

# THE CRISIS IN VICTORIAN COMMUNITY FOOTBALL

2026 STATE OF PLAY REPORT



**LEVEL**

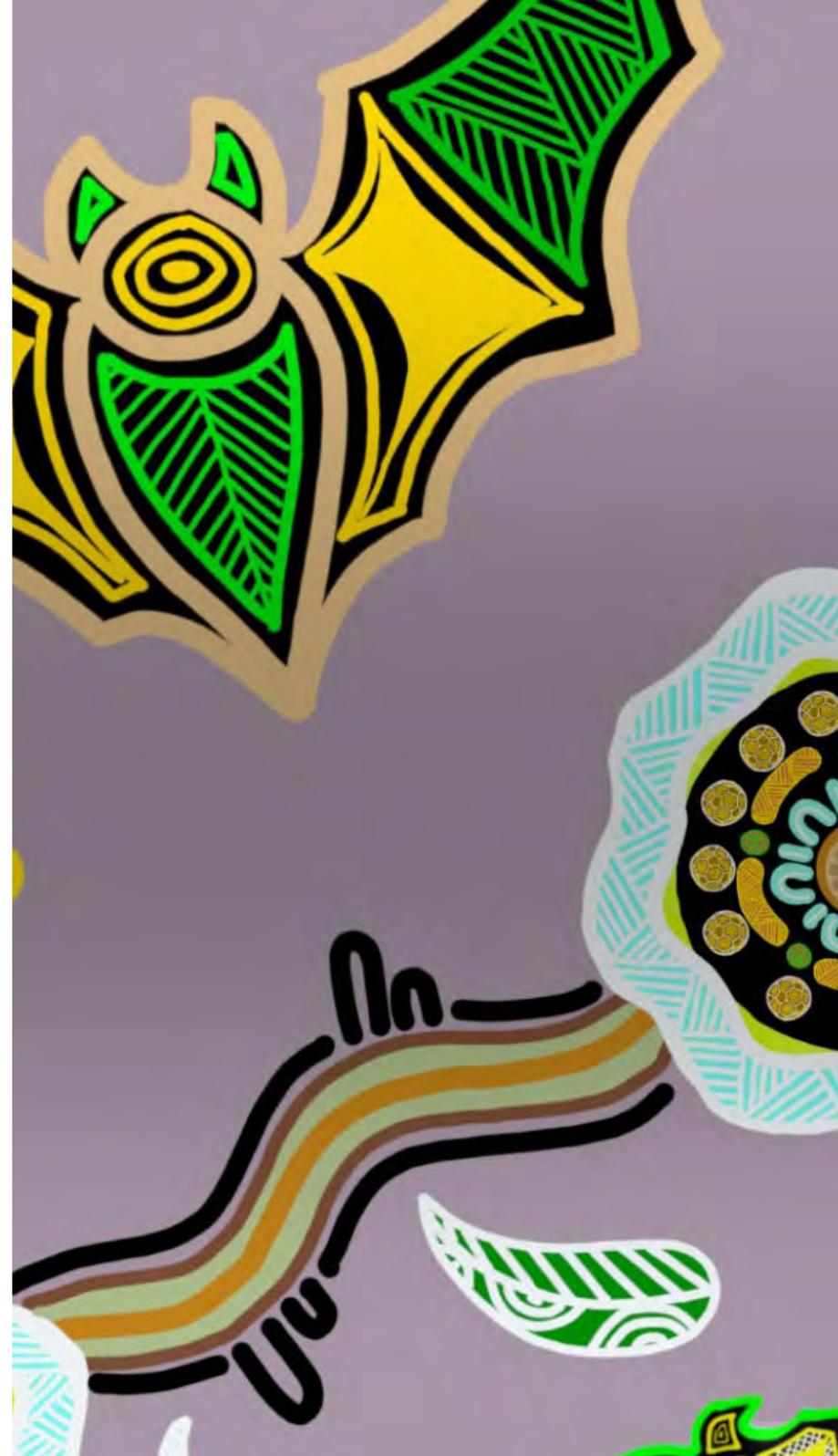
**THE PLAYING FIELD**



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Football Victoria acknowledges the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Nation occupants of Australia and the Torres Strait and extend our acknowledgement to all First Nations peoples within the state of Victoria upon whose lands we play on.

