



Report

# Sports facilities and sports policy in the Netherlands

State of knowledge, trends and  
developments

# Introduction

**In this report, we outline current sports knowledge, policy, trends and challenges in the Netherlands.**

## **Dutch sports facilities and policy**

Sports facilities are regarded as an essential precondition for sports participation in the Netherlands. The country is known for its dense and diverse sports infrastructure, offering various types of facilities within close proximity to most residents. However, both sports facilities themselves and the way they are perceived from a policy perspective are subject to change, driven by evolving trends and societal developments.

## **Similarities with Sweden**

The Netherlands and Sweden share notable similarities in their approach to sports facilities and sports policy. In both countries, sports facilities are considered vital for enabling sports participation. And in both countries, municipalities play a leading role as primary investors in sports infrastructure, and in creating opportunities for citizens to engage in physical activity.

We therefore believe that insights from the Netherlands may be valuable in informing and inspiring policies and practices in Sweden, particularly in relation to municipal investment strategies aimed at increasing public participation in sport.

## **This report**

In this contribution, we provide a concise overview of the current state of knowledge regarding the impact of sports facilities on sports participation (chapter 1). We then describe recent trends and developments concerning sports facilities in the Netherlands (chapter 2). Based on these insights, we outline several challenges that we anticipate facing in the (near) future (chapter 3). Finally, we end with some concluding reflections (chapter 4).

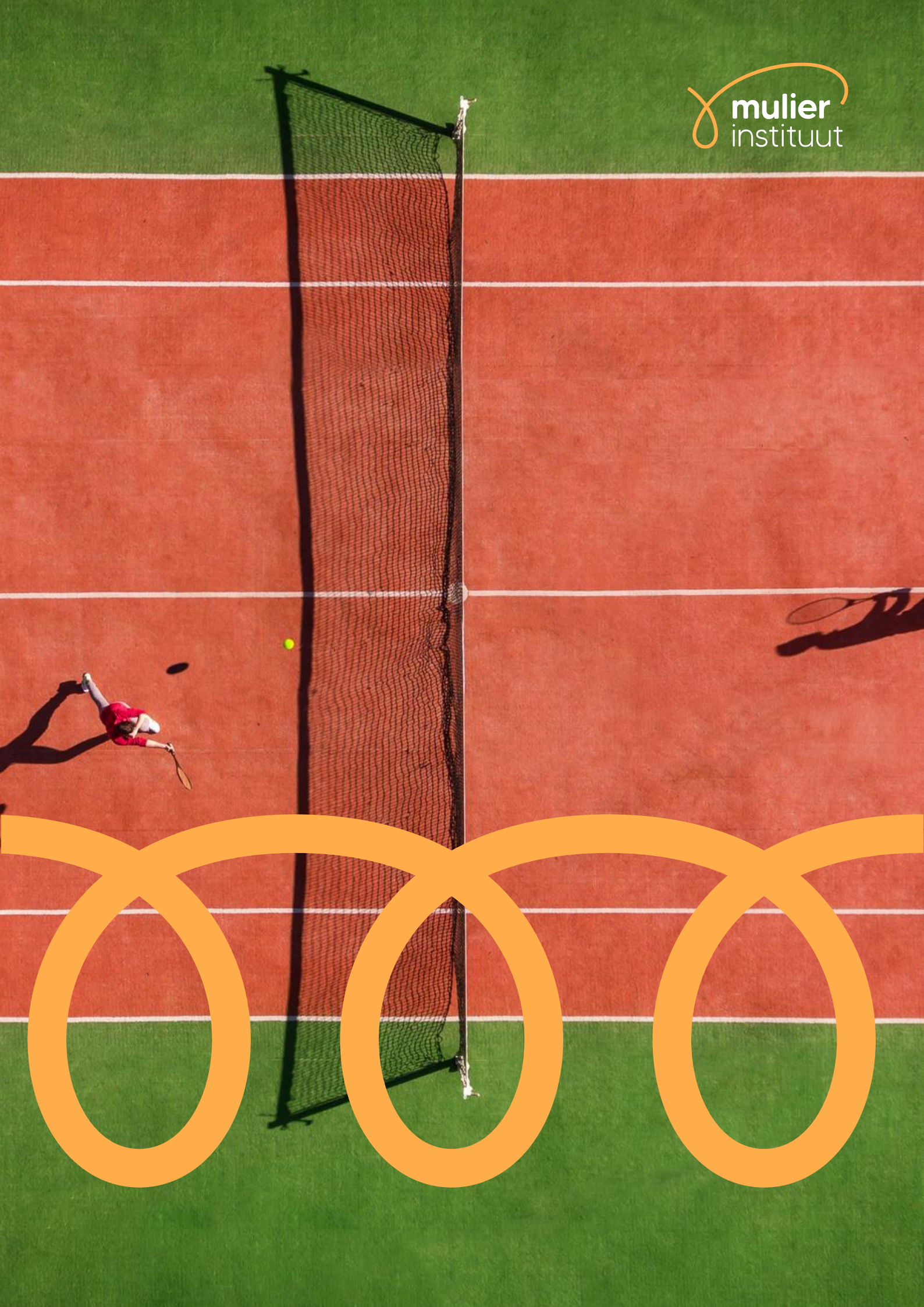


### **The Mulier Institute**

The Mulier Institute is a scientific research agency focused on sports and physical activity. With our research and expertise, we aim to contribute to well-founded policies aimed at promoting sports and active lifestyles, and strengthening the sports sector.

