



WLVT
We Lead Volleyball Together

Guidelines for implementation



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1. Introduction

These guidelines are intended to support volleyball clubs, national federations and other grassroots sport organisations in implementing youth leadership initiatives. They are based on the experiences and findings of the WLVT project.

The content comes forth from the data that was collected throughout the project and analysed by The Hague University of Applied Sciences. As well as best practices and lessons learned that were defined. All this information, combined with the advice of the advisory board, the expertise of the consortium and the scientific theoretical basis led to this set of guidelines.

The full report of THUAS on youth leadership development in grassroots volleyball clubs is available upon request.

2. Best practices for youth leadership development

2.1 Youth leadership as organisational necessity

Across all WLVT-interviews, youth leadership was framed not as an educational aspiration but as a practical condition for the club's continued viability. Interviewees in all four countries linked the development of young coaches, board members, and event organisers directly to succession planning, volunteer renewal, and long-term sustainability.

"If we can't develop our own coaches and leaders, we don't have a club." (Rødovre Volley, Denmark)

"They are the ones who will grow and eventually take over. Enthusiastic volunteers don't just appear naturally; they need to be developed." (Namsos VBK, Norway)

"Young leaders are important to keep everything going. As assistant coaches, as role models, and just as help in general." (THF, Iceland)

The strength and consistency of this framing across national contexts is analytically significant. It suggests that the organisational sustainability argument for youth leadership is not culturally specific but reflects a shared structural reality of volunteer-based grassroots sport. However, the convergence in rhetoric did not translate uniformly into practice. The KA interviewee in Iceland acknowledged directly that their club currently offers young leaders no meaningful formal role, that empowerment remains insufficient, and that the club has not yet developed the culture or knowledge needed to change this:

"No, not really. I think that as things stand, there is a lack of knowledge in this area." (KA, Iceland)

This candid self-assessment is important precisely because it disrupts the otherwise consistent framing. Recognising the necessity of youth leadership and actually building the conditions for it are distinct challenges, and several clubs in this study are more advanced on the former than the latter.

2.2 Informal and relational pathways into leadership

No club in the sample described a formal, institutionalised pipeline for identifying and developing young leaders. In every case, potential leaders were noticed through everyday

participation and invited into roles through personal relationships rather than open recruitment.

"You can always clearly see who loves volleyball - people who arrive far too early for training, who stay after, who show up to watch matches even when they're not playing." (Amager Volley, Denmark).

"It's rarely about singling one person out — it's more like: you three, wouldn't it be great if you did this together? Suddenly it doesn't feel so scary." (Amager Volley, Denmark)

The Dutch interviews both confirmed and analytically sharpened this pattern. Zaanstad described recruitment as essentially word of mouth and direct personal contact at training sessions, noting that general announcements rarely produce responses. VVH Harderwijk described a more systematic approach: using annual member surveys to map skills, study backgrounds, and interests as a basis for targeted personal approaches, effectively institutionalising what would otherwise remain entirely ad hoc. RVV Katwijk offered the most precise formulation, drawing an explicit distinction between young people being given space to lead — which she rated at 7 out of 10 — and young people actively taking that space — which she rated at 5 out of 10. This gap between opportunity availability and opportunity uptake captures a tension that is visible across the full dataset but is rarely articulated so clearly.

The reliance on informal, relational pathways carries an important equity implication that was not directly addressed in any of the interviews. Young people who are socially well-connected, visibly committed, and already embedded in club networks are more likely to be noticed and invited in. Those who are less visible, less confident, newer to the club, or differently positioned in terms of age, background, or family connections are systematically less likely to be identified through informal observation alone. The interviews describe how the existing system works for those it works for, but are largely silent on who it does not reach.

2.3 Graduated responsibility and mentorship

Across all interviews, the combination of graduated responsibility and personal mentoring emerged as the mechanism most consistently associated with effective youth leadership development. The principle appeared in similar terms across all four countries: do not ask young people to take on full leadership roles immediately; build through small tasks; provide support without taking over.

