



LOCAL GOVERNMENT, SMALL BUSINESS AND CUSTOMER SERVICE COMMITTEE

Members present:

Mr JP Lister MP—Chair
Mr AJ Baillie MP
Mr MA Boothman MP
Hon. ML Furner MP
Mrs ME Nightingale MP

Staff present:

Ms K Guthrie—Inquiry Secretary

PUBLIC HEARING—INQUIRY INTO VOLUNTEERING IN QUEENSLAND

TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS

Tuesday, 25 March 2025

Gympie

TUESDAY, 25 MARCH 2025

The committee met at 12.17 pm.

CHAIR: Good morning, everyone. I declare today's public hearing in Gympie open for our inquiry into volunteering in Queensland. I am James Lister and I am the member for Southern Downs and chair of this committee. With me today are: the member for Townsville, Adam Baillie; the member for Theodore on the Gold Coast, Mark Boothman; the member for Inala, Margie Nightingale, who is also the deputy chair; and also joining us is the Hon. Mark Furner, the member for Ferny Grove, who is standing in for the member for Lytton. It is great to have you here today, Mark.

The hearing is a proceeding of the Queensland parliament and is subject to the parliament's standing rules and orders. Only the committee and invited witnesses may participate in 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.

In line with general rules relating to parliamentary proceedings, I remind witnesses to please refrain from using unparliamentary language such as swearing or offensive terms, even if you are quoting material or someone else. That is because everything is being recorded and made into a transcript for posterity. That is why we have to keep it parliamentary.

Media may be present and are subject to the committee's media rules and my direction at all times. You may be filmed or photographed during the proceedings and images may also appear on the parliament's website or social media pages. I ask everyone to put your mobile phones on to silent for the duration of our hearing.

We were to have the Gympie Regional Council, but they are not here yet. I would like to call forward Mr Justin Choveaux representing the Queensland Rural Fire Brigades Association.

CHOVEAUX, Mr Justin, General Manager, Rural Fire Brigades Association Queensland

CHAIR: Would you like to give us a presentation and then the committee will have some questions for you.

Mr Choveaux: Thank you. I have a written statement. I would like to thank the committee for allowing me to appear before it today. Once there was a fire and a group of people came to put it out. Then a community meeting, where these same people agreed to form a rural fire brigade, was held. In that meeting a faith community was formed, an unincorporated association that was equally owned by all of its members.

This association then wrote to the head of the fire service department board asking to be a registered rural fire brigade. This is the conception story of almost all brigades: they self-form to meet local needs, supplied by local people who put their time, money, expertise and their bodies on the line. In this model, the brigade had primacy. The service department board existed to support each individual community fire brigade with training, support and equipment, and each brigade agreed to abide by a wide set of terms and conditions to maintain their registration. In Queensland, you have a broad church of brigade models. Being the most decentralised state, we have diverse communities that are reflected in a diverse variety of rural fire brigades. This is unlike the state created models of other agencies.

In 2018 we—the RFBAQ and QFES—went and saw brigade leaders from across Queensland in relation to their legal status. The overwhelming answer from the top to the bottom of Queensland was that brigades were comfortable with their legal status and wanted to keep a simple legal structure that allowed them to function effectively. Brigades wanted to keep their unincorporated status. If I may, I would like to supply attachment 1 as a document for the committee.

CHAIR: Leave is granted.

Mr Choveaux: This status allowed them financial independence for the brigades with bank accounts, the ability to seek financial support from their local governments through a rural fire levy and to raise money from their community to buy equipment and fund their operations. This third-party

status was clearly stated by Crown Law advice and was recognised by the fire service, so much so the fire service had brigades register their own equipment separate to that provided by the state and covered it differently for insurance and disposal. Crown Law's advice states—

Equipment provided or subsidised by the director-general remains the property of the state and may be repossessed. Section 84 does not apply to all the equipment of a rural fire brigade. Accordingly, if the group of persons comprising the brigade purchases equipment from funds they have raised themselves, that equipment would not be property of the state under section 84. It would remain the property of the group of persons and would be held by them in accordance with the rules of the brigade. The brigade can deal with that property as it decides provided it is not inconsistent with the brigade rules.

I would like to tender that Crown Law advice document, too, if I may.

CHAIR: Leave is granted.

Mr Choveaux: This document goes into brigade ownership and equipment and funds in detail. It is well worth a read from start to finish. Brigade bank accounts all administered by the unincorporated association for the benefit of the local community are the same.

The QFD that was formed by the new legislation of last year asserts that now all this equipment that was owned by the members of the unincorporated association and was funded by local government, donated community money or gifted to the brigade by the RFBAQ is now owned by the state. This was not the agreed contract as entered into by local government or donors. The QFD also asserts that the 1,400 unincorporated associations are no more and that brigade bank accounts cannot have funds deposited into them and the brigade accounts are now the responsibility of the signatories and not the brigades as the association has been dissolved. This is my final document, if I may table document 3 supporting that.

CHAIR: Leave is granted.

Mr Choveaux: Over the years the fire service department has made statements that were not supported in law and this now may be another instance of unenforceable bureaucratic overreach. When a functioning association is wound up, it is done so by its members with any equipment distributed to clubs or associations with like goals and any money, like council money, is returned to council. In 1,400 instances this did not happen. The property of the unincorporated association, I suggest, remains the property of that group of persons and that the QFD attempt at ownership is questionable.

The actions of the QFD last year are also in contravention of section 24 of the Human Rights Act 2019, which states—

... All persons have the right to own property alone or in association with others.

... A person must not be arbitrarily deprived of the person's property.

You cannot get more arbitrary than the QFD commissioner saying all 1,400 unincorporated associations are dissolved and he now owns all their things. These actions and the new legislation clearly show the disdain that the centralised bureaucracy has for the community raised and led groups.

In reading the over 500 submissions to this committee that are online it would seem that rural fire is not Robinson Crusoe in removing autonomy and centralising command and control and asserting ownership. This cult of compliance has also seen true consultation scrapped and replaced with an appointed council. If the appointed council had existed earlier, there would be no equal cancer coverage for all firefighters as the fire service was against that; there would be no extra RFSQ staff, no defibrillators on trucks, no bushfire mapping tablets, no crew deluge systems, no P3 masks, no red and blue flashing lights, no fuel and maintenance, and many other improvements would not have happened.

Can rural fire turn around? Yes. The Fire Department is just a thing; it is a tool. It is created to provide support to those who do hazard reduction burning, preparation, community education and respond to fire and other operational incidents. If the tool is not working or it is not fit for purpose, then manufacture one that is. The difficulty is the social licence the Fire Department has inherited on the back of generations of firefighters that makes government reticent to instigate fundamental change—separate. Rural fire and fire and rescue are sociologically different. Give rural fire separation. Return the rural fire's board that gives non-operational direction to the chief officer and oversees policy and budget. Have rural fire report directly to the fire minister with an established place in government and separate legislation.

Ensure that rural fire has access to adequate funding. Volunteers defending 93 per cent of Queensland is the best return on investment any government is going to get. In the interim and to commence this journey, I suggest appointing a director-general to control the QFD, with fire and

rescue and Rural Fire Service Queensland reporting to them. Have the director-general investigate and audit the waste and other historical allegations in QFD. As outlined in our written submission, amend the bad and divisive fire legislation ahead of fire season. Is there an opportunity for a general empowerment of emergency volunteers? Yes, it is the Emergency Volunteer Respect Act, again as outlined in our written submission.

Volunteers are not worthless; they are priceless. With the disasters experienced in Queensland so far this year we will not just need to keep every volunteer we have, but we will need to recruit and keep many more. Again, I would like to thank the committee for the opportunity of allowing me to present today.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: I note that in the submission the graph showing the brigade membership shows the decline from approximately 35,000 volunteers to 28,000 since 2016. What do you suggest is a contributing factor to that? What have they told you—the members who have left? Why have they told you they have left?

Mr Choveaux: There was a tidy up of the books before those numbers started and we were at a high of about 40,000. I found a lot of people who had passed away or were not interested anymore. One of the greatest instant demises we saw of brigade membership was through the blue card—the reaction to that. Whether or not you support blue card, it is about how it was handled by the fire service, which is fit in or leave. At the beginning of the conversation we had at the beginning of 2019—and blue card goes back to 2014. Prior to that every couple of years the director-general wrote to Blue Card Services and said—it was not called Blue Card Services then—‘Is there a requirement for the extension of a white card’, at that time, ‘to firefighters?’ Every two years they would get correspondence back saying, ‘It does not need to be extended to firefighters,’ so it was not.

