

2.5: INFRASTRUCTURE

Findings

32. Facilities for sport are not meeting demand and in the case of field sports, the drought is making this problem worse.
33. In general, local governments do not have sufficient resources to address sporting needs.
34. Existing facilities in schools, universities and defence installations are underutilised.
35. There is insufficient data on supply of and demand for facilities to make informed decisions and local planning is patchy.
36. Australian Government funding for sports facilities has been ad hoc and not based on a strategic assessment of competing community needs.
37. Community sports facility funding is not co-ordinated across Australian governments.

Adequate facilities are needed for increasing participation in sport. To maximise participation, facilities must be of a quality and quantity that makes participation attractive, convenient and safe. There is little point in taking other action to increase participation without a concurrent program to ensure there are enough facilities available to take advantage of interest generated. It is not clear why something so obvious has not been properly addressed in the past. All levels of government have spent millions of dollars in an effort to increase participation without strategic consideration of where people might play should they be inclined to do so.

The primary objective of investment into community facilities must be to meet the needs of the community now and into the future. There are two obvious steps in doing so: determining the needs and meeting them.

DETERMINING THE NEEDS

In order to meet the needs of the community, it is critical to know what they really are. Funding facilities without an assessment of need is unlikely to provide optimal outcomes. Reports from two Australian Government inquiries have highlighted the need for systematic and strategic approaches to the provision of sport and recreation facilities across the country. The House of

Representatives report *Rethinking the Funding of Community Sporting and Recreational Facilities: A Sporting Chance*⁷² and the Sport 2000 Taskforce report *Shaping Up: A Review of Commonwealth Involvement in Sport and Recreation in Australia*⁷³ both highlighted the need for systematic and strategic approaches to the provision of sport and recreation facilities across the country.

Governments at all levels have to deal with an array of established sports organisations, each bringing its own agenda and objectives to the policy arena. Community sporting programs are often driven by sporting organisations competing for market share, rather than meeting the needs of the population. In this environment well-resourced, high-profile and influential sports are likely to receive the lion's share of the available resources and assistance. This does not necessarily reflect the needs of the community.

With the changing demographics in many areas, notably the influx of Asian immigrants, sports that are currently considered 'minor', such as table tennis, badminton and other sports popular in Asia, will become more important in the future. In addition, as the population ages, more provision will need to be made for sport facilities that cater to the needs of older people.

Asking sporting organisations to identify their needs as the sole criteria for infrastructure planning is not the answer. If asked, particularly in the context of possible funding, all sporting organisations will put forward a case for better facilities.

Without a comprehensive evaluation of the state of Australia's sport and recreation infrastructure and an assessment of the level of need in various communities, efforts to address community concerns about unmet demand, dilapidation and drought-proofing are ad hoc at best, and likely to be inefficient and therefore ineffective.⁷⁴

It is clear that an evidence base is required to:

- Identify current and future needs, including consideration of changing population demographics.
- Determine the location and standard of our current stock of facilities.
- Determine to what extent existing facilities (including those under-utilised in schools, universities and defence installations) are able to meet current and future demand.
- Enable planning to address future community needs.

⁷² House of Representatives Standing Committee on Environment and Heritage, *Rethinking the Funding of Community Sporting and Recreational Facilities: A Sporting Chance*, October 1997.

⁷³ Australian Government Sport 2000 Taskforce report *Shaping Up: A Review of Commonwealth Involvement in Sport and Recreation in Australia*.

⁷⁴ Parliament of New South Wales, Legislative Assembly, Standing Committee on Public Works, *Inquiry into Sportsground Management in NSW*, report no. 53/08, November 2006.

The Panel notes that existing facilities in schools, universities and defence installations are generally under-utilised. A first option is to ensure that barriers to their use are overcome if possible. This may be a highly cost-effective approach and should be considered as part of any assessment of existing facilities.

Facility audits of varying scope have been carried out. In 2002, the Australian Government conducted the National Sport and Recreation Facilities Audit.⁷⁵ However, that audit did not take into account local and regional data which comprises a majority of Australia's sport and recreation facilities. It was also limited by the inability of some jurisdictions to provide detailed information on their respective stocks of facilities.

