



LOCAL GOVERNMENT, SMALL BUSINESS AND CUSTOMER SERVICE SUBCOMMITTEE

Members present:

Mr SM Dillon MP—Chair

Mr AJ Baillie MP

Mr MA Boothman MP

Mrs ME Nightingale MP

Staff present:

Ms K Guthrie—Acting Committee Secretary

Mr P Yagmoor—First Peoples Liaison Officer

PUBLIC HEARING—INQUIRY INTO VOLUNTEERING IN QUEENSLAND

TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS

Tuesday, 15 July 2025

Cooktown

TUESDAY, 15 JULY 2025

The subcommittee met at 9.02 am.

ACTING CHAIR: Good morning. I declare open this public hearing for the committee's inquiry into volunteering in Queensland. My name is Sean Dillon. I am the member for Gregory and acting chair of the committee. I would like to respectfully acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet today and pay our respects to elders past and present. With me here today are: Margie Nightingale, member for Inala and deputy chair; Mark Boothman, member for Theodore; and Adam Baillie, member for Townsville.

This hearing is a proceeding of the Queensland parliament and is subject to the parliament's standing rules and orders. Only the committee and invited witnesses may participate in the proceedings. Witnesses are not required to give evidence under oath or affirmation, but I remind witnesses that intentionally misleading the committee is a serious offence. I also remind members of the public that they may be excluded from the hearing at the discretion of the committee. Media may be present and are subject to the committee's media rules and the chair's 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.

HOLMES, Ms Robyn, Mayor, Cook Shire Council

ACTING CHAIR: Welcome. Would you like to make an opening statement before we start with questions?

Ms Holmes: Volunteering is vital for event delivery and support throughout our region. It is most critical in regional and remote areas, given the limited number of people available and willing to dedicate their time to volunteering. Volunteers are simply that: volunteers who donate their time and skills free of charge for the prosperity of their communities. This should be embraced and supported by all levels of government. Instead, it comes with a raft of challenges such as blue card and other regulatory requirements, a financial burden and sacrificing time with family and friends.

I relocated to Cooktown in 2006. Within a few years I had recommenced volunteering through Little Athletics, cricket and charity fundraising events, and four years later I became the recipient of the 2010 Australia Day awards by Cook Shire Council. I have continued to volunteer, but today I have minimised my contributions due to work commitments. My present volunteering roles include the Marton Rural Fire Brigade, the Cooktown and District Cricket Association and the Cooktown turf club.

Not-for-profits are subject to expensive insurances, compliance and regulatory matters—such as workplace health and safety, financial audits, amending constitutions, adopting and managing codes of conduct, and blue card and criminal history checks. All of these are a cost that sometimes unskilled and unpaid workers and/or their not-for-profit associations endure. These and other administrative operational tasks can be taxing and at times exhausting for not-for-profits which add personal costs, including the use of private office equipment such as laptops and printers, private motor vehicles and meals et cetera. Grant applications are often unsuccessful when inexperienced grant writers lodge applications, and when successful they do not provide for administrative or project management costs, placing additional pressures on those not-for-profits.

To support outcomes, consideration could be given to how to better support not-for-profits through local governments, noting that not all clubs seek the same level of support. This could be as simple as councils being funded to provide maintenance and grant-writing services and administration, with an additional provision for volunteers to claim a tax benefit through mileage allowance for use of private vehicles, demonstrated through logbook entries and endorsed by committees.

The Cook Shire Council is regularly approached by not-for-profits for support, whether it be staffing support, assisting with organisational costs or delivery of services. With the number of not-for-profits in the local government area, it is not feasible to support all groups and it would be an added cost to councils. Council do not see the requests as unreasonable; however, current resources do not permit this kind of support on a regular or long-term basis.

The council is willing to consult with all levels of government to support better outcomes for volunteer organisations. This would include funding to ensure appropriate resources and staff could be dedicated to volunteer services. As noted in my earlier submission, all rural fire brigades across Cook shire struggle with attracting members, primarily due to blue card requirements and the increasing volume of work expected from volunteers. Volunteer firefighters contribute endless hours to firefighting to preserve life and property yet receive very little benefit for placing themselves in life-threatening situations. Volunteer firefighters need to be granted the same exemption afforded to other emergency service providers and health workers whilst on duty.

Further to their current duties, rural fire brigades received an email on 14 July asking for grassland fuel observers to aid regular collections of grass observation operations. If a current member accepts, they are required to undertake further training and allocate 15 minutes per site per week over the fire season, and this does not account for travel time to and from each site. Within an area of 105,719 square kilometres, this can be quite considerable. This is a state government agency relying on volunteers to collect data. The increasing burden expected by the state is becoming unreasonable. These officers carry out their duties with pride and dedication to protecting their communities with no benefit. Emails asking for more is not how we say, 'Thanks for your time.'

Across the board, volunteers are aging and there is not enough uptake by the younger cohort to deliver the same service levels as currently exist. Without reform, we will lose vital social events, history and community sporting events that support social and emotional wellbeing. Unfortunately, the Brisbane Olympics has not brought any notable benefit to the Cook shire. I thank you for hosting the parliamentary inquiry and hope we can gain some outcomes.

ACTING CHAIR: Thank you. There are problems and opportunities unique to each region. At the end of your statement you touched on generational change and an aging population being a real impediment to uptake. Can you unpack that a bit more? Do you have a figure on the number of firefighters you have lost, for example, through the blue card requirements plus the aging? Can you quantify the decline in firefighters or any other group in your region?

Ms Holmes: If you take the Laura Rural Fire Brigade for example, they have one current registered volunteer who is also their first officer and their fire warden. He is roughly 80 years old. He is unable to attract volunteers because most of the Indigenous people who did support the rural fire brigade are unable to get blue cards, which immediately makes them unable to assist. A former councillor, Alan Wilson, was also part of that rural fire brigade and he had raised that very issue with me numerous times. He said that it is very difficult because primary producers will support the fire wherever they can and they will usually work 24/7 but will not work within the guidelines as outlined in the rules for the Rural Fire Service.

ACTING CHAIR: We will come back to that.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: Thank you for appearing today. We are very happy to be here and to hear the unique challenges in this wonderful part of the world. I am keen to unpack the blue card requirements. It is something we have heard in a number of communities. My community in Inala has a number of First Nations people so I understand that for the First Nations people there is often more of a barrier. Can you explain that blue card impact for First Nations people particularly? What is the likelihood of them requiring a blue card in terms of their daily work? What is the likelihood of them working with children in that role?

Ms Holmes: My comments are more around a rural firefighter who fights on the front line to battle a fire. The likelihood of them coming into contact with children is probably rare because we are talking about the rural fire setting; we are not talking about urban. You would really hope there were no children on that fire setting. On a property that is 250,000 square kilometres you might have three or four residential dwellings, so the likelihood of coming in contact with a child would be minimal.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: What are the impacts of them finding it difficult to get a blue card?

Ms Holmes: When we talk about the Indigenous population in Laura, if they have had any kind of criminal conviction it makes them ineligible to obtain a blue card for a certain period of time. That is the first challenge. Part of the challenge is the actual process, which they find really difficult to go through. You could have a support person to step them through that process, but then it comes back to needing a volunteer to do that. With every angle we take to try to achieve these outcomes the responsibility falls back onto a volunteer, and sometimes that can be challenging because those volunteers do not necessarily have the skills to delve into those electronic systems.

Mr BOOTHMAN: You certainly have a beautiful region up here. It is obviously very different to where I come from down in the south-east, in the Gold Coast region. We have a lot of rural fire brigades and it is good to see you are very passionate about those volunteer organisations. You

briefly mentioned bureaucracy to do with the rural fire brigades. How do you find the support from the regional offices when it comes to helping to sort through the paperwork? Do you have any comments about that? Do you feel they are responsive?

Ms Holmes: The Queensland fire service have just established an office here; it is very new. The support that I have got from them personally, being in an administrative role with the Rural Fire Service, is really good; it is excellent in comparison to what we have had and it is very easily accessible for those rural fire brigades that are in close proximity to Cooktown.

