



EXAMINING THE HEALTH AND SOCIAL IMPACT OF PARTICIPATION IN CRICKET FOR PEOPLE WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES

AN EVALUATION OF THE MELBOURNE
ALL ABILITIES CRICKET ASSOCIATION

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

In September 2015, Cricket Victoria recognised the Melbourne All Abilities Cricket Association (MAACA) as their 77th association. Cricket Victoria and MACCA are now providing opportunities for people with an intellectual disability to play in a regular, structured and organised cricket competition, moving from sampling to sustainability. MAACA commenced its fourth season of cricket in 2018 and has grown from five clubs in the first year to 13 clubs in the 18/19 cricket season. The Association facilitates two divisions that provide opportunities for participation based on levels of functionality. Higher ability players participate in a Super League that generally replicates the format of mainstream cricket, whilst players with more complex needs can participate in a Ten Over Tonk, a competitive format that offers greater levels of flexibility in relation to equipment, number of players and rules. In March 2019, Cricket Victoria commissioned researchers from Monash University's Faculty of Education to undertake an evaluation of the work of MAACA.

The evaluation responded to three key research questions:

1. What are the experiences of people with disabilities and their families of participating in MAACA?
2. How have clubs facilitated these experiences? and?
3. How do they anticipated the Association will develop in the future?

EVALUATION APPROACH

The evaluation adopted a mixed method approach, utilising telephone interviews with MAACA administrators and club volunteers, surveys with players and face-to-face interviews or focus groups with players and their families. In total, the research team undertook 11 telephone interviews with club based volunteers and conducted interviews or focus groups with 15 players three of which identified as women. Five parents also took part in the focus groups. 32 players responded to the survey across 6 clubs with an estimated response rate of 26%.

Telephone interviews with club volunteers sought to examine why and how disability provision had been established at the interviewee's club, the type of model that the club had developed to facilitate participation, the perceived impacts for players, volunteers and the club more broadly as well as anticipated future directions and opportunities for development. The player surveys and interviews focused on impact of participation across the dimensions of physical, mental and social health. The research project was granted ethics approval from Monash University Human Ethics Committee. To meet ethical obligations, the research team has sought to de-identify all participants within the report, identifying them as MAACA representatives, club volunteer or player.

KEY FINDINGS

The first section of findings outlines the impact on players and their families/carers and the impact of All Abilities sections on the broader cricket club environment.

EXPERIENCES OF ALL ABILITIES PLAYERS

The majority of players considered that participating in All Abilities cricket had provided them with numerous benefits. The opportunity to play cricket and to be able to do so within the competitive system that MAACA facilitated was highly valued. The survey findings and player interviews outlined a number of physical, mental and social benefits associated with their participation. In terms of physical benefits, players felt they were more physically active because of their participation. Players also experienced a number of psychological and emotional benefits from their involvement, including enhanced feelings of wellbeing, increases in self-confidence and self-esteem. Cricket also facilitated the development of meaningful social connections for players. Interviewees suggested that cricket afforded players a space where they could be independent and engage in social interactions that were not dictated by carer/client relationships that tended to dominate other aspects of their lives.

EXPERIENCES OF CRICKET CLUBS

The development of MAACA and All Abilities sections has positively impacted clubs and their members. The volunteers all discussed the personal satisfaction and 'feel good' factor they gained from organising and facilitating participation for people with intellectual disabilities. The All Abilities teams were felt to help clubs create an inclusive, supportive and family friendly culture and embrace other forms of diversity. The development of All Abilities teams had also facilitated meaningful contact between mainstream players and people with disabilities. There were also several practical benefits of having an All Abilities team, including increased club profile leading to greater membership and revenue.

CHALLENGES AND TENSIONS

MANAGING COMPETITION

Clubs and volunteers at times struggled to navigate the balance between performance and participation outcomes. The development of two divisions within MAACA has provided an important mechanism to support clubs to manage this tension and allow individuals with a range of abilities the opportunity to experience structured cricket. Volunteers and players appreciated the greater levels of flexibility afforded in the Ten over Tonk and the opportunity to let all players participate. However, several discussed how the Super League had developed to become a similar level to lower tier mainstream cricket with some teams continually playing their high ability 'best players' to ensure competitive success. Several club volunteers indicated there was a danger at their club that, similar to mainstream cricket, the 'most able' players would be given priority and those with more diverse abilities would fall away due to lack of competitive opportunities. The perceived over competitiveness of the Super League was also reflected in complaints by the players about sledging,

both within and across teams. Unsurprisingly players suggested this was their least favourite aspect of cricket. Some clubs had sought to manage the competitive challenges by supporting high ability players to transition into mainstream teams and open up their Super League team to players of more diverse abilities. However, some players struggled to cope with the social interactions and expectations of mainstream cricket. Additionally, mainstream teams were not always welcoming.

MANAGING CHALLENGING BEHAVIOUR

Players and volunteers suggested an ongoing challenge was managing the behaviour needs of some All Abilities players. The club volunteers suggested some players could become aggressive and volatile. Club volunteers discussed having to be vigilant around more vulnerable players who could potentially be manipulated by more high functioning players. Club volunteers would seek guidance from the players and their families as to the best ways to manage trigger points. Consideration of how to better support the education of volunteers through resources, guidance and access to training was thought to be important moving forward and critical in overcoming some of the resistance clubs might have to establishing an All Abilities section.

MODELS AND APPROACHES TO ALL ABILITIES CRICKET

The clubs adopted different models and approaches to supporting All Abilities cricket. All had offered provision for many years but volunteers suggested that MAACA had assisted in formalising All Abilities opportunities and offering an ongoing competitive structure. Some felt this had enabled All Abilities teams to gain some legitimacy within their club because it was no longer just about people with disabilities engaging in one off carnivals and short term training opportunities. How integrated All Abilities teams are within clubs varies considerably. Some clubs had successfully supported full integration but some clubs operate segregated models where the All Abilities team has little contact or connection to the mainstream club. Although all club volunteers were happy with the development of their teams, those with closer ties to the mainstream club reported having greater access to resources and more volunteering support.

