



# PARTICIPANT-LED SYSTEMS

## A Roadmap for Sustainable Youth Sport Reform

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# Organised Sport is Losing Young People

82% of Australian adults report experiencing at least one form of interpersonal violence during childhood participation in community sport.<sup>1</sup>

Organised sport participation for most major sports peaks between ages 9 and 14, then declines sharply through adolescence - particularly among girls.<sup>2</sup>

By early adulthood, organised club participation has reduced to a fraction of its childhood levels across most major sports.<sup>2</sup>

**These are not isolated problems. They are system outcomes.**

For decades, organised youth sport has been treated as a permanent fixture of public life. Governments fund it. Schools rely on it. Communities build identity around it. But the data reveals a system in structural decline - one that retains the minority and loses the majority during the very years that matter most for critical habit formation for lifelong physical activity.

The landscape for young people's time and attention is more competitive than at any point in history. Academic pressure intensifies. Social norms shift. Digital immersion deepens. Youth sport must compete within that environment. Yet it continues to operate with structures designed for a different era.

Meanwhile, in Australia participation gaps persist across gender, socio-economic status and cultural background.<sup>2</sup> Globally, physical inactivity is projected to cost USD \$300 billion in preventable health conditions by 2030.<sup>3</sup> Sport is frequently positioned as the solution to this public health crisis. But a system that loses the majority during adolescence cannot deliver on that promise.

***The problem is not that young people are rejecting sport. They are responding rationally to systems that were not designed with their needs at the centre.***

## Talent Bias Was the Symptom. System Design Is the Cause.

In November 2024, I wrote about talent bias in youth sport - the competitions that put ranking before development, the bench time that signals who matters, the academies that divide young children by perceived 'potential' before it can reasonably be predicted. The response revealed something I hadn't fully anticipated.

Parents and coaches recognised every pattern. They'd witnessed these behaviours. Many had even challenged them within their own clubs. But they kept hitting the same wall: "*This is just how the system works.*"

**They were right. And that's the problem.**

Talent bias isn't rogue behaviour by individual coaches. It's a rational response to the way youth sport is structurally designed.

Consider what clubs are actually organised to do. Competition structures grade children by ability. Representative pathways select the best performers. Funding models reward registration numbers and high performance outcomes. Leadership positions are dominated by people who successfully navigated performance pathways.

***When systems are designed to identify and advance talent, talent bias isn't a bug - it's a feature.***

The structural contradiction has been recognised for decades. Canada's *Long-Term Athlete Development framework*, which calls for late specialisation and age-appropriate competition, was adopted in 2005.<sup>4</sup> Sport New Zealand's *Good Practice Principles for Children and Young People in Sport and Recreation*, advocated a participant-centred approach, developmental readiness, safe social environments and warned of the risks of over-emphasising winning.<sup>5</sup> Its later *Balance is Better* initiative built on these themes, more explicitly linking early selection and performance-focused structures to adolescent dropout.<sup>6</sup>

Australia's FTEM framework (Foundations > Talent > Elite > Mastery) reflects much of this international thinking. It maps developmental stages.<sup>7</sup> It cautions against early specialisation. It emphasises foundations before talent identification.

But FTEM's directional endpoint is still Mastery.

***This matters because the end point determines culture. When performance progression sits at the centre of system design - in what gets measured, what gets funded, who governs, how competition is structured - everything downstream aligns to protect that priority.***

And so the fundamental patterns persist, because the incentive architecture has not changed. Dropout still accelerates through adolescence.<sup>2</sup> The Australian Sport Medicine Council notes there's a growing trend towards youth specialising in a single sport at an early age.<sup>8</sup> Psychological safety continues to be deprioritised in environments that emphasise competitive outcomes.

**We've been trying to fix behaviour without changing structure.**

Education can modify how coaches behave. It cannot override what the system rewards.

Performance pathways are important. Elite progression must be enabled. **The question is whether they should define the architecture that shapes everyone's experience.**

If youth sport is to sustain participation at scale, we need systems designed for retention, not just progression. That requires more than guidelines and education. It requires structural redesign.