"What we have succeeded with is giving everyone space and follow-up so they see results and feel safe. Rookie leaders need a lot of help and guidance." (Steinkjer VBK, Norway)

"You must not throw young people into the deep end too early. But there also shouldn't be too much support — it shouldn't be curling. You grow by being given real responsibility." (Rødovre Volley, Denmark).

The VVH Harderwijk interviewee offered the most vivid account of deliberate non-intervention as a developmental strategy. She described intentionally allowing young participants to encounter practical problems during programme activities without stepping in, including a situation where participants nearly ran out of ice cream at a club event and had to cycle to a nearby supermarket to resolve it. The observation that real learning happens in moments of managed difficulty, combined with genuine availability for support when asked, aligns with what Pierce et al. (2020) describe as the conditions necessary for leadership awareness and confidence to develop. It also, however, rests entirely on the interpretation of one adult who chose to frame the episode positively. Whether the young participants experienced it as a productive learning moment or as a stressful failure is not known.

The Icelandic picture is more varied. HK described a structured youth council and a deliberate practice of assigning young members to lead specific events, with broadly positive outcomes. KA, by contrast, acknowledged that while individual club members could recognise and encourage talent, no consistent mechanism existed for doing so, and that this remained an aspiration.

3. Common challenges during implementation

3.1 Barriers to sustainable youth leadership

All interviews identified structural barriers that systematically complicate youth leadership development. Four recurred across the full dataset.

Educational mobility was the most frequently cited challenge and the one most resistant to programmatic solutions. In clubs outside major urban centres, particularly in Norway and Iceland, young leaders routinely leave for higher education, taking their commitment with them. Several interviewees noted that some do eventually return, but the disruption to club continuity is significant and the gap between departure and return can span several years.

"Some of our best young leaders will most likely move to Aarhus for university. The advantage now is that some of them are starting to come back." (Bedsted Volleyball Club, Denmark)

"Most of them will move away when they start studying. If they're still here, or once they're done, I think we'll use them in all kinds of roles." (Steinkjer VBK, Norway)

Time constraints were noted across all four countries. Those most willing and capable of taking on leadership responsibilities were often already the most over-committed, and the time expectations associated with formal roles were identified as a deterrent for potential volunteers who might be willing to contribute in more limited ways.

The perceived formality and intimidation associated with leadership titles was raised in multiple interviews. Several interviewees described deliberately reframing leadership as helping and contributing rather than as holding a position. This practice implicitly acknowledges a cultural barrier that formal programme activities alone are unlikely to resolve. The dynamic resonates with role congruity research: the agentic qualities culturally associated with leadership can feel misaligned with how young people, and particularly young women, understand themselves and their position in club hierarchies (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

"Some think it can be scary — 'leader' sounds a bit serious. We try to explain what it involves and let them try." (Namsos VBK, Norway)

Parental engagement emerged as a distinctive barrier in the Dutch and Icelandic interviews and was notably absent from the Scandinavian material. At RVV Katwijk, the interviewee argued that mobilising young volunteers is structurally linked to parental attitudes: families that normalise voluntary contribution to the club and actively encourage their children's involvement create conditions that families with more passive or indifferent orientations do not. The THF Iceland interviewee offered a parallel observation. Whether this reflects national cultural differences in how sport club membership is understood, or differences in the age profile of participants, is not clear from the available data.

"It is just as hard to get parents to do volunteering jobs as it is getting the kids — so if that is not going well, then we are never getting the kids to help us." (THF, Iceland)

4. Organisational support

4.1 Volunteer coordination as a structural solution

A distinctive and consistent theme in the Dutch interviews was the identification of a dedicated volunteer coordinator role as the most practical structural response to the challenge of retaining young leaders. This theme appeared independently in all three Dutch clubs and was not matched as explicitly in any of the other three countries.

