

CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into country football

Kerang – 23 March 2004

Members

Mr M. P. Crutchfield	Mr R. G. Mitchell
Mr B. P. Hardman	Dr D. V. Naphine
Mr C. Ingram	Mr P. L. Walsh
Mr J. M. McQuilten	

Chair: Mr B. P. Hardman
Deputy Chair: Mr C. Ingram

Staff

Executive Officer: Ms K. Murray
Research Officer: Dr V. Koops

Witnesses

Mr A. L. Davies, Area Manager, North-West/Central (sworn); and
Mr O. P. Aertssen, Regional Manager, North-West, Victorian Country Football League, and
Member, Victoria Police (sworn).

The CHAIR — Could you provide us with your full names and addresses, and state whether you are representing an organisation and, if so, your positions in those organisations?

Mr DAVIES — My full name is Alan Lewis Davies, 75 Hayes Road, Lake Boga. I am the area manager of north-west/central of the VCFL.

Mr AERTSSEN — My full name is Oscar Paul Aertssen. I live at 67 Main Street, Koondrook. I am the VCFL regional manager for the north-west. I was also the previous secretary of an amalgamated club over two states, Koondrook and Barham, for the last three years. By occupation I am a member of the police force, and that is also relevant to my submission.

The CHAIR — Please provide us with some brief comments, then we will ask some questions.

Mr DAVIES — My presentation today is a little more specific in that I have already met with Peter and Keith den Houting. It was felt that the VCFL submission that was presented at the start of this inquiry covered a lot of the VCFL-type issues. My submission today is to give the committee an outline of my role as an area manager for football in the north-west/central area, and also to just elaborate on a specific area, that being funded grants by the state government. I wanted to focus on something more specific rather than give a general overview of what probably has been covered quite a bit, not only in this hearing but also in Horsham. It is significant that I have only been in the role for five months. It was viewed by the VCFL with regard to the area management program which started last year that it initially had four area managers who were overseeing football right across the state of Victoria. It was felt at the end of last year that the requirement of another area manager up this way was important because the previous area manager was covering right across the top of the state, based in Albury and servicing Sunraysia. So you can imagine the role that that person had to play with regard to overseeing football right across the top of the state.

My area covers Bendigo, Horsham, Sunraysia, Horsham and Swan Hill. In regard to regions, it was the Bendigo region, North Central, Sunraysia, Wimmera and Central Murray. geographically it is a big area, but not quite as big as what we had in place previously. It is important to understand that the position of area manager was created to try and get down to grassroots football and to the local club level. Previously a lot of the management of clubs and leagues was done through the regional manager, but also via management in town or in Melbourne. Significantly my course through football always was questions about what was the VCFL, who were the VCFL, what did it do for football and so on. I suppose the VCFL has moved significantly to try and put people out in full-time positions to reach club level and to communicate the things that are happening in the VCFL down to clubs and work and support clubs right down to netball, junior clubs and also the senior clubs. It is probably significant — and again I have not hear all the arguments — but we are not only talking about senior football, we are also talking about netball and junior football. Junior football is a big thing in the country with regards to just trying to sustain.

The main thing I wanted to touch on today was the fact that in any organisation, whether it be the VCFL, an education department or any of the things out in country Victoria, there always seems to be in my experience, having been in both fields, the ability of state, local or federal government-type funds or grants that are available actually reaching down to the level where they are probably first intended to try and reach.

Where the VCFL has tried to break down the tiers and to get down to that level, I believe there is an opportunity through this hearing to try and get the funds and the grants that are available and breaking down the tiers so it filters down and gets to the local club level. We have heard a number of submissions in here for the last hour that there does not seem to be a lot of those grants making their way to where they are probably intended. I applied for a grant last year through the local football club, through the country action grant scheme. Unfortunately it had 500 other applicants so I was not a successful applicant.

One of the things I wanted to touch on, and I have handed out my recommendations — I have not gone into a lot of detail with them — there is no doubt that there are some cases where the funding for the betterment sports at the local level are filtering down. We know that Murrabit has a brand-new watering system, and we hear of some facility upgrades occasionally around our area. Safety equipment is one that seems to be getting to club level, and participation grants is another one that I have heard of. But all too often these are only spasmodic; every now and then you will see in the paper that a club has received something from a particular grant, or something from an application that they have put in.