Audits have been conducted in some states, territories and regions and good data is held by some local governments. However, this data is generally collected and stored independently using different systems and may not be compatible with data from other state, territory or local governments. Moreover, many local governments, particularly in regional areas, do not have good data on infrastructure in their jurisdictions.⁷⁶

Both Australian Government inquiries mentioned above, called for a 'national audit' of sport and recreation facilities, as did many submissions to this review. The concept of a national 'top-down' audit might appear attractive in that it would be conducted through a single agency with simple cost arrangements. However, there are limitations to this approach:

- Conducting a national audit would primarily rely upon local input. But, the Australian Government does not own community sporting facilities (with the exception of defence installations) and neither do the states/territories (with the exception of the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), which is functionally both a territory and a local government).
- An adjunct to not owning facilities is not being responsible for their upkeep and maintenance. The Australian Government and state and territory governments do not generally keep information about the condition of local facilities and their ongoing costs.
- The Australian Government is currently a relatively minor spender on facilities. States/territories spend more. Local governments are clearly the major investors in construction and upkeep. Local governments are likely to see such a national audit as bureaucratic rather than useful and data collection may well be problematic.
- A new national audit starting from scratch would be a massive task and take substantial time and probably be out of date by the time that it is completed.

⁷⁵ Australian Government, Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, *National Sport and Recreation Facilities Audit*, March 2002.

⁷⁶ Parks and Leisure Australia, Submission to the Independent Sport Panel, 7 November 2008, pp. 2.

State or territory based audits have similar appeal, but the use of facilities sometimes ignores government borders, for example, the twin cities across borders such as Coolangatta–Tweed Heads, Albury–Wodonga and Canberra–Queanbeyan.

A more locally based ‘bottom up’ approach would have the advantages of:

- Ownership by local communities, with the resulting information being more accurate and more likely to be kept up to date over time as it is in the interests of local governments to maintain this information for local planning and resource allocation purposes.
- Being small enough to be manageable at the local level and could be completed in a relatively short timeframe.
- If conducted in co-operation with neighbouring local governments would address cross-border issues, allowing for regional information and priorities to be identified.

Any new audit, top down or bottom up, will also face the issue that some state, territory and local governments already have good information and the time, cost and effort of producing this data would be wasted.

Clearly, a preferred approach would use existing data where available and combine it into a form which is useful on a local, state/territory and national basis. Such a system would also provide guidelines for future data collection to ensure compatibility. Note that such a system may have application beyond the sports sector and be useful for other kinds of infrastructure, such as schools, libraries and, youth centres.

Submissions to the Panel have identified some possible solutions. A web-based geographic information system (GIS) may offer a mechanism,⁷⁷ a new system may need to be developed, or there may be other solutions. A scoping study would need to be conducted to assess the processes and practicalities of establishing a national system. Such a study would not be expensive and should be able to be completed in a short timeframe. The result should be a national sport infrastructure database and blueprint, which would logically be held and maintained by the Australian Government. This database would be a compilation of existing local databases connected through web-based technology.

This web-based database would be expanded as more local governments develop local databases. States and territories would be encouraged to help local government work with other councils in their jurisdictions to develop databases where none exist.

⁷⁷ Parks and Leisure Australia, Submission to the Independent Sport Panel, 7 November 2008, pp. 2.

With a practical approach identified, data will need to be collected and updated. While it might be argued that local government should be doing this as routine (and clearly some are), the reality is that many have not. Often town planning has ignored the needs of communities for sport facilities, both sporting and active leisure spaces. They will need a carrot to get moving.

If there is money available, action generally occurs. While it is appropriate for the Australian Government to bear the cost of housing the national database, state and territory governments should be responsible for providing assistance to local councils to develop their databases where necessary as some, or many may find it difficult to do so with existing resources.

Once the system is functional it is then possible (using a GIS) to add layers of information such as needs of particular sports, changing populations over time, socio-economic data and public transport. In fact, any available information that will assist in determining where, when and what facilities need to be provided could be added to the database. The collection of this data alone is of benefit, as councils can develop better quality plans for expansion areas, including adequate provision of sport and recreation facilities.

There is little point in collecting data and maintaining a shining new database if there is little prospect of fixing the problems it identifies. There must be the prospect of funding for facilities once the needs are identified. With a plan in hand, governments will be able to assess applications for support in the knowledge that they will be efficiently and effectively meeting the community needs of the community.

If the basis for funding is solely the needs of the community as demonstrated by robust data, then the criteria becomes simply how to prioritise those needs and develop jurisdictional and regional priorities. This should be done on a case by case basis, as it would be difficult and inconsistent to accord priority on some other criteria, for example local versus national versus international, regional versus metropolitan, or swimming versus football.