THE IMPORTANCE OF AN ALL ABILITIES 'CHAMPION'

All clubs had identified champions who worked extensively to develop and maintain the team. At some clubs, where much of the work was done by a single individual, there was concern about ongoing viability and what would happen if they stepped down or left the club. For these champions MAACA had provided an important avenue for support and advice and one that they highly valued. Some club volunteers contended that those who held both club and MAACA roles were particularly overburdened and suggested that ideally MAACA should gain funding for a paid administrator to support the administration, organisation and promotion of the league. Many of the clubs emphasised the value of having a person involved with a detailed understanding of communicating and working with people with disabilities and these individuals continually shared their knowledge and offered support to other volunteers.

DEVELOPMENT OF MAACA AND ALL ABILITIES CRICKET

The club volunteers acknowledged that much of their efforts and those involved in the MAACA administration was focused on establishing and maintaining the league and where possible adding to the number of teams involved. They suggested beyond this there had been little strategic direction and promotion of the league despite the many positive impacts it was achieving. Clubs felt that there were obvious avenues for development including the establishment of youth teams and separate provision/opportunities for women, recruiting more mainstream clubs to establish All Abilities teams and looking to extend the MAACA model to regional areas.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The evaluation findings suggest that opportunities facilitated by MAACA and affiliated clubs are providing numerous positive benefits for players, their broader family and club members more broadly.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are based on the evaluation findings

- The evaluation reinforces the need for promotion and marketing of the achievements of MAACA to encourage further external funding and sponsorship. Of particular importance is a website and social media presence that can showcase player and club experiences (possibly through short videos) and include guides and information on establishing All Abilities teams.
- Clubs require support in accessing disability specific education, particularly around managing diverse behavioural needs and facilitating positive relationships between players. It would be valuable if Cricket Victoria/MAACA could provide guidance on where this could be accessed.
- Recruitment of volunteers to support All Abilities section is critical. As cricket specific knowledge seems less relevant than disability expertise it may be valuable for Cricket Victoria to explore options of how clubs could recruit volunteers who may not have a specific interest in sports clubs volunteering but would like to support disability provision.
- MAACA clubs are a valuable community of practice holding considerable collective knowledge of how to establish and develop disability provision. In seeking to promote the work of MAACA and encourage other clubs to establish teams, it is important to leverage this knowledge and facilitate opportunities for MAACA clubs to share their learning. Some volunteers were enthusiastic to contribute to information sessions to encourage new clubs to become involved.
- It would be valuable to consider how MAACA could cater to the group of players whose ability currently falls between the Super League and the Ten over Tonk. It may be that this requires clubs to be more accommodating of high ability, competitive players within their lower grade mainstream teams allowing the Super League to cater for a middle tier of players.
- The evaluation suggests there is a desire and need to develop opportunities for women only (as opposed to the current mixed gender approach), young people and extend to regional areas. These extensions are currently beyond the scope of MAACA to undertake independently and would require support and resources from Cricket Victoria. Consideration needs to be given in any strategic planning as to whether these developments are feasible and how they would be resourced and supported.

1 INTRODUCTION

In February 2016, Cricket Victoria celebrated 10 years of the Melbourne All Abilities Cricket Carnival. This is an annual carnival hosted by Cricket Victoria that provides people with an intellectual disability from across Victoria the opportunity to form a cricket team, play and celebrate inclusion. These events have always been a positive experience for participants and stakeholders; however, with the significant number of people with an intellectual disability not meeting the current physical activity guidelines, a one-off yearly carnival was not considered to offer appropriate sustained opportunities for participation.

In September 2015, Cricket Victoria recognised the Melbourne All Abilities Cricket Association (MAACA) as their 77th association. This was a significant achievement following over 12 months of community consultation and research on how to develop the most appropriate pathway for cricketers with an intellectual disability. Cricket Victoria and MACCA are now providing opportunities for people with an intellectual disability to play in a regular cricket competition, moving from sampling to sustainability.

MAACA commenced its fourth season of cricket in 2018 and has grown from five clubs in the first year to 13 clubs in the 18/19 cricket season. It is also important to highlight that several of these clubs offer two divisions, thus offering more opportunities for participation based on levels of functionality. Higher ability players participate in a Super League that generally replicates the format of mainstream cricket, whilst players with more complex needs can participate in a Ten Over Tonk, a competitive format that offer greater levels of flexibility in relation to equipment, number of players and rules. Anecdotally, the MAACA competition is making a difference to many people from the intellectual disability community, however the health and social impacts have never been formally addressed or analysed. This is now required to ensure that Cricket Victoria have the evidence base to qualify the potential positive and negative impacts on the health and well-being of people with an intellectual disability; and to re-position strategy for future growth opportunities. This includes becoming a sport of choice for Victorian Special Schools and allied disability organisations and to increase opportunities to seek additional partnership and sponsorship opportunities.

In March 2019, Cricket Victoria commissioned researchers from Monash University's Faculty of Education to undertake an evaluation of the work of MAACA.

The evaluation responded to three key research questions:

1. What are the experiences of people with disabilities and their families of participating in MAACA?
2. How have clubs facilitated these experiences? and
3. How do they anticipated the association will develop in the future?

2 EVALUATION APPROACH

The evaluation adopted a mixed method approach, utilising telephone interviews with MAACA and club volunteers, surveys with players and face-to-face interviews or focus groups with players and their families.

Interview schedules and surveys were developed in consultation with Cricket Victoria staff and MAACA volunteers. In brief, telephone interviews with club volunteers sought to examine why and how disability provision had been established at the interviewee's club, the type of model that the club had developed to support participation, the perceived impacts for players, volunteers and the club more broadly as well as anticipated future directions and opportunities for development. The player surveys and interviews focused on impact of participation across the dimensions of physical, mental and social health. Acknowledging that people with intellectual disabilities are not a homogenous group, the research team sought to modify the research tools to suit a range of capabilities. For example, players had the option to participate in individual or small group conversations depending on how comfortable they felt communicating verbally. A number of player surveys were also completed face to face with support from the researcher or carer when required.

All club contacts were invited to participate in a telephone interview and the online player survey was distributed via a website link posted on the MAACA Facebook page and through individual club communication channels. After telephone interviews were completed, the research team asked clubs contacts if it would be possible to invite players from their club to participate in a focus group or interviews. Due to the timing of the evaluation within the cricket off-season, there was some challenges in gaining access to players but three clubs were able to facilitate this process.

