Sport is an investment, not a cost

EOC EU Office demands for the Multiannual Financial Framework 2028–2034

SPORT DELIVERS ON POLICY PRIORITIES

Sport is often perceived as a cost to public budgets. Yet investment in sport generates significant returns for individuals, communities and society. Across Europe, National Olympic Committees, federations, clubs and grassroots sports organisations promote healthier lifestyles, strengthen social inclusion, support education and skills development, foster volunteering and active citizenship, generate economic activity and reinforce community resilience.

The EOC EU Office's message "Sport is an investment, not a cost" reflects the need to move beyond a narrow understanding of expenditure on sport and recognise its long-term social and economic value, as a cross-sectoral enabler.

ECONOMY & RETURN ON INVESTMENT

€1 → €5

Every €1 invested in sport yields a return of €5 in eco-social benefits (Ecorys)

2.12%

of EU GDP is contributed by the sport industry (European Commission)

HEALTH AND WELLBEING

€80bn

is the annual cost to European healthcare systems from physical inactivity - driving non communicable diseases such as cardiovascular diseases, diabetes and obesity (European Parliamentary Research Service)

EMPLOYMENT, VOLUNTEERING AND SOCIAL COHESION

6%

of people engage in voluntary activities in sport (European Commission)

8.1%

increase of employment in sport between 2024 and 2025 (Eurostat)

SUSTAINABLE AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

10%

of global tourism expenditure is sports tourism (UN Tourism)

€67.6bn

spent by EU governments on recreational & sporting services, 0.4% of EU GDP (Eurostat)

Sport's contribution to EU and national policy priorities is evident, yet poorly recognised. In particular, sport supports:

PREPAREDNESS AND DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE
by promoting civic engagement, democratic participation, European values.

EDUCATION AND LIFELONG LEARNING
by developing transferable skills, supporting non-formal and informal learning and strengthening personal development.

YOUTH
by empowering young people through participation and youth work, developing skills for employment, active citizenship.

HEALTH AND WELLBEING
by increasing physical activity, supporting mental health, preventing NCDs and helping reduce long-term healthcare costs.

EMPLOYMENT, VOLUNTEERING AND SOCIAL COHESION
by creating jobs, fostering volunteering and active citizenship, and strengthening local communities.

SUSTAINABLE AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT
by supporting resilient communities and contributing to environmental, social and territorial objectives.

COMPETITIVENESS & ECONOMIC RESILIENCE
by supporting a healthier and productive population, developing skills and strengthening communities and orgs to contribute to Europe's performance.

The evidence is clear: sport is a powerful delivery mechanism for achieving the European Union's and national policy objectives. The recommendations set out in this paper are therefore based on a simple principle: **"Sport is an investment, not a cost", and support for sport should not be regarded merely as expenditure, but as a strategic investment in Europe's people and future.**

EUROPEAN OLYMPIC COMMITTEES | EU Office THE HOUSE OF EUROPEAN SPORT

About the EOC EU Office

The EOC EU Office represents the interests of the European Olympic Committees and its partner organisations towards the institutions of the European Union. It acts as the voice of the Olympic and organised sport movement in Brussels, promotes the contribution of sport to European policy objectives and supports sports organisations in accessing and implementing European Union programmes.

HOW THE MFF 2028-2034 CAN SUPPORT SPORT ORGANISATIONS' ESSENTIAL ROLE

The Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) should therefore combine dedicated funding for sport with mainstreaming across EU policy and funding programmes. Sport should be clearly visible and eligible in key instruments, in particular Erasmus+, National and Regional Partnership Plans (NRPPs) and related sectoral regulations, AgoraEU and the Competitiveness Fund. This would enable the EU, Member States and local authorities to better harness sport's potential and allow sports organisations to translate European/national priorities in practical action.

By explicitly integrating sport across EU funding programmes and recognising sport organisations as key partners in translating European priorities into concrete action, **the next MFF can maximise social impact, strengthen regional development and deliver lasting benefits for citizens and communities across Europe**.

ERASMUS+

What we ask: Increase the Erasmus+ budget to at least €47.5 billion, allocate at least 5% to sport, preserve learning mobility, sport events, and volunteering opportunities, simplify access, and strengthen the dissemination of Erasmus+ Sport projects' results.

