



LOCAL GOVERNMENT, SMALL BUSINESS AND CUSTOMER SERVICE COMMITTEE

Members present:

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

Staff present:

Ms M Telford—Committee Secretary
Ms K Guthrie—Inquiry Secretary

PUBLIC HEARING—INQUIRY INTO VOLUNTEERING IN QUEENSLAND

TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS

Wednesday, 2 April 2025

Brisbane

WEDNESDAY, 2 APRIL 2025

The committee met at 10.11 am.

CHAIR: Good morning, everyone. I declare open this public hearing for the committee's inquiry into volunteering in Queensland. My name is James Lister. I am the member for Southern Downs and the chair of this committee. With me today 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 joining us today in place of the member for Lytton is the member for Pine Rivers, Nikki Boyd.

This hearing 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 hearing at the discretion of the committee.

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COWIE, Mr Edward, State President, Queensland State Emergency Service Volunteer Association Inc.

CHAIR: Mr Cowie, would you like to make an opening statement? Then the committee will have some questions for you.

Mr Cowie: I thank the committee for the opportunity to speak on behalf of SES volunteers within Queensland. My name is Edward Cowie. I am the President of the Queensland State Emergency Service Volunteers Association Inc., the recognised peak body representing volunteers in Queensland SES. The SES in Queensland is in a building phase where the volunteer association has been part of consultation for our transition from Queensland Fire and Rescue Service to the Queensland Police Service, which has begun. There has been a significant scope of work we have advocated for over many years. This is part of the process that will likely see SES become its own statutory authority in the future.

SES volunteers are often overlooked despite the significance of the work that they do, in particular as one of the only entities that can help Queenslanders in their own homes when significant events and disasters occur. They are a significant part of the preparation phase for disasters and a huge part of the response phase and, being deeply embedded within their communities, the recovery from those events. The SES are also heavily involved in community events day to day, and that is important for our volunteers and the community as well. In a particular event in small communities in rural and remote Queensland, the SES is often the backbone along with other volunteer organisations.

It would be remiss of me not to acknowledge that many of our SES members wear multiple response hats. They may also be rural fire volunteers or community members in other local community responder groups such as community ambulance first responders and other community focused activities. This shows the nature of the fine individuals that Queensland draws upon to assist.

Today I would like to focus on the inequities that SES volunteers face in functioning as volunteers in an organisation where they have had to face issues of potential disciplinary action or complaints but where the challenges are much deeper. If a paid member of the SES were to face similar actions then they would have greater opportunity than the volunteer. I would welcome questions around this inequity. I would also like to focus on the onerous red-tape threats to success—blue cards, training inequities, the actions imposed on SES volunteers. Members and, in particular, our volunteer trainers and our local executive volunteer members all struggle with this red tape.

I do not intend to regurgitate the contents of our submission but rather identify the future opportunities that Queensland SES volunteers can be afforded and that the actual volunteers can contribute to. Historically, Queensland SES has found it hard to keep our volunteers engaged and has a significant retention problem. It also has a significant problem getting people through the door, into the recruitment phase and onto actual operational tasks. The process is arduous and cumbersome. It appears that decisions of the past have continued into the present so that a volunteer can show interest but it can be over six months before they are utilised. Why is it that in other organisations we can have people show an interest and be engaged within days, not months?

I am the first to acknowledge that significant actions have taken place under our new chief officer, but cultural change takes time. Indeed, cultural change seems to come at the expense of volunteers. The reality is that we really need 7,500 active volunteers to support Queensland at this current time, which is from the height of SES volunteer numbers of over 19,000 in 1992. There are significant events that we know we need to be preparing for now, including the Olympic Games. Those circumstances highlight the need to be actively supporting and recruiting volunteers but particularly retaining them.

Right now, after the effects of Tropical Cyclone Alfred, the North Queensland rain events and the south-western rain and flooding events, we have a high interest in volunteering. If we cannot get those people involved quickly, we lose them. We have been hearing numbers of tens of thousands of SES volunteers needed to support the Olympics. With the current retention and recruitment rate, that is a fantasy. We acknowledge that things are improving, but we need volunteers across Queensland to be engaged and given meaningful work, participation and appropriate training, without the onerous impost of bureaucracy in a reasonable, safe and appropriate work environment.

The SES finds itself being hamstrung by historical malaise and needs to be a leading light in the engagement of volunteers. To this end, we will propose that Queensland needs a body with the power of an ombudsman or an inspector-general to support all volunteers—to protect them from poorly managed programs, to keep them safe and to ensure they are not utilised in potentially adverse ways. It also needs to be a body that can address issues and complaints that volunteers may have in their engagement. A function of that will be to paid staff through other means, to ensure that justice for all volunteers can be afforded.

CHAIR: Thanks, Mr Cowie, and thank you also for your submission.

Ms BOYD: Thank you for coming in to see us today and thank you for the work that you do. It is very valuable work. I am interested in a lot of your submission, but one of the things I would like a clear understanding of is where you talk about volunteers who are disillusioned with what they thought they were going to be able to contribute versus the kinds of activities they have found themselves able to do. Could you unpack that a little more for me, please?

Mr Cowie: Yes, I can. We have some really great opportunities for people coming in to SES groups. Our structure is essentially, for an SES group that might be in a small rural town, the local group is controlled by an SES unit that is essentially structured around local government and then, obviously, the state structure that oversees that. Each location is different. Using Brisbane as an example, there may be very little opportunities for volunteers to do any significant SES function that has not been agreed to by that local government. An example of that would be that there are no SES volunteers within Brisbane who are trained to perform things such as road crash rescue, vertical rescue, limited swiftwater rescue. People will say, 'Jeez, there's a whole lot I could be doing in SES,' only to find that they are limited by what is agreed to by the structure that is in place.

On the opposite side of the fence, we may have a small rural community that has to undertake a whole lot of functional responses in relation to SES. That can be anything from vertical rescue, road crash rescue, flood-bound operations—the entirety of the functions that we actually do—with a very limited pool of people who are often hindered by being able to undertake training in a timely manner and then keep up their skills. The disillusion often happens with volunteers believing that they will be out there doing things that are really good, but ultimately they find that they become a professional sandbagger.

Ms BOYD: At what point does that information become clear to them?

Mr Cowie: I think it becomes clear generally within the first 12-month period when they realise that the opportunities they thought would be statewide are actually limited by the structures that are in place in the communities in which they live. We talk about the functions that we perform and the legislation is clear. What we do not do is draw down into how that becomes restricted to where you are and what unit you may belong to.

Mr BOOTHMAN: I am a former SES volunteer, many years ago. I was in there for quite a long time so I certainly understand exactly what you are talking about. You mentioned inequity among volunteers. Can you elaborate on the inequity between paid individuals and volunteers? Can you also highlight training? Back in those days, I thought training was always a bit of problem. You felt you had to wait and wait until you got training, but it was not up to you to get to that position. Someone else would tick and flick and say yes or no. They would say which you were going to get. Can you elaborate on the inequity for volunteers and their struggles?

Mr Cowie: Absolutely. Likewise, I have been a volunteer now for 38 years so I have had many experiences. I will talk about the early days of training. Training was simple. We were not controlled by needing to have a certificate IV in training and assessing just to teach someone how to climb up a ladder because we identify it as being high risk to work on a roof. There are many things that we were able to deliver with a commonsense and straightforward approach that dealt with the safety side of it but also were effective in relation to being able to put people from the SES into the field sometimes much quicker than what we do now.

There are a number of training issues where you make your way through the application process, then you go through your blue card process and then, hopefully, you are signed off and you go into the mainstream of SES training. If you were a permanent staff member and were to come in to, say, the work environment then, depending on the nature of the role that you perform, most of that training is provided up-front in a very short timeframe so that you can effectively hit the ground running.

From an SES volunteer perspective, given the way we have now started to drag out that training, it can be literally months and sometimes up to 12 months before we provide people with the appropriate training to give them the skill set to go out and potentially use a saw to cut up timber that has fallen over a driveway. There are a number of things. It is not necessarily always the fault of the SES system; it has been a combination of having to take into account so many changes in workplace health and safety in relation to training, RTOs that have a very stringent process of capturing evidence and keeping that evidence and then ensuring there is competency maintenance ongoing. There are a whole lot of things that come in there.

Going back to the question on equity, from an SES volunteer perspective there is a very strong vision or ethos that volunteers will lead volunteers in events, but we are then restricted by what we can do in that aspect. We are restricted in relation to the type of training volunteers are provided in leadership, executive management, conflict and even financially so that they are able to get a corporate card to buy our volunteers a bottle of water or food in the middle of an operation. It is possible for us to do that but only if there is a staff member there. We have to make a phone call and get a staff member with a corporate card to pay for that food. There are certain restrictions put upon volunteers.

I think it comes down to this: because you are 'just' a volunteer, the level of trust and empowerment that you should be getting is actually reduced, yet a staff member can come into an organisation within two weeks, have all of that completed and go out there and do their job. It is about effectiveness and efficiency. There are many examples in relation to that inequity that I can provide, even from a disciplinary process. Volunteers definitely are dealt with under a different structure. We are not paid employees so we cannot, as the process goes along, at the end go and challenge what may be happening if there is an allegation that something has occurred that is inappropriate. A paid staff member is able to go to a commission and present their case and have it independently dealt with. From an SES volunteer perspective, we are deemed to be different.

