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# INSIGHTS FROM SUPPORTING REGIONAL CLUBS RESEARCH

**INTERIM REPORT**  
*OCTOBER 2021*



# CONTENTS

<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY</b>	<b>02</b>
<b>PREAMBLE</b>	<b>04</b>
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY ABOUT REGIONAL SPORT VICTORIA	04 04
<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>05</b>
PROJECT BACKGROUND	05
PROJECT PURPOSE	06
PROJECT OBJECTIVES	07
<b>RESEARCH DESEIGN</b>	<b>08</b>
DATA COLLECTION	08
DATA ANALYSIS	09
<b>KEY FINDINGS</b>	<b>10</b>
1.THE IMPACT OF COVID-19	10
2.MEMBER & VOLUNTEER PARTICIPATION & RETENTION	13
3.THE DEMAND FOR GRANTS & OTHER ASSISTANCE	17
<b>PRELIMINARY RECOMMENDATIONS</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>SUMMARY</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>APPENDIX</b>	<b>21</b>



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Responses to this survey paint a picture of the challenges faced by community club, leagues, and associations throughout regional Victoria, particularly due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. These survey results raise concerns in three key areas: **the impact of COVID-19 on volunteers, member and volunteer participation and retention, and the demand for grants and other assistance.**



These three concerns have also been echoed by other research in the area, including that by the Australian Sports Foundation. From 28th August 2021, seven Regional Sports Assemblies (RSAs) were undertaking one-to-one conversations, covering the survey questions, with those clubs, leagues and associations which fell within their catchment areas. These conversations took anywhere from 15 to 40 minutes.

As of 6th October 2021:

- 400 conversations had taken place
- 38 out of 48 LGAs were represented
- 49 different sports and physical activities were represented amongst the data set (see appendix of sports listed)
- 21% of the organisations had between 51-100 members; 14% of the organisations had over 100 members, and 20% of the organisations had more than 300 members, and,
- All conversations took place with either Club President, Chairman, Treasurer, Secretary, Manager, Vice President or Director.





37% of respondents stated **COVID-19 uncertainty** as their major concern



14% were most concerned about **membership retention** & whether they would return



12% were concerned about a **lack of volunteers**, impacting on the ability to hold competitions, or run events



An overwhelming **58%** of respondents were concerned about **multiple areas** relating to the impact of **COVID-19 pandemic**



Over **17%** had **serious mental health concerns** for individuals within their organisation

From hearing the major concerns of the respondents from sports organisations, there are a number of areas where both Regional Sport Victoria, and the Regional Sports Assemblies, can be providing assistance to the community sports organisations throughout regional Victoria, including;

- grant writing assistance and increasing the communication on available grants,
- access to mental health first aid, inclusion and education courses,
- more regular information on what COVID-19 restrictions and compliance mean for the sports organisations, and:
- assistance with, and ideas for, developing strategies to attract and retain both participants and volunteers.





# PREAMBLE

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

Regional Sport Victoria proudly acknowledges Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and their rich culture and pays respect to their Elders past, present and emerging. 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.

## ABOUT REGIONAL SPORT VICTORIA

Regional Sport Victoria (RSV) is the peak body which supports the nine Regional Sports Assemblies (RSAs) across the state of Victoria. The network of RSAs cover a population of over 1.45 million rural and regional Victorians and over 6,500 community-based sport and recreation clubs. RSV's purpose is to support the RSAs through the provision of training, information, advice, skill development, linkages, and advocacy with and for clubs, organisations, and communities.



# INTRODUCTION

## PROJECT BACKGROUND

Previous research has continually shown that there are significant discrepancies between metropolitan and regional areas in terms of participation, opportunities and access to sport and physical activity. Some of the factors that have previously been highlighted as contributing to these barriers include:

- Population decline in smaller towns, which then impacts on the number of people available to make up teams or to participate in activities;
- Difficulties in recruiting and retaining volunteers;
- Difficulties in attracting and retaining junior players;
- Competition from an increasing number of sports or other activities;
- Lack of experienced or qualified coaches available;
- Ageing communities impacting both the availability of players and volunteers;
- Low levels of physical activity in general;
- Costs and limited local funds, grants, and sponsorship opportunities to offset the rising costs;
- Changes to physical activity participation in general. A shift away from organised sport to activities such as walking, cycling, swimming, running, and gym workouts.

