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## BACKGROUND

**Athlete Wellbeing & Engagement (AW&E) is a team at the Australian Institute of Sport (AIS)**

AW&E’s role is to partner with national sporting organisations (NSOs) to create cultures that support those individuals involved in high performance programs.

### AW&E IS STRUCTURED ACROSS FIVE FUNCTIONS:

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<td>Access to a national referral network of clinical specialists in the field of mental health</td>
<td>Access to expert counsel, and help to develop and refine policy &amp; procedures</td>
<td>Networking events for past and current athletes</td>
<td>Access to a national work-placement network that links athletes with employers who understand the demands of elite sport and offer workplace flexibility</td>
<td>Access to approved education and expertise to optimise health and wellbeing</td>
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<td>Broadening awareness about the mental health challenges commonly faced by athletes</td>
<td>Professional development for athlete advisory committees</td>
<td>Opportunities to give back to the community at a local and national level</td>
<td>Mentoring to enhance leadership and communication skills</td>
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<td>Guidance to develop support networks, both within the sport and outside</td>
<td>Access to education, expertise, and mentoring around the responsible behaviours specific to elite sport</td>
<td>Speaking engagements and activities to increase individual and squad profiles in the corporate sector, and general community</td>
<td>Access to a national referral network of vocational guidance experts</td>
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<td>Direct liaison with universities to assist with managing study</td>
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AW&E frameworks operate across multiple contexts, addressing issues of athlete wellbeing both directly, on an individual basis, and also more broadly to influence the regulatory and cultural landscape of each NSO.
The AIS and DIVING AUSTRALIA have collaborated to develop an AW&E implementation plan called the DIVING AUSTRALIA AW&E FRAMEWORK

**AIM**
To ensure that athletes' experience of the high performance program is affirmative, encouraged, and supported, and that athletes are able to talk positively about their time in the sport.

**OUTCOME**
Athletes choose to engage at an elite level, can deal with the requirements of the sport, and feel fulfilled and supported during their time in Diving, and in life subsequently.

**APPLICATION**
Designed to integrate into HP operations so as to maximize efficiency, the Framework provides the AW&E Manager at DA with a strategy to deliver agreed AW&E services in a staged manner.

**PROCESS**
To develop the AW&E Framework, the AIS and DA

- conducted **focus groups** across a range with a variety of stakeholders involved in the high performance program to canvass opinions and experiences
- reviewed DA policies, procedures, and processes to determine how AW&E can support DA in the pursuit of best outcomes and best practice
- benchmarked the proposed DA Framework against professional sporting codes in Australia, and elite international and Olympic programs
- confidentially managed all data collected.

Focus groups were conducted in three states around Australia during May and June, consulting with 42 stakeholders across five cohorts—

**Current elite divers**

**Recently retired elite divers**

**HP coaches**

**HP managers & staff**

**HP parents**
1.0 WELLBEING IN THE SPORT OF HP DIVING

In the past, coaches didn’t care if you were having problems outside the sport; you had to leave that stuff at the door. I’ve seen a huge change in that. Now there’s a real willingness to ask and to know.

Athlete wellbeing in HP Diving has been subject to significant cultural change in recent times, with a new generation of executive and coaching appointments driving tangible positive change.

UNDERSTANDINGS OF ‘WELLBEING’

Respondents indicated that having lifestyle ‘balance’ is a necessary pre-condition for athlete wellbeing. The widespread acceptance of this principle is a marker of the HP program’s changed outlook across a relatively short space of time.

<table>
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<th>Wellbeing means permission to be a human first and an athlete second</th>
<th>Wellbeing is thinking of the athletes as something more than commodities. It’s treating them as people so they can use the lessons of sport in the real world</th>
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<td>Nurturing the individual as a whole being, not just something that can jump off a plank and land smoothly in the water</td>
<td>Previously, Games results were very strong but there was a heavy toll on people unable to transition-out</td>
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In addition to progressive appointments in HP, the move away from centralisation was also cited as having promoted shifts in AW&E.

It was all about you come to training and do nothing else; that’s why I didn’t move up to Brisbane because of that monomania. It was very much two days off all year or else you get kicked out. So wellbeing has come a long way.

To be honest, there was a lot of unhappiness up in Brisbane between London and Rio. You had people on scholarship who just walked away because there was no escape in that environment. It was a pressure-cooker: Diving, Diving, Diving.

The new CEO brought a personal aspect to the HP program. He got to know us individually, used nicknames around the pool; we felt like we meant something, we had self-worth. Previously I had no idea who the CEO was.

The focus group process revealed a sport that is well placed to become a leader in AW&E and address the most significant gap in its servicing history: a lack of preparation for and support during/after the transition-out.