"I think a coordinator role — someone who invests in this, who regularly checks in with the young people, who helps them understand what they can do and how." (RVV Katwijk, Netherlands)

"We had a volunteer coordinator. The role was to go around the teams, organise recognition for volunteers, and be a bridge between committees and the board. That position is currently vacant and we feel the absence." (VVH Harderwijk, Netherlands)

The coordinator role as described is relational in function rather than administrative. Its value lies in maintaining contact, clarifying expectations, providing recognition, and serving as a point of continuity across the inevitable disruptions of season changes and shifting club populations. The VVH Harderwijk case is particularly instructive: the club had invested in this role, experienced its benefits, lost it, and could articulate precisely what they were now missing. That experience provides a degree of counterfactual evidence not available in clubs that have never held the role.

The absence of a parallel discussion in the Danish, Norwegian, and Icelandic material is worth noting. It may reflect differences in club size and organisational capacity, differences in national sport club management cultures, or simply that these clubs have found informal equivalents in the mentoring relationships. However, it may also reflect a blind spot: clubs that have never had a structured coordination function may not recognise its absence as a problem in the way that VVH Harderwijk, having experienced and lost it, clearly does.

5. Benefits of youth leadership development

5.1 Life skills and transferable competencies

All interviews addressed the competencies young people develop through club leadership involvement, and all 12 described outcomes that extend well beyond volleyball. Communication, planning, financial awareness, problem -solving, resilience, and the ability to work constructively across different ages, backgrounds, and perspectives were the most commonly cited.

"It's a kind of small company you step into. You think it's a club and everything runs by itself. You learn — it's a real way of growing up." (RVV Katwijk, Netherlands)

"Communication, resilience, helpfulness, independence and respect. I will be really happy if they go out with respect — whether it is for teammates, coaches or just anyone else." (THF, Iceland)

"It will encourage you to be leaders wherever you are — because being a leader is someone that can stand in front of an audience and just say: here I am. It doesn't matter whether it's in sport, volleyball or life." (HK, Iceland)

The VVH Harderwijk interviewee was particularly articulate on this dimension, drawing on her own experience of growing up in a volleyball family and tracing the professional and personal competencies she attributed to her club involvement. She described how young participants move from abstract enthusiasm into the practical realities of organising: managing budgets, coordinating logistics, solving problems in real time. The Zaanstad interviewee reflected on how involvement broadens young people's perspectives beyond their own team to an awareness of the wider regional sport ecosystem and the interdependencies between clubs.

These findings are consistent with research demonstrating that sport can be a productive context for life skill development, particularly when participation involves genuine responsibility and adult facilitation of reflection (Gould & Carson, 2008; Pierce et al., 2020; Cronin et al., 2023). However, a significant interpretive limit applies to this entire theme. Every account in this section is an adult's perception of what young people are gaining, not a young person's self-report. Club leaders are both observing their own programmes and have an interest in presenting those programmes favourably. The consistency of the life skills narrative across all 12 interviews does suggest it reflects something real, but the absence of any direct youth voice means it remains an adult construction rather than an empirically verified outcome.

6. Lessons learned

6.1 Programme experience and design implications

Across all four countries, interviewees offered direct reflections on the WLVT programme. The overall orientation was positive, but the critical feedback was substantive and, in several areas, convergent enough to constitute a clear evidence base for redesign.

In Denmark, all three clubs described the programme materials as too heavy, too long, and poorly adapted to the practical conditions of small volunteer-run organisations. These assessments were consistent, unprompted, and came from clubs that were broadly supportive of the programme's underlying goals:

"We came back from the kick-off day and were sent home with a thick book of exercises that was completely hopeless. It needs to be shortened significantly — maybe 10 good exercises. It bears the hallmark of something foreign that was translated rather than created for a Danish context." (Rødovre Volley, Denmark)

"The manual probably needs to be compressed. Give people concrete things they can use." (Bedsted Volleyball Club, Denmark)

"It's 260 kilometres to Odense. There have been real logistical challenges." (Bedsted Volleyball Club, Denmark)

Geography compounded the material weight problem in Norway, where distances between clubs, combined with the demands of online coordination, limited the quality and frequency of cross-club interaction that several interviewees identified as the programme's most valuable component.