**ADDING TO THIS, THE ONGOING COVID-19 PANDEMIC HAS THROWN UP EVEN MORE CHALLENGES OVER THE PAST 18+ MONTHS.**



## PROJECT PURPOSE

The purpose of the Supporting Regional Clubs Research is to better understand the position of regional sport Clubs, Leagues, and Associations, what their concerns are, and which areas RSV and the RSAs should be focussing on to best service and assist them. This will also ensure that funds and resources are being used efficiently and effectively to ensure that sporting organisations throughout regional Victoria are thriving, attracting, and retaining players, volunteers and members, and competitions and leagues are running smoothly.

### IN SHORT:

**THE AIM OF THE RESEARCH IS TO PROVIDE A BETTER  
UNDERSTANDING OF THE CURRENT STATE OF  
COMMUNITY SPORT ACROSS REGIONAL VICTORIA  
AND TO INFORM FUTURE PROJECTS**





## PROJECT OBJECTIVES

The project objectives were to:

- Identify the issues and challenges faced by sport and active recreation organisations throughout Regional Victoria;
- Conduct conversations with a wide range of representatives from sport and active recreation organisations across Regional Victoria;
- Further investigate and explore the concept of and interest in community hubs and shared services models and subsequent development of guidelines for usage;
- Develop recommendations for strategies and initiatives to address the key issues and challenges identified and faced by sport and active recreation across Regional Victoria.

This report presents the research findings to date related to objectives 1 and 2.





# RESEARCH DESIGN

## DATA COLLECTION

An online survey of participants from across a wide range of sport and active recreation organisations throughout Regional Victoria was conducted in conjunction with the Regional Sports Assemblies (RSAs). Regional Sport Victoria consulted with a range of organisations in the development of these surveys, including: La Trobe University, Vicsport, Volunteering Victoria, and Disability Sport & Recreation Victoria.

A random sample of ~1000 contacts of the RSAs aged 18 and over received a phone call from 26th August 2021 onwards inviting them to participate in the survey.

Project Officers from seven Regional Sports Assemblies conducted the survey with participants on the phone line, which enabled the obtaining of detailed information from a relatively large number of respondents. It also ensured each survey was completed in full before being submitted. The project officers also underwent accidental counsellor training to ensure that they felt equipped to appropriately support any distressed respondents. The online survey was made up of both quantitative, closed-ended questions, and qualitative, open-ended questions. Topics of questioning included: the organisation's major area of concern, how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the number of both participants and volunteers, any strategies adopted to increase retention, whether they would be interested in a shared services model and participating further to determine what this may look like, and any other areas they feel they require assistance or greater guidance. Response categories for the closed-ended questions were developed from previous annual club surveys.

Qualitative questions were devised based upon the objectives for RSV in conducting this research, as well as already existing literature in the area of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on community-based and grassroots sport and physical recreation.





# DATA ANALYSIS

## QUANTITATIVE COMPONENT

Quantitative data were analysed in multiple ways to capture the differences between the overall data set, the different regions covered within the RSAs, and also the different sports and active recreations included.

This enabled any potential trends and themes to emerge both across geographic locations as well as between and within sports.

## QUALITATIVE COMPONENT

Qualitative data were analysed descriptively based on a combination of both pre-determined and emergent themes. Data was captured and downloaded from the online survey platform, collated within a spreadsheet, and then underwent a coding system of applying certain highlighting to key and emergent themes within the data. Pivotables were also utilised to explore different variables in greater detail.



# KEY FINDINGS

## 1. THE IMPACT OF COVID-19

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic is taking a serious toll on community sports clubs and organisations throughout regional Victoria. It has been made particularly difficult at times because there were often grey areas between metropolitan and regional Victoria in terms of restrictions. As one respondent put it,

**"The rules are hard on regional Victoria... it is hard to work out the interpretation on how we are actually supposed to run our work. we thought coaches counted in the group of ten but then later found out that they didn't apply and they could train with 10 others plus coaches".**

There is also a great deal of uncertainty around what a return to play looks like, how guidelines and protocols will apply, and what, and how, a mandatory vaccination scheme in community sport would be implemented.

