

Community Australian Football in Sydney

A Health Check



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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Project Overview

Australian football in the Greater Sydney Region is undergoing significant change at all levels. This change is fuelled by significant investment by the AFL, AFL NSW/ACT and their stakeholders.

The most visible changes are the:

- establishment of the AFL's 18th team, the GIANTS
- development of the Swans and GIANTS Academies, and,
- entry of two Sydney teams in the second tier NEAFL competition.

It is timely that AFL NSW/ACT is undertaking a stepped process to establish a consolidated Strategic Plan.

Step 1: Undertake this health check into the way football is delivered in the Greater Sydney Region. This health check is arranged to reflect the pathway of a football player, from cradle to grave as follows:

- Auskick
- junior club football – AFL Greater Sydney Juniors (GSJ)
- senior club football – AFL Sydney
- elite club (Sydney Swans and GWS GIANTS) academies and AFL NSW/ACT Joss Talent Program

Step 2: Derive strategic and tactical recommendations to improve the health of football in the Greater Sydney Region, in a new five year AFL NSW/ACT Strategic Plan.

Step 3: Implement the Strategic Plan over a five year period.

1.2 Acknowledgements

The research phase of this health check has involved seeking responses from Australian football volunteers in Sydney, a group we already owe a debt of gratitude for their contribution.

Twenty-nine in-depth interviews were conducted, eight with junior club volunteers, six from senior clubs and 15 with managers from either AFL NSW/ACT, the Swans or the GIANTS.

On-line surveys were returned by 19 of the 24 senior clubs and 39 of the 65 junior clubs.

The remaining principle source of data was the Street Ryan Australian Football Census (January 2012) commissioned by the AFL.

2. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Australian football in the Greater Sydney Region is reasonably healthy, with all stakeholders diligently addressing their operational challenges.

The structure within AFL NSW/ACT supporting the delivery of Australian football in NSW and ACT is straight forward and appropriate. The structure is best described as a matrix of regional teams in clearly defined geographical regions delivering programs owned by program managers.

This health check focuses on two of the six NSW/ACT regions, namely Sydney Harbour/Illawarra and Greater Western Sydney.

In summary, the endeavour and enthusiasm within all the AFL NSW/ACT regional and program teams and external stakeholders is sound and commensurate with the resource allocation. Efficiency benefits will be realised with three fundamental improvements:

1. improving collaboration within the matrix of teams and with external stakeholders
2. prioritising the large, measurable outcomes on which the regional and program teams can focus, and
3. reallocating existing resources to identified areas of need and reducing duplication.

3. THE MARKET

The Sydney metropolitan sports market is possibly the most crowded in Australia. The winter sports market is particularly competitive. There are four football codes plus basketball, not to mention popular lifestyle sports such as golf, cycling, surfing, skiing and touch football. It is often said of Sydneysiders that their allegiances are fickle, not just across sport but across the wider entertainment sector.

The emergence of Australian football in this cluttered Sydney market has progressed from being of ‘little interest’ to Sydneysiders. They are now considering the possibility of their child sampling the sport. They are considering watching Australian football on TV or even attending a game.

The Australian game has an acceptable brand image. Consumers are finally ‘at the table’.



3.1 The Numbers

The aspirational benchmarks for Australian football in NSW should be the Australian football outcomes achieved in other Australian states for the following reasons:

1. The competing winter codes, particularly in the Sydney metropolitan market, experience vastly different penetration rates within the one city. Local pockets of rugby union, rugby league, basketball, and to a lesser extent soccer, inhibit meaningful, macro comparisons. The best macro benchmarks are the Australian football results achieved in the most populated states that have mature alternative winter sports, namely Queensland and Victoria.
2. Purity of Data - comparing AFL NSW/ACT data with other AFL states guarantees the comparison of ‘apples with apples’ The Street Ryan Australian Football Census adopts identical measurement criteria across all states and territories ensuring, for example, that something as simple as ‘a participant’ is consistently defined.¹
3. Australian football observers nationally (sponsors, media, public) benchmark the inroads Australian football is making in NSW/ACT against the traditional Australian football states.

¹ A football participant plays in six weeks of football events whereas a cricket participant plays in four cricket events.

3.2 AFL NSW/ACT Summary Figures vs Other States

3.2.1 The Good News

Measures that compare favourably against other jurisdictions are as follows:

Measure	State Ranking
Australian football visits to Primary Schools	2 nd (behind Queensland)
Auskick participation	2 nd (behind Victoria)
Australian football promotional programs*	2 nd (behind Queensland)

*Note: Australian football participation of less than 6 events

3.2.2 The Not-so-good News

Measures that do not compare favourably against other jurisdictions are as follows:

Measure	State Ranking
Junior Club Participation	5 th (behind Vic/WA/SA/Q)
Youth Club Participation	4 th (behind Vic/WA/SA)
Level 1 Coaches	5 th (behind Vic/Q/WA/SA)
Australian football friendly grounds	4 th (behind Vic/Q/WA/SA)

3.3 So What?

Introducing primary aged school children to sample Australian football in metropolitan Sydney via school, Auskick or promotional programs appears to be a strength.

Converting young Australian football ‘samplers’ into regular club participants with the subsequent engagement of parents, friends and colleagues has not yet been as successful.

Retention and consolidation are the challenges.

