LOCAL GOVERNMENT, SMALL BUSINESS AND CUSTOMER SERVICE COMMITTEE

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

Staff present:
Ms K Guthrie—Inquiry Secretary
Mr Z Dadic—Assistant Committee Secretary

PUBLIC HEARING—INQUIRY INTO VOLUNTEERING IN QUEENSLAND

TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS

Wednesday, 30 April 2025

Brisbane

WEDNESDAY, 30 APRIL 2025

The committee met at 10.34 am.

CHAIR: Good morning, everyone. I declare open this public hearing for the committee's inquiry into volunteering in Queensland. My name is James Lister. I am the member for Southern Downs and chair of this committee. With me here today are: Margie Nightingale, the member for Inala and deputy chair; Adam Baillie, the member for Townsville; Mark Boothman, the member for Theodore; Michael Healy, the member for Cairns; and Nikki Boyd, the member for Pine Rivers, who is substituting for Joan Pease, 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 or affirmation, but I remind witnesses that intentionally misleading the committee is a serious offence. I also remind members of the public that they may be excluded from the hearing at the discretion of the committee. In line with general rules relating to parliamentary proceedings, I remind witnesses to please refrain from using unparliamentary language such as swearing or offensive terms, even if you are directly quoting material or someone else.

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CLARKE, Ms Emma, President, Queensland Rural, Regional and Remote Women's Network Inc.

CHAIR: Good morning. I invite you to make an opening statement and then the committee will have some questions for you.

Ms Clarke: Good morning. On behalf of the Queensland Rural, Regional and Remote Women's Network and our members, thank you for your proactive focus on volunteering in Queensland and the opportunity to make a submission and appear today. Rural, Regional and Remote Women—RRR Women—is an independent not-for-profit membership organisation founded in 1993 to connect, develop and inspire Queensland women. We are and always have been volunteer founded and run. Our current board has eight members. We come from across the state and we bring a variety of professional skills and experiences to the organisation. Similarly, our event and program committees of about 10 are entirely volunteers made up of our members and the wider network across the state. Every outcome of RRR Women over the past 31 years has been delivered by volunteers. Like many not-for-profits, we work closely with our peers like the Queensland Country Women's Association, who are here today. But this is not about us.

In forming our submission, we overwhelmingly found that Queensland, particularly rural and regional Queensland, cannot function without the volunteer economy, to which our members belong and contribute. In fact, more than a quarter of respondents to our research volunteered their time to work in their industry, the majority in the agricultural industry in Queensland. Close to a quarter of respondents performed a mix of paid and unpaid work. More than a third volunteered more than 10 hours a week to committees or helping someone out—their community or other organisation or person.

Our submission to this inquiry made three recommendations to improve the volunteer experience and output for both individuals and organisations. Where reformed, our key priority areas of policy and economic challenges, Australia's insolvency and directors' duties, and skills and development can provide significant impact to volunteer organisations, individuals and the state. More details about these recommendations are in a submission, and I can table this should you wish. Thank you. I am pleased to take questions.

CHAIR: Thank you very much, Ms Clarke, and thank you for your submission. Deputy Chair, do you have any questions?

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: Thank you for appearing before us today. I appreciate your presence here. I found it interesting that your submission talked about the concerns around insolvency and directors' duties legislation. What would you propose as a solution to that, and can you see any risks that might arise as a result of that?

Ms Clarke: Many volunteer organisations are, of course, not-for-profits as well, which means we are not financially motivated, which means sometimes the bottom line and the legislation that that applies to is not at the forefront of our minds, as not-for-profit organisations. In our submission, we made a recommendation that these organisations are exempt under the legislation, but a comparable legal protection is applied respective of the nature of volunteers and the work that we do in the community to make sure that protection still exists but also to acknowledge that we are volunteers and we work in the not-for-profit sector. As I said, it is especially important given that we are not necessarily financially motivated.

Mr BOOTHMAN: With regard to how your organisation works, how do you get your funding? Where do you get your income stream from? Also, where do you spend your money and what are the benefits you give out to the community? I am curious where you get your money from, how you distribute it and how you upskill et cetera. It is quite a broad-ranging question.

Ms Clarke: We are a membership organisation, so we are funded. We have three tiers of membership, being individual, small business and organisation. The most expensive of that is $220, so it is not a significant income stream for us but that does exist. We have a very loyal membership base. We have some members who were founding members, so they have been financial members for 31 years now.

Outside our membership, we access private sponsorship from private businesses. We do that for particular programs or events. For example, we have a conference coming up in Rockhampton in June, and we have a whole suite of private sponsors. That is a traditional sponsorship model. We can offer them some kind of exposure or some kind of access to our audience. We also receive some sporadic government grants.

Mr BOOTHMAN: When it comes to upskilling, as you mentioned in your submission, do you want to elaborate on the issues you are finding with that when it comes to bureaucracy?

Ms Clarke: Do you mean the section in our submission where we are calling for support for organisations to upskill volunteers?

Mr BOOTHMAN: Yes.

Ms Clarke: We are finding that there is a significant maybe micro-credentialing or soft skills or small skills gap in the volunteer market in Queensland, and I have made a whole list of recommendations: first aid, workplace health and safety, social media, book keeping, governance, even leadership and public speaking—those kinds of soft skills. If there was some kind of support available for organisations to upskill their volunteers, it would be a wonderful way to attract new volunteers to the market to not only enter into a volunteering role but also to improve the output of organisations and the impact that we can make in Queensland. Often volunteers come with different skills and experience, whether it be ag or media or legal or something like that, but there are always soft skills and there are always ways that we can upskill and maybe train in some of those smaller areas that can benefit the volunteer and the organisation.

Mr BOOTHMAN: What type of medium would you like to see it on? You have rural families et cetera, so obviously they might not be able to do face to face very often. What type of medium would you like to see it on and how would you like to see that medium distributed to your community groups?

Ms Clarke: These mediums already exist. There are organisations all over Queensland that can provide this training. A good way to distribute that to other volunteer organisations like ours and other organisations is just through a simple grants program, subsidy, rebate or something like that. The flow-on benefit to that means we can invest that money in regional Queensland and we can spend that money on local businesses and in the local economy to be able to access those skills at the local level. It also just means it is accessible for volunteer organisations that otherwise might not have the revenue stream to do that.

Mr BOOTHMAN: With Volunteering Queensland, if we had a one-stop shop which could then give the information out to the individuals—'This is what you can do; this is how you can do it'—do you think that would suffice?

Ms Clarke: Yes, I think so. Like I say, many of those services already exist in Queensland, and maybe there is a way that we can partner or connect those services perhaps with Volunteering Queensland to be able to deliver those to more organisations and make them more accessible.

Ms BOYD: I was really interested in reading your written submission around the research that RRR Women do, and I notice that you did an annual study. I want to inquire into the methodology and analysis that you use around that but also ask if you are seeing any trend, year on year. I think your submission is fantastic in terms of providing suggestions and solutions around what can happen going forward, but I am also interested in the research and information that you have in terms of, year on year, what you have been seeing with rural and remote women through Queensland?

Ms Clarke: I imagine we will in future years. This is the first year we have done the study—2025. We do not have the trend data yet. The Rural, Regional and Remote Women's study is really aiming to benchmark the sentiment, conditions, wants and needs impacting rural, regional and remote women to make sure they have access to the services they need to continue making the impact they do. It also looks at where they see hope and opportunity—areas that we might be able to strengthen in regional communities or where we can strengthen the women within them. I have the research data here and I would be happy to share it with you, if you wish.

Ms BOYD: May we get that tabled, Chair?

CHAIR: If you are happy to put it before us, we can accept it provisionally. We will formally table it after the committee has had a chance to look at it. That would be great, thank you.

Mr BAILLIE: I note on your website that you reach about 5,000 women. Is that reach interchangeable with memberships?

Ms Clarke: Yes.

Mr BAILLIE: How many memberships do you have? How far are they dispersed? Do they go as far up as, for example, Townsville—a beautiful part of the world where it is 29 degrees and sunshine today?

Ms Clarke: Yes.

Mr BAILLIE: They go all the way up there and out west?

Ms Clarke: Yes. Our membership is close to 200. Like I said before, we have a relatively small paid membership base. They are all over the state. We have very strong representation in North and Far North Queensland, in the Darling Downs, in Central Queensland as well as around the Rocky region. We are, of course, a rural, regional and remote organisation, so we see equal representation across the state. Our network of 5,000 is made up of our membership, our email distribution list and also some of our programs and events attendees and that kind of thing.

We are very aware of the fact that membership is a luxury for some people—particularly in regional areas it is not something that they are able to access—so a really strong focus of ours is making sure that our organisation can support people, even if they are not a financial member. There are certainly benefits to being a financial member, if that is what women choose to do. Of course, our programs, awards programs, events and information are open to all rural, regional and remote women.

Mr BAILLIE: With your volunteers and members being dispersed, what do you find is the most effective way to communicate with members or attract new members? Do you have any membership hotspots, where you have a higher membership base than others, and what have you been able to attribute that higher membership to?

