



GUIDELINES ON OPEN SPACES OUTDOOR SPORTS



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This document has been authored by Dr Antoine Zammit, Luke Azzopardi and Kirsty Borg for studjurban, in collaboration with the Local Councils' Association Malta.

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Published by:
Local Councils' Association
Local Government Building
Local Government Road
Marsa
Malta

T. +356 25968000 E. lca@lca.org.mt
www.lca.org.mt

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1. Introduction

Outdoor sports and recreation have long held a significant role in sustaining people’s physical and mental well-being and are essential components of a truly vibrant community life. Outdoor sports facilities can also provide further assets that benefit society. Spaces with integrated outdoor sports facilities can become spots where users meet outside work hours or as an alternative to staying home, forging social bonds. Multi-use sports facilities may even boost foot traffic for nearby businesses, serving as economic catalysts.

Too often, physical activity is relegated to organised clubs or costly indoor gyms. This document urges a cultural shift – one where movement becomes part of daily life, supported by accessible, inclusive and well-designed outdoor environments.

Within the Maltese context, open spaces that are flexible for outdoor sports are especially valuable. However, as discussed in the other LCA **Open Spaces** documents, the limited availability of public green spaces in Malta presents a significant challenge. The Local Councils Association (LCA) has long emphasised the need for a holistic plan of open spaces, centred around the community, within its **ResidentFirst** initiative.

This document takes a similar approach to the other documents within the **Open Spaces** series. It first analyses different typologies of outdoor sports and the current status of outdoor sports integration across the Maltese Islands. It discusses Malta’s unique challenges and opportunities, as well as salient pointers for successful and effective sports spaces, drawing lessons from earlier LCA documents and international best practice. This is followed by a more action-oriented section presenting eight pragmatic steps which Local Councils and stakeholders may use to implement outdoor sports areas. The document concludes with some key reflections, highlighting the importance of putting residents at the forefront of planning and embracing a more collaborative approach to adopt a culture of outdoor activity across the Maltese Islands.

2. Outdoor Sports Typologies and Benefits



Outdoor recreation areas can be broadly divided into formal and informal typologies. Distinguishing between these categories is essential since each requires specific design considerations and provides different experiences. Both typologies are important, but successful open space planning usually blends the two.

2.1 Formal Outdoor Sports Facilities

These refer to spaces with integrated facilities such as football pitches, tennis and basketball courts, outdoor gyms, athletics tracks and/or other structures dedicated to sports. These cater for organised play such as matches, workout routines or local club training, and are usually defined by marking, goalposts, nets, exercise machines or other equipment. In Malta, one can find examples of such facilities, including football grounds (usually maintained by local clubs or schools) and public basketball courts. In recent years, the addition of outdoor gyms in public gardens has also been on the rise, defined by clusters of fitness equipment installed in urban areas. Similarly, skate parks such as the one in Msida are another formal facility slowly gaining traction, dedicated to skateboarding, BMX biking and scootering. Formal facilities are beneficial because they provide the necessary infrastructure for people to train in particular sports, and at the same time help attract those who seek a more structured form of exercise.

2.2 Informal Outdoor Sports Areas

These refer to open areas which are not dedicated to one specific sport, allowing for various physical activities and recreation. Within these spaces, one usually finds multi-purpose furniture which users temporarily appropriate for their activity's needs. In Malta, seaside promenades and outdoor walking trails can be considered as informal outdoor sports areas, used for jogging and cycling, with the addition of occasional fitness stations and benches which double up as exercise props for impromptu outdoor exercise sessions. Informal use of space within town squares and piazzas has also been a long-standing tradition for many years, with children using quieter side streets or space within the church parvis as a spontaneous play area. A recently growing trend is also the concept of 'play streets', temporarily turning residential streets into playing zones by restricting access to cars for certain hours: this was amply discussed in the **Slow Streets** schemes carried out for several localities throughout Malta and Gozo, where some streets were proposed to be partially closed to release urban space for safe informal play or other activities.





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Understanding the difference between the two typologies is very important for Local Councils, vis-à-vis requirements. Formal facilities usually need dedicated space, funding and proper maintenance and management, whilst informal play areas tend to require a more holistic urban design approach, in order to make sure that they are accessible, safe and inviting for spontaneous recreation. The user typology also varies between each typology: a football pitch, for example, would most probably serve a community's competitive targeted sports' needs, whilst a network of walkable streets and spaces tends to attract more day-to-day physical activity from a wider population segment.