In total, the research team undertook 11 telephone interviews with club based volunteers and conducted interviews or focus groups with 15 players three of which identified as women. Five parents also took part in the focus groups. 32 players responded to the survey across 6 clubs with an estimated response rate of 26%. 5 survey respondents identified as female and 2 non-identifying, the remainder identified as male. Most survey respondents (69%) had been playing cricket for 4 seasons or more. 12% had played in the All Abilities League for 1 season, 32% for 2 seasons and the remainder for more than 2 seasons.

The research project was granted ethics approval from Monash University Human Ethics Committee. To meet ethical obligations, the research team has sought to de-identify all participants within the report, identifying them as MAACA representatives, club volunteer or player.

Interviews and focus groups were transcribed in full and the transcripts thematically analysed. Two researchers undertook this process independently and then discussed interpretations and developed a coding system for the data. The major codes included: Development of All Abilities, Models and Approaches, Impacts, Challenges, Future Development. Sub-codes were developed for all of these categories. Cross comparative analysis was undertaken between the player responses and those of club volunteers. Due to the small number of surveys completed, a descriptive analysis has been provided of these.

3 OVERVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

3.1 The importance of sport and physical activity for individuals with intellectual disabilities

The health of people with intellectual disabilities has been identified as a priority area within public policy across numerous countries including Australia, the US, UK and Canada (Pitchford, Dixon-Ibarra & Hauck, 2018). There are significant health disparities between people with intellectual

disabilities and the general population, with people with intellectual disabilities experiencing shorter life expectancy, increased morbidity and increased likelihood of obesity (Pitchford et al., 2018). Individuals with intellectual disabilities are 58% more likely to be obese than the general populations (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2012). Contributing to health inequalities is the lower participation in sport and physical activity by people with intellectual disabilities compared to the general population and individuals with other disabilities (Darcy & Dowse, 2013; Taliaferro & Hammond, 2016).

3.2 Benefits of sport and physical activity participation

Existing literature suggests individuals with intellectual disabilities who do participate in sport and physical activity can gain numerous benefits including enhanced feelings of wellbeing, increased confidence, a sense of achievement, increased social networks and the development of new skills (e.g. Harada, Siperstein, Parker & Lenox, 2011; Jeanes et al, 2018). Darcy and Dowse suggest for many participants, sport offers an opportunity to feel connected to the community and experience a sense of belonging. Several people with intellectual disabilities within this study discussed the value of sport for giving them a space where they could assert greater levels of independence and interact with individuals away from their family. Jeanes et al (2019) suggest that when community sports clubs fully include people with intellectual disabilities and structure training and social events to facilitate contact across multiple teams there can be several benefits for players with a disabilities and broader clubs members. These include greater awareness and understanding of disability, higher levels of tolerance towards diversity more broadly, greater feelings of connection and confidence amongst participants with an intellectual disability and increased profile of the club that lead to increased membership and access to additional funding and grants (Albrecht et al., 2019; Jeanes et al., 2018).

3.3 Constraints and facilitators

Various personal, social, economic and environmental barriers intersect to limit the participation of people with intellectual disabilities in sport and physical activity (Taliaferro & Hammond, 2016). Darcy and Dowse's (2013) study identified a range of constraints to participation in sport for people with intellectual disabilities. These include the lack of appropriate and affordable activities. The authors elaborate that within this category some individuals with intellectual disabilities fall between different forms of community participation options, with one interviewee suggesting they were 'too good' for disability specific programs, but not good enough for mainstream sports (p.399). People with intellectual disabilities also often rely extensively on paid carers/family or volunteers to attend activities which can be a constraint if this support is not readily available. Taliaferro and Hammond (2016) suggest that carers can be a significant barrier or facilitator for people with intellectual disabilities. There can be particular barriers for individuals who live in residential or supported housing who may not receive the encouragement or support to participate in regular sport and physical activity (Rimmer & Yamaki, 2006). One of the most significantly reported barriers to participation is the attitudes of others with participants across several studies (Darcy & Dowse, 2013; Hutzler & Korsensky, 2010) indicating that they experience negative reactions from others when seeking to participate in sport.

There is a general lack of funding supporting disability grassroots participation which results in ad hoc provision and heavy reliance on volunteers establishing and maintaining opportunities (Darcy & Dowse, 2013). This leads to fewer participation opportunities for many people with intellectual disabilities (Jeanes et al, 2019). However, when clubs develop provision this is not always connected to the main operations of the sport club. Whilst players and their families develop strong bonds and feelings of connection with each other and the coaches and volunteers organising their section, they do not feel included within their wider sport club community. Jeanes et al (2018) outline how at some clubs intellectual disability players would not be invited to attend social functions, would train at different times to other teams and would not have their achievements and successes recognised at presentation and awards evenings. Jeanes et al's (2018) study also highlights some of the practical considerations for volunteers of supporting players with intellectual disabilities including managing a highly diverse range of abilities within. Volunteers Jeanes et al's study reflected that they often were unable to support participation of individuals with more complex intellectual disabilities.

Enablers to participation include locally available and affordable opportunities, support and encouragement from carers and family, connection with a social network that encourages participation, positive attitudes from sport and recreation organisations and sporting environments that make people with intellectual disabilities feel welcome, included and valued (Taliaferro & Hammond, 2016; Temple, 2007). Within club-based provision, small dedicated groups of volunteers or 'disability champions' are essential in establishing and developing opportunities and lobbying for support and resources within their club (Jeanes et al., 2018). With regard to recruitment, Darcy and Dowse (2013) suggest a key facilitator to promoting participation amongst people with intellectual disabilities is the development of partnerships between sport organisations and disability specific services who have the most interaction with people with intellectual disabilities. However, opportunities within sport need to draw on 'a spectrum of approaches (from segregated to mainstream) to disability sport depending on the context and desires of the individual' (Darcy & Dowse 2013, p.405).

4 KEY FINDINGS

The first section of findings considers responses to the research question 'what are the experiences of people with disabilities and their families of participating in MAACA?' In answering this question, the findings have been split into several sections considering impact on players and their families/ carers and the impact of All Abilities on the broader cricket club environment.

