

**Regional Sport Victoria**  
**Insights from *Guided Conversations* with regional  
sporting clubs, associations, and leagues**  
**Interim report – May 2020**

## Acknowledgment of country

Regional Sport Victoria proudly acknowledges Australia’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and their rich culture and pays respect to their Elders past and present. We acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as Australia’s first peoples and that this country was never ceded.

We recognise and value the ongoing contribution of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities to Regional and Rural Victorian life and how this enriches us. We embrace the spirit of reconciliation, working towards the equality of outcomes and ensuring an equal voice.



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## Executive Summary

This interim report provides insights into the current perspectives, challenges and issues facing regional community sport in Victoria. Throughout the months of (late) April and May, Regional Sports Assemblies (RSAs) undertook one on one 'guided conversations' with their local sporting clubs, associations, and leagues, and this data was recorded systematically across the network.

Results of this early data set demonstrates the main concerns for respondents was the physical, social, and mental wellbeing of their members and communities. While most respondents were looking forward to resuming activity, many were frustrated by the additional requirements placed on them - be it by State Government, their local Council or State Sporting Association (SSA). While there was broad consensus that such measures were necessary to protect communities, many respondents cited that it would be difficult to adhere to return to play guidelines due to a lack of volunteers within their club.

Other common themes included both short- and long-term financial impacts resulting from decreased membership and lack of competition, as well as requests for assistance to access government grants.

It is important to note that this data is primarily qualitative in nature, and that the rich conversations which have taken place provide deep insights into the state of community sport in regional Victoria. It is envisioned that the final report will include reference to complementary quantitative data sets, however at the time of writing, no such data set could be sourced within a similar cohort.

## Context and background

### Regional Sport Victoria

Sport makes an important contribution to the physical, psychological, and social well-being of Australians. Rural and regional Victorians are less healthy overall than their metropolitan counterparts, however, are more likely to participate in organised sport than those who live in metropolitan areas. Therefore, any delays or prohibitions of organised sport, it can be argued, are most acutely felt by regional Victorians. In many rural and regional Victorian communities, the sporting club is an integral part of the social fabric of the local community.

Regional Sport Victoria is the peak body that provides advocacy and leadership for nine **Regional Sports Assemblies (RSA)** across the state of Victoria. The organisation has a network of 6,500 community-based sport and active recreation clubs and groups across regional Victoria, with a network of 43 staff employed by RSAs across the state.

### The circumstances of Autumn 2020

On 23 March 2020, the Premier of Victoria declared a State of Emergency in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Victorians were instructed “if you can stay at home, you must stay at home” and all community sport ceased from this point. Traditional summer sports were unable to finish their seasons, while winter sports were to cease pre-season training immediately. Walking groups, yoga classes and other social sport and recreation activities were suspended indefinitely. All RSA participation programming was also put on hold.

Professional sporting codes were not exempt from this response. After only one round played, the AFL committed to a ‘lock down’. Broadcast deals were null and void, and 75% of the workforce were stood down without pay. SSAs were forced into similar scenarios, and often, regional, on the ground staff were the first to go. The regional sporting eco-system had been disseminated.

### The approach taken by RSAs

It was becoming clear that sport must be more dependent than ever on the commitment of volunteers over the coming months, even years. As local clubs, associations, and leagues confront the various financial and logistical hurdles they must clear to get back to training and playing during the pandemic, volunteers were front and centre of this re-emergence.

Sports Focus based in Bendigo identified early on that their local clubs would be struggling. Not only was the season in crisis, but the bills continued to arrive, with no clear idea of what a return to community sport in 2020 would look like if it could happen at all. In mid-April, staff began systematically contacting their local clubs, associations, and leagues, to check in and have one to one ‘guided conversations’. While staff were gathering information about their current challenges and areas where support would be required, what became clear was that the struggles extended beyond sport. Many of the clubs had not been in contact with anyone from within their industry or broader networks and so naturally, people started to express their emotions and vent their frustrations.

RSV identified that this project formed part of the Networks COVID-19 Conceptual Framework (figure 1) and the ability for this mountain of work to inform not only the support provided by RSAs, but from SSAs, Councils, State Government, and the sector at large. To prepare the workforce for such potentially emotionally triggering conversations, accidental counselling was delivered to staff across the network. A conversation guide along with a data collection process via Survey Monkey was then designed, to ensure consistency of approach and uniform data collection across all RSA’s

