



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

Wednesday, 26 March 2025

Birtinya

WEDNESDAY, 26 MARCH 2025

The committee met at 9.30 am.

CHAIR: Good morning. I declare open our Sunshine Coast hearing for the committee's inquiry into volunteering in Queensland. My name is James Lister, member for Southern Downs and chair of the committee. With me today are: Margie Nightingale, member for Inala and the deputy chair; Adam Baillie, member for Townsville; Mark Boothman, member for Theodore on the Gold Coast; and Mark Furner, member for Ferny Grove, who is substituting for the member for Lytton. This hearing is a proceeding of the Queensland parliament and is subject to the parliament's standing rules and orders. Only the committee and invited witnesses may participate in the proceedings. Witnesses are not required to give evidence under oath, 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 pertaining to parliamentary proceedings, I remind witnesses to please refrain from using unparliamentary language such as swearing or offensive terms, even if you are directly quoting material or someone else—so no quoting Billy Connolly, please. These proceedings are being transcribed by Hansard—thank you, Tina. Media may be present today—I think WIN and 7NEWS Sunshine Coast will be here at some stage—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 you to please turn your mobiles phones off or to silent mode.

O'DONNELL, Mr Simon, Traveston Rural Fire Brigade

PIKE, Mr Ian AFSM, First Officer, Federal Rural Fire Brigade

CHAIR: Welcome. Leave is granted for the tabling of the document from Mr O'Donnell. It will be subject to the parliamentary requirements regarding material which is tabled, so we will let you know. Thank you for that. Mr Pike, would you like to provide an opening statement and after you have both spoken we will have some questions for you.

Mr Pike: Firstly, I would like to say thanks for being able to speak at this hearing. It is a great privilege to do so.

CHAIR: Thanks for coming.

Mr Pike: Basically, I would like to speak on behalf of my brigade at Federal and the problems we have in retaining volunteers and obtaining volunteers. The first is basically that the onboarding of volunteers is very clunky within the Rural Fire Service. It takes up to six to eight months to get some people onboard. People then lose confidence in the organisation, and without confidence firefighting is a dangerous proposition and they leave.

The second one is when we do get them onboard we do not have the training facilities or people to train those people, and now we are being told that the responsibility of those people lies with the first officers. We are not allowed to put them on the trucks basically until we can get them trained, and that can take six months so they leave. It is a real problem with training. We have very good area staff, but they do not have the numbers and they do not have the ability to train our people. Six months ago we had volunteer trainers who were sacked. Unfortunately, that left a big gap that we cannot fill.

The other problem is that staff are not giving us the respect that we require, and without that respect volunteers find it very difficult to operate, especially in an officer's position in a brigade or at a higher position. The other is the new funding since the reform—the funding system, the financial system within a brigade, the banking systems where we were independent, where we had our own independent banking systems. That has been taken away from us and it is now very hard to operate in our own space and we find it very difficult with banking and our treasurers are walking away.

Basically, they are most of our problems. Since the reform we are slipping backwards as a fire service and it is affecting the volunteer confidence. That is basically what I would like to put forward.

CHAIR: Thank you for that and for your submission. Mr O'Donnell, would you like to speak?

Mr O'Donnell: Thank you for having me here. The thing I am interested in is unlocking the value that volunteers have in Queensland. A lot of our brigades have very highly skilled people. Over half of our brigade have university degrees and over half of them run their own businesses. They are very highly skilled. I see that there is a huge gap between the ability of volunteers to advance and the technology that is required to help them advance.

I have handed out a page from a book and it was taken from an active participation process in England. It talks about raising the steps of a ladder. What we are experiencing is a lot of the activities and actions that we get as volunteers are at the bottom part of the ladder and that does not engage volunteers. What I am interested in is raising the ladder up, getting the volunteers up and putting them in a position where they do have power as a volunteer and as a citizen. We are undergoing a huge social experiment here. Australia has a lot of volunteers in hundreds of different roles, and we really do not yet have the technology to actually bring them up and get the maximum benefit from them. I think that is the sort of thing that I am interested in.

CHAIR: We are interested in the things that you are interested in. That is why we are conducting these hearings, so thank you for that. Is there anything else you want to say?

Mr O'Donnell: My report to you talks about a lot of the frustrations for the volunteers, and we know that. I appreciate that the volunteers have high expectations so the huge challenge for us all is to bring those expectations up and get them met, but also get the expectations of the departments and the organisations that run volunteering to meet in the middle.

CHAIR: Thank you. It was remiss of me earlier to not acknowledge in the audience our parliamentary colleague Marty Hunt, the member for Nicklin. It is good to have you here, Marty. I know you are very familiar with volunteering with your PCYC background and so forth. Deputy Chair, would you like to ask a question?

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: Thank you for appearing before us today and for giving us your valued experience and suggestions. I am interested in the time it takes to onboard volunteers. Can you explain that a bit more? What is involved in that and why does it take that much time?

Mr Pike: I cannot tell you why it takes so much time. That is a mystery. Up until just before Christmas, we had a project team in Kedron which was going for something like six to nine months to improve the onboarding and to also set up a new system to bring in new volunteers. At a Teams meeting last night, I was told that that has been wiped and they are going into a whole new system. The system they put up was pretty useless. Since the reform, we have had a lot of new people come onboard at senior levels in positions in Kedron who do not understand the world of volunteering and do not understand the world of firefighting and the risks involved. They are just there to collect their pay and go home at night. That is the major problem with onboarding—that we have not got a system in place that works for us.

The other is the consultation. If I onboard a new member today and two months down the track he is still not on and I ring up to find out what is going on, I am told, 'With the Privacy Act we can't tell you the problems,' so I cannot help that person. To me that is ridiculous statement.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: Are there steps of the onboarding process where you notice there is the biggest hold up? Is it to do with criminal history checks, or is it to do with paperwork not being administered in a timely manner? What do you think are some of the hang-up points?

Mr Pike: With an onboarding system, the new member comes along and I will sit down with him and fill out all the paperwork to make sure it is correct. We then send that to area office. It may sit there for months.

Mr O'Donnell: Basically, when they get the paperwork it is ready for them to just sign. We make sure everything is right. I can give you an example. We had a fellow in and we went through the whole process with him. We got him inducted. We sent the application up to, say, the Maryborough office on 30 October and I rang last week and said, 'What's the progress of his application?' They said that because of the floods it is sitting on the table waiting to be signed. We are being placated.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: Do you think they do not have sufficient people to process it, or do you think the priority is not there? Do you have any insight?

Mr O'Donnell: I have the impression that it is not a priority for them.

Mr Pike: It is also that they have expanded it. We had one signature at area office, but they now have a new form which means it has to go from area to district office and the assistant chief officer has to sign it off, so it sits in two offices for a time before it is eventually sent into head office.

Mr O'Donnell: The first officers could have the power to sign off. We have powers under the legislation for other things. We should have the power to sign off on that. If the police checks are right, we have checked a fellow out, we have interviewed him—we normally have a couple of guys who would be interviewing him—we make sure everything is okay and we are happy with him, then we should be able to sign off on it. When we were talking earlier Ian was saying it is six to eight months.

If you have a volunteer and you wait for them to get to be signed off, and then you have about three months for them to get gear and then, say, we are coming through this period and it is wet, it could be 12 to 14 months before you actually get that volunteer to a fire. When guys come into the brigade, they want to fight fires and we want to get them out. We can get them on the truck straightaway. Our brigade is ignoring all this process. We make sure the applications are there but we have three guys who are trained and ready to go now and we are still waiting on their applications. In fact, one of them is from Western Australia and he is a 20-year veteran, and we have another guy who has come from the urban fire brigade and joined us. We cannot get them signed off. We could have them on the truck straightaway.

Mr BAILLIE: Thank you both for joining us. Mr Pike, you referenced a reform and I will assume you are talking about the disaster management amendment bill 2024 and the changes that came with that?

Mr O'Donnell: The new legislation, yes. That is what they called it—reform—basically after it went ahead.

Mr BAILLIE: Can you describe what changes have occurred recently and the impact that had on the service? I will then have some follow-up questions.

Mr Pike: In another role that I played, as president of the Rural Fire Brigades Association, I moved right around the state. The problem is that a past minister who pushed the reform through, a very good minister, guaranteed that we would get boots on the ground. Since the reform, what we have had is huge hierarchy offices set up in the region and district and we have not got any extra boots on the ground. By sacking these volunteer trainers, which were allowed a little bit of payment, we have lost ground. The guarantees we were given and the new legislation has pushed us back a little bit.

Mr BAILLIE: The trainers that you mentioned, the volunteer trainers, were they regionally based or centrally based?

