ACADEMY

RESEARCH GRANT PROGRAMME

Mapping & Evaluating Disability Football Provision Across UEFA Member Associations

Final Report

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A project conducted by Leeds Beckett University and supported by Special Olympics and the Slovenian Football Association

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- Most MA have policies and responsibility in place
- Fewer than half have dedicated working groups
- Limited staffing capacity in most MA
- Funding is present in many MA but often insufficient, unstable or fragmented

PROVISION AND PARTICIPATION REMAIN UNEVEN AND OFTEN PROJECT-BASED

- More one-off events (16 MA) than regular leagues (9 MA)
- Participation tracking is weak and inconsistent
- Club infrastructure and reach vary widely
- In many MA, leagues are run outside MA control

MOST MA RELY ON SPECIALIST EXTERNAL PARTNERS, BUT THE QUALITY OF THESE PARTNERSHIPS VARIES

- Partnerships are central to delivery and growth
- Strong partnerships extend reach and expertise
- Weak or informal partnerships can limit ownership, continuity and data access

COACH EDUCATION AND WORKFORCE CAPACITY ARE MAJOR CHALLENGES

- Only a small number integrate disability football across all coaching courses
- Opportunities for PWD to become coaches exist but are often ad hoc
- Coach developer preparation remains inconsistent

MA integrate disability football across all coaching courses

DATA WEAKNESS IS A CRITICAL SYSTEMIC BARRIER

ONLY 1 — MA can track players with disabilities in mainstream football

ONLY 5 — MA can track disability football registrations with confidence

- Limits benchmarking and target setting
- Restricts evaluation of impact
- Hampers evidence-informed decision making

THE MAIN MESSAGE

Disability football is widely recognised but operational depth and development remains uneven, fragmented, and capacity-constrained from many MA.

- Strengthen governance depth
- Expand and sustain provision
- Build effective, strategic partnerships
- Invest in coach education and workforce

INCLUSION | EQUALITY | ACCESS | OPPORTUNITY

ACADEMY

MAPPING & EVALUATING DISABILITY FOOTBALL PROVISION

ACROSS UEFA MEMBER ASSOCIATIONS

10 PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS

THE KEY MESSAGE

Move from strategic intent to sustainable system design.

INCLUSION | EQUALITY | ACCESS | OPPORTUNITY

1. Executive Summary

This final report presents the first comprehensive, cross-national study of disability football provision across UEFA Member Associations (MA). Funded through the UEFA Academy Research Grant Programme, the project responds to an important and timely challenge for European football: how to ensure that people with disabilities (PWD) are not only welcomed into football, but are able to access meaningful, sustained, high-quality opportunities to play, coach, compete, volunteer, lead, and belong.

The research brings together evidence from a scoping review, survey responses from 20 UEFA MA, and seven in-depth case studies. In doing so, it provides a system-level assessment of how disability football is currently governed, resourced, delivered, monitored, and supported across Europe. The report examines the current state of provision, identifies key drivers and barriers, highlights emerging good practice, and offers recommendations for UEFA and its MA across governance, provision, partnerships, coach education, workforce development, data, and system sustainability.

The findings show that disability football is now widely recognised across UEFA MA. Most associations report some form of strategic commitment, organisational responsibility, policy framework, partnership activity, or dedicated provision. However, recognition does not yet consistently translate into operational depth. Across Europe, provision remains uneven, fragmented, and often constrained by limited staffing, inconsistent funding, weak data systems, variable club readiness, incomplete competition pathways, and overdependence on external partners. In many countries, disability football exists, but it is not yet fully embedded into the mainstream football system.

A central conclusion is that European disability football has moved beyond the question of whether it matters. The more pressing question is now how it can be systematically developed, locally delivered, properly resourced, and sustained over time. The report argues that the next phase of development should move from inclusion as aspiration to inclusion as system design.

Academic Contribution

This research makes a significant academic contribution by moving the study of disability football beyond fragmented, single-country, programme-specific, or impairment-specific accounts toward a comparative, system-level analysis across UEFA Member Associations. While existing research has generated important insights into disability sport participation, inclusion, access, coaching, and adapted football formats, there has been limited evidence on how national football associations organise disability football as part of wider football systems. This study addresses that gap.

First, the research provides one of the first comparative frameworks for understanding disability football provision across Europe. By examining governance, resourcing, provision, participation, partnerships, coach education, workforce capacity, and data systems together, the study demonstrates that disability football cannot be understood through participation numbers alone.

Instead, it must be analysed as an ecosystem shaped by national structures, organisational priorities, partner relationships, local club capacity, cultural attitudes, welfare systems, geography, and workforce availability.

Second, the study advances understanding of the relationship between strategic recognition and operational implementation. Many MA now have policies, roles, strategies, partnerships, or programmes relating to disability football. However, these indicators of recognition do not necessarily produce strong pathways, reliable data, inclusive coach education, stable funding, or consistent local delivery. This distinction between governance architecture and governance depth offers a useful conceptual contribution for future research on inclusion in sport organisations.

Third, the research challenges the assumption that there is a single 'best practice' model for disability football provision. Successful development is highly context-dependent. Larger associations, smaller associations, geographically dispersed countries, mature disability sport systems, and emerging systems face different challenges and require different models. The study therefore contributes to a more nuanced understanding of inclusion as context-sensitive system building rather than simple policy transfer.

Fourth, the research highlights implementation capacity as a central analytical category. Staffing, volunteer support, coach education, coach developer preparation, local club readiness, and partner coordination emerge as key factors shaping whether strategic intent becomes meaningful provision. This shifts attention from policy presence to the practical conditions required for delivery and contributes to wider debates about the gap between organisational commitment and lived participant experience.

Fifth, the research identifies data weakness as a structural issue in disability football. Many MA struggle to track participation, progression, disability-football registrations, mainstream participation by players with disabilities, and coaches with disabilities. The study shows that this is not simply a technical database problem. It is linked to data protection, disclosure, classification, fragmented delivery, external governance, and the absence of unified pathways.

Finally, the mixed-methods design contributes methodologically. The combination of survey data, qualitative responses, case studies, and literature review enables both breadth and depth. The survey provides a comparative picture across MA, while the case studies explain how national context, partnerships, geography, governance traditions, and delivery ecosystems shape practice. Taken together, the research establishes disability football as a system-level field of study within European football.

Practical Impact

The practical value of this research is that it provides UEFA and its MA with an evidence-informed basis for strengthening disability football across Europe. It does not simply describe current provision; it identifies where the system is working, where it is fragile, and where targeted support could have the greatest impact. The findings point to ten practical priorities for UEFA and European football.

1. Strengthen governance depth, not only governance presence. Most MA now recognise disability football through policies, roles, strategies, partnerships or programmes, but many lack the structures, staffing, working groups, KPIs, budgets and internal coordination needed to translate commitment into sustained delivery.

2. Support differentiated development models. MA operate in very different contexts. Some may be ready to expand national leagues and club-based structures, while others may need regional hubs, festivals, mixed-impairment provision, cross-border collaboration, school/community partnerships, or pilots before full pathway development is realistic.

3. Move from event-based provision toward connected participation pathways. One-off competitions and festivals are valuable entry points, but regular leagues and sustained pathways are less common. The next stage is to connect events to continuing participation, local clubs, regular sessions, appropriate competition formats and progression opportunities.

4. Strengthen disability football partnerships. Specialist external partners bring expertise, trust, classification knowledge, community reach and delivery capacity. However, partnership quality varies. Strong partnerships require shared strategy, clear roles, mutual learning, data exchange and long-term coordination.

5. Invest in coach education and workforce development. Many MA provide some disability-specific coach education, but full integration across coaching pathways remains rare, and coach developer preparation is inconsistent. Inclusive provision depends on confident, skilled and well-supported coaches, volunteers, tutors, club staff and coach developers.

6. Support PWD to become coaches, volunteers and leaders. Opportunities for PWD to enter coaching pathways exist in many systems, but support is often ad hoc. Qualifications, learning environments, mentoring, assessment, communication and club cultures need to be made more accessible.

7. Improve data systems and evidence-informed decision-making. Data systems are one of the weakest parts of the current landscape. Better data is needed to benchmark provision, understand participant journeys, monitor growth, evaluate impact, identify gaps and make the case for investment, while respecting legal and ethical requirements.

8. Build local club readiness and delivery capacity. National policy alone does not create inclusive football opportunities. Clubs, volunteers, parents, coaches, local authorities, schools, community organisations and disability partners all shape delivery. UEFA and MA can help through club-facing tools, training, mentoring, recognition schemes and adaptable delivery models.

9. Co-produce disability football with people with disabilities and those closest to delivery. Provision is more likely to be relevant, trusted and sustainable when people with disabilities, families, coaches with disabilities, clubs and specialist partners are involved in design, delivery and evaluation.

10. Position disability football as core football development. Disability football should not be treated as a peripheral social responsibility activity. It connects directly to grassroots football, club development, competitions, coach education, facilities, safeguarding, workforce planning, participation, women's and girls' football, sustainability and football's wider social role.

Overall, the report provides UEFA with a clear evidence base for action. It shows that disability football across Europe has strong foundations, visible commitment and many examples of promising practice. It also shows that the next stage requires deeper system building. The key challenge is no longer simply to promote the idea of disability football, but to embed it into the everyday structures, cultures and development systems of European football.

The overarching recommendation is therefore that UEFA and its MA should work together to move disability football from strategic intent to sustainable system design. This means strengthening governance, investing in workforce capacity, improving data, supporting clubs, developing appropriate competition pathways, building effective partnerships, creating leadership opportunities for people with disabilities, and ensuring that disability football becomes part of the core identity and future development of European football.

2. Introduction & Brief Literature Review

Approximately 15% of the global population identify as having a disability (WHO, 2011; 2022). In Europe, various reports put this figure between 18% and 24% for those aged 16 and over (European Commission, 2018; Eurostat, 2024). Research suggests that adults and children with disabilities are less likely to be physically active than their non-disabled peers (ECORYS, 2018; Ross et al., 2016). Lower activity levels mean that people with disabilities (PWD) are more likely to suffer from the effects of physical inactivity, including non-optimal weight management, higher risk factors for certain linked disease, and poorer mental health (ECORYS, 2018). As a popular form of physical activity, it is crucial that PWD have access to sport opportunities that support an increase in activity levels. This directive has been enshrined at policy level as a key strategic target in the European Commission's *European Disability Strategy 2021-2030* (European Commission, 2021).

Despite these policy developments and an increased awareness and allocation of resources in recent years towards disability sport, recent evidence consistently demonstrates that sport provision for people with disabilities remains insufficient in both scale and quality, with disabled individuals significantly less likely to participate and frequently reporting a lack of appropriate, accessible, and inclusive opportunities (Activity Alliance, 2024; Disability Policy Centre, 2024; Purcell, 2024; Sport England, 2023).

Although football is typically seen as a leader in the promotion and provision of opportunities for PWD to participate in sport, significant gaps remain. Recent research form the UEFA Foundation for Children (2026) highlighted that often provision for children with disabilities is not integrated into mainstream grassroots football clubs and that it relies heavily on isolated, project-based initiatives rather than systemic provision. In addition, it has been argued that a deeply embedded culture of *ableism* dictates disability football development leading to a conflict between mainstreaming and inclusion often focused on performance-oriented provision to the detriment of grassroots participation (Kitchin et al., 2024).

While undoubtedly important progress has been made in expanding inclusive practices and strengthening capacity across the sector, notable inconsistencies and areas of uncertainty persist across European and global football systems (Kitchin et al., 2024). This requires further investigation. UEFA Member Associations (MA) are key actors in advancing football provision for PWD. However, there remains limited systematic understanding of the nature, scope, and quality of provision across different national contexts, age-groups, participation domains and types of disability. There is also limited clarity regarding what constitutes effective or exemplary policy, organisational structure, and delivery practice across diverse national realities and cultures.

In response to these gaps, Leeds Beckett University, in partnership with Special Olympics, and supported by the Football Association of Slovenia in collaboration with the Swedish Football Association, undertook a comprehensive audit of disability football provision across a large sample of MA. This study adopted a mixed-methods design, combining desk research, surveys, semi-structured interviews, and in-depth case studies to generate a robust and nuanced evidence base. The overall goal of the project was the development of evidence-informed,

actionable recommendations for UEFA and UEFA MA to support the expansion, enhancement, and sustainability of football opportunities for PWD.

This research was funded by a UEFA Academy Research Grant for the 2025-26 period and is closely aligned with UEFA's strategic framework, *United for Success*, particularly Pillar 1 (Keeping Football for All) and Pillar 5 (Acting Sustainably), thus contributing to UEFA's commitment to accessibility, inclusion, and long-term systemic development within European football.

3. Research Aims, Objectives & Hypotheses

The overarching aim of the research was to map the current landscape of disability football across a large sample of UEFA MA. Specifically, the mapping process revolved around four distinct research questions:

- How is disability football governed and resourced?
- What level and range of disability football provision is there?
- What is the role and incidence of partnership work in disability football?
- How are coaches recruited, educated and supported in disability football?

Based on the preliminary literature review conducted during the grant application process and the professional experience of the research team as well as Special Olympics, and the Slovenian and Swedish Football Associations, several hypotheses guided this research:

Hypothesis 1: Presence and variability of provision

All UEFA MA will provide some form of disability football provision for PWD, but there will be **significant variation in the scale, scope, and strategic prioritisation** of such provision across MA.

Hypothesis 2: Governance and organisational structure

Disability football within UEFA MA will predominantly be **organised through segregated structures (e.g., disability-specific units or departments)**, with governance, management capacity, and strategic integration varying considerably between associations.

Hypothesis 3: Nature of provision and resource allocation

Disability football provision will tend to be **grouped under broad disability categories**, with multiple impairment types addressed through **limited, generic programmes and resources**, rather than through highly differentiated or impairment-specific pathways.

Hypothesis 4: External partnerships and ecosystem development

UEFA MA will demonstrate varying degrees of **reliance on partnerships with external organisations** (e.g., disability sport organisations, charities, NGOs) to deliver disability football provision, with stronger ecosystems associated with **more extensive and accessible opportunities for participation**.

Hypothesis 5: Coach education and development structures

Coach education and development for disability football will be **predominantly segregated from mainstream coach education systems**, with variability in the extent to which different types of disability are catered for and the degree to which inclusive approaches are embedded within formal coaching pathways.

Hypothesis 6: Accessibility of coaching pathways for PWD

Opportunities for PWD to enter, progress, and succeed within coaching pathways will be **limited and uneven across MA**, with structural, educational, and cultural barriers restricting progression to higher-level coaching roles.

Hypothesis 7: Participation structures and access routes

PWD will access football through a combination of **segregated disability-specific clubs and integrated club structures**, with the balance between these models varying across MA and influencing participation opportunities and inclusion outcomes.

Hypothesis 8: Competitive opportunities and player pathways

The availability, structure, and quality of **competitive opportunities for disability football** will vary significantly across MA, with some systems offering **clear progression pathways** and others remaining fragmented or participation-focused only.

Hypothesis 9: System coherence and alignment

MA with more developed disability football systems will demonstrate **greater alignment across governance, provision, partnerships, and coach development**, whereas less developed systems will exhibit fragmentation across these domains.

Hypothesis 10: System inequality hypothesis

There will be **systemic inequalities across UEFA MA** in disability football provision, driven by differences in resources, governance capacity, and national sport systems, resulting in **unequal access and development opportunities for PWD across Europe**.

In testing these hypotheses, the study also aimed to identify challenges shared by MA, propose potential solutions to these challenges, and showcase practical examples across governance, resourcing, provision, partnerships and coaching. In sum, this project aimed to enhance the evidence-based around disability football in UEFA MA and propose actionable recommendations to support the expansion, development, and sustainability of football opportunities for PWD.

4. Research Design & Methods

To answer the research questions, this project used a multi-step, mixed methods, cross-sectional approach:

- **Step 1 – Scoping Review:** A scoping review of literature was deemed the best method to quickly map existing literature, elicit key ideas and identify gaps in the literature in relation to the four selected areas of inquiry (e.g., governance and resourcing, provision and participation, partnerships and coach education and recruitment). A scoping review is an appropriate first step because the disability football landscape in Europe is heterogeneous, under-theorised, and characterised by diverse forms of provision, populations, and evidence types; scoping reviews are specifically designed to map the breadth, nature, and gaps in such emerging or complex fields rather than to answer narrowly defined effectiveness questions (Arksey and O'Malley, 2005; Munn et al., 2018). In contrast, a systematic review would be premature given the likely lack of homogeneous interventions and comparable outcomes, while a narrative review would lack the transparency and methodological rigour required for policy-oriented work; scoping reviews offer a structured, reproducible approach to synthesising both academic and grey literature, which is critical in fields like disability sport where much evidence sits outside traditional peer-reviewed sources (Tricco et al., 2018).

  Multiple searches were conducted in SPORTDiscus (via EBSCOhost). A list of search terms was devised in conjunction with project partner Special Olympics (Table 1), and inclusion and exclusion criteria were developed to filter the results of the searches(Table 2). This search returned 895 papers. Each paper was screened using the titles and abstracts against the inclusion and exclusion criteria. After the screening process and the removal of duplicates, a total of 30 papers were selected for initial review. During the review process, a snowball sampling approach was applied leading to an additional 10 papers being found through key citations leading to a total of 40 papers being included in the final sample. These 40 papers were supplemented where appropriate by relevant grey literature, statistical data relating to disability, and non-disability specific literature.