Then in November 2014 the then commissioner, Katarina Carroll, wrote and said, ‘I have concerns in relation to whether the blue card needs to be extended to the QFES.’ They said, ‘If you are concerned we are also concerned,’ and so then advice was sought. The advice was that they believed because the fire service was providing a health service, therefore it also needed to provide a blue card. Then the fire service did nothing for 4½ years. They did not know how to deal with it. Then in January 2019 they approached us and said, ‘This is what we want to bring in.’ We said, ‘We don’t believe that it is a requirement, but if you believe you want to do it, please don’t do it this way.’ Their plan was: get a blue card or we will sack the volunteers. We told the fire service, ‘You can’t actually sack a volunteer because they are a member of that unincorporated association.’

The very adversarial and nasty way it was rolled out got a lot of people’s backs up. Also, a lot of people did not believe it was necessary. We went to the fire service and also the government at the time and said, ‘If you want to achieve this policy outcome, we believe there is a better way of doing it.’ They did not want to hear any of that. I believe the numbers we lost through blue card would be in the region of 9,000 people. That can be borne out by the monthly reports given by the fire service—broken down by each region and area by fire and rescue, rural fire, SES and the department—of who had it, who did not have it and then the declining numbers of membership. That has been offset probably by about 4,000 or 5,000 new people joining the fire service which is fantastic.

The difficulty for the fire service as an organisation is that where the people are joining is not necessarily where we lost them. We are getting really good participation on the coast and the coastal fringe with high-population densities because people are seeing rural fire as a way of supporting their community for all hazards because rural fire brigades have a very broad ability to defend their community, but we have lost a lot of people in the west and the central west and the more rural areas which, combined with a declining population, is really hurting those areas.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: If I can clarify, you feel that the blue card had an impact from 2019 onwards—

Mr Choveaux: Yes.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: Although it did attract some additional people, they were not attracted in the areas where you lost them. In the period between 2016 and 2019, what do you think contributed to the loss of volunteers prior to blue card being enacted?

Mr Choveaux: Prior to blue card coming in, regionalisation in 2018 upset a lot of people. I think a lot of it was the tidy up. The fire service said, ‘We have a lot of people on the books.’

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: There were a number of people on the books who really were not on the books.

Mr Choveaux: Yes. You have that with a lot of volunteer organisations. A lot of volunteers do not resign; they just fade away. You write to them or the brigade will try to contact them or contact their families and they have moved on or passed away.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: What would that number be, if you could make an estimate?

Mr Choveaux: It would have been a few thousand from the tidy up, most certainly. Then we saw another peak with the renewal of blue card, when people started to get blue cards in 2020, in numbers. Then in 2023 when we saw the renewal of the three-year blue card we saw another spike of people leaving.

Mr BOOTHMAN: From reading your submission you talk heavily about centralised bureaucracy and the effect that that is having on your volunteers. Can you give some examples of what your volunteers are saying to you as an organisation about what is happening with the centralised control?

Mr Choveaux: The major things that affect brigade members are training, trucks, PPE and things like that. New fire brigade trucks have not been rolled out in numbers for many years now. The trucks that are being rolled out have had no volunteer input in the production of them. In terms of training, we used to have a crew leader course. The crew leader course was rewritten about 4½ to five years ago. I do not think there have been any full crew leader courses rolled out in the last four or five years. That is core business for rural fire—being able to get people to go from firefighter to firefighter advanced to crew leader to be able to go out and safely move a number of trucks around a fire ground and do it safely for both the firefighters and the community. Rural Fire was a case of previously some things did not work here or some things did not work there and some things did not work well. Now everything has stopped.

Mr BOOTHMAN: Is there an issue to do with training courses? Is it hard to get into training courses? Is it too limited? Could you elaborate?

Mr Choveaux: In terms of training courses, just up the road in Maryborough there have been brigades waiting for over three years to have firefighter minimum skills rolled out. We have brigade training support officers and area training support officers. Under the new scheme of the Rural Fire Service in the Queensland Fire Department, those jobs have been changed to area support officers and brigade support officers who do not roll out training anymore. There is an expectation that brigade volunteers go and get cert IVs and train themselves. While we have had a doubling of the number of staff within Rural Fire, the amount of support that brigades directly get from the Rural Fire Service has declined markedly.

We also had RFSOs who were casual trainers. Casual trainers were very good. In a region you would have one FTE and you could break that up into a number of areas of casual people. There would be a casual person in Mackay who was very good at doing chainsaw. There would be a casual person in Mackay who would be very good at doing some other form of training. What would happen is that the Mackay area office would get that casual trainer, who was a brigade member, to go and train the brigades in their speciality of what they are very good at. In this new uplift, all of those RFSO roles, those casual trainers, have been dissolved and they have now put on one full-time FTE. That full-time FTE is now in Townsville. They are not a casual person in Mackay. They have to drive four hours down to Mackay and four hours back to Townsville. There is a day of no training being done. Then there is accommodation and other costs. While we have many more staff, the practicality of training being rolled out has diminished.

Also—and this information is a couple of weeks old—there was one permanent area training officer in the whole of the northern region. The Mackay area office has an inspector and admin. It does not have a BTSO. It does not have an ATSO. The Charters Towers office has an inspector and I think it has one ATSO. There are so many officer positions—frontline hubs of connection between your inspector and inspector staff and the brigades—that are just not staffed. We have a whole new level of bureaucracy that was created under the uplift, and that is called the assistant chief officer—a role that never existed before. We have created a new level of senior bureaucracy in Rural Fire. Everyone has taken a promotion and we have drained the front end where the brigades get training support from their paid staff.

Mr FURNER: Thank you, Mr Choveaux, for the work you do. I was a previous volunteer myself with a rural fire brigade not too far from the CBD of Brisbane.

Mr Choveaux: Samford.

Mr FURNER: I understand the challenges. I am reminiscing, hearing some of the comments you have made. I enjoyed your lead-in commentary in your submission that managing brigades and volunteers is like trying to muster cats. Nevertheless, it is always a challenge in terms of volunteers

because volunteers in general are not paid, are they? Despite that, I do note in some of the submissions to this inquiry that I have read that there is a desire by some—only a minority—that volunteers should be paid. Do you have a view on that?

Mr Choveaux: I do and it is a changing view. Brigade volunteers have said in the past they want to get some form of income or some form of payment. Every couple of years I take that to the annual general meeting in front of the whole state executive where they all talk about it and they say, 'No. That's not what volunteering is all about.' Volunteering reflects what people want and more people are saying what you are saying.

Mr FURNER: Sorry, it is not what I am saying. It is in the submissions I have read.

Mr Choveaux: It is what you have raised. There was a federal review that came out recently and that was a key part of that as well. I think what a number of volunteers are saying is now changing. If we are a representative organisation that is representing volunteers, we need to listen to them and we need to come up with a way to possibly satisfy that. The SES has a facility where they give their group leaders a stipend each year. That is to cover any costs that they may incur in their volunteering. The tax office does not see that as income and it is not taken as income. Fire wardens under the Fire Services Act have the facility to be reimbursed for any costs. If volunteering is something communities do and that is what volunteers and people in communities are starting to talk about, we need to take it seriously and see whether we can turn their policy desires into a reality that can be managed and give the outcome that is desired.

Mr FURNER: In your opening statement, you mentioned adequate funding. I note the department when they appeared before the committee in Brisbane indicated they have \$2.4 million over five years. No doubt that is to assist, I imagine, with working through this inquiry but also to assist volunteers. Would that be adequate funding to assist in your desires as a volunteer yourself?

Mr Choveaux: Is that the department?

Mr FURNER: The unit within the department has indicated they have \$2.4 million over five years. Is that adequate funding in your opinion?

Mr Choveaux: I did not know they had it. They do not talk to us anymore.

Mr FURNER: This is Volunteering Australia. It is not under the auspices of the fire department.

Mr BOOTHMAN: That has nothing to do with the rural fire brigade.

Mr Choveaux: I have not heard from Volunteering Queensland since Mara was the chairperson.

CHAIR: That concludes the time for the presentation by the Rural Fire Brigade Association Queensland. Thank you, Mr Choveaux.

