



LOCAL GOVERNMENT, SMALL BUSINESS AND CUSTOMER SERVICE COMMITTEE

Members present:

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

Staff present:

Ms K Guthrie—Inquiry Secretary
Mr Z Dadic—Assistant Committee Secretary

PUBLIC HEARING—INQUIRY INTO VOLUNTEERING IN QUEENSLAND

TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS

Wednesday, 21 May 2025

Brisbane

WEDNESDAY, 21 MAY 2025

The committee met at 10.00 am.

CHAIR: Good morning. 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 chair of this committee. With me today we are very fortunate to have the deputy chair, Margie Nightingale, the member for Inala; Adam Baillie MP, the member for Townsville; Mark Boothman, the member for Theodore, who will be joining us shortly; Nikki Boyd, the member for Pine Rivers, who is substituting for the member for Lytton—it is good to have you with us, Nikki; and Michael Healy, the member for Cairns.

This hearing is a proceeding of the Queensland parliament and is subject to the parliament's standing rules and orders. Only committee and invited witnesses may participate in these 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. I remind committee members that officers are here to provide factual or technical information. Any questions seeking an opinion about policy should be directed to the minister or left to debate on the floor of the House.

These proceedings are being recorded and broadcast live on the parliament's website. Media may be present and are subject to the committee's media rules and my direction at all of times. You may be filmed or photographed during the proceedings and images may also appear on the parliament's website or social media pages.

MERCER, Ms Kylie, Director, Legal, Monitoring and Evaluation, Inspector-General Emergency Management

CHAIR: Good morning. Thank you for being with us. Would you give us an opening statement? After that we will have some questions for you.

Ms Mercer: On behalf of the Inspector-General Emergency Management, Mr Alistair Dawson, I extend his sincere apologies for not being able to attend in person today. The office appreciates the opportunity to appear before this inquiry and contribute to this important discussion.

The Office of Inspector-General Emergency Management, also known as IGEM, was established in 2014 pursuant to amendments made to the Disaster Management Act 2003. The key function of the office relevant to this inquiry is outlined at section 16C(g) of the Disaster Management Act, which states that a function of the office is to identify and improve disaster management capabilities particularly in relation to volunteers. Through a systems focused and multihazard approach, the office undertakes various types of reviews and assessments to provide assurance services, insights and recommendations that identify opportunities to continuously improve Queensland's disaster management arrangements. Those arrangements are locally led, regionally coordinated, state facilitated and Commonwealth supported.

Volunteers play a critical role in disaster response and recovery, bringing skills, dedication and community spirit to every crisis. Whether as trained members of the SES—and may I take a moment to recognise that today is national WOW, or Wear Orange Wednesday, a day to thank our SES volunteers—or whether they are part of Marine Rescue Queensland, Surf Life Saving Queensland or the Australian Red Cross, their contributions strengthen Queensland's resilience. Likewise, spontaneous volunteers, who step up in times of need, play an essential role. Their collective commitment ensures Queensland has the surge capacity necessary to respond swiftly and effectively to emergencies.

Most recently, Queensland has experienced some significant disaster events, each cascading and complex in nature. Over the 2024-25 period, 73 of the 77 local government areas have been affected. This offers a clear insight into the challenges we are facing. We are entering an era of greater uncertainty, with disaster events being more intense, more frequent and increasingly complex. As we navigate this evolving landscape, it is essential to foster stronger collaboration across all

sectors—government agencies, not-for-profit organisations, the private sector and the volunteer community. By working together in a coordinated effort, we can enhance disaster preparedness, streamline response mechanisms and build greater resilience for the future.

I take this opportunity to draw the committee's attention to the Standard for Disaster Management in Queensland, which serves as a framework for enhancing performance and achieving shared system-wide goals. The standard reflects the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, a global agreement adopted by the United Nations to enhance disaster resilience and risk reduction. Of note, the Queensland standard is outcomes focused. This model shifts away from a traditional compliance-based approach, which focuses on meeting a minimum standard, and instead embraces a framework of continuous improvement and a shared system-wide goal. It provides the flexibility necessary for entities at local and state levels to adapt based on their unique needs, their capability and their capacity. It is a crucial consideration in the Queensland context, where diverse challenges require tailored solutions.

A key principle of the standard is that of shared responsibility. Put simply, disaster prevention, preparedness, response and recovery activities are not solely the responsibility of emergency services. Rather, disaster management arrangements in Queensland involve all stakeholders, emphasising the importance of all entities and the community working together to develop integrated strategies that mitigate risk and improve resilience.

A well-informed and engaged community is at the heart of effective disaster management—one that understands local hazards and risks, takes proactive steps to reduce the impact of disasters and works collectively to build resilience. A strong and healthy volunteer network is one that truly reflects the community it serves, fostering diverse representation across all ages, ethnicities, vulnerabilities, backgrounds and skill sets. This enhances the resilience of Queensland's local communities, ensuring the disaster preparedness and response efforts are inclusive and equitable. By drawing on a broad range of experiences and perspectives, we can build greater capacity and capability within our volunteer sector, creating a more adaptive and effective system.

With an aging population, investing in empowering young people today is the key to fostering innovative ideas, encouraging fresh perspectives and embracing the principles of shared responsibility and continuous improvement. Ultimately, a system built for the most vulnerable benefits everybody. By prioritising inclusivity and resilience we create a stronger, safer and more effective framework for all.

The reviews undertaken by the office of the IGEM during its 10-year history have demonstrated that the key to enhancing disaster resilience through a model of shared responsibility requires continuous education, training and exercising across all of the sectors of the community. By fostering knowledge, developing skills and practising coordinated responses, we ensure that individuals, businesses, government entities and the like work together effectively in times of crisis. Preparedness is not just an obligation; it is a collective commitment to safeguarding lives, livelihoods and the future resilience of our communities.

It is perhaps in the areas of education, training and exercising that opportunities exist to highlight and encourage the value of volunteering. Volunteers play a critical role in this collective effort. Their dedication, local knowledge and willingness to step up in times of need strengthen the disaster management system. They provide essential support, bridge resource gaps, provide insights into the unique needs of their community and ensure their communities are equipped to respond and recover. Their contributions embody the spirit of shared responsibility and demonstrate that resilience is built not just through policies but also through people.

I take this opportunity to sincerely thank our disaster volunteers for their unwavering dedication and tireless service, particularly over the last few months. In the face of extraordinary challenges, their commitment has been invaluable to Queensland's disaster response and recovery efforts. Thank you.

CHAIR: Thank you. I am sure we all noted what you said about needing to engage young people. We had a precociously self-assured 10-year-old by the name of Evie Wright come before us a couple of weeks ago. She was orchestrating all of her class to become volunteers in one way or another. I thought that was great. Maybe that is the way forward.

Ms Mercer: Indeed.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: Thank you for appearing before us and being involved in the great work that happens across the state with these important volunteers. I am interested in the surge volunteers. I know that when there have been disasters and people from my patch have responded, there have

been 50 or 60 people out there volunteering, whether it is sandbagging or helping with the clean-up. I do not think in any way their details were recorded, they were captured in numbers or there was any kind of oversight around their activities. I just wondered if you could talk a little bit about how we look at that surge volunteer workforce and provide ideas around how they could be managed or captured or understood.

Ms Mercer: Obviously, as I have stated, Queensland has a locally-led system, so councils are the ones that lean in first and then they are supported throughout the system as they recognise that they cannot meet the needs of the issues that are presenting themselves. In relation to capturing volunteers, if we think about it from a systems point of view, it is a locally-led system. If councils have identified ways in which they can capture people who are willing to step up at those points in time, that is a preparedness activity. From the perspective of a preparedness activity, are there opportunities within the system to capture people who would be able to, if they are not disaster-affected, put their hand up and assist, do the sandbagging and the like?

When we are in the midst of an event, there are challenges that are experienced across the system to capture detail, whether they are a person sitting in a shelter because the cyclone is raging overhead or someone else. What it comes down to is that disaster management requires a response from all; it is not one single entity that is responsible for it. The question is: how do we have a system that is integrated and able to capture the information that you are seeking, to then improve and amplify those opportunities for volunteers to step up, knowing that volunteers may wish to do one day or 100 days, they may wish to do just a small part that they are comfortable doing or they may wish to be trained and have greater skills down the track?

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: I was thinking not so much about the local government getting a formalised mud army out there but about all those other people who just come out of the woodwork and are seen around helping. We do not have any oversight of any safety processes or procedures for those people or even a record that they were there doing it. They could potentially be a suitable future volunteer. Traditionally, we get in and help our neighbours. I am interested in that piece of work between such an informal, natural way of things to what is looking like a more formal way of managing a surge volunteer workforce in a disaster.

Ms Mercer: It depends on the model you want to roll out and the risk appetite that you have in relation to that.