Why it matters: Erasmus+ is the flagship programme for sport. Greater investment will enable organised sport to contribute more effectively to health, education, inclusion, volunteering, sustainability and European cohesion.

NRPPs

What we ask: Explicitly recognise and mention sport as a cross-sectoral investment priority within National and Regional Partnership Plans.

Why it matters: Integrating sport into regional planning strengthens territorial cohesion, healthier communities, social inclusion, regional attractiveness and sustainable economic development.

ERDF

What we ask: Recognise sport infrastructure as eligible and integrate sport into regional and urban development strategies.

Why it matters: Modern, sustainable and accessible sport infrastructure supports healthier populations, stronger communities, sustainable tourism, urban regeneration, territorial attractiveness and the green transition.

ESF

What we ask: Recognise sport as a strategic partner for social inclusion, employability, lifelong learning and skills development.

Why it matters: Sport helps integrate disadvantaged groups, develops transferable skills, strengthens volunteering and workforce resilience, as well as contributing directly to the European Pillar of Social Rights.

CAP/LEADER

What we ask: Recognise sport as a contributor to rural development and support investment in local sport infrastructure, services, organisations and community partnerships.

Why it matters: Sport strengthens the vitality of rural communities by promoting health, volunteering, youth engagement, active ageing, social cohesion and territorial resilience.

AgoraEU

What we ask: Recognise organised sport as a civil society actor and improve access for sport organisations to funding under AgoraEU.

Why it matters: Through millions of volunteers and over 700,000 local sport clubs, organised sport strengthens democracy, active citizenship, equality, inclusion and European values.

COMPETITIVENESS FUND

What we ask: Acknowledge sport and physical activity as strategic investments in prevention and recognise organised sport as a key partner in delivering health promotion and preventive actions.

Why it matters: Investing in sport and physical activity is one of the most cost-effective preventive health measures, reducing healthcare costs, preventing non-communicable diseases, improving mental health and wellbeing, and strengthening Europe's competitiveness through a healthier, more resilient and productive population.

HOW THE MFF 2028-2034 CAN SUPPORT SPORT ORGANISATIONS' ESSENTIAL ROLE

ERASMUS+

Erasmus+ is the European Union's flagship programme for education, youth and sport and one of its most visible success stories. Demand for Erasmus+ Sport has grown steadily in recent years, demonstrating both the increasing capacity of organised sport to contribute to EU priorities and the need for greater investment.

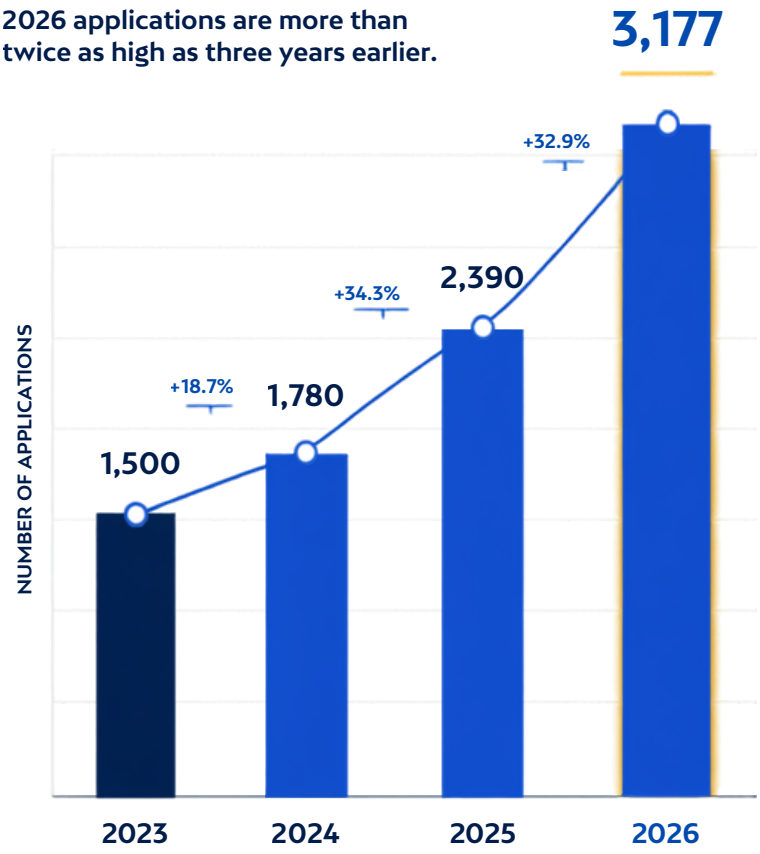
Over the past four years, Erasmus+ Sport has seen a sustained and significant increase in demand, with application numbers reaching a new record high every year. Applications rose from 1,500 in 2023 to 1,780 in 2024 (+18.7%), before increasing more sharply to 2,390 in 2025 (+34.3%) and reaching a further record of 3,177 in 2026 (+32.9%). Taken together, this sustained growth means that demand for Erasmus+ Sport has increased by almost 112% since 2023, with the number of applications in 2026 now more than twice as high as just three years earlier.