The Mulier Institute was founded in 2002. It is the only independent, non-profit, scientific sports-research institute in the Netherlands. As such, it is engaged in fundamental, practice-focused and policy-relevant social-scientific sports research. It monitors developments within the Dutch sports sector. It builds its own databases and trend series to this end, in close cooperation with academic and professional universities, both in the Netherlands and abroad, as well as with other research organisations and statistical administrative bodies.

The Mulier Institute has an annual budget of 6 million euros. Part of this budget is funded by an institutional grant from the Dutch Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sports. The other financial means stem from contract research for third parties (municipalities, ministries, sports unions and umbrella organisations) as well as subsidies for scientific research.



# State of knowledge

**In this chapter, we outline the current state of knowledge regarding how sports facilities in the Netherlands support sports participation, and how (local) policies can contribute to strengthening this relationship.**

## Historical perspective

To better understand the relationship between sports facilities and sports participation, it is essential to look at the historical development of sports infrastructure in the Netherlands. Within this development, several key turning points can be identified.

### The eight-hour working day

The first major turning point was the introduction of the eight-hour working day in 1919. With increased leisure time available to the general population, sports participation became more popular and began to democratize.

In the following years, participation in sports such as football, korfbal, gymnastics, swimming, and boxing grew significantly (Hoekman & Van der Poel, 2009). Local authorities started constructing sports facilities for clubs representing these more accessible sports, particularly in cases where members could not afford to finance them independently.

At the time, more elite sports such as tennis did not receive government support. Football and swimming, for example, were explicitly facilitated by the government, as these activities were viewed as responsible leisure pursuits for the working class, contributing to public health and hygiene, and unlikely to be realized without public investment.

### Post-war reconstruction

A second turning point was the post-World War II reconstruction period. Sports facilities, especially football fields serving the working class, were rebuilt, often as part of job creation programs to address high unemployment. This reconstruction enabled the population to resume sports participation in the aftermath of the war.

### Free Saturdays

A third important development was the introduction of the free Saturday, or five-day working week, in 1965. During this period, the government promoted sports as a responsible and desirable leisure activity, particularly for lower social classes.

In the 1960s and 1970s, sports became a visible element of urban landscapes, driven partly by welfare state policies to promote public access to sports (Hoekman & Van der Poel, 2009). In 1967, the government introduced a national subsidy scheme to expand the number of sports facilities. Although temporary, this program

was highly successful: numerous sports halls, swimming pools, and sports fields were built and operated by local authorities.

Sports clubs, now equipped with long-desired facilities, were able to open their doors to a broader public (Van Bottenburg, 1991; Pouw, 1999). Participation data from this era show a clear increase in sports participation following these infrastructure expansions.

### **Further growth of sports opportunities**

Following this third turning point, one could argue that the Dutch sports infrastructure became sufficiently aligned with the interests and needs of the population. In subsequent years, the government increasingly enabled market actors to provide sports opportunities, contributing to a diverse landscape of sports facilities and a variety of provision models. The number of facilities continued to grow, largely in response to rising demand, as more people took an interest in sports and joined clubs, necessitating further expansion.