To do so will require leaders across the HP system to continue in the work of challenging ‘institutionalisation’ as it applies to younger elite divers, whose exclusive long-term focus on sport often has adverse consequences for wellbeing and performance both.

Unashamedly it’s also about performance. We invest in wellbeing because it is absolutely the right thing to do, and also because we see it as an investment in performance.
**PERCEIVED BARRIERS TO WELLBEING INITIATIVES**

**B: ATHLETE BUY-IN**

'Getting the kids to commit' was regularly nominated as a limiting factor for AW&E initiatives going forward, especially with regard to younger HP divers.

*In the last 12 to 18 months a lot of measures have been put in place around minimum scores and measures to maintain HP status. As a result, my kid doesn't want to miss a minute*

*The kids really drive it, they pick Diving over school. I’m not well enough to go to school, but I’m fine to go to training*

Responses such as these speak to a deeper characteristic of HP Diving: its propensity to become the defining institution in a young person’s life.

*It’s hard in the sport with athletes still culturally putting everything into diving, doing nothing but training. All their down time is just waiting for the next training session. They need to get their head around the fact that it’s okay to do something else*

The cultural legacy by which young elite divers are ‘defined’ solely by their involvement in the sport has long-term implications for wellbeing. It is a legacy that some HP coaches are already actively (if informally) challenging.

*Here we have an unwritten rule: Everyone has to do something else [study or employment pathways in addition to the HP program]. If they’re not doing something else, I want to know why. You might say a person needs ‘permission’ to not do something else*

Such approaches would appear to be indispensable for the prospects of AW&E in HP Diving given the enormous influence coaches exert in terms of modelling behaviour for school-aged athletes, many of whom spend 25-30 hours in the Daily Training Environment (DTE) weekly.

*I would have had nowhere near the buy-in that I do without the support from the coaches. Coaches here have engaged with me positively in front of athletes and told them of the benefits of engagement and contact. They pick up on those cues and support for AW&E and recognise that it is a big part of being HP, not something outside of*

A clear consensus emerged from the consultation process that revising the sport’s offer to its elite exponents will necessarily entail better legacy outcomes, helping HP divers to reflect on their career without a sense of grief and/or abandonment that was a recurring theme

**A: EMBEDDING AW&E AS AN INDEPENDENT SYSTEM**

A concern was expressed that AW&E across the 'five pillars' is a function of current HP coaching and staff appointments, as opposed to being an embedded structure that operates in an independent sense.

*Our coaches now are prioritising it. Because of that, people have been employed, resources deployed, and wellbeing voices listened to...But if there is a turnover in the coaching ranks, will we lose that wellbeing traction overnight?*
2.0 BROADENING THE AW&E SERVICE OFFER IN HP DIVING

DA runs the tier system, which supports wellbeing a lot. But all the hands-on servicing comes through the state institutes. The four coaches that head up the four institutes are really cooperative. The athletes feed off that feeling of harmony across the program. They also feel that the coaches now are open to hearing their ideas. It’s a progressive ethic that basically says that everyone is here to learn something.

Wellbeing has been good for me. I was able to negotiate a day off a week and I pushed that at the outset. My parents fought for it and so it became my normal. You have to bring an ‘empowerment’ model to dealing with young athletes; they need to be trained to engage. They have been used to just being ‘told’, so getting them to become proactive agents in their own wellbeing is a big ongoing challenge.

BALANCE & COMMUNICATION

Translating the new acceptance of AW&E into practical arrangements on a concrete or procedural level is seen as an important work in progress. HP coaches rejected the old approach of discouraging study pathways and cultivating a social life as abnormal. Seen as the next challenge is the better integration of such pathways into the day to day experience of the DTE: “We do lose some important HP divers to the US college system. Nowadays if they decide to go, they go with our blessing because it’s a quality opportunity for their education. But if we are going to pitch that they should stay, then our education needs to be comparable with what they’re giving up.”

A clear sense emerged that better alignment of the HP program with university programs could greatly enhance an athlete’s outcomes in both.

In the US, the head coach will know everything about the diver’s academic ambitions and performance. Here, you don’t even know what course they’re doing. The legacy is Oh, the coach doesn’t need to know that kind of stuff, but think for a minute about the possibilities if HP staff were engaging on that level.

An opportunity exists for DA to take ownership of this integration, and so offset the inevitable sense of ‘remoteness’ that some HP divers ascribe national body in a less centralised era.

This conception of DA as being removed from the DTE has been compounded by perceived shortcomings in communication.

General organisation could be better. Emails from head office are usually cold and unengaging, which is a problem when they’re only giving you a week’s notice for going overseas.

Leading into the Comm Games, there was some general talk about engagement with high schools. There was a disconnect in communication over a period of time, and the feeling in the end was it could have been managed better than it was.

