



5 May 2023

Committee Secretary  
Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital and External Territories  
PO Box 6021  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

By electronic lodgement

Dear Madam / Sir

**Inquiry into fostering and promoting the significance of Australia's National Capital– Australian Rugby League Commission / National Rugby League Response**

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in the consultation process which forms part of the Inquiry into fostering and promoting the significance of Australia's National Capital. This submission is a response from the Australian Rugby League Commission Limited (ARLC) and the National Rugby League Limited (NRL) with input from two key stakeholders, the Canberra Raiders Pty Ltd and Canberra District Rugby League Football Club Ltd.

We have responded to the ToR as we have intimate experience of sporting facilities across the nation and indeed the world. We would like to highlight key insights and also convey our desire to be a partner in discussions on critical national infrastructure.

We would like to highlight the role of sport in maintaining the currency and vibrancy of Australia's national capital. We would also emphasise the role of facilities in raising the profile of the ACT and Canberra nationally. We have a recent case study in Townsville that illustrates the importance of well-designed state of the art facilities and the role they play in economic development, engendering civic pride and forming regional identity.

**1. Rugby league in Australia in 2023**

The ARLC is the controlling body of the game of rugby league in Australia. In addition to organising and conducting the elite NRL Premiership and the State of Origin series, the primary objects of the ARLC include,

*"...to foster, develop, extend and provide adequate funding for the Game from junior to elite levels and generally to act in the best interests of the Game;*

*...to promote and encourage either directly or indirectly the physical, cultural and intellectual welfare of young people in the community, in particular the rugby league community... (and)*

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*...to promote and encourage either directly or indirectly sport and recreation, particularly rugby league football, in the interests of the social welfare of young persons."*

The ARLC is a not-for profit company limited by guarantee. All revenues generated by the ARLC (from the licensing of media rights and other sources) are directed back into the sport, either by way of distribution to its members (the 17 NRL Clubs, NSW Rugby League, Queensland Rugby League) or other investments in the game including grassroots participation and community programs

The Canberra Raiders are an Australian professional rugby league football club based in the ACT. They have primary serviceable area across the Canberra Region that extends nearly 60,000sqm and covers a combined population of ~950,000, from ACT, west to the Riverina, east to Batemans Bay, south to Albury and Bega and north through to Bathurst and Orange (i.e. Capital Region). The Canberra Raiders have competed in the NRL Premiership since 1982, and excitingly in 2023 the club will enter the National Rugby League Women's (NRLW) competition. They are based at their high-performance facility in Braddon ACT, which doubles as administration headquarters of the Canberra District Rugby League.

The Canberra District Rugby League Football Club Limited (CDRL), who are the sole shareholder of the Canberra Raiders, foster and promote the game of rugby league across the Capital Region. They administer amateur aspects of rugby league – participation and development – and strive to increase participation, inclusion, and diversity in local sport at all levels. The CDRL advocates and innovates to create a better rugby league experience for all and is committed to improving Capital Region communities.

## **2. The role of sport in Australia's identity**

Sport plays a major role in our nation's identity. Many would go as far as to say that it defines our identity. Australians love sport, both as participants and spectators. We watch, play and attend sporting events as part of our everyday life, enjoying time with family, friends and teammates.

We celebrate our successful athletes as role models and heroes. We are divided when they are seen to not live up to Australian values that we share such as fair play, having a go and being a 'good sport'. Our sporting heroes are household names and often live on in hearts and minds long after they are gone.

Sport has the power to unite us as a nation, both in defeat and triumph. It is the topic of office chit-chat, family discussion and pub banter. It draws us together in its many forms and gives us a sense of belonging and community. It helps us to tell stories, share truths and find common ground.

Sport is an extension and reflection of Australia society...

*"Australian identity, and myth making, frequently finds expression in sporting achievement. "Fair play", "punching above our weight", "having a go", "triumph in the face of adversity", "dignity in the face of defeat", "sport as social leveller": we like to see these as values that encapsulate who we are, both on, and off, the sporting field"*

Paul Barclay, ABC RN, (22 August 2016)

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**3. Requirements for the National Institutions to convey a dynamic, representative national story**

Across the nation, infrastructure contributes directly to a dynamic and representative national narrative. Venues across Australia have played a role in delivering events that build sporting identity and achievements.

The national institutions located in Canberra play a key role in providing identity and pride for all Australians. Arguably, infrastructure such as stadiums and sporting facilities in the nation's capital have lagged behind cultural assets.

Stadiums and associated local facilities enable our nation to unite and celebrate our sporting success and national identity. Stadiums are the stage, the arena.

