

Summary of advice

The positioning on the playing field and
the associated Legal and financial addendum

2022

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// The Netherlands has an extensive range of sports on offer as well as a closely-knit sports infrastructure. However, it is not clear whether the range of sports and physical activity in leisure time on offer is in sync with the needs of the population and whether the sports sector is future-proof. Is it robustly organised and sustainably funded? Is the sports framework based on the sports sector and government bodies capable of reaching the half of the population that is at present not participating in sports or physical activity on a weekly basis? The current COVID-19 crisis is highlighting the urgent need for adequate sports activities and physical activity.

The Netherlands Sports Council, in collaboration with many experts and interested parties, recently analysed the organisation and financing of sports. The Council then issued a recommendation on a future-proof organisation of the sports sector that would contribute to increasing the percentage of the Dutch population that gets enough physical activity, from 50% at present to 75% in 2030. In its recommendation *The positioning on the playing field* and the associated *Legal and financial addendum*, the Council recommends that sports and physical activity in leisure time be viewed as a public facility for which the government has (shared) responsibility.

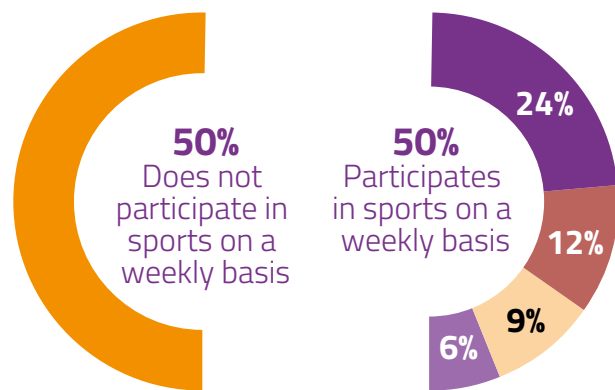
This summary contains the most important results and recommendations of the advisory process, starting with a description of the sports sector, going on to opportunities and challenges for the future, and ending with the recommendation to treat sports as a public facility.

A hybrid sports sector ¹

The sports sector in the Netherlands is characterised by a hybrid organisational structure. A total of 35,000 sports providers, including clubs as well as businesses, staffed by 80,000 FTEs of volunteers and approximately 25,000 FTEs of paid employees, provide a rich palette of sports, exercise and other physical activities in leisure time. A closely-knit infrastructure of 20,000 sports accommodations and a great many sports facilities in the public space are available for that purpose. The sports sector currently has an annual turnover of 5.7 billion euros, with the biggest contribution coming from the sports participants themselves (2.9 billion euros in the form of membership fees, subscriptions, etc.) and the municipalities (2.2 billion euros for sports facilities and public space, encouraging participation in sports, etc.).² Roughly half of the Dutch population participates in sports and physical activity on a weekly basis, either independently or by taking advantage of the range of activities provided by the sports sector and government bodies.

¹ The data were collected in the [Sports sector report](#). This quantitative analysis is the first to provide a good description of the organisation and financing of all sports providers.

² The figure cited above does not include turnover from sporting goods.



- Unorganised sports participation
- Via organised club-based sports activities
- Via commercial sports providers or events
- Via other providers (after-school day care, company-based sport, care/wellness sector)

figure 1
Sports participation in the Netherlands
(Source: Sports sector report)

The first sports clubs in the Netherlands were established in the mid- 19th century, and their number has grown rapidly since the Second World War. Within clubs, members facilitate sports activities for each other, and volunteers are still the primary driver behind sports clubs. Volunteers contribute to the low price card of sports activities and to social cohesion.

The role of municipalities in the activities of sports associations also has a long history. Two thirds of the more than 25,000 sports clubs rent an accommodation, primarily from municipalities. A quarter of the persons in the Netherlands who sport on a weekly basis take advantage of the sports activities provided on an organised basis (figure 1). Children in particular often participate in sports via sports clubs. The structure of sports clubs and federations as well as the umbrella organisation NOC*NSF is well organised.

The commercial services offered by gyms, fitness centres, and other businesses in the sports sector have grown rapidly since the beginning of the 1980s. The number of fitness and yoga entrepreneurs, in particular, has grown strongly over the last decade. There are

now already more than 6600 entrepreneurial sports providers who make a living from sports, who generally operate their own accommodation, and who have salaried employees. These entrepreneurs have had their own sector-specific organisation since 2021. The municipalities are much further removed from these commercial sports providers than from the club-centred sports providers. One fifth of those who sport on a weekly basis take advantage of these business-centred sports activities.

