

CHAPTER 1.6: BUILDING COMMUNITY SPORT WITH PEOPLE AND PLACES

The infrastructure of community sport, made up of both people and facilities, is under threat. The supply of volunteers, often the lifeblood of any club or association is under pressure. There is no coherent approach to building community sports and the physical facilities they need.

If participation levels are to grow or even be sustained, policy makers and sports administrators must find new ways to encourage and support volunteerism. Governments at all levels will have to increase their investment in community facilities if grass roots sport is to flourish.

There are about 1.5 million volunteers⁹ involved in clubs and sport associations across Australia. They are coaches, officials, administrators and the helpers who arrive early to mark out the lines on the oval, provide refreshments and organise the fundraising events.

The tradition of volunteering is a competitive advantage for Australia, and is not replicated in many other countries. But sports organisations report increasing difficulties in securing enough volunteers. Modern lifestyles and flexible working hours do not fit easily into the schedules for community sport.

Compliance obligations and duties of care are increasingly onerous. Volunteers face increasing costs. There is rarely any reimbursement for required courses such as coaching, first aid and necessary police checks or other out of pocket expenses including telephone calls, travel cost, accreditation costs and sporting equipment.

Submissions and the consultation process highlighted the decline in volunteer numbers and described the pressures on volunteers as they try to balance work-life issues. Volunteer coaches and administrators are overloaded and under-resourced and feel trapped in their roles with little support.

Sports that use unqualified coaches run serious liability risks as well as the loss of participants to better organised and equipped sports. The problem is that capability comes at a cost.

Sports organisations are becoming more complex off the field. They are required to operate as a small business with all of its regulatory, legal, accounting, insurance and other administrative components. These demands place pressure on volunteers who are not fully equipped to carry out these roles.

⁹ Parks and Leisure Australia, Submission to the Independent Sport Panel, 7 November 2008, pp. 2.

Of the volunteer organisations surveyed by Volunteering Australia as a part of the *National Survey on Volunteer Issues 2007*¹⁰, half indicated that they experience barriers (including skills and training barriers) to using potential volunteers.

The Australian Government should explore a national scheme where volunteers would be reimbursed for mandatory accreditation courses such as coaching and first aid. Volunteers contribute their time and social capital and it is not unreasonable that they be compensated by government for undertaking mandated training.

There should be a central resource to help volunteers with technical support including advice on legal and insurance matters, handling GST and applications for grants. The Australian Sports Commission (ASC) should explore such a resource. Every sports organisation wrestles with similar issues and there are economies of scale in 'knowledge' and technical expertise. As already discussed in a previous chapter, larger national sporting organisations (NSOs), or other sports bodies could establish 'shared services' that could be offered to other sports or an organisation that is less tied to a particular sport.

There is need for a network of former elite athletes to volunteer and mentor others. Talented athletes are too often lost from the sport once they have finished competing at the elite level. The Panel sought to find out whether past Australian Institute of Sport (AIS) scholarship holders are still active in their sport and found that we have no system in place to track them, let alone encourages them to continue involvement in their sport. Clearly they have a great deal to offer as volunteer coaches and local leaders. The Australian Government through the ASC should invest greater energy and resources in its alumni network and encourage past scholarship holders to maintain their involvement.

Strategies to attract new volunteers are needed. There is a prospective pool of volunteers among the growing number of retirees (referred to in the next chapter). As the population ages, there will be more people for whom contributing to local community activities will become attractive. Strategies to attract these people to become involved should be explored.

There should be rewards for volunteers. Australians are so accustomed to having enough volunteers that we take them for granted. Currently there is no suitable scheme acknowledging volunteers in our sporting system. Some sporting clubs have initiatives that encourage volunteering, such as reduced registration fees for families that commit their services. These schemes should be encouraged by all levels of government.

Just as the volunteers need financial support, greater investment is needed in community sports infrastructure.

¹⁰ Volunteering Australia, *National Survey of Volunteering Issues 2007*, 2007, pp. 2.

Currently most of the funding task falls to local government and it is under-resourced. The relatively small amount of Australian Government funding was often viewed as politically motivated and not related to an objective assessment of needs.

Community sports facility funding is simply not co-ordinated across all levels of government. Community groups find it difficult to apply for funding support. The process is complicated with several levels of government often involved. Invariably the community groups lack the necessary expertise.

The Australian Sports Foundation (ASF), which could be a source of funds, is barely known and certainly not understood. It is still small and donors are put off by uncertainty, unsure their gifts will reach their intended destination. Preliminary analysis also suggests that the ASF is being used primarily by wealthier sporting clubs and needs to be reworked so that it is also able to support less wealthy sporting organisations.