Ms BOYD: Mr Cowie, in your verbal submission this morning you made reference to wanting to become your own statutory authority in the future. Can you please elaborate on that for me?

Mr Cowie: Absolutely. From our inception back in 1975 through to where we currently sit, the Queensland SES has become an agency essentially of support. Everything that the SES does is in support of other lead agencies. Under the Queensland disaster management arrangements, obviously, we would support both the Queensland Police Service and local government in relation to being a lead in relation to flooding, storm, cyclone, potentially tsunami. With some of those key response activities that one would expect to occur from a state emergency service, in Queensland we are not that statutory authority. The New South Wales SES is predominantly volunteer and is a statutory authority that has lead opportunities in relation to storm damage, floods, severe storm, tsunami. Given that is one of the end goals, I believe, from an agency point of view, being a statutory authority would allow us to have the ability to stand up and lead events instead of being part of the process where we would assist in events.

Ms BOYD: In your submission you talked about attrition and you also talked about the average timeframe for an SES volunteer, being four years at the moment. In your written submission you stated that many SES volunteers in Queensland leave with a disillusioned view of what they wanted or what they could offer in comparison to what they could actually perform within the SES. How have you captured that data in terms of the satisfaction rate or otherwise of people departing the SES as volunteers after a four-year period? Do you do an exit interview? As an organisation, how have you captured that data?

Mr Cowie: In my role within Queensland SES, I am a local controller. Essentially, the majority of those controllers are volunteers. Some are paid, and I identify that from a local government perspective. I am a paid local controller, essentially still deemed to be a volunteer under the state entity because I am not paid by the state but by local government. What we would do and what occurs currently within the processes and procedures is that an exit interview would occur or, in many different cases, there are verbal interviews that occur. It is essentially that information which feeds back into the state that provides quantitative evidence which supports those statements that many SES get to the point where they believe that the effort they provide as volunteers is not being rewarded in the way they expect would be from a volunteer perspective.

Ms BOYD: Mr Cowie, can you please inform how frequently you meet with the SES chief officer?

Mr Cowie: Personally, from the president of our volunteers association, we have a monthly meeting which is scheduled. That is obviously flexible. There are times when we may communicate within that month period. Certainly there are occasions, for various reasons, when meetings are rescheduled. Our meeting yesterday, operationally and due to other reasons, was rescheduled for Thursday. I meet regularly with the chief officer from the volunteer association point of view. Often we will make phone calls in between.

CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Cowie, for your appearance today. We are all most grateful, I am sure, for the work that your members have done very conspicuously this year alone with the weather events we have had in Queensland. Please feel free to remain to observe the rest of the proceedings.

BARTLETT, Mr Andrew, Policy and Advocacy Adviser, Volunteering Queensland

HEDGER, Ms Jane, Chief Executive Officer, Volunteering Queensland

CHAIR: Welcome. We have seen quite a lot of the two of you at the various hearings we have been having around Queensland. I acknowledge also that Mr Bartlett is a former senator for Queensland and is most welcome here. I invite you to make a brief opening statement before the committee has questions for you.

Ms Hedger: Thank you. Good morning. I would like to acknowledge the ancestral lands on which we meet, the traditional custodians of these lands and the elders past, present and emerging. I would also like to thank the inquiry committee for the opportunity to present today and recognise the valuable time and energy you have also generously been giving to this process. We have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to make a valuable and measurable impact on our communities and the future of our state with this inquiry. Queensland has an opportunity to be world-leading in our response to this local and global issue. Considering the volume of submissions and the passionate presentations we have seen, our community is ready for this change.

Volunteering is the best of us as people. In our increasingly disconnected society, it is also what brings us together and reminds us of the power and compassion of humanity. We know that volunteering brings \$30 billion of social and economic benefit to Queensland every year. When this starts to decline by 10 per cent, the gaps that emerge have significant consequences for community and government. We have survived on goodwill and the kindness of friends and neighbours for a long time. We have reached the tipping point. A truly effective, enabling environment requires investment in both resources and systems.

Volunteering Queensland was founded over 41 years ago. We are part of a network of state peak body volunteering associations which were the foundation for Volunteering Australia. The state bodies continue to be the operational arms of the national volunteering strategy and implementations of the national standards. We each hold state volunteering awards and contribute to nationally consistent external independent research which collates the state of volunteering reports for each state every two years.

Volunteering Queensland is only small. We have two permanent and 10 contracted staff. We are funded through a five-year service agreement with the Queensland government for \$550,000 a year. We create a further \$700,000 with our own income through memberships, training and community partnerships. We have a five-year federally funded grant with the Volunteer Management Activity program which we have to pass on to the local Queensland communities through a program of structured grants and volunteering projects that increase access to volunteering opportunities for diverse and vulnerable populations. Along with everyone else here, we apply for community grants as they come up. There is no structured funding of the state volunteering ecosystem.

Our role is to provide advocacy and recognition for volunteers and to build capability and capacity in volunteer involved organisations to enable them to provide responsible, rewarding and impactful volunteer programs. We maintain and deploy a database of 72,000 EV CREW and Care Army volunteers and have deployed them in over 165 major disaster or community events.

We have around 125,000 regular users of our website. Last year, nearly 170,000 people sought out a volunteer opportunity through our website. This year we are working in 28 schools across all regions of Queensland, and we have engaged over 16,000 high school students in a volunteering qualification and introduced them to what we hope is a lifetime of volunteering.

Critically, we have also put over 500 volunteer managers and coordinators through our Certificate IV in Coordination of Volunteer Programs. The role of volunteer manager/coordinator was only just formally recognised as an occupation by the ABS and there is much work yet to be done to grow our volunteer managers. We continue to lead national program delivery and are currently delivering a large IT platform and a cross-culture enabling project with SBS. We delivered a volunteer rostering portal in just three days during the recent cyclone. China, which is grappling with 283 million people aged over 60, has contacted us to talk to us about our senior ambassador program.

We are only tiny, yet we roar. This inquiry is a timely opportunity to raise our voice in advocacy on behalf of our 2.8 million volunteers and the organisations and communities they support to say we cannot do this on our own, with so few resources, with the growing challenges that are playing out globally. The volunteers are no longer coming, and we must lead the sector to explore and embrace new ways of volunteering. We see very clearly through the defunct volunteer resource centre program that volunteer resourcing and matching programs, whilst desperately needed, are not commercially viable in communities.

VQ can continue to create centralised resources. Our communities need people permanently funded on the ground around the state to bring together people who want to volunteer with the organisations that need them as well as encourage others to volunteer more. We think every Queenslanders should feel a sense of ownership and responsibility to their community and have the opportunity to contribute to it. We need a long-term, well-funded volunteer matching and resourcing network across all regions of Queensland; protection for volunteers through insurance, a complaints mechanism and a framework for safety and retention; volunteer manager training and support; easier administration and registration systems with equitable policies and reimbursement across volunteering in government; and volunteer reward and recognition programs, including considerations for the cost of volunteering relief.

We thank the current government for embedding a minister and department area for volunteering and for standing up this inquiry. I grew up in remote rural communities in a family of long-term, lifelong volunteers and started volunteering at five. I am incredibly passionate about this sector and our many hardworking organisations and volunteers. This is an exciting opportunity for all of us to create the Queensland we want for generations to come and for this inquiry and our government to use this opportunity to see the vibrant and diverse ecosystem that can flex up and down around events, disasters and community need.

Volunteering Queensland looks forward to continuing our strong collaboration with organisations such as Red Cross, SES and Griffith, partners with us here today, and with our others in community need. We look forward to working with the government, communities, other NGOs, the private sector and our volunteers to build and bring to life a volunteer legacy for Queensland where no-one is left behind and everyone can flourish. We thank the committee again for the invitation to address the inquiry and are happy to answer any questions you may have.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: Thank you. It is good to see you again. Thank you for the work that Volunteering Queensland is doing. One of the things we saw in your submission and have heard overwhelmingly throughout the inquiry so far is the concern of red tape and insurance for volunteers and volunteer agencies. This clearly is an impact. Do you have suggestions about ways in which the impact can be minimised?

Ms Hedger: We have for some time been asking for a project with Queensland Treasury to scope what a state-based volunteer insurance program would look like. I travelled to the international volunteer conference in Korea last year, and there are a number of other countries and states overseas who have a national or a state-based volunteer program so that anybody who is registered as a volunteer is covered under a state-based insurance program. That is one of the options. We would like to explore what that looks like, and we think there are some opportunities then potentially to see whether that is effective or whether we can then work with the state with volunteer insurance agencies to see what is possible.

Mr BAILLIE: It is great to see you both again. In Townsville, of course, I am very familiar with Volunteering North Queensland. You have some passionate advocates and people on board there. I am interested to know a bit more about the formal organisational structure of Volunteering Queensland versus, say, Volunteering North Queensland. We heard from Volunteering Sunshine Coast at our recent public hearing. Around the organisational structure and how you are affiliated, can you explain how the funding model works and then how you manage resources when in particular areas there is a bigger call for volunteers?

Ms Hedger: Back in about 2012, the federal government started the Volunteer Management Activity Program and they funded about 52 volunteer-involving organisations around the country to engage in volunteer matching and community volunteering. Over the years that program has changed and organisations have come in and out of that. We have four left in Queensland who are independent organisations who call themselves a volunteer resource centre, and they were part of that original program.