Ms Clarke: Population density. We have really strong membership in the Darling Downs, in North and Far North Queensland and in Central Queensland which is centred around Cairns, Townsville, Toowoomba and Rockhampton. That is where we are seeing the relative population density in regional Queensland. Comparatively, we have some members, but it is a weaker membership base, in areas like Longreach or Winton, some of those western or north-western Queensland areas. That is due to population density, really.

We seek good value through word of mouth. We are a relatively connected community and a relatively connected network. Like I said, even if they are not financial members we find that a lot of women come through our research, events, programs and that kind of thing. They may have heard of RRR Women, may have been a member in the past or might have connected with us another way, even though they are not part of our membership base.

Mr HEALY: Emma, you are smashing it! Well done! You really are. I am very aware of your organisation. It does a great job. Your submission is terrific and you have really highlighted all of those key areas, so I do not have too many questions. I think you said the organisation was established in 1991 or 1992.

Ms Clarke: It was established in 1993, yes.

Mr HEALY: We have had other organisations over the years, such as the CWA. Can you highlight what you are doing differently and the importance of it? One of the things we see in this area is that, as it grows, there is the potential for duplication. That is why we are having this inquiry. Can you highlight the difference between yours and other organisations that are out there in the marketplace, whether they be national, state or regional?

Ms Clarke: Like CWA here today?

Mr HEALY: That is right.

Ms Clarke: Yes.

Mr HEALY: They are all good. I know. It is just working out who is where and how it all fits.

Ms Clarke: I said this to the QCWA board before, so I know they will not mind me saying it: we generally attract a younger audience—

Mr HEALY: They look very reasonable too, so it is all good.

Ms Clarke:—and a younger membership base through the nature of our programs and the events that we deliver. For example, we are currently in the process of delivering the Future Queensland: Rural Women's Leadership Program, which is a 10-week program to encourage future leaders in the renewable energy transition in Queensland and to make sure they can be strong advocates and strong leaders in their community. The programs, the themes, the speakers and the things we have coming up at conference and in our events as well typically attract a younger audience. Sometimes they might be at the early- or mid-career level. Also, we deliver programs and events and have our meetings and those kinds of things outside business hours. Our whole board have careers and jobs outside of what we do on the board, myself included, so it is really important to us that people can access our services after they have finished their family duties for the day, after they have worked a shift or after they have come in from the property or doing something like that.

In saying that, though, there are a lot of similarities in what we do, of course, with organisations like the Queensland Country Women's Association. We are very much of the belief that we are trying to achieve the same thing as these organisations with the same audience in the same state. We are all not-for-profit, so it makes sense for us to work together to deliver a bigger impact, and we do.

Mr HEALY: Good call. How many members do you have?

Ms Clarke: We have 188.

Mr HEALY: You are doing a good job. Thank you.

CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Clarke, for your appearance today and for the submission. I hope you have enjoyed your trip to Brisbane. Where are you heading to from here?

Ms Clarke: I am local in Brisbane.

CHAIR: You are a Brissie girl, are you? There you go. Thank you very much for your appearance. You are most welcome to remain to view the rest of the proceedings.

Ms Clarke: Thank you. Thank you for your time.

CASTLEY, Mrs Christine, Chief Executive Officer, Multicultural Australia

IYER, Ms Kalpalata, Research & Advocacy Manager, Multicultural Australia

THOMAS, Mr Jeril, Regional Manager, Ipswich and Cultural Intelligence Trainer

CHAIR: I now welcome the representatives of Multicultural Australia. Thank you very much for your appearance and for your very detailed submission. Would you like to make an opening statement of about five minutes? Then the committee will have some questions for you.

Mrs Castley: Thank you for the invitation to come along and speak to you today. I will do the opening statement and Kal and Jeril are here to answer questions as well. I am Christine Castley, the CEO of Multicultural Australia. As I said, I have Kal here with me, who is our Research and Advocacy Manager, and Jeril, who is our Regional Manager in Ipswich. He also coordinates our volunteering activity. I acknowledge the traditional custodians of the ancestral lands on which we meet and pay my respect to elders throughout all time.

Multicultural Australia is a for-purpose organisation. We are Queensland based. We are a settlement provider with a very strong and connected physical presence right across metropolitan and regional Queensland. Our offices are in Woolloongabba, Logan, Springfield, Toowoomba, Rockhampton and Townsville and we also subcontract services in Cairns. We are a bit unique in terms of that statewide presence. We are definitely a Queensland provider.

Our clients and community are at the heart of everything we do, and we are very passionate about providing care and services in person centred and compassionate ways. Our journey over the past 27 years has been driven by our commitment to create welcome, promote inclusion and foster belonging for everyone. We achieve this through client service delivery, community development, advocacy, building cultural capability and community events, working with people, community, business and government.

Volunteers support our work and our mission at Multicultural Australia in numerous ways, from assisting new arrivals to Queensland with one-on-one support in their settlement journey—that includes things like how to catch a bus, how to find your way around the city and how to connect with services—right through to being part of our community events and festivals. The Luminous lantern festival at South Bank each year is the biggest one we do, with about 35,000 people attending.

Our organisational volunteering program is a significant platform for social inclusion and connection not just for our clients but also for individuals from across the broader community. We also think the opportunity we give people to connect across cultures and communities is a significant platform for social cohesion. Multicultural Australia currently has around 620 volunteers in various roles in the organisation and another 149 prospective volunteers currently in the onboarding process—people generally contact us through our website or by phoning in.

Our volunteer numbers and hours volunteered have varied over the years. This reflects changes in volunteer availability among other things, and COVID really impacted our volunteer numbers. Probably the biggest impact comes from our organisational capacity and capability to recruit for and administer a volunteer program. Our volunteer pool is diverse. It includes Australian citizens, permanent residents, international students and other visa holders. They come from over 55 different countries, they speak many different languages and most speak more than one language other than English. Our volunteers bring a rich diversity and diverse skills into our work, including multilingual abilities, lived experience, cultural awareness, professional expertise and personal attributes, and our submission speaks in some detail about the different skill sets and capabilities they bring. Their motivations to volunteer are also varied. Usually it is about cultural exchange, learning, helping others, community building, social inclusion, personal connection to the migration experience, professional development, skill application, personal fulfilment and social connection.

Our submission to the inquiry responded to key inquiry terms of reference, including the views and perspectives of volunteers, their experiences, the motivations and challenges for volunteers, the barriers to volunteering and the unique challenges experienced by people from diverse backgrounds who seek to engage in volunteering. As a volunteer-involving organisation, we noted our experience in providing opportunities to improve volunteering participation, accessibility and volunteering experience with diverse participants. We also see a tremendous opportunity coming up with the Brisbane 2032 Olympic and Paralympic Games.

Our submission also talks about the various barriers that can prevent people from volunteering and ways to assess and address these towards improving volunteering rates. Our experience reflects broader community sector challenges and barriers to volunteer engagement, and this includes the

administrative burden—for example, the onboarding process, blue card applications and so forth—as well as resourcing challenges. We are a funded organisation and our funding contracts generally do not make provisions for things such as volunteer activities, so we lack a dedicated budget for volunteer management or resources to celebrate or appreciate our volunteers.

I particularly want to note that many of the individuals and communities we work with are keen to contribute to their local communities and there is some effort required in the administration of that to ensure that you can match the skills, particularly for people who are new arrivals. We see this as an opportunity to do this, particularly as we support new arrivals into employment opportunities, in terms of creating that connection, that experience in Australian spaces.

Our community representatives and leaders, including youth leaders, are significant volunteers and contributors of their time and effort to support the settlement of their own communities and their peers. I would particularly like to acknowledge the many ways that individuals whom we interact with contribute to their local communities. Unfortunately, this is often not recognised as formal volunteering, despite being a significant enabler of community cohesion and requiring many hours of personal volunteering time. This informal volunteering effort, which is offered outside of formal organisational volunteering settings, is offered with similar motivations like altruism, sense of duty and need for social connectedness but it is formal enough, for example, for people to receive phone calls from the police to provide 24/7 support when people experience conflict or domestic violence. In those sorts of situations, they are known as the community leaders in that volunteer capacity. I want to take a moment to express our deep appreciation for the extraordinary effort and generosity of those multicultural community leaders. I did want to make that particular point because we are often contacted and asked how we can lift the level of involvement of our multicultural communities in volunteering efforts. The formal data will show that those are historically low when, in fact, it simply is not recorded and does not actually reflect what is happening in real life.

Multicultural Australia are committed to supporting our volunteers. We think it is really important to try to provide a meaningful volunteer experience and opportunities. We do our best to provide ease of engagement and process, as well as ongoing recognition and celebration of the value of volunteering and its impact on our organisation. We would be very happy to assist with any further information or respond to any questions.

CHAIR: Thank you. We have about 10 minutes up our sleeves for questions.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: Thank you for appearing before us today. I am interested to know about the barriers. I am from a very multicultural community and know very well the numbers of people who volunteer, although they may not recognise it as volunteering, as you said. What I have noted, which is not something that is listed in your submission, is that many people come to me saying they lack a physical space. Could you give your insights as to whether or not you think that is a barrier?

