

# WILL LIGHTING OUTDOOR SPORTS FACILITIES HELP VICTORIANS TO BE MORE ACTIVE?

## Research summary

## Introduction

Commissioned by Sport and Recreation Victoria (SRV), the research aimed to explore **if** and **how** lighting public outdoor sports facilities could encourage more Victorians to be physically active.

Specifically, it explored what barriers to participation are (or are not) removed by providing suitable lighting, and what other factors need to be considered to encourage use of lit outdoor sports facilities by the general community for non-sport purposes.

Research comprised two phases:

- Phase 1 Knowledge review: review of published literature and case study interviews with three councils (Greater Bendigo City Council, Maroondah City Council, and Wyndham City Council).
- Phase 2 Community research: online community forum with 40 Victorians aged 18-70 over 2 days in June 2025. Participants were split evenly across the general community and inactive women aged 35-64.

The research revealed real interest in using lit facilities, particularly over the winter period, however lighting alone will not remove all barriers.

Careful execution is required to address barriers and encourage participation by sectors of the community not currently using these facilities.

## Insights



- The research revealed real interest in using lit facilities, particularly when the days are shorter.
- Amongst women (and some men), the initial instinctive response to the concept of being active outside at night (even with lighting) was quite negative and fearful.
- Interest in using lit facilities increased after participants saw council promotional material with inclusive images and lighting examples.
- Lighting can significantly improve perceptions of safety and increase motivation, especially among women, but lighting alone isn't enough—execution and community engagement are critical.
- Safety, accessibility and inclusivity are recurring priorities.

### ABOUT THE RESEARCH

Conducted by: SEC Newgate Research on behalf of Sport and Recreation Victoria

Publication date: July 2025

# Phase 1: Knowledge review

The review sought evidence of the effect that lighting outdoor sports facilities has on their use after dark, particularly amongst the general population (versus those playing organised team sport) and inactive women aged 35-64. The scope of the literature review was expanded to include research into physical activity in outdoor spaces generally, due to a lack of published reports or articles focused specifically on sports facilities.