STARK, Ms Andree, Manager, Community and Commercial Services, Gympie Regional Council

STENGL, Ms Alex, Director, Community Sustainability, Gympie Regional Council

CHAIR: I welcome Ms Andree Stark, who is the Manager of Community and Commercial Services for the Gympie Regional Council.

Ms Stark: May I please pass on our apologies. We thought we were in the 12.35 pm timeslot. I do apologise.

CHAIR: That is fine. Thank you.

Ms Stark: I do have my colleague Director Alex Stengl with me today. Is she able to join me at the table?

CHAIR: Yes, please come forward, Ms Stengl.

Ms Stark: We would also like to acknowledge that we have Councillor Milne and Councillor Warnes here with us today from Gympie Regional Council.

CHAIR: You are most welcome, councillors. Would you like to make a brief presentation to the committee? After that we will have some questions for you.

Ms Stengl: For the committee's benefit, I would like to explain that we have a corporate plan, and volunteering is part of that plan. At council that is the mechanism for us to help support the community in volunteering. I will hand over to my colleague Andree Stark. She deals with the community and volunteering through her portfolio.

Ms Stark: As Alex outlined, at the very corporate level, our councillors have endorsed a plan for the next five years and in that it talks about council's role in the livability of our region and ensuring we have strong communities and connected communities. One way of doing that is obviously offering support to community organisations and volunteers. For the inquiry today, I would like to outline some of the ways we do that.

One is through financial assistance. That can take the form of both cash and in kind. That is predominantly through our community grants program which we provide twice a year—two rounds a year—and a rolling grant. That is for activities such as environmental, sporting and cultural activities. Many of the groups in the room with us today have been recipients of those grants. Obviously those community organisations are very much volunteer-based organisations.

The other ways that we provide financial assistance is in kind. That is through the maintenance of sporting fields, for example, that volunteer organisations use and the maintenance of our community halls and community facilities. We also provide some in-kind use of our venues such as our civic centre and pavilion. We also provide sponsorship for community events such as the Goomeri Pumpkin Festival, GourMay et cetera. Financial assistance is a key way in which the council supports volunteers. We also undertake skills development. That is through training and support programs for topics such as governance, project planning and financial planning.

Importantly, we provide recognition in the volunteering space. That recognition is through key events such as the Australia Day awards and senior citizens awards. We have particular categories which really do lean into volunteering, such as the Community Event of the Year and the Community Group of the Year. In terms of celebrating volunteering, we have also made some videos recently highlighting groups, such as our walking groups and the Heart Foundation. We also made a video around the SES and emergency services, recognising the incredible contribution that they play in our community. Those videos were also done as a way of recruiting new volunteers, if you like.

The other opportunity that council undertakes in volunteering is around promotion. There is a National Volunteer Week every day—sorry, not every day; every year. Volunteers work every day but there is one week in the year where we especially do shout-outs for our community volunteers.

A critical role that councils can also play is around information provision. We have a newsletter called the *Community InfoShare*, whereby we share volunteer organisation events and activities as a way of helping to promote what they are doing and also assisting recruitment. It is also a way for us to flag grants through Volunteering Queensland or other grant bodies. We have what we call a community photocopying scheme. There is not so much of a take-up now, given we have moved a lot more to digital, but in the past photocopying was an expense that volunteer groups needed help with, so we still provide that for the community.

Given this opportunity, we would like to acknowledge the incredible work that volunteers do in disaster management. Obviously, council plays a key role with the state government in the disaster management framework, and that would not be possible without the work of volunteers, the SES and the likes of the rural fire brigade.

I would also like to acknowledge the role that volunteers play in tourism for Gympie Regional Council. A lot of volunteers work in our volunteer information centres but also run community events such as the Goomeri Pumpkin Festival, Kilkivan Great Horse Ride and GourMay. Those volunteers, by virtue of their unpaid work, are attracting visitors to our region. Volunteers play a really vital part in our community. I understand representatives of the Rattler are here today as well. Through their work, the volunteers at the Rattler are bringing visitors to our region, and they would be lost without their volunteers as well.

That is our outward facing support for, and recognition of, volunteers, if you like. Council, as an organisation itself, supports volunteering through providing staff with two days per year to do volunteer work within the community. That is a new initiative for our council. We are still boosting that and trying to encourage staff to undertake those opportunities.

Finally, we are a volunteer involving organisation in that we have volunteers at our libraries, at our visitor information centres and at our regional gallery. Hopefully that has given you a bit of a snapshot of our volunteering scope and support. We are obviously happy to take any questions.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: Thank you for coming in today to share with us your submission and to answer some questions. I am interested in the two-day volunteering opportunity that your council provides for your staff. Have you seen a good take-up of that? If so, are they people who are new to volunteering or are they people who are already volunteering in other organisations?

Ms Stark: I actually checked with our HR team this morning on this one. As I said, it is a relatively new initiative. The uptake has been limited, I will be frank, for a couple of reasons. We have found that it works when a particular business unit organises it on behalf of the team and does it as somewhat of a team-building and giving back activity. We have done two sessions with OzHarvest and they have been well supported.

We believe—and we need to check this—that people who are already volunteering in community organisations can simply take a day off and go and work with an existing organisation. We did reach out to Gympie Medical Transport because we have people in our organisation who can drive, but you need more than two days to do a proper induction, get the right licences in place and undertake those processes.

For us, it is about thinking how we need to craft this program to benefit our community whilst not being a burden to volunteer organisations by saying, 'Here are 10 people. Please supervise them for the day.' That is not ideal either. It is still a learning process for us and we are happy to work with Volunteering Queensland and others to get some clues around how to do it well.

Mr BAILLIE: Thank you both for attending today. I commend you and the council for the effort that you are putting in to acknowledging the value that volunteering brings to our communities. Providing financial assistance, resource assistance, recognition and promotion assistance goes a long way to helping the volunteers. How many resources is council putting in to support the local volunteer organisations and their efforts?

Ms Stark: Predominantly that is done through our Community Development Team, which is a team of three full-time staff. Their work is largely in that community services space. One FTE would be helping volunteer organisations and supporting volunteer activities. The rest of the team is also involved in broader social issues such as housing and homelessness, youth work and seniors work. Whilst they all have an interface with volunteers, if I had to put a number on it, it is probably about one FTE.

Mr BAILLIE: Thank you.

Mr BOOTHMAN: How do you recognise your volunteers? Do you do any special events? Can you elaborate on that?

Ms Stark: In terms of council's own volunteers?

Mr BOOTHMAN: Yes, and when it comes to disaster events and things like that.

Ms Stark: Sure. I will go to the galleries first and then I might do disaster management, if that is all right. We have a regional art gallery. We have a small number of volunteers, as does our library as well. One of our regular activities would be hosting morning teas. A core part of volunteering is also the social element and feeling part of the team.

We also organise bus tours sometimes down to Brisbane to take the volunteers to major exhibitions or other galleries. Because our volunteers are there to enhance the experience of visitors to our galleries, it is a skills development opportunity. It is also a social activity and a form of reward and recognition. We recognise years of service—give thankyou for their years of service. During National Volunteer Week, we do activities as well. It depends on place to place.

Mr BOOTHMAN: Have you found that by doing that you are retaining those volunteers and potentially getting more? What are your feelings on that?

Ms Stark: Yes is the answer. In a more general sense, if I could, COVID really impacted our volunteer numbers. Volunteering was not possible during COVID, and it took a while to get volunteers to come back after COVID. Many of our volunteers are 60-plus years old, so there were health implications around that. We have had to work more proactively to actually retain our volunteers and really value the work that they do in our organisation.

Mr BOOTHMAN: When it comes to disaster situations, how does the council coordinate with volunteer groups and sum up what actually transpired so you can keep volunteers on side et cetera?

Ms Stark: Alex and I work specifically in the community recovery space, which often takes a lot longer than the actual response phase, as you are aware. Through the last floods back in 2022, there was a huge response. Our council recently did a bit of a celebration, if you like, for the end of recovery and we put on a big barbecue over at the Pavilion for the council workers, contractors and volunteers. That was one way of doing it.

We also do other smaller things. The video that council did around the SES and emergency services was to really elevate the significant role that they play in disaster management and to say, 'Hey, come and join in.' Wherever we can, we use council's platform to recognise people, and we are certainly open to working with Justin and other teams more to make that more possible.

Mr BOOTHMAN: I am just curious because obviously the Gympie region does have its disasters.

Ms Stark: We do have our fair share, yes.

Mr BOOTHMAN: You certainly do. You well and truly get your fair share.

