



Creating Mentally Healthy Sporting Clubs

Acknowledgement

We acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as Australia's First Nations people and the Traditional Custodians whose cultures and customs have nurtured and continue to nurture this land, since the Dreamtime. We pay our respects to the local Wadawurrung people, their Elders, past, present, and emerging.

Recognition of People With Lived Experience

We value all people with lived experience, as well as their carers.

We recognise their strength, courage and unique perspective as a vital contribution to our service; to learn, grow and achieve better outcomes together.

Contents

Acknowledgement.....	2
Foreword.....	5
Nicole's* Story	7
Project Team	8
Why We Chose Read the Play.....	9
Executive Summary.....	11
Read the Play.....	13
Project Purpose	15
Approach.....	15
Timeline.....	16
Preliminary Findings	17
Stakeholder Engagement.....	20
Framework Development and Implementation Plan	24
Deliverables	25
Challenges.....	30
Opportunities	33
Recommendations	34
Group Reflection	38
Project Mentor	39
Appendix 1.....	41
Appendix 2.....	42
References.....	43

There are elements of this report that some people may find distressing.

If you or somebody you know needs support, **Lifeline's Crisis Support 13 11 14** services are available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

Please reach out for help.

Foreword

“Read the Play delivers mental health and help-seeking information to young people by way of fun, interactive games at their sporting club to ultimately increase young people’s knowledge and understanding of mental health and mental illness, facilitate an environment where mental health problems are not negatively judged, and thereby promote positive help-seeking behaviours.

The Leaders for Geelong Project team have been tasked with producing a guide for local clubs on how to become a ‘Mentally Healthy Club’ with a number of tools and programs available to support clubs through the process.

This project will greatly support clubs in navigating the mental health space and ensure they are providing the best support and guidance to their players throughout the season regarding their mental health and wellbeing.”

Michael Parker
CEO, Read the Play Inc.





Nicole's* Story

"I first became aware of the Read the Play program a little over 10 years ago when my children were involved at a local football and netball club. Back then, mental health wasn't spoken about as openly as it is now and the information available to teenagers wasn't as accessible.

I became aware of a situation that had happened a couple of years prior with our club's Wellbeing Officer. It was toward the end of the annual Read the Play session that was run with under 16 footballers in the club. She noticed a player, one of the more confident and popular players in the team, was hanging toward the back of the group as they exited the room. She approached him to enquire if he'd enjoyed the session and it was then that he told her that he'd been thinking about taking his own life. It was clear that the Read the Play session had created a safe space for him and given him the confidence to reach out to someone.

He spoke those words out loud for the first time that night and saved his own life. He also saved his family, friends, team mates and the community from unimaginable grief."

** names have been changed to protect confidentiality*

Project Team



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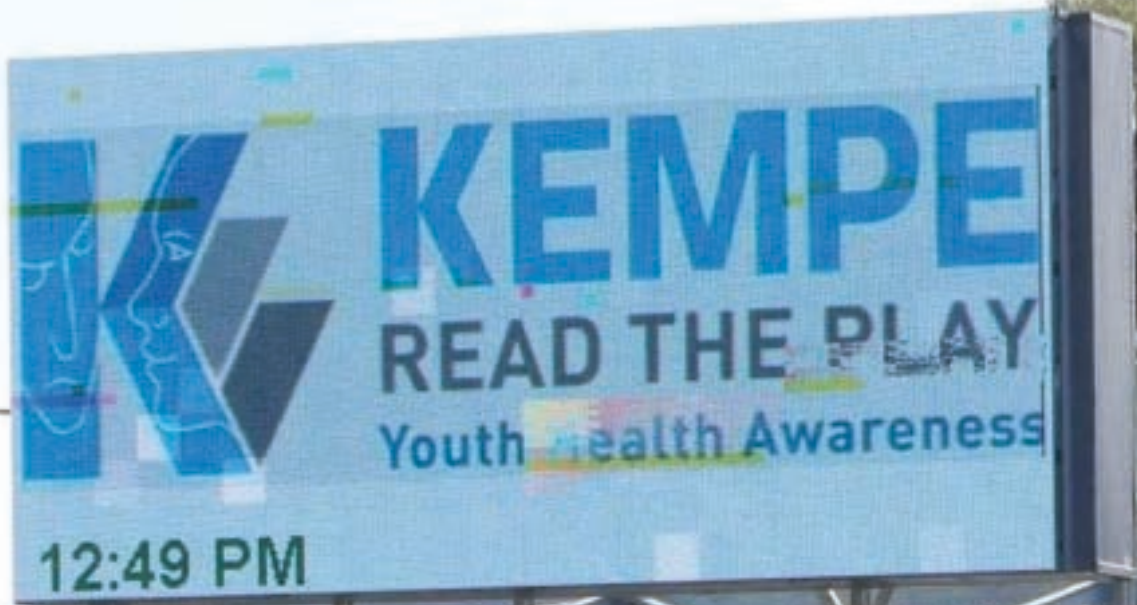
Why We Chose Read the Play

Each member of the project group identified Read the Play as an opportunity to commit time and effort to an initiative that has the potential to genuinely save lives.

We are each involved in local sport and recognise that through this, young people have the opportunity to establish new friendships, learn the value of teamwork and respect for authority. These skills and attributes are not only relevant for sports, but incredibly important life skills. We also understand that sport and recreation can help to build communities through social inclusion and can build a sense of connection to community. This is often what attracts young people to join sporting clubs.

Our group has seen and felt the devastating impacts of having family and friends struggle with their mental health. It is now well recognised that mental illness is a significant issue in Australia, with one in five people experiencing a mental health disorder every year. The effects on families and friends are significant.

Through our work on this project, our hope is that volunteers at local sporting clubs will feel confident to identify young people that might be struggling with their mental health and be able to provide support before it's too late.



KEMPE
READ THE PLAY
Youth Health Awareness

12:49 PM

The billboard features a stylized blue 'K' logo on the left, which incorporates a profile of a human face. The text is in a clean, sans-serif font. The background is a light blue grid pattern.



Executive Summary

As sporting clubs are becoming more and more the 'hub' of the community, local coaches are no longer required to just support their team on the field, they are seen to have a responsibility to support their player's mental health and wellbeing. Research shows that community sport offers an ideal space to support mental health and wellbeing, particularly for young people.

Read the Play is a not-for-profit organisation, born from the Barwon region's need to increase youth health awareness in relation to drugs, alcohol and mental health. It was designed to increase mental health literacy and help seeking behaviour in young people. The overarching purpose is to deliver innovative programs in partnership with sporting clubs that empower young people to take control of their mental health and wellbeing. The Program has been very successful and is recognised as a major mental health initiative in the Geelong Region supported by the Geelong Football and Netball Leagues.

