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**Extract of:**  
**Review of Football in  
Country Victoria**

Peter Jackson – AFL Victoria Chairman  
October 2011

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Victorian country football is a critically important asset for the AFL.

It has about 78,000 players (excluding VCFL affiliated clubs in defined AFL Victoria Metropolitan Regions) or about 12% of the total players in Australia.

In terms of the other traditional major football states in Australia, country Victoria has almost the same number of players in the whole of South Australia and about 75% of the number of players in the whole of Western Australia. The number of players in country Victoria is over twice the number in either country SA or country WA.

Country Victoria has provided 22% (279 of a total of 1281) of the draftees into the AFL competition since 1997.

There are 82 leagues, 702 clubs, and 2,867 teams affiliated with VCFL. There were 16,364 NAB AFL Auskick participants in country Victoria in 2010.

When the Review into Football in Country Victoria (Review) was announced, I was clear in stating the Review was not just about the VCFL, or clubs and leagues affiliated with the VCFL. The Review would be about all aspects of football in country Victoria. The Terms of Reference clearly spelt that out. The Review included AFL Victoria's operation of NAB AFL Auskick, schools football, coach accreditation and the individual TAC Talent Programs, and how they fit into country Victoria from a governance and structural viewpoint, as well as the governance and structures of the VCFL affiliated leagues.

It became apparent to the Review team early in the visits to the regions the Review did indeed need to cover the whole of football and any distinction between VCFL and AFL Victoria operations in the Review was neither relevant nor appropriate. The recommendations we have made look at country Victoria as a whole with no clear distinction between the VCFL and AFL Victoria. We are firmly of the view that for football to flourish in country Victoria, it requires a 'whole-of-state' approach.

It is essential football in country Victoria at a minimum retains its current status in the Australian Football landscape.

There are parts of country Victoria where football is in decline, often through no fault of the local administrators and volunteers. There are other areas however, that are growing strongly due in part to significant demographic changes and the urban sprawl of Melbourne. We have to ensure these growth areas build the capacity to handle this growth so football stays the paramount sport in those regions. We have to build the capacity of the regions facing population declines so the impact on football can be mitigated as much as practically possible.

Our recommendations are focussed unashamedly around the sustainability of the club, not necessarily the sustainability of leagues. For country Victoria to maintain its status and indeed grow, the clubs must be vibrant and financially sustainable. This means putting support resources more directly at their disposal, providing training and development more directly, and reducing the cost of participating in competitions.

This requires a change in the current governance structures around country Victoria and it is incumbent on administrators of all governing bodies, including leagues and umpire associations, to consider this for the future well-being of the clubs and the game. The recommended changes are not so much a reflection of what is wrong, or a response to criticism of the current governance structures, but a reflection of what is needed over the next 10-20 years given the issues confronting football and clubs in country Victoria.

## 2. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

On behalf of the Review team, I would like to thank all the people who contributed to the Review.

Members of the team met personally with a number of league administrators and volunteers, umpire associations, AFL Victoria staff, councils, and other stakeholders and interested parties. In some cases, the people involved travelled distances to meet with us. The discussions were always conducted in an open, transparent and constructive manner, and were vital in developing the team's views and conclusions.

We have used many of the quotes made during those discussions in this report. They are important to validate some of the Review team's findings. All the quotes (plus others) are listed in appendix eight. However, for the sake of confidentiality, we have avoided identifying the person who made the quote where we think it appropriate.

We received a large number of written submissions, which in the main were extensive and constructive.

Most volunteers and administrators around country Victoria already have a high workload and the time and effort involved in preparing these submissions would have been considerable. The AFL, AFL Victoria and those who play and support football in country Victoria owe these volunteers and administrators a debt of gratitude for what they put into the game. They do it for the love of the game and certainly not for any personal financial return. The team appreciates the extra effort involved in contributing to this Review.

We also acknowledge the contributions from those councils who met with us and provided written submissions. Councils are very significant stakeholders in our game and we respect and appreciate the contribution they make to its success. Their contribution to this Review is also indicative of the importance they place on the game to the overall well-being of their communities.

We would like to acknowledge the VCFL Board and Management. The team met with the Chief Executive Officer Steven Reaper, as well as the President Nicholas Rolfe and Vice President Gerard Lucas. These meetings were open and constructive. The written submission received from the VCFL is extensive and professional. CEO Steven Reaper was also available and co-operative at all times in responding to ongoing enquiries from the team.

Finally, as Chairman and leader of the Review, I would like to acknowledge the support and contribution of members of the Review team, in particular Jim Cail, who has been on the whole journey, as well as Mark Riddiford and Darryl Collings who provided valuable input along the way.

### 3. TERMS OF REFERENCE

The “Terms of Reference” for the Review of Football in Country Victoria were released on Wednesday 1<sup>st</sup> June at a meeting with VCFL affiliates, conducted at Visy Park, Carlton.

#### INTRODUCTION

The AFL Chief Executive Andrew Demetriou has announced a review of the governance and structures of football across country Victoria. He has requested Peter Jackson, in his capacity as Chairman of AFL Victoria Limited, to lead that review.

The AFL’s commitment to football in country Victoria is significant. The VCFL is the governing body for leagues that play football in country Victoria, and together with their affiliated leagues, meet the cost of participation and development of those leagues.

The AFL however also makes a very significant additional financial contribution to the well-being of country football, being direct grants to VCFL of almost \$600,000 and indirect investment in excess of \$2.8 million for TAC regions, annual U/16 and U/18 country championships, and wages for development managers and officers employed in country regions by AFL Victoria. On top of this is the investment made in the State Government’s Country Football and Netball Program, the annual AFL Community Camps for AFL Clubs that visit country Victoria and the pre-season NAB Challenge games played in country Victoria.

The AFL has seven key development objectives for the game. AFL Victoria is charged with the responsibility of achieving these objectives in Victoria, by working together in a collaborative fashion with its major affiliates, one of which is the VCFL.