4.1 Experiences of All Abilities Players

The majority of players considered that participating in All Abilities cricket had provided them with numerous benefits. The survey suggested 96% of respondents 'enjoyed playing cricket 'very much' or 'a lot'. The opportunity to play cricket and to be able to do so within the competitive system that MAACA facilitated was highly valued. The opportunity to play 'real cricket' was valued with many outlining how much they loved the game and the joy they gained from taking a wicket, hitting a four or making a challenging stop whilst fielding. Particularly during interviews, players described how privileged they felt they were to have the opportunity to play and pursue their passion as many felt this was beyond them if mainstream cricket was the only option. One parent explained the importance of this:

"I know there are arguments out there and some say that disabled players should all play mainstream and there should not be leagues just for them, but there should as sport just isn't set up that way. So what [club] has done shows just how needed this type of cricket is as not all of these players can play mainstream cricket and without All Abilities cricket they wouldn't have cricket." (All Abilities Family Member).

Another parent agreed and felt that,

"Australia has come a long way in the last 20 or 30 years, and it has some way still to go by the way, but to have this for my son is just fantastic and all cricket clubs I believe should have an All Abilities section." (All Abilities Family Member).

4.1.1 Physical Impacts

The surveys and player interviews outlined a number of physical, mental and social benefits associated with their participation. In terms of physical benefits, the questionnaire suggested that players felt they were more physically active because of their participation. During interviews players talked about their desire to train and gain a level of fitness that would support their participation across a season. Questionnaire data suggested that 87% felt they were more physically active as a result of their cricket participation. Players also discussed improvement in their skills and abilities because of regular access to opportunities and supportive coaches. 76% believed their skills had improved either 'a great deal' or a 'moderate amount' from playing in the All Abilities section.

4.1.2 Psychological and emotional Impacts

Players also experienced a number of psychological and emotional benefits from their involvement, including enhanced feelings of wellbeing, increases in self-confidence and self-esteem. These occurred through a variety of factors, including increased physical fitness and enhanced feelings of belonging.

The survey data illustrated that:

- 93% of players always or often feel part of the team
- 86% feel they 'fully' or 'mostly' belong at the club
- 86% felt playing cricket had made them more confident as a person
- 96% felt playing cricket made them feel better about themselves

Several players talked about gaining confidence through social interaction and their enhanced cricket skills. Cricket also provided players with a focus that was particularly important for those who did not have access to employment opportunities. The following player summarised suggesting that the opportunity to play regular cricket,

"makes me feel pretty good and if I don't have it I go mad. I'm virtually out of work at the moment and I look forward to every Thursday just to hang out and take my frustrations out and I'll feel good for the next couple of days or even a week" (All Abilities Player, Male)

One volunteer stated that for players

“being with peers like them is absolutely positive for their mental health and why they rock up and just love being part of something. It gives them a real identity within the community and they can be seen to be a somebody and just want to be with their mates who look out for each other through cricket but outside that too”. (Club volunteer)

Another volunteer summarised some of the player viewpoints suggesting that:

“quite a few participants on the team had never done any organised sport before so there are physical benefits to getting involved but also the feeling of belonging and a lot of them had never experienced that before and it builds up self-esteem.” (Club Volunteer)

4.1.3 Social Impacts

The survey data suggested that most players feel welcome at the cricket club and at club social events.

- 93% of survey respondents considered their club to be ‘extremely’ or ‘very’ welcoming.
- 89% feel their family and friends are welcome at their club
- 77% have met new people not in their team
- 70% talk to ‘some’ and ‘a lot’ of people outside of their All Abilities team
- 73% feel welcome at all or most of their club’s social events

Players valued the opportunity cricket afforded to develop meaningful social connections and friendships that were often difficult to form elsewhere. The survey data suggested that,

- 84% had made ‘many’ or ‘heaps’ of new friends,
- 86% felt ‘heaps’ or ‘moderately’ more connected to other people.

Interviewees indicated that they had formed deep and important social bonds with their teammates. Players commented that their favourite aspects of cricket were,

“being felt welcomed and part of the team and playing alongside a great bunch of blokes and girls” (All Abilities Player Male)

“Meeting new people” (All Abilities Player, Female)

“having fun with my friends” (All Abilities Player, Male)

“There’s a good family atmosphere...Beside [player name] I’ve been socialising with two players and going out with them for beers or watching the football so we socialise outside cricket” (All Abilities Player, Male)

“I’ve got heaps of friends from cricket, a few that I’ve known before but it’s good to catch up with at cricket” (All Abilities Player, Male)

When asked in both surveys and interviews what is the best aspect of participating in cricket, players overwhelmingly focused on the social aspects. The opportunity cricket provided for regular social connection and the opportunity to develop and maintain friendships were important benefits. A family member of a player further elaborated how:

“my brother [an AA player] just wants to be with his mates and the cricket and mentally the AA cricket is just so important to him. The players are amazingly positive, even though they may not be the best players but they are nurtured along by their mates and always look out for each other and my brother is a case in point”. (All Abilities Family Member)

Having the opportunity to play competitive cricket helped foster these relationships for some of the players who felt that playing together and experiencing the highs and lows of winning and losing matches provided shared experiences through which friendships could emerge. One parent further felt that,

“it [AA section] extends the club outward into the community and goes toward the social inclusion of a community club. When we turned up we knew people previously from basketball and other places and had friendships already but we got then to develop those in a wider cricket club and I’m no cricket person believe me but the club has been great for my son.” (All Abilities Family Member)

All Abilities teams have supported players and their families to forge strong bonds with significant others at the clubs. During focus groups, several players talked about their coaches/team volunteers becoming important mentors for them who they looked up to. One player, talking about the volunteers at his club, reflected that,

“I think they are brilliant. I’m being honest they are brilliant. They are encouraging. Make us feel good. They are very skilled with us. They are pushing us to work hard at training and they want us to win more than one game.” (All Abilities Player, Male)

Coaches were referred to by players and families as important role models and critical in the success of the program. One parent commented

“this [All Abilities] has been fantastic for my family and I can tell you the two coaches are just fantastic and they are such positive role models to the players in the team which I cannot thank them enough for”.

Players valued the opportunity to develop positive and supportive relationships with adults outside of their immediate family circle. Furthermore, interviewees also suggested that cricket afforded players a space where they could be independent and engage in social interactions that were not dictated by carer/client relationships that tended to dominate other aspects of their lives. Some participants valued their position as a player in the club, with rights and responsibilities within the team, as opposed to a disability service ‘client’, a relationship that they found could be disempowering. One parent felt that

“to have the opportunity to play state cricket, to train in the nets at the MCG, it’s all just great for [son’s] independence and as he drives he picks up his mates and that adds to his independence too and it’s good for me that he is doing that”. (All Abilities Family Member)

This sense of independence was a key feature of the program.