3.4 What will Success Look Like?

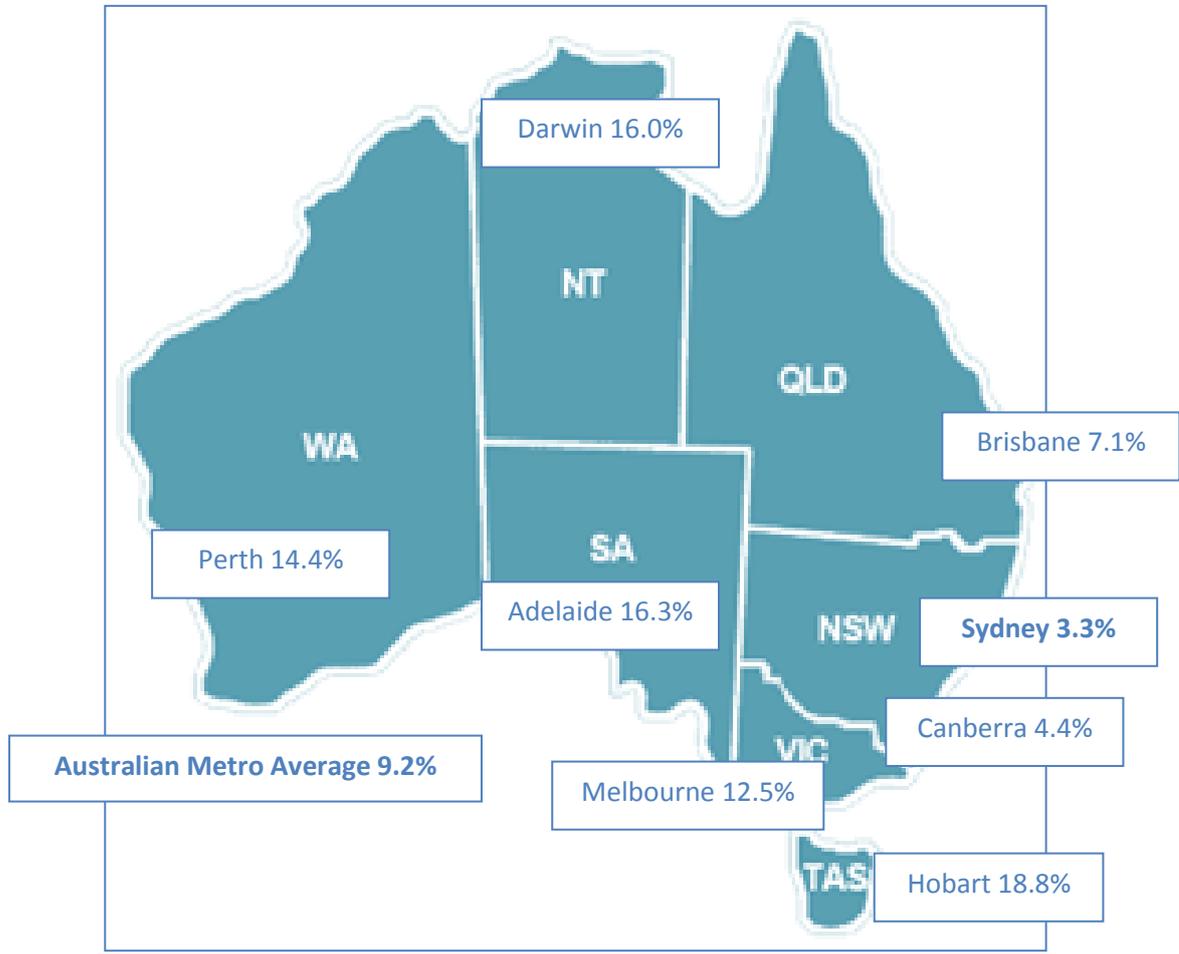
The two relevant measures of success for Australian football in Sydney and NSW/ACT are:

1. The aforementioned Street Ryan Australian Football Census compares participation levels and numbers of coaches, umpires, grounds and promotional programs across Australia. To rank in the top four must be seen as a mandatory benchmark for Australian football in NSW/ACT, with higher aspirational targets set.
2. A widely acknowledged benchmark for penetration of a product (cars, umbrellas, widgets etc) or service (health, education, utilities etc) is the per capita consumption of that product or service. Sport is no different.

Two telling statistics illustrate what success will look like in NSW and ACT if national per capita participation benchmarks can at least be met.

3.4.1 Metropolitan Success

Penetration Rate: Comparison of Male Player Participation to Metropolitan Male Population Rates (for population 5-39 years)



In the short term the Sydney metropolitan player to population penetration should match that of Brisbane; and in the long term it should match that of the national metropolitan average.

Distribution of Australian football participants compared with State Populations

	% National Popn	% National Players	
Northern Territory	1%	3%	'Punching above their weight'
Tasmania	2%	4%	
South Australia	7%	15%	
Western Australia	10%	16%	
Victoria	25%	29%	Upside / Potential
Queensland	20%	16%	
NSW / ACT	34%	17%	

Medium to long term success in NSW must resemble “Punching at our weight”.

3.4 What Next?

The following health check of the principle Australian football stakeholders in the Greater Sydney region should assist to diagnose the reasons for low per capita performance.

Attention must then turn to drafting and implementing a new AFL NSW/ACT Strategic Plan.

4. AUSKICK

4.1 Description

Auskick is Australian football's key introductory program for children aged five to eight years where they learn the fundamental skills of the game in a non-threatening, non-competitive, enjoyable environment.

In NSW and ACT, Auskick is delivered in primary schools, in after-school centres and in club based Auskick centres.



4.2 Pathway Links

Auskick 'graduates' join junior football clubs and/or PSSA school programs.

4.3 Health Check

4.3.1 Multiple Versions of Auskick

In the chase for participant numbers in NSW and ACT, a shortened and often subsidised version of Auskick has been aggressively rolled out in primary schools (In-School Auskick) and after-school centres (Community Auskick). The In-School participants have rarely elected to join an Auskick program. Their school has chosen to include an Auskick program.

Junior club feedback has indicated that the In-School and Community versions have, at times, harmed Club Auskick. Consequently, the longer term retention of entry level participants has been jeopardised in two fundamental ways, discussed shortly.

