



# ***LOCAL GOVERNMENT, SMALL BUSINESS AND CUSTOMER SERVICE COMMITTEE***

**Members present:**

Mr JP Lister MP—Chair  
Mr AJ Baillie MP  
Mr MA Boothman MP  
Mr MPT Healy MP  
Mrs ME Nightingale MP  
Ms JE Pease MP

**Staff present:**

Ms M Telford—Committee Secretary  
Mr Z Dadic—Assistant Committee Secretary

## **PUBLIC BRIEFING—INQUIRY INTO VOLUNTEERING IN QUEENSLAND**

### **TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS**

**Wednesday, 19 February 2025**

**Brisbane**

## WEDNESDAY, 19 FEBRUARY 2025

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**The committee met at 10.45 am.**

**CHAIR:** Good morning. I declare open the public briefing with the Department of Local Government, Water and Volunteers for the committee's inquiry into volunteering in Queensland. My name is James Lister, member for Southern Downs and chair of the committee. I would like to respectfully acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet today and pay our respects to elders past and present. We are very fortunate to live in a country with two of the oldest continuing cultures in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples whose lands, winds and waters we all share. Other committee members with me here are the deputy chair and member for Inala, Margie Nightingale; the member for Townsville, Adam Baillie; the member for Theodore, Mark Boothman; the member for Cairns, Michael Healy; and the member for Lytton, Joan Pease.

This briefing is a proceeding of the Queensland parliament and is subject to the parliament's standing rules and orders. Only the committee and invited witnesses may participate in the proceedings. Witnesses are not required to give evidence under oath or affirmation, but I remind witnesses that intentionally misleading the committee is a serious offence. I also remind members of the public that they may be excluded from the briefing at the discretion of the committee. I remind committee members that departmental officers are here to provide factual or technical information. Any questions seeking an opinion about policy should be directed to the minister or left to debate on the floor of the House. These proceedings are being recorded and broadcast live on the parliament's website. Media may be present and are subject to the committee's media rules and my direction at all times. You may be filmed or photographed during the proceedings and images may also appear on the parliament's website or social media pages. Please turn your mobile phones off or to silent mode.

**DOBE, Ms Linda, Director-General, Department of Local Government, Water and Volunteers**

**ZERBA, Ms Bernadette, Deputy Director-General, Department of Local Government, Water and Volunteers**

**CHAIR:** I now welcome representatives from the Department of Local Government, Water and Volunteers who have been invited to brief the committee on the inquiry. Please remember to press your microphone button when you speak and switch it off when you are finished as there is only a limited number of channels. Director-General and Deputy Director-General, I invite you to provide an opening statement to the committee, after which committee members will have some questions for you. Over to you, DG.

**Ms Dobe:** Good morning, Chair and committee members. Thank you very much for the opportunity to come and speak with you today. I would like to also acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet, the Turrbal and Yagara people, and pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging.

The dedication of volunteers is witnessed across all areas in our communities—from disaster response to social and wellbeing support, sporting and cultural initiatives, environment and animal protection, and the health and education sectors. Our communities simply would not function without volunteers and the value of volunteering for individuals, the economy and society is significant. Volunteering Queensland's 2024 state of volunteering report estimates that volunteering contributed over \$117 billion to Queensland's economy in the 2022-23 financial year. Volunteering also strengthens community ties, reduces isolation and loneliness and allows individuals to develop skills that lead to new employment opportunities.

From the government's perspective, volunteers are critical to the delivery of essential services, including public safety and disaster response. Approximately 27,000 volunteers staff Queensland's volunteer rural fire brigades, around 5,000 volunteers are signed up to the SES and a further 2,700 volunteers support Marine Rescue Queensland. These volunteers support communities across the state to respond to emergencies all year round. As the response efforts to the North Queensland floods demonstrated in the past few weeks, they are critical to the immediate aftermath of natural

disasters. While volunteering provides benefits for the individual and the community, volunteering rates are in decline. The Australian Bureau of Statistics reports a gradual reduction of 10 per cent in the formal volunteering rate in the period from 2010 to 2020, but more recent analysis commissioned from Volunteering Queensland suggests that Queensland's volunteering rate reduced even more rapidly during and after the pandemic, with many volunteers not returning.

The characteristics and demographics of volunteers are also important. Evidence suggests that younger generations are more likely to volunteer informally through issue-based and episodic volunteering for particular causes rather than signing up to volunteering for an organisation. Only 14 per cent of SES volunteers are aged 25 or under and only five per cent of Rural Fire Service volunteers are aged 24 or under. The decline in formal volunteerism, particularly among younger generations, is not unique to Queensland, with the trend reflected both at state and national levels. The decreasing volunteering rate is concerning for Queensland, particularly when considering the critical role of volunteers in responding to disasters and the need for increased volunteers to support the 2032 Brisbane Olympic and Paralympic Games.