Alumni occasionally referenced terms of address or reference that are residual of a previous era.

Diving is a great sport for imparting mental resilience because kids are taught to push through fear. But the messaging has to be done in a healthy way, by which I mean bad experiences of hearing that a talented 14-year-old called a ‘coward’.

DA regards someone doing badly as, Oh, he’s a choke. So there was a negative culture at DA of pejorative offhand talk. I imagine it’s not the same now.
Finally in the communication space, an appetite exists for greater sense of AW&E engagement from Diving Australia with parents and other family stakeholders. Greater transparency in the communication of servicing opportunities across the HP pillars was also cited.

**Basically, talk to five institutes and you get five different responses.**

I would just like to know that DA does care, and I would like to hear from the AW&E Manager about what you’re doing. It’s a lot of pressure on the kids to feel that they are wholly and solely judged for medal potential, so the idea of hearing from DA more, engaging more, would reduce that suspicion.

**MENTAL HEALTH**

Integration of services was again raised when discussing the sport’s applied approach to mental health matters. The opinion was expressed by some current and former HP divers that such support is an area of strength at each of the state institutes, but that identifying issues at earlier stage could be improved.

For me it was a situation of having great servicing generally, but a feeling of not good engagement across disciplines when a problem arose. I fell through the cracks for a period because as good as they were individually, I felt the doctor, nutritionist, ACE, and psych servicing didn’t combine as well they might have.

Current divers were clear that transparency about mental health issues has improved markedly in recent times, with candid and constructive conversations between athletes and HP coaches & staff now commonplace.

Many accredited this to the excellent and mutually supportive team cultures that have emerged at the state centres in recent times.

We organise regular events to do as a team and make sure we involve everyone. It’s not to a calendar, just as we can, but it builds strong friendship bonds.

It’s quite different to the previous HP environments I was in. Within the first month I found my feet really quickly – bowling, a team dinner, the social induction saved me so much time and grief.

Among parents and current HP athletes, levels of awareness around the Mental Health Referral Network (MHRN) were notably low.

**MONITORING**

Respondents feel that monitoring platforms have great potential to emphasise the sport’s commitment to athlete wellbeing, perhaps through the inclusion of a separate wellbeing component when tracking performance progress.

As a parent I would welcome it. But the sport needs to be serious and do it properly, because they are up against some entrenched distrust.

In the past, some people in and around the sport misconstrued monitoring as a selection tool. That had the potential to impact the honesty and objectivity of reporting.

Existing platforms have worked well in this sport in terms of tracking wellbeing, and flagging issues that lead to appropriate interventions.
**ENGAGEMENT**

Stakeholders expressed a view that raising the sport’s profile is a project that current HP athletes are passionate about.

Achievements of top divers in this country not publicised or celebrated in the same way as other sports. I know the athletes want to address that, they just need some direction from above. There’s a big self-esteem boost that comes with raising Diving’s profile.

Athletes are encouraged to come and do coaching and judging courses. It gives them a different perspective and experience, but I think it’s probably a tip of the iceberg sort of thing.

**PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT**

To reprise the issue of institutionalisation, senior figures in the sport were clear that – in marked contrast to the issue of Engagement – Personal Development has traditionally been a ‘hard sell’ because it specifically requires athletes to invest in skill sets that are not consistent with their ‘Diving personality’.

Athletes never want to put an end-date on a career, so it’s actually very easy to enable them to not plan. But if you could have a dialogue about finishing, an advisor who sits down and says ‘structure it like this’...It’s like if your grandparents retired and had no pension, no super. We can’t let them sleepwalk to a point where they are thirty and are financially illiterate.

Notwithstanding this cultural baggage, stakeholders were clear that the sport has a responsibility to cultivate athlete-led Personal Development to support the pressing corollary issue of Transitioning-out of HP.

If they don’t walk out of here with a growth mind-set, in one sense we’ve failed. I know there’s no medals attached to it, but in a way there is – or there can be, or there should be.

**TRANSITIONING-OUT**

In sharing their experiences candidly, recently retired HP divers disclosed an exit process that amounted to an abrupt sense of bereavement.

These experiences were not categorised by failures of messaging or sensitivity on the part of the sport, rather longstanding structural gaps and shortfalls already touched on: a sustained period of ‘institutionalised’ focus by a developing athlete who was not encouraged to cultivate pathways (or a persona) outside of Diving.

People were always struggling to know what to do next. They felt a sense of panic about it and put their head in the sand and the sport just let them because it was convenient for everyone. I mean, the old coaches had no interest in that because in the systems they’d come from, it was none of their business.