This widening gap between demand and the programme's capacity to support projects underlines the need to strengthen Erasmus+ Sport in the context of the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), ensuring that the programme can meet the needs of the sport sector and fully deliver on its potential.

The future programme should provide sufficient resources, legal certainty and flexibility to maximise sport's contribution to health, education, social inclusion, volunteering, sustainability and European cohesion.

Applications increased by almost 112% since 2023

2026 applications are more than twice as high as three years earlier.



THE EOC EU OFFICE CALLS FOR THE FOLLOWING PRIORITIES TO SHAPE THE FUTURE ERASMUS+ PROGRAMME

- **provide an ambitious and sustainable Erasmus+ budget**
- **ensure financial stability through annual earmarking**
- **allocate at least 5% of Erasmus+ to sport**
- **maintain support for Large-Scale European Sport Events**
- **expand learning mobility in sport**
- **strengthen volunteering through Erasmus+**
- **preserve a balanced delivery model**
- **simplify access to Erasmus+**
- **better exploit Erasmus+ Sport results**

HOW THE MFF 2028-2034 CAN SUPPORT SPORT ORGANISATIONS' ESSENTIAL ROLE

ERASMUS+

Provide an ambitious and sustainable Erasmus+ budget

The proposed Erasmus+ budget does not sufficiently reflect inflation, the integration of the European Solidarity Corps or the sustained growth in demand across all sectors. A stronger financial framework is essential to ensure that the programme can continue delivering its objectives while responding to emerging priorities.

THE EOC EU OFFICE THEREFORE CALLS FOR

- a minimum Erasmus+ budget of **€47.5 billion;**
- annual budget adjustments reflecting inflation; and
- sufficient flexibility to address emerging priorities without reducing existing opportunities.

Ensure financial stability through annual earmarking

Predictable annual allocations provide legal certainty for beneficiaries and National Agencies while ensuring balanced development across all sectors of the programme.

THE EOC EU OFFICE THEREFORE CALLS FOR

- annual earmarking for education, youth and sport;
- transparent publication of annual allocations and success rates; and
- predictable funding enabling long-term planning.

Allocate at least 5% of Erasmus+ to sport

Demand for Erasmus+ Sport continues to grow significantly faster than available funding. In 2025, more than **2,390 applications** were submitted, while only around **330 projects** could be supported. Future allocations should better reflect demonstrated demand and the growing contribution of sport organisations to EU policy objectives.

THE EOC EU OFFICE THEREFORE CALLS FOR

- allocating at least **5% of the Erasmus+ budget** to sport;
- future allocations based on demonstrated demand; and
- adequate funding for both grassroots and European-level sport organisations.

Maintain support for Large-Scale European Sport Events

Large-scale European sport events promote European values, volunteering, sustainability, social inclusion and regional development while generating lasting social and economic benefits. Continued support will strengthen their legacy and long-term contribution to communities across Europe.

THE EOC EU OFFICE THEREFORE CALLS FOR

- maintaining a dedicated annual Erasmus+ call;
- encouraging projects with measurable legacy and grassroots impact; and
- enabling multi-annual planning for recurring European events.

Expand learning mobility in sport

Learning mobility should reflect the diversity of the European sport movement and support knowledge exchange across all functions within sport. Expanding mobility opportunities would strengthen skills development, innovation and peer learning throughout the sector.