Volunteering Australia has identified structural factors which are potentially influencing Australia's volunteer rates. Australia's aging population means that the demand for volunteers is increasing while many older Queenslanders are reducing their volunteering commitments. Cost-of-living pressures are impacting the ability of individuals to volunteer and impacting on the ability of smaller volunteer organisations to meet expenses. The COVID pandemic is also having an ongoing impact, with volunteering rates yet to rebound. Similarly, consultation with the volunteering sector undertaken in 2023 and 2024 highlighted a number of challenges faced by volunteers and volunteer organisations, including difficulties in attracting and retaining volunteers, increasing complexity of the operating environments such as regulatory and training requirements and increasing costs for volunteers and volunteering organisations, with rising insurance costs a particular issue for many volunteer organisations. These challenges were felt more acutely by volunteer organisations in regional and remote locations and by smaller volunteer organisations which are often staffed entirely by volunteers and operate under significant financial constraints.

I want to now turn to the role of the Queensland government and my department in relation to volunteers. The Queensland government interacts with the volunteer sector in numerous ways. The government administers laws and regulations which apply to volunteer organisations, including workplace health and safety laws, Blue Card Services and criminal history checks. The Queensland government engages volunteers directly to deliver essential services such as justices of the peace and funds volunteer organisations to deliver discrete projects and initiatives. The state also supports the volunteering system indirectly through financial and regulatory relief for charities. Almost all Queensland government agencies engage with the volunteering sector in some capacity.

The Department of Local Government, Water and Volunteers includes the Supporting Volunteers Unit and the Community Recovery, Local Government and Water Resource Management divisions. The Supporting Volunteers Unit, which is newly established, is the first time the Queensland government has had a team dedicated exclusively to volunteering policy and supporting systems stewardship. This unit will develop the government's response to this inquiry process and will oversee delivery of any recommended actions accepted by the government. The unit administers the Queensland government's funding agreement with Volunteering Queensland of \$2.4 million over five years from 2022 to 2026. This funding allows Volunteering Queensland to promote volunteering opportunities and build sector capacity. The Supporting Volunteers Unit has only recently been established, as I have just said, and will staff seven members once fully operational.

The Department of Local Government, Water and Volunteers is the lead agency under the Queensland disaster management arrangements for coordinating human and social recovery services following an eligible disaster in Queensland, and this is done through the Community Recovery branch. Community Recovery assists with recovery activities and provision of social and recovery services, including emotional and psychosocial support, material aid and financial assistance on the ground in the community and via helplines. Community Recovery also engages charities and NGOs such as the Red Cross, the Salvation Army and St Vincent de Paul which deploy volunteers at Community Recovery hubs to provide referrals and information to impacted community members. I had the privilege of visiting some of those hubs in North Queensland in the last couple of weeks to see the support that they provided to people on the ground. There are over 1,300 Queensland public servants registered as Ready Reserves. Participation in the Ready Reserve is voluntary, but Ready Reserves are not considered to be volunteers as they are paid their regular wage and any applicable overtime and allowances. These Ready Reserves assist the Community Recovery team and are deployed to assist high priorities during disaster recovery phases.

I look forward to the outcomes of this inquiry as the outcomes of the inquiry are going to drive the work program of our Supporting Volunteers Unit going forward. We welcome any practical suggestions to support volunteers in Queensland and break down barriers to participation and strengthen the volunteering sector over the long term. Volunteering brings people together and makes our communities resilient. It is important that the culture of volunteering is fostered, particularly among younger generations, not only because our charities and community groups need younger volunteers but also because volunteering strengthens an individual's connection to their community and helps to address social isolation and loneliness. A strong network of volunteers will also be critical to deliver our future priorities like the Brisbane Olympic and Paralympic Games, and the work to strengthen this volunteer base needs to start well in advance of 2032. While the current state of volunteering poses significant challenges, it also presents opportunities for transformation and rejuvenation. I thank you very much for the opportunity to appear before you today.

**CHAIR:** Thank you, DG.

**Mrs NIGHTINGALE:** Thank you for appearing here today and I appreciate your contributions and look forward to learning more about how everything fits together, particularly in light of the inquiry. In terms of staffing, is there a general manager? How is volunteering factored in? I note that there is a lot of emphasis on Local Government, Water et cetera but not a lot of mention of Volunteers on the website, so I am keen to see how Volunteers fits in departmentally.