MEETING THE NEEDS

Successive Australian Governments have considered funding for facilities to be primarily the responsibility of state, territory and local governments, with comparatively minor funding coming from the Australian Government. In 2000–01 an Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) survey revealed the three levels of government provided a total of \$2.1 billion in funding for sports and physical recreation. Of this, the Australian Government contributed \$198.9 million (nine per cent), state and territory governments contributed \$875.2 million (41 per cent) and local governments provided \$1,050 million (49 per cent).⁷⁸

⁷⁸ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Sport and Recreation Funding by Government, Australia 2000–2001*, cat. no. 4147.0, pp. 3.

Community groups find it hard to know how to apply for funding support even when programs are in place. The process is complicated because different levels of government are often involved and community groups lack the expertise needed to navigate the process.

An independent report into local governments in 2006 found that up to 30 per cent of local governments might not be sustainable. The report noted a national total backlog in local government infrastructure renewal work costing an estimated \$14.5 billion. This backlog has resulted from a growing gap in many local councils between their revenue base and the funding required to deliver a broader range of services, as well as maintain and renew the infrastructure which supports these services.

The inescapable conclusion is that investment is needed and it is likely that the Australian Government is the only level of government able to drive national reform. The obvious way to drive reform is to provide funding. A national sport facilities fund should be established.

The size of such a fund cannot be quantified at this time in the absence of robust data on need.

However, there is little doubt that the current need will exceed \$1 billion, so a four or five year program of \$200 to \$250 million per annum will make a major difference. This is considerably more than the last Australian Government facilities program, the Community Cultural Sport and Recreation Program, which was \$60 million over two years. Out of every six applications, five were considered worthy of support. Demand from proponents was in the order of \$300 million, though since the grants had an upper limit of \$250,000 many larger projects were ineligible, so the real demand would have been much higher.

Future funding should be dependent on ongoing information collection through the national database.

The danger of establishing an Australian Government funding pool for sport infrastructure is that in doing so, Australian Government funding might be used to replace plans for development that are already on the table and future facility funding by local and state/territory governments. Any Australian Government funding must supplement other spending for objectives to be achieved.

This will require agreement at the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) level. Such an agreement will need to take into account the current forward commitments and spending levels of all tiers of government in sporting facilities and across departments recognising that sport facility funding comes from a number of areas of government. Further, an agreement needs to be put in place to ensure that current spending at state, territory and local government at least remains constant (or rises with CPI) and preferably rises with the introduction of new Australian Government funding.

It seems obvious, but worth pointing out, that the construction or redevelopment of any facility needs to take account of ongoing costs. No level of government should be both up for the cost of a facility and the ongoing costs of upkeep, repairs and renovations. A business case should be mounted that demonstrates the ongoing viability of the venue and the organisation before funding is provided.

A clear objective therefore is for venues to be self-sufficient and reduce, or be able to eliminate the need for future government assistance.

This may be achievable by some larger sporting organisations. It is unlikely to be for many smaller sports. Multi-sport facilities have the potential to be more self-sustaining. Larger facilities catering for a number of sports make communal features more economically viable, for example, meeting rooms, function rooms, canteens, bars, and change rooms can be used by a number of groups, not just sports organisations. There is the potential to ensure greater and more constant use throughout the year, as seasonal sports come and go.

Larger facilities also hold greater prospects for increasing social capital. As demographics change, this will become increasingly important. It may be that multi-sport facilities that include, for example, emerging sports preferred by people originating from Asian countries, may provide an avenue for integration and inclusion in communities. It is known that:

- Sport can have a critical and formative influence on the ethics, beliefs and behaviours of its participants.
- Sport is a vehicle for building community identity and cohesion.
- Sport provides inspirational role models who can engender community pride and help strengthen the social fabric of divided communities, regions or countries.
- Sport provides a positive alternative to anti-social behaviour and problems which stem from a lack of self-esteem, boredom, alienation and poverty.
- Well-run sporting programs provide training and experiences that develop individual capacity and provide skills transfer to other areas of life.
- Sport can be a valuable vehicle for reducing or eliminating alienation and stigmatisation for specific groups within the community.

In this respect, thinking should also go beyond just the sporting realm. Co-location of sporting facilities with other community facilities such as libraries, shopping centres, youth centres and others will also impact on the viability and creation of community centres. Other planning considerations include accessibility to public transport.

It would indeed be short-sighted to build new facilities or upgrade existing ones without regard for the future. Long-term viability depends on the ongoing availability of facilities. Recent years have seen the use of grass fields severely restricted in some states and territories by the effects of the drought. Synthetic turf or drought resistant grass, water tanks, recycling measures, use of solar power and energy efficient buildings must become fundamental principles of facility design. Facilities must use technologies that meet the challenges of climate change and community expectations of 'greenness'.