In about 2018, the government did a review and said, 'We have created a whole heap of little organisations that are duplicating training, duplicating resources and doing things differently and are only in certain areas. We think there is a better opportunity to put centralised funding into the state peak body and for the state peak body to distribute that around the state in a grant and project process so that all areas of Queensland get opportunities to run volunteering programs.' When we run a project, the resources and the learnings from that go into a portal that anybody else in Queensland or anywhere else can access. It is truly about making the best use of government money.

The volunteer resource centres were defunded and then the minister decided to give them a little bit more funding. For about the past seven years they have been transitioning to some kind of community funding, with \$50,000 funding each year. Our only formal relationship with those

organisations is that the federal department handed their funding to us and asked us to manage the \$50,000 that they get each year. We are to work with them to try to help them become self-funding in their communities.

Volunteering Far North Queensland and Volunteering Gold Coast have done some really good work to try to get some commercial activity into there. They are kind of surviving. Volunteering Gold Coast has a number of other grants. That covers their rent and a few other things so that their \$50,000 allows them to do volunteer projects. Volunteering Sunshine Coast has not embraced that model and they are struggling, and I understand they are suggesting they are going to close at the end of the June. I think Townsville are also in dire straits. We help where we can. We have quite a tight government policy around the money that we hand out. They see that they are already giving \$50,000 to these four east coast organisations and their preference is that we try to get to organisations in rural, regional and remote areas that do not have access to that, to provide projects and resources in those areas.

We would love something like those four resource centres fully funded across all regions in Queensland. We think that is the ecosystem that is required to provide the right kind of support in those communities. We have no formal role with those organisations, except that we are their funder by default through the department at the moment. I have been establishing supportive relationships with them whereby we try to do as much as we can to help them come up with ideas. I travel up for their expos and those sorts of things. There is no affiliation. They are not an offshoot of us or anything like that; it is purely a relationship.

Ms BOYD: I am interested in training. One of the pieces of continuous feedback we are receiving—often something that is seen to be prohibitive to volunteers—is the amount of time it takes them to come in, to do onboarding and to get trained up. I understand Volunteering Queensland is an RTO.

Ms Hedger: Yes.

Ms BOYD: Can you explain to me the timeframes it would take? At first sight on your website, getting a certificate I takes the same amount of time as getting a certificate IV. I am wondering how people can obtain qualifications in a timely way through that process.

Ms Hedger: Certificates I, II and III generally are run through schools. They look like they take a long time because they have to run in with the school curriculum, so you have a 'one class a week' type of thing. The certificate IV is much more intensive but done by people who are either out of school or in the workforce who have more time to devote to that study. We are able to tailor that to people.

Also, our system is online. We have been talking with the SES and a number of other organisations about how we can use our training skills to help them move some of their training online. We have recently developed a four-minute disaster volunteer orientation video. We have been able to deploy that to people who remotely might be activated as a disaster volunteer: 'Here, watch your four-minute video and that is your orientation.'

We are also trying to work with councils to say, 'Your one-off disaster volunteer does not need to know about your workplace health and safety, your code of conduct and all of those things.' Again, we are talking to councils about what is realistic, to develop something that is short and sharp to be able to deploy very quickly, ideally via a video or a podcast or something we can SMS them on their phone in the moment, so that we do not have to have resource intensive face-to-face training and weeks and weeks of that.

Mr BOOTHMAN: You briefly talked about volunteering in schools. My question is about school students and trying to get young people interested in volunteering. Obviously, they are the next generation coming through. We have the defence cadets and the emergency cadets programs and the Leos. Do you have any advice about how you would attract more young people into these types of programs? Do you think we could do a lot more in schools? What are your thoughts on this matter?

Ms Hedger: Out of the 2024 *State of volunteering report*, there is a youth volunteering report that is an offshoot of that. That has some really interesting research around how we know young people want to volunteer and how we can target programs to young people differently. Certainly, we are going into schools and working with the vocational programs in schools. We are getting people who are not looking to go on to university but who are going to go to TAFE. It gives them TAFE credit points beforehand. We are involving people in volunteering through their education. Because there is a practical component, they then get that experience of volunteering. We are hoping, again, that that breeds lifelong volunteers.

We think there is a large amount of work that can be done with the SES and cadets. We also think there is some work that can be done to bring the sector together to look at where, for example, EV CREW volunteers might be interested in becoming SES volunteers in their community. We think there are a lot of opportunities to connect this up. Again, that requires us, as a very small organisation, to have the capacity to have those discussions, to bring all of those people together to create those programs. We would love to be doing them and we are doing them at the pace that we can, but we think there is an awful lot more that can be done with a very concerted volunteering strategy for Queensland that talks about all of those things and makes them a priority for all of those organisations to come together.

Ms BOYD: My question relates to your written submission. In the 'Opportunities Summary' under the heading 'Protect and value the work of volunteers', you talk about having a formal complaints process for volunteers. I want to understand your thinking a little more in relation to how that would exist when volunteers like the SES or the Rural Fire Service are actually in government agencies. How would that work? What was your thinking in relation to making that an opportunity?

Ms Hedger: I guess we were looking at other structures like the Health Ombudsman and areas like that. Queensland has 2.4 million people who work. We have an incredibly complex HR and IR system around that. We have complaints mechanisms. We have courts. We have legislation. We have 2.8 million volunteers and we have no structure around that. Each individual organisation has a code of conduct and workplace health and safety. We have broader structures around anti-discrimination et cetera, but we get regular complaints from volunteers about how they have been treated and we have no authority to investigate those. We have no authority to work with the organisations. We feel that there needs to be something in place to start to protect volunteers. We hear some quite concerning stories, and there is nothing we can do about it. We think there should be. We do not have the answers to that, but we think it is something we can all work on.

CHAIR: Thank you very much. That concludes the time allotted for Volunteering Queensland. Thank you for your submission, for your interest and for your regular appearance before us. Please feel free to remain to observe the rest of the proceedings.

SIVALINGUM, Mr Collin, Director, Queensland; National Director, Emergencies and Disaster Response, Australian Red Cross

STRATHEARN, Ms Sarah, Director, South Australia; National Member and Volunteer Strategic Initiatives, Australian Red Cross

WARNOCK, Mr Mark, Senior Adviser, External Engagement, Australian Red Cross

CHAIR: Welcome. Thank you for coming in. Would you like to make an opening statement? Then the committee will have some questions for you.

Mr Sivalingum: I take this opportunity to thank the committee for giving us this opportunity to present to this hearing but also for having this inquiry in the last couple of weeks. Voluntary services is one of the seven fundamental principles of the Red Cross movement internationally and is the backbone of everything that we do. This is very close and very important to us—internationally, whether there is conflict or in disasters—as the key principle of voluntary services. Unfortunately, during times of conflict a lot of our volunteers are impacted across the world, if you look at some of the current conflict that is taking place at the moment. Our thoughts are with them and we pray to God for them.

For over 110 years, Australian Red Cross has helped communities prepare for, respond to and recover from disasters and has provided a range of other programs. This year has already been a busy one for us in our emergency services area, especially emergency services volunteers, with Tropical Cyclone Alfred, the North Queensland floods and the Western Queensland floods. Earlier this year, when the Bruce Highway flooded in North Queensland, the Hinchinbrook council requested our support to help locals whose homes were completely flooded. This is part of our arrangements with local councils to either support or manage the evacuation centres—to do registration, to reunite family and friends and to manage evacuation centres with psychosocial support.

Our emergency services volunteers for this event actually flew in by Army helicopter to manage the town's evacuation centre really quickly, because the local capacity was really stretched and we could not get our volunteers through because of the road closures. With homes underwater, locals came in needing a place to stay but, more importantly, needing emotional support. It was their new home for a couple of weeks while they were in Red Cross care, supporting them before they could go back into their homes.

Our volunteers provide psychological first aid and work with a range of government agencies to provide care and support. Fundamentally, what sets us apart in terms of our volunteer services is the psychological first aid, that emotional support, that community sentiment. For the current event that is taking place and at the multiple recovery hubs that members of the committee would have visited during this event, our job is to collate that community sentiment and feed it into the state structures so that you get to hear firsthand how the community is feeling and what impact it is having from a psychosocial perspective in community.

This example underscores a crucial point: we cannot wait for a disaster to strike to prepare our volunteers for the field. A big part of our work is to prepare our volunteers for this very event. That takes a lot of resourcing and a lot of time to make sure they have the skills and training to actually do that. As disasters are becoming more severe, we know that we need to grow our volunteering workforce, ideally drawing on people in rural, regional and remote communities as well as in the south-east. Also, our volunteers need to be representative of the population in terms of culture, race and so forth to make sure we can support communities across the region.

We are working hand in glove with Volunteering Queensland, as mentioned, to maximise the value of our database of volunteers by offering just-in-time training. There is a lot of testing and a lot of important pilots taking place right here in Queensland. We are hoping that, with the success of the Queensland pilot, working closely with Volunteering Queensland, we can take this nationally. I and my colleagues are actually responsible for national outcomes.