4.3.2 Skill Acquisition Focus

A peculiar aspect of the junior Sydney sport environment is that a large number of children attending a Club, In-School or Community Auskick centre have also sampled entry level programs of other sports. Soccer, rugby league and rugby union introductory programs essentially comprise modified games whereas Auskick centres concentrate on skill acquisition drills. Interviews and surveys have suggested that in Sydney there is a preference for more game based activities to complement skill based content.² The introduction of AFL 9s to augment Auskick Centres is worthy of review, as is facilitating the talented older Auskick participants to progress into local U9/U10 teams during the season.

² The trial of Inter-Auskick Centre modified 'games' is occurring in metropolitan Sydney. They cater for the 'play games' ethos adopted by the introductory programs of competing codes while also giving the opportunity for the child/parent to be immersed in their local junior club environment. The potential to retain the Auskick graduate seems greatly improved. According to the evidence of one region, who have introduced Inter-Auskick games, the retention of players from Auskick to U9s/U10s has improved from less than 25% to over 75%.

4.4 Findings

4.4.1 Role of Auskick

The Auskick program plays two vital roles in NSW and ACT:

- inspiring young girls and boys to ‘play’ Australian football, and
- engaging teachers, families and friends with Australian football.

Arguably, Auskick is the most important step in the Australian football pathway in Sydney and NSW/ACT – the recruitment step.

Within the NSW/ACT Auskick portfolio, Club Auskick (approx. 10,600 participants; 22% of total) is an elective version. Club Auskick is ‘hosted’ by junior clubs who benefit in the following three ways.

1. recruits children into their club environment,
2. recruits volunteer parents/grandparents/guardians, and
3. is financially self-sufficient at worst, and profitable at best, for the host club.

There appear two real risks when an In-School Auskick (approx. 21,700 participants; 44% of total) and Community Auskick (approx. 16,500 participants; 34% of total) are conducted in a Club Auskick catchment area.

1. children/parents who **do not** enjoy the In-School or Community Auskick program will be reluctant to sign-up with the local Club Auskick. Lack of enjoyment results from poor delivery or poor content, or both; and,
2. children/parents who **do** enjoy the In-School or Community Auskick program may feel they have ‘done’ Australian football. In fact, they have only sampled a satellite program and may not have been directed to their local Club Auskick or junior football club³.



The importance of Club Auskick was reinforced in the results of the survey of 65 Sydney Junior Club Presidents, who said the most challenging aspect is forming new entry level teams (ahead of volunteers and facilities).

³ There is a role for targeted In-School and Community Auskick programs.

In-School Auskick is most applicable when there is a good chance (75%) that Australian Football will be played in that school in years 5 and 6.

Community Auskick centres are most applicable when junior clubs do not yet exist in an area (ie parts of GWS / higher CALD or indigenous populations) Without junior clubs, Club Auskick centres do not exist. Until they do, Community Auskick centres are the sole (and expensive) means of introducing Australian Football to that population.

4.4.2 *'Ownership' of Auskick*

It appears not all junior clubs 'own' and value their Auskick centres. Some treat Auskick as an aside, run by others. The junior survey (Appendix A) found that 48% of clubs only converted less than half their Auskick participants to be club footballers.

Forward thinking, entrepreneurial junior clubs aspire to co-ordinate several, strategically located Auskick centres that operate midweek, Friday night or Sunday morning, feeding to their entry level teams. These clubs recognise the long term benefits of recruitment and retention of player and volunteer numbers that flow from well run Auskick centres.

5. JUNIOR CLUB FOOTBALL

5.1 Description

Junior club football in the Greater Sydney Region operates under the auspices of the AFL Greater Sydney Juniors (AFL GSJ). It comprises five regions in 2012, with 65 junior clubs, providing 440 teams across eight age groups (U9 to U16).

A Board, currently seven people, chaired in 2012 by John Holmquest and supported by Secretary Bob Robinson (an AFL NSW/ACT Manager, appointed to the GSJ Board) oversee the GSJ. The five regions each have a Regional Committee comprising a Chairman and between four and nine members.



5.2 Pathway Links

AFL GSJ Player intake includes:

- Auskick graduates or 'first timers' (likely to have sampled Australian football at their Primary School) join the entry level teams at U9 or U10.
- the intake into older teams (U11 to U16) are either transferring from other Sydney, intra or interstate Australian football clubs or 'first-timers', often students who have experienced Australian football in their school environment.

AFL GSJ Player output includes:

- AFL GSJ players may be selected in regional representative teams, the Swans or GIANTS Academies and AFL NSW/ACT U16 RAMS. Senior Football is the next step in their pathway.

5.3 The Facts

Participation Numbers (excluding Auskick)

Year	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
Participants	6,198	7,603	7,696	7,694	
% Increase		22%	1%	0%	
Excl. Illawarra				7,004	7,178
% Increase					2%

5.4 Health Check

It became evident early in the health check of junior metropolitan club football that there is a very uneven distribution of the junior playing population across Sydney, historically driven by demographic trends. Organic growth, or 'picking the low hanging fruit' has seen the strong Australian football areas grow further (i.e. North Shore and Eastern suburbs) but the 'untouched' regions essentially remain just that, untouched.

This situation is inhibiting overall growth as the bigger regions approach ‘saturation’ (often for facility reasons) and the ‘untouched’ regions are slow to develop a junior club infrastructure. A multi-layered approach will be needed that addresses governance, operational actions and an integrated attack on the under represented areas. The responsibility for this has to be shared between AFL NSW/ACT, the Swans and the GIANTS, summarised as an ‘all-of-AFL’ approach.

5.5 Findings

5.5.1 Governance

The AFL GSJ Board currently comprises seven active members and is reliant on its Constitution for its power, authority and duty.

The Board currently has three Executive Members and four of six Ordinary Members positions are occupied. The AFL NSW/ACT General Manager is an Honorary Member.

The composition of the Board has, overtime, deliberately shifted from Ordinary Members representing their regions to individuals offering a particular skill set, no matter their region of origin. Links to regions are facilitated by assigning a Board Member to each region as that region’s mentor.

