

Speech by Sophie Ray – RSL NSW Congress 2022

Delighted to be here, and back with you all in person after such a long break.

Three years ago, when we met in Albury, we identified a problem. The problem was our aging membership, and the lack of a plan in place to address this. Those of you who were there will remember that Jon showed us some analysis that he'd done, based on the then rate of new membership and age of new members. The analysis showed that, at those current rates, RSL NSW would be closed within 15 years.

But also at Albury, you did something very brave. You voted for change. You approved a new Constitution, and you told the Board and Executive that you wanted us to find ways to help you solve the problem we'd identified, and build a resilient RSL, for the future.

In the three years since we met in Albury, while continuing to support all of you and the wider veteran community with day to day services and commemorations, the Board and Executive have done what you asked us to, and focussed on building and implementing a careful and deliberate strategy which we believe will turn around the increasingly fast decline of RSL NSW, and make it a vibrant, sustainable organisation, supporting the needs of all veterans, and the leader in the veterans sector. Most of you have embraced this, and have been instrumental in helping this change, both through your advice and input to the Board and staff team, and the work you've done on the ground, in your Sub-Branched and communities. For this, the Board thanks you profusely.

And the results are beginning to show. We are seeing ever increasing levels of new members, the average age of members has dropped by 3 years; through our partnership

with RSL Lifecare, the number of veterans receiving assistance has grown rapidly; and we are now seeing renewed respect and engagement from Government and other ESOs.

There's an old adage that change must come from the top, and the changes in our Board over the last three years certainly reflect the change that we're trying to build within the organisation. Ray was reflecting with me a few weeks ago how much the leadership of the RSL in NSW has changed in the 8 years since he joined what was then the State Council. When he joined, in his late 60's, he was the youngest member of the State Council; all of the Councillors were retired and all male. The State Council was made up of representatives from designated areas of NSW and was a Council of representation rather than governance.

Fast forward eight years, and the leadership team you've now chosen looks very different. We range in age from our late 30s to our early 70's, there are two women and two independent members on the Board, and Board members are scattered across NSW, not from designated areas. Between us, we have 18 children ranging in age from preschool to late 20's, 5 grandchildren and many of us also have caring duties for other family members. Four of us served full time in the Army; one full time in the Navy, one full time in the Air Force, one as a Military policeman and lawyer, and seven for varying periods of time in the reserves. The service members of the Board, served for periods lasting from several years to, in three cases, over 30 years; some were officers, some were diggers and stokers, and some served in ranks in between. They have deployed to Vietnam, Afghanistan, East Timor, Egypt, the Solomons, Papua New Guinea and Bougainville; and in addition to their frontline and regular service, have served in joint peacekeeping forces, in multinational efforts, as Defence advisors to Government, and in disaster relief and recovery efforts here at home.

All of us on the Board have had careers outside defence and, apart from Ray are still employed full or part time, which means the Board is now made up of members with a range of business, legal and governance skills in addition to their service history.

For example, Ray had a long career with the NSW Police Force and the Transport Investigation Branch, and while he is now retired, essentially volunteers 24/7 in his role as President of RSL NSW.

John Hutcheson was the CEO of Legacy in NSW and is now General Manager of GP Mortgage Corporation, a financial services firm; a Director on the Board of Vasey Housing; and a Councillor on the Royal Humane Society NSW.

Phillip Bridie worked since 2006 at Fujitsu, where he has led Defence ICT, and is now the Crisis Response manager for Fujitsu's operations in Australia and New Zealand.

Like Ray, David McCann also had a post service career in the NSW Police Force, and now works full time as the Mayor of the Coolamon Shire in the Riverina.

Steve Graham has worked as an aviation executive with airlines, and in the resources and government sectors, including in Australia, and overseas. He currently owns an aviation and contingency management consultancy, providing services to the Federal and State Governments and their agencies.

Phillip Chin is a manager at Austrade and has over 15 years of experience in the Australian Public Service working in various roles.

Louise Sullivan is a corporate lawyer, risk and governance professional, currently the (Chief Operating Officer) of a leading independent construction materials business, and a long-time Director, President (and Chair) of Netball NSW and Chair of the NSW Swifts and GIANTS Netball Clubs.

