



NORTHERN FUTURES PROJECT REVIEW REPORT

PRESENTED BY

Northern Futures Project Steering Committee
Central Rivers Leagues Board

JUNE 2025

Project Summary

November 2024 > May 2025

Introduction

The Northern Futures Project (NFP) Steering Committee, appointed by the Central Rivers Leagues (CRL) Board and endorsed by AFL Central Victoria, was formed to propose a sustainable path forward for football and netball competitions in our region into the future.

Methodology

The Committee has engaged with clubs in both the Central Murray Football Netball League (CMFNL) and Golden Rivers Football Netball League (GRFNL) through written surveys and personalised consultations.

The Northern Futures Project process was initiated through a series of club president forums held in mid-2024, providing an early opportunity for direct engagement and high-level input from club leadership.

This initial phase laid the foundation for broader consultation, leading to the formation of the NFP Steering Committee in December 2024, tasked with guiding the project's direction and ensuring alignment with regional needs.

In early 2025, the project advanced with the rollout of tailored league and club surveys in February, designed to capture detailed insights from across the football community. These surveys were complemented by one-on-one club consultations throughout April & May, enabling deeper discussion and the identification of key themes, priorities, and challenges facing clubs in the region.

This structured and inclusive approach ensures that the Northern Futures Project is shaped by those most directly involved in community football - the clubs in the Central Murray & Golden Rivers Football Netball Leagues.

Project Findings

Key Themes

Key themes identified by the NFP Committee from the consultations included:

- *The GRFNL is unsustainable with less than 6 clubs, and/or if any club is unable to field one or more teams.*
- *Of league structure options presented to the committee:*
 - *There was strongest support for a single league competition*
 - *There was low support for a “two tier” league structure with any form of a promotion/relegation style system*
- *The need for strict participation criteria in relation to the fielding of football and netball teams was strongly supported*
- *The majority of clubs indicated amalgamations are inevitable in the future due to player and volunteer shortages. Whilst some clubs indicated they have had conceptual merger discussions no clubs indicated they were considering this for Season 2026 at this stage.*
- *Clubs accept that any proposed structure of football and netball in the Central Rivers region may change again in the coming years based on amalgamations and/or closures of current clubs, and likely changes in surrounding leagues and clubs.*
- *Create a point of difference through greater promotion of “marquee games”, double headers, more night games and exploring other novel ideas.*



Project Findings

Guiding Principles

The NFP committee, having considered the available data, key themes, the local knowledge and opinion collated through consultations, based recommendations on the following guiding principles:

- *That sustainable models for community football and netball are required immediately to maximise participation opportunities and community interest*
- *The number of clubs in the Central Rivers region is unsustainable*
- *The existing geographic footprint of football and netball in the Central Rivers region, where feasible, should be maintained to provide participation opportunities to all community segments, however:*
 - *the rationalisation of the number of clubs is expected*
 - *that club transfers and amalgamations be considered with clubs and leagues both internal and external of the Central Rivers region*
- *When seeking sustainable models for the Central Rivers region, consideration must be given to:*
 - *the competitive levels between the GRFNL and CMFNL which is significant*
 - *The feasibility of any increased or consolidated competition*
 - *That whilst clubs should choose their preferred destiny, they are subject to regional considerations, relevant rules and regulations*
- *That whilst further change should be expected, immediate change must be considered better than the existing models*
- *Local Councils are finding it more difficult to obtain grant funding for the numerous facility upgrades required by clubs across both leagues and would welcome better utilisation of facilities through a shared approach.*

Project Summary:

The committee present these recommendations for further consideration and discussion by CRL Board, its member clubs, and AFL Central Victoria. These recommendations are not binding and are presented to seek a sustainable future for football and netball in the Central Rivers region.

The committee appreciates the various opinions and options presented, acknowledge and recognise that change is inevitable, which should be managed collaboratively and not in isolation under the relevant AFL Victoria Affiliate Transfer regulations and protocols required.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 1. That 2025 be the final season of the GRFNL providing an opportunity to celebrate its history during the 2025 finals series*
- 2. That GRFNL clubs, consistent with AFL Victoria Transfer Regulations, individually consider transferring to a league either within or outside of the Central Rivers region where they can compete sustainably, and that specific to this review an exemption to current AFL Victoria transfer deadlines be sought on behalf of transferring clubs.*
- 3. That clubs explore amalgamation opportunities which can maintain the geographic footprint of football and netball and participate in a league where they can compete and be sustainable*
- 4. That the CMFNL expand by accepting club transfers which can value add to the league, which are considered capable of competing and being sustainable, and acknowledging that any participation criteria or developed minimum standards will become applicable to all new and existing clubs*
- 5. That the region considers all transfer and amalgamation propositions individually whilst recognising that a collaborative approach with neighbouring leagues is necessary*
- 6. That the operational and functional model of an expanded league should not be an obstacle to immediate decision making, and consideration should be given to:*
 - a. CCSP consideration (Player Points and Player Payment Caps)*
 - b. Finals modelling*
 - c. Number of Home & Away games*
- 7. Relevant regional league Boards should collaborate with AFL Central Victoria to ensure any proposed regional restructure be considered sustainable, viable & within regulatory limits.*
- 8. Should no acceptable 2026 model be achieved, that the GRFNL continue with a minimum of 4 clubs for 2026 only (as a transitional arrangement)*

Acknowledgments

On behalf of the Central Rivers League Board, we would like to extend our sincere thanks to the clubs, key stakeholders, and most importantly, the dedicated members of the NFP Steering Committee for their invaluable input, time, and unwavering dedication. Your collective efforts have been instrumental in guiding this important work, and your commitment to collaboration and progress continues to shape a stronger, sustainable future for our region.

Thank you for your continued support and contribution.