Mr BOOTHMAN: Thank you, Kylie, for coming in today. My question goes to the State Emergency Service. Those volunteers used to be enveloped in the State Emergency Service, but in recent years we have seen a steep decline in volunteering which has obviously had a massive impact on the call-outs and coordination and, therefore, we are becoming more and more reliant on interstate volunteers coming up for the SES. We saw that in Alfred and the Christmas Day storms on the Gold Coast. How we can revitalise the SES been brought to your attention? Has trying to get people into the SES been brought up when you have had these reviews and conversations with local communities? Has the fact that a lot of call-outs cannot be fulfilled because the SES does not have the numbers to do that come up in these briefings?

Ms Mercer: During an event we are observers. We are looking at it from a systems perspective. We are looking at where those pinch points are, where a system can be made better and can be improved to smooth the way so that we can respond more quickly, more effectively and more efficiently. If we look at the SES, they are aware of their numbers—

Mr BOOTHMAN: They used to be a hub for disaster management when it came to responding and getting out into the community. They used to cook, supply food for volunteers et cetera. Is that something that is coming up? I used to be an SES volunteer a lifetime ago. What we used to do back then I do not see happening anymore.

Ms Mercer: I do not have a lengthy experience to call upon in relation to disaster management, having only been in this space for a few years. What I would say in relation to that is that I think that is reflective of our community. We have to recognise where we are at as a community. We have to understand that there needs to be an acceptance by the community that, in relation to disasters, there is a shared responsibility that exists. It is not just for paid employees to help; you are part of helping yourself.

How we encourage people to join the SES, whether that is as a result of an event and we capture those people who are there and we get to train them quickly or whether that is through a marketing approach, for lack of better words, where we encourage people and whether we incentivise

that or not—because there are certain skills that the SES provide that could be valuable from an employment perspective. If we are looking at bang for buck, perhaps there is opportunity there so that you train people, they get accredited and then they are part of your workforce in that disaster response space. I guess that is where I would focus from a systems point of view.

If I talk about the IGEM itself and the recommendations we make, those recommendations are in relation to state organisations, state agencies. We do not tell council what to do. We do not tell the Commonwealth government what to do. We identify where there are opportunities to improve our system in Queensland and, ultimately, the end consumer of that is the community.

Ms BOYD: The 2023 review of Queensland disaster management arrangements by your office made recommendations in 10 key areas. Can you provide the committee with a status update on implementation? Are they all completed? Have they all been implemented?

Ms Mercer: It is publicly available on our website where those recommendations are at in terms of assessment. That is part of the monitoring, evaluation and reporting process that we do. We report twice a year in relation to the progress of recommendations, across all of our recommendations. I do not have the number off the top of my head, but I am happy to provide that information on notice.

Ms BOYD: Thank you. I would appreciate that.

CHAIR: Thank you.

Mr BAILLIE: Kylie, my question goes to the question of the member for Inala around how we better engage those informal volunteers in a disaster recovery response. In those situations, there are a lot of big organisations and it is quite formal and then you have people standing up, wanting to do sandbags or wanting to donate something to help out. How do we best engage those informal volunteers to harness their efforts and have them perhaps fall into a structured response?

Ms Mercer: As I indicated in our submission and in my statement, there are opportunities for incentivisation, where you can offer a skill set to people that can then be built upon for them. We know that communities lack that sense of connectivity these days. If we are creating opportunities for people to engage and connect with their local community, how we achieve that falls outside my remit. However, what we like to see is that the system is as smooth as possible. When we set up a system—if you want to use a lack of red tape or the like—we want to make it as smooth and as simple and as easy as possible to engage people who show interest and have a system in place that is a simple system for them to engage with. How we do that is more than likely going to be bespoke to each local community. Wujal Wujal and the Gold Coast are two extremely different environments that will need different avenues to engage people within their communities.

CHAIR: That concludes the time for this part of the hearing. We appreciate your appearance and the Inspector-General's submission, Ms Mercer.

Ms Mercer: Thank you so much.

CHAIR: Before I call the next witnesses, I acknowledge in the public gallery students from St Joseph's College, Gregory Terrace. It is good to have you here. I also acknowledge a former senator for Queensland, Andrew Bartlett, who is with us in the public gallery.

JONES, Ms Kaylene, Chief Officer, Rural Fire Service Queensland, Queensland Fire Department

SMITH, Commissioner Stephen ASFM, Queensland Fire Department

CHAIR: Good morning and thank you for your appearance. Would you like to make an opening statement? Then we will have some questions for you.

Commissioner Smith: Thank you for the opportunity to attend and answer questions you may have about the department's volunteers. I would like to start by acknowledging the critical importance of our volunteers and the incredibly positive impact they have on Queensland communities. QFD's volunteers are a crucial component of emergency response capabilities throughout the state. Whilst the majority are Rural Fire Service Queensland volunteers, the department also maintains and supports other volunteers including volunteer scientific officers who respond to emergency incidents involving chemical hazards; elements of our highly trained disaster assistance response team such as our canine handlers, who are deployable, when needed, anywhere in the world to respond to earthquakes, tsunamis or other severe weather events or disasters; our auxiliary support officers who provide non-operational support such as community engagement or administrative support to auxiliary firefighters within Queensland Fire and Rescue; and volunteer peer support officers who provide support to members who may be experiencing work or personal difficulties.

We have carefully reviewed the submissions made to this inquiry, alongside feedback gathered through our own engagement processes within the department. We understand that volunteering in emergency services presents unique challenges as well as fantastic opportunities to contribute and protect the community. For volunteers in the emergency services, a primary consideration is the type of work that we are asking them to do and the environment in which they are doing it. Safeguards are necessary and the safety and wellbeing of our volunteers is paramount.

This inquiry comes at a time of change for the department. The establishment of QFD on 1 July 2024 marked a significant period of reform and uplift, bringing together Queensland Fire and Rescue and Rural Fire Service Queensland with a renewed focus. The reform brought a shift in some of our processes, including improvements in how we support our volunteers and investment in additional support resources.

I am very pleased to report some very positive steps the department is taking to improve the experience of volunteering. The newly established Rural Fire Service Queensland Advisory Committee, comprised of volunteer and staff representatives from across the state, ensures volunteer views directly inform Rural Fire Service Queensland leadership. This state-level committee will be joined shortly by district-level committees across our eight districts. These committees are being formed to ensure we truly hear the diverse views of such a large state, directly from our volunteers. We value the perspectives shared, both positive and negative. This feedback is vital as we continue to refine the way we deliver our services. From onboarding through to training, operational support and administrative requirements, the department is working hard to streamline processes and provide greater support to volunteers. The recent reforms in associated funding uplift directly target these areas, yet, as with any reform and change, some of these will take time to be fully realised.

Key legislative changes have further integrated volunteer rural fire brigades into Rural Fire Service Queensland, formally recognising their role and, crucially, strengthening protections for volunteers, bringing them into line with other frontline responders including other volunteer agencies of similar demand. The department provides a wide range of tangible supports such as uniforms, personal protective clothing, vehicles and communication devices as well as other supports such as 24-hour dedicated mental health support for our volunteers and their families.

Queensland relies heavily on the dedication and selflessness of all its emergency service volunteers. QFD is committed to ensuring our volunteers feel valued, supported, well equipped and safe. We acknowledge there are challenges and areas for improvement and we are actively working to address those through many initiatives underway and by listening carefully to the feedback from our volunteers and this inquiry. Thank you again for the opportunity to appear today. We are happy to take any questions that the committee may have.

CHAIR: Commissioner, I have a question really in my capacity as the member for Southern Downs as much as the chair of this committee. In my electorate we have the Whetstone Rural Fire Brigade, among many others. You might be familiar with this case. As volunteers have often done, the volunteers there have expressed difficulties with red tape, compliance and so forth. Their beef has been particularly with the procurement method that has been mandated for their fire shed, which I understand is a fairly modest structure. We are now three years in and \$700,000, and the shed has

not been opened yet. Is the procurement process used by the Queensland Fire Department something that you have discretion over internally or is there a government policy mandating the use of QBuild? I certainly recall that my own rural fire brigade shed at Severnlea West was put up in a couple of weeks with some people helping and friendly local builders. It was all done very cheaply and expeditiously. Can you provide some insight into that and whether or not it is possible to open the procurement rules to include a locally managed build?

Commissioner Smith: It is an important point and something that the department is very much focused on in terms of how we ensure projects are able to be delivered, are delivered in a financially responsible way and meet all of the compliance requirements of a workplace. Currently, the process is that QBuild is a part of that process. We are working with government around what that will look like and needs to look like. If there are other ways of doing it, we are exploring those at this point in time. When projects are being built with that community engagement, a lot of in-kind support and a lot of community buy-in, it is incredibly valuable to the ownership and connection with that facility and our workforce and members in those locations. We are very conscious of that and want to strengthen that. We believe that there is a way.

CHAIR: They want to decide where the beer fridge will be, rather than QBuild.