Mrs Castley: Absolutely, yes, I can answer about people gathering and coming together to have their events. I suppose we did not raise that because that was more in terms of creating that social connection piece as opposed to being specifically about a volunteering issue. I think you are right to raise it in that many of the amazing festivals that happen right across our community are volunteer-driven and volunteer-led. Wherever we can as an organisation and we have some spaces, we try to make spaces available. It certainly is an issue right across the state in terms of finding those spaces for people to come together.

When you think about the volunteering issue, it is about that capability to actually administer and register people, to make sure people have their blue cards and those sorts of things. For a volunteer organisation that is often quite difficult. That is why we try to provide spaces where people can engage through us, because we have a bit of that inbuilt infrastructure as an organisation. Again, as I said, it is not something we are funded to do under any of our funding programs, so we have to try to find ways to make that work. Our ability to do that then becomes very variable because there are times when we have to focus on delivering services to our clients and delivering the programs that we are contracted to provide. We simply do not have the time to ensure the volunteers are supported in what they are doing and also ensure the work they are doing is legitimate. We do not want to put people in a situation where they are doing things they are not authorised to do.

Mr BOOTHMAN: You mentioned the Olympics coming to Brisbane. Obviously, it is going to be the biggest event in the world at that time. How do you envisage your organisation participating and how can we best facilitate that?

Mrs Castley: I will use one example, which is the Luminous Lantern Festival that we hold every year. We do versions of that as Luminous in the Regions. We do that in Cairns, Toowoomba and Rocky with smaller lantern-making events and it is purely around a simple message that everyone is

welcome and let's walk together. It is a very simple message. We do not want to make it more complex. It culminates in an event—last year 35,000 people turned up at South Bank. We had about 2,000 people walking in that walk of welcome.

For Luminous last year we had about 120 volunteers on top of our staff organising the event, and that was a point of connection for people as well: being involved in a very central event at a central point. It showcases Brisbane as a community of welcome, as a community that embraces its diversity and comes together in unity. We have learned quite a bit in terms of how you bring people together to mobilise them. We found that when people are very keen to engage in these sorts of events they often do not know how. 'How do I find that thing? Where do I find that space and how do you create the platform?' For example, on our website we have, 'What would you like from us? Would you like to volunteer?' The volunteering people will register—and when I spoke about how we currently have 149 people we are working through, that is the list of what we get at a particular point in time. Someone has to pick up the phone and have a chat to them and find out what they are capable of doing and what hours they have to give.

That enabling process—it sounds very process-driven, but it is the piece about how you get people engaged in that event and, looking forward to how Brisbane does this, how it engages people in volunteer efforts. It particularly will be how you reach those people who do not generally engage in that volunteering effort. Many people in the older age bracket, for example, might want to get involved but not be entirely sure about what is involved and only want to do so for segments of time. How do you do that intake process to find out who is out there wanting to engage? It is about those processes. We can then connect into our multicultural communities in terms of bringing and mobilising those cohorts.

I will give you the example of what we were able to mobilise during COVID. When the Chief Health Officer stood up alongside the Premier to make the announcement of what was happening, each afternoon of that day her office would contact us to ask if we could we mobilise community leaders, so she could do the verbal—get the word out about this and what the information is about. A key issue we often flag with our multicultural communities is that doing printed written documents does not work; no-one reads them. Word of mouth and giving people the authority to spread the word is how you get that information out to get people to then connect with you so you can get the information and let them know how they can then engage in a volunteering piece, for example.

Ms BOYD: Can I clarify? It is 149 people right now that you are going through your intake process with?

Mrs Castley: Yes.

Ms BOYD: In terms of that intake process, I am curious to know what kind of resourcing needs to be dedicated to that? What is the typical time range to onboard somebody? What is the typical financial impost to do that? I presume that a lot of people who are volunteering with your organisation or through your organisation are already volunteers elsewhere. I am interested to understand that a little better.

Mr Thomas: Like Christine mentioned earlier, we do not have dedicated resources for our volunteering. However, our organisation's commitment has been in touch with states that we have engaged a volunteer coordinator to manage the volunteering journey in that process. The prospective volunteers go through different journeys. Some prospective volunteers come to the space because they want to engage with our programs. Some would see our Luminous lantern parade festival and want to be engaged in the festival. The journey is also dictated by the motivations of people who want to come in. Typically, the time it takes is through the process of getting an inquiry and then we make a phone call to find out their motivations and then we send the paperwork that is required, and that is one of the most important things that defines the time it takes for a volunteer to then translate into an approved volunteer.

The pace at which they have to complete their criminal history check as well as their blue card process is varied depending on what capacity people have. For some prospective applicants it might be within a two-week period—getting all the paperwork, getting approvals for their blue cards or their criminal history checks—and then completing our induction training. Again, that is another onerous process for some of the prospective volunteers because they might not have time and they might think, 'This is a longer process than I expected.' That is where the time is taken. Sometimes they remain prospective for a long time just because they do not have the time to complete the process. Then we have a staff member who will ring around checking in and finding out if there is some way we can make the process easier for them. Again, it varies depending on the motivations and depending on how involved they would like to be. We have volunteers from all sorts of backgrounds.

They might be volunteering with our organisation. They might be in a particular path in their career and they want to give back. They might also be new arrivals who are people just looking into connecting with someone in the community. There is a varied type of applicant who comes into our space. That is in our submission.

Ms BOYD: In a perfect world, what kind of process would you like to see to help, assist or streamline in that regard?

Mr Thomas: I am very sure we would talk about the same thing as many other respondents in terms of an easing of that administrative burden—the burden of that initial administrative process. When a person is really motivated, the next thing an organisation needs is to have a quick turnaround to get them on board. What stops them is definitely that administrative process in terms of the blue card, in terms of any of the processes it takes to get them approved as a volunteer in the general space. Also as an organisation, different programs and funding bodies have different categories and strict guidelines as to who they need to engage with. Those are all obstacles that prevent us from taking less time to onboard a volunteer.

In an ideal world, it would be about getting a standard system to get a volunteer approved, so then we do not have to follow up with blue cards. We would have a system where we know this is an approved volunteer with all the right checks and we can get them on board just by doing our induction training and get them to join our program straightaway. That is what would happen in an ideal world.

Mrs Castley: If I could add to that, coming from a community sector perspective as a not-for-profit, the volunteer piece is seen as part of your overhead costs. If there was a specific funding stream that allowed you to do that administrative piece—and often we get that discounted when we put in a proposal as they say, 'No, that is just your management overheads. We won't fund that because that's not the program we're funding,' not realising the significant value-add. From our perspective, the thing we all would say is that volunteer effort for us is not free because it comes with that specific resourcing implication. As Jeril says, it would be good if we could tap into funding that says you can get a volunteer coordinator capability—someone who actually has time to spend their day ringing people in a timely way so we do not lose perspective volunteers.

I will give you an example of one very specific, more short-term volunteering effort piece for the Luminous lantern festival. That is a big event on one day. We will put a call out for volunteers. Students and different people will put up their hand. Like I said, we had 120 last year. The process leading up to that is checking everyone has blue cards, getting them in, doing an induction and a briefing and also making sure they have that capability to deal with the public because they are going to be our ambassadors on the day. There is a briefing process that happens on top of organising the event just to get them in there to then be administering, being guides and briefing them up. There is a significant administrative effort that is often not recognised in that volunteering effort. You talk about getting volunteer coordinators to coordinate the volunteers, but, again, there is always that piece that relies—what does it mean to not have that dedicated resource? It becomes variable; it is not consistent because we just do it when we can.

CHAIR: Thank you very much for your appearance today and for your submission. You are most welcome to remain with us while other presenters come before us.

COULTER, Mr Steve, General Manager, Queenslanders with Disability Network

CHAIR: Thank you for appearing before us today and for your submission. Would you like to make a brief opening statement? After that the committee will have some questions for you.

Mr Coulter: Absolutely. That would be awesome. Good morning, Chair, committee members and fellow colleagues. Thank you for the opportunity to appear today to provide opening remarks on behalf of Queenslanders with Disability Network, known as QDN. We are a statewide organisation led by and for people with disability, guided by the motto 'nothing about us without us'. We represent the voices, experiences and leadership of over 3,000 members across the great state of Queensland. Our work informs systems reform and drives inclusive change across the state. We acknowledge the important work of this committee through the inquiry into volunteering in Queensland and thank you for recognising the critical role that volunteering plays in building a stronger, more inclusive community in Queensland.

I turn to the key issues that we see and the opportunities. Volunteering offers value not only to communities but also to organisations and to individuals themselves. For people with disability, volunteering is more than social participation; it is a proven pathway to skill development, confidence and leadership but also employment. Through volunteering, people with disability gain transferrable skills, expand their networks, build work experience and strengthen self-advocacy, directly supporting transitions into sustainable employment.