**Ms Dobe:** As I said before, it is a new function in the department and it is the first time we have had a dedicated team. The Supporting Volunteers Unit will be headed by a director level and have seven staff and will report to an executive director and ultimately to Bernadette Zerba as the deputy director-general.

**Mrs NIGHTINGALE:** Are those seven staff going to be based centrally in Brisbane or will they be working remotely?

**Ms Zerba:** We are currently recruiting, so we have two staff appointed at the moment. For the other staff we have made it optional for regional or South-East Queensland staff, so we are just waiting to see how the recruitment goes.

**Mr BAILLIE:** Thank you for joining us today. You mentioned the rain we had up north. Just looking over the briefing we have here, in terms of a number of volunteer organisations that came to the forefront during those two weeks, some of them were organised groups; others were last-minute get-togethers of people wanting to help. Sometimes I think that worked well while at other times I could see some opportunities there, but I am interested in the department's view on how we can better harness that desire to volunteer and help one another at the next event.

**Ms Dobe:** I think you are right. In a disaster event there is a lot of preparation that goes in beforehand and the NGOs that are regularly engaged to support post disaster have mechanisms in getting people ready, so getting people trained, getting people organised and when they see an event coming they all stand up ready to go.

Then there are processes that happen during the event, for example, through the establishment of a community recovery hub where we have unfortunately well practised processes in place in bringing people together. Sometimes we have insurance companies; we have the Salvation Army, for example; we have housing department people there; and then we have the community recovery staff from my department who administer the grants. That is a process that is a very formal process.

Sometimes in disasters things happen more organically, particularly when they are very big, and the formal organisation does not respond quickly enough. Then people step in to another space. One of the interesting things that we would like to hear through this inquiry is how can people who want to be involved in volunteer events be engaged? They may not want to do it through those existing organisations, so maybe there are other mechanisms as well. I would be interested in hearing what else we might be able to do in response.

**Ms PEASE:** It is a relatively new department.

**Mr HEALY:** It is brand new.

**Ms PEASE:** It has been 100 days. Given the work that you are doing, particularly in regards to this inquiry, what are you hoping to get out of the inquiry?

**Ms Dobe:** From the department's point of view we would like to get a much deeper understanding of what the issues are that are impacting volunteering organisations across the state, so getting some much more detailed information. That will then help us to understand what the reforms are that are needed going forward. For example, we have a lot of anecdotal information

around blue cards, insurance and some of those bigger issues that are impacting volunteering organisations. It would be very useful for the department to get some detailed examples of what some of those issues are so that we can then go and work across state government agencies on how we might be able to fix some of those problems and make it much easier for the sector to do their business.

**Ms PEASE:** Forming an opinion with regards to that, have you taken into consideration the large amount of work that went into the Queensland Volunteering Strategy 2024-2032?

**Ms Dobe:** We recognise that that strategy was built from lots of consultation that happened to build that strategy that was announced in 2024, and we will be building on that work through this process.

**Ms PEASE:** How will you be building on it? That is what I am trying to understand.

**Ms Dobe:** We have already been looking at the submissions and the outcomes of the workshops that happened through that process. We will be looking to see whether the same themes and issues are coming up and then working on what the future strategy might be going forward post inquiry.

**Ms PEASE:** At this point there is no definite outcome?

**Ms Dobe:** No. That is where we are genuinely—

**Ms PEASE:** As in no desired result?

**CHAIR:** Member for Lytton, I think we are straying into seeking an opinion on government policy from the officers here.

**Ms PEASE:** I actually do not think that is the case. We are doing an inquiry. I am trying to understand what the purpose of it is.

**CHAIR:** I will rule that question out of order but, of course, I will give you latitude to answer the question in whichever way you find appropriate.

**Mrs NIGHTINGALE:** Perhaps I can ask to clarify a question, Chair?

**CHAIR:** Do you wish to respond to that question, or shall I go to the member for Inala?

**Ms Dobe:** I think there is a genuine desire to hear from the volunteering sector through this inquiry as to what their issues are and what their suggestions are to improve the experience they have in volunteering and to really build and strengthen the sector.

**Ms PEASE:** That were not answered in this inquiry in 2024?

**Mr HEALY:** That was a strategy, not an inquiry.

**Ms PEASE:** No, they undertook a significant amount of inquiry. Thank you for that. One of my other questions is with regards to the work you are currently doing in terms of developing and growing your staffing. What work are you doing with First Nations people and also developing the fact that a lot of people volunteer but they do not necessarily see it as volunteering, particularly around First Nations with kinship carers? We heard from multicultural communities where a lot of the work that families do is just 'family business' but in actual fact it is volunteering work. Has that been considered in your department?