Increasingly, stadiums must be fit for purpose and provide the opportunity for our national teams to showcase Australia's sporting excellence and identity. They must offer amenities and experiences that compete with the comfort of home and attract vibrant and engaged audiences. They must cater to the needs of both fans and players, with world-class performance and athlete facilities that allow players to perform at their best. They must be located in accessible areas, with established and efficient transport options. They must be 'connected' and boast first-class technology infrastructure and capability. Stadiums themselves can become a source of pride for communities, a nation and can influence a sport's decision to host a major event in a certain location.

**4. Importance of Australia's national capital in highlighting sporting, cultural and tourism potential and it's symbolic importance**

A national capital holds a critical responsibility in promoting a country's sporting, cultural, and tourism potential. Not only does it serve as the physical location for the federal government, but it also serves as the cornerstone for a country's representation. In relation to this Inquiry, Canberra must fulfil its role as a national symbol. To accomplish this, it is essential for the city to have adequate stadium infrastructure, especially in relation to rugby league, to showcase Australia and our national identity to the rest of the world.

As stated earlier, sports serve as a crucial component in defining Australia's identity, and there's no better way to promote our national identity and showcase our potential than by promoting representative national sporting teams. In rugby league, this includes the Kangaroos (Australian Men's team), Jillaroos (Australian Women's team), Pacific Nations teams (e.g. Tonga, Samoa, Fiji and PNG), and our Indigenous All Stars Men's and Women's teams. These teams exhibit their talents on the global stage every year through internationals, test matches, and the Indigenous All Stars versus Maori All Stars matches. Integral to this promotion, is having a fit for purpose stadium.

Furthermore, the NRL boasts several other major events including Magic Round, State of Origin and the Men's and Women's Final Series and Grand Final. These events garner international recognition and consistently draw large crowds, both in-person and through broadcast viewership.

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The NRL works closely with governments (State and Local) and stadiums nationwide to ensure these events are not only staged in world-class facilities, but they are given the best opportunity to highlight our sporting and event potential and brilliance. The events are unique to Australia and promote what it is to be Australian.

Sports possess a distinctive capability to promote not only a town, city, or country's sporting potential, but also its cultural and tourism potential. The significant events mentioned earlier are cultural spectacles in their own right. Sport is a reflection of society, of our culture and a sporting event not only exhibits sporting potential 'on the field', but also our nations cultural potential in the coming together, sharing of experience and deeper connection that the event generates 'off the field'.

Stadium infrastructure is just one of the many means by which a country can demonstrate its cultural identity. However, other institutions, such as museums, galleries, and archives, also have a significant role to play. The Australian Sports Museum, which is presently located at the Melbourne Cricket Ground, is a prime example of this. While the MCG is an iconic national symbol in and of itself, some argue that a nation's capital should take the lead in commemorating and preserving the role of sports in Australian society. A collaboration between a stadium in a nation's capital and a national institution would be an appropriate and exciting way to highlight Australia's sporting and cultural potential.

Likewise, hosting a major sporting event, specifically an NRL Major event, highlights the tourism potential of a location. The economic and tourism benefits of major events are well-documented. They attract visitors, encourage overnight stays, and when held repeatedly in the same location, can promote habitual travel. A major event can be utilised by a nation, state, or territory to promote the location more widely. It will attract new visitors while also enticing previous visitors to return and explore the location further, beyond the sporting event itself. Additionally, the event is broadcasted to a global audience, showcasing packed stadiums, iconic landmarks, and unique offerings.

As the heart of Australia and as the nation's capital, Canberra should have the capacity to host nationally significant NRL events such as Internationals and the Indigenous All Stars. However, the current stadium infrastructure, amenities, and location make it impossible to achieve this objective.

This is a similar situation for the Canberra Raiders. They have an impressive history both on and off the playing field, six Grand Final appearances in 41 seasons (including 3 Premierships) and unmatched innovation in terms of sports presentation (e.g., iconic Viking Clap). However, the Club cannot realise their full potential (or exhibit their regional pride) because of the standard of GIO Stadium Canberra, the only venue they can use for their home fixtures

Athlete and fan experience are integral to the overall success of an event. The expectation of attendees and athletes at stadiums has increased significantly over the past decade. With the recent development of Commbank Stadium and Allianz Stadium in Sydney and Queensland Country Bank Stadium in Townsville, the benchmark for these elements has reached a new high.

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## **5. Current Stadium Infrastructure and Best Practice**

GIO Stadium Canberra has been home to the Canberra Raiders since 1990 and has served the region adequately, despite originally opening in the late 1970's as an Athletics meet venue within the Australian Institute of Sport (AIS) precinct. Unfortunately, the venue no longer meets a best practice standard for stadium and sporting event delivery and infrastructure revitalisation is needed. Consequently, the competitive position of Canberra as a possible sporting event destination has been impacted, and the deteriorating facilities will further affect the sustainability of the Canberra Raiders that use the venue for their NRL Premiership and NRLW Premiership games.