THE EOC EU OFFICE THEREFORE CALLS FOR MOBILITY OPPORTUNITIES FOR

- athletes;
- coaches and technical officials;
- volunteers;
- administrative staff (paid or volunteer) and personnel (paid or volunteer) supporting strategic activities (e.g. governance; safeguarding, integrity, sustainability, inclusion, etc.)
- stronger peer learning between National Olympic Committees, federations and grassroots organisations.

Strengthen volunteering through Erasmus+

The integration of the European Solidarity Corps into Erasmus+ provides an opportunity to better recognise the role of volunteers, who represent the backbone of organised sport across Europe.

THE EOC EU OFFICE THEREFORE CALLS FOR

- removing or significantly broadening existing age limits, recognising that most sport volunteers are over the age of 25;
- recognising sport organisations as both hosting and sending organisations; and
- supporting volunteering as a pathway to lifelong learning and active citizenship.

Preserve a balanced delivery model

National Agencies play a vital role in ensuring that Erasmus+ remains accessible to grassroots organisations, while centralised actions remain essential for strategic European cooperation. Preserving both approaches will maximise the programme's impact.

THE EOC EU OFFICE THEREFORE CALLS FOR

- maintaining centralised and decentralised management models, ensuring coherence and complementarity between them and reflecting the different needs and scope of sport stakeholders operating at national and European levels;
- ensuring consistent interpretation of programme rules; and
- providing clear guidance on the most appropriate funding route.

Simplify access to Erasmus+

Administrative requirements should remain proportionate to project size and organisational capacity. Simplification would improve accessibility, particularly for smaller grassroots organisations and first-time applicants.

THE EOC EU OFFICE THEREFORE CALLS FOR

- wider use of simplified cost options;
- harmonised application and reporting procedures;
- clearer guidance and digital tools; and
- proportionate audit requirements.

Better exploit Erasmus+ Sport results

Hundreds of Erasmus+ Sport projects have generated valuable knowledge, innovative practices and practical tools. Greater dissemination, peer-to-peer learning and uptake would maximise the long-term impact of EU investment and strengthen the link between funded projects and future sport policy, while avoiding the duplication of efforts.

THE EOC EU OFFICE THEREFORE CALLS FOR

- systematic dissemination of project results;
- european communities of practice and peer learning;
- scaling up successful project outcomes; and
- stronger links between Erasmus+ Sport projects and EU sport policy.

HOW THE MFF 2028-2034 CAN SUPPORT SPORT ORGANISATIONS' ESSENTIAL ROLE

NATIONAL AND REGIONAL PARTNERSHIP PLANS (NRPPs)

National and Regional Partnership Plans (NRPPs) should provide an integrated framework for addressing the economic, social and territorial needs of Member States and regions. As a cross-sectoral policy tool, sport contributes directly to healthier communities, social inclusion, regional attractiveness and sustainable economic development. Explicitly recognising sport within these Plans would enable investments that better respond to demographic change, regional disparities and territorial cohesion.

Recognise sport as a driver of territorial development

Sustainable and modern sport infrastructure, community-based sport, volunteering and active tourism generate benefits that extend far beyond the playing field. They improve health and wellbeing, strengthen community cohesion, create opportunities for non-formal learning and volunteering, support neighbourhood regeneration, and contribute to local economies through events and active tourism. Integrating sport into NRPP would therefore help maximise the impact of EU investments across regions.

THE EOC EU OFFICE THEREFORE CALLS FOR

- explicitly recognising and mentioning sport as a cross-sectoral contributor within NRPPs;
- investing in accessible and sustainable sport infrastructure, community-based sport and volunteering as drivers of social cohesion and territorial resilience;
- supporting active and sport tourism as contributors to sustainable regional development and local economies; and
- strengthening partnerships between public authorities and sport organisations to deliver regional development objectives.

HOW THE MFF 2028-2034 CAN SUPPORT SPORT ORGANISATIONS' ESSENTIAL ROLE

EUROPEAN REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT FUND (ERDF)

Sport contributes directly to many of the ERDF's objectives - including health, social inclusion, urban regeneration, sustainable tourism and regional competitiveness. Therefore, it should be more explicitly recognised in the future ERDF Regulation, thereby providing greater legal certainty and encouraging more consistent investment in sport across Member States.