Commissioner Smith: I am sure those things can be resolved in terms of some of the minor planning and design outcomes, but our process is about making sure that we get value for money, that things are compliant, that we have land tenure and that we have buildings built to comply with our workplace health and safety obligations. Those elements will do, but we can definitely work through some of the easing of the burden on local brigades when they are doing some work.

CHAIR: If you could take a personal interest in the Whetstone Rural Fire Brigade's case, I would be much obliged.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: Thank you for the great work that you do. I understand it is very challenging being able to manage not only departments but also the volunteer aspect. It is important work. I thank you for the work that you have done in response to the submissions, in identifying and being proactive in some areas for improvement. That is always great to hear. On the tangible supports that you spoke of in terms of equipment et cetera, one of the frequent issues that we have seen raised is the delay in onboarding from the administrative perspective and also the provision of personal equipment that is needed. Can you please explain what measures have been taken to reduce that delay in onboarding?

Commissioner Smith: I will get the chief officer to provide a little bit more detail, but there are a couple of things. They are legitimate issues that have been raised and there are bodies of work being done currently around recruitment material collateral to support recruitment, the time and processes that are involved in the onboarding process and the time and process required to issue uniform, PPC and those sorts of elements to people in order to change that experience, because that is a frustration we have heard and there are clear bodies of work in place for that. The chief officer may want to comment further.

Ms Jones: We certainly have a number of different challenges with regard to onboarding our membership. The process is quite complex. It goes through a range of different steps and gates before we are able to get somebody from showing an interest right through to being a member who is able then to get onto a vehicle, onto an appliance and respond to an emergency situation. Some of those challenges relate to it being a manual process, so we are looking at developing an electronic onboarding process that will allow the member to understand the steps that need to be taken but also to see where they are at visually within that process, which is part of the challenge we hear. People do not hear anything for a period of time; therefore, they do not know they are still progressing through the system. The electronic onboarding system will adjust that and improve the visibility both for the member and for the brigade who, again, wonder once it has left the endorsement process at the brigade what step it is actually at in the process of that individual becoming a member.

There are a couple of other challenges we have within the system, not least of which is the criminal history check requirement and the working with children check requirement. They are managed by different organisations and we are a little bit at the mercy of the timelines for those organisations and the way the process goes once it steps outside of RFSQ or QFD. We are working with those agencies. We are attempting to minimise the delays that we are observing. We have established a pathways team in recent months and that has reduced delays because there is a proactive activity going on for each of our applications. We are making inroads into that, but there are certainly challenges that our members are still finding.

Mr BOOTHMAN: There has been a decline in membership numbers since the Queensland Fire Department was established in July last year. Have any surveys been done to find out the opinions of volunteers?

Commissioner Smith: I will start and then we will go into a little bit more detail. There has not been a decline in Rural Fire Service Queensland's volunteers in that period. In fact, in the last two years we have managed to increase and have had a net increase in our volunteering numbers across the state. A great deal of effort has gone into trying to achieve that, because we did have a significant decline. The process we have gone through is to ask: what are the drivers? We are only just net increasing, so I am not suggesting we have found the perfect solution.

Part of that has been due to the fact we are getting much closer with the additional personnel who are being put into Rural Fire Service Queensland. There are more area officers that are closer to our workplaces in terms of our brigades. That means we can connect and support volunteers through the process as much as anything in terms of their recruitment, onboarding and interest, and that support—whether it is administrative, operationally or otherwise—is closer. Some of the impacts are that communities do not just have the draw; they do not have the same time or the same ability, and there are some requirements we have to make people safe. Our requirements are somewhat more than someone just arriving and volunteering their time. Also, there are the impacts that community changes are having, and they are different in different parts of the state. The number of people to even draw on and the other pressures in people's lives mean they either cannot afford time at all or they have less time to provide for us. The chief officer may want to comment.

Ms Jones: We have a number of mechanisms to survey our members at different points of time throughout the year. The Volunteering for Queensland Survey has recently closed. We had 1,200 responses to that survey this year, which is a marked improvement on previous years. All of that data comes in, along with other direct activities that we undertake with our membership to understand their needs and requirements. We have training surveys and various other bespoke bodies of work where we are trying to get a handle on what we need to do better or continue to do in order to support our members to receive the training they require but also to put a perspective forward that allows us to make smart and informed decisions about the way the organisation is established and functions.

In addition to the Volunteering for Queensland Survey, we work with the Rural Fire Service Advisory Committee, which has a range of members who consult and share the views of the membership through the process of that engagement activity. We also regularly meet with the Rural Fire Brigades Association Queensland. They provide us additional information from the membership perspective as well. There is a range of different surveys, formal and informal, that allow us to understand the requirements and needs of our members.

Mr BOOTHMAN: Is it possible to get this survey in its text form, as in the raw data itself?

Ms Jones: I can certainly provide you with the questions that are asked within the survey, the structure of the survey and some overarching numbers and detail around some of the responses—the thematic responses. We can provide that.

CHAIR: I think the committee might benefit if you could provide a little more than that. Are you able to, with deidentified responses, give an indication of the kinds of responses that have been made to the survey?

Ms Jones: Absolutely, Sir. We will send that in.

CHAIR: Thank you very much.

Ms BOYD: I am interested in the training and support that our rural fire volunteers get when they sign up to serve their community. Are you able to inform us what current positions are vacant and what the vacancy rate is for FTEs in the new structure of Rural Fire Service Queensland, particularly in positions like BTSOs and the like?

Ms Jones: I cannot give you the specific information today, but I am very happy to provide that to the committee afterwards. Certainly, we are still facing a number of vacancies. There are challenges with being able to identify suitable persons within those locations. They are in some cases more remote and require the individuals to be available in those locations. We recognise as well that there are some challenges with families and housing in different areas of the community. We are trying to manage our way through all of that. We have a number of processes underway at the moment to continue to fill the uplift vacancies that were created through the establishment of the Queensland Fire Department. We are working through what that needs to look like. We have 114 and I believe that approximately 100 of those positions have already been filled.

Ms BOYD: Term of reference No. 5 talks to ‘the extent, effectiveness and efficiency of current government support at all levels for the volunteering sector in Queensland and sustainable opportunities for improvement’. One of the things that our volunteer first responders often provide as feedback is that they need to have mutual agreement with their employers to be able to take leave to respond to the community, to be on call, to be able to be responsive frequently and often at unsociable times. Can you provide the committee with any information around how QFD believes we can do this better? What are some settings we can improve to promote more volunteerism within our community but also work in with employers?

Commissioner Smith: There are probably a few things. We do provide support and some information around the conversations employees need to have, to frame those demands so that people are familiar with what the expectations are or what the impacts might be and what leave entitlements they might be able to access depending on how they are employed. Some of that is in place, but there is also, I believe, an element of how we recognise people who release volunteers. We do it to a degree. Can we do it better? In all likelihood, yes, in a consistent sense. I think from that larger point of view, recognition of the contribution of people releasing—volunteers absolutely do remarkable things and put their hand up, but there is a cost impact and there are impacts for those releasing them from employment as well. I also note that a lot of our volunteers are self-employed.

Ms BOYD: Some submitters have put forward suggestions around what some of those supports could look like for volunteers and for employers. Do you have any suggestions in that regard?

Commissioner Smith: There are the recognition things we have traditionally done. There might be certificates of appreciation after certain events, like an event to hold a morning tea and provide thanks. We have looked at whether there is opportunity for places that have shopfronts and those sorts of things to have stickers and signage to put on desks. I am aware of a range of ways that different jurisdictions do things and we always look to those opportunities. Underway at the moment is a review of RFS’s acknowledgement processes and how it does acknowledge its volunteers and those who support them. There is opportunity for us in that space at this time.

Mr BOOTHMAN: Since, say, 2019 has the number of volunteers in the Rural Fire Service stayed stable, gone up or decreased?

Commissioner Smith: I will come back to you with a year figure. In 2019 and up to the last two years there was a decline in numbers. It has only been in the last two years—last year and this year to date—that we have had a net increase. We will provide those figures.

CHAIR: Thank you for your appearance today. You have taken a number of questions on notice. We would be grateful if we could have a reply to the committee by 30 May, please.

VANDERSEE, Ms Sarah, Deputy Director-General, Corporate Services, Department of Sport, Racing and Olympic and Paralympic Games

CHAIR: Thank you very much for coming before us today. Would you like to make an opening statement before the committee has some questions for you?

Ms Vandersee: I would like to start by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we meet today and pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging. I would like to thank the Local Government, Small Business and Customer Service Committee for inviting the Department of Sport, Racing and Olympic and Paralympic Games to speak at today's hearing.

The department acknowledges the indispensable role of volunteers across Queensland, particularly in the sport and recreation industry, the racing sector and in preparation for the Brisbane 2032 Olympic and Paralympic Games. Community sport and recreation organisations, programs, events and activities across the state often rely on the assistance of volunteer labour to operate successfully. Therefore, downturns in volunteering can be strongly felt across the sector. In response, the department has supported sport and recreation volunteerism through grant programs and provision of resources.