Mr Pike: No. Each region was allowed a permanent position amount of money to distribute with the volunteer trainers. They came from within each brigade area and they had to have a cert IV in training. They were all sacked.

Mr BAILLIE: If we step back before the reform was put in place, did you still face similar challenges with onboarding or has that just gotten worse?

Mr Pike: No, the onboarding has been a problem.

Mr BAILLIE: That has always been an issue?

Mr Pike: Since the time of the blue card, onboarding has been a major problem.

Mr BAILLIE: When did that come in?

Mr Pike: Probably 2018.

Mr O'Donnell: There is also a problem with advancement. This is just new recruits, getting them truck ready, getting them some skills, but there are also guys like Ian and I who have fairly advanced training. For us to get up to the next level of training sometimes you need prerequisites and those prerequisites might not crop up for a couple of years and then when they do you put your name up for them then it will be lost or something will happen and you will never hear. I am currently a level 2 planner, which is national planning capability, and I wanted to go into an incident commander role, but I did not have a prerequisite. I applied for that prerequisite so I could move into the command and it just got lost. I tried to follow up, saying, 'What has happened to it?', and they said, 'We can't even find your application.' That particular course probably only comes up every few years.

For our guys in the firing line, the crew leader—when you see a guy with three stripes he is a very well trained officer—their training courses are not even coming up. I think I did the last crew leader course four or five years ago, and that was a fairly advanced course. That was a five- or six-day course. We are not seeing those courses for the advanced firefighting skills. That also affects our ability to handle natural disasters. What we are finding is that the staff seem to have this training. They will disappear in natural disasters and we just get left hanging. There are areas where we could be filling some of those roles, the guys who are trained, but we should also be mentoring with those guys so that we get that advanced experience. It is not happening.

Mr BAILLIE: Are there any areas that, prior to the recent changes, worked a lot better and are not working now and if we took a step back you would say that part works better? Conversely, are there any parts that are working better now—that have improved since the reform?

Mr Pike: No, there are no improvements. We have gone backwards, if anything.

Mr BAILLIE: Are there any specific areas that you can identify?

Mr BOOTHMAN: Like chain of command or how that works—is there confusion with incident controllers?

Mr Pike: Yes, there is. Consultation has gone out the door. If I go back to probably 10 years ago, we had a lot of volunteers on committees within Kedron. There are no committees left. We have no volunteer input into the build of our appliances or into the training. I know they have set up an advisory committee, but it is not working so we are going backwards.

Mr FURNER: Simon, you mentioned the need for technology to pick up the skills in terms of identification of people who may be coming in to volunteer. That makes sense to me. For the benefit of the committee, could you unpack how that would work? Would it be through a data system whereby when a volunteer steps forward they identify their previous skills that may assist to the benefit of the unit?

Mr O'Donnell: I think the skills are needed within the permanent staff of the rural fire brigade. That is where I see it. A good example is you remember years ago when the federal government insisted that each organisation should put a certain amount of their money into training? It was probably 20 years ago. I was in the department of primary industries at the time and they went into quite a significant program of training of the extension officers in engagement and participation techniques. I thought that was a fairly successful program. It was at that level where all the people who are coordinating, who are giving technical advice and so on, got those things so they could bring landholders in and get them participating in the sorts of technologies that they were trying to sell. I think the same thing is required of government departments and staff within government departments. If you had those participation skills—there is a whole set of community participation processes and skills that you can learn—you can use those skills with your volunteers and then guys like Ian and I can act as conduits and we can then also do similar things with our brigade members.

Mr FURNER: I am also astounded by the procrastination in terms of what you identified in particular in getting your kit. When I first volunteered at Samford Rural Fire Brigade, the very first day I turned up—or evening it was—I was provided with my shield, jacket, pants and boots. Has there been a decline in supply in terms of personal equipment?

Mr O'Donnell: It takes ages to kit up a guy. As soon as we see the paperwork for their membership, we sit down with them and we fill out their paperwork for the kit and it can take months and months to get it. We waited four, five, six months for the paperwork for their membership to come and then we have to wait another three or four months to kit them up. What we have been doing is scrounging gear from guys who are not active and we are giving those kits to the new volunteers. That is the only way that we can get them out.

CHAIR: Thank you very much for your submissions and your participation today.

MOODIE, Mr Michael, Chief Executive Officer, Volunteering Sunshine Coast Inc.

PATTON, Ms Caroline, Board President, Volunteering Sunshine Coast Inc

CHAIR: Welcome. Would you like to make an opening statement before the committee has some questions for you?

Mr Moodie: I will make a statement for both of us. Thank you very much for the opportunity. Volunteering Sunshine Coast is the leading provider for volunteering services on the Sunshine Coast. VSC recruits, selects and deploys volunteers to Volunteer Involving Organisations, or VIOs. The focus of our submission is to raise the issues as we see them and, where possible, provide suggestions and/or solutions for improvement to the inquiry. We have provided a submission, which I am sure you have seen, and these will just be key points that are raised in the submission. At the outset, we believe the current system of VRCs in Queensland is broken and requires a major rethink and rebuild. We support a regional network of VRCs throughout the state, with each VRC governed by a properly constituted board representing the interests of volunteers and the local community. The role of a VRC needs to be defined by the inquiry with particular emphasis on recruiting, selecting and deploying volunteers. Other functions, such as training and ensuring the safety and quality of volunteer services by VIOs, should also be considered.

Ideally, there should be a single point of contact for information and registration for volunteering within a region. However, this may be difficult to achieve because of the number and diversity of organisations engaging in volunteering. VRCs should be restricted from engaging and raising other forms of revenue utilising volunteers because of the perceived and actual conflicts of interest. If fees are to be levied on VIOs, these should be set independently of VRCs. We do not support the current arrangements in Queensland of a peak body for volunteering representing to government the interests of the volunteers and VRCs. Functions such as planning, funding and evaluating of volunteering should be undertaken by the recently established volunteering unit in the department, consistent with any recommendations of the inquiry. We support a single contract with the department that articulates VRC deliverables and performance criteria. VRC funding should be sufficient to meet the basic requirements of a not-for-profit to ensure good governance and a safe and quality work environment. Further, we support the volunteering unit in the department managing, on behalf of VRCs, any Commonwealth and state relations and relationships with any other volunteering peak bodies.

The central issue for VSC is funding. VSC is currently planning to cease operation by the end of this financial year because of insufficient funds. This situation has arisen because there is no funding from either state or Commonwealth governments to resource the key functions of volunteering. We request that the inquiry seek further details on the sources of revenue for all VRCs, including Volunteering Queensland, with a view that these funds be reallocated on an agreed formula for distribution, with particular attention to be given to whether the funding for Volunteering Queensland to undertake the role of a peak body should continue in light of the creation of a volunteering unit in the department. Similarly, all sources of government funding, including local, state and Commonwealth, be reviewed to identify those grants available for volunteering or similar processes such as social inclusion and these grants be prioritised and quantified and quarantined for VRCs to undertake volunteering; and a consolidated single agreement with the department and VRCs be developed to ensure delivery against agreed criteria. The Queensland state government, if it wishes to support the growth of volunteering in consideration of the Olympics, should ensure that funding for volunteering be directed to those organisations for volunteering services established as a result of this inquiry. We further request that the inquiry address the continued viability of spontaneous volunteers as a component of a coordinated disaster recovery response. This request is made in light of the recent establishment of DRA, Disaster Relief Australia, and the assumed role of Volunteering Queensland to coordinate spontaneous volunteers across the state.

In conclusion, serious consideration be given by the inquiry to establishing a volunteering research centre, preferably at a regional university in Queensland. This centre, once established, should be funded by research grants and the university and VRCs, or their replacements, become foundation members of the research centre.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: I am sorry to hear that you see that your organisation is no longer financially viable and faces closure. I am interested in the ideas you have around the peak body and why you do not feel that is beneficial to your organisation. Could you unpack that a little bit more for me, please?

Mr Moodie: I will let Caroline answer that question.

Ms Patton: The way in which the peak body operates today, the peak body operates both as a peak body in its interest but also as a VRC in its own right. What we see is that it actually is not representative of all of the VRCs. Up until only recently, where there were changes in their administrative structures, did Volunteering Queensland start to want to be engaged with Volunteering Sunshine Coast? I have been on the board for two years now and today was the first time I actually met a Volunteering Queensland representative in person. Having said that, I feel that there is a conflict for them to represent the body and be a VRC. My view is that the board of Volunteering Queensland should be made up of representatives of all of the boards from each of the VRCs in order for them to have a fair and equitable position and mindset as to how we approach volunteering here in Queensland. I hope that answers your question.

Mr Moodie: I think there has been a request for a separate in camera session to discussion the relationship.