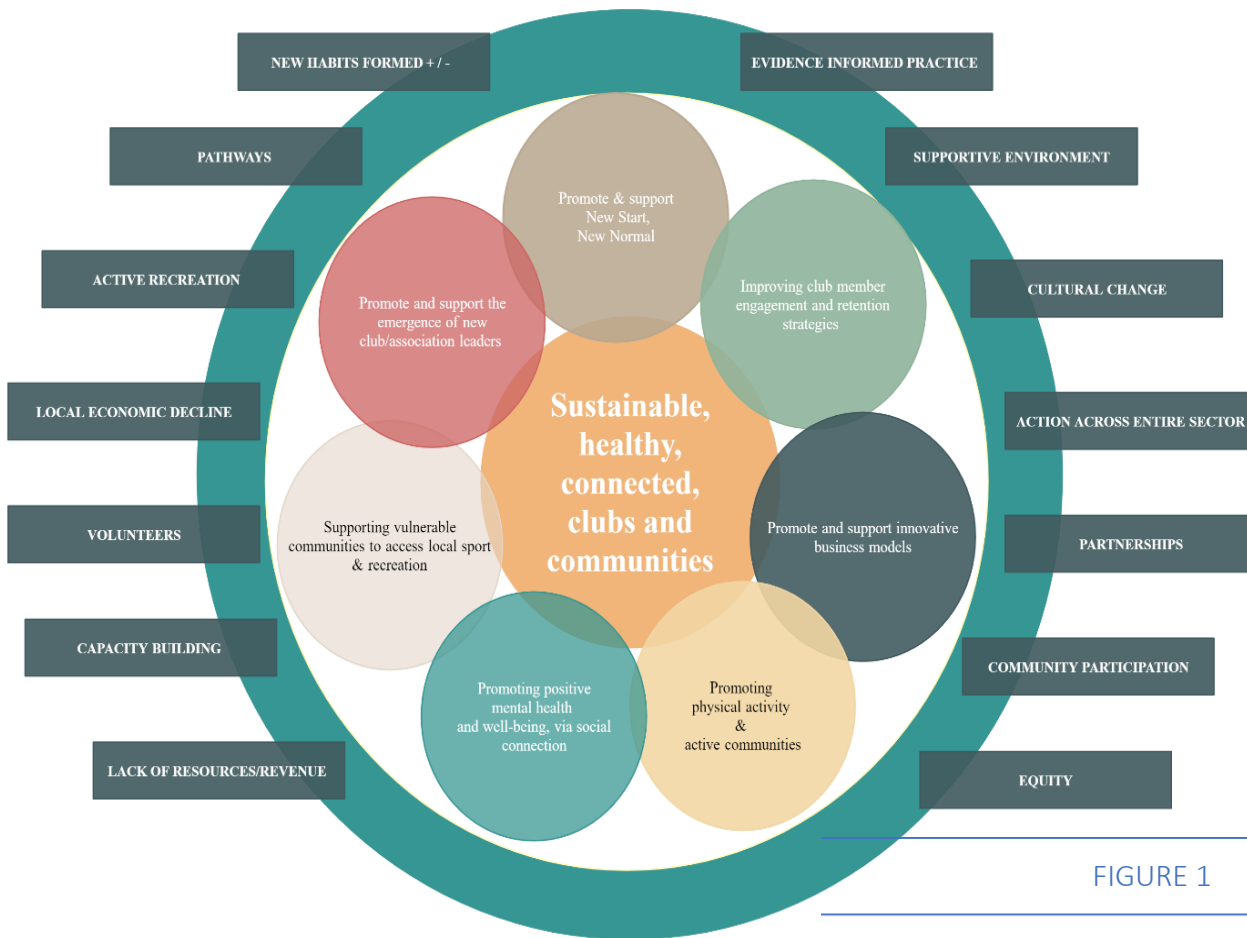


FIGURE 1

RSV COVID-19 Response Conceptual Framework

## Profile of the data

From April 30<sup>th</sup> 2020, all RSAs were undertaking one to one guided conversations with those clubs, associations and leagues which fell within their catchment areas. These conversations took anywhere from 15 minutes, to up to an hour. As of June 2<sup>nd</sup> 2020,

- 369 conversations had taken place
- 44 out of 48 LGAs were represented
- 39 different sports and physical activities were represented amongst the data set (see appendix of sports listed)
- 73% of conversations took place with either the President or Secretary
- 53% of the clubs surveyed had at least 100 members (2019 data)
- 18% of the clubs surveyed had more than 300 members (2019 data)

## What did we hear?

### Immediate concerns

Almost all clubs, associations, and leagues surveyed listed the **health concerns of their members and their communities** as topping the list of immediate concerns. There was a trend for this concern to feature less prominently as numbers of active COVID-19 cases started to reduce, however it continued to be represented in some shape or form during all conversations. This demonstrated that for the respondents, the focus is 'person first' and sport second.

Most respondents listed the **uncertainty around timelines being lifted**, many unsure whether they would be able to commence competition in the current season, and the flow on impact that this would have on the club, association or league. Many also listed the **limits surrounding crowd numbers**, and that due to financial impacts (lack of gate sales, canteen sales, etc. to support game-day operational costs) this would be a defining factor as to whether a 2020 season would commence.

