

# Scouts Australia Youth Program Review



08 Aug 2014

Fellow Scouting members

The Youth Program Review is conducting a wide variety of research to ensure we develop the best possible youth program for our future youth members. This research requires feedback from our own members, members who have left Scouting and the wider community to understand the perceptions and needs of both potential youth members and the parents of our prospective members.

Our research is a multi-faceted approach using external demographers, our own teams, summarising previous research and working with other similar National Scout Organisations.

The following research, completed by BDRC Jones Donald, involved a focused, qualitative exploration into the causal factors behind attrition in an age group in which it is particularly apparent. The research also highlights what BDRC Jones Donald consider to be opportunities to improve on these factors.

At times our research will challenge our thinking, garner support and generate angst and concern. Share your thoughts at [www.ypr.scouts.com.au](http://www.ypr.scouts.com.au), through discussion great ideas can evolve. If the YPR isn't contentious then we aren't doing our job!

YPR team

# Project Scouts Australia

Research to support  
strategies for retention of  
10-15 year olds


31 July 2014



Prepared for Scouts Australia

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# Contents

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- 1 Project background, task and design
  - 2 Key findings
  - 3 Implications and opportunities for strategies

Scouts Australia has identified that the 10-15 year age bracket is a **critical age for attrition**

Research was sought to establish an understanding of the **reasons for drop off and how that could be reduced**

This research helps **inform the need for any changes** to the youth program, method and branding



# The fundamental task is to determine how Scouts Australia can optimise the program for 10-15 year olds

The following questions were addressed by the research

- 1 What are the specific range of factors contributing to drop off in each of the 10-15 age bracket?
- 2 How does the program need to change to meet the needs of youth at this age whilst still delivering to the core promise?
- 3 How relevant are the age brackets and should they evolve to better meet the needs of youth?
- 4 What factors outside of the program need to be addressed to reduce attrition?



# The project design was 6 focus groups held with former Scouts and their parents

All groups were held in Victoria

## Youth focus groups

Age:  
10  
10  
10  
11  
11  
12  
12  
12  
13



Age:  
10  
10  
11  
12  
12  
12  
14  
14



Age  
11  
13  
13  
13  
14  
14  
15  
15



Fieldwork conducted 9 July 2014

Focus groups lasted 75 minutes


### Screening criteria were minimal:

1. Have left Scouts sometime in the last 12 months
2. Mix of boys and girls where possible
3. Ages grouped as much as possible (10-11, 12-13, 14-15)

## Parents focus groups



# Contents

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- 1 Project background, task and design
  - 2 Key findings
  - 3 Implications and opportunities for strategies

This report is  
structured around  
five key findings

- 1 The social aspect of Scouts is a significant driver of acquisition and retention
- 2 Learning by doing is fundamental to the program and should underpin all Scout activities
- 3 Some aspects of the method are outdated and need to be amended to foster retention
- 4 There is substantial equity in the brand assets of Scouts, and these should be retained
- 5 Leaders need greater support and commitment





## Key finding 1

- 1** The social aspect of Scouts is a significant driver of acquisition and retention
- 2 Learning by doing is fundamental to the program and should underpin all Scout activities
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Scouts want a reason  
to come back



# Both parents and youth wanted a reason to stay in the Scouting program

Parents and youth could envisage remaining in the program if some of the elements were changed

- School changes and competing activities were cited as a reason to leave
- But the lack of interest was driven by the Scout activities no longer being compelling
- Youth were choosing sport or other extra curricular activities because they were more fun
- This could be due to a change in the Scout activities and how they were delivered, or a change in age meaning different activities were required

All would have stayed if the program could better deliver to expectations



There are five core pillars to Scouts: when these are missing Scouts choose to leave



# Typically the parents drove enrolment, but the youth made the decision to leave

## Reasons for joining: To make new friends and be outdoors

- Typically it was the parent's decision or suggestion that their child try out Scouts
- The reasons were fairly basic
- The ability to socialise and make new friends was one of the most important elements of joining
- To a lesser degree they also wanted their child to get outdoors
- Positive development of skills and character was a contributing factor
- But mostly they wanted their child to have fun