Then we talk about the ones in Laura, Coen and Lakeland who have that travel distance so they are not as accessible. I know that those crews are going out there trying to be more available, but it does not alleviate the pressures of the blue card. That is a big comment that comes from all of those rural fire brigades. You either become a rural fire brigade or you transition back to a primary producer brigade, and there is another bulk of paperwork involved with any transition as well. If you go to Lakeland, for example, where they are primarily farmers, they are more interested in just getting a job done. They would rather come together as a group of farmers to fight a fire or mitigate the risks, as opposed to getting involved in an organisation that has regulatory requirements.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: Can you tell me about the impact of the reduction in volunteer numbers over the last five years? What does that look like in terms of numbers?

Ms Holmes: Cooktown has an aging population. People get to a certain point where it becomes very difficult to allocate the same level of volunteer hours and time and I think that is just purely because of aging. I do not have the answers for the difficulties and how we attract young people to step into those roles. I think I have tried just about every angle, but it is still very difficult because they have different interests and I think we do not necessarily understand the value of volunteering.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: Have you seen a decline in numbers over the last five years?

Ms Holmes: Yes.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: How could you quantify that, roughly?

Ms Holmes: The decline in numbers I think is because the volunteering scope has really broadened. It lessens the number of people who are available to volunteer for individual groups. You will find in this area that it is the same volunteers who generally step up to various groups across the board. You might find that one person is involved in five, six or seven.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: How many people do you think you have not been able to replace over time?

Ms Holmes: That is a really difficult question. Some of the other people who are actually in volunteering might be able to assist with that. From the turf club point of view, there are currently six volunteers who run an organisation that has in excess of a 100,000, 200,000 annual turnover.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: How many would that have been roughly five years ago?

Ms Holmes: Sixteen.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: So a significant loss in one organisation?

Ms Holmes: Yes.

Mr BAILLIE: Thank you, Mayor, for allowing us to enjoy this wonderful part of the world and hosting our hearings here. I am going to change gears a little bit and get you to put your council hat on. Roughly how many volunteers would you say council has in its workforce? I just want to understand the quantity. Many councils have quite a large volunteer workforce. I want to understand the resources you might apply to help manage that workforce.

Ms Holmes: In the council workforce it could be anything up to 50 per cent volunteer. That could be a small amount of time to significant amounts of time. From council's point of view, it is really difficult to support those groups across the board because it is an endless request. We generally have RADF grants and community development grants available and at various times, for example Anzac Day, as a courtesy we might go and put chairs out and we will make sure that the facilities are maintained or mowed and it is fit for purpose on the day. It is really difficult because you are talking about people's requests for building maintenance. They are making requests to support them deliver their event, they are asking for funding to tidy their facilities and it is endless.

Mr BAILLIE: What are some of the bigger events that your volunteers are required for in Cook shire?

Ms Holmes: Cook shire recently hosted the Discovery Festival, and I know it is hosted by Cook shire but there is also a considerable amount of volunteer support behind that. We put out an annual request for volunteers to come in and support. It is a really good uptake, but it is still an organisation tapping into the volunteer services which can, in turn, take away from not-for-profits.

ACTING CHAIR: I will ask a question that may be operational that you may need to take on notice. For members of your staff who are also volunteer members of organisations that support either Fire or Marine Rescue or undertake work that is essentially a state government job but they are doing it as a volunteer through one of their respective organisations, do you have a dedicated leave structure at council that supports them? Let us just say they are out fighting a fire all night and when they return to work the next day there is a period of standdown, obviously, from a safety perspective, for them in your workforce. Do you have a dedicated structure that then supports them as an employee to allow them to partake in the volunteering but also not be held back at work?

Ms Holmes: Yes. I might have to take that on notice. I believe there is provision for it but to what detail I would not be able to answer at the moment.

ACTING CHAIR: We would be really interested if the CEO or somebody could forward that detail, because across a large part of the state there are issues with either auxiliary firefighters or volunteer firefighters undertaking that role. I would be interested in what steps you take here in Cook.

Ms Holmes: That is no problem at all.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: In terms of engaging with First Nations volunteers, do you have a strategy or a process around the way that you go around engaging and do you find that there are barriers or challenges to attracting First Nations volunteers, apart from blue card requirements?

Ms Holmes: From a council point of view, generally that would be our events team that would do that. I would probably have to take that question on notice to find out the detail.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: Thank you.

Mr BOOTHMAN: Going on to another topic you mentioned, which was cricket—

ACTING CHAIR: Great result last night in the West Indies, by the way. Everyone else takes this committee off on a tangent so I will go there as well.

Mr BOOTHMAN: Volunteering for those organisations: how is that going? Do parents get actively involved? We are seeing in certain sporting groups in parts of Queensland that a lot of parents are dropping off a bit. How is that up here? Do you have strategies to attract parents?

Ms Holmes: At the moment it does not work very well at all. When I came here it was exactly what you have said. My son and my husband love cricket. That is how I got involved. We went right through that process. I think there were about five or six teams here. It was a district. There were teams from Wujal Wujal and Hope Vale and it was really quite engaging. I think I did 10 or 12 years volunteering in that space and really hope to move out of it. It was really inclusive because they actually ran the Milo cricket program to attract kids to bring them through the system and it was really effective because the Indigenous community was engaged in cricket. It was a fantastic organisation when it was fully operational, but over time the volunteers dwindled and now pretty much they have a committee of about three people. I still help out occasionally. They only have events a couple of times a year. It is really disappointing because cricket is our national sport.

Mr BOOTHMAN: Previous to that there were events—

Ms Holmes: Every weekend during the season, but up here it was unique because Cooktown used to play during winter because of the heat. The timing was adjusted to suit the community. That was one of the things that happened here. It was really unusual, but you used to capture more people.

ACTING CHAIR: Are you aware of any issues with blue card attainment for a volunteer firefighter who is a foreign national? I think specifically of the Lakeland experience, where a significant number of the inherent workforce there are foreign nationals. Are you aware of that being raised with you as an issue?

Ms Holmes: They have not actually raised that directly as an issue. I understand there is a more rigorous process to go through if you are a foreign national. I am out in Lakeland tomorrow so I am happy to provide feedback on it, but it has not been brought up.

ACTING CHAIR: Let us not take that as a question on notice, but if you are aware of it I think the committee would welcome any advice that you can provide from the locals from that perspective. There have been questions taken on notice. If possible, could we secure responses by 25 July, please.

GREEN, Ms Lois, Heritage Site Manager, Cooktown Museum

ACTING CHAIR: Good morning. Would you like to make an opening statement before we start any questions?

Ms Green: I actually have a prepared statement from the National Trust which I will read from. Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. My name is Lois Green and I am the manager of the Cooktown Museum, the original site managed by the National Trust of Australia Queensland. We are a non-profit, member-based charity committed to promoting and conserving Queensland's natural, built and cultural heritage. We are an organisation that manages 14 built heritage, environment and wildlife properties across Queensland, 11 of those being heritage listed places and supported by a large network of volunteers.

To give an overview of volunteers involved with the National Trust, we rely on 605 volunteers across both city and regional locations. Volunteers are the backbone of our organisation. They greet visitors; maintain heritage gardens; run tours; assist with exhibitions and education, tourist guests and experience hosts; and volunteer with wildlife, horticulture, wildlife hospital, fundraising, research and more. Many of our volunteers have been with us for a long time. Their knowledge and passion are invaluable, especially in some of our remote locations. National Trust Queensland uses an online portal for all volunteers called Better Impact. Better Impact is a centralised platform managing all aspects of volunteer engagement from recruitment and onboarding to rosters, communication and training. National Trust Queensland is also a member of Volunteering Australia and Volunteering Queensland.

Turning to the volunteer landscape and the reality in Cooktown, I want to speak frankly about our experience in Cooktown. At present, we struggle to attract and retain volunteers. We technically have one volunteer on our books, but, due to personal circumstances, their availability is extremely limited, effectively leaving us without active volunteer support. When it comes to the challenges we face, Cooktown is a small, remote town with a limited population base. Many of those who may be interested in volunteering are older, already volunteering elsewhere or managing health issues. In communities like ours, the same small group of people are often asked to give their time across multiple causes. This leads to volunteer fatigue and limits our ability to build a sustainable volunteer program. Younger people are often unavailable to volunteer due to paid work or lack of long-term residency in the community. Economic pressures include the rising cost of living, particularly fuel and groceries, which impacts a person's ability to give time freely. Some locals who might be interested in volunteering simply cannot afford to. Our historic museum, like many heritage buildings, has accessibility challenges and that can deter potential volunteers, especially those with mobility issues.