What I am saying is that government departments, local councils and communities need to work more closely together with regard to trying to assist clubs with their applications, and we have heard that previously. But we probably need to look at a more coordinated and planned approach. Far too often grants and other things are put out there in areas, without ever really giving the general communities the opportunity to know where they are. If you are at a local club — and I think Keith mentioned that there are some smart clubs around that do have the personnel who are in the right channels to be able to know where to access these types of grants, but all too often they are very hard to try and work out which particular grant is going to be applied for.

Back in October when I was appointed area manager my role was to take up my office with the Mallee Sports Assembly person in Swan Hill. For me that has been a godsend in regard to the amount I am able to interact with that person at that level. I have opened up so many more doors that I did not realise were there previously. I suppose that gives me the opportunity as the area manager for football now to try and pass these on to the regional people, to leagues and to clubs. Without those links it could be easily said that a lot of people do not know what is happening out in the sporting assemblies, and do not know of the services that they provide. What we need to try and do is try and have a coordinated and planned approach as to how best to utilise the people who are already on the ground. I suppose I am using the sports assemblies, but there may be other groups out there in the communities that local people do not know about, that have skills and services that they provide and have means by which to channel or direct clubs and local people in the right direction as to where they might go about servicing or applying for some of these grants and some of these funds.

I talk about joint partnerships and the development of working parties with key groups involved in the delivery of football and netball within regions. That is what I was just touching on before. There are many sections and groups of people that have information that not everyone can access at the moment. I believe there can be a really strong development now between the Victorian Country Football League (VCFL), local communities, local councils and also state government bodies and departments that can start to work together far better to provide that access to local clubs. Specifically I am talking about just creating links and better channels of communication between the departmental bodies and the clubs. I suppose the whole thing is to try to break it down so that clubs are getting that information channelled down and the communication is a lot more open than it has probably been in the past, given that we have new people in different roles out in the country now.

Mr AERTSSEN — My role is subordinate to Mr Davies's position. I am one of his four area managers. He is full time in that capacity. I have a real job, and this is a bit of a hobby because of the enjoyment of football, so I go up to Swan Hill. I want to mention one thing that may or may not have come up. As I mentioned, I was secretary of an amalgamated club. That club amalgamated some seven years ago now, and as a result of the amalgamation it had to work with two shires and two state governments, and that in itself is an inherent problem. During my time as secretary of that club I made a couple of attempts to obtain grants, mainly for capital grants. As was mentioned before, a lot of female umpires are starting to appear these days, so we have to give them the same facilities as we have to encourage them to participate in the sport. When you make an application to a Victorian-based organisation, they basically tell you where to go. You then make an application to a New South Wales government organisation — and by the way we are in the same league as people over here — and they say, 'You are in a Victorian league. Apply to Victoria', because we play in a league affiliated with the VCFL.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Do you live in New South Wales?

Mr AERTSSEN — No, I live in Victoria.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Is the club in New South Wales?

Mr AERTSSEN — The club, as a result of the amalgamated — —

Mr DAVIES — It was amalgamated across the border.

Mr AERTSSEN — Yes, as a result of that amalgamation, the better facilities at that time, the grounds — we are talking about a physical geographical distance of the width of the Murray — were in New South Wales. So you apply to Victoria, and they tell you to go to New South Wales, and you lose it — and it is not only in the Central Murray league and mine. Mr den Houting mentioned the Golden Rivers Football League and the netballers. They are saying to us, 'You belong to a Victorian league. Apply to Victoria'. When we finally convince them that

the ground is physically located in the state of New South Wales, aerial ping-pong in Sydney has a higher priority. As the committee would well understand, beyond the Sydney Swans, they do not care about you.

So in that time we had to go back to the local shire. The shire that we were in for football purposes is not that big, so we were competing with other clubs, sporting organisations and community groups for the dollar. That is something that I do not think has come across. We have to be able to convince New South Wales that the asset is in New South Wales and not Victoria.

Mr McQUILTEN — Why did you not go to Peter Black?

Mr AERTSSEN — We did go to Peter, and he helped us as best as he could, and also the federal member for Farrer, Susan Ley, was most helpful with paperwork and submissions and that sort of stuff, but the list of reams and reams of paperwork required for a little \$5000 or \$10 000 grant — which is little to the government but to us is an upgrade of a facility for the future — is mind blowing, and we just cannot compete with Rugby League, which is obviously the dominant sport in New South Wales. That is one consideration.