CHAIR: If you would like to arrange something like that would you speak with the committee secretary, Kylie Guthrie, after the hearing.

Ms Patton: Yes, that would be great. Thank you.

CHAIR: Member for Theodore, do you have a question?

Mr BOOTHMAN: I am just getting my head around how your organisation works, and what you are doing is commendable. You have around 1,000-odd volunteers working for your organisation?

Mr Moodie: On our books, yes.

Mr BOOTHMAN: So how do you coordinate? How does your approach work? We have something similar on the Gold Coast, but it does not seem to be as dynamic as what you have achieved, so I am just curious. How does your organisation work? How do you interact?

Mr Moodie: There are differences between us and Gold Coast. Gold Coast are Volunteering Gold Coast, so they perform volunteering functions, but they also generate revenue from their aged-care patient service, and I think that is a conflict. I think VRCs should be independent and be focused purely on the recruitment, selection and deployment of volunteers. What we do—and there are inherent difficulties with the process—is that we have about 100 volunteering interested organisations. They come to us and say, ‘We would like a volunteer,’ so they do up a position description. We then advertise it through our network, which is Seek, and then those people apply. We then, as I say, recruit them, assess them and we then deploy them to the volunteering interested organisations.

The problems with the process are that we do not run any systems about verifying volunteering interested organisations. If they register with us, we have no process, so they could be anybody. They are not, but they could be anybody. Also in terms of the follow-up process, they then become that organisation’s volunteer. For example, we recruit for the Sunshine Coast University Hospital. Once they enter that hospital, they become their volunteer, so we lose contact with them. I think that is a problem because I think people should be registered with us. If there is an issue they could come back to us as an independent body and make a complaint or whatever and there should be processes that support all of that.

The other problem with the issue is that we do not have a process that says to people, ‘If you have an interest in volunteering, approach us.’ So if it is not driven by the VIO in a position description, we do not do it, and that is an issue for multicultural groups, so we end up with a particular cohort of volunteer that fits the VIO. We are not picking up people. For example, on the Sunshine Coast a lot of people come here from the south who have senior jobs. They are a huge resource for the community that these systems are not picking up.

Ms Patton: If I can add to that, the reason we do not do that is because our team is made up of volunteers and we do not have the capacity to do that breadth of activity. Because we have no funding we cannot employ permanent employees in order to put these constructs in place in order to be able to offer those services and so we are hamstrung with the model that we are working within, so you have the kindness of all of the volunteers who are trying to put the systematic systems in place. If you think about some of the considerations for the rural fire brigade and the onboarding processing, it is a systematic problem because of the lack of funding in order to orchestrate those processes.

Mr BOOTHMAN: I have a follow-up question then. You said that you lose contact with these individuals once they are placed in their specific organisation. What would be a solution to fix that issue? Obviously if that person is very good at doing what they do, they potentially could be still on the books and go somewhere else if they had spare time. What solution do you feel would be appropriate?

Mr Moodie: The first component to the solution—and that we certainly request of the inquiry—is that we need a mandate to operate. Because we are a voluntary organisation we just exist and we do what we do. There is no mandate from anyone for us to do what we do; we just do it. If there were a mandate, we would then have some legitimacy in the process, particularly with VIOs. I believe that the volunteers should be registered, which we do, but there should be a charter for the volunteer that says, 'Here are your rights and responsibilities if there's a particular issue then you come back to us if there's a particular point of reference,' because I think if people have a bad experience they have nowhere to go so they just leave and we do not learn from that, so the mandate is very important.

If you then wanted to enhance volunteering, you need some information to work by about who it is and where they are from and it is easier for the volunteer if there is a single point of contact within a particular region. So a VRC should not be doing other things like Gold Coast; they should just be a VRC. We are not suggesting that that is a big cost issue. I think a lot of it can be done as long as you have some foundation funding. There seems to be lots of money from government in grants that ideally should be quarantined to these particular organisations, because most of our overhead to operate is applying for grants, and it is a game. We could talk about it all day, but they are the types of issues that need to get resolved. When things like the Olympics come along, because this is all over the shop you have no base to understand your volunteering population and who is interested. Then when you go to gear up for something like the Olympics you have to start from scratch, and of course people then want to set up their own organisations to do that, and I understand that.

Mr FURNER: Mr Moodie, I am pretty certain that in your submission you identify as the largest voluntary organisation on the Sunshine Coast; that is correct?

Mr Moodie: Yes.

Mr FURNER: Given your position leading into the financial year and your status of sustainability, are there other organisations within the Sunshine Coast that may be of assistance or willing to participate in the sustainability of Volunteering Sunshine Coast?

Mr Moodie: We get funding from the Sunshine Coast Council to open the doors—obviously councils are not blessed with large sums of money, so we get some money—but part of the current process is to try and source that additional revenue, and traditionally we do that via grants. I have been there 12 months as at the beginning of April and we certainly have been trying to seek funding, but it seems to me that there is funding from both the Commonwealth and state governments; it is just that it is not focused on the core business of volunteering. We do get grants to expand volunteering to multicultural groups or whatever, but we do not get money from anybody to do the basic volunteering work for those 100 or so VIOs, and the view is that it is free. Everyone thinks it just happens because it is free. It is done by volunteers. One of the other issues you have, which I mention in my submission, is it costs money for people to volunteer—they get dressed up to come to work and they pay for petrol et cetera. There is a huge resource in volunteers. People want to volunteer, but it is not a free good. At Volunteering Sunshine Coast we are seeking money, yes, but you deal with volunteers. That is the dilemma.

Mr FURNER: Mr Moodie, I specifically wanted to identify in your submission that you mention SC2032 has made some connection with you. How is that going? Is that a possibility?

Mr Moodie: My advice to them was that, instead of trying to set up on their own, there is an organisation like ours that can do that work for you. There is no need for the duplication, and one of the problems with volunteering is that you have a multitude of organisations. For example, the Sunshine Coast Council has its own volunteer program, so you have all of this effort dispersed throughout the community whereas I think it should be brought together in terms of the resources. We understand government does not have large sums of money to spend on all of the demands of government, but it seems to me that there is duplication all over the place that can be brought together, but we do not have the mandate to do that. That is what we are looking for you to do in terms of saying, 'Maybe instead of a little bit of this money going here and a little bit there, there's going to be this organisational structure of VRCs that have a mandate from the state government. Its job is to do these things,' and the focus should be around quality for the volunteer and safety for the volunteer about their experience. You set the criteria and then mobilise funding that is going all over the place in terms of grants. Just go and google grants. There are hundreds of them, but you have to apply. That money should be quarantined, I think.

Ms Patton: I also understand that we have federal funding for Volunteering Queensland, and that is a substantial amount of money, but that money stays within Volunteering Queensland. If you think about the model, if we had a fair and equitable funding disbursement model that caters to my earlier point with regard to VQ and being a VRC as well as the peak body itself, if you looked at that

model and disbursed that model you could then accommodate Far North Queensland, which is struggling, and ourselves. We could also be looking at the Gold Coast and actually fund accordingly so that we then had the base foundation of funding which covers for our basics—utilities, accommodation and minimum staff in order for us to operate and have the systemic processes in place. You referred to technology earlier as well, so that would allow us to have the minimum viable technology requirements in order for a VRC to provide that value back into the community. When we look at the efforts that are developed from people participating in voluntary activities through the community, it is something that is quite extraordinary and we can only do something to honour that in order to then put the right structures in place to support them.

Mr FURNER: So you are suggesting that the model is that the funding come from the Commonwealth directly to the organisation and bypass the state?

Ms Patton: No, it is disbursed equitably.

Mr FURNER: Via the state?

Ms Patton: Via the state.

Mr Moodie: Commonwealth funding should come through the state.

Mr FURNER: Yes, of course.

Ms Patton: Yes, but be disbursed equitably.

Mr FURNER: Okay.

Mr BAILLIE: Thank you both for joining us today. I want to ask something for my own clarity. A lot of the volunteering organisations that we hear from are trying to achieve a specific outcome in the community, be it fire services or transport. From what I am picking up from your evidence today, you are positioning yourself as a service provider to the other—

Ms Patton: To those VIOs; correct.

Mr BAILLIE:—volunteer organisations.

Ms Patton: Yes.

Mr BAILLIE: Is that a competitive space? Are there many others that purely focus on providing that service to other volunteer organisations? So you are largely—

Ms Patton: No, and we have one of those members here today. We assist them in doing, if you like, the administrative activities in order for them to focus on the community value that they contribute to their community.

Mr BAILLIE: Yes, so in providing your service to the other organisations, obviously there is a lot of communication involved there. Are there any specific opportunities you see that could be undertaken to achieve better outcomes and connect more volunteering organisations with services like yours?