We welcome this inquiry as an opportunity to strengthen Queensland's volunteering sector. Our submission makes three key recommendations. First, invest in volunteer-led organisations, including funding for recruitment, training and support, to ensure a deployable workforce is always ready. Second, work towards national standardised requirements to streamline compliance and onboarding processes. Compliance is a requirement under arrangements by the Queensland government—working with children checks, police checks and psychosocial support. We take that very seriously. Besides being a compliance tick box, it is professional development, developing local community in terms of capacity and making volunteers more employable in their local community as

well. Lastly, promote a culture of volunteerism through education and incentives to make volunteering more accessible, particularly for young people. We can speak a lot more about that when we go to questions.

In conclusion, and giving enough time for questions for me and my colleagues, the overwhelming number of submissions demonstrate what you already knew. From reading through some of those submissions and conversations, we are aware of this and we see this trend internationally as well, but there are certainly local nuances that are special to Queensland. Queensland volunteers want to help and, with ministerial and department focus, we are keen to contribute to a resilient volunteering community in Queensland.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: Thank you for coming today and for the great work your organisation and volunteers do. During the recent event they were very beneficial for members of my community who were sleeping rough and who were able to access, finally, the centre in Logan staffed by Red Cross volunteers—so thank you. I am interested in the need to double your volunteers in the next four years. Do you think you will be able to do that? If so, how and, if not, why not?

Mr Sivalingum: Absolutely, and my colleagues can come in on this question as well. Certainly it is something that we believe we can do. This is based on a lot of data and research through our volunteer recruitment process. Retention is important to us. We are just not waiting for funding to do this. Funding will help us with our training and will certainly help us to retain our volunteers. The idea is to retain current volunteers but attract new volunteers as well. We have partnered with corporates—for example Qantas, which is the latest corporate funder that is supporting Red Cross specifically around volunteering. I am meeting with the CEO of Qantas next week to talk more about that: what does that mean in terms of Qantas staff volunteering? Also, you will see as of Monday next week a massive campaign on volunteer recruitment at airports, on Qantas planes and so forth so we can recruit volunteers. We are not waiting. We know that we can do this, but we are also very conscious that it requires good retention. It is not an issue recruiting and attracting volunteers to Red Cross. We do not have issues with attracting volunteers to Red Cross. It is about keeping them engaged and retention. That is where the big issue is.

Ms Strathearn: We see that disasters are increasing in severity and impact, and we are being called upon more frequently in Queensland and, indeed, across the country. We have done the research and taken from the research to understand that we need to double nationally the number of volunteers over the next four years. Indeed, here in Queensland, given the high number of natural disasters that have been projected to continue, we see that that number needs to be tripled. The emergency services volunteers currently in Queensland are approximately 650. We have 18,000 volunteers across the country, but ES volunteers nationally are 2,500. We are looking to increase our volunteers across the country to 5,000 and in Queensland to triple our volunteer numbers.

Mr BOOTHMAN: It is nice to see you again, Collin. I remember seeing you down at Helensvale for a Rotary church function. You have a unique organisation in that you go into disaster zones and all of that. Is volunteer burnout an issue, and how do you deal with it?

Ms Strathearn: It is critically important for us to retain our volunteers and ensure they have the support they need in terms of their care and wellbeing through what can often be traumatising situations. As you point out, the unique position of our organisation is that we are nationwide with our volunteer workforce and they can sometimes be leveraged internationally to provide support internationally. In Queensland we have the ability to bring in volunteers from interstate to replenish our local volunteers, ensuring we have the right people on the ground to complement local knowledge and local volunteers who may be more traumatised by their own circumstances amidst their desire to support their communities. We can complement that and leverage some of our supports interstate. In order to do that—and reflecting on the previous submission from Volunteer Queensland—the national passport to activate those volunteers quickly, particularly from interstate, in alignment with the legislative requirements of Queensland will help that. To reiterate, the wellbeing of our volunteers and the support we provide them is fundamental to ensuring they are best placed on the ground to provide support to their communities.

Mr Sivalingum: Our practice is that the volunteer guidelines we use in our operation are based on the shifts they actually do. Like many response agencies, often those guidelines go out the window very quickly, especially in the early response. We constantly monitor the long hours that volunteers do and replenish them. The reality is that sometimes volunteers are stuck in evacuation centres before their replacement crew comes in. It is hard to predict different scenarios. We have really prepared volunteers as to what to expect: there may be road closures; it will sometimes be difficult to get an incoming replacement shift; they are holding the fort. Working with other agencies and local government for this event and a couple of previous events as well, often we are working together.

Because we are part of state, district and local disaster management arrangements, being at the disaster table means that relationships with other volunteer agencies and different levels of government are important in terms of how we manage fatigue guidelines. Sometimes the Salvation Army will hold the fort before the Red Cross gets in. It is working. We cannot do this alone, without government and other volunteer organisations.

Ms BOYD: Thank you to your volunteers and for the work that you do. I meet a lot of them in disaster impacted areas. They are certainly special humans and you do very well to support them, which is a credit to you. I think it is also demonstrated in the growth you have seen nationally just in that 3,500 recently. Can you elaborate on that for us, please? We have seen feedback from submitters around blue cards and police checks and things being onerous on them or being something that is not required of them. I am interested in your national volunteering passport concept. Can you unpack that for us a little more? I think this is the kind of thing that puts volunteering in a very well-placed position to volunteer in multiple ways across different streams, so to speak. Are you able to elaborate and unpack that? Could you furnish the committee with any other information or perhaps documentation that could better inform us around how a structure could be created that supports volunteering in this way in Queensland into the future?

Mr Sivalingum: One of the things, especially in Queensland with the minimum requirements around the working-with-children check, the police check and so forth, is the legislative requirements as part of our contractual obligations. We make sure volunteers have that before they go onboard. What we are working with now is a pilot with Volunteering Queensland, and I think this is where the big shift is. It means that every time a volunteer joins a new organisation they do not have to do all of the checks again. If they just had a recent check, it would transfer across to us. This has been a game changer. You do not have to put them through the same process, for example, if they have a current, valid working-with-children check. We are just testing this at the moment as part of this pilot and it is a game changer. That will fast-track the process. We took a different approach in terms of minimum requirements as more than compliance; it is because of the safety of the people that we support. As much as it can be quite onerous on them to do it, our volunteers are very proud to do these checks. We are looking at how we can fast-track the process and recognise other agencies as well, but more with regard directly to the passport and looking at it across agencies.

Ms Strathearn: I will note as well that developing a national volunteer passport has been included and featured in both the 2024-2027 action plan of the National Strategy for Volunteering and the 2023-2033 plan. It is something that is on the national agenda and that Queensland absolutely has the potential to lead the way in. Queensland can in fact benefit from it the most, given the number of activations that occur. We have done some internal consultation that probably builds on the evidence you have been hearing with our volunteers and their almost universal frustration with the variable and fragmented onboarding requirements of different organisations and jurisdictions across the country. Particularly in regional and rural areas in Queensland, people often—as you would have observed and know from your own experience—volunteer for more than one organisation in their community. Having one passport so they do not need to keep going through that administrative process would make sense for them and make sense for interoperability across activations across the country, yes.

Mr BAILLIE: It is great to see some familiar faces again, Mark and Collin. We met not long ago up in sunny Townsville, just after the rain event. Referencing the member for Theodore's comments, managing your volunteers with what you might have thought was an initial disaster in the Townsville region, then having floods and a cyclone down here and now floods out west, must be a tremendous challenge. Thank you to your organisation and all of your volunteers who assist our communities. My question references some of the questions earlier with regard to increasing the numbers of volunteers. Do you have any particular strategies or any ideas on how we can engage more, younger volunteers who may or may not be known already?

Mr Sivalingum: Sarah would love to take that question. Maybe it is a good opportunity to share the youth program we are starting with schools.

Ms Strathearn: The research and evidence we have about how to better engage with young people hinges around providing a strong value for them in terms of their personal circumstances. They often have limited time or want opportunities that are not necessarily long-term. They want online opportunities. They want a range of different ways to engage in volunteerism. There is also a really important possibility, which is quite exciting, to build a shared value for the young people who are open to volunteering as well as the communities that we know need young volunteers through programs like a current pilot we had. Young people can participate in the Youth in Emergencies program. They provide preparedness information for their schools and communities. We have

partnered with the Duke of Edinburgh's Award nationally to give them credit towards their Duke of Edinburgh's Award, and sometimes that feeds through to their high school qualifications. It meets multiple purposes for young people. We have found that is a great way to attract young people.

The other thing to note is the opportunities for young people to get on-the-ground experience, something to put on their resume through their volunteering opportunities. We find it is incredibly easy for us to attract young people in schools and through universities and other mechanisms to an organisation with a brand as recognisable as Red Cross. It is providing them with tangible opportunities to operationalise their skills in a way they want to on the ground, which is an exciting possibility that is central to our volunteer strategy nationally.

Mr Sivalingum: One of the successes in Queensland specifically is around our Red Cross university clubs across all of the major universities. We do information days and people sign up through that process, so it is a very successful program. It means they are coming in quite early. They often come from different countries and they want to give back to society and assimilate into Australian society, and they see Red Cross volunteering as a way to do that.

CHAIR: Thank you. I thank all of the Red Cross representatives today. You are most welcome to remain and view the rest of the proceedings.

BHATTACHARYA, Dr Diti, Senior Research Fellow, Griffith Centre for Social and Cultural Research, Griffith University

PAVLIDIS, Dr Adele, Griffith Centre for Social and Cultural Research, Griffith University

CHAIR: Thank you for your submission and for appearing before us today. Would you like to make an opening statement before we have some questions for you?