Search 1	disability or disabilities or disabled or impairment or impaired or special or special needs	AND football or soccer	AND barriers or obstacles or challenges	NOT supporter or fandom	**69 results**
Search 2	disability or disabilities or disabled or impairment or impaired or special or special needs	AND football or soccer	AND enablers or facilitators or factors	NOT supporter or fandom	**220 results**
Search 3	disability or disabilities or disabled or impairment or impaired or special or special needs	AND football or soccer	AND participation or engagement or involvement	NOT supporter or fandom	**133 results**
Search 4	disability or disabilities or disabled or impairment or impaired or special or special needs	AND football or soccer	AND management	NOT supporter or fandom	**128 results**
Search 5	disability or disabilities or disabled or impairment or impaired or special or special needs	AND football or soccer	AND partnerships	NOT supporter or fandom	**6 results**
Search 6	disability or disabilities or disabled or impairment or impaired or special or special needs	AND football or soccer	AND policy or policies or law or legislation	NOT supporter or fandom	**70 results**
Search 7	disability or disabilities or disabled or impairment or impaired or special or special needs	AND football or soccer	AND resource or programme or services	NOT supporter or fandom	**266 results**

Table 1. Scoping review search terms and search results

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
English language	Non-English language
Published from 2015 onwards	Published prior to 2015
Focus on disability sport and management and governance AND/OR partnerships AND/OR coaching and coach education AND/OR participation	Focus on disability but in areas unrelated to the research questions (e.g., injury prevalence, biomechanics, fandom, strength and conditioning, etc)
Peer reviewed	Non-peer reviewed
Gray literature from recognized organisations (e.g., international sport bodies, NGOs, etc)	

Table 2. Inclusion and exclusion criteria.

- **Step 2 – MA Survey:** An online self-reporting survey was distributed to all 55 UEFA MA. The purpose of the survey was to create a pan-European picture of disability football with specific emphasis on the four areas of inquiry of the project: governance and resourcing, provision and participation, partnerships, and coach education and recruitment. The survey was drafted by the research team based on the research questions and refined based on the findings of the scoping review. The survey contained a mix of numeric, rater and YES/NO questions. It also included several free-text boxes and questions where respondents could provide additional detail about their responses and programmes. A mixed-methods survey incorporating both quantitative and qualitative questions is well suited to multi-country research, as it enables the systematic comparison of patterns across contexts while also capturing contextualised experiences and meanings that vary between settings. This approach enhances the breadth and depth of analysis, allowing for more robust and actionable insights when examining complex, system-level phenomena across diverse populations (Creswell et al., 2017; Fetters et al., 2013).

  Prior to distributing the survey, feedback was obtained from Special Olympics, the Slovenian and Swedish MA, and the chair of the UEFA Disability Commission. The final version of the survey (Appendix 1) was distributed to all 55 MA in the English language. MA were given the option to have the survey translated into their own language. On advice from the UEFA Disability Commission, the survey was hosted as a Word document on a dual-authenticated individual shared folder for each MA on Microsoft One Drive. In this way, multiple staff members within each MA could contribute to the survey based on their area of responsibility and expertise. Overall, 26 MA replied to the survey (20 full responses and 6 partial responses). The sample achieved optimal geographical distribution with 4 Nordic countries, 8 Western, 5 Central/Eastern and 3 Southern. Size and maturity where also evenly represented. The quantitative survey data was analysed to generate descriptive statistics (i.e., frequencies, averages, etc). The qualitative data was analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) to identify key themes and subthemes from MA responses.

  Thematic analysis is particularly valuable in applied research contexts because it offers a flexible, systematic, and accessible approach to identifying patterns across qualitative

datasets without being tied to a specific theoretical framework. Unlike more theory-bound approaches such as grounded theory or phenomenology, it allows researchers to work both inductively and deductively, making it especially suitable for policy-oriented projects where predefined themes (e.g., governance, provision, partnerships and education) need to be integrated with emergent insights (Braun and Clarke, 2021).

Additionally, thematic analysis is well suited to handling large, heterogeneous datasets—including interviews, surveys, and documents—while maintaining transparency and rigour through clear coding and theme development processes. Compared to narrative analysis (which focuses on individual stories) or content analysis (which can become overly reductive), thematic analysis strikes a balance between depth and pattern recognition, enabling the production of rich, yet structured and actionable findings for stakeholders (Nowell et al., 2017).

- **Step 3 – In Depth Interviews:** Following the survey, 10 MA were selected for case-studying via in-depth interviews. From the selected MA, seven consented to interview. A case study methodology is particularly appropriate for this type of research because it enables an in-depth, context-sensitive examination of complex, real-world systems such as disability football provision across different national and organisational settings. Case studies are well suited to exploring "how" and "why" questions and integrating diverse data sources (e.g., policy documents, interviews), thereby producing rich, practice-relevant insights that can inform policy and implementation (Yin, 2018; Stake, 1995). Moreover, in heterogeneous and context-dependent fields like disability sport, case study approaches allow for analytical rather than statistical generalisation, making them especially valuable for understanding variation across UEFA member associations and identifying transferable principles of good practice (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

  MA were initially selected across different regions, population sizes and football system maturity levels on the assumption that they represented different sociopolitical and sport development typologies (Table 3).

Region	Population Size	Whole System Maturity
Northern = 2	Large = 2	Mature = 4
Western = 3	Mid = 2	Developing = 3
Central/Eastern = 1	Small = 3	
Southern =1		

Table 3. Case study MA distribution according to region, population size and system maturity

A generic interview script (Appendix 2) was created covering the four main areas of inquiry (e.g., governance and resourcing, provision and participation, partnerships and coach education and recruitment). However, this generic script was tailored to each MA based on their responses to focus on areas of special interest or ask for clarification or expansion. Interviews were conducted using video-conferencing software (Microsoft

TEAMS), recorded and automatically transcribed. Transcripts were downloaded as a Word document and checked for accuracy by the research team.

- **Step 4 – Case Study Composition:** The survey responses and interview findings were combined to develop seven in-depth case studies of the MA who consented to interview (Appendix 3). The case studies will provide an overall picture of the disability football landscape in each selected MA and expand on significant areas specific to each MA.

- **Step 5 – Final Composite Report:** This final report brings together evidence from all phases of the research to provide a critical, comparative assessment of disability football provision across UEFA Member Associations. It examines how disability football is currently governed, resourced, delivered and supported, while identifying the key factors that enable or constrain progress. By integrating survey findings, case-study evidence and wider literature, the report highlights emerging good practice, persistent system gaps and context-specific development needs. It concludes by offering practical recommendations for UEFA and its Member Associations to strengthen governance, expand sustainable provision, improve partnerships, enhance coach education and workforce development, and move disability football from strategic commitment towards embedded, system-wide inclusion.

With regards to its ontology and epistemology, this study adopts a relativist and interpretivist approach aimed at auditing and understanding the landscape of disability football provision across UEFA Member Associations, rather than seeking to produce generalisable, positivist findings. As such, validity and reliability are conceptualised in terms of trustworthiness—including credibility, dependability, and transferability—achieved through systematic and transparent analytical procedures, triangulation of multiple data sources (e.g., surveys, interviews, and documentary analysis), and careful attention to context when comparing diverse national systems. This approach is particularly appropriate for large-scale, cross-national mostly qualitative audits, where the goal is to map variation, identify patterns, and generate actionable insights rather than establish causal relationships or statistical generalisations (Braun and Clarke, 2021; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Tracy, 2010).

Finally, the study received ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee of Leeds Beckett University. Key ethical considerations in this type of cross-national audit include ensuring informed consent, confidentiality, and the responsible representation of organisations and individuals, particularly where findings may highlight gaps or inequalities in provision. Given the involvement of multiple stakeholders across UEFA Member Associations, care is taken to anonymise responses, avoid attribution of sensitive data, and present findings in an aggregated and constructive manner to minimise reputational risk. Ethical rigour is further supported through clear communication of the study's purpose, voluntary participation, secure data management, and reflexive awareness of potential power dynamics between researchers and participants. These measures align with established principles for ethical research and help ensure that the study generates meaningful insights while protecting participants and organisations (Orb et al., 2001; Tracy, 2010).

5. Findings

Literature Review Conclusions[1]

The available literature provides a clear and compelling rationale for examining disability football provision across UEFA MA. There is strong and consistent evidence that PWD are less likely than their non-disabled peers to participate in sport and physical activity, despite the well-established physical, psychological, and social benefits associated with participation. Within this broader context, disability football has developed significantly over recent decades, with increasing recognition from national associations, clubs, and international organisations. However, the literature also highlights that provision remains uneven, often fragmented, and insufficiently understood at a European systems level. This reinforces the importance of this UEFA Academy-funded project in moving beyond general commitments to inclusion and toward a more systematic and evidence-informed understanding of how disability football is currently structured, delivered, and supported across different national contexts.

Across the four themes reviewed (e.g., governance and resourcing, provision and participation, partnerships and coach education and recruitment), the strongest and most developed body of evidence relates to provision and participation. The literature provides relatively rich insight into the barriers, facilitators, and benefits associated with sport involvement for PWD. Barriers are consistently shown to operate at multiple levels, including inaccessible facilities, limited local provision, transport difficulties, insufficiently trained staff, financial constraints, and the varying levels of support available from families and carers. Importantly, these barriers are not isolated but interact in complex ways, aligning with the social relational model of disability. This perspective emphasises that exclusion is rarely caused by impairment alone, but rather by the interaction between individual needs and disabling environments.

In contrast, the benefits of participation are well documented and extend beyond physical health outcomes. The literature highlights improvements in psychological wellbeing, including enhanced confidence, resilience, and sense of identity. Social benefits are also significant, with participation fostering inclusion, belonging, and community integration. In some cases, participation also generates wider impacts for families and communities, including improved social networks and, potentially, economic benefits. This depth of evidence provides a strong foundation for policy and programme development, particularly in understanding why participation matters and what conditions are required to support it.

By comparison, the evidence base on education and coaching is notably thinner and less developed. The literature consistently identifies coaches as a critical determinant of participant experience and programme quality, yet disability-specific coaching remains under-researched and underdeveloped in practice. Several studies point to recurring barriers to recruitment, including lack of confidence, limited knowledge, apprehension about working with disabled participants, and the persistence of medicalised assumptions about disability. These factors

[1] To facilitate the flow of this interim report, academic references have been omitted from the literature review conclusions. These references can be found in the full academic review.

contribute to a reluctance among coaches to engage in disability sport contexts. At the same time, there is some evidence to suggest that once coaches enter these environments and receive appropriate support, retention may be less problematic than recruitment. This suggests that initial access points and educational support are key leverage points for system development.

The literature also highlights a structural weakness in coach education systems. Disability-specific content is often delivered separately from mainstream coaching pathways, rather than being integrated within them. This fragmented approach limits the development of an inclusive coaching workforce and reinforces the marginalisation of disability sport. As a result, there is a clear need for more coherent and embedded approaches to coach education that normalise inclusion rather than treating it as a specialist add-on.

Partnerships emerge in the review as an important but comparatively underexplored area. The literature suggests that effective disability football provision is rarely delivered by a single organisation acting in isolation. Instead, successful programmes are often associated with collaboration between football associations, clubs, disability sport specialists, and organisations outside the sport sector, such as education, health, and social care services. Partnerships with football clubs are particularly valuable due to their visibility, legitimacy, and ability to attract participants. Similarly, partnerships with disability-specific organisations can provide specialist knowledge, credibility, and tailored support for different participant groups.

However, despite their apparent importance, the evidence base on partnerships remains limited in both quantity and depth. There is relatively little detailed analysis of how partnerships are formed, governed, resourced, or sustained over time. Furthermore, there is a lack of comparative evidence examining different partnership models across contexts. This represents a significant gap in the literature, particularly given the central role that partnerships are likely to play in scaling and sustaining disability football provision across diverse national systems.

The management and governance literature provides an important macro-level perspective, but it too remains uneven and underdeveloped in key areas. The review identifies several strategic challenges that are highly relevant to UEFA MA, including the need to cater for diverse impairment groups, to move beyond broad disability categories, to align financial and human resources with strategic priorities, and to develop robust systems for data collection and impact measurement. The literature also highlights that policy ambition alone is insufficient; effective implementation depends on organisational capacity, leadership, and the ability to translate strategy into practice.

A particularly important issue identified in the literature is the lack of reliable and comparable data on disability sport participation. Differences in definitions of disability, variations in data collection methods, and limited transparency in reporting all contribute to a fragmented evidence base. This makes it difficult to assess the scale, reach, and effectiveness of existing provision, and limits the ability of organisations to benchmark progress or identify areas for improvement. As such, improving data systems represents a key priority for both research and practice.

A critical conclusion from the current literature is that its coverage is uneven, its depth is theme-dependent, and its geographical spread is limited. Coverage is strongest in relation to provision and participation, where there is a relatively mature body of research. In contrast, education and

coaching, partnerships, and governance are less well developed, particularly in relation to system-level analysis. In terms of depth, many studies provide useful descriptive or case-based insights, but fewer offer comparative or longitudinal analysis capable of informing strategic decision-making across multiple contexts.

Geographically, the literature is heavily skewed toward English-speaking and Western contexts, particularly the USA and the UK. Within Europe, research is concentrated in a small number of countries, such as Denmark, France, Spain, and the Netherlands, with very limited representation from Eastern Europe. Only a small number of studies adopt a pan-European perspective. This lack of geographical diversity is problematic, as disability football provision is highly context-dependent and influenced by national welfare systems, institutional arrangements, and cultural attitudes toward disability. As a result, the current evidence base does not fully reflect the diversity of UEFA MA.

Taken together, the literature provides a valuable but incomplete foundation for understanding disability football provision. It confirms the importance of provision and participation, highlights the central role of coaches and partnerships, and identifies governance and resource challenges as key determinants of system effectiveness. However, it also reveals significant gaps in coverage, depth, and geographical representation. The most important implication is that this UEFA Academy-funded study is not simply additive but necessary. By systematically mapping provision across a large and diverse sample of countries, the study addresses existing gaps, generates more representative evidence, and provides actionable insights to support the development of more inclusive and effective disability football systems across Europe.

Survey Findings

The below offers a summary of the main quantitative and qualitative survey findings from the 20 complete responses and across the four areas of inquiry.

Governance & Resourcing

- 16 out of 20 MA (80%) reported having a specific policy or strategic framework for disability football, and all 20 indicated at least having some department or role responsible for the area.
- All but one MA (n=19; 95%) stated that there was an explicit and manifest desire to improve disability football provision within the MA.
- Nonetheless, less than half of MA (n=9; 45%) reported having a dedicated working group or committee for disability football.
- Most associations operate with either one dedicated person (n=7; 35%) or a small team of 2–5 staff (n=4; 20%). Only two countries in the current dataset report 6+ staff (10%). Notably, 13 MA (65%) reported having disability specific KPIs. From this, it is plausible to infer that governance architecture is broader than operational depth.
- Disability-specific funding is present but uneven: 11 MA (55%) reported having a dedicated budget line, five MA (25%) fund disability football through a broader development budget, two (10%) reported no dedicated funding, and two (10%) were unsure about the provenance of their funding.
- Although most associations report some budgetary basis for disability football, the spread of qualitative responses shows that budget presence does not necessarily imply sufficient resourcing. In several countries the issue is not whether funding exists at all, but whether it is stable, scalable, and protected.

Provision & Participation

- The dataset shows a clear structural weakness in monitoring. Only one MA (5%) can track players with disabilities in mainstream football and only five MA (25%) can track disability-football registrations with confidence (see meta theme below). This has major implications for benchmarking, target-setting, and evaluation.
- From the five countries who track disability-football registrations, two of them report much higher participation figures of over 4000 and 3000 respectively. This difference may be due to the relative population size of the countries as well as the higher level of maturity of their disability sport system.
- Club infrastructure is also very uneven. Five countries (25%) report much larger club footprints (i.e., mainstream clubs with disability sections) than smaller or emerging systems. One of them reported over 1000 mainstream clubs having a disability section, a figure five times higher than other comparable population size countries. In qualitative terms, these larger footprints appear to depend on national strategies being translated into local club opportunities.
- Delivery is more visible in episodic than in regular competitions: 14 MA (70%) offer one-off disability competitions, but only nine (45%) offer regular disability leagues.
- Where league data are available, provision is highly uneven. Two countries (10%) appear as outliers in system scale with over 50 different leagues in operation, while several associations (n=9; 45%) report zero leagues or provide no numeric figure. Notably, the country with the highest number of leagues (n=56) has a relatively small population thus pointing towards a higher level of maturity of its disability sport system.

- Moreover, six MA (30%) reported not having control of disability football leagues as they were run by organisations outside of the jurisdiction of the MA.
- With regards to disability-specific league provision, Special Olympics/intellectual-developmental provision is the most common league format in the sample (n=9; 45%). Blind/VI (n=5; 25%), deaf, amputee and powerchair provision appear in fewer countries (n=4; 20%), while CP and Down syndrome league provision are rarer still (n=3; 15%).
- One-off events widen the reach of impairment-specific provision, particularly for Special Olympics/intellectual-developmental football (n=11; 65%). However, the reliance on one-off formats also suggests that regular competitive pathways remain underdeveloped in many contexts, indicating that many systems are still event-based rather than pathway-based. This aligns closely with the qualitative evidence from countries that described disability football as project-based, workshop-based, or festival-based rather than integrated and continuous.

Partnerships

- Most MA (n=15; 75%) operate formal partnerships with other organisations to deliver disability football activities, especially competitions (n=12; 60%). Therefore, partnerships and collaboration with external disability organisations are central to the model used by most associations. However, the perceived quality and effectiveness of these partnerships vary. The qualitative data show that reliance on partners can be either an asset or a constraint depending on whether the MA retains enough ownership, expertise, and data access.