The Read the Play, Mentally Healthy Sporting Clubs Framework project rationale was to develop a framework to apply to clubs that incorporates programs, policy and governance to create safe and healthy places for people to thrive. The proposed outcome of this project was to be a robust and agile framework that could be integrated into sporting clubs and the wider community to enhance a community's wellbeing. This project aimed to provide clubs with a 'best practice' model to support their members and players with mental health and wellbeing.

Preliminary research was undertaken on existing frameworks, projects and publications to determine what was available within the scope of mental health providers in the realm of regional sport. We discovered just how 'overcrowded' this space is and identified a number of points of concern including a lack of accredited programs and a surplus of those with no evidence-based results. The research process also involved engagement with a vast number of stakeholders, both regionally and broader. They provided us with insight into their roles within this space, valuable information, and support for the project.

The findings evolved into the development of a number of key deliverables including an annual survey to identify areas for development within the Barwon region, a checklist for clubs to self-assess their capacity, a framework to provide support, direction and information to clubs, and a website design to be housed by AFL Barwon, which would bring it all together in a central, easily accessible platform.

It is vital for the future success of the project in years to come, that key information relevant to the project is correctly resourced and that annual data is collected, and information reviewed and updated. Further recommendations for development in this space are included at the conclusion of the report. Our hope is that this work will continue to exist and be accessible to sporting clubs, and continue to support players, members, and families to develop their mental health literacy.



WorkSafe

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Read the Play
KEMPE ENGINEERING

WorkSafe

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Epworth

Bulla

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SCA

Read the Play

Read the Play is an innovative program that began in Geelong in 2006, that addresses the health and well-being of young people. The program is designed for the junior levels of sports clubs and imparts information about mental illness through engaging the young players in fun and interactive games, thereby helping to remove the stigma and increase help seeking behaviour. The program was founded in Geelong and all programs are delivered by a local mental health professional in your clubs.

Purpose:

To deliver innovative programs in partnership with sporting clubs that empower young people to take control of their mental health and wellbeing.

The RTP programs aim to break down the barriers that prevent young people from seeking help.

The primary barriers that RTP aim to address are:

- The stigma associated with mental ill health
- The lack of knowledge about mental health/illness
- The lack of language/literacy to engage in conversation on the topic
- A common reluctance to engage with adults as part of teenage development

The aim of the Read the Play programs is not to prevent mental ill health or alcohol/drug use, but rather, promote and facilitate help-seeking behaviour in young people. Rather than ignore the inevitable fact that young adults have a high prevalence of mental ill health and explorative use of alcohol and illicit substances, we acknowledge its presence and aim to provide a program focused on mental health literacy, techniques to support peers, information on the harmful effects of alcohol, drugs and cyber bullying and the provision of appropriate avenues to seek help when needed.

U15 NETBALL AND UNDER 16 FOOTBALL PROGRAMS:

Huddle Up:	MVP:
<p>One in four young Australians (12–24yo) will experience a mental illness in any one year and research indicates that lack of mental health literacy may increase the risk of mild/moderate mental health conditions. Cyber bullying is also a significant contributor to mental ill health with 88% of adolescents reporting experiencing cyberbullying (Lenhart et al. 2011).</p> <p>Huddle up is a community-based program for young adolescents (13–16yo: football and netball players), that aims to increase knowledge on mental health, promote help seeking behaviour and influence beliefs and attitudes related to identifying and responding to their peers who may be at risk of mental ill-health or cyber bullying.</p>	<p>One in four young Australians (12–24yo) will experience a mental illness in any one year and research indicates that lack of mental health literacy may increase the risk of mild/moderate mental health conditions. Suicide is the leading cause of death for young Australian 14–24 years old and research indicates that people do not have the confidence or knowledge to appropriately respond to a peer having suicidal thoughts.</p> <p>MVP is a community-based program for young adolescents (13–15yo: U15 football and netball players), that aims to increase knowledge on mental health, promote help seeking behaviour and influence beliefs and attitudes related to identifying and responding to their peers who may be at risk of mental ill-health or suicide.</p>

U17 NETBALL AND UNDER 18 FOOTBALL PROGRAMS:

Play On
<p>One in four young Australians (12–24yo) will experience a mental illness in any one year and research indicates that lack of mental health literacy may increase the risk of mild/moderate mental health conditions. The AIHW National Drug Strategy Survey has indicated that 26.4% of Australians over the age of 14yo have exceeded safe alcohol consumption for single-occasion risk in the past year. Specifically, young Australians are far more likely to drink in harmful amounts than the rest of the adult population.</p> <p>Play On is a community-based program for adolescents (15–18yo football and netball players), that aims to increase mental health literacy and knowledge of the impact underage alcohol use can have on mental health outcomes within local sporting communities. The program will have strong focus on influencing beliefs and attitudes towards underage drinking and increasing confidence in being able to respond to peers who may benefit from support for their drug and alcohol use.</p>

Project Purpose

The purpose of the project was to provide sporting clubs in the G21 region with a tangible and practical resource to assist them in becoming a mentally healthy and in supporting their young players with their mental health.

The project was guided by the following objectives;

