



## MEMORANDUM

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To: **Community Football stakeholders**

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From: **AFL Game Development, AFL Legal & Regulatory**

Date: **28 November 2025**

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Re: **Summary of 2026 amendments to National Community Football Policy Handbook**

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Dear all,

The purpose of this memorandum is to provide a summary of the substantive amendments to the National Community Football Policy Handbook (**Policy Handbook**) for 2026.

Following extensive consultation with State and Territory Football Bodies, legal review, and stakeholder feedback, the following key amendments will be implemented in the 2026 edition of the Policy Handbook:

### 1. Section 1.1 – Definitions

- a. Defined key terms including Harassment, Bullying, Victimization, and Abuse to ensure clarity and compliance with Sport Integrity Australia's (**SIA**) requirements under their Sport Integrity Policy Standards (**Integrity Standards**) which are derived from the National Integrity Framework (**NIF**).

### 2. Section 3 – Player Transfers

- a. Amended section 3.3(a)(ii) to outline that where a transfer is requested for a player who has an active Permit, the Permit will be voided. This change reflects current practice. Previously, this section stated that transfers must not be initiated for a player with a Permit despite this being common practice.
- b. Removed section 3.3(e) on transfer requests involving suspended players, as section 27.1 (Suspension of Person) addresses players seeking to gain an advantage in serving their suspension. Transfers will no longer be restricted for this reason.

### 3. Section 6 – Coach and Umpire Accreditation

- a. AFL can now reinstate accreditation without a full review if it was revoked for not providing requested information and that information is later provided.
- b. Accreditation Panel reviews will now consider compliance with Working with Children Check (WWCC) requirements given Accreditation cannot be reinstated unless WWCC compliance is met.
- c. Revoked umpire accreditation now prohibits that person from holding any umpiring role, including, but not limited to, umpire coaching.

#### **4. Section 7 – Deregistration**

- a. A person can now be deregistered under section 7.3 for serious or cumulative sanctions even if they're not registered at the time (e.g. the deregistration determination occurs after the season ends).
- b. A Football Official can now be deregistered under section 7.4 for Serious Criminal Offences even if they weren't an official at the time of the offence or are no longer registered when the decision is made.
- c. AFL may now allow a deregistered Football Official (under section 7.4 for Serious Criminal Offences) to continue as a player, avoiding the anomaly where Football Officials who also play (e.g. playing Coach) lose both roles while players committing the same offence can still play.

#### **5. Section 9 – Member Protection**

- a. Expanded responsibilities to include respect for Controlling Body Officers following many instances of disrespectful conduct toward them in 2025.
- b. Coaches must now stay up to date with and follow all child safeguarding requirements, to comply with SIA's Integrity Standards.
- c. Clubs must now provide a "respectful and safe, including culturally safe" environment, expanding the previous focus on cultural safety to also address general poor crowd behaviour, particularly toward umpires and visiting teams.

#### **6. Section 10 – Vilification and Discrimination**

- a. To reflect an increasing practical function, the AFL Vilification and Discrimination Panel's role now includes providing expert assistance in section 10 Tribunal proceedings (e.g. sitting as a Tribunal Panel member on a local Tribunal), expanding beyond its previous function for conciliation only.
- b. Removed the ability for a Controlling Body to charge a fee for conciliation administration, as conciliation is an AFL decision and charging a fee was considered inappropriate.
- c. Changed arrangement of conciliation from "will" to "may" to reflect limited uptake and better expedite outcomes.
- d. Removed clauses from 10.6 that outlined the procedures for managing a section 10 matter where it has not proceeded to conciliation or has not been resolved at conciliation and align to section 23.4 and section 23.5 which already cover the same processes.

