Places to Play

Australia's National Community Sport Infrastructure Plan

Australian Government
Australian Sports Commission

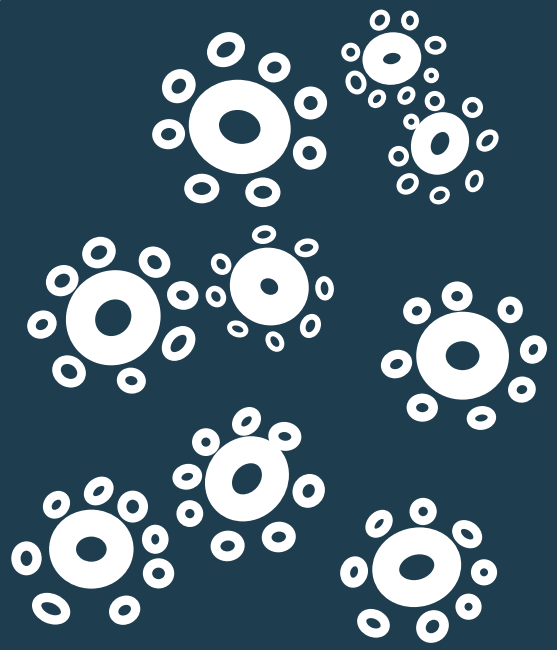
PLAY WELL

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

The Australian Sports Commission acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the lands where our offices are located — the Ngunnawal people; the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people of the Kulin Nation; and the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation. We recognise and respect all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples across Australia, and we pay our deepest respects to Elders past, present and emerging.

We honour the enduring contributions of First Nations peoples to sport and society, and we celebrate the power of sport to promote reconciliation and reduce inequality.

As we walk together, we embrace a culture of learning — blending Western and Aboriginal leadership practices — to shape a positive and shared future. We act with respect for our impact and legacy, not only for today, but for our children's, children's, children.



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Adam Bishop, General Manager, Growth and Development, Australian Athletics

Adam Cassidy, Senior Manager, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion, Australian Sports Commission

Adam Cheyne, CEO, Sport Environment Alliance

Anand Pillay, CEO, Parks and Leisure Australia

Ashley Madgwick, Senior Manager, Sporting Schools, Australian Sports Commission

Carly Goodrich, Head of Government Relations and Corporate Affairs, PGA of Australia and Golf Australia

Fiona Baxter, Head of Infrastructure, Cricket Australia

Matt Burton, Executive Director, Sport Infrastructure and Precincts, Queensland Government

Paul Cammack, Strategy and Special Projects, Tennis Australia

Philip Saikaly, Lead Director Community Sports Infrastructure, Victorian Government

Shayne Ward, Head of Venue Network Enhancements and Partnerships, AFL

INTRODUCTION

Community sport is one of Australia's greatest strengths. It brings people together, builds healthier and more cohesive communities and creates opportunities for people of all ages and backgrounds to participate, connect and belong.

The success of community sport depends on having sufficient and appropriate places to play which enable welcoming, safe and inclusive experiences. Local fields, courts, pools and community spaces are critical to community sport delivering on its potential.

Across Australia these facilities are vital places for sport and active recreation. For safe gathering in times of disaster, as sites of celebration and welcoming and as community hubs supporting essential social connection and cohesion across metropolitan, regional and remote communities.

These places play a significant role in local, state and national economies, delivering recurring positive social, health and economic returns on investment and are shaped by decisions made across all levels of government, sport organisations, schools and communities. Yet too often, these decisions are made in isolation.

The system that provides the network of these places is under increasing strain, with local government bearing the biggest burden. Across the country, facilities are ageing. Demand for places and spaces is growing. Participation is more social, more flexible and more diverse than ever before, which broadens the demand for access and the amenities required to support it.

At the same time, the cost of building and maintaining infrastructure continues to rise, planning processes are often complex and fragmented, and access to existing facilities is not always equitable or efficient.

Often, the current model builds more but it doesn't always enable more and despite significant investment by multiple agencies across the system, too many communities still struggle to find a place to play. This is the challenge at the heart of the Places to Play Plan.

The future role and value of community sport infrastructure will not be measured by how much we build, but by how effectively we invest in connecting participation with places to expand the crucial benefits that physical activity and connection to place generate. This Plan reflects that shift.