This shift has led to three of the current seven Board members (typically of two to three years tenure) originating from Sydney North, one from each of Newcastle, Western Sydney, South Sydney and the treasurer, who has no AFL background or club connection.

It is essential that a volunteer Board be seen to be representative of **all** of its constituents and inclusive of relevant stakeholders. In this case, senior club football, AFL NSW/ACT Community Participation and ideally, School Football appear the most relevant stakeholders.

The Charter of Operations for Regional Committees states “A Regional Committee is largely responsible for the day to day management (as defined) of AFL junior football in its respective region and is subject to a degree of control and supervision by the Board....” This delegation by the Board is sound practice as *regional issues deserve regional solutions* and will be effective if all Regional Committees are proactive, representative of their clubs and outcome orientated. Interviews and surveys indicated that this might not be the case for all Regional Committees.

It appears that the range in maturity of the Regional Committees is reflective of the health of their junior football clubs. On one hand, the Sydney Harbour and City region has a stable Regional Committee that represents its clubs. It has the vast majority of AFL GSJ Junior footballers (55%; 22 clubs growing at 6% p.a.). Clubs such as Willoughby and the Maroubra Saints have their own strategic plans, marketing personnel and financial surplus. On the other hand, Western Sydney (15 clubs) and Sydney South (seven clubs), have relatively inexperienced Regional Committees, clubs who struggle to fill office bearer positions with volunteers from year to year and respective growth of 0% and 0%.

The aforementioned Charter of Operations empowers Regional Committees to tackle issues in their region. It appears not all Regional Committees are grasping the leadership available to them.

Subsequent to conducting the junior club survey and recent AFL GSJ Board discussions, the amalgamation of Sydney South and Sydney Harbour/City Regional Committees is seen as the

most efficient way to assist junior Australian football in Sydney South. It will become part of a bigger region but not necessarily alter the week to week football if northern (Harbour) and southern (City and South) competitions are formed.

Benefits of the merged Regional Committee include the alignment with the Swans Academy and removal of the need to identify Regional Committee volunteers from a seven club region, which has always been a challenge.

The AFL GSJ Board's influence on its Regional Committees should extend beyond their current ratifying of the Chair and membership⁴. The Board must also ensure they endorse the objectives and protocols of their Regional Committees while also encouraging them to proactively contribute to football in their region.

The AFL GSJ is too important to be an 'operational island' or 'silo'. It, more so than any other stakeholder, must be the custodian and another marketer of Australian football in the Greater Sydney Region. It needs to adopt a fully integrated entrepreneurial role within AFL NSW/ACT as its expertise and reach will greatly benefit Australian football outcomes in NSW and the ACT.

5.5.2 Specific Junior Club Challenges

The interview and on-line survey process revealed recurring operational challenges. These are listed below, in declining order of strategic importance.

1. Western Sydney – The Reality versus Perception Gap

The reality is that junior club maturity and participation numbers appear to have stalled. There are 6% less junior/youth players in 2012 than in 2009. The perception, however, is that the game is growing well. This perception is supported by masking low junior club numbers with Auskick numbers (Club, School and Community Auskick) and school program numbers. This optimistic, bullish perception is needed to market the game, however this perception urgently needs to be underpinned by committed junior club participants.

Interestingly, the knowledge and experience to stabilise and then increase junior club numbers in Western Sydney does exist within the AFL GSJ Board and other Regional Committees. Transferring this knowledge and experience must continue to be encouraged.

2. All Junior Clubs to embrace Club Auskick

By their own admission, only half the surveyed junior club Presidents think Auskick is their club's main recruiter.

Given the great reputation of Auskick as a recruiter, more junior clubs need to be convinced of the benefits of Auskick. The responsibility to 'sell' Auskick must sit with the AFL GSJ Board and the five Regional Committees.

In addition, the AFL NSW/ACT Auskick management need to adjust the product offered to the Sydney metropolitan market (refer Chapter 4) so that more Auskick 'graduates' progress into

⁴ To include the region's AFL NSW/ACT Manager or nominee as per the Charter.

junior club football. The five Regional Committees need to partner with Auskick co-ordinators to roll out enhanced Club Auskick centres.

3. On-line Junior player registrations/payment

So crowded is the Sydney junior sports market that any sport with poor on-line/web based presence will impede that sport.

The 2011 season, the first year of online registration, saw 15% of AFL GSJ registrations completed on-line, with significantly less payments transacted by credit card or EFT. By way of example, soccer only accepts on-line registrations.

It is essential that significant advances are made in both on-line registrations and payments. Early indications are promising with 34% of 2012 junior registrations conducted on-line, however cheque or cash payment is still needed to accompany most on-line registrations. The continued promotion of the Sportingpulse online registration and payment facility will assist further uptake.

Apart from the obvious customer service benefit of on-line registration, purer data is obtained on-line, there is less double handling of data by volunteers and debt collection virtually disappears.

4. GWS Junior Club integration with the GIANTS Academy

It is noted later, (in Chapter 7) how healthy the Swans Academy's link is becoming with their pathway junior clubs but how immature the comparable relationships are with the fledgling GIANTS Academy.

Given the strategic importance of the western and southern GSJ clubs, they must collaborate with the GIANTS Academy. Early indications (gauged from interview and survey) are that the GIANTS Academy is a competing stakeholder, more so than a value adding partner (see Chapter 7). The AFL GSJ Board and the Sydney South and Western Sydney Regional Committees have a major roll to play in improving this relationship.

5. AFL GSJ Club Integration with AFL NSW/ACT Regional Teams

Pre-empting Chapter 8, that reviews the health of AFL NSW/ACT regional teams, it must be noted that interviews and surveys revealed a misalignment of what junior clubs want from the regional teams and what AFL NSW/ACT believe they need.

Examples include:

- In-School and Community Auskick damaging Club Auskick,
- increasing the presence of Australian football in already strong primary schools when U14/U15 recruits are needed, and
- inappropriate 'front line' staff selection.