Formal Sports Facilities

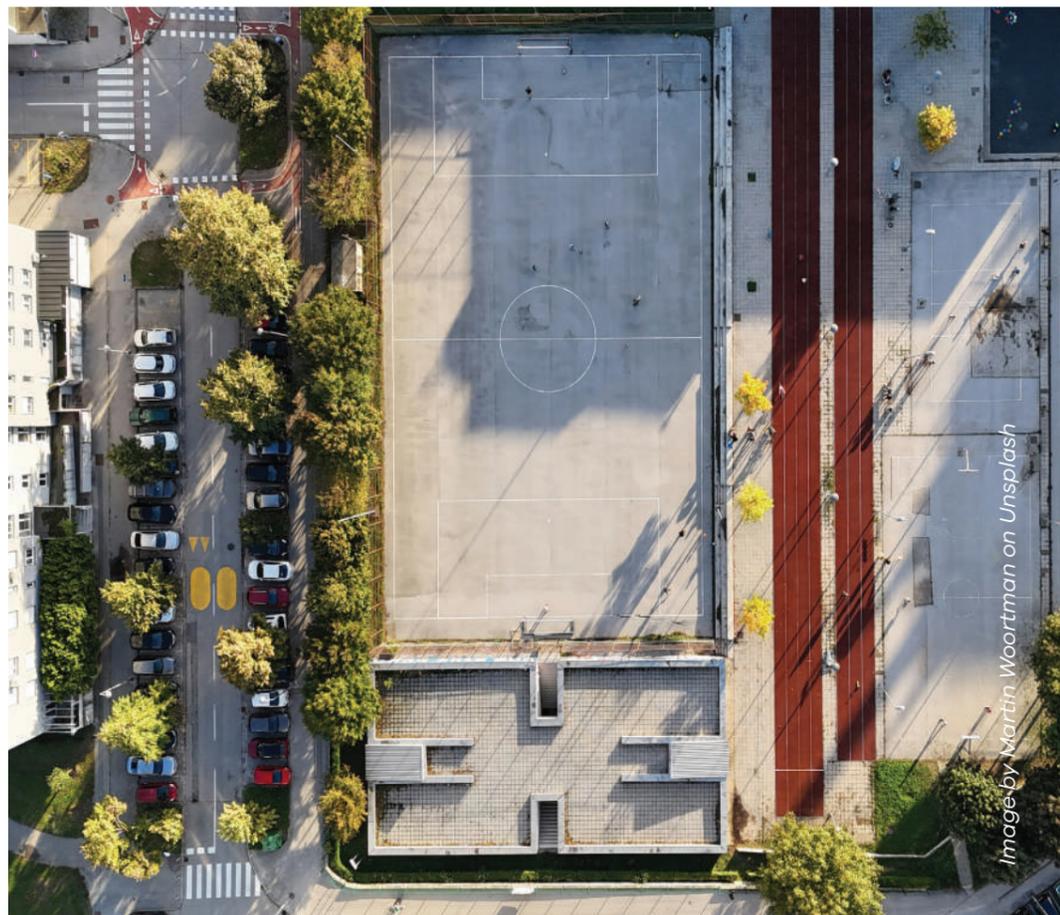
Informal Outdoor Sports Areas

Formal Sports Facilities	Informal Outdoor Sports Areas
<p>Primary Use Organised, structured sport</p>	<p>Primary Use Spontaneous, varied physical activity</p>
<p>Examples Football pitches, tennis courts, outdoor gyms</p>	<p>Examples Promenades, trails, town squares, play streets</p>
<p>Equipment / Markings Goalposts, nets, machines, markings</p>	<p>Equipment / Markings Benches, multi-purpose furniture, no formal markings</p>
<p>User Type Clubs, teams, serious exercisers</p>	<p>User Type General public, casual users, children</p>
<p>Infrastructure Requirements High needs investment, management</p>	<p>Infrastructure Requirements Low to moderate, needs design sensitivity</p>
<p>Flexibility of Use Low – sport-specific</p>	<p>Flexibility of Use High – multi-purpose</p>
<p>Trend Increasing (gyms, skateparks)</p>	<p>Trend Growing interest (play streets, slow streets)</p>

Formal vs Informal Sports Facilities. Source: Studjurban

2.3 Value of Outdoor Sports Space

Research and practical experience show significant evidence of the benefits of well-designed sports areas within the public realm. Even small interventions could be beneficial, such as converting a small patch of underused land or a small street section into an activity-oriented place. Key benefits are outlined in the following pages.



2.3.1 Health Benefits

The most direct benefit of outdoor sports facilities would be on the user's physical and mental health. If an accessible and pleasant space is nearby, a resident is more likely to go for a short walk or play sports. Any outdoor activity that allows people to exercise would be critical for Malta, which currently faces very high obesity rates.

Besides fitness benefits, regular physical activity boosts mental health by relieving anxiety. Even being outdoors has its own

therapeutic effects. Outdoor recreation spaces can also become 'green gyms' to allow users to work out surrounded by nature for its calming effect. In a country like Malta, where urban life can become hectic, an open-air exercise spot can act as an oasis for mental wellbeing and, in the long term, helps prevent disease, reduces healthcare costs and enhances quality of life.





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2.3.2 Social Benefits

Spaces for outdoor sports host a variety of social realms, connecting people of different ages, backgrounds and individual abilities. An inclusive sports space can host multiple uses throughout different times of the day, fostering interactions amongst different community members. This overlap of varying users helps create social cohesion as users become more familiar with each other.

Sports can unify people with different language or cultural barriers. Inclusive design features and their strategic placement allow other generations to use spaces side by side, increasing the chances of chance encounter and interaction. Diverse users also make the space feel safer, given that the presence of people may deter antisocial behaviour.