In respect to your earlier question, Chair, when you asked Mr Matthews about the matters of clubs going into schools, the reason I mentioned my occupation, which is relevant to that, is the issue of police checks. That is something that has come up in my role as the regional manager, and it is something that Mr Davies and I have discussed. That is an issue that has to be raised, so it is not that simple to do these things. Those are just the two things I wanted to mention, and obviously also to support Mr Davies in the work he is doing.

Mr DAVIES — I finish by saying again that the dissemination of information at times is the key thing that I am trying to focus on here, in that there are people within the communities already that have that information that can help clubs and leagues. But, again, I just feel it is not getting down to the club level. It was only the fact of being in the Legislative Assembly in the last couple of weeks that I have been able to put my hands on some things, but at the end of the day a lot of clubs and leagues do not know about the things that have been produced to try to support them in applying for grants. The publication that I have with me, which provides guidance for applying for grants, is obviously an excellent resource to try to bring together all the different things in the different municipalities, but I do not think there would be anyone in the community who would really know of these types of resources. The state government has a role in regard to providing these types of services and resources that actually filter down and are able to assist clubs and leagues in applying for grants and funds.

The other key thing is that there has been a lot of talk about applying for these grants and funds, but the key thing is that you get a return back — after a hell of a lot of work that goes into putting in a submission — with feedback, feedback along the lines of:

Over 500 requests for funding were received in this funding round. The majority of these applications were very high standard, and consequently competition for funds was extremely tight. Unfortunately, I regret to advise you that your application has been unsuccessful on this occasion.

A lot of man-hours and a lot of work and thought go into applying for a particular grant application, and to receive feedback like that does not really encourage people to go out and do it again. I think there is also a role to be played by some other people on the ground out in the communities or out in the regions who could actually provide that feedback to applicants as to why their grant was unsuccessful. That is another key thing that I wanted to focus on.

The CHAIR — Are you saying that a few brief clues in the letter would have been sufficient to explain how you could have improved your application next time?

Mr DAVIES — With anything you do it is imperative that, if you put a lot of work and a lot of time and effort into something, if you are unsuccessful it has to be for a particular reason. We understand there is only a certain amount of money and there were 500-odd applications for grants, but there may have been some key things in the submission that made it unsuccessful, so with some feedback the next time they go back to the drawing board they could certainly present something that might meet all the requirements.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — What was the application for?

Mr DAVIES — Just country action grants. Basically my application was to try to assist a junior football club with regard to helping them to support under-17s with travel and other oncosts that the club was incurring.

Dr NAPHTHINE — You may have heard earlier, if you were here, evidence about the reluctance of AFL clubs and players to come up and support country leagues, particularly those more than 2½ hours drive from Melbourne. Do you have any comments on that? What are you, as the employee of the VCFL, doing to ensure better interaction between AFL players and local clubs? There is obviously mutual benefit there.

Mr DAVIES — There is certainly a mutual benefit. I know you touched on having local players coming into schools to run clinics and so on as well. There is no doubt that the drawing power of AFL players back in the community helps to increase the participation, I suppose, of young players in the game. I do not think we should rely all that heavily on the fact of AFL players coming out. They are certainly one part of a lot of different programs that are running to try to increase the participation of young players in the game.

The community can be involved. In Echuca it certainly was seen as something that was of benefit, and if they are to continue there is no doubt that each of the regions will have an opportunity at least once a year to have a full team of AFL players. I know that other programs are being conducted later in the year to bring AFL players to regions. They are certainly working a lot harder to provide those players out in the country, but there needs to be a whole lot more of other types of programs that we are working with in schools, with junior football and even with local communities and local players, because at the end of the day they look up as highly to a senior player in their senior team as they do to an AFL player. They do not necessarily see them on television all the time, but certainly they aspire to be senior players in their clubs, and they look towards the leadership of those senior players too.

Dr NAPHTHINE — I have a follow-up question. Some people hark back to the days when there was zoning and say that zoning provided a better link between country footy and the AFL, that an AFL club had a vested interest in encouraging football at the grassroots and that there were enormous benefits for country footy. I do not think we can ever go back to zoning, but let me float an idea to you. What if clubs were allocated to certain country areas, and in return for the AFL club they could swap their second or third-round draft pick for a no. 1 pick out of that area as a pre-draft thing, like the father-and-son rule? So the AFL club would have a particular area to nurture and would benefit by having priority draft picks in exchange for, say, a second or third-round pick out of that area. Would that be a model that you think should be pursued, or do you think that the era of having a direct link between a region and an AFL club is gone completely?