CHAIR: Thank you very much for your appearance and participation. I acknowledge the other representatives of the council in the room today—it is great to have you here.

CARKEET, Ms Sally, Secretary, Gympie Medical Transport Inc.

GOODALL, Ms Beverley, President, Gympie Medical Transport Inc.

CHAIR: I would now like to welcome the representatives of Gympie Medical Transport, who are resplendent in uniform.

Ms Carkeet: Thank you, Mr Chair. I would like to invite my colleague to sit beside me as well, as she is the president of our organisation.

CHAIR: For the benefit of Hansard, could you say your name and your position?

Ms Goodall: I am Beverley Goodall. I am the President of Gympie Medical Transport.

CHAIR: Thank you. I invite you to make a presentation of a couple of minutes and then we will have some questions for you.

Ms Carkeet: Volunteers are the backbone of Queensland communities and Gympie Medical Transport are no different. We demonstrate the immense value of volunteering, particularly in Gympie, in preserving the health care of our local community. We reduce the impact of our geographic location and the lack of public transport to accessing health services that are needed by our general community that are not within this region.

Gympie Medical Transport are also an active contributor to the local economy. We work closely with car dealerships, mechanics, fuel providers and suppliers, ensuring that any grant funding that we benefit from also benefits our counterparts in the region. The dedicated network of volunteers that we have in our organisation reflects the spirit of Gympie. We are known for our volunteers and the work and funding that we do for this community has a broader impact.

Gympie Medical Transport receive no funding whatsoever. We receive all our money through very generous donations, very generous bequests, successful grant applications and very hard fundraising efforts. Gympie Medical Transport started five years ago now with two cars and 15 volunteers. Over the past four years, because of the need for the service within this community, we have grown to owning seven cars and having over 50 drivers on our books. In total, we have about 75 volunteers.

Our Gympie cars travel 1,000 kilometres per car per week. In the last financial year, Gympie volunteers contributed close to 12,000 volunteer hours to ensure our service was viable for our local community. We have gained support for our cars on a yearly basis by talking to local people in the community, local organisations and local businesses, and we display their names proudly on the rear bumper of our cars. They support the registration, the insurance, the roadside assistance and the tyre rotation. Sadly, fuel is a different matter.

Thanking volunteers is an extremely important part of our process. The founding committee of Gympie Medical Transport and the two remaining members of our current committee are very conscious of the amount of work that our volunteers do. Our volunteers can leave at 3 o'clock in the morning with a car to drive a client down to the royal Brisbane who needs to be admitted at 6.30 for surgery. There is no public transport available at all for this service.

On a yearly basis we apply for a grant that may be used for thanking our volunteers. We have been successful in the past in getting a \$5,000 grant to enable us to contribute to our volunteers at Christmas by giving them a \$100 voucher for their fuel. A lot of our volunteers do not live in the Gympie CBD. They come from areas outside that immediate area, so some of them are travelling half an hour to come in to pick up one of our cars to do some volunteering work for us, for a trip. We are very conscious of thanking our volunteers and we are very conscious of the amount of work they do for us considering there is no payment at all involved. Sadly, a lot of people within the Gympie region itself think both Bev and I are paid employees and we receive a wage or that our drivers receive a wage. No matter how we present it, 100 per cent volunteer service does not equate to no-one gets paid.

I think that is all I would like to say as an opening. I look forward to any questions. I am very proud to be part of this organisation and serve our community.

CHAIR: And rightly, too. I am sure I speak for the committee in saying that you are doing fantastic work and your dedication has not passed unnoticed.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: Thank you for coming along and thank you and your volunteers for the great work you do. As a former nurse, I know how important it is to get people to those appointments and to ensure they have the procedures and medical treatment in a timely fashion. I also know that without a way to get there, the reality is many people just would not have those procedures done or undergo that treatment. Is that your observation as well?

Ms Carkeet: It is our observation. Funnily enough, Bev and I are both ex-nurses as well. We have a number of ex-nurses who used to work with us in previous lives who are also drivers. We have certainly noticed the aging population in Gympie does not have easy access to any transport because family do not live here and it is not easy for them to get to the sites they need to go to. The majority of the trips we do are to the Sunshine Coast University Hospital, which is an enormous building in itself. When you get out of the car and you are 76 years of age, hobbling to a room on the second floor of this enormous building is quite a daunting outcome.

The other thing we found is that a lot of the elderly are now staying within the Gympie region, staying within their own homes. We think we are contributing to the continuation of their staying in Gympie and their life in Gympie because they can now access our service on a regular basis.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: I am trying to get a snapshot of where you are saving the government money. Obviously, there is in terms of health care with people getting treatment on time. Can you think of other ways? Are there other ways that your service is not just benefiting the individuals themselves but also the state?

Ms Carkeet: Keeping clients within their own communities is a huge saving not only for the clients but for the government as well. They can maintain the services they have been brought up with in the one area. In terms of the ability for this community that does not have a hospital that meets the requirements of this community, we are getting people to those appointments and those surgical appointments and the health reflects in the statistical data that may well be produced—they probably have a better health outcome because of it.

I am not sure if you are aware, but there is also a bus now available within the Gympie region, the Wishlist bus, that was started some four or five months ago. It was started with a lot of consultation with us. It is provided by Wishlist as a two-year scheme. They take clients to the SCU Hospital and to Nambour. It goes nowhere else. Sadly, all eye surgery in Gympie is done in Caloundra, which the bus does not go to. In an aging population, eye surgery is a huge area and the service does not meet that at all, nor does it go anywhere near Noosa, Buderim or any of those areas where a lot of the specialists are located. It is really only going to the Sunshine Coast University Hospital and Nambour.

When we consulted with the bus team that was putting the bus timetables together we were invited and we did give them the best of our knowledge of what we knew was needed. Having done it for the four years, we felt we were well and truly in a position to give our expertise and our experience. Sadly, that has not been listened to. They do not meet the requirements in terms of times that people need to be at the Sunshine Coast. They have a bus that runs twice a day. It goes early in the morning to Nambour and then to SCUH and then it heads back to Gympie. It then leaves again about lunchtime for an afternoon run. Sadly, what it does not consider is that some clients need individual services. They cannot even get to where the bus leaves from.

Because of the Gympie areas we cover—we cover out to Kilkivan and out to the Mary; we cover a lot of areas—our drivers go out, pick up the client, take them to their service and bring them back to their front door. There are a lot of reasons people need individual service. Being on a bus that is rocking and rolling may not be conducive to wellbeing or health. You are exposing yourself to other people's germs which, post COVID, is a really valid issue, particularly for people who are receiving radium treatment. As I said, sadly, the community are not very supportive of the bus either. We have noticed ourselves in our own information that we have gained that the bus has one or two at the most at any one time.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: Your suggestion might be that the funds would be better diverted to your organisation rather than the bus?

Ms Carkeet: That would be lovely.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: Would that be a fair suggestion?

Ms Carkeet: Can we arrange that while we are here? That would be really lovely. We did try to talk to them about joining us and helping make that happen. When it first started there was a very involved process of how people got on the bus which was just, in our opinion, ridiculous. So I wrote a letter to them and said, 'We needed to simplify this, otherwise we are not going to get anyone on the bus.' They did simplify it and it did improve slightly, but it is still not well patronised.

Mr BOOTHMAN: Thank you for being so passionate about your organisation. I can see it literally pours out of you. You were both nurses, as you alluded to before. What are the requirements for your volunteers? Are they required to have some medical training or do they need to do CPR courses or anything like that?

Ms Carkeet: That is an excellent question. Our drivers are drivers. Under our directive from the Department of Transport and Main Roads—we are registered with them and we have to follow their directives—if someone has a heart attack in the back of one of our cars, the first thing our drivers do is ring triple 0. We do not offer a medical service at all. In fact, it is very hard for our nurses who drive to do that. It is very hard because nurses tend to not want to do that. No, they do not do any medical training whatsoever. They do training for the cars and we have to meet requirements with the department. As part of that training, they are told very clearly that medical intervention is via triple 0.

Mr BOOTHMAN: How do you attract new members? How does that work? What is your methodology of going out to the community and saying, 'We are looking for drivers'? You have obviously expanded your service dramatically over the years. I am curious to see what you have done to get those people in.