Coach Education and Recruitment

- Coach education is a major bottleneck. Only four MA (20%) integrate disability football across all coaching courses, although 12 of them (60%) provide some form of disability-specific coach education.
- With regards to PWD becoming coaches, nine MA (45%) reported providing specific opportunities for PWD to access regular coaching qualifications.
- In addition, seven MA (35%) stated that coach developers receive specific training related to disability so they can deliver this content in coach education courses.
- Therefore, the coaching picture is mixed. Specific coach education is fairly common, but whole-pathway integration is rare and coach-developer preparation is inconsistent. Several associations allow coaches with disabilities to enter general pathways but rely on ad hoc accommodations rather than systematic inclusion design.

Data Systems and Tracking

In addition to the four pre-determined themes, a meta-theme emerged around the quality of data available across different MA. Data systems are the weakest area in the dataset. As mentioned above, only one MA can track players with disabilities in mainstream football and only five MA can track disability-football registrations with confidence. Similarly, MA struggle to track coaches with a disability. In many cases this is impeded by laws which prevent MA from asking players and coaches on registration if they have a disability.

Survey Conclusions

Across the quantitative and qualitative data, the following interconnected themes emerge:

Governance exists more often than fully developed systems

A key cross-country pattern is the gap between strategic recognition and operational depth. Many associations now have a policy, linked strategy, dedicated role, or partnership arrangement. Yet this does not automatically translate into leagues, reliable tracking, coach developer preparation, or continuous local pathways. Disability football as project-based rather than continuous and a relative of the MA's direct control over data and pathway design are pervasive. A recurring pattern across the dataset is the emergence of partnership-led governance models, where delivery, expertise, recruitment, and competition structures are heavily dependent on collaboration with external disability organisations, charities, or specialist sport bodies. In many cases, these partnerships appear essential to operational delivery rather than supplementary to it.

Staffing and implementation capacity are pivotal

The quantitative data show that most associations operate with one person or a small team, while only a few report 6+ staff. The qualitative responses repeatedly connect limited delivery to workforce power, expertise, and volunteer dependence. MA #11 explicitly links its next stage of growth to the need for two more full-time staff. MA #7 highlights 'human power' and cross-departmental coordination as limiting factors. MA #4 links barriers directly to funding, staff, and resources. Staffing pressures manifest differently across systems. In some contexts, the challenge concerns overall workforce capacity and financial resource. In others, particularly larger or more decentralised systems, the issue becomes coordination across regions, partners, and delivery structures. Smaller systems often face a different challenge altogether: achieving sufficient critical mass to sustain viable provision. Taken together, the evidence suggests that staff capacity is one of the clearest practical levers separating strategy from implementation.

Competitions are often easier to create than pathways

Across the sample, one-off competitions are more common than leagues. This is consistent with the free-text responses, which often describe tournaments, flagship events, workshops, promotional days, and project-based activity. MA #16, MA #10, and several smaller systems rely strongly on one-off or mixed-format provision. By contrast, higher-delivery systems such as the MA #11, MA #13, MA #1, and MA #4 show more evidence of sustained league or pathway structures. The comparative implication is that many associations have achieved visibility and entry points, but not yet continuity. Notwithstanding this, several associations appear to favour mixed-format or unified approaches that prioritise flexibility, inclusion, and participation access over highly formalised impairment-specific pathway structures. In some contexts, these models may represent pragmatic and context-sensitive solutions rather than transitional forms of provision.

Data weakness is a system-wide problem, not just a technical issue

Only one association in the dataset can track players with disabilities in mainstream football, and only five can track disability-football registrations. The qualitative data show that this is not a simple database problem. It is tied to questions of data protection, organisational delegation, classification complexity, and the absence of unified pathways. MA #14, MA #15,

MA #2, and others explicitly note partial, declarative, or unavailable data. Moreover, in some associations, the challenge extends beyond formal monitoring systems and reflects the absence of a fully mapped disability football ecosystem. Several responses suggest that associations are still in the process of identifying existing provision, coordinating stakeholders, and establishing baseline visibility regarding participation, clubs, and delivery structures. As a result, even countries with active work in disability football often struggle to evidence scale, progression, and impact robustly.

Club readiness and local ecology matter as much as national policy

The most prevalent qualitative theme in the coded dataset is club readiness/culture. Associations repeatedly mention volunteer capacity, knowledge, awareness, mainstream-first cultures, and the difficulty of translating national intent into local provision. MA#1 highlights the lack of lower-ability and impairment-specific opportunities across local authorities. MA #2 emphasises volunteer knowledge and club recruitment challenges. MA #11 points to knowledge and visibility deficits at grassroots clubs. The dataset thus suggests that many disability football ecosystems remain heavily dependent on volunteer commitment, informal local leadership, and goodwill within grassroots clubs. This creates vulnerability in relation to sustainability, continuity, and scaling. It also indicates that the bottleneck in many countries may lie in the local delivery ecology rather than in national intent alone.

Geography, scale, and population shape what is realistic

Population size, geography, and ecosystem density emerge as major structural determinants of what forms of disability football provision are realistically achievable. In several smaller or sparsely populated systems, sustaining impairment-specific leagues or pathways is constrained not only by resources but by the practical challenge of assembling sufficient numbers of players, coaches, officials, and clubs. Consequently, mixed formats, regional hubs, travelling events/festivals, unified football approaches, and cross-organisational collaboration may represent structurally appropriate models rather than temporary compromises. For example, MA #6 and MA #10 both stress population size and difficulties assembling enough players for teams. MA #5 and MA #9 emphasise long travel distances and regional sparseness.

Inclusion in coaching remains more aspirational than embedded

Although more than half the sample reports some form of specific coach education, only four associations include disability football across all coaching courses and only seven report specific disability training for coach developers. Many responses describe open access for coaches with disabilities but with support handled case-by-case. This means that inclusion is often present as opportunity, but not yet fully embedded as system design. The findings also suggest that associations are approaching coach education integration differently. Some systems are developing impairment-specific education pathways, while others are intentionally embedding disability content within broader inclusion-oriented coach education structures. This reflects differing strategic philosophies as well as practical differences in scale, expertise, and workforce capacity. Overall, the coaching workforce appears to be one of the main medium-term development priorities for the sector.

Stronger systems still describe important constraints

Even countries with relatively strong governance and delivery scores do not present disability football as ‘solved’. MA #11 and MA #13, for example, report sizeable participation and

stronger structures, yet still highlight resource pressure, awareness, staffing, and sustainability. This is important analytically because it shows that the issue is not binary. Mature systems face a different challenge set: scaling quality, consolidating infrastructure, improving data, and sustaining growth over time. Thus, mature systems are not necessarily encountering fewer barriers, but rather different ones. As provision expands, challenges increasingly relate to sustainability, regional consistency, workforce development, infrastructure coordination, and maintaining quality across larger delivery systems.

Disability football development is not following a single pathway

Overall, the findings suggest that disability football development across UEFA MA is not progressing through a single linear pathway from 'less developed' to 'more developed' systems. Instead, associations appear to be responding to different structural realities shaped by population size, geography, organisational history, governance models, partnership ecology, workforce capacity, and existing disability sport infrastructures. As a result, effective development models may need to remain flexible and context-sensitive rather than assuming a single ideal structure for all national contexts.

Overall, the broad picture elicited from the survey data is one of strategic recognition but uneven operationalisation. Policy, formal partnerships, and one-off competitions are common. By contrast, tracking systems, disability content across all coach education, and mainstream registration visibility are rare. Nonetheless, progress and pathways are highly context-sensitive, idiosyncratic and non-linear. No simple one-size fits all solution appears likely nor desirable.

Case Study Findings

This section provides a synthesis of key findings from the seven case studies conducted. The countries were selected to reflect variation in system maturity, governance models, scale of participation, and cultural context, rather than to represent a linear progression or hierarchy. The survey data provided a valuable system-wide map of disability football across MA. It showed that policies, responsible roles and partnerships are relatively common, while data systems, sustained pathways, coach education integration and operational capacity remain uneven. The case studies add the explanatory layer beneath those patterns. They show how similar survey indicators can represent very different realities once governance, relationships, local access, workforce capacity, legal context and cultural meaning are examined in depth. The survey tells us where there is strategic recognition; the cases show what turns recognition into usable provision. A full summary of each case study can be found in appendix 3.

Provision is not "one thing"

The survey counted policies, clubs, leagues, events and education offers. The cases show that these indicators differ greatly in quality and function. A league can be a mature national pathway, a single central competition that requires long travel, or an adult-focused structure that does not suit young players. A club footprint can mean embedded disability sections, festival participation, unified football, or relatively fragile volunteer-led activity. This matters because development cannot be judged by presence or absence alone; it must consider continuity, accessibility, player experience and institutional ownership. In practical terms, "provision" should be interpreted as a layered concept: entry points, regular activity, appropriate competition, transition support and long-term belonging.

Partnerships are both enablers and governance challenges

The survey showed that most MA rely on formal partnerships. The cases explain when partnerships help and when they constrain. They are strongest when the MA retains football leadership, data access and strategic ownership while drawing on disability-specific expertise. They are weaker when responsibilities are unclear, when competition structures sit outside the MA, or when partners hold activity, but the MA is accountable for strategy. Effective partnership is therefore not simply collaboration; it is governed co-delivery with clear roles, trust and shared standards and, where possible, data. The cases also show that partnership quality changes over time: early development may require external expertise, while mature systems need clearer integration into football governance.

Local accessibility matters more than nominal national availability

The survey showed whether leagues or events exist, but the cases show whether PWD can actually use them. Centralised competitions may look like national provision but still create 90-minute travel burdens, cost barriers and fatigue. Conversely, small local hubs, school-club links and low-barrier festivals may offer more meaningful access even where formal pathways are still emerging. Geography, population density and transport therefore shape what viable disability football can look like. This is especially important for smaller or more dispersed MA, where mixed

formats, regional hubs, travelling festivals or cross-border solutions may be more realistic than conventional league structures.

Data weakness is a values, legal and governance issue

The survey identifies data systems as the weakest area. The cases show that this is not merely a database problem. In some countries, disability registration is legally constrained. In others, disabled players are integrated into mainstream clubs and therefore intentionally not identified. In partnership systems, data may sit outside the MA. In developing systems, data collection may risk undermining trust. Future data collection and management support therefore needs to combine technical solutions with guidance on voluntary disclosure, privacy, dignity, shared data agreements and proportionate monitoring. Better data should help MA improve provision, not create a sense of surveillance or deficit labelling among disabled participants.

Workforce development extends beyond coaching courses

The survey highlighted coach education as a potential bottleneck, but the cases broaden the issue. Sustainable disability football needs coaches, coach developers, referees, regional coordinators, club managers, volunteers, medical or classification expertise, and staff who can build local relationships. Some systems show advanced coach education but limited staffing; others have strong partnerships but limited specialist coaches. One of the clearest lessons is that workforce development should be treated as an ecosystem rather than a single training course. Coach education is necessary, but it is not sufficient unless coaches are supported in clubs, connected to communities of practice, and surrounded by people who can organise, safeguard, fund and sustain provision.

Maturity changes the problem; it does not remove it

The cases challenge any simple distinction between “developed” and “undeveloped” systems. Emerging systems struggle to create viable provision, recruit clubs and build basic workforce capacity. Mid-stage systems often struggle with governance, pathways, regional equity and volunteer dependence. Mature systems face different pressures: sustaining quality, managing growth, protecting funding, improving data, coordinating multiple bodies and moving from start-up energy to institutional stability. Strong systems still report constraints, but the constraint set changes. This is important for because future support should be staged: foundational support for emergent systems, pathway and workforce support for building systems, and quality, data and sustainability support for mature systems.

Different models of institutionalisation are possible

Across the seven cases, disability football is institutionalised in different ways: mainstream EDI integration, youth-first partnership delivery, regional coordination, relationship-led consolidation, system transition from parasport to football, standards-led “football for all abilities”, and a dedicated disability football division. No single model fits all MA. The transferability lies not in copying structures directly, but in understanding what problem each model solves and what conditions it requires. For example, a dedicated department can create coherence and legitimacy but requires sufficient resources; mainstreaming can build shared

responsibility, but risks dilution without clear leadership; partnership models can accelerate expertise but require governance clarity.

The cases reveal the importance of cultural framing

The survey captured structures and outputs, but the cases show that language, dignity and public meaning matter. Some MA deliberately avoid the phrase "disability football" and use "football for all abilities" to reduce deficit framing. Others prioritise children's rights, unified football, adult lifelong participation, or standards and competitiveness. These framings shape how clubs, families and players understand the offer. They also shape whether disability football is seen as charity, inclusion, performance, community development or ordinary football. Future guidance should therefore support MA to select language and narratives that fit their context while protecting dignity, agency and player-first principles.

Implications for UEFA

The case studies suggest that UEFA's added value lies in supporting differentiated system development rather than prescribing one universal model. Priority areas include helping MA clarify governance and partnership roles; supporting ethical data systems; developing flexible competition models suited to geography and impairment groups; strengthening coach developer, referee and club leadership capacity; sharing templates for club-start guidance and workforce development; and offering targeted support that recognises system maturity. The survey shows where the gaps are; the case studies show why they exist and how they might be addressed. Taken together, the evidence suggests that UEFA support should be both strategic and practical: strategic enough to help MA build governance and sustainability, and practical enough to help clubs and other organisations create safe, meaningful and repeatable opportunities for PWD.

Taken together, the seven case studies show that disability football development across UEFA MA is not a linear journey from "low" to "high" provision. Rather, MA are developing through different governance logics, each with specific strengths, risks and transferable lessons. Table 4 overleaf is designed to cap off the case-study section by showing what each individual case study reveals beyond the survey data: not just whether provision exists, but how different systems organise responsibility, translate strategy into delivery, use partnerships, develop the workforce, manage data, and define future priorities.

Case	Dominant Development Model	Case Singularity	Distinctive Enablers	Specific Barriers/Risks
MA #1	Mainstreaming model with targeted disability leadership	Shows how disability football can be embedded within wider grassroots, EDI and club-development structures rather than treated as a separate programme. The case highlights that mainstreaming can work, but only when there are clear specialist leadership, practical club support and ongoing CPD.	Internal alignment across grassroots and participation structures; strong public-sector and third-sector ecology; flexible grant funding; use of coach developers and communities of practice; emerging place-based approach.	Limited specialist staffing; gaps in youth and transition-stage provision; volunteer capacity pressures; uneven impairment-specific infrastructure; difficulty tracking disabled players in mainstream football.
MA #2	Youth-first, partnership-led grassroots model	Demonstrates that a strong flagship programme can create momentum even when the MA does not yet have full ownership of all disability football. The case shows how targeted work with children and young people can expand participation, especially for hidden disabilities and neurodivergent players.	Strong partnership with national parasport structures; practical inclusion tools; regional delivery support; school links; clear programme identity; club start-up support.	Reliance on external partner structures; limited internal staffing; underdeveloped youth-to-adult pathways; insufficient regular competition opportunities; risk that disability football remains concentrated in a small number of internal partners.
MA #3	Decentralised system model with strong national coordination	Shows how large-scale disability football can be delivered through regional football structures when there is national alignment, dedicated regional responsibility and formal coach education. The case also shows that scale does not remove data or governance complexity.	Large club network; regional disability coordinators; structured education linked to licensing; blended learning; visible national events; strong emphasis on unified football; tandem coaching approaches for coaches with disabilities.	Federal complexity; fragmented governance across disability sport bodies; limited visibility of disabled players integrated in mainstream settings; separate governance for some impairment groups; legal and ethical constraints around disability data.
MA #4	Community-driven, relationship-led consolidation model	Shows that rapid growth creates a second-stage challenge: governance, quality assurance and regional equity must catch up with participation demand. The case also highlights the importance of trust-based club development in socially complex contexts.	Strong local relationships; education partnerships producing coaches and referees; school-to-club potential; lived-experience leadership; flexible grassroots culture; developing accreditation approach.	Travel burden; concentration of provision in certain areas; small staff team; limited impairment-specific pathways; need to strengthen club governance without alienating volunteers.

Case	Dominant Development Model	Case Singularity	Distinctive Enablers	Specific Barriers/Risks
MA #5	System-transition model from parasport to football governance	Illustrates the complexity of transferring responsibility from multisport disability organisations to MA. The case shows that integration must be gradual, partnership-based and respectful of existing parasport expertise.	Strong national inclusion culture; established parasport expertise; regional disability officers; digital coach education; public funding routes; high club affiliation within football structures.	Legal restrictions on disability data; limited competition structures; long travel distances; low visibility of disability-specific pathways because many disabled people are already included in mainstream education and sport; uneven regional capacity.
MA #8	Standards-driven, dignity-led integration model	Shows that disability football can be positioned as high-quality, athlete-centred football rather than charity or welfare activity. The case adds important insight into cultural change in contexts where disability stigma remains a major external barrier.	Strong central leadership; football for all abilities framing; stable specialist partnerships; integration into club and national-team structures; use of former players as mentors; commitment to quality and international standards.	Social stigma; limited disability inclusion in education; small specialist coaching workforce; limited public support; reliance on MA and project funding; difficulty identifying players in some impairment groups.
MA #13	Institutionally embedded disability-specific department model	Demonstrates the value of giving disability football a formal place inside the MA's core structure. The case shows that a dedicated department can generate legitimacy, scale, competition infrastructure and accountability, but still requires sustainable resourcing.	Dedicated national department; strong regional delegate network; medical and classification governance; direct competition management; large-scale organised activity; specialist coach and management education; senior leadership buy-in.	Funding pressure; workforce capacity stretched by scale; risk of start-up mentality persisting as the system matures; ongoing cultural normalisation required; need to sustain quality while expanding.

Table 4. Case study summary table.