## What Is a Participant-Led System?

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**High performance sport already understands this principle.** Elite programs have shifted toward "athlete-centred" approaches that embed athlete voice in training design, competition planning and welfare support. The shift happened because outcomes improved when athletes shaped the systems meant to serve them.

Youth sport has been slower to make the equivalent move for participation outcomes.

**Participant-Led Systems apply the same logic to the majority, not just the elite.** They place diverse participants, motivations and needs at the centre of decision-making, design and accountability.

This isn't novel thinking. Health systems, technology platforms and community services made similar shifts decades ago when they recognised that top-down, producer-driven structures couldn't scale or sustain engagement.<sup>9</sup> The pattern is consistent: **systems that embed real-time user insight iterate, respond and retain. Systems that remain internally defined struggle as expectations evolve.**

The shift requires four structural changes:

**1. Participant experience becomes a core performance indicator.**

Not a "nice to have" measured occasionally through surveys. Rather as a tracked metric that sits alongside participation numbers, financial performance and competitive outcomes and features in every board report.

**2. Lived experience becomes system intelligence.**

Participants - including those who've walked away - inform format design, rule changes, competition structures and resource allocation. This feedback doesn't sit on shelves. It drives decisions.

**3. Retention becomes a measurable outcome.**

Not just "how many registered this year?", but "how many stayed, and why did the others leave?" Longitudinal tracking that makes dropout visible and organisations accountable.

#### 4. Design becomes responsive, not fixed.

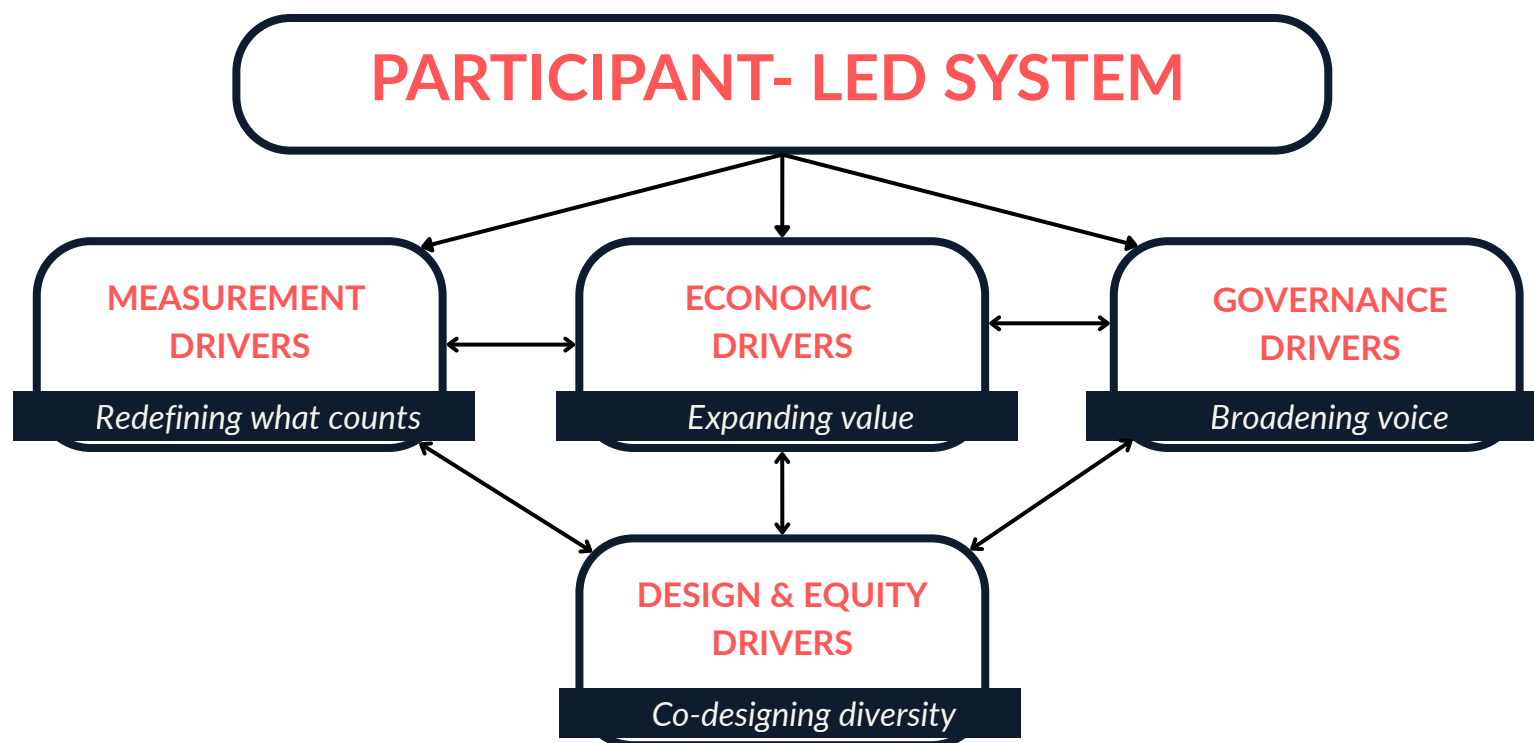
Formats, structures and pathways adapt based on what participants actually need, not what sports have always done. Experimentation is enabled. Failure is learning.