For the last 20 years, since leaving the army, Jason Hazell has worked in the Superannuation industry where he currently manages an investment team and an \$8 billion portfolio.

Jim Hungerford, our newest Independent member of the Board, is the CEO of the Shepherd Centre in Sydney, which specialises in teaching deaf children to speak. He's been the CEO of a fundraising consultancy, and a Board member of the Fundraising Institute of Australia; and now sits on a number of not-for-profit and for-profit Boards.

And I spent 15 years as a corporate lawyer with PricewaterhouseCoopers in Sydney and London, before starting a hospitality business on the NSW South Coast; and am now a full time Non - Executive Director of not for profit and for-profit companies across Australia.

So you can see that your Board members, while having long defence careers, also have between them extensive post service careers which bring to the Board significant skills and experience in finance, law, governance, business and running not for profits.

And perhaps most importantly, our Board currently consists of a Randwick rugby supporter; an Essendon AFL supporter; a (by his own account) die hard St George Dragons supporter; a

netballer; a former boxer and rugby player who still pulls on his boots to play for the Navy Old salts despite his age and his family's protests; a keen bushwalker; and someone who says their sport is 'singing' and their claim to fame is having been a backup singer with Elvis' original band at the Sydney Entertainment Centre. As you can see, quite a diverse makeup on your Board!

Under the RSL NSW Act and Constitution eight of our Board members are elected by you every three years, and two are independent members recruited from outside RSL NSW and appointed by the Board with the approval of the District Presidents' Council. All Directors serve for three-year terms, to a maximum of 9 years. Once we're appointed to the Board, doesn't matter how appointed (whether elected or independent): all Board members are equal, with equal responsibilities and say in the running of RSL NSW. Importantly, all Directors have legal duties and obligations set out in the Corporations Law and the ACNC provisions. These include things such as acting in good faith and in the best interests of the organisation; declaring and managing conflicts of interest; and a legal liability for the debts of the organisation which means, in theory, that if RSL NSW were to become insolvent, the Directors could be personally liable for the debts of the organisation; and could also be criminally charged for the actions of RSL NSW.

The changes to the Board in the last few years have not only been about who is sitting on the Board. Following the introduction of the new Constitution in 2019, the Board is now a Board of Governance, and is not involved in the operations of RSL NSW. The Constitution makes it clear that the Board's job is to set strategy, in consultation with the members, and

oversee that strategy and the financial viability of the whole of RSL NSW, which, as one RSL, includes all of the Sub-Branches. In other words, our job is to work out how we can keep RSL NSW doing what it does best for many years to come; and the Executive and staff's job is to make that happen. The Board checks that it's happening and reviews what RSL NSW as a whole, including all the Sub-Branches, is achieving, and whether it's doing what the members want it to.

The Board also oversees the finances of the organisation and makes decisions about significant financial matters. We make sure the organisation is managing its risks and putting in place measures to address those risks; and we make sure the organisation is compliant with all the regulations and laws it must comply with.

The matters considered by the Board, and the decisions they've made, are outlined in the Board communique which is sent to all members within a couple of days of each Board meeting. This is one of the ways in which each and every one of you can see what the Board is doing, and thinking about, and what it is likely to be discussing at its next meeting.

There have also been practical changes to how the Board functions. We now meet every two months, alternating between in person in Sydney, and online, which is a significant change from three years ago, when we met every four weeks in person in Sydney. This has been a deliberate change by the Board to try to make it easier for members from outside Sydney sit on the Board, but also to ensure that the Board spends its time on strategic matters, and not getting too involved in operations. An important side effect of cutting back on the number of meetings and work of the Board has been costs savings for RSL NSW. In

2015, Board expenses were over \$200,000. This financial year, they are \$20,000, down from \$40,000 the year before. One thing that hasn't changed is that, while the RSL NSW Constitution does allow Board members to be paid, the current Board has decided not to be paid for our work: we are all volunteers just like all of you. As mentioned earlier, most of us are working full or part time, so carrying out RSL NSW duties involves us taking annual leave from our paid jobs, or if we own our own business, paying staff to carry out our roles while we're at RSL NSW. But other things on the Board's financial affairs have changed: Board members no longer have RSL credit cards, we don't have mobile phones paid for by RSL NSW, and the only expenses that are paid for are the actual costs of us carrying out our Directors' duties. Details of all Board expenses are published on the RSL website, so all of you can go on at any time and see what Director expenses are being reimbursed.