The seven key development objectives are:

1. **Participation** – to develop and support pathways from NAB AFL Auskick to open age football that maximise participation.
2. **Community** – to support leagues, clubs and schools to provide quality environments and management to motivate volunteers, umpires, coaches, teachers and sports trainers for all levels of Australian football.
3. **Engagement** – to develop community engagement initiatives that add social value and support access to broader pathways for inclusive environments, particularly in the indigenous and multi-cultural communities.
4. **Talent & Second Tier** – to establish best practice talent pathway and enhance Second Tier competitions to identify, attract and develop first choice athletes as well as provide a career path for talented umpires and coaches.
5. **Facilities** – to collaborate on facility development for the community football network of leagues, clubs and schools.
6. **Fan Development** – to build relationships with the community to develop fans of the game.
7. **People & Culture** – to attract, develop & retain quality people and develop a high performance culture in line with our values.

## PURPOSE

The purpose of the Review was too;

- (i) To examine current governance and structures of football in country Victoria, including AFL Victoria Development and NAB AFL Auskick, TAC Talent Programs and pathways, the VCFL and its affiliated bodies, and the AFL Engagement programs, to determine;

- the effectiveness of these structures;
- the level of duplication of resources and administration effort; and
- the levels of collaboration between various stakeholders;

and assess their impact on firstly achieving the seven key development objectives, and secondly, ensuring the AFL grants and investment provided to country Victoria is being used most effectively;

- (ii) To make recommendations to the AFL and the VCFL and its members as to how the governance and structures between these bodies may be improved in order to maximise collaboration between all parties, and thereby ensure;

- the seven key development objectives in country Victoria can be achieved; and
- the governance and structures are most cost effective.

The AFL and AFL Victoria recognise that member leagues of the VCFL, and the VCFL itself, are autonomous bodies responsible for the management and conduct of football competitions under their jurisdiction.

## BACKGROUND

In his report in October 2001 titled **“Investing in the Future of Australian Football”**, then AFL Commissioner Colin Carter recommended as one of his ten initiatives the following;

***Exploring more efficient ways of working together:*** *The structures that govern football were put into place many decades ago. We want to initiate a discussion with our state and local league partners to assess what organisational relationships will best serve football in coming years. The football system now employs substantial staff and resources. Our focus should be on improving the system’s effectiveness, putting into place more rigorous performance measurement systems and reducing duplication of effort.*

This recommendation was based on his findings under the heading of **“Football’s governance structures are costly and out of date”**. Some extracts under that heading are as follows;

*Football, especially in the traditional states, is built around structures – leagues, regional and state bodies – that reflect our long history and have grown ‘from the bottom up’.... So much of what happens in football’s ‘development industry’ reflects these inherited organisational structures and administrative arrangements.*

*It is clear that the many levels of Australian football have not worked well together. The code has long operated as a series of ‘silos’, between states, leagues and clubs, and even inside the AFL competition. Turf has been protected, and potential partners ‘in the greater cause’ have been treated as enemies. There has not been a concerted ....approach to developing the game.*

*Political differences between national, state and regional bodies consume energy and block change.*

*“For an AFL development initiative to have any influence on a participant in country Victorian football, it has to get past 6 levels of governance. First the board of Football Victoria, then the Development body, then the VCFL Board, Regional Board, League Board and finally the Club Board” – interview with Administrator*

*As a result, various states and leagues duplicate their efforts and typically fail to share ideas, resources and strategies, despite commonality in issues and interests.... **This lack of co-ordination is costly.....The result of the lack of co-ordination is more costly and poorer delivery of services to local football clubs and leagues....The vision should be for more collaboration....***

*The dominant themes underlying a structure would be collaboration and sharing, to ‘think national and act locally’.*

*Our overall conclusion is that Australian football should not waste its limited resources by constantly re-inventing the wheel. The challenge is to adopt a co-ordinated, unified approach to tackling the issues. ‘Silos’ are no longer affordable. Performance and outcomes must be measured and communicated.*

That report was adopted by the AFL. Then Chairman Ron Evans at a pivotal meeting of the AFL and AFL Clubs made the now well known statement ‘**Ultimate competition on the field - Ultimate collaboration off it’**. This has led to a greater level of collaboration at the highest level.

AFL Development has adopted the theme on a national level, with the concept of ‘**think national, act locally’**.

However, it is not apparent that the level of collaboration and sharing has improved and the removal of costly ‘silos’ has occurred in Victoria generally. This was apparent in discussions with stakeholders in metropolitan areas during the transition from Football Victoria Limited to AFL Victoria Limited.

Some initiatives have been taken in country Victoria. In 2005 the VCFL structure was changed from 10 regions to 4 Areas, each with an Area Manager. Central administration hubs have also been created to reduce administration effort and costs. However, in terms of governance, Football Geelong is the only ‘hub’ that runs with an independent commission that oversees more than one league. All other hubs still have independent governance structures for participating leagues.

It is also most apparent that Melbourne is undergoing one of the most significant demographic changes in its history. This is being reflected not only by the fact that Western Melbourne is now officially the fastest growing region in Australia, but also by other growth corridors extending into what were once regarded as country regions. As a result, the boundaries between metropolitan and country in some areas of Victoria have become blurred; as has the concept of whether leagues in these regions are now metropolitan or country leagues, or a mix of both.

In 2003-2004 the Victorian Government conducted an inquiry into country football through the Rural and Regional Services and Development Committee. An extract of the Chair, Mr Ben Hardman MP, forward contained in the final report December 2004, included:

*Although country football clubs and leagues have amply demonstrated their ability to ‘help themselves’, there remains areas where additional support would be welcomed. The Committee has made a range of recommendations directed at football’s peak bodies and local and state government, which are designed to provide this support. It is apparent that volunteers in sporting clubs would benefit from additional assistance to meet their many financial and legal obligations. It is also clear that the huge potential of country football is being constrained by the often poor and inadequate state of some grounds and facilities. The Committee has made funding recommendations to address both of these issues. However, the injection of additional funds into*

*country football will not be sufficient to ensure its continued success. The Committee also believes the Australian Football League, Football Victoria and the Victorian Country Football League should continually review and improve aspects of their operations to ensure that they are adequately responding to the needs of people in rural and regional Victoria who play and support grassroots football’.*

The intent of this review is to ensure that football’s peak bodies adequately respond to the future needs of country football.

### **THE VICTORIAN COUNTRY FOOTBALL LEAGUE (VCFL)**

Under its Statement of Purpose, the VCFL has the responsibility to “*promote, control, manage, encourage, develop and foster the Australian game of football*”.