We respectfully embrace their continued cultural and spiritual connection to Country and pay respect to all their ancestors.



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is grounded in the voices of the football community. Football Victoria recently completed its biggest deep dive into football facilities in Victorian history to release the [Facility Strategy 2025 to 2035](#), supported by our largest survey ever undertaken, with responses gathered from a community of 350 clubs and more than 127,000 club participants, including players, coaches, volunteers, parents and administrators from all corners of Victoria.

**The results are unambiguous: local football facilities are at a crisis point, and communities are demanding positive change.**

Community football in Victoria is experiencing record-breaking growth, increasing by 57% since 2022. With over 400,000 annual participants, and a broader community footprint nearing one million people including parents, club volunteers, school partnerships, and A-League supporters - football is now the largest club-based outdoor participation sport in the state. Yet the infrastructure supporting the game has not kept pace. Local clubs across Victoria are under pressure. Fields are overused, changerooms are often non-existent or outdated, and many clubs are having to turn away players, particularly women and girls, whose numbers have surged off the back of the Matildas' success. While football leads the way in participation, it lags behind in funding. Independent studies and industry data confirm that football receives significantly less local facility investment per year and per participant, when compared to other major sports like AFL and cricket, despite its extensive participation base. This imbalance has created a facilities crisis, capped the game's growth and is preventing clubs from delivering the social, health and economic benefits that football provides to communities. This report outlines:

- The current infrastructure shortfall across the state;
- The scale of unmet demand in growth corridors and under-served communities;
- The opportunity for urgent government and council co-investment.

Football Victoria is ready to partner to help "Level the Playing Field".



# LEVEL

## THE PLAYING FIELD



# MESSAGE FROM THE CEO

Community Football in Victoria is at a critical juncture. Participation continues to grow at a rapid pace, fuelled by the passion of our players, volunteers, and clubs. But while our game thrives on the pitch, our infrastructure is struggling to keep up. Facilities are stretched, and in too many cases, simply not fit for purpose. That's why in November 2025, Football Victoria wrote to each local government council Mayor requesting more partnerships in local infrastructure projects as we launched the 'Level the Playing Field' campaign that brings together community football, local government and local communities.

This report is a call to action. It shines a light on the urgent and growing crisis in community football facilities across the state. We believe football deserves its fair share, not just because of the exploding participation in Victoria, but because investment in football delivers measurable outcomes in health, social inclusion, and economic activity.

Our strategy will not be realised overnight, but with the support of clubs, councils, state and federal governments, we can ensure that every footballer has access to safe, inclusive, and quality facilities.

A statewide survey captured responses from our community of 350 clubs and over 127,000 club participants, painting a compelling picture of the urgent need for change and the infrastructure crisis facing our game. Alarming, 82% of individual respondents believe facilities require significant improvement or do not meet modern standards to provide a welcoming environment. It is clear that poor facilities are a barrier to continued participation, particularly for women and junior players.

Even more telling, 94% of respondents indicated they would consider changing their vote at the upcoming state election based on their local club's access to infrastructure and funding.

This is a powerful message: investing in football infrastructure is not only the right thing to do for communities, it is becoming a ballot box issue for thousands of Victorian families.

Let's level the playing field.

**Dan Birrell**  
**CEO**  
**Football Victoria**



# MESSAGE FROM THE CHAIRPERSON

Football has long been Australia's most played outdoor team sport but in Victoria, that success has outpaced our infrastructure. Our community clubs are under extraordinary pressure. They're accommodating thousands of new participants with outdated facilities, overstretched changerooms, and fields that can't keep up with demand. This is not just a matter of inconvenience - it's becoming a matter of fairness and equity, particularly for women, girls, and multicultural communities who are helping grow the game.

