

## **Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland**

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24 February 2025

Inquiry into Volunteering in Queensland  
Local Government, Small Business and Customer Service Committee  
Cnr of George and Alice Streets,  
Brisbane QLD 4000

Dear Committee members,

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the *Inquiry into Volunteering in Queensland*.

The Foundation for Rural & Regional Renewal - FRRR - (phonetically: F-triple-R) - is the only national foundation specifically focused on ensuring the social and economic wellbeing of remote, rural and regional communities. Established in 2000 with the Australian Government and The Sidney Myer Fund as members, FRRR connects common purposes and funding from government, business and philanthropy with the genuine local needs of rural people and places. FRRR provides funding and capacity building support at the hyper-local level; aligning funding, big and small, to community-led solutions that build resilience and long-term viability and vitality of smaller remote, rural, and regional communities across Australia. Since FRRR's establishment in 2000, FRRR has delivered more than \$200 million to more than 15,000 local projects.

FRRR's vision is for a vibrant, resilient, empowered and sustainable remote, rural and regional Australia, something that can only be achieved with a continued focus on community wellbeing and sustainability.

FRRR is pleased to see that this inquiry seeks to address important questions around the wellbeing of the volunteering sector in Queensland and notes the unique challenges faced by people from diverse backgrounds in partaking in volunteering.

In this submission, FRRR would like to address three of the areas of Inquiry listed in the Terms of Reference (numbered as per the original Terms of Reference), with a specific focus on the challenges and opportunities for volunteering in remote, rural and regional Queensland.

Should you have any questions in relation to our submission, please contact the FRRR team at [info@frrr.org.au](mailto:info@frrr.org.au) or (03) 5430 2399.

Kind Regards

  
Natalie Eggleton  
Chief Executive Officer



### **1. The current state of volunteering in Queensland and the value it contributes, including benefits to volunteers, organisations, communities and the State**

- i. In remote and rural Queensland communities with low populations and limited resources, local volunteers often take on the role of providing services and support to their communities, which would otherwise be difficult to access due to distance or cost. This ranges from healthcare and education to land management and providing public facilities. Despite the challenges for volunteers to provide these vital services for their community, there are significant positive personal benefits from volunteering, ranging from reducing social isolation and loneliness, strengthening relationships and a sense of belonging, to improving mental health and wellbeing. Volunteering can also provide settings for learning new skills and personal growth, opportunities that can otherwise be hard to come by in rural and remote areas where access to education and training can (but shouldn't) be limited.
- ii. FRRR's granting team works with volunteer led and/or run not-for-profit groups (NFPs) across remote, rural and regional (RRR) Queensland and hears first-hand from groups about the challenges being faced. Within Queensland, experiences can differ significantly between locations and organisations. However, we see consistent patterns of volunteer burn-out due to increased demand for services. This demand is often a result of cost-of-living pressures and internal migration from higher-cost metro centres, combined with dwindling volunteer numbers as older generations move on from their voluntary roles. The need for training, particularly in governance