Ms Patton: Yes. First and foremost, we do not charge these VIOs in order for them to use our services. When I first started there was a fee for service. In terms of the fee for service, a lot of those volunteering entities or communities cannot afford it, even if it is \$150 or something like that. We then said, 'We need to create a model and build the community in order to give them the service so that they can provide the services back into the community.' From that, yes, we could raise revenue for ourselves by charging them, but you are taking from one hand and giving to the other. We are not benefiting the environment from doing that. It is really important for us to look at systematically what foundational things are needed for us to implement for us to then work with organisations to be able to enable that service for them. I hope that answers that, Adam.

Mr BAILLIE: Yes. Thank you very much.

CHAIR: Mr Moodie, you said in your opening statement that there should be research units established in the university to look into the volunteering questions and the kinds of things that we are dealing with here. What would you suggest might be the most promising lines of inquiry if such an establishment were to be raised?

Mr Moodie: Volunteering can be a major economic activity, and I do not have a volunteering background; my background is in health care. I have been here 12 months and it amazes me that you have such a major component of the economy where there is no research or analysis going on about it, particularly in a state like Queensland where the current structure is that there is a limited number of VRCs.

We get calls from Central Queensland that they cannot get enough people to volunteer to run the football teams. Volunteering is a huge component of the welfare of communities in terms of social inclusion, health care, people connecting, whatever. For those communities that is all dropping away. Where is the research base about all of that? There is all of this advocacy going on about volunteering. A lot of it is myth and legend. There are very few facts about what is going on, what the reasons are. If the research was there you would not necessarily have to do as much work in terms of your inquiry to find that out. It astounds me that it does not exist at the moment.

I think that a regional university would be the best. In the submission, I referred to the work that QUT did in terms of the establishment of DRA. If you take the time and have a look at the research, it is all about place-based community building local communities. The trend with volunteering is that it has been centralised by de facto into Volunteering Queensland, a Brisbane-based organisation. Everything is regionalised in Queensland. We had those debates 30 years ago and they have been resolved. It is those communities and locations that are really important and there should be some research and analysis going on about those things. I am not saying there is not research, but someone needs to bring it together to inform government. They would have a relationship with departments and groups. Then the group would set policy and provide advice to government, and we would have a role within that.

CHAIR: Are you saying that a want of credible research backing up the value and opportunities of volunteering skews government priorities away from funding or supporting volunteers in other ways?

Mr Moodie: Yes. Where is the research into people who have volunteered for periods of time? A PhD student could survey volunteers about their issues. I do not think you are going to get many individual volunteers talking to your inquiry about their experiences. I think you are going to get lots of organisations because they see opportunities from a financial perspective, but really the emphasis should be on the volunteer and what we are trying to do. That research has to be done independently. It should not be done by a peak body or by us because we are conflicted. We are not talking about big research centres. These are the sorts of things regional universities should be doing.

I think your job is around mandates. The Queensland government has an interest in a mandate for volunteering. We want to do volunteering and we want it to work. It does not mean you have to spend millions of dollars making it happen. If you mandate it, lots of things flow from that. That is the key issue. In terms of raising money, we do not have a mandate so the message is that it is not important.

CHAIR: Thank you. That brings to an end your appearance before us today. Thank you very much for your submission and for your participation. You are welcome to stay and observe the rest of the hearing.

BOND, Mr Michael CSC and Bar, Vice-Chair, Queensland Water and Land Carers

GITTINS, Ms Mary-Lou OAM, Chair, Queensland Water and Land Carers

CHAIR: Ms Gittins, I declare before everyone here that you are a constituent of mine and we have met on many occasions, but I will not be any easier on you because of it.

Ms Gittins: In different roles too, as in the Goomburra Town Hall Committee and the show.

CHAIR: Yes. We are here to listen to you, so if you would like to make an opening statement then the committee will have some questions for you.

Ms Gittins: Firstly, I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners and their custodianship of the land, and pay our respects to their ancestors and descendants, who continue to work and play on the land. We recognise they are land carers, and that is what we are here today to talk about.

We have approximately 500 members, which equates to 60,000-odd volunteers. We do not manage our volunteers; we work with the groups. Their time and resources go towards enhancing the Queensland environment, and they do this work with heart and passion. They are action orientated in what they do. In our annual report survey, which we have been doing for 10 years, we asked the group what are their biggest challenges. We strive to understand our volunteers. Both Michael and I are volunteers. We belong to a Landcare group. In order to be a director in our group you must be from a volunteer background and a member of a volunteer group.

We listen to what our members are saying. They would like support and help with government regulations, capacity building and engagement. Only a small number of our group, about two per cent, say they have everything under control. I will give you an example of how QWaLC works with their volunteers. In 2024 the Australian Taxation Office—and I am sure all of the volunteers here can put their hand up and shock them about their income—introduced tax changes. The Office of Fair Trading is also introducing changes. This was very confronting for some of our groups, especially with the ATO and Landcare. In many other states some groups are not incorporated, so they were confronted with the new regime and what had to happen. QWaLC rose to the challenge to educate our 500-plus members about the current financial and governance changes for their groups. We were able to do that because the Queensland government has invested in QWaLC over many years and we have the capacity to work with our 500-plus members.

Community volunteers are not action driven and are not administrative driven, as you have heard before. To help our group be legally safe, the QWaLC team has to make sure that the latest legal and workplace safety information is made known to our members. On our QWaLC website we have what is called the toolbox. Within that are policies and workplace health and safety forms. We need to keep our groups not only physically safe but also legally safe. The QWaLC team looks forward to the Crisafulli government discovering solutions to the issue of red tape in volunteering administration. The 300 QWaLC members in SEQ, the Burnett-Mary and the Darling Downs regions are a ready workforce to implement on-the-ground action to support the development of the 2032 Olympics in the Sunshine State. Together, let us empower these dedicated individuals and ensure a brighter future for Queensland volunteers.

Mr Bond: We are offering the QWaLC model to the inquiry as a successful example of a funded peak body that successfully supports a sector of volunteering in Queensland.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: Thank you for your great work and for coming in today. It sounds like it is working quite well for you. One of the issues we have heard from numerous submissions is about managing the executive within some of the smaller groups. How do you help support those groups in their search to recruit and hold onto those key executive or board positions?

Ms Gittins: I recently attended a meeting with the Boonah Landcare group. I spent three hours with them talking about governance and looking at ways to make it easier to maintain those roles while meeting legalities. We have templates on minutes and what is required financially—making sure they are ACNC registered helps a lot—and giving those supports. There is not only support on the QWaLC website, but they can ring up our CEO, Darryl, or the director for their region to seek support and talk. We go out and visit our groups and communicate regularly with them.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: Have you had any feedback from them in terms of the impact that has on them being able to maintain those positions?

Ms Gittins: As you know, in rural communities you come to a meeting and you sort of change your hat. Within a community you get to know those volunteers who have capacity within the administration. Sometimes you may be secretary to four communities groups—but that is beside the point—because you have that capacity. That is limited as you go through, but by having Birtinya

communication with QWaLC they can seek some support. In the past we have submitted to government that having what we call community offices would work within a region. We are in catchments. They would support our on-the-ground groups with administration and meeting some of the legal requirements that some groups may not have the capacity to do.

Action on the ground is not the problem—they are out there doing it, they have boots on the ground—but it is writing up minutes and having to know that that truck should be insured or something. QWaLC does provide support through other insurances. Apart from our QWaLC members, the general community out there does not know that you really should have not just public liability insurance but also committee insurance and volunteer insurance. As for the Office of Fair Trading, people on committees do not even realise that through their constitution they should have insurance and they should let their volunteers know they are insured. There are other things on our QWaLC website such as volunteer agreements and how to perform an induction so that they do know how they should behave in relation to blue cards and the different types of requirements that are legally required.

Mr BOOTHMAN: Queensland Water and Land Carers is obviously a massive organisation. As you said, you have a lot of members all over South-East Queensland, including in the South Burnett out to Warwick. How does an organisation such as yours manage that? How do you attract that massive number of people? What is your key to success? You mentioned red tape. I am also curious about that.

Mr Bond: We are a statewide organisation that stretches from Cape York to the border. We have 12 directors who have their patches. We attract members by word of mouth. Our offering is that attractive to volunteer organisations—

Ms Gittins: We do not have the time.

Mr Bond: No. We are not out there recruiting. That is why I am suggesting that this is a model that actually works for a sector. We get new organisations joining us every week, so that is not an issue. In relation to red tape, I would just caution that often red tape is there for a reason. It is a great line to say you are going to try and cut red tape. One example is the blue card. Yes, that is a burden for volunteer organisations, but it stops hundreds of inappropriate people from gaining access to children and young people in the volunteer sector. I would just issue that caution.