## Reasons for leaving: Not socialising and activities no longer fun and interesting

- A friend leaving the program was a significant trigger for leaving
- There was a lack of active socialisation facilitated as part of the program, some youth felt lonely and left out
- Meetings were often unruly and disorganised
- Start and finish times were problematic and contributed
- But mostly it was the activities, they were no longer compelling
- Youth would usually make the decision and the parents would support it
- A combination of these drivers would tip youth into reprioritising out of school activities



# Youth relish the opportunity to socialise but it wasn't always delivered

## One of the main reasons that they came to Scouts was to meet new people

- It was clear that there was too much reliance on a small number of friends
- But youth often needed their hands held as they were naturally shy
- This was seen as a core area where the Leaders could and should help
- Activities weren't structured around encouraging interaction
- The issue was amplified by the structure of working in the same small groups
- Young people were keen to interact more widely and really enjoyed it when activities were combined with other groups
- Small groups worked in some ways to get youth working together
- But these obviously weren't working properly because the youth had no strong feelings towards their groups
- There was an appetite for meeting new cultures and have exposure to different customs and food in some way



Scouts need to facilitate socialising in order to remove reliance on a single friend

# Changing the age and transition points will help keep Scouts fun

## 10-15 is too much of a range in age with significant differences in development

- Both parents and young people believed that 10.5 is too young to move to Scouts but varied on what needed to change
  - Parents felt transitioning later was sufficient
  - Youth felt that two levels are needed
- Both agreed that 12 or part way through grade 6 is an appropriate transition point, but should factor in experience/development
- This would allow the young people to get comfortable in Scouts before transitioning to high school
- Presently the transition occurs on their birthday which resulted in friends moving at different times

- This transition splits young people up, and amplifies the risk of leaving due to losing friends
- It could potentially be better to do it in six month blocks
- Need flexibility to allow the youth to go together – some troops already have this

## Benefits of changing transition points

- 1 Keep friendships in tact
- 2 Ensure youth are socialising with others close to their own age
- 3 Doing activities that are age appropriate
- 4 Sufficiently challenged but not intimidated



# The section meetings themselves need to be better planned and controlled

Often the meetings were unorganised, youth didn't have a sense of what they would be doing for the evening

- That led to the youth being quite unruly and manic at the start of the meeting – the meetings were often described as “chaos”
- Once youth became hyperactive it was very difficult for Leaders to get them back under control
- Both parents and young people wanted more discipline to the meetings
- Yet the Leaders were too strict in areas that didn't seem important to the young people, for example not allowing toilet or water breaks out side of the meeting
- Both parents and youth wanted there to be organised rules and someone taking control

Getting this under control would make a significant contribution to the incidence of bullying



# Youth want an opportunity to contribute to ideas for activities, but not at the start of every meeting

Youth perceived the meeting to be disorganised when Leaders start by asking what they wanted to do

- This contributed to a sense of chaos and lack of control
- Individuals all had their various ideas and preferences for activities, which made it difficult for the Leader to please everybody
- An opportunity to contribute was welcomed and becomes more important as they get older to keep them engaged
- Some envied the Venturers in this regard – but others found that level of responsibility too overwhelming
- Youth would prefer that Leaders canvas their ideas as a separate exercise and then plan the program's term accordingly
- Young people were not always able to think of ideas or activities themselves, but can say what they have enjoyed and why, or react to the ideas put forward by Leaders
- Former Scouts wanted their voice heard, but didn't aspire to having responsibility

Youth wanted Leaders to come in and start each meeting with a clear sense of what would be done



# The meetings need to start earlier and finish on time

By the time youth get to the meeting they are already tired, which leads to distraction

- Coupled with the program not being ready to start, which leads to unruly behaviour
- They were then difficult to settle and time was wasted
- This often led to bullying and bad behaviour
- Parents cited that the late start would often tire youth for the rest of the school week
- Youth need to be rested for the next day at school, particularly as they get older
- Some parents felt the (Joey) meetings should be longer, an hour was too short
- Young people didn't have this same complaint, but this was more because they were often bored