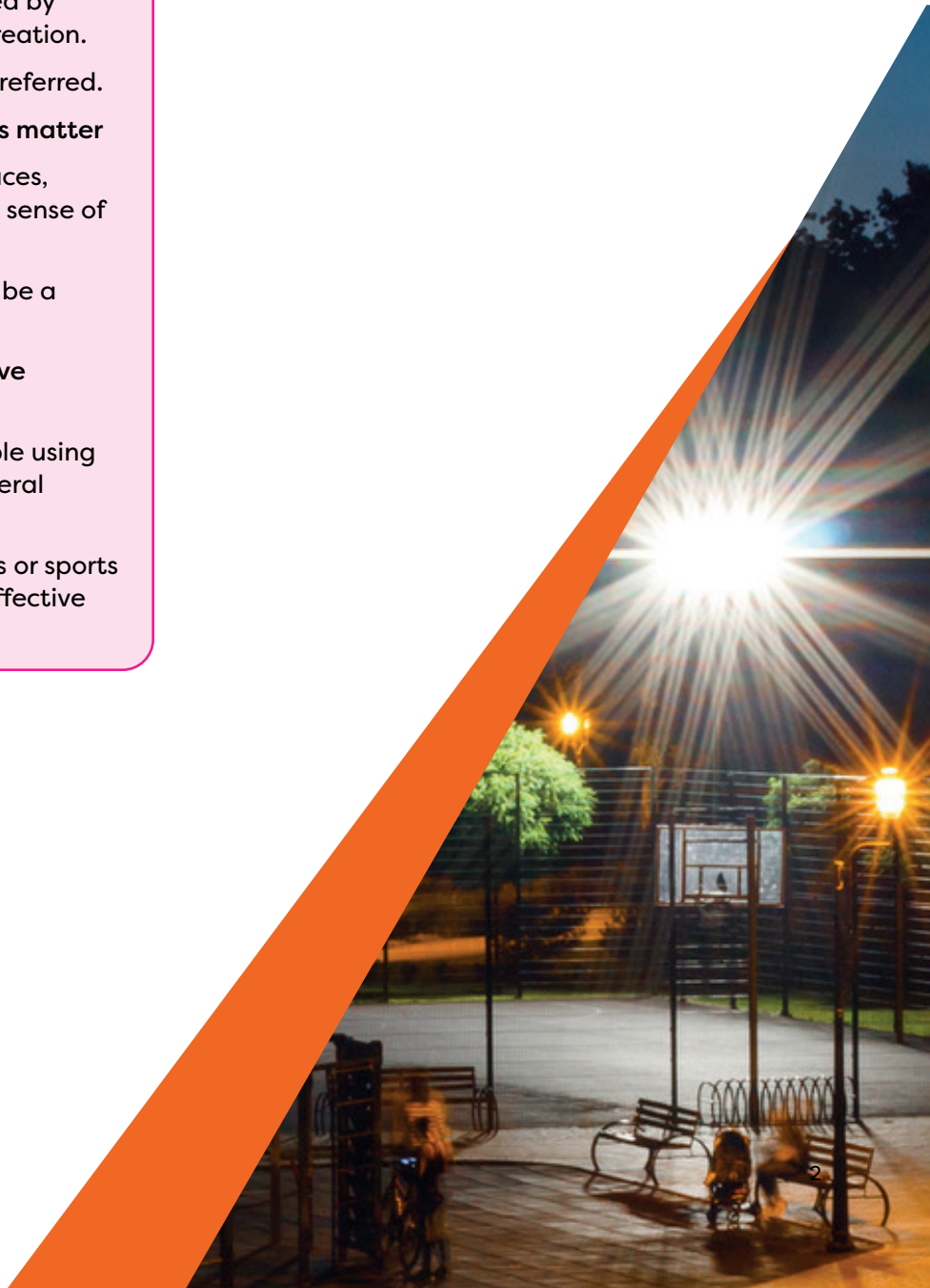
## Key insights



- 1. Lighting is critical for safety and participation**
  - Safety is a prerequisite for outdoor activity after dark.
  - Lighting is the most influential factor in perceived safety.
- 2. Low usage by women and gender-diverse people**
  - Sports facilities are underused by these groups for general recreation.
  - Parks and main streets are preferred.
- 3. Environmental and social factors matter**
  - Use increases with green spaces, amenities, foot traffic, and a sense of belonging.
  - Perception of ownership can be a barrier.
- 4. Council case studies show positive outcomes**
  - All councils noted more people using the facilities at night for general exercise.
  - No complaints from residents or sports clubs; programs were cost-effective and well-received.

## Council case studies

- Interviews were conducted with three councils that had implemented and promoted lit spaces for physical activity at outdoor sports facilities during winter.
- All three councils considered their respective programs to be successful and have continued (or expanded) offering these programs.



# Phase 2: Community research

## General perceptions of outdoor sport facilities

**'Not for me' barriers to using sport facilities for active recreation (at any time of day)**

Amongst those who don't use outdoor sports facilities, there is a sense that these facilities are 'not for them'—because they don't play sport or because they feel these are spaces for younger people:

- Not feeling it was a place they belonged.
- Feeling awkward being at sports facilities alone/having no one to go with.
- Not thought of as an option (i.e. never considered using these facilities for active recreation).
- Avoidance of outdoor spaces due to weather conditions, particularly in winter.

While council-run facilities are generally understood to be available to all, many felt that they did not belong, and some felt they would require 'permission' to use the facilities. This issue appears particularly strong for ovals and pitches, less so for external boundary paths.

**Factors contributing to interest in using sport facilities**

- Already familiar and comfortable with the facility (e.g. due to location of the facility or previous use such as taking kids there to play or for games/training).
- Seeing others using the space for activities other than sports.

## Perceptions of using outdoor sports facilities when it is dark

**Barriers to the use of outdoor sports facilities specifically when it is dark**

- Significant concerns about personal safety (i.e. fear of being attacked)—mostly but not solely from women.
- Safety concerns due to reduced visibility (e.g. tripping).
- Distance (e.g. too far, or not safe to walk there at night).
- Avoidance of cold, exposure to the elements.
- Not interested in being active, or having other commitments, in early mornings/evenings.

**Positive factors contributing to interest in using outdoor sports facilities when it is dark**

- Gives them more time to be active in darker months—able to fit into schedule before/after other commitments.
- Less busy—space may be more relaxing/peaceful at off-peak times.