In summary, poor collaboration between some Regional Committees and AFL NSW/ACT are leading to inefficiencies and lost opportunities. Ongoing improvements are being sought, however inclusion of the region's AFL NSW/ACT Regional Manager on its Regional Committee should improve this situation.

6. Competition Formats and Retention

a. Formats for U9, U10, U11 age groups.

An age old debate rages across junior clubs about how competitive the entry level formats need to be. The national AFL directive to remove ‘competitive elements’ from these age groups, now in its third year in the AFL GSJ, was challenged in the survey of Junior Club Presidents. They cited the peculiar Sydney market, where competing sports do keep scores, have premierships and cope with winning and losing as a reason to adapt the national directive for the Sydney environment, adhering to the AFL’s “*National Objectives, Local Solutions*” philosophy. AFL 9s may have a role to play in these age groups in the Sydney environment, philosophy that seek a semi-competitive format.

b. Retention above U14

The greatest ‘retention cliff’ in GSJ football occurs from U14 to U15 age groups (-27%; 706 to 515 players in Greater Sydney). Across the five regions and their clubs many solutions are being trialled or were suggested to improve retention at this, and all other points of significant player loss. Suggestions included:



1. When numbers progressing into U15s are low, create an U16 Division 2 instead of a freestanding U15 competition. Player retention improved by up to 40% in some Western Sydney clubs when an U12 Division 2 was preferred to a new U11 competition.
2. Re-grading teams after Round 3 or 4 of the season into divisions to better cluster teams should avoid score blowouts and aid player retention.
3. Rostering Friday night fixtures for U15/U16 games, if possible.
4. Sunday junior football facilitates cross-over participants from Saturday sport (i.e from independent schools, other sports etc).

Trials such as these must be authenticated and then communicated across the AFL GSJ. To focus Regional Committees on retention, it was even suggested that one measure of the success of a Regional Committee could be the number of registered players in its competition at specific age groups (i.e. U14 and U16).

The second biggest ‘retention cliff’ is when U16 junior footballers fail to join the senior ranks. 86% of Junior Club Presidents predicted that more than half their U16 footballers will be lost from Australian Football within two years⁵.

⁵ This is not necessarily a reflection on the poor health of junior football. None the less, solutions suggested by the Club Presidents’ are worthy of further study/consideration:

- establish a geographically clustered U18s competition
- develop an U18 competition to be part of the GSJ so players dealing with HSC are not also having to transition to a senior club. (This was mentioned by nine Presidents and discussed further in Section 6.5.3); and
- play fixtures for this ‘transition age’ group on Friday night under lights wherever possible to add interest/intrigue, and, to free-up weekends.

The Club Pathway Policy and Transition Document was created by AFL Sydney to improve the links between local junior and senior clubs. The junior Presidents' survey revealed that the majority of relevant Junior Club Presidents felt their club did not understand or know about the Club Pathway Policy. The GSJ Board, through the Regional Committees must continue to ensure that such strategically important documents are widely circulated and understood.

6. SENIOR CLUB FOOTBALL

6.1 Description

Senior club football in the Greater Sydney Metropolitan area is administered by AFL Sydney, a division of AFL NSW/ACT. AFL Sydney is responsible for the governance, operations, strategy and financial management of the game which is administered by a Football Operations Manager and a Football Operations Co-ordinator. The competition comprises 30 clubs, providing 91 teams across six open aged male divisions, two U18s divisions and an open aged female division.⁶

There is no Board or steering committee. There is an Administration Committee to approve regulatory and administrative changes.



6.2 Pathway Links

AFL Sydney player intake includes:

- AFL GSJ pathway players,
- transfers from country NSW or interstate clubs,
- new players to Australian football.

AFL Sydney player output includes:

- NSW based AFL clubs (Swans and GIANTS),
- other elite AFL clubs,
- NEAFL clubs, including Sydney Hills Eagles, Sydney University teams and ACT based teams,
- intra and interstate community clubs.

6.3 The Facts

Participation Numbers

	2009	2010	2011**	2012***
Senior*	1,811	2,097	2,269	2,361
% change		+14%	+8%	+4%
U18*	610	577	645	669
% increase		-5%	+12%	+4%

Notes:

*Defined as playing at least 1 game

**Division 5 created

***Two teams elevated from AFL Sydney to NEAFL

⁶ This Health Check of Senior Club Football does not include the Women's Division, which is in its first year of integration with AFL Sydney.

6.4 Health Check

In the last three years, since divisionalisation, AFL Sydney is as stable as it has ever been. Growth in player numbers and teams, the spread of premierships across divisions and the decreasing number of game forfeits are all positive signs of the health of the competition.

2012 has seen the elevation of two premier division teams, Sydney Hills Eagles and Sydney University to join the Swans and GIANTS reserves in the NEAFL, the maturing of the Swans Academy and the launch of the GIANTS Academy. Consequently, AFL Sydney is operating in an increasingly complex football environment. It is too early to predict the cumulative effect on the health of senior football in Sydney, however, with the growth of senior numbers halving (from 8% to 4%), U18s growth dropping from 12% to 4% and significantly more 100 point victories in 2012 in U18 Division 1 and Premier Divisions, there appears good reason to maintain a watching brief.

Division	Year	% of total games won by	
		> 50 points	> 100 points
U18 Division 1	2010	47%	14%
	2011	41%	6%
	2012	47%	22%
Premier Division	2010	44%	12%
	2011	42%	9%
	2012	52%	22%

6.5 Findings

6.5.1 Governance

The simplest governance model possible is the best description of how AFL NSW/ACT manages senior club football in Greater Sydney. Two full-time employees (Manager and Co-ordinator) are accountable for strategy, planning and operations of the thirty club, ninety-one team competition. They manage the day-to-day tasks in a way respected by all the senior club Presidents interviewed and surveyed, given the resource constraints. The support of the internal Administration Committee is limited to non-strategic regulatory changes.