From an NRL major event perspective, the venue no longer meets best practice in terms of fan experience, athlete experience, high performance facilities, connectivity and technology, transportation and location. Despite the natural alignment to host significant national matches in Canberra, the lack of significant investment in stadium infrastructure has made the region uncompetitive for hosting such events.

When evaluating the suitability of a location and venue for an NRL major event, several factors are considered. Unfortunately, GIO Stadium Canberra falls short in two crucial areas compared to other venue options: the quality of experience for athletes and fans and commercial viability.

In representative rugby league, it's crucial to provide players with superior high-performance facilities that enable them to prepare before and recover after matches. This is considered a non-negotiable aspect for players to perform at their best and represent the nation effectively. To achieve this, adequate facilities like a warm-up area, recovery wet area with hot and cold options, medical room, team meeting room, property room, player strapping room, and drug testing room are essential. These facilities should cater to both home and away sides and be gender-inclusive, providing the same quality and quantity of facilities for both male and female athletes. These facilities should allow for a seamless transition with minimal barriers and be spacious enough to accommodate 30+ athletes comfortably. Unfortunately, GIO Stadium Canberra lacks these facilities, either entirely or in quality and quantity and with the current lack of female facilities, scheduling premier female and male events in Canberra has become unfeasible for the NRL.

Across all major events, the NRL focuses on fan experience to drive attendance. A venue must offer various elements such as comfortable seating with optimal sightlines, a range of food and beverage options, top-tier corporate facilities, advanced technology (audio, big screen, Wi-Fi, etc.), accessible amenities (parking, seating, restrooms, transportation), and complete digital integration for an engaging game day experience. However, GIO Stadium Canberra falls short in several areas that are critical to hosting an NRL Major event. Specifically, it has inadequate connectivity and technology, subpar corporate facilities compared to other venues, and insufficient undercover accessible seating, leading fans to opt for watching the game from home instead of enduring the discomfort of a cold and wet stadium seat. Match attendee access is also compromised when approaching the venue and once inside, concerns are held by both the NRL and Canberra Raiders in respect to patron safety and satisfaction.

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In terms of enhancing fan experience, the location of a venue and its accessibility through public transportation are crucial factors. Modern stadium planning considers the entire match day experience, including pre-match, during the game, and post-match activities. Fans' enjoyment of the event, their accessibility to dining and entertainment, and how they travel to and from the venue all impact their overall experience, which may influence their attendance at future events. Unfortunately, the location of GIO Stadium Canberra in Bruce, away from the city centre and any active commercial precinct, makes it difficult to provide a satisfactory end-to-end fan experience, even with reliable transportation networks.

Another essential element closely linked to fan experience is the commercial opportunity a venue provides. This encompasses the ability to sell tickets within the stadium and the premium corporate hospitality offerings available. If the fan experience does not meet a certain standard, it can be challenging to sell out events and obtain the best possible commercial return, particularly in terms of premium corporate hospitality. The NRL will always consider the commerciality of the venue when assessing its suitability for hosting major events.

When evaluating minimum venue requirements for NRL Major Events, the elements needed for an appropriate level of fan and athlete experience are critical. Unfortunately, GIO Stadium Canberra no longer meets these requirements. While some issues may be remedied through a stadium redevelopment, the current venue location will always be a significant challenge.

## **6. Future Stadium Infrastructure**

To attract national events and gain international recognition as the capital city of Australia, Canberra requires a new national stadium. Interestingly, Walter Burley Griffin even referenced this in his original 'Plan for Canberra'. While the essential features of a modern stadium have been identified, the biggest constraint remains the location of GIO Stadium Canberra. Investing in the current stadium may solve some deficiencies, but a stadium in Canberra's central business district is necessary to fully benefit tourism, the economy, community pride, and cultural connection.

A national stadium that showcases national significance should be located in a central business district. Best practice planning for modern stadiums involves integrating them into an active precinct, with proximity to commercial hubs and multiple transportation options. This allows for maximum utilisation of the services the CBD has to offer, including accommodation, transportation/parking, hospitality, and shopping. Not only does this improve the fan experience, but it generates additional economic benefits for the city.