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2.3.3 Economic Benefits

Well-placed sports and recreation areas can yield economic dividends for the vicinity. Generated activity tends to increase foot traffic and 'stay' time, benefitting nearby small businesses: a pedestrianised historical square, a football ground or a seaside promenade with a jogging path, for example, all attract a diversity of people that increases the chances of them going to a nearby shop, during or after their workout. In turn, areas that become known as gathering spots – such as squares or waterfronts – tend to become more popular with investors and vendors, increasing opportunities for local businesses. Research shows that prices of properties with access to recreational amenities can also rise, since investors are willing to pay more to live close to active spaces because of their lifestyle benefits. Furthermore, other macroeconomic benefits come into play since a healthier population leads to lower healthcare expenses. Investing in a multi-functional space that can host multiple sports and other recreational activities makes more efficient use of the space, which is money well spent and saves further money in the long run.

2.3.4 Environmental Benefits

Outdoor sports areas can become important urban assets, providing opportunities to integrate green infrastructure. When thoughtfully designed, the inclusion of trees, shrubs, or perimeter gardens helps cool the area's microclimate, provide much-needed shade in summer and filter air pollutants. Integrating greenery also helps contribute to sustaining biodiversity, offering a habitat for insects or birds in an otherwise hard-surface neighbourhood. Ground cover also serves as a water catchment area, an opportunity to store rainwater overflow.

Integrating sports facilities at a local level also encourages active mobility. Giving people a purpose to use alternative means of transport, such as cycling or walking, reduces car usage on the streets.

Ultimately, integrating these environmentally friendly elements helps foster an ethic of environmental awareness within our communities. As people spend more time outdoors, they automatically appreciate the integration of natural elements in their communities and are more likely to support further integration of such elements in the future.

3. Challenges and Opportunities for Outdoor Sports in Malta

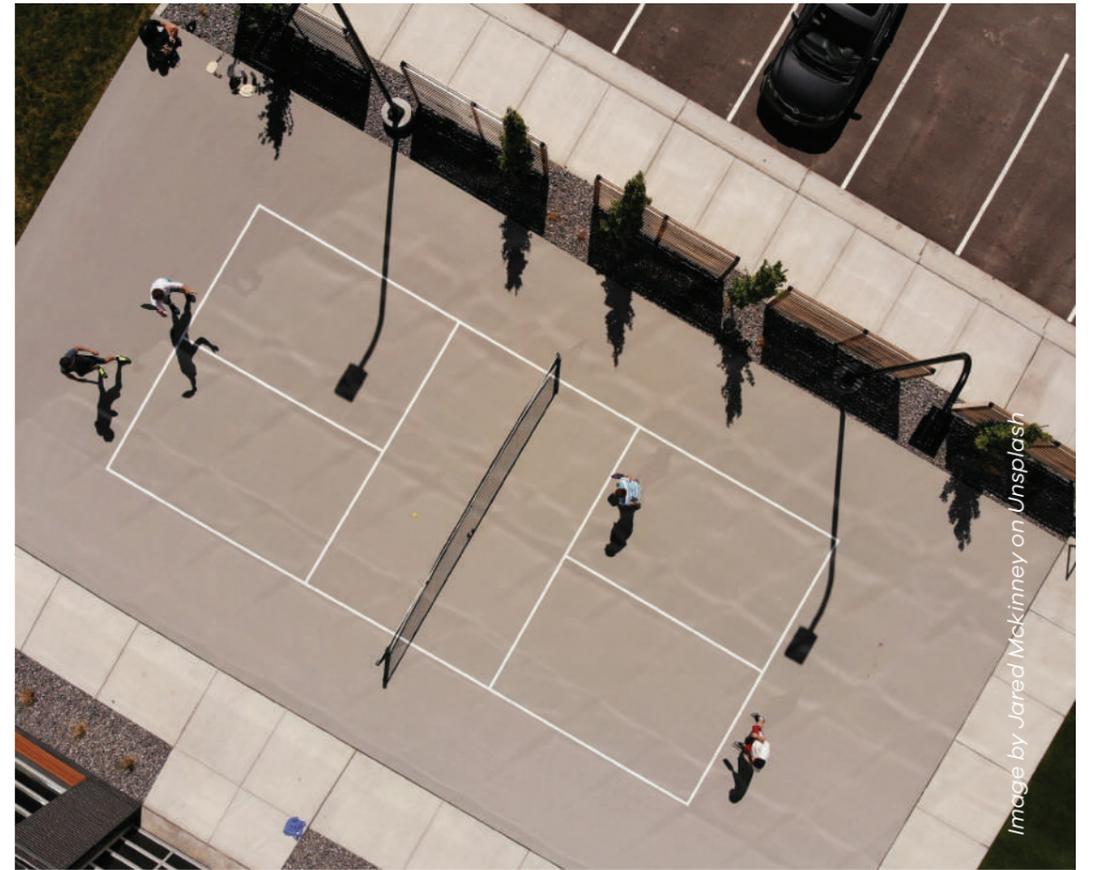


Integrating outdoor sports spaces in the Maltese Islands comes with its own set of distinct challenges. These same challenges, on the other hand, also present innovative opportunities for a well-designed multi-functional design. Some key challenges of integrating outdoor sports and recreation areas in Malta are presented next, as well as how each can be seen as an opportunity for smarter and more creative solutions. By understanding these contextual constraints, solutions can be developed specifically for Local Councils' needs.