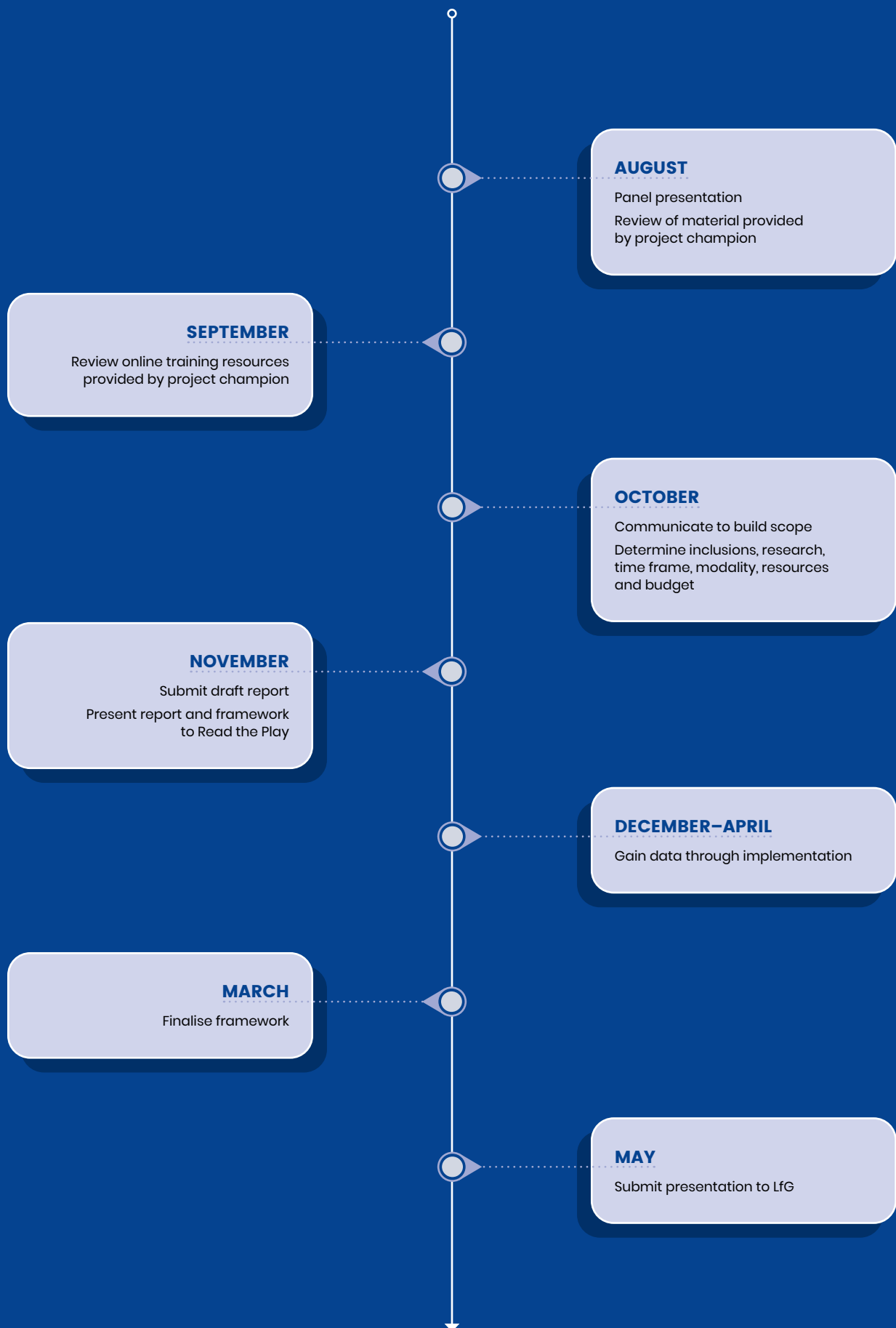
- Development of a best practice framework to support “Mentally Healthy Sporting Clubs and to help them navigate a crowded and ever growing ‘mental health’ marketplace”. The framework will be developed as a live document which can be handed back to Read the Play to manage and maintain the currency of the document.
- The framework will include reference to the Read the Play objectives:
 - » Increase knowledge and awareness about mental health problems
 - » Increase knowledge about local support services

Increase confidence and skills in guiding our youth to relevant support services.

Approach

In order to develop a tangible and accessible framework, our Project Team conducted research on the current availability of mental health programs in regional Victorian sporting clubs. Existing research from Monash University, Mission Australia, Orygen and VicHealth was analysed, in addition to the current training material provided by Read the Play. Engagement with key stakeholders was carried out to help understand the opportunities and challenges associated with the provision of support to clubs.

Timeline



Preliminary Findings

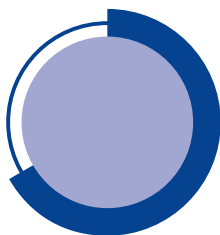
Upon commencement of the project, the team needed to gain a thorough understanding of the project brief and scope. This was accomplished through consultation with Read The Play and by reviewing the initial documents provided. The team needed to gain a good understanding of the gravity of mental health in Australia and the priorities for the Greater Geelong region. Identification of key players within the scope of mental health and wellbeing (MHW) provision was also important. This collection of data and information helped the team to better understand the context of the project and the problems that needed to be addressed.

The Mental Health Situation

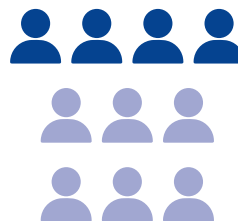
“Mental health refers to how a person feels, thinks and behaves.”¹ It is influenced by a range of factors including life experiences, social relationships, our thought processes, and our interpretations. Having good mental health means we are in a state of wellbeing where we feel good and can function well in the world.⁵ Good mental health is linked with positive outcomes.

When we look at the most recent data published by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), we can see 15% of Australians experience high or very high levels of psychological distress⁴. It’s been established that mental health

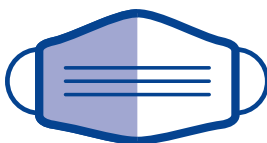
A survey of over 20,000 Australian youths between the ages of 15–19 in 2021 presented valuable insight into the values, aspirations, and issues of concern to young people in Australia. It was no shock to the project team, that Mental Health was a common theme. Psychological distress has increased 8% in last past decade³. An alarming upward trend. The report also presented the following statistics around mental health of Australia’s young people:



66.9% of respondents identified **Mental Health** as something they value



4 in every 10 young people surveyed indicated that they were **extremely** or **very concerned** about mental health



COVID-19 has had a negative impact on **over 50%** of young people



Mental health was identified as a barrier to achievement by **over 50%** of youth

Looking a bit closer to home in Victoria, survey results highlight similar trends. Mental health was the number one barrier for youth to achieving their study and work goals. It also ranked highly in what young Victorians value most, coming in at third with close to 75% of youth seeing it as extremely or very important.

The Greater Geelong region, like all regions, has seen and felt the devastating effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. While specific data on youth mental health in Geelong is scarce, we can report that in 2020, seven youths (aged 15–18) lost their lives to suicide in the Greater Geelong area.⁷ After consultation with key stakeholders in the Barwon region, and through our own experiences, we identified the following priorities for the Greater Geelong region:

- Normalising and encouraging discussion around mental health
- Proactively improving the mental health
- Suicide prevention
- Resources and tools
- Clear targets for sporting clubs
- Community connection
- Sense of connectedness

The Relationship Between Mental Health and Community Sport

Sport has the potential to play an important role in sustaining the wellbeing and in particular mental health of youth¹². Organised sports provide a connected social network for young people¹². They play a central role in Australian culture⁶, this fact reflected by the large proportion of Australian youth engaged in such extracurricular activities⁶. “Community sporting clubs, associations, and leagues also have the potential to provide indirect benefits toward mental health via the social support and resources they offer to their members”.

