

# CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

## RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

### Inquiry into country football

Lakes Entrance – 6 April 2004

#### Members

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#### Witness

Mr G. Allen, area manager, east, Victorian Country Football League (sworn).

**The CHAIR** — Welcome everybody; thank you very much for attending today's hearing. Under the powers conferred on this committee by the Constitution Act and the Parliamentary Committees Act this committee is empowered to take all evidence at these hearings on oath or affirmation. I wish to advise all present at these hearings that all evidence taken by this committee, including submissions, under the provisions of the Constitution Act is granted immunity from judicial review. I also wish to advise witnesses that any comments made by witnesses outside the committee's hearing are not protected by parliamentary privilege. This is an all-party parliamentary committee, including one Independent member, and we are inquiring into country football. I welcome Graeme Allen, manager of the VCFL's east area. For the purposes of the transcript could you give us your full name and address. If you are representing an organisation, please state the name of the organisation and your role in it.

**Mr ALLEN** — My name is Graeme Robert Allen. I live at 19 Turner Road, Langwarrin. I am an area manager for the Victorian Country Football League, and I represent the VCFL.

**The CHAIR** — Please provide us with a brief statement, then we will ask you some questions.

**Mr ALLEN** — The submission that the VCFL has already prepared details most issues facing country football, and I do not want to reiterate too many of them today. This submission has been specifically prepared to detail the issues facing football in East Gippsland, many of which are relevant to the entire football family.

The current long-term viability of country football in East Gippsland has been under severe pressure for some time and years as a direct result of population movements leaving many small communities with fewer players in the required age groups to play competitive football. In addition to the reduction in players this population shift has also had a direct effect on the numbers of volunteers and sponsors able to assist football clubs. The facts are that there are less and less people available to participate in country football in many local communities in the east of the state. This has been as a result of country people moving to larger towns and cities for employment and education, and the consolidation of many rural properties; however, football still remains so popular that 86.3 per cent of all eligible males in the football age groups from 5 to 39 years in East Gippsland are playing football.

We have seen the number of teams overall reduce in the east by 14 over the past five years. There has been growth in the junior teams, including Auskick, but alarmingly a reduction in youth and senior teams. Youth teams have reduced by 13 in the same period, and senior teams by 8. Whilst clubs cover the reduction in junior teams and youth teams, the reduction in senior teams normally means the end of the club, either through amalgamation or the club folding. These statistics are detailed below and they are well below the state average with most teams' club reductions coming from the west of the state, not the east.

We must never underestimate the role a football club plays in the local community. The football club is the most important local identity in most country towns. The importance can be summarised in the following ways. It is the social hub of the community. It gives local people a sense of identity, pride and ownership they cannot experience in any other community group. It is where everyone gathers to meet, drawn by the common interest in football. The economic benefits are also there, and people are attracted to the town when supporters come to visit.

I do not believe any other sport or entertainment changes have had any major effect on the participation in football. The statistics I previously detailed support this. They show that most eligible males in the local community are still participating in football. The fact is that there are not many of them left to participate. It would be great if we could retain our country towns as they once were, but this is not possible. We need to ensure our clubs plan for their futures. Sometimes our future may be alone; in other cases it may not. Realistically there will be clubs that will cease to exist or merge, but we need to ensure there is an option for them and that they have every opportunity to continue to participate.

Other issues affecting participation include: shops opening seven days and week and employment taking people away from what has traditionally been Saturday afternoon sport time. I do not believe other sport or recreational activities are meeting the social needs in towns where football has ceased to exist. In fact data from the justice department will confirm that in towns where the football club has ceased to exist the crime rate has increased as bored youths are unable to fill their time either socially or in a participation/belonging sense.

Football has not been replaced by other activities. In most cases the football club has been the last major icon in the town to cease activity, and when it does the town has lost all its sporting and social identity. There are many costs

associated with operating a football club that are increasing substantially and are out of our control, and these are having a major impact on running a viable football club. This is where we require assistance. They include: the cost of facilities, such as water and power; the cost of maintenance of grounds to a level acceptable under current risk-management requirements, including facility upgrades; assistance to meet new government regulations and legislation; and assistance to obtain grants to assist with some of these issues.