4.2 Experiences of Cricket Clubs

Whilst the evaluation focused on the impact on players and their parents/carers, the data also revealed that the development of MAACA and All Abilities sections can have several positive impacts on the club and its members. The volunteers all discussed the personal satisfaction and 'feel good' factor they gained from organising and facilitating participation for people with intellectual disabilities. As one volunteer explained 'involvement is infectious', whilst another suggested that 'I just love the opportunity to give back'. Another outlined how his involvement with the All Abilities team had,

"given me a great sense of empathy and a greater understanding of people with a disability ...it has shown me the gaps in the system where volunteers can plug that gap and get All Abilities players involved in the club and given them cricket opportunities that bring smiles to their faces" (Club Volunteer).

WAA teams were viewed as a positive addition to the club, with several volunteers outlining how they embodied the clubs' approach to inclusion. The All Abilities teams were felt to help create an inclusive, supportive and family friendly culture, demonstrating that cricket was not a 'boys drinking club' (Club Volunteer). The following volunteer quote is illustrative in the shift made at one club to supporting multiple forms of diversity,

"We [club] have had to take a step back to not be a one dimensional male, white club. We now have All Abilities, girls, women and it gives the club the opportunity to give to many more people involved, swelling the numbers...having a AA section has helped us get more sponsors as we are putting a social footprint on the local community" (Club Volunteer)

Reflecting this, another suggested that:

"this is a community minded club. We want to get involved in the local community, from All Abilities to refugee programs and multicultural programs. We want to connect to marginalised groups and the AA has helped create that ethos" (Club Volunteer).

Reflecting this, another suggested that:

"I think it [AA program] gives a broader outlook on All Abilities to the community and what is actually out there. If I look back 20 years and think of disabilities and special needs then they were very much excluded from a lot of things and I think nowadays the community is much more included...and through sport, and cricket as we are talking about, is much more inclusive and that is reflected in the community with the cricket club we are at" (All Abilities Family Member).

The development of All Abilities teams has also facilitated meaningful contact between mainstream players and people with disabilities. Another club volunteer suggested that:

"Our club has got more out of the All Abilities than we ever imagined when we got involved with it and AA cricket is such a good thing for our club...it has been great to see so many wider club members get involved and take on leadership roles and the interactions between a wide range of club members is good for people to experience... It's given some of the mainstream players an insight into not focusing on themselves and their game" (Club Volunteer).

Volunteers felt this had broken down some of the stereotypes and assumptions that these players may have held regarding people with a disability. Several clubs found that the All Abilities players had highlighted a need for club wide education about disabilities, which they had undertaken and as a result felt their members were more knowledgeable, sensitive and empathetic towards people with disabilities. This volunteer summarised the value of club members interacting with players in the following:

“Club members come and help with the All Abilities and come with no experience, they come in green and all of a sudden eyes are wide open quickly as they start to realise the capabilities of these players and what they can do. It really challenges how they see disability. You don’t get that in many other places where such an impact occurs.” (Club Volunteer)

The volunteers also outlined several practical benefits of having an All Abilities team, included increased club profile leading to greater membership and revenue. Several clubs also felt their All Abilities team enabled them to access a wider range of grants beyond MAACA and resources.

4.3 Challenges and Tensions

It is important to acknowledge that whilst players, volunteers and their families talked mostly about the benefits of their participation there were some less positive aspects. Whilst the survey data generally suggested players had positive participation experiences there was a minority who indicated that their experiences were less positive,

- 19% felt ‘slightly’ or ‘not at all’ connected to the rest of their club
- have met new people not in their team
- 23% have only met ‘a few’ or ‘not really met anyone’ outside of their All Abilities team
- 25% felt they would only be welcome at a ‘couple’ of club social events or ‘none of them’

These focus groups and interviews also highlighted particular tensions surrounding managing the competitive aspects of All Abilities Cricket and mediating player behaviour and relationships.

4.3.1 Physical Impacts

Whilst all volunteers, players and parents were supportive of MAACA and felt that it had brought an important competitive dimension to All Abilities cricket, some found it challenging navigating the balance between performance and participation outcomes. The development of two divisions within MAACA has provided an important mechanism to support clubs to manage this tension and allow individuals with a range of abilities the opportunity to experience structured cricket. Volunteers and players appreciated the greater levels of flexibility afforded in the Ten over Tonk and the opportunity to let all players, regardless of ability or numbers, participate. However, several discussed how the Super League had developed to become a similar level to lower tier mainstream cricket with some teams continually playing their high ability ‘best players’ to ensure competitive success. A number of the ‘best players’ also participated in lower tiers of mainstream cricket and were able to play more regularly and access greater coaching support which widened the gap in abilities.

Several club volunteers indicated there was a danger at their club that the 'most able' players would be given priority and those with more diverse abilities would fall away due to lack of competitive opportunities. Often these players were too advanced for the Ten over Tonk, but were not amongst the higher ability players in the Super League. The following quotes captures a number of players who felt the Super League was too competitive for them,

"the best players and teams seem to dominate the competition [super league]." (All Abilities Player, Male)

"Sometimes people are too competitive and there are a few Kevin Pietersen's on a few ego trips...they think they are better than what they are. That's probably the only issue but that's to do with competitiveness." (All Abilities Player, Male)

This was reinforced by survey findings with 20% of players reporting that the level of cricket they participated in was either too easy or too hard for their ability. Reflecting the interviews, the survey data suggests there is a group of players that neither the Super League nor the Ten over Tonk are catering for.

The perceived over competitiveness of the Super League was also reflected in complaints by some players (7 across the focus groups and interviews) about sledging, both within and across teams. Unsurprisingly players suggested this was their least favourite aspect of cricket. Some players discussed abusive teammates who shouted at them for making mistakes but also opposition teams making offensive and abusive comments when they were playing. Whilst players generally were pragmatic about dealing with these comments, it inevitably impacted on their experiences.

"people at times sledging but you get used to it.....people getting uptight and saying things they shouldn't. It has happened plenty of times in our team and from other teams too." (All Abilities Player, Female)

Another player from a different club expanded,

"I've had a few sledges here and there but that's where the egos come out. It was nothing that I haven't heard before. Sticks and stones will break your bones but I think it has to stop as it's a bit of bullying" (All Abilities Player Male).