QDN has seen the impact of inclusive volunteering firsthand through our peer support groups, which number 32 across Queensland, and initiatives such as the Successfully Engaging Volunteers with Disability resource developed in partnership with Volunteering Queensland. We have seen lives transformed and people gaining confidence, forging connections and finding purpose and belonging within the community. We support the Queensland Volunteering Strategy 2024-2032 and the action plan that completes it. However, we believe there is significant opportunity to further strengthen the focus on inclusion of people with disability across volunteering policy, programs and investments.

Our *Game changers* report, developed in partnership with Urbis, outlines how major events like the Brisbane 2032 Olympic and Paralympic Games can deliver transformative change that includes inclusive volunteering and employment strategies from the outset. Experiences from London 2012, Gold Coast 2018 and Tokyo 2020 show that inclusive volunteer programs drive higher post-games employment, improve community engagement and boost long-term civic participation among people with disability. Brisbane 2032 presents Queensland with a once-in-a-generation chance to set a new global benchmark for inclusive volunteering. In order to seize this opportunity, action is needed and it is needed now.

Our recommendations include: setting specific volunteering targets for people with disability; co-designing volunteer strategies with people with disability from the start; embedding disability awareness training for all volunteers and staff; ensuring communications, venues and support systems are fully accessible; using volunteering as a skills pipeline; and linking volunteers with disability to long-term employment beyond the games. By taking this action today, Queensland can create a lasting legacy—one where people with disability are not only included but also visible, valued, skilled and economically empowered. Volunteering must not be seen as an end point for people with disability but as a critical step towards full social and economic participation.

Today I would like to highlight five key areas from our submission. The first is strengthening inclusion and accessibility. Inclusion must be embedded across all stages of volunteering, from recruitment and onboarding to training, support and recognition. Programs should be flexible, accessible and responsive to the diverse needs of people with disability, using the co-design principles. Secondly, build our organisational capacity. Expand training, resources and communities of practice with volunteer-involving organisations led by people with disability to support inclusive practices and to address unconscious bias and foster welcoming environments.

Thirdly, simplify systems and processes. Streamline regulatory requirements and reduce admin barriers to make volunteering more accessible. Pathways must be easy to navigate, with support systems in place. Fourthly, improve the collection and use of data about volunteers with disability, including their participation, their barriers and their outcomes. This is vital for shaping effective, evidence-based policies for the future. Lastly, leverage Brisbane 2032. The 2032 games represent an opportunity to present Queensland as a global leader in inclusive volunteering. Our *Game changers* report provides a practical road map including volunteering targets, co-design principles and awareness training.

QDN is committed to working alongside the government and the broader sector to realise a vision of Queensland where every person, regardless of disability, can participate fully and meaningfully in volunteering. Volunteering not only strengthens communities; it also empowers individuals to become leaders, advocates and active citizens. It is a cornerstone of our society and a driver of inclusion and opportunity. We thank the committee for the opportunity to contribute today. I look forward to any questions that you have.

CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Coulter. We have 10 minutes for questions, so I will go to the deputy chair first, the member for Inala.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: Thank you, Mr Coulter, for being here today, and thank you for the work that you do in the disability space. It is very valuable work. I am interested in the impact of stigma and discrimination and how that may present in the volunteering space. I suggest it may go across all elements, but is it more of an issue that people do not see people with a disability as a suitable volunteer, or is it the way in which they are treated once they become a volunteer, or is it something that impairs their ability because their health conditions may make them less considerably reliable in the same way that someone might perceive is required? Can you unpack a little bit how those things are barriers?

Mr Coulter: Absolutely. Everything you have just described is a barrier. We hear it frequently from our thousands of members, right up to the top of Queensland, right to the border. The thing we are finding, and our members are telling us, is that there is conscious and unconscious bias of people within the workplace when people go to volunteer—'Oh, you can't do that'—whereas the person who is visually impaired with an assistance dog is actually the best typist in the room and somebody who understands words better. There is a lot of misconception out there. There is a lot of opportunity for people to co-design any volunteering, but there is also an option to bring everyone, including the wider community, along on this. It is a learning experience when somebody with disability comes into the office because everyone learns together. We believe there should be some training around that—that if you have someone with disability, which one in five Queenslanders identify as, there is a bit of co-design and there is a bit of conscious and unconscious training that happens before. We want to set people up for success. We do not want people to go in where the volunteering opportunity has been described as something different that they cannot achieve. We want everyone to achieve.

Mr BAILLIE: I have had a quick look through *Successfully engaging volunteers with disability* and it looks like a magnificent resource.

Mr Coulter: Thank you.

Mr BAILLIE: It is quite comprehensive, with checklists and all sorts of things that organisations would consider before engaging volunteers. Have you received much feedback from industry about whether it is helpful or if there is anything further that may need to be added to it, or is it quite comprehensive as it is?

Mr Coulter: The feedback has been overly positive. It certainly has been a conversation starter for people. It is great to have a document, and we are getting great feedback on the document. I believe that people have good intentions—they want people with disability to volunteer—but we are finding that the structures or the training they have within the workplace do not enable them to take it to the next step. It is great we have done that bit, but now we need to act upon that. We need to work together as a community to make sure people have support mechanisms and things within the workplace to take it to the next step. I believe everyone's intentions are great, but it is knowing what to do next.

Mr BAILLIE: That goes to another question I have of your network. You have lots of volunteers, but not all sites are appropriate. How do you manage not only expectations but also the realities of particular sites and capabilities with the volunteers that are available, are willing to help and are great resources?

Mr Coulter: Our members are basically telling us on a daily basis which locations are accessible and which ones are not. We tap into our wider network of other disability organisations and community organisations, some of which are here today, and ask them locally which ones are accessible and which ones are not. As has been mentioned before, word of mouth in the community is pretty strong. People will know straightaway even what workplaces or government offices are accessible or not. The community know where they can go and where they cannot, but more of that needs to happen. I know there is technology out there trying to get people to map out Queensland with what is accessible and what is not. That is of great assistance. We also have a section called

QD-eNgage, where we get consultants with disability to go out into communities to work with organisations and just to look from a different perspective: 'Is this workplace accessible? Is the lighting too strong? Is that door accessible?' They look at the furniture. We frequently do that with organisations and government departments.

Mr BAILLIE: I imagine every volunteer has limitations, be it time—time of day or time they can provide—or skill sets and limitations. Are there any specific tools that you have that you manage those considerations by, or does it rely on people?

Mr Coulter: We have an extensive peer support network where a lot of our members get together. It is run by volunteers for other peers. They can debrief around our four pillars of QDN and they talk about things within the local community. We are very strong in regional areas as well. A lot of what we hear is brought back to our policy team so we can make change at systemic levels, speaking to people like yourself to take things to the next level. We do work locally, and that peer support—speaking to each other—is a great mechanism to cope with that. People being in their house after COVID is still a major issue within the community. People do not have the confidence because their local roads, if they are in a regional area, might not be accessible; they cannot go where they need to go. Having that peer-to-peer support outlet, if they volunteer or not, is a great asset.

Ms BOYD: I am interested in the recommendation of setting specific volunteering targets. I wonder if you can speak to other jurisdictions that do this and where you think the ideal target may sit.

Mr Coulter: Absolutely. We believe targets are really important. We did a lot of research through our *Game changers* report, so the targets are in there. We looked at Paris and London as well, and we spoke to people who were there and we got their feedback. Having a target helps focus everyone's minds on it. Then we can be accountable to each other, whether it is government, local council or organisations. Our feedback was that people with disability were excited by that. They felt respected by that. It gives us something to aim for. I can provide you the report that has a full list of targets, if you do not already have it.

Ms BOYD: That was one of my queries, too—and it is perhaps a point of clarity—because the targets were referred to in terms of the *Game changers* report. Was it a broader target as well?

Mr Coulter: Absolutely.

Ms BOYD: Can you talk to us about that as well?

Mr Coulter: Absolutely. We were launching it off the back of the *Game changers* report. We would love to see a wider target which is agreed that everyone should follow. For example, if government was to set their own target or organisations would set the target, whatever that is, that in itself gives everyone something to aim to. We also want to see a whole-of-society target on procurement—the people who provide. For example, if we look at 2032, there would be a percentage target for the people who volunteer letting people into the stadiums. The office organising the volunteers would have a percentage as well. As much as possible, we want to see that become the norm.

Ms BOYD: I think your submission stated, off the top of my head, that one in five people in our community has a disability.

Mr Coulter: That is correct.

Ms BOYD: What is your ideal number?

Mr Coulter: It would probably be 20 per cent, to be honest. Absolutely, it has to reflect wider society. The legacy of London was volunteering. It help shaped parts of London. I come from Northern Ireland. We have always had targets around recruitment and how to recruit people, and I have personally seen the benefits of that.

CHAIR: Mr Coulter, I was really interested to see the guide that you prepared in conjunction with Volunteering Queensland—and I acknowledge former senator for Queensland Andrew Bartlett, with us here today—*Successfully engaging volunteers with a disability*. When was that produced, and do you have data or anecdotal evidence about the impact that has made in the volunteering sector?