6. Comparative Composite Analysis

The survey findings and case-study evidence demonstrate that disability football provision across UEFA MA cannot be understood through a simple binary distinction between “developed” and “underdeveloped” systems. Instead, the evidence points towards the existence of multiple models of disability football development and delivery. While all 20 MA in the study demonstrate at least some degree of strategic recognition of disability football, the ways in which this recognition is translated into operational practice vary considerably.

Importantly, these differences do not appear to be random. Rather, the evidence suggests that disability football systems are strongly influenced by broader national contexts, including population size, welfare traditions, football-system maturity, governance structures, geography, and the wider ecology of disability sport within each country. Consequently, comparisons between MA require careful contextual interpretation. Systems facing fundamentally different structural realities may legitimately adopt different delivery models, partnership arrangements, and pathway structures.

The seven in-depth case studies reinforce this interpretation strongly. Across the cases, no single model emerged as universally superior. Instead, effectiveness appeared to depend more on clarity, capacity, coherence, and alignment between ambition and available resources than on any specific organisational structure. The comparative evidence therefore suggests that disability football development across Europe is best understood as a series of context-sensitive ecosystem models rather than a single developmental pathway.

Population Size, System Scale, and Ecosystem Viability

One of the clearest comparative patterns emerging from the data relates to population size and ecosystem scale. Smaller and microstate systems face fundamentally different developmental conditions from larger football nations. Countries such as MA #6, MA #10, and MA #17 operate within extremely limited participation pools, which directly affects their ability to sustain impairment-specific leagues, regular competitions, specialised coaching pathways, or large disability football workforces.

The survey data strongly suggest that in these contexts the primary challenge is often viability rather than refinement. Several smaller systems reported difficulties assembling enough players for teams, sustaining regular competitions, or creating geographically viable league structures. This reinforces the notion that participation density itself becomes a key structural determinant of what forms of provision are realistically achievable.

By contrast, larger systems such as MA #3, MA #11, MA #13 and MA #14 appear more capable of sustaining differentiated pathways, broader club infrastructures, and multiple competition formats. Larger population bases create greater opportunities for impairment-specific leagues, regional structures, specialist coaching expertise, and more stable participant pipelines.

However, the case studies also show that larger systems do not necessarily face fewer challenges. Rather, their challenge profiles differ. In more mature and larger ecosystems, issues

increasingly concern coordination, quality assurance, regional consistency, sustainability, and integration across multiple stakeholders and delivery partners. The MA #3 and MA #13 case studies illustrate this particularly clearly, where system maturity has shifted the focus from recognition towards sustainability, governance coordination, and workforce scaling.

This distinction is analytically important because it prevents smaller systems from being interpreted solely through a deficit lens. In many contexts, mixed formats, regional festivals, unified football approaches, and partnership-based provision may represent structurally appropriate solutions rather than incomplete developmental stages.

System Context	MA Codes	Main Structural Implications
Microstate / very small systems	MA #6, MA #10	Viability challenges; limited player pools; reliance on mixed formats and partnerships
Small / dispersed systems	MA #4, MA #15, MA #17, MA #19, MA #20	Travel burden; uneven local access; difficulties sustaining impairment-specific pathways
Medium systems	MA #1, MA #2, MA #7, MA #8, MA #12, MA #16, MA #18	Potential for pathway growth but operational depth still developing
Large / high-capacity systems	MA #3, MA #5, MA #9, MA #11, MA #13, MA #14	Greater capacity for differentiated provision but more complex coordination demands

Table 5. Population Scale and Ecosystem Viability Context

Welfare Traditions and Disability Sport Cultures

The findings also suggest that broader welfare traditions and national approaches to disability significantly shape disability football systems. Although the study did not directly measure welfare-state characteristics, clear regional tendencies emerge when interpreting the survey findings comparatively.

The Nordic MA (MA #2, MA #5, MA #9, MA #17) appear to reflect stronger traditions of inclusion, local participation, and community-based sport delivery. Their responses often emphasise participation access, local club engagement, and integrated provision. The MA #2 and MA #5 case studies particularly highlight values-led approaches focused on inclusion, local flexibility, and participation continuity. At the same time, geography and population dispersion remain major structural barriers in some Nordic contexts, particularly in MA #9 and MA #17, where travel distances and sparse populations complicate regular league structures.

By contrast, countries operating within more corporatist or association-based welfare traditions (MA #3, MA #7, MA #11, MA #12, MA #14) appear more likely to demonstrate structured partnership ecosystems involving football associations, disability sport organisations, clubs, and

specialist agencies. In these contexts, disability football provision often appears embedded within broader institutional frameworks, although this can also create fragmentation where responsibility is distributed across multiple actors.

Moreover, countries positioned within the liberal or hybrid systems category (MA #1 and MA #4) appear to demonstrate strong traditions of partnership working, community engagement, and voluntary-sector involvement in disability football provision. These systems often rely heavily on collaboration between football associations, charities, schools, community organisations, disability groups, and grassroots volunteers. The evidence suggests that this can generate flexibility, innovation, and strong local relationships, particularly where provision is adapted to community needs. However, these systems may also become vulnerable where delivery depends too heavily on a small number of committed individuals, short-term funding, or uneven local capacity. As a result, long-term sustainability may remain fragile without stronger coordination and workforce support structures.

Notably, the Southern European or family-oriented systems grouping (MA #6, MA #13, and MA #20) appears to reflect contexts where disability football provision is shaped more strongly by informal support structures, family networks, and community relationships. In these systems, participation pathways may emerge more through locally embedded social structures and trusted relationships than through large-scale institutional coordination. This can create highly committed and socially cohesive environments but may also lead to uneven provision between regions and clubs. The evidence therefore suggests that these systems often combine strong relational foundations with less consistent structural formalisation, meaning that local culture and interpersonal trust play a particularly important role in shaping disability football experiences.

Finally, several Central and Eastern European post-socialist countries (MA #8, MA #16, MA #18, MA #19) appear to be operating within more transitional or uneven disability sport infrastructures. The MA #8 case study illustrates how disability football may simultaneously function as football development, social education, and cultural change within contexts where disability inclusion historically had lower visibility.

The findings therefore reinforce the importance of understanding disability football not simply as a football issue, but as part of wider national disability ecosystems shaped by welfare policy, institutional history, and cultural attitudes towards disability and inclusion.

Welfare / Disability Tradition	MA Codes	Typical Characteristics
Nordic social-democratic	MA #2, MA #5, MA #9, MA #17	Inclusion-oriented; community participation; strong local delivery ethos
Continental / corporatist	MA #3, MA #7, MA #11, MA #12, MA #14	Structured institutional ecosystems; partnership-heavy governance
Liberal / hybrid UK-type systems	MA #1, MA #4	Reliance on voluntary sector and community partnerships
Southern European / family-oriented	MA #6, MA #13, MA #20	More informal or community-led support structures
Post-socialist transitional systems	MA #8, MA #16, MA #18, MA #19	Developing infrastructures; uneven regional provision

Table 6. Welfare and Disability-Sport Contexts

Inclusion Philosophies and Approaches to Disability Football

The data also suggest important differences in how MA conceptualise inclusion itself. Some systems appear to prioritise mainstreaming and integrated participation, while others maintain more specialist impairment-specific structures. The clearest examples of mainstream inclusion-oriented approaches emerge in MA #1, MA #2, and MA #5, where disability football appears increasingly embedded within broader grassroots, community, and club-development structures. In these systems, the emphasis is often placed on local accessibility, integrated participation opportunities, and the normalisation of disability football within mainstream football environments.

By contrast, MA #3 and MA #13 appear to demonstrate stronger specialist pathway-oriented models, characterised by more formalised impairment-specific structures, competitions, and governance arrangements. These systems often provide clearer competitive pathways, stronger specialist expertise, and greater institutional visibility for disability football. However, they may also face greater complexity in coordinating multiple impairment-specific structures and maintaining pathway sustainability at scale.

The MA #8 case study's "Football for all abilities" framing is particularly important because it positions disability football around dignity, standards, and belonging rather than deficit or charity narratives. Meanwhile, MA #7, MA #11, and MA #14 appear to operate more clearly as hybrid systems, combining integrated participation opportunities with specialist structures simultaneously. In these contexts, systems appear to be actively balancing broad inclusion objectives with the need to maintain specialist expertise and meaningful competitive opportunities.

Elsewhere, MA #4, MA #6, MA #10, and MA #17 appear to prioritise more flexible participation-first approaches, often shaped by geographical realities, smaller participation pools, or local accessibility considerations. In these systems, flexibility, adaptability, and sustaining regular opportunities may take precedence over maintaining highly formalised pathway structures.

Neither approach appears inherently superior. Rather, the comparative evidence suggests that MA are continually negotiating tensions between flexibility and standardisation, participation and performance, local adaptation and national consistency, and broad inclusion and impairment-specific expertise. This reinforces the idea that inclusion should not be understood as a simple binary between "mainstream" and "specialist" approaches, but rather as a continuum of context-sensitive models shaped by differing structural and cultural conditions across Europe.

Inclusion Philosophy	MA codes	Characteristics
Mainstream inclusion-oriented	MA #1, MA #2, MA #5	Integrated participation and club mainstreaming
Specialist pathway-oriented	MA #3, MA #13	Formal impairment-specific structures and competitions
Hybrid inclusion models	MA #7, MA #11, MA #14	Combination of integrated and specialist approaches
Dignity- and standards-led approaches	MA #8	Inclusion framed around quality and legitimacy
Flexible participation-first systems	MA #4, MA #6, MA #10, MA #17	Accessibility prioritised over formal pathways

Table 7. Inclusion and Participation Philosophies

Football-System Maturity and Organisational Capacity

A further important contextual factor concerns the maturity and scale of the football system itself. Countries with highly mature and developed football infrastructures (MA #3, MA #11, MA #13, MA #14) often demonstrate stronger organisational capacity to support disability football. This includes larger staffing structures, more sophisticated coach education systems, stronger grassroots networks, and greater ability to integrate disability provision within existing football structures. For example, several of the stronger-performing systems in the dataset combine relatively mature football ecosystems with clearer governance structures, broader competition formats, and more visible disability football pathways. In these countries, disability football appears less dependent on isolated projects and more embedded within mainstream football development strategies.

The "high-functioning developmental systems" grouping (MA #2, MA #5, MA #7, MA #9, and MA #12) appears to occupy an important middle ground between emerging systems and the most institutionally mature disability football ecosystems. These MA generally demonstrate relatively strong organisational cultures, growing governance coherence, and increasing integration of

disability football within broader football-development structures. Compared with smaller or more viability-constrained systems, they often possess stronger local club networks, more established coach education systems, and greater capacity to sustain regular participation opportunities. However, the evidence suggests that these systems are still consolidating operational depth and long-term pathway continuity. Across several of these MA, the main developmental challenge appears less about strategic recognition and more about scaling provision consistently across regions, strengthening workforce capacity, improving data systems, and embedding disability football more systematically within mainstream football structures. As a result, these systems often demonstrate significant developmental momentum while still navigating important tensions between expansion, coordination, and sustainability.

The "small/emerging football systems" grouping (MA #6, MA #10, MA #15, MA #17, MA #19, and MA #20) appears to be shaped primarily by viability and sustainability challenges rather than by lack of strategic intent. These systems often operate within smaller participation pools, limited staffing structures, and more fragile local delivery ecosystems, making it difficult to sustain regular competitions, specialist pathways, or broad regional coverage. As a result, provision in these contexts frequently relies on flexible formats, mixed participation models, strong local relationships, and partnership-based delivery. The evidence suggests that the main challenge for these MA concerns building sustainable participation continuity and critical mass.

However, the relationship between football maturity and disability football maturity is not entirely linear. The MA #1 and MA #4 case studies show that medium football systems can still demonstrate strong innovation, relational governance, and high levels of strategic coherence despite relatively limited scale and staffing. Similarly, some large systems continue to report substantial challenges around data integration, local club readiness, coach education consistency, and coordination across multiple governance layers. This suggests that leadership, strategic prioritisation, and partnership quality may sometimes compensate for smaller system size.

Importantly, the findings indicate that football maturity influences not only resources, but also organisational confidence and legitimacy. Associations with stronger football infrastructures often appear better positioned to coordinate external stakeholders, influence local clubs, and sustain longer-term strategic initiatives.

Football-System Maturity	MA Codes	Oganisational Characteristics
Highly mature football systems	MA #3, MA #11, MA #13, MA #14	Larger infrastructures; stronger pathway potential; higher coordination complexity
High-functioning developmental systems	MA #2, MA #5, MA #7, MA #9, MA #12	Strong organisational cultures; growing integration capacity
Medium-capacity systems	MA #1, MA #4, MA #8, MA #16, MA #18	Developing operational depth; reliance on partnerships
Small / emerging football systems	MA #6, MA #10, MA #15, MA #17, MA #19, MA #20	Viability and local sustainability challenges dominate

Table 8. Football-System Maturity and Disability Football Capacity

Governance Structures and Partnership Models

The comparative findings also highlight important variation in governance arrangements. Disability football across UEFA MA rarely operates as a fully vertically integrated system controlled solely by the national association. Instead, many systems are characterised by distributed or networked governance involving disability sport organisations, Special Olympics programmes, Paralympic structures, charities, educational institutions, and community organisations.

The case studies deepen this significantly. The MA #2 and MA #5 cases show relatively mature partnership-led systems where football associations and parasport organisations share responsibility and expertise. By contrast, the MA #13 case demonstrates a highly institutionalised model in which disability football sits within a dedicated division of the federation itself.

The data suggest that partnership-led systems can produce both strengths and vulnerabilities. On one hand, partnerships can extend reach, improve credibility, provide specialist expertise, and facilitate participant recruitment. On the other hand, they may also create fragmentation, unclear accountability, inconsistent data sharing, and reduced MA control over pathways and competitions.

The evidence also seems to indicate that governance clarity matters more than governance form. Systems with very different structures may still function effectively if roles, responsibilities, and progression pathways are understood by stakeholders. Conversely, systems with apparently sophisticated structures may struggle operationally if ownership and accountability are fragmented. In line with previous sections, this finding suggests that future support should focus less on promoting a single governance model and more on strengthening governance coherence, partnership quality, and strategic alignment within different national contexts.

Governance Archetype	Characteristics	MA codes
Integrated mainstreaming systems	Disability football embedded within wider grassroots and inclusion structures	MA #1, MA #3, MA #11
Partnership-led ecosystems	Shared delivery with disability sport organisations and external agencies	MA #2, MA #5, MA #14
Specialist institutional systems	Dedicated disability football structures within the federation	MA #13
Community-driven / relationship-led systems	Local trust networks and grassroots leadership dominate	MA #4, MA #8
Hybrid / emergent systems	Mixed structures with evolving governance responsibilities	MA #7, MA #12, MA #16, MA #18
Viability-oriented systems	Flexible provision shaped primarily by scale and geography	MA #6, MA #10, MA #17, MA #19, MA #20

Table 9. Governance and Delivery Archetypes

Geography, Population Density and Accessibility

Geography emerges as one of the most underappreciated determinants of disability football development across Europe. Several MA explicitly identified travel distances, regional dispersion, and low population density as major barriers to sustainable participation. The MA #4 case study illustrates particularly clearly how national provision may still be inaccessible if families must travel long distances to participate regularly. Similarly, MA #9, MA #5, and MA #17 face substantial logistical challenges related to dispersed populations and long travel times, while smaller systems such as MA #6 and MA #10 experience additional viability pressures linked to limited player pools and reduced regional density.

The findings suggest that geography shapes not only participation and competition structures, but also coach education accessibility, volunteer recruitment, family participation burden, and overall system sustainability. This reinforces the need for differentiated delivery models. For example, geographically dispersed systems such as MA #9 and MA #17 may require regional hubs, travelling festivals, or hybrid competition structures, whereas compact and densely populated systems such as MA #2 and MA #11 appear better positioned to sustain regular local leagues and centralised provision. Importantly, the evidence suggests that geography interacts with other structural conditions rather than operating independently. Sparse populations become particularly problematic when combined with small football ecosystems, limited staffing, or fragile volunteer infrastructures, as appears evident in MA #6 and MA #10. Conversely, geographically dispersed systems may still function effectively where strong regional coordination structures and local delivery networks exist, as demonstrated in parts of MA #5 and MA #9.

Geography & Population Profile	MA Codes	Main Implications
Sparse / dispersed populations	MA #5, MA #9, MA #17, MA #15, MA #19	Travel burden; regional access difficulties
Dense / compact systems	MA #2, MA #11, MA #7	Greater potential for regular local provision
Mixed urban-rural systems	MA #1, MA #3, MA #4, MA #8, MA #12, MA #13, MA #14, MA #16, MA #18, MA #20	Regional disparities and coordination demands
Micro-territorial systems	MA #6, MA #10	Small player pools but easier national coordination

Table 10. Geography, Population and Accessibility Profiles

Competition, Pathways, and Participation Continuity

Competition emerges as one of the strongest cross-cutting themes across both the survey and case-study evidence. Almost all systems report tensions around balancing inclusion with competitive integrity, adapting adult-oriented competition models for children and young people, and sustaining meaningful pathways over time. However, the nature of these tensions appears to differ considerably across MA.

More structured systems such as MA #3, MA #11, and MA #13 often prioritise legitimacy, visibility, and formal recognition through national leagues, impairment-specific competitions, and clearer performance pathways. In these contexts, competition appears closely linked to institutional legitimacy and long-term pathway development. However, these systems also face greater pressures around sustainability, regional consistency, workforce capacity, and maintaining sufficient player depth across multiple competition formats.

By contrast, more flexible or participation-oriented systems such as MA #4, MA #6, MA #10, and MA #17 appear to prioritise accessibility, player experience, retention, and local participation continuity over highly formalised competition structures. In these contexts, festivals, mixed formats, and flexible participation opportunities may represent more viable and developmentally appropriate solutions than fully structured league systems.