Given their scarcity, Local Councils often struggle to find and locate unused plots for new communal facilities. Within town and village cores, narrow squares and streets are difficult to convert into modern

sports facilities. Thinking of adaptive, re-usable urban spaces for recreation encourages Local Councils to use every space available innovatively, no matter its size, as explored further in the LCA's document 3.4 **Open Space Re-use**.

The issue is compounded by the fact that urban areas have been planned and designed around the car, resulting in traffic-congested streets and public spaces dedicated to parking. The lack of proper pavements or bike lanes – combined with the dangers of fast traffic along pedestrian movement – leaves little physical room for pedestrian usage, deems the user's experience unsafe and discourages active mobility, as amply discussed in the LCA's **Sustainable Mobility** series.



The ever-rising awareness of the disadvantages of car-centric planning has slowly encouraged a positive momentum for more inclusivity of pedestrians and traffic-calming measures. It offers a timely opportunity to reclaim spaces for people. Projects such as the LCA's **Slow Streets** and IM's **Vjal Kulhadd** invite local communities to rethink urban spaces as shared spaces rather than just for vehicular access.

Building on this momentum, Local Councils can identify streets that are over-dimensioned or have less traffic and consider redesigning them to partially cater to recreation spaces. Examples of this would be integrating linear playgrounds by narrowing carriageway lanes, or freeing up sprawling parking lots by creating structured parking facilities such as a periphery multi-storey car park and reutilising the freed-up space better.



Image by Declan-sun on Unsplash

Another challenge is climatic, especially in summer when intense heat during the day can make outdoor sports very uncomfortable – even dangerous – without proper protection. In warmer seasons, hard surfaces can amplify the urban heat island effect and glare from the sun. In the colder seasons, open spaces need to be able to handle periodical heavy rain and windy days. Any urban furniture and equipment used must have proper materials to withstand such conditions. These climate constraints are also an opportunity to implement smarter, climate-responsive outdoor spaces. As discussed in the LCA document **3.1 Parks and Gardens**, tree cover is central to cooling down urban spaces. Designing permeable surfaces within outdoor sports areas and well-installed drainage systems underneath turns them into dual-purpose infrastructure. Such measures can also tap into the same climate for energy sources. For example, the installation of playful canopies, as part of a wider playscape design, may be partly or fully covered in PV panels to generate electricity. Designing outdoor spaces with seasonality in mind ensures that their usage is extended throughout the year. Activity in the evening is popular and should be further encouraged by good installation of artificial lighting and windbreakers where needed — some facilities, such as football pitches, already do this.

Sports and recreational facilities may also be exploited for tourism purposes. In recent years, tourists have sought out more active experiences in their visits (active tourism). They are willing to engage in outdoor sports activities such as renting bikes or participating in outdoor yoga. Local Councils may take advantage of this by providing attractions such as scenic bike routes or outdoor spaces for such activities. The prospect of tourism as an attractor also offers the opportunity to showcase local culture through sports, such as the game of bocci that is present in several localities.

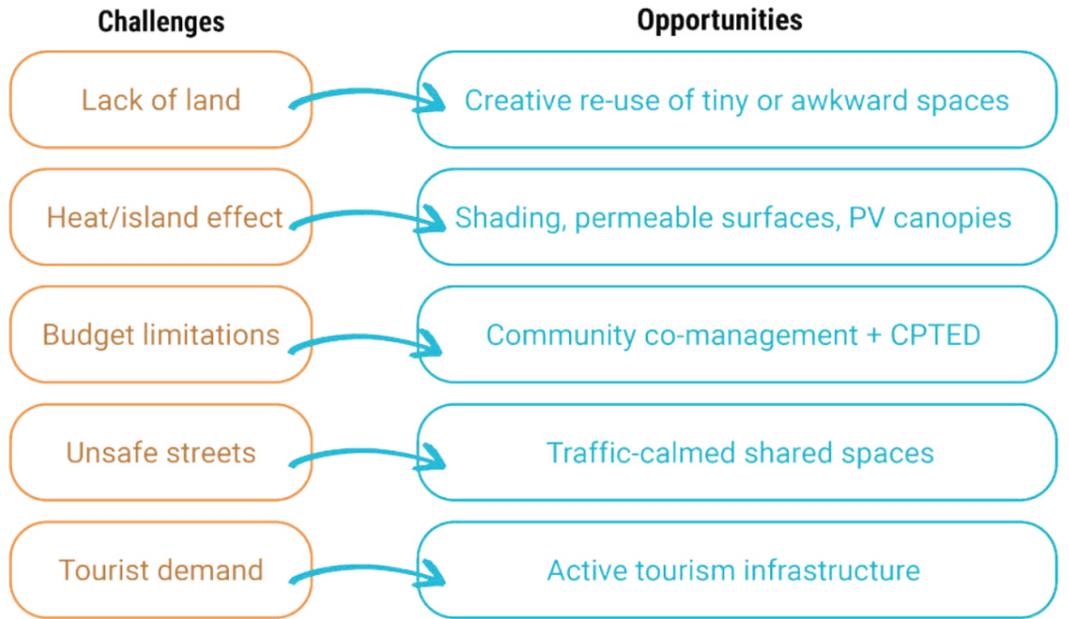




Image by Christian Lue on Unsplash

While creating and integrating attractive spaces for the community is ideal, maintenance is key to their longevity and ensuring that they remain usable for years to come. This is especially important for outdoor sports areas, where playgrounds or gyms need regular inspection to ensure constant high safety standards. This might be quite challenging for Local Councils given their limited budgets. One possible strategy for maintaining a space is to involve the community in its stewardship. When users of a space feel a sense of investment and ownership, they will automatically