The VCFL Constitution states this purpose is to be conducted in “*The State of Victoria with parts of New South Wales and South Australia (which) shall be divided into amalgamated areas to be known respectively as East, North East, North West/Central and South West or such other areas as may be determined by the Directors from time to time.*”

Eligible bodies that may be affiliated with the VCFL include

“All:

- (i) *Country Football leagues and associations which conduct a competition of the Australian game of Football within Victoria and in parts of New South Wales and South Australia; and*
- (ii) *other country football associated bodies (including umpire associations),*  
*in all such cases as determined by the Directors from time to time.....”*

The VCFL 2011 Handbook lists the contact details for 79 VCFL Leagues, of which 25 fall under the administration of other leagues, presumably as part of ‘hubs’. It lists 30 Umpiring Associations.

The handbook also lists 19 staff of VCFL, 13 of whom are listed as being employed in Melbourne.

There is one Area Manager for each of the regions specified above; a total of 4 Area Managers for country Victoria. The role of these Area Managers is;

- Clubs & leagues first port of call for all day to day matters
- The communication channel to the VCFL and from the VCFL to its affiliates

This Review will seek submissions and feedback from all VCFL Leagues and Umpiring Associations. In many cases this will include face to face interviews, however, where that is not practical for timing reasons, the Review will seek written feedback based on a ‘to be determined’ format.

### **TAC TALENT PROGRAMS**

There are 6 AFL Victoria TAC Regions in Victoria that are responsible for talent programs and pathways in country Victoria, being Bendigo Pioneers, Geelong Falcons, Gippsland Power, Murray Bushrangers, North Ballarat Rebels and the Dandenong Stingrays. Each TAC Region is managed by a Region Manager and has 2 or 3 Development Officers. The Region Managers report to AFL Victoria Head Office.

The Review will seek feedback from the Regions and the Leagues in each region, as to the effectiveness of the programs and pathways, including the adequacy of programs post the TAC for players not drafted to the AFL.

### **AFL VICTORIA DEVELOPMENT**

There are 13 AFL Victoria Development Regions within the larger 6 TAC Regions, managed by Development Managers who report to the Head Office of AFL Victoria.

Core development activities include NAB AFL Auskick, coaching programs, school football, AFL player appearances and assisting with TAC development squads.

The review will seek feedback from the Regions and the Leagues in each region, as to the effectiveness of development programs and impact on the quantity and quality of participation across the age levels.

### **COMPETITORS & OTHER STAKEHOLDERS**

The Review will seek feedback from other key external stakeholders to football including State Government and various local councils/municipalities.

The Review will also look at the structures and programs of major competitor sports, notably Football Federation Victoria, to assess the effectiveness of these against those of Australian football.

### **OUTCOMES**

The Review will assess and provide recommendations specifically against the following key issues;

- The level of common understanding in all stakeholders on the key issues and development objectives;
- The level and effectiveness of communication and collaboration between all stakeholders in football in country Victoria, including AFL Victoria head office, its regional development and talent network, the VCFL and its affiliates;
- The cost of providing services to all these stakeholders, including the level of duplication, and whether an alternative governance structure can provide more cost effective services and/or those additional services and programs required to achieve the seven development objectives;
- The effectiveness of relationships with key external stakeholders in terms of gaining support for game and facilities development;
- The adequacy of human resources, including the location of those human resources, to;
  - effectively service VCFL Leagues and Clubs; and
  - implement the programs to achieve the seven AFL development objectives
- How the demographic changes of Melbourne are impacting on the delivery of services to particular leagues and stakeholders, and whether more effective structures will deliver better results in these particular regions;
- How the programs and structures in Australian football compare with those of our major competitors and what threats, if any, exist;

**TIMING**

A report with recommendations will be provided to the AFL by 31<sup>st</sup> August 2011. The final recommendations will be communicated to all stakeholders by 30<sup>th</sup> September 2011.

## 4. GLOSSARY OF TERMS

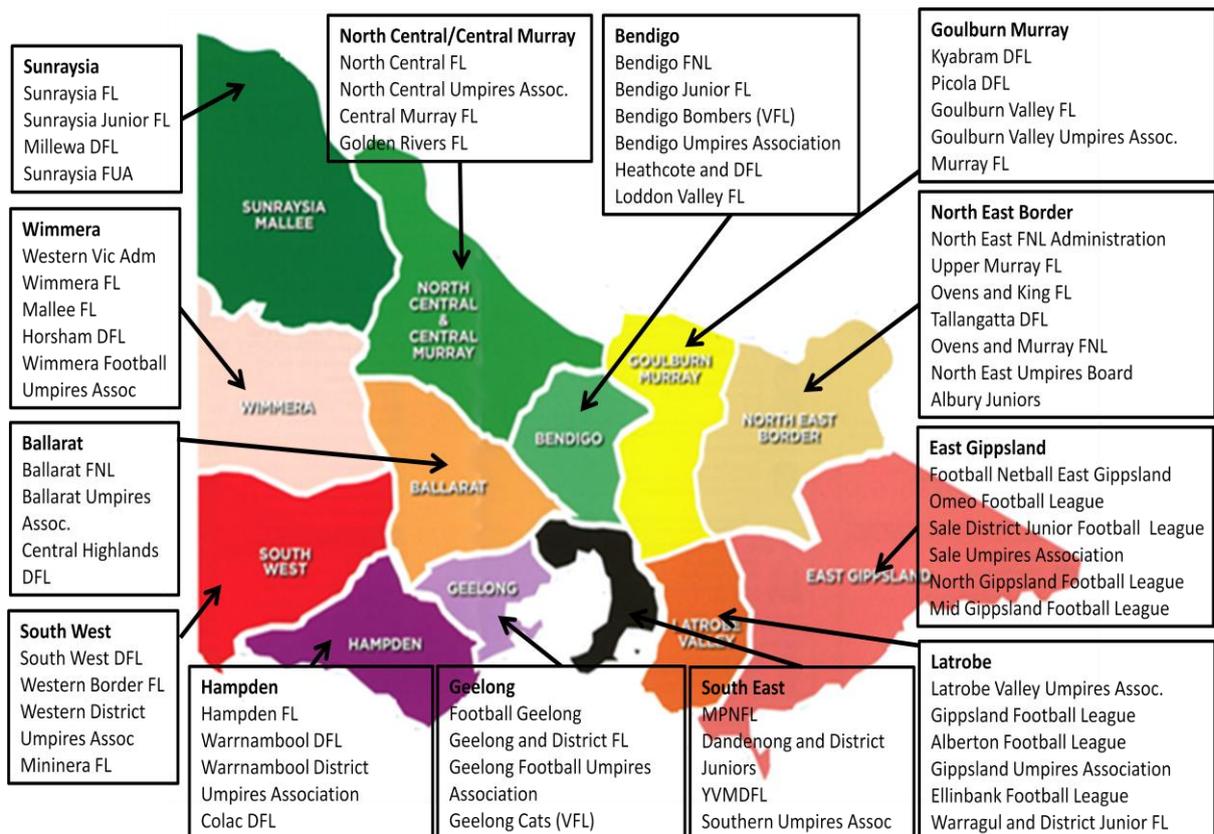
- Review** ⇒ The term Review refers to ‘the Review of Football in Country Victoria’ as explained in the terms of reference
- The Review team** ⇒ The Review team was made up of –  
 - Peter Jackson (AFL Victoria Chairman)  
 - Jim Cail (AFL Victoria)  
 - Mark Riddiford (AFL)  
 Assistance with data collection and analysis was also provided by Darryl Collings (AFL Victoria).
- AFL Development Objectives** ⇒ These objectives have been developed by the AFL Development Department in conjunction with all state football bodies. Each state aligns their development strategies with these objectives
1. **Participation** – to develop and support pathways from NAB AFL Auskick to open age football that maximise participation.
  2. **Community** – to support leagues, clubs and schools to provide quality environments and management to motivate volunteers, umpires, coaches, teachers and sports trainers for all levels of Australian football.
  3. **Engagement** – to develop community engagement initiatives that add social value and support access to broader pathways for inclusive environments, particularly in the indigenous and multi-cultural communities.
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  6. **Fan Development** – to build relationships with the community to develop fans of the game.
  7. **People & Culture** - to attract, develop & retain quality people and develop a high performance culture in line with our values.
- Country Football** ⇒ For the purposes of the Review, Country Football has been taken to include the 13 AFL Victoria Development Regions that have VCFL affiliated leagues located in them. (The Review team notes there are a small amount of VCFL affiliated clubs in some of the other AFL Victoria Metropolitan Development Regions).
- Development Region or ‘Region’** ⇒ AFL Victoria is broken into 19 Development Regions. These are geographically based regions based on Local Government Area (LGA) boundaries or part LGA boundaries.