In the Netherlands, the programme was experienced more positively in terms of engagement, though the picture was not without complications. RVV Katwijk noted that out of the seven or eight young people who participated, approximately half had left the club by the end of the programme period, primarily to pursue higher education. The remaining participants had moved into coaching or committee roles, which the interviewee described as a meaningful outcome, but the attrition itself reflects the structural problem of educational mobility that the programme can document but cannot solve. The Zaanstad interviewee described the programme as having directly contributed to a young woman joining the board, which he presented as real organisational renewal. VVH Harderwijk offered the most reflective account: the programme's value emerged most clearly in moments of deliberate non-intervention, when young participants were allowed to encounter difficulty without being rescued.

In Iceland, the responses were more varied and more divided than in any other national context. HK described the programme as a catalyst for formalising practices that were already beginning to develop, crediting it with giving institutional legitimacy to a youth council that might otherwise have remained an informal arrangement. KA offered a starkly different assessment. The interviewee acknowledged that their club had not yet built the structural conditions for programme outcomes to be sustained, and that without those foundations the programme had produced recognition of the problem more than actual change.

Across all four countries, the elements consistently identified as working best were direct peer relationships between participants, informal and flexible session formats, and close personal support from club facilitators. The most problematic elements were complex or over-lengthy

materials, logistical demands on volunteer time, and the difficulty of fitting programme activities into already crowded club calendars. Taken together, these reflections point to a persistent gap between the programme's ambition at the transnational design level and the absorptive capacity of the grassroots clubs it is designed to serve, a challenge identified in the sport programme design literature and one the WLVT project has not yet fully resolved (Frawley et al., 2018).

6.2 Cross-national observations

Placing the four national sub-samples alongside one another reveals a shared structural logic and important contextual variation.

The most consistent cross-national finding is that the mechanisms of youth leadership development are broadly similar regardless of national context: informal observation, personal invitation, graduated responsibility, and mentoring. This consistency across countries with quite different sport club cultures, national federation structures, and demographic contexts suggests that these features reflect the structural conditions of volunteer-based grassroots sport instead of culturally specific practices. It also implies that programme activities built around these mechanisms are likely to have cross-national relevance.

Within this shared architecture, however, meaningful differences emerge. The Danish and Norwegian clubs present the most developed and explicitly articulated mentoring practices, including formal youth board positions at Namsos, a structured cross-club peer support relationship between Rødovre and Amager, and proactive coaching education pathways at several Norwegian clubs. These represent the most mature examples of institutionalised youth leadership development in the dataset and offer a practical reference for less developed clubs.

The Icelandic sub-sample is the most heterogeneous in the study. HK represents one of the most advanced cases of deliberate youth leadership culture in the entire dataset, with an established youth council, strong organisational confidence, and a clear articulation of how youth leadership connects to the club's long-term sustainability. KA represents the earliest developmental stage, with an explicit acknowledgement that current practices are insufficient and that the structural foundations for change are not yet in place. THF sits between these positions and introduces the parental engagement dimension that does not appear prominently elsewhere. This heterogeneity is a finding in itself: national context shapes the field of possibilities but does not determine what clubs do within that field. Organisational culture, leadership priorities, and club history appear to be stronger determinants of youth leadership development than national context.

The Dutch sub-sample introduces the most institutionally structured framing in the dataset. The volunteer coordinator concept, the explicit distinction between having and taking space,

VVH's deliberate diversity policy in committee composition, and the systematic use of annual member surveys to map skills and interests all reflect a more formalised approach to club management than is visible in the Scandinavian material. Whether this reflects a broader Dutch sport organisational culture or the specific institutional profiles of these three clubs is a question the present data cannot resolve.

6.3 Programme design and transnational transferability

The interview material from all four countries raises a consistent challenge for the WLVT programme at the level of design and implementation. The programme was experienced as too heavy, too complex, and poorly adapted to the absorptive capacity of small volunteer-run clubs. This feedback, which was consistent, convergent, and unprompted in the Danish material and echoed in other national contexts, is not a problem of participant engagement. It is a design problem with governance implications for the European programme partnership.