Meanwhile, MA #1, MA #2, MA #5, and MA #7 appear to be navigating hybrid approaches that attempt to balance inclusive participation with progressively structured developmental pathways. The evidence suggests that these systems are increasingly moving away from purely event-based provision towards more continuous participation models, while still trying to preserve flexibility and accessibility for players and families.

Overall, the findings suggest that competition is not merely an output of disability football systems, but a mechanism that shapes the wider culture and sustainability of provision.

Competition design influences player motivation, parental confidence, coach behaviour, and the extent to which disability football is perceived as legitimate within wider football structures. At the same time, the transition towards more continuous and developmental pathways remains uneven and heavily constrained in many MA by staffing limitations, player density, transport logistics, and varying levels of club readiness.

Competition & Pathway Profile	MA Codes	Characteristics
Hybrid developmental systems	MA #1, MA #2, MA #5, MA #7	Combination of inclusive participation opportunities with progressively structured pathways and competitions
Flexible participation-oriented systems	MA #4, MA #6, MA #10, MA #17	Festivals, mixed formats, local participation continuity, accessibility prioritised over formal competition structures
Emerging / transitional competition systems	MA #8, MA #12, MA #14, MA #15, MA #16, MA #18, MA #19, MA #20	Developing pathway structures but limited by staffing, player density, geography, or club readiness
Regionally complex systems	MA #3, MA #9, MA #13, MA #14	Large or mixed systems balancing national coordination with regional disparities and uneven local provision

Table 11. Competition and Pathway Profiles

Workforce Capacity and System Sustainability

Workforce capacity emerges as one of the most consistent constraints across the entire dataset. Regardless of system size or governance model, almost all MA identify staffing, volunteer recruitment, coach development, or local delivery capacity as major challenges. However, the nature of these workforce pressures varies considerably across systems.

Larger and more mature systems such as MA #3, MA #11, MA #13, and MA #14 often rely on relatively small central disability football teams supported by wider regional or club-based delivery networks. In these contexts, the primary challenge appears less about initial workforce creation and more about scaling provision sustainably, maintaining quality assurance, and coordinating increasingly complex delivery ecosystems.

By contrast, smaller or more viability-constrained systems such as MA #6, MA #10, MA #17, and MA #19 appear to depend heavily on a limited number of committed individuals, local champions, or volunteer-led initiatives. This creates significant sustainability risks where participation opportunities may become highly vulnerable to staff turnover, volunteer fatigue, or local organisational instability.

Meanwhile, several developmental or hybrid systems, including MA #1, MA #2, MA #5, MA #7, and MA #12, appear to be experiencing growing tension between increasing participation demand and limited workforce expansion. In these systems, participation growth may be outpacing the

development of coaches, volunteers, referees, and local coordinators, creating pressures around delivery consistency, pathway continuity, and workforce sustainability over time.

The findings therefore suggest that workforce development should be understood as an ecosystem challenge rather than simply a coach education issue. Sustainable disability football systems require not only coaches, but also volunteers, referees, regional coordinators, coach developers, safeguarding expertise, and individuals capable of building relationships with schools, clubs, municipalities, and disability organisations. Overall, the evidence points towards the need for more strategic approaches to workforce sustainability, including mentoring structures, communities of practice, volunteer support systems, and stronger integration between coach education and real-world delivery environments.

Workforce Profile	MA Codes	Characteristics
Scaled but capacity-pressured systems	MA #3, MA #11, MA #13, MA #14	Larger delivery ecosystems with growing coordination and quality-assurance pressures
Developmental growth systems	MA #1, MA #2, MA #5, MA #7, MA #12	Participation growth beginning to outpace workforce expansion and operational depth
Volunteer- and champion-dependent systems	MA #4, MA #6, MA #10, MA #17, MA #19	Heavy reliance on a small number of committed individuals or local leaders
Emerging workforce systems	MA #8, MA #15, MA #16, MA #18, MA #20	Workforce structures still developing alongside broader disability football infrastructure
Regionally networked systems	MA #3, MA #5, MA #9, MA #11, MA #14	Delivery dependent on coordination between national and regional structures

Table 12. Workforce Capacity and Sustainability Profiles

Comparative Analysis Implications

Taken together, the survey and case-study evidence suggest the emergence of several broad "disability football ecosystem archetypes" across UEFA MA. Importantly, these archetypes should not be understood as rigid categories, developmental stages, or rankings of system quality. Rather, they represent different ecosystem logics shaped by the interaction between structural conditions, welfare traditions, football-system maturity, geography, participation density, governance arrangements, workforce capacity, and broader cultural approaches to disability and inclusion.

The evidence suggests that disability football systems across Europe are often attempting to solve fundamentally different developmental challenges. For some MA, the primary challenge concerns embedding disability football within already mature and inclusive football ecosystems. For others, the key issue relates to sustaining viable participation opportunities across geographically dispersed populations, coordinating complex partnership networks, building

foundational infrastructure, or achieving sufficient critical mass within very small participation systems. Consequently, similar forms of provision may serve very different functions depending on the wider national context in which they operate.

The archetypes presented in table 13 below therefore aim to provide a more explanatory and context-sensitive framework for understanding variation across UEFA Member Associations. Many MA demonstrate characteristics associated with multiple archetypes simultaneously, reflecting the hybridity and evolving nature of disability football systems across Europe. The value of the framework lies not in categorising systems rigidly, but in helping explain why different MA prioritise different forms of governance, competition, participation, workforce development, and inclusion according to their particular structural realities and developmental needs.

Ecosystem Archetype	Structural Conditions	Typical Characteristics	Main Developmental Logic	Illustrative MA Codes
Embedded Welfare-Inclusion Ecosystems	Strong welfare traditions; high social trust; dense local sport infrastructures	Disability football integrated into mainstream participation and community club systems	Expanding inclusive participation through local football ecosystems	MA #2, MA #5
Large Multi-Layered Football Ecosystems	Large football infrastructures; strong institutional capacity; complex regional systems	Multiple pathways, specialist structures, larger competition ecosystems	Managing scale, coordination, and sustainability	MA #3, MA #11, MA #13, MA #14
Partnership-Dependent Developmental Ecosystems	Moderate institutional capacity; strong reliance on external organisations and voluntary sector	Shared delivery between football associations and disability/community actors	Building coherence through partnerships and gradual integration	MA #1, MA #4, MA #7
Transitional / Emerging Inclusion Ecosystems	Developing disability sport infrastructures; uneven regional provision; changing cultural attitudes	Strong strategic intent but developing operational depth	Building foundational infrastructure and participation cultures	MA #8, MA #16, MA #18
Geography-Constrained Participation Ecosystems	Sparse populations; regional dispersion; transport barriers	Flexible and decentralised participation formats; regional access challenges	Sustaining viable participation opportunities across dispersed territories	MA #9, MA #17, MA #19
Microstate Viability Ecosystems	Extremely small participation pools and limited system scale	Reliance on flexibility, mixed formats, and strong interpersonal networks	Achieving critical mass and sustaining continuity	MA #6, MA #10
Relational Community-Centred Ecosystems	Strong local identity and informal support cultures; less formalised structures	Provision shaped heavily by relationships, local leaders, and family/community networks	Sustaining trust-based local participation environments	MA #20 and aspects of MA #4, MA #8

Table 13. Emerging Disability Football Ecosystem Archetypes Across UEFA MA

7. Confirmation, Refinement and Extension of Hypotheses

The combined evidence from the 20 MA survey responses and the seven follow-up case studies broadly confirms the original hypotheses that guided the study, while also refining them in important ways. The survey provided the clearest basis for testing the presence, scale, distribution, governance, organisation and workforce of disability football provision across the sample. The case studies added explanatory depth by showing how national context, culture, governance paradigm, partnership design, geography, staffing, local club ecology and wider disability sport systems shape whether strategic commitment becomes sustained practice.

Hypothesis Assessment

Table 14 below provides a hypothesis-by-hypothesis evidence-based analysis to confirm, refine and/or expand each of them.

Original Hypothesis	Judgement	Integrated Survey and Case-Study Interpretation
H1 Presence and variability of provision	Strongly supported	All 20 MA reported some responsibility for disability football, but provision ranged from structured pathways to small-scale, event-based or partner-led activity. The case studies confirmed that similar survey indicators can hide very different implementation realities.
H2 Governance and organisational structure	Supported and refined	The issue is less whether a structure exists than whether it has operational depth. Nine MA reported a dedicated working group or committee, 13 reported disability-specific KPIs, but staffing remained thin: seven reported one staff member, eight reported teams of 2-5, three reported none, and only two reported 6+. Case studies showed that leadership commitment matters, but delivery depends on cross-departmental ownership and local translation.
H3 Nature of provision and resource allocation	Broadly supported	Provision often clusters around broad or mixed disability categories, with Special Olympics/intellectual or developmental disability football most visible. The case studies showed why: small player pools, classification complexity, travel, limited specialist expertise and funding pressures often make fully differentiated pathways difficult, especially in smaller or geographically dispersed contexts.
H4 External partnerships and ecosystem development	Strongly supported	Fifteen MA reported formal disability-specific partnerships and 19 reported regular or occasional collaboration with external disability organisations or experts. Case studies refined this finding: partnerships are strongest when they combine expertise, access to participants, shared ownership, data flows and strategic alignment; they are weaker when they create dependency, fragmented accountability or limited MA control.

H5 Coach education and development structures	Supported	Twelve MA reported some disability-football-specific coach education, but only four reported disability football content across all coaching courses and only seven reported disability training for coach developers. Case studies showed that coach education is not simply a course-content issue; it depends on coach developer confidence, club mentoring, practical placement contexts and a workforce able to support inclusive delivery locally.
H6 Accessibility of coaching pathways for PWD	Partially supported	Nine MA reported specific opportunities for PWD to become coaches, seven reported none and four were unclear. The case studies indicated that many systems are open in principle but rely on ad hoc adjustments, case-by-case support or individual goodwill. Systematic inclusive design across recruitment, assessment, mentoring and progression remains underdeveloped.
H7 Participation structures and access routes	Supported	PWD access football through mainstream clubs with disability sections, disability-specific clubs, partner-led activity, schools, festivals, leagues and mixed formats. Case studies showed that access depends heavily on local club readiness, volunteer capacity, transport, parental/carer confidence, community links and the wider welfare/disability sport ecosystem, not only on national policy.
H8 Competitive opportunities and player pathways	Strongly supported	Sixteen MA reported one-off or occasional disability competitions, but only nine reported regular disability leagues. The case studies confirmed that events can create visibility and recruitment points, but do not necessarily create progression. Sustainable pathways require regular competition, local opponents, affordable travel, appropriate formats and clear links between grassroots, clubs and representative opportunities.
H9 System coherence and alignment	Strongly supported	More developed systems showed greater alignment across governance, provision, partnerships, competition, coach education and strategic intent. However, case studies showed that even stronger systems still face constraints around data, resources, club readiness, workforce and sustainability. Coherence is therefore a continuum, not a simple distinction between developed and undeveloped systems.
H10 System inequality hypothesis	Strongly supported	The findings confirm systemic inequality across responding MA, shaped by resources, staffing, population size, geography, national sport structures, disability sport infrastructure, welfare systems and partner availability. Case studies were especially important in showing that weaker provision is not always a lack of commitment; it may reflect structural conditions requiring differentiated support models.

Table 14. Hypothesis assessment

Overall, the study confirms the broad direction of the original hypotheses while adding important nuance to how disability football systems develop in practice. Across the 20 MA survey responses and seven case studies, the evidence shows that disability football is increasingly recognised and valued, but remains unevenly embedded, resourced, and connected across governance, delivery, partnerships, coach education, competition, and data systems. The hypotheses were therefore not simply confirmed or refuted; they were refined. The central finding is that the future development of disability football across UEFA MA depends less on isolated examples of provision and more on building coherent, sustainable, locally adaptable ecosystems that enable PWD to access, enjoy, progress in, and contribute to football in meaningful ways.

8. Research Impact

This research makes a significant contribution to both the academic understanding and practical development of disability football by moving the field beyond fragmented, context-specific insights toward a system-level, comparative European perspective. In doing so, it advances current theory, expands the state of knowledge, and provides actionable guidance for policy and practice. Importantly, the combination of survey data from 20 UEFA Member Associations and the deeper case-study evidence allows the report to move beyond describing whether disability football provision exists, toward understanding how it is organised, why it varies, and what conditions appear to support more sustainable development.

Advancing Theory and Conceptual Understanding

At a theoretical level, the findings reinforce and extend the social relational model of disability, which conceptualises disability not as an inherent individual deficit but as the outcome of interactions between individuals and disabling social, organisational, and environmental conditions (Kitchin et al., 2021; Thomas, 2004). The evidence from this study demonstrates that barriers to participation in disability football are systemic and multi-layered, spanning governance structures, social welfare policies, general attitudes to inclusion, workforce capacity, competition formats, club cultures, physical accessibility, partnership arrangements, geography, and data infrastructures. This aligns with broader ecological perspectives on sport development, which emphasise the dynamic interplay between individual, organisational, community, and policy-level factors (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Sotiriadou et al., 2008).

Building on this, the study introduces a novel conceptual distinction between “strategic recognition” and “operational depth”. While many MA have adopted policies, strategies, designated roles, partnerships, or budget lines for disability football, these are not consistently translated into sustained, system-wide delivery. This distinction advances existing sport development literature by highlighting that policy presence is a necessary but insufficient condition for effective implementation, echoing insights from institutional theory regarding the gap between formal structures and enacted practice (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Skille, 2010). The case studies strengthen this point by showing that progress depends not simply on having a strategy, but on whether that strategy is supported by leadership, staff capacity, local delivery mechanisms, credible partnerships, and practical tools for clubs and coaches.

The findings also contribute to emerging discussions around hybrid and networked governance in sport systems. Disability football provision across UEFA MA is rarely delivered by a single actor; instead, it is characterised by distributed responsibility across football associations, disability sport organisations, NGOs, clubs, municipalities, schools, community organisations, parents, volunteers, and impairment-specific bodies. This reflects broader shifts toward network governance models in sport policy, where inter-organisational collaboration is essential but also introduces challenges related to coordination, accountability, identity, ownership, and data sharing (Misener & Doherty, 2013; Dowling et al., 2018). The study therefore provides empirical grounding for understanding disability football as a multi-actor networked ecosystem, rather than a vertically integrated system.

The case-study evidence adds an important refinement to this argument. Partnerships appear most effective when they are not merely transactional or symbolic, but when they combine football expertise, disability expertise, shared objectives, trusted relationships, and clear operational responsibilities. In stronger examples, partners do not replace the role of the MA; rather, they help the MA build reach, credibility, knowledge, and delivery capacity. Conversely, where external partners hold most of the operational expertise, competition structures, or participant data, MA may remain dependent on partners without developing sufficient internal capacity or strategic oversight.

Finally, the research extends knowledge on coach development and inclusive practice, highlighting the continued marginalisation of disability content within mainstream coach education pathways. This supports existing literature suggesting that inclusive coaching requires both structural integration and a shift in coach beliefs, knowledge, confidence, and practical competence (Townsend et al., 2017; Cregan et al., 2007). The findings suggest that inclusion remains more aspirational than embedded in many systems. Coach education is often available as separate disability-specific provision, but much less frequently integrated across the whole coaching pathway or supported by systematically prepared coach developers. This reinforces the need for systemic rather than additive approaches to coach education.

Advancing the State of Knowledge

Empirically, this study addresses a significant knowledge gap by providing comparative, cross-national evidence across a large and diverse sample of European football systems. Previous research has been geographically concentrated and often limited to single-country case studies (Kitchin et al., 2024). By mapping governance, provision, partnerships, coaching structures, data systems, and barriers across 20 MA, and then supplementing this with case-study evidence, this study offers a more representative and nuanced understanding of how disability football is structured and delivered across Europe.

A key contribution is the identification of data systems as a systemic constraint. While previous literature has noted challenges in measuring disability sport participation, this study demonstrates that data limitations are deeply embedded in legal frameworks, organisational arrangements, registration systems, partnership models, and conceptual ambiguities around disability categories. In some contexts, data protection legislation limits what can be collected; in others, provision is delivered by external bodies that hold the relevant information; elsewhere, disability football is integrated into mainstream registration systems without disability-specific identifiers. This aligns with broader critiques of sport policy evaluation, which highlight the difficulty of generating reliable and comparable data in complex, multi-level systems (Nichols et al., 2010).

The research also advances understanding of contextual variation in sport systems, showing that factors such as cultural traditions, welfare systems, population size, geography, transport infrastructure, club structures, and institutional arrangements significantly shape what is desirable and feasible in disability football provision. This reinforces calls for more context-sensitive approaches to sport development, rather than the transfer of uniform models across diverse settings (Houlihan & Green, 2008). Smaller or sparsely populated MA, for example, may

require mixed formats, regional hubs, travelling festivals, or cross-border collaboration, while larger or more mature systems may focus more on pathway depth, quality assurance, specialist provision, workforce development, and data integration.

The study also adds to the state of knowledge by identifying several broad disability football ecosystem archetypes. These should not be understood as fixed rankings, but as heuristic ways of interpreting system development. Some MA appear to have higher-structure and higher-delivery systems, with clearer governance, established partnerships, competition structures, and greater participation scale. Others are structured but still building pathways, with formal commitment and emerging architecture but gaps in continuity, data, club readiness, or direct MA control. A further group can be described as emergent or constraint-heavy, where provision is shaped by small populations, limited resources, geography, volunteer dependence, low visibility, or project-based delivery. The case studies show that these archetypes are not simply about organisational maturity; they are also shaped by national context, leadership choices, the strength of local club networks, the role of disability organisations, and wider cultural attitudes toward inclusion.