Through a recent statewide survey of our rapidly expanding football community, Football Victoria has heard the message loud and clear: community football is being held back by poor infrastructure. Alarming, only 27% of participants believe local football facilities are adequate to meet current demand for the game.

We believe the time for urgent action is now. This report shines a spotlight on the scale of today's challenge and the opportunity for government, councils and the football community to lead together. The game is ready to partner, ready to co-invest, and ready to deliver unmatched social and economic return for Victorian communities.

It's now time to level the playing field.

**Dr Angela Williams**  
Chairperson





“The growth of the game is undeniable – now our facilities need to catch up. Whether it’s for young girls falling in love with the game, older weekend warriors or our dedicated volunteers, **we need modern infrastructure to match the passion of our football communities.**”

Lucy Brennan - President, Ballarat SC

# A SPORT THAT'S GROWING FASTER THAN INFRASTRUCTURE

Football participation in Victoria has entered a period of unprecedented growth, placing extraordinary pressure on an infrastructure base that has not kept pace.

**Since 2021, football participation has grown by more than 60%.**

This has been driven by population growth, migration into growth corridors, and the Matildas' success at the 2023 FIFA Women's World Cup. Football Victoria now supports more than 127,000 registered club-based participants, with total engagement approaching over 400,000 Victorians when families, volunteers, schools and community programs are included.

Clubs are reporting record numbers of new players particularly girls entering the game. But many facilities are no longer fit for purpose, unable to cater to the volume of players. Pitches are overused, changerooms are too few and outdated, and lighting is insufficient for evening training.

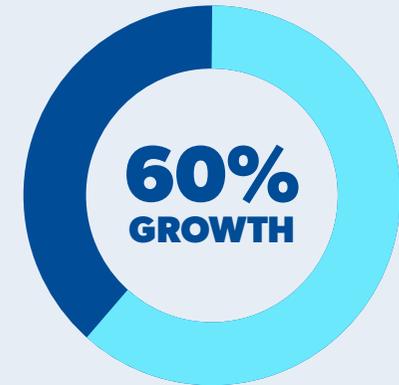
More than half of football pitches across the state are currently rated in moderate, poor or very poor condition, and only around half have lighting capable of supporting safe evening use.

**The current pitch-to-population ratio exceeds 1:7,000, well above the industry accepted benchmark of 1:5,000.** This mismatch between demand and supply has resulted in overused pitches, declining surface quality, cancelled training sessions and increasing safety risks - all of which directly threaten participation retention and community access.

