

CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into country football

Leongatha – 7 April 2004

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Mr R. J. Cheffers, president, Yinnar Football and Netball Club (sworn).

The CHAIR — Welcome, Russell. For the purposes of the transcript, could you please provide your full name and address and if you are representing an organisation the name of that organisation and your role within it?

Mr CHEFFERS — My name is Russell John Cheffers. I live at 245 Creamery Road, Yinnar. I am representing the Yinnar Football and Netball Club in the capacity of president.

The CHAIR — You have provided a lot of information, thank you very much. All of us are in awe of your insignia there; we think it is fantastic. If you would like to give us a brief presentation we will have some questions for you afterwards.

Mr CHEFFERS — Firstly, I will start with an apology on behalf of our secretary, who prepared that suite of information that you have. He has another commitment, unfortunately, and he could not get out of it. So I am here to present on behalf of the Yinnar Football and Netball Club and we thank you for the opportunity to do the presentation. I have just given you a brief summary there on our comments on the terms of reference that your committee is addressing. These comments have been prepared by our football and netball club independent of external influence because we thought it was important to give you a micro view of a club that operates in the junior league, in the sense of being affiliated with the Mid Gippsland Football League. It is interesting, just having heard from the Mid Gippsland executives, that some of the things that we have put in here do tend to reflect some of the comments that they have made. Perhaps if I just go quickly through the points.

We agree that the Mid Gippsland Football League in its current format is viable. It has been operating for 69 years, as the other lads said. It is a good competition of. It is geographically close, so it is easy to get from one venue to the other in the sense of weekly competition. We do have some concerns that a couple of the clubs have been struggling for a number of years now and tend to be down at the bottom of the table. They are continuing to survive but whether they continue into the future I think addresses some of the points that your committee is grappling with at the moment. I will come to those points in a couple of minutes.

We also believe our football and netball club is pivotal to the sporting and cultural importance of Yinnar itself. We are a small community of about 550 people, but we do have strong links with the cricket club and the tennis club and we share the facilities at the recreation reserve which are, by our standards, excellent. We have just put a \$100 000 extension into our social rooms, which has been funded from grants but more particularly paid for by volunteer labour, both trade and non-trade labour that has come from within the Yinnar community. That enables us to address the issue that was raised earlier of female umpires, having separate facilities for them, and also for the netballers who need separate facilities and for the disabled people.

On the third term of reference, in a sense we probably just take a view similar to what was expressed earlier — that the downturn in the Latrobe Valley over the last 15 years associated with the restructuring of the power industry and the paper industry and to a lesser extent the oil industry has had an enormous impact on the sporting activities and cultural activities of the central Latrobe Valley, particularly Moe, Morwell and Traralgon, although the impact has probably been felt more in Moe and Morwell in that context. That has had a repercussive effect on both the minor and, of course, the major league. We believe that those socioeconomic changes have impacted negatively in the sense, firstly, of the numbers of volunteers that we are able to attract to our club to do the work, although we are fortunate in the sense that we have probably a core of 12 to 15 people who can do the bulk of the work, supported by others. We do rely on rostering of our netball ladies, for example, to run the canteen. We do rely on rostering of our footballers to do both the bar activities as well as the important cleaning up of the ground and its facilities. So we have been able to keep above the waterline, so to speak, in that respect.

There is also more particularly of concern been a reduction in the number of junior players coming into the football and netball club — that is both males and females. We have addressed this by moving quite concertedly into under-10, under-12 and under-14 football and netball competitions, to make sure that we have this regeneration coming from within the community and the catchment area around Yinnar. Interestingly enough, the reduction in population in the Latrobe Valley has also had an impact on the Latrobe Valley Umpires Association. As a league the home team provides the central umpire for reserve grade football and that has been occurring for the last three or four years. I think that is just indicative that the umpires also are feeling the squeeze in that particular context.

Obviously the reduction in people also affects sponsorship. The contraction in business has affected sponsorship and that is something we have had to work pretty hard on, to try to keep our sponsorship dollars up to the levels that we need to sustain it. I suppose that the last comment I would make there is that we were probably lucky. For 40 or

50 years we had the benevolence of the SEC to support us and we grew fat and enjoyed the very good life based on the benevolence of the SEC through all sorts of avenues. That has now virtually evaporated and that has added to the impact on the scene.

With the fourth term of reference, in the sense of numbers of clubs and whatnot, as the Mid Gippsland executive said, we have not had any reduction in numbers of clubs in recent times, and we believe our competition is good and strong, albeit that we have some issues we need to address that we can go through in the course of the next few minutes. Regarding the specific cost elements that you folk mentioned, we have been able to address the insurance issues. It was a vexed issue probably 12 to 18 months ago, but the league and others have done a good deal in the context of insurance coverage, so we do not see that as being an issue. It is a cost impost, but it is one that we think we can manage.