Transnational sport development programmes face a structurally difficult translation challenge. They must be substantial enough to offer real content and credibility at the partnership level while remaining simple enough to be implemented by a club administrator volunteering a few hours a week during a competitive volleyball season. The WLVT materials, as currently designed, appear to sit closer to the former end of that continuum than the latter. This is consistent with what Frawley et al. (2018) describe as a persistent misalignment between the ambition of transnational sport development frameworks and the implementation reality of grassroots delivery partners.

The cross-national variation in programme experience also points to contextual factors that a single programme design will not easily accommodate. The geographical constraints faced by Norwegian clubs, the parental engagement dynamics in the Netherlands and Iceland, and the differences in club organisational capacity between HK and KA in Iceland all represent implementation realities that a standardised manual cannot resolve. There is a plausible argument that the programme's most sustainable contribution would not be a content-heavy manual but a set of enabling conditions: clear role definitions, accessible coordination support, structured opportunities for cross-club peer learning, and adult facilitators equipped to exercise the deliberate non-intervention described most clearly by the VVH Harderwijk interviewee.

7. Recommendations

Based on the findings and lessons learned during the WLVT project, the following recommendations are proposed to support future implementation at club, federation and European level.

Programme design and materials. The current materials should be substantially compressed, with priority given to a small number of high-quality, practically usable activities rather than comprehensive coverage. A useful benchmark would be ten well-designed exercises that club administrators can implement in realistic volunteer time, rather than a complete programme manual. Materials should be adapted at national level rather than uniformly translated, to account for differences in club size, organisational capacity, and geographic constraints.

Structural empowerment as a programme goal. The programme should explicitly frame structural empowerment as a goal alongside individual development. This means building in activities that are directed at club leadership, not only at young participants: conversations about governance culture, explicit commitments to creating meaningful leadership roles for young people, and mechanisms for monitoring whether those commitments translate into practice. The programme's evaluation framework should include structural empowerment measures at the club level, not only self-assessed competency gains at the individual level.

Volunteer coordinator roles. The Dutch evidence on volunteer coordinator roles offers a practical and replicable model. National federations and larger clubs should be encouraged to consider whether a dedicated coordination function, even a part-time or shared one, would improve both the quality and equity of youth leadership development. The key function is relational maintenance rather than administration: regular contact with young volunteers, recognition of contributions, and continuity across seasonal disruption.

Equity and access. The informal, observation-based pathways through which young people are currently identified and invited into leadership roles reproduce existing advantage. Clubs should be supported to develop more systematic approaches to identifying potential young leaders, including mechanisms that reach less visible participants. The VVH Harderwijk example of using annual member surveys to map skills, interests, and backgrounds offers one transferable model. The programme should address this equity dimension explicitly rather than treating informal identification as a neutral or universal good practice.

Evaluation and youth voice. Future evaluations of the WLVT programme should integrate direct youth voice as a primary data source rather than relying on adult accounts of young people's experience. This could be achieved through focus groups with young participants, participant diaries, or reflective interviews conducted by trained peer researchers. Without direct youth voice, evaluations of this kind will continue to describe adult perceptions of youth development rather than youth development itself. The attrition problem in the quantitative component should also be addressed through improved tracking and follow-up procedures, particularly in countries where geographical distance complicates in-person engagement.

Cross-national learning. The study identified meaningful variation in the maturity and sophistication of youth leadership practice across the four national sub-samples, with the Danish and Norwegian clubs offering some of the most developed examples and the Icelandic sub-sample presenting the widest range of developmental stages. The programme partnership should invest in structured cross-national and cross-club learning, creating opportunities for clubs at earlier stages to learn directly from those that have developed more systematic practices. This peer learning function may be more valuable than additional programme content, and it builds on an element that interviewees across all four countries identified as among the programme's most effective features.

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