The cost of insurance is sometimes perceived to be an increasing cost in country football, but it has reduced substantially over recent years, with premiums being maintained at a manageable level. It is my belief that one of the biggest issues facing football clubs is the loss of volunteers, or the inability to attract new young volunteers due to the continued workload placed on them to attract funds to maintain the club or new government requirements placed on the volunteers.

We require assistance to attract volunteers. Perhaps there may be an incentive for volunteers to spend a certain number of hours assisting our clubs, and that may be done through a tax incentive or by a lot of people who are almost at retirement age being given some incentive to join sporting clubs as volunteers — and not just football clubs but sporting clubs in general. We require assistance in reducing the costs associated with ensuring that all of our staff are trained and accredited to the required levels. We are in fact running one of the biggest businesses in the country town. In most cases the football club would turn over more than most of the businesses in the country town, yet in most cases those clubs have their management turn over every two or three years, and those people in most instances are untrained for that role. We need to ensure that they are trained, and we need assistance to make sure that they can be trained. As to volunteer protection, volunteers have a fear of their legal obligation. I realise that in November or October 2002 the volunteer protection act came through, but that legislation has never been promulgated properly. Everywhere I go I have to pull that out and show people. What I would like is some sort of promotion so that we can get that message out. We could say, 'If you are a volunteer in a sporting club, a sporting organisation or a football club, this volunteer protection act covers you against a lot of those legal issues, provided you are doing the right thing'. Unless something is put in place urgently many teams will simply fade away.

What are we and other peak bodies doing to assist? The VCFL is currently restructuring football in the east of the state to ensure that like teams play each other. What I mean by that is that communities playing communities, towns playing towns and the bigger towns playing bigger towns. At the moment we have the anomaly of towns which are literally a football oval and a phone box playing against a town of 5000 or 8000 people. It is very hard for them to commit not only with players but with volunteers and sponsors and those sorts of things. We are restructuring that at the moment to ensure that every team plays a like team, and that every team has the right to continue at a level that is suitable for their club. There are people out there who do not want their club to be the premiers every year; they just want them to be successful in their community-based identity. We need to ensure that if they want to they can continue with that.

We are reviewing team compositions. What I mean by that is we have reserves competitions across the state that have a lot of very major problems. We are looking at issues where we need to deal with reserves football to ensure that they are not just made up of people who are 48, 50 or 52 years old to make up the numbers. We are looking at that at the moment.

Our training and education of volunteers is ongoing. We have four people like me who travel the state and talk to our clubs and leagues, educating them and bringing them up to speed with all training requirements.

Developing a central administration concept is one of the prime issues I am looking at the moment — that is, ensuring that we take the pressure of our volunteers by having central administration that may run two or three leagues. We can consolidate a lot of economic issues, a lot of volunteer time issues, and we can run it much more professionally. We are striving to make sure that it is easier to run a football club. Our mission at the VCFL is: if it is not making it easier to run a football club, we do not do it. Unless it is making it easier, we do not do it.

The AFL and Football Victoria are continually supporting country football with development and participation programs aimed at attracting new players to this great game. This funding involvement must continue to country football in the interest of overall development of the game. They already provide elite pathways for talented players, payment for transfer fees to country clubs, Auskick programs, specialised coaching programs for coaches at all levels and for AFL teams coming into the country for training camps and country practice games, where

funds go back into the junior football in country areas. I think it is important that that continue. They assist us in the recruitment, training and retention of umpires. They have been of great assistance to us.

We have a real chance as part of this inquiry to make a difference and ensure that every club can continue to be part of country football if they wish. As I said, the future might not necessarily be alone, it may be in a merged situation, but it is a future for these people. As I travel around the state to many of the local communities the football is really a side issue. It is the catalyst that brings them together to share a social participation and community involvement not equalled in any other sport. The consequences of not assisting may well destroy the social fabric and heart of many country communities.

**Mr INGRAM** — A number of things come out of that. The issue that has come up fairly widely across the hearings that we have had so far is the salary cap and adherence to it. There are clubs that say this is really driving up the costs of attracting players and they are continually have to battle losing players to other clubs that come in and bid for them. Have you got some comments or some solutions for how we can deal with that? What is the challenge there? Is the salary cap as it is okay? How do we make sure that the salary cap, if we can retain it, is enforced, I suppose?