The department is currently publicly consulting on a new sport strategy through its discussion paper 'What does 2032 mean for you?' The importance of volunteer contributions to the sport and active recreation industry and how they can be further supported is a core issue for consideration. Stakeholders are asked to consider how to encourage more people to volunteer in sport and streamline governance to make volunteering less onerous. As for the racing industry in Queensland, the 2022-23 *Size and scope of the Queensland racing industry* report estimated that the Queensland racing industry is supported by close to 8,300 volunteers providing their skills, time and resources.

The Brisbane 2032 Olympic and Paralympic Games presents a unique opportunity to revitalise Queensland's volunteer culture, with approximately 50,000 volunteers to be required. It will be critically important to leverage the heightened interest in the games to maintain a broader uplift in volunteering within the Queensland sport and recreation industry in the lead-up to, during and after the games.

The games can also help diversify the range of people who get involved in volunteering, creating pathways for young and old and diverse groups including First Nations people, individuals with a disability and multicultural cohorts to join in with the cultural and sporting life of their community. To this end, building a vibrant and diverse volunteer network is a key focus of the Elevate 2042 legacy strategy. The Brisbane 2032 Organising Committee will be responsible for volunteering programs for the games, which is expected to kick off after the Los Angeles 2028 Olympic and Paralympic Games.

Volunteers are at the heart of Queensland's communities, underpinning the success of sport and recreation organisations, the racing industry and preparations for Brisbane 2032. The department is committed to contributing to a sustainable volunteer culture through collaboration across government and industry, targeted initiatives and the development of the new sports strategy. By addressing barriers and enhancing support, Queensland can ensure its volunteer workforce thrives, delivering long-term benefits for this state. I would like to thank the committee again for the opportunity to participate today and I would be happy to answer any questions.

CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Vandersee. I will go to the deputy chair.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: I defer to my colleague the member for Cairns.

CHAIR: Member for Cairns, you have the floor.

Mr HEALY: That is very nice of you. Thank you very much. Sarah, it is great to see you. How are you?

Ms Vandersee: I am very well, thank you.

Mr HEALY: It is great to see you all. You are all looking fabulous there today. I have a hard-hitting question, as no doubt you would be expecting. How much of the department's budget is allocated for sporting funds and programs which is directed to supporting volunteers? It was not meant to be that hard hitting.

Ms Vandersee: We have a lot of funding programs that the department is supporting, but I will have to get you the dollar figure. In terms of the types of grant programs that we have, we have ClubIQ, which provides free, easy-to-use resources for Queensland sporting clubs. We have Active

Clubs, which provides funds to local and regional sport and active recreation organisations to support volunteers and provide flexible and safe physical activity opportunities to increase sport and active recreation participation. We have the Active Industry Base Fund 2023-2025, which provides funds to state-level active industry organisations and industry peak bodies to build and strengthen the capability of their activities or sector.

We have the Active Women and Girls Program. The program is dedicated to encouraging greater participation across a range of focus areas including volunteer training, resources, equipment or creating more participation opportunities for women and girls within clubs, communities and organisations. We also have the Sport and Recreation Sponsorship Program, which provides targeted investment and seeks to collaborate with key stakeholders to deliver and leverage major and community events and initiatives across Queensland including supporting the volunteers who assist to plan and deliver many of these events.

We also have the Active Industry Project Fund, which is designed to increase participation opportunities and to build the capacity and capability of the sport and active recreation workforce in Queensland, with round 2 specifically supporting upskilling of volunteers in 22 industry organisations. I will have to take the question on notice to find out the exact amount that we are giving but, as you can see from those programs, it is not just to volunteers. It is meshed in with many grant programs.

Mr HEALY: You are right, Sarah. We know moving forward that volunteers are going to be a very strong focus for government to be able to start to grow our volunteer base leading up to the Olympics. I would be interested to see what is allocated specifically for volunteers. I suspect that government may need to address that issue specifically. Finally, how does the department measure the success or otherwise of its various sports funds and programs? Is it by how much money gets out into the marketplace? How do we measure that?

Ms Vandersee: There are many ways that we measure that, and it depends on what the grant program is looking to achieve. It may be how much money is delivered, but it also might be specifically about how many women we increased in participation in sport. There are multiple ways that we would evaluate grant programs, but it is based on the aim of the program.

Mr BAILLIE: I am certainly looking forward to seeing Townsville become an Olympic city in 2032. Right across the state, obviously there are going to be a number of Olympic cities. Your submission states that approximately 50,000 volunteers will be needed for the Olympics. I have a two-part question. The first part is: what strategies does the department have to start engaging volunteers and building that volunteer force? The second part is: as far as a registration or onboarding process is concerned, there is obviously going to be a tremendous variation in volunteer tasks that will be required to be performed. Also, we have an incredibly diverse community that may be looking to volunteer and assist. Is there one consistent onboarding process or is that going to vary based on location, function and capability?

Ms Vandersee: To the first part of your question, as I mentioned in my opening statement, we are exploring opportunities of how we can increase our volunteers through our sports strategy consultation. A key tenet of our consultation at the moment is how we can better engage with volunteers and increase the volunteer base. There are many opportunities in the coming years that we see the games will deliver. We will perhaps have national championships. We will host world titles. All of these events will have a volunteer base. We are hoping through the sports strategy that we can really plan that out so that we can use these events to encourage participation and upskilling to see the long-lasting legacy for Brisbane 2032 but also for everyday grassroots sports and also for the racing sector.

To the second part of your question, the volunteers for Brisbane 2032 are the responsibility of the Brisbane 2032 Organising Committee. Multiple opportunities will exist in the games area. This is likely to include things such as providing sport support at competition and training venues; guiding spectators and providing ticketing and security check support; providing language and cultural support services; helping deliver technology solutions such as scoring, results and event information; providing support for media operations; and assisting at medal ceremonies. The onboarding for Brisbane 2032 will be the responsibility of the Brisbane 2032 Organising Committee.

As I said before, volunteers has been a key theme in our current sports strategy consultation, our discussion papers and also our games consultation. Volunteers is really a tenet for us to be able to deliver the 2032 games successfully.

Mr BAILLIE: You are not aware whether the onboarding process varies based on function or might vary based on function? That is someone else's responsibility?

Ms Vandersee: That is the Brisbane 2032 Organising Committee's responsibility for the games.

Ms BOYD: Is there a process for onboarding generally for volunteers in sporting clubs throughout Queensland as it stands?

Ms Vandersee: I will ask my learned colleagues and take that question on notice.

Ms BOYD: We have approximately half a million Queenslanders who are currently volunteering. I understand there are a number of streams of funding that go into sports programs across our state. How do you measure what money is directly attributed to volunteers through those buckets of money and how is that captured by the department?

Ms Vandersee: It again depends on the focus of the program. For example, the ClubIQ program is specifically for volunteers and to upskill volunteers. We can say that any money that we put to ClubIQ is specifically for volunteers and increasing the capacity and capability of volunteers.

Ms BOYD: What about within the other programs?

Ms Vandersee: Again, it would depend on what the program is designed to do. For example, round 2 of the Active Industry Project Fund was specifically for upskilling volunteers.

Ms BOYD: Data will be captured specifically and you will be able to provide that to us?

Ms Vandersee: Data is captured when we are specifically targeting volunteers.

Ms BOYD: You will be capturing that information and you will be reporting back to us with volunteering as a specific line item within each of those programs that are relevant?

Ms Vandersee: When we are evaluating them, yes.

Ms BOYD: Was that part of the question that you took on notice? That data is included in the question you took on notice before, or the evaluation has not yet happened and you are not in a position to furnish the committee with that information so we will not get that information from the department?

Ms Vandersee: That is correct. We have not yet finished round 2 and evaluated round 2.

CHAIR: Member for Theodore?

Mr BOOTHMAN: I do not actually have any questions. I could ask about what we have learned from the Commonwealth Games and how we can implement those learnings for the Olympics. Obviously, the Commonwealth Games was a very big event on the Gold Coast. There were certain things we could have done better, obviously. I am curious to see how we can learn from those previous experiences.

Ms Vandersee: It is really important that we learn from our previous experiences. I understand that there is great engagement—there have been audit reports and several different reports provided on the Commonwealth Games that are being used to help us chart our way forward. Naturally, the department has an oversight function. The Brisbane 2032 Organising Committee is responsible for volunteering and putting on the event. They also have at their disposal many different feedback mechanisms from other Olympics. There are reflections on what happened in Paris, for example. There will be reflections on what happens in LA and how we can improve and leverage those learnings.

Mr HEALY: Sarah, when it comes to volunteers, what can we do better?