#### **7. Section 11 – Safeguarding Children and Young People**

##### **Appendix 6 – Children and Young People Safe Practices**

- a. Overhauled section 11 to align and comply with SIA's Integrity Standards regarding safeguarding including addition of Appendix 6 to more comprehensively outline Children and Young People Safe Practices including:
  - i. Professional boundaries;

- ii. Harmful behaviour and language;
- iii. Physical contact with Children and Young People;
- iv. Positive guidance & discipline;
- v. Supervision;
- vi. Use of electronic and online communications;
- vii. Photographs or video Children and Young People
- viii. Drop off and pick up of Children and Young People
- ix. Transporting Children and Young People
- x. Overnight stays and sleeping arrangements
- xi. Change room arrangements
- xii. Alcohol, drugs and medicine
- xiii. Parent / Guardian involvement

- b. Clarified obligations for Clubs and Controlling Bodies, including screening, reporting, and behavioural standards.

#### **8. Section 14 – Anti-Doping and Supplements**

- a. Based on advice from the AFL Medical team, a new subsection has been added to provide guidance on supplement use in community football. Players considering supplement use are encouraged to follow the AIS Supplement Framework and choose batch-tested products.

#### **9. Section 17 – Extreme Weather**

- a. Based on advice from the AFL Medical team, a new subsection has been added to outline the effects of poor air quality and recommended actions for a Controlling Body or Club based on varying PM2.5 air quality thresholds.

#### **10. Section 22 – Reportable Offences**

- a. Clause 22.2(c) has been added to state that any offence involving vilification or discrimination is to be managed under Section 10 of the Policy Handbook. This was previously a guidance note and is now a formal clause to ensure clear obligation on Controlling Bodies on management of these matters.
- b. Clause 22.2(c) also clarifies that any Notice of Report or Incident Referral Form involving vilification or discrimination will be treated as a Notice of Complaint under Section 23.1. This means these matters can be managed as a Policy Breach based on an Umpire report without requiring a separate Notice of Complaint form or submission through the AFL Integrity Portal.
- c. Moved clauses related to recording reportable offences to section 27 (General disciplinary provisions) and merged with the same clauses related to recording policy breaches.

## 11. Section 23 – Policy Breaches

- a. A new clause under 23.1(c) states that a Controlling Body cannot charge a fee for lodging or administering a complaint related to Section 10 (Vilification/Discrimination) or Section 11 (Safeguarding). This change removes an unfair barrier to submitting complaints on these serious matters.
- b. To align with SIA's Integrity Standards requirements, new clauses under 23.1(f) place an obligation on a Club, Football Official or Player to report conduct which is reasonably likely to be a breach of:
  - i. prohibited conduct under Section 9 that relates to Abuse, Bullying, Harassment, Sexual Misconduct, Victimization or a serious criminal offence;
  - ii. vilification or discrimination under Section 10;
  - iii. prohibited conduct under Section 11.4;
  - iv. gambling or match fixing under Section 13; or
  - v. an anti-doping rule violation under Section 14.2.
- c. New clauses under 23.2(a)(i)(E) and 23.2(c)(i)(G) clarify that the AFL or a Controlling Body may dismiss a complaint where the complaint has not been made in accordance with Section 23.1 or where it does not fall within the purview of the Policy Handbook. This change aligns with SIA's Integrity Standards requirements.
- d. Clause 23.2(b)(i)(D) now allows the AFL to stand down a person on a conditional basis during investigation and resolution of serious conduct matters, consistent with SIA's Integrity Standards requirements. This means a person may be stood down but still permitted to participate in a role under certain conditions (e.g., play matches only, not able to coach underage persons).
- e. Clause 23.2(b)(ii) now requires the AFL to give any person under investigation a reasonable opportunity to be heard, rather than simply notifying them. This change aligns with SIA's Integrity Standards requirements.
- f. Clause 23.2(b)(ii) has been amended to allow the AFL discretion not to provide written notice, or a reasonable opportunity to be heard, to a person under investigation when it is deemed inappropriate. This change addresses situations such as unsupported complaints or highly sensitive matters (e.g., child abuse, sexual abuse, criminal conduct) where referral to another agency may be more appropriate.
- g. Clause 23.2(e)(i)(A) now requires Controlling Bodies to give any person under investigation a reasonable opportunity to be heard, rather than simply notifying them. This change aligns with SIA's Integrity Standards requirements.
- h. Clause 23.2(i)(i) clarifies that a parent or guardian can submit a written complaint on behalf of a person under 18. This change aligns with SIA's Integrity Standards requirements.
- i. Added new sections 23.2(k) (Conflict of Interest) and 23.2(l) (Criminal Conduct). This change aligns with SIA's Integrity Standards requirements.