**Country Development Regions**      ⇒ Of the 19 AFL Victoria Development Regions, 12 are considered Country Development Regions by AFL Victoria. They are -

- South West
- Hampden
- Geelong
- Ballarat
- Wimmera
- Sunraysia
- Central Murray and North Central
- Bendigo
- Goulburn Murray
- North East Border
- Latrobe Valley
- East Gippsland

The Review team also included the South East Region as a Country Region for the purposes of this Review (unless otherwise advised), due to the number of VCFL affiliated leagues within this region.

The map below illustrates the AFL Victoria Country Development Regions and some of the VCFL Leagues and Umpire Associations the Review team met.



- Metropolitan Development Regions** ⇒ Of the 19 AFL Victoria Development Regions, 7 are considered Metropolitan Development Regions by AFL Victoria. They are-
- South East (included as a Country Region for the purposes of this Review)
  - Eastern
  - Northern
  - Central
  - Inner Southern
  - North West
  - Western
- TAC Talent Program** ⇒ This term refers to all aspects of the AFL Victoria TAC Talent Programs which are aimed at developing and improving young players in a high performance environment. The program looks to provide players with development opportunities on and off the field, and is a pathway to the AFL’s elite competition.
- TAC Regions** ⇒ This term refers to the 12 TAC Regions across Victoria. In Country Victoria each TAC Region is made up of 2-3 AFL Victoria Country Development Regions, and in Metropolitan Victoria, one Metropolitan Development Region makes up one TAC Region.
- The Country TAC Regions are -
- Bendigo Pioneers (Bendigo, Central Murray/North Central, Sunraysia)
  - Geelong Falcons (Geelong, ½ Hampden)
  - Ballarat Rebels (½ Hampden, Ballarat, South West, Wimmera)
  - Murray Bushrangers (North East Border, Goulburn Murray)
  - Gippsland Power (East Gippsland, Latrobe)
- RDM** ⇒ Region Development Manager – AFL Victoria employs one Region Development Manager in each of the 19 designated Development Regions across Victoria. Their role is to coordinate and manage the delivery of NAB AFL Auskick, School Programs, Coach Education and assist with the TAC Talent Program.
- RM** ⇒ Region Manager – AFL Victoria employees one Region Manager in each of the 12 designated TAC Regions across Victoria. Their role is to coordinate and manage all aspects of the TAC Talent Program within their region, in particular managing in the TAC Cup U18 team.
- Region GM** ⇒ The term Region GM refers to the new positions recommended to be appointed in larger Development Regions.

- CDO**           ⇒ The Community/Club Development Officers positions refer to new positions recommended to be employed in each Development Region to support volunteers, umpiring development, community engagement, coach education and club development.
- VCFL**           ⇒ Victorian Country Football League
- VCFL affiliated leagues and clubs**           ⇒ Refers to the leagues and clubs affiliated to the VCFL. There are 82 leagues, 702 clubs and 28 umpiring associations.
- VCFL Area Managers**           ⇒ The VCFL has 4 Area Managers each based in designated areas of Victoria. Their role is to service the affiliated leagues and clubs within their Area. They work mostly on rules and regulations, and training and development for leagues and clubs
- CAH**           ⇒ A ‘Central Administration Hub’ provides administration and day to day management services to locally based leagues and umpire associations within a centrally located area.
- NV**           ⇒ Netball Victoria
- FFV**           ⇒ Football Federation Victoria
- AFL National Census**           ⇒ This refers to the ‘National Census of Australian Football Participation and Players’, which is compiled by an independent body – Street Ryan. Street Ryan has completed the Census since 1997, and completes Census collection for other major sporting codes such as Cricket Australia, Golf Australia and Hockey Australia.
- AFL Victoria Census**           ⇒ This refers to an internal AFL Victoria database which records Census information relating to Football Participation and Players in Victoria. This is compiled by AFL Victoria staff and uses information supplied by the VCFL to determine country football numbers.