Participant-led systems don't require the abandonment of performance pathways. It's about ensuring they don't define the architecture for the majority who won't enter them.

## The Ecosystem That Must Shift

Youth sport exists within an ecosystem of interconnected drivers. When these drivers align, systems adapt and thrive. When they misalign, reform efforts stall, regardless of intent.

Currently, the ecosystem is calibrated for performance progression. Shifting to participant-led design requires recalibrating four key drivers:



### Measurement Drivers: *Redefining What Counts*

**Systems optimise for what they measure.**

Youth sport has historically measured what's administratively convenient: registration totals, workforce size, competitive outcomes. These metrics are easy to collect, easy to compare and politically defensible. Sport has organised itself accordingly.

**But volume and performance metrics tell us nothing about safety, experience or retention.** Their prominence has made recruitment the dominant growth strategy, while dropout remains largely invisible in accountability frameworks.

The consequences extend beyond participation. Sport's predominant reported metrics - participation counts, medal tallies - do not capture its broader contribution to public health, wellbeing and social cohesion. This shapes how organisations allocate resources, design competitions and define success.

**If retention, wellbeing and equity are not embedded as core performance indicators, they will remain secondary priorities.** Reform begins with redefining what counts.

**In a Participant-Led System:** Boards track retention rates alongside registration numbers. Participant experience metrics sit in every quarterly report. Dropout is visible, investigated and addressed. Success is measured by sustained engagement, not just recruitment. And sport's broader value to society is measured, understood - and central to its design.



## Economic Drivers: *Expanding Sport's Value Proposition*

The way sport measures success shapes the way it is funded.

Public investment frameworks mirror the indicators sectors can evidence. When sport reports primarily on participation counts and competitive outcomes, funding conversations remain anchored there.

But governments don't value sport for its registrations and medals alone. They invest because sport contributes to public health, mental wellbeing, social cohesion and youth development. Physical inactivity will cost USD \$300 billion globally by 2030.<sup>3</sup> The World Economic Forum has argued that participatory sport models generate broader and more sustainable returns than elite-focused approaches.<sup>10</sup>

***When sport can demonstrate measurable impact on health, wellbeing and cohesion outcomes - not just participation volume - it strengthens its case for funding beyond sport portfolios.***

**This reframes sport as preventative social infrastructure, which aligns with how governments increasingly think about return on investment.**

**In a Participant-Led System:** Sport organisations track and report health, wellbeing and social outcomes. They articulate impact in terms government health and community portfolios understand. Funding conversations shift from discretionary sport spending to preventative social infrastructure investment.



## Governance Drivers: *Broadening Who Shapes Decisions*

According to path dependence theory, **organisations tend to reproduce the perspectives that historically defined success within them.**<sup>11</sup>

In sport, leadership is typically drawn from those with deep competitive experience. That background brings valuable insight and commitment. It can also create blind spots.

**When governance remains anchored primarily in pathway expertise, the system naturally prioritises what that expertise values:** progression, performance, competitive outcomes.