Ms Vandersee: There are many barriers that we see for volunteering. Time is a massive issue. I do not know how we can get more time in our day. Volunteering takes up a lot of time. There is a lot of burnout with longstanding volunteers carrying a heavy workload. Then there is also a lack of recognition and support. We also see that there is a recruitment and retention issue. We are not getting younger generations involved and also people with diverse backgrounds. In addition, there can be a lack of pathway opportunities to more senior volunteering positions or to paid professional roles. For example, in the coaching space you can be a volunteer coach but you could progress to become a paid coach.

There are training and development gaps. Inaccessibility to relevant training opportunities can result in volunteers lacking the confidence or skills required to take certain roles. We are trying to build partnerships between community sport clubs and local organisations to maximise shared experiences and expertise and resources. We are trying to enhance collaboration among community sport clubs to facilitate increased sharing of knowledge, resources and best practices. Every sports club has a treasurer. Can we share those resources and share our knowledge?

Mr HEALY: They are usually unique people, too.

Ms Vandersee: Spoken like one! We are trying to modernise sport volunteering through measures such as implementing targeted engagement strategies, tailored messaging and specialised promotion materials to attract a diverse range of volunteers. We are trying to reimagine volunteer roles by making volunteer roles more accessible and inclusive by redesigning them to accommodate a diverse range of skills and backgrounds.

Mr HEALY: That is outstanding. Thank you very much.

CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Vandersee, for your appearance. That concludes the time for your department's presence here. We will now take a short break and reconvene at 11.45 am.

Proceedings suspended from **11.30 am to 11.45 am.**

FOX, Ms Andrea, Executive Director, Policy and Workplace Services, Workplace Health and Safety Queensland, Office of Industrial Relations

PHILIPSON, Ms Beth, Director of Safety Legislation Reform and Inspectorate Policy Support, Workplace Health and Safety Queensland, Office of Industrial Relations

CHAIR: I welcome representatives of Workplace Health and Safety Queensland from the Office of Industrial Relations. Thank you for appearing today and for your submission. I invite you to make an opening statement, and then we will have some questions for you.

Ms Fox: Thank you for having us here and giving us the opportunity to assist you with your inquiry into volunteering in Queensland. Workplace Health and Safety Queensland is a regulator committed to working with the community to reduce work related fatalities, serious injuries and illnesses and to make it easier for businesses to do their work safely. I understand that your inquiry is considering the regulatory frameworks relating to volunteers, the extent and effectiveness of the existing government support, and how portfolios can continue to improve these initiatives, particularly for emergency response volunteering and in the lead-up to the 2032 Olympic and Paralympic Games. I note that those goals align closely with our direction as a regulator. We too are very focused on some of those emerging pressures in terms of emergency response and, of course, the games.

Our purpose in making a submission to the inquiry is to draw the committee's attention to how volunteers and organisations which engage them are protected and supported by Queensland's work health and safety framework. Volunteers play a vital role in Queensland and are protected against potential harm to their health, safety and welfare through the Work Health and Safety Act 2011. This includes those who have made submissions to your inquiry, which we have monitored closely, such as State Emergency Service workers, volunteer firefighters assisting with emergency responses on behalf of government as well as other volunteers working for the not-for-profit organisations throughout Queensland.

A person or organisation engaging a volunteer—who we refer to in our legislation as a person conducting a business or undertaking, or a PCBU, but who looks mostly like an employer to most people—has duties of care to ensure as far as reasonably practicable the health and safety of their volunteers. Volunteers, like paid workers, face a range of possible risks and injuries when volunteering, and it is crucial that PCBUs meet their duty of care under the act to ensure their volunteers are not put at risk. That is through the same sorts of measures that they would be taking for others in their workplace—ensuring properly maintained equipment, making sure there are suitable facilities for their volunteers, like toilets, and providing any necessary information, training and instruction to do their roles.

A PCBU engaging a volunteer could be a sole trader, a company, a government department or a not-for-profit organisation. This engagement may include a volunteer assisting in places that also employ a manager—that is, they will not necessarily be entirely made up of volunteers, such as a local charity or op shop. It could also be part of the State Emergency Service, such as rural firefighting.

In addition to protections and support, volunteers to which our act apply have their own obligations to their co-workers, to the people who engage them and to the public. These obligations essentially require volunteers to take reasonable care for their own health and safety as well as others who may be affected by their actions or omissions. There is also a requirement for these individuals to follow any reasonable instruction given to them by the PCBU. Consultation with workers is a core component of Queensland's work health and safety framework. We encourage volunteers to be included in these discussions by PCBUs to identify the issues impacting their services and work together to achieve a safe workplace.

The regulator's primary planning documents, including our WHSQ Priority Plan—which is a data-driven, proactive plan for what we will pay attention to as a regulator over the next couple of years—recognise the importance of supporting vulnerable worker groups who are over-represented in the WHS data. Some examples are young people, people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and older people. I note that these vulnerable groups are also highly represented within the volunteering system.

We have developed and are continuing to develop specialised WHS guidance and interventions to drive better outcomes for these vulnerable workers. Among the options available to their workplaces is access to our free advisory service for Queensland businesses, known as the Injury Prevention and Management program, IPaM. I will put a caveat here to say that I note that volunteers assisting a volunteer association—that is, one made up entirely of volunteers, like a junior sports club run by parents—are generally not covered under our act. That is the exception.

Looking ahead to the 2032 Brisbane Olympic and Paralympic Games, the regulator will be working closely with other government departments to coordinate an approach for ensuring volunteers are safe and protected. They are on our radar. We recognise that this will be a growing pressure for us as a regulator. Finally, I thank the committee for the opportunity to talk about the perspective of volunteers under our act. I hope I am able to answer your questions.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: Thank you for appearing before us today. My question goes to what is a common perceived barrier by volunteers—that is, workplace health and safety red tape and additional burdens they see when they are going through the process of volunteering. They sometimes feel that it is not balanced with the kind of volunteering they want to do, versus the onboarding that is required for health and safety measures. Can you speak about your understanding of that and how you can see that balance being more effective?

Ms Fox: The work health and safety regime treats everybody who is in the workplace and who is exposed to work health and safety risks as part of the story, as part of the discussion that should be happening. For obvious reasons, we would not want volunteers to be outside that framework at all because they can be and are exposed to the same types of risks and health hazards that other workers and members of the public can be.

I think there is a valid point to be made that much of the way in which we talk about work health and safety to the public as a regulator is probably not always as digestible as it should be to everybody. For lots of reasons, when we develop regulations and guidance, it is often the experts in WHS together having that conversation about what that material needs to cover—experts from unions and employer organisations from the work health and safety space. I do think it is an important goal to actually make that more digestible, and that is on our radar. In the coming period, as a regulator we are looking at making work health and safety material more accessible for small businesses and more accessible for organisations that do not fit within the traditional structure, where the tensions are very hierarchical between employers and workers—a lot of community organisations are much flatter in structure; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations are often much flatter in structure—so that is one of the goals we have in that space.

I would still say that a lot of our material is very good. Our guidance material has been developed with that idea of somebody being able to use it as a layperson, but I do think it is an area where we can continue to improve, for sure.

Mr BAILLIE: We are hearing more and more corporates getting on board with volunteering and including in remuneration packages things like volunteer leave or an opportunity to volunteer, which can be paid or not paid. I am interested in the legal liabilities on that front. If an employer was paying for one of their employees to take volunteer leave and an injury occurred while undertaking that volunteering, who ultimately would be liable?

Ms Fox: To clarify, are you talking about the obligations on the employer who releases someone to go and do volunteer work, rather than the organisations absorbing them as a volunteer?

Mr BAILLIE: Yes.

Ms Fox: That is a really good and tricky question. The PCBU—the organisation that takes the volunteer—has ultimate responsibility for their site, their activities and the safety of the volunteers. That includes even if you pay their expenses or there is some nominal form of payment. It is difficult to foresee a situation where an employer who is releasing someone to do volunteer work and has procedures in place to allow them that access would actually be responsible for any injury, illness or health condition that occurred out of it. The way in which the duties of our act apply are, essentially, that the more responsibility you have for the place, the more responsibility you carry for the outcomes in terms of duties. It is difficult for me to foresee a situation where an external organisation carries that, because they do not have that much control over the undertakings that are happening in that workplace.

Mr BAILLIE: I will give you a quick example. When I worked corporately, we did a couple of days of volunteering with homes for humanity. It was a work sanctioned volunteer effort. We had tickets to operate machinery but we were also in roof spaces putting in insulation and those sorts of things. While on site we were obviously under the control of a PCBU in performing the tasks that they outlined, but it was a work sanctioned event as well. Maybe it is a grey area and it would need to be tested but it struck my interest.

Ms Fox: With that bit of extra information, I think the workplace that is releasing the workers to go and do this does carry some responsibility because they have identified particular organisations that they would support or encourage you to consider. I guess one I would be particularly mindful of

or situations we have seen is where people have been released from workplaces to go and do volunteer work in other areas and there is exposure to things like sexual harassment or trauma related incidents. I think with that bit of extra information you have given me, yes, the employer releasing them has responsibility for ensuring that these places are going to provide a safe workplace for them.