Mr Coulter: That was released about 12 or 13 months ago. We can get that data to you. I do not have it with us today, but we can certainly work with our colleagues to get that.

CHAIR: If you are happy to provide that to us on notice, please, that would be great. Shall we say by 10 May, please?

Mr Coulter: That is fantastic, yes.

CHAIR: We would appreciate that. Thank you so much. Thank you for your appearance, Mr Coulter. It has been great to have you here and your submission is very thorough. The committee will now take a short break and resume at 11.45 am.

Proceedings suspe**nded from 11.27 am to 11.43 am**.

PULESTON, Ms Carolina, Chief Executive Officer and Founder, commonkind

WILLIMS, Mrs Ester, Board Chair, commonkind

WRIGHT, Miss Evie, Volunteer, commonkind

CHAIR: I now welcome representatives of commonkind. How old are you, Evie?

Miss Wright: I am 10.

CHAIR: It is wonderful to have you with us today. I hope you enjoy giving your evidence to us. I invite you to make an opening statement and after that the committee will have some questions for you.

Ms Puleston: Thank you so much for having us here today. I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the lands on which we meet, the Yagara and Turrbal peoples, and also the traditional custodians of the land where commonkind serves. We pay our respects to elders past and present and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people joining us today.

My name is Carolina Puleston and I am the founder of commonkind, a small but growing, 100 per cent volunteer-run charity, based in Brisbane. We provide age-appropriate community service opportunities for children, young people and families to support fellow Australians experiencing hardship. Our work focuses on relieving poverty, tackling food insecurity and improving wellbeing.

Today I am joined by our board chair, Ester Willims, and, most importantly, by one of our inspiring local change-makers, Evie Wright, who is just 10 years old and already showing us what the next generation of volunteers looks like.

I would like to commend this committee for the breadth of your inquiry and your openness to hear from volunteer-involving organisations of all shapes and sizes. We welcome your focus on both the immediate and long-term challenges facing the volunteering sector in Queensland. You will have seen in our submission our detailed responses to your terms of reference, but today we would like to highlight two core areas of opportunity as well as illustrate the potential of engaging Australia's youngest citizens. These examples will touch on terms of reference 1, 3, 4 and 6.

First, how can we grow adult volunteer numbers in Queensland? We believe one of the most powerful and practical levers we have is family-inclusive volunteering. While the cost-of-living crisis and time pressures affect us all, these challenges are amplified for parents and carers, especially when volunteering means needing child care or committing to rigid schedules. At commonkind, we have designed flexible, family-friendly volunteering experiences through our Home is Where the Heart Is model. These enable families to give back together on their own terms. Parents love that it helps instil community values in their children and kids love doing something meaningful with their grown-ups. This approach not only reinvigorates adult volunteering by reducing barriers; it also creates a ripple effect, cultivating civic responsibility across generations.

Next, turning to our youth, how can we engage more children and young people in volunteering, including those under 16? We believe service learning embedded in the school curriculum is critical to the future of volunteering in Queensland. Many schools offer opportunities to help out or fundraise but far fewer provide students with structured volunteering experiences with external community organisations. Programs like the Duke of Edinburgh's Award and the certificate in active volunteering are fantastic but they often begin in later high school, missing a crucial window in primary and early secondary years. Through our Learn by Heart program, students from prep upwards participate in meaningful, hands-on service learning linked to the curriculum. It is a natural extension of the social and emotional learning pedagogy already embedded in schools and one that has been proven to enhance wellbeing, reduce bullying and support both student and teacher welfare.

As shown in the Stationery Aid case study in our submission, service learning can increase the capacity of the volunteer sector. Sarah Witty, the CEO of The Nappy Collective—another of our charity partners—attests—

> At The Nappy Collective, we rely on volunteers to power our mission and youth volunteers from commonkind have been a shining example of what's possible. Their energy, dedication and willingness to give up their weekend to support over 600 local families has been invaluable. Contributions like this directly increase our capacity, allowing us to support more families in crisis with fewer resources. When young people step up to help other children, it not only lightens the load; it gives us hope for the kind of community we are building together.

On top of productivity and efficiency gains in the sector, service learning also builds empathy, agency and purpose in our young people. It aligns with the Australian Curriculum's ethical understanding and personal, social and intercultural understanding capabilities. As one of our leaders from a partner school states—

Volunteering offers young people invaluable opportunities to develop essential skills, build meaningful connections and make a positive impact on their communities.

The service learning encounter model allows our young people to come as a guest into the lives of others. It allows them to be deeply present through compassionate giving of time or talent. We believe the Department of Education holds a key role in establishing a strong, sustainable volunteering pipeline. That is why we urge the committee to consider introducing compulsory community service for Queensland school students, enabling applied service learning experiences that serve today's community needs while growing tomorrow's volunteer leaders.

Commonkind sessions are designed to be turnkey, not add an additional burden to busy teachers and support staff. We handle planning, logistics, education, service activities and impact evaluation. All we need is space, students and teachers during their usual school day. The response from schools has been overwhelmingly positive. Our net promoter score is 91, which far surpasses the Australian not-for-profit sector average of 43. Rather than only hearing from us adults on this matter, we invite Evie to share her story because no-one can better illustrate the impact of early and meaningful volunteer experiences than young people themselves. Over to you, Evie.

CHAIR: Just before you start, Evie, I understand you are here with the permission of your mother; is that right? Is that mum there?

Miss Wright: Yes.

CHAIR: That is great. Thank you very much for that. You are very welcome. Please proceed.

Miss Wright: Hello, and thank you for having me here today. My name is Evie. I am 10 years old, and I am really proud to speak on behalf of many children and young people who have had the chance to volunteer through commonkind. To me, the best part of volunteering is knowing I am helping others in my community. It feels good to give back, and I also think it is a great way to build skills that will help me when I am older at school, at work and in life.

I first got involved with commonkind last year when my whole year group did a community service session at school. We learned about important issues like poverty, hunger and mental health and how these challenges affect real people, including children and families just like ours. Then we got to take action. In just 90 minutes, 130 of us year 5 students sorted and tested over 5,000 donated markers to help 435 kids living in poverty get the school supplies they need, packed over 320 kilograms of donated food into hampers for 35 families facing food insecurity and made 351 kind cards with messages and drawings to go inside care packages for people experiencing homelessness. It felt amazing to see how much we could do together in such a short time.

I think programs like these are really important because most charities do not let you volunteer if you are under 16. This gave me a chance to make a real difference, even though I am still in primary school. After that session, I wanted to do more. My mum helped me learn more about commonkind and now I am part of their Child and Youth Advisory Group, where I help shape future volunteering projects for other kids like me. I am also looking forward to joining their family community service events soon. I really hope more schools offer this kind of program. It is fun, it is meaningful and it shows that no matter how old you are you can still help others. Thank you for listening.

Ms Puleston: I am not sure if it is etiquette to clap, but well done, Evie. Some of you have been asking about the Olympics. She is 10 now but in 2032 she will be 18, so she probably will be one of those volunteer leaders that you were asking about in relation to the future of volunteering in Queensland. Thanks, Evie. You have captured so clearly what we as adults sometimes forget—that children and young people are not just the volunteers of tomorrow; they can be capable volunteers today.

Committee members, if we can offer more service opportunities like this that are accessible, meaningful and a positive experience from a young age, we will not only increase the capacity of the sector now but also lay the foundations for a lifetime of civic engagement. Thank you, again, for your time and attention today. We welcome your questions and would be pleased to elaborate further on our submission or today's presentation.

CHAIR: Thank you very much.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: Thank you for appearing before us today. Thank you, Evie—that was a really great presentation and answered one of the questions I had, which is good because it means I can ask you one directly. What is it about volunteering that inspires and motivates you? Do you think other children and young people would feel the same?

Miss Wright: What motivates me is helping others. When you help others it makes you feel really good about yourself, which makes you feel really happy. I think if other people volunteered too, they would feel happy and better about themselves, and that might get them into volunteering.

Mr HEALY: Good response.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: Yes, thank you for that. Do you think it is difficult for children to know where to go to help and how to go about helping, particularly when so many groups do not allow you to volunteer if you are under 16?

Miss Wright: I would say it would probably be difficult for children. Obviously if they do sessions with commonkind—like, I knew straightaway to go to the website and then I kind of just learned more about it and got in touch.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: That sounds fantastic. Thank you for your motivation and for your eagerness. We are really excited about what your advocacy with young people can bring. Thank you, Evie.

Ms Puleston: I am really proud of you, Evie. She was not expecting to answer questions today. I might walk out now.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: She has shown that she can do it.

Ms Puleston: I said that you were all very friendly when we prepared. Obviously she is super confident. Go for it, Evie.

Mr BOOTHMAN: Miss Wright, you are awesome. I just want to put that on the record. Carolina, Lions clubs have their Leos, who are aged 12 to 30, but a lot of them struggle to get membership. I am curious: how has your organisation actually engaged the younger generations and made them so enthusiastic, like Miss Wright here? What is your secret and what can we learn from your experience?