## 5. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Victorian country football is a critically important asset for the AFL. It has about 78,000 players (excluding VCFL affiliated clubs in defined AFL Victoria metropolitan regions) or about 12% of the total players in Australia. This is almost the same as the number of players in the whole of SA and about 75% of the number of players in the whole of WA. The number of players in country Victoria is over twice the number in either country SA or country WA.

Country Victoria has provided 22% (279 of a total of 1281) of the draftees into the AFL competition since 1997.

There are 82 leagues, 702 clubs, and 2,867 teams affiliated with the VCFL. There were 16,364 NAB AFL Auskick participants in country Victoria in 2010.

### FINDINGS

The overall conclusion drawn by the Review team is that, irrespective of how the VCFL or AFL Victoria are seen to be operating now, country football needs a change of governance structures to provide greater strategic focus, more effective decision-making at a regional level, and an investment of resources directly in regions. The sooner this can occur the better. Until this happens, the AFL Development objectives will not be achieved across country Victoria.

There is a view by some within various levels of football governing bodies, that clubs and leagues are very resilient. Despite the challenges, they will find a way to keep things going. This is true to a degree, but there are cracks in the system, and they need to be repaired. Planning for changes to governance structures and the commencement to invest in new resources needs to start now.

The major individual conclusions are as follows;

- The reported growth in VCFL participation is not as strong as it appears, in that it is built in the main on growth in U/9 & U/10 teams, at the expense of NAB AFL Auskick numbers.
- The four major regions of Ballarat, Geelong, South East, Bendigo, most of which are experiencing strong population growth from the urban sprawl and/or changing demographics of Melbourne, account for virtually all growth in country Victoria across all age groups. There has been a decline in the number of teams across the other Country Development Regions.
- The role NAB AFL Auskick plays in strengthening community clubs needs to continue to be a focus. NAB AFL Auskick participation has slowed due in part to the growth in U/9 & U/10 teams, but is also due to a lack of sufficient focus by AFL Victoria RDM's on NAB AFL Auskick, a lack of collaboration between RDM's and local junior leagues/clubs, and the fact there is no incentive for VCFL leagues/clubs to help grow NAB AFL Auskick numbers.
- Participation growth in Schools football in country Victoria is poor when measured against other traditional states of SA and WA.
- Participation trends in any region are not directly related to trends in population. Participation appears to be as much dependent on available resources, the skills of those resources, and the level of collaboration in a region.
- There are local issues in many regions that are impacting the achievement of the AFL Development objectives. In those regions issues need to be addressed locally in a proactive manner without having to rely on centrally based governing bodies. This pro-

active behaviour includes priority setting, independent decision-making and resource allocation for the overall benefit of the game in that region.

- There are a number of individual organisational and competition structural problems that are impeding the achievement of the AFL Development objectives. They include;
  - The separation of duties of AFL Victoria RDM's from local leagues/clubs and the distraction of a disproportionate amount of their time into the TAC Talent Program. This results from a lack of effective management from head office due the head office structure, and a perception of the lack of importance and seniority of the RDM role. The overall performance of RDM's in NAB AFL Auskick and Schools football indicates greater focus on these markets is necessary.
  - The location of too many of the available resources in both VCFL and AFL Victoria in head office, and their inability, despite their best intent, to effectively cover the country regions with the level of support that is required.
  - A lack of resources in country regions, working directly for leagues/clubs to provide the level of support required. The VCFL Area Managers in the main work diligently and are respected, but clearly are stretched too far given the areas they cover, so as to be ineffective.
  - Apart from a few examples, and only two major examples, an overall lack of collaboration between leagues in most regions which results from the current structure of 82 leagues and 28 umpire associations. As a result, the vast majority of effort in country Victoria is focussed on operational issues and little if any effective strategy. Under this structure, the AFL Development objectives cannot be achieved.

That number of leagues and umpire associations means the number of people that need to be found to fill governance positions in these organisations is probably not sustainable and is a reason succession planning of league and umpire associations' volunteers is a problem.

The collaboration that is happening in the examples noted is by way of a Central Administration Hubs (CAH). CAH are beneficial to a degree because they significantly reduce the administration cost to leagues and clubs. However, going forward, the key need in regions will be greater collaboration, more strategic focus, better decision-making in the interests of the game itself, and improved relationship building particularly with local councils.

CAH's on their own do not achieve all these things. The two best examples, Geelong and Ballarat, provide additional and more skilled resources and as a result, are able to focus to a greater extent on strategic issues in their region. However, not to the level that the Review team believe will ultimately be required.

There is not a forum in place for 'shared learning's' across leagues and umpire associations, which is a reflection of the general lack of collaboration that exists due to the current governance structures.

- In many regions, ineffective relationships with major local councils, and in some regions, a dysfunctional relationship, because council has to deal with approaches from all leagues, umpire associations and in many cases clubs themselves, to discuss facility development. In those cases, discussions are not strategic for the benefit of football as a whole, but based on own interests.
- Player payments are putting undue strain on many clubs. The current league structure only adds to the problem as leagues compete for players. The effort and

funds directed to recruiting players is at the expense in some cases of junior development programs, so the need to recruit outside players via payments becomes self-perpetuating.

This problem, together with league structures and competition structures, also does not easily allow clubs to find their own niche in terms of their preferred culture (e.g. winning flags or family environment). A solution needs to be found that caters for both requirements.

- The situation with volunteers is potentially a crisis. Whereas the current structure has enough volunteers in place to operationally manage community leagues and umpire associations, it was evident the majority of volunteers are older, in some cases elderly, tired and cannot see a succession plan to replace or support them. There is very little strategic thinking going on anywhere except those two regions where the substantial hubs already exist (Geelong and Ballarat). It is not a crisis right at this time, but unless a volunteer strategy is developed and resourced, encompassing recruitment, development and training programs, and implemented consistently over the next 5-10 years, then a crisis will develop.
- Volunteers will remain a critical plank in the development and growth of country football, but they need support through greater access to resources employed in the field and their own personal development.
- A similar conclusion has been formed in relation to umpires. There is evidence that umpire numbers in many regions have dropped over the last 10-15 years. In some associations numbers have more than halved with the same faces now as were there all those years earlier; hence umpire groups are also dramatically aging. A similar strategy encompassing recruitment, development and retention needs to be implemented over the next 5-10 years.