However, it has also become apparent that three vital areas of senior club football cannot be adequately addressed by the simple structure. These are:

- setting a strategic direction for AFL Sydney,
- setting specific directions for the diverse regions of Greater Sydney, in which most clubs are Sydney-centric while population growth is on the periphery, and
- being able to adequately engage affected stakeholders, be they the clubs, the Swans and the GIANTS, NEAFL or junior clubs.

It is unrealistic to expect a manager and his co-ordinator to autonomously address the complex, often political decisions that are sure to arise in the near future. Examples include:

- delivering the optimum geographical spread and number of teams in Premier Division,

- equitably facilitating player progression to all Sydney NEAFL teams,
- club mergers,
- accommodating 'elite' teams/players and 'participating' teams/players in the one competition, and
- amending the transition for junior players into AFL Sydney.

In summary, the senior Australian football environment in Sydney is becoming more complex. In four of the six one-on-one interviews with senior club Presidents, it was suggested that an advisory Board or steering committee would assist. It should be representative of the senior club constituents and relevant stakeholders. In this case, junior club football, the Academies and AFL NSW/ACT appear the most relevant stakeholders.

A new governance body would be responsible for deriving and driving the strategic direction for AFL Sydney (seniors and juniors) and overseeing sub-committees to address specific, strategic issues. Operational decisions remain with the Operational Managers.

6.5.2 Financial Sustainability

The cost of running a senior Sydney club is increasing at a greater rate than their incomes are increasing. Coach and player payments simply are not being matched by increased sponsorship, grants, player levies or benefactor's contributions. Consequently, more is being asked of volunteers in the fundraising area, usually on top of their football operations responsibilities.

Financial stability and sustainability was the hardest challenge listed by most Senior Club Presidents in their recent survey. Anecdotally, some were amazed at how their clubs survived from year to year.

In such a tight environment, it is rare for a club to commit time and resources to vital areas that can secure their future such as junior player development, sponsors, facilities and Municipal Council partnerships. Clubs do not appear to have time to plan their future.

6.5.3 Player Recruitment and Retention for Senior Clubs

The introduction of two new NEAFL teams has highlighted the importance of recruitment to most senior clubs. Senior Club Presidents named U18 pathway players, followed by transferring senior players from other AFL Sydney clubs, as the principle sources of new players to their club (nearly 50%).

Junior clubs are encouraged to develop links with their local senior club. The Club Pathway Policy attempts to legislate this process. However, Senior Club Presidents believe that 'cherry picking' of their best junior talent has increased. In other words, those junior and senior clubs which have diligently developed their talented players and abided by the Club Pathway Policy do not reap the fruits of their labours. This is common practice in the southern States, but rarely impacts on a whole competition. Australian football in Sydney does not yet have the depth of talented players to allow the creation of 'super teams'. This unhealthy situation is compounded by the fact that the majority of relevant Junior Club Presidents are either unaware or do not understand the Club Pathway Policy, and, of the senior clubs who responded, the majority also did not support the policy.

In summary, it appears that the Club Pathway Policy is in need of review as the senior club recruiting landscape seems to be changing⁷. This is compounded by the opinion of 40% of Senior Club Presidents who estimate that they will lose more than 50% of their U18 players list within two years. A ‘revolving door’ analogy was mentioned. U18 players join a senior club on their ‘list of 30’, while others depart at approximately the same rate.

Retention and consolidation are the challenges.

6.6.3 Western Sydney

Further to section 5.5.2 (Western Sydney – Reality vs Perception) that discussed Western Sydney’s immature junior club structure, a similar situation exists in the senior club competition. Only six of the twenty-two senior male clubs are in the strategically important Greater Western Sydney zone, providing two of the eleven Premier Division teams, Campbelltown and Sydney Hills Eagles (a NEAFL ‘reserves’ team). In the short term this is not critical, but when an increased number of GWS junior players emerge there will be a need for more, local senior clubs.



⁷ Two variations of the Club Pathway Policy emerged from the interview and survey process:

1. Fine tune the Club Pathway Policy with a ‘first right of acceptance’ from senior clubs to pathway player. Club and player have a prescribed time to make the offer and reach agreement. If there is no agreement in the time frame, the player becomes a free-trade player.
2. Convert the existing U18 Division 1 and 2 competition administered by AFL Sydney to an U18 competition with the AFL GSJ. A new U18 competition could have eight geographically spread teams, ideally with each representing a cluster of nearby junior clubs. Division 2, made up of single club U18 teams, could be split into Eastern and Western conferences of shorter seasons and local travel, ideally played on Friday nights.

7. ACADEMIES AND AFL NSW/ACT TALENT PROGRAM

SWANS ACADEMY

7.1 Description

Talent identification and the subsequent ‘fast tracking’ of junior footballers led to the establishment of the Swans Academy in 2010 with 2011 being its first full year of operation. Now in its third year, the Swans Academy adds value to players on their club pathway. Five Academy programs are in the Greater Sydney area and 4 are regionally based.

7.2 Pathway Links

Swans Academy intake includes:

- Nominations from existing junior clubs,
- Talent identified from primary school zone carnival (PSSA) and Paul Kelly Cup,
- Talent identified from AFL GSJ representative carnival, and
- Athlete Assessments – open to all children, with or without an Australian football background.



Swans Academy output includes:

- Junior club football,
- AFL NSW/ACT U16 or U18 RAMS Squads,
- AFL Sydney community clubs, and
- NEAFL clubs.

7.3 Health Check

7.3.1 Communication to Stakeholders

The Academy program has matured to be a very respected program in the metropolitan area. The interface with AFL GSJ clubs has significantly improved from its earlier, imposing stance. This is largely due to the philosophy of emphasising that Academy members should absorb themselves in their club-of-origin, in their correct age group, respecting the Academy as a value adding football supplement, not an end in itself. Interviews recommended that these attributes need to be more widely communicated. Fuller and more transparent communication of the impressive Swans Academy’s philosophies, practices and programs will further build its reputation and output.