**"Uncertainty about the rules and when we can start competing again. Uncertainty around density limits and the rule inconsistency between different sports. For example, football and cricket clubs seem to have more freedoms than shooting clubs". Target Clay Club, Ararat**

29% of respondents completed the survey during the strictest lockdown rules for regional Victoria, the easing of restrictions has not made for a more positive outlook for respondents, with many reporting that the stop-start nature of seasons or having no set return to play date making it impossible to plan for future events and meaning, **"we're unsure of what the future looks like".**



By far the biggest concern for organisations of any size were serious mental health concerns for individuals with over 17% of respondents citing the issue. This has only been enhanced by the nature of community connection sporting organisations provide in more regional and rural areas. As a respondent from a Football / Netball club in the Yarriamback government area expressed,

**"Isolation has had an impact on individuals".**

For medium-sized clubs of up to 100 members, membership retention was the biggest concern currently. As many reported, **"membership is the only survival"**, but with no competitions or events being held and training in most cases severely impacted, clubs felt that they either could not charge fees or generate the same level of revenue they would usually get from their members and events. They also felt that any strategies they were adopting to retain and increase membership were falling flat as they couldn't really offer anything at the time. As such, 33% of clubs experiencing decreasing participation would not currently doing anything to address this.

Inextricably linked to membership retention is the financial viability or stability of a community sport organisation - a concern felt by organisations of any size. As a cricket club from the Indigo region, with 301+ members explained,

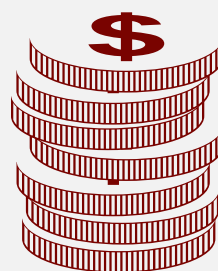
**"Financial stability has gone. We lost sponsorship because of the pandemic. We can't charge players more because everyone is affected... No income from anywhere in the club".**

A golf club in the Northern Grampians region also stated that,

**"Lack of participation within the sport means lack of income from social members. The club can't generate revenue for maintenance. Fundraising activities can't be conducted due to the pandemic".**



On top of losing revenue from the usual streams, the COVID-19 pandemic has also come with added costs. Hygiene measures such as extra soap, hand sanitiser, cleaning products and masks, as well as added signage all come with a cost, and although these may be relatively small costs, they are additional to ordinary running costs meaning that small clubs may simply not have the funds to cover them and large clubs, who would obviously need to purchase more, may also stretch the budget to cover these. A number of clubs were struggling to break even, whilst others were, **"running on funds from the 2019/2020 season"**.



The Australian Sports Foundation reports that the average fundraising revenue lost due to the COVID-19 pandemic is:

- **\$3929 for a small local club**
- **\$7132 for a large local club**

While it is difficult to make up for the revenue already lost, community sports organisations cannot rely solely on government support and will need to be able to raise their own funds going forward.

Simple ideas may include:

- Those organisations that refunded memberships due to the lack of sport could ask members to donate that fee back to the organisation, or;
- For those who are financially able, they can donate slightly more than their membership cost to cover those who cannot afford it.





## 2. MEMBER & VOLUNTEER ==PARTICIPATION & RETENTION

The shutdown of community sport has had a profoundly negative social impact with participation, both in terms of playing and volunteering, continuing to decline. Participation in community sport brings so many benefits, not least for the physical and mental health of the participants themselves. Therefore, it is concerning that sports are continuing to report an overall decline in participants within their organisations.

This is unfortunately not due exclusively to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, but rather an already evident trend that has been intensified by the current situation. Large organisations have been just as affected by this as the smaller organisations, with a respondent from a tennis club in the Greater Shepparton area with over 300 members put it,

**"Membership and participation, and by default volunteers. Participation has dropped dramatically in the last 10 years, especially locally. Majority of tournament participants are from outside the area".**

Overwhelmingly, 42% of organisations reported a decrease in participants over the past twelve months, whilst 30% saw a decrease in volunteers by an average of 25%. These numbers are significant in community sport, particularly in regional and rural areas. It can mean the difference between having a team or not or having enough volunteers for an event to even go ahead, as a number of responses highlight.