Mr DAVIES — I came through that system, and there was no doubt that with players from a particular zone — for example, Rainbow being in the Essendon zone — you followed the Timmy Watsons, Hawkers and those guys with interest. I still do not believe that has a lot of bearing on local club footy and trying to develop and continue to provide football and netball at the grassroots. I believe that in some ways the pathways direction of players now through the TAC Cup and through the draft system, in the views of country teams, has probably done more damage. That is the view I would have. It has certainly been seen by country teams as taking away their good young players, albeit to play in the Pioneers or along that pathway, that they have been able to develop over the 10 years of football that they have had rather than through their junior team. We encourage the fact that they have the opportunity to play at a higher league or at a higher standard, but the idea of the zones and the TAC Cup pathway is still having a big impact on country clubs because they are taking away some of their players.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — I want to follow up on that old chestnut, the AFL. Maybe it would be best if Oscar commented, Alan, because you are an employee.

Mr AERTSSEN — Are you suggesting I might not be employed by this time — —

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — There has been a consistent theme, whether it is a perception or a reality, that the AFL has neglected real country football. I fly a flag that it could be a capital grant per municipality or per league and that there has been too much focus at the elite level, which is touching on what Alan has said. Is there a degree of reality in that, and how can we fix that for areas like this?

Mr AERTSSEN — From a club perspective or from an AFL perspective?

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Either.

Mr AERTSSEN — The AFL has one interest only, and that is the AFL. It is to promote the game at what it says is a national, elite level. And it is doing it fairly successfully.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — The AFL will argue that it put \$6 million or \$7 million into country football.

Mr AERTSSEN — They can argue that all they like. As a club secretary for those years I can say we had a player who is presently playing at AFL level, but apart from some money we received because of the specified games he received and the clearance and that sort of stuff, we got nothing else from them, not even a nice glossy little magazine saying, ‘We will support you if you are having trouble with this’ or ‘This seminar is available’. It would be ultimate if we could use the example of a club trainer. They are grassroots people; we cannot survive without them. There would be nothing wrong with an opportunity for a trainer or two to be given a weekend at an AFL club. That would cost that club absolutely nothing, but the benefit that that trainer would get in the way that the club at elite level treats its players — —

If one thing was brought back to treat our players, or any football club players come to that, that has got to be a bonus. The exchange does not always need to be money. It can be a situation with me going back to the last three years as a club administrator. It would have been nice to go to a club at that level, maybe for a couple of days, and have a look at how they do things. I am not interested in their secrets. It is my role as the volunteer to help the professionalism of the club as best I can. If I can go along somewhere else, learn something and bring it back to my club, it might be a better way of doing something. I do not know. The club runner. There are lots of things that can be done for absolutely no cost. We will kick in the money for the petrol to get the man down there. There would not be a problem, because we would win in the end. That is something that needs to be looked at. As to what the AFL gives us, competition on Saturday afternoons on television has a bearing on local clubs, but not much comes back.

Mr DAVIES — I will extend on the point regarding pathways. There is no doubt there are benefits from having young Victorian players going through that pathway system and being drafted, because for each young Victorian who goes through that system or country Victorian young player who goes through that system, the transfer fees that filter back down to the regions are a very important part of our funding. I am not being critical of the fact that players go off and have the opportunity to play AFL. When they are drafted the transfer fees that come from that draft filter down and are equalised across the state with regards to money back into the regions. We run some really successful programs at the regional level to try and develop football. What I am saying is that country clubs themselves are not necessarily in favour of having their young boys being taken away for the pathways, but at the end of the day money is still coming back to the regions where it is used to develop other programs for local clubs.

Mr AERTSSEN — To follow up on that, that money does filter back to the club. If you have had any connection with a small football club in a small community, even if you only get a thousand bucks back it is a raffle you do not have to run. That does come back. We do not want to give you the impression that that is the only thing we get back.

Mr WALSH — Alan, as you are aware, the committee is also doing an inquiry into farm deaths and accidents. For the benefit of the committee, I wonder if you would like to relay to the other committee members what you said to me about the reactions you get to the emblems on your shirt when you go places. You have a WorkSafe emblem on one pocket and a VCFL one on the other.