7.3.2 Importance of Coaching

Whenever a player is involved in multiple teams or programs the co-ordination of coaching assumes great importance. Up-skilling club coaches in tandem with Academy coaches will add even greater value to Sydney club football, coaching standards and subsequent player development.

7.4 Findings

7.4.1 Academy Program Content

There is a great balance of skills and game sense training supplemented by the monthly inter-Academy games delivers the skill acquisition objective.

The 'life skills' component is equally as impressive to those interviewed.

7.4.2 Interface with Junior Clubs

Respectful co-ordination of Academy training and matches with the week-to-week club obligations is a visible sign of the Swans Academy's integration with, rather than domination of, junior club football. This integration extends to improved co-ordination of the Academy program with the GSJ's Representative carnival program. Assistance to the regional representative program was also questioned.

7.4.3 Value

The Swans Academy program is perceived as fair value at \$380 per participant, comprising 26 weeks of coaching and monthly games. Regional academies may not reflect the same perceived value.



GIANTS ACADEMY

7.5 Description

Talent Identification and fast tracking of junior footballers in the GWS zone led to the establishment of the GIANTS Academy for the 2012 seasons. In its first full year of operation, the challenges facing the GIANTS Academy significantly differ from the early years of the Swans Academy both philosophically and organisationally.



The GIANTS conduct Academy programs at 12 venues, three in outer metropolitan Sydney and nine at regional centres, from Griffith to Broken Hill, along the Victorian border and up to Nowra. Relationships also exist with regional sports academies to include Australian football. A major challenge the GIANTS Academy faces is the range of football maturity levels, from very mature along the Victorian border to immature in western Sydney. Consequently, a 'cookie cutter' Academy syllabus is inappropriate.

It appears that the principle objective of the GIANTS Academy is to identify recruits to draft for the GWS GIANTS. Altruistic objectives such as improving the standard of club football in the region and positioning Australian football as the sport of choice do not currently appear high on the agenda of the GIANTS Academy.

7.6 Pathway Links

GIANTS Academy intake includes:

- Players are nominated by junior clubs in the twelve venues,⁸ and
- Talent identification from PSSA and High School programs.

GIANTS Academy output includes:

- Junior club football,
- AFL NSW/ACT U16 or U18 RAMS Squads,
- AFL Sydney/ACT or local country senior football,
- NEAFL.

7.7 Health Check

Given the variation in maturity of their geographically spread Academy programs, it is hard to generalise about the health of the GIANTS Academy.

In the mature Australian football regions where club football is well established, the Academy augments, and does not challenge the strong, week to week club competitions.

In Greater Western Sydney, where the junior and senior club structure is immature, there is a real risk of the GIANTS Academy assuming the role of the 'super club' and undermining the

⁸ In the immature AFL areas, all registered junior AFL players are invited to GIANTS Academy trials.

week to week viability of club football, an essential component of all sustainable football environments.

7.8 The Findings

7.8.1 Program Content

The geographic spread and tight budgetary constraints have led to five week, two game programs across the 12 venues requiring 32 coaches and four Academy Managers at a cost of \$150 to each participant. Content is limited to skill acquisition sessions and game sense scenarios until centralised age group squads are formed.

In 2012, an U14 Academy squad of approximately 100 members (60 GWS / 40 country) was formed for additional training in a camp environment.

The U16 squad of 61 members and the U18 squad of 47 members receive the greatest investment per head, usually in camp environments. Up to 20% of the camp program includes life skills, including leadership, expected behaviours, public speaking and health related topics.

7.8.2 Tyranny of Distance

The opportunity to regularly bring an age group squad together is impossible for the GIANTS Academy coaching staff. The U14, U16 and U18 squad members are all schoolboys living across the south and west of NSW and the ACT.

Live in camps in school holidays present an opportunity but are expensive and lack ongoing contact. Regional coaches administering individual player programs become vital but are also relatively expensive.

7.8.3 Interface with Junior Clubs

Interviews and surveys of junior club Presidents and AFL NSW/ACT management repeatedly mentioned that they did not understand whether the GIANTS Academy is competing with, or adding value to junior club football.



The risk for the GIANTS Academy is that perception becomes reality, until proven otherwise. Comments from a number of clubs referred to a 'secret society which steals our players and coaches', regularly mention that Academy members are encouraged to gravitate to certain larger clubs, and inferred that the GIANTS Academy is only focusing on skill acquisition of the player. It is not enhancing the player's club role as a leader, mentor or even transferring new training drills to his club.

The 2011 request by the GIANTS Academy to form their own U16 team to play in AFL Sydney's U18 competition is often cited as evidence of their low respect for local club football and their desire to form 'super teams'.

The real risk in western Sydney is that if the better players, (and often their volunteer parents) are being distanced from their home club it will severely jeopardise that club's sustainability.

In summary, there is a sense that the GIANTS Academy staff do not respect the quality of junior football played in western Sydney. Somehow the stand-off has to be addressed.

7.8.4 GIANTS Academy Delivery Model

It appears that there may be duplication of effort and resources in developing talented junior footballers in GWS. Obviously, the GIANTS Academy is establishing a profile, philosophy and practice. AFL NSW/ACT's Talent Program also has a presence, as does the GSJ U13, U14 and U16 club representative programs.

Given the relatively low numbers of clubs and junior players in GWS, a solution worthy of further exploration is that instead of the GIANTS forming their own junior talent infrastructure to trial/cull /coach and develop junior talent in GWS, they outsource this to AFL NSW/ACT Talent Program. This would resemble the way the GIANTS community team outsource GWS community work to AFL NSW/ACT's community participation and engagement teams.

In affect, the GIANTS Academy could have two delivery models.

