

Youth Leagues playing their part

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The Wigan and District Youth Football League is made up of three different competitions. The Wigan and District Girls' League, who play on Saturdays and Sundays, The Wigan and District Small Sided League, made up of 46 teams from U7s to U10s, and the main Youth League, which comprises 106 teams from U11s to U16s. Every weekend, more than 2000 children play football and have their needs catered for by the Wigan and District Youth League.

With such variety within the league and a link established to the local youth and open-age competitions, the league not only plays an important role in developing players but also does a sterling job with the match officials.

Links with the local Wigan Referees' Society forge back to 1985-86, when the Association helped supply some officials for games. Now the relationship is a lot more than just an administrative one. The league and RA work closely together to ensure that young and inexperienced officials are mentored,

supported and developed throughout their time on the league and whilst officiating in the local area.

The mentoring scheme was launched in 2006 and became more structured and official in 2007 when the then Lancashire FA Referees' Department delivered a Mentors Workshop to 14 league committee members and six officials from Wigan Referees' Association. Keith Harris, the League Chairman, was appointed as the Mentor Co-ordinator for the Wigan area and together with the Referees' Secretary Peter Dickenson and his wife Helen they were given responsibility for the retention and conversion of Level 9 officials.

In 2008, the League together with the LFA set up a Referees' Development Plan which was put in place for all referees joining the League panel. Attending a meeting prior to officiating, being mentored throughout their development from 7-a-side to 11-a-side and receiving advice and support are all important factors within the plan.

The mentors are not just ex-referees. Parents of referees, club officials, league committee members and County FA representatives have all undertaken the mentor workshop and actively supported new referees by supporting their development.

The league was also one of the first in the country to trial the use of barriers and now every team has to have a barrier providing a designated spectator area. The league has fully implemented the Respect programme and takes a no-nonsense approach to poor behaviour from players and/or officials.

The league in 2011 looks very different to how it did in 1985 – more players than ever, a fantastic and dynamic relationship with the local RA and County FA, a Respect League and a superb mentoring programme providing the support that newly qualified referees need. The proof is, as they say, in the pudding, the league now has 100% coverage and the list of newly qualified officials wanting to join the panel is increasing season after season.