Cutting back on the number and length of Board meetings, has also allowed us to increase the number of Committees which are focused on specific aspects of governance and strategy, and can do the hard work in between Board meetings and bring recommendations to the Board. All of our Board members sit on several Committees each, joined by other members of the League, and in some cases, external experts.

Committees include the Audit & Risk Committee, which is responsible for overseeing the detailed finances and the risk management of the organisation; the Nominations & Remuneration Committee, which oversees the performance, remuneration, hiring and firing of the CEO and Executive; and leads the recruitment of new Board members when needed; and the Veterans' Services & Policy Committee, which leads all the work on veteran's issues and policy, including putting together submissions to Government, receiving input from our

members about issues affecting them, and making recommendations to the RSL NSW Board about how to deal with current veterans' issues

Board members also represent RSL NSW on the Congress Agenda Committee, the Selections Committee, Joint Working Group of RSL Lifecare, at NVAC, as members of RSL Custodian, the Australian Forces Overseas Fund, the Anzac House Trust, the RSL National Gender Advisory Committee, the Election Review Committee, the District Rationalisation Committee and a number of others, including the Young Veterans' Committee. The YVC which was established to help provide feedback to the Board on the strategic direction we need to take to attract and retain younger members. We did this because we were already asking the District President's Council to do so much work with the Board on governance and SOPs that we felt asking them to also take on gathering views of the younger members would be asking too much of them: so we decided to go right to the source instead.

Three years into the change that you asked for, the building blocks for that change have been put in place, with the strategic plan and the funding model. In 2022, the Board's work has focussed particularly on monitoring the progress of the strategic plan initiatives, including the development of internal policy and SOPs and training for members, with feedback from the District President's Council. In February, all Board members joined the Executive team in a Strategy Day and risk workshop, and the Board has also regularly reviewed the financial position of RSL NSW, including the engagement of Sub-Branches with the proposed 'pooled' funding model; the progress of the Hyde Park Inn sale; and the strategic development of alternate income sources. This development has included discussions with RSL Qld about the proceeds from the Art Union; signing of a Memorandum

of Understanding with Clubs NSW and the RSL & Services Clubs Association; and approving the creation of an RSL NSW Fundraising Committee, which will be formed and start work in early 2023. The Board has also worked closely this year with the Board of RSL Lifecare, to ensure that the strategic directions of both organisations are aligned, and that communications and branding send a coherent message about the work of the two organisations in supporting veterans, while respecting the independence of each organisation.

Change in an organisation like ours, with over 25,000 members doesn't happen without a lot of hard work from a lot of people. The Board particularly wants to thank the District Presidents' Council, under the leadership of Derek Leslie, and the Young Veterans Committee under the leadership of Sarah Watson for their hard work, positive interaction and collegiality this year. You have worked with us, challenged us, and helped us to ensure that the change we're making is what is wanted and needed by veterans, and not just something that's been dreamt up in the Anzac House Boardroom. Additionally, we thank the Board, management and staff of RSL Lifecare, who provide our Veterans' Services. The relationship between our Boards and management teams is stronger than ever, and we look forward to continuing to work with their new CEO, Janet Muir and Chair Ewen Crouch.