The challenge becomes visible in strategic planning. Boards debate facility investments, competition structures and resource allocation based primarily on internal perspective. Participant voice - particularly from those walking away or never entering - rarely informs these decisions systematically.

**Public sector reform increasingly emphasises co-design and lived-experience input** because systems perform better when those most affected by decisions help shape them.<sup>12</sup> The principle isn't replacing existing expertise - it's complementing it with undeniable system intelligence.

**In a Participant-Led System:** Boards create formal mechanisms for participant perspective to inform strategic decisions. Diverse participant advisory panels provide input on priorities, policy and plans. Programs and solutions are co-designed with underrepresented groups and recent drop outs.

International agencies are embedding these practices. The Youth Sport Trust (UK) has developed Youth Voice Resources to engage the views of young people in decisions affecting them.<sup>13</sup> Norway's Children's Rights in Sport embeds child consultation in policy development. These are formal input mechanisms that change what organisations prioritise and measure.<sup>14</sup>

From a governance perspective, lacking systematic participant insight is a strategic risk. Boards making decisions about participation systems without understanding why the majority leave, are operating with incomplete information.

**Without formal mechanisms to incorporate participant perspective, reform risks being procedural rather than transformative.** Organisations will update policies and commission reports while continuing to optimise for what established leadership already values.



## Design & Equity Drivers: Co-Designing for Diversity

**Expanding access to unchanged systems does not guarantee equitable experience.**

Youth sport has widened entry over recent decades. Yet participation gaps persist across gender, socio-economic status and cultural background.<sup>2</sup> One reason is structural design. Systems still calibrated primarily to performance progression - assuming linear advancement, escalating commitment and early specialisation - marginalise those whose motivations or circumstances differ.

Research shows enjoyment, social connection and perceived competence drive retention.<sup>15</sup> When formats prioritise competitive selection over participant choice, they create exclusion that's often invisible in registration data.

Norway's Children's Rights in Sport demonstrates what structural protection looks like. Introduced in 1987 and binding for all coaches working with children under 13, the framework codifies age-appropriate competition, participant choice and child voice within national policy.<sup>14</sup> Children can decide how much they train, opt out of games, transfer clubs without penalty. No score-keeping before age 11. No regional championships before 11, no national championships before 13. Adults don't separate "talented" from "average" until high school.

**The results speak to both participation and performance.**

Norway maintains an extraordinary 93% youth sport participation while producing elite athletes at extraordinary rates.<sup>14</sup> At the 2018 Winter Olympics, a nation of 5.4 million won 39 medals - more than any other country. This isn't despite the participation focus - it's because of it. As the former Secretary-General of the Norwegian Confederation of Sports said: "We're a small country and can't afford to lose them because sport is not fun."

The framework doesn't just protect children from harm. It creates the conditions for sustained engagement that builds both broad participation and a deep talent pool.

**But mandates alone don't create adaptive systems.**

Norway's policy sets structural guardrails. It doesn't address the overlapping dimensions of exclusion shaped by identity, culture, local context and individual aspiration. True equity requires ongoing co-design with diverse participants.

**In a Participant-Led System:** Design happens *with* participants, not *for* them. Those currently engaged, those silently walking away as well as those who never entered, become partners in shaping formats, structures and progression pathways. Inclusion isn't a parallel program layered onto fixed structures - it's embedded in system architecture.

Co-design strengthens leadership by integrating lived experience and reducing assumptions with direct participant intelligence. Early work with the AFL is testing co-designed program formats with participant feedback loops. Swimming Victoria is exploring how community-led plans impact participation and inclusion efforts. Walking Football 4 Health Victoria is building diverse participant perspectives into its governance and decision-making structures.

These organisations are recognising that designing for retention requires input from those the system aims to retain.

***Equity, in this context, is not achieved through equal treatment within fixed models.***

It's achieved through place-responsive systems capable of continuous adaptation. Youth sport that remains one-size-fits-all will struggle to meet increasingly diverse community needs. Systems that co-design with participants strengthen both participation and performance.