In O’Connor et al’s 2020 report into Mental Wellbeing Provision in Western Australian sport, they identified “...an apparent lack of coordinated support for clubs” and the need “...to develop the confidence and capacity to support the mental wellbeing of their members”¹². The project also highlighted a number of recommendations such as translation and dissemination of quality criteria for the provision of MHW in community sport, the promotion of the market analysis conducted, summarising data on major providers and what they offer, additional support for clubs and providers, addressing health equity in sport, and developing a mental health promotion strategy for sport.¹²

Mental Health and Wellbeing (MHW) Providers

Through our own prior knowledge, and through consultation with stakeholders and the review of the key publications, the team began to develop a good picture of what was presently available to sporting clubs within the mental health and wellbeing space. The key points identified were:

1. The space is overcrowded

The research highlighted that the “...sector has seen a significant proliferation in the number of public mental health programs servicing it.”² This proliferation of programs makes it difficult for clubs and their volunteers to determine which best fit aligning with club values and specific needs. O’Connor et al (2020) identified “...ten key providers that specifically targeted sporting clubs support services within the state of Victoria, Australia.” They also identified a further 28 providers who were found to be supporting MHW more broadly.

2. Lack of evidence-based data

The Orygen ‘What works for mental health in sporting teams?’ evidence guide indicated that there were very few programs with evidence from more than one high-quality study that indicated the intervention worked in sports.¹ O’Connor et al determined that “programs need to demonstrate they make a measurable and meaningful impact on outcomes they claim to target through the implementation of carefully planned and executed evaluation. Demonstrating the meeting of outcomes through robust evaluation is the best indicator of program quality and impact.”¹ They also determined that effective programs are those which sit within an overarching systematic and strategic framework.

Stakeholder Engagement

Early on in the process, we identified a number of players in the mentally healthy sporting space. The following are the key stakeholders we engaged and consulted with throughout the duration of the project.



**Read
the
Play**

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Read the Play

As Read the Play is a key stakeholder in this project it has been important to engage with them at a number of different stages during this project to ensure a complete understanding of their vision for the concept of Mentally Healthy Sporting clubs and the subsequent framework. Read the Play has provided guidance supporting the development of the framework, opportunities for engagement with other stakeholders such as AFL Barwon and Headspace from their perspective as a program which addresses the mental health and well-being of young people.



AFL Barwon

AFL Barwon is one of Victoria's strongest regions for football and netball participation. 23,000+ registered football and netball players, 4 Senior Football and Netball Leagues, 3 Junior Leagues, 2 Umpire Leagues / Associations, 49 clubs, 434 Football teams and 357 Netball teams across seniors and juniors that are managed by AFL Barwon. AFL Barwon aims to support people and clubs right across the region and has been long-time backers of mental health support with long-standing partnership with Read The Play.



VicHealth

VicHealth (the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation) is a foundation with a mandate to promote good health. Their key objectives are to fund activity related to the promotion of good health, safety or the prevention and early detection of disease, increase awareness of programs for promoting good health in the community through the sponsorship of sports, the arts and popular culture, encourage healthy lifestyles in the community and support activities involving participation in healthy pursuits, and fund research and development activities in support of these objectives.



Monash University

Justen O'Connor is an associate professor at Monash University, he is the principal chief investigator on projects evaluating the provision of Mental Health support in sporting clubs, partnering with VicHealth and the AFL players association. Having published a number of funded research papers on similar topics, we engaged with Justen to learn more about his findings and whether there was further development into a mental health promotion strategy for sport in Victoria.



Headspace

Headspace Geelong supports young people, from 12–25, who are going through a tough time. They assist young people in four key areas; Physical Health (incl. sexual health), Mental Health, Alcohol and Other Drugs and Work and Study Support. Headspace offers mental health presentations for 12–25 year olds in schools, education settings, community groups and in some circumstances sporting clubs. Headspace Geelong are a key mental health provider for young people in the Geelong community and as such an important voice in the development of a framework aimed at supporting sporting clubs to develop mentally healthy practices.



Leisure Networks

Leisure Networks delivers Tackle Your Feelings training, a training program designed for local football clubs. It strives to improve understanding and awareness of mental health as well as build skills within coaches to have conversations about mental health with their players. Through online and face-to-face training and support, Tackle Your Feelings supports community coaches to broaden their capacity to influence the mental health of those within their football environment, and ultimately add to their coaching skill set.



Geelong Cats

The AFL Mental Health Framework ensures the AFL industry establishes a shared understanding of the prevalence and impact of mental health as well as how to support people within the industry who are or may be at risk of suffering a mental health issue.

Their framework is intended to support and encourage people across the industry to recognise the importance of early identification and intervention for those who have/are experiencing a mental health issue. It is hoped that through the introduction of education and awareness raising activities, targeted research and building the internal capacity across the industry they can ensure that Australian Football is well positioned to de-stigmatise the issue of mental health.



Barwon Sports Academy Inc.

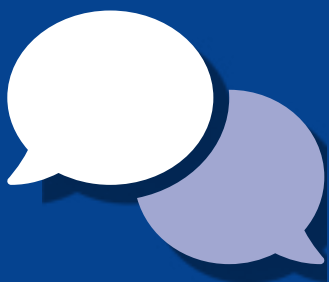
The Barwon Sports Academy Inc. provides pathways for aspiring athletes in our region to reach higher goals at State and National levels through development programs, sharing information, ideas and experiences.

As an organisation that exists to identify, support and further develop the sports related skills, personal abilities and health and wellbeing of talented athletes in the Barwon region, it was important to include their observations in our research.

Thanks

The Project Team were fortunate to be able to engage with representatives from each of these organisations. Each provided valuable insights that have helped shape this project. We would like to acknowledge all of them for their time and ongoing support throughout the project inception and delivery.

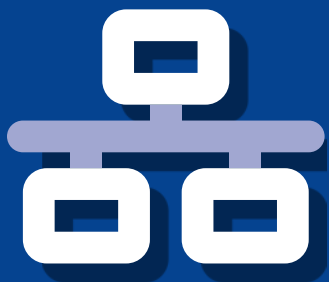
Framework Development and Implementation Plan



Developing communication for clubs



Development of framework



Development of website design



Creation of survey to collect data from sporting clubs

Deliverables

Using the information collected through preliminary research and stakeholder engagement and consultation, we determined that we needed to develop more than just the framework for clubs. We needed to develop a tool for Read the Play to collect information, the tangible framework document, a checklist for clubs to use to self-assess their mental health capabilities, and a website to host the framework which was easy to find and easy to navigate.

The Survey

One of the project deliverables which was requested by Read The Play, was the creation of a survey that could be issued to all football and netball clubs within the AFL Barwon Region.