Ms Gittins: But it is simplifying, making things practical. It is when you have to do things that you cannot see the connectivity with things. Volunteer groups are not a business so what you will have to equate to is that these people want to be involved and give of themselves. This is where it comes to—if they go through local council or whatever it is—having that administrative support to keep our groups legal.

QWaLC has been going for 21 years. Before that, it was an advisory board to the Landcare and Catchment Management Council. Then when those groups were closing, we put through a request and asked the government to support a peak body for these groups. That year I was lucky and had the honour to chair the steering group that formed Queensland Water and Land Carers. At that time we only had landcare. We had 170 groups. That has grown to 517 groups over 21 years. We are celebrating 21 years and we are quite excited about that. We have a diversity of groups. You must have something to do with the environment, something to do with farming or something to do with caring for our healthy land and water here in Queensland.

People are finding more time to become involved. There are different types of groups. Wildlife groups and things like that are developing. There are community gardens. We offer these groups a safe way to volunteer and that is legal and with insurance. It is looking at both of those forms. You cannot take those separately. There is a legal and a physical insurance that we need to do.

Mr Bond: I think that is a good point. Our volunteers want to be out there pulling some weeds and planting some plants as opposed to being in here trying to incorporate or whatever. That is the support that a peak body, in our case, offers.

CHAIR: Is it fair to say that the support that you can give to executive members to do the hard yards and take on those risks and those onerous responsibilities is—to use a military term—a force multiplier.

Mr Bond: It is. It is an upside-down tree. We see ourselves at the bottom supporting. As Mary-Lou says, this is a diverse range of groups. Some people will ask, 'What is an AGM? How do you do that?' That is the support we offer every day and it works. I have had a lot of feedback, and I am sure Mary-Lou has, about the fundamental support that we provide and the success and the burden that that relieves.

Ms Gittins: May I state that we are lean and productive.

Mr Bond: Yes, we are all volunteers.

Ms Gittins: We have one CEO and two contractors—one contracted to do media and the other to do a lot of our computer and IT, because we do the *Health of Landcare in QLD* report. Our directors are volunteers and we put a lot of hours into the administration of Queensland Water and Land Carers to make sure that capacity is there so that we can pass onto our groups. We advocate for our groups. We do not advocate, in a sense, for what they do on the ground. We do not dictate or give grants out for that. We seek government support for our groups, not for QWaLC itself. We still would like support for QWaLC to maintain and give that capacity to our on-the-ground groups.

Mr FURNER: I want to take you to your submission where you note one of the terms of reference of this committee, which is dealing with First Nations people. Thank you for your acknowledgement of country, as well. I do note there has been an increase—it does not stipulate the increase, but it is sitting at 4.44 per cent. What has it increased from?

Ms Gittins: Probably nonengagement. There has been some engagement but we are developing our relationship. We have two First Nations people on our committee, which is fantastic, from the cape and from the Fitzroy area. We acknowledge that they were the first landcarers per se and they have a lot of cultural knowledge and gifts that they can pass on to the wider community. It is very important for us to engage with that sector of the community and to acknowledge the work that they do and let that reflect. Cultural burning is quite strong within our landcare groups. That is another thing that we can build that relationship with. The ranger groups are quite strong within our community, our groups. They liaise with each other, the rangers as well as the landcare groups or other community groups that we have.

Mr FURNER: You mentioned burning. I have been up to the cape on many occasions and seen cool burning, which obviously is part of the culture of our First Nations people and they understand the purpose of doing that.

Ms Gittins: That is right.

Mr FURNER: Are there other mechanisms and processes that you consider would be beneficial to First Nations people and your group?

Ms Gittins: A lot of the cultural burning is happening out west now and in our area. In each of the regions in Queensland, cultural burning is becoming quite a tool that farmers can use. It is also about being aware of the climate and our seasons and recognising signs of growth in our plants and our environment and just what are local endemic plants and native grasslands. That knowledge is also very important.

Mr FURNER: Are they identifying any changes as a result of climate change? At times I have been up to the Torres Strait and seen weeds that had not been there previously. As a result of the change in weather, there seems to be an increase in pests and weeds in those climates.

Ms Gittins: It is because it changes. We have lantana out west now and we never used to have that. The encroachment of pests and weeds is actually quite prolific in that sense. The cool burns or cultural burns are a tool in a preventive way of dealing with our pests and weeds. They come back and you can see where the lantana has been knocked back and if there is a continued practice it will actually destroy it. They do have a seedbed and, instead of using the old chemicals, this is a more natural process to actually take that seedbed out.

Mr FURNER: Do you generally rely upon traditional owners to be part of the group or is it open to other First Nations people in those areas?

Ms Gittins: No, we do not dictate in any shape or form who can or cannot be a member of a group. For the group itself, there is a criteria they must meet. First of all, they must be incorporated—

Mr Bond: That is for all groups.

Ms Gittins: That is right—and have volunteers. We do not deal with a company or anything like that. It can be a company or something like that. They must be legally a group and have volunteers within that group.

Mr Bond: We also give advice to our groups on how to auspice other groups that do not take that criteria. There is a whole range of support that we provide.

Ms Gittins: There is one group out on the Downs that may have 10 groups underneath them.

Mr BAILLIE: I commend you on your efforts as an organisation to maintain our environment and continue to improve it. As you mentioned, Mr Bond, your members want to pull out weeds, plant trees—

Mr Bond: Probably not in that order, but yes. That is the requirement.

Mr BAILLIE:—pick up rubbish and so on. I am also mindful, from my dealings with similar groups in my area, of the overlay of ownership structures as soon as you walk out the door. You might have state land, council land, federal government land, private land. How do you go about trying to perform the work that you do with all of those overlays and are there opportunities for improvement? For example, weeds do not stop at a boundary. We have seen a bit in the media recently about fire ants, which do not care at all if there is a fence line there; they will keep on moving. How do you do what you do and maintain legal liability, coverage, protection against accidents and also get those permissions to enter that land?

Ms Gittins: As stated, with QWaLC our members have been out there with Landcare and then we had soil groups before that. For over 40 years this has been happening. Landholders are actually members of groups and things like that. They work closely. If you look at the *Health of Landcare in QLD* report, QWaLC member groups work closely with local government. They also have a relationship with the state government. We do not impose any of that or what their relation should be or anything like that. We can offer support because we work at the state level. However, we do not impose any relationship there because this is local people taking local action in their local area. The information and the knowledge is there. If they need support to gain some knowledge then our CEO is quite capable of doing that.

Mr Bond: But you are right: land tenure is an issue for groups. In any one catchment you will have all sorts of land tenure. You might be able to weed only up to a boundary, for example. Each individual group is out there negotiating with Seqwater or whatever the organisation is to try to gain access or with private landholders to gain access to property. It is no good weeding down to the bottom of the catchment—

Mr BAILLIE: If the rubbish is blowing along with the wind and it goes from one to the other. Do you see opportunities to improve how we try to—

Mr Bond: There may well be. One of our groups has great success, of course, in having these negotiations and there are wonderful examples in my patch, which is South-East Queensland, of whole-of-catchment type bands involving all the stakeholders. People get it. I do not have a specific example, if that would help. I like the line from the speaker before: a lot of this is about mandate and that support.

Ms Gittins: Yesterday you heard from one of our member groups, the Gympie landcare group. They are actually part of the Mary River Catchment Coordinating Committee. The MRCCC is not an overriding body but it collects all those stakeholder groups. In the Condamine catchment, we have the Condamine Catchment Management Association, of which I am the secretary. We have all of these landcare groups and environmental groups. We meet quarterly to discuss what we are doing, what issues you might have, share our knowledge and the experiences that we have had. It is that communication which, as we all know, is very strong and it strengthens capacity.

CHAIR: Thank you very much for your participation today and for your submission. It is much appreciated. I encourage you to stay and have a cup of tea with us and absorb the hearing today. I look forward to crossing paths with you at the Goomburra town hall at some stage.

Ms Gittins: Excellent. May I just add that we have strong relationships with Volunteering Queensland and Volunteering Australia so we are very interested in what is happening. Thank you very much for this initiative. It is fantastic.

AKERS, Ms Kaitlyn, Deputy Chair, Volunteer and Community Committee, Sunshine Coast 2032

WHITE, Ms Roz, Chair, Sunshine Coast 2032

CHAIR: Would you like to make an opening statement and then the committee will have some questions for you?

Ms Akers: First of all, thank you, panel. I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting at the moment, the Gabi-gabi people, and elders past, present and emerging as they hold the stories of our volunteers and of our places where we meet. Those stories are close to our hearts as well.