*These four drivers are interdependent. Changing measurement without shifting governance produces reports nobody acts on. Expanding economic narratives without adaptive design creates unfulfilled promises. Real transformation requires recalibrating the entire ecosystem.*

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## The Choice Before Us

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### Organised youth sport stands at a structural inflection point.

Participation declines sharply through adolescence.<sup>2</sup> Inequality persists.<sup>2</sup> And 82% of Australian adults report experiencing interpersonal violence during childhood sport participation.<sup>1</sup> Reform efforts across multiple countries have acknowledged these patterns and called for change.<sup>456</sup> Yet the problems deepen.

The issue is not a lack of awareness or system education.

It is a misalignment between what sport measures, what it funds, how it governs, how it designs - and what communities and society increasingly expect.

They expect sport to deliver health, wellbeing, belonging and opportunity - not just competitive pathways for the talented few. Public policy frameworks have shifted to reflect this.<sup>10</sup> The sport sector's structures have not.

### *The next phase of reform will not be defined by position statements or working groups.*

It will be defined by whether systems structurally internalise these expectations, through what they measure, how they allocate resources, who shapes decisions, and how they design for diversity.

### This framework isn't theoretical.

I'm currently working with the AFL, Swimming Victoria and Walking Football 4 Health Victoria to test how participant-led principles translate into practice. The work is context-specific - sports environments and systems have unique opportunities and challenges - but several patterns are emerging.

When organisations create mechanisms to systemically gather participant voice, different design questions surface. When retention becomes a tracked metric alongside registration, resource allocation shifts. When governance structures expand beyond traditional pathway expertise, the definition of success broadens.

Perhaps most significantly for government investment, when sport organisations can demonstrate measurable impact on health, wellbeing and social outcomes - not just participation volume - **they strengthen their case for funding beyond traditional sport portfolios.** Participant-led systems don't just retain more people. They reframe sport as preventative social infrastructure, which aligns with how governments increasingly think about value and return on investment.

These are early-stage partnerships, but they're demonstrating something important: the shift from theory to implementation requires organisational commitment to measure differently, design collaboratively, resource accordingly and govern adaptively.

**Early patterns show that when organisations shift from measuring participation volume to measuring participant experience and retention, different design choices follow.** When decision-making structures broaden beyond traditional performance pathways, different voices shape what matters.



**Participant-Led Systems offer a roadmap for that alignment.**

They don't diminish performance ambition. They strengthen its foundation. They don't replace competition. They ensure competition serves development rather than narrowing opportunity. They don't undermine institutional legacy. They adapt it for long-term sustainability.

Youth sport now competes for time and trust in a landscape more complex than at any point in history. **Organised sport that remains calibrated to the progression of the few will face gradual cultural marginalisation and declining public investment.** Sport that redesigns around sustained engagement of the many will expand its social licence, strengthen its economic case, and raise its performance ceiling.

This shift does not require abandoning institutional knowledge or existing leadership. It requires evolving both. Leaders and organisations that embed participant-led design into measurement, governance and strategy will not dilute performance standards. They will secure sport's legitimacy, expand its funding base, and future-proof its relevance.

Governments and peak bodies ready to move beyond incremental reform need partners who understand both the diagnostic and the design challenge. If you're working on participation strategy, policy reform, or system redesign and want to explore how Participant-Led Systems might apply to your context, **let's talk.**