Challenging Assumptions in Disability Football Provision

A further contribution of this research is that it challenges several assumptions often made about disability sport provision, governance, and development. Rather than identifying a single "best practice" model that can be transferred across all UEFA MA, the evidence suggests that disability football systems are shaped by a complex interaction of governance arrangements, legal frameworks, cultural attitudes, geography, population size, welfare systems, club structures, workforce capacity, and partnership arrangements. As such, the findings point less toward universal replication and more toward context-sensitive system design.

Assumption 1: A universal best practice model exists

One of the clearest findings is that there is no single model of disability football provision that can be straightforwardly applied across all MA. Some associations operate with relatively mature national structures, larger club footprints, established partnerships, and regular competition pathways. Others work in smaller, more geographically dispersed, or resource-constrained contexts where leagues may be unrealistic and where festivals, regional hubs, mixed formats, or cross-border activity may be more appropriate. This challenges the idea that the most developed systems should simply be copied by others. Instead, the evidence suggests that UEFA and MA should think in terms of best fit rather than best practice. The key question is not "Which model is best?", but "Which model is most viable, equitable, and sustainable in this specific context?"

Assumption 2: Policy presence means system maturity

The survey data show that many MA have policies, strategies, designated roles, budget lines, or formal partnerships linked to disability football. However, the findings also show that these structures do not automatically translate into operational depth. Some MA demonstrate strategic recognition without consistent delivery pathways, reliable data, integrated coach education, or strong club-level implementation. This challenges the assumption that having a strategy is a

reliable indicator of maturity. In practice, disability football development depends on whether policy is translated into staff capacity, delivery mechanisms, competitions, local club support, partnership coordination, and monitoring systems. Strategy is therefore an important starting point, but it is not the same as system-building.

Assumption 3: More provision always means better provision

The evidence also challenges the assumption that higher quantities of activity automatically indicate better disability football provision. More events, competitions, clubs, or participants may suggest greater reach, but they do not necessarily demonstrate quality, accessibility, progression, safeguarding, inclusion, or long-term retention. For example, one-off festivals and tournaments can be powerful tools for visibility, recruitment, and engagement, but if they are not connected to regular participation opportunities, they may not create sustainable pathways. Similarly, a large number of clubs offering some form of disability football does not necessarily mean that players experience meaningful inclusion, appropriate coaching, or progression opportunities. The findings therefore suggest that UEFA and MA should assess both scale and quality, and both visibility and continuity.

Assumption 4: Disability football is mainly a specialist provision issue

The findings challenge the idea that disability football should sit only within specialist disability structures. Specialist knowledge is clearly important, particularly in relation to impairment-specific provision, classification, adapted formats, safeguarding, communication, and player support. However, the evidence also shows that sustainable disability football depends on integration with mainstream football systems, including grassroots development, club support, coach education, competitions, facilities, safeguarding, and workforce development. This means disability football should not be treated only as a separate technical or charitable domain. It should be understood as part of core football development. The issue is not whether provision should be specialist or mainstream, but how specialist expertise can be embedded into mainstream systems without losing the quality, trust, and specificity that disability-focused organisations often provide.

Assumption 5: Partnerships automatically strengthen provision

Partnerships are central to disability football delivery across many MA, but the findings challenge the assumption that partnership presence automatically equals effective collaboration. In some cases, partnerships increase reach, credibility, expertise, and access to communities. In others, they can create dependency, fragmentation, unclear accountability, or limited MA ownership of data and pathway design. The case-study evidence is particularly important here. It suggests that partnerships work best when they are based on shared objectives, clearly defined roles, mutual respect, and long-term coordination. Partnerships are less effective when they operate as outsourcing arrangements or when the MA becomes disconnected from delivery knowledge, participant data, or local relationships. Partnership quality, therefore, matters more than partnership quantity.

Assumption 6: Data weakness is simply a technical problem

The research also challenges the assumption that poor data can be solved only by improving databases or registration systems. Data limitations are partly technical, but they are also legal, ethical, organisational, and conceptual. Some MA face restrictions on collecting disability-related information. Others rely on external partners who hold participation data. In some contexts, players with disabilities participate in mainstream football but are not identifiable within registration systems. In others, there is uncertainty about categories, definitions, or whether players and families feel comfortable disclosing disability status. This means data improvement requires more than a common spreadsheet or digital platform. It requires clear definitions, ethical protocols, legal compliance, trust-building, partner agreements, and clarity about why data is being collected and how it will benefit participants.

Assumption 7: Small systems are simply less developed versions of large systems

The findings suggest that smaller, lower-population, or geographically dispersed MA should not be interpreted simply as underdeveloped versions of larger systems. Their challenges may be structurally different. In some contexts, there may not be enough players within a specific impairment group to sustain regular local leagues. Long travel distances, limited public transport, fewer clubs, smaller coaching workforces, and reliance on volunteers can all shape what is realistically possible. This challenges linear models of development in which all MA are expected to progress toward the same end point. For some MA, the most sustainable model may involve regional clustering, multi-impairment formats, cross-border events, school-based entry points, or periodic but well-connected competition opportunities. Development should therefore be judged against contextual feasibility, not only against the structures found in larger or more mature systems.

Assumption 8: Inclusion can be achieved through access alone

Finally, the findings challenge the assumption that providing access is the same as achieving inclusion. Many MA offer some form of opportunity for players with disabilities, and some provide access for people with disabilities to mainstream coaching qualifications. However, the evidence suggests that access often depends on case-by-case adjustments rather than fully inclusive system design. True inclusion requires more than opening the door. It requires coaches who feel confident and competent, clubs that are prepared and supported, facilities that are accessible, competition formats that are meaningful, data systems that make participation visible, and governance structures that involve people with lived experience. Inclusion should therefore be understood not as an invitation to participate in existing systems, but as the redesign of systems so that participation is possible, meaningful, and sustainable.

Summary Implication

Taken together, these findings challenge simplistic assumptions about disability football development. They show that progress is not linear, that visibility is not the same as sustainability, that strategy is not the same as implementation, and that partnership is not the same as shared governance. The central implication is that promoting a single universal template for disability football provision may be a futile exercise. Instead, customised MA support to develop context-

sensitive, evidence-informed, and ethically grounded systems that combine strategic ambition with operational realism must be provided.

This means moving from a “best practice” mindset to a best-fit ecosystem approach, where the aim is not to make all MA look the same, but to help each association build the most inclusive, coherent, and sustainable disability football system possible within its own context.

9. Limitations & Future Research

Study Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings of this cross-country audit of disability football provision. First, the study relies heavily on self-reported data from MA, which introduces potential issues of response bias and partiality. Respondents may consciously or unconsciously present their provision in a more favourable light, particularly where disability football is politically or strategically sensitive. Moreover, given that different individuals or teams within each MA completed the survey, there is likely variation in interpretation of questions, depth of knowledge, and internal coordination, which affects consistency across responses. This is compounded by the absence of standardised definitions in some areas, for example what constitutes a "programme", "league", "regular provision", "coach education", or "mainstream inclusion", leading to potential comparability issues across countries.

A second set of limitations relates to data access, completeness, and granularity. In several cases, MA were unable to provide quantitative data on participation, coaches, or clubs, often due to limitations in their registration systems, such as the absence of disability tagging, or because responsibility for aspects of disability football sits with external organisations, including Paralympic, disability sport, adapted sport, or impairment-specific federations. This limitation was already evident in the survey findings, where tracking systems were identified as one of the weakest areas of provision, with very few MA able to track disability participation in mainstream football or disability-football registrations with confidence. As a result, the dataset contains missing, uneven, or proxy data, which constrains the robustness of comparative statistical analysis and necessitates cautious interpretation of cross-country differences.

Third, although the inclusion of seven case studies strengthened the depth and explanatory power of the research, the case-study sample should not be interpreted as representative of all UEFA MA. The case studies were designed to illuminate different system types, governance arrangements, resource conditions, and delivery challenges rather than to provide a statistically generalisable account. They add important insight into how disability football operates in practice, particularly in relation to partnerships, workforce capacity, local delivery, competition structures, and lived experience. However, they also reveal further variation that cannot be fully captured in a cross-country audit. In particular, the case studies show that similar survey responses can reflect very different underlying realities depending on national geography, welfare systems, club structures, disability sport traditions, and the maturity of partnerships.

Fourth, many responses were highly variable in detail, with some MA providing rich qualitative insights and others offering minimal or binary answers. This limits the depth of thematic comparison across the whole sample. The case-study data partly addressed this limitation by allowing deeper exploration of selected contexts, but it also highlighted the importance of interpreting survey responses cautiously. For example, the presence of a policy, partnership, competition, or coach education offer does not necessarily indicate the same level of quality, reach, stability, or integration across countries.

Finally, the study captures a snapshot in time within a rapidly evolving policy and practice landscape. Several MA were in the process of developing new strategies, establishing partnerships, piloting competitions, revising coach education, or improving their registration and data systems. As such, ongoing initiatives, pilot programmes, or forthcoming reforms may not yet be fully reflected in the data. The findings should therefore be understood as a current system map and analytical baseline rather than a fixed assessment of national performance.

Future Research

Future research should build on this study by moving from cross-sectional mapping toward more longitudinal, multi-level, and system-sensitive designs that can capture change over time and better explain causal mechanisms. First, there is a clear need for longitudinal tracking studies that follow the development of disability football systems within and across MA, particularly in relation to policy implementation, participation growth, pathway development, workforce capacity, and the sustainability of provision. Such research would help UEFA and MA understand not only whether provision is expanding, but how and why systems mature over time.

Second, future work should prioritise the development of robust and comparable data frameworks, including ethically sound approaches to tracking disability participation in both mainstream and disability-specific contexts. The current study shows that the absence of consistent data systems is not merely a technical problem, but a strategic barrier to benchmarking, planning, accountability, and evaluation. Future research could therefore explore how MA can collect meaningful disability football data while respecting national data protection laws, participant privacy, and the diverse ways in which disability is understood and disclosed across contexts.

Third, more in-depth case study and comparative research is required to unpack how different governance models, partnership configurations, and resource allocations influence outcomes. The additional case-study evidence suggests that partnerships can be a major enabler where roles, trust, data-sharing, and ownership are clear, but can also become a constraint where responsibility is fragmented or where MA lack direct influence over delivery. Future research should therefore examine not only whether partnerships exist, but how they function, how decisions are made, how expertise is shared, and how accountability is distributed across the disability football ecosystem.

Fourth, there is scope for research focusing on club-level ecology and coach behaviour, examining how inclusion is enacted or constrained in everyday practice and how club and coach education interventions translate into behavioural change. The findings suggest that many barriers emerge at the point where national strategies meet local delivery: club readiness, volunteer capacity, facility access, parental trust, impairment-specific expertise, and coach confidence. Future studies should therefore investigate the everyday conditions that enable clubs and coaches to move from willingness to meaningful inclusion.

Fifth, future studies could more explicitly incorporate the voices and lived experiences of people in disability football, including players, coaches, parents, families, volunteers, and disabled leaders within football. While this study included organisational perspectives and case-study

insights, further research should place lived experience more centrally in the design, evaluation, and refinement of disability football provision. This is particularly important for understanding the quality of participation, perceived belonging, accessibility, safeguarding, progression opportunities, and the difference between provision that is available and provision that is genuinely inclusive.

Sixth, further research may also explore how national context shapes what forms of disability football provision are realistic and sustainable. The survey and case-study evidence indicate that geography, population density, transport infrastructure, welfare systems, school and community sport structures, and the wider disability sport landscape all influence delivery. Future work could therefore test differentiated models for different contexts, including regional hubs, mobile delivery models, mixed-ability formats, cross-border collaboration, club accreditation approaches, or impairment-specific national centres of expertise.

Finally, there is a need for more policy-oriented and implementation-focused research, including pilot interventions and evaluation studies, to test scalable models of provision. These could include integrated versus disability-specific pathways, hub-based systems in low-density contexts, disability football modules within mainstream coach education, coach developer training, player transition models, and mechanisms for involving people with disabilities in co-production and governance. Such research would help move the field beyond describing variation toward identifying which models work, for whom, in which contexts, and under what conditions. The overall priority is to generate actionable evidence that supports UEFA and its MA to embed disability football not as a peripheral programme, but as a core component of football development.

10. Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings generate several strategic implications for UEFA and MA:

1. Move from strategy to system-building

UEFA and MA should prioritise the transition from policy frameworks to coherent, aligned systems. This involves ensuring that governance, provision, coaching, competition, partnership, club development, and data infrastructures are mutually reinforcing, rather than operating in isolation. Evidence from sport policy suggests that alignment across system components is critical for effective implementation and sustained impact (Sotiriadou et al., 2008). The findings indicate that many MA now recognise disability football strategically, but the next stage of development requires operational depth. This means translating strategy into clear roles, delivery plans, staff responsibilities, implementation milestones, resourcing models, and accountability mechanisms.

2. Strengthen workforce capacity as a primary lever

Human resources emerge as one of the most consistent constraints across the survey and case-study data. Investment in dedicated staff, cross-functional teams, regional support networks, volunteer development, and workforce planning is essential to operationalise strategy. Research consistently shows that organisational capacity is a key determinant of programme delivery and sustainability (Misener & Doherty, 2009). This should include both specialist disability football roles and distributed responsibility across departments such as grassroots football, coach education, safeguarding, competitions, club development, sustainability, women's football, and participation. Disability football should not sit solely with one committed individual, as this creates vulnerability and limits system-wide integration.

3. Reframe competitions as pathways rather than endpoints

While one-off events are effective for engagement, visibility, awareness, and recruitment, they should be embedded within structured participation pathways that enable progression and retention. This aligns with long-term athlete development principles, which emphasise continuity and progression as critical to sustained participation (Balyi et al., 2013). The findings suggest that many MA have achieved entry points through festivals, tournaments, promotional days, workshops, or partner-led competitions. The next challenge is to connect these opportunities into more regular, meaningful, and locally accessible pathways. These may include leagues, adapted formats, regional competition days, impairment-specific opportunities, mixed-impairment provision, school-club links, and national or international progression routes.

4. Embed inclusion within mainstream coach education

Disability football should be integrated across all coaching pathways, rather than delivered only as a specialist add-on. This includes training coach developers, embedding inclusive pedagogy within curricula, providing practical examples across coaching awards, and ensuring that coaches encounter disability football as part of mainstream football education. Inclusive coaching research highlights that exposure, education, and supported practice are key to building coach confidence and competence (Townsend et al., 2017). At the same time, specialist disability-specific modules remain important where coaches work with particular impairment groups or competition formats. The key implication is not to replace specialist provision, but to combine it with mainstream integration so that inclusion becomes part of normal coaching practice.

5. Strengthen partnership governance and coordination

Given the central role of external organisations, MA should develop clear partnership frameworks, including shared objectives, defined roles, agreed delivery responsibilities, sustainable funding arrangements, and mechanisms for data sharing. Effective collaboration has been shown to enhance resource efficiency and programme reach but requires strong governance to avoid fragmentation (Misener & Doherty, 2013). The case studies show that the quality of partnerships matters as much as their existence. Stronger partnerships are based on trust, shared purpose, complementary expertise, and mutual recognition. UEFA could support MA by developing guidance on partnership models, including how to work effectively with specific types of organisations, impairment-specific bodies, municipalities, schools, clubs, and civil society organisations.

6. Prioritise data systems as a strategic foundation

Improving data collection and tracking is critical. UEFA could support MA in developing common indicators, ethical data collection protocols, and interoperable systems that respect national legal frameworks while improving the visibility of disability football participation. Robust data is essential for monitoring participation, evaluating impact, allocating resources, identifying gaps, and informing policy (Nichols et al., 2010). However, the findings also show that data weakness is not simply a technical problem. It is linked to governance, definitions, legal constraints, registration systems, partnership arrangements, and trust. UEFA's role should therefore include supporting MA to develop practical, proportionate, and ethically sound approaches to data that are sensitive to local legal and cultural contexts.

7. Support differentiated and context-sensitive models

Recognising the diversity of MA contexts, UEFA should promote flexible delivery models, including regional hubs, mixed-impairment formats, cross-border competitions, travelling festivals, club-cluster models, school-community links, and adapted formats for smaller or sparsely populated countries. This aligns with evidence that sport development strategies must be tailored to local conditions (Houlihan & Green, 2008). A

uniform model of disability football development is unlikely to work across UEFA's diverse membership. The findings suggest that MA need different forms of support depending on their ecosystem archetype. Higher-structure systems may need support with quality, scale, specialist pathways, and data integration. Structured but developing systems may need help converting strategy into delivery. Emergent or constraint-heavy systems may need flexible formats, shared resources, cross-border collaboration, and targeted capacity-building.

8. Address club-level culture and readiness

The findings highlight that local club environments are critical to inclusion. UEFA and MA should invest in club education, awareness campaigns, practical toolkits, inclusive club accreditation, mentoring, and local support mechanisms, recognising that cultural change at grassroots level is essential for sustainable inclusion (Spaaij et al., 2015). Club readiness is not only about willingness; it is also about knowledge, confidence, facilities, volunteers, safeguarding, transport, parental trust, and access to appropriate coaching support. National policy will have limited impact unless clubs are helped to understand what inclusion looks like in practice and given the support to implement inclusive environments in realistic, manageable ways.