## Key insights – Lighting sports facilities



1. **Lighting improves safety perceptions, especially for women**
  - Safety concerns (e.g. fear of assault, poor visibility) are major barriers to night-time activity.
  - Lighting may help mitigate these concerns, especially if this makes it more likely that others will be present.
2. **Interest increases with exposure to promotional material**
  - Seeing images and local participation programs boosted interest and perceived feasibility (i.e. understanding there would be set times when lights would be on for the general public).
  - Social proof and inclusive messaging were effective motivators (i.e the program is for everyone).
3. **Lighting alone isn't enough**
  - Not all facilities will be suitable for community use, even with lighting. The space needs to feel inviting and appropriate for active recreation—ideally with flat walking paths.
  - Execution matters—lighting must be paired with promotion, accessibility, and community engagement.
  - Preferences for automatic lighting at set times, group activities, and dog-friendly spaces were common.
  - Safety in numbers and group activities increased comfort and likelihood of use.

## What else might be needed to encourage active recreation?

High-priority features identified by participants\*:

- Lit facilities to be available to use on weekdays and on weekends.
- Good lighting of the area for physical activity **AND** lighting of the car park, well-lit path from car park or public transport stop.
- Line of sight between road or car park and the area for physical activity.
- Lighting that is automatically switched on every night/early morning (evening lighting was more of a priority than early morning lighting)
- Ability to be active when no-one is playing organised sport at the facility.
- Toilets that are open when the lights are on.

The following were not as high priority but still important:

- Other people being around or having a friend to come along.
- Signage to say public are welcome to use for physical activity/recreation.
- Separation between general public doing personal physical activity and teams playing organised sport.
- Proper (surfaced) walking path.
- Evening lighting was more of a priority than early morning lighting.

\* High priority indicates at least half the research group ranked this feature as 'Very important'. These results should be treated as indicative only.

## There is no universal solution

- Experience and perceptions vary. Barriers (particularly safety) appear to be more prevalent amongst women (and potentially also gender diverse people) than men.
- People are less likely to be active when it is cold and dark, but for many (especially working people) this is the only time they can be active outside of the summer months.
- Some people definitely don't want to use the space while organised sport is occurring, but others feel safer with the presence of other people.
- For some, being able to bring their dog was essential, but for others being around off-lead dogs was off-putting.



# Checklist

*Practical suggestions to increase community use of lit sports facilities for active recreation.*

## Target suitable facilities

- ☒ Prioritise well-activated facilities with existing daytime use/foot traffic.
- ☒ Choose locations in high-density residential areas with easy access (e.g. public transport, parking, flat paths).
- ☒ Select sites with additional amenities (e.g. walking tracks, fitness equipment, courts).

## Design for safety

- ☒ Ensure end-to-end lighting—facilities, paths, car parks, and access routes.
- ☒ Use warm, non-intrusive lighting that enhances visibility without glare (i.e. not too bright).
- ☒ Avoid creating dark patches or overly bright zones.
- ☒ Include security features—cameras or patrols where feasible.

## Make it easy to use

- ☒ Install automatic lighting—avoid requiring pre-booking or manual activation of lights.
- ☒ Have lighting on at set, published times so visits can be planned. Keeping the hours consistent can create confidence and help people create participation habits.
- ☒ Focus on evening use—most demand is likely to be in the 2–3 hour window directly after dark.
- ☒ Balance needs—allow dogs with clear rules; manage organised sport overlap.

## Create a welcoming environment and address perceptions of ownership

- ☒ Make it clear that facilities are for everyone, not just organised sports clubs.
- ☒ Include signage and messaging that welcomes all users (not just sports teams) to foster a sense of belonging.
- ☒ Provide a staff presence or group activities to support first-time users, where possible.

## Promote inclusion

Promote lighting programs to build awareness and social proof.

- ☒ Promote the initiative using inclusive messaging and imagery—‘This is for you’ and ‘Others like you are doing this.’
- ☒ Use social proof—show people like the target audience enjoying the space, use images depicting a range of age groups.
- ☒ Tailor materials to local audiences, including CALD communities.
- ☒ Highlight safety, convenience, and enjoyment in communications.
- ☒ Use multi-channel promotion—social media, newsletters, signage, postcards.

Authorised and published by the Victorian Government, 1 Treasury Place, Melbourne.

Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions, 121 Exhibition Street Melbourne Victoria 3000

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