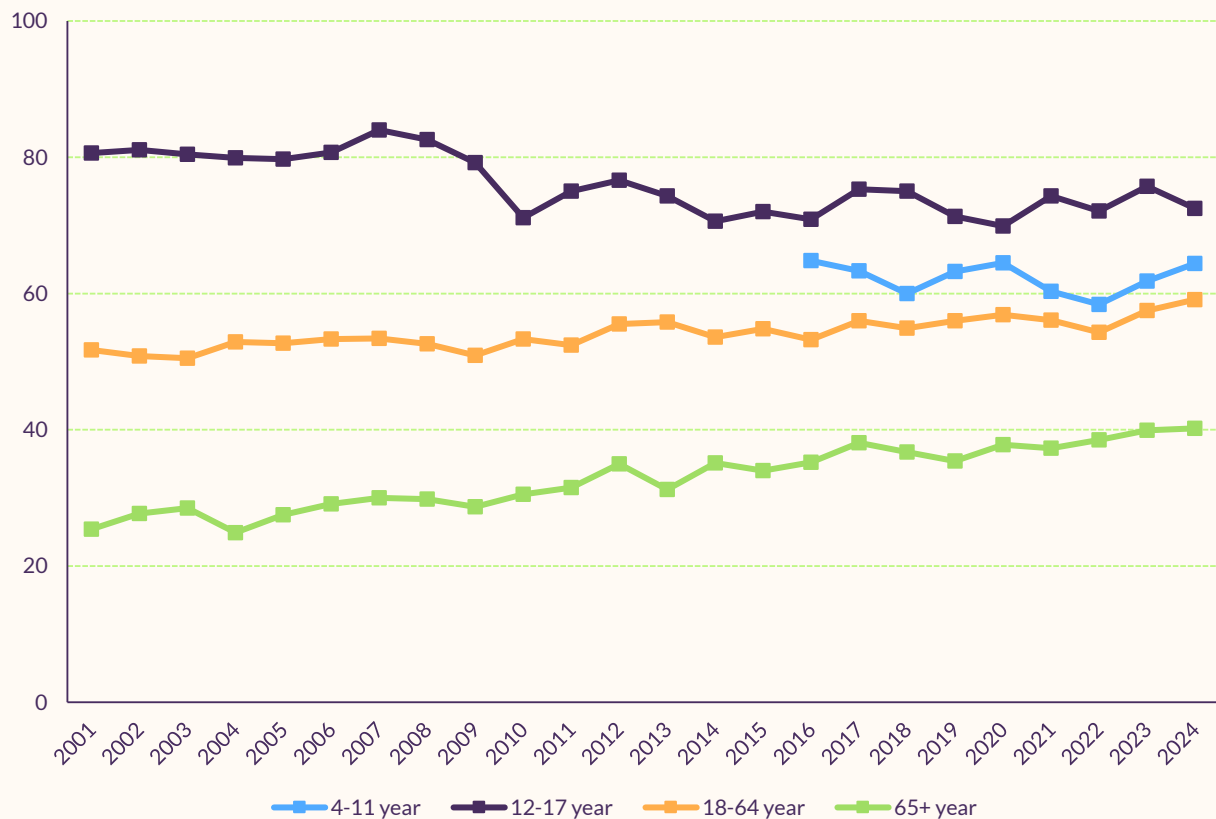
### **Current situation**

At present, numerous sports opportunities are available in close proximity to most residents. Consequently, the added value of constructing new facilities is different today than in the 1960s and 1970s. Recent research indicates that reasons for non-participation are rarely related to a lack of facilities. While a diverse range of options may encourage individuals with lower motivation to participate occasionally, it does not play a significant role in fostering regular, frequent participation. Those who engage in sports on a weekly basis generally make use of what is already available.

### **Sports participation**

On a broader scale, weekly sports participation rates in the Netherlands have remained relatively stable over the past two decades. Participation among older adults has increased from 25% to 40%, while participation among youth has declined from 81% to 73%. Adults show a slight upward trend ([figure 1.1](#))

**Figure 1.1**  
**Development of the weekly sports participation in the Netherlands**  
 (as percentages of the population)



Source: Statistics Netherlands, Health Survey (2001–2013); Health Survey/Lifestyle Monitor conducted by Statistics Netherlands in collaboration with the National Institute for Public Health and the Environment (2014–2024); 2020 Health Monitor for Adults and Older Adults by Municipal Public Health Services, Statistics Netherlands and the National Institute for Public Health and the Environment.

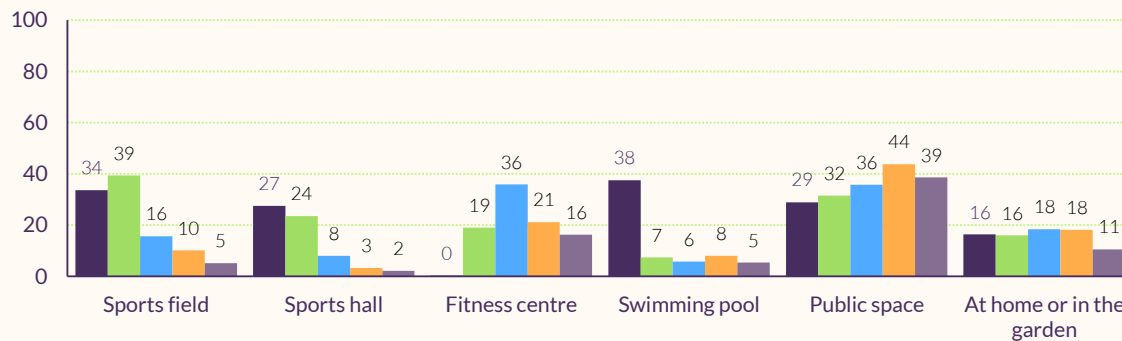
### Use of sports facilities

Sports fields, sports halls, and swimming pools are now primarily used by youth, whereas adults and elderly people are more active in public spaces and commercial venues such as fitness centres (figure 1.2). Adults and elderly people tend to participate in sports primarily for health-related reasons, whereas members of sports clubs – who are active mainly in sports facilities – attach more value to the social aspects and the sense of community that these environments provide.

**Figure 1.2**

**Practice of sports activities by location according to the Dutch population**

(as percentages of the Dutch population who participate in sports at least twelve times a year)



Source: Statistics Netherlands/The Netherlands Institute for Social Research, Leisure omnibus survey 2022. Edited by: Mulier Institute.

## Contemporary policy directions

### Central government

In recent years, the central government has increasingly positioned itself as a prominent stakeholder in the field of sports facilities, a role it did not traditionally occupy (Van der Poel, 2023). This shift can be attributed to several significant developments:

- Firstly, sports facilities were identified as one of six priority areas in the National Sports Agreement (**see box below**).
- Secondly, the expansion of the VAT exemption for sports meant that municipalities and sports clubs could no longer reclaim VAT on their investments in sports facilities. To offset this impact, two national subsidy schemes were introduced.
- Thirdly, the national requirement mandating that primary schools provide at least two physical education lessons per week, combined with the obligation for municipalities to ensure adequate facilities to support this, further reinforced the government's involvement.
- Finally, the central government played a crucial supporting role during the COVID-19 measures, when sports facilities were forced to close but continued to incur fixed costs.



## National Sports Agreement

The National Sports Agreement (NSA) aims to '(re)vitalize' the Dutch sports system, to create a sports environment in which everyone can participate in (and enjoy) sports and physical activity. The principal stakeholders are the Ministry of Sports, the National Sports Federation, the Association of Sports and Municipalities, and the Platform of Sports Entrepreneurs.

The NSA can be regarded as a form of 'collaborative governance'. The main principle is that constructive collaboration between the national or local administration, sports federations, sports clubs and other public and/or private organisations leads to outcomes that could not otherwise be accomplished. It is also a form of 'multi-level' governance: co-operation between the national, regional and local level.

Regarding the sports facilities, the stated goals are:

- wider and more intensive use of existing sports facilities;
- more exercise-friendly public spaces and more freely accessible sports facilities; and
- more environmentally sustainable sports facilities.

## Local authorities

Although the national government has become increasingly involved in the domain of sports facilities, local authorities have historically been – and continue to be – the primary implementing bodies responsible for the realization and management of these facilities.