You go from having this identity — I’m a Diver for Australia — and then one day you wake up and you’re no one, you’re nothing. I mean, no one would ever say that, but you say it to yourself. You say it to yourself a lot.

What the sport has failed in the past is tell its athletes, It’s not just okay to plan for post-retirement, it’s actually really important.

Before, if you tried to pursue study or work there was this instant feeling that you weren’t committed and there was something wrong with you. Then you finish and go out into the real world with no plan, no skills, and it can really fall apart very quickly.
You’re so young, and you are still finding out who you are as a person. Suddenly I wasn’t a diver and I was nothing. I felt that I jumped from a high cliff into darkness.

It really was like losing a family member. I was quite numb for a while, and then I realised the family member who’d been lost – the person who’d died – was me.

Responses underline the key role that Mental Health servicing has to play in policy and process.

I was expecting no support, so 6 months came as a surprise. I am really grateful for it.

I struggled. I did some coaching, which helped, but it wasn’t until I relocated that I was offered psych sessions, and they have really helped.

While stakeholders are adamant that work remains to be done to embed AW&E in a structural sense to overhaul the transitioning-out process, it is – once again – the day to day attitude of individual coaches at the HP coalface that is crucial:

“We don’t have transition programs because numbers are small, and it tends to be customised organically. By that I mean some people come in every day after retirement whereas others disappear. We are here to accommodate and support every scenario.”
3.0 PRIORITY ACTIONS

A. DEFINE WELLBEING

HP staff, coaches, and athletes to discuss & define the position wellbeing should have in DA culture. All of HP to agree upon the ensuring actions and behaviours that reflect this position, and commit to regularly reviewing themselves against these standards, both individually and as a team. The objective is to share and record the philosophies that are making a positive AW&E difference in the various DTEs in the interests of translating these advances into cultural norms.

B. EMBEDDING AW&E

The AW&E Manager to identify those policies, procedures, and structural mechanisms that are necessary to establish AW&E as an independent and invariable feature of the HP Diving environment. A subsequent REPORT ON EMBEDDING AW&E to suggest the appropriate attribution of AW&E responsibilities by role within the HP system.

C. SERVICE CLARITY

DA to develop and distribute a matrix of AIS- and NIN-provided services, activities, work placements, and networking platforms so that athletes can explore the pathway opportunities that interest them. Matrix to incorporate components of the PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT CURRICULUM as it comes online (refer to Priority Action J).

D. MENTAL HEALTH LITERACY

AW&E Manager to distribute a communication piece across all of HP that briefs all stakeholders (coaches, athletes, and parents) about the MENTAL HEALTH REFERRAL NETWORK (MHRN), and that clarifies the role and process of CURRENT MONITORING platforms to dispel any residual misconceptions that it is in any way related to selection.

E. COMMUNICATIONS

DA to introduce a RESPECTFUL BEHAVIOURS education piece for categorised athletes and families. DA to also review communication protocols for the support of, and next steps for, NON-SELECTED/DE-SELECTED athletes. This to include transparent and timely face-to-face service delivery on a consistent basis. Review to ensure that existing Selection Policy is complemented by detailed procedures for the delivery of selection decisions.

F. REVIEW CRITICAL INCIDENT PLANS

Using templates provided by the AIS, DA to review critical incident plans. Provide education on how these will be implemented to athletes, families, and DA staff.

G. FEEDBACK SYSTEM

Seek rolling feedback from athletes, coaches, staff, and parents & partners via the establishment of an annual Fix/Improve/Keep survey, administered and tracked by the DA AW&E Manager.

H. AW&E NEWSLETTER

AW&E Manager to establish a scheduled AW&E NEWSLETTER for distribution to stakeholders. The newsletter should aim to promote understanding within the sport of current AW&E initiatives, as well as highlighting events, achievements, success stories, and interviews with past HP athletes.

I. CAREER & EDUCATION AWARENESS

AW&E Manager to distribute a corresponding communication piece to HP athletes who are engaged in or considering higher/further education about the ELITE ATHLETE EDUCATION NETWORK (EAEN).
PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT
DA to formalise the AW&E offer to its athletes via the development of a PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT CURRICULUM that delivers scheduled learning and workshop opportunities around key areas: Leadership, Financial Literacy, Media & Social Media, Resilience, Career Planning, Goal-Setting, Time Management

TRANSITIONS-OUT (EXITING HP)
DA to review current management processes for transitions-out of the sport, including the appropriate communication of outcomes and the support of affected athletes (including full MHRN integration). Provide education about processes to athletes, families, and DA staff

MENTOR PROGRAM
In conjunction with AIS, DA to develop and implement a MENTOR PROGRAM that matches retired HP divers with elite youngsters coming through for mutual engagement and knowledge-sharing