



DDSL Emerging Talent Programme Handbook

August 2026



Table of Contents

- 1.** Background and Ethos
- 2.** Our Team
- 3.** Programmes
 - 3.1** Football Foundations Programme
 - 3.2** DDSL Representative Squads
- 4.** Communication
- 5.** Player ID Sessions & Player Development Programme
- 6.** Squad Selections and Release Forms
- 7.** What to bring?
- 8.** Attendance
- 9.** FAI Abbotstown Pitches
- 10.** Behaviour
- 11.** Kennedy & Gaynor Cups
- 12.** Insurance
- 13.** Complaints & Child Welfare



1. Background and Ethos

The DDSL Emerging Talent Programme is a dedicated initiative within the DDSL focused on player learning, enjoyment, and individual skill development. At the heart of the programme lies our guiding principle and mission: *'Empowering young players through increased time on the ball, nurturing creativity and developing their skills.'*

This ethos drives every aspect of the programme and shapes the environment we strive to create. Our aim is to foster a positive, engaging, and educational player-focused environment for all children involved.

Originally launched in August 2023, the Emerging Talent Programme (ETP), the programme has continued to evolve each season. Over the course of the last couple of years, the structure and objectives of the programme have developed. The focus of the programme is to provide players with additional opportunities to learn, improve, and experience high-quality coaching in a positive environment, while complementing the excellent work already being carried out within their clubs.

The programme offers structured training sessions built around specific technical themes and skill-based learning, bringing together players from clubs across the league. While individual player improvement remains central, players are also provided with opportunities to participate in matches and game-based learning experiences where they can apply their skills and decision-making in realistic football environments.

Each year, the programme is reviewed and adapted to ensure we continue to provide the highest quality experience possible for players, coaches, and clubs across the DDSL.

2. Our Team

The success of the DDSL ETP Programme is a direct result of the expertise, commitment, and dedication of our volunteers and staff, who work tirelessly to provide a positive and high-quality experience for all players involved. The programme is led by the Director of Football and the Club Development Officer, and is supported by the Programme Coordinator and Administrator, who together oversee the organisation, delivery, and continued growth of the programme.

Each age group within the programme benefits from a dedicated coaching team made up of Head Coaches and Assistant Coaches, all of whom bring valuable experience and knowledge from across the football community. Our coaches are fully player-focused and dedicate significant time and effort towards planning and delivering engaging, skill-based sessions.



Their emphasis is on supporting both the individual learning of players and the collective growth of the squad environment. In addition to their football experience, many of our coaches bring professional expertise from outside the game, adding unique perspectives and personal qualities to their coaching styles and session delivery. Beyond the core coaching staff, members of the wider DDSL team also contribute across various stages of the programme. Throughout the season, specialist coaches may also be involved in areas such as goalkeeping, athletic development, and player education, helping to further enhance the overall experience for players within the programme.

All coaches involved with the ETP Programme are Garda Vetted with the DDSL in line with the National Vetting Bureau Act (2012).

3. Programmes

3.1 Football Foundations Programme

The Football Foundations Programme is an initiative designed to support the learning and education of both young players and club coaches within the DDSL. The programme is specifically aimed at U9, U10, and U11 boys and girls age groups and provides a structured, enjoyable, and skill-focused football experience.

Each season, the DDSL ETP Programme invites teams from the U9, U10, and U11 Saturday and Sunday divisions to attend workshop-style sessions delivered by the DDSL coaching staff at Abbotstown. These sessions are open to all clubs within the relevant age groups, with bookings organised through an online survey distributed to clubs at the beginning of the season.

The sessions are designed not only to provide players with a fresh, engaging, and enjoyable football experience, but also to create an educational environment for club coaches. Coaches must attend the session alongside their team. Coaches are encouraged to observe the sessions from a learning perspective, gaining new ideas, practices, and approaches that can be applied within their own club environments.