Local policies, particularly in urban areas, have become increasingly focused on maximizing the use of existing sports facilities (Hoekman & Schadenberg, 2023). In recent years, municipalities have invested significant effort in promoting multifunctionality (Hoekman & Van der Maat, 2017; Hoogendam et al., 2021; Geurink et al., 2025).

More and more sports parks are being opened up for broader community use, and freely accessible facilities such as calisthenics areas and obstacle courses are being added. The number of sports park managers – paid professionals tasked with optimizing utilization – is also steadily increasing (Bronkhorst & Van Suijlekom, 2025).

These efforts aim to create more opportunities for users beyond traditional sports clubs. By facilitating informal and self-directed (physical) activity, municipalities seek to increase the social value of sports facilities, engage specific target groups (such as youth, elderly people, and individuals new to sports), and integrate additional functions that extend beyond the traditional role of sports clubs. In doing so, they not only respond to evolving patterns of sports participation, but also strengthen the societal justification for maintaining and publicly investing in sports facilities.



# Trends and developments

In this chapter, we present a brief overview of recent trends and developments observed in the Netherlands with regard to sports facilities and related issues.

## Sports landscape

### Satisfaction

The Netherlands provides a dense and diverse sports infrastructure, offering a wide range of facilities in close proximity to most residents. As a result, the Dutch rank among the most satisfied Europeans when it comes to local sports facilities. More than nine out of ten residents believe there are sufficient opportunities to engage in sports within their local area (91%). This is similarly true for residents in Sweden (89%, European Commission, Eurobarometer 525, 2022).

### Density as a key performance indicator

In 2023, the density of sports facilities in the Netherlands stood at 21.7 per 10,000 inhabitants. Facility density is one of the key performance indicators (KPIs) used by the Ministry of Sports (**see box below**). The score on this indicator has remained relatively stable since 2015 (Wezenberg-Hoenderkamp et al., 2024). Due to the absence of a comprehensive database on sports facilities, a comparable KPI cannot currently be established in Sweden.

### Innovation

To the extent that innovation within the sports infrastructure has taken place in the Netherlands over the past two decades, it has largely been driven by commercial initiatives (e.g. bouldering, fitness centers, and squash facilities). More recently, there has been a notable increase in the number of air domes, beach courts, and padel courts (Wezenberg-Hoenderkamp et al., 2023). These facilities contribute to more efficient use of the existing infrastructure and often serve as alternative variants of other sports.



### Key performance indicators

The key performance indicators (KPIs) for sports were established in 2014 by the Minister of Health, Welfare and Sport to enable systematic and sustainable monitoring of the state of affairs in the field of sports over time.

In calculating the facility density KPI, differences in diversity (i.e., the number of different sports a facility can accommodate) and capacity (such as the size of playing surfaces) are explicitly taken into account. The primary source for these calculations is the Dutch Sports Facility Database.

The Dutch Sports Facility Database is a national database containing information on approximately 22,000 sports facilities across the Netherlands. The database is managed by the Mulier Institute. We continuously develop and expand it by incorporating more detailed facility characteristics. For example, the number of solar panels installed. We receive a government subsidy to support our work on maintaining and enhancing this database.

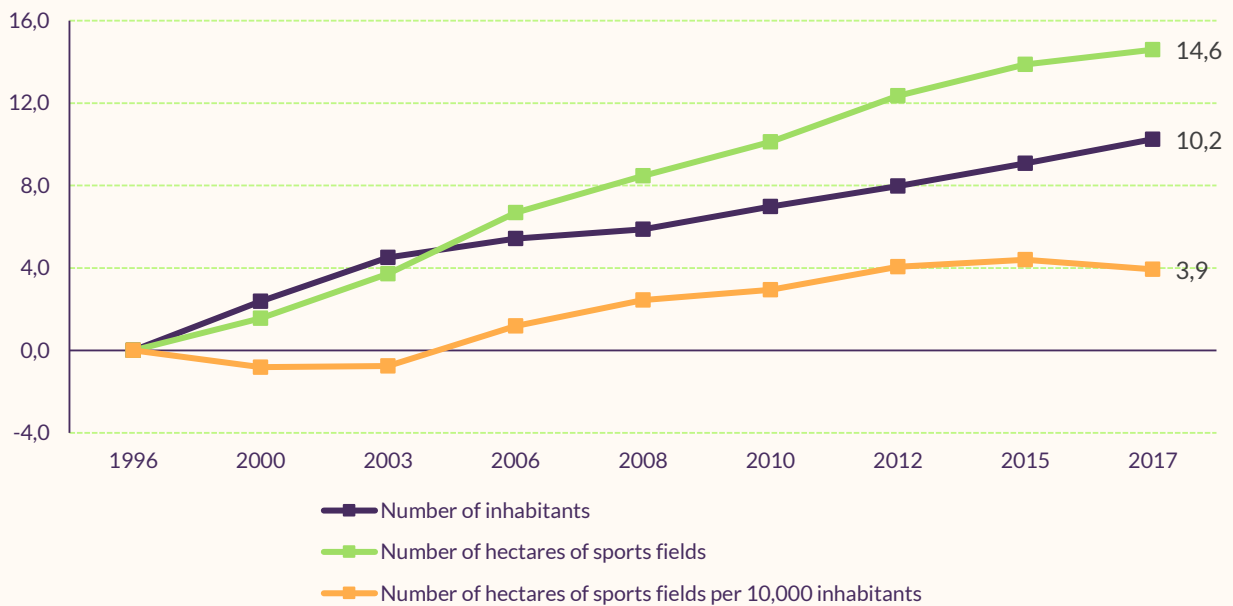
### Spatial footprint of sports

The spatial footprint of sports in the Netherlands has increased by 15% since 1996. While the population also grew during this period, that increase was more modest (+10%). As a result, the spatial footprint per inhabitant has expanded ([figure 2.1](#)). However, regional differences are significant. In urban areas – particularly in the Randstad – the sports footprint has decreased, either in absolute terms or relative to the number of inhabitants.