Ms Carkeet: We do advertise periodically in the local *Gympie Today*. We have our website and we have our Facebook site. Our sponsors certainly talk about us. We do a lot of work with volunteer groups like Rotary and Lions and we have received a lot of our volunteers through them. We get some of our volunteers through Services Australia because they need to volunteer 15 hours per week. We get quite a few through this, which is lovely, but that is then a balancing act because they have to work and our other volunteers do not have to work. We have to balance that very carefully.

Every now and again we do a drive, a really big push, but mostly it is word of mouth. We get people who come in and say, 'You took so-and-so down to SCUH the other day and they really enjoyed the drive and they really enjoyed the driver. I would like to drive for you.' That is how a lot of it is done.

CHAIR: You mentioned your registration with the Department of Transport and Main Roads. Could you quickly tell us what other requirements are around that? Are there certain training and licensing requirements, blue card and that kind of thing?

Ms Carkeet: There is. Our fleet manager, Allan Gate, had to do specific training with them. Gympie Medical Transport and Cooloola Coast Medical Transport do not fit under any umbrella in the transport department.

CHAIR: Have they squeezed you into the one—

Ms Carkeet: They squeezed us into this little area called us because they are mostly talking about limousines, taxis and buses.

CHAIR: Commercial hire vehicles—

Ms Carkeet:—and we are not commercial. It is very important that is recognised for things like insurance for our cars and things like that. We have to meet their requirements. We have to train a certain way. There are certain things we have to train our drivers on which we have in our training packages. We take each of our drivers through a three-hour training session. We are audited. We have been audited once and we have just received our five-year certification to say we can work for the next five years because we have been good people and met all the requirements.

CHAIR: I imagine it is a not inconsiderable amount of work to maintain a registration like that.

Ms Carkeet: It is a huge amount of quality assurance in the background and it is a huge amount of compliance. That is probably my role more than anyone's.

CHAIR: Do you think it adds value to the public good?

Ms Carkeet: Absolutely. Our cars are serviced at certain times according to Toyota—all our cars are Toyota—and the department of main roads. They are serviced a certain way to make sure our cars are safe for our clients, our volunteer drivers and general road users. There are certain processes. The cleaning of our cars in between clients is important. During COVID that was horrendous because we worked through COVID and we had very specific things we had to do that were 10 times more than what we have to do now. We do six-monthly training. All our volunteers have to do six-monthly training, particularly our drivers—our office staff not so much. We work with Volunteering Australia and we meet their requirements as well.

Mr FURNER: Thank you, Sally and GMT, for the work you do for the local community. I note in your submission a request for some recognition of the fuel that drivers would be out of pocket for of \$100 per year. I think it is a very selfless request. I think they deserve a lot more.

Ms Carkeet: Totally.

Mr FURNER: How is that obtained currently? Do you seek grants or is it through fundraising?

Ms Carkeet: We receive grants for that currently, but that grant source that was there is now dwindling and things have changed a little with the grant requirements. That was through the federal government that we were able to do that. Currently, we have a lot of fundraising groups that do things for us and we would like to try to maintain that on the basis of our fundraising. That is purely how we would like to maintain it, just to say thank you. They expect nothing. They do not ask for anything. We really have this most wonderful group of people. It is just nice to say thank you. It seems so inadequate—\$100 for fuel for a 12-month period. They are very grateful to receive that. It is the recognition and the thankyou that is really the important thing.

Mr FURNER: Are you aware of the Gambling Community Benefit Fund grants? Have you tried to access those?

Ms Carkeet: We have. We accessed that very early on in our infancy for a car and we had one car supplied by them. The thing with that grant process is that you can really only apply every two years. The office was housed in an area that sadly was flooded during the 2022 floods. Our cars, very kindly, are securely parked at the Drake's car park by Trident Property. They own that building. The middle level is secured overnight. I approached them and asked them if they would secure our cars overnight for us because they are valuable assets for the town. Thankfully, that is where our cars were parked and we were literally over the road. Sadly, when the floods were on, the building that we were in was very badly flooded and we needed to seek alternative arrangements. The committee would like to build a hub, the Gympie Medical Transport hub, which would house the cars and the office together, with an area for a training room and an area for maintenance of cars. The cars have to be washed and have a maintenance process done every week to meet our legal obligations.

Yes, I am a grant scammer and a grant queen. I follow everything and try to get what we can. Sadly, grants are becoming harder to get because of the need in the community. Every community is finding that difficult. A lot of people do not want to give support by buying a car. They just do not see a car as a vital service unless they know. Even with the grants and what we tell them, they just do not see cars as such a vital service. We are really wanting to get the hub going. We have some meetings coming up with the mayor and the local member for Gympie. Hopefully, we will be able to acquire some land that we can lease so that it is not going to impact our organisation and we can maintain affordable fees.

CHAIR: Thank you very much, Goondiwindi—sorry. Goondiwindi is in my electorate. This is Gympie.

Ms Carkeet: You can do that service out there, too. We will come and train you.

CHAIR: We have tried and it is not easy.

Ms Carkeet: No, it is not.

CHAIR: I acknowledge what you do. President Bev Goodall and Secretary Sally Carkeet, thank you for your evidence today.

Ms Carkeet: Thank you so much your time. We appreciate your understanding and being asked to speak.

CHAIR: Not at all.

LOWE, Mrs Sherry, General Manager, Mary Valley Rattler

CHAIR: Mrs Lowe, thank you for coming before us. Would you like to give a brief presentation and then the committee will have some questions for you?

Mrs Lowe: Absolutely. Good afternoon and thank you for providing me with the opportunity to address this important inquiry into volunteering in Queensland. My name is Sherry Lowe. I am the general manager at the Mary Valley Rattler. We are a not-for-profit organisation that champions heritage railways and has been powered by volunteers for over a decade and continues to play a critical role in the vibrant example of community-led tourism, heritage preservation and social inclusion. In 2024, the Queensland tourism industry awarded the team of volunteers gold for outstanding contribution for a volunteer group.

The Rattler operates on state government owned land and self-funds all operational and infrastructure costs through tourism and fundraising. We receive no recurrent funding yet support more than 110 volunteers who range from retirees to school leavers; from NDIS participants to long-term unemployed; from those with decades of railway experience, or Foamers as we call them, to those seeking belonging, purpose and skills for the first time. For our volunteers, this is more than just a hobby or a community obligation; it is an opportunity for connection, growth, contribution and for some even healing.

Some of our volunteers have overcome significant personal challenges. Others such as young adults have flourished in our inclusive environment with personalised training and mentoring, and through these pathways they have gone on to gain employment in other railway organisations like QR and Aurizon. For many, the Mary Valley Rattler is a way to find their identity, pride and purpose, and to celebrate success.

However, we must acknowledge that the pressures on volunteer-driven organisations and on volunteers themselves are growing. Volunteering is increasingly impacted by accessibility challenges in heritage settings where upgrading facilities is costly and logistically complex. The rising cost of living, particularly fuel prices, deters volunteers from travelling, especially in regions like ours where public transport is infrequent, limited or non-existent. Compliance and certification requirements including medical through our safety roles—CPR, first aid, RSAs, food handling—are absorbed by operational organisational costs. Insurance premiums in operational compliance are rising faster than the community funding opportunities. The emotional and operational strain of volunteer attrition can disrupt service and team moral.

It is important to recognise that not all not-for-profits are the same. Our governance models, obligations, funding sources and risk profiles differ widely. Heritage organisations like the Rattler carry additional responsibilities related to safety, asset preservation and tourism delivery and this comes at a cost. Every volunteer we train, roster, feed, support and equip is an investment in both our community and Queensland's living history. If organisations like ours were to close due to financial strain, the impacts would be far reaching. Centrelink recipients would lose one of their few accessible pathways to fulfil their mutual obligations. Local tourism would suffer and with it regional economies. Volunteers, particularly those from diverse backgrounds, would lose their community hub, their place of purpose, safety and connection.

With this in mind, I respectfully offer the following recommendations to the committee: targeted funding initiatives for both volunteers and recognised organisations that host them, with a focus on rural and regional areas, which could include travel reimbursements and subsidies, certification subsidies and grants for volunteer support costs; simplified and streamlined grant application processes that acknowledge the administrative constraints of grassroots and regional volunteer organisations; statewide campaigns and programs that promote volunteering, not just as a noble act but as a gateway to learning, employment, inclusion and community pride for Queensland; and recognition for volunteer organisations as critical social infrastructure, worthy of the same support and stability we afford other essential services. Volunteering is not free. It is a deeply valuable contribution that deserves structural backing, recognition and sustainability. Our volunteers are preserving Queensland's past while helping build a more inclusive, connected and compassionate future.