Persons participating in organised sports activities represent a large and growing group: half of those who sport on a weekly basis organise their own sports activity, either on their own or with like-minded others. In large part, these unorganised participants utilise the public space. The bicycle paths, walking routes, and recreational areas used for that purpose are primarily managed by Dutch municipalities but also by private landowners such as the Dutch Society for Nature Conservation (Natuurmonumenten) and Dutch Forest and Nature Management Agency (Staatsbosbeheer).

Sport as part of society³

Sport is an inseparable part of society.

General trends and developments in society also have an impact on sport. Demographic changes (ageing, migration), spatial developments (shrinkage areas, urbanisation), and technological possibilities (digitisation, online services) lead to a different demand for sports activities or a changing range of sports activities on offer.

Sport and physical activity in leisure time not only have value in themselves but are increasingly seen as a solution for societal problems. They are important for physical and mental health and for maintaining social contacts. Within that framework, the ability to participate in sports as well as the opportunity to get in contact with one another and the involvement of so many volunteers is of great value.

³ The content of this and the following chapter follows from the qualitative analysis *The fitness of sport*, based on a literature study and input from a large number of stakeholders and experts in the sports sector and related sectors.

Challenges for the sports sector

The diversity in the organisation of sports activities in the Netherlands represents a strength as well as a risk. The qualitative analysis by the Netherlands Sports Council makes it clear that the innovative potential of the sports sector is limited by its fragmentation, the limited financial reserves, and the (traditional) character of many sports organisations. There are more volunteers working in the Dutch sports sector than there are professionals and, although this represents a significant amount of social capital, it also limits the ability of the sector to deal with future developments. The necessary qualities and competencies in the area of sport and exercise are not set down in training/study requirements or licensing systems. There are no labour market policies in place aimed at improving job opportunities in the sector. The Netherlands Sports Council also observes that the various parties in the sports sector do not collaborate sufficiently, do not have a shared vision and agenda, and do not speak with one voice to parties outside the sports sector.

Based on an advisory process spanning over 18 months, the Netherlands Sports Council observes that the sports sector is not organised and financed in a future-proof manner, in part due to a lack of government vision and management, lack of a legal framework, and lack of guidance based on funding flows. Although the urgency of expanding the opportunities available for participating in sports and physical activity is recognised by all the parties concerned and the ambitions of the sports sector are quite high, the sector itself is not capable of realising this goal on its own. Market failure is visible when it comes to promoting the participation in sports and physical activity by the growing group of older persons, by persons with a disease or handicap, and by persons with a low income. The Netherlands Sports Council notes that the government is currently facilitating the sector but is not strengthening it, and is not doing enough to manage matters so as to ensure that sport and physical activity are made available to everyone. The result is a collection of parties who organise and finance sport activities,

with differences per region and changes over time. The major challenges facing society require a shift in the sector. The role played by elite sports, grassroots sports, and physical activity in promoting a healthy and resilient society is so important that the Netherlands Sports Council advises the government to intensify its involvement in the sector. This type of involvement by the Dutch government actually does exist in similar sectors such as education, childcare, and culture.

Action plan for a future-proof sports sector

With the above situation, opportunities, and challenges in mind, the Netherlands Sports Council recommends a three-step action plan to ensure that the sector is future-proof.

1. First, the Council recommends strengthening and professionalising the sports sector. The foundation must be solid: adequate facilities that are suitable for a variety of elite sport and grassroots sports activities as well as exercise, strong and flexible sports providers, and good coaching and guidance by volunteers and professionals serving a wide range of target groups including the very young, seniors, emerging talents, and professional athletes. Clarity must be introduced into the division of responsibilities and roles between different government bodies and between the government and private parties within the framework of a robust overall system. In addition, the sports sector has to be further professionalised, and the job market has to be improved. A strong sector-specific vision has to be developed together with an effective representation of the entire sports sector, and the relevant funding flows must comply with standards of governance and transparency. All these elements will contribute to strengthening the sports sector.

2. Second, the Council recommends introducing innovative elements into the sports sector to transform it into a sector that facilitates sport in the broadest sense of the term, including a wide range of sports and physical activities. Introducing innovative elements and broadening the range of activities offered is needed to satisfy the potential needs of the population as a whole. At present, the sports sector primarily serves younger people as well as healthy fit adults who wish to participate in sports and can afford to do so. The Netherlands Sports Council recommends focusing on broadening the range of suitable sports and exercise activities and making them available to everyone, including vulnerable groups. Together with this expansion, energy must be invested on strengthening and improving the training environment in the sports sector, ensuring that groups with a handicap or specific condition receive adequate supervision and guidance, improving governance and integrity, and dealing with problematic issues in the world of sports. The further professionalisation of the sector can contribute to realising these goals.