**Figure 2.1**

**Development of the number of inhabitants and number of hectares of sports fields in the Netherlands**

(as percentages compared to 1996)



Source: Statistics Netherlands, Corrected land use 1996-2017 by region of the year 2025. Edited by: Mulier Institute.

### Scarcity of urban space

Concerns are growing about whether existing sports facilities can meet the demands of expected urban population growth. Due to the severe scarcity of available space, it is highly uncertain whether additional capacity can be realized. At the same time, in many cities, existing sports facilities are increasingly being considered as potential sites for housing development. This creates a risk that valuable sports infrastructure may disappear if protective measures are not taken.

### Sports facilities in rural areas

In more rural areas, the focus has shifted toward preserving the quality and availability of sports infrastructure as a means to support liveability despite ongoing population decline (Van der Poel, 2023).

## Usage

### Public space as an important sports location

Public space is the most frequently cited location where residents in the Netherlands engage in physical activity (figure 2.2). The number of people exercising at fitness centres has stabilised after years of growth. One possible explanation is that many individuals have continued to exercise at home after the COVID-19 pandemic. Meanwhile, the use of indoor sports facilities—such as sports halls and swimming pools—has shown a gradual decline over time.

## Trends in facilities used for PE

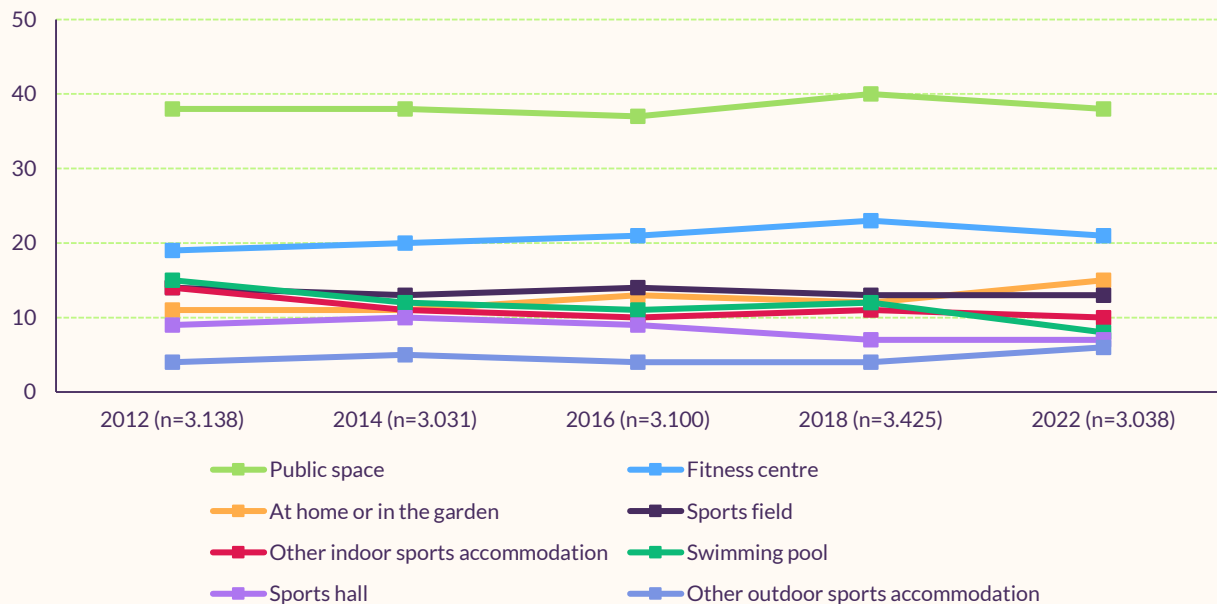
In the Netherlands, gymnasiums remain the primary venue for physical education in both primary and secondary schools. This has remained consistent over the years. However, several notable trends have emerged in how schools use sports facilities:

- The use of sports halls has increased. This is largely due to the clustering of physical education lessons. Smaller, outdated gymnasiums are increasingly being replaced by larger sports halls, which are shared among multiple schools.
- The use of outdoor (sports) facilities, including schoolyards, has grown. In part, this reflects seasonal use: during spring and summer, more physical education takes place outdoors, while in autumn and winter, schools generally continue to rely on indoor facilities.

**Figure 2.2**

### Practice of sports activities by location according to the Dutch population (12 years and older)

(as percentages of the Dutch population aged 6 years and older who participate in sports at least twelve times a year)



Source: Statistics Netherlands/The Netherlands Institute for Social Research, Leisure omnibus survey 2012-2022. Edited by: Mulier Institute.

## Finance

### Funding by municipalities

Due to their ownership of a large share of sports facilities, municipalities are the primary funders of the Dutch sports sector. This is similar to the situation in Sweden (SKR, 2023). In 2023, Dutch municipalities spent an average of €71.30 per resident on sports, amounting to nearly €2 billion in total. Of this, approximately 75% was allocated to the development and maintenance of sports facilities. Since 2017, municipal spending on sport has increased annually, in most years even after adjusting for inflation (Van Eldert, 2025).

However, the financial outlook for municipalities is becoming increasingly uncertain. The majority anticipate budgetary challenges in the near future (Geurink et al., 2025). A revision of the national funding distribution model will result in significantly reduced transfers from the central government. In addition, proposed cuts to subsidy schemes (see below), combined with rising inflation, are likely to constrain future investment in sports infrastructure.