All sessions are built around age-appropriate technical themes and skill-based activities, with a strong emphasis placed on enjoyment, creativity, decision-making, and maximising time on the ball. The programme aims to create a positive and challenging environment where players can continue to build confidence and improve their technical abilities.

A key objective of the Football Foundations Programme is coach education and support. Through these workshop sessions, the DDSL coaching staff aim to provide club coaches with



practical ideas and concepts for delivering positive, enjoyable, and player-centered sessions within their own teams. The programme also serves as an important steppingstone for young players as they continue their football journey and transition towards more competitive formats of the game at older age groups.

3.2 DDSL Representative Squads

In addition to the Football Foundations Programme, the DDSL ETP Programme operates Representative Squads for both boys and girls at U12, U13, and U14 age groups. These squads are composed of selected players from clubs across the DDSL and provide players with opportunities to experience additional coaching, learning, and representative football environments alongside their club football.

Each squad is supported by a dedicated coaching team that delivers structured, skill-focused sessions aimed at supporting both individual learning and overall squad development. The programme also includes classroom-based technical workshops, position-specific coaching sessions, and goalkeeper-focused training throughout the season. The emphasis is firmly placed on creating a positive and educational environment where players are encouraged to learn, improve, and enjoy their football.

The U12 and U13 Representative Squads train on a bi-weekly basis throughout the season. The U14 Representative Squads also train bi-weekly during the first half of the season before moving to weekly sessions following the Christmas break in preparation for competitions.

Throughout the season, the coaching staff also organise challenge matches and game-based learning opportunities to allow players to apply the skills and concepts introduced during training sessions. In addition to the underage squads, the DDSL also operates an U18 Boys Interleague Team which represents the league in official competition.

Players are invited into the Representative Squad structure through a Player ID and observation process, which begins annually at the start of the season. This process includes Player ID sessions, ongoing match observation, and continuous player monitoring by the coaching staff throughout the season. For specific details on how the Player ID sessions work please see Section 5.

The Player ID process typically runs over several weeks, after which an initial training squad is selected. Squad reviews then continue throughout the season, with players being added, observed, and reassessed on an ongoing basis based on performance, attitude, attendance, and progression.



At the conclusion of each training block, the coaching team may retain, add, or release players depending on the needs of the squad and the progression of individual players. Players released from the programme may receive a feedback report along with the opportunity for a meeting with a member of the coaching staff. To ensure feedback remains meaningful and constructive, formal feedback is only provided to players who have attended a minimum of four sessions to allow for a fair assessment period. Players who attend less than four sessions won't receive formal feedback as it would not be accurate or feasible to be able to provide detailed feedback.

4. Communication

The DDSL Skills Programme operates a clear communication policy to ensure consistency, transparency, and the efficient handling of all queries and correspondence. All communication relating to the programme should be directed through the Programme Coordinator via email at etp@ddsl.ie.

During the Player ID process, communication regarding player nominations, invitations, and squad updates is managed directly with clubs via email. This communication structure continues throughout the season for all Representative Squads and programme-related matters.

Parents will also be provided with a dedicated programme contact number, which should only be used to notify the team if a player is unable to attend a session or in the event of an urgent issue relating to attendance. All other communication, including questions, concerns, or general updates, should be communicated through the player's club in line with the programme communication structure.

In situations where a player is released from the programme, the coaching staff may offer the player and their parents the opportunity to attend a feedback meeting. These meetings are intended to provide brief and constructive feedback, answer any questions, and most importantly offer encouragement and reassurance to support the player's continued enjoyment and confidence in football.

The only exception to direct communication with parents is during participation in Kennedy Cup and Gaynor Cup competitions, where direct communication may be required for logistical and organisational purposes. In the event of an emergency during any session or activity, programme staff will contact parents or guardians directly.

All coaches and staff involved in the DDSL Skills Programme are volunteers who dedicate significant time and effort to supporting players and clubs across the league. The DDSL expects all communication from players, parents, and clubs to remain respectful and appropriate at all



times. Abuse, aggressive behaviour, or inappropriate conduct towards any volunteer, coach, or staff member will not be tolerated under any circumstances.