Ms Puleston: I know that in previous hearings you have expressed interest in involving more youth in volunteering. I do not know that it is necessarily a secret. I think that—

Mr BOOTHMAN: It is working.

Ms Puleston: Thank you. Evie is just one of our fantastic examples. We have not really had that problem. Maybe everyone is very passionate and motivated, and certainly Evie is at a school that excels in service learning. If you look at the research on generation Alpha—even the youngest ones—they do have a passion for community causes and making a difference in the community. Sometimes I think traditional volunteering models and maybe organisations—I do not know; I do not want to speak to any of those organisations—do not speak to them so much. What we try to do is have things that are co-designed by children, so it is not just done by a bunch of adults. That is why it was so important to have Evie here speaking today—it is not just us again telling kids what to do like they get all day, every day.

We ask, 'What are your ideas?' In our constitution, our three objectives are on hunger, poverty and improving health and wellbeing, so what can we do around that? For example, one of our young change makers who is seven had this idea to create breakfast boxes to be given to people facing food insecurity. We have charities that are desperate to take them so it is just a matter of our finding the funding to create those materials. It is a cliche, but the children are our future. They have plenty of ideas, if someone is willing to listen and invest in the suggestions that they have.

Mrs Willims: Can I add something to that as well? I think Carolina is probably underselling her relationship management as well. Something that I have kind of noticed in parallel—we have our family community programs and then we have our school programs. The school program feeds into the community program. They get this experience at school—maybe one hour—and suddenly the light goes on and they want to get involved in the other stuff, and that is when the families get involved. Mums and dads look up the website and want to do the programs at home or come in—we run programs at New Farm Library. The school seems to give them a taste. They make it easy. Bang! That seems to be what happens. The relationships with the schools is Carolina's hard work.

Ms Puleston: I have had experience working closely with schools. I used to work in the public sector and public health and then I worked in education as a speech pathologist, so I know what it is like to be a busy teacher—not that I am a busy teacher—and have a heavy workload. Many of them are trying to do as much as they can with the resources they have, so if we can come in and bring these programs to them they are more than—

Mrs Willims: And making it really easy. A lot of the feedback we get is that it is really easy to do rather than it being another thing on top of everything. The turnkey thing has really helped with that engagement.

Mr BOOTHMAN: A lot of the time, it seems to work if you get the right person to facilitate—they have the right skill sets and know how to work with the youth. I have been a Lion for many years and I have seen Leo programs come and go. If you do not get the right person, it just starts dying off and you just hope it comes back again. What you are doing is obviously working extremely well and it is something that could be, and should be, copied and disseminated.

Mrs Willims: I would hate for it to be person-dependent, though. That is a risk.

Mr BOOTHMAN: That is right—you want to teach other people.

Mrs Willims: Absolutely.

Ms Puleston: In our Child and Youth Advisory Group, our eldest member is 17. He is in year 12. For me, part of that succession planning is, 'Okay, you've been involved in this Child and Youth Advisory Group, now let's see if we can upskill you to the next level of actually being the leaders of the future.' I was a Rotary youth leader many years ago, so there is nothing against those organisations. It is just about changing the model a little bit to suit families that are also very busy.

Ms BOYD: We have heard a lot today about the barriers to inclusion and accessibility for young people and for culturally or linguistically diverse folks. What special considerations have you needed to make to be able to provide a safe and thriving space for young people, a cohort that really is not accommodated in many other not-for-profits across the state?

Ms Puleston: I think the key driver of that is actually running the sessions in schools because physically they are already set up, health and safety wise. They are places that, in general, students feel comfortable being in in the first place. For example, you are speaking about the Lions—and obviously to your question as well. The reason we set this up is: even for me, I was looking for opportunities for my children, who are much younger than 16, and charities just would not take them because of perceived hassle. Also I guess economically, in terms of return on investment, it does take a lot of time, so at every one of these sessions we provide education about why we are doing things. We also talk about what is the impact. There needs to be that education piece, and that is time that is invested up-front. As I said, with the co-design with the students as well, they are able to say, 'We are not that interested in this.' They provide feedback and they are not shy in coming forward with their feedback if they like things and they do not like things. We actually listen to that and we incorporate that in future sessions. In that way, we aim to make everyone as comfortable as possible. Obviously we are aiming to be the best we can in terms of being a child safe organisation, so part of that is listening to the voices of children and young people. That is why Evie is here today. We ask our Child and Youth Advisory Group to provide feedback on how we can make spaces safer for them.

Ms BOYD: It is always unfiltered, isn't it?

Ms Puleston: Yes.

Mr BAILLIE: Thank you all for attending today. You mentioned commonkind is a new small organisation. How big is the organisation and what is the percentage of adults versus youth?

Ms Puleston: I do not have the numbers here in front of me, but we incorporated in April last year so we are just over a year old. Before that it was me being very much grassroots, piloting things. In the past 12 months, we have had over 500 children and young people involved in our community service sessions. The model usually is that if it is our family sessions then a parent has to attend with their one or two children—whatever they are bringing—and then obviously at school a teacher has to be there with their children. It is predominantly children, with a very small proportion of adults involved. We maintain the safe ratios of teacher to student.

Mr BAILLIE: In terms of the two different scenarios, one is a school-based program and it happens within school hours?

Ms Puleston: Yes.

Mr BAILLIE: The other is outside school hours, is it?

Ms Puleston: Yes.

Mr BAILLIE: What percentage of your programs operate within the school environment?

Ms Puleston: The majority is in school. We have space constraints. We operate out of New Farm Library once a month and in that room we can fit only about 20 to 30 people. Unfortunately, we have a waiting list for those family sessions, as Evie was mentioning before. It would probably be

90 per cent in school and 10 per cent outside of school. One of the challenges of working in schools is changing staff. You have a champion who is really keen and really supportive and then they leave or they get a job somewhere else and you have to start almost from scratch. We also did a pilot in an outside-school-hours-care provider, because in a sense they are a captive audience. They are there anyway; why not offer that there? You can see on the last page of our submission the value they received from that.

Mr BAILLIE: Miss Wright, I have three daughters and two of them are about your age so I know how busy you are with school. Do you play sports as well?

Miss Wright: Yes, I do.

Mr BAILLIE: You have lots going on. When do you find the time to help and volunteer?

Miss Wright: Obviously we do a lot at my school. We do lots of Mercy Action programs. On the weekends I do not have sport—it is usually during the week—so I will try and do things then. In three weeks I will try to do at least one or two things to help.

Mr BAILLIE: If you could tell us one thing that you think we need to do to encourage more people your age to volunteer, what would that be?

Miss Wright: Probably just listen to people. You have to make a safe space for them and they will really come out of their shell and have amazing ideas. Sometimes people—adults—will look over children even though you have a whole mind.

Mr BAILLIE: Thank you very much for your feedback today.

CHAIR: I thank everyone for their appearance today, in particular Miss Wright. Evie, you are a most impressive young lady. The committee has a small gift we would like to give to you to help you with your schooling this year. With the indulgence of the committee, I thought we might have a quick photograph with the representatives of commonkind and with Evie as the star attraction. We will, if you do not mind, put that up on the parliament's website. It has been such a pleasure to have you here today.

LYNCH, Miss Morgan, Queensland Youth Policy Collective

CHAIR: Thank you for your appearance today and for your group's submission. Could you give us a brief opening statement? Then we will have some questions for you.

Miss Lynch: Thank you, Chair, and members of the committee, for the opportunity to speak to you today. My name is Morgan Lynch and I am a founding member of the Queensland Youth Policy Collective. When I say 'youth', I do not mean quite as young as Evie. Most of our members are in their late teens and their twenties. We were founded in 2021 and we comprise now approximately 45 members. Our membership particularly includes students of law, business and journalism, early-career lawyers, consultants, academics and policy officers and current and former judges' associates. As an independent think tank, we are not affiliated with any political party, university or corporation. Our mission is to unite young individuals to amplify the youth perspective in civic debate and to provide thorough, high-quality, evidence-based policy papers, research and advocacy.

Young Queenslanders have the capability and motivation to make a significant contribution to this state through volunteer activities. According to a 2024 report by Volunteering Queensland, nearly 70 per cent of Queensland youth engage in volunteer work, yielding a return of $3.60 for every dollar invested in volunteers within this age group. Despite this, the talents, skills and efforts of our state's youth are often underutilised and underappreciated within the volunteer sector. Nearly half of organisations in Queensland with volunteer programs do not report having volunteers under the age of 25. Additionally, over a quarter of Queenslanders aged 15 to 24 who do not volunteer cite age related challenges as a barrier.

Youth volunteers are more likely than their older counterparts to face financial, time and transportation obstacles to volunteering more. We call on the government to help alleviate these barriers by providing more affordable transportation to and from volunteering activities, empowering organisations to help recruit and retain young volunteers and developing an official online platform for young people to formally record their volunteering experience. By doing so, the government can help Queensland's youth volunteers and the organisations they support to foster a thriving volunteer community and create a better Queensland. I welcome the opportunity to answer your questions.