### **Important developments**

Several other developments are shaping local sports financing:

- Outsourcing of indoor facility management is on the rise, often to companies affiliated with the municipality or to private operators (Schadenberg, 2022).
- Sports clubs are increasingly responsible for the maintenance of outdoor facilities (Hoekman et al., 2022).
- Growing attention is being paid to commercial sports providers and their infrastructure (Geurink et al., 2025).

### **Subsidy schemes**

Since 2019, two national subsidy schemes have been in place to support the development and maintenance of sports facilities, as well as the purchase of sports equipment. However, upcoming national budget cuts mean that the available funding for these schemes will be significantly reduced in the near future.

#### **● SPUK Sport**

Municipalities can apply for compensation for the VAT they incur on investments in sports facilities – such as construction, renovation, and maintenance – as well as on operational costs like facility management. The annual budget for the SPUK Sport scheme exceeds €180 million, but demand consistently outstrips available funds.

#### **● BOSA**

Sports clubs can apply for a subsidy covering 20% of the costs for constructing or maintaining sports facilities and for purchasing sports equipment. An additional 10% subsidy is available for investments aimed at energy efficiency, accessibility, circularity, and climate adaptation. The annual budget for the BOSA scheme is over €75 million.

## **Sustainability and accessibility**

National and local sports policies in the Netherlands place strong emphasis on two key themes: sustainability and accessibility.

### **Sustainability**

By far the most attention has been paid to energy when it comes to sustainability. The (high) energy costs have motivated the implementation of energy-saving measures. The energy crisis of 2022–2023 further accelerated efforts to reduce energy consumption and make cost reductions permanent.

Notable developments include:

- The share of sports facilities using LED lighting (e.g. at sports fields or in sports halls) has increased from 14% in 2016 to 39% in 2023.
- The share of sports clubs with solar panels has risen from 3% in 2016 to 33% in 2023.

Another area receiving growing attention is environmentally responsible facility management. For example, the share of municipalities that no longer use pesticides on sports fields has increased from 49% in 2019 to 79% in 2022.

Despite significant efforts to make sports infrastructure more sustainable, meeting long-term goals – such as achieving a low-carbon sports sector by 2050 – remains a major financial and operational challenge (Dalhuisen & Hoekman, 2023).

### **Accessibility**

In recent years, awareness of and policy attention for inclusive and accessible sports has increased at both national and local levels. In 2024, ‘good accessibility’ was the second most frequently mentioned goal for sports facilities in local sports policies – up from a much lower ranking in 2016 (Geurink et al., 2025).

While collecting detailed data on the accessibility of individual sports facilities remains costly, time-consuming, and complex, there is broad consensus that major improvements are needed to comply with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, ratified by the Netherlands.

Most municipalities are taking steps to improve accessibility, such as:

- promoting suitable sports and physical activity options (73%);
- providing adequate parking spaces for people with disabilities (72%);
- enhancing the usability of changing rooms and showers (67%).

Despite these efforts, a majority of local policymakers (78%) report experiencing obstacles in improving physical accessibility. The most frequently cited barriers include budget constraints (47%), a lack of time (36%), and limited awareness of relevant laws, guidelines, or support organisations (Van Lindert, 2023).



# The future and its challenges

**Based on our current state of knowledge, as well as the trends and developments we observe, we foresee several major challenges for sports facilities in the Netherlands.**

## Challenges

### Facilitating population growth

The Dutch population is expected to continue growing in the coming years. A larger population means more potential users of sports facilities, in addition to policy ambitions to further increase participation rates. According to scenario analyses, visits to sports facilities are projected to increase by between 5.2% and 20.3% by 2040.

In urban areas, land is scarce, competition for available space is intense, and the construction and maintenance costs of sports facilities are higher than in rural regions. While existing facilities are already operating at or near full capacity, new residential developments often include few, if any, additional sports facilities. This results in longer waiting lists and lower levels of sports participation than desired.

In these contexts, efforts will need to focus on vertical integration of facilities (e.g. a sports hall above a swimming pool, topped by a sports field; or sports facilities integrated with distribution centers, tunnels, or parking garages) as well as on multifunctional and innovative uses (e.g. sports fields combined with rainwater collection and reuse, or multi-purpose sports floors).

Clustering sports facilities with schools and with social, cultural, and healthcare services can also create meeting spaces and opportunities for more intensive use of existing infrastructure.

### Sustaining facilities in rural areas

In rural areas, sports facility usage is declining as a result of population ageing, youth migration to urban centers, and overall demographic shrinkage. When renovation becomes necessary, municipalities are often confronted with the choice of closing or merging facilities. While this can be a viable solution, it is essential that alternative facilities remain accessible within reasonable distances.

However, such consolidation can reduce facility density, making it more difficult to organize balanced competitions without extensive travel. This may initiate a downward spiral: fewer participants and volunteers, reduced usage, further closures, and diminishing community cohesion.

Here as well, exploring clustering and multifunctional use is critical. Integrating sports facilities with educational, cultural, and healthcare services can create community hubs and help maintain essential infrastructure in smaller communities.

### **Funding and realizing ambitions**

Sports facilities are expected to become more sustainable, more accessible, more affordable, and more intensively used. These national ambitions must be translated into local sports policy and practice. Realizing these ambitions entails higher costs, or is at least perceived as such.

This challenge concerns not only financial resources for investments, maintenance, and operations, but also the time and capacity of volunteers and municipal staff – who often prefer to focus on sports-related activities rather than administrative or operational tasks.