Recognise sport as a driver of regional development

Sport facilities are essential social infrastructure. Modern, accessible, inclusive and sustainable sport facilities improve health and well-being, promote social inclusion, strengthen community resilience and enhance the attractiveness of cities and regions, thereby reinforcing the "right to stay". At the same time, many grassroots infrastructure require renovation to improve accessibility and energy efficiency, reducing operating costs while contributing to the EU's climate and energy objectives. Sport also supports regional economies through sporting events, active tourism and local employment, reinforcing the ERDF's objectives for sustainable growth and territorial cohesion.

THE EOC EU OFFICE THEREFORE CALLS FOR

- explicitly recognising sport and community sport infrastructure as eligible areas of investment within the future ERDF Regulation;
- supporting the modernisation, accessibility, decarbonisation and energy-efficient renovation of sport infrastructure as part of investments in social and sustainable infrastructure;
- integrating sport into sustainable urban and regional development strategies, recognising its contribution to health, social inclusion, territorial attractiveness and community resilience; and
- recognising sport as a driver of sustainable tourism, regional competitiveness and local economic development, while ensuring continued investment in sport and community facilities.

HOW THE MFF 2028-2034 CAN SUPPORT SPORT ORGANISATIONS' ESSENTIAL ROLE

EUROPEAN SOCIAL FUND (ESF)

As the principal financial instrument implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights, investing in people, supporting employment, social inclusion, education, skills and equal opportunities, the future European Social Fund (ESF) should explicitly recognise organised sport as a strategic partner in delivering these objectives and maximise its contribution through the National and Regional Partnership Plans.

Recognise sport as a driver of social inclusion and skills development

Sport provides structured and inclusive environments that promote participation, strengthen communities and equip people with transferable skills and competencies that support personal development, employability and active participation in society. Through grassroots activities, volunteering and local partnerships, sport helps tackle social exclusion, supports the integration of disadvantaged groups, develops transferable competences and enhances employability. Explicitly recognising sport within the future ESF would enable Member States to better harness its contribution to implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights while strengthening social cohesion and economic resilience.

THE EOC EU OFFICE THEREFORE CALLS FOR

- explicitly recognising organised sport as a key mechanism for actions promoting social inclusion, equal opportunities, active participation and the integration of disadvantaged and vulnerable groups;
- supporting sport-based initiatives that develop employability, lifelong learning, volunteering, leadership and transferable skills, particularly among young people, persons with disabilities, migrants and those furthest from the labour market;
- recognising sport organisations as strategic partners in the design and implementation of ESF programmes at national and regional level; and
- encouraging greater use of sport to support the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights, active citizenship and resilient communities and workforces.

HOW THE MFF 2028-2034 CAN SUPPORT SPORT ORGANISATIONS' ESSENTIAL ROLE

COMMON AGRICULTURE POLICY (CAP) & EUROPEAN AGRICULTURAL FUND FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT (EAFRD) – LEADER

The European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), through the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and the LEADER approach, plays a central role in strengthening the social, economic and environmental resilience of rural communities. While LEADER represents a relatively small share of EAFRD expenditure, it has consistently demonstrated the added value of community-led investments, including in sport. The future CAP should therefore more explicitly recognise sport as a contributor to rural development, territorial cohesion and quality of life, especially because research [1] has shown that, among Local Action Group's (LAG) activities, improving shared community infrastructure, such as sport facilities, has one of the highest perceived environmental effects.

Recognise sport as a driver of resilient rural communities

Sport strengthens the vitality and attractiveness of rural areas and supports people's "right to stay" by promoting health, social inclusion, volunteering, youth engagement and active ageing. Investments in community sport infrastructure and local sport initiatives also contribute to stronger social capital, local partnerships and economic activity. Despite this demonstrated impact, sport organisations remain underrepresented within LAGs, limiting their contribution to local development strategies and LEADER projects.

THE EOC EU OFFICE THEREFORE CALLS FOR

- explicitly recognising local sport organisations and physical activity as contributors to rural development, territorial cohesion and community resilience within the future CAP and NRPP;
- ensuring investment in community sport infrastructure, active mobility and physical activity facilities is eligible under rural development programmes;
- strengthening the participation of sport organisations and community sport clubs in LAGs and other local partnership structures; and
- encouraging LEADER projects that use sport to contribute to social inclusion, volunteering, youth engagement, active lifestyle and ageing, social cohesion, regional sustainable development and territorial resilience.