3. Third, the Council recommends implementing structural cooperation between the sports sector and other sectors. This will make it possible to work together in various areas of policy to realise a healthier and more resilient society. A more professional sports sector can deliver added value in terms of prevention and well-being, education, care, and employment to mention just a few of the relevant sectors. This will require robust policy from the Minister of Health, Welfare and Sport to encourage interdepartmental collaboration, to create overarching frameworks, and to stimulate cooperation between different sectors, while at the same time ensuring that legislation and regulations do not obstruct such efforts. Collaboration between different departments and sectors has already begun in some places, but it is not being done on a structural basis and depends too much on stand-alone projects and individual initiatives.

Additional funding is needed to realise the above goals. By increasing the financial contribution from the national government, provinces, municipalities, and consumers to a maximum of 970 million euros per year for structural resources and 570 million euros for incidental expenses, it will be possible to increase and improve the availability, accessibility, and quality of sports facilities by 2030 to such a degree that we will be able to maintain the health and resilience of a large part of society.

Sport as a public service

To ensure the future of a robust sports sector, the Council recommends treating sport as a public service and enshrining the responsibility of the government to provide such a service in law via a Sports Act. In a sports framework anchored in the Sports Act, government bodies and private actors in the sports sector work together to provide a range of sports and exercise activities that satisfy the needs of the entire population. The Netherlands Sports Council has several reasons for providing this advice.

First, the Council considers other policy instruments, such as sport agreements, programmes, and subsidy schemes, as being too voluntary in nature. Relevant parties can, after all, choose to participate in these policy instruments as they see fit. In addition, the instruments are not of a sustainable nature, as their duration is often too short to achieve relevant goals and the tasks and roles of the players involved are re-evaluated or revised with every change in the composition of the government or council.

Second, in the current situation, none of the funding flows are secure. This is true of the revenues generated from consumers and businesses (sensitive to economic conditions) as well as from government bodies and social partners (lack of a legal framework), and this applies to grassroots sports as well as sport activities. The lack of a structural framework and associated funding flows leads to differences in terms of place (differences per province and municipality) and time (differences per election cycle or body of experts).

Third, a Sports Act provides additional support and confidence by the government for and in the sector. It also makes it possible (in the future) to delegate tasks to the sector or set requirements. Examples of this are making a certain level of training a requirement for trainers or establishing requirements for providing sports activities to children and seniors responsibly and safely. This could also serve to encourage collaboration with other sectors (e.g. education, childcare, and care). For these sectors, which are subject to legal responsibilities and requirements, the added value of sports as a public service creates new opportunities.

Finally, it would give sport as a whole a better negotiating position. For example, one million additional housing units will potentially be built in the Netherlands between now and 2030. When new neighbourhoods are built, the space that is needed for sports and physical activity is often not taken into account. However, based on the Sports Act, municipalities would have a legal duty to provide their residents with adequate facilities for sports and exercise.

If a Sports Act is passed, there would still be flexibility in terms of policy allowing for tailor-made options at the local level and for private initiatives, including innovative activities on the part of clubs and businesses. If municipalities are made responsible for grassroots sports and exercise activities, they will be able to ensure, within the framework of the law, that there are sufficient opportunities for their citizens to participate in sports activities and that not only sports clubs make use of the available accommodations but also sports businesses, schools, or childcare centres. Besides, if sport is viewed as a public service, the organisations that now provide sports and exercise activities, such as sports clubs and businesses, will continue to do so. This means that the initiative presently shown by members of society in the sports sector, including the contribution of so many volunteers and the work of professionals, will remain in place, while at the same time taking into account regional differences in the range of sports activities and infrastructure on offer.

The Netherlands Sports Council

The Netherlands Sports Council (NLsportraad) is an independent advisory body that focuses on strengthening the significance of sport for society. The Netherlands Sports Council provides strategic and operational recommendations on sport-specific themes as well as the relationship between sport and other policy areas. The Council drafts its recommendations in a transparent way and in cooperation with the relevant parties in the field. The recommendations from the Netherlands Sports Council are innovative, supported by research, and applicable in practice. The Netherlands Sports Council consists of a maximum of 10 members and is chaired by Michael van Praag.

More information: www.nederlandse-sportraad.nl

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