CHAIR: You heard the vivid insights from Evie Wright. You did make the point that your members are generally a little bit older than Evie, but would you say that the views she expressed about engagement with youth apply equally to a 10-year-old as to someone young at university in trying to alleviate the shortage of youth volunteers?

Miss Lynch: Yes and no. I think the general passion that Evie spoke about among young people to want to make a positive difference in our community and to contribute is certainly true, both for children and for young adults. In terms of the challenges that young adults sometimes face, though, they can be a little bit different. Organisations like commonkind are great at reaching out to children, particularly through school integrated volunteering opportunities, which provide a fantastic opportunity for school-age children to directly link up with volunteering organisations in a very structured way. The challenge that a lot of young adults find is that, once you emerge from that school environment and you are navigating the early workforce or perhaps studying, those structured opportunities are not presented to you as nicely. You are entering a phase of your life where you are becoming more independent and having to seek out your own opportunities and, even though technically an 18-year-old is an adult, it can be very intimidating and difficult trying to work out exactly where those opportunities are and how they fit into your life. I think because you do not have that structure that a school environment provides, for young adults outreach and also providing very easy contact points become even more crucial.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: Thank you for appearing today. I am interested in volunteers being able to leverage off their volunteering to capacity-build and to demonstrate that skill set and experience for potential employment. I note that you talked about recording volunteer hours against a USI number, which is novel and very intriguing to me, and I am quite excited to hear your ideas about how that could work.

Miss Lynch: We would actually support a model quite similar to the volunteering passport that I know the committee has heard about that has been suggested by Volunteering Queensland in its submission—the idea of providing an online platform where volunteers can record their credentials, particularly in a verified way that could then be leveraged for employment opportunities. The idea of linking it to a USI is that a USI—a unique student identifier—allows people who are going through education to have a formal single record of their qualifications and experience; however, often volunteering experience is not formally recorded in the same way. Having a central database which

is verified which you could then present to employers, much like an academic transcript, to say, 'Here is where I have volunteered. Here are the people who have signed off it. You do not have to go chasing them up necessarily to work out if what I am saying is true because you have it all verified in one singular spot,' would be not only convenient but also a great way to allow young people to leverage the skills they are getting in a volunteer environment and show their transferability into paid employment.

Mr BAILLIE: Thank you for joining us, Miss Lynch. The chair asked a great question earlier and I think you provided a very elegant response around the structured opportunities that present themselves when you are perhaps a bit younger versus the less structured options that you are navigating these days. How does your organisation go about engaging with potential volunteers, attracting new volunteers, given there are less structured opportunities that present?

Miss Lynch: If we expand the idea of volunteering to even the Queensland Youth Policy Collective, which is a volunteer-run organisation—and I am not paid to be here today—a lot of it really has been by word of mouth. I was a founding member and we were a group of students at university who had similar interests. If you are looking for like-minded people with like-minded interests, places like universities, sort of similar to schools, are a great way to help get the word out.

The other thing in terms of reaching out to young people—and this is going to sound stereotypical but it continues to be true—is social media. I started university before the COVID pandemic and continued after, and I have noticed that the amount of time people are spending on campus since the pandemic is reduced. There was the initial shift to online learning during COVID, but people have not gone back. I think partially that is because people have become used to studying online and often they have jobs they are trying to do while studying. Also, so many university courses now only offer online lectures. It means that, instead of being able to put a notice up on a pin board that everyone will walk past on their way to a class, you really have to leverage these social media channels to get into people's homes and computers, which is where they are doing the majority of their learning.

There is another challenge that presents with volunteering. I know in my experience, I would go to a lecture in the morning at university, for example, and go somewhere else in the afternoon. If you are only sitting at home, the extra motivation it takes to actually get out of the house is really difficult. I do not have a great solution for that; I just think it is a shift in our culture.

Mr HEALY: They are really good points.

Mr BAILLIE: I do not know if you can tell by the grey hair, but when I went to school the internet and social media definitely did not exist. When you say 'social media', we might have a different definition of what that is. Could you describe social media today and the people you are interacting with in trying to attract volunteering, and how would you leverage social media to attract those potential participants?

Miss Lynch: The Queensland Youth Policy Collective is perhaps slightly unique in that often our members, just by the nature of the organisation, are more likely to be people studying particular things at university or university-educated with an educational focus. Often our social media will be things like Facebook; if you are reaching out through university, it would be Facebook pages of law organisations and societies. We find even LinkedIn is quite useful. If you were looking more broadly at young people, though, I would not say that the average person in their late teens or early 20s necessarily has the same level of engagement on LinkedIn that perhaps our members have. There seems to be a shift towards more short-form video social media platforms like TikTok. I have not tried it yet—I have not been game to—but if you are looking to reach out to young people apparently TikTok is where everything is at the moment. Even YouTube: the amount of media that people consume through YouTube compared to the traditional television platforms shows a massive shift.

Ms BOYD: I was interested in your submission, which was obviously very well researched and considered, so thank you for making it in the way you have. A particular point of interest to me is the financial barriers you identified. The possibility of providing financial support is something I am keen for you to elaborate on—in terms of the cost of membership, providing vouchers for transport, having tax deduction capabilities for materials. I am really conscious that younger people throughout our community often have a reduced amount of time to be able to earn an income and when they do earn a source of income it is often at reduced rates as well. Can you talk more to that, if you are able to? If it is possible, could you reference other jurisdictions or spaces where you have seen a successful model in operation?

Miss Lynch: Data from the National Centre for Vocational Education Research released in September last year found that 37 per cent of 23-year-olds report financial stress. You made really good points about the fact that young people often are working reduced hours because you are trying to fit work around study commitments and you are often earning at a reduced rate. When there are then financial costs associated with volunteering, that can be a big obstacle in terms of people's ability to participate.

Data from the Australian Youth Barometer in 2023 shows that 33 per cent of young people found volunteering to be too expensive. Even putting to one side the fact that you are spending time and not getting compensated for that, there are often membership fees involved, there are transport costs and there are costs of materials which often are not reimbursed. Not only are you earning nothing for your time—that is the nature of volunteering; that is obviously not going to change and it should not—but you are also ending up in a net negative financial position as a result of the cost.

I mentioned transport in particular because, according to Volunteering Queensland's youth report for 2024, youth were more likely than individuals aged 25 and over to perceive their location as something that made it harder to volunteer. Even though in Queensland we now have 50-cent public transport fares, which can make it easier to get around, often volunteering will happen outside business hours or on weekends because you are fitting it around work commitments, and public transport availability can be quite limited at those times. When you are asking someone to give up their time, telling them that you can spend 50 cents catching three buses and two trains and walking two kilometres to get somewhere is not a particularly appealing proposition—plus, not all locations where you want to volunteer are easily accessible by public transport to begin with. It means that young people, particularly ones who do not have their own driver's licence yet, are having to hit up friends and family for lifts or incur the costs of Ubers and taxis to get where they need to go.

There is an idea of being able to help alleviate some of those initial transport costs and then even, as we suggested, perhaps being able to claim it as a tax deduction. There is bit of a strange contradiction between the idea that a financial donation can be considered a tax deduction but a donation of a cost involved in offering your time to an organisation cannot. That really pivots towards a focus that the government seems to be putting on financial contributions and perhaps an undervaluing of the time contributions that people can make.

Mr BOOTHMAN: Going back to the line of questioning about social media and trying to attract young people, obviously at the moment a lot of young people like using their iPads to watch TikTok and YouTube—and some of it is mind-numbing—but one thing I have found is that there are a lot of influencers and individuals who market items et cetera. There is an option of having people such as Miss Wright, who could be an example to other individuals by saying, 'This is what volunteering is about. This is the buzz I get from it.' What are your thoughts about that type of direction—trying to encourage young people that this is something that is cool to do and fun because you get to meet new people and it is great for mental health? What are your thoughts about strategies and how we could potentially do that?

Miss Lynch: I think that sounds like a fabulous idea: an influencer who is not trying to sell you a Stanley cup but instead is trying to sell you a volunteering opportunity. I suppose part of the challenge is that social media, in particular, means that we all seem to have the attention span of gnats when we are scrolling so you need to be able to get a message across sharp and to the point. It can be difficult to make that point quickly when you are talking about something intangible like volunteering.

In terms of social media engagement—that is not my area of expertise but I appreciate it is incredibly important—you need to be able to capture people but then also direct them to the appropriate resources where they can find out more information and sign up. As I said, when you start looking at young adults who perhaps are not in a structured environment like a school where volunteering can be possible, it is about showing them not only what organisations to become involved in but who you contact, the phone number you call, the email address you use—the single point of contact where you can sign up. If you can use social media to grab people's attention and then direct them to those sources, I think that would be a fantastic use of social media.

Mr BOOTHMAN: It is a social change that we need to look into for people's mental wellbeing and social skills. I see that constantly.

Miss Lynch: Absolutely. Bouncing off one of the earlier questions, I was talking about the fact that so much education has moved online and it is trying to get people out of the house and socialising with other young people. From my experience, my father would often say, 'My friends at university are ones I made at lectures,' and I would say, 'Lectures are online now. That's not how it works

anymore, Dad.' I am out of university now, but the friends I made at university were through things like the Queensland Youth Policy Collective and the Law Society. It is the people you have a common interest with. The effect that has on mental health and developing social skills is immense.