Under no circumstances should parents or clubs contact coaches or staff members directly outside of the official communication channels. All inquiries should be submitted through the official programme email address, where they will be addressed appropriately or directed to the relevant personnel where necessary.

5. Player ID Sessions and Player Development Programme (PDP)

The DDSL Skills Programme operates a structured Player ID and observation process each season for the selection of players into the DDSL Representative Squads. The process is designed to provide players with an opportunity to be observed within both training and match environments while ensuring that all sessions remain safe, organised, and manageable for participants and coaching staff.

At the beginning of each season, clubs competing within the Premier and Major divisions across the relevant boys' and girls' leagues are invited to nominate a set number of outfield players for the Player ID process. In addition, clubs may nominate goalkeepers for goalkeeper-specific Player ID sessions. Following the nomination process, selected players are invited to attend Player ID sessions held by the DDSL coaching staff. Sunday Division 1 and all other divisions will be managed through our PDP, where our team will attend and observe multiple games across all divisions and invitations will be issued to players who are noted by our coaching team at these games.

Where possible, separate Premier and Major Player ID sessions will be organised to assist with player assessment and to help provide an appropriate learning and coaching environment for all players attending.

Due to the significant number of players participating across the DDSL and the programme's responsibility to maintain appropriate child welfare standards and safe coach-to-player ratios, it is not possible to directly invite every player into the initial Player ID phase. As part of the wider observation process, members of the coaching staff will also attend league matches and tournaments throughout the season to monitor and assess players within their club environments. Through this observation process, additional players may be invited into Player ID sessions or training blocks during the season where appropriate.

While clubs are initially invited to nominate a limited number of players, the DDSL Skills Programme recognises that player development and progression continue throughout the



season. As a result, some clubs may have additional players invited into the programme through the ongoing observation and assessment process.

A key requirement of the Player ID process is that all players attending sessions must be fully and correctly registered on the DDSL Fusion System and officially listed on a registered playing panel with their club. Player registration must be fully completed and approved prior to invitations being issued. Player Registration rules are listed in Section 2.1 of the DDSL Rules 2026-2027. Players who are not properly registered or not assigned to an approved panel at the time of nomination will not be invited to attend Player ID sessions and may not be considered for invitation at a later stage.

The Player ID process typically runs over several weeks, after which an initial training squad is selected. Squad reviews then continue throughout the season, with players being monitored, added, and reassessed on an ongoing basis through both training sessions and match observation. Selection within the programme is reviewed continuously throughout each season, with coaching staff regularly monitoring player progression, attitude, attendance, and overall engagement within both club and programme environments.

The DDSL coaching staff invest significant time into observing and assessing players throughout the year to ensure that the process remains as fair, balanced, and inclusive as possible while operating within the practical limitations of squad sizes, facilities, and coaching resources. By nominating players for the programme, the ETP team understands this as consent and agreement to the rules, policies and procedures of the ETP Programme.

6. Squad Selection and Release Forms.

Following the conclusion of the Player ID phase, an initial Representative Squad training panel of approximately 20 to 25 players will be selected. Selection is based on the ongoing assessment and evaluation process carried out by the DDSL coaching staff throughout the Player ID sessions and observation period.

Clubs will be notified via email regarding players selected for the initial training block. Training blocks will generally operate over an eight-week period, with players typically attending four bi-weekly sessions during this time. The structure and duration of training blocks may vary slightly depending on the age group, calendar schedule, facility availability, and competition preparation requirements. U14 squads may move to shorter and more frequent training blocks following the Christmas period in preparation for interleague competitions.



Throughout each training block, the coaching staff may continue to invite additional players into sessions for further observation and assessment. Squad reviews are conducted on an ongoing basis throughout the season, with players being monitored across training sessions, matches, attitude, attendance, and overall engagement within the programme.