The Australian Sports Commission's role is not to deliver, but to orchestrate. We play a system leadership role, creating the conditions for governments, sport and communities to work more effectively together. As the system aligns and works together, Places to Play will shift how Australia makes decisions about spaces and places to enable inclusive, high quality participation opportunities.

Places to Play sets out a new, nationally aligned approach to community sport infrastructure, one that places participation outcomes at the centre of decision-making.

Together this plan provides a foundation for more connected and inclusive planning, more targeted and sustainable investment and more effective use of existing infrastructure.

The Places to Play Plan is not a blueprint for a single organisation, sport or level of government. It is designed to span traditional thinking about levels and jurisdictions. It is a shared plan for collective action by the system, one that recognises the different roles across the system, while uniting them around a Common Goal and a Common Ground.

The Plan establishes a Common Goal for the system:

Everyone has a place to play.

Our Common Goal will support inclusive, participation-first thinking and coordinated investment for well-used, shared community hubs with a focus on accessible, climate resilient places. This Goal brings the Play Well vision to life through a focus on places to play.

The Plan lays out our Common Ground:

Optimise what we have and grow what we need.

Our Common Ground recognises sport and active recreation facilities as essential social infrastructure, reinforcing the importance of evidence to encourage better use of existing facilities alongside smarter planning for and provision of new infrastructure targeted at addressing genuine need.

THE CASE FOR CHANGE

For decades, the focus of infrastructure planning has largely been on building more. More fields, courts, pitches, tracks, pools and pavilions. Traditionally, infrastructure investment has often been the result of opportunity, point-in-time funding availability or asset-based planning processes. This logic perpetuates a system where new facilities are developed with the expectation that participation will follow.

The result is a community sport infrastructure system that does not always deliver the outcomes it is capable of. Facilities can be built or upgraded without a clear, logical link to priority participation outcomes. Many existing venues are underutilised or oversubscribed across the national network, and these challenges are sustained by adherence to a paradigm in which planning and investment decisions are not sufficiently informed by data or calibrated to the needs of existing and future users.

At the same time, expectations of community sport infrastructure are changing. Communities are seeking facilities that are more inclusive, more responsive to local surrounds and more adaptable to how people want to participate today and into the future. Sport organisations are seeking and programming for facilities that can support quality participation experiences and more diverse formats of play. Communities are also seeking to access these facilities for recreation, leisure and social cohesion benefits.

Achieving our Common Ground and Common Goal will require changes in the ways the sport system plans, funds, designs, manages, shares and evaluates community facilities for sport. The shared ambition will require:

Clearer strategic and operational alignment between all parts of the system.

Consistent collaboration and stronger partnerships with existing and new stakeholders.

A collective commitment to ensuring that community sport infrastructure works harder to support participation, now and into the future.

These challenges cannot be addressed by any single organisation acting alone.

This is why the Places to Play Plan matters. For the first time, stakeholders across the system are provided with a nationally-aligned framework for participation-centred community sport infrastructure that will coordinate action around a shared goal and a clear common ground. Local Government is the biggest sponsor of community sport through the provision of facilities and enabling services, and by aligning stakeholders' planning for, investment in and use of infrastructure, the Plan will deliver better outcomes for communities, sport, active recreation and all levels of government.

Current model	New model
Overspecification of facilities.	Only the essential requirements to support regular play.
Build it and they will come.	Deliberate, participation-first and evidence-based investment.
Facilities built to meet today's demands.	Facilities designed and scheduled for future needs, flexible use and inclusive participation.
Individual facility design, management and delivery.	Place based, whole-of-systems approaches, optimising use of existing facilities first.
Extended lease over entirety of facility.	Equitable access for multiple sports and community uses.
Focus on new assets.	Focus on access, sharing, and optimisation of existing assets.
Capital investment as the end goal.	Inclusive, flexible participation opportunities as the end goal.

THE STRATEGIC SHIFT

While new infrastructure is often necessary, the predominant focus on additional places is insufficient to meet the evolving demands of contemporary Australian communities, nor is it sustainable for those that develop, own and operate these assets or the environments that support them.

The Places to Play Plan adopts a different starting point.

The Plan starts with and centres people, not projects and is underpinned by a fundamental shift in how community sport infrastructure is planned, delivered and managed.

Participation-centred decision making recognises that infrastructure is a means to an end, not an end in itself. This approach prioritises a deeper understanding of community need and demand, better design, improved access to existing infrastructure, better scheduling and targeted investment where genuine gaps exist.