These ambitions conflict with future funding possibilities. Due to national budget cuts, subsidy levels will be significantly reduced, and municipalities will receive less funding from central government as a result of changes in the distribution model.

## **Projected shifts in (national) policy**

To address these challenges, policy shifts concerning sports facilities are being considered.

### **Sports in spatial planning**

In general, there is policy attention for creating a healthy living environment, but this is not always reflected in spatial planning. Without targeted focus, the space available for sports and physical activity risks shrinking rather than expanding, even though national ambitions call for more opportunities to be active.

To strengthen policy attention, sports facilities will be formally designated as essential community infrastructure in the National Spatial Strategy. This strategy, a guiding document from the national government, will outline long-term policy directions (post-2030) and look ahead to 2100.

### **Sports as a municipal responsibility**

Additionally, there is an ongoing debate on whether sports provision and facility development should become a statutory municipal task. Although this is unlikely to materialize in the short term, new reference standards for the number of sports facilities are being developed. Municipalities may choose to adopt these standards to ensure sufficient provision.

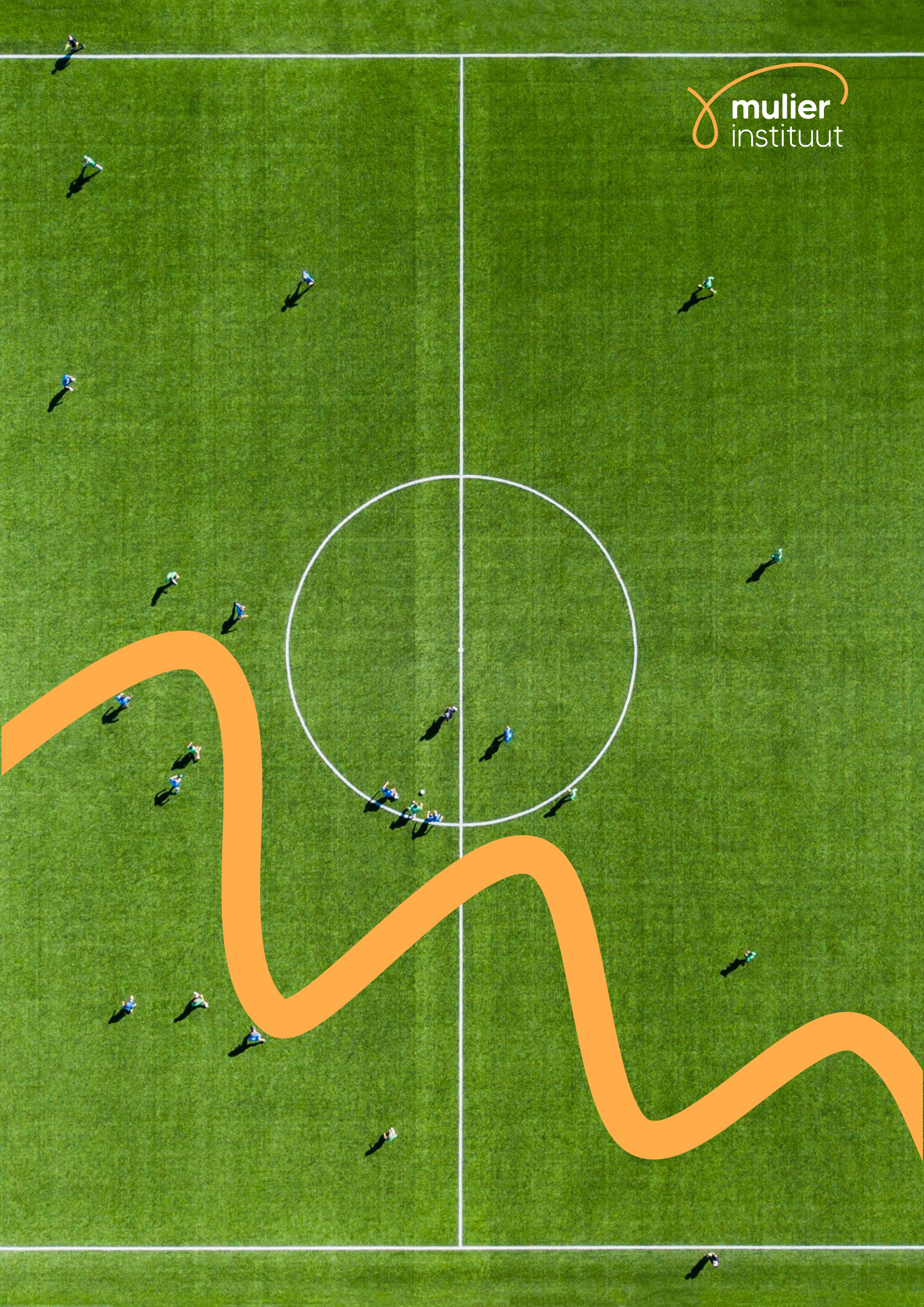
### **Social value of sports facilities**

Within the sports sector, there is widespread recognition of the need to emphasize and make visible the social value of sports facilities – both within the sector and to other policy domains. Tools such as Social Return on Investment (SROI) and Social Cost-Benefit Analysis (SCBA) can support this effort.

## **Housing plans**

The main vehicle for embedding these considerations into local policy is an Integrated Sports Facilities Strategy, Municipal Sports Facilities Plan or Strategic Plan for Local Sports Infrastructure. As of 2025, only a limited number of municipalities – primarily larger cities – have adopted such plans.