At the conclusion of each training block, the coaching staff will carry out a review process to determine squad retention, player progression, and any potential additions or releases ahead of the following block.

Recognising its responsibility towards player welfare and positive learning experiences, the DDSL Skills Programme operates a supportive feedback process for players who are released from the squad environment. Where applicable, clubs may receive a feedback form outlining areas of strength along with suggested areas for future improvement. The coaching staff may also offer players and parents the opportunity to attend a brief feedback meeting to discuss the process and provide encouragement and support moving forward.

Release from a training block does not prevent future involvement within the programme. Players may continue to be monitored through club matches and observation throughout the season and may be invited back into future Player ID sessions or training blocks where appropriate.

Formal feedback is generally only provided to players who have attended a minimum of four sessions, as limited attendance may not provide the coaching staff with a sufficient opportunity to complete a fair and meaningful assessment. Players who attend less than four sessions won't receive formal feedback as it would not be accurate or feasible to be able to provide detailed feedback.

At the conclusion of the final training block of the season, players who complete the programme may receive a certificate of participation in recognition of their involvement and commitment throughout the year.

All parents must sign a Google Form confirming they understand the process of releasing players at the start of their child's first training block. Parents must also attend a meeting shortly after the squads are confirmed.



7. What to Bring?

All players attending Player ID sessions, squad training, and matches are required to wear their full club attire, including socks, shorts, and training tops. Players should also come prepared with the following items:

1. Shin guards (must be the correct size, no credit card size shin guards)
2. Football boots
3. Rain gear
4. Water bottle
5. Spare change of clothes (for match days)
6. Light snacks or fruit (for match days or when traveling)

8. Attendance

Attendance plays an important role in ensuring the smooth operation and overall effectiveness of the DDSL Skills Programme. The coaching staff dedicate significant time and preparation towards planning and delivering each session, making communication regarding attendance extremely important.

If a player is unable to attend a session, parents or clubs are asked to notify the programme in advance by emailing etp@ddsl.ie or by contacting the designated programme contact number where appropriate.

As squad sessions operate on limited training numbers and structured coaching plans, regular attendance and positive engagement are considered as part of the ongoing player review process throughout the season. Consistent absences without communication or reasonable explanation may result in a player being removed from the programme.

Players who repeatedly fail to attend sessions may not be eligible for a formal feedback review due to the limited opportunity for meaningful assessment by the coaching staff and may not be invited back to the programme.



9. FAI Abbotstown Pitches

The ETP squads train at the National Sports Campus in Abbotstown. Parents are kindly requested to park only in the designated parking areas and to avoid parking directly in front of the pitches. Additionally, smoking and vaping **is not permitted** on the sidelines of the pitches. Anybody who breaches these rules will be asked to leave the premises.

As these facilities are rented by the DDSL, we ask all players and parents to treat the grounds with respect, ensuring that the pitches, changing rooms, and toilets are left clean and tidy.

Changing rooms and toilet facilities will be available for all players.

Google Maps Location: <https://maps.app.goo.gl/DLfj3yAk5ckfmB5X8>

10. Behaviour

The DDSL Skills Programme is committed to creating a safe, positive, and enjoyable environment where children can learn, improve, and enjoy their football. We encourage all players to embrace new challenges, try new skills, give their best effort, and maintain a positive attitude towards teammates, coaches, opponents, and match officials always.

Players are encouraged to communicate openly with coaches, ask questions, and fully engage in all sessions and activities. Respect, effort, enjoyment, and teamwork are values that sit at the centre of the programme environment.

Parents and guardians also play an extremely important role in supporting the overall experience for players. We kindly ask parents to allow coaches to coach and players to play. Positive encouragement from the sidelines is always welcomed; however, parents should refrain from giving instructions or tactical direction to players during sessions or matches, as this can create confusion and place unnecessary pressure on children. We encourage parents to support, encourage, and enjoy watching their child participate while allowing the coaching staff to manage the football environment.