9. Build disability football through co-production and lived experience

A further implication from the case-study evidence is the importance of involving people with disabilities, families, coaches with disabilities, clubs, and community partners in the design and evaluation of disability football provision. This aligns with co-production approaches in sport, exercise, and health research, which emphasise the value of experiential knowledge, shared decision-making, and involving people with lived experience in shaping provision that affects them (Smith et al., 2023). Co-production can improve relevance, trust, accessibility, and legitimacy, particularly where national associations are still developing disability-specific expertise. This means moving beyond consultation toward more systematic involvement of people with lived experience in advisory groups, coach education design, programme evaluation, club support, and strategic planning. Doing so would also help MA avoid treating disability football as a single homogeneous category and instead respond more effectively to the different needs, preferences, and aspirations of players with intellectual, physical, sensory, and multiple disabilities. This is important because accessibility and inclusion barriers are often context-specific and can vary substantially across different disability groups, settings, facilities, and forms of participation (Rimmer et al., 2017).

10. Position disability football as core football development

Finally, the findings suggest that disability football should be positioned not as a peripheral social responsibility activity, but as part of core football development. This aligns with research on the mainstreaming of disability sport, which emphasises that responsibility for disability sport provision should be integrated into mainstream sport

organisations, while also recognising that such integration requires organisational capacity, clear planning mechanisms, workforce education, appropriate resources, and credible partnership networks (Kitchin et al., 2019; Kitchin & Howe, 2014). This requires stronger alignment with grassroots football, coach education, club development, competitions, safeguarding, participation, women's and girls' football, facilities, and sustainability strategies. Where disability football remains project-based or dependent on isolated champions, sustainability is fragile. Where it is embedded into the wider football system, supported by credible partnerships and adapted to local context, it has greater potential to grow, endure, and become part of the everyday identity of football. The overall recommendation is therefore for UEFA and MA to move from inclusion as aspiration toward inclusion as system design.

Closing Thoughts

This report shows that disability football across UEFA Member Associations has moved beyond simple recognition and aspiration but has not yet become a consistently embedded part of football development systems. Across the survey, case studies, and wider analysis, the central message is clear: most associations now understand disability football as important, and many have policies, partnerships, events, dedicated roles, or emerging strategies in place. However, the depth, maturity, and sustainability of provision remain highly uneven. The challenge for the next phase is therefore not only to increase activity, but to strengthen the systems that make activity continuous, visible, inclusive, and resilient.

A key contribution of the study is that it highlights disability football as an ecosystem issue. Sustainable development depends on more than goodwill, isolated projects, or flagship events. It requires connected progress across governance, funding, workforce development, coach education, club readiness, competitions, data systems, partnerships, and the meaningful involvement of people with disabilities. The evidence suggests that many MA have created important entry points into disability football, particularly through festivals, one-off events, and partner-led initiatives. Yet the transition from entry points to structured pathways remains one of the most important development challenges. This is especially evident in the gap between the relatively common existence of policies and partnerships and the much rarer presence of reliable participation tracking, regular leagues, integrated coach education, and mainstream club-based provision.

The findings also caution against a single model of development. MA operate in very different demographic, geographic, cultural, legal, and organisational contexts. For some, the priority is scaling and quality assurance; for others, it is simply creating viable opportunities where player numbers, travel distances, staffing, or awareness remain major constraints. UEFA's role, therefore, should not be to impose uniformity, but to support differentiated development pathways underpinned by shared principles: inclusion by design, local adaptability, credible partnerships, stronger data, and sustained investment in people.

Ultimately, this report points toward a shift in mindset. Disability football should not be understood as a separate charitable strand of football, nor as a peripheral social responsibility activity. It should be recognised as part of football's core development mission. When disability football is embedded into everyday structures, clubs, competitions, coach education, and strategic planning, it becomes more likely to endure beyond individual champions or short-term projects. The task now is to move from provision that is often present but fragile toward systems that are intentional, inclusive, measurable, and sustainable. In doing so, UEFA and its MA have an opportunity not only to widen access to football, but to redefine what a genuinely inclusive football system looks like.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Member Association Survey

UEFA Disability Football Provision National Association Survey:
Thank you for participating in our survey. The survey contains 4 strands:

1. The management and governance of disability football in the NA
2. The partnerships and resources utilised to provide disability football opportunities
3. The recruitment of coaches and the provision of coach education for different disability groups
4. An investigation of the clubs and participants involved in their respective categories.

Disability football in this context involves programmes designed to support the engagement of players with a range of different impairments in the game of football, including both grassroots and performance programmes.
For each section please, highlight your answer, and provide any further details in the open text box below each question:

Section 1: Management and Governance

Q1.	Does your organisation have any specific policies regarding the provision/status of disability football?	Yes		No	
Q1.1	Please provide further detail here:				
Q2.	Does your organisation have any specific departments or role(s) in charge of disability football?	Yes		No	
Q2.1	Please provide further detail here:				
Q3.	Does your NA have a disability Working Group or committee designated and responsible for disability football?	Yes		No	
Q3.1	Please provide further detail here:				
Q4.	Does your organisation have any KPIs relating to disability football provision?	Yes		No	
Q4.1	Please provide further detail here:				
Q5.	How many staff members are currently assigned to work specifically on disability football?	0	1	2-5	6+
Q5.1	Please provide further detail here:				
Q6.	Are different types of disabilities (e.g. intellectual, physical, sensory) managed by separate experts or staff members?	Yes, each type has dedicated staff	No, one person covers all types	Mixed approach (some dedicated,	N/A

				some shared)	
Q6.1	Please provide further detail here:				
Q7.	Is funding for disability football allocated as a separate budget line within your association?	Yes, with a dedicated budget	Yes, but part of a general football development budget	No dedicated funding	Not sure
Q7.1	Please provide further detail here:				
Q8	Are there any barriers in terms of funding for disability football?				
	Response to Q8:				

Section 2: Partnerships

Q9.	Does your organisation have a formal partnership with any disability specific organization (for example, Special Olympics)?	Yes	No			
Q9.1	If you answered yes to Q9, please name the organisation and briefly describe the partnership:					
Q10.	If you answered yes to Q9, please rate the quality of this partnership.	Very poor	Poor	Neutral	Good	Very good
Q10.1	Please explain your response to Q10:					
Q11.	Does your association collaborate with external disability organizations or experts to support your disability football programs?	Yes, regularly	Yes, occasionally	No	Planning to establish partnerships	
Q11.1	If you answered yes regularly or yes occasionally, please list the organizations or experts you work with and what their expertise/contribution is:					
Q12.	Does your organisation run any competitions with partner organisations focused specifically on disability football?	Yes	No			
Q12.1	If you answered yes to Q12, please name the organisations and briefly describe the competitions:					
Q12.2	Please rate the quality of this partnership:	Very poor	Poor	Neutral	Good	Very good

Q12.3	Please explain your answer to Q12.2:

Section 3: Coach Education and Resources

Q13.	Is information/education about disability football included within all your coaching courses?	Yes	No
Q13.1	Please provide further detail here:		
Q14.	Does your organisation offer coach education specific to those working in disability football?	Yes	No
Q14.1	If you answered yes to Q14, where does your education sit?	Within your coach education pathway	Separate educational resources
Q15.	Do you offer coach education or continuing professional development (CPD) for amputee football?	Yes	No
Q16.	Do you offer coach education or CPD for deaf football?	Yes	No
Q17.	Do you offer coach education or CPD for CP football?	Yes	No
Q18.	Do you offer coach education or CPD for Down Syndrome football?	Yes	No
Q19.	Do you offer coach education or CPD for Powerchair football?	Yes	No
Q20.	Do you offer coach education or CPD for Blind/ Visually impaired football?	Yes	No
Q21.	Do you offer coach education or CPD for Special Olympics?	Yes	No
Q22.	Do you offer coach education or CPD for any other disabilities or impairments, or would you like to add anything else?		
Q23.	In terms of coach developers (also known as coach educators), do they receive any specific training or education on disability football?	Yes	No
Q24.	Does your organisation provide opportunities for people with disabilities (PWD) to become coaches?	Yes	No

Q24.1	If you answered yes to Q24, please provide details of how you provide these opportunities:
Q24.2	If you answered yes to Q24, please provide details of how you support coaches with disabilities through the coach education courses:
Q25.	If you answered yes to Q24, please provide details of how you support coaches with disabilities outside of coach education courses:

Section 4: Participants and Clubs

Q26.	Does your country offer disability **leagues**?	Yes			No		
Q26.1	If you answered yes to Q26, for which disabilities or impairments are they available for – *Please insert Y for Yes, or N for No, in each of the below boxes as shown in the example)*	Male *Y*		Female N		Mixed N	
Q26.2	Blind/VI football						
Q26.3	Deaf Football						
Q26.4	CP Football						
Q26.5	Down Syndrome Football						
Q26.6	Amputee Football						
Q26.7	Powerchair football						
Q26.8	Special Olympics/ Intellectual/ Developmental						
Q27.	If you answered yes to Q26, how many participants with disabilities play football in your country in disability-specific leagues?	Total number =		Male =		Female =	
Q28.	How many disability-specific leagues are organised by your organisation?	Total number =	Male leagues =		Female leagues =		Mixed Leagues =
Q29.	Does your country offer any one-off disability competitions? (i.e. not a	Yes			No		

	league but an annual tournament for example)			
	If you answered yes to Q29, for which disabilities or impairments are they available for – *Please insert Y for Yes, or N for No, in each of the below boxes as shown in the example)*	Male *N*	Female *N*	Mixed *Y*
Q29.1	Blind/VI football			
Q29.2	Deaf Football			
Q29.3	CP Football			
Q29.4	Down Syndrome Football			
Q29.5	Amputee Football			
Q29.6	Powerchair football			
Q29.7	Special Olympics/ Intellectual/ Developmental			
Q30	Does your club registration system allow you to track players with a disability in Mainstream football?	Yes	No	
Q30.1	Does your club registration system allow you to track players with a disability in disability football?	Yes	No	
Q30.2	Please provide more details on your registration systems and how they track players with disabilities?			
Q31	How many participants with disabilities play football in your country in 'mainstream' leagues with non-disabled participants?	Number =		
Q32	How do you register participants with disabilities (in regular and disability-specific leagues)? Please provide your response here:			

Q33.	How reliable and accurate is this participant data?	Very reliable	Not very reliable	Unsure
Q33.1	Please explain your answer to Q33:			
Q34.	How many licensed coaches in your country have a disability?	Number =		
Q35.	How many disability-specific clubs are members of your organisation?	Mainstream clubs with a disability section with disability teams =	Standalone disability clubs =	
Q36.	Are there disability-specific leagues organised by other organisations independently of the National Association?	Yes	No	
Q36.1	If you answered yes to Q36, please provide details and any available participation data:			
Q37.	Do external disability organisations share the data with you about disability football provision and participation?	Yes	No	
Q38.	Please describe any disability specific football related programme/projects that your National Association runs?			

Barriers:

Q39.	What are the current limitations or gaps in your disability provision?		
Q40.	What are the main barriers for players with disabilities to participate in your country?		
Q41.	What are the main barriers for disability football clubs/sections to thrive?		
Q42.	What are the main barriers for the National Association in developing disability football in your country?		
Q43.	Is there a desire to change or improve the provision/services of disability football?	Yes	No
Q43.1	Please explain your response to Q43:		

Q44.	What has facilitated any growth or development in this area for your National Association so far?
Q45.	Is there anything else you would like to add or comment on in relation to the provision of disability football in your country?
	End of survey – Thank you for your participation.

Appendix 2 – Individual Interview Script Template

MA Name	
Key insights from survey	Prior to interview, the MA's survey responses will be analysed to fully personalise the interview with relevant information. Special attention will be placed on those elements or characteristics that make the MA's disability provision stand out from others.
Management and Governance	• How is disability football structured within your country? • How does your MA contribute to this? • What appears to be working well within the current arrangement and what could be improved?
Partnerships	• What partnership organisations do you currently work with to support the delivery of disability football? • Please explain how these work in practice • How do these positively impact the disability football offer from your MA? • How could you/would you want to develop these partnerships further? • Are there any partners that you do not work with that you would like to work with? Why?
Coach Education	• What is your current coach education offer for disability football? • How would you seek to develop this further?
Participation	• Please explain some of the barriers faced by disabled participants, coaches within your country (e.g., lack of youth teams, lack of volunteers, lack of funding, high level of existing teams). • In an ideal world, how would you tackle these barriers? (aspirational Q) • What realistic steps could you take to work towards these? (realistic Q)

Appendix 3 – Anonymised Case Study Summaries

This appendix summarises seven case studies using the anonymised MA codes and typologies applied in the main report. Country names, national association names, named programmes, named partners and other potentially identifying references have been removed. Each summary follows the same structure: classification, overview, governance, provision, workforce, partnerships, barriers, learning points and future priorities.

Case Study Classification

MA code	Report typology	Case-study model	Primary analytical focus
MA #1	Higher-structure / higher-delivery	Integrated mainstreaming model with limited specialist capacity	Strategic integration, club development, coach education and pathway-building.
MA #2	Structured but still building pathways	Youth-first, partnership-led grassroots growth model	Children and young people, hidden disabilities, local club support and partnership governance.
MA #3	Higher-structure / higher-delivery	Decentralised system-wide inclusion model	Regional delivery infrastructure, broad impairment formats, workforce development and club integration.
MA #4	Higher-structure / higher-delivery	Community-driven accessibility and governance-strengthening model	Local access, club governance, regional competition and school-to-club pathways.
MA #5	Higher-structure / higher-delivery	Values-led system-transition model	Transfer of responsibility, privacy-sensitive monitoring, competition design and digital coach education.
MA #8	Structured but still building pathways	Standards-driven, dignity-led integration model	Quality standards, social change, adapted formats, elite inspiration and long-term partnerships.
MA #13	Higher-structure / higher-delivery	Embedded disability-specific division and competition-led scale model	Institutional embedding, direct competition management, medical governance, workforce education and sustainability.

Case Study MA #1

MA code	MA #1
Report typology	Higher-structure / higher-delivery
Case-study model	Integrated mainstreaming model with limited specialist capacity
Primary analytical focus	Strategic integration, club development, coach education and pathway-building.

Overview

This case illustrates an association where disability football is increasingly positioned within the wider equality, diversity and inclusion agenda rather than as a peripheral programme. The model is led by a small specialist function but depends heavily on mainstream grassroots staff, club developers and coach developers accepting disability inclusion as part of their core role. The system is strategically ambitious and has a clear growth orientation, but delivery remains constrained by volunteer capacity, youth pathway gaps and uneven local club readiness.

Governance and organisational model

Governance is moving from specialist ownership towards shared organisational responsibility. A cross-functional working group is being developed to reduce siloed practice and strengthen internal alignment. This creates the potential for disability football to be treated as part of ordinary football development, but also requires ongoing staff education so that responsibility is not diluted as it becomes more mainstreamed.

Provision and player pathways

Provision is relatively well established at adult level, but less consistent for children and young people. The most significant gaps are early-entry opportunities, age-specific youth provision, and transition points for young adults leaving education. Adult disability football is also recognised as a growth opportunity, particularly because some players remain involved across the life course. The strategic challenge is therefore not simply increasing numbers, but creating an end-to-end participation pathway.

Coach education and workforce development

Coach education is oriented towards embedding disability inclusion within mainstream entry-level qualifications, supported by CPD and communities of practice. Coach developers are viewed as a critical mechanism for improving quality, confidence and consistency. External agencies provide specialist knowledge, but the association is seeking to avoid over-reliance on separate disability-specific training routes.

Partnerships and collaborative working

Partnerships are primarily system-alignment relationships rather than funding arrangements. External disability sport and community partners support accreditation, impairment-specific learning, referral routes and local recruitment. Their value lies in expertise and reach, although national coverage and capacity remain inconsistent.

Specific barriers and enablers

Limited specialist staffing and reliance on wider grassroots capacity.
Youth and transition-stage provision remain underdeveloped.
Volunteer capacity and local club confidence vary considerably.
Data systems do not yet capture all disabled participants in mainstream settings.

Key learning points

Mainstreaming can be a credible strategy where organisational leadership is clear.
Coach developers are an important lever for cultural and practice change.
Adult disability football should not be treated as secondary to youth growth.
Partnerships can add value through alignment even where they do not provide substantial funding.

Future priorities

Future priorities include clarifying the standard offer for clubs, strengthening youth and transition pathways, improving voluntary data capture, expanding adult opportunities, and embedding disability inclusion more visibly in senior organisational planning.

Case Study MA #2

MA code	MA #2
Report typology	Structured but still building pathways
Case-study model	Youth-first, partnership-led grassroots growth model
Primary analytical focus	Children and young people, hidden disabilities, local club support and partnership governance.

Overview

This case represents a youth-first approach to disability football development. Rather than immediately assuming full control of all disability football activity, the association has focused on building a structured grassroots offer for children and young people who may not fit easily into mainstream football. The model is partnership-led, locally adaptive and values-driven, with a strong emphasis on club culture, positive experiences and sustainable participation rather than rapid central roll-out.

Governance and organisational model

Governance is shared between the football association and a national parasport partner. This creates access to disability expertise and existing competition knowledge, while enabling the football association to bring football-specific club networks and child-centred development principles. The partnership is constructive but complex, particularly where adult competition traditions do not align fully with youth participation values.

Provision and player pathways

The flagship grassroots model now reaches dozens of clubs and several hundred young participants, with plans to expand further. Provision is especially oriented towards neurodivergent children, young people with intellectual impairments and, increasingly, children with physical impairments. Clubs receive structured support while retaining flexibility to adapt provision to local needs. Current playing opportunities are mainly festivals, local events and friendly tournaments, with more regular youth-appropriate competition formats still under development.

Coach education and workforce development

The association has created a dedicated short specialist education offer for participating clubs. This is supported by practical inclusion tools such as visual schedules, adapted communication resources and modified equipment. However, disability content remains only partially embedded within mainstream coaching qualifications, and limited staff capacity constrains both delivery and scale.

Partnerships and collaborative working

Partnerships are central to the model. The national parasport body, local authorities, schools and disability organisations all contribute to recruitment, expertise and local delivery. The model works best where small local working groups are built around each club, rather than assuming a uniform national implementation process.

