

Viken Regional Sport Confederation: Support grassroots sport developing an active identity

We encourage the EU to strengthen voluntary structures by recognizing grassroots sports clubs as essential social infrastructure. They play a unique role in developing physical literacy. Research across Europe shows that children from low-income families are underrepresented both in organized and self-organized activities.

Self-organized activity contributes to flexibility, creativity, and everyday movement, and is an important complement. However, studies show differences in *volume*: organized sports provide higher and more stable amounts of physical activity. Self-organized activity doesn't reach all.

At the same time, Eurostat data indicates that countries with well-developed voluntary club systems often have higher overall physical activity levels. This suggests that a strong grassroots model supports an *active identity* – a result of physical literacy.

Recent European studies have strengthened this position. Lagestad et al. (2019) show that organised sport is strongly associated with higher total activity levels among adolescents. Owen et al. (2022), in a meta-analysis of 104 studies, find that youth who leave organised sport rarely replace the same activity volume through self-organised means. Ungdata (NOVA/OsloMet) consistently documents that adolescents who have participated in organised sport remain more active over time than those who never participated – evidence of long-term development of an *active identity*. Rittsteiger et al. (2021) demonstrate that low-SES youth have lower total activity unless supported by structured, volunteer-based environments. Engell et al. (2024) show that self-organised activity reaches some groups well but cannot alone engage those furthest from participation.

The General Block Exemption Regulation remains vital for municipalities and regions, enabling lawful investment in non-commercial sports facilities and voluntary organisations. We applaud the Commission for signaling continued support for these provisions, which are essential for equal access across Europe.

In conclusion: Europe needs a dual approach, and the EU should focus on an infrastructure- and participation-focused ecosystem, where voluntary sports clubs and accessible local environments together build an active identity across the life course.

Key recommendations

1. Reinforce the ESM with a focus on participation, inclusion and volunteer-based sport.
2. Strengthen GBER provisions enabling public investment in non-commercial sport.
3. Simplify and enhance support for volunteering and local clubs.
4. Promote cooperation between organised and self-organised activities without weakening grassroots structures.

5. Prioritise social sustainability and lifelong physical literacy, especially for children, youth, older adults and low-income groups.

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