This Plan recognises that improving participation outcomes does not always require new infrastructure. It often requires a more coordinated and deliberate approach to how existing places are planned, configured, shared and used.

It also recognises that better alignment leads to better outcomes. When communities, schools, sport, active recreation and government work from a shared understanding of need, a shared approach to planning, and a shared commitment to participation outcomes, infrastructure can be used more effectively, investment can be more targeted, and communities can benefit more broadly.

The opportunity is not simply to build more, but to build a more connected, coordinated and outcomes-focused system.

Infrastructure should follow and enable achievement of outcomes, not the other way around.

The effort required to enable and sustain this shift is significant, but so is the opportunity.

THE COMMUNITY SPORT PLACEMAKING MODEL

Delivering places to play that support the achievement of participation outcomes requires alignment and collaboration among diverse stakeholders across multiple sectors.

Community sport infrastructure does not operate in isolation. It exists within a broader system that shapes how people engage and participate, how facilities are planned, delivered and managed, and how effectively places are used over time.

Community consultation has reinforced that achieving stronger participation outcomes requires a more connected understanding of this system and its evolution into a cohesive model that brings critical system components together.

The Community Sport Placemaking Model can be understood as connected Common Goal drivers and Common Ground enablers that support us all to stand together and take coordinated action.

The future role and value of community sport infrastructure will not be measured by how much we build, but by how effectively we invest in connecting participation with places.

Places to Play

Australia's National Community Sport Infrastructure Plan

Our Common Goal:
Everyone has a place to play.

Our Common Ground:
Optimise what we have. Grow what we need.

Places to Play requires a deeper understanding of community need and demand, better design, improved access to existing infrastructure, better scheduling and investment only where genuine gaps exist.

Common Goal Drivers

People	Places	Planet	Policy	Planning	Programs	Partnerships
The diverse communities who use, access and benefit from facilities, with different needs, preferences and barriers to participation.	The suburbs, country towns, city centres and remote areas where sport and active recreation occurs, the physical size, shape, design and accessibility of built infrastructure, including fields, courts, facilities and multi-use spaces.	The environmental context, including climate, sustainability, the increasing impact of extreme weather on infrastructure and participation, along with our changing relationship with natural resources.	The frameworks and guidelines that shape investment decisions, set design standards, prioritise access arrangements and support adjacent community use opportunities.	The processes that guide where, when and how infrastructure is developed, optimised, renewed and/or prioritised.	The activities and offerings that activate infrastructure and enable participation.	The relationships between governments, sport organisations, local groups, schools and communities that enable shared use, access and coordinated delivery.

Common Ground Enablers

Leadership and Governance	Collaboration and Partnerships	Evidence and Insights	Capability and Capacity
Improved coordination and alignment across governments, sport and communities recognising community sport facilities as critical community infrastructure serving multiple, diverse needs.	Stronger collaboration across sport, planning, government, education, commercial and not-for-profit sectors enabling inclusive participation outcomes through infrastructure.	Clear, accurate and freely available information to inform planning and investment decisions that support optimising what we have and growing what we need.	Greater capability and enhanced capacity across the system to continually improve participation-first infrastructure development.

SHARED ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

No single part of the community sport system can deliver on the outcomes of this Plan alone.

Delivering better outcomes through community sport placemaking requires coordinated action across a diverse and interconnected system. It requires stakeholders in each place to play distinct roles, shaped by their respective responsibilities, capabilities and connections to communities.

The Places to Play Plan recognises that, while stakeholders and their roles may be different, they are in all cases interdependent. Stronger alignment and proactive connections across the system, especially within a local community, are essential to ensuring infrastructure supports better and more sustainable participation outcomes.

Strengthening Alignment Across the System

The system does not always operate in a coordinated way - while discrete roles are often recognised, the respective responsibilities can be misunderstood and/or considered individually. By working more collaboratively with shared evidence and better aligning effort and investment, the system can move beyond fragmented decision-making towards a more connected approach that delivers better outcomes for communities.

A Shared Responsibility

The system shares responsibility to optimise what we have and grow what we need. This Plan identifies the predominant roles of specific stakeholders and describes the interdependent responsibilities for these stakeholders across the system, recognising that governments enable and invest, sport activates and engages and communities participate and shape demand. Local governments play a central role in the system and their critical role needs to be valued and supported so it becomes more sustainable. More broadly:

> **Local government** are the primary owners, planners and managers of local sport facilities, playing a crucial role in optimising existing facilities, understanding where growth is required and enabling inclusive participation outcomes.