The purpose of the survey was to obtain baseline data which would assist Read the Play in understanding what strategies or programs local sporting clubs currently have in place around mental health.

The survey was produced by the Project Team, reviewed and revised in conjunction with Read The Play, and has been issued to all clubs by AFL Barwon once the season has commenced. The reason for waiting until then was that clubs are very busy in the lead up to the start of the season and will have more time to respond once the season is underway. The survey is aimed at club committees and will take approximately 5-10 minutes to complete.

Read The Play will then be able to gather, review and utilise the data from the survey to identify key areas for which they can focus on and provide the most benefit to the clubs in their sessions and providing resources.

Sample Email to Clubs

From: AFL Barwon
Sent: Wednesday, 18 May 2022 12:00 PM
To: Local Sporting Clubs
Subject: Read the Play — Supporting Mentally Healthy Sporting Clubs Checklist



The last two years have been challenging and sporting clubs across our region have certainly felt the strain.

Now more than ever, being able to provide a safe, supportive and inclusive environment for your members is so important – especially in the area of mental health.

Becoming a mentally healthy sporting club doesn't need to be complicated or difficult – in fact your club is probably already doing a number of things in this space.

You might even have some ideas about additional things you could be doing, but feel that you don't have the skills or expertise to implement them.

That's where the team at Read the Play can help.

Their trained team members are available to offer support to clubs who are looking for guidance in this area.

To assist Read the Play in understanding what strategies or programs clubs currently have in place around mental health, we're asking club committees to complete the short survey in the following link.

[Click here to complete the survey](#)

This will provide Read the Play with an understanding of the areas they can focus on that will provide the most benefit for local clubs.

You are under no obligation to provide your club name or contact details when completing the survey.

However, if you choose to do so it will enable Read the Play to be ready to support your club in the most appropriate way when they come to conduct their session with your junior players later this season.

Thank you for helping us to understand the important role that sporting clubs are playing in our community.



aflbarwon.com.au



readtheplay.org.au

The Framework

The initial briefing for this project was to deliver a robust and agile framework that can be integrated into sporting clubs and the wider community to enhance a community's wellbeing, and to provide local clubs with a 'best practice' model to attain in supporting their members and players with mental health and wellbeing.

Importantly, the framework needed to include reference to the Read the Play objectives:

- Increase knowledge and awareness about mental health problems
- Increase knowledge about local support services
- Increase confidence and skills in guiding our youth to relevant support services.

As the project progressed and we spoke to key stakeholders, we realised that the framework would also be an integral component in helping local clubs navigate a crowded and ever growing 'mental health' marketplace. With greater acknowledgement of the increasing pressures on young people and the resulting challenges to their mental health, clubs are looking to engage experts in this field with a view to providing strategies for their members.

An increasing number of athletes from a high-performance environment available as guest speakers with mental health as their focus. Anecdotal reports suggest that while these athletes have incredible stories to share, they have the potential to trigger young people and often, on-going support is not provided following the session. Clubs are confused and just want to do what's best for their members.

The framework needed to be accredited, simple to follow, need limited financial investment from clubs and based on advice from trained experts in this field.



The Checklist

A checklist was developed to provide an easy, quick mechanism for sporting clubs to identify the areas where they were already performing strongly in enhancing mental health whilst also providing an opportunity to identify areas for potential growth and change. The checklist was then subsequently adapted into a survey which was sent to all AFL Barwon clubs on behalf of Read the Play by AFL Barwon with the aim of identifying opportunities for growth and development to assist Read the Play in targeting their resources during the upcoming 2022 season and beyond.



Supporting Mentally Healthy Sporting Clubs

Questions for community-based sporting organisations

1. Raise Awareness

- Do you promote Mental Health and wellbeing on socials?
- Does your club have connections to local mental health providers? If so, what providers?

2. Build a Culture of Support



- Has your club experienced any mental health crisis events?
- Does your club have player wellbeing officers? If so, how many?
- Have they completed online training?
- Has your club provided mental health awareness training to coaches and committee members?
- Do you display Mental Health awareness posters such as Read the Play in the clubrooms?

3. Identify Champions of Mental Health in Your Club

- Does your club promote mental health champions amongst your own club?
- Does your club have policies in place relevant to health and wellbeing?
- Does your club discuss mental health and identified risks for your club at club meetings?

4. Open Lines of Communication

- Does your club run Read the Play sessions?
- Does your club take part in the Read the Play round?
- Does your club ensure support is available from multiple people within the club?



5. Encourage Participation

- Does your club emphasise sport is about enjoyment?
- Does your club follow up with families when young people disengage?

6. Embrace Diversity

- Does your club have policies/procedures in place to address bullying, racism, vilification, or intimidation?
- Are any policies/procedures in place regularly reviewed?
- Are any policies/procedures easily accessible to all members?
- Does your club consult with young people about what will help them feel included?
- Does your club have processes to welcome new people and offer support?

7. Build Links to External Supports

- Does your club understand what external well-being services can offer and how you can collaborate?
- Do you have clear responsibility within the club to maintain relationships with well-being services?
- Does your club compile a list of key well-being supports on your website and keep this up to date?
- Would your club be interested in a free web based mental health framework which provides information and resources to players, coaches and parents at local football clubs?

Adapted from Orygen 'Supporting Mental Wellbeing in Community Sport' toolkit.

The Website

Storyboarding for a user-friendly website has been developed, based closely on the framework. The intention is to provide clubs and individuals with readily accessible and easy to navigate information about how to access Read the Play, how to support young people with their mental health, and how to access support services. It is intended that the website will be hosted by both AFL Barwon and Read the Play. The website will need to be maintained by a stakeholder to ensure relevance and currency of the available information.



[Click here to visit the Framework](#)

Challenges

Over the course of the project, we faced a number of challenges which are detailed below.



Project Clarity

Upon commencement of the project, the project group met with Michael Parker from Read The Play to discuss in detail the background, purpose and objectives for the project. From this, the group produced a detailed Project Scope which provided us with direction on research, gathering of data and information to then allow the project deliverables to be developed.

Initially the aims for the project were quite broad, and potentially involved different sporting codes and a large number of stakeholders. At the time of our early research, the COVID restrictions were having a significant impact on all organisations and our group had difficulties in sourcing feedback or arranging meetings with stakeholders. As a result of these challenges, the project objectives became blurry without clear direction.

After further research and work by the Project Team, and ongoing meetings with Michael Parker and Tayla John from Read The Play, the project objectives were narrowed to focus on providing a framework for local football and netball clubs which are part of AFL Barwon. The refinement in scope provided clarity for the team, and allowed the framework and deliverables to be agreed and developed in conjunction with Read The Play.