As a not-for-profit organisation, the Mary Valley Rattler is also proud to directly support over 26 not-for-profit organisations, most of which are also volunteer driven. We also provide assistance in kind to fundraisers and community events, helping those groups meet their financial goals and extend their own impact. This is locals supporting locals in action and it demonstrates how organisations supporting the active involvement of volunteers amplifies the social impact well beyond even our operations; it is far reaching into the community.

I want to extend my thanks to you guys for offering me the opportunity to speak. The Mary Valley Rattler remains committed to strengthening the volunteer landscape and ensuring its accessibility and sustainability for generations to come.

CHAIR: Thank you very much for your submission. I particularly like how you draw together the benefits to the volunteers themselves beyond the actual act of volunteering but in terms of training and improvements to their prospects and their lives. I think that is something that is common to many volunteering pursuits.

Mrs Lowe: We are very proud of that, to see them use us as a stepping stone to commence employment—maybe to their first paid job—and see them thrive in what is the challenging industry of rail.

CHAIR: Yes. Hear, hear! Deputy Chair, member for Inala, do you have a question?

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: I have a two-part question. Thank you for appearing and for your submission. I am now interested in checking out the Mary Valley Rattler.

Mrs Lowe: Please. We would welcome you aboard.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: I am not sure I would have time this afternoon but that would be a nice thing for a future trip. I am keen to understand how you work with people to help them get employment following. Do you have, say, a standard set of skills list that you then put in a reference? How do you maximise the benefit of volunteering to employability?

Mrs Lowe: Let us be honest: not every volunteer is a best fit for every organisation. Through the induction and recruitment process we ask them what their points of interest are. Being such a versatile organisation in terms of hospitality, customer service, infrastructure, rail, workshop, carpentry, there are front-facing and also back-facing opportunities in our organisation. We work with them within their capabilities to unpack, I guess, their challenges and also embrace their strengths. Some people are looking at the Mary Valley Rattler as a transition to retirement. Some of the younger generation who do not fit in a particular box gravitate towards the Rattler and we extend mentoring and training to give them real-life skills to take away and use as a stepping stone. We provide references. We provide mentors internally as well for them to partner and gain guidance to some points. For example, young Ethan jumped on board with us as a school work experience lad. He then went on to do work placement with us. He has been upskilled through that journey and he has really high prospects in the rail space through being a guard, being a guest experience attendant, learning those basic skills of interacting with customers and even overcoming some internal challenges as well with regards to anxiety. We have a great team that can support that.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: Do you have someone who looks after that reference part? How do you manage that? Do you have a volunteer whose job it is to oversee that? How do you work that?

Mrs Lowe: When you have as many volunteers as we have, you are definitely going to find that unicorn in the community who can absolutely hit the ground running with all types of volunteers. We have been absolutely blessed to have someone on board our team part-time—we cannot quite extend to full-time at this stage. It is a part-time role to onboard, induct and then partner with our safety coordinator to make sure that they have all the right compliance certificates and qualifications to transition into a safe workspace.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: Fantastic. In your submission you spoke about insurance. How much do you pay, if you know a rough ballpark, and have you ever lodged a claim?

Mrs Lowe: For the organisation it is about \$150,000 a year in insurance for all the different elements.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: Have you ever lodged an insurance claim?

Mrs Lowe: Because of floods or anything else?

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: Either natural disaster ones or personal liability?

Mrs Lowe: As a not-for-profit organisation, we are limited to how much we can actually obtain. As you can appreciate, rail infrastructure is not cheap so it is difficult to fit in a box. Yes, we have claimed but, unfortunately, we are still on our rehabilitation journey since the 2022 floods. That journey has got a long way to go and that is self-funded through ticket sales on board the train.

Mr BAILLIE: I would like to thank the deputy chair for asking some of the questions which I had on my list as well. I am new to the Mary Valley Rattler. I had not heard about it.

Mrs Lowe: Welcome, and welcome to Gympie.

Mr BAILLIE: I am from the other end of the state. It sounds like a fantastic operation. I am interested to know how many volunteers you have. It sounds like there is a bit of an organisation that runs the Rattler proper. How big is the paid organisation versus the volunteer organisation?

Mrs Lowe: We have about 16 FTEs across a very multifaceted organisation—our cafe, retail, museum and operations space. We also have our rail gang and workshop fitters. There is a high level of safety compliance in the rail industry that we need to maintain for the National Rail Safety Regulator. There is that governance structure that is essential to function. Then you have the front-facing opportunity where you have your guest experience attendants, your volunteer coordinators and the like. It is a very small team but the team is mighty. Combined with the volunteers, we are an absolute powerhouse.

Mr BAILLIE: How many volunteers would you have on any one day?

Mrs Lowe: It can range because of availability, travel, transport, health, all of that. Across about three months, we have actively about 110 volunteers who interact—some daily, some weekly, some fortnightly or monthly, depending on their obligations and their availability. Again, as I said, some of our volunteers drive interstate and some of our volunteers fly up from Sydney to take the opportunity to drive a steam train. Each and every one of them makes their own sacrifice or commitment to be engaged in the Gympie region community and give back.

Mr BAILLIE: I bet everyone puts their hands up to have a go at driving the Rattler.

Mrs Lowe: Absolutely. Everyone wants to be a steam train driver. Again, if you look at that pathway, it is a four-year pathway. We have a journey where they start out as a guest experience attendant—it is very structured—and then they go on to be a guard and they go and do their shunting course. There are stepping stones to becoming a steam train driver but that is a four-year program.

Mr BAILLIE: You mentioned the functions, from guard right up to driver. Is there maintenance that your volunteers get involved in? What other areas do the volunteers get involved in functionwise to keep the Rattler going?

Mrs Lowe: Everything from the moment you step out of the car: from the gardening and mowing of the grass, right through to front of house, back of house, in the cafe, our amazing team that welcome you into the station, to even the guys working with the carpenter down in the workshop. When you are dealing with heritage carriages, everything is timber so for us it is really important to preserve that heritage element, although preservation of heritage items or buildings does not come cheap. Yes, there is a real rounded opportunity so if they are not finding their feet or not gravitating towards that particular role there are other job descriptions or role descriptions across the business they can lend their hand to.

Mr BAILLIE: Thank you.

Mr FURNER: I have the 2019-20 annual report in front of me. I assume that is out of date by now.

Mrs Lowe: It is absolutely out of date.

Mr FURNER: I note that the previous Labor government provided \$4.7 million in terms of Works for Queensland funding. Where did the bulk of that funding go to in terms of your organisation?

Mrs Lowe: The Works for Queensland funding was awarded to Gympie Regional Council. The Gympie Regional Council committed that to the Rattler project itself. It went towards asset refurbishment and rebuild, being the track and the bridges.

Mr FURNER: Mainly the sleepers?

Mrs Lowe: No, actually it went into bridges. Timber sleepers, as you know, have a very short life, especially when you receive as much rainfall as we do here in Gympie. One of our significant challenges is around trying to secure funding for betterment and resilience as opposed to just chipping away with the same.

Mr FURNER: What is the cost of the rail safety works certificate, which is a national certificate requirement? Is it per person to qualify for that?

Mrs Lowe: As a rail infrastructure manager, being the Rattler Railway Company, we control the operations of the rail corridor between QR's interface at the northern end near the main line there on the North Coast Line, right through to Amamoor. We are required to uphold a standard of compliance to the National Rail Safety Regulator and get audited regularly. There is a cost to that Gympie

through obviously making sure we have a safety officer on board to be able to guide us through any amendments to our safety management system, as well as around medicals for our drivers and our crew. We have to make sure they go through a particular level 2 medical on a frequent occurrence, and that comes at the cost of the business.

CHAIR: Thank you.

STARK, Ms Andree, Manager, Community and Commercial Services, Gympie Regional Council

VAN BEEK, Ms Alexandra, President, Gympie and District Landcare Group

CHAIR: Welcome. Thank you for coming before us.

Ms van Beek: I have a copy of my submission if anyone would like it.

CHAIR: If the committee is happy to table it, we will look at it and check it for compliance with parliamentary standards but I am sure it will be fine.

Ms van Beek: I think I read that I could so I thought I would ask.

CHAIR: Thank you. I invite you to make your opening statement.