Dr Bhattacharya: Good morning to you all and thank you for giving us this opportunity to speak today. Firstly, we would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we live, work and play. We also acknowledge that we receive funding for our research through an Australian Research Council and Discovery fellowship. The findings from the research we present today and in our inquiry submission come from our individual and collective research on sports, women in sports, and sports volunteering for over a decade. These research projects have been funded by the Australian Research Council and are supported by the Griffith Centre for Social and Cultural Research, Griffith University. Across these research projects we have examined experiences of women in sport and sport volunteering in Queensland, nationally across Australia and indeed internationally.

Dr Pavlidis: As researchers and volunteers, we have a strong belief in the power of volunteering: first, as a pathway to employment; second, as a meaningful leisure activity that provides opportunities for increased physical activity and health; and, third, as a practical and evidence-based activity that facilitates belonging and social connection. Over the past two years we have conducted interviews across South-East Queensland with a range of people involved in sport volunteering. We would like to draw your attention to research we conducted in partnership with Toowoomba Hockey Association, which developed a now showcase program for recently arrived refugees. This program, called Belong in Hockey, harnessed long-time hockey club members to volunteer. This volunteer program had multiple benefits which we have documented in our research. First, all volunteers talked about their enjoyment of being part of the program and the satisfaction they received in seeing the refugees learn, progress and enjoy themselves. The volunteers were initially inspired by their love of hockey, so that was the pathway in. The volunteers noted that language was a barrier but they found ways of communicating through gestures and body language and by encouraging the recently arrived refugees to practise their English. The volunteers appreciated the cultural exchange and understanding facilitated by their volunteering experience.

In Logan we gained similar results: volunteers shared how they have learned about migrant and refugee backgrounds and cultures whilst migrants and refugees have had the opportunity to learn about Australian customs and traditions. However, we also found significant issues within the sector. These include very little understanding of the value of volunteering in some culturally and linguistically diverse communities and its significance in Australian social and cultural life. There was also a hesitancy towards volunteering due to an unclear understanding of the benefits in the Australian context and an unwillingness to take on unpaid work, particularly for mothers who already had high care loads.

Dr Bhattacharya: In addition to the suggestions we put forward in our submission to the inquiry, we recommend targeted action research in communities with little to no volunteering experience. This action research can: first, find out more about why certain members of the community do not volunteer; second, identify community champions who can undertake training to then be able to go into their own communities to advocate for the benefits of volunteering; and, third, document best practice guidelines for organisations in engaging a non-traditional volunteer workforce.

We know from extensive research by Volunteering Australia, Volunteering Queensland and other bodies that our volunteering workforces are diminishing. In order to refresh our volunteer workforce, we recommend targeting whom we might call non-traditional volunteers. These types of programs not only empower communities to increase participation but also generate accumulative social capital. However, with the upcoming 2032 Brisbane Olympics, we think there is a need to start these initiatives now so that we can reap the benefits in time for the games.

As indicated in our recommendations that stem from our research, we strongly believe in tapping into the cultural capital and centrality of food, for example, in bringing together people from all parts of our society. We think both sport and volunteering can use food to bring people together in contested spaces. This is not about celebrating one particular kind of culture at the cost of others but about finding or creating spaces where various cultural experiences can coexist. While these

observations might feel trivial or frivolous at times, often in our everyday lives the small yet significant memories of joy and happiness we create for ourselves and others catalyse a key motivation for collective activities like volunteering. Thank you, and we look forward to your questions.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: Thank you for appearing today and thank you for the information on that project. It sounds very interesting. Hopefully we can get some more information around that unique space, particularly around the groups of people who do not understand necessarily the way in which we traditionally see volunteering here when they are new to the country. I know that a great deal of volunteering takes place in lots of cultural groups, whether they are helping set up cultural celebrations or important events or whether they are making food for a church organisation, but that is often not seen as volunteering within those communities. There is a big gap between those people who are volunteering types and their engaging in other types of volunteering. Have you garnered any information about that through your research?

Dr Pavlidis: Some of the people we engaged with have experienced significant trauma, and I think that is also part of their not feeling like they necessarily belong in these volunteering spaces like sport. We need to help them see that this is a way for them to get out of the house, make connections and improve their English—all of these different things. As you said, communities have a strong sense of service and of giving back, and it is not called volunteering. I think it is worth trying to develop those champions in the community to help others see the benefits of potentially getting involved in more traditional volunteering in Australia for things like mental health and social cohesion.

Mr BAILLIE: Thank you for joining us today. Obviously, you have a body of research behind you which informs your position, which is fantastic. I am interested in the volunteering passport, which has come up a bit during this inquiry. My specific question for you is: how would that be administered, or is there a format that would work better with multicultural groups? Here in Australia our multicultural groups are growing, but is there a preferred or an optimal way to engage with groups from other backgrounds?

Dr Pavlidis: I think we have some work to do in co-designing the passport for all different types of communities around Australia and in Queensland. What would that look like, working with children and parents? What would it look like in different multicultural communities? I do not have an answer for you today.

Volunteering Queensland talked about a kind of national or state-based insurance and whether we could connect the passport to some of these initiatives. I definitely think it needs to be co-designed and it needs to be simple for people to use. There are so many things that people have to do. It could incorporate things like testimonials and references that people can then use when they are looking for, say, their first job or something like that.

Mr BAILLIE: With regard to the passport, we all have our own assumptions as to what that might look like. Do you imagine it may take the form of an app? Do you imagine a particular body would administer it? What do you think the best platform would be so we can engage with the different cross-sections in our community?

Dr Pavlidis: I am hesitant to just suggest another app, but an app may be the solution. I would not just say, 'Yes, let's have another app.' Government apps are not like commercial apps that have so much funding and so many resources to make them very usable. Potentially, it could be administered by a volunteering peak body. They would need support to do that. Perhaps there could be a website where you can make submissions. Again, it needs to be co-designed. An app would be ideal, but I know that they do not always work when they come from governments.

Ms BOYD: This is probably a very broad question, so I apologise in advance for asking. I was really interested in the point that you made around creating safe and inclusive volunteering spaces. I am really conscious that at peak sport levels that is often not the case. We are an eclectic group of people who come together in Australia. I am really conscious of the fact that we can set up passports and we can set up volunteers with the tools they need, but if they go into spaces that are not safe and not inclusive they will have a dreadful experience and will not want to continue participating. How do we create those spaces? Has anything come out of your learning? I appreciate that you looked at something that was particularly unique, but was there anything that would be beneficial in informing what creating those safe and inclusive places would look like for the average sporting club across Queensland?

Dr Bhattacharya: Just to provide a bit of context around how we have approached our research, we are particularly interested in people who have little to no experience in volunteering and maybe have had unpleasant experiences in volunteering. For example, for women who may have been out of the workforce and are looking for an entry way back in to the workforce, how can volunteering help respond to those sorts of barriers?

In focusing on those who have not had pleasant experiences, I suppose we have developed an in-depth knowledge and we have an idea of what things are not working and what things have been creating unpleasant experiences for them. We are not just looking at volunteering in sport in terms of volunteer coaches. Sports clubs are quite interesting in the sense that there are canteens and there are spaces where mums are waiting for their kids who are playing. A more in-depth and wider approach about how a sports club can be utilised for different groups of people is a good starting point in understanding whether it will be about people who are playing sport or whether it will be about people who are utilising those spaces in different ways.

What are the other forms of volunteering that can be re-imagined within the sport volunteering blanket term where different people with different experiences can use that space? Also, during off-peak times, can fields be used for other things? Can these spaces become community spaces for other allied kinds of activities, without, of course, damaging the sportsground? Do you want to add anything?

Dr Pavlidis: We heard a little bit about volunteer burnout, and that happens in sport as well. Retention is the issue. As you said, it is about culture. After a decade of researching sport volunteers, we know there is so much politics in sport, especially at the volunteer level. Part of addressing culture is calling it out and starting to talk about that. Read the comments on Facebook posts about sport issues—everybody knows that there is politics in sport but for some reason we do not really like to talk about it.

We need to provide people with a voice and make sure that people who are new to clubs have the opportunity to volunteer even in small roles. I do think it is worthwhile turning roles over. If we have the same people in those roles for too long, it becomes their domain. If somebody wants to have this great sport experience but they do not fit in or get along with that person, they will leave and they may leave sport forever. There is a lot to be done. It is slow work around culture change. It is what we are trying to work towards but it will not be a quick fix.

CHAIR: What potential employment opportunities do you see opening up for people who volunteer in the upcoming Olympics, particularly for people from diverse backgrounds and for those who, as you said before, Doctor, might be volunteering as a way of re-entering the workforce?

Dr Pavlidis: As someone who gained entry into employment through volunteering, I cannot speak highly enough about the benefits of volunteering. I am now the director of a research centre and I started volunteering at a reception desk at a rehab. It is what people make of it. There are all those skills you learn: talking to people, following instructions, being entrepreneurial and taking initiative. There are so many opportunities at a lower risk. You are not going to lose your job, are you? You are not going to not get paid if you get it wrong. Here is an opportunity to really see what you are good at. Getting that feedback is also really important. People may be volunteering, but being able to get some feedback from the managers about what they did well might be helpful when thinking about their future career options.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: With the pathway to employment through volunteering, I am interested in making sure that we have some key ideas about ways that we can provide good references or maximise the potential of people gaining employment from their role in volunteering. Do you have any suggestions that might contribute to how volunteer organisations can maximise those references, for example?