Then there is the administrative burden. While we support checks like blue cards and applying online, the process can feel overwhelming, especially for older volunteers or those with limited digital access. For sites like ours with small teams, managing this compliance also adds pressure.

In relation to support needed and opportunities, we need targeted regional volunteer strategies, not one-size-fits-all solutions. Practical incentives like fuel vouchers, small grants for community-led recruitment or support for volunteer coordination would be a game changer. The opportunity to link First Nations storytelling and heritage interpretation to volunteering could open meaningful culturally relevant roles.

In closing, at the National Trust Queensland we see every day the value volunteers bring to our sites and communities. In places like Cooktown, however, we are at a tipping point. Without new models of support and engagement we risk losing the very people and places we are trying to protect. Volunteering in regional Queensland is not just about fulfilling roles; it is about sustaining communities and preserving local identity. Thank you again for the opportunity to speak.

ACTING CHAIR: In your statement you mentioned issues that young people have around work. Has it been your experience that child care or a lack of childcare access may also be impacting on young people?

Ms Green: I do not really know how to answer that so I will sort of bracket everything that I say. I have been in Cooktown for two years. I have an extensive history in culture volunteering. I was often, by decades, the youngest in places I did volunteer at in Ontario, Canada. I can tell you what I have noticed. Many of the young people have to cobble together two or three jobs in order to put together full-time work to be able to stay here, so that is immediately a disincentive.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: Thank you for appearing and thank you for the great work that you do. I am hoping we can squish in a bit of time to visit the museum before we leave. In effect, you barely have a volunteer, with just one person.

Ms Green: True.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: How does that impact the day-to-day operation of the museum?

Ms Green: I have been there six weeks and I parachuted in at the very height of our busiest season. In terms of being able to adequately staff the museum, it is a large enough building that there is no question there always has to be two people there, so to maintain hours is exhausting.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: Would you say that it has implications for personal safety with just one person in the building or is it more the size of the building that means you need two people to manage the flow of people?

Ms Green: I could say yes to both.

Mr BOOTHMAN: How many people would come through the museum?

Ms Green: At six weeks, I cannot definitively answer that. It is not unusual for us to have 100 people come through in the first hour.

Mr BOOTHMAN: That is a fair few people.

Ms Green: Yes.

Mr BOOTHMAN: It would be very difficult for one person to manage.

Ms Green: There would not be one person onsite. There are always two people onsite. We are all—what do I want to say?—vintage. We are all of an age.

Mr BOOTHMAN: I refer to the demographic of the Cooktown region. In other regions we have seen that people who volunteer for one organisation also volunteer for another organisation, which obviously can create burnout. You have been volunteering for a long time. Have you picked up any ideas from other areas that have worked well and you could tell the committee about?

Ms Green: In Ontario, Canada, for instance, high school students do not graduate unless they have committed 40 hours to volunteering. They do not get their diploma. That means that they are automatically drawn into a volunteer situation. They often get fabulously mentored and have a reference and experience to put on their CV before they even begin their work life. It could be at somewhere like the Cooktown Museum, the local library or any number of other places. It could be helping out with an art camp. It could be helping to pick up rubbish. They already have a structure and experience of volunteering that turns out to be quite positive. That is possibly one of the best things that was done.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: In your experience, do the young people who have been required to volunteer as part of their school process continue volunteering once they leave school?

Ms Green: What I could say about that is just observational. It can spark civic-mindedness in those young people. There is also the reality that some kids are more civic-minded than others, but it does provide them with a valuable resume item at the end of it all.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: I think 'spark' is a good word.

Mr BAILLIE: In your statement you mentioned the online portal. Can you expand on that portal and your experience with the museum?

Ms Green: I could say a couple of things. I presume things are similar here as they were in Ontario. A lot of the time, volunteers are retired professionals—although not always, so I will speak very generally. There is some technical savviness in terms of applying on an online portal. However, new ways and using computers is not always easier; sometimes the old way is easier. I would take it on a case-by-case basis. If I was approached by a volunteer and it made sense to print out a form and have them fill it in then I would be happy to do that, too.

Mr BAILLIE: In your experience with the portal and the information provided, is it easy to use?

Ms Green: I would say that most people who are reasonably computer competent could do it. I can see that it would be a challenge for some.

Mr BAILLIE: How does it impact the onboarding process of a volunteer?

Ms Green: I do not know how to answer that. I do not really know what to say about that because we have not had a lot coming through.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: In terms of the flexibility of hours and types of volunteering available for people who may be interested in the museum—say five people had two hours a month free. Would they be able to volunteer?

Ms Green: Absolutely.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: So it is not about flexibility; you can work with touchpoints of volunteering here and there?

Ms Green: Yes, exactly. There are opportunities, whether it is in the garden or elsewhere. It depends on the person's experience, truly. If they do not necessarily have experience working with cash, there is always something else for them to do and it is meaningful; it is not just cleaning.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: How do you communicate to the community the need for volunteers and the types of roles available?

Ms Green: In my past experience, it typically was word of mouth. It would often be people coming to the museum that I worked in and thinking, 'This would be alright.' It is as simple as that. I have only been at the museum for six weeks so I do not know how to confidently comment on that. The National Trust website, as part of their overall umbrella of information, has both an employment and a volunteer portal.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: Do you have signs up around the museum or in places locally?

Ms Green: I have not got to that place yet, but there is nothing at the moment that I am aware of.

Mr BOOTHMAN: I want to go back to Ontario, Canada, and you may have to take this question on notice. Are you able to get some more information for us? I am very interested in seeing how we can attract young people. If we cannot attract young people then we are literally wasting our time because as we all get a bit of older and cannot do it anymore the next generation needs to come through. Is it possible for you to put something in your own words and also get some relevant information? I am fascinated by that.

Ms Green: I would be glad to. I found it really impactful this idea that you cannot graduate; you do not get your diploma.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: Currently, the museum has two paid staff?

Ms Green: There are three casual part-time employees, myself included.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: Does the money that the museum makes cover the cost of that employment? Who funds that employment?

Ms Green: To be true, that is better a question for the National Trust.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: Is there a risk that without volunteers the museum would close?

Ms Green: Yes. As it stands, the staff we currently have are really pushed to their physical limit in terms of the hours they have to contribute. The trust is actively looking for more staff. I do not quite know how to answer why that has not been addressed. I know there have been some applications. I can think of one individual in particular who is desirous of working with us but, because she is already working another part-time job and the hours fall within the same time, she could not cobble together those full-time hours. That is just one experience.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: If the museum were to close due to a lack of volunteers, that would be a significant negative tourism impact on the community?

Ms Green: I could say a lot about that in terms of my experience in Ontario, and I cannot imagine things are much different here. The museum actually was quite a hub. It had been closed for two years for renovations. As it reopened, it faced tremendous challenges including local people thinking, 'We've spent all this money on this facility so what's the go? How does that make a difference?' There was also a volunteer board there. Inroads were made in terms of getting volunteers from the local community who understood that cultural institutions like history centres, museums, botanical gardens and galleries actually generate more money in terms of tourism in Canada than most other activities. With people who come into town for sport versus people who come into town for culture, the culture visitors in Ontario spend \$10 for every one in the community.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: I expect it would be a similar scenario here.

Ms Green: I would have to think that, culturally, the same thing extends to Queensland, definitely, and Cooktown in particular. Our cultural visitors generate a lot of business within the community. It may not be evident on the face of things, but cultural tourism really drives business.

ACTING CHAIR: Lois, thank you very much for your time this morning.

Ms Green: Pardon me for leaving. I have to go and open the museum.

ACTING CHAIR: You did take a question on notice. If possible, could you send in your response by 25 July?