**Mr ALLEN** — The main issue with the salary cap is that it has been a guide and we have not had the ability to police it properly. We do not have access to tax files and a number of other matters — going to players and seeking the tax files and those sorts of things — to get into it and find out what they have been paid through their football club. As there has been in football over the years, a lot of cash money comes out of the bar to pay the players and those sorts of things. We have never been able to monitor it. There are ludicrous situations like a player getting nothing to play football but his wife getting \$250 to play netball. There are those sorts of things that are making it impossible for us.

As late as last night our management team had a meeting for almost 3½ hours on the salary cap. We are putting a summit together at the end of May in which we are involving every club. Everybody involved in football in country Victoria will be asked to provide a submission on the salary cap: the future of the salary cap, how they want it policed and what they want involved in it. Out of that we will select a number of people randomly at all levels across the state, including players, officials, league people and regional people. We will bring them in to the MCG and go through that summit to determine exactly how this should operate. At the moment, the issue in it has been the policing of it and the inability for us, through privacy and all those other issues, to go in and accurately get the data.

**Mr WALSH** — I suppose you have partly answered the first question, Graeme. Thank you for a well-thought-out submission. The issue of costs in running a club, you have talked about a lot of those.

**Mr ALLEN** — Yes.

**Mr WALSH** — The thing that exercises my mind is that if we make some recommendations that government should do some things for country football, how do we make sure that does not get built into extra player payments — not directly but indirectly because we are saving you some of your other costs?

**Mr ALLEN** — I think part of that decision should include, if that is a possibility, perhaps capping the payments for players.

**Mr WALSH** — The evidence we have heard in other places is that no-one sticks to it anyhow.

**Mr ALLEN** — There are different things that we are looking at, Peter, including a points system, under which it does not matter what they pay them, there is a points system and they can have only so many players under those points. That is another option that we are looking at to try to maintain it. The issue at the moment, as I said before in answering Craig, is that we cannot police it. It is very, very difficult, but if it was something that came from this group that said, 'This is the cap and this is what we have to go to', I think it has a lot more weight and a lot more power behind it. You can say, 'If you do go over it, you are breaching a recommendation or perhaps even legislation'.

**Mr WALSH** — I do not think it is the place of this group to say what the cap should be. That is not our role in life — or I do not believe it is.

**Mr ALLEN** — That is why we are trying to get everybody in and go through all that.

**Mr WALSH** — You spoke, and everyone has too, about this issue of government regulation and legislation as a disincentive for volunteers. Can you give us some examples, please?

**Mr ALLEN** — Two quick ones that come to mind are the responsible serving of alcohol and ensuring that everybody does that, and that is a great thing, and food handling is another one — having a food handling certificate and those sorts of things. That is great and we all acknowledge that for health and hygiene and the responsible serving of alcohol and all those sorts of things that must happen. Food handling is a classic. To get that certificate the costs charged to our volunteers have ranged between \$85 and \$285 across the state. That is the issue. I am not mentioning that because we should not have to do these things; the cost of doing it is causing the dramas to them — for example, in food handling that is 8 hours that they have to go over a couple of nights to go through. Is there any way we can perhaps not streamline it but reduce the costs or assist clubs and their volunteers in making sure that it is a reduced or subsidised cost for these people who are doing it as a volunteer? It is different if they are running a cafe or milk bar where they are making a profit out of it, but in this instance they are undergoing the same certificate requirements with the same criteria to be a volunteer. It is really putting a lot of people off. It does not seem like it would but it is.

**Mr WALSH** — And the alcohol one, what is the issue there — the cost again?

**Mr ALLEN** — Just the cost, again, of doing it and the time. Volunteers are obviously putting a lot of time into their clubs and leagues et cetera now, and it is doing all these other things. They have to undertake that course, they acknowledge that; it is just really the cost issue.

**Mr WALSH** — We have heard in a lot of other places that the AFL will not let their players travel for more than 2½ hours in a car to go out and do training nights or whatever. Is that the same issue down here, that you do not get AFL players down here?

