

Opening Statement to the Community Affairs Legislation Committee

Australian Sports Commission

27 October 2020

The Australian Sports Commission is pleased to appear before the Community Affairs Legislation Committee today.

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented challenges for Australian sport, as it has for many parts of our society and we've been thankful for the ongoing Australian Government support provided to the sport sector through this period.

COVID-19 has impacted how active Australians are and how they engage with sports. The latest research results from our national AusPlay survey shown that participation in sport plummeted through the early phases of COVID-related restrictions. Thankfully, this lack of activity has been somewhat offset by participation in accessible forms of physical activities like walking and bike riding. Through this period sports have explored innovative ways to connect with their participants, members and fans, especially through online engagement. But without people and teams playing sport regularly in 2020, the impacts across the sector have been felt deeply.

COVID-19 has had a significant financial impact on our National Sporting Organisations and National Sporting Organisations for People with Disability, particularly the parts of those organisations related to community-based participation, member services and organisational development. Sport Australia has consulted with sports on financial challenges, guiding them through the available Australian Government stimulus packages, as well as facilitating regular financial workshops to provide ongoing financial advisory assistance and create a collegiate forum for finance staff across NSOs and NSODs. We estimate our funded Olympic, Paralympic and Commonwealth Games sports have received at least \$17 million in financial support via JobKeeper and the cash flow boost to the end of September 2020. This has been vital to stabilising the financial positions of many sports and saving jobs. We have also provided financial flexibility and certainty for our sporting organisations through targeted initiatives, including allowing the repurposing of unspent Core Participation Funding towards maintaining organisational and workforce capability and allowing the carry-over of High Performance funding unused in 2019-20 to 2020-21 to support preparations for the delayed Tokyo 2020 Games and Commonwealth Games in 2022.

COVID-19 has also impacted high performance sport around the country and, indeed, the globe, with the postponement of the Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games. Social distancing requirements and restrictions on domestic and international travel have disrupted the meticulous preparations of athletes and teams in many ways, with the Australian Institute of Sport (AIS) reporting an increase in referrals to its mental health referral network for both athletes and high performance staff through this period.

As well as supporting elite athletes and support staff, the AIS has also played a key role in the Government's COVID-19 Sport and Health Advisory Committee, which is chaired by AIS Chief Medical Officer Dr David Hughes. The AIS published its *Framework for rebooting sport in a COVID-19 environment* (the first of its kind to be published anywhere in the world) and is working with sports, the National Institute Network, the Australian Olympic Committee, Paralympics Australia, Commonwealth Games Australia and government stakeholders to help sports minimise risks associated with international travel and streamline the administrative burden of such travel on public health authorities and Australian Border Force staff.

Meanwhile, the operations of the AIS facilities in Canberra have also been impacted. Closure of the AIS during the initial stages of the COVID-19 response impacted bookings for elite sports camp activities and commercial operations. There has also been a period of approximately three months of very limited operations. The AIS facilities have been managed carefully to ensure strict alignment with public health directions to maintain the safety of staff and patrons, and recently the AIS returned over 160 athletes to the site. As some borders have reopened there is expected to be significant bookings for sports to access the AIS facilities in preparation for the deferred Tokyo Olympic/ Paralympic Games.

The impacts of COVID-19 have reinforced why we continue to focus on supporting sports to build their capability and governance models. A wonderful example is our current work with the National Sporting Organisations for People with Disability sector. In November 2019, for the first time, the nine Sporting Organisations for People with Disability formalised a partnership to embed cooperative practices, while also retaining the individual identities of each specialised organisation. They have worked together in the best interest of providing sporting opportunities for the five million Australians with a disability.

Another critical project we led this year was the development of a *Return to Sport Toolkit*, based on the AIS's framework and applicable to sports at every level. The Toolkit was aimed at supporting our administrators, many of them volunteers, to put plans in place for a safe return to sport.

Thank you to everyone who contributes to Australian sport. Keep playing, keep volunteering, and keep contributing in whatever way you can. As we emerge from this challenging year, sport will again play a prominent role in lifting the nation's energy and spirits.

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