Starting earlier and on time will significantly reduce bullying and unruly behaviour



## Key finding 2

- 1 The social aspect of Scouts is a significant driver of acquisition and retention
- 2 Learning by doing is fundamental to the program and should underpin all Scout activities**
- 3 Some aspects of the method are outdated and need to be amended to foster retention
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# Being outdoors was one of the most compelling reasons to be a Scout

Youth really enjoyed the adventure of the outdoors

- The camps were one of the most enjoyed activities
- Learning fires and survival was part of the fun, and they got bored when there was too much time spent in the Scout hall
- When they did fun outdoor activities they got excited and told their friends, which in turn made friends want to come
- Too much time spent tying knots was frequently cited as a reason for boredom
- Whilst the youth accepted that they couldn't be outdoors every week, too many weeks indoors was a substantial driver of disappointment in the program

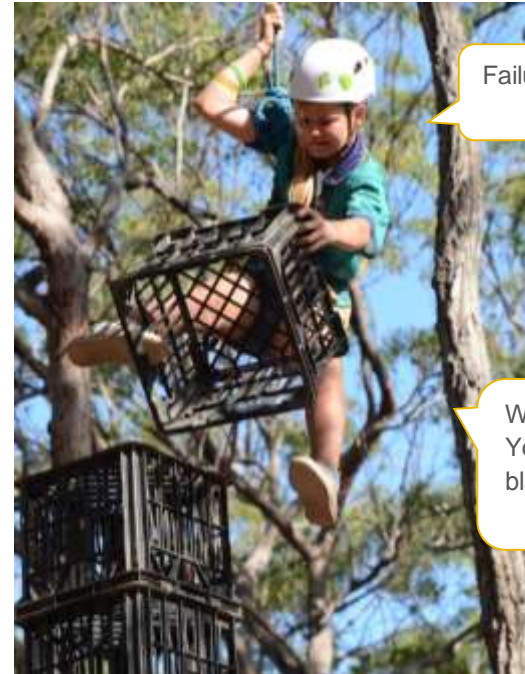
**Scout activities need to deliver to the 'promise' of outdoor adventure**



# Learning by doing was a critical part of the program, but not always delivered

## Youth most enjoyed the activities where they were learning whilst having fun

- They were driven to develop themselves and their skills
- Some meetings had become too mundane and unchallenging, with parents describing them as babysitting
- Some activities were just fun for fun's sake, which was seen as pointless on its own.
- To begin with fun alone could be engaging, but over time became pointless and boring
- Learning alone wasn't enough to keep them, the theory could be long and boring
- Young people want to be challenged and out of their comfort zone, which was amplified as they got older
- Parents also saw this as an important part of developing
- Both youth and parents were divided on the importance of developing leadership – it was more about skills development overall



Failure is a part of life  
Age 12

With Scouts it's hit and miss.  
You either have an absolute  
blast or it's really boring  
Age 15

Learning by doing  
differentiated Scouts from  
other sporting activities

# There are mixed feelings towards badges and the role that they play

Youth were keen to 'earn' rewards and were disappointed when the badges weren't awarded appropriately

- They needed to be properly earned and shouldn't be awarded lightly
- But equally they did want to be rewarded when they had achieved the goal of the badge - incidences of being told the Leader had ordered it but the badge had never arrived
- The badges weren't always treated as prestigiously as the youth would like
- Younger "geekier" young people were typically more attracted to the badges
- Receiving them was more important than wearing them on the uniform, with this contributing to the idea of Scouts being uncool
- As they got older and school activities got in the way they had less interest in the badges, however each activity having a purpose became more important



# The badges themselves weren't as important as the sense of accomplishment and the lesson learnt

## Suggestions for change

1

A group rather than individual award – as a troop we've achieved the badge

2

Optional and outside of the Scout meetings, particularly for older youth as homework gets in the way

3

Some suggestion of managing the badges online



# There wasn't a strong desire to integrate technology into the Scouts program

## There was no role for technology within the four walls of the Scout Hall

- It didn't fit with learning by doing
- It was inconsistent with outdoors adventure
- It was potentially a barrier to working together

## However, there was no objection to introducing technology outside of the Scout Hall

- It is the way that youth engage these days
- It allows a mechanism, for engaging with the badges
- It could be used to foster greater socialisation and communication outside of Scouts
- And could be a mechanism for interacting with other cultures – international network of Scouts

There is no obvious need to invest in digital technology within the Scout hall

We would suggest that there is a role for greater use of technology when engaging with the parents about the program\*.