help to take care of it. This can help alleviate some of the burden on the Local Council while also fostering civic pride. It also helps improve safety within the site – day-to-day recreational activities allow for informal surveillance, greatly diminishing the possibility of vandalism. Outdoor space design should adhere to CPTED (Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design) principles: ensuring clear sightlines and facilitating visual permeability, avoiding the creation of covered areas that could serve as hiding spots and installing adequate artificial lighting and signage.



Challenges and Opportunities. Source: Studjurban

4. Key Design Pointers for sports and play spaces



Image Yura Batiushyn on Unsplash

Universal Accessibility

Well-designed recreation spaces should be accessible to users of all ages, abilities, and backgrounds. Provide level spaces or ramped access, using tactile paving to cater to the visually impaired. Consider distance proximities to cater to those with mobility issues, with amenities such as dedicated parking bays or well-located drop-off points. For more sports-dedicated spaces, ensure minimal obstacles to access and that the site is as close to street-level as possible. Wide entryways to the space are also important, facilitating crowd flow and avoiding any choke points during peak event times. Multiple pathways should be integrated within the space to connect different facilities, the surface of which should be smooth, safe and preferably step-free. An inclusive design approach also extends to the choice of play equipment to be installed within the space, such as sensory play equipment for autistic children or equipment suitable for the elderly.

Safety and Visibility

Safety measures are crucial when planning spaces for active use, and should be incorporated by design rather than as a reaction, preventing injury to their users. This can be achieved by using appropriate impact-absorbing flooring especially in places of high risk.

As discussed in the previous section, outdoor sports spaces should always have unblocked visibility from surroundings so that users are always in view from the rest of the public and well lit, avoiding hidden sports behind barriers, dark areas or secluded corners: this makes the space feel safe to use during all times of the day, including in the evening. This can be further enhanced in dense urban areas by adopting the concept of natural surveillance, locating spaces so that adjacent residents can observe from their homes, keeping an eye out for potential dangerous activity in the space and adding an extra layer of supervision.



Durable and Quality Surfaces

Investing in well-lasting, high-quality surface materials for outdoor sports spaces serves as the foundation for the spaces' usability and longevity, making sure that these can handle both the expected loads and the Maltese climate. In multi-functional urban spaces, robust materials should withstand pedestrian wear-and-tear and occasional vehicle loads if applicable. For example, a court that might double up as a parking area should be surfaced accordingly for these multiple uses. Any sports-related painted markings should use weather-resistant, non-slip paint to avoid fading under the harsh Maltese sun. expense of the pedestrian space being generated.





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Environmental Considerations

Integration of green elements in outdoor sports areas is key to improving their environmental performance and aesthetics, making the space more inviting. Incorporating shrubs, trees or ground cover helps give the space a more human approach by softening its landscape. It also helps in improving the air quality of the surroundings. Trees or large shrubs become essential shading elements from the sun, potentially even from heavy rain or wind flow. Other functions using other typologies of landscaping can be achieved. For instance, planters around activity spaces can act as informal seating for users or spectators, whilst strips of shrubs

can demarcate a sports space and act as a containment barrier to balls going astray. These green elements tie such small spaces into broader environmental initiatives to reach climate action targets and urban greening efforts to reduce the urban heat island effect, previously discussed in other LCA documents, in our towns and villages.

Noise mitigation is another environmental consideration which should be planned for, depending on the context: if the space is close to homes, sound mitigation is imperative, through noise-dampening surfaces or even plant hedges to absorb sound.



Multi-Functionality and Amenities

Given the limited availability of space, sports areas should be designed to be as multi-functional as possible, such as flexible court spaces for different types of sports, using moveable urban furniture which can be moved and adapted according to the sport being hosted. Sports infrastructure itself can also be flexible, such as foldable ping-pong tables which can work as picnic tables – a hybrid design which promotes resilience, ensuring the space will rarely be unoccupied because there is always some purpose being served. Amenities should be installed to make outdoor sports areas user-friendly and support longer stays. One such feature is seating. Users

can rest and observe the space where seating is provided, potentially engaging in conversation during sports events. For this reason, seating should be clustered near activity areas, such as benches facing sports courts. An active environment may also be enhanced by integrating amenities such as drinking water fountains or bottle refill stations, especially given the Maltese climate. Public toilets should be designed near outdoor sports activity areas, together with waste separation bins. Other design features may include bike racks, ideally located close to entrances; appropriate signage, way-finding markers and important emergency numbers.