Ms van Beek: I am the current president of the Gympie and District Landcare Group, colloquially known as Gympie Landcare. Gympie Landcare is a 38-year-old local organisation. It started as purely volunteer based amongst farmers, as many Landcare groups have. We now run as a members-based incorporated association and function as a non-profit social enterprise with charitable status. We currently have around 16 to 18 staff members and approximately 27 volunteers. I am not sure whether we calculated it by the federal or the Queensland rate for volunteering, but together they contributed over \$200,000 to the local economy last year.

Our management committee is volunteer based. It is a complex little organisation and it has been a very steep learning curve. We have recently partnered with other community organisations to start running Skilling Queenslanders for Work training at both a cert I and a cert III level. I am pleased to say that at least five of our young volunteers are now in that process on these traineeships. That is really exciting, especially because we have a nursery that is a really safe environment for the quiet people and for people who might have neurodiversity. We are able to support them on their journey and help them and we have that combination of members. I am going totally off topic but we have 16-year-olds working with 60-plus-year-olds, all done per regulations, blue cards et cetera. We have that mentoring and we are helping them to build social skills and it is a joy to watch.

As a social enterprise, our funding comes from providing environmental services across this region: some of it is to private enterprise; some of it is to government departments; and some of it comes via other larger NRMs such as BMRG and the Mary River Catchment Coordinating Committee. We also run a native nursery that provides endemic and Indigenous native species at affordable prices to our community, and we run workshops and education events. Our volunteers play a critical role particularly in our nursery. If we did not have our volunteers, we would not have a nursery. It is really that critical.

I am only mentioning this because it is just what I do. This is an unpaid position, but in my paid position I am a social researcher. I research particularly in social complexities and social wellbeing, so I found it interesting to go through the submissions before I came here and I tried to find the common themes. This is what is very common across all volunteers: there is not enough funding, it is hard to recruit, there are legislative challenges. What I did not see a lot of are the challenges to board members: volunteer leadership, management committees and governance boards at small, local organisations. It is extremely challenging so I would like to quickly talk to that.

The benefits of being a board member are massive. They offer a unique opportunity to make a meaningful impact on our community while at the same time developing valuable leadership and governance skills. They allow people to contribute to causes they are passionate about. They influence organisational direction and they support positive social and, in our case, environmental change. They provide opportunities for professional growth, networking with like-minded individuals and gaining experience in strategic decision-making, financial oversight and compliance. It is a really rewarding experience but it is also extremely challenging and it is getting harder and harder. It is hard enough to find general volunteers. Multiply that by 10 if you are looking for a board member and then multiply that by 10 if you are looking for somebody to take those executive, legislative roles such as treasurer, president and secretary. It is incredibly difficult and it is getting harder and harder.

I want to touch on briefly the challenges to this and why it is getting so hard. Part of that is the increasing complexity of governance responsibilities, employment, workplace health and safety, and insurance. All of these different regulatory and financial requirements are being loaded on people who are saying, 'Yes, I'll give it a shot,' but they do not have the experience. They do not know about all this legislation that we are obliged to comply with. It is a very steep learning curve and I am still learning. I have been on the board for five years and I have been in the president role for about 18 months and, quite frankly, if I had known what was facing me I would not have taken it on.

CHAIR: It's too late.

Ms van Beek: Exactly. There are lots of volunteers who are not prepared for these responsibilities and they are reluctant to take on positions where they can be held personally liable. It is not fair, quite frankly. It is also hard because legislative requirements change all the time. You are constantly running behind the ball and going, 'How do we do this?' In an organisation like Landcare where we have staff and volunteers, it becomes doubly hard because we have requirements for both.

One of the problems we face is lack of free training and resources. I can go and do a board training course with I think they are called Community Inc. but it would cost me \$990. I do not have those kinds of funds, and many people in Gympie do not have those funds. We do not have access to expert support. We have a bit of a workplace health and safety issue we are looking at at the moment around psychosocial safety, and let me tell you that is really tricky to navigate. We rang what used to be CCIQ and are now Business Chamber Queensland—it used to be chamber of commerce Queensland—and they were very good to be able to provide us with some verbal over-the-phone support but if we needed anything more we would have to pay \$335 an hour. We do not have those funds. It is getting trickier and trickier for board members of small to medium community-based organisations to navigate this space.

As a result—and this is not just in Landcare; I hear it across local boards all the time—there is a lot of psychological stress and burnout and people are leaving. In these small communities, they hear about how hard it is and they will not step up anymore. We thought about what would make life easier. Free and accessible training would be a good start for volunteer board members. That would also increase the pool of people who might be available, because it is great training for young people or for young professionals. If they were able to access this training free, it would also benefit any kind of employment area. Everything you have to do with a volunteer you have to do with a staff member. To be able to provide that training for free would benefit everybody, I think.

There needs to be a source of free or very affordable expert advice. I need to be able to ring somebody and say, 'We have this issue. There is this power differential. How do we manage that so that everybody is safe but we are able to treat it equitably and fairly?' There needs to be increased legislative protection. People are stepping into roles they are not qualified for, yet they are being held responsible for that. I do not think that is very fair. Mental health and wellbeing support would be really good. That would be something we could provide to all our volunteers. Life really is not getting any easier. I am pretty sure everyone here would know that their volunteers also face mental health problems.

I read the Volunteering North Queensland's submission, and we would like to support their idea of regional volunteer hubs. Gympie used to have a volunteer coordinator up until about four or five years ago. That funding got pulled, so that position does not exist anymore. Just having one person there was really useful. People who wanted to volunteer could go to them and people who needed volunteers could go to them, and that person could coordinate it. A volunteer hub, as suggested by Volunteering North Queensland, would be a hub for everybody. It would be a hub for management boards who are seeking some help, support and advice. It would be a hub for volunteer committees who are looking for volunteers. As they suggested, in times of floods, they could coordinate volunteers. I would like to support their suggestion. I thought that was a really good idea.

In regard to diversity and inclusivity, you could run diversity and inclusivity training. Those centres could really promote and grow the volunteer sector. Sorry, that was probably a bit lengthy.

CHAIR: You have been a most impressive witness. Thank you very much, Ms van Beek.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: Thank you for doing your research on other submissions and then adding to that body of work. You speak of governance support. I am interested to know whether you have engaged with Volunteering Queensland.

Ms van Beek: We have. We have used some of their free resources. Again, you have to pay for a lot of it. We are considering going ahead and paying for it.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: You have not found that has met the needs—

Ms van Beek: No.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: It is either too expensive or does not have what it is that—

Ms van Beek: We can find the basics for free but, when it comes to providing governance advice and helping us to build our leadership skills, I have not been able to find that for free.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: The other thing is the accountability piece for executive. Out of interest, do you have indemnity insurance for your executive?

Ms van Beek: My understanding—and I am not a legal eagle—is that, as an incorporated association, we have a certain level of indemnity but only for financial as far as I know. If we have to close because of financial difficulties, we are covered for that. As far as I know we are not covered—and, again, you would have to consult with a lawyer—for people suing us for bullying or harassment or whatever. As far as I know, we have no cover for that.

CHAIR: I am a military man by background. When we look at a problem usually we view it as looking at the enemy. We will call the ‘difficulties for volunteers’ the enemy here. We try to identify what their centre of gravity is. What can we identify as the key aspect of their vulnerability? You are obviously quite clever in the field of volunteering, sociology and so forth. What is the answer to the critical centre—which I am sure you will agree with me—is the shortage of executive personnel? The committee has heard that without the secretary, the treasurer—without the people to do those onerous jobs—nothing else can happen. If that is the centre of gravity, what do you suggest? You have outlined support. Is it that volunteer organisations like yours, as you have done, need to commercialise a bit or expand and diversify beyond the core of what a landcare group does to achieve extra sources of funds so you can then employ the necessary expertise, or is that not practical on the ground from where you look at it?

Ms van Beek: We have a general manager. He does operational things. I will probably work around this a little bit. This is such a specialty area. It really is. We have not been able to find a general manager who has all the skills they require. That is really hard. It is such a big ask. Our critical mass I would say is the training and the legal expertise and support. I think that would make a big difference, as well as knowing you are financially safe and that you have psychological support. The amount of times I have been in tears—it is hard but we are committed. We are all passionate about what we do.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: We can see that. Thank you for what you do. It is tough.

Mr BOOTHMAN: Thank you for everything you do. I am very active in my local area. I do not have a landcare group in my area, but we have the Coomera River Catchment Association, which is a similar thing. I am from the Gold Coast. When it comes to invasive species, on the way up here I was looking at the highway.

