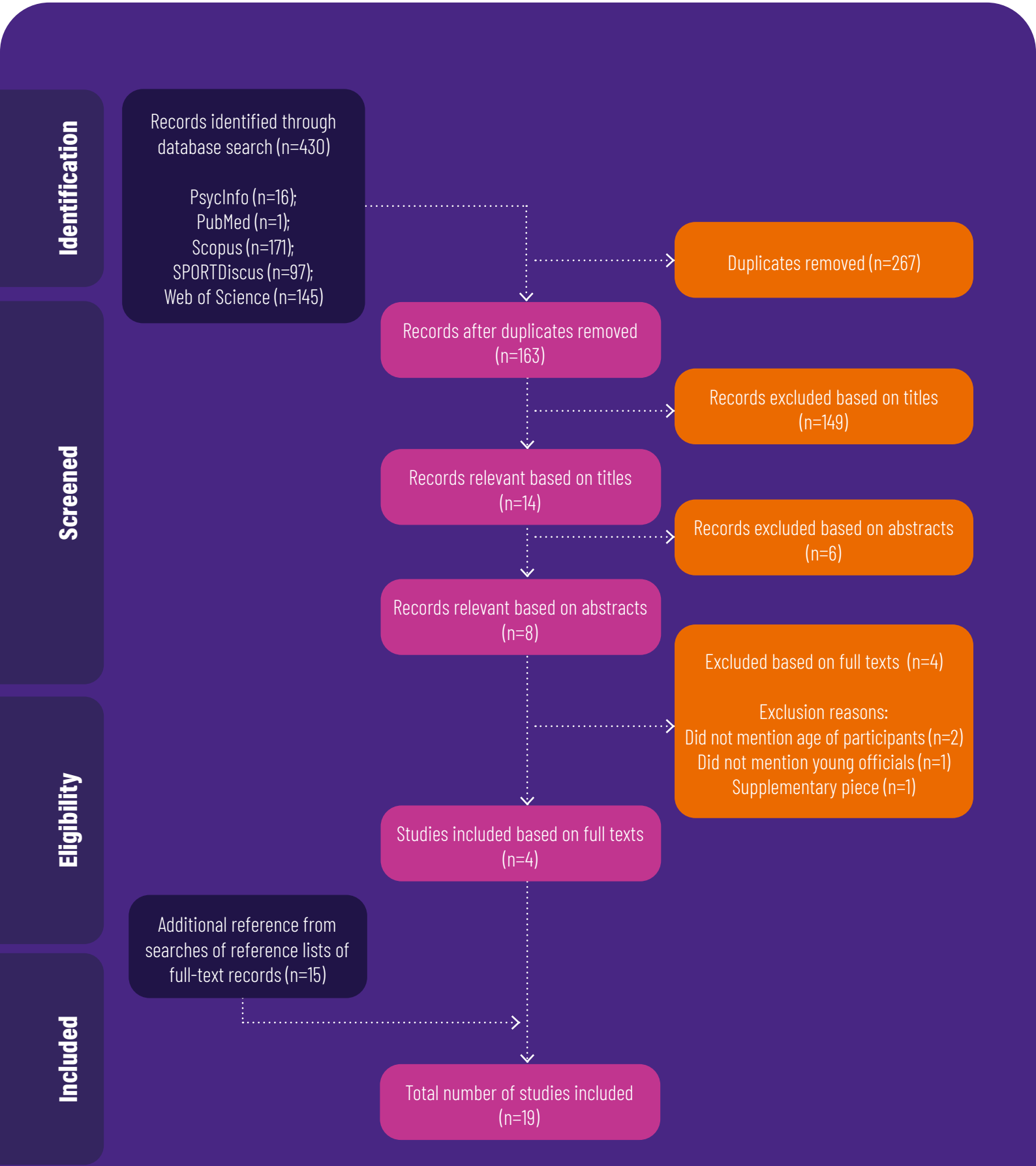
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Appendices

