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## Summary: *Functional United – New Hockey* (Meeting, 11 March 2026)

### Purpose of the Meeting

Club leaders from several Northern Sydney hockey clubs met to discuss **serious concerns about junior hockey pathways**, particularly **Under 12s**, and the **negative impact of current North Area competition structures** on participation, development, and club sustainability.

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### Core Problems Identified

#### 1. Declining Junior Numbers

- Most clubs are struggling to field junior teams, especially **Under 12s**.
- Recruitment is weak and retention is worsening.
- Clubs fear a **domino effect**: U12 issues will soon hit U14s and U16s, threatening long-term viability.

#### 2. Forced Full-Field Competition

- Clubs feel **compelled into full-field formats** by North Area, even when:
  - Player numbers are low
  - Skill levels are mixed
  - Kids are early in development
- This removes club choice and does not suit many families.

#### 3. Travel, Time, and Burnout

- Long travel times (Friday nights and Saturdays) are a major deterrent.
- Families are overextended; kids are overscheduled.
- Volunteers are exhausted and lack capacity for proper recruitment and development.

#### 4. Over-Emphasis on “Elite Pathways”

- A strong belief persists that kids *must* move quickly to full-field and Metro hockey.
  - This:
    - Discourages new families
    - Pushes kids too fast
    - Shrinks the base of community players
  - Only a tiny fraction of players reach elite levels; the system is failing the majority.
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## Key Themes & Philosophical Shifts

### Community Over Elitism

- Junior hockey should prioritise:
  - Fun
  - Engagement
  - Skill development
  - Belonging
- Clubs risk becoming collections of teams rather than communities.

### Small-Sided Hockey Works

- Strong support for:
  - Half-field / small-sided formats
  - Boarded hockey
- Benefits:
  - More touches
  - Higher engagement
  - Faster development
  - Better retention

### Local is Better

- Same place, same time, local venues suit families.
  - Local competitions allow:
    - Better integration of new players
    - Older kids mentoring younger ones
    - Stronger club culture
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## Proposed Solutions Discussed

### 1. Club-Controlled Local Competitions

- Develop **association-run competitions** outside North Area control.
- Especially focused on **Under 12s** initially.
- Clubs set:
  - Rules
  - Formats
  - Development focus
  - Umpire standards

## 2. Proof of Concept / Trial Approach

- Start with:
  - U12s
  - U14/U16 “B” teams
- Use trials or short-term pilots (e.g. one night per week).
- Demonstrate value before broader rollout.

## 3. Hybrid Models

- Ideas included:
  - Small-sided hockey most of the year
  - Short full-field blocks between championships
  - Combined “Harlequin” teams for higher-level competition

## 4. Recruitment as the Priority

- Local competitions are seen as the **best recruitment tool**.
  - Registration and “come and try” programs should stay open all season.
  - Recruitment must target **new families**, not just player movement between clubs.
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## Club Positions (High-Level)

- **Manly, Mosman, Gordon:** Open to alternative models, especially for B teams and U12s, but cautious about abruptly pulling Metro teams.
  - **Northern Districts:** Supportive of change but prefer planning for next year due to trust and transition issues.
  - **General consensus:**
    - Change is necessary
    - Timing and execution are critical
    - Doing nothing will lead to continued decline
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## Risks Acknowledged

- Short-term player loss is likely with any major change.
  - However, many believe **losses will happen anyway** if the current system continues.
  - Leadership, communication, and a clear product are essential to maintain parent trust.
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## Overall Conclusion

The meeting strongly concluded that:

- The current junior hockey structure is **not fit for purpose**
- Clubs must **take ownership of junior development**
- A **locally focused, small-sided, community-first model** offers the best chance to:
  - Grow participation
  - Retain families
  - Sustain clubs long-term

There was broad agreement to continue working together on a **clear, practical alternative model**, starting with Under 12s, and to progress discussions urgently given declining numbers and upcoming seasons.

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If you'd like, I can also:

- Turn this into **formal minutes**
- Create a **one-page briefing for committees/parents**
- Extract **clear action items and next steps**
- Draft a **proposal for an alternative U12 competition**

Just tell me what format you want next.