The administration effort that goes into maintaining independent umpire associations needs to be minimised, firstly, to reduce the deductions from umpire pays (average at least 20% on total cost of \$4 million across country Victoria) to provide a greater return to umpires; and secondly, to provide more focus on strategy, including recruitment and retention rather than operational matters.

- The situation in umpires and volunteers highlights the ineffectiveness of head office structures. Resources exist in both head offices, but they are not seen often enough by individual country regions and not on a consistent basis. Program implementation becomes a 'tick and flick' exercise simply due to the inability of individual resources to cover the regions involved.
- The operation of TAC Talent Programs is left largely to the Region Managers. As a result there are inconsistencies in the way regions are operated, and few examples of shared learning's implemented across all regions. This also highlights the ineffectiveness of head office structures, given the challenge of head office management getting out into the regions to see the real picture.

The TAC Talent Programs operate largely independently from local leagues and clubs. As a result, there is a lot of frustration, probably unfairly, at league/club levels with the talent program and clubs that could be readily addressed with more communication, collaboration and acknowledgement.

AFL Victoria seemingly operates all the TAC Talent Programs under a generic budgeting model. However, like the country regions have local issues, so do the individual TAC Talent Programs depending on the region they are in. AFL Victoria needs to look at each region individually and address the strategic and funding needs of each region accordingly.

Long term, individual TAC Talent Programs and probably metropolitan TAC Talent Programs, should formally become much more closely aligned to the local community governance structures that are recommended in this Review. This however is at least 3-5 years away and cannot be considered before regions can demonstrate they have the capacity and capability to do so.

- A formal talent program is required beyond the TAC Talent Program at least in northern Victoria to cater for those young men 18-23 year olds from the Pioneers and Bushrangers programs. There will be players from these programs who might have struggled due to the travel burden, physical and emotional immaturity, the need to complete years 11 & 12, or all of the above. These players may also struggle to travel to Melbourne to take up an opportunity in a VFL club, given it means leaving home young, and opportunities may not be readily available in aligned clubs. They need to be given the opportunity to still make it to the AFL level. Any program developed for 18-23 year olds needs to be aligned to the existing TAC Talent Program and work in conjunction with a VFL club(s) to provide a VFL pathway.
- There is virtually no resource or strategy being directed towards community player pathways; that is, from NAB AFL Auskick to Juniors; from Juniors to Youth; and from Youth to Seniors. The drop off through each pathway is significant and the reasons have become folklore, but are not substantiated by fact.

There is no reasonable data tracking system, no collaborative strategy to address it and no resource dedicated to it. There are minimal individual regional strategies to improve pathways.

It is obvious the higher the percentage of players through each pathway, the higher the overall participation. The higher the participation, the higher is the revenues to clubs and probably the higher number of volunteers – even possibly the higher the number of umpires from people who switch from playing to umpiring.

The results are not guaranteed because the folklore reasons for drop offs are valid to a degree. However, as an industry in Victoria, we are not trying to address the issue.

- Netball is critically important to the sustainability of clubs. The vast majority of leagues and clubs recognise this point. There are real frustrations with Netball Victoria (NV) because of the lack of support in return for the fees collected and paid. The threat to NV is football leagues running their own netball leagues, and that extending in to metropolitan leagues.

NV is conducting its own strategic review. It recognises like this Review does, that having all 40 of its staff in head office is not sensible or sustainable.

NV and AFL Victoria should form a much closer strategic relationship to work collaboratively to put more resources in regions to support leagues/clubs and work strategically with local councils to develop facilities.

- The 2004 Parliamentary Inquiry made a lot of recommendations; some have been addressed. Unfortunately, many recommendations relate to issues that are still apparent around this Review, in particular volunteers. The governing bodies need to do something this time round.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

There are a number of challenges for football in country Victoria to be addressed and whereas there are some common themes across all regions, the geographical diversity of Victoria combined with the lack of effectiveness of head office structures and resources, and the existence of issues unique to each region, mean that any solution must be locally focussed. The AFL Development credo of **Think National: Act Local** absolutely applies, and is a major principle behind the recommendations.

Country football needs a change of governance structures to provide greater strategic focus, more effective decision-making at a regional level, and an investment of resources directly in regions.

The recommended changes are a reflection of what is needed over the next 10-20 years given the issues confronting football and clubs in country Victoria.

The principles behind the Review team's recommendations are as follows;

- a). Sustainability of clubs is the critical issue, not necessarily the sustainability of leagues or governing bodies. For country Victoria to maintain its status, and indeed grow, the clubs must be vibrant and financially sustainable. This means putting support resources more directly at their disposal, providing training and development more directly, and reducing the cost of participating in competitions. It is incumbent on administrators of all governing bodies, including leagues and umpire associations, to consider this for the future well-being of the clubs and the game;
- b). Decentralise resources to provide more direct support to the volunteers and stakeholders in the field. This will necessitate an increase in the number or resources in regions as well as provide efficiencies in head office;
- c). Decentralise authority where practical to do so to let local representation make decisions in accordance with local needs. As part of this, to have independent commissions to address strategic issues as well as make decisions in the best interest of the game/competitions locally.

The recommendations are;

### Decentralise Authority

1. Merge the VCFL and AFL Victoria to achieve efficiencies in head office resources, by eliminating duplication of resources to free up funds to employ more resources directly in the regions.
2. Establish independent commissions in all regions, representing all stakeholders in the region, with the authority to develop the strategic plan for the regions and make independent local decisions.

Representation should include all leagues and an umpire association representative in the region, as well as some independent directors. The chairman should preferably be independent from any existing league.

The structure of the current leagues under this independent commission is ultimately to be determined by the representative commission and leagues locally.

There should be 8 larger regions and 5 smaller regions. The 8 larger regions will include Geelong, Ballarat, Bendigo, Hampden/SW, Goulburn Murray, North East (Albury, Wangaratta) Gippsland and South East (Frankston, Mornington Peninsula)

The larger regions should incorporate a central administration hub (CAH) as part of their structure. A larger region has greater capacity to employ administration resources and

establish modern and professional systems. There is little sense in attempting to duplicate this across all 13 regions, given the lack of financial resources in the smaller regions. However, as appropriate, a larger region should undertake the administration effort of an adjacent smaller region on a fee for service basis.

The establishment of 8 administration hubs will reduce the administration cost and effort of all leagues across country Victoria. The results achieved in Ballarat and Geelong confirm this.

