



Submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into the Handling of Child Abuse by Religious and Other Non-government Organisations

Submitted on behalf of vicsport by:

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22 March 2013

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Introduction

As the peak body for sport and active recreation vicsport represents the collective interests of Victoria's single largest community sector. With over 170 member groups, 16,000 clubs and associations and an estimated 1.8 million participants, workers and volunteers, the community sport and active recreation sector make a significant contribution to the social, physical, mental and economic well-being of our communities, as well as creating vital capacity within metropolitan and regional communities.

vicsport welcomes the opportunity to provide input into the Parliamentary Inquiry into the Handling of Child Abuse in Religious and Other Non-government Organisations and supports all efforts to minimise child abuse in any form.

This submission highlights the initiatives sport already has in place to minimise the risk of child abuse in sport and the policy and procedures adopted to deal with suspected or reported cases. It is to be noted that the submission is made on behalf of vicsport affiliated members who are largely State Sporting Associations.

Background

The structure of Australian sport is important to note when considering the policies and procedures sport currently adopts in regard to issues including child protection, dispute resolution and codes of conduct.

In general, Australian sport exists within structures which include National Sporting Organisations (NSO), State Sporting Associations (SSA) and local associations and clubs. Some different governance models do exist, however the majority of sport structures still include national, state and local organisations all responsible for different parts of the respective sports' competitions, events, high performance and participation pathways and programs.

Paid staffing within sporting organisations has increased enormously over the past 20 years, however delivery of the majority of sport participation is still managed by volunteers at the local community level.

Although far from being considered an endemic issue in Victorian sport, vicsport understands the potential for child abuse to occur within a sport setting and is aware of a number of cases where child abuse has occurred. Unfortunate incidents that sport has been implicated in have included inappropriate and/or criminal behaviour by adults placed in positions of responsibility within sport. This may have been as a coach, a team manager, an official or an administrator.

Sport has been proactive in many areas to protect children and over recent years has put in place many initiatives to minimise the potential for child abuse to take place within a sport setting and processes to deal with reported cases. That said, it is recognised sport cannot be complacent in this area and even with appropriate policies, procedures and checks in place, criminal behaviour can still take place. vicsport and vicsport members are extremely keen to ensure that sport provides a safe, welcoming and inclusive environment and will support relevant initiatives which assist this aim.

Relevant Initiatives Currently In Place In Sport

Currently the sport and recreation sector has a strong regime of legal checking requirements as well as information resources to help the sector to identify, prevent and deal with issues of child abuse. The following initiatives are in place to minimise risk of child abuse and deal with cases within a sport setting;

Working with Children Checks (WCC)

vicsport has supported the introduction of WCC. vicsport also successfully lobbied the Department of Justice for such checks to be free of charge for volunteers within sport.

State Sporting Associations have proactively promoted the need for WCC by all relevant individuals within sport and anecdotally the concept has been fully embraced at the club level. Many clubs have taken the level of compliance within the club to higher levels than legislated. For example - if you are a coach with a child in your team you are not required to have a WCC however many clubs require all coaches to have WCC regardless.

vicsport is not aware of the number of individuals who have been prevented from an involvement in sport due to WCC but the system is believed to have discouraged those with a relevant criminal history even attempting to engage with sport.

Limitations with the WCC process do exist including the delays in notification (or no notification at all) of sport if a current WCC card holder has been charged, convicted and sentenced with an offence, particularly if that person has not listed their role in sport as part of their original WCC application.

National Police Checks

Some organisations are requiring those working with children to agree to a National Police Check. It is believed by these organisations that the National Police Check is a more robust way to screen people initially and to monitor thereafter.

vicsport is aware of a number of major sporting organisations that require a dual checking system for officials and administrators requiring both a WWC and National Police Check.

Coach Accreditation

For many years Coaching and Officiating in Australian sport have been regulated via the National Coach Accreditation Scheme and the National Officiating Accreditation Scheme respectively. The Schemes include the endorsement of structure and curriculum of courses for each sport through the Australian Sports Commission. Accredited Coaches and Officials also must abide by a Code of Conduct which includes appropriate dealings with children.

A small number of sports (including the AFL) have made coach accreditation compulsory however in many sports this is not the case and volunteer coaches may or may not have had access to appropriate resources or education.

Play By The Rules

The Play By The Rules website was created to support sporting organisations deal with a myriad of issues including those related to child abuse. The Play by the Rules website provides news, resources and free online training to assist sport and recreation clubs and administrators, officials, coaches, players and spectators to keep sport safe, fair and inclusive.

Play By The Rules has been well promoted within the Victorian sports sector and many sporting organisations are using it as a resource.

The website is considered very useful within sport and provides step by step guides for organisations and individuals in the event they are dealing with a child abuse related issue. vicsport and many of its members would refer to the PBTR websites if a general query in regard to child protection was received.