Dr Pavlidis: LinkedIn could be an opportunity to provide testimonials, or there may be other ways of providing short testimonials that do not take up too much of people's time. There could be pro forma template references. A lot of the time we are asked to write our own reference letters, and that can be a really great job in itself: 'Why don't you reflect on what you did well and then I can edit it and either agree or not.' With all the demands on volunteer managers, we just need to think creatively about how we can do more with less.

Dr Bhattacharya: I would just add that universities are also looking at designing courses that are being labelled as work integrated learning. A lot of the work integration path comes from internships and things like that. Volunteering in different organisations—and this is about perception more than anything—is not just considered something you do in your leisure time. There are a lot of things that you learn and new skills that you gain through that. There is an opportunity for learning and academic institutions to work with volunteering organisations to make something more meaningful out of those exchanges.

CHAIR: Thank you very much for your appearance today. The committee will now take a short break and we will reconvene at 11.45 am.

Proceedings suspended from 11.30 am to 11.46 am.

PHILLIPS, Ms Kirsten, Membership Services Officer, Surf Life Saving Queensland

WHIMPEY, Mr Dave, Chief Executive Officer, Surf Life Saving Queensland

CHAIR: Thank you to you and Surf Life Saving Queensland for your submissions and for your appearance today. I invite you to make a short opening statement and then the committee will have some questions for you.

Mr Whimpey: I am very proud to be here. Kirsten, to my left, is our state membership officer and a volunteer. I am the chief executive officer of Surf Life Saving Queensland. I might give you a couple of minutes just on some pretty shocking stats. As of yesterday, Surf Life Saving Queensland had 36,951 members, just 49 shy of 37,000 members. We are the largest volunteer organisation in Queensland.

CHAIR: You are a real classic.

Mr Whimpey: Thank you. I saw the red and yellows on the border when I came across this morning. Welcome to Queensland! Through our supporters clubs we are also connected with 499,200 members. They have to be associate members in our supporters clubs with our surf clubs. They are not volunteers; they are associates. When you add those two numbers together you come to 537,000. We are connected with 9.72 per cent of the Queensland population. When you go a little bit broader, around Australia we have 315 surf clubs and 199,200 members. We are the largest volunteer organisation in Australia as well, as I said, with those 315 surf clubs. Internationally, there are 115 countries that join lifesaving and there are 30,313,000 members worldwide. All of our sports athletes have to patrol between the red and yellow flags to become athletes. I will come back to that in a second.

On average, our volunteers give up 340,000 hours a year of patrolling time. I just want to give you a few vital stats. Out of those 340,000 hours, we know through Deloitte's research there are 14 hours produced off the beach to make a bronze lifesaver. If you do the math, that works out at about 5.1 million hours and actually dilutes down to about 2,750 full-time equivalents.

Surprisingly, in the last 40 years we have not ranked in terms of credibility with Australians. In the last 10 years, on International Reputational Tracker we were No. 17 and four weeks ago we were announced as the second most trusted charity brand by Australians. You might ask who No. 1 is: Royal Flying Doctors. We are closing the gap but we tip our noddies to that amazing service.

Our volunteers produce 340,000 hours and many more—five million hours—off the beach. During an average season, in six months—combined with our 456 lifeguards—we do about 650,000 preventable actions for Queenslanders on our beaches. Those preventable actions are far superior to the final result, which of course could be drowning or serious injury. In a good year we will render 45,000 first-aid treatments and in a bad year, when we have those northerlies and the pesky little bluebottles, we will go up to about 95,000 treatments.

I have some more really pithy stats: every year we save 3,000 lives—real lives—on our beaches. That is mums, dads, sisters, uncles, aunties and brothers who are going back to their families—all successful rescues. Since 1908 we have saved 156,313 people on our beaches, of whom 51 per cent are Queenslanders. Our organisation is in great shape. As I said, we are the largest, but it does not come without a high churn rate. We live on the eastern seaboard and we have to work very diligently every year to maintain those numbers. In the last three years we have grown at compound 2.75 per cent against an industry average of a 20 per cent decline. We are in a very great position. We have 58 surf clubs with 456 professional lifeguards patrolling every public beach on our 6,972 kilometres of beautiful coastline, so we are everywhere.

When you are all sunning yourselves on the beach and you look up and you hear a 'whiz' go over, that is our Lifesaver Westpac rescue helicopter. I am sure you look up with your kids and think, 'We got that.' On 7 December next year that service is turning 50 years old, from humble beginnings off Caloundra when we used to fly the Squirrels. Do you remember *Skippy the Bush Kangaroo*? Maybe he used to fly it back in the day. We have now progressed to a fleet of significant aircraft. We now have two EC135s which are night-vision capable and rescue-ready in terms of search and rescue. Last year we tendered for, and were successful in winning, a \$200 million plus contract with the Queensland government in the rollout of our Polair services contract. We now fly \$50 million worth of brand new, state-of-the-art 429 Bell aircraft. I know this is a sidenote, but it is having an indelible impact on youth and youth crime in this region. We were also successful in getting a one-year Sunshine Coast extension.

I want to quickly talk about a couple of things in your terms of reference and then hand over for questions. This is something that was a little bit hard for us to take this year in the transfer of power between governments. One of your terms of reference speaks to surge capability or emergency management capability for volunteers. For the last decade, and certainly for the last five years I have been here, I have been working very closely with government and we have done the following. In the last two years we have rolled out handheld Government Wireless Network radios. We are the only non-government organisation to be granted access to that network. If you know anything about that network, when we have natural disasters it is infallible, certainly below the 26th parallel. Up north it does work off 4G. We are going around putting black spot wi-fi in to help police and Fire and Emergency Services where we are patrolling and they are not in times of emergency.

I think the disaster emergency kicked off on 29 January down into Ingham and Townsville. We always seem to talk about record flood events. We had our six aircraft and 212 rescue-ready first responders who were not tasked. That was the first time in living memory. I do not think we have a surge capacity problem; we have a transfer of power and government issue. Looking forward, we are confident that, when this government knows what we have available, we will be tasked. For Tropical Cyclone Alfred, on the Gold Coast we had 312 full-time, rescue ready. I am talking about op support, aviation, night vision, rescuing people off roofs, swiftwater, still water and post recovery, including doorknocks. We have spent the last five years, with Queensland government funding and our own funding, building out all of those provisions.

The GWN is interoperable straight into Kedron, straight into our system and all through our surf clubs. It is a little bit hard to sit at home and watch people come in from interstate when we have the capability right here. To the 512 people I rested in the lead-up to those two events, to my 15 pilots and \$70 million worth of aircraft, I say: when we have this discussion with government and talk to officials and they know what we have, we will be tasked again in the future. We are here, ready and available now. That is a little bit on that.

We are the largest RTO in Queensland. You are going to hear a lot about education and compliance. We are a volunteer RTO, yet no-one can tell us how an RTO, particularly a federally moderated RTO by ASQA, has any business dealing with volunteer organisations. They are being built for commercial enterprises.

I chair the Emergency Volunteers Advisory Forum, although I note that in this government it has lost its way. We have not reconvened. It had been assembled for the purpose of having discussions around recruitment, retention, onboarding and training. Surf Life Saving Queensland is leading the way in training. We have 485 full TAE qualified, so trained as facilitators under their TAE module. It takes about a year to get that. We have 486 active right now, and we are delivering that for free to our 36,000 members. Last year we delivered 40,214 units of competency under a national VET system.

VET systems do not work for volunteers. I do not have time today to give you the answers on that. If you would like me to come back in and work with a panel, I will show you what we are doing. The long and short of that is: more blended learning, more learning applicable for volunteers by volunteers instead of overlaying a commercial training regime. We are a volunteer-led, professionally managed business. To manage these systems we have 176 administrators at the back end—it is significant—managing the volunteers. Volunteers managing volunteers in administration, whether it comes to training, onboarding or recruitment, is a really difficult task. Fifty of those staff are now out in the regions supporting all of our volunteers. We want our volunteers just to be on the front line, not caught up in such matters.

I want to touch on insurance. It is both a legislative requirement of the Queensland government and also a requirement of our agreement now working with police—formerly QFES—that we take out insurance for our volunteers. This is a really interesting point. We are almost forced, if you like, to take this insurance. Up until five years ago, when I started as CEO, it was bubbling along at about \$700,000, or \$22 per member. Two years ago on a rainy Monday morning WorkCover lobbed a \$1.8 million bill into my office. That works out at \$88 per member. Imagine if you join a club and you are paying \$100: \$88 is going towards insurance. That is \$1.7 million that could be going elsewhere. My solution there is to climb to the top of the building, grab your binoculars and have a look at New South Wales and Victoria. They cover their volunteers under a state system. I think there is an opportunity to look at other best practices, dare I say it, and move the dial in terms of insurance when it comes to our volunteers.

I know there is an inquiry going on about blue cards. Imagine a mum joining with her kid. I really feel for Blue Card employees. We get tens of thousands of applications every year. They are under-resourced. They do not have enough technology and there are some issues with that system.