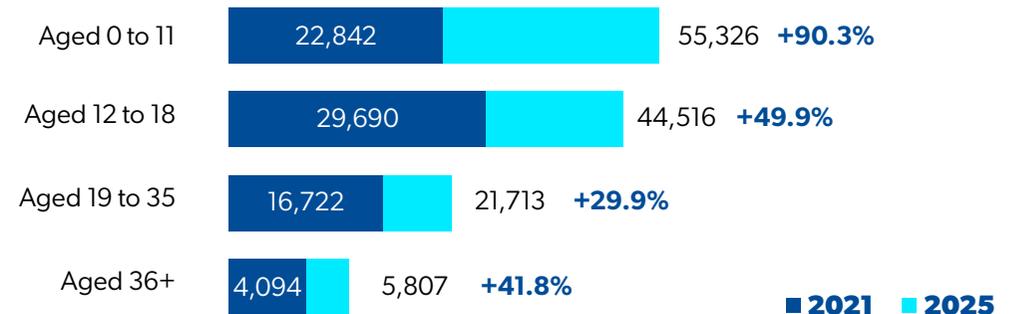
## CLUB FOOTBALL PARTICIPATION

79,565  
2021

127,362  
2025



## CLUB FOOTBALL PARTICIPATION BY AGE



# THE BIGGEST PARTICIPATION SPORT BUT THE LEAST FUNDED MAJOR SPORT

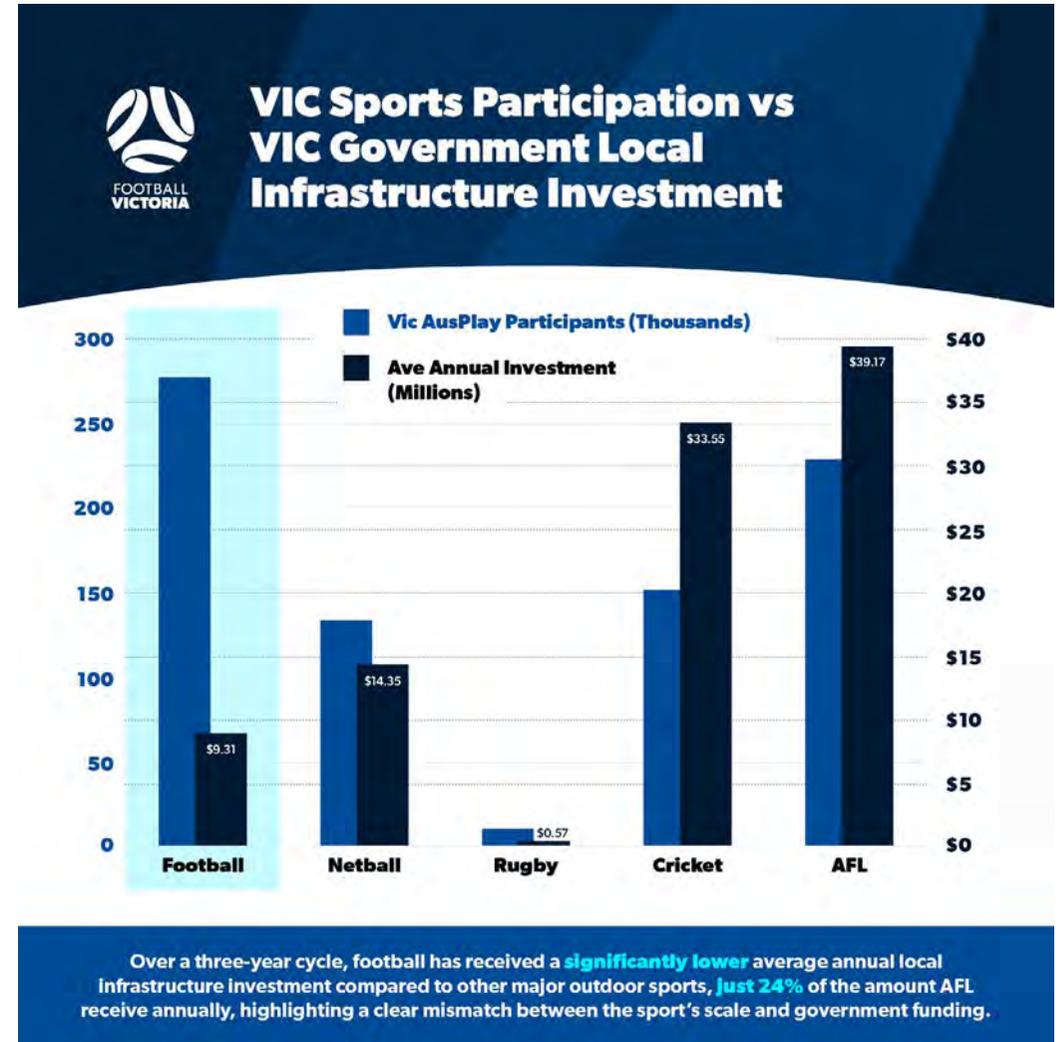
Despite being Victoria's most played outdoor sport, football receives far less public investment into local infrastructure than other major codes. This underinvestment creates a significant equity gap and leaves communities behind.

While football services the highest number of players across metropolitan and regional Victoria, its share of state and local government facility funding has not kept pace with the participation boom. This imbalance has created a structural inequity, where football clubs are expected to accommodate more participants, longer seasons and higher utilisation rates with fewer and lower-quality facilities.