The independent commission and decision making authority will remain for the smaller regions.

3. AFL Victoria to provide \$50,000 funding to each larger region as a contribution to the cost of employing a Region General Manager (Region GM) for the region.

The Region GM will report to the independent commission as well as an AFL Victoria Country Football General Manager to be employed at AFL Victoria reporting to the GM of AFL Victoria. The Region GM will be responsible for implementing the region strategic plan, administering the region and developing collaborative relationships within the region.

The independent commission to nominate the person to be appointed as Region GM but the appointment is subject to ratification by AFL Victoria.

#### **Additional Resources for Regions**

4. AFL Victoria Region Development Managers continue to be employed by AFL Victoria, however report directly and be accountable to the Region GM and be responsible for growing junior participation, including NAB AFL Auskick and schools, but also junior/youth competitions and the pathway from NAB AFL Auskick to juniors to youth.

This makes the regions directly responsible for outcomes in NAB AFL Auskick, Schools and coach accreditation as well as junior clubs and pathways.

5. Utilise the player registration fees after insurance currently paid to the VCFL, to employ at least one, and preferably 2, Community/Club Development Officers (CDO) in each larger region and 1 CDO in each smaller region. The final numbers employed in the larger regions will depend on the player registration fees currently being paid by each larger region.

Any surplus fees from the larger regions will be used to subsidise the employment of a CDO in a smaller region, if that smaller region currently does not pay sufficient fees to meet the cost of a CDO.

CDO's to be responsible for umpire/volunteer programs, community engagement and club development programs. Where 2 CDO's are employed, the Region GM to define individual responsibilities.

A template for the recommended structure in a region is attached in appendix six.

The current commercial operations of VCFL to be continued, including sponsorship and merchandise operations.

#### **Umpires & Volunteers**

6. Develop integrated state-wide umpire and volunteer programs, to address recruitment, induction, retention, development & training.

These programs to be adequately funded by AFL Victoria (estimate of \$100,000 pa) with a time frame of 5 years minimum.

The program implementation to be the responsibility of regions and to be implemented in each region by the CDO's.

### **Affiliation**

7. It be a condition of funding and additional resources that each region and commission be affiliated directly with AFL Victoria, and both parties sign a new affiliation agreement that includes specific performance conditions, including but not restricted to,
  - Establishment of a representative independent commission including definition of the commission's authority to make decisions locally;
  - Appointment of a Region GM approved by AFL Victoria;
  - Preparation of a strategic plan for the region that includes achieving the seven AFL Development objectives;
  - Assessment of current league and competition structures and plans for the future.

### **NAB AFL Auskick**

8. In conjunction with the AFL, AFL Victoria to design an incentive program during the 'detailed design' phase of this Review, so that regions benefit financially from growth in NAB AFL Auskick numbers.
9. In conjunction with the AFL, AFL Victoria review with the current NAB AFL Auskick program to identify whether or not it requires refreshing and re-launching.

### **AFL Victoria Talent Program**

10. AFL Victoria to continue to be vigilant in monitoring the TAC Talent Program boundaries in those areas where demographic changes are occurring and previous country areas are now becoming metropolitan. AFL Victoria must also look to ensure on a 'case by case' basis that players are provided with the best possible opportunity to participate in the TAC Talent Program.
11. AFL Victoria to review the current budget and funding philosophy for individual TAC Talent Programs and ensure they take into account regional issues, and reduce the burden on families of young men participating.
12. Develop a talent program to cater for young men 18-23 years old not initially drafted to the AFL in their final TAC Talent Program year. The priority regions for this program to be the Bendigo Pioneers and Murray Bushrangers regions. The program needs to be aligned to the existing TAC Talent Program and work in conjunction with a VFL club(s) to provide a VFL pathway.
13. In due course, when the region and commission concerned can demonstrate their capacity to do so, the AFL Victoria Region Manager continue to be employed by AFL Victoria, but he and TAC Talent Program report through to the Region GM.
14. AFL and AFL Victoria in conjunction with AFL Clubs develop a program aimed at further acknowledging a drafted players junior football club and the volunteers that assisted him in reaching the elite competition.

## **VCFL**

15. The merger of the VCFL and AFL Victoria will mean the VCFL and its board does not need to exist into the future after the implementation of these recommendations. This will ultimately mean the VCFL should be wound up and its assets and liabilities transferred to AFL Victoria. This should be initiated by the VCFL Board on a planned basis depending on the timing the recommendations are implemented.
16. AFL Victoria to guarantee the cash and assets in the VCFL (about \$1 million) transferred to AFL Victoria be used as an initial fund for facilities grants to country regions and not be used to fund the implementation of these recommendations. AFL Victoria to meet the costs of funding these recommendations.
17. The independent Appeals Board be retained to consider appeals from regions, leagues and clubs.
18. AFL to ensure the current and future level of funding provided to the 'Country Football Netball Program' continue as in previous years.
19. VCFL representatives as appropriate be utilised on the Implementation Project Team and also where appropriate, act as independent directors on region commissions.

## **Netball**

20. AFL Victoria Chairman and General Manager approach Netball Victoria with a view to developing an integrated strategic relationship, including NV also providing additional resources in the major regions working directly with the regions, to strengthen and grow both sports in country Victoria.

## **Other**

21. AFL Victoria set up a committee of country and metropolitan league representatives to consider and design a state-wide points system similar to that adopted in South Australia, in order to address the issues identified by player payments.
22. AFL Victoria to set up a forum to ensure 'shared learnings' accross all Country and Metropolitan Development Regions.
23. AFL and AFL Victoria develop a consolidated HR system for all full-time employees in regions, that includes personal development and career pathway programs, to be implemented by the Region GM.
24. AFL Victoria review the current arrangements with Sporting Pulse and the impact on leagues and clubs, and where appropriate make changes to that arrangement.
25. AFL Victoria develop an improved participation data tracking system so the success of programs can be measured, particularly pathways between age groups.

### **What do these recommendations mean for football in Country Victoria?**

These recommendations are designed to put additional resources and greater responsibility for country football into country regions. They are designed to have country people maintain authority for the governance of football in regions. They are not about a takeover of country football by the AFL or any other sole governing body. They are designed to provide a more strategic focus, more effective decision-making and greater collaboration in each region, something that does not exist at present, but something that is essential for the vibrancy of the game in the future.