Specific barriers and enablers

Very limited national staffing relative to ambition.
Shared governance can slow decision-making and create role ambiguity.
Youth-to-adult pathways remain underdeveloped.
The model risks expanding faster than available resources can sustain.

Key learning points

Partnership models need explicit role clarity and regular communication.
Grassroots disability football benefits from football-specific leadership.
Child-centred participation values may require different competition formats from adult para sport.
Practical tools and local facilitation can reduce club anxiety about starting provision.

Future priorities

Future priorities include scaling the youth programme responsibly, developing more regular and age-appropriate competition, strengthening transition pathways, integrating disability content into mainstream coach education, and securing sustainable staffing and finance.

Case Study MA #3

MA code	MA #3
Report typology	Higher-structure / higher-delivery
Case-study model	Decentralised system-wide inclusion model
Primary analytical focus	Regional delivery infrastructure, broad impairment formats, workforce development and club integration.

Overview

This case shows how a large, decentralised football system can coordinate disability football through national direction and regional autonomy. Disability football is embedded within a broad inclusion agenda and is supported through a foundation-style structure and regional officers. The model is not centralised delivery from the national office; instead, it provides frameworks, education, visibility and coordination so that disability football can be developed through local football structures.

Governance and organisational model

The association operates through a national framework supported by regional delivery leads. This allows the system to adapt to local conditions while maintaining shared principles and knowledge exchange. The structure is well developed, although complexity remains because some high-performance disability pathways and specific impairment formats sit partly outside direct football association control.

Provision and player pathways

Provision is among the broadest in the dataset, including multiple impairment-specific formats and a strong emphasis on unified or mixed-ability football. Around one thousand mainstream clubs provide some form of disability football activity, although this remains a small proportion of the overall club base. The strategic emphasis is less on a single headline participation target and more on breadth of opportunity, club integration and disability football visibility.

Coach education and workforce development

This case includes one of the most structured education systems in the study. Disability football education is linked to mainstream coaching qualifications, supported by blended learning and regular national knowledge-exchange events. The association also uses adapted approaches for coaches with disabilities, including paired coaching and tailored learning methods where appropriate.

Partnerships and collaborative working

Partnerships with national disability sport structures are pragmatic and generally positive, particularly around specific impairment pathways. However, some formats are governed through separate disability sport systems, which creates fragmentation and limits full pathway control. The association also places strong emphasis on public-facing visibility events to normalise disability football.

Specific barriers and enablers

Complex multi-level governance and regional variation.
Data protection and stigma make individual disability tracking difficult.
Some impairment pathways sit outside direct football governance.
Scale creates a continuing challenge of consistency across local areas.

Key learning points

Decentralised delivery can be effective when supported by national coordination.
Formal coach education pathways strengthen quality and scalability.
Unified formats can be powerful vehicles for social inclusion.
Visibility events can shift public understanding and club confidence.

Future priorities

Future priorities include expanding club-based provision, strengthening coach and referee education, improving data systems within ethical limits, deepening collaboration with disability sport partners, and maintaining disability football as a visible part of football culture.

Case Study MA #4

MA code	MA #4
Report typology	Higher-structure / higher-delivery
Case-study model	Community-driven accessibility and governance-strengthening model
Primary analytical focus	Local access, club governance, regional competition and school-to-club pathways.

Overview

This case reflects a compact but socially complex football context in which disability football has grown rapidly. The association has moved from informal expansion towards a more structured model focused on quality, safeguarding, governance and local accessibility. Growth has created new opportunities, but also exposed the need for stronger club standards, regional provision and more sustainable workforce pipelines.

Governance and organisational model

The delivery model is led by a small full-time team, supported by a wider casual workforce that is particularly active in school-based provision. Governance improvement is being pursued through relationship-led club support rather than compliance-heavy regulation. The association's approach recognises that trust, community relationships and local identity are central to sustaining participation.

Provision and player pathways

More than sixty clubs now deliver inclusion football, with provision covering pan-disability and learning disability formats alongside a small number of targeted impairment teams. However, provision is concentrated in some areas, and a centralised league structure means some players face lengthy travel. The strategic direction is towards regional leagues, local development hubs and clearer progression from school activity into club football.

Coach education and workforce development

A dedicated disability coach education pathway sits alongside the mainstream coaching structure. It trains a substantial annual cohort, including through open courses, schools and partner education programmes. Current review work is seeking to ensure the curriculum reflects the actual participation landscape, with stronger emphasis on neurodiversity, learning disability and pan-disability delivery rather than formats that are not yet widespread locally.

Partnerships and collaborative working

Education partners are a major workforce multiplier, providing routes into coaching, refereeing, volunteering and casual employment. Community and charitable partners also support events, inclusion language, facilities and life-skills expertise. These partnerships help compensate for limited internal staffing and deepen local relevance.

Specific barriers and enablers

Small staff team managing rapid growth.
Regional imbalance and travel burden for families.
Limited targeted impairment-specific pathways beyond pan-disability provision.
Sensitive social context requiring careful language and relationship-building.

Key learning points

Rapid growth requires governance consolidation, not only expansion.
Local accessibility is more important than nominal national availability.
Trust-based engagement can strengthen club compliance and quality.
Education partnerships can expand workforce capacity quickly.

Future priorities

Future priorities include creating more regional leagues, developing regional hubs, strengthening school-to-club pathways, improving ethical data tracking, and professionalising club governance without weakening community trust.

Case Study MA #5

MA code	MA #5
Report typology	Higher-structure / higher-delivery
Case-study model	Values-led system-transition model
Primary analytical focus	Transfer of responsibility, privacy-sensitive monitoring, competition design and digital coach education.

Overview

This case is shaped by a national transition in which disability sport responsibilities are moving progressively from multisport disability organisations into sport-specific federations. For football, this means the association is taking increasing responsibility for disability football while seeking to retain the expertise and relationships of the existing disability sport system. The model is cautious, values-led and focused on sustainable integration rather than rapid expansion.

Governance and organisational model

Governance is currently shared during a planned transition period. National steering and project groups bring football and parasport partners together, with the explicit aim of avoiding knowledge loss and fragmentation. Most clubs delivering disability football are already affiliated to the football association, but some national and elite responsibilities remain outside its direct control.

Provision and player pathways

Around 170 clubs provide disability football, with provision concentrated mainly in intellectual disability football. Smaller pathways exist for visual impairment, frame football and cerebral palsy football. Other formats are limited, partly because some players are already integrated into mainstream environments or participate in other adapted sports. A central challenge is that strong mainstream inclusion can reduce the visibility of disability-specific pathways.

Coach education and workforce development

A digital disability football coaching course has been introduced, with separate learning tracks for different impairment groups and a progression route into mainstream coach education. This provides a scalable entry point for coaches and supports consistent messages across a geographically dispersed system. The association is also exploring ways to make introductory coach education more accessible for coaches with disabilities.

Partnerships and collaborative working

The transition depends heavily on a strong national parasport partnership. Where local football structures act without disability sport expertise, the risk of duplication and conflict increases. Funding bodies and charities also support facilities, participation and public-facing engagement, but the core partnership issue is knowledge transfer rather than financial transfer alone.

Specific barriers and enablers

Legal restrictions prevent individual disability registration.
Competition structures remain underdeveloped in several regions.
Mainstream inclusion can make disability-specific recruitment more difficult.
Regional capacity is limited despite broad commitment.

Key learning points

Responsibility transfer requires patience, shared governance and trust.
Privacy-sensitive systems must balance dignity with evidence needs.
Digital learning can expand workforce capacity efficiently.
Competition design should prioritise player experience rather than simply replicating mainstream formats.

Future priorities

Future priorities include completing the governance transition, developing low-barrier regional competition, refining adapted playing formats, widening coach education access and supporting regional staff to deliver more consistently with limited time.

Case Study MA #8

MA code	MA #8
Report typology	Structured but still building pathways
Case-study model	Standards-driven, dignity-led integration model
Primary analytical focus	Quality standards, social change, adapted formats, elite inspiration and long-term partnerships.

Overview

This case demonstrates a standards-driven approach in a context where disability participation remains affected by wider social stigma and limited institutional inclusion. The association deliberately frames the work around abilities, dignity and athlete identity rather than charity. Growth is important, but the core ambition is to deliver credible, safe and technically meaningful football experiences that can challenge social perceptions as well as develop the game.

Governance and organisational model

Disability football sits within the association's sustainability and social responsibility framework rather than a standalone department. This connects the work to safeguarding, inclusion, human rights and broader organisational values. Delivery is centrally led, with partners, clubs and international networks providing much of the specialist expertise and operational support.

Provision and player pathways

Provision includes blind football, amputee football, football for people with Down syndrome, unified formats and emerging recreational formats. Participation is modest but increasingly structured. Elite and representative teams are used as aspirational anchors, while club-based registration and integration are being strengthened. Player identification is difficult because many disabled people remain under-connected to mainstream education, community sport and formal club systems.

Coach education and workforce development

Specialist coaching capacity remains a key vulnerability, particularly in technical impairment-specific formats. Rather than building a fully separate coaching system, the association is developing inclusion components for mainstream qualifications, drawing on partner education and retaining former players as coaches, mentors and advisors. Pathways for coaches with disabilities are beginning to emerge but are not yet systematic.

Partnerships and collaborative working

The partnership model is selective and long-term. Partners are expected to share responsibility, protect standards and align with football-specific expectations. Specialist organisations provide access to target groups and impairment expertise, while clubs increasingly host teams and formalise player registration. Partnerships are therefore not simply delivery outsourcing arrangements.

Specific barriers and enablers

Societal stigma and limited disability awareness.
Small specialist coaching and referee workforce.
Limited public support and reliance on federation, project and partner resources.
Player identification is constrained by weak links to education and community systems.

Key learning points

Language and framing matter for dignity and legitimacy.
Quality, safety and standards are as important as participation volume.
Former players can strengthen expertise and continuity.
Stable partnerships are more useful than short-term project relationships.

Future priorities

Future priorities include expanding coach and referee capacity, strengthening player registration, developing clearer routes for coaches with disabilities, deepening club integration and continuing to use football as a vehicle for broader social education.

Case Study MA #13

MA code	MA #13
Report typology	Higher-structure / higher-delivery
Case-study model	Embedded disability-specific division and competition-led scale model
Primary analytical focus	Institutional embedding, direct competition management, medical governance, workforce education and sustainability.

Overview

This case represents one of the most institutionally embedded disability football systems in the study. Disability football is governed through a dedicated division located inside the national football association. This gives the area specialist leadership and clear accountability while keeping it within the core football institution. The model has achieved significant scale, but it also faces the sustainability pressures that come with rapid growth and high delivery expectations.

Governance and organisational model

The association operates a dedicated disability football division with central staff, regional delegates and specialist medical oversight. Disability football is also aligned with the association's wider sustainability strategy. This creates institutional legitimacy and allows disability football to be treated as part of football development rather than as an external charitable activity. At the same time, the division still describes itself as agile and resource-constrained relative to its workload.

Provision and player pathways

The system includes several hundred registered teams, several thousand players and a large annual competition programme. Unlike many areas of mainstream football, disability competitions are managed directly by the federation. Competition is treated as a driver of legitimacy, continuity and club engagement, offering players structured opportunities and reinforcing the status of disability football inside the wider system.

Coach education and workforce development

The association provides an extensive specialist coaching course with strong practical content, while also embedding disability football into mainstream coaching qualifications. Demand for places exceeds supply. A distinctive feature is management education for disability football team managers, recognising that sustainability depends on governance, administration, fundraising and community leadership as well as coaching expertise.

Partnerships and collaborative working

Partnerships with disability sport, inclusion and international football organisations contribute expertise, legitimacy and shared learning rather than acting primarily as funding sources. The association retains direct ownership of core competitions and registration systems, while partner organisations support specialist knowledge and broader networks.

Specific barriers and enablers

Funding remains the principal constraint on further growth.
Workforce pressure is significant relative to the scale of activity.
Cultural normalisation is still uneven despite institutional progress.
The system must move from start-up energy towards mature long-term resourcing.

Key learning points

A dedicated internal division can create clarity, scale and legitimacy.
Direct competition management strengthens pathway control.
Medical and eligibility processes require strong privacy safeguards.
Management education is an important but often overlooked sustainability lever.

Future priorities

Future priorities include securing long-term financial sustainability, consolidating workforce capacity, maintaining ethical data and medical governance, embedding disability football further across the federation, and supporting quality as participation expands.

Appendix 4 – Methodological Basis for the Comparative Typologies

The comparative typologies presented within the comparative analysis section should not be interpreted as rigid classifications, rankings, or fixed developmental stages. Rather, they are heuristic analytical groupings developed through iterative comparison of the survey findings, qualitative case-study evidence, and established comparative frameworks from welfare-state theory, sport-development systems, disability studies, governance research, and ecological approaches to sport participation.

The typologies were constructed inductively from the survey and case-study data while also being informed deductively by established theoretical and comparative literature. Their purpose is not to categorise UEFA MA as more or less successful, but to contextualise variation in disability football systems and identify the different structural conditions shaping development across Europe.

The comparative analysis therefore adopts a systems-thinking and ecological perspective, recognising that disability football systems are influenced by the interaction between population size, geography, governance arrangements, welfare traditions, football-system maturity, organisational capacity, disability policy cultures, and local participation environments.

Population Scale and Ecosystem Viability Typologies

The population and ecosystem viability typologies were developed primarily through analysis of national population scale, likely participation density, territorial spread, and the practical viability of sustaining disability football pathways. The underlying analytical assumption is that participation density and ecosystem scale shape the feasibility of maintaining impairment-specific leagues, coaching structures, and regular competition formats.

This approach was informed by ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and holistic ecological approaches to sport systems (Henriksen et al., 2010), alongside comparative sport-development literature emphasising the influence of system scale and organisational environment on participation pathways and delivery capacity (Houlihan & Green, 2008).

The typology was therefore designed to capture how structural conditions influence what forms of disability football provision are realistically achievable in different national contexts.

Welfare and Disability-Sport Context Typologies

The welfare and disability-sport typologies were informed primarily by comparative welfare-state theory and disability-policy literature. The categorisations adapt broad welfare-state traditions identified by Esping-Andersen (1990), including Nordic/social-democratic, continental/corporatist, liberal, southern European, and post-socialist transitional traditions.

The analysis assumes that disability football systems do not emerge independently from wider national welfare and disability-support structures. Instead, broader cultural approaches to

inclusion, state-voluntary sector relationships, public-sector support traditions, and civil society structures shape how disability football is organised, funded, and delivered.

This dimension of the analysis was also informed by comparative sport-policy literature examining how national political and welfare traditions influence sport governance and participation systems (Bergsgard et al., 2007).

Football-System Maturity and Organisational Capacity Typologies

The football-system maturity typologies combine indicators relating to organisational capacity, football infrastructure maturity, coach education sophistication, governance depth, and competition structures.

The conceptual basis for this typology draws from comparative sport-development and elite-sport systems literature (De Bosscher et al., 2008; Houlihan & Green, 2008), alongside organisational capacity research in sport management (Doherty et al., 2014).

Importantly, the analysis does not assume that football-system maturity automatically produces disability football maturity. Rather, the typology reflects the interaction between overall football-system capacity and the degree to which disability football has become integrated within wider football structures.

Governance and Delivery Archetypes

The governance and delivery archetypes emerged particularly strongly from the qualitative case-study evidence. The classifications are based primarily on governance ownership, delivery responsibility, partnership dependence, degree of institutionalisation, and the locus of operational control within each disability football ecosystem.

The analysis was informed by governance and network-governance theory, particularly literature examining collaborative and distributed governance arrangements (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Provan & Kenis, 2008).

This perspective is especially relevant because disability football systems across UEFA Member Associations rarely operate as purely hierarchical structures. Instead, they are often characterised by networked relationships involving football associations, disability sport organisations, charities, educational institutions, local authorities, and community actors.

The governance typologies therefore seek to capture different patterns of coordination and system organisation rather than formal institutional hierarchies alone.

Geography and Accessibility Typologies

The geography and accessibility typologies were informed by literature examining the relationship between geography, settlement density, accessibility, and sport participation.

The analytical logic underpinning this typology is that geographical dispersion, travel burden, regional infrastructure, and settlement patterns significantly shape practical accessibility to disability football participation opportunities.

This aspect of the framework was informed by sport geography literature (Bale, 2003) and disability sport accessibility research (Darcy & Dowse, 2013), both of which emphasise the importance of spatial and logistical factors in shaping participation experiences.

Inclusion and Participation Philosophy Typologies

The inclusion and participation philosophy typologies were developed from comparative analysis of how Member Associations conceptualised inclusion, mainstreaming, specialist provision, and disability football pathways.

The analysis was informed by disability studies literature, particularly distinctions between medical, social, and rights-based approaches to disability (Oliver, 1990; Shakespeare, 2013), alongside literature examining inclusive and specialist approaches within disability sport systems (DePauw & Gavron, 2005; Fitzgerald, 2012).

The typologies therefore reflect different underlying philosophies regarding participation, belonging, legitimacy, specialist expertise, and the relationship between disability football and mainstream football structures.

Methodological Positioning

Overall, the typologies should be understood as heuristic comparative tools designed to support contextual interpretation of variation across UEFA Member Associations. They are intended to facilitate comparative understanding rather than produce normative judgements or fixed developmental rankings.

The framework adopts a pragmatic and systems-oriented approach that combines inductive interpretation of the empirical data with deductive use of established comparative and theoretical literature. Consequently, many Member Associations may exhibit characteristics associated with multiple typologies simultaneously, reflecting the complexity and hybridity of disability football systems across Europe.

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