



PUFFING BILLY RAILWAY

Victorian Ombudsman's investigation and report

Today the Victorian Ombudsman tabled her report after investigating various Victorian railway organisations and their historic involvement with convicted child sex offender, Robert Whitehead. In response to the Ombudsman's report, the Emerald Tourist Railway Board resigned and the Government has formed an Interim Puffing Billy Board, bringing renewed governance and leadership to the Railway.

The Interim Board acknowledges and accepts all conclusions and recommendations the Ombudsman has handed down. We take ownership of the matter, recognising it is utterly at odds with Puffing Billy Railway's mission and its standing as a tourist icon much loved by the community for more than 100 years.

We are deeply sorry that people in positions of authority acted to protect their organisations' own reputations at the expense of victims, that they failed to act on complaints, and that victims were not encouraged to come forward. The victims have been incredibly courageous in coming forward to talk about what they have endured – we commend and thank them for this.

Our apology

Along with the Victorian Government, the Interim Puffing Billy Board intends to issue a formal apology to victims, their families and others directly affected, for the historical abuse they suffered. We will consult with victims so we do this in a way that is meaningful, according to their preferences, and so they have suitable support through the process.

Our pledge to victims, our current staff and volunteers, and broader community

The Board will work with staff, volunteers and the Puffing Billy Preservation Society to renew confidence in the organisation, and to ensure they have the support they need during this difficult time.

For our employees and volunteers we have counselling services available on-site, as well as an Employee Assistance Program, and a series of information sessions for our people to discuss any questions or concerns they have.

We pledge to do everything in our power to make sure this cannot happen again, and are taking decisive action to this end.

- We will work with the Government to implement the Ombudsman's recommendations in full at the Railway over coming months.
- We have renewed leadership – at both Board and CEO level – steering the organisation into the future.
- We are implementing a formal grievance resolution policy. It will be reviewed to ensure it aligns with current legislation.
- In 2006 we introduced Working with Children Checks and we will ensure all our volunteers and employees comply
- The Youth Program is suspended while under review.

- Our child safety policies comply with laws and regulations, but we need to go beyond that – we have engaged an independent consultant to review all our policies and procedures to give confidence that what we do now, and in the future, is best practice.

Our clear imperative is to foster a safe and caring culture with awareness and knowledge at all levels of our organisation from the Board through to our volunteers and employees.

Our future together

Puffing Billy Railway is one of Victoria's most iconic attractions, powered by a dedicated volunteer and employee community. The Railway's new leadership will work hard to make sure families can continue enjoying it for generations to come.

Further information

The Minister for Tourism has shared a statement about the Ombudsman's report here: <https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/media-centre>

Media enquiries

Patrick Molan – 0418 173 201