We hypothesise that there may be risks with using digital technology with youth. Scouts Australia will need to be aware of these risks.



## Key finding 3

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# Perceptions of Scouts being outdated are driven by the components of the program

## It was not a fundamental problem with the brand that was driving attrition

- All issues related to leaving related to the program itself not meeting the youth needs
- Nonetheless young people (and to a lesser degree their parents) are often embarrassed to admit to others that they are in Scouts
- When they enjoyed the activities they were more likely to tell their friends about the cool activities they were doing – which has the potential for friends to then want to take a closer look
- Ensuring that activities stay true to the core promise of outdoors fun and adventure will naturally improve perceptions of the brand
- Brand image improvements will start with the youth who are enrolled in the program and filter through to their friends and beyond by word of mouth

Scouts needs to change its core program which will in turn drive an improved image



# The Principles, Aim and Law are important but invisible elements of the brand

## These elements were all seen as important attributes and the foundation of Scouting

- Both parents and youth alike felt it was important for Scouts to have these values, they were an important element of the Scouting tradition
- It was recognised that this was the basis upon which Baden Powell, the founding father had built the fabric of Scouts
- But these elements were not always visible
- Nor did they appear to tie to the activities or programs, which needed to have a better link to the values
- Leaders needed to enforce the values and weren't always seen to by those who had left Scouts
- The Scout Law content was fine, just too long

"Yes of course they need to stay! That's what Scouts is all about."

"I think these principles are very important, but I don't see Scouts ever delivering to them"

"It would be good if these were more visible in some way."

**Scouts need to make the core values more visible**



# Youth unanimously wanted to lose the Promise because of its delivery

The Promise content was accepted, it was just the delivery that was seen as repetitive, unnecessary and childish

- It was an unnecessary component for what was valuable time
- Arguably if you were living to the principals, aims and law then you were delivering to the promise
- Overdoing in the meetings contributed to Scouts being seen as uncool. It was seen as fine to keep, but perhaps below the surface
- Other rituals were also considered irrelevant with youth and parents alike not understanding why they were doing it

**The Promise**

**Other Rituals**

**Grand Howl**

**These rituals create discomfort and embarrassment, and contribute to the perception of Scouts being uncool**



# Removing references to God would contribute to Scouts being seen as more relevant and contemporary



## Case for leaving alone

Most felt it was quite an umbrella 'idea' that was not intended to be overly religious or exclusive

- Parents and youth alike tended to co-create meaning that was religion neutral
- Other than in the Promise the use of the word was often invisible



## Case for removing

It had the potential to polarise and alienate those who felt strongly

- It was more important to the parents than the youth
- It was seen as quite an old fashioned notion
- If it was made more religion neutral Scouts would likely be seen as more relevant and inclusive

The inclusion of references to God were irrelevant to the decision to stay or go amongst former members

# The uniform was important but needs to be more casual



The existing uniform had improved according to parents but was still too 'ugly' and restrictive

It was an important leveller having everyone wearing the same thing and is a powerful symbol to indicate to others that they are part of something

Some were looking for a reason to wear the uniform proudly – e.g. dance troupe, they want acknowledgement that Scouts was cool



The pants were restrictive, and the badges got caught and just weren't fit for the purpose of adventuring

Youth felt uncomfortable wearing the scarves and badges and just wanted a casual polo top



Somewhere it should say Scouts and a marker to say what group you were in (e.g. coloured collar)

The green in the uniform was relevant as a symbol of Scouts and nature, however youth were wanting it be a bit more colourful to make it less uncool

We would suggest polo shirts throughout the year and hooded jumpers for winter

Changing the uniform will make a substantial difference towards reducing the negative perceptions of Scouts



## Key finding 4

- 1 The social aspect of Scouts is a significant driver of acquisition and retention
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The logo and Scouts name should be retained as an important symbol of the tradition



The name itself had an intrinsic meaning; it communicated outdoors and adventure and didn't need to change



The symbol was recognised and communicated the brand





## Key finding 5

- 1 The social aspect of Scouts is a significant driver of acquisition and retention
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“It’s the Leader who makes  
or breaks the group!”