- j. Moved clauses related to recording policy breaches to section 27 (General disciplinary provisions) and merged with the same clauses related to recording reportable offences.

## **12. Section 25 – Tribunal**

- a. A new clause under 25.2(a) requires Controlling Bodies to establish a Tribunal to perform the functions outlined in Section 25.1. The wording has also been amended to clarify that they must appoint members to the Tribunal (previously stated as 'may').
- b. Added that a person who has been a Controlling Body Officer in the 12 months preceding the appointment must not be appointed to the Tribunal (except where the Controlling Body determines otherwise).
- c. Added clause to outline that any Tribunal member must not sit on a hearing if they have an actual, potential or perceived conflict of interest.
- d. Clause 25.3(c)(ii)(D) has been amended to clarify that a Tribunal hearing can proceed even if someone cannot attend, and the charged person may still be sanctioned. This change removes confusion after a case where a witness was suspended by the Tribunal for not attending a hearing.
- e. General provisions have been added under 25.3(d)(vi), based on AFL regulations, to address instructions that a Tribunal Chairperson may give in a hearing.
- f. Chairperson approval is now needed under 25.3(e) before calling a victim player as a witness. This aligns with AFL regulations and prevents situations where victim players feel pressured to give false evidence to help another player avoid charges or have charges downgraded.
- g. Clause 25.3(i) has been amended to confirm that no 'person' (rather than 'Person') bears an onus of proof. This change addresses a previous situation where a Controlling Body was expected to carry an onus of proof because it is not included within the definition of a 'Person' under the Policy.
- h. Revised order of provisions under 25.4 to outline the outcome options available to a Tribunal for a Reportable Offences under 25.4(a)(ii) and Policy Breaches under 25.4(a)(iii) and clarified that Tribunals cannot revoke a coach or umpire accreditation – this remains an AFL function.
- i. Amended provision 25.4(a)(iv) to outline that exceptional and compelling circumstances must relate directly to a person's involvement in Australian Football—not their character or standing in the community, or the importance of future matches (e.g. finals). This change prevents an increasing incidence of sanctions being reduced on these grounds just so players can participate in key games.
- j. Moved 25.5 (Suspension of Person) and 25.6 (Criticism of decision) to section 27 (General disciplinary provisions) given they apply more broadly than just to Tribunal.

## **13. Section 26 – Appeal Board**

- a. Moved 26.4(g) (Criticism of Appeal Board decision) to section 27 (General disciplinary provisions) given this applies more broadly than just to Appeal Board decisions.

#### 14. Section 27 – General disciplinary processes

- a. Under 27.1(a), suspensions for Policy Breaches (except section 10 breaches) can now be set as a period of time, not just a number of matches. This is more practical for Football Officials who commit serious breaches and does not limit the application of the suspension to just matchday activity (e.g. a Coach suspended for a child safeguarding offence will also now not be able to coach at training).
- b. Added a clause at 27.1(b)(iii) to outline that during a suspension, a person cannot play or participate in any match run by any Controlling Body. This reflects 22.4.4(a) from the Laws of Australian Football and addresses a frequently posed question on application of a suspension.
- c. New clauses at 27.1(b)(vii), 27.1(b)(viii) and 27.1(b)(ix) explain how suspensions apply when players transfer between competitions, preventing attempts to gain an advantage in serving the suspension including by reflecting 22.4.4 from the Laws of Australian Football.
- d. Moved and combined clauses related to recording reportable offences and recording policy breaches from section 22 (Reportable Offences) and section 23 (Policy Breaches) to section 27 (General disciplinary provisions).
- e. Added new section 27.3 to outline how a disciplinary matter may be closed. This section has been added to comply with SIA's Integrity Standards requirements and has no practical impact on handling disciplinary matters.
- f. Added new section 27.4 to outline that a Controlling Body or the AFL, as applicable, will communicate as appropriate with the involved parties throughout the management and resolution of a disciplinary matter, including notification of the outcome and closure of a matter. This section has been added to comply with SIA's Integrity Standards requirements and is not expected to have any practical impact on handling disciplinary matters.
- g. Added a new section (27.5) which now prohibits public comment or criticism of Tribunal, Appeal Board, Controlling Body decisions, or any Controlling Body officer. This combines previous provisions for Tribunal and Appeal Board and extends the restriction to Controlling Body decisions or any Controlling Body officer.
- h. Added a new section (27.6) to outline that, except as required by law, records, pleas or findings under the Policy Handbook apply only within the Policy Handbook and cannot be used as admissions or evidence in any other proceedings. This addition aligns with 16.3(c) in the AFL Regulations.
- i. Added a new section (27.7) to outline that a person interviewed as a suspect in a criminal investigation, charged or arrested by a law enforcement agency in respect of a criminal offence is not required to make any statement or give evidence which would breach any privilege against self-incrimination or legal professional privilege. This addition aligns with 2.6 in the AFL Rules.