Ms Green: Certainly. I am going to count on Kylie to follow up with me.

BOULTON, Ms Tracey, Chief Executive Officer, Cooktown District Community Centre

ACTING CHAIR: Welcome. Would you like to make an opening statement before we start any questions?

Ms Boulton: The Cooktown District Community Centre is a registered neighbourhood centre with the Queensland state government. For a lot of other services in Queensland, volunteering forms a core part of the service they deliver to the community, but it is certainly not the case in ours. We have about 25 volunteers who do various things at various times so we in no way have a coordinated approach to volunteering. We have attempted, over the last couple of years, to improve that through working collaboratively with other agencies, in particular the Cook Shire Council, where we have discussed in great detail a chamber of volunteers program where we might be able to centralise the coordination of people who are willing to volunteer or those who just need to understand it more. We have lots of different programs that run throughout the year that use volunteers, but that information is not necessarily available across the whole community.

We did put in an application to the gambling fund at that time—maybe 18 months ago, I think—for a coordinated volunteer program; there was a category for that at the time. However, we were unsuccessful in getting that grant. The purpose of that was because human resources are limited. As a neighbourhood centre, we have an 80 per cent full-time-equivalent community development coordinator who is responsible for funding we receive for community development and delivering programs associated with our strategy, which volunteers form a part of. However, what we actually need is a focused program to put a system together to recruit and assess people adequately to get the right ticket.

Mayor Holmes was saying that blue cards can be an issue, along with the skill sets that are required for different types of programs. For example, we deliver a four-week unsubsidised school holiday program, for which we rely on donations from the community. This requires volunteers but, because it is working with primary school aged children, there are requirements for who is working there and what their skill set is. The Cooktown District Community Centre actually allocates our own staff who are trained in working with young people to support that. We pay two staff and then we have anywhere between five and six staff work across the whole week using in-kind support so that between 20 and 25 children can attend our school holiday program and their parents can keep working.

If we could establish a coordinated volunteer program and then have an appropriately qualified coordinator in there who was a volunteer but who could walk into a set-up program, we could take the time to bring people in, advocate for volunteering, engage with the community properly and understand what the local services and events need and that sort of thing. It is no different to recruitment, really, but we do not have the capacity to do that as a neighbourhood centre. We do not have a dedicated resource that could do that for six months to get it up and running, which was the purpose of that application for funding, if that makes sense.

One of the other issues we have found is that volunteering has changed quite a lot in the next generation, which Mayor Holmes also touched on. The younger crew want something. They think, 'What's in it for me?' They want instant gratification. For them it is not enough to feel emotionally involved in the community; they want a hat, a touchpoint, a gift or some acknowledgement.

Within that volunteering program, we have also thought about having membership of some description with local businesses where people can get a discount or something like that, but, again, we need resources to coordinate that. The skill set that we are talking about to actually coordinate and get a program like that up and running does not come from a volunteer. It is a full-time role; it is a dedicated project.

What I am saying is that there are solutions, but in a regional setting we only have a limited population. People work full-time. I volunteer at the Boathouse as the treasurer on the committee, and Loretta is here. I do not work full-time, and it is really hard to work full-time in this role and devote enough time and attention to that very small not-for-profit. The skill set that is required to do that role in that committee is not easily come by, but if I do not do it then who will? There is a lot of pressure in that; there is a lot of pressure across the whole community. There are people who want to volunteer but they do not know how and they cannot get access points in. We are very regional and everybody is spread out, so they do not know where to go so it just kind of stops. There is this dichotomy.

We recently applied for funding through Queensland Health to support local parents who run a basketball clinic here at the Events Centre. We did that through the young women's health campaign. We got the funding, which is fantastic. With that funding we have got four volunteers from that group—

that is great; they are all parents—but CDCC has to support with two staff over the weekend to make sure the young people are properly supported because there is risk insurance, blue cards and that sort of thing along with our vehicles to drive them down and back again. There is that in-kind support.

Volunteering is not just about community members stepping up; it is about organisations having the resources to support groups to get up and running so they can continue to volunteer and provide opportunities, for young people in particular, which are very limited in our area. Parent engagement can be quite low at times, so supervision at these events is really important. The parents want to be able to drop their kids off and leave, but you need to be able to monitor who is coming in and out and what is happening—and, if it is a supervised event, what are the risk factors around that and do the people who deliver that even know what that risk is? That is what I found with the basketball parents. They did not really understand that there is a lot of compliance around taking children away for a weekend. You cannot just put them in a car and scoot down the road and say that everything will be fine. That is why they came to us—so that we can provide that governance over what they are doing and make sure that everybody is safe in what is happening.

The other issue is finding data to substantiate funding applications. As a neighbourhood centre, we have tried surveys, we have tried in person, we have tried reaching out to people to get that data to substantiate applications, and it is competitive. Whoever is assessing these funding applications is looking at population size and what data you have to substantiate the need. We do not have any data but we need it. I cannot provide that level of detail to them. Without the resources to get the data, we are just in this vicious cycle. I see that the larger population areas are getting that funding—and I understand why—but it means that the poor become poorer and you cannot get ahead enough to get everybody involved. I think that will do for the moment. If I think of anything, I will add to it.

ACTING CHAIR: I am sure some of us are keen for some questions. You have given us a lot to think about. We have had two groups from different locations present a proposal—one was yesterday from FNQ Volunteers; another was in Brisbane a few weeks ago—around a clearing house for accreditation. There is a lot of consistent accreditation required but it is not administered collectively. You have to apply individually whether you are volunteering for the local football club, to be a firefighter or whatever. I am interested in your thoughts on that. Do you think that would be a benefit to you and other groups—where it is centrally administered rather than every organisation having to chase up accreditation for volunteers?

Ms Boulton: Yes, absolutely, but it would depend on where it is administered. If it is a government department—no offence to all of us who have previously worked in government—in Brisbane that is pulling these resources together, it is really challenging for them to understand what the requirements are and who is going to access that pool.

ACTING CHAIR: And how do you interact with it?

Ms Boulton: Yes. If CDCC wants volunteers, our people in our region who are willing to volunteer put their details into the data point and then the people who want the volunteers go into the data point and call the people and coordinate it. It is essentially what we wanted to do for Cook shire as a region. I think if you were going to do that, it would be fantastic if it was within the regions. What we find—and I will not get off track—is that with other services where we access DVConnect, for example, if we say we need accommodation somewhere they have absolutely no idea where we are—none whatsoever. They do not understand the remoteness and what we are doing. That is a real challenge. Do you understand what I am saying?

ACTING CHAIR: If I could summarise for you, if every organisation in the FNQ region did not have to individually secure accreditation for volunteers but that was shared locally, that would cut down on the work for the volunteer and the organisation.

Ms Boulton: In principle it is a great idea.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: Thank you for your great work. It sounds like you provide a lot of valuable services to the community. I am interested in your thoughts around the idea of a volunteer card, and that has been flagged by a lot of organisations. It is similar to a central point of onboarding in terms of administrative processes for blue cards and workplace health and safety. With that volunteer card, do you think it would need to be administered locally? Do you think we need regional volunteer hubs to do that across Queensland?

Ms Boulton: I think that is a bit different to what I was saying previously. We want to target young people in particular, in terms of bringing people up through that culture. If you could get some of the major retailers on board that can afford that, like JB Hi-Fi, Apple, Myer and those sorts of things—is that what you mean?

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: We have had conversations about a volunteer card being like a permission card like a blue card, but I am intrigued by your idea about supporting businesses with something like a perks card. That would not only help with the administrative onboarding; that volunteer card could be of some benefit to those businesses to promote them as supporting volunteer organisations.

Ms Boulton: Yes, a volunteer card for accreditation would be fantastic, and also if it was combined with a rewards scheme like Flybuys or something. We thought it could work in that your hours worked would earn you points and you could enter that in the same way you do with the 100 hours to get your licence.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: A bit like Flybuys points or Rewards points.

Ms Boulton: Yes. The more you volunteer the more points you get, so you can tap in and buy something.

Mr BOOTHMAN: Our previous witness mentioned programs they did in Ontario where students had to do 40 hours of volunteering as part of their graduation.