Project Timing

With many of the key stakeholders in this project involved in the local football and netball community, we knew that our timelines needed to align with the 2021 and 2022 football and netball seasons in the Geelong region.

Our plan was to have all research and interviews with stakeholders completed in September and October 2021 before the football and netball season finished for the year. This would enable us to have our framework ready for the start of the 2022 season.

Unfortunately, COVID cut the 2021 season short which impacted on our ability to meet with these stakeholders in a timely manner. However, with perseverance from the team and the support of our project champions and AFL Barwon, the framework was made available to all clubs at the 2022 season launch.

COVID Restrictions and Compliance

Like in all aspects of life, the ongoing COVID pandemic has had a significant impact on all aspects of this project. In particular, the work normally undertaken by the Read the Play program during a 'normal' football/netball season was curtailed during both 2020 and 2021 resulting in a reduced number of events being provided to clubs and junior players. Alongside this, clubs were struggling to manage the impact of COVID on their junior members in particular and looking for options for support. A sense of uncertainty was palpable in sporting clubs in much the same way as the general community.

Further, during the life of this project, the impact of COVID generally has ebbed and flowed. Whether it be the arrival of yet another strain of the virus and the changing rules associated with this new strain, or the ongoing impact of existing COVID requirements around gatherings and educational events, all aspects of COVID have impacted upon the development of the project. At times it has been unclear as to whether the time frames for sponsored rounds or education events will proceed. Challenges have also included minimal opportunities to meet face to face with either group members, stakeholders, champions and mentors. These challenges were not insurmountable however it is important to acknowledge their impact upon the progression of the project.

Lack of Evidence-Based Data

In the context of this project, the impact of this uncertainty was a reduction in the amount of experiential data available from clubs which in previous years would have been utilised by Read the Play and other mental health organisations to inform and further refine their interventions.

Change of Roles

Throughout the project the group has experienced some challenges when engaging and seeking to collaborate with stakeholders and staff in key roles within those organisations. Key contacts the team were engaging with from within organisations changed roles internally or may have departed the organisation altogether.

In some instances the group were not made aware of such changes or staff movements happening in advance which created some lost time from the project with no handover happening with replacement staff members regarding the project for them to be able to continue to support and provide information, background, data or make commitments as required.

The Project Team on a few occasions had to seek out the right people to engage and bring them up to speed on the project scope, the work that had been done to date, key conversations or commitments previously made and ensure that those commitments or arrangements were still supported.

NEWCOMB & DISTRICT SPORTS CLUB

Home of the Mighty Dinos



Opportunities

Extending to other leagues and sporting codes

The framework and best practice mental health approach has been created in a way that it is transferable to other leagues and sporting codes. We envision that the framework be tested and adapted within the AFL Barwon network and then taken to other regions and expanded to reach a higher number of players from sporting league's and codes across Victoria.

We understand that there tends to be a large focus on AFL and Netball codes however we cannot lose sight of the other important sporting codes that operate in our region. Players within codes such as soccer, hockey, tennis etc. still have a right to access up to date, best practice, mental health services and even though these codes may not have access to the funding that AFL and Netball have access to, mental health guidelines and frameworks such as those contained within this report are still relevant and important to those players.

Networking Between Service Providers

The development of a framework for sporting clubs to create mentally healthy environments provides great opportunities for service providers currently working in the field of youth mental health to develop and/or cement stronger networks. In consultation with stakeholders, it was acknowledged that the timing for this framework was perfect, as it supports the development of mental health literacy within the Geelong community for both adults and young people. A range of service providers practice in different ways in this space, whether it be via education in schools, education to coaches and adults, or in Read the Play's case, education to young people in the sporting club environment. This framework provides an opportunity to bring these service providers together with a view to the development of enhanced interagency collaboration.

Funding Opportunities

Read the Play has forged strong relationships with sponsorship organisations and has opened up fundraising opportunities through their hugely successful [#Sockittomentalillness](#) campaign (head to the website and buy a pair of limited edition unisex socks, you won't regret it!).

There are further fundraising opportunities as the program evaluates expansion into additional netball and AFL leagues as well as other sporting codes.

Other opportunities of sponsorship through organisations in the expanded regions will also be required. Some sporting clubs simply do not have the budgets to pay for mental health programs, and sponsorship allows Read the Play to provide the program to these clubs for free so that they can continue the great work achieved so far in breaking down barriers and expanding access to evidence based mental health services.

Recommendations

Website Access

Understanding the importance of this document as a resource to local football and netball clubs, we needed to ensure that anyone involved in any club, such as players, families and committee members had easy and immediate access to it. With AFL Barwon the governing body in this region, we knew that clubs were familiar with their website and that many policies and procedures were already available there.

As such, we determined that the AFL Barwon website would be the best place for this framework to be housed. However, we did have some concerns about the usability of their website and questioned if clubs would be able to find the information easily—an incredibly important aspect of providing information about mental health support.

We were excited to learn in the later stages of our project, that the AFL Barwon website was undergoing a re-design and that as part of this process, the framework would be included when the new website was launched at the 2022 Season Launch.

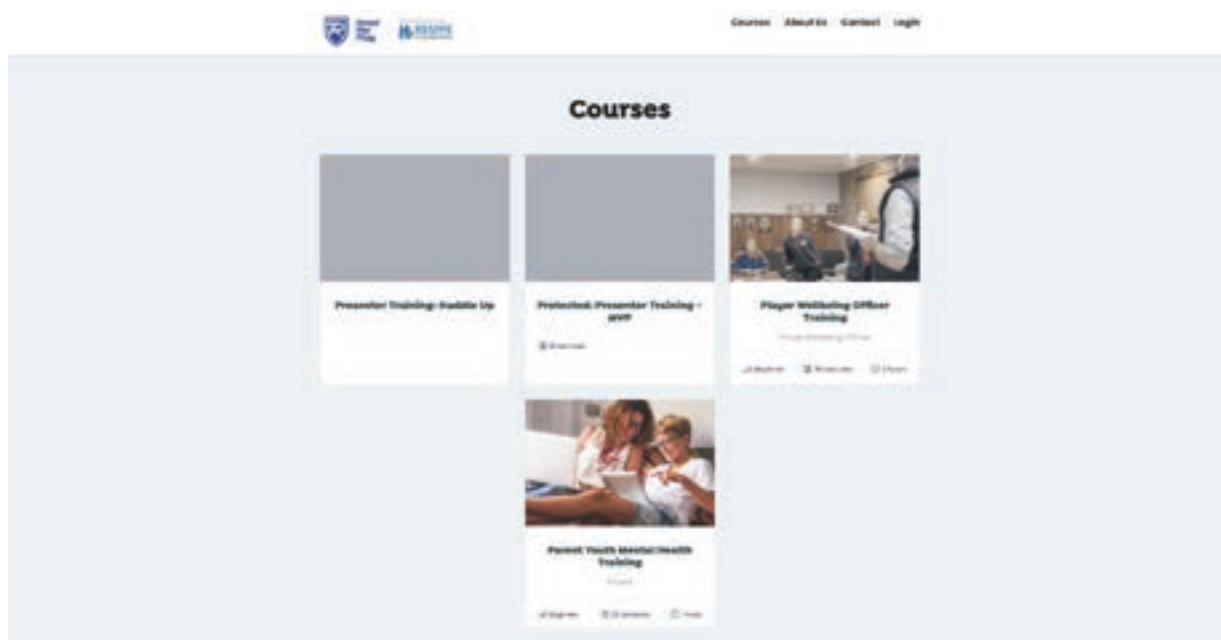
We also recommend that the information is also available through the Read the Play website where there are many resources referring to mental health support.