The Panel believes that there is an important and necessary opportunity for the ASF to become a better facilitator of funds across the sports system. It is now an appropriate time for the Australian Government to review the effectiveness of the ASF and to determine the best structure, governance and strategy required to deliver consistent and better co-ordinated funds to the sector.

There is limited data available which gives a fact-based picture of the supply and demand situation for sports facilities that would enable informed decisions to be made. The common view expressed to the Panel is that facilities do not meet demand and, in the case of field sports, the drought is making it worse. Local governments do not have sufficient resources to address the sporting needs, yet existing sports facilities in schools, universities and defence installations are often underutilised.

The ASC should lead a review of sports facilities in education and defence institutions that are currently locked away from community use.

There have been calls for a 'national audit' of sports facilities. Audits have been conducted in some states/territories and regions and good data is held by some local governments. This data is generally collected and stored independently using different systems and may not be compatible with data from other states/territories or local governments. Many local governments do not have good data on infrastructure in their jurisdictions.¹¹

The Panel is not convinced that a national audit is needed. It would be a massive task and probably out of date by the time it was completed. It would run the risk of 'paralysis by analysis' when the real problem is already known on the ground.

¹¹ Parks and Leisure Australia, Submission to the Independent Sport Panel, 7 November 2008, pp. 2.

The Australian Government has made commitments of approximately \$118.5 million for sport and recreation facilities, administered through the Department of Health and Ageing and the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government over the 2008–09 and 2009–2010 financial years.

In addition the Australian Government has announced \$1.67 billion in funding through programs including the Regional and Local Community Infrastructure Program and Jobs Fund Initiative. A component of this will go to sport and recreation funding, including sport and recreation infrastructure funding.

This is welcomed by the Panel. Successive Australian governments have considered funding for community facilities as mainly the responsibility of state, territory and local governments, with comparatively minor funding coming from the Australian Government. There is a need to build a physical infrastructure strategy around the Australian Government's announced commitments, and that annually the Australian Government adds to this fund.

In keeping with the principle explained earlier—that the Australian Government 'manages' the elite sports while state, territory and local governments 'manage' community sport—this particular fund should be entirely devoted to community sports facilities. Elite facilities or major stadium upgrades would be handled through a different budget process.

A fund of (say) \$250 million each year could then be divided between the states and territories in rough proportion to their populations. Local government and community sporting organisations could then present proposals to the states and territories for their projects. Some preference could be given to projects where state, territory and local government—and the communities themselves—match the Australian Government dollars. Small projects—such as new cricket nets or refurbished toilets—should be assessed through a much simpler process than more expensive projects. Priority would also be given to disadvantaged areas and incentives should be designed to ensure that cross-border issues are addressed.

This more 'bottom up' approach would have the advantage of greater ownership by local communities and would push decisions down to where the competing projects are known and best evaluated. A straight-forward application process should be designed. At present community groups find it hard to know how to apply for funding support even when programs are in place.

The exact size of such a fund cannot be quantified at this time in the absence of robust data. There is little doubt that the current need would exceed \$1 billion, so a four or five year program of \$200 million to \$250 million per annum would soon make a major difference. A process will also need to be designed to ensure that any Australian Government funding supplements, rather than replaces other spending. This proposal will require agreement at the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) level.

Recommendations:

- 6.1 The Australian Government should develop and fund a national volunteer program for sporting and physical activity organisations that aims to attract and retain volunteers to sport through education, accreditation and recognition and in particular takes account of the potential offered by the growing number of older Australians to become volunteers.
- 6.2 The Australian Government should establish and fund a national scheme that encourages past high-performance scholarship holders (Australian Institute of Sport and state and territory institutes and academies of sport) to volunteer within community sport organisations as coaches, managers, administrators and mentors.
- 6.3 The Australian Government, in consultation with the state and territory governments, should develop a strategic national facilities initiative for the funding and development of Australia's community sport and recreation facilities over the next decade.
- 6.4 The Australian Government should establish a national sport facilities fund with an initial allocation of \$250 million each year for four years, to begin the implementation of the strategic national facilities initiative in partnership with state, territory and local government and the private sector, where appropriate.
- 6.5 The national sport facilities fund should have an initial focus on drought-proofing assets that are determined to be of 'high-priority'.
- 6.6 In any infrastructure programs, preference should be given to projects that have the potential to engage wide sections of the community, such as multi-sport facilities in proximity to other community infrastructure, to help with sustainability and to increase social capital.