CHAIR: Thank you for your appearance today. It has not passed unnoticed that you were here in a volunteer capacity.

O'BRIEN, Ms Clare, Strategic Partnerships Manager, P&Cs Queensland

WISEMAN, Mr Scott, Chief Executive Officer, P&Cs Queensland

CHAIR: Welcome. I invite you to make an opening statement and then the committee will have some questions for you.

Mr Wiseman: Apologies for being a bit late. We were at another inquiry. Having to be in two places at the same time is always fun but that is the status quo. I begin by thanking the committee for the opportunity to come and speak to you today. We are so excited about this as a topic in terms of volunteering and better understanding volunteering. I also extend apologies from our chair, who is based in Cairns and would love to have participated today but due to circumstances could not.

Thank you for the opportunity to address the committee on the vital role of volunteering in Queensland parents and citizens associations. In 2024, with the support of our 58,000 volunteers, P&Cs contributed approximately $75 million and over one million hours volunteered into our state schools. This remarkable effort underscores the importance of a volunteer base which has grown by nine per cent over the last year, which is remarkable.

I will go to our role and the structure of the P&Cs for those who do not know. P&Cs Queensland is the peak body representing over 900,000 state school parents through our network of 1,266 P&C associations. Our unique statutory structure, governed by the Education (General Provisions) Act, enables us to play a crucial role in enriching students' educational experiences. Our volunteers are an integral part of this mission, engaging in activities from fundraising to managing tuckshops, uniform shops and the like. While our volunteer numbers have increased, we have observed a slight reduction in the total number of volunteered hours. At over a million hours, it has actually dropped over the last year or so with the changing ways that people volunteer and the amount of time they actually have. That is an interesting element to what we will be discussing.

The nature of volunteering is changing. To better understand this, we surveyed our P&C presidents about their experiences in volunteering. Our survey revealed that the primary motivation for joining a P&C is supporting their children's education. This is different—and a great point—from other volunteer organisations where it is a direct correlation and a direct vested interest. The biggest barriers to others volunteering were identified as no time and not interested. A significant majority—87 per cent of our presidents—find gaining volunteers harder than retaining them.

In terms of the challenges and recommendations, despite our successes we face challenges in volunteer recruitment, as we all know, and retention. Our survey revealed that gaining volunteers is obviously a lot more difficult than retaining them, with time constraints and lack of interest being significant barriers. To address these issues we recommend: allocated funds for dedicated volunteer coordinators within schools and P&Cs to streamline volunteer management and support; reducing red tape and simplifying departmental processes that make volunteering more appealing and less burdensome—because the actual volunteering process in P&Cs is quite rigorous, given that we are dealing directly with children; digital volunteer management systems including implementing a system for blue card compliance, training, scheduling and enhancing efficiencies within the volunteering aspects; and emergency grant funding providing automatic grants for P&Cs during disasters, such as the floods, cyclones and things we have experienced recently, to support the community services.

In conclusion, our volunteers are the backbone of our P&Cs, significantly contributing to the educational landscape of Queensland. By implementing these recommendations we can ensure a sustainable and thriving volunteer environment that benefits our schools and our communities. P&Cs Queensland remains committed to working with government and stakeholders to enhance the volunteering experience and support our state's educational goals.

One other thing that I would like to say is that P&Cs are generally and often a person's first experience of a volunteering type of role. We believe we can nurture that, which then extends through to other volunteering engagements.

CHAIR: Thank you very much. I turn to the deputy chair.

Mrs NIGHTINGALE: I put on record that I am a life member of two P&Cs. I will not necessarily go easy on you, but it means that I can ask more informed questions. Thank you for your submission. I am interested in the component of it that talks about some kind of financial benefit. I know that it is a very common practice for a lot of organisations involving children, whether it be sporting or kindy, that you can pay $150 or you can volunteer. That is against the constitution that P&Cs have under legislation. What are your recommendations around changing that and what would that look like?

Mr Wiseman: As everyone would know, each P&C is managed under their own constitution and also an accounting manual that provides rigorous and accountable transparency for that. We make the point that a lot of the rules and procedures are very strictly controlled, sometimes prohibitively, to the point where if someone volunteers in a tuckshop then technically you cannot offer that volunteer a lunch. You can say, 'There's lunches over there, but we can't give them to you because that's against the constitution.' There needs to be some rationalisation. We are also involved with the red-tape reduction programs across the department. These are the things where we need to look at—and not only from a P&C perspective—how those rules need to be modernised to allow our P&Cs to run more efficiently and more effectively.

We are seeing our volunteer time change. It used to be that mum or dad would volunteer for the tuckshop all day, but that is no longer the case. They are volunteering for half an hour in the morning or half an hour in the afternoon. There are short timeframes that people are available. That requires a whole lot more management and coordination from a volunteer manager person, which often falls on someone in the P&C as well.

It is about how we change the rules to provide more flexibility in the system and the way things operate. We do not want to go to the extreme where you open yourselves up for other issues to arise or other unintended consequences. It is also about how we enable our volunteers through technology. To join a P&C, you still have to fill out a paper form. We are not in 1988. We need to be modern and some of our practices need to be updated as well. We see part of our volunteer journey being how we help our volunteers, who put up their time and dedicate over a million hours—there are some fantastic people out there—to do their jobs rather than fill out paper forms.

Ms O'Brien: To add to Scott's point, if you are motivated by money rather than volunteering or you want some sort of financial reward, P&Cs are very unique in that we call ourselves the safest set of hands for government funding as opposed to, say, unincorporated or incorporated associations. P&Cs are statutory bodies and it is almost their strength. They are supported by us, obviously, but they have a state-based award. We are very lucky in Queensland, as opposed to every other state. We see this happen in a lot of P&Cs where someone might volunteer to run the disco and they end with a job in the tuckshop that pays really well. Our state-based award pays exceptionally well. For women in particular, it provides accessible employment close to their kids. It is pretty phenomenal that there are 6½ thousand employees in P&C land, along with our 58,000 volunteers. Volunteering is a great pathway to employment in P&C land.

Mr BOOTHMAN: My question goes to the difference between primary schools and high schools. I am curious to know if you are seeing the same thing. In my primary schools the P&Cs are always a lot stronger. They are a lot bigger and a lot more enthusiastic. When you get to high school, if anybody turns up it is wonderful. Do you find that is the case? Do you have any suggestions that might create interest in the high schools?

Mr Wiseman: We certainly see that. It is a very real thing. In primary schools, the parent engagement with their children is a whole lot higher. When your kid gets to high school it is, 'Drop me around the corner, not at school.'

Mr BOOTHMAN: 'You're not cool, Dad.'

Mr Wiseman: Most of the fundraising aspects come from primary school activities, which is where you see colour runs, the Mother's Day and Father's Day stalls and that sort of activity. High school becomes a different kettle of fish where it is more about how it should be running and overseeing the business units of the school. We often debate with the Department of Education whether schools should be running tuckshops or P&Cs. With teacher shortages and the status of education at the moment, all of our parents are saying that we need principals and we need teachers in classrooms teaching, not trying to run a tuckshop or a uniform shop or something like that. We have 75 years of history in running these sorts of things.

Certainly, there is a historic difference there. How we fix that is the million dollar question. We try to provide a lot of support and engagement to make sure that parents stay engaged with the education of their children, because there are five functions of a P&C; it is not just all fundraising. It is about building and fostering interest in education. From all of the research we know that it is six times better for English and 10 times better for mathematics when parents are engaged. The whole engagement thing changes from primary school to high school as well. It is with the age of the children.

Ms O'Brien: Going to Scott's point, it is a bit of a fallacy. We survey our members every year around filling those crucial executive roles. Like most organisations, a P&C has the executive and the general membership. We are seeing consistent rates of 75 per cent of executive roles on every P&C

in Queensland filled first go. You might have three out of the four. That is a pretty strong retention rate compared to what we hear about in other organisations. We fill those roles. Again, being a statutory body rather than an incorporated association, there are a few more rules and regulations that you need to be across.

With the high schools, we are currently working with the department around Scott's point about the business units. What a great way to stay connected to your children. I volunteer for a couple of hours. We are also looking at various community partnerships. We had some previous ones with the eSafety Commissioner and something with the university. I have a nine-year-old so we talk about the disco because that is really exciting and really important to him, but if he was in year 9 I think it is far more important that we partner with TAFE to have those career discussions because we know the nature of volunteering changes but so does the nature of parenting.

CHAIR: That brings to an end our proceedings today. Thank you very much to representatives of P&Cs Queensland. It is good to see you again. Thank you to all who have come before us today. I would like to thank the Hansard reporters, Megan and Tina, as well as Kylie Guthrie, our inquiry secretary, and Zac Dadic, our assistant secretary. The transcript of these proceedings will be available on the parliament's website in due course, as will the video.

The committee adjourned at 12.38 pm.