Ms Stark: It’s not about weeds!

Mr BOOTHMAN: My question goes to expert support. You briefly mentioned expert support and getting support from departments and potentially councils et cetera when it comes to dealing with these types of things. Do you as an organisation deal with invasive species? I noticed there was cat’s claw creeper everywhere. Down my way we have fire ants and cat’s claw creeper. We have everything.

Ms van Beek: Yes, we have it all. Luckily we do not have fire ants yet. We are trying very hard not to have them.

Mr FURNER: They are on their way.

Ms van Beek: They are on their way—exactly. Our environmental expertise is partially in-house. We are very lucky to have our environment and conservation manager who is very passionate. He brings a lot of knowledge and he has lots of links he can connect to. Various government departments offer that type of expertise, support and other local—

Mr BOOTHMAN: Do you find it helpful though?

Ms van Beek: I think the knowledge is there. I do not know if any of you are aware of *The Conversation*. It is like an academic newspaper. They did research on regenerating our environment to a healthy state. Invasive species was by far the largest cost.

Mr BOOTHMAN: It is, yes.

Ms van Beek: Our volunteers do not do invasive species control at all. They work in the nursery area. We get paid to do that work. We purely rely on being able to access grants for that work or through the BMRG, the Burnett Mary Regional Group, or the MRCCCC. They are getting big grants. Council is certainly putting some funding towards it. HQPlantations is working towards it.

Mr BOOTHMAN: I noticed that council has a free workshop. Good on you for doing that.

Ms van Beek: Yes, on cat’s claw. Our manager is running the workshop.

Ms Stark: The council through the Lands Protection team works closely with Landcare.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: Would you like to come up to the table so you can be in front of microphone to be recorded?

Ms Stark: Council does work closely with Landcare. That is through payment to Landcare for services that they undertake on behalf of the ratepayers of the Gympie region. We also have a Lands Protection team that works in that weed space and it does workshops in conjunction with Landcare and other stakeholders.

Mr BOOTHMAN: The reason I bring it up is that it is about having the expertise and the knowledge of these pests. Yesterday when we were heading to Toowoomba and Dalby on the Warrego Highway, there was a whole hill that was covered in cat's claw. I could not believe that a whole hill was covered. It literally enveloped every tree and every shrub on that hill.

CHAIR: That would not happen in my electorate! We just have boxthorn, blackberry and harrisia cactus.

Mr BOOTHMAN: Is there anything you think could be improved? You spoke about expert support. What improvements would you like to see in those types of areas when it comes to accessing training?

Ms van Beek: To my mind it would be so simple.

Mr BOOTHMAN: You have a unique organisation. You do environmental.

Ms van Beek: Yes, we do a bit of everything, but we have an environmental focus. There are different things that you can do. To build leadership, maybe—I will not say 'the government' because I do not want to blame anybody. There is so much opportunity to provide free online workshops whether it is about environmental protection or whether it is about building governance and leadership skills. There is such a huge opportunity. It would not take much to set up, but everybody could access it.

Mr BOOTHMAN: That is a really good idea.

Ms van Beek: I do not understand why it is not being done.

CHAIR: Does the committee object to Ms Stark coming forward again and saying a few more things? I am sure what you have to say is valuable.

Ms Stark: After Alexandra finishes is fine—just before you close. I would not be doing my job properly if I did not say one more thing.

CHAIR: Why don't you do that now?

Ms Stark: Thank you so much for this opportunity. I would like to support what Alexandra said in terms of having a locally-based volunteer centre or a volunteer coordinator. The Gympie region did have a funded part-time worker for some years. Many of us would know Carley. It is so vital to have that local connection. She was undertaking work whereby you would have people in the community who would like to offer to work and volunteer, but to have someone you could physically go to and then be matched with a community organisation was critical. Then you would have the likes of Landcare, Gympie medical transport or others saying, 'This is who we need.' She would do up position statements and then find people with those skills. We have not had that for many years now.

Yes, I can speak on behalf of the community organisations here when I say that has been a real loss to our community. My understanding was that that was federally funded at the time. We do have links with Volunteering Queensland within the region which we are thankful for, but having face-to-face connections—it is very much relational based. Sometimes when you are reliant on digital resources or blanket approaches, they do not always provide that friendly face or that phone call that you can have saying, 'I'm having a really tough time. Our treasurer has been sick for two months. They've just got cancer. Do you know anyone who could step in?' 'Actually I do. I know Bob who has just retired from this accountancy firm. They would be ideal.' You do not get that sometimes from a distance.

If I could say on behalf of the groups here that we would very much advocate for the state government to look at more placed-based regional volunteering. I know that other areas do have that, but we have missed out in Gympie for some time. That would be a huge benefit to our region.

CHAIR: Thank you very much, Ms van Beek. It was very good to hear what your particular group is up to. As I say, you were very impressive in your presentation. We are thankful for that. I thank you, Ms Stark, as well. That concludes the organisational presentations that we have today.

I would now like to call before the committee members of the public who have registered to come and speak to the committee. We have two people—Mr Ben Styles and Ms Sandy Brown. Are they both here today? No. That is fine.

If there anybody wishes to come before us and speak, we value the contributions made by everyday Queenslanders and their views on the problem of volunteering declining in Queensland. If any of you would like to speak, you are most encouraged to. I ask you to approach the committee secretary, Kylie, to fill out a form so we have your details for the record. We would be happy to hear from you and ask some questions as well. Is there anyone who would like to brave the chair?

Mr BOOTHMAN: It is not electrified. It is okay.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: As an enticement, if there has been anything that people have thought when someone was speaking, 'Yes, this is something really important and I can add something,' and it is something that we have not already heard that may connect with any of those points, we would be happy to hear that as well.

Ms van Beek: I just want to quickly speak to Andree's idea of a volunteer coordinator. I think that would be a great start because that would link us to people who may not want to step up to be on a board but they have the expertise and are happy to provide a couple of hours of expertise, whether it is legal or HR or something like that. That would provide linkage to people who have the expertise that we are looking for, whether it is environmental or legal or whatever, but who do not have the time to step up to be on a board. I think that might provide a linkage to cover that gap.

CHAIR: It is fair to say that Landcare is famous for its volunteer coordinators, and that is a vital square on the board in terms of identifying participants, identifying tasks and opportunities, and bringing it altogether. You do it within your own organisation. You are talking about having someone situated to do that for the community locally. Is that is what you mean?

Ms van Beek: Yes, exactly. Having someone in the community who can then coordinate not just people who want to volunteer on an arbitrary or regular level but professional people who do not have the time to give but they do want to contribute would provide that link. We connect with various opportunities through the local chamber of commerce. There are always people who say, 'We'd like to help in any way, shape or form,' but they do not have the time. Having somebody who can coordinate all of that and have the names of people who have a couple of hours spare to help you sort out your financial mess or your legal mess or your HR mess would be really useful.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: We have JPs in the community. From what I am hearing, we need treasurers in the community—a group of accessible supports who have information and who have the expertise such as accountants or people like that who can be accessed to provide some of that expertise on a free, ad hoc basis. Would that be of benefit?

Ms van Beek: Yes.

Mr BAILLIE: I am so glad you mentioned the business chamber. Many regional areas have business chambers. In a business sense they would specialise in roles like chair, secretary and treasurer. The Townsville business chamber offers reduced rates on some of those courses, as I understand. Are you aware of volunteer groups engaging with the business chamber and trying to get some of those skills or to look at the opportunity for workshops from facilities that may already be operating in the region?

Ms van Beek: I am not personally aware. We are a member of our local chamber of commerce. Our connections have been on a one-to-one basis. They might do it. I just might not know about it. They might provide workshops for non-profits or things like that. I am not aware of it.

CHAIR: Thank you very much, Ms van Beek. Nobody has decided they would like to come forward. That concludes our hearing. I want to sincerely thank everyone for coming today. It is wonderful as a committee to come to a room full of people who are interested in contributing to the work that we are doing, so I am most grateful for that.

I would like to thank our Hansard reporter, Tina, for coming up from Brisbane today to record the proceedings. Tina is usually in the loft in parliament recording everything. I would like to thank our inquiry secretary, Kylie Guthrie, for all of the work her and her team have done to make this possible. A transcript of these proceedings will be available on the committee's webpage in due course. I look forward to catching up with you all for a cup of tea.

The committee adjourned at 2.05 pm.