From an opening statement point of view, Sunshine Coast 2032 has no official role in the Olympics but we are a volunteer-led and community-driven organisation that is all about building capability and advocacy to achieve the best outcomes for our community from the Olympics, both now and in the future. We are also here to empower and motivate sectors across our community—business and economic—and people of all ages and places to get involved in this exciting opportunity, given the notices that we had yesterday. I would like to thank the chair for this opportunity. I know that you had a number of submissions. For me to comment here today is a great honour. We are empowered and excited by yesterday's announcement and what it means for the Queensland community, particularly Sunshine Coast.

This inquiry is particularly important now because volunteers will be lent upon to supply workforces before and post the Olympics. This is an opportunity to really shine a light on those volunteer landscapes and acknowledge some of the challenges and issues volunteer organisations more broadly have. Most of our volunteers in Sunshine Coast 2032 also play volunteer roles in their own communities and they are representing those communities by coming together as a body for Sunshine Coast 2032.

We are looking to build out a social, cultural and economic fabric that will give voice to wider participation. Volunteer participation, as we all know, is declining. That is why we are here and talking. There are changing attitudes and impacts across the areas. That economic buy-in needs to recognise how we build human centred design into bringing forward our volunteers and making sure that the volunteer opportunities—whether spontaneous or planned—across these great organisations are able to be engaged with in an easy way that is accessible for all, regardless of what contribution you have to make. We need to ensure that contribution has meaning for the individual and also provides legacy back into what they are doing in their own worlds. This will require support from a cultural perspective, recognising funding, and also opening up opportunities for organisations to participate and know where they can put their best efforts. Volunteers are short on time—we are all short of time; we all have jobs, lives, families and work—and they really want to make sure they are getting best effort and best acknowledgement for their community for the time they put in. It is not about them; it is actually about the purpose behind the contribution they are making. I hope that your inquiry will help to support frameworks and funding that will eventually provide some baselines for us to move forward and contribute more widely coming up to the Olympics.

Ms White: This organisation is a community-based organisation that is volunteer-led and volunteer-driven. We are all united in the purpose of driving best outcomes for our region—unapologetically—across all sectors, in the lead-up to, during and after this wonderful event that is coming to us in Queensland in 2032. Our vision is to leave a lasting impact of enduring benefits for the region across all sectors—whether that is community sport, an increased participation of volunteering, economic benefits, cultural and environmental aspects or infrastructure. It is a wonderful opportunity for our region. We embrace this opportunity. We want to be able to drive best outcomes and to work with all levels of government—community groups, residents associations and grassroots sporting clubs—to activate new ideas and initiatives that will propel our region in a strong way with leadership.

We are working with groups at the highest level. We are working with organisations such as the World Academy of Sport, which works with global sports right across the world, and, indeed, we work very collaboratively with the IOC and OCOG. They see Sunshine Coast 2032 as a model that could be adopted to help make the Olympic and Paralympic Games a success. That is due to the community activation we can initiate because our volunteers are on-the-ground people. They are everyday people who just want the best for our region. That is what we aim to do.

As Kaitlyn said, we want to build capability across business and tourism and help to educate and inspire businesses through programs that will drive their business. We want to advocate for our

region, unapologetically, to get great outcomes such as the announcements yesterday and investment into our region. We also want to motivate people to get involved—motivate volunteers, motivate kids into sport, motivate people to invest in this region and motivate visitors to come to this world-class region that I am so proud to be a part of.

CHAIR: Thank you. The Olympics is supposed to be about not just sport but also the legacy—the infrastructure and so forth. Do you see this as having potential to spark a renaissance in volunteering that will provide a legacy of volunteering and community involvement going forward—for tourism or for whatever the needs of the community are?

Ms Akers: We certainly do. While the event can be used to promote volunteering on a large scale, most of the volunteering that happens around the actual event itself is external to the event organisers, so you really need to create that collaboration before you come into the games. There will be official games volunteers. They found in Sydney, Paris and in other games that most of the volunteering that happens around the games was not in an official capacity. There could be a call for 200,000 volunteers to deliver the actual games. Outside of that, you could have another 800,000 applications that are unsuccessful for those official positions. That is an opportunity to engage those people, to get them involved in the community, and for other organisations to come through. Having collaboration across those external community organisations is particularly important both on the way in and on the way out—this is a 10-year project; it is not just the next two years—to make sure people have those connections, they are well qualified, they understand what their roles are and they have a sense of purpose in what they are giving and the time they are spending there as well.

CHAIR: It is obviously something you have given a lot of thought to.

Ms Akers: Absolutely, yes.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: Thank you for coming in today. Can you explain how your organisation works? How many volunteers do you have? Do you manage those volunteers? What are those volunteers doing at the moment? How have you recruited them, and how does what you do differ from the work of Volunteering Sunshine Coast?

Ms Akers: We have volunteering members of Volunteering Sunshine Coast on our committee. There are a couple of them here today, as well as some of our other volunteers. We are a peak body that sits around other organisations and our volunteers tend to have multiple volunteering roles, as we know from most volunteers across Queensland. Our fire person is also the local police officer who is also doing landcare. We are counting those numbers, saying, 'We have 20,000 volunteers.' Sunshine Coast 2032's volunteers are wrapped up within other organisations as well, when you are counting them in terms of how many you have.

We recruited through an active recruitment practice, through a HRM. One of our local members, the honourable Ted O'Brien—at that time he was in an Olympic preparation role—saw the opportunity to bring forward a group of people to activate the community. Then there were loads of people involved. That is how the organisation established itself. We have multiple committees underneath us that play roles. We sit on those committees from our other volunteering roles in community. That creates that collaboration. It is a hub and spoke model where you have a chamber and multiple people coming in. They are there representing other organisations, and their other points of view, so we can get a more broad point of view of the whole community.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: You do not see duplication between what you are doing and Volunteering Sunshine Coast?

Ms Akers: Volunteering Sunshine Coast provides the volunteers; we broker and advocate for opportunities for Volunteering Sunshine Coast.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: So you do not see any duplication?

Ms Akers: Definitely not, no.

Ms White: The important thing is that we champion each other to collaborate in terms of achieving best practice and best outcomes and being in step with one vision. It is so important to activate the entire community together so that there is that conversation happening and we are supporting each other. Sunshine Coast residents and our beautiful region are real champions of that in their heart already. It is just elevating that to the next level. Inspiring the next generation is definitely part of our vision—not only leaving a lasting legacy for their benefit but also inspiring them to get involved. At the end of the day, in 2032 a lot of them will have their own businesses. They could be athletes. They are an important part of our region that we continue to motivate, inspire and bring along. Old heads like mine can maybe help and mentor our new generation.

Ms Akers: Thank you. That is a great question because people often say, 'You're doing that and the Olympic committee is doing that' and everybody's jumping in. I think without collaboration you do not get the best outcomes. This is a big job so we should be working together and across organisations. Strength comes through that collaboration. It is through innovation that we will build our volunteering sector to something that will be more robust because you have more heads in there and you have more time.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: Thank you. Your enthusiasm is definitely on show today. Thank you for that as well.

CHAIR: Hear, hear.

Mr BOOTHMAN: My question is in respect of post the games. I am from the Gold Coast, and we had the Commonwealth Games a few years back now. What is your vision in terms of how we keep volunteers in the system? What are your methodologies and ideas to see them retained? We found with the Commonwealth Games that a lot of them fell off; we did not capture them. I am curious to hear your ideas.

Ms Akers: From an organisational perspective, the cultural volunteering sector is where you get people. Congratulations on the games at the Gold Coast, by the way; they were amazing. In terms of the volunteers, what we are advocating for is starting to build a volunteering culture—not focusing on individuals but focusing on commitment as an Australian way of life and a Queensland way of life: 'This is how we do things.' Start with younger people in schools, teach them about volunteering and build that into the fabric of our society. Make it something that is a worthwhile purpose. It is something that has come through, as you can see, from the past.

It is also about how we structure volunteering for younger people and for older people who are time-poor and for people who are working—more spontaneous volunteering. It does not have to be a lifelong commitment. It is for some people—it is about their passion and belief in the cause—but for other people volunteering is a drop-in moment. There is a spontaneity piece around that, particularly when it is event-based. What we would hope is that, before the event and post the event, that experience is so positive that they then sign up for their local Lions group, for landcare, for lifesaving or for handing out vouchers at the next sporting event and that volunteering becomes something that does not have an expectation around payment or anything like that—I have seen that coming through a little bit, that there needs to be reciprocity in terms of personal gain—but something that we build into the fabric of our society. It is not personal gain; it is community gain. That is where the benefit comes from long-term.

