

CHAPTER 1.2:

REFORMING THE AUSTRALIAN SPORTS COMMISSION TO LEAD THE SPORTS SYSTEM

Created 25 years ago, the Australian Sports Commission (ASC) has played an important role in ensuring Australia's continued success on the world sporting stage. Whilst its vision for the nation to be recognised as a world leader in developing high performance and community sport is admirable, changing circumstances and expectations of sport means that it is time to reconsider the primary role and structure of the ASC.

If the Australian sports system is to work well and deliver on the ambitions of a national sports strategy, it needs:

- a leader for the whole sports system—elite and grass roots
- a generator of ideas, projects and innovation across the sector
- a problem solver—helping solve the big problems facing sport
- an advisor to government on sports policy and standards
- a source of Australian Government funds for various participants in the system
- a builder of consensus and collaboration across the sector
- a facilitator of conversations with relevant stakeholders (a 'door' through which things get done).

This list is not inconsistent with the ASC's existing ambition. And the Panel believes that the ASC is the logical organisation to discharge these responsibilities, but requires significant reform to do so.

The ASC has described itself as:

*'Australia's primary national sports administration and advisory agency, and the cornerstone of a wide-ranging sports system. On behalf of the Australian Government, the ASC plays a central leadership role in the development and operation of the Australian sports system, administering and funding innovative sport programs and providing leadership, coordination and support for the sports sector. The ASC is recognized as a world leader in the development of high performance sport and sports participation.....'*⁴

⁴ www.ausport.gov.au

The ASC submission described the Australian sporting system as being ‘at a fork in the road’ where we can either accept the status quo or confront the critical problems—that ‘our active lifestyle is under threat and the sport system which has evolved over our history is now struggling to adapt and compete with modern challenges and inactive leisure pursuits’. The ASC describes itself as ‘ready to facilitate the reform’ of the sporting system.

The Panel agrees the sports system is at a critical point and reform is now needed. But the Panel believes that reform is also needed at the ASC if it is to carry out its agreed roles.

In the course of our work, we heard wide-ranging criticism of the ASC’s performance from other participants in the sports system. Indeed—and commendably—we see a number of initiatives now being taken by ASC leadership to address some of the issues.

In a presentation to the Panel in July 2009, the ASC acknowledged it needed to build a ‘collaborative national sports system that creates opportunity for all Australians to participate in sport and to excel at every level’.

It went on to say: ‘ASC’s role and focus will change over time but its core role should be system leadership, program planning and co-ordination, funding of sport and being the ‘information clearing house’ for sport in Australia.’

This is a positive development, moving the ASC from its previous vision of wanting to be recognised as the world leader in developing high performance and community sport. The panel supports the ASC’s commitment to move towards greater partnerships with the national sporting organisations (NSOs), the creation of ‘whole of pathway’ plans and the facilitation of co-operative Australian Government and state and territory government high performance programs. The panel endorses the move from ‘directive leadership’ to a uniting and partnering style.

Some of the questions relate to the way the ASC has dealt with other participants in the system—in the view of many it has been controlling and not very collaborative. Others have been concerned about the ASC’s conflict of interest as a service provider when dealing with other participants. Some would say the job itself is very difficult due to the great complexity of the Australian sports system.

The current Australian sports system is very complex, inefficient and cumbersome. Delivery of sport involves all three tiers of government and its various arms including sport and recreation, health, education, and other portfolios. Most of the NSOs also have ‘federal’ structures consisting of several layers of governance and control. As well, the sports system involves the participation of many other players, including the Australian Olympic Committee, private providers, universities and the school system.

The result is that every aspect of sport has to be managed across multiple organisational boundaries by voluntary collaborative effort involving many stakeholders. This takes time and effort and does not always happen. There is frequently poor co-operation between stakeholders, leading to inconsistent and ineffective delivery. The Panel was frequently told that the level of co-operation across the sports system has been deteriorating and is less effective than it was before Australia hosted the 2000 Olympic Games.

The ASC is seen by most to be the logical ‘broker’ across the system, building collaboration and bringing various parties to the table to secure agreement. The ASC itself understands how important this is and in its submission declared that it is ready to ‘lead the strengthening of relationships among stakeholders and across all jurisdictions...’⁵

This is welcomed by the Panel. But to fulfil this promise, the ASC will not only have to change its style but also be restructured to remove activities that give it a ‘conflict of interest’ with those organisations it must support and bring to the table.

There are at least two important areas where the ASC is ‘conflicted’. The ASC ‘owns’ the Australian Institute of Sport (AIS) which has been increasingly viewed by the state and territory institutes and academies of sport (SIS/SAS) and private providers as a competitor. It comes into further conflict when the ASC negotiates the provision of government funding for the NSOs who are deciding whether or not to use the AIS.