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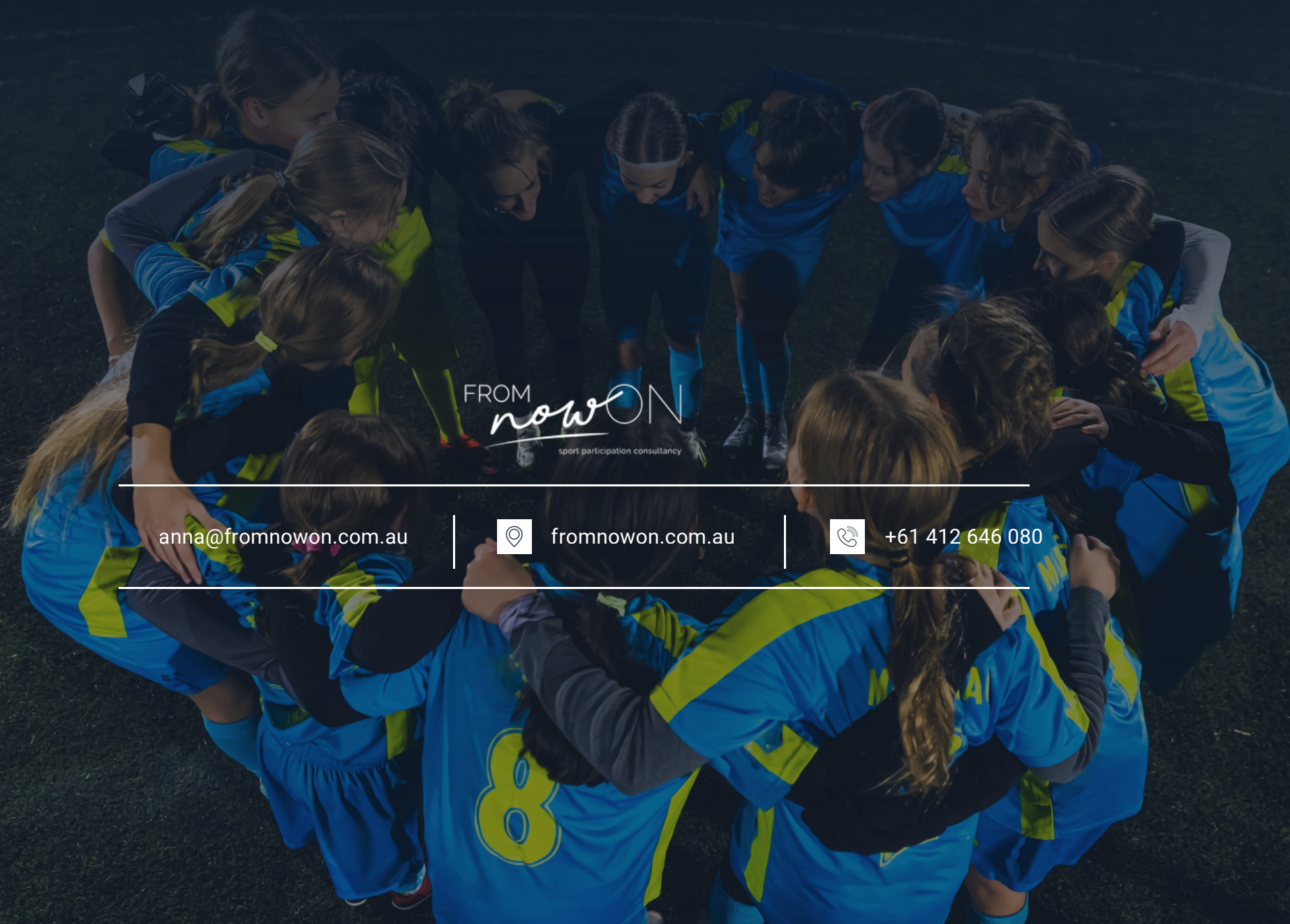
## About the Author

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Anna Walker is Founder and Director of From Now On, a sport participation consultancy working at the intersection of participation, inclusion, data and impact. With more than 25 years' experience across National Sporting Organisations, government agencies and community sport systems in Australia and internationally, Anna brings a rare combination of system-level thinking, deep respect for the realities of clubs and volunteers, and an ability to translate lived experience into executive and board-ready insight.

Anna's career has spanned strategy development, program design and policy advice across more than 40 sports in Australia, New Zealand, the Pacific Islands and England. This perspective - shaped by frontline conversations with participation leaders and firsthand observation of how early decisions in sport systems shape who feels welcome and who quietly opts out - informs her current work helping sport organisations design systems that value participation as much as performance, retention as much as recruitment, and experience as much as access.

She established From Now On to address a challenge she witnessed repeatedly across different contexts: sport systems designed for outcomes they were never structured to deliver. The Participant-Led Systems framework emerged from this work - combining international evidence, organisational theory and practical partnerships with organisations and leaders to test how systems change translates into sustained participation growth.



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