**Ms Dobe:** In the work that we will be doing, we will be very clearly recognising informal volunteering as part of the volunteering scope of work because the formal volunteering is people who are joined to specific organisations. Informal volunteering is—

**Ms PEASE:** Mum and dad, grandma—

**Ms Dobe:** Yes, helping your neighbours as well as the informal responses that I think the member for Townsville was talking about. We are very keen on hearing from First Nations organisations. I am hoping they will participate in this process. Through the recruitment process we are very open to First Nations people applying. We have First Nations people employed in our staff. We will definitely be working with those organisations and those agencies across government as well to give us input into that specific space.

**Ms PEASE:** That is good to hear because in the terms of reference of the inquiry First Nations people are mentioned as one of the inquiry levers.

**Mr BOOTHMAN:** In over a thousand-odd days the biggest event on the planet will be hosted in Brisbane. When it comes to these types of events, obviously we need an enormous number of volunteers. I have a question to do with the Commonwealth Games that we held in 2018. Is there any information that the department potentially could summarise for us so we can see how they actually attracted the volunteers and how the information was distributed to those volunteers? It created a

sense of worth and enthusiasm for those volunteers to be a part of that event, and obviously the Olympics is going to be just as big. Potentially you could then use those individuals as future volunteers for other organisations, so to speak. I know that is a long-winded question and is a bit all over the place.

**Ms Dobe:** We are very conscious of the need for a very large number of volunteers for 2032. We will work with the—I cannot remember all the department names and sports agencies—

**Mr HEALY:** I know. It is early days. We are still trying to get around all of that, so it is all good.

**Ms Dobe:**—relevant agency to understand what they think is needed for the 2032 Olympics and definitely build on what they did for the Commonwealth Games. I am sorry, I do not have specific information at hand about what they did to prepare for the Commonwealth Games, but we will definitely be working with them in that space because we know it is such a key priority.

**Mr BOOTHMAN:** Being from the Gold Coast, I know we did learn a fair bit from that and it is very useful information going forward.

**Mrs NIGHTINGALE:** Given that we are talking about expanding upon the work of the strategy and the report, I noted that the health and safety concerns were ranked as the second highest issue in the Queensland strategy and the report that was delivered, and I note that it is outside the terms of reference for the inquiry. I am interested as to what is happening with that issue, either in some other element of the terms of reference or within the department as a broader issue.

**Ms Dobe:** In terms of workplace health and safety for the volunteers working in organisations, I am not sure about it being outside the terms of reference. It is a very broad scope—

**Mrs NIGHTINGALE:** Because it was not mentioned specifically, I am keen to understand where it fits into the terms of reference.

**Ms Dobe:** There was a very deliberate, very broad scope for this inquiry. The health and safety of volunteers while they are volunteering is a very important aspect. We would particularly like to also understand whether there is any change needed from a regulatory point of view to help the volunteering organisations improve their efficiency in attracting volunteers and also whether there is anything we need to do to protect volunteers while they are undertaking volunteering activities. I think it is a two-pronged approach that we need to understand, and I think it would be interesting to hear through your process what volunteering organisations and volunteers themselves have to say. Just to expand on that a little, I think the volunteering organisations will have views and the volunteers themselves will have different views in that workplace health and safety space.

**Mr HEALY:** Firstly, I think it is fantastic we are holding an inquiry into volunteering. If I look up in our part of the world in Cairns I see significant community-based organisations and I know how important volunteers are. You elaborated on the details of the literally billions of hours across the country and the state, so volunteering is huge. I am sure these things are having an impact somewhere down the road on people's interaction—sorry, there is a question here somewhere. I think it is really important. I have just a couple of things.

The Queensland Volunteering Strategy, which we have made reference to—and I have been through it; I think it is very detailed and very well researched—raises two points. First and foremost, the government of the day is talking about red tape across all departments and all areas. One of the things that is highlighted in that strategy and when you talk to community groups is some of the red tape that restricts people. It can be insurance issues, blue cards or other things we can identify. I want to get your take on how that should be presented in the sense that it is a challenge. Is it identifiable? Ideally, we need to identify that as a challenge and determine what would be the best way out of that.

The other one is on the theme that the member for Theodore touched on. I was in Sydney during the 2000 Olympic Games. The volunteer base there was impressive, but the lead-up work was significant. In terms of the expectations, are there any expansions in your areas to enable you to engage with significant numbers or a strategy working with a broader group to ensure that we have the appropriate resources in place?