Such a plan typically outlines the current status, distribution, and condition of local sports facilities; assesses future demand based on demographic and spatial developments; and sets strategic priorities for investment, renovation, new construction, and potential decommissioning. It also considers accessibility, sustainability goals, multifunctional use, and collaboration with schools, clubs, and other stakeholders.



# Concluding reflections

**In this chapter, we summarize and reflect on the main points of this report.**

## **Developments in recent decades**

Over the past decades, the Netherlands has made significant investments in sports facilities as a key driver for increasing sports participation. In the 1960s and 1970s, there was a clear rise in participation directly linked to the growing number of sports facilities. Today, the traditional approach – more facilities automatically lead to more participants – no longer applies in the same way. This calls for a reassessment of how we view the role and value of sports facilities.

## **New challenges for sports facilities**

Sports facilities remain undeniably important. They provide the physical space where sports can take place, and contribute to social cohesion and the vitality of neighbourhoods. However, constructing new facilities is not the key to a broader and more inclusive sports participation. The challenge now lies primarily in making better use of existing facilities and creating offerings that better meet evolving needs, and the needs of those who currently don't participate in sports.

## **Integrated approach needed**

This shift requires an integrated approach in which the concepts of hardware, orgware, and software are central.

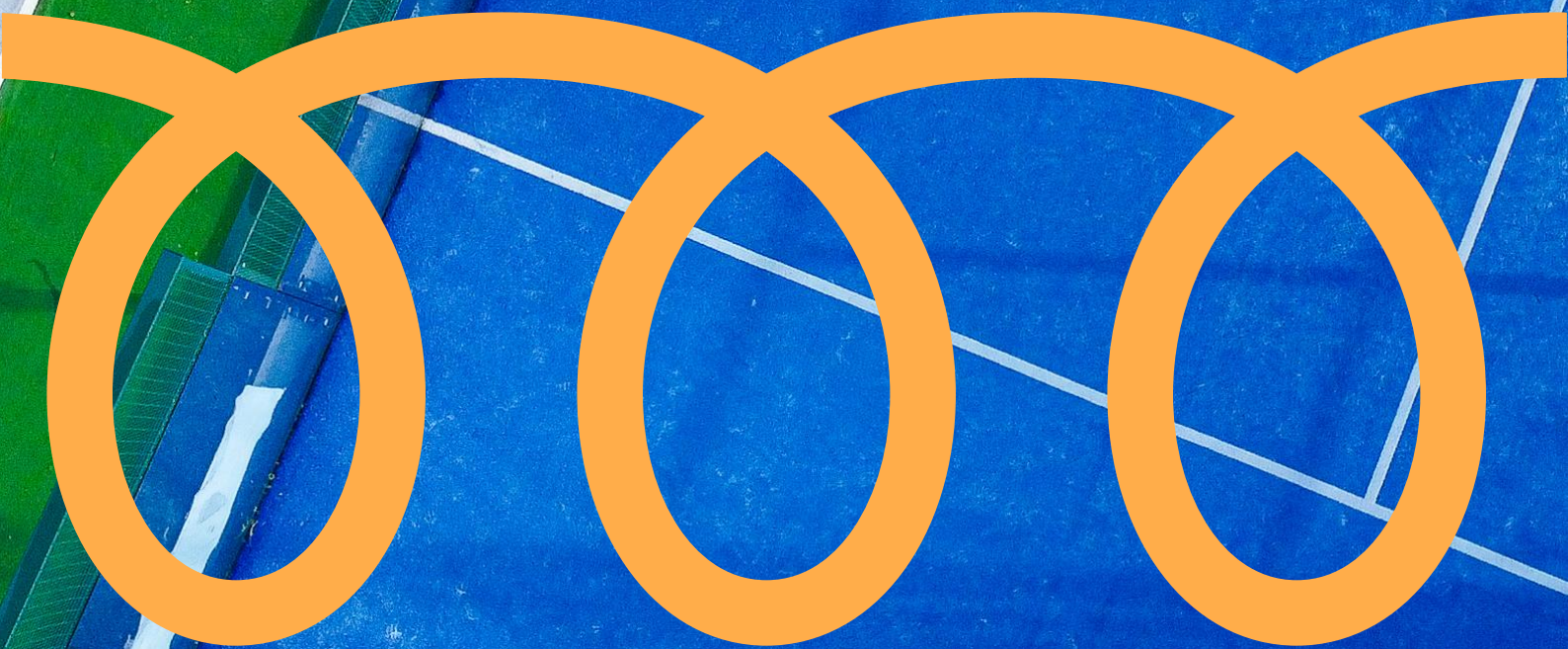
- The hardware – the sports facilities – is the foundation. Without adequate facilities, sport is not possible.
- Equally important is the orgware: how facilities are organized, managed, and made accessible. Are fields and halls available at times when people want to participate? Is there sufficient collaboration with local partners and clubs?
- Lastly, there is the software, meaning the programs and activities themselves. What activities are offered, how do they align with different target groups' preferences, and how are people encouraged to participate?

## **Collaboration between policy domains**

An effective sports infrastructure cannot be viewed in isolation from other societal issues such as health, social inclusion, and liveability. Increasingly, the focus is on broad-based prosperity and the contribution that sport can make to it – from promoting physical and mental health to strengthening community cohesion and improving quality of life. This requires close collaboration across policy domains such as spatial planning, healthcare and welfare, and education. By integrating sports policy with these sectors, greater societal impact can be achieved.

### **Broader use of sports facilities**

The challenge, therefore, is not to build more, but to use what we have more intelligently. By placing greater emphasis on orgware and software, sports facilities can make a greater contribution to a vital and inclusive society. We should no longer see sports facilities only as places to practice sports, but as dynamic meeting places that respond to changing needs and lifestyles.



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