**Mr ALLEN** — Yes, it has been the case. Last year we had Richmond at Traralgon for a club camp and the furthest they would come from Traralgon was Sale. I wanted them to actually come down here to East Gippsland — because they just do not get too much down here of that sort of thing. I wanted them to come down. I believe that under the current bargaining agreement that has been changed a little bit. In fact I have seen some schedules where they are actually going all over the country, flying rather than driving.

**Mr WALSH** — Who pays for that? They do?

**Mr ALLEN** — They do, yes.

**Mr WALSH** — Previously, when we had the zones, if you go back quite a few years, do you believe that country football was better serviced by the AFL clubs when they had a prescribed zone, that they actually took some more interest in them?

**Mr ALLEN** — My personal view is that it was. They owned that zone, and they had a very strong interest in making sure that they developed that zone. Today, under the drafting system, they could nurture a player all the way through and somebody else could take him, so they have no real commitment to that.

**Mr WALSH** — Is it the opportunity then to have zones for Victorian clubs in Victorian country regions and have some sort of second or third priority draft pick, like the father-and-son rule, to encourage them to look after a zone?

**Mr ALLEN** — That would certainly encourage them to participate more locally and get involved. I must admit, though, some of the AFL clubs — and Hawthorn is a classic at the moment — are actually putting a lot of effort into country clubs and country towns. Hawthorn now has three or four clubs that they are aligned with in what I call the east of the state, which includes the Mornington Peninsula — I run from the Mornington Peninsula to here. They are aligned with a few of those clubs and are working that well, knowing full well they may never get a player from there.

**Mr INGRAM** — I know that you are recently actively involved, and you mentioned it, in the restructure, if you like — trying to get towns playing as towns is the way you put it. You have had Lindenow South go to the

Omeo District Football League and Paynesville go across to the East Gippsland Football League, and I know there was some move earlier to get Stratford into East Gippsland as well. Can you explain just some of the challenges from the area manager's point of view in trying to deal with that? Obviously there are some challenges. You cannot tell clubs that this is the best thing to do; you can assist with that process. Can you explain the influence you have there?

**Mr ALLEN** — Prior to this role there have been a number of efforts to do some of these restructures, as you may recall. They had nobody on the ground to do it. My role is to look after the east of the state, and I am passionate about that. I make sure that a lot of these things work for the betterment of football. But the clubs and their supporters are also passionate about what they want to do, and it is up to me to be able to discuss, negotiate and work with them as to exactly what is best for their clubs. A lot of the time I need to be involved with those clubs quite closely, and I try to do that to ensure that we do what is best for a club and its future, not what is best for the VCFL. It needs to be what is best for their future, because nobody knows better than the clubs themselves where their future lies. Down this end of the state we had an issue where there were three leagues of six teams and one of seven, so I needed to rationalise that. The Riviera Football League disbanded and some of its clubs disappeared. Stratford is an example that you gave. At one stage it wanted to go this way and then the other way, and I negotiated with its members that the club would go the other way at this stage for 2004. Does that answer that?

**Mr INGRAM** — Yes, that is all right. The other thing that has come up in a lot of evidence, particularly in areas that have fairly strong numbers, is that the reserves are the backbone of the footy club. Some of our leagues have struggled in the past with reserves, and you mentioned that, so the Omeo and District Football League does not have reserves at all. You mentioned that you are looking at some of the reserve stuff. Can you explain that? Some leagues have been telling us, 'Whatever you do, do not touch the reserves'.

**Mr ALLEN** — I have looked into this in great detail over the last 8 to 10 months as part of this restructure exercise. A number of people say, 'Do not worry about it. We love our reserves. We want our reserves. They are the backbone of our club'. But any club, particularly the major league clubs, that is relying on five or six of their reserves players to stay around and have a beer during the afternoon to prop up their club are never going to survive. That is not what they can survive on. I can see a big positive in certain leagues not having reserves and their reserves filtering out to the district leagues. By that I mean that currently there are a number of reserve competitions, and I will give you a major league example, where the major league has four or five players in its reserves who are capable of playing ones. They have got four or five guys in the reserves who are filling up the numbers, and then they have got four or five guys in the reserves who are probably playing their second or third game for the day. Particularly in the east of the state a lot of the reserves players from the major league clubs are being wooed out to the district league clubs for a lot of money. If they did not get a game in the major league they would filter back to their district league club and play for nothing, which would assist that club with its team numbers as well. Surprisingly I am getting a lot of positive feedback on that. In fact five of the seven major league clubs in West Gippsland/Latrobe support that move.