Research shows that **football receives just 24% of the average local infrastructure funding that sports like AFL, cricket, or netball receive annually.** This disparity is unsustainable and must be urgently addressed.

From a government perspective, this funding disparity represents a growing risk. Underinvestment in the state's most-played sport constrains participation outcomes, limits return on previous community and health investments, and places additional pressure on councils already struggling to meet demand.

Addressing this inequity through a more proportional, participation-based funding approach would deliver immediate system-wide benefits.



# A LOOMING GENDER EQUITY CRISIS

Female participation in football is one of the fastest-growing segments of the Victorian sport system, increasing by an industry leading 120% since 2019, yet infrastructure provision has not kept pace.

While participation by women and girls has surged, a significant proportion of facilities still lack gender inclusive changerooms, adequate lighting, or safe access pathways. This impacts girls' ability to train safely and feel part of the club environment. If we don't act now, we risk losing the momentum behind women's football and failing to meet community expectations of equity.

**Only 69% of player change facilities across Victoria are currently assessed as all-gender accessible**, leaving many clubs unable to offer equitable environments alongside Fair Access Policy requirements.

Lighting is also a critical gender equity and safety issue. Research commissioned by Sport and Recreation Victoria identifies safety as a major barrier to physical activity after dark for Women & Girls participants, noting that fear of assault and poor visibility reduce night-time participation, and that suitable lighting can help mitigate these concerns by increasing visibility, safety and accessible usage of public spaces.

To service female participation, one of the game's strongest areas of growth, we must make gender equity a core objective of all facility upgrades. The Level the Playing Field campaign will prioritise infrastructure that supports inclusion and participation outcomes for girls and women.



“As someone who came through grassroots football, I know how important it is to have safe, welcoming spaces to train, play, and belong. **Girls deserve equal access to great facilities**, and this report makes that a priority.”

Selin Kuralay - Former Matilda



# LOCAL CLUBS FORCED TO CAP TEAMS

As a direct result of infrastructure constraints, football clubs across Victoria are increasingly being forced to cap registrations or turn players away. Limited pitch availability, insufficient changerooms and inadequate lighting mean clubs cannot safely or sustainably add teams, even where volunteer capacity and community demand exist. Often the high volume of usage, due to record participation, leaves pitches in an unsafe condition and closed by Councils for training and matches during winter.

**According to survey results, only 34% of clubs believe their facilities are adequate to meet current demand, and alarmingly 54% of clubs in Victoria have had to turn away participants in the last 5 years, with an average of 80 participants unable to join a club facing facility capacity challenges.**

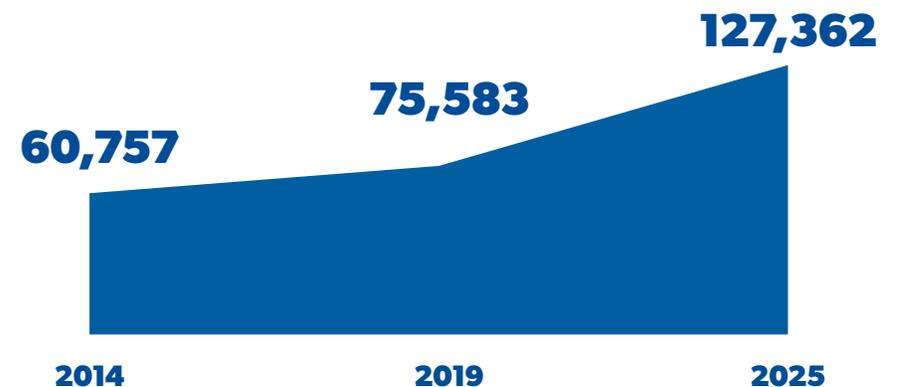
This has serious consequences for participation, particularly among juniors and women. Being turned away from sport at a young age is strongly correlated with long-term dropout from physical activity. From a policy perspective, this represents a missed opportunity to keep young people active, engaged and connected to their communities. If we want to keep kids in sport, keep communities active, and grow the active Victorian community, we must remove these barriers now.