All coaches and volunteers involved in the DDSL Skills Programme should be always treated with respect. Abuse, aggressive behaviour, inappropriate language, or intimidation towards players, coaches, volunteers, staff members, opponents, or match officials will not be tolerated under any circumstances. This applies both on and off the pitch, including during training sessions, matches, tournaments, and programme events.

Parents or spectators who fail to follow these standards of behaviour may be asked to leave the venue and may be subject to further action by the DDSL where necessary.



Any concerns, questions, or issues relating to the programme should not be raised directly with coaching staff during sessions or matches. All communication should instead follow the official communication process outlined in Section 4 of this handbook.

All parents must sign a form noting they have read and understand the DDSL Skills Programme prior to the commencement of programme activities.

11. Kennedy & Gaynor Cups

Each year, the U14 DDSL Representative Squads participate in the Kennedy Cup and Gaynor Cup competitions, two of the largest interleague football tournaments within Irish schoolboy and schoolgirl football. These national competitions take place annually in June and bring together representative squads from leagues across the country. **Players must be born in the equivalent U14 age group year to be eligible to play in the Kennedy and Gaynor Cup.**

Following the conclusion of the relevant training blocks, typically around April and May, the DDSL coaching staff will begin the squad selection process for these competitions. In accordance with competition regulations, each squad may contain a maximum of 20 players.

As part of the selection process, the coaching staff may also identify an additional group of approximately five to six standby players. These players remain under consideration in the event of injuries, holidays, withdrawals, or other unforeseen circumstances affecting the selected squad prior to the tournament. Players selected as standby options will be given the choice as to whether they wish to remain on the standby list.

Players on the standby list are not considered part of the official tournament squad and, unless called into the final panel, will generally conclude their involvement within the programme at the end of May. Standby players will also receive feedback forms from the coaching staff in recognition of their involvement and contribution throughout the season.

Players who are not selected for the final squad may be offered the opportunity to meet with members of the coaching staff to receive feedback and support following the selection process.

The tournaments are typically held over a five-day period at the University of Limerick. During this time, a dedicated DDSL support team accompanies the players throughout the event, providing supervision, accommodation, meals, transport coordination, and support activities outside of match participation.



Once squads are confirmed, the DDSL Skills Programme will communicate directly with parents and guardians regarding all tournament arrangements. An information evening will be organised for parents, and a dedicated WhatsApp communication group may be established by the Programme Coordinator to assist with tournament updates and logistics.

All communication throughout the tournament period will continue to follow the programme communication policy. In the event of emergencies or urgent matters during the competition, parents will have direct access to designated members of the DDSL support team.

All parents and guardians must attend the official Kennedy Cup and Gaynor Cup information meeting prior to the commencement of the tournaments.

12. Insurance

For all queries involving insurance and to view the insurance policy and claims procedure please see details on the link below

<https://ddsl.ie/insurance-terms/>

13. Complaints and Child Welfare

The DDSL Skills Programme is committed to maintaining the highest standards of child safety, welfare, safeguarding, and programme integrity always. The welfare of all players participating within the programme remains a priority for the DDSL and all staff and volunteers involved.

Formal complaints relating to the conduct, environment, organisation, or procedures within the DDSL Skills Programme may be submitted via email to etp@ddsl.ie in line with the programme communication policy. To ensure fairness, transparency, and accountability, anonymous or informal complaints cannot be formally investigated or acted upon.

Where concerns relate to child welfare, safeguarding, or matters that fall outside the direct scope of the programme, individuals are encouraged to contact childwelfare@ddsl.ie, where they will be supported by the DDSL's appointed Child Welfare Officer in accordance with the DDSL safeguarding procedures and FAI child welfare guidelines.



The DDSL takes all safeguarding and welfare responsibilities extremely seriously and is fully committed to providing a safe, positive, and supportive environment for every player, coach, volunteer, and family involved within the DDSL Skills Programme.