In terms of business and community benefits, locating a stadium in the CBD can provide several advantages, including but not limited to:

- Increased revenue from pre- and post-match spending on hospitality and other activities
- Improved access to public transportation to attend matches and events, as existing networks often prioritise connectivity to the CBD
- Enhanced media coverage and a better image of the location on TV and other platforms
- Improved accessibility to the airport and the ability to walk to most hotels, thus enhancing the visitor experience

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- Improved road networks around the venue, resulting in reduced congestion during events
- More parking options due to the proximity to the CBD
- Serves as a major catalyst for CBD development and revitalization
- Greater opportunities to facilitate new and alternative uses of the venue to maximise utilisation
- Enhanced visibility of current and former sporting role models, either in person or through public art (e.g. Laurie Daley and Mal Meninga statues)

To assess the potential for a new stadium in Canberra, it is useful to compare it to similar stadiums in comparable locations. Queensland Country Bank Stadium, located in Townsville, is one such example

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## Townsville Stadium - A Case Study

OPENED IN 2020

COLLABORATION BETWEEN LEVELS OF GOVERNMENT

A HOME FOR NRL MAJOR EVENTS

MULTI-USE - SHOWCASES SPORTING, CULTURAL AND MUSIC EVENTS

Although Canberra and Townsville may differ in terms of climate and geography, they share a number of similarities:

- Both cities serve not only the immediate city area, but regions beyond, such as Mount Isa, Mackay and Cairns surrounding Townsville, Wagga Wagga, the NSW South Coast and Goulburn surrounding Canberra
- They have similar populations, and have access to the people in regions that surround them
- They have 1 NRL and NRLW sporting entity that call them home – The Cowboys in Townsville and the Raiders in Canberra
- Each city experiences climate conditions that affect people's willingness to attend a sporting event – high temperatures and wind in Townsville, low temperatures in Canberra
- Community rugby league in both cities is well established and experiencing participation rate growth
- Appetite for city regeneration and the re-establishment of a city identity exists
- The previous Townsville Stadium – 1330Smiles Stadium, was located on the outskirts of the city, with similar issues to GIO Stadium Canberra such as poor access to public transport and amenities.

Queensland Country Bank Stadium opened in February 2020 and was a \$293.5 million joint project funded by the Queensland Government, Australian Government and Townsville City Council. It was also supported by the National Rugby League and the North Queensland Cowboys Rugby League Club.

The stadium was built with the intention of being a crucial part of a broader urban revitalization initiative in the region, and its proximity to the city centre made it an ideal location for this purpose.

The size and the features of Queensland Country Bank Stadium lends itself to an ideal case study for a new National Stadium in the Canberra CBD

- Seating for 25,000 – similar to what has been proposed in Canberra
- A roof design inspired by the local area, which covers 80 percent of the seating and is designed to resist cyclonic wind conditions – an 'all weather stadium' with seating and viewing comfort
- Sports lighting incorporated into the stadium roof, eliminating the need for light towers
- 11,000 square metres of specialised 'Ready to Play' turf
- A 200m<sup>2</sup> scoreboard, featuring 365mm square LED panels
- 29 permanent general admission food and beverage outlets (including 17 on the main concourse level)

([www.queenslandcountrybankstadium.com.au](http://www.queenslandcountrybankstadium.com.au))

Of particular relevance to this Inquiry is the fact that Queensland Country Bank Stadium embodies the features that the NRL deems necessary for hosting major NRL events. These features include its location in the Townsville CBD, its use of state-of-the-art technology, its excellent transportation connections, its comfortable seating, protected from adverse weather conditions, and its best-practice high-performance facilities. Since the Stadium was developed, the NRL has hosted several major events in Townsville, with more planned for the future.





## **7. Conclusion**

It could be argued that Canberra is currently perceived as a large regional centre rather than a proud, innovative, and vibrant national capital city that can effectively showcase Australia's potential in sports, tourism, and culture. To change this perception, it is critical to invest in quality infrastructure, specifically an iconic National Stadium.

Australia's capital city should be home to sporting contests and, in particular, rugby league events of national significance, that reflect and promote Australia's character, values and identity and draw international recognition. In rugby league, these events consist of International's featuring our Men's and Women's teams or our NRL Indigenous All Stars, one of our annual marquee events with deep cultural ties that make it so much more than just a game of rugby league. Sporting events are unique as they not only allow a city or nation to promote their sporting potential, but also their cultural and tourism potential.

Canberra's proximity to many regional towns in Southern NSW and Northern Victoria make it an attractive proposition for domestic visitation, and the modern airport which now boasts both domestic and international flights provide interstate and overseas opportunity.

GIO Stadium Canberra and the Nation's Capital have lost their appeal as being a potential location for rugby league events of national significance and no longer fit-for-purpose. They will, therefore, be overlooked in favour of venues such as Queensland Country Bank Stadium in Townsville and Commbank Stadium in Sydney.

## **8. Further information**

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in the consultation process. We are happy to provide further information or answer questions regarding any matters raised in this submission. Should you require any further information please contact:

Jessica Goddard: NRL General Manager, Government Partnerships

Don Furner: CEO Canberra Raiders and Canberra Region Rugby League

Or myself, Andrew Every: Executive General Manager – Strategy and Transformation

Yours sincerely,

Andrew Every  
Executive General Manager – Strategy and Transformation

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