5. Playscapes and Innovative Outdoor Activities

There has been a growing trend towards more innovative, creative approaches to outdoor recreation areas in recent years. The concept of a 'playscape' is increasingly being used: essentially, this is a type of playground where, instead of the usual off-the-shelf play structures, more organic and imaginative urban furniture is installed, allowing users to invent their own ways of playing. It stimulates and embraces creativity, offering an organic feel through integrated mounds or winding paths. Playscapes can enhance the appeal of outdoor sports areas by moving away from the typical open space model and allowing for playful, more vibrant landscapes. This approach reaches a broader audience thanks to its flexibility and reflects a more progressive attitude towards urban design. A well-designed playscape can also be more cost-effective to construct and more adaptable than installing multiple pieces of equipment.

Complementary to playscapes, the following are some other current trends and ideas that could be introduced or further developed in Malta.



Image by Eugene Chystakov on Unsplash

Interactive Installations

Adding interactive elements invites interaction among different typologies of users. These may include musical installations such as outdoor xylophones or drums that people can use, or technology-driven play such as light installations that react to user movement or LED paving tiles in playing areas.

Pop-Up Activities

Programming pop-up events or temporary installations is vital for activating the space in new ways. Setting up temporary sports-related facilities, such as a pop-up roller skating rink or mobile climbing walls, can be organised as part of a local event or town festival. **Play Streets** events have been trialled in various cities around the world, where streets are closed to become linear gardens, cycling routes, or more. Building on the LCA's **Slow Streets** project, these are relatively low-cost and can gauge the community's interest in certain activities.

Playscape for All Ages

Whilst playscapes often focus on children, the concept can also apply to different generations, encouraging outdoor recreational use by other youths and adults. Ideas often incorporated in other cities, such as Berlin or Barcelona, include giant chess boards, table tennis tables, marbles or puzzle trails.

6. Eight Steps for Implementing Outdoor Sports Spaces

Successfully implementing well-designed outdoor recreation spaces requires multiple assessment and planning stages, incorporating feedback from residents and other members of the local community. This section presents eight steps to bring outdoor sports and play projects to fruition, offering Local Councils a robust yet adaptable process to plan, implement and maintain outdoor sports infrastructure that is inclusive, community-oriented and environmentally responsive. Principles of tactical urbanism inform these steps, and therefore, it is encouraged that ideas be tested and refined early on in the process, echoing the LCA's document **3.4 Open Space Re-use** and its action plans.



*8 Steps for Implementing Outdoor Sports Spaces.
Source: Studjurban*

Step 1

Audit, map and assess recreational needs (existing assets and gaps)



A comprehensive baseline assessment is critical. Local Councils should initiate a locality-wide spatial audit that categorises all existing outdoor sports and recreation assets – including both formal (football pitches, tennis courts, outdoor gyms, bocci clubs, skateparks) and informal (promenades, school yards, side streets used by children) spaces. Map also potential sites that could host outdoor sports, such as underutilised, redundant or leftover spaces that could be converted or reclaimed (eg. empty plots or wide streets with ample space), discussed further in the next step.

Assess the context, physical condition, current use, safety, accessibility and lighting of each urban space and understand whether all residential areas are within a reasonable walking distance (say a 10-minute walk) from such spaces. Mapping could be done using GIS (Geographic Information System) to locate which zones lack access to recreation.

Alongside space mapping, the community's needs should be evaluated through public meetings and surveys to understand usage patterns and latent demand of residents, clubs, NGOs and schools. Examining community demographics also guides preferred uses: a neighbourhood with more young families, for instance, might favour more outdoor play spaces, while one with more teenagers might prefer outdoor sports courts. Demographic mismatches may be identified, such as youth-oriented neighbourhoods without accessible play areas.

The output of this process would be a shortlist of potential sites cross-referenced with a comprehensive list of community needs. This would provide the data and groundwork for possible projects, ensuring both the correct location and purpose. This groundwork would allow Local Councils to build a data-informed, location-sensitive strategy.

Step 2

Reclaim marginal and underutilised urban spaces, undertake tactical urbanism



Image by Lucas Han on Unsplash

Given Malta's spatial constraints, new land is rarely available. Local Councils must adopt a mindset of urban reprogramming, transforming underused spaces into active places. Convert dead zones like oversized parking areas, over-dimensioned road space and intersections, or awkwardly shaped plots into micro-sport spaces (e.g. table tennis spots, marked circuits). As discussed within the LCA's **Slow Streets** project, evaluate wide roads or parking bays for temporary conversion into weekend pedestrian zones and play streets and seek to introduce tactical urbanism interventions, as discussed in Step 6.

Step 3

Integrate outdoor sports within everyday mobility networks

Outdoor activity does not only take place within sports grounds. Movement corridors, notably promenades, linear parks, cycling paths and walkable streets, are equally vital for daily physical activity and should be seen as part of a broader recreation network. Active mobility routes may be planned with fitness elements including distance signage, hydration points and exercise stations. Shaded areas and safe street crossings may be further provided to improve accessibility for all users. Schools, community centres and shops may be linked through these networks to embed movement into everyday errands. This network thinking ensures that all residents, not just formal sports players, have accessible and inviting options to remain active throughout the week.