Read the Play Online-Training Improvement

During our initial investigation and review of the resources, we accessed both the parent training material and the Player Wellbeing Officer (PWO) training material provided by Read the Play. While we agree that this information is paramount to the program and to supporting youth through mental health, we found it difficult to remain engaged with.

It is our recommendation that the instructional design of the programs be evaluated to provide users with a more engaging and interactive experience.



A Tier-Accreditation System

The development of a tiered accreditation system is a core element of this framework. Becoming a mentally healthy sporting club doesn't have to be a new initiative that clubs spend time and resources supporting – most clubs are already doing work in this area. A tiered accreditation system is a means to support clubs at all stages to continue to grow and develop. It's about adopting an alternative way of thinking, it's about developing club culture and it's recognising that sporting clubs are a great place to help break down stigma and start conversations on mental health.



Read the Play Mentally Healthy Sporting Club Accreditation

Social Media Promotion Kit

Through the research undertaken as part of this project, we see an opportunity for Read the Play to provide local sporting clubs with collateral. This will enable Read the Play to share the incredible work being done by their organisation and also share key messages about the importance of mental health in our community.

Knowing that local sporting clubs are managed by volunteers, it's beneficial to provide information that is "ready to go" and that makes it as easy as possible for clubs to share. Tiles for social media channels, wording for emails and posters for clubs to display in their social rooms are some examples of what could be made available.



Annual Data Collection

Data collection has been undertaken to assist Read the Play in understanding what strategies or programs local sporting clubs currently have in place around mental health, and where the gaps are. In future, the annual survey will be vital for not only maintaining information, but demonstrating the journey clubs have taken to become a mentally healthy sporting club.

The annual survey should continue to be aimed at club committees and take no longer than 5–10 minutes to complete. Once the survey data is received, this will allow for the identification of key areas of focus to provide the most benefit to each club in their sessions and providing appropriate and relevant resources. From this, Read the Play can also support clubs where required via connections with other established and accredited mental health providers that can play a key role in helping to create a mentally healthy sporting club for the community.



Maintenance of the Framework, Survey and Website

The purpose for this project was to develop a framework for busy sports clubs and help to take the guesswork out of navigating what a Mentally Healthy sports club looks like. Our group has achieved this objective; however, it is recommended that the framework, survey, and website be reviewed annually by Read The Play to ensure that the information remains current, and that any required alterations are made to keep with the times. This is particularly important in the current COVID climate where significant changes are regularly being made to the way organisations operate.

Group Reflection

Participating in the Read the Play project group has been rewarding for all of the team, as well as the stakeholders and mentors who have worked with us. The bonds that we have formed are strong because of our early identification of needing to be vulnerable in this space. We all shared our own experiences and had those around us share theirs. This created a team culture that was trustworthy and empathetic to the needs of each other and the anxiety and capacity constraints we all experienced through the peak of the pandemic. Each of us has our own personal story to tell of experiences in this challenging health space but it takes a psychologically safe environment to enable each person to tell their story.

We are a group of passionate leaders from the very diverse fields of health, teaching, disability, local Government, and construction. We are advocates for creating easily accessible mental health awareness and education frameworks. Using our learnings and experiences from this project, we have all committed to continuing our leadership in this space with the aim to de-stigmatise mental illness and assist those in need to find the right treatment, at the right time.

Each of us identified Read the Play as an opportunity to commit our time and effort to an initiative that has the potential to genuinely save lives.

Project Mentor

“This project has the capacity to positively impact future generations of the Geelong community for a long time. This stuff is so topical and necessary, children, parents, volunteer coaches, clubs and mental health service providers will now have access to a framework bringing resources together that aim to get children and young people involved in community sport, the wellbeing help and support they need when they need it. This project team has had real vision and dedication. Through their lived experiences and values, they understood their multiple stakeholder requirements and have accomplished a sustainable program with real and tangible outcomes for the community.”