> **State and Territory governments** shape the system through investment, policy leadership and planning, by setting infrastructure and participation priorities and supporting consistency and alignment with partners.

> **Australian government** provides national leadership, coordination and investment, enabling collaboration across jurisdictions, facilitating joint outcomes and strengthening data and evidence.

> **Sport** at all levels influence and shape participation through product offerings and program delivery, they advocate for infrastructure that supports their sport and may partner with government to plan facilities.

> **Education institutions and schools and education providers** are significant owners of community sport infrastructure and can help optimise what we have through provision of access outside of school hours.

> **Communities** shape place and are the centre of the facilities and participation systems, they offer local insights, shape participation demands and are often the primary stewards of local facilities.

What this means for Local Government

Ensure your local plans and strategies complement and support the Common Ground of Places to Play.

Gather and analyse data about your communities to frame participation-first thinking to optimise facility planning and development.

Collaborate with sport and other relevant stakeholders to create and operationalise localised Places to Play Plans.

Optimise access to and utilisation of sport and active recreation facilities by exploring equitable, shared use options with sport and non-sport organisations.

Apply universal design principles in new builds, upgrades and renewals.

Ensure the Common Goal and Common Ground of Places to Play are prioritised through venue contracts and facility management practices.

What this means for State/Territory and Australian Government

Gather and analyse data about communities to ensure participation-first thinking drives network planning and investment roadmaps.

Prioritise future focused data and evidence trends in facility investment programs.

Ensure universal design principles underpin decisions for new builds, rebuilds and upgrades.

Optimise access to and utilisation of sport and active recreation facilities by ensuring equitable, shared use with sport and non-sport organisations.

Align policy and investment programs to the Common Ground and Common Goal of Place to Play.

Ensure the Common Goal and Common Ground of Places to Play are prioritised through venue contracts and facility management practices.

What this means for Sport

Optimise access to and use of existing facilities within a community before advocating for new facilities.

Gather and analyse data about communities to ensure participation-first thinking drives planning for facilities and the programs delivered within them.

Understand and promote the essential requirements of your sport to support regular play that is tailored to participants and place.

Support flexible and social formats of play suitable for multiple facility types.

Partner with other sports to ensure equitable, multipurpose use of existing facilities.

TIMEFRAME

The Places to Play Plan is configured in three phases over a span of ten years, recognising the sustained focus and incremental approach required for enduring change across the system.

Phase	Core Focus
Years 1—3 2026 - 2029	**Collaboration, knowledge sharing, capability building and more equitable use through participation first thinking.**
Years 4—6 2030 - 2032	**System reform, embedding the change and modernisation.**
Years 7—10 2033 - 2036	**Building on momentum and growing strategic capability.**

What Happens Next?

The Places to Play Plan is intended to guide planning, investment and operational decisions across the community sport infrastructure system.

By working together to optimise what we have and grow what we need, we can ensure everyone has a place to play.

NATIONAL PRIORITIES YEARS 1 - 3

Better use, improved collaboration and greater capability through participation-first thinking.

Project	Focus
National Advisory Committee on Places to Play	Collaboration between system leaders to ensure the Plan delivers impact.
Open for Play	National coordination between sport and education sectors to increase and sustain community access to public schools after hours.
Optimise What We Have	Support sport to adopt safe, inclusive participation-focussed approaches to school facility suitability, recognising that these places can support meaningful participation outcomes without meeting full competition standards.
National Universal Design Guidelines	Practical guidance for leaders at all levels to ensure our Places to Play are for everyone.
Play Anywhere strategies	Strategies that unlock innovative sport and active recreation formats to optimise what we have.
Essential Requirements for Play	Support sport, local government and schools to align on the minimum, essential requirements necessary to support participation in local level sport and physical activity.
Active Places Network	Establishing and connecting the network to build capability, showcase best practice and continually improve participation-first infrastructure development.
Places to Play plans	A structured approach and practical tools to support the development of Local Government Places to Play plans and to align NSO & NSOD planning and investment across participation and places.
Dedicated Places to Play Research	Growing the evidence base for community sport placemaking to support adoption, collaboration and evaluation.

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