Image by Mahendra Putra on Unsplash

Step 4

Design for multi- and inter-generational, inclusive and adaptive use



Image by Marek Lumi on Unsplash

Outdoor sports infrastructure must cater to diverse abilities, interests and age groups. Beyond the traditional football field, Local Councils must plan multi-use, layered and inclusive environments. Incorporate spaces for *bocci*, yoga, walking, rollerblading and general play, prioritising universal design principles. Inclusive use is more than providing spaces that are accessible for all. An inclusive design ensures longer daily use, wider appeal and community ownership. This is especially important in smaller or denser urban areas.

Co-locating different functions, such as a circuit for older residents adjacent to a kids' play area, or a seating area near a workout zone, allows the intergenerational use of space, bringing diverse members of the local community together and strengthening inclusivity. In this respect, too, mono-functional designs should be avoided. Sports courts, for example, may double as community event spaces when they are not in use.

Use the *Key Design Pointers for sports and play spaces* outlined in Section 4 of this document to guide the design of such urban spaces in an innovative and inclusive manner.

Step 5

Design climate-responsive and seasonally flexible infrastructure



Malta's climate requires spaces that remain usable year-round. Outdoor sports areas must be planned with seasonality, shade, water management and energy efficiency in mind. Green infrastructure has a critical role to play here, especially with the potential of tree canopies to cool down key activity areas and provide rest spots from recreational activities. Permeable surfaces could lend themselves to some sports activities while simultaneously improving rainwater absorption. Sports equipment and fixtures could double up as passive energy generation opportunities (dual-use infrastructure), such as housing PV panels or integrated water collection systems. A good level of artificial lighting will enable evening use of these facilities, keeping in mind proximity to existing neighbourhoods so as not to create negative amenity issues.

Again, some of the *Key Design Pointers for sports and play spaces* outlined in Section 4 of this document may provide pointers for the added design value these elements may have.

Step 6

Undertake Tactical Urbanism



Image by Paul Wallaz on Unsplash

Tactical urbanism is a temporary 'test' implementation of the idea in real life. Depending on its success, this could be tested throughout a one-day event or extended by a number of weeks. It may include colourful sports markings on existing asphalt or pop-up basketball hoops. Lightweight infrastructure may be used, including removable nets, mobile ramps or foldable goalposts to support flexible and temporary setups. This creative reuse maximises existing urban land, spreads recreational opportunities and pilots community uptake before long-term investment and the commitment to fully implement an idea.

The aim would be to simulate the use intended for the space to demonstrate its potential, attract interest from the community and gather useful feedback. For example, suppose the plan is to pedestrianise a street for outdoor sports. In that case, this should be tested, closing the street on a particular day and setting up temporary outdoor sports infrastructure. This would invite the local community to try the new idea out, builds excitement around it and at the same time serves as an opportunity to observe how people use the temporary space – which activities are being used more and by which demographic (usage rates), what issues arise and what other elements need to be addressed (for instance, with regard to noise or safety perceptions) in an eventual fully fledged implementation. Usually, such tests also serve as a way to win over sceptics of the project, serving as a good PR tool to attract support and potentially even sponsors. Throughout such tactical urbanism trials, documentation is essential through photos, brief surveys or user feedback that further refines the concept design.

Step 7

Establish maintenance plans and stewardship partnerships



Image by Laedrian Salazar on Unsplash

Sports spaces degrade quickly without care. Establishing a long-term stewardship model is vital to ensure safety, cleanliness and function. Site management should include maintenance plans that focus on retaining a high-quality space and ensuring that quick, minor adjustments can be made, ensuring flexibility.

Local Councils could involve sports clubs, schools, NGOs and local fitness communities in co-maintaining facilities. An idea could be to set up local “sports ambassadors” or wardens within the locality, for regular reporting and feedback. Digital platforms may be used (through appropriately located QR codes on site, or via specific apps) to allow residents to report damage in real time or suggest improvements. A schedule for checking of equipment and quality of materials, cleaning of the space, and landscaping, among others, may be implemented.

Dedicated Local Council staff or contractors may be engaged where budgets allow for routine inspections and repairs. Shared responsibility improves longevity, safety and community connection to the space.

Step 8

Activate, monitor and embed into community life



Image by Billow on Unsplash

A successful outdoor sports space is also properly programmed. This requires long-term activation beyond physical construction. Local Councils can sustain interest in the space by organising proactive programming events inviting people of all fitness levels, such as sports-related meet-ups, small walking groups, weekly exercise classes, play sessions for children, or family fitness festivals. These can be done in collaboration with schools, sports groups, elderly clubs, wellness NGOs, local volunteers or even businesses. Such events develop habits of using the new space, with the physical and social benefits it would bring.

The final step should also ensure monitoring of the usage of the outdoor sports space, analysing and evaluating its impact on the community, and taking action to improve the space over time. By measuring outcomes over a set period, Local Councils may determine whether people are engaging in physical activity, whether the space is well-maintained, and how safe it is for the public. On the other hand, if some features of the new space are not working as hoped, evaluation helps modify some aspects of the design.