“Turning players away is the hardest part of running a club. Our waiting lists keep getting bigger each year, but living in a growth area, **our facilities can’t service the massive demand of our community.**”

Tim Hobson, President, Berwick City SC



## CLUB FOOTBALL PARTICIPATION





## COMMUNITY CLUBS ARE DOING MORE THAN EVER

Community football clubs now function as year-round community hubs, delivering far more than weekend sport - they run training programs, school partnerships, holiday clinics, multicultural events, community initiatives on mental health, positive relationships/behaviours, and more. Yet they do all this with minimal support and aging or inadequate infrastructure.

Investment in community infrastructure is an investment in strengthening these community outcomes. Modern pitches, lighting and changerooms enable clubs to expand programming, better support volunteers and provide safe, welcoming environments for families and young people. By upgrading facilities, we support the clubs who are already supporting their communities.

"For over 30 years, we've had the tradition of providing meals to our grassroots and junior teams after their weekly training session... resulting in approximately 3,000 meals served throughout the year - free of charge for our players.

We also assist in subsidising a portion of the playing fees for our young players to keep costs low for families and emphasise the importance of physical activity in children.

Additionally, we offer shin guards, second-hand football boots, mouthguards, and head guards at very affordable prices to further **support our community and provide safety for our players.**"

Tracy Dean, Treasurer, Forest Rangers SC

# MEETING THE NEEDS OF SCHOOLS, FAMILIES & FOOTBALL COMMUNITIES

Our facilities strategy must consider the growing demand from the community and football clubs, which are increasingly seeking partnerships with schools to access fields, lighting and changerooms, allowing more participants to engage in the game. Many clubs are already establishing productive partnerships with local schools to share facilities particularly during and after school hours, for physical education, or holiday football clinics. These arrangements help maximise community assets while deepening the connection between football and education.

Importantly, these school-club partnerships also open up new opportunities to blend football programs into after-school care. This emerging model allows children to stay at school for structured, safe football sessions delivered by community clubs meaning families no longer need to coordinate multiple pickups or rush across town after work. It reduces logistical pressure on working parents, supports physical activity, and builds stronger ties between clubs and their local communities. With the right infrastructure in place, football can become a natural extension of the school day enriching student wellbeing while growing participation in the game.

**Government leadership is crucial to simplifying and embedding these joint use agreements between schools and community sport to resolve infrastructure challenges across Victoria.**

The pilot program delivered by the Victorian Government in 2025 across Melbourne's West has shown the value of boosting access for after-school community use of school fields and facilities, and a state-wide approach would unlock such valuable space solving many community sport usage challenges across Victoria.

These partnerships between football, education and government should be backed by the education department and unlock co-investment in, and access to, facilities that serve both school and community needs.



# FACILITY OPPORTUNITIES IN GROWTH CORRIDORS & REGIONAL

Outer suburban and regional communities are among the fastest-growing in the state, and with that growth comes increased demand for football. Yet these same areas often have the most outdated or underserviced infrastructure. Councils in growth areas are stretched and require urgent co-investment to deliver modern facilities. This is a clear opportunity for government to invest where the need is greatest.

Football Victoria has more than 127,000 registered club participants, and growth corridors such as Melton, Wyndham, Casey, Hume, and Whittlesea are among the fastest-growing areas in Victoria, alongside regional centres such as Geelong, Ballarat, Bendigo and others, with some LGAs increasing by tens of thousands of residents annually. **In some LGAs, football participation has grown between 80-100% in the past 5 years, yet infrastructure investment has remained static or slow-moving.**

Targeted investment in the identified PSPs of growth corridor and regional LGAs offer one of the highest-impact opportunities for government - supporting the largest population growth, equity of access and broader community outcomes.



# RESEARCH THAT CAN LEAD POSITIVE CHANGE IN COMMUNITIES

Football Victoria's advocacy is underpinned by a comprehensive evidence base, including statewide facility audits, participation forecasting and spatial analysis. In 2024 alone, almost 1,000 pitches across 468 venues were audited to assess condition, capacity, lighting and accessibility. This data provides a clear picture of where investment is most urgently needed.