We also, of course, want to thank the whole Anzac House team. During the year, our CEO, Jon Black took a couple of months of leave, and in his absence, the Board appointed Scott Warr as Acting CEO. The Board was grateful to Scott for his leadership and for keeping the organisation running smoothly in Jon's absence. Jon and his team at Anzac House work tirelessly every day to run the complex organisation that is RSL NSW, and support all of our

members, and through them, other veterans and their families throughout NSW. They implement the strategic plan, run commemorations, assist Sub-Branches and members with financial and legal matters, manage the RSL NSW brand and membership, publish Reveille, work with Government and other ESOS and a myriad of other day to day tasks which many of us never see. I can assure you that without the Anzac House team, led by the CEO, we would simply have 300 odd groups of veterans dotted around NSW, each doing good work in their local community, but with little connection and no power to assist veterans outside their immediate area, or influence government policy on Veterans. The Anzac House team makes all of this, and more, happen, and ensures that all of our Sub-Branches are able to continue the work they're doing without spending time on administration, legal and financial issues.

And our final thank you is to every one of our members, in Sub-Branches far and wide throughout NSW. Change isn't easy. It's uncomfortable, it requires compromise, it requires willingness to do things differently and learn new skills. Collectively, we are trying to change how we've done some things for over 100 years, while still honouring and preserving the values that are at the core of everything RSL NSW stands for. That's really hard. In the last three years, most of you have embraced that challenge. Some more quickly than others, some with a healthy dose of scepticism, but most with willingness to try something new and see if it works. And what we hear from many of you, now is that it does work – that you can see positive things happening in your sub-branches, and are beginning to see more interaction from the next generation of veterans and RSL members.

However, we still have some members, and some Sub-branches, who find it hard to compromise, and embrace the changes we're bringing in. They agree that we have a problem, and are very clear that if they don't get younger members into their Sub-Branches and the organisation, their Sub-Branches will close, but they resist the steps the organisation is trying to do to help solve that problem. And they express this loudly and often, in public forums, in the media, and, often in unacceptable ways, to our staff.

Here's what I want to say to those members. The League in NSW has a problem. You acknowledge the problem, but are unwilling to accept the proposed solutions. The leadership of RSL NSW has worked closely for three years in deep consultation with the wider membership and together we have come up with these solutions. Between us, the leadership team, and the members, are implementing these solutions and they're beginning to work. You don't have to trust me, or the leadership team on this: ask your fellow members. Ask them what they're doing in their Sub-Branches to make them more welcoming to younger members. Ask them what they're doing to support their older members using new technology. Ask them what they're doing to spread the word to their communities about the changes in RSL NSW, and how that is assisting veterans. And more than anything, ask your fellow members why they believe this change is necessary and is the right path.

And then ask yourselves, what is the legacy you want to leave? I know why I volunteer my time for RSL NSW. I know why my fellow Board members give their time; I know why our staff are so dedicated and passionate; and I know why most of you here today and in the RSL community beyond live and breathe RSL: because, in whatever time we have, all of us

want to do everything in our power to ensure that RSL NSW can continue doing what it does best, supporting veterans and their families. If you resist that, with no willingness to compromise and find a way forward, then the legacy you leave will be a devastating one, because it will mean that veterans and their families have even less support available to them than they do today. I don't believe that's really what you want, but you have to make a choice: resist and ensure the demise of your sub-branch and the League, or join your fellow members in embracing and leading the change, and leave RSL NSW better than when you joined it. That's what the Board, the staff and most of the members I meet work for every day, and we will continue doing so until we are convinced that RSL NSW is a thriving, healthy and robust organisation which will continue long after we're gone.

In the meantime, I encourage every member here to go away from Congress with a renewed energy and optimism. If you're an older member, whether in age or the length of time you've been a veteran, then I ask you to really look at how you're welcoming new, younger veterans to your Sub-Branch, and meeting their needs. If you're a younger veteran, my challenge to you is to take the time to get to know the older members of your Sub-Branch, understand why they do things they way they do, and think about what you can do to ensure that, even as you help to modernise the Sub-branch, you still find ways to respect and support the existing members, whose needs may be very different from yours. And for all of our members, I ask you to make whatever change you need to at a local level to help the veteran community, and the community beyond that, understand what RSL NSW now offers. We have put the framework in place for a vibrant, re-energised and relevant RSL NSW – but the hard work on the ground is just beginning and is very much in your hands. All of us on the Board look forward to supporting each of you in that work and to seeing the

membership of the organisation grow and diversify, as we take the RSL NSW of which we are all so proud into the future.