I am not part of the review so I will only comment from my experience. The problem for us is the delay in the onboarding experience. We know that the No. 1 issue with onboarding volunteers is the first contact point. Guess what? When you come to us, we say, 'You or your daughter may not be able to join us or play an active role as an age manager for up to two months whilst you are waiting for your blue card.' We have examples where it does take up to two months. It is now digitised and it has significantly improved.

I will say two things about blue cards. Why can we not have a national system? We have a national police check system. We do not have a national blue card system. That is one issue. We are a federated state. When our volunteers have surge capacity and they come across the border, it causes major issues. When we have our Australian championships, and last year when we had our \$6.8 million world championships, where we generated \$42 million worth of economics—that is a bit of a segue into the Olympics—it was very difficult to navigate compliance. Yes, there are exemptions. We think that with blue cards—an API to a trusted agency like ours, like the government gave us GWN. We are an NGO. I believe we are the most trusted NGO in Queensland. As I said, we are the largest and second most respected. If you give us technology interfaces, we can do the lifting. I have a whole team of professionals managing blue cards at the back end and you have a whole team.

The Olympics is in your terms of reference. I only have one more point. I am just trying to stay under five minutes. We are shocked that volunteers do not have a seat at the organising committee for the Olympics. We think the Olympics will play a significant role. If you look at our movement—199,000 volunteers and another 499,000 people we know in Queensland who are members of our surf clubs—we have great administrative systems to stand up, activate, train and enable volunteers. For three years we have been asking for surf lifesaving to be one of the five sports that the Queensland government, as the local organiser, has the ability to pick. You have had 38 submissions. We want to be No. 5. Right now we have 80,000 kids in the pocket around Australia who could be competing in the Olympics if it was announced. Secondly, can you imagine the influx of volunteers if we were one of the five sports?

I make the point that, unlike soccer, basketball, netball, skateboarding and anything else, all of our sports athletes are emergency responders. They have to do their time between the flags to qualify for the sport. There are many reasons we think you should engage with Surf Life Saving Queensland on the matter of the Queensland Olympics in terms of volunteer engagement and of us being a sport.

I will go to my final notes, because I have run out of brain power.

Mr HEALY: I think you are doing well. I do not think you have run out of brain power at all.

CHAIR: I think the committee's view is that you have remarkable brain power as you have been able to rattle off so many statistics without glancing at anything written in front of you.

Mr Whimpey: I left it all at home, sorry.

Mr BOOTHMAN: It is quite incredible.

Mr Whimpey: Kevin, my cat, and I have spent hours in front of the mirror. He is my soulmate.

Mr HEALY: Now it is getting strange!

Mr Whimpey: I want to be very proud and very serious about this. There is an issue with First Nations, and you talked to this—and you also talk to the CALD community in references 5 and 6 of your nine reference points. Look to Surf Life Saving Queensland as your vessel for change in this space. Did you know that this weekend we are doing something that I cannot believe the Queensland government is not aware of and we have not marketed it? I have already told you that we are the second most highly respected brand in Australia, our red and yellow. On Saturday we are raising the red and yellow flag and on the other side of the beach we are raising the First Nations flag as a real, symbolic and meaningful gesture.

We started this three years ago. We now have 17 clubs doing this in three branches, and Cairns opens up this season. We will be raising both the Aboriginal and the Torres Strait Islander flags and we will be doing the welcoming and we will, in turn, do the acknowledgement. When you are with me on those occasions I lean down, I pick up sand, I let it run through my hands and I say, 'We've had this sand running through our hands for 109 years. You've had it running through your hands for 60,000 years.'

First Nations people are having elegant discussions with us. I feel for government and I feel for First Nations because they were pitted against each other before they were born. For five years I have been knocking on former minister Enoch's office door—and anyone else who will listen; the former premier—and saying, 'If you resource us properly we can actually be your conduit.' I will give

you some facts. Two weeks ago we had our reconciliation plan signed off by Reconciliation Australia. I can tell you in relation to reconciliation plans that First Nations have a lot of questions around it; they are very mistrusting around it. They say that corporates have not acted on it. When it comes to a volunteer organisation, you find a very different, elegant narrative because we cohabit in these spaces.

Over the last few years we have put 812 First Nations people through our bronze, first aid and Beach 2 Bush programs. We now have the Fastest Man on the Sand and we have some amazing athletes who are First Nations. All of their artwork has been enshrined and is being rolled out in the next 12 months and nearly 1,100 of those kids who were in year 12—we put through those 11 First Nations people through their year 12. They got four points towards their TAE.

In relation to the idea of the raising of the flags, the federal and state governments should be looking to us and saying, 'Here's a volunteer organisation that is No. 2 in Australia'—hopefully next year No. 1—'and that has 315 clubs and 6,972 kilometres of coastline, and red and yellow flags are going to be raised with First Nations.' It is apolitical but it is so meaningful. We think we can help you there.

When it comes to moving with diversity and the CALD community, did you know that right now 23.2 per cent of people in Queensland were born overseas? You should know that. So 23.2 per cent of our audience right now were born overseas. Did you know that in the next 25 years, whether you listen to the great Bernard Salt or you listen to our own Treasury and you take a midpoint, 50.1 per cent of the growth is going to come from migrants, from overseas. In the year 2049 into 2050 we are going to land at about 32 to 34 per cent, depending on how you do the numbers. I should declare I am a former economist, so I think I have it pretty close.

What is going to happen if at the moment—and we know this through Volunteering Queensland; I sit on their research panel and I sit on my own research panel with the good Kirsten here—only 10 per cent of our volunteers in Queensland come from this demographic? Just picture this: volunteering is your vessel. As they come to Queensland, we can introduce them to our surf clubs and within those surf clubs give them a better onboarding experience with our community, and they engage differently. I will not unpack all that here. They do not come as mums and dads; they come in as groups. We used to call it a herd mentality—and it is a proper demographic word. Herding is an immature market; they stay together. Then as they start to get more confident they grow out. We are going to have real issues with engaging with them, because if we stay at 10 per cent of patrolling members from that background and it grows to 34 per cent we are going to find more of our lifesavers doing more of the work when we could be bringing them in.

Finally, infrastructure is not really in there but infrastructure is a big thing for volunteers. In Cairns since 2001 they have had a cyclone once every 2.37 years. I can give you all of the natural disasters, all the way down the coast for the last decade. I could recite them to you now.

CHAIR: That would be very interesting, but I am afraid the time for Surf Life Saving Queensland's presentation has expired. I thank you very much for your appearance today and your energy. Both of you are most welcome to remain to observe the rest of the proceedings. We have one more group to come forward, which will be QSport. Thank you very much.

Mr Whimpey: Thank you.

KLAR, Mr Tim, Chief Executive Officer, QSport

LYONS, Ms Alison, Deputy Chair, QSport

CHAIR: Would you like to make an opening statement? Then we will have some questions for you.

Mr Klar: Thank you very much. Both Alison and I will speak as part of that opening statement today. Thank you very much to the committee for the opportunity to contribute to the inquiry into volunteering in Queensland. QSport's vision is that every Queenslander can find connection, be active and contribute to their community through sport. This is a central commitment that is in absolute lock step with the intent of this inquiry. This is a really crucial topic for leaders at all levels of Queensland's sport industry, and solving these really well documented challenges that we face is increasingly important and urgent given the opportunities that are being created by the Brisbane 2032 Olympic and Paralympic Games. This once-in-a-generation event is a really powerful billboard for the joy and positive impact of volunteering and it is a convening force for better collaboration and more innovative strategies to recruit, develop, reward and, of course, retain volunteers.

Volunteering is the lifeblood of sport and its positive impacts on the industry provide volunteering opportunities in every Queensland community through our network of grassroots clubs, associations and centres. The corollary of this statewide footprint and our broad opportunity base is that sport as an industry requires a very large volunteer workforce. The span and diversity of roles and responsibilities mean it is not merely a question of enough volunteers but of sufficient volunteers holding the appropriate skills and competencies to meet expanding governance, administration and delivery obligations.

More than half of our 70 state sporting organisation QSport members identify volunteering as one of their top three challenges, and this is reflected also when they share data from their clubs and associations. These sports are grappling with the problems detailed in the Queensland Volunteering Strategy and they cite specific capability challenges that constrain the number and efficacy of community sport volunteering including a lack of clearly documented and understood roles and responsibilities; sourcing and retaining volunteers given the significant and increasing governance and compliance requirements; the time required to mitigate and successfully resolve member protection matters; succession planning; the continuous and ongoing learning needed to underpin effective club and community leadership; and gaps in technology and digital literacy.

Ms Lyons: To enable the successful leadership and sustainability of sport, the industry requires a volunteer workforce the right size in each Queensland community which ideally reflects the diversity of its community; which holds and can leverage the competencies, certifications and experience required to ensure sport is welcoming, safe, compliant and sustainable; and which can scale up to keep pace with participation growth and event delivery requirements that naturally stem from successful efforts to boost engagement and investment in sport.

We echo the Volunteering Strategy's proposal for greater collaboration across government and volunteering sectors. We stress the importance of the Volunteering Strategy's call to act now to prepare for Brisbane 2032 to ensure we develop the systems and networks required to promote and sustain volunteering and its benefits long after the games.