Ms Boulton: The school is doing that here, which is terrific. That has kicked off this year and it has been fantastic. We are very engaged with the state school, ECC and Holy Spirit. The state school are doing it and we have engaged with that. It has been really good.

Mr BOOTHMAN: Has it been beneficial?

Ms Boulton: I think it is a very positive program. I would not be able to comment on whether it has been beneficial yet.

Mr BOOTHMAN: What types of tasks do these volunteers from the schools do in your organisation?

Ms Boulton: It is not our program so I do not know. You would have to ask the school.

Mr BAILLIE: Thank you for joining us today. In your statement you spoke about trying to work with council to better manage volunteers centrally here in the region. I am just wondering what lessons you might have learned in those efforts and what outcomes you might recommend to us.

Ms Boulton: Not many because I did not really go very far. What I outlined was really the lessons that we learned. We need more data to substantiate grant applications to get programs up and running and we do need a centralised coordination of our local volunteer resources to put them in touch with people who need volunteers.

Mr BAILLIE: Appropriate services for appropriate volunteers and interests and qualifications.

Ms Boulton: Yes. Those are the two main points. Then ultimately it would be terrific if we could recruit a volunteer coordinator who was a volunteer. I think they are like diamonds in the sky.

Mr BAILLIE: Possibly more precious.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: The idea of volunteer coordinators is something that has come across from just about every group. A lot of organisations have felt that it is very challenging to have that being a volunteer role and that funding for a volunteer coordinator is the ideal. Do you think you would require funding or do you think a volunteer coordinator, should you be able to attract such a person, would be sufficient?

Ms Boulton: I do not know because we have not been able to test that out. My work experience has not covered volunteering and volunteer coordination previously, so I would take the lessons learned from other areas that have had that experience.

LYNCH, Ms Pasha, Volunteer Coordinator, Cape York Folk Club

ACTING CHAIR: Good morning. Would you like to make an opening statement before we start any questions?

Ms Lynch: Yes, I would. It is a little bit different to what everybody else has been presenting. I would like to say good morning to everyone. I am actually here to share a story of mud, water, heartbreak and something very special that grew from it. In December 2023 the flooding that followed Jasper sent waves of devastation through the small communities along the Bloomfield Track. Powerlines and phone lines went down, roads vanished, homes were flooded and over 140 properties were damaged or destroyed, surrounded by chaos and disaster and isolated from the outside world for days and, for some, weeks. By April 2024 the level of shock remained palpable. There was so much destruction. Even with everyone putting in 200 per cent it just was not enough. People were exhausted, communities were exhausted and yet there was no end in sight.

As the volunteer coordinator I had sent out over 400 emails asking for help, but the flooding had been widespread; no-one had any energy left. Cairns, Tablelands and Cassowary Coast were all struggling too, and it felt like I was shouting into a storm. Then I stumbled across a hidden gem in the Border Force guidelines: backpackers with 417 or 462 visas can count flood recovery in disaster zones towards their 88-day visa requirements. That was our breakthrough. Weeks of research, emails, phone calls and social media consumed my life until I was certain we could do this. I can tell you that it nearly broke me, but it did open the door to move forward.

Donations were sought for tents, beds, bedding, PPE and clothing. Contributions were received from a wide range of individuals and organisations and we were ready to go. In May 2024 we welcomed our first backpackers: young people with big hearts and ready to help. Over the next few months 38 volunteers from 17 countries came to Rossville and beyond. Some stayed a week and others stayed months. To meet the Border Force requirements of visa extension, a documentation pack was developed and utilised. This pack was also shared with other affected properties across the region so they could recruit and manage their own volunteers, allowing the effort to grow far beyond our region.

The volunteers worked four to six hours a day, Monday to Friday. We provided safety induction and upskilling in basic tools and procedures, spending time getting to know them and the community members that required the help. Although similar volunteer groups like BlazeAid exist for this purpose, grassroots recovery has demonstrated the importance of local knowledge and community connections over being managed from an office far away. Matching individuals with vulnerable hosts was really crucial to everyone's wellbeing. Most of these backpackers camped at Wallaby Creek Festival grounds in Rossville and the food was provided by hosts in exchange for help. It was wet and muddy, and at times it was pretty miserable weather to be camping in a field with basic facilities, but no-one complained.

From May to September 2024, 25 properties from Cooktown to Cape York received their help. As well, over seven tonnes of household items and rubbish were removed from Wallaby Creek. They shovelled mud, hauled rubbish, pulled down walls, fixed fences, laid irrigation hose and lifted spirits. There was so much laughter and happiness being around them. They raised the atmosphere and planted seeds of hope.

In June, three volunteers and I drove a trailer laden with donations to the community of Degarra. It is about 75 kilometres from here and was one of the hardest hit. The community had insisted they did not have the means to take volunteers. They were living in caravans or tents themselves and even potable water was a challenge. It was just too overwhelming for them. Something happened during that visit because not long afterwards I received a call: 'We would like to take six volunteers, please.' The community had held a meeting and found a solution. Together they had pooled resources, identified accommodation and sourced food, and once again contributions flooded in from Cooktown, Atherton and the surrounds. The change was immediate: the walls came down and hope blossomed, because once you step up then others step up around you. By the time the Bloomfield Bazaar rolled around in August, those young volunteers were not strangers anymore; they were family, and the love went both ways.

There was a common theme amongst all of the volunteers when describing their time with us: that they had experienced the true heart of Australia. They spoke of being deeply enriched, joyful. They had found meaning, belonging. They had helped people from their heart and in return they found something within themselves. It was the enrichment of true connection and fulfilment. Community members still speak affectionately of the turning point when the young backpackers arrived into their homes filled with enthusiasm, getting stuck into whatever they were asked to do, bringing hope and gratitude for the future. We all remain very grateful to all of them. Thank you.

ACTING CHAIR: That is very nice—a very good story.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: Wow, that is a fantastic story. Thank you for sharing it with us. It certainly imparts a point of difference. We have not really heard much throughout the course of this inquiry in relation to volunteer engagement by backpackers. What great work you have done in being able to make all of that happen. It sounds like it made such a meaningful difference. Can I ask what the challenges were and what you see is the potential in such a program in terms of a continuation or way of expanding or extending that?

Ms Lynch: I can certainly see this being used more in places such as Townsville, with the flooding that went on around Ingham and all of that. I want to shout to everyone, 'Hey, listen. There is a solution here.' We are lucky that Cape York Folk Club has 22 acres out in Rossville so we were able to house people. In terms of challenges, we did not want any money to pass hands; we wanted to make sure everything was aboveboard. We would say to everyone, 'If you need the help, how many people do you need? You need to feed them. You need to feed them breakfast, lunch and dinner for the day and maybe a little bit extra to cover the weekends as well.' People were willing to do that. That helped a lot. It was hard work, but I have a background in bureaucracy.

I had actually heard about it through the Lismore floods. I had heard that people had done that and so I thought, 'Let's have a go.' There are a lot of backpackers here who are desperate to find work or to find help, as it is really hard for them to find something to contribute their 88 days to. There is a difference in them, too. Those who actually volunteer for something like this: my God, their hearts are huge. There is something very different about them. One of the things I would say to them when they came is, 'Yes, you are here to do some really heavy work, but the main job is to instil hope and to let these people know that you are there for them.' They took this on board. They were amazing. The reason I talk about this now is that I think this is a program that could be used in disaster areas.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: Can you see it extend beyond disaster situations? Do you think there is scope for use of backpackers in other volunteer required settings?

Ms Lynch: Absolutely. It is about recognising that they are here. They are a workforce. Two of them who were here last year have come back to work in Cooktown and there are more coming. They are coming to the area to do some volunteer work and they actually want to stay. They want to come back for their six-month visa now and work in that area. We actually have a workforce that could benefit from a couple of months working. It is 88 days, nearly three months. We know that their dedication brings them back as well.

Mr BOOTHMAN: What an interesting idea you have put before the committee. We are looking for good ideas going forward. Using the subclass of a visa to create a workforce for volunteering is quite a remarkable idea. In my region we have seen a decline in the number of backpackers since COVID. It has slowly come back. How do you think we should attract backpackers as a whole back to Australia? I know this is a big-picture question. What are your thoughts about attracting those people back to our wonderful country so they can experience Australia and its real heart?