The GIANTS southern model, based out of Canberra or Albury, could 'value add' to players in a mature club environment.

The GIANTS GWS model could be outsourced to the AFL NSW/ACT Talent Program. Camps could combine both squads in readiness for the Academy Cup series.

AFL NSW/ACT TALENT PROGRAM



7.9 Description

Identifying and developing the most talented AFL footballers in NSW/ACT, culminating in the U16 and U18 RAMS teams competing in their respective national championships is the principle role of the AFL NSW/ACT Talent team. The U18 national championship is the precursor to the national draft for all AFL clubs, not just a precursor for the Swans and the GIANTS recruiting.

The identification process commences at the primary school programs (PSSA championship, Paul Kelly Cup etc) and progresses through junior club, GSJ representative and CHS schools football. The development process is, in essence, currently out sourced to the Swans and GIANTS Academies. The U16 and U18 levels culminate in the U16 and U18 Academy match series at which AFL NSW/ACT Talent Management select the RAMS U16 and U18 squads. One live in camp is held, augmented by on-line reporting.

7.10 Health Check

The health of the RAMS U16 and U18 programs is dependent on the health of the Swans and GIANTS Academies. The RAMS talent identification and development has been largely outsourced to the Academy programs.

Here in lies a subtle conflict of interest. The objective of the Academy programs is to develop talent for the Swans and GWS Giants. The objective of the RAMS U18 program is to present the best NSW U18 footballers for the national draft. In time, it is inevitable that Swans and GIANTS Academy resources will be developing more players drafted to other AFL clubs than to the Swans and GWS GIANTS clubs. The implications of this situation could vary from the GIANTS and/or Swans Academies not making project players available for RAMS selection and the national draft, to AFL NSW/ACT Talent Management not having balanced Academy squads from which to select their RAMS teams.

7.11 The Findings

7.11.1 RAMS Program Content

The program delivered by the AFL NSW/ACT Talent Program to U16 and U18 RAMS squad members is of a fine quality, from technical skills and game sense training to fitness, recovery, travel, match day coaching and administration.

7.11.2 Roles and Responsibilities

There is a risk of overlapping roles and responsibilities between AFL NSW/ACT Talent staff and Academy staff and the duplication of resources. For example, in Greater Western Sydney the AFL NSW/ACT Talent Program manager and co-ordinator are both charged with similar responsibilities as the GIANTS Academy team.

Duplication leads to inefficiency, de-motivation and confusion from both internal and external perspectives. This perceived duplication could also be occurring outside the Sydney metropolitan area (beyond the scope of this study) and needs to be addressed.

8. AFL NSW/ACT REGIONAL TEAMS

8.1 Description

AFL NSW/ACT exists to promote and develop interest and participation in Australian football in NSW and the ACT from grass roots to senior community competition level.



Comprising approximately 90 full-time staff and up to 200 part-time staff, AFL NSW/ACT provides the strategic direction and resources to marshal Australian football's volunteer workforce in NSW and the ACT.

The regional teams are those closest to the community football customer. Their field staff are the 'front-of-house' staff often creating the consumer's first impressions of Australian football.

8.2 Health Check

This health check covers the Sydney Harbour and Illawarra regions and the diverse GWS region, but aspects may be relevant to the 4 country regions.

The regional teams deliver or assist volunteers to deliver the programs owned by the program managers (ie. Auskick, AFL 9s, School Visits, CALD and Indigenous programs etc).

The competency of delivery is directly related to the competence of field staff.

Unsatisfactory delivery occurs when there is poor staff selection, poor induction and training, unclear lines of communication and minimal feedback. Enthusiasm soon disappears, resulting in unsuitable staff creating the first impressions of Australian football.

8.3 The Findings

8.3.1 Delivery of School Programs

The third most desired improvement that club Presidents wanted to see in their Australian football landscape was "improved quality of AFL NSW/ACT school and club programs (content and/or staff delivery)."

When interviewed and surveyed, they emphasised that there is a considerable range of AFL NSW/ACT field staff competencies, suggesting delivery rather than content is where there is room for improvement.⁹

⁹ There are three staffing models used to mobilise field staff in sporting organisations:

1. Model 1: has many casual employees paid at entry level wages as performing menial tasks. Staff turnover is high. The benefits of reaching many customers may be mitigated by uncommitted delivery.
2. Model 2: has fewer staff, each paid more to be accountable for planning and delivering agreed outcomes. The 'reach' is less than for Model 1, but the quality of delivery should be higher.
3. Model 3: outsources the field work to private providers who mobilise staff to deliver prescribed tasks.

AFL NSW/ACT's drive to increase participation numbers has favoured Model 1. Model 2 invests more time into recruitment and training of fewer staff, and is worth investigating. Model 3 is also worthy of investigation when a geographical area is to be targeted for recruitment.

8.3.2 *Accountability and Profile*

Junior and senior club Presidents surveyed felt that field staff must be accountable for their outcomes; the inference being that to ‘tick-the-boxes’ will not advance the development of Australian football.

A similar number emphasised that their club was not familiar enough with their AFL NSW/ACT Regional team. Further work is needed at the micro level to establish whether this is the club not engaging with a well profiled team or the team lacking profile.



9. CONCLUSION

Australian football in the Greater Sydney Region is reasonably healthy, with all stakeholders diligently addressing their operational issues.

AFL NSW/ACT's matrix structure of regional teams delivering programs owned by program teams is appropriate. In football jargon, the team structure is fine but an improved 'game plan' is needed.

The new 'game plan', to be outlined in the next AFL NSW/ACT Strategic Plan needs to:

- improve collaboration within the matrix of teams and with external stakeholders;
- prioritise the big, measurable outcomes; and
- reallocate existing resources to facilitate the big outcomes and reduce duplication.

APPENDIX A – JUNIOR CLUB SURVEY

APPENDIX B – SENIOR CLUB SURVEY