Mr BAILLIE: While we encourage corporates to get involved and provide an allowance for their employees to participate in volunteering, depending on the arrangements they should also be mindful that they may be liable for any unforeseen incidents that may occur.

Ms Fox: Correct. The thing I would note, though, is: remember with our legislation the identification of risks is based on reasonableness. I certainly understand there would be situations where corporations could not have foreseen a particular risk. I would emphasise that it is based on a reasonable assessment of risks and the management of risks.

Ms Philipson: I will add that, within the work health and safety framework, in any situation where there are multiple PCBUs, businesses or employees involved, there is a duty for those PCBUs to consult with one another. Depending on the exact circumstances, there may be a requirement for the two organisations simply to have a discussion about the risks involved and how they are being managed for that particular subset of employees in the volunteer setting.

Mr BOOTHMAN: Just to clarify, if a business has a group of volunteer organisations that they suggest, a person would volunteer with one of them; however, if a person then volunteers outside of that preferred area they would not be covered?

Ms Fox: If a corporation is encouraging you and offering this as an opportunity, it would be like attending training or other events or conferences for work; you retain some level of responsibility in terms of your workers participating in a formal system. You would not want them going into a loosely arranged and managed space, but you would not be expected to foresee every element of the employment conditions in that other workplace and who they have working there and to do an audit of their systems or anything like that. If you knowingly have your workers attend other spaces as part of their work function and do not have confidence in the reliability of those places, you are exposed.

Ms BOYD: Under the WHS Act, a PCBU must provide adequate facilities. I am particularly interested in adequate facilities such as showers, toilets and handwashing facilities and the hygienic means of disposal of sanitary products for volunteers in our SES and Rural Fire Service. Can you tell me if there is an audit of workplaces and locations where folks are volunteering? If there is a complaint received, how is it dealt with?

Ms Fox: That is a good question, because we do recognise that a lot of volunteer work happens in spaces that face additional stresses because of the nature of the work—in isolated places or in rural and regional places. Workplace Health and Safety Queensland does not have a proactive audit of those workplaces; it is more reactive in terms of responding to complaints where they happen in those spaces. We have a number of codes that apply in terms of the provision of first-aid facilities, bathroom amenities and those sorts of things. In terms of how complaints are responded to, it is not unusual for us to receive complaints from workplaces looking for further information about what their obligations are, or workers raising concerns about the full requirements of the workplace being provided. It would be like any other workplace. To return to your original question, there is not a program at the moment where Workplace Health and Safety Queensland proactively goes and audits spaces where volunteers are likely to be working.

Ms BOYD: I am also interested in psychosocial hazards in the emergency response arena and how our volunteers are supported and given a framework to not only be prepared for the things they may face in their volunteering efforts but also respond to the struggle that might come with processing and dealing with some of the interactions they have while they are volunteering. Can you talk us through the proactive steps that are being taken and the areas where the department can intervene to provide more support or protections to volunteers throughout our community?

Ms Fox: I think that is a really good question because I agree with you. When we talked to the operational area and asked, in preparing for this, 'What has been your recent experience with volunteers and the types of tensions they experience?'—volunteers tend to work in a lot of public-facing settings. We are very aware that we are seeing an increase in work related violence and aggression issues and sexual harassment for people in those spaces.

I would draw people's attention to the fact that we have sexual harassment regulations which put a proactive duty on employers to consider the risk factors their workers are exposed to and how they will manage them. We have a psychosocial hazards regulation and a psychosocial hazards code which go into a lot of the types of factors you spoke about. They give quite clear guidance about what

a PCBU can be doing to reduce the risks: not only implementing workplace policies but also talking to volunteers about how they might respond to threats from people they are dealing with; determining what kind of support you will offer to them when it does happen; and allowing access to a breakout room for people to go and take a break and digest an interaction if it is difficult.

Some of the risk factors we have identified around violence and aggression in customer-facing roles are long wait times, increased reliance on technology and people being in a vulnerable state. It is not hard to see that those same factors apply for a lot of the people who are doing volunteer work. They are often working with people in highly vulnerable states who are already very agitated and probably experiencing long wait times as they wait for things to be processed.

The only other thing to say in relation to what you raised is: we did note that in the submissions you have been receiving people were talking about the problem of burnout because you have a smaller pool being stretched further. Our psychosocial hazards code does look at the risks associated with burnout, remote and isolated work, exposure to traumatic events, fatigue and those sorts of things. It does go through how to manage those risks.

CHAIR: Thank you very much, Ms Fox and Ms Philipson, for your appearance today.

EADES, Ms Kirsten, Acting Executive Director, Community Justice Services, Department of Justice

McCONE, Ms Sally, Acting Director, Strategic Policy and Legislation, Justice Policy and Reform, Department of Justice

MILLER, Ms Michelle, Director, Screening Services, Blue Card Services, Queensland Worker Screening Services, Harm Prevention and Regulation, Department of Justice

ROBINSON, Ms Nicola, Acting Executive Director, Queensland Worker Screening Services, Harm Prevention and Regulation, Department of Justice

THOMSON, Ms Victoria, Deputy Director-General, Harm Prevention and Regulation, Department of Justice

CHAIR: Thank you for your appearance today and for your submission. I invite one of you to make an opening statement, after which the committee will have some questions for you.

Ms Thomson: Thank you, Chair, and thank you for the opportunity to address the committee about the services provided for Queensland volunteers. I would like to make some very brief opening remarks about the range of functions within the Department of Justice that connect with volunteerism in Queensland.

As you will see from our submission, volunteers attend Queensland courts to deliver services to court users including mental health, housing and general social support. In terms of justices of the peace, there are close to 84,000 justices of the peace and commissioners for declaration in Queensland. Nearly 4,000 of these are engaged within the JPs in the Community Program. These volunteers dedicate their time and their experience at one or more of the 251 community signing sites located across Queensland. JPs provide witnessing services in our community free of charge and often make themselves available after-hours to assist people in their times of need.

In terms of the blue card, one in five Queenslanders hold a blue card, which is fully transferable between paid employment and volunteering. Blue Card Services supports volunteers in Queensland by processing volunteer applications for free and by providing a range of services to assist volunteers and organisations to understand the system through webinars, in-person information sessions and, of course, digital services, phone and email contact. Dedicated culturally appropriate services are also available for First Nations volunteers and organisations. Overall, more than 94 per cent of blue card holders are satisfied or very satisfied with our services. There are over 300,000 blue card holders who are reported to be providing volunteer services for child related activities in Queensland. This financial year to March, over 98 per cent of people who apply to volunteer with children received a blue card clearance. The majority of those applicants do not have any police or other relevant information, and their cards are processed within an average of two business days.

Blue card screening prevents people from working or volunteering with children in regulated environments if their past behaviour shows that they are an unacceptable risk to children or are unable to support a child's wellbeing and to protect them from harm. Our check is comprehensive, capturing a wide range of information compared with a standard national police check, and cardholders are monitored daily for any changes in their criminal history. This financial year, Blue Card Services has prevented more than 2,700 individuals from working or volunteering with children; 170 negative notices were issued to proposed volunteers; and 77 volunteer applicants had their blue card suspended. These suspensions were made in response to police notification of charges for serious or disqualifying offences such as child related sexual or exploitation offences, other serious sexual or violent offences such as torture, or sexual assault against an adult or a child. My colleagues and I welcome the opportunity to assist the committee in their inquiry and are able to now answer the committee's questions. Thank you.

CHAIR: I represent a border electorate. One of the difficulties that volunteers, particularly for sporting teams and schools, find is that they have to deal with a blue card system in Queensland and its equivalent in the New South Wales jurisdiction. What are the difficulties, if any, that might be encountered in trying to have a formal recognition of prior certification by a comparable jurisdiction so that someone with a Queensland blue card could coach or be with the kids when they play on the other side of the border, or a New South Wales holder of an equivalent card could be deemed to have been certified by an appropriate jurisdiction and, therefore, allowed to be involved with kids?

Ms Thomson: Thank you, Chair, for raising those issues around cross-border communities. Working with children checks—regardless of where they are issued across Australian state and territories—are not currently recognised across jurisdictions. Whilst there have been lots of discussions about creating a national mobile scheme, no agreement has been implemented as yet; however, it would be fair to say that, part of the reason that goal—whilst admirable—is difficult to attain in real practice is the complexities of aligning laws, policies and administrative systems across the jurisdictions. Each jurisdiction has all of their own laws and systems, which results in variations in terms of how those checks are conducted. For example in Queensland, our checks look at a broader range of information than just criminal history checks. In Queensland, we also consider state-based domestic and family violence backgrounds. That is not done in every other jurisdiction, so it is not like-for-like across the country. In Queensland we also have daily monitoring of people's criminal history. We get a feed from the QPS data and we can see that someone has been charged by the Queensland police. We also have arrangements with the AFP.

