

YOUNG ATHLETE AGE-GROUPS IN BRITAIN SET FOR CONTROVERSIAL OVERHAUL

The following article was published on the Athletics Weekly website recently.

UKA board approves proposals from the home country athletics federations to adopt even number age group categories. The age-group system for young athletes in Britain will change from odd to even numbers in April 2026. In an historic move, the traditional categories of under-13, under-15 and under-17 will be replaced by under-12, under-14, under-16 and under-18. It is a move that will anger grassroots coaches and officials in particular, many of whom have fiercely argued against the changes in recent years. The 'even number' categories are used by World Athletics and the vast majority of its member federations. International championships organised by World Athletics and European Athletics also use the under-18 and under-20 categories. Yet now, following last month's UK Athletics board meeting, the same age groups will be used in Britain from April 1 in 2026, thereby giving the sport just over two years to prepare for the change. The proposals to move from odd to even age groups were made by the home country athletics federations last year with a nationwide consultation taking place in the autumn before it was debated at the UKA board in December.

"UK Athletics can confirm an amendment to age groups as part of the rule change proposals for the 2024-2026 rule book has been approved at a recent UKA board meeting," a statement read. "The home country athletics federations' proposal to revise the current age groups of U13, U15, U17 to new age groups of U12, U14, U16 and U18 was approved." The statement continued: "The HCAF proposal was formed following consultation carried out by each of the HCAFs with key stakeholders in the sport to frame the recommendation to the UKA board. In approving the proposal, the UK Athletics board acknowledged the strategic role of the HCAFs in administering the sport at junior age group level, while also recognising the important role carried out by the rules group on behalf of the whole sport. "The full implementation of the age group changes will come into effect from 1 April 2026. A publication of a summary of changes and guidance notes will be on the 16 February 2024 as per the rules consultation timeline."

This will mean:

Years 5 and 6 (ages 9-11) will fall into the under-12 category.

Years 7 and 8 (11-13) will be under-14.

Years 9 and 10 (13-15) will be under-16.

Years 11 and 12 (15-17) will be under-18.

Year 13 and university students (17+) will be under-20.

As well as moving into alignment with the rest of the world, the governing bodies argue the changes will help minimise teenage drop-out rates because the current system in the UK sees top year under-17 and under-20 athletes juggling athletics competitions with GCSEs and A-levels – or National exams and Highers in Scotland. This is, they say, is a "perfect storm" of pressure. They have pointed to a [2018 survey](#) that found "time constraints from studying" was the leading reason for athletes aged 15-22 stopping athletics. "The clash with academic commitments, creating massive pressure on young people, the lack of alignment with other countries, sports and talent pathways and the negative mental effect caused by large amounts of pressure and other aspects such as the Relative Age Effect could cause the athlete to decrease or cease participation in athletics," the governing bodies told grassroots during their consultation period in 2023. "An athlete shouldn't have to choose between academic or athletics success."

Several attempts in recent years to change the age groups have been met with strong opposition from grassroots. They insist new age groups will not improve drop-out rates and will cause confusion when it comes to throws implements and hurdles races, not to mention long-established age-group records.

[As we reported last year](#), Northern Athletics – the main track and field competition provider in the North of England – was particularly critical and last year wrote to its member clubs to say that the consultation process was sprung on them with the webinars being "lectures followed by a few approved questions and answers". They added that changing the age groups would create "considerable chaos... and there is scant evidence it will benefit our athletes nor our clubs and officials." AW understands that despite these new rules the age groups within schools competitions will remain unchanged.