Furthermore, the ASC’s role in the Active After-school Communities (AASC) program is that of service deliverer and, as such, the ASC is competing with NSOs, other government agencies, non-government organisations or private providers who might also deliver the program.

The Panel believes those activities that create, or have the potential to create a conflict for the ASC, be removed from its operations. Specifically, the AIS should be separated from the ASC (we discuss this further in the next chapter) and the AASC program should be contracted out by the ASC to appropriate providers at agreed performance standards.

The Panel was told by many respondents in the sports sector that the ASC has not contributed enough to resolving problems and proposing initiatives in key areas of sport. This view is shared by the Panel.

There are many areas where the absence of data or analysis has been telling. We have already noted the dearth of data on total government spending on sport—and make the obvious point that no sensible sports strategy is possible without data on where the money is currently being spent.

⁵ Australian Sports Commission, *Submission to the Commonwealth Government’s Independent Review of Sport in Australia*, October 2009, pp. 4.

While there is talk of rapidly changing demographic and lifestyle shifts in Australian society with significant impact on participation, little research or analysis appears to have been conducted on what this means for sports planning. There seems to have been little attempt to measure outcomes in sport beyond medal counts and certainly there is a paucity of data on the state of community sport. We have been repeatedly told of the need for systems to support volunteers; for locating alternative sources of funding for NSOs and their increasing competition for the ‘entertainment’ dollar; for creating an inventory of facilities, and for providing whole sector funding packages. The only information that exists on past AIS scholarship holders is through a voluntary alumni association, and little is known about whether they are still engaged in their sports. These are just some of the examples cited through the course of the review.

The Panel believes that the ASC has focused overwhelmingly on elite Olympic sport to the detriment of other sports as well as participation and community sports. It is time this changed. Even, in its own submission, the ASC suggested ‘community sport was on the brink of collapse’ and called for a national plan to rectify the problem.

The areas of elite and community sport are strongly related and the link needs to be reflected at the policy and strategic level. There is an obvious link between the size of the participation base and the flow of talented athletes to the elite end. Elite sports are now recognising that building and ‘owning’ their grassroots participation structures is an avenue to securing new revenue streams and elite success. The Panel believes it is important that policy and funding decisions are made in ways that recognise the links between elite and participation sport. The ASC’s role is defined as covering both elite and participation sport and this linkage needs to be strengthened.

The Panel believes—along with the ASC—that the sport system needs change but that change is also needed at the ASC. Removal of those activities that give it a conflict and strengthening its commitment to building collaboration and problem solving are needed. And to ensure that these changes are driven from the top, the board and executive leadership needs to be reconstituted to ensure that the right skills are in place to meet its objectives.

The Panel’s view is that a spill of the current ASC board should take place and the Minister for Sport should take advice on nominations for the new board to ensure the proper skills-set is achieved. The board should have no more than eight non-executive directors plus the chief executive officer (CEO) as a board member.

Board members should be chosen on a skills basis but with relevant and diverse experience and a truly national perspective. A chairman and CEO who can best bring the skills and vision appropriate to meet this new challenge should be appointed.

The 'new' ASC should be a much smaller organisation but one that provides strong and empathetic leadership to the entire sports system.

Recommendations:

- 2.1 Recognising the complex nature of the Australian sports system, a single point of focus is required to provide leadership. That point of focus should be the Australian Sports Commission.
- 2.2 Consistent with the Australian Sports Commission's leadership role, it should not be involved in service delivery. Those activities that give the Australian Sports Commission a 'conflict' with the other organisations it is supposed to deal with and support should be taken away from it. Specifically, the Australian Institute of Sport should be separated from the Australian Sports Commission (we discuss this further in the next chapter) and the Active After-school Communities program should be contracted out to appropriate providers at agreed performance standards.
- 2.3 The Australian Sports Commission should be responsible for developing the overarching strategy framework in light of Australian Government policy, proposing and measuring national outcomes, contributing to policy proposals, solving problems, allocating Australian Government money to elite and community organisations and strengthening and evaluating the national sporting organisations. And very importantly, it should be building collaboration across the sports system.
- 2.4 The Australian Sports Commission board and executive leadership should be reconstituted to ensure that the right skills are in place to meet the Australian Sports Commission's new objectives. The Australian Sports Commission board should be reconstituted with no more than eight non-executive directors plus the chief executive officer as a board member. Board members should be chosen on a skills basis but with relevant and diverse experience and a truly national perspective. A chairman and chief executive officer who can best bring the skills and vision appropriate to the new challenge should be appointed.