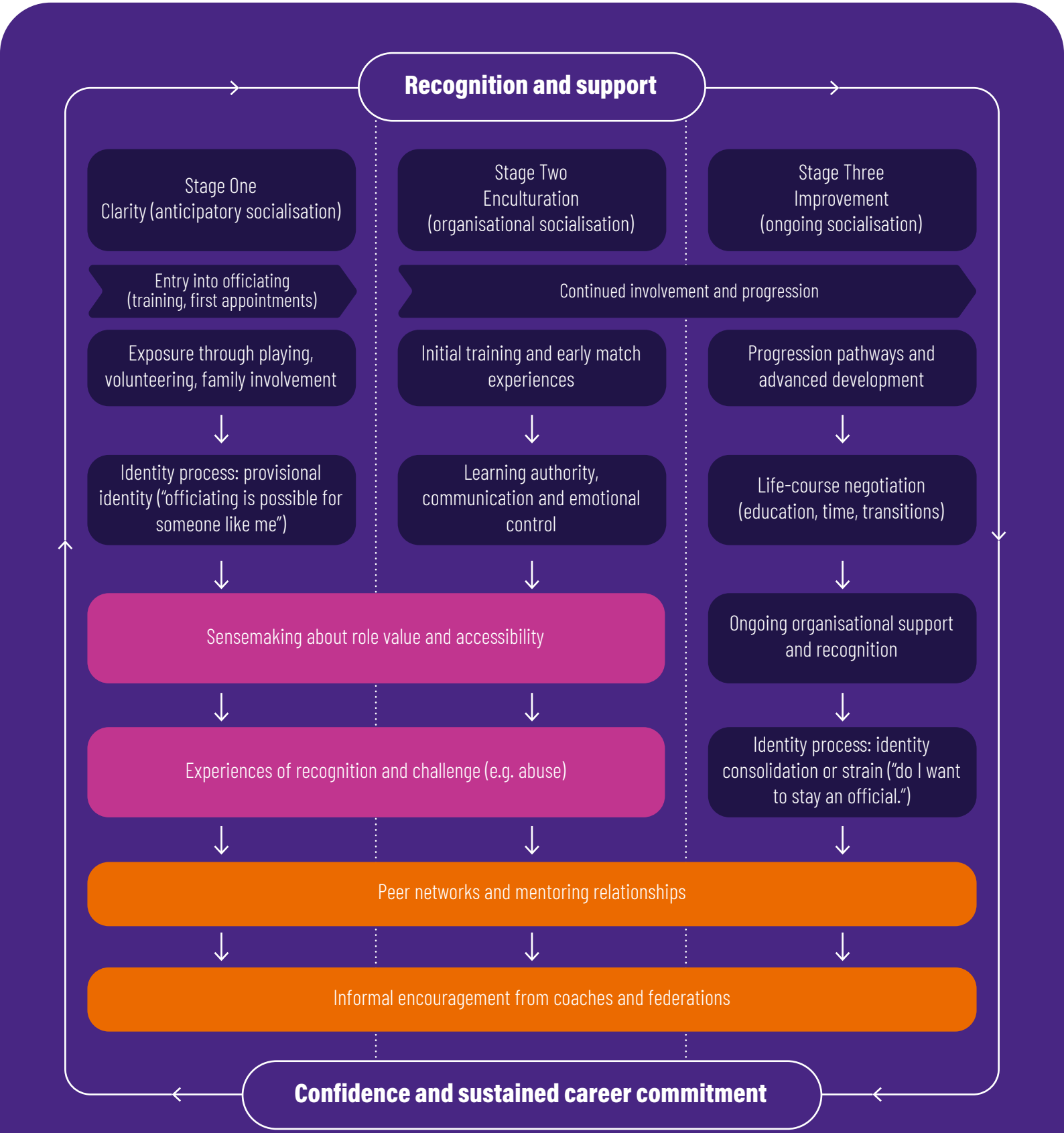
Appendix 1

PRISMA Flow Chart Diagram



Appendix 2

Staged career socialisation and identity formation in youth sport officiating model



Appendix 3

Barrier profile by gender

Percent selecting each listed barrier; Male and Female groups only.

Barrier	Female	Male
Lack of respect	58%	60%
Fear of abuse or criticism	52%	61%
Lack of awareness	37%	33%
Time clashes	45%	30%
Cost/difficulty of training	9%	11%
Not seen as cool/rewarding	26%	41%
Few progression opportunities	10%	12%
Lack of friends/peers	34%	35%

Appendix 4

Updated data tables, cross-tabulations and verification notes

This appendix provides selected cross-tabulations and verification notes from the survey spreadsheet. Charts and graphs have been moved into the main report where they support the narrative; the appendices retain supporting tables and methodological transparency.

Selected abuse cross-tabulations

The tables below report descriptive cross-tabulations only. Sport and country tables are limited to groups with at least 30 valid responses. Smaller groups were reviewed during analysis but are not used to make concrete claims in the final report.

Sport (n>= 30)	Valid N	Verbal abuse %	Physical abuse %	Online/social media abuse %
Rugby Union	80	80.0%	5.0%	3.8%
Field Hockey	53	77.4%	7.5%	7.5%
Badminton	51	56.9%	11.8%	9.8%
Football	35	71.4%	17.1%	5.7%
Tennis	34	67.6%	5.9%	2.9%
Cycling	31	32.3%	3.2%	3.2%
Country (n>= 30)	**Valid N**	**Verbal abuse %**	**Physical abuse %**	**Online/social media abuse %**
France	198	42.9%	9.6%	**5.1%**
United Kingdom	92	75.0%	2.2%	**4.3%**
Netherlands	36	58.3%	5.6%	**5.6%**
Gender	**Valid N**	**Verbal abuse %**	**Physical abuse %**	**Online/social media abuse %**
Male	300	61.0%	8.3%	6.3%
Female	131	47.3%	7.6%	4.6%

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