Ms Lynch: I think that is the difference, is it not? Most of them go to Sydney, Melbourne or Brisbane and they sit there and they do not actually know where else to go. It is actually recognising that and bringing them into rural Australia. This is what we are looking at. I think it is looking at opportunities like we were talking about with the museum, for example. What if people have the skills to come and work three months in an organisation? What if they had these skills? Could that be a possibility to bring them in as well?

Having fresh blood brings more fresh blood in. Young people seem to bring more young people in. They are all under the age of 32. It is good having that young workforce through. It is 88 days in the first year. It is six months in the second year. Imagine if people wanted to work in a volunteering role. Some of them can do that, as long as they are provided with food. For a bed in Port Douglas Backpackers, one bed in an eight-bed room is \$350 a week. That is what they are paying right now. Add their food and everything else and you are looking at 600 bucks a week just to survive. This is not in itself a payment, by looking at the volunteering, because many of them work just to survive in the area. You are giving them free accommodation and providing them with food and then you have a workforce.

Mr BAILLIE: Thank you for raising what is quite an intriguing proposition. A lot of the backpackers do not come here to make their millions; they come here to immerse themselves in the experience, in the culture. By engaging in some of these activities, like recovery, they are actually really immersing themselves in the culture, building those relationships with locals and experiencing what it is to be Australian. I think that is fantastic. To be able to tap into that enthusiasm they have and the energy they have by something as simple as ensuring they are not really concerned about

the roof over their heads—as long as it keeps them dry—and some good food is fantastic. I really want to congratulate you on your efforts there and being able to pull it all together and make it happen. I am particularly excited about what it could mean for regions like mine as well. As the member for Theodore mentioned, backpacking may have softened a little bit down in the south-east corner, but there is a real opportunity going forward for more backpackers into the regions. We have no shortage of fencing out your way, member for Gregory, but lots of recovery efforts as well as that general volunteering effort.

Ms Lynch: And not always through someone like BlazeAid because, as I said, when you know people in your community then you know not to send a male there or you know the kinds of personalities that mix whereas someone like BlazeAid turns up en masse and they go out. The grassroots thing, I think, makes a lot of difference to people's recovery.

Mr BAILLIE: How did you go about matching the backpacker to the person who was receiving the help? What checks and balances were in place? Was there an interview process to ensure they would get along?

Ms Lynch: We looked at what work needed to be done or the vulnerability of the people. Sometimes there were single women living on their own so we would not send a couple of men out there but would send a couple of women or mixed. We would be asking what they wanted, too, and also the jobs that were involved. It is all jobs that do not require a lot of skill but they do require a lot of grunt, ultimately.

Mr BAILLIE: Is that something that you managed personally and decided to put together a criteria?

Ms Lynch: Yes.

Mr BAILLIE: Is it something that could be easily replicated, do you think, across different regional areas?

Ms Lynch: I think this program could be replicated across all regional areas, yes.

Mr BAILLIE: But it would need to be managed locally in the region?

Ms Lynch: Yes.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: How did you go with onboarding in terms of safety? What kind of administrative onboarding did you have for those backpackers?

Ms Lynch: We were very clear before they came as to what was expected of them so that they did not turn up expecting to be sleeping in a soft feather bed as there was a good chance they would be in a tent. We were very clear before they arrived how it was going to be. On arrival we had safety inductions, so they all went through safety. We also had the rural fire brigade involved. They would come down and show them how to do things. Even with digging a hole or basic fencing, they were taught by our local rural fire brigade how to get on. It was not until we felt confident that they knew what they were doing that we let them go out and start.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: Were there blue card requirements?

Ms Lynch: No, because they were going out. Again, it is something that we did. I do not believe we actually had anywhere that had children onsite at all.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: You did not feel that there was too much of a bureaucratic or administrative burden in managing it?

Ms Lynch: I just ran with it. What do you do? You are exhausted and here is an opening. We did the best we could to meet guidelines, but we just ran with it because you are watching people dropping around you.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: That is right. Does the folk club have public liability insurance?

Ms Lynch: It has public liability. Our insurance covers us for all members. People who were asking for help signed up for membership of the Cape York Folk Club and, therefore, they were covered for insurance.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: Were the backpackers covered through membership?

Ms Lynch: Yes, because they also became members of the folk club, so we used the membership as a way of our insurance.

Mr BOOTHMAN: Ms Lynch, looking at the visa requirements for backpackers, I had something to do with this in my region on the Gold Coast. If they complete their 88 days then they can reapply, I think, three times or something like that.

Ms Lynch: They can reapply and then the second year they have to do six months, and they also have to do six months in the third year if they decide to stay.

Mr BOOTHMAN: That is correct. Do you think we could make things a bit more flexible to attract backpackers? I know there were some changes to do with the British backpackers, with a regional emphasis. If we made it more flexible and easier for workforces to come into the regions, obviously that would be a major positive. If we could get that influx, how could we cater for that in regional areas?

Ms Lynch: Interestingly enough, out of the 38 we had only one British person apply. It was people who really needed their visa. Again, if you make it easier then will they really go for that? There was only one of the 38 who came from the UK.

Mr BOOTHMAN: I think it was in 2024 that they changed that.

Ms Lynch: Yes, but still it was easier for a British person. Mainly they were South American, Asian and a few Europeans. I think if part of a visa application was whether would there be a willingness to work as a volunteer in areas then, yes, 100 per cent, because sometimes you have to have money and then you also have to prove your ability to work and your skills. Skills can also be the ability to help others in need.

Mr BAILLIE: You mentioned that a couple of the volunteers from that original effort have come back and are doing a bit more work in the regions. Have you had any feedback from either those who were accepting the assistance or the volunteers themselves on whether they formed lasting relationships with each other and have kept in touch since?

Ms Lynch: Constantly, I hear from most people who had it that they hear from one person or another. That has happened. The volunteers themselves have created groups over Australia and they still talk if they are back in Europe or wherever they are. It has created something. They say it creates something more solid than anything they have ever had because they are contributing together. We know through psychology that the more you contribute the better you feel in yourself. We tapped into something that I do not think they even knew.

ACTING CHAIR: Thank you so much.

LEYS, Ms Barb, Private capacity

ACTING CHAIR: I now welcome Ms Barb Leys.

Ms Leys: I am a bit terrified because I actually put my name down as I thought everyone was going to.

ACTING CHAIR: A lot have. Do not be frightened.

Ms Leys: I am not very prepared. I do not know whether I have very much to offer. I apologise in advance.

ACTING CHAIR: Would you like to open by introducing yourself and explaining the role that you play as a volunteer and what volunteering has meant to you? Could you explain any positive and negative experiences that you or others around you have had? Then we can lead the conversation. Think of it more as a conversation than an interview.

Ms Leys: I come from a long background in government. I will start by saying that. I have had experience in managing a whole lot of people. I think at one stage we had 14 volunteers on our books in a centre here in Cooktown. That felt very successful. There were lots of people doing lots of different tasks. I have managed a lot of people in my working life and I really believe that work should be fun, fast and flexible. I feel the same with volunteers. They should be really valued. People should be able to find their own niche with their skills and the things they like to do or want to learn.

We had some volunteers who were working across a really broad spectrum of the organisation. They were waiting on tables, meeting and greeting people, giving visitor information. Some did a funding submission for art exhibitions. There was a whole range of things that people were doing. Some people developed their own niche and wanted to do one particular area. They did not want to move outside that. That was fine, too. It is just about accepting what people want to do. That worked really well. People were very happy, I think, in the main. We never had any blow-ups in the 2½ or three years that I was involved. I think that was because people felt like they had some autonomy within what they were doing. They were allowed to define the sort of role they wanted to do.

The most critical thing was having a happy environment. I think that is critical because why would you volunteer somewhere, work and not get paid if you are miserable? I certainly will not do that. I want to be amongst people who are going to make it a bit fun. As a manager of volunteers I think being flexible is really important, and as a volunteer I want that flexibility back.