Local government charges: we do not have a major problem with local government charges, although we do operate our own bore for water supply. We are one of the very fortunate clubs that does not have to pay water rates; we can keep our grounds in excellent condition. With pricing policies for electricity, gas, phone and whatnot, we do not have a major issue with that. We factor CPI rises into our budgets, so we do not have any — —

I am saying they are not an impost — they are — but they are not draining on the situation at Yinnar.

Player payments: again you have had a good discussion in the last hour or so on that. We support the salary cap. If there was a debate at Mid Gippsland to move it from \$30 000 to \$35 000 we would argue to take it back to \$25 000 because we think that the progressive increase in salary cap is one that is a potential danger for football clubs. Bear in mind that we are a minor league; I am not talking about major league. We certainly believe around the \$30 000 mark is appropriate for us at this point in time. We do rely on bringing our juniors through. They are the bulk of the netball and football complements of our four grades of football, and the two senior grades of football and netball. We tend to rely on bringing up to 2, 3 or 4 people in as specialist coaches and coaches to inject that level of skill externally if we have not got it within our own ranks.

Affiliation fees: we think we get good value for money from the league that we are associated with.

As far as the recommended actions are concerned — and you have heard some of these things again from previous presenters, and these are not in any order of priority — we believe the issue of volunteerism is of real concern for country football and netball, both at major and junior level. We do not have any magic answers, except to run a good club and to work your butts off to encourage people to get involved and, as their kids get involves, bring them in as juniors, and bring mum and dad in. A lot of mums and dads like to drop their child at the front gate and drive off. We try and encourage them to come in by giving them free passes or offering them free access to some of the major functions that you run during the course of the year.

Over and above that the dreaded spectre of money will emerge at some stage. We pride ourselves on not paying for our bar and canteen and gate managers and whatnot, but we do pay our scoreboard attendants because we simply have not been able to get those for the last couple of years by giving them a pie, a drink or something like that. We have had to pay some money, although we have definitely drawn the line in that sense at that level of activity.

The second level of support that we would see maybe as appropriate in the foreseeable future is modern business equipment. A lot of the leagues operate on antiquated PCs and photocopiers. There could be a need to inject, whether it is second-hand equipment or whatever, a higher level of sophistication. I am no computer expert, but I am told there are ways of moving information around now that is a lot better than faxes and whatnot. That would certainly aid our relationship with the Mid Gippsland Football League, and the secretary there in particular, and his relation back to us. At the moment there is a lot of work going on with clearances, and, of course, during the home game attendances you get all the scores and whatnot that you have got to move between the two streams.

We believe if some support can be given to the junior ranks in football at all levels, that would be terrific. I know there are programs run and sponsored by the AFL, but if there is some additional support given, whether in the sense of subsidised jumpers or footies, or getting more skilled coaches coming out into the country areas, that would be supportive in the sense of getting juniors involved and directing them into footy rather than, say, soccer, basketball or whatever, because that is how we survive. We survive by building on the base of the juniors we have got.

Obviously the issue of water is topical at the moment. We are fortunate enough to have bore water, but if people have access to bore water and some ability on a dollar-for-dollar basis access or whatever to enable clubs that do not have access to bore water to have that access would be good for ground conditions. That is an occupational health and safety issue for players as well as for umpires and officials. Basically that is the essence of our submission. Thanks very much.

The CHAIR — Obviously with water, whilst your own ground is fine and you do not have any hassles there, you still have to go and play on the other ones, so I imagine you probably shake your heads sometimes at the harder grounds that might be around.

Mr CHEFFERS — The first game we played was an away game. We had a bit of an issue with the ground because they had not been able to water it, but they did some good work in the last week and it was up to scratch, so there are no problems there.

The CHAIR — Yinnar is not a big town; it has 550 people. There are probably a lot of bigger towns, maybe twice the size or a bit more, that do not have a football netball club any more, but used to. What do you think are the key differences and the things you see? We can probably pick it up from our submissions, but what are the key things that mean Yinnar has a football netball club that is still obviously strong while maybe some of the other towns around that have had to merge or whatever do not have?

Mr CHEFFERS — Probably a myriad of things sit behind it, but I suppose the key ones are that we have focused strongly in the last 15 years on a family atmosphere being created within the clubs. We run smoke-free environments and we have responsible serving of alcohol. We have a policy, which is in the submission we put to you folk, and we encourage, as I said earlier, the families of the kids to get involved in the club basically at the grassroots level. They can come in and help with the timekeeping or with the goal umpiring and then gradually get involved more and more in the community of the football netball club itself. We place a lot of emphasis on our netballers, because most footballers have partners, wives or girlfriends. To have them involved is very important. You have got to have the right atmosphere again to encourage the ladies to be involved in that particular concept.

The CHAIR — How do you do that? Do you place a lot of emphasis on it? What things do you do?