While we could address it from an event or a singular volunteer's experience, the challenge for us as a state is to step back from that and look back on top of it and ask: how are we building a culture of volunteerism, giving and reciprocity within ourselves as individuals but also within our young people as they are coming forward and being part of our communities? How are we encouraging that? How are we making it easy? How are we bringing people in so that they have that beating heart that makes them feel that they have got something out of it? With volunteerism, as we know, the numbers are dropping. It has a great economic flow-on, but if we do not address the human element, that human centred design around this—and that starts with our young people—then we will not have the volume of volunteers or they have shrinking hours. It comes from church, state, life—it is how we grow up and it is our values that drive it. If we can think about how we build our society's cultural values around volunteering, that is where the long-term benefit and legacy is.

Mr BOOTHMAN: You are after generational change?

Ms Akers: Generational change, and it is more than this games; it is actually about what we do. You all look about the same age as I am. Remember when we used to do emu parades at school and we would run around the oval and pick up our rubbish? As adults, when we walk past rubbish in the street we pick it up because it has been part of our fabric and our cultural heritage. Let's make volunteering a part of the fabric and cultural heritage of our young people today. Through these games is an opportunity.

Ms White: To add to that, Sunshine Coast 2032 has an aspiration to create model leadership that will leave enduring benefits. Volunteering is one of those. One of the activations could be to inspire businesses to be more involved in providing platforms that can engage volunteerism. In my own organisation that I run, we provide volunteer days for our employees to participate in. We do that a couple of times a year with local charities. They can go and paint fences or do whatever it is and we provide that support for them to be able to do that. That is just one example of different ways that

business can get involved—business and community. It is creating a whole community of volunteers. It happens right across sectors. I think we have to start to think a little differently about how we can activate it and motivate people to inspire others to become volunteers. I have been a volunteer for over two decades. It truly does enrich your life and I think you receive more than you give.

CHAIR: Thank you very much for your appearance and your submission. That concludes the institutional witnesses coming before us today. It has been very good, thank you. I would now like to move into the period where we hear from registered individuals who have expressed a desire to come and speak before us. I believe we have four. If there is anyone here who would like to register with Kylie and speak before us, we would value your views and I encourage you to come up and speak.

I remind witnesses of the terms of reference for the inquiry that the committee is gathering evidence based on key themes. We are not investigating individual complaints about persons or organisations, and in this regard I ask witnesses to be cautious of providing evidence that names or adversely reflects on a person or an organisation.

GUTHRIE, Ms Wendy, Team Leader, Sport Planning and Development, Sunshine Coast Council

CHAIR: I invite you to make a statement before we ask you some questions.

Ms Guthrie: This is a little bit off-the-cuff as well, so please bear with me. I did make a small written submission. My team works with community grassroots sports organisations in two ways: we are responsible for planning for community sport facilities in our region, and we also provide development support for community clubs. We have over 300 grassroots community sports organisations in our council region, and we have three sport development officers to assist those clubs. That can be anything from assisting them with knowledge and writing of grants, managing their facilities, governance, information and guidance—all sorts of things. As you can imagine, we are spread pretty thin, but we do our best with assisting the clubs.

One of the challenges we have is that committees change over so frequently. You have the odd club where the committee has been in position for 10 years or something, which is often a good thing, but sometimes they get a little stale and stuck in their ways. Then often there are clubs where every season at their AGM a whole new committee comes in and you have to start that education process all over again. We work closely with the sport peak bodies, either at state or regional level. They tend to assist the clubs more with the running of their sport as such and less so on governance and facility management. Some of the ideas we try to instil in our clubs are around having set position descriptions, having succession plans or doing some role swapping so that if you are the treasurer one season and you are having trouble attracting new volunteers you just swap those roles around. We encourage them also to try to gather information when they are doing their sign-on days as to what the parent body's skills are so that if they need some accountancy work done or something like, they know who they can tap on the shoulder and ask for some assistance.

There is also an untapped resource in embracing grandparents if they are local or even senior members of your community who often have some free time on their hands because, as we know, volunteers are often mums and dads of the children who are playing sport, and they are running businesses or have full-time jobs as well as trying to run a club on the side.

Also, people with disabilities is an area where there are some excellent opportunities. At the Sunshine Coast Council this year we have employed a part-time sport liaison officer. His role is a partnership with Sport4All, which is one of Dylan Alcott's initiatives. Our sport liaison officer is someone with a lived experience. He is a Paralympian who lives locally, and he is working with clubs and schools to educate around getting involved with clubs, whether it be as a timekeeper or in the canteen or actually playing on the field or the court.

Some clubs, to deal with the lack of volunteers, are putting in incentives or penalties, depending on which way you look at it. It might be that if you coach the under-9s footy team, the following year you will get free membership as a thankyou for doing that. Other clubs add on a volunteering levy so that you might pay an extra amount, say \$50, for your membership, but if you put in X number of hours in the canteen, coaching, line marking or whatever it is you will get that money back at the end of the season.

Where we find clubs are really struggling is around those administrative roles, having good finance management and those sorts of things. There are some organisations that will do pro bono work as part of community obligation. I think we should promote that more, as well as for the private sector to assist in not-for-profit community organisations; it does not have to be sport. Incentivise insurance companies to heavily discount their premiums for clubs across public liability, whatever that might be. Also incentivise utility companies, as electricity and water is really prohibitive. Each council area, in terms of tenure for their sports, does it differently. For instance, the council in Moreton pays for or manages the maintenance of fields, clubhouses and infrastructure, whereas here on the Sunshine Coast only in the last couple of years we have taken on structural maintenance of clubhouse facilities. Prior to that, the clubs were 100 per cent responsible for paying for all the maintenance of the field, all of the building maintenance et cetera. We have improved that situation somewhat. I think it is to try to reduce the burden on the volunteers so that they can concentrate on delivering their core business and have less time spent on the administration and the management responsibilities of those clubs.

CHAIR: It is a common theme we have heard.

Ms Guthrie: Yes, from previous speakers.

CHAIR: Would you mind if the committee had some questions for you now?

Ms Guthrie: Absolutely.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: I am keen to see if you have any ideas about ways that some of those burdens could be alleviated.

Ms Guthrie: With regard to financial management, as I said, perhaps some pro bono work from bookkeepers or accountants. The state government in Queensland has a platform called Club IQ, a series of online videos that helps educate club committees on all sorts of things—how to write grants, how to do financial management and even volunteer recruitment and retention. That has been an excellent initiative. We used to do face-to-face workshops, but we found that was just, again, another impost on the clubs themselves to attend. That now being online has made a big difference. That is one way.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: So, effectively, continuing some of those things that are already working and being able to identify those in particular organisations and with peak bodies et cetera who are supporting them.

CHAIR: Thank you very much, Ms Guthrie, for coming before us today. Impromptu as it was, we find everything that comes before us of value, so thank you.

ACWORTH, Mrs Michelle, Private capacity

CHAIR: Welcome. Would you like to make a short opening statement? Then the committee will have some questions for you.

Mrs Acworth: Wunya—welcome, in our native tongue. I am the volunteer manager for the Sunshine Coast Hospital and Health Service. I have been in this role for approximately 11 years and with Queensland Health for 25 years. I was a Commonwealth Games volunteer, and I am very proud of that. The only reason I left was that I do not live there, but I very much enjoyed the experience and the process.

I have five hospitals within my portfolio. I look after the hospital chaplains, the on-call chaplains, JPs, BreastScreen Queensland, our public hospitals and our aged-care facility, and I am one person. I have volunteers with disabilities and volunteers from non-English-speaking backgrounds. We support a lot of the new doctors and nurses coming through from overseas who are not registered here. They ask us to volunteer for a while and then they wait for their registration and move into roles. We see it as a great opportunity. My volunteers are aged 18 years all the way to 90—Eve is 90 next month—and we are very proud of the teams we have onsite.

I wanted to comment today after listening to the Rural Fire Service. I am so proud. We were six to nine months recruitment as well, and we are now down to three to five months. As to how we made that possible, I am not really sure what the formula was. I do feel the blue card process has improved immensely, and I am grateful for that. Criminal history checks are done within 48 hours, so they are not an issue. We have the added level of vaccinations within our health service, but our health service is one of only a few that does the blood tests and the vaccines for free. We do not allow our volunteers to pay for that; we say that we will do it, so we find that is a lot smoother. They are not having to go and get tests and pay GPs and so forth because, let's face it, that is not cheap.

I will speak to what I am seeing consistently. We have a volunteer network of hospital coordinators and we meet regularly. We feel that our teams are great, our recruitment is fine and we can get volunteers. The average stay for my volunteers is seven to 10 years. We do not have a problem keeping them; we love them and they love us. It is the volunteer managers who are really suffering. We do not have consistency. Being government organisations, there are rules and unions involved which make it very difficult for us because we have to balance that.