Some considered it part of the game but others felt it unnecessary given the 'have a go' participation ethos that underpins All Abilities cricket.

Whilst several players found opportunities were too competitive, there were a group of players in the focus groups who did not feel they were sufficiently challenged and in particular could not access appropriate coaching support to assist them with improving their skills. One player said that "for the All Abilities we could do with more coaching" whilst another indicated that the coaches could be "working on technical things in my batting" and a further commented that "they [coaches] could help me, especially with my batting as I miss the ball heaps even though they are easy to hit". A different player said that the coaches "need to push us harder" whilst another elaborated:

"We could do with more coaching from them so our skills improve and they could push us more but we don't want pushed too hard as that can be bad for us too." (All Abilities Player, Male)

Another player suggested “what the club should do is build in individual training programs for people like myself who are a bit older”. Thus some players believed there was not enough emphasis in the program on improving players’ cricketing ability and that training nights were not focused enough on those wishing to improve. One player recognised the heavy burden on the club coordinator of the program who had limited time to do any coaching so suggested that “a bit more support from the senior players” could help with the coaching side of the program.

4.3.2 Transitioning AA players into mainstream cricket

Some clubs had sought to manage the competitive challenges by supporting high ability players to transition into mainstream teams and open up their Super League team to players of more diverse abilities. However, three volunteers suggested this was challenging as some players struggled to cope with the social interactions and expectations of mainstream cricket. Additionally, mainstream team were not always welcoming. A volunteer explained at his club the mainstream lower grade sides

“have a bad habit of bringing in the All Abilities players when they are short and then dropping them and they make all sorts of rubbish excuses as why they do that” (Club Volunteer).

This made it difficult to provide appropriately challenging opportunities for high skilled players. Clubs have been proactive in managing wider attitudes and promote increased tolerance amongst mainstream club members. As outlined below, one club removed members due to their attitude towards players with disabilities,

“the AA players joined the team but the mainstream players moaned about the AA and their lack of ability as to why they did not win the competition which was a bit frustrating as the club were 100% behind the players that played... there have been guys that have been resistant to the AA players being seen as the same and didn’t want them having the same shirt and some were vocal so we had to have a chat about that. One didn’t back down so he had to leave. He was the best player but the club was forced to let him leave because of his attitude”. (Club Volunteer)

Another club reported that the mainstream club had a Facebook page for all club members, including All Abilities players, but this caused issues when All Abilities players engaged with posts from the mainstream club that were not directed to All Abilities players. One example was a Facebook post that advertised for a player to fill a spot at late notice in the second grade mainstream competition which got a response from an All Abilities player to say they would play. He was quickly informed that he was not of the standard, with subsequent negative comments posted about the player from mainstream club members upsetting him. The thread had to be removed but the co-ordinator met with the second grade captain to request that the second grade team were spoken to about the distress caused by their negative comments toward the AA player and that future consideration needed to be given toward interacting with All Abilities players. The co-ordinator cited it as part of a wider education process the club had to go through regarding disability integration within the club.

4.3.3 Managing Challenging Behaviour

Players and volunteers suggested an ongoing challenge was managing the behaviour of some All Abilities players. The club volunteers suggested some players could become aggressive and volatile,

often very quickly. One volunteer outlined for example that 'the behaviour of players can get very aggressive when decisions go against them, it can get difficult and that's something the club always needs to keep working on'. Another expanded on this,

"Managing behaviour of disabled cricketers can be hard.....we have to manage a bit of bullying as there are people who have a very high confidence and players that don't who then get bullied and constantly told what to do. With disabled players you have a range of levels of disability, some for example don't talk and they can get picked on"
(Club Volunteer).

Club volunteers discussed having to be vigilant around more vulnerable players who could potentially be manipulated by more high functioning players. One volunteer gave an example where a player was 'borrowing' money continually off a teammate but not paying them back and the club had to intervene to regain the money for the player and ensure that this did not continue. Several of the volunteers suggested that behaviour issues were heightened when working with players with intellectual disabilities but it was important to navigate a fine line between providing appropriate levels of support and protection for vulnerable participants whilst also acknowledging that the players are adults and affording them appropriate levels of respect and encouraging individual responsibility.

As indicated earlier in the report some clubs used social media platforms and whilst they stated that this facilitated many positive interactions for All Abilities players such as posting photographs of game action and presentation nights, using it to communicate messages about training and games, and for team bonding, it could also lead to problematic interactions between All Abilities players. One volunteer said there had been some serious incidents of distasteful comments between players posted online when games had been lost and this descended into overly personal and abusive comments that went beyond perceived poor cricketing ability. This caused friction within the team that had to be acted upon by the co-ordinator who removed the thread and met with the players in question to resolve the issues. From then the club made more effort to educate the All Abilities players on their online communications and carefully monitor what was being posted online.

Club volunteers would seek guidance from the players and their families as to the best ways to manage trigger points and challenging behaviour. They outlined how this was an ongoing process for them and they tended to develop an increasing range of strategies within experiences. Several suggested that access to more formal education would be valuable. Volunteers did not feel that they required any cricket specific coach education as they found it easy to tailor their existing coaching approaches to the diverse needs of participants. However, they felt less well equipped in supporting players with disabilities, managing a range of challenging behaviours, identifying key trigger points and as outlined above, managing interactions to ensure the safety and security of more vulnerable players. Whilst some clubs had actively sought education for their volunteers for many it was a case of learning on the job. A more formalised approach to education and identification of education and training opportunities was thought to be important moving forward and critical in overcoming some of the resistance clubs might have to establishing an All Abilities section.

4.4 All Abilities Cricket and the Development of MAACA

The second half of the findings section focuses on answering the questions how have clubs facilitated these experiences and how do they anticipate the association will continue to develop in the future?