Interactive maps, zone-level analysis and club-specific data allow government and councils to prioritise funding based on demonstrated demand and risk. This ensures investment decisions are transparent, targeted and aligned with broader planning and infrastructure objectives.

**The most comprehensive deep dive into football facilities in our history has enabled us to create an [extensive list of priority projects and outcomes](#) across each LGA and electorate across Victoria.**

This ensures we are not just asking for investment, we are showing precisely where it is needed.



# FUNDING FOOTBALL IS FUNDING SOCIAL IMPACT



## Investment in football goes far beyond the game. It supports better health outcomes, promotes social inclusion, brings communities together, and creates safer spaces for young people. The return on investment is high and the impact, measurable.

Facilities aren't just about sport, they're about people, and they're about communities.

Football clubs, above all other sports, play a critical role in supporting multicultural communities, new arrivals and young people in growth areas. Football clubs are among the most diverse and inclusive social structures in the country. They bring together multicultural communities, support new arrivals and refugees, and offer a safe space for young people.

Recent research confirms that local sport programs build social cohesion and civic pride, particularly when designed to be inclusive ([Sport Australia, 2024](#), [International Journal of Arts Recreation & Sport, 2024](#)).

Participation in organised sport such as football significantly contributes to both physical and mental wellbeing, especially in young people. A recent study shows improved activity levels, reduced mental distress, and a stronger sense of personal confidence in sport participants compared to non-participants ([Springer Open, 2024](#)). Sport participation has also been shown to reduce youth crime and anti-social behaviour by providing purpose, structure, and adult mentorship in the lives of young people, particularly in areas with higher rates of social disadvantage ([PMC Journal, 2020](#)).

National analysis shows that the economic impact of community sport infrastructure is significant. According to the Australian Sports Commission, sport and active recreation infrastructure delivers over \$6.3 billion annually in economic, health and social benefits ([Sport Australia, 2024](#)).

Football Victoria's own survey data reinforces this link, with **97% of participants reporting improved physical health and mental wellbeing, greater social interaction, and increased connection to local community as direct outcomes from their experiences in football**. Improving facilities therefore directly supports government priorities in health, inclusion and community wellbeing.



# VICTORIA'S OPPORTUNITY TO LEAD THE NATION





## Victoria has the chance to set the standard for football investment nationally not simply because participation is high, but because our grassroots pathways have a proven track record of producing elite talent across both men’s and women’s football. These success stories show what is possible when community infrastructure supports player development, and why Victoria must continue to invest boldly in facilities that nurture the next generation.

Across the state, grassroots clubs have been the starting point for numerous Victorian footballers who went on to represent Australia and play professionally at the highest levels. Their journeys demonstrate the impact of community football on individual lives, local pride, and wider football culture, including stories of success from Victoria’s Grassroots:

- **Steph Catley (East Bentleigh SC & Melbourne Victory)** - An international superstar who started her football journey in Melbourne’s South East before debuting at a young age with Melbourne Victory in the A-League Women’s competitions, soon catapulting her career to Arsenal FC and captaining the Matildas during the 2023 FIFA Women’s World Cup and 2024 Paris Olympics.
- **Mathew Leckie (FC Bulleen Lions)** - The Melbourne born Socceroos forward began his football journey in the local Victorian leagues in Sunshine then later with Bulleen Lions before moving through the state system into professional football in Europe and becoming a key player in the Socceroos FIFA World Cup campaigns.
- **Alana Murphy (Box Hill United & Victoria NTC)** - Murphy developed through local football in Langwarrin and Box Hill United, as well as Football Victoria’s National Training Centre, before making her way into the A League Women’s competition and earning a Matildas call up.

In recent years, a number of Victorian girls such as those named to the CommBank Junior Matildas squads (e.g., Dali Gorr Burchmore, Leyla Hussein, Kaya Jugovic, Izabella Rako) have emerged from local Victorian clubs on to international stages, showing the depth of female talent being developed in Victorian communities.