An additional 17 people (CDO's) will be employed in the regions in country Victoria to complement the 4 Area Managers currently employed by VCFL; 21 in total directly supporting leagues and clubs in country football.

As well, there is provision to employ an additional 6 skilled and qualified Region GM's with much broader job responsibility, similar to those GM's currently employed at Football Geelong and Ballarat FNL.

Further, 14 Region Development Managers currently employed by AFL Victoria are to be re-allocated under the supervision of the regions, responsible for the collaborative development of junior football and pathways, as well as greater engagement levels in NAB AFL Auskick and schools.

The establishment of independent commissions in 13 regions should ultimately see a reduction from 82 league boards and 28 umpire association boards, thus making governance, strategic focus and decision-making much more effective. The timing of the constitutional consolidation of leagues in a region under one commission is up to the local stakeholders and will depend on the level of confidence established in the commission. It is likely the commission will be established first and commence to manage football in the region, with leagues maintaining constitutional independence for a period until that confidence is attained. Funding by AFL Victoria will however depend on the clear intent of all stakeholders in a region to work towards this structure as the long term objective.

### **What will be AFL Victoria's contribution?**

AFL Victoria's additional investment in country football will be about \$750,000. The timing of this investment will depend on the timing of individual regions committing to move towards this governance structure.

This investment is made up of a grant of \$50,000 for each larger region (8) to appoint the Region GM; an allowance for an incentive or financial return to regions to develop NAB AFL Auskick participation (about \$150,000); funding the development of the umpire & volunteer development programs and strategies (about \$100,000); and the implementation costs of the Review recommendations (about \$100,000).

It is intended the player registration and affiliation fees currently paid by leagues, clubs and players to the VCFL be allocated to the employment of CDO's in the regions.

It is anticipated, based on the Review team's analysis of the public VCFL reports that efficiencies can be achieved in the VCFL and AFL Victoria through the merger of those two governing bodies, such that the balance of the VCFL services and commercial operations can be maintained. It is also expected that in time, additional revenues can be generated by running the commercial operations under the national AFL brand as distinct from the more narrowly defined VCFL brand.

These views need to be confirmed by detailed financial analysis.

## IMPLEMENTATION

There are two parts to the implementation of these strategies;

### Part 1 - Detailed design

This will involve the detailed preparation and analysis that is necessary to build the framework for implementation of the recommendations. It will include;

- Develop a detailed implementation plan including cost and timetable;
- Confirmation of governance structure template for a region;
- Legal documentation such as affiliation agreement with AFL Victoria;
- Detailed financial analysis to identify efficiencies in head office structures of VCFL and AFL Victoria;
- Work with VCFL Board to plan the impact of these recommendations on the VCFL as an entity;
- Develop a 3 year financial plan for the implementation of the recommendations;
- Prepare Expressions of Interest for regions to submit.

### Part 2 – Support Regions to Implement Recommendations

This will involve working with and supporting regions; initially those that indicate their intent to adopt these recommendations. Expressions of Interest will be invited from regions which would involve leagues in a region collaborating to make a joint submission.

The support provided to those regions that submit an Expression of Interest will include assistance to;

- Establish a representative commission to be appointed;
- Prepare a strategic plan for the region, including a financial plan;
- Appoint key people, including initially the Chairman, Region GM, and CDO's.

### Timing

It is expected Part 1 of the implementation will take most of the first half of 2012, so that Part 2 can commence and be completed in those regions that adopt the recommendations in time for the 2013 football season.

This will require an **Implementation Project Team** to be established during the latter part of 2011 and to establish that Team's Terms of Reference.

The Implementation Project Team should consist of AFL Victoria, VCFL and region representatives. It should include a Steering Committee and a people responsible for the implementation.

The Steering Committee should include;

- Chairman of AFL Victoria to operate as Chairman of Steering Committee
- 1 VCFL Board representative
- AFL Victoria General Manager
- 1 Football Geelong representative, given that region is already well down the path to this recommended governance structure and can contribute the experiences and lessons learned;
- 2 representatives from other regions that have not yet moved towards this structure.

The implementation team should report to the Steering Committee and consist of 3 people including;

- VCFL CEO
- 1 AFL Victoria employee
- 1 Region employee seconded to the team.

Other people can be seconded during the implementation stage as appropriate.

## 6. CLOSING REMARKS

I was clear from the start that the Review was not just about the VCFL, or clubs and leagues affiliated with the VCFL. The Review was to be about all aspects of football in country Victoria. This is because Victorian country football is a critically important asset for the AFL. It is not about any distinction between VCFL and AFL Victoria.

The recommendations we have made look at country Victoria as a whole with no clear distinction between the VCFL and AFL Victoria. We are firmly of the view that for football to flourish in country Victoria, it requires a 'whole-of-state' approach.

We are unashamedly focussed on the sustainability of the clubs. For country Victoria to maintain its status, and indeed grow, the clubs must be vibrant and financially sustainable.

We all owe the volunteers and administrators who have put such a huge amount of their personal time and effort into the game a great debt of gratitude. They do it for the love of the game and certainly not for any personal financial return.

There is a view by some within various levels of football governing bodies, that clubs and leagues, and the volunteers who administer them, are very resilient. Despite the challenges, they will find a way to keep things going. This is true to a degree. The volunteer network is the key factor behind the historical success and sustainability of community football in Victoria.

However, the challenges are becoming greater, to the point the game may decline over the next decade or two if the status quo is retained.

In our view, this requires a change in the current governance structures around country Victoria, and it is incumbent on administrators of all governing bodies, including leagues and umpire associations, to consider this for the future well-being of the clubs and the game. The recommended changes are not so much a reflection of what is wrong, or a response to criticism of the current governance structures, but a reflection of what is needed over the next 10-20 years given the issues confronting football and clubs in country Victoria.

Country football needs a change of governance structures to provide greater strategic focus, more effective decision-making at a regional level, and an investment of resources directly in regions. The AFL Development objectives will not be achieved across country Victoria without a structure that allows this and indeed encourages it.

I wish to thank the AFL for the opportunity to undertake this Review. It has been a very interesting and fulfilling exercise, and one I trust that will ultimately be considered worthwhile by all stakeholders of country football in Victoria.

**On behalf of the Review Team**



**Peter Jackson**  
**Chairman**  
**AFL Victoria**