By working with Queensland's sporting industry on game focused volunteering solutions, the relevant portfolios across the state government and games organising committee will shorten the time and effort required to convene a games-ready workforce by harnessing the industry's large and passionate volunteer base. These volunteers are already in the tent and are driven by passion for the affinity with sport and will ensure the games experience for athletes, guests, fans and visitors is infused with the same energy and sense of service. There is perhaps no better example in the Queensland sports industry of a challenge which is so widespread, which stakeholders at all levels are ready to contribute to finding and implementing the right solutions for, and which will have profound and enduring positive impacts at its scale.

Thank you once again for the opportunity to speak to you today. We are happy to take questions.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: Thank you for appearing today. I note with interest the engagement of volunteers by age and how there is a big chunk of those volunteers that I guess would be at the age at which they have children engaged in sport. I know there are a lot of parents who become volunteers because of their children. What impact does the FairPlay vouchers have on levels of volunteering for sporting organisations and sporting clubs?

Mr Klar: I will talk to the scheme. I will reference that, in addition to the deputy chair role with QSport, Alison is also the CEO of Hockey Queensland so can give really important insight from a sport perspective as well.

The voucher scheme obviously is a critical investment in ensuring the affordability of sport is maintained for Queenslanders at a time when cost of living is obviously a significant issue. We are obviously very grateful for, and supportive of, that kind of investment in sport because it naturally flows to community sport.

To the question of impact, one of the things that is worth stressing here is that, when you have an investment like the quantum of money that was invested in vouchers last year, there needs to be a commensurate investment on the supply side to ensure that clubs, sports organisations and volunteers actually have the uplift in capability and capacity they need to meet the demand that a voucher scheme would stimulate. We found that with a number of vouchers, at the point of redemption sports were having to say either, 'I'm sorry, we don't have a coach for that team' or, 'We don't have the officials to keep the courts open long enough.' I think there is a positive pressure that comes from that. It is a good problem to have, but the important point on that is that the scheme needs to be configured so it invests on both sides of that supply and demand equation in order for it to deliver the outcomes we are looking for in terms of activating the community and getting sports involved in supporting their local communities.

Ms Lyons: It is a very special kind of parent who comes into a sport for the first time and says, 'Where do I help out?' It takes time for those new families coming into a sport to feel their way around taking on responsibilities. Although we see an uplift in participation, the flowthrough in volunteering does not necessarily come straightaway. Oftentimes club politics can also constrain the ability to inject new faces into volunteering. Again, that is a challenge for us. It is one of the things that I think this inquiry can look at to better support volunteers who have been at the coalface for some time to get back into why they got into volunteering in the first place, which is often to get the kids to the park or to participate in sport themselves. What we find is that they are so overburdened with compliance that they tend to get bogged down in that. One of the initiatives we would like to look at is how we provide support for our volunteers so we can take that heavy burden of compliance from them so they can fall back in love with volunteering again. We can then start to scale up in terms of the capability.

Mr BOOTHMAN: My question goes to the Olympics and the learnings from the Commonwealth Games on the Gold Coast. We found there was a sense of pride and belonging to the Commonwealth Games. We had a lot of people from sporting groups—soccer, netball and cricket associations—participating because they were already volunteering in those organisations. They really jumped on board and participated. The Olympics is obviously a whole new level, a lot bigger than the Commonwealth Games. Does your organisation have any suggestions or ideas on how to get people involved in the Olympics? Obviously, we will need a massive pool of people.

Ms Lyons: As a board we certainly have been talking about how we help the organising committee in driving the volunteers for this. Since the announcement of the games there has been a discussion around a volunteering passport, a register, so that those who are already volunteering in some capacity can step forward into an Olympic volunteering role. QSport supports that initiative. We think that is a great way to connect volunteers from different networks.

The opportunity to host major events in the lead-up to 2032 will also give us that capability. If we are funding Tourism and Events Queensland to attract major Olympic sports for friendlies, world cups, world championships—events that might be in the grand prix system—that we can host in Queensland before the games, it will enable us to get our volunteers match fit, basically—preparing them and ironing out any concerns that may arise when the big event comes. It will allow us not only to uplift the capability of those people already in that sport but also to bring in and start to test people who have not been involved in that sport before. For example, if we are holding a world cup water polo event, part of that volunteering cohort might come from another sporting sector such as surf lifesaving and it will get them prepared for the games.

Mr Klar: A significant challenge that has been identified in lots of the submissions that the panel has received, and in the previous strategy, is the challenge around recognition and reward. We have an extraordinary opportunity to link recognition and reward in this once-in-a-generation moment—and in the seven years leading up to it and in the 10-plus years beyond it. What a vehicle for reward and recognition for people who are already contributing.

I appreciate that the volunteer games-time workforce is the responsibility of the organising committee for the Olympic and Paralympic Games so the conversation we are having here needs to have a consistent interface across the entire journey from here to Brisbane 2032 and beyond so that

people are drawn in from industry and are involved in the games and in the lead-up to it. They are a part of family that happens for those four weeks of competition but then they are transitioned from a retention perspective back into the industry. We need to hang on to those people who step up to be involved across the four weeks in 2032.

Mr BOOTHMAN: I have noticed that, even to this day, there are people who still walk around with their volunteering shirts from the Commonwealth Games.

Mr Klar: Yes.

Mr BOOTHMAN: I must say, they are starting to look a bit tired now! They are still very proud of what they contributed and how they participated in that very important athletic event.

CHAIR: The member for Cairns is not normally so piano, but he has a bit of a crook voice. You are most welcome to ask a question.

Mr HEALY: Thank you, Chair. It is great to be back. Tim and Alison, it is great to see you. Your comments earlier, Tim, were terrific. As we know, there is a committee set up. It is really key that they look at what we did in Sydney and what happened in other areas. Our responsibility is to provide a report to parliament and make recommendations. There have been a number already from some of the earlier discussions we have had and we will continue to move forward as a committee. Your contribution has been good.

Alison, earlier you said that one of the biggest hindrances is regulation. As well intentioned as governments can be, I think the key is how you articulate that. I would encourage you and other organisations to highlight exactly where the priorities would be, because you could list 20 or 30. We have heard from so many different groups. What would your priority be?

Ms Lyons: In terms of compliance?

Mr HEALY: In terms of compliance, being a major issue. If we asked 30 organisations for their top three issues and there were 26 in common, it would just help us.

Ms Lyons: We recently surveyed our members, which are the state sporting organisations in Queensland. The percentage of SSOs that identified the number of volunteers available was 69 per cent; volunteer recruitment, 69 per cent; retention, 50 per cent; capability, 31; and volunteering upskilling, 44. Interestingly, when you go further down into the club and association system, the number of volunteers available was 94 per cent.

Most of the time, the reasons people cannot volunteer are that they are time-poor and they are burnt out. We have talked about how the state sporting organisations can be better resourced to support those volunteers so they are not feeling burnt out; to distribute the workload across a greater number of people—many hands make light work—so that it is not just a committee of five who are doing everything; and to have people fall back in love with why they volunteered in the first place. If we can help them focus on getting the competitions up and running, training the kids for state championships, getting the little ones on the park and teaching them how to use the skills they are gathering then we, as the state sporting organisations, can support them with the burden. The compliance piece is extremely important, particularly around integrity. We have seen an uptick in integrity cases across all sports. This is because of the systems that have been put in place that have allowed people to come forward. That has been fantastic, but having to manage those issues puts a huge burden on volunteers.

Mr BAILLIE: Thank you both for joining us. Similar to the member for Inala, I noted the age of the volunteers and made the assumption that they are probably parents helping out. If that is the case, it is interesting considering how difficult some of the schools find it to attract people to volunteer on their P&Cs, for example, when you consider how much time their child spends at school versus the sporting grounds. What are you doing at a sporting level—our previous speakers might have some contributions—around identifying those parents who may be available to volunteer and then fostering them? As you mentioned earlier, even though there are a lot of parents it is still difficult. It might take a couple of years to get them into the canteen. Then what do you do to get them into an executive level as far as volunteering?

Mr Klar: I point to the Australian Sports Commission. In 2021 they developed a segmentation solution for volunteering. To answer your question, what we need is a more nuanced and tailored communication strategy to volunteers for that awareness building and acquisition, because not all volunteers are created equal. Not all of them have the same tools in their toolkit when they turn up to volunteer, but we keep broadcasting 'Come and volunteer' in the same way to everyone—a billboard

as opposed to a conversation. We need to be more nuanced and targeted and accept that, on the basis of your geography, your culture, your volunteering experience, your age and your gender, you need a conversation that is for you—not just, ‘Come over here and be part of what we think is important.’

Ms Lyons: The president of the Townsville Hockey Association, Chris, is a great example. He does not have any hockey experience. He came to the game through his children playing hockey. Via that step-through volunteering process, over the last couple of years of volunteering in different parts of the organisation, he now finds himself as the president. I think that is part of the communication piece: ‘We are not going to overburden you straightaway. We just want you to do a couple of hours in the canteen. Just take the money at the gate. Run the parking.’ They are skills that do not frighten people. Then you can ease them in, but there needs to be a framework that we can use to support our clubs to follow to make that happen.

CHAIR: Thank you. That concludes today’s hearing. I would like to thank Hansard for being here to take the record of proceedings. The transcript will be available on the committee’s webpage in due course. I would also like to thank and acknowledge our inquiry secretary, Kylie, and our committee secretary, Margaret, for making this possible. I look forward to having a yarn with you afterwards. Thank you.

The committee adjourned at 12.25 pm.