# The quality of Leaders is highly variable, with enthusiasm the core trait that matters

## Bad Leader traits

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- Youth didn't sense any excitement from Leaders
- Work was the excuse for poor preparation and planning
- Bad Leaders behaved like they don't want to be there, and turn a blind eye to bad behaviour and bullying

"Our Leader just sits out the back and drinks cups of tea. We'd like him to be more involved with what we're doing"

## Good Leader traits

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- Fun adults who are engaged, join in on the activities and care about the program
- Leaders may not be their age but should try to understand them and take on a youthful outlook
- At the very least they should know the young peoples names!
- Good Leaders recognise accomplishment in a fair and equal way (display no favouritism)
- A good Leader cared about creating a fun and varied program that delivered to the values of learning by doing

"Our Leader is great! They are really creative and are always engaged with what we're doing."



# Leaders need more support from Scouts Australia in delivering the program

## Skills in handling riotous behaviour

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- Leaders don't always have the skills to control the behaviour of youth
- Parents were empathetic, but expected Scouts to provide support and training
- They also expected Leaders to care enough to invest their time in learning these skills
- Both parents and youth felt Leaders needed to have more control over behaviour

## Support in program content


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- Leaders didn't all have the creativity to think of activities that were compelling
- Those that did do exciting activities were well liked by the young people

**Both parents and youth respected Leaders for volunteering, recognising that there was a 'cost' and that they should be supported and compensated**



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The findings from this qualitative **exploration of attrition** drivers amongst 10-15 year old scouts suggest that although the **concept of Scouting remains important** and of interest to them and their parents, **other activities are gaining priority** in a crowded life outside of school.

For youth, there is an almost **unlimited number of extra curricular options** to choose from with these being **regularly reprioritised** based on their **underlying “learning and development”** potential. In a “Scout’s journey”, the degree to which the **program provides an experience** which facilitates learning appears to **decline and lead to lower prioritisation** in the competition for attention and engagement.

To improve retention and preference above competing activities, Scouts needs to **revitalise its program content and delivery**.



# There are 9 fundamental findings 1 of 3

## Findings

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1 10-15 year olds have a strong desire to learn and expect this to happen at Scouts. The current feeling is that the meetings rarely teach anything new and do not deliver on their promise of development. The weekly meetings were often described as “boring”, “repetitive” and “pointless”.

2 At the point of entry, former scouts recall being promised adventure and outdoor activity. For many this promise does not materialise. Camps and other outdoor trips were often described as rare despite being one of the young peoples favourite parts of the program. Inconsistencies between groups showed that this was not an issue for all former Scouts.

3 Youth are keen to earn rewards, however the badge system has been devalued due to the inconsistencies in delivery. The sense of accomplishment was dampened when badges were awarded without completing the work and when the work had been completed but the badge never arrived.

## Opportunities

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Scouts Australia could form a guide for Leaders of planned activities which involve learning by doing. Theory work should be integrated with games rather than alternating each week to avoid dividing learning and fun. A guide of planned activities will also reduce the risk of being seen as repetitive and therefore boring.

A higher level of outdoor activity needs to be incorporated in to the program, even if this is just conducting meetings in a local outdoor area rather than the Scout hall. There is opportunity to increase the number of camps available based on evident demand.

If badges are to be continued, Scouts might consider introducing a process to ensure recognition is given when deserved and consistent . There is also opportunity for Scouts to introduce new methods of recognising accomplishments, such as group awards for team work.



