Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland

Submission No: 83

Submitted by: Southern Downs Steam Railway Association Inc

Publication: Making the submission and your name public

Attachments: See attachment

Submitter Comments:

Submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Volunteering in Queensland

Prepared by:
Southern Downs Steam Railway Association Inc. (SDSR)
Submitted on behalf of our 200 members, 70 of whom are actively involved in operating and managing the heritage steam railway out of Warwick, Queensland, for the past 24 years.
Contact: Kelvin Hutchinson, Chairman
Phone: ██████████
Email: ████████████████

Introduction

The Southern Downs Steam Railway (SDSR) appreciates the opportunity to contribute to this important inquiry into volunteering in Queensland. Our organization is built entirely on the dedication of volunteers, who have committed themselves to preserving Queensland's heritage while significantly benefiting the local community, businesses, and tourism. However, our experience has highlighted several critical challenges that we believe require urgent attention to ensure a thriving volunteering ecosystem. We welcome the chance to participate further and present our case directly to the Committee if required.

Summary of Key Points

- **Regulatory Burdens**:
    - Overwhelming and time-consuming requirements at federal, state, and local levels.
    - Streamline processes and establish a dedicated support office for volunteer compliance.
- **Lack of Financial Support**:
    - Volunteer contributions significantly benefit communities and tourism but lack consistent funding.
    - Increase grant funding and operational financial support for volunteer groups.
- **Insurance Challenges**:
    - Rising insurance costs threaten the viability of volunteer organisations.
    - Propose a government-backed insurance body or subsidies for volunteer group insurance.
- **Recognition of Volunteer Work**:
    - Agreed per-hour volunteer value is often not recognized in funding assessments.
    - Mandate recognition of volunteer hours and introduce incentives for volunteer-driven projects.
- **Barriers to Grants**:
    - Restrictive and burdensome grant processes deter volunteer organisations.
    - Simplify grant applications and reporting requirements, tailoring them to smaller organisations.
- **Government Support**:
    - Need for more effective and centralized government support.
    - Propose volunteer recruitment, training programs, and leadership support initiatives.
- **Diversity and Accessibility**:
    - Address unique challenges for underrepresented groups, remote volunteers, and those with diverse needs.
    - Targeted initiatives and subsidies to improve accessibility.
- **First Nations Volunteering**:
    - Develop culturally appropriate frameworks for First Nations communities.
    - Invest in initiatives aligned with Closing the Gap objectives.
- **Additional Suggestions**:
    - Leverage the Brisbane 2032 Olympic and Paralympic Games to promote volunteering.

- o Celebrate volunteer contributions through recognition campaigns.
- o Foster partnerships between government, private sector, and volunteer organisations.

Key Issues and Recommendations

1. Regulatory Burdens

Issue:

Volunteering organisations face overwhelming and time-consuming regulatory requirements at federal, state, and local levels. The burdens associated with compliance, especially for heritage rail operations, often detract from the core purpose of volunteering.

Recommendations:

- Streamline regulatory processes and provide simplified pathways for compliance for volunteer-run organisations.
- Establish a dedicated government office to support and guide volunteer groups through regulatory requirements.
- Review the role of Fair Trading in regulating not-for-profit organisations, as current conditions are onerous and inhibit their ability to operate effectively.

2. Lack of Financial Support

Issue:

Despite proven benefits to communities, tourism, and local businesses, volunteer organisations struggle to access consistent and meaningful financial support.

Recommendations:

- Increase grant funding availability and make conditions less restrictive, fit-for-purpose, and accessible to volunteer organisations.
- Recognize and financially value volunteer contributions as part of broader economic and community benefit assessments when considering government support.
- Develop mechanisms to provide ongoing operational funding to volunteer groups delivering substantial community benefits.

3. Insurance Challenges

Issue:

Rising insurance costs are a critical issue and threaten the viability of many volunteer organisations. Without intervention, many groups may close in the near future.

Recommendations:

- Establish a government-backed insurance body to support volunteer organisations, especially those deemed substantial and meaningful to their communities.
- Cover costs or provide subsidies or rebates for insurance costs specific to volunteer operations.

4. Recognition of Volunteer Work

Issue:

While governments have agreed to a per-hour value for volunteer work, many departments fail to recognize or utilize this metric when assessing or funding volunteer projects.

Recommendations:

- Mandate recognition of volunteer hours at agreed-upon rates in all government assessments, funding applications, and decision-making processes.
- Introduce incentives for organisations employing volunteers, such as tax exemptions, discounted utilities, or priority access to funding.

5. Barriers to Grants

Issue:

Grant processes are overly restrictive, burdensome, and often not designed to accommodate the unique needs of volunteer groups.

Recommendations:

- Simplify grant applications and reporting requirements, tailoring them to smaller volunteer organisations.
- Increase grant funding pools for organisations delivering measurable community benefits, including heritage and tourism initiatives.

6. Government Support

Issue:

There is a need for more effective and efficient government support for volunteering at all levels.

Recommendations:

- Provide centralized government resources to assist with volunteer recruitment, retention, and training.
- Create programs to support leadership and governance within volunteer organisations.
- Offer training opportunities for volunteers that are fully funded by government schemes.

7. Diversity and Accessibility

Issue:

Certain groups face unique challenges in volunteering, including individuals from diverse backgrounds, age groups, and abilities, as well as those living in remote locations.

Recommendations:

- Develop targeted initiatives to increase volunteer participation among underrepresented groups.
- Provide transport subsidies and technology support for remote volunteers to improve accessibility.

8. First Nations Volunteering

Issue:

First Nations communities often face unique challenges in volunteering, especially in remote areas.

Recommendations:

- Engage First Nations leaders to develop culturally appropriate volunteering frameworks.
- Invest in volunteer initiatives that support Closing the Gap objectives.

Additional Suggestions

- Leverage the Brisbane 2032 Olympic and Paralympic Games as an opportunity to promote and support volunteerism across Queensland.
- Increase recognition campaigns to celebrate and honour volunteer contributions.
- Foster partnerships between government, private enterprise, and volunteer organisations to share resources and expertise.

Conclusion

Volunteers are the backbone of Queensland communities. Organisations like the Southern Downs Steam Railway Assoc Inc. demonstrate the immense value of volunteerism in preserving heritage, boosting tourism, and fostering community spirit. However, without significant changes to reduce barriers and provide appropriate support, many organisations will struggle to survive.

We urge the Committee to consider these recommendations and work toward building a stronger and more sustainable volunteering ecosystem for Queensland. We are more than willing to present further information or participate in hearings to elaborate on our experiences and suggestions.

Kelvin Hutchinson
Chairman
Southern Downs Steam Railway Association Inc.