National Member Protection Policies

All National Sporting Organisations funded by the Australian Sports Commission (ASC) are required to have a Member Protection Policy in place which in theory covers all affiliated sporting organisations under the sports umbrella. The ASC has produced a Policy template (see http://www.ausport.gov.au/supporting/nso/member_protection) to assist National Sporting Organisations write their own sport-specific member protection policy and is one of several steps to address issues of harassment, discrimination and child protection within their organisation.

A template for local clubs has also been produced which ensure that clubs and the NSO have consistent policies in this regard.

The template policy includes child protection and also refers to the relevant state laws regarding reporting of suspected child abuse and screening of adults who will supervise or work with children (ie. Working with Children Checks).

As part of the template Policies, sporting organisations are to appoint Member Protection Information Officers (MPIO) who have the role of ensuring policies are complied with and dealing with any complaints or situations that arise. The MPIO role also includes escalating issues to higher authorities including the police as relevant. On-line training is available for MPIOs in addition to face-to-face training which has been delivered at irregular intervals in Victoria over recent years.

Despite such policy templates and requirements being in place it cannot be said that all sporting organisations in Victoria are therefore applying the policies and engaging MPIOs. Sports that do not receive funding from the ASC may or may not have such policies in place. These sports are generally quite small and have a small number of participants nationally.

In addition the flow through from the NSO to the local clubs is assumed in many sports and it is difficult to measure the number of clubs that would have adopted the template policy (or a compliant policy).

Code of Conduct

The Victorian State Government has introduced a Code of Conduct for Community Sport which outlines behaviours that are expected of every person involved in community sport and active recreation, as well as identifying the types of behaviours that will not be tolerated. SSAs have adopted the Code directly or integrated into existing codes/policies. Breaches of the code, which could include child abuse, are dealt with via the sports' Member Protection Policy procedures or where a breach of the Code constitutes unlawful behaviour, referred to the Police.

The Australian Sports Commission also has documented Codes of Conduct for all 'participants' in sport ie. players, coaches, officials, administrators and parents. The Code includes items on the safety and welfare of children and also any physical contact with a young person being appropriate to the situation and necessary for the player's skill development.

The Code of Conduct is widely promoted by sporting organisations and is used in many clubs as the guide for behaviour which is used within the organisation to discipline those who behave inappropriately (referring to general inappropriate behaviour, not referring to criminal behaviour in this statement).

Other Considerations

Religious and Other Non-government Organisations in comparison to Sport

vicsport believes that the Parliamentary Committee should not categorise all Religious and Other Non-government Organisations together when considering the handling of child abuse due to the vastly differing nature of the various organisations covered by the Inquiry.

Further, it is suggested that sporting organisations be considered as separate to other organisations within the Inquiry for the following reasons;

- The aforementioned programs, policies and procedures are well developed and supported within sport.
- The large number of sporting organisations, participants and volunteers in sport.
- To vicsport's knowledge there is no evidence to suggest that child abuse is prevalent within sporting organisations, nor is vicsport aware of any circumstances whereby known cases of child abuse have been concealed or where sporting organisations have been uncooperative with investigations in this regard.

Reporting

vicsport is aware that Mandatory Reporting of suspected Child Abuse is currently not a requirement for staff and volunteers working in Victorian sporting organisations and that such a requirement does exist for sporting organisation staff and volunteers in some other states.

If Mandatory Reporting is considered for introduction in Victoria for sport staff and volunteers further information and discussion is required. vicsport, on behalf of its' members, would be very keen to be involved in such considerations.

In considering Mandatory Reporting vicsport would be keen to understand the impact this has had in other states ie;

- how sporting clubs were educated on Mandatory Reporting requirements (particularly volunteers at local clubs),
- the number of reports associated with sport,
- the outcomes from such reports, and
- any impact on volunteering.

It would also be beneficial for sport staff and volunteers to understand more about the process that occurs when a report of suspected child abuse is made to the police and the Victorian State Government's processes and resources committed to the handling of reported child abuse.

Anecdotally it is believed that people in the community are generally reluctant to report suspected child abuse for fear of either being incorrect or worried about the personal consequences that could result.

Sex Offender Register

vicsport is aware that in Western Australia the public has access to the Sex Offender Register. vicsport does not have a view on the merits or otherwise of public access to such a register, however it would be beneficial for senior administrators in sport (either at NSO and/or SSA level) to have the ability to cross reference staff and volunteers in sport with the Sex Offender Register.

Capacity of State Sporting Associations

SSAs are currently under resourced to deal adequately with the myriad of responsibilities that they are required to. In most SSAs, an inadequate number of volunteers and/or paid staff are attempting to manage all requirements of an SSA, everything from competition management, participation promotion, high performance pathways, coach and official education, dispute resolution, governance and finance. The resources, expertise and/or governance structure in many of these organisations are limited and this restricts the support SSAs can provide to the 16,000 clubs in Victoria in all areas including policy development, implementation and compliance.

Some of Victoria's larger sports are investing significantly into staff to support local sport (some of which is with Federal and State Government funding), however increased government investment in supporting management of sport at the local level is certainly needed, particularly if more stringent policy implementation and compliance is required.