4.4.1 Models and Approaches to All Abilities Cricket

The clubs adopted different models and approaches to supporting All Abilities cricket. Many had offered provision for many years but volunteers suggested that MAACA had assisted in formalising All Abilities opportunities and offering an ongoing competitive structure. Some felt this had enabled All Abilities teams to gain some legitimacy within their club because it was no longer just about people with disabilities engaging in one off carnivals and short term training opportunities. They now trained and played in a similar vein to mainstream teams. How integrated All Abilities team

are within clubs varies considerably. Some clubs had successfully supported full integration where All Abilities player wear the same uniform, train on the same nights as mainstream teams, are represented on club committees, participate in social events and are supported on match days by other club members. This approach was summarised succinctly by a volunteer who explained that,

“we were adamant from the onset to be all inclusive and one entity so it is one club and I was big on one uniform and our guys are so proud to wear that shirt.” (Club Volunteer)

At the opposite end of the spectrum were fully separate models where the All Abilities team operates under the club name and uses facilities but beyond this has little contact or connection to the mainstream club. Although all club volunteers were happy with the development of their teams, those who described having closer ties with the mainstream club reported having greater access to resources and more volunteering support as the All Abilities volunteers were able to persuade other club members to support the team and assist with tasks such as umpiring or team management.

4.4.2 The importance of an All Abilities ‘champion’

All clubs had identified champions who worked extensively to develop and maintain the team. At some clubs, where much of the work was done by a single individual, there was concern about ongoing viability and what would happen if they stepped down or left the club. For these champions MAACA had provided an important avenue for support and advice and one that they highly valued. As one volunteer commented ‘it’s not like I’m doing this on my own anymore, there’s other people to talk to and work out the best way to do things’. One volunteer who was also involved in the MAACA administration reinforced this and suggested that in the early days of All Abilities cricket there was no assistance but ‘today there is thankfully in MAACA and we can provide help and assistance to those champions’. Where there was only one or two volunteers driving everything, the All Abilities sections were quite vulnerable. This generally occurred at clubs where there was limited links to the mainstream club structures and therefore limited institutional buy in from the club to the All Abilities team. Several of the volunteers who were in clubs where All Abilities was more integrated emphasised the importance of gaining support early from the club committee and ensuring this translated into tangible action and support for the All Abilities team. As this volunteer suggests,

“one champion cannot do it all. You have got to sell the idea to the rest of the club...you need to get a mass of support on board to back the AA notion and go from there as that then begins the process of culture change.” (Club Volunteer)

The club champions acknowledged that whilst they were happy to be the figurehead some did not have broader club support or a team of volunteers within the program and instead relied on one or two individuals. As a parent commented, with this model

“there is the danger of burnout on [volunteer] as he does so much and the burden is huge. It is remarkable as him and his assistant do not have any children with

disabilities connected to the club yet they give up so much time and energy and are such positive role models but I do wonder without them whether it will continue and I really doubt it.” (All Abilities Family Member)

Several volunteers, usually those at clubs where the All Abilities team operated separately to mainstream teams, indicated they had limited match day support, particularly when working with higher functioning All Abilities players who would drive themselves and other players to games. This meant that parent volunteers were not always available and the All Abilities champion would find themselves opening up the club rooms for toilets to be used, filling in as scorer or umpire if no one else would, making sure players stayed rehydrated, organising the batting order so everyone got a turn and then getting the post-match refreshments ready before cleaning the room and locking up. As one commented, “It can get a bit much”.

Another volunteer commented that:

“you can ask my husband how many calls I field over all abilities cricket. I’m always getting calls on the days of the match. Do I need to bring a bat? Do I need to bring a water bottle? Can you bring sunscreen? Very practical things but important to the players and a lot of work has to go on behind the scenes that people don’t realize.” (Club Volunteer)

Volunteers often recognised the need for a succession plan with one saying

“I’m quite old and getting on a bit and I do worry what will happen when I cannot do it anymore so I just hope someone steps in. I’m sure they will but it is a worry.” (Club Volunteer).

Another said that

“it’s hard to look too far in the future. Without me there would be no program, without being pretentious. We have no succession plan though. I got no plans to leave but still that doesn’t say something could happen to me and that’s a concern.” (Club Volunteer)

Whilst none of the club champions expressed any immediate desire to step away from their role, some had already begun to try to lighten their load. One had recruited some younger mainstream club members to come along and had given them responsibility for aspects of the program. Another recruited an assistant to help with coaching and had been asking parents and respite carers to become more involved. Some club volunteers contended that those who held both club and MAACA roles were particularly overburdened and suggested that ideally MAACA should gain funding for a paid administrator to support the administration, organisation and promotion of the league.

In terms of AA organisation and disability expertise and experience, all of the clubs had at least one person involved in the All Abilities section that had disability specific knowledge; this may be through their employment or personal experience with family members. One volunteer summarised the benefits of this,

“I would recommend clubs looking to start it up that having cricket people involved is good but it needs someone with a disability background who can give tips about how to manage disability issues as you are going to face the management of that as much more of an issue than cricket playing.” (Club Volunteer)

Many of the clubs emphasised the value of having a person involved with a detailed understanding

of communicating and working with people with disabilities and these individuals continually shared their knowledge and offered support to other volunteers.

4.4.3 Development of MAACA and All Abilities Cricket

The club volunteers acknowledged that much of their efforts and those involved in the MAACA administration was focused on establishing and maintaining the league and where possible adding to the number of teams involved. They suggested beyond this there had been little strategic direction and promotion of the league despite the many positive impacts it was achieving. At a club level, many volunteers echoed the view that the All Abilities sections needed,

“to develop a strategic plan, short and long term, as AA cricket is cemented into the business of the club but I am aware that if I was not longer there a succession plan for potential champions has to be in place as we don’t want to fall by the wayside because the original champions as no longer involved.” (Club Volunteer)

This has been acknowledged by Cricket Victoria who have supported MAACA administrators to work with a consultant on developing a strategy and marketing plan moving forward. As a MAACA administrator indicated, “we want to be independent and gain corporate sponsors”. Volunteers suggested that key to ongoing promotions would be a professional and detailed website, outlining in more detail what MAACA does and the experiences of players and clubs that are part of the association. Volunteers and players also felt there could be a stronger social media presence to promote the league more broadly and attract new players. It was acknowledged that this would require further investment from already stretched MAACA administrators but it was important that ‘MAACA gets out there and is known’.

As noted, few clubs had established a strategic direction for their All Abilities team although some felt that there were obvious avenues for developments including establishment of youth teams and separate provision/opportunities for women. Volunteers indicated that current teams were mixed and some women did participate but similar to mainstream cricket, women were less inclined to join if no other females were already playing. Youth leagues were discussed as an obvious next step in the development of MAACA but volunteers felt this would need direction and support from Cricket Victoria as well as the establishment of partnerships with special schools and disability youth service providers.

Currently, most clubs do not actively advertise or promote their All Abilities teams instead relying on word of mouth and the existing network of players. Some clubs have successfully connected with other disability sport providers including disability AFL teams to recruit players from. Others had offered ‘come and try’ sessions and developed a core group of players from these. Most of the clubs felt that they lacked the capacity for further expansion and were not actively seeking to recruit more players. As these volunteers explained,

“A massive influx of players would cause some problems to meet the same needs and I’d have to recruit someone else with a disability background to give me a hand. We would not be able to provide the same level of support and service as now if we got an influx of players.” (Club Volunteer)

“I haven’t had to recruit players so it’s pretty organic and we can always fill two teams in the MAACA competition. At times we have too many players and I hate some missing out.” (Club Volunteer).

Generally, volunteers acknowledged that whilst some existing MAACA clubs may be able to expand further and field a teams for each of the divisions, there was not much capacity to extend their adult provision beyond this. The need for volunteers, access to grounds, resources and coaches meant that several club volunteers felt that it would not be possible for their club to support more than two squads.

Although existing clubs considered they did not have the capacity to extend, growing the number of clubs involved in MAACA was felt to be an important part of future development. There was a belief that MAACA could have a useful role in promoting All Abilities to other clubs, also act as a hub, and provide resources for clubs interested in getting involved. Many of the club volunteers were willing to help support other clubs and share their experiences of establishing and developing All Abilities cricket. This was captured by one volunteer who suggested he would

“be more than happy to go to other clubs and give tips and advice about how to go about setting up All Abilities cricket but it does need someone at the club to be willing to put their hand up and be that person who is going to be on top of everything.” (Club Volunteer)

Several volunteers suggested there was growing interest in regional areas and this may be a further area of expansion, with clubs encouraged to establish teams that could lead to regional versions of MAACA. This would again require some strategic direction and impetus from Cricket Victoria to encourage clubs to engage and build on existing regional successes.

5 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The evaluation findings suggest that opportunities facilitated by MAACA and affiliated clubs are providing numerous positive benefits for players, their broader family and club members more broadly. For players, these include opportunities to be physically active, to engage in meaningful sporting opportunities, to develop skills, develop strong connections with role models and mentors outside of their immediate family and perhaps most importantly establish deep friendships and social connections with All Abilities peers and other club members. The benefits for All Abilities players should be acknowledged in the context of their broader life situations. Players and their families emphasised that cricket is one of the few opportunities they can participate in that supports the social, emotional and physical health benefits documented.

All Abilities volunteers gain a great deal of intrinsic satisfaction from working with All Abilities teams and there was a general belief that the All Abilities teams had promoted greater levels of inclusion, recognition and tolerance within the wider clubs. Furthermore, the introduction of All Abilities sections has prompted an education process within some clubs that allowed mainstream players and volunteers to become more knowledgeable, informed and accepting of people with disabilities. Clubs have approached the development of their All Abilities sections in different ways, with some operating fully integrated teams whilst others continue to have some distance from the mainstream club operations. At all clubs an individual or small group of champions have been key to the establishment and ongoing development of All Abilities cricket and ultimately the development of MAACA. These individuals generally have either personal connections to people with disabilities or have work experience and knowledge of the disability sector. It is this disability specific knowledge, rather than cricket specific expertise that has been critical in establishing and managing All Abilities Cricket.

Whilst the evaluation highlights the numerous positive outcomes generated by MAACA, it has also highlighted some challenges and tensions. There is suggestion that volunteers needed to be equipped to address disagreements between players and ensure vulnerable players are not manipulated by higher functioning team mates whilst still encouraging players to develop independence and responsibility. There was also some criticism by players and volunteers that several teams within the Super League are overly competitive to the point where player experience is negatively impacted. To negate this a middle tier of provision between the Super League and Ten over Tonk or more supported transitioning of higher ability players into mainstream opportunities may assist clubs to cater for the spectrum of players that they worked with. At a structural level the evaluation highlights the extent to which MAACA and individual club All Abilities sections are reliant on a small group of champions who undertake the majority of the volunteer workload. Champions were aware that if they moved on the All Abilities provision may not continue illustrating that despite considerable progress at many clubs it was not yet fully embedded in the culture and fabric of everyday club provision.

These challenges aside, the evaluation has illustrated the value of MAACA in supporting club to establish All Abilities teams as a legitimate and ongoing part of their operations. Although many of the clubs consider they do not have the capacity to accommodate many more All Abilities players, there is the appetite and interest to extend and develop the MAACA concept in the future through engaging with other mainstream clubs. Areas for future development include encouraging more clubs to develop All Abilities teams, extending the concept to regional areas, supporting female only opportunities and establishing provision for young people.

5.1 Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on the evaluation findings

- The evaluation reinforces the need for promotion and marketing of the achievements of MAACA to encourage further external funding and sponsorship. Of particular importance is a website and social media presence that can showcase player and club experiences (possibly through short videos) and include guides and information on establishing All Abilities teams.
- Clubs require support in accessing disability specific education & information, particularly around managing diverse behavioural needs and facilitating positive relationships between players. It would be valuable if Cricket Victoria/MAACA could provide guidance on where this could be accessed.
- Recruitment of volunteers to support All Abilities section is critical. As cricket specific knowledge seems less relevant than disability expertise it may be valuable for Cricket Victoria to explore options of how clubs could recruit volunteers who may not have a specific interest in sports clubs volunteering but would like to support disability provision.
- MAACA clubs are a valuable community of practice holding considerable collective knowledge of how to establish and develop disability provision. In seeking to promote the work of MAACA and encourage other clubs to establish teams, it is important to leverage this knowledge and facilitate opportunities for MAACA clubs to share their learning. Some volunteers were enthusiastic to contribute to information sessions to encourage new clubs to become involved.

- It would be valuable to consider how MAACA could cater to the group of players whose ability currently falls between the Super League and the Ten over Tonk. It may be that this requires clubs to be more accommodating of high ability, competitive players within their lower grade mainstream teams allowing the Super League to cater for a middle tier of players.
- The evaluation suggests there is a desire and need to develop opportunities for women, young people and extend to regional areas. These extensions are currently beyond the scope of MAACA to undertake independently and would require support and resources from Cricket Victoria. Consideration needs to be given in any strategic planning as to whether these developments are feasible and how they would be resourced and supported.

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