For mutual recognition and cross-border mobility to occur, a significant piece of work would need to be done to look at how we can align what our jurisdictional thresholds are. That is not to say that jurisdictions have been idle in this space. There has been a fair bit of work happening with the Commonwealth, state and territory organisations to move towards national consistency and that goal of mobility across borders. There has been work by my colleagues here to implement some national standards, to get some baseline standards across states and territories. We have also been setting up a national reference system. That is a place for jurisdictions to share adverse decisions. If Queensland, for example, refuses someone's application for a reason then that is shared across jurisdictions so people understand there is a negative notice that has been issued. The Commonwealth government's National Continuous Checking Capability Project will enable screening units to continuously monitor cardholders and applicants at the national level for changes in charges and court outcomes.

In summary, whilst we do not have full mobility across the jurisdictions, we are working hard to make sure that we are at least moving to a baseline and also sharing information so that people, likewise, cannot shift across borders without detection.

CHAIR: I appreciate your fulsome response. Thank you very much.

Ms BOYD: The key portfolio deliverables in the charter letter of the Attorney-General contain a dot point which is to strengthen and streamline the blue card system. Can you inform the committee what inroads have been made in strengthening and streamlining the blue card system here in Queensland?

Ms Thomson: In relation to the strengthening and streamlining election commitment, one of the things the government is progressing is the commencement of the WCCOLA legislation, which was passed in the last term of parliament. We expect that legislation to commence later this year. It will expand the range of regulated employment categories that will apply for working with children checks. For example, child entertainment services will fall within the scope of blue card checks. It currently does not. The other thing we are doing is continuing to lift our education offering to assist organisations and businesses to better understand the blue card system. That will also obviously educate and prepare businesses that currently do not fall within the working with children check for what will be quite an extensive change towards the end of the year if, indeed, that commences. As do all parts of government, we look to continue to improve our education and information offerings for organisations that need blue cards to conduct their business.

Ms BOYD: With those arrangements that were made under the previous government?

Ms Thomson: The WCCOLA legislation passed under the previous government and is due to commence this year.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: Thank you for appearing today. We have heard from a number of submitters about concerns with being able to establish an executive on some of the volunteering organisations due to individuals' concerns about liability should something go wrong in their activities of being on an executive. It seems to be something that we have heard quite a lot about. Different organisations take out additional insurance for that. Can you explain, with the Civil Liability Act, which provides some protection around that, how we can do better in terms of assuring volunteers of their risk of liability and what we can do in that space?

Ms McCone: We would be happy to take that question on notice and provide to you some information about the Civil Liability Act. We do not really deal with that piece of legislation specifically and the blue card does not really go into that space, but we could provide some information to you on what the Civil Liability Act does in this space.

Mr HEALY: The submission of the Department of Justice notes that there have been recent increases in the number of JPs, which is terrific. I am in Cairns. I have just had a group come through—25 in 30 years. They make a wonderful contribution. Are we seeing volunteer numbers across other services go up or down? This is a key area and it would come at significant cost to the government if we were to see a decline. It is good to see JP numbers going up. I am just wondering how other areas in that legal fraternity are performing.

Ms Thomson: Yes, we are seeing an upward trend in the number of volunteers applying for a blue card and clearing blue card checks. For the financial years 2019-20 to 2023-24, the number of blue cards increased from 123,895 with a 92 per cent clearance rate to 155,184 with a 98 per cent clearance rate. That shows a slight increase in the number of applicants and clearance rates, so people getting through the system and successfully getting a blue card.

Mr HEALY: How long does it take to get a blue card?

Ms Thomson: As I said as part of my opening statement, for the vast majority of people who do not have any criminal history and do not have any information of concern it is an average of two business days. The vast majority of people apply online. We have very good feedback in terms of our online system. When people have criminal history, that does not necessarily mean that they do not get a blue card, but what it does mean is that we engage with them in a process underpinned by natural justice and they get the opportunity to respond. It depends on, I guess, the nature of their history, the complexity of it and then there is a process of, as I say, engaging with that applicant to work through the system and make a decision about whether or not they should be eligible for a blue card. Some complex matters can take several months. Less complex matters can be a couple of weeks. It really depends on the nature of the application that is in front of us.

Ms BOYD: In relation to term of reference 8, you refer in your submission to the important contribution of First Nations volunteers with respect to the community justice groups that operate in community. One of the things that previous parliaments have focused on is how we can encourage more First Nations volunteers to obtain blue cards to be able to participate more in their communities. Can you inform the committee about improvements that have been made in that space and what supports are currently in place or will be rolled out to First Nations communities to lift the rate of blue cards obtained?

Ms Thomson: Blue Card Services has a dedicated team, including identified officers, who work closely with First Nations communities to provide culturally appropriate, tailored support to enable those applicants to attain blue cards. This team visits regional and remote communities right across the state to provide in-person assistance to applicants and those organisations. There is also a lot of engagement with local councils and interagencies and we often go to the muster events that happen throughout Queensland. Support is also available via a dedicated First Nations phone line and email address and also through MS Teams, so we have lots of different platforms for people to meet them where they are at in terms of supporting them through the blue card system.

We have tailored resources for First Nations communities. We have a great podcast called *Yarn with Jess*, which is all about making it really accessible for people to understand the blue card system. I would like to inform the committee particularly about what we call our BCLO process, which is our blue card liaison officers, who are specifically based in Yarrabah and on Palm Island. It is culturally appropriate support given by the community for the community to assist organisations to navigate the blue card system to better understand the blue card system requirements. We also connect with community for other government services, for example, Transport and Main Roads. The Yarrabah BCLO also has a justice of the peace certification process which enables her to also witness documents, so it is kind of like a one-stop shop, if you like, for people in community.

I do not have the specific data on me at the moment, but we have had a very positive engagement with both of those communities in terms of being able to navigate through and get some great outcomes and help people to engage in the process so that they get a blue card for all sorts of reasons, including employment and kinship care.

Ms BOYD: Is that something you are willing to take on notice and come back to the committee with?

Ms Thomson: Yes, absolutely, we can come back with some data on that.

CHAIR: How long would you need? We are generally asking for responses to questions taken on notice by about 30 May. Will you need longer?

Ms Thomson: No, Chair, we should be able to provide that data to you fairly expeditiously.

CHAIR: There was another question on notice regarding civil liability.

Mr HEALY: I am the member for Cairns. For a lot of the regions to the north and to the west of us, getting a blue card is a challenge, particularly in First Nations communities. We are obviously not looking at making changes to blue cards. From your perspective—and I am asking for a collective point of view—what can make it easier? People come up to me and talk about how long it takes and about their frustration. When we look at incarceration and juvenile crime issues, unfortunately that is a real issue. Are you seeing an easier way that it could be dealt with and government could do something about it?

Ms Thomson: As I said before, I think what we see in our BCLO project is that really strong local engagement is very helpful. Part of it is taking away the scariness of trying to navigate the system and having that locally based, culturally safe and appropriate service for First Nations communities but also for others. One of the things Blue Card Services is very committed to is improving our outreach and our community engagement. For example, I think there is a very positive role for us to play in engaging with the organisations that engage the volunteers. Recently our blue card team held an information session with Volunteering Queensland, for example. We have engaged with Surf Life Saving Queensland. We have engaged with Scouts Queensland.

We are always looking for opportunities to get out and about and to support those organisations, to help them help their volunteers to navigate their way through the system. We are always looking for inroads and new products. Some things that work for some groups do not work for others, such as webinars in remote Queensland. Obviously getting to every corner of this very big, diverse state is difficult, so we are looking at how we can do webinars and podcasts and provide the right resources. We are always grateful for feedback from community so we can improve resources for them.

Mr HEALY: There is a set criteria. Having webinars and getting the information out to those organisations is great, but the rules do not change, do they? At the end of the day, these are the rules and guidelines. You are talking about further engagement, but I was talking about the flexibility. I am sorry if I did not make that clear. Is there flexibility?

Ms Thomson: There is eligibility criteria that we apply across the board. If somebody has a disqualifying offence, there is a process of a negative notice and a back and forth. We also work very hard to assist businesses to not overcomply with blue card. Sometimes people apply for blue cards—I am not just talking volunteers here; I am talking more generally—when a blue card is not required because they do not fall into an area of regulated employment. Assisting the community to understand when they do not need a blue card is just as important as them understanding when they do need one and the process they need to go through. Sometimes I think blue card is overcomplied with and actually not required. People are getting themselves involved in the process to assist them when they do not need to. There are other ways they can manage the risks.

CHAIR: Thank you very much to all the representatives of the Department of Justice. Your presentation today has been very good. Thank you.

HERRING, Ms Kirsten, Deputy Director-General, Arts Queensland, Department of Education

STEVENSON, Ms Hayley, Assistant Director-General, Student Support, Department of Education

CHAIR: Thank you both for your appearance. Would you like to make an opening statement? Then the committee will probably have some questions for you.