As a volunteer I have had a whole range of experiences and am still experiencing. There are so many plusses in terms of social contact and things like that. I think it can be tough, too. A lot of the volunteers now are really quite elderly, as I guess you are very aware. Some people are less flexible as they get older. I think that is harder within a group setting. There are a whole lot of people with a whole lot of different skills and abilities. In one of the organisations I have been involved in we have had to do a huge amount of developmental work that has meant a lot of stuff on the computer. I have been a secretary so I have done a lot of that, but not always can other people cope with that. I come from a place where, as a volunteer within an organisation, I think we should be really transparent. Certainly as a secretary, if I am doing something then at least the rest of the community knows what you are doing. I think that is democratic. Some people find that really hard. Everybody has different computer skills, different technology, different internet. All of those things affect how well people can interact on a committee that is doing a lot of developmental work.

Over the last 18 months we have published a book, which we had to do from scratch. It was a huge amount of work. We have really developed the gallery more recently and that was a lot of work, too. It can be tough. People can become very passionate about how they think it should be. I have actually experienced more stress in relationships in volunteer work than I did in decades of work—decades. That is a bit interesting. I am not sure why that is, whether I have just become older and nastier—

Mr BOOTHMAN: The audience says no.

ACTING CHAIR: I am sure that is not the case. If it helps you, there was lots of nodding to your comments so you have broad support, it would appear.

Ms Leys: The other thing is the accountability—the compliance with financial stuff, which I am sort of pretty involved with in one organisation. That is a lot of work for a little organisation. I have morphed into doing the bookwork when I had hoped that I would be doing a more relaxed role. I ended up doing this other stuff that was more time-consuming and more sort of brain power, I guess, than what I had hoped to be doing. I am part of the fire brigade. That is lovely. We have a lovely fire brigade and people are really working together to get things done.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: Thank you for everything you do. It sounds like you do a lot for the community and I am sure it is very much appreciated. You mentioned the internet. Can you talk a little about the varying accessibility to the internet that you find volunteers in this region have? A lot of solutions that have been generated through this inquiry involve some kind of virtual engagement assistance, onboarding et cetera. If the internet is an issue, I can see that could be a problem. Could you talk a little bit about the variability in terms of internet access and the reasons for that?

Ms Leys: It is really variable. Even for people in town it can be. It depends on what lengths people decide to go to, I guess, in order to access the internet. We had pretty crappy internet at home for a long time because we were out of town. We ended up getting Starlink, which became a game changer.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: Is that an additional cost? What would that cost impost be? That would be a barrier, obviously.

Ms Leys: I think it would be. We have a family business so it is not an issue for us because it is just part of the business cost, but if you were just doing it for your volunteer work and you are on the pension then yes.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: Cost of internet is a significant barrier to volunteering in a region like this?

Ms Leys: It could be, yes.

Mr BAILLIE: Thank you for joining us. We appreciate the opening statement. You mentioned that generally the volunteers are those of us with more life experience. I wonder if it has always been the case that the older members of our community have been leading the volunteer charge. We continually say that volunteers are getting older. It is always the new retirees coming on board, I guess, who say, 'I have extra time. I would like to give back to the community.' I wonder if you have noted anything that has changed specifically over the last five to eight years that might have seen a further decline in those with more life experience engaging in volunteering.

Ms Leys: I do not know what it is, but when I was thinking about this last night I suddenly realised that both of my daughters—two out of three of my children—got jobs through volunteer work. One, while she was at uni, volunteered for a land council and when she finished her degree they offered her work. My other daughter did the same. She had been through a little bit of a rough patch and she went to do some volunteer work and then worked her way through that organisation. She was only a volunteer for about two weeks. Then they offered her paid work and she became a manager and now she is kind of a level above that. I think it is a really important message that we need to get out. Nas and I did something at the careers expo last year about volunteering and just saying, 'Look, there are lots of paths it can take you on. It can take you on really interesting learning opportunities, interesting relationships—all sorts of things—and career paths.'

ACTING CHAIR: It is not something that has been very topical in a lot of presentations, but you raised it and there were a lot of heads nodding behind you. I have been on rodeo, show and cricket societies for a long time with both my wife and prior to that my parents. There are pressures and stresses that come with volunteering. This inquiry has heard a lot about the roadblocks, such as insurance and public transport in the south-east corner being a huge cost, and transport out here generally, but I am interested, in the remaining time we have, to hear your thoughts about the pressure and stress that volunteering for groups places on relationships, whether they would be within a household or across the community. It is the untold story around regional Queensland and in urban areas but especially in rural areas, where everyone knows everybody. I would be interested in your thoughts on that.

Ms Leys: Yes, that is right. It is really tough when people are passionate and have opinions. Maybe as you get older you get more solid in your own opinions. As I said, I have certainly experienced a lot more stress through volunteerism than through working life, which has been a very short period as against a very long period of working. I do not really know. I cannot speak for the other people involved.

Mr BAILLIE: Do you think that might be because there is a less formal positional power structure or a less formal hierarchy?

Ms Leys: Maybe. Maybe that is actually part of it, whereas in working life it is more delineated. It is certainly something that is there.

ACTING CHAIR: Is it amplified by these other problems or is it just the role of being a volunteer and the community expectation on the event or the product? Do you think those stresses and pressures are being caused by the impediments to volunteering that we hear discussed a lot or is it because of the product of what they are volunteering to do?

Ms Leys: It is maybe the product that you are trying to do and people having strong opinions about how that should take place or how you go about something. I think in some cases it is people's stress in their own lives. A lot of volunteers have a lot of other things in their own lives and maybe it is almost a safe outlet to express their stress and angst. It is better than doing it at home with your partner. I do not know. It is not an easy one. I have thought about it quite a lot. It is certainly not why one volunteers. It would be easier to walk away rather than encounter stress in a volunteer situation.

Mr BAILLIE: Do you take on much stress, as you are on the executive of the organisation you are volunteering with? I think you said you are the secretary?

Ms Leys: Yes.

Mr BAILLIE: Do you take on much stress as a result of that position that you hold and the obligation that has, or is it more personalities and the clashing of direction?

Ms Leys: I think at times it has been tough when we have been trying to get things done. I have had a very supportive committee. That is really good. People are very supportive. It has been more with people further outside the committee where things have become stressful at times.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: We often hear that role delineation within volunteer organisations and a lack of clarity around that can sometimes lead to some of that interpersonal frustration or challenges. Also, perhaps the separation between work and home life is quite clear, but volunteering is seen as an immensely personal role and so there is not that separation. Do you think any kind of structural support for volunteer organisations in helping to delineate volunteer roles and responsibilities would be of assistance in managing some of that interpersonal frustration?

Ms Leys: Yes, maybe it would be. The way I approach volunteering is that I treat it like a job in that if I am not going to be there I say. I do not just not turn up. Some people are much looser about it. I take it quite seriously and just use the courtesies.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: In a work scenario, expectations of behaviour and conduct are quite clear whereas in volunteer settings we are so desperate for any kind of volunteer that we will take whatever bits people can offer, but then sometimes potentially there may be some resentment or friction based on people's interpretations of expectation or willingness to give. Would that be a fair thing to say?

Ms Leys: Yes. Having managed volunteers and having it work really quite well for quite a long time, I think that—I have just lost my train of thought. If people know what they are doing and they are feeling good within an organisation—they have just got to feel like they are valued and that they are going somewhere where they know what they are doing, that they are not just let loose.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: Their time is valued?

Ms Leys: Yes.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: Thank you.

ACTING CHAIR: Thank you very much for your contribution this morning. It has taken a different form and it has been really insightful for the committee. Our terms of reference and the scope of the report are very broad, but part of it is to identify and draw into the open some of the challenges, pressures and stresses on volunteers. To have a different intersect into that and conversation with you this morning has been really insightful for the committee, so I thank you very much for taking the time to present.

Ms Leys: I am sorry I am so bumbled at the moment. I was meant to be driving out with a whole lot of trucks to a station out west today. We are going tomorrow, but my life is in a bit of chaos at the moment.

Mr BAILLIE: We appreciate you spending time with us.