**Mr WALSH** — Are you talking about major leagues not having reserves?

**Mr ALLEN** — That is the issue I was talking about in my team structure or team composition changes.

**Mr INGRAM** — It was not very clear how you were explaining that.

**Dr NAPHTHINE** — If you follow that through — —

**Mr ALLEN** — This is not in all major leagues, Denis. There are other leagues. I am not talking every major league. There are only certain major leagues where they have shortages of numbers in the area, as in East Gippsland.

**Dr NAPHTHINE** — For any football club to have a decent seniors team it has to have 25 or 28 reasonable players who can fill up for injuries and vacancies and things like that. As four or five players might come back to their district club they are going to displace people who perhaps have played the last three or four games and feel quite peeved that they are missing out on a game.

**Mr ALLEN** — They could well, but a lot of these district clubs are trying to attract these borderline players from a major league and spending \$150 to \$250 a week to attract them to go and play district-level football.

**Dr NAPTHINE** — But they are happy to do that because they are getting them for every game for the whole year not just every second or third game when the major league does not want them coming in and out. One of my concerns is that some of the fringe players play half a dozen games during the year and then miss out when it comes to finals or things like that, so next year they do not play. The last thing we need is to lose more players, so it worries me that there is a real potential for that to happen.

**Mr ALLEN** — I do not think that would happen. A lot of the district league clubs in their reserves have got people just making up the numbers or they forfeit the games because they do not have enough numbers. What this would do is that there will be some players who would be borderline players play in the district senior team who would perhaps go back and play in the reserves in that district team when these guys come back, or in fact the district league coach may play these people in the reserves. I doubt it, but that is a possibility. That would be entirely up to the district league coach.

**Dr NAPTHINE** — You have said things about the cost of facilities and maintenance. What specific things would you recommend that we recommend to the state government in terms of concrete assistance for country footy?

**Mr ALLEN** — As I go round the state I see facilities that almost should be destroyed compared to some other facilities. We need to get facilities up to a certain level not only for the players but also for the umpires and all those people. I am not talking about giving each club money to build new rooms. Perhaps it may be assistance by giving those clubs the ability to arrange an interest-free or reduced-interest loan over a lengthy term so that they can actually have ownership of it and ensure that their facilities are up to a suitable standard. A lot of grounds that I travel past are really on the borderline on risk-management issues, but there are issues with the facilities and in the ground playing surfaces themselves.

**Mr WALSH** — Do all your football leagues have netball clubs or do the football clubs have netball clubs?

**Mr ALLEN** — Most of them do, but there are the ones closer to the city, like the Yarra Valley Mountain District Football League. The Mornington Peninsula Football League is just getting into it. Yarra Valley does not, but the further you come east, virtually from Pakenham down here and over to Warburton and whatever, they have all got netball.

**Mr INGRAM** — All the real country leagues?

**Mr ALLEN** — The real country leagues do have them. The ones that are almost metropolitan leagues these days do not. Netball is a very important part of our whole network.

**Mr WALSH** — So the football facilities are fairly basic in a lot of places. What are the netball facilities like?

**Mr ALLEN** — We asked all the clubs this last year. We have some fantastic netball facilities. I have a major league club in this area whose netball is played in the asphalt car park beside the ground. So it ranges from that to some very good facilities or a little bit of asphalt tucked in the corner of the sporting oval.

**Mr WALSH** — I meant change facilities more than the actual netball court.

**Mr ALLEN** — I think that around about 52 per cent or 55 per cent — I cannot quite remember which — of netball clubs have change facilities. Only 19 per cent of them have showers. There are places to get changed that are out of the way, but no real change rooms.

**Mr WALSH** — So it is a big issue?

**Mr ALLEN** — It is; it is so important to the success of our football clubs. It is part of that family/community issue.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you very much, Graeme. You will receive a copy of the transcript. You will be able to correct any matters of fact or grammar but not matters of substance. Thank you very much for your submission and your time today.

**Witness withdrew.**