Ms Herring: Thank you for having Hayley and me here today. It is lovely to see a number of you whom I have met before and who are very well aware of volunteering in arts events and arts organisations across the state. I will also be speaking on behalf of the Department of Education in my opening address. First of all, I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet and of course acknowledge the members of the committee.

I will speak on behalf of Education first. Certainly volunteers play a valuable role and are always welcome at Queensland state schools. They assist in school tuckshops—many of us have worked in those school tuckshops. They provide additional support for school excursions. They help out in classrooms with reading support and on the sporting field with coaching, umpiring and other duties. They are involved in school parent associations and assist in the organisation of fetes and other school events.

The number of volunteers in Queensland state schools changes daily, clearly in line with school activities, events and opportunities. Those volunteers work in a very flexible environment. P&Cs Qld has reported to the department that there are over 58,000 volunteers across more than 1,200 affiliated P&C associations and that collectively those volunteers and P&C associations spend over one million hours volunteering in Queensland state schools each year. That is just the state school sector. It does not really cover what also happens in the kindergarten or C&K sector or what happens in private schools. We know that volunteers extend right across all of those institutions.

More broadly for arts, we know that volunteers make valuable contributions across all levels of the state's arts and culture sector. Arts Queensland, as the administrative agency for the arts, has a number of arts statutory bodies that actually hang off Arts Queensland and report through to the minister. That includes the Queensland Performing Arts Centre, the Queensland Art Gallery, the State Library, the Queensland Museum and the Queensland Theatre. All of those arts statutory bodies deliver activities that rely on volunteers for often festival events, writing festivals, children's festivals and so forth. There is a very active volunteer network through the statutory bodies.

We also fund arts organisations right across the state in addition to all the events and festivals we fund. I think Arts Queensland funds around 80 organisations in four-year funding contracts right across Queensland, from South-East Queensland all the way to the cape. Across those 80 arts organisations alone, there are a number of volunteers who work very actively. Arts Queensland itself, through the Minister for the Arts and the Lord Mayor, is responsible for the Brisbane Festival. The Brisbane Festival itself recruits, trains and has hundreds of volunteers to deliver their four-week festival every year.

We estimate that in Arts Queensland around 8,300 volunteers work within the not-for-profit art sector that we are fundamentally responsible for. We have noted that, while Queensland is sort of growing philanthropy in the arts—which we need; it cannot be all about government funding—we are finding that volunteering is going down slightly. We are seeing that that is probably likely to be a post-COVID challenge that the sector is now negotiating. We are obviously very interested in finding ways that we can actually increase volunteer hours back into the arts.

I think that is probably enough from me at this stage. I think it was two to three minutes. I am sure we will touch on some of the other matters I had in my opening address anyway, so I am happy to stop there.

CHAIR: Thank you. Deputy Chair, would you like to ask a question?

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: Obviously there is quite a broad range between education and the arts. My questions in the first instance will be mostly related to education, particularly with volunteers in the P&C space. There are a couple of issues. One is around insurance and the cost of insurance. I am interested to understand more about how that relationship with Marsh insurance has been established. How do we know we are getting bang for buck with that insurer, given that insurance is one of those issues that affects volunteer organisations across the state? Also, in terms of the number of claims—although you may not have that information—are there many claims compared to cost of the insurance premiums that are paid?

Ms Stevenson: I understand that you have experience in some P&C associations and so you have that knowledge. You are right: P&Cs Qld has three insurance policies. There is the general property insurance policy and the combined general and products liability insurance policy. They cover P&Cs and their members. There is the personal accident insurance policy for the voluntary workers—those who carry out voluntary work on behalf of the P&C. They also have \$25 million public liability insurance and workers compensation insurance. I do not have the number of claims. If that was of interest, I could certainly see if I can get that information for you. The department actually has an agreement with P&Cs Qld where we cover the personal accident insurance premiums for volunteers. That premium is around \$36,000. The department actually covers that for P&Cs Qld.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: The other question I have is around P&Cs Qld and the cost to individual P&Cs to have that membership and access all of those resources to support them navigating quite complex accounting manuals, legislation et cetera.

Ms Stevenson: I do not have with me the P&Cs Qld amount that they charge. Perhaps that is a question the P&Cs Qld president would be able to address and provide to you. We provide funding to P&Cs Qld—around \$380,000—to support their operations as well as provide a position of a service manager to assist in that work and providing materials. I have seen the accounting manual and there is quite a lot that is new. It is quite complex and there is a lot of legislation that our P&Cs have to comply with. I know that we do have resources and materials to assist, but I do not have the information to hand as to the amount of money that every individual P&C pays to be a part of P&Cs Qld.

Mr BOOTHMAN: My question relates to P&Cs and schools. I go and see my P&Cs regularly and participate. Over the years, more and more staff members have been taking up those roles as the number of parents unfortunately started to dwindle. What information does the department get from P&Cs about concerns when it comes to red tape, how we can attract new individuals to participate in P&Cs and how we can retain them?

Ms Stevenson: I see that the P&Cs Qld submission has some ideas around how they can retain or attract more membership and more volunteers. I noted that, while there has been an increase of nine per cent in the number of volunteers, the amount of time they are able to give is reduced. I see in their submission a real focus on red tape. You are probably aware that the Department of Education currently has a very strong focus on reducing red tape. I think there would be an opportunity there for us to reduce the amount of time volunteers need to spend on completing the forms and all of those administrative duties associated with volunteering and therefore maximise their time. I know that the team is looking at how we can streamline those processes. Once the red-tape reduction action plan and report is released, there may be opportunities for us to digitise some of those processes so that we can reduce the administrative burden.

We have a really strong relationship with P&Cs Qld, though. I am in regular contact with the president. Those matters are matters that we are able to continue to talk about. We certainly take on board their feedback and will see what opportunities we have to address those issues that are raised.

Mr HEALY: Ms Stevenson, you just made a comment about reducing red tape. I understand about efficiencies and that you have to be thorough in how you do things. Can you give us some examples of what red tape you are reducing? Can you give us some examples of red tape that you have identified?

Ms Stevenson: In general or in relation to P&Cs?

Mr HEALY: Not just in relation to P&Cs. I know there is a push across a range of areas to reduce red tape. If you want to be specific about P&Cs or any other areas, that would be fine.

Ms Stevenson: A number of areas have been identified where we can move from, for example, paper copies and filling in paper forms to looking at how we can enhance our digital capacity not only for our P&Cs but also for our staff to be able to integrate all of our online platforms. We have a number of different platforms. They are looking at how we can create efficiencies in those platforms.

Some of the amendments in the bill that was before the House amending the E(GP)A were about reducing some of the administrative burden. One of them was for P&Cs to be able to fundraise for a particular cause outside of their own school. There are some enrolment processes that will be streamlined—for example, enrolment in our special schools. If the child and family moved and wanted to enrol in another school, they would need to complete a whole new enrolment process that required documentation such as assessments from medical practitioners et cetera. That will be streamlined so that one application would apply across any and all schools.

Also, we are looking at what elements are taking up our teachers' time during the day and seeing if we can streamline some of those processes, like applications to get access to IT programs and platforms. We want to make sure that programs are safe and that we protect student and staff information, so there need to be those checks around the quality of the programs. At the moment it is quite a time-consuming process for teachers to apply to use a particular software program—like Reading Eggs or something like that. We are certainly looking at those sorts of things.

Mr HEALY: This is more of a statement than anything, but when we take into account that we are really challenged in a number of areas across not just the state but nationally when it comes to volunteering, if we look at the demographic who is volunteering it is usually the older people. Older people find digital engagement highly challenging. I just make the note that I think we need to be really cautious in that space, but I understand that it does increase efficiencies.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: One of the areas that I have seen is the increased workload on a principal in supporting P&Cs and being able to help them to manage their day-to-day work, particularly around student risk prevention and risk management plans for P&C-led events. Has there been any identification of that at a departmental level and are there opportunities for improving support for P&Cs to reduce their workload or to assist them with some of those regulatory requirements in that space?

Ms Stevenson: That is certainly something we are looking at—particularly, as you said, the assessment forms in general around risk assessment and the need to balance guarding against risk with the paperwork involved. I think schools are in a unique situation where they are responsible for the care of all of their students. That balance of student safety versus the risk is a difficult one, but that has certainly been a focus. Do we need to have a look at our risk appetite and the risk lens and is there a way we can make that more efficient without compromising safety? It is a tricky balance of those two elements.

CHAIR: Thank you very much, Ms Stevenson and Ms Herring, for your appearance today. I understand that you have taken on notice a question regarding insurance payouts associated with P&Cs. Would you be able to provide us with a response to that by close of business on 30 May?

Ms Stevenson: Yes.

CHAIR: That would be great. Thank you very much. That concludes today's hearing. I thank everyone who has participated today. I particularly thank our staff: our Hansard reporters and our inquiry secretary and assistant secretary for all of the work they do to make this possible. I declare this public hearing closed.

The committee adjourned at 12.45 pm.