**"Volunteers are tired and stressed from extra work".  
FNC, Yarriamback**

**"COVID has made it harder to keep members and volunteers. That affects the competition and the number of teams entered". Golf Club, North Grampians**





**"People have lost touch with the club because of not racing for a while. Aus. Cycling memberships expire in a year, many participants have not renewed it because of COVID-19 uncertainty".**

**Cycling Club, Greater Ballarat**

Participants losing touch with clubs appears common. However, it appears that not all organisations are doing as much to address this as they could be. 33% of clubs with decreasing membership and 34% with decreasing volunteer numbers were not adopting any strategies to address the situation. Many citing that there was no point at the moment because they can't play anyway or that there was, "nothing to be done". Unfortunately, this will set the community sports organisations back even further when restrictions allow play to start again.

The majority of participants who identified they were adopting strategies to attract and retain both participants and volunteers were doing so through social media channels. Whilst this is a good way to stay connected with people already engaged with the organisation, it is unlikely to reach those external to the organisation unless specific advertising is paid for, therefore limiting the potential for growth via this means.

Undoubtedly though, the COVID-19 pandemic has severely harmed the social side of community sport, which is of particular importance to regional and rural communities and has therefore also affected the enjoyment experience through sport and people wanting to be involved.

**"Being able to get on the pitch and play and train is really hard due to restrictions, so it's hard to have social things as well. We used to have teas after training every week and it would bring everyone together... hard to do in the pandemic".**

**Cricket Club, Horsham**



Junior boys and senior men appear to have been the hardest hit by decreasing numbers, with 38% and 23% of respondents respectively reporting these groups to be the most affected within their organisation. While the reason for decrease in senior men is less clear, many respondents speculated that junior boys were more interested in casual, recreational activities, such as cycling and skateboarding, as a means to spend time with friends rather than structured sport, especially as it hadn't been going ahead.

Interestingly, a small percentage of respondents (22%) reported seeing an increase in participant numbers over the last twelve months. Future focus groups will seek to understand the driver for this. It is thought that the Get Active Kids voucher program implemented by the Victorian State Government may be having an impact, as well as sports that are less impacted by continuing restrictions, such as golf, gaining members.

Whilst times are undeniably tough for community sports organisations and working to gain participants and volunteers at this time may seem incredibly difficult, a number of clubs and leagues have adapted with the times and taken approaches that have worked for them.





- A netball team in the South Gippsland region has designed more inclusive uniforms for those who don't feel comfortable playing in skirts or dresses. The t-shirt and shorts uniform has been designed to look just like the other uniform and has attracted an increased number of participants.
- An Australian Rules Football Club in the Greater Geelong region moved their social and fundraising evening online and did not see a significant decrease in the funds raised by the evening, whilst also saving on the expenditure of venue and staff hire.
- Orienteering Victoria started utilising an app which meant that participants could complete a course from their house, within the travel limit and allocated daily exercise time. They have seen a growth in new participants and have been able to accommodate more people than a normal, physical event would.
- A larger Little Athletics centre made it mandatory for parents to volunteer if they wanted their child to participate. This alone has been successful in ensuring good volunteers and no over-reliance on the same few people. However, they also understood that not everyone can give up their time to volunteer. Where this was the case, they could pay a small fee. This money could then be used to cover the costs of COVID-19 hygiene items, to pay the volunteers for their time or for certain jobs or used to pay for courses such as first aid or upskilling coaches and officials.



### 3. THE DEMAND FOR GRANTS & OTHER ASSISTANCE

Overwhelmingly, community sports organisations are desperate for grants, information on grants, which ones are available, how they go about getting a grant and, most importantly, assistance with grant writing. 55% of the respondents listed grant writing assistance as the main area they needed supporting. Of these respondents, 31% were so stuck with grant writing, and how to write a successful grant, they were willing to outsource and pay someone else to do it for them.

**"We need help to find someone to help with grants as we don't have time to do it. It's also hard to pick which grants we are suitable for. Filling in the information required is hard and the council can't apply for more than one grant a year". Football/Netball Club, Gannawarra region**

Other respondents suggested that a central resource with all grants, application criteria and deadlines would be incredibly helpful, as they felt that if they knew where to find the grants and which ones were most suitable, they would be confident in applying themselves.

However, lengthy application processes are a significant burden placed upon already stretched volunteers, many of whom do not have the background or skills to write a successful grant. Online grant writing workshops, capable of reaching even the most rural of clubs could significantly help this.