This is not anything negative against our organisation, but quite often there is one of us and we are supposed to be in five sites. Volunteers like face-to-face support. We can email, we can have meetings, we can send newsletters, we can do FaceTime—we can do lots of wonderful things. We are not short of ideas and we are motivated, but we cannot be there face-to-face, and as a volunteer that is really important. I feel like the volunteer managers need support. We need better structure. We can look at training, systems, policies and the data, but volunteer managers are burning out. We need help. I think that was really echoed last week in the volunteer conference that VQ held. It was an exceptional conference. I have trained through them. I dropped off and I have come back on board with them. I found them extremely supportive.

We talked about recruitment earlier. We are lucky—unlike the Rural Fire Service, I sign everything off. Our recruitment team do not help us. They do not advertise, they do not shortlist, they do not referee check, they do not do blue card checks, they do not do criminal history—that is me, so you can see I am doing a lot. I am qualified in counselling and I wear that hat probably 85 per cent of my day, so I am covered in cold sores; I am burning out. That is what was echoed last week. We need help, so if you can come up with a system or a process or something to help us, we would love it.

CHAIR: Thank you. Out of an abundance of caution and for your benefit potentially, can I invite you to say that you are here in a private capacity and not speaking for Queensland Health?

Mrs Acworth: Yes. I was asked for an opinion when the inquiry came out and I wrote back. I actually thought I was going to be on leave as well. I just said we had nothing to add at the time. The reason I said that was that I did not want to take away from areas in our community that I know need help. We do not have an issue with recruitment, we do not have an issue with funding and we do not have an issue with creating a training platform, and I did not want to take away from those groups because I know that that can be an issue. I am here as a volunteer manager, from my experience as a volunteer, living in the community and listening to people within that role.

CHAIR: Everything you say here today is subject to parliamentary privilege. Thank you for coming to speak with us. I am sure the committee has some questions.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: The theme of volunteer burnout is a very common one that we have heard. It seems to be quite a complex and challenging area to try to address. In your experience and opinion, having worked across a broad range of volunteers who have been there for a long time—with yourself as an example—can you think of anything that would benefit you personally and then could be extrapolated to other volunteers to prevent or manage burnout?

Mrs Acworth: I think there are two. From a professional perspective, I would like to see government employees being given access to two days volunteering a year which allows us to escape the environment and support our local groups. I think that gives us an opportunity because quite often I will take annual leave days to volunteer. I hate that. I think we should be supporting our staff and our communities. There should be just a very brief process for that; do not overdo it with more paperwork.

I would like to see more support and understanding from our leaders. I do not think they understand what is involved in managing volunteers. I feel like we are pleading our case all the time. I have got my spiel down; I know what I do. My executive, for example, are asked to volunteer on International Volunteer Day every year so I take them into a ward or an area for an hour. They take off their executive jacket and put on a volunteer vest and they experience the role. Through that I am seeing change and I am actually getting more support through my role which is great. I think we need more exemplifying from the top and they need to be doing more volunteering and getting involved in the process. We can tell you everything but you have to do it to understand it.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: That is fantastic. Thank you.

Mr BOOTHMAN: What you are undertaking and doing is truly wonderful. How do you attract volunteers? What types of processes do you use? Is it word of mouth? Is it advertising the facilities? Also, how do you try to keep them?

Mrs Acworth: Thankfully, they built us a new hospital, which is shining light, so that really attracted people. Now all we have to do is advertise on Facebook and in the media to say, 'It's National Volunteer Week,' or 'Let's celebrate Bec, who has been here for 20 years.' I get phone calls and emails daily. To help buffer that, I engage Volunteering Sunshine Coast. We were using them for quite a few years for recruitment, but it became a little bit disjointed for quite some time. It is now back on track, so we have re-engaged their services. They advertise, meet with the volunteers and short-list them, but our paperwork is complex. Even though we can step it through with the team at VSC, we find we are doubling up going through that again anyway.

How do we keep them? I would like to think that they love what they do and they love helping. We try to look for roles where volunteers feel valued. I make an effort to meet with each volunteer regularly and ask, 'How are the grandkids?' or 'Oh, your daughter had back surgery.' You have to have those people skills. If you do not have a person in that role who has people skills, you will lose them. It is almost like being a permanent motivational speaker. It is exhausting. Having some support for us would be great—some education, some training. We only go to a certificate IV level in volunteer coordination. There is nothing much above that, so I think having some more support for us would be great.

Mr BAILLIE: You mentioned that the rules make it difficult for your volunteers to do what they need to do and for you to do what you need to do. Do you have any specific examples of areas that you think can be streamlined? I come from a commercial background in a trade industry. When I have an electrician available, I like him to be working on electrical work and not doing invoices or quotes, for example—having the right fit in that skill set and streamline. Do you have any examples that you can share with us where there might be opportunities for improvement?

Mrs Acworth: I would like to see a really clear line in the sand as to what we can and cannot do. I am being cautious of being in a government role, but volunteers cannot do the work of a paid worker. We are paid by taxpayers. There is a line in the sand there. Quite often volunteers are the ones who want to give, give, give. They will take on any task, and I am having to pull them back and say, 'Hang on a second. Someone is paid and trained to do that.' In an organisational type government role, I would love to see a really clear stance on that. I would love to be able to work with the unions on that so that we can clarify that. That would take away a lot of the work we have to do when someone says, 'I could have got extra hours.' For me in a government sense, I would love some more structure around unions and what we can and cannot do.

In the private sector—they call me the 'ideas man' because I come up with ideas randomly—I would love to be able to put those ideas forward, but I do not feel like there is anywhere I can go and say, 'I have this skill. I have this idea. Let's do this.' It is all fragmented around the place. Last week at the volunteering conference was a great opportunity for us all to get together and say, 'Oh my

God—I have the same idea,’ or ‘I’m already doing that.’ A couple of people stole my executive volunteering idea. It was great to hear that it has been successful. We really need to be banding together a lot better and supporting each other because the duplication drives me nuts. I have enough of that. I do not need to be having the same conversation over and over. There needs to be that strong structure at the top and then we need to connect into that as leaders because you can pull the resources from each person in that group to see what they are doing and how they are doing it.

CHAIR: Recently we have had a commission of inquiry into veteran suicides. I suspect, partly motivated by the alarming findings along the way, the Department of Veterans’ Affairs, a federal agency which I have a little bit to do with myself sometimes, has gone from requiring about seven pages of details to register an injury or make a claim to one or maybe 1½ pages. Is that kind of thing possible, noting what you have said that you are running hospitals—you are playing for keeps? Nevertheless, could you see a way to simplify the workload for volunteers in applying and therefore the people who do the approvals to expedite getting volunteers on board?

Mrs Acworth: Yes. I think that is the reason we have gone from six to nine months down to three. We have reduced it significantly. I have removed a lot of the la-di-da chat in it. It was not necessary. I have reduced it to three pages. Even for one of those pages, when I meet them I pride myself on saying, ‘We’ll just cross that out,’ because you know your business, you know your people and you get a good feel. I try to reduce it according to the volunteer I am meeting with as well. You can usually tell. They already have references. We have reduced it significantly to get it down to three months.

The training that is required under all government umbrellas—it does not matter where you sit—is all mandated. We all have to do code of conduct, emergency response, colour coordination—all of that. I fought for eight years and finally reduced that. I do not ask my volunteers to do that online. I hate that. I get them in a room like this—we actually use this room—and we complete it in two hours face to face. We have conversations and tell stories. I think that is important. When we are doing our fraud training, when they are not sitting at a computer and they are not in their books, it is great to talk about ‘What does fraud look like?’

CHAIR: You must hear some really interesting stories and examples.

Mrs Acworth: I always put the Queensland Health prince up on a screen and say, ‘Remember that headline?’ Everyone goes, ‘Ah.’ Then that starts a conversation about time sheet fraud, Centrelink fraud and so forth. I think the approach we have needs to be supported, instead of people saying, ‘You have to do this training. You have to fill out that form.’ Okay, but is there a better way to do this? I do it face to face in a room for two hours and I have reduced it to a lot of pictures.

CHAIR: If there are no further questions, that concludes our proceedings today. I would like to thank everybody who has participated. There will be a transcript of today’s proceedings on the committee’s webpage on the Queensland parliament’s website in due course. I would like to thank the staff of the parliament—Kylie Guthrie, our inquiry secretary, and Tina from Hansard—for coming with us on this trip. We could not do it without you. I look forward to having a cup of tea.

The committee adjourned at 11.30 am.