#### 15. Appendix 1 – Reportable Offences

- a. Clarified that High Contact grading for a Dangerous Tackle can apply if there's potential for injury from high contact with the ground—even if that contact *with the ground* doesn't actually occur.

- b. Introduced flexibility for sanctioning of low-level offences by allowing a 2-match penalty offer (reduced to 1 under EGPO) instead of a Tribunal hearing. This closes the gap between a reprimand and direct Tribunal referral for cases like careless or unnecessary umpire contact, contact with injured players, or obscene gestures where 1 match under an EGPO may be appropriate.
- c. Made several amendments to the auditory offences classification table including:
  - i. Listing 'receiver' first and 'conduct' second to simplify the table when classifying offences and emphasise higher gradings for conduct toward an umpire.
  - ii. Adjusting 'low level' conduct to 'medium / low level' following feedback that suggested match review panels were finding it difficult when they felt a matter was somewhere in between 'low level' and 'high level'.
  - iii. Increased the base sanction for 'high level' and 'threatening' conduct toward an umpire to further penalise and deter umpire abuse which remains one of the most commonly reported offences across community football.
  - iv. An early guilty plea discount (one match) now applies to threatening conduct, bringing it into line with all other forms of auditory conduct and bridging the sanction gap between threatening and high-level conduct.
- d. An additional match penalty may apply for an auditory offence by an adult directed at an underage umpire or an Accredited Coach toward an umpire. This aims to deter such conduct which remains at unacceptable levels in community football.
- e. The meaning of 'verifiable' and 'exemplary' have been outlined within the reduction for exemplary record section to emphasise to local Tribunals that it is a high threshold. Any reduction for verifiable exemplary disciplinary record is now limited to reducing the base sanction by one match whereas previously the Tribunal had absolute discretion to determine the reduction in sanction.
- f. Clarified handling of sanctions relating to multiple offences in a single match.
- g. For Rough Conduct (bumps to the body), contact may be graded as High/Groin/Chest if the bump involves chest contact (female players only).
- h. Clarified to Tribunals that they can substitute a charge where appropriate, rather than simply finding a player not guilty of the original charge. For example, if a player is charged with *intentional umpire contact* but the evidence supports *careless umpire contact*, the Tribunal should substitute the charge to reflect the lesser offence instead of issuing a not guilty verdict.
- i. Added guidance for Charging offences, including the Laws of the Game definition and factors to consider like player vulnerability, expectation of contact, and level of force.

## 16. Appendix 3 – Serious Criminal Offences

- a. Added flexibility for the AFL, having regard to all the circumstances, to determine other offences not explicitly listed to be a serious criminal offence.

Please note that there are expected to be further amendments and a subsequent release of the Policy Handbook in early 2026 including with respect to the following sections:

1. Appendix 1 (Reportable Offences) – Amendments to the AFL Tribunal Guidelines (for elite) will result in further amendments to this Appendix to ensure consistency between the documents (where practical).
2. Appendix 2 (Example Reportable Offences) – Updates to the vision examples will result in amendments to this section.

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