**Ms Dobe:** There are two questions.

**Mr HEALY:** Take your time to answer.

**Ms Dobe:** I have only had a very brief interplay in this in the last couple of months in engaging with the volunteering sector. The volunteering sector contains people who have been doing this for decades and decades and they have lots of very good ideas on things that could be improved and how to improve them. I think it would be very useful to extract some of that detailed information so we can then go away and look at how we can implement some of that if we possibly can.

In terms of the Olympics, we know that there will need to be a very big uplift in that space for the volunteers, and we will be working on a strategy on how to do that. Part of what we would like from this inquiry is what is the base platform that we need to have efficient processes in standing that up? What are some of the recommendations in terms of mechanisms and how to do that? Are we looking at a statewide volunteering sector and people coming into Brisbane? Are we getting most of the people from here? I know in the Commonwealth Games there was a lot of activity in terms of bringing people down there and then accommodation being found and hosting people as well. Sydney did a lot of that, too.

**Mr HEALY:** I think Sydney was national; people came from all over.

**Ms Dobe:** It was. That is something we are still working through. This inquiry gives us the ability to understand some of the structural or regulatory changes that might be needed to make that an easier process.

**Ms PEASE:** Did you mention how many volunteers there are in Queensland? Do you have any figures on that?

**Ms Dobe:** I think we do have a figure on that.

**Mr HEALY:** Not enough, is it?

**Ms Dobe:** Not enough. I will have to take that question on notice. I know that I had it at my fingertips at some point in time. There we go: 2.8 million people say that they volunteer either formally or informally. That is from Volunteering Queensland.

**Ms PEASE:** That is in Queensland alone. Just on the Commonwealth Games, I can tell you that my husband is a professional volunteer. He has volunteered at all the games. They attract people from all around the world. There are people who have volunteered everywhere at all games. It is sort of like a thing. It has been a wonderful experience. Just on that 2.8 million volunteers, that is formal and informal volunteering. Did you say you have a staff of seven?

**Mr HEALY:** You are going to be busy.

**Ms PEASE:** You are going to be very busy. It is a big undertaking. I have always been a big volunteer, as probably all MPs are. That is why we get into service. Rotaries and all of those service organisations do outstanding work. I want to take the opportunity to acknowledge all of the great volunteers in my community because they make our community the vibrant and wonderful place that it is. I know it is probably too early to pre-empt any recommendations, but has there been any consideration to giving public servants who are not the Ready Reserves—just straight public servants—time off? I know in the corporate world they are encouraged to volunteer. Is that something you might look at considering?

**Ms Dobe:** That is definitely an option we might be able to consider and put forward. I know in the past I have worked in agencies where you could take time off to do volunteering.

**Ms PEASE:** Do you get paid though?

**Ms Dobe:** It is like leave, so yes, you do, but it is not consistent across the board. I do not even know if that still exists anywhere at the moment, but that is something we can take on board.

**Ms PEASE:** In my community, I have the Port of Brisbane, Patrick's and all the wharfies, and they actively encourage their employees to volunteer. They do pretty amazing work.

**Ms Dobe:** We are very keen to engage with the corporate sector as well. We know they are very keen to increase their volunteer participation.

**Ms PEASE:** To be good corporate citizens looks good for them.

**Ms Dobe:** It is having meaningful volunteering that is not just coming in and out for a day. That will be something that will be very interesting. I hope they will engage with the inquiry as well.

**Ms PEASE:** We constantly hear about the benefits of volunteering. You get so much more back than what you put in.

**Mrs NIGHTINGALE:** With reference to point 3 of the terms of reference for the inquiry, I am interested to know if there is going to be anything specifically that looks at or addresses the socioeconomic status or income level of volunteers. I represent an electorate that has a lot of financial barriers. One of the key issues is that it costs to volunteer, and people are too busy working and do not have the money and time available to volunteer. Are you interested in looking at correlations or information about income levels and volunteering?

**Ms Dobe:** We also understand that that is a barrier. We are very keen to hear through the inquiry what people's experiences are and what can be done to make it easier for people to volunteer.

**CHAIR:** We have received a lot of submissions. We are releasing some today, so you will be able to have a look at what has come in so far. We expect quite a few more. There being no further questions, thank you.

**Ms Dobe:** I want to acknowledge the guests from volunteering organisations who have come along, so thank you to them.

**CHAIR:** I note that one of them is a former senator for Queensland. You are very welcome here, Sir. That concludes this briefing. Thank you to everyone who has participated today. I thank Hansard and the committee secretariat for their work in making this happen. A transcript of these proceedings will be available on the committee's webpage in due course. I declare this public briefing closed.

**The committee adjourned at 11.20 am.**