# There are 9 fundamental findings 2 of 3

## Findings

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- 4 Leaders approach to delivery heavily impacted how enjoyable the meetings were. Youth were unhappy with the lack of perceived leadership and described the meetings as chaotic. In some cases, it was suggested that Leaders lacked control, were poorly prepared and not really interested in being part of Scouts.
- 5 The social aspect is both a reason to join and a reason to leave Scouts. Parents introduce their children to Scouts to help develop their social skills, whilst children join to meet new people. Despite youth having an interest in socialising with a wider group, they are shy and stick with a small number of friends. This appears to lower engagement and increase the likelihood to leave if one friend leaves.
- 6 Former scouts expressed a desire to be involved and contribute to decisions making, but this did not extend as far as taking responsibility. Being able to contribute becomes more important with age. Current contributions were described as shouting out ideas which led to chaos.

## Opportunities

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There is opportunity to develop Leader's skills in areas such as management of youth via training and coaching. This, along with other support from Scouts Australia (e.g. Content guidance), may help Leaders to control the group allowing for a more rewarding meeting for both Leaders and youth. In addition, commitment could be driven by a form of incentive (not necessarily monetary).

Scouts could consider introducing activities which encourage interaction with a wider mix of youth. Leaders have the potential to play a key role in assisting socialising and ensuring they mix. There may also be opportunities to broaden socialising beyond the local group by organising events for multiple scout groups to attend. Socialising could be further encouraged by changing the age range and transition points. Closing the gap between age groups, for example splitting to 10-12 and 12-15, and making the transition easier could help make interacting with new people less intimidating.

The desire to contribute could be incorporated in to the program in a controlled and managed way for example, participation in a planning meeting. This would allow for contribution by the youth without having to commit to taking on responsibilities.





# There are 9 fundamental findings 3 of 3

## Findings

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7 Parents expressed frustration with the timing of meetings. The start time was perceived to be too late, which resulted in the child being run down the rest of the week. In addition, the meetings often run over due to a lack of organisation at the start. Parents linked youth being tired and unruly at the start with the occurrence of bullying and bad behaviour.

8 Although both youth and parents had no strong objection to the Scouting Principles, Aim and Law, they were seen to be not always evident in the activities and program. Parents were seeking meetings with a greater link to the values. Although the Promise was evident in meetings and there was no disagreement with the content, youth found the delivery childish and unnecessary.

9 The uniform was recognised as an important part of Scouts however it was described to be ugly, uncomfortable and unfit for the purpose of adventuring. The scarfs, in particular, were found to be restrictive.

## Opportunities

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There is opportunity to change the timing of meetings, making them earlier and ensuring a punctual finish. Timing changes would satisfy parents as it works around disruptions to the evening (e.g. Dinner time). Youth may also benefit as distractions should be reduced which could help towards overcoming bullying.

The Principle, Aim, Law and Promise should continue to be part of Scouts, however there may be more effective ways to incorporate these values in to the program. Scouts might consider different approaches to making the delivery more adult so youth aspire to join in, rather than feeling embarrassed.

Scouts should continue to have a uniform, however could consider making it more casual. Polo shirts or a hooded jumper with the troop colours could be considered.



# The most critical area to address is the **activities** within the program

- 1 Give the Leaders support in a structured program of activities that delivers to learning by doing in a fun and varied way
- 2 Maintain an appropriate balance of outdoors vs indoors and avoid repetition
- 3 Allow for contribution by the youth into the activities chosen, in a structured and controlled way
- 4 Ensure that activities are structured around fostering social engagement and working with and meeting a variety of people
- 5 Ensure that Leaders are actively facilitating the social aspect of Scouting

Leaders need more support in implementing this change

# There is a case for increasing fees for the betterment of Scouting

- Parents were willing to pay more for Scouts
- Compared to other activities it was relatively inexpensive
- Parents would prefer to pay for more structure and discipline
- Parents acknowledge the kindness of volunteer Leaders, but felt there was a case for somehow compensate them for their time
- This was seen to have the benefit of an improved program
- This would also lessen the burden on parent contribution\*
- We would suggest that some investment is required

## Areas Scouts could potentially fund:

- Program support for Leaders
- Revamp of uniform
- Monitoring of Leader delivery
- Remuneration of Leaders

Value for money was only questioned where the activities weren't worthwhile!



bdrc  
jones donald