

# CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

## RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

### Inquiry into country football

Ballarat –27 April 2004

#### Members

Mr M. P. Crutchfield  
Mr B. P. Hardman  
Mr C. Ingram  
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#### Witness

Mr F. Williams, regional manager, Victorian Country Football League.

**Mr WILLIAMS** — My name is Frank Williams. I live at 26 Kerry Way, Invermay Park, Ballarat. I am the VCFL regional manager. You have heard from each of our competing leagues and also from the area manager, but I would like to share a few quick observations and perceptions with you. I am responsible for the regional framework, which is basically concerned with strategic planning for the region. Our role is to coordinate and facilitate football at the highest level within the region. We are currently undertaking a regional review of junior football and a regional summit will be conducted in the area on 10 May. Why is that important? There are a whole range of under-age competitions and there is not as much corporation and liaison between leagues and clubs as we would like. It is also critical to have a look at the enormous drop-out rate particularly in the under-17 and under-18 competitions. So the VCFL is initiating this review with a view to getting solid data to do some concrete planning and also to assist the development of country football.

We are concerned with football and netball as a family involvement and, of course, to provide appropriate pathways for young people through football to play at the highest level that is possible. There has been a lot of cooperation and support from local leagues and clubs, but there are also a number of dilemmas. Earlier on Denis asked the question about what had happened to the young people who are involved, for instance, with Auskick in the Smythesdale and Scarsdale areas. Seven teams formulated a loose-knit league called the Golden Plains football league, which operated last year. They have decided to formalise that into an under-14 competition in the Lexton Plains league this year on a trial basis and to review the situation at the end of this year. But we cannot afford to have such local initiatives that are raised one year and which we inject funds into with the uncertainty of what is going to happen in the following year. Again we have issues of jumper subsidies and so on. This year we have contributed \$1800 to the Lexton Plains Football League for each of the new clubs in relation to the league and it is a great initiative.

Some of the dilemmas we confront are that we have something like 1400 young people involved with Auskick. They are paying \$35 per head this year. Where does the money go to? It is Victorian football development. We are concerned about why this money is not put into country football and the development and facilitation of greater participation and involvement. There is a fair bit of concern in relation to the long-term viability of some of our clubs. We know in many cases it is a year-to-year proposition. I think we often overlook this critical factor which is so vital to country communities. In fact some clubs struggle from one crisis to another. We need that long-term framework and strategic planning to support and underpin the enormous amount of volunteerism that takes place in our country leagues.

We currently have an excellent relationship with the North Ballarat Football Club, but there is a fair bit of scepticism between leagues and clubs in relation to taking the best young people from the whole of western Victoria into the TAC Cup. We commend and applaud the North Ballarat Football Club for what it is doing in relation to the development of junior football, but the reality is that it is robbing country clubs of their best junior footballers, and there has to be a compromise in relation to that. What is happening now is that it is impinging on public schools football. What has happened in the last few years is that, for instance, Ballarat and Clarendon College offered sports scholarships to Ballarat Rebels footballers so it won the public school football premiership. Last year it was St Patrick's College; this year it was St Patrick's again. Eight to 10 sporting scholarships are offered. But a school like Ballarat High School, which has had very strong teams but which cannot compete with that, is robbed of equal competition. As a result many of the public schools have simply dropped out of that competition. School football is at all-time low in this area. We have really got to address that.

You heard about one of the dilemmas in relation to sports teachers within schools and their interest in football. If you come in and do it for the schools, they will facilitate it. But unless it is done for them, and unless it is an integral part of the curriculum it is not going to be effective. Likewise we have some 200 young people in Melbourne who are linked to AFL clubs and who are living with host families and doing VCE. What is that doing for country football? Six hundred and eighty Australian Rules footballers have something like \$800 million expended on them and the promotion of their game. By comparison, what do we do for the 71 000 country footballers with a budget of \$8.5 million. We really have to address the imbalances. If we expect the best footballers to emerge in this state, we have to look at the grassroots level and really look at what we might do to underpin football at that level.

We have all sorts of dilemmas constantly being imposed on country clubs — trainers courses, two-day accreditation, \$150. The VCFL subsidises that to the tune of \$75, but it is again another impost on clubs. Coaches accreditation is another one. The VCFL would like to make this mandatory from the beginning of next year before

coaches take over the realms of the football club. Again that is \$120 there, partly subsidised, but it is another impost on clubs.

Police checks is another impost on clubs; as necessary and important as they are, the reality is that with player registration and all of the other imposts on clubs, clubs really have their backs to the wall in relation to the impositions that are made. We are all aware of the profound significance of country football, the grassroots development, the family participation, but are we really supporting country football? I would question that the state government could be doing a lot more in that regard. Thank you.

**Dr NAPHTHINE** — It begs the question: if the state government could be doing a lot more, like what?

**Mr WILLIAMS** — There are all sorts of initiatives that could be supported in all sorts of ways. There is no coordinated development in relation to a local range of initiatives, so, for instance, you probably saw where Hawthorn was inviting worthy recipients from country clubs down for a training session and then they were presented on the *Today Show*. That should be so significant that it should be a universal initiative. Simple little things like Max has mentioned — various certificates and recognitions, those sorts of things can really affect grassroots football and keep young people in.

We are adapting and modifying competitions in the Central Highlands region. It is allowing for over-age 18½-year-olds to remain in football by including them in their teams, but if they play a senior or seconds game they cannot go back down. We would like to see much more support of these sorts of things as well. When it is all said and done the community benefits from things like trainers and coaches' development, but we think there could be more financial support in relation to those sorts of things that benefit rural communities as well.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you very much, Frank. We will finish there. Thank you for your time. You will receive a copy of the transcript in due course.

**Committee adjourned.**