However, as timelines from the State Government were announced, this concern shifted from uncertainty surrounding season dates to **concern regarding fulfilling the requirements to return to play/training**.

As the President of one club put it:

*"The major concern for the club is trying to adapt and update policy and procedure dependant on the current guideline and procedures. The Club do not want to spend a significant amount of time developing new club protocols and procedures if they are going to change/alter based on any developing restrictions/guidelines."*

Many of the respondents mentioned that they felt fortunate that **the cases of COVID-19 in Australia were comparatively low** compared with other parts of the world, and that **they did not want to jeopardise this**.

As one club President noted:

*"we as a community are feeling so grateful. We only have had one person with COVID 19 and compared to the rest of the world we are feeling so fortunate. We are happy to not play or train for the remainder of 2020 to stay safe and healthy. If you look at the rest of the world, training and playing our sport is the least of our concerns. We are so lucky to live where we live."*

While many were looking forward to resuming activity, it is important to note that this perspective was not shared by all. For example, some expressed feeling pressure to return to sport and as one respondent mentioned:

*"There is pressure on volunteers - especially the COVID-19 safety officer/s... It seems like State Sporting Associations are putting protocols in place.... But then there is the cost of sanitiser/gloves/cleaning etc. There is also some nervousness around coverage of insurance.... I'm not comfortable with only one person being COVID Safe Officer."*

This was a sentiment many echoed – the feeling that **responsibility was being shifted onto volunteers** and that as a club, they did not have the capacity to shoulder such a burden. This strongly correlates with the first concern listed – the health and wellbeing concerns of their members and their communities. One club President describes it by saying: *"We're feeling **pressure to restart** and feeling nervous about repercussions if something went wrong. It feels like [our SSA] went too early."*

Many respondents also listed the flow on **financial impacts** as an immediate concern. There are concerns about losing sponsors, however only a small number of clubs mentioned that this had already occurred. Many respondents mentioned that membership was impacted, and that should a 2020 season not occur, it would put significant strain on the club's finances. A number of clubs mentioned their inability to fundraise and hold events either would have, or has already had, a major impact on the club's bottom line. A lack of match day crowds, gate takings, canteen sales and the overall impacts of a shortened season also contributed to this. One respondent accurately sums up these concerns:

*"We're worried about our sponsors and whether or not we'll lose any because of how businesses are struggling. If we lose any, it'll impact our club finances and we'll have to try and cover that loss which may lead to an increase memberships, but we still have to be mindful that people may not be able to afford it. We may have to reduce the number of events or the amount that we offer at each event. We're also really not sure about what's going to happen. And we just don't know what it will look like so we need to know how we can manage an event safely under the government guidelines. We don't want there to be a second wave".*

Finally, many clubs, associations and leagues mentioned the fact that they were focusing on simply existing on the other side of the COVID-19 pandemic and that they were acutely aware that they existed to serve their communities. One Gippsland based club referred to the **confounding factors** of the recent bushfires stating:

*"After the bushfires in East Gippsland, followed by the COVID-19 pandemic, I am most concerned about our members and their wellbeing. It has certainly been a tough year to date for our local communities and we want to get people back socializing and being physically active again. Of course we want to adhere to all rules, and being an indoor centre, need to make sure that we provide the safe*

*environment that is needed for participation to get back up and running again when we are permitted.”*

### Impact to date on clubs

While many of the Guided Conversations focused on the concerns and anxieties which club volunteers were acutely feeling, some were able to elaborate on the impact that COVID-19 restrictions had had on their clubs to date, and the actions they were taking to remedy this.

While most clubs were volunteer run and led, one social sport and active recreation provider identified it had closed their venue and stood down 32 staff members. Where clubs, associations or leagues did have a paid administrator, this continued to be a trend. However, it wasn't simply administrators impacted. This extended to any paid role in the club – be it coaches, trainers and even green keepers.

Some mentioned that they were **engaging their members and supporters virtually**, and that this sustained connection was important for their members mental health. These online engagement methods were predominantly conducted via social media, in the form of “group chats”, however other tools were used, such as using Zoom to host virtual training sessions.

Only a small portion of respondents had used the down time to **review policy and procedure** and ‘get their house in order’. One club President best articulated it by stating *“It’s been difficult to plan for anything, because you need to be ready at a moment’s notice, so we’ve just been sitting and waiting to hear about what is next”*. The feeling that clubs were in a **‘holding pattern’** was a common occurrence.