The activation of the space also takes into consideration keeping community engagement alive: promoting feedback by the community on how the space is working and providing suggestions for improvement. Animating the space makes it slowly part of the community's daily life, not just a static installation. In this way, a sense of community "right to use" is also ensured, whereby residents feel the space is theirs, not just for a few athletes or organised sports.

7. EU Projects and Funding Opportunities



Implementing and investing in proper outdoor recreation projects requires tapping into external resources including design expertise, monetary funding or partnership networks. Together with national schemes and regional collaborations, in recent years, there have been several EU initiatives, funding programmes and other collaborative projects focusing on green infrastructure, urban wellbeing and promoting active lifestyles, all of which Local Councils may benefit from. The following is a list of key funding opportunities, resources and other initiatives that can be useful for planning and financing outdoor sports in open spaces:

- **EU Regional Development Funding (ERDF) and Cohesion Fund (2021–2027):**

These funds, partly managed by national authorities, have been useful in financing several projects in Malta. Local Councils may consider to include recreation components within broader ERDF-funded projects. In the period between 2021 and 2027, priorities include a greener, more carbon-free and more social Europe, further aligning with active mobility investments.

- **Erasmus+ Sport Programme (2021–2027), European Week of Sport:**

A Sport chapter is included within the ERASMUS+ scheme programme, funding collaborative partnerships and organised events which promote physical activity. While not funding the infrastructure itself, it can support engagement and support for a new space. Maltese NGOs have been able to access ERASMUS+ funds for projects such as SportMalta's BeActive campaign. The European Week of Sport is a specific initiative by the European Commission that encourages different countries to host physical activity events. SportMalta coordinates Malta's participation, acquiring support or small grants for local events (including the BeActive events).

- **URBACT and Other EU City Networks:**

URBACT is a European exchange programme in which various cities form common networks to tackle mutual urban challenges, especially those related to active cities and public spaces. Local Councils may benefit from such networks by either following or even joining them. These include networks such as URBACT "Health & Greenspace" or "Vital Cities," which also deal with green areas for recreation and sports, and CIVITAS, which often tackles active mobility.

- **European Sports Capitals (ACES Europe):**

ACES Europe is a non-profit organisation which awards different municipalities committed to sports titles such as European Capital of Sport, European City of Sport, and more. Whilst not directly funding projects, Local Councils may aspire to upgrade their sports facilities and apply for such designations, the recognition of which can drive further investment in facilities.

- **National Funding Programmes and Initiatives:**

Various schemes have been introduced locally, such as the Planning Authority's Development Planning Fund (DPF) which aims to contribute to community projects such as squares and gardens, or occasional community grants offered by SportMalta. Amongst others, the LEADER programme (EU Rural Funds, managed by Local Action Groups) could also be relevant to Local Councils, for projects such as creating recreation trails or smaller parks. Other health-related funds might also come into play, with support offered by the Health Ministry to integrate community health projects.

- **NGOs and Corporate CSR:**

Several local NGOs focus on community well-being and the environment, such as Nature Trust, Green House, and the B-cycle foundation, and can contribute to landscaping drives and initiatives related to greenery in active spaces. When it comes to corporate social responsibility, even local banks often invest in community initiatives. Furthermore, contacting local businesses to sponsor small components may add support.

The above list illustrates how several funding and support opportunities are available at Local Councils' disposal through national and EU channels. By aligning projects with EU priorities, Local Councils can muster resources well beyond their limited local budgets, with the best way often being a combination of funds. These initiatives and networks also help influence the vision of local stakeholders, keeping Maltese localities at the forefront of urban wellbeing innovation. The LCA and Regional Councils may assist in this process by disseminating these opportunities and possibly helping formulate joint applications (collaboration among localities may help compete for more substantial EU funds), focusing on programmes emphasising greener and more active and liveable communities.

8. Concluding Remarks

Outdoor sports infrastructure is not just about providing facilities — it is also a catalyst for healthier communities, stronger social bonds, and more sustainable environments. Designing open spaces for active recreation and outdoor sports is undoubtedly challenging, but it is more important in a country with limited open space opportunities.

Through the **Open Spaces** document series, we have seen that open spaces – whether historical piazzas, re-used urban spaces, linear parks or market streets – may be programmed for multiple layers of community benefit. Outdoor sports space adds yet another layer: it moves bodies, connects people and activates places. Local Councils, empowered by the LCA's **ResidentFirst** vision, are uniquely placed to lead this transformation. Significant benefits result from this, most notably related to health, especially addressing growing public health concerns such as Malta's high obesity rates. Other benefits relate to social cohesion, economic benefits (through the increase in footfall and potential strengthening of local businesses) and environmental benefits (designing outdoor recreational areas with green infrastructure in mind and stormwater resilience).

To unlock this potential, outdoor sports must be viewed as core community infrastructure. Just as walkability was emphasised as a policy priority in the LCA's earlier **Sustainable Mobility** work, recreational activity must rise to the forefront of spatial planning approaches and strategies.

Successful sports areas do not need to be large or expensive. Even the smallest pocket court or marked trail could become a valued node within the local ecosystem – if designed with people, climate and flexibility in mind.

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Kunsilli Lokali**

Local Councils' Association Malta