Mr DAVIES — It is very strong.

Dr NAPHTHINE — Very supportive?

Mr DAVIES — No, sorry! No. Certainly I have had some funny and different experiences. I will give a couple of examples. Whenever I buy food or go into a shop, I certainly get a look, and the badge has a strong bearing. I was in a petrol station once when a guy said, ‘You should have been here X number of minutes ago. There was a guy talking on his mobile phone and pumping petrol’. He said, ‘You could have done something about that’. They certainly notice the WorkSafe emblem before they notice the VCFL one!

Sometimes I have comments like, ‘You are not coming here to steal our players, are you?’. Sometimes there is a feeling in country towns that a VCFL person has come there to steal their players. I say, ‘No, really, I am here just to buy a sandwich’. Certainly WorkSafe is a key part of the sponsorship at a VCFL level, and it is certainly recognised on the shirt.

Mr INGRAM — Can both of you comment very briefly on the issue of salary caps and how potentially they could be enforced or even whether they should be enforced and what impact the breaches of the salary cap have on the unevenness of the competition?

Mr AERTSSEN — Were you listening to a conversation I had about an hour ago?

Mr INGRAM — No.

Mr AERTSSEN — The level of the salary cap is a major issue, especially in the area that I deal with as the regional manager. There is a perception out there, even when I was the secretary, that clubs just buy a premiership. It is a difficult thing to enforce. One of the problems we have to look at is being able to look at the books. No matter what you do, you have to be able to look at the books. Then you have to have somebody who understands the books to look at them. So, yes, it is a major issue, and it is an issue that the VCFL — —

I happened to be speaking to somebody about it recently. It is an issue we are trying to address this year — somehow!

Mr DAVIES — The key thing about the salary cap it is that there needs to be education of the clubs. To just throw the salary cap up and say that it is a major problem is not accurate. It is not a major problem for a lot of leagues and a lot of clubs around Victoria. The clubs that run themselves well, plan their clubs well and have the right people in the right positions are able to work within those salary cap means and are able to plan for their clubs on a wider basis than just paying players — for example, developing their facilities, upgrading their grounds and providing a better service for their community. I think there is a lot to be said for clubs around Victoria that have a very clear pathway with regard to how they manage their clubs.

The problem with the salary cap is that there are some clubs that have some very poor player payment programs and ways of getting around salary cap rules. The VCFL has rules in place. The thing about the salary cap is that we need to try to educate clubs better to manage their player payments and their finances better so that they can be sustainable for the next 5 or 10 years or longer so they do not to just pour a lot of that money back into player payments, but also use it for other things such as development of their grounds or upgrading their facilities.

The salary cap is a major problem for some clubs and some leagues, but what the VCFL is trying to do is to educate those clubs better on how to structure or manage their clubs so that that does not become as big an issue.

The CHAIR — With the player payments, when there is a netball court that needs to be done up, a changing room for umpires needs to be done up or when other facilities need to be improved, when salary caps go up and more money goes into that, does resentment occur from the people who are seeing money being put into player payments rather than into facilities that are there supporting the rest, or most, of the people? I have spoken to people in the past who have spoken about their resentment upon finding out that someone has been paid when they play free of charge, and so on; but now that we are talking about the importance of facilities, is that resentment coming through?

Mr AERTSSEN — Football is a very passionate sport, as the committee would have heard. The aim is to be successful. If you can be successful as a football/netball club you put your town on the map, because people hear about your town in a variety of different ways. I think for some clubs the priority is to keep that success going to the detriment of other parts of the infrastructure, and they tend to pay for it down the track with the loss of that infrastructure. As Mr Davies said before, maybe it is an education system that we need to ensure that clubs structure their budgets and finding so that infrastructure is improved, but not to the detriment of playing and vice-versa, but by striking some balance there.

Mr DAVIES — One of the key areas that is affected by the fact that you are paying players too much in your club is the amount of volunteer support that you will get. A lot of clubs administratively rely on those volunteers, and if over a number of years that community sees the money being poured into players and there is not upgrading, they lose those volunteers and those people who have been supporting that community for a lot of years. That is a where you start to see the decline, because people are not going to keep working for just one part of the club. That is a key point.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for your time, gentlemen. You will receive a copy of the transcript, in which you will be able to correct matters of fact or grammar, but not matters of substance.

Witnesses withdrew.