Burden on Volunteers

vicsport implores the Parliamentary Committee to consider the impact of any resulting recommendations on volunteerism in sport. Currently State Government has a number of initiatives underway to reduce red tape and decrease the burden on volunteers. It is not suggested that regulatory burden is a greater problem than Child Abuse, however many of Victoria's 349,000 volunteer administrators are now time-poor and struggling to cope with the increased demands placed upon them in managing and providing participation opportunities in community sport. Such demands include; responsible serving of alcohol, food handling, code of conduct and respect agendas, club administration, regulatory compliance, coaching, officiating and dealing with complex disputes.

vicsport is concerned about the pressure currently on the volunteer management structure in sport and suggests that a decrease in volunteers in sporting clubs will result in a decrease in appropriate sporting opportunities for Victorian children. Subsequently it is suggested that this will result in increased social problems including issues related to physical and mental health, crime, community connectedness, academic engagement, etc.

Recommendations

1. That Victorian State Sporting Associations receive additional support to ensure the adoption of existing programs, policies and procedures related to safe sport environments at all levels.
2. That the impact of any Parliamentary Committee recommendations on volunteers is strongly considered.
3. That sport is considered separately to other Non-government Organisations for the purposes of the Inquiry.
4. That the Inquiry considers the success and impact on sport of legislation change in other states.
5. That senior sport administrators have access to the Sex Offender Register for screening purposes.

Conclusion

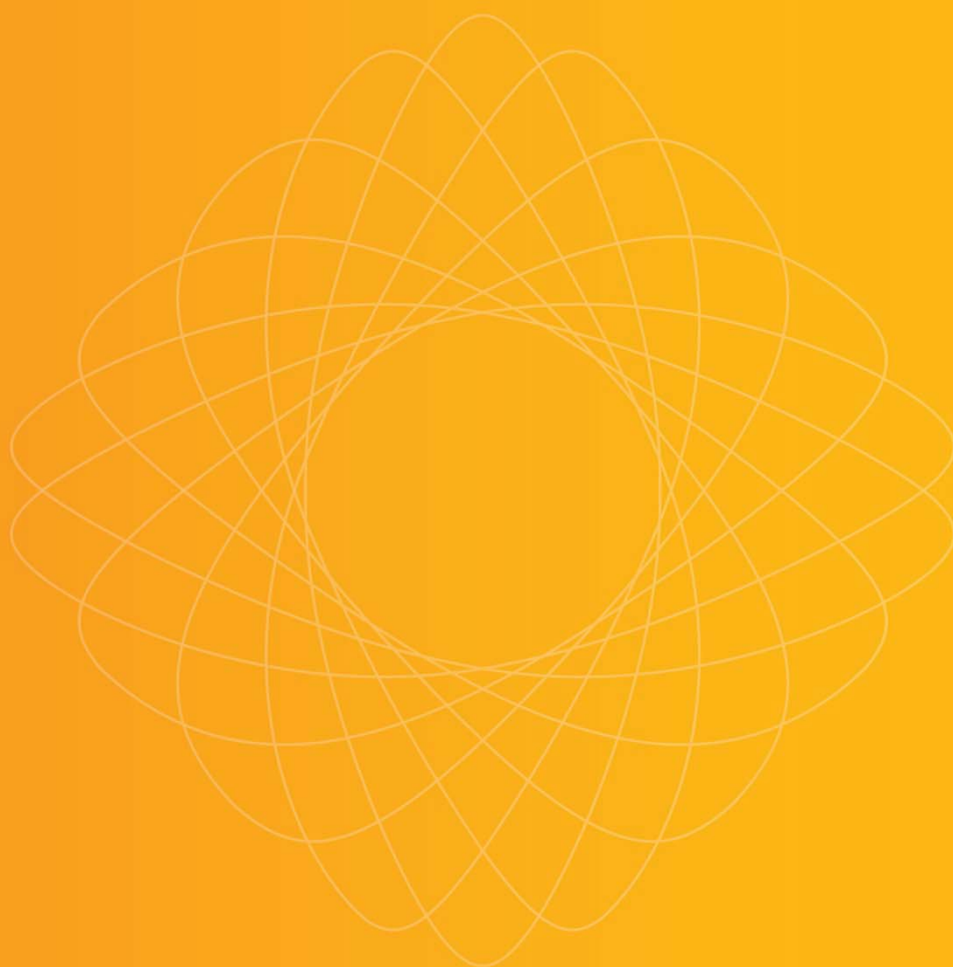
In conclusion vicsport welcomes the Parliamentary Inquiry into the Handling of Child Abuse by Religious and Other Non-government Organisations and is grateful for the opportunity to present this paper.

Victorian State Sporting Associations (vicsport members) are keen to ensure safe and welcoming environments in their sports and many have committed much of their limited resources to develop local clubs in this manner. Victorian sport would welcome additional support for local sport, which in many areas is struggling to cope with existing demands. vicsport looks forward to the outcomes from the Inquiry assisting sport to have safer and more welcoming environments for all.



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