Mr CHEFFERS — In the context of the ladies, there are simple things like scheduling the game so that they can see their partners in the afternoon. We offer discounts on the membership. If a family is involved they get a significant discount on the cost of membership. We certainly support the netballers in every shape or form. The netball courts have been resurfaced, we have just put in change rooms for netballers, and we have just put in place things like new balls and bibs and whatnot — they get those at the start of each season. We try and treat the netballers on an equal basis as the footballers in the sense of the money, time and effort that goes into it, and we emphasise their importance to the club.

Dr NAPTHINE — About your responsible serving of alcohol, a couple of clubs have talked to us about alcohol issues. They have raised a concern with the regulations that relate to the serving of alcohol. I am not au fait with the regulations exactly, but they advise us that at 8 o'clock at night people under 18 have to leave the area where you are serving alcohol under the liquor licensing laws. They have said that it is probably better for somebody who is 16 or 17 in the club to stay and be under supervision rather than to be thrown out onto the streets where they would be at more risk than if they were in an environment where there is the responsible serving of alcohol. What is the issue in terms of your club if you are having an evening that goes on late in terms of under-age players who perhaps want to stay and participate in the social activity, but not necessarily participate in the alcohol activity?

Mr CHEFFERS — They are quite complex, and we are fortunate that one of our committee people is a publican, so he has worked his way through this. The current licences that have been put in place have been designed to try —

We did not realise that, having put in extensions to the social room, and we want to put a pool table in. If an under-18 person goes in and plays pool during the course of the day and we are serving alcohol during a senior match, we could be in trouble if our licence did not cover that provision. He has now worked it through with Liquor Licensing Victoria to make sure that that is covered. I am not sure on the issue of the 8 o'clock business, but if it were to be a problem we would work around that by ensuring that we had maybe a child-minding facility made

available through one of the parents so that we were not contravening the law in that sense, but also enabling those who wanted to stay beyond 8 o'clock to stay for that particular function. But they are complex — they are certainly a lot more complex than when I was running the bar 15 years ago — and you have to have someone who is fully au fait with the ins and outs to make sure you have the full licence coverage to protect the interests of the business. Rightly, the police will come around and if you have not got the right licence they might give you one warning and after that you could lose one of your primary revenue sources, if you are not up to date with it.

The CHAIR — Is it common for clubs to have one of these, this club handbook for 2004?

Mr CHEFFERS — I cannot speak for other clubs. It is something our club has been running for the last 10 to 15 years. We think it is important. Again this is not only for our own members but to broaden the membership base and the player base and to keep the community au fait with what the club is doing. Again in a small community the more support we get the better off we can be. What sits behind that is that we circulated that to the local community with a pass to come and see the first game, which is a Newborough–Yinnar game, which will be a pretty big game. So we encourage through those passes the community to come through the gate and they will spend some money at the canteen and maybe buy a few drinks in the afternoon and hopefully stay and then come back subsequently. So it is a bit of a marketing tool as well as an information document for the players and the community.

The CHAIR — You have a number of codes of conducted in here and also suggestions on what being a good sport is about. Have you taken on board the recent programs for umpires and the way umpires are treated to, which I think is an Ausport program, and do you have any issues with getting umpires? How do you find that side of things?

Mr CHEFFERS — There is some additional information that the secretary has pulled out of those documents that you mentioned that are now put into the change rooms and have been explained by the team managers to the footballers. We obviously abide by umpire escorts and what not. It really gets back to how the committee sets the standards in supporting the team and then how their players' wives, et cetera, set the standards in supporting terms. We encourage the proper conduct of people. They can certainly barrack, but barrack in the right spirit and what not. I have noticed a change in the last five years, where it has gone from fairly negative to people barracking in the right context, in that sense, without being personal, vindictive or abusive in that particular context.

From a personal point of view, we have to provide a field umpire for our reserves. I have done that job for the last three or four years and it is an enormously enlightening experience, to be on the other side of the fence. I think the people who do the boundary umpiring and goal umpiring also find the same experience. We probably have a bit of a way to go, but we are slowly but surely getting there.

Mr MITCHELL — Has the responsible serving of alcohol policy improved things? Has it brought more people to the club, given it a better atmosphere and encouraged more people to come in?

Mr CHEFFERS — We find there have been a number of things. When I first got involved about 18 years ago, to put it crudely, the more grog you could serve the more money you made. It has changed very significantly in the context of the smoke-free zoning; the involvement of kids in the room while we have our meal up until 7.30 p.m. or 8 o'clock, and then we either have a function or it will be home time by 9 o'clock-ish; and making sure that we do not serve people who have had too much to drink — there is a fine line near; it is difficult — and certainly not allowing people to go anywhere near a car if they have had anywhere near the level in that context. All those factors have had a positive impact in that we attract families. They buy a different form of drink across the bar but because there are more of them we have found that our bar sales have increased.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much, Russell. You will get a copy of the transcript and you will be able to correct any matters of fact or grammar but not matters of substance. Good luck for this year.

Mr CHEFFERS — Thanks very much.

Witness withdrew.