The second most requested form of assistance is the provision of mental health first aid courses or mental health awareness programs. This is important as we already know that regional and rural communities experience higher rates of mental ill-health than their metropolitan counterparts. And with the added burden of the COVID-19 pandemic, mental health issues have only increased further. Provision and access to such courses could play a significant role in someone asking for help, spotting signs of mental struggle in a friend or colleague, or even just better equipping people with awareness and development of their own coping strategies.





Larger organisations, such as the AFL, can provide their affiliates with access to their own courses, such as Tackle Your Feelings, but smaller organisations and sports that aren't as well resourced simply cannot afford to provide such a service. As over 17% of respondents stated that serious mental health concerns for individuals was their biggest, current concern, assistance with this could have a substantial impact.

The final area where respondents require assistance is with specific educational courses. First aid and CPR courses are mandatory for many roles within a community sporting organisation, yet in regional and rural Victoria, they may not happen very often at all. Equally, coaching courses, ensuring that a coach is qualified, or their qualifications are up-to-date, are often held once or twice a year, over a weekend in Melbourne. This means that travel and cost may be a barrier to participation in such courses. One hockey club stated that they wanted to try and run coaching courses for to try and run coaching courses for members to try and incentivise them to become coaches, but they would need assistance in getting the course to their region and for it to be recognised.

Accidental counsellor training could also be added to coaching courses to equip coaches appropriately to support distressed members and players. The mental



impact of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns has been widely recognised. In addition to this, many of our regional areas had already experienced significant hardship during the summer of 2019/20 due to bushfires. Having skills to navigate difficult conversations would be of benefit, particularly to regional and rural coaches.

Lastly, courses around inclusion, particularly for people with disabilities, were highly requested. Many community sports organisations would like to be able to offer such programs but are unsure as to where to begin or how to do it. Not only do they see it as a way to provide for more of the community, but also to increase their participant numbers and become a more inclusive organisation. Supporting such an initiative could have a huge impact on inclusivity in regional sport.





# PRELIMINARY RECOMMENDATIONS

The preliminary recommendations from this report are:

- As a matter of urgency, provide the sporting sector with clear guidelines on COVID-19 protocols, including how mandatory vaccinations will be monitored across the sector;
- Continuing to support dedicated resources across regional Victoria to enable clubs to plan for, identify and apply for grants;
- Consider using sporting clubs as a key site for the delivery of mental health programs across regional and rural Victoria ;
- Consider innovative ways that volunteers can be supported to remain engaged in their sporting clubs, including the development of localised administrative support (further research to be provided on this point in December 2021).
- Continuing to support dedicated resources across regional Victoria to enable clubs to plan for, prevent and address the impact that COVID has had on the reduction in volunteer and player numbers.



# SUMMARY

This preliminary research has set the baseline and will inform questions for focus groups going forward to understand, in greater detail, the position of community sporting organisations across regional Victoria, and how best they can be assisted and supported going forward. These areas will likely include addressing the concern of volunteer resources and time commitments by testing the concept of localised community sport support, such as shared administration resources and other activities that can support regional sporting club volunteers.



Lead Author: Rebecca York  
Research Project Officer  
Regional Sport Victoria



# APPENDIX

## SPORTS INCLUDED

Archery	3	Karting	2
Athletics	10	Little Athletics	1
Badminton	6	Martial Arts	1
Baseball	6	Motor Sport	2
Basketball	16	Motorcycling	1
BMX	1	Netball	8
Bocce / Petanque	2	Recreation Reserve	1
Bowls (Lawn/Indoor/Carpet)	30	Roller Sports	1
Bowls (Lawn) / Croquet	14	Rowing	8
Boxing	2	Running	2
Calisthenics	1	Shooting	11
Cricket	45	Squash / Racquetball	3
Croquet	14	Surf Life Saving	3
Cycling	4	Surfing	3
Dancing	1	Swimming	8
Diving	1	Table Tennis	3
Fishing / Angling	2	Tennis	30
Flying Disc	2	Triathlon	1
Football (Australian Rules)	10	Umpiring	1
Football (Australian Rules) / Netball	55	Volleyball	2
Football (Australian Rules) / Netball / Hockey	1	Walking / Bushwalking	1
Football (Soccer)	11	Other	13
Golf	36		
Gymnastics	4		
Hockey	11		
Horse Riding / Pony	6		





[regionalsportvictoria.org.au](http://regionalsportvictoria.org.au)

14 Nolan Street

Bendigo VIC 3550