HOW THE MFF 2028-2034 CAN SUPPORT SPORT ORGANISATIONS' ESSENTIAL ROLE

AgoraEU

AgoraEU is the European Commission's proposed programme under the 2028–2034 MFF bringing together EU support for culture, media, civil society, citizens' participation, equality, rights and European values. By incorporating key priorities currently supported through the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) Programme – including civic engagement, equality, fundamental rights, gender equality and the prevention of violence – AgoraEU provides an opportunity to better harness the potential of organised sport as an important yet underused vehicle for advancing these objectives.

Recognise sport as a pillar of European civil society

With more than 700,000 grassroots sport clubs [2] and millions of volunteers, athletes, officials and coaches, organised sport constitutes one of Europe's largest civic network. Sport promotes active citizenship, democratic participation, equality, inclusion, intercultural dialogue, youth engagement and intergenerational solidarity, while fostering a shared sense of European identity and belonging.

Nevertheless, sport organisations continue to face barriers in accessing EU funding opportunities targeting civil society networks, as they are not consistently recognised as an eligible or primary target group. Improving their recognition within the Programme by a clear mention of sport, and reduced administrative burden, would enable organised sport to contribute to priorities inherited from the CERV Programme, including the promotion of Union values, citizens' participation, equality, rights and the prevention of discrimination and gender-based violence, whilst also reaching a broader range of civil society actors.

THE EOC EU OFFICE THEREFORE CALLS FOR

- explicitly recognising organised sport as a civil society actor under AgoraEU, contributing across the Programme's priorities, including democratic participation, active citizenship, European values, equality and gender equality, social inclusion, fundamental rights, and the prevention of discrimination and gender-based violence;
- strengthening access for grassroots sport organisations through enhanced guidance, capacity-building and reinforced Programme Desks; and
- promoting cross-sectoral cooperation between sport, culture and civil society organisations to maximise the Programme's contribution to resilient, inclusive and democratic communities.

HOW THE MFF 2028-2034 CAN SUPPORT SPORT ORGANISATIONS' ESSENTIAL ROLE

COMPETITIVENESS FUND

The proposed Competitiveness Fund, which will integrate the current EU4Health Programme, provides an important opportunity to place greater emphasis on preventive health and to further value the role of sport and physical activity in supporting the European Union's health, resilience and competitiveness. Currently, only 5.5% [3] of health expenditure in the EU is dedicated to preventive health, highlighting the potential to strengthen investment in prevention. EU countries spent €62.8 billion on preventive health care in 2023 [4], whereas the economic burden of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) amounts to €530 billion [5] and the economic burden of cardiovascular diseases to €282 billion[6].

The future Fund should therefore place greater emphasis on preventive health and explicitly recognise the key role of sport and sport organisations in supporting population health, reducing healthcare expenditure and strengthening Europe's human capital, while acknowledging their central role in delivering health promotion and preventive actions.

Recognise sport as a strategic investment in prevention and competitiveness

Physical inactivity is estimated to cost European healthcare systems around €80 billion annually [7], while increased physical activity significantly reduces the risk of depression, anxiety and other chronic conditions [8]. In this regard, regular physical activity is one of the most effective tools for preventing NCDs, improving mental health and promoting healthy ageing. Therefore, by supporting healthier and more active populations, sport contributes directly to a more productive workforce, greater social resilience and enhanced European competitiveness. Explicit recognition of sport would also reinforce key EU health priorities, including the prevention of NCDs, mental health and the objectives of the European Commission's SAFE Hearts Plan.

THE EOC EU OFFICE THEREFORE CALLS FOR

- explicitly recognising sport and physical activity as strategic investment in preventive health measures within the Competitiveness Fund; accordingly, recognising organised sport as a key partner in delivering health promotion and preventive actions thereby ensuring that sport organisations can fully contribute to health-related funding calls;
- supporting sport organisations that promote sport, physical activity and active lifestyle across civil societies, including underrepresented and vulnerable groups; and
- encouraging cross-sectoral initiatives linking sport, health, education and social inclusion to maximise prevention outcomes.

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