These examples show that local Victorian clubs are powerful contributors to the national game on the World Stage. They provide the foundation for elite players, community leaders and role models but these pathways are only possible when clubs have access to quality facilities that meet the needs of today’s players.

Female participation growth must be mirrored by equal infrastructure. As women’s football continues to expand inspired by success at national and international levels facilities must support this growth with inclusive amenities and equitable access.

Victoria’s leadership in community football investment will ensure that the next generation of elite players continues to emerge from local clubs, keeping the state at the forefront of national football development.

# FOOTBALL & COUNCIL ARE READY TO PARTNER WITH GOVERNMENT



**Football Victoria and its affiliated clubs are ready to partner with government to deliver outcomes at scale. The Football Victoria Facilities Strategy 2025 to 2035 identifies a pipeline of shovel-ready projects, regional hubs and local upgrades supported by councils and communities across every corner of the Victorian landscape.**

The comprehensive 10-year roadmap has been developed backed by extensive data analysis on facility conditions, participation rates and trends, coupled with population growth and projections to arm Football Victoria with clear infrastructure priorities, co investment models alongside motivated LGAs, and demonstrated demand, football is well positioned to translate funding into rapid, visible community benefit.

The **Football Victoria Facilities Strategy 2025 to 2035** offers shovel-ready projects, willing partners, and a strong level of community engagement. The broader football community are ready to work constructively with all levels of government to get outcomes that matter.



# FOOTBALL & COUNCIL ARE READY TO PARTNER WITH GOVERNMENT

Many local councils across Victoria are already doing their best to support football through pitch upgrades, lighting installations and master planning. However, their budgets are constrained, and they often rely on partnerships with state and federal governments.

We are realistic about the scale of the facilities gap, especially given the constrained fiscal environment facing Victoria. We know investment will not occur overnight, and that a phased approach including all three levels of government is required.

The establishment of a dedicated legacy fund for grassroots facilities (or reinstatement of the former World Game Facilities Fund) would ensure that Victoria's facilities keep pace with surging participation.

The reinstatement of a dedicated football infrastructure fund is critical, and the [FV Facilities Strategy 2025 to 2035](#) identifies the return of the World Game Facilities Fund (WGFF) as the single most impactful mechanism to drive coordinated, high-value investment and accelerate delivery of high priority projects in both established areas and growth corridors, and scale up gender-inclusive and capacity-building projects statewide.

A renewed World Game Facilities Fund, administered by Sport & Recreation Victoria, aligns directly with the Government's Fair Access Policy implementation, population growth forecasts, community sport participation priorities, and the surging demand for football across both metropolitan and regional Victoria.

Football Victoria's campaign will work in lockstep with LGAs to identify shared priorities and opportunities. Where councils are ready to act, the state and federal governments must be ready to match that ambition.



# A COORDINATED VISION FOR THE FUTURE IS UNDERWAY

In response to this infrastructure crisis, Football Victoria has launched a coordinated state-wide campaign entitled 'Level the Playing Field'. This campaign is not just a slogan - it is a structured movement backed by data, real world experiences, and grassroots mobilisation. It aligns participation data, facility evidence and community voices into a single, consistent message for government.

Over the next 12 months, this campaign will engage local clubs, councils, state and federal representatives and the broader community to push for a fair share of investment. With the 2026 State Election approaching, the next budget and election cycle represents a critical window to address long-standing infrastructure inequities and secure lasting outcomes.



**FUEL THE GROWTH.  
FUND THE GAME.**

**LEVEL**  
THE PLAYING FIELD





**“Football is more than a sport** - it’s where kids find their community, their confidence, and their voice. But too many clubs are running on outdated or inadequate facilities. This report lays the groundwork to change that, and I’m proud to stand alongside Football Victoria in this campaign.”

Carl Valeri – Former Socceroo  
Current President Gisborne SC



**LEVEL**

**THE PLAYING FIELD**



**FUEL THE  
GROWTH.  
FUND THE  
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# **LEVEL**

**THE PLAYING FIELD**



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