However, this was not true of all clubs. One club Secretary was able to demonstrate a plethora of **proactive activities** the club had taken during the shutdown period:

*“The club are keeping engaged through virtual means and the players are partaking in “informal” training methods to keep physically active. The senior netballers and footballers have private group chats where they have been touching base with each other. The committee are partaking in regular Zoom meetings and are preparing for the 2021 season. The club have utilised this time to focus on the administrative side of the club. The club have purchased the “TIDY-HQ” program and are busy setting that up for the next season. ...The club are also continuing their usual fundraiser “Pie Drive” doing so by completing contactless drop offs.”*

### What about the current restrictions?

By far the most common comment from any conversation which took place after the 20<sup>th</sup> of May highlighted the current restrictions and the return to play guidelines.



Many respondents expressed concern regarding their **capacity to fulfill the requirements** in their sports return to play guidelines, while some had full confidence in their sports ability to provide a safe environment within the guidelines provided.

However, several respondents surveyed mentioned that despite the restrictions being eased, they would not be returning:

*“Half of clubs in the league have said they aren't going back to training with the current restrictions of 10 people. The league has conducted a survey of their clubs and asked if they would be keen to hold a half season if given the chance. When the survey was initially held, most clubs said yes to a half season - now most have changed their mind and said no, it wouldn't be worth it. The league is currently in contact with state government, asking to get an insight into future easing of restrictions guidelines. Stated that restrictions would need to allow for a maximum of 500 people in an outdoor area for the season to go ahead.”*

At the time of writing, at least half a dozen Football & Netball Leagues **had cancelled their 2020 season** due to limits on crowd numbers and inability to provide player payments, while several Leagues were actively considering the option. While the income derived from crowds was a key factor for cancelling competitions, some respondents mentioned that playing without a crowd within itself would be the defining factor and that *“without the community it wouldn't be the same.”*

At the time of writing, RSAs were endeavouring to contact any club associated with a league which had decided to forgo the 2020 season, determining whether any supported could be provided during the off season.

### Support required from the sector

By far the most referenced aspect of support required was assistance in **sourcing grants to ensure they can stay afloat**. In fact, when asked an open-ended question ‘was there anything else you would like to add?’ assistance with grants was the number one response.

Clubs, associations, and leagues, also identified a **forum for sharing best practice** for retention strategies, noting that they were expecting a decrease in both membership and volunteers because of COVID-19. As one President put it:

*The biggest concern is that some of the older volunteers may not want to return to the sport as they have enjoyed their time off. The club has heard from several older volunteers that they are enjoying their time at home. Club is also finding it more difficult to keep those people engaged and in contact with the club.”*

Finally, it cannot be stated enough the frustration which volunteers felt regarding the expectation placed upon them. As one club put it:

*"We need everyone to recognise the importance of community clubs and sport. However we also need to recognise that the majority of clubs are not financially sustainable in the longer term based on past practices and finances. We really need to go back to what community sport and clubs are all about – providing a safe and enjoyable place to come and stay and play and/or watch sport for all ages and all backgrounds. This should be a concern for the sector".*

This highlights a key opportunity for Regional Sports Assemblies to support clubs, associations and leagues to build **'new' competition formats, governance structures and social sport models** which return to the reason for community sport existing – to serve the needs of the community.

## Summary

Guided Conversations continue to be carried out with clubs, associations, and leagues across the state and collectively the Network aim to undertake at least 500 unique and rich conversations before the end of June 2020.

Many staff within the network have expressed how important it is to stay connected with their local sporting groups during such a difficult and emotional time. While this project was initially designed to inform the work of the RSAs and provide insights for the wider sector, the act of reaching out and displaying empathy has enabled RSA staff to **strengthen the relationships** they have with local sporting groups, which has been an added benefit of the project thus far.

Broadly speaking, many respondents were looking forward to resuming activity, however, were frustrated by the additional requirements placed on them - be it by their local Council or SSA.

While the primary concern for these regional sporting leagues, associations and clubs were the health of their members, many stated that a lack of volunteers meant that fulfilling return to play guidelines would be extremely difficult.

Finally, many clubs identified the financial impacts of COVID-19 restrictions and indicated that support in applying for grants was their number one immediate area of need.

An updated report will be delivered in July 2020 and it is envisioned that this can inform the response of RSV and RSAs to COVID-19 and the support provided to regional sporting clubs, associations and leagues across the state of Victoria.

## Appendix

Sports included (in order of number of conversations)

Australian Rules Football	Badminton
Cricket	Croquet
Bowls (indoor and lawn)	Rowing
Soccer	Mountain Biking
Tennis	Squash
Golf	Walking / bush walking
Netball	Flying Disc
Hockey	Fire Brigade competitions
Horse Riding	BMX
Table Tennis	Boxing
Baseball	Canoeing
Basketball	Cycling
Gymnastic	Dancing
Shooting	Fishing
Running	Martial Arts
Volleyball	Motor Sports
Athletics	Orienteering
Calisthenic	Swimming
Yachting	Roller sports
	Triathlon / Biathlon