ACTING CHAIR: We will now hear from people who have registered to appear as a witness at this hearing. You will each have approximately five minutes to make your statement. I remind witnesses of the terms of reference for the inquiry and that this committee is gathering evidence based on key themes. The committee is not investigating individual complaints about persons or organisations. In this regard, I ask witnesses to be cautious of providing evidence that names and/or adversely reflects on a person or organisation.

GONDA, Ms Ella, Private capacity

Ms Gonda: Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak today. I have not done this before so I am a bit nervous. I would be much more in my comfort zone having done a written submission but here I am.

My partner and I have visited Cook shire regularly since the late 1990s and we have been blessed to live here permanently for the past six years. We just love absolutely everything about this place—the whole shire. In the past I have worked as a community worker, a welfare worker and a counsellor, and then for way too long—27 years—I worked for the Australian government. I am retired now. I am involved in the Cooktown History Centre, the Cooktown Creative Arts Association and the Bloomfield Boomerang Bags group. I am also a Red Cross emergency services volunteer. I am the only one they have north of Cairns. I recently joined the local SES group. I am quite committed to community.

I believe my comments will link to Nos 3, 4, 5, 7 and 8 in your terms of reference. I really just want to speak about my observations as a volunteer from that perspective and perhaps give some suggestions. I may repeat some things that have already been said today.

In terms of large organisations, one of the big things that occurred to me is that there seems to be a lot of one-size-fits-all around resources or funding or the whole thing. In terms of big organisations, I find there can be a bit of a disconnect between paid staff and volunteers and that a lot of the larger organisations do not seem to understand, or the resources that are available are not a comfy fit for, remote volunteers. In terms of access to accredited training, they do require you to undertake and complete certain training but then you get limited opportunities to actually be deployed and consolidate those learnings and become confident and proficient. That is due to remoteness. The logistics of getting me to Brisbane after Cyclone Alfred were pretty horrendous for them because their systems did not allow for the extra steps. I could have done it but the systems do not allow me to do that.

I think, too, a lot of the larger organisations and probably the smaller ones are very dependent on funding models. For example, on a six-month funded project, when that funding ends the role goes. The next funding round comes around and another person is funded to do something totally different, so there is no continuity in support. That is probably the best way to summarise it.

Please listen to us. We do know some stuff, too. I do not know how it would happen, but it would be really nice to see a model that is tailored for remote volunteers and that takes into account the different things that happen in logistics, especially. Also, if I can get accredited training then I can present programs to my local community and you do not have to bring people up from Brisbane, Sydney or wherever, so it is cost effective as well. That is for the whole community—not just Cooktown, Rossville and Lakeland but all the way up the cape. That is an observation that I have made, that the one-size-fits-all does not really seem to work well in remote areas. I do not know what the answers are but if in some way the volunteers in those communities can contribute to and have a say in how things might be done to organise us.

In small organisations, with recruitment a lot of people have spoken about the aging population and that sort of thing. Also, people are working longer. They are not retiring until they are 70 and maybe by then they do not want to be doing things. They just want to put their feet up and relax, which is fair enough. Tracey spoke a fair bit about something I have thought of as well in terms of having a pool of volunteers. The mayor spoke about, for example, difficulties with the rural fire brigade people needing help to apply for blue cards. If I was in a pool of volunteers—my skill space is admin—I could help people fill in forms. I worked for the government for so long, I can fill in a form. I can do that online. Even though I am not a member of the rural fire brigade, maybe they can call on my skills to help with certain admin tasks. I think other people have touched on this as well. I would be really supportive of that. I am also mindful that if you want to attract and retain volunteers in these areas, particularly in emergency services, if you make people jump through too many hoops then you will lose them. That is probably about it, I think.

There is funding allocated for Volunteering Queensland. You can go in and search for a volunteer role. I put in the 4895 postcode and three things came up. One was a local St Vinnies. One was in Mossman and Cairns. For the third one, they wanted you to pay money to do the training first. I do not know if people would want to do that. Perhaps, again, there are resources that are used for volunteer recruitment in major centres. If we could have funding to do something that is tailor-made for our community then that would be awesome. It does come down to funding.

Finally, if I may—and this probably does not link to anything—I would like to comment on people who do not call themselves volunteers but who do a lot of things. I know a lot of people in Cooktown who do this. I was deployed to Cardwell after the flooding earlier this year. I was in Thornlands and Mount Tamborine after Cyclone Alfred. So many people in that community were going out and checking on people, bringing them to the recovery hub, waiting with them until they did what they had to do and then taking them home. They did not think they were volunteers. I do not know where that fits into all of this, but I wanted to give them a tap on the shoulder.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: I have a question about informal volunteering. We have not really touched on this much here. I know that within regions that have a lot of First Nations communities a great deal of informal volunteering goes on. It is not captured and it is not recognised. Often in different cultural groups it is not even seen as volunteering; it is seen as just being human. I am interested in anything else that you have to offer from your observations. You have had a lot of experience around the traps. What might we need to consider in our inquiry with regard to that kind of volunteering?

Ms Gonda: I think for the people who are doing those things it is just what you do. I cannot speak on their behalf, but I would suspect that they would not want anything really formalised around it. Perhaps we could be mindful of it in developing services or resources so that we do not duplicate services. Perhaps we could draw on those people for their skills to help us learn what is needed. It is that sort of thing.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: So more of an informative resource and a support resource rather than necessarily having to count them as a volunteer workforce?

Ms Gonda: Yes. I do not know if they would want that. You would have to ask them.

Mr BAILLIE: I want to give a special shout-out to Alfie down in Cardwell. I know a lot of the community down there. They were hit extremely hard in the recent rain events. Thank you so much for your efforts there. In your statement you mentioned trying not to make it too difficult for volunteers to join up through the onboarding process. Can you cite specific examples where the onboarding process was perhaps overly onerous?

Ms Gonda: Not for me personally, no, but it is things like the blue card process. I had to take my own photo and send it in so they could make me an ID card. Some people might find that daunting. I may not want to be a regular volunteer with your organisation, but I can help you with certain tasks. You could actually be helping several organisations and, hopefully, those people who would be daunted by it and walk away might see it through.

Mr BAILLIE: It is looking for that balance between how we take the formal volunteer organisations and engage the informal volunteers better?

Ms Gonda: Yes. Having worked in government, I understand the need for rules and regulations and so on, although not everyone does. They just see it as bureaucracy, and sometimes it is. Perhaps in some way you can reduce that, but if you cannot reduce it then do something to make it easier for people.

ACTING CHAIR: Ms Gonda, thank you very much for coming forward this morning. Normally when this happens people panic but I ask the mayor not to: Mayor, could you rejoin the table? I have a particular question that we did not get a chance to ask.

HOLMES, Ms Robyn, Mayor, Cook Shire Council

ACTING CHAIR: Councillor Holmes, I have given you no warning so I apologise. My colleagues left and right knew you were coming back but you did not, I am sorry. My question goes to child care. It is a question that is as relevant here as it is in inner-city Brisbane. What is available locally? Is it enough? If not, does it impact on the capacity for people to volunteer?

Ms Holmes: That is an excellent question. I note that someone mentioned that before. There is one childcare facility that is owned by council and leased to an independent provider. No, it is not sufficient, but that is not because we have not tried. It is basically the capacity of the provider to deliver the services within a facility that has its own challenges. I am not sure to what degree it does impact on volunteering because we have had those conversations, which align with the hospital redevelopment, to try to expand them to a 24/7 service. If you are volunteering, it could be on a 24/7 basis that you have a callout, whether it be from an emergency service point of view, or just business hours. I could not really definitively comment on the impact it has on volunteering, but I do know that it is restricted. There are some independent family day care providers, but I am pretty sure that is fairly restricted too.

ACTING CHAIR: Councillor, you were in the hot seat for a very short period. Thank you. That concludes this hearing. Thank you to everyone who has participated today. Thank you to our Hansard reporters. A transcript of these proceedings will be available on the committee's webpage in due course. For those who took questions on notice, we would welcome your responses by Friday, 25 July. I now declare this public hearing closed.

The subcommittee adjourned at 10.59 am.