Sharon Kelly
Legal Manager, Medical Panels

Appendices

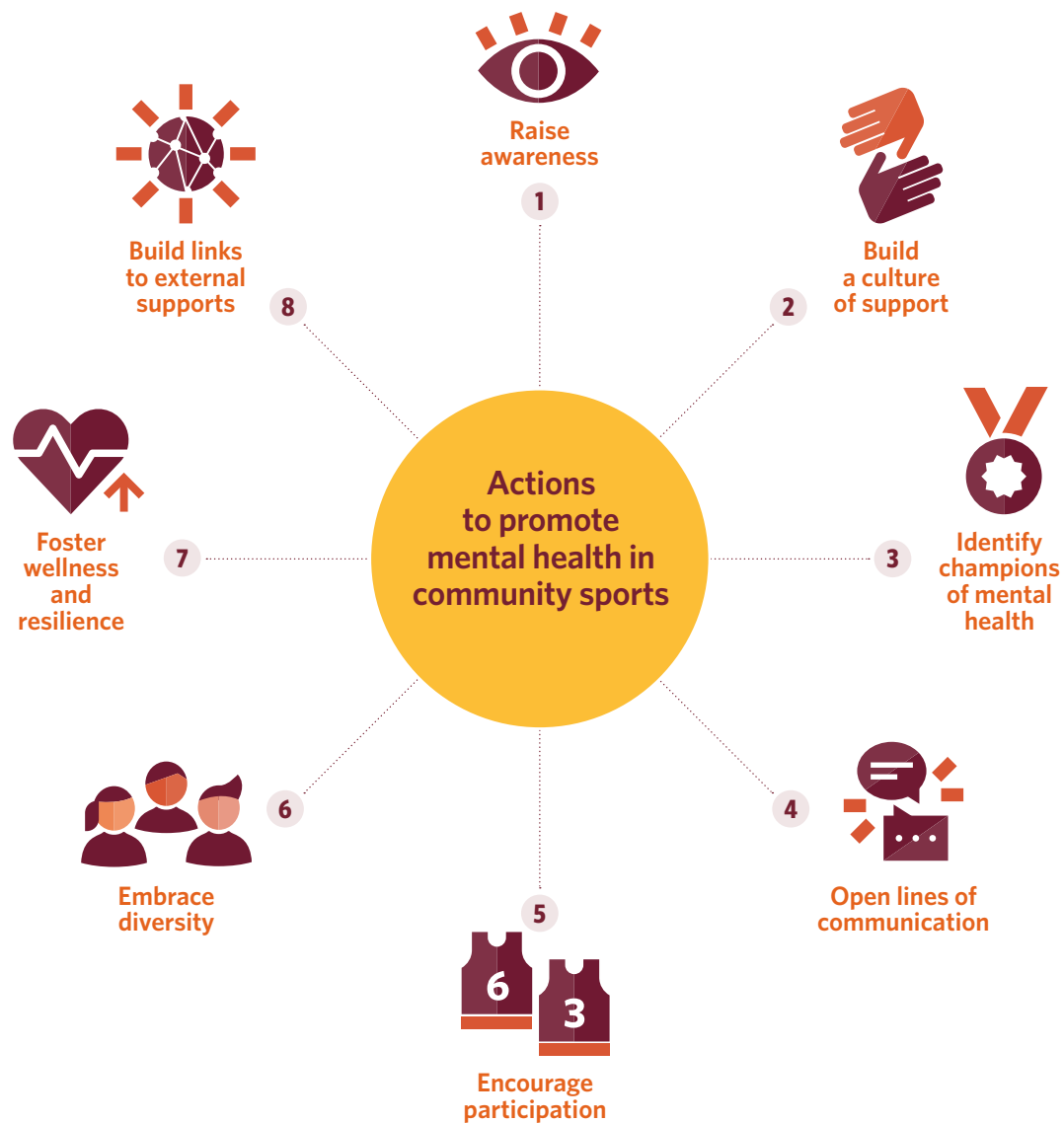
Appendix 1

Checklist reference

The Orygen Supporting Mental Wellbeing in Community Sport toolkit was utilised by the Project Team as a basis for the development of the checklist.

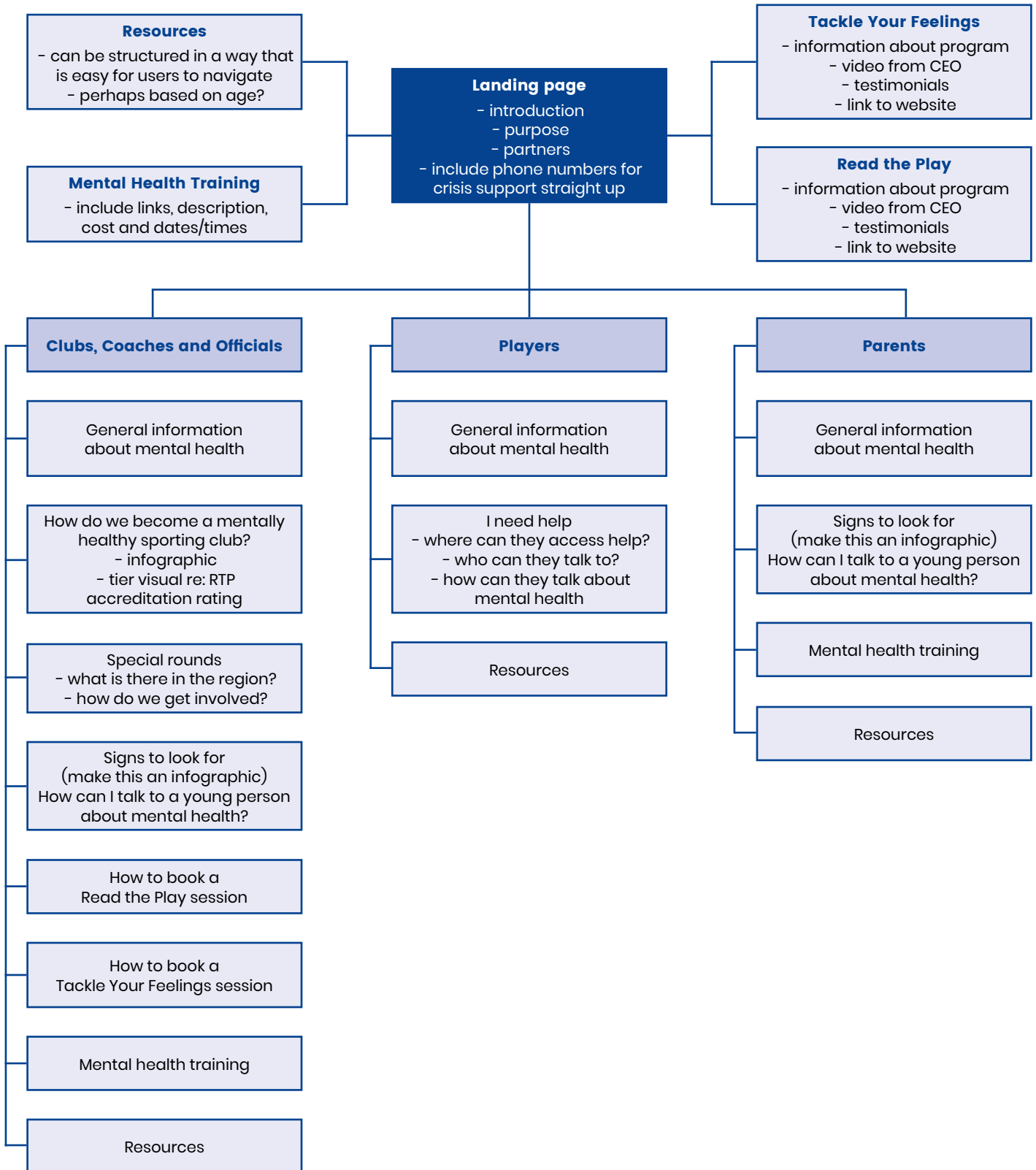
[Click here](#) to access the toolkit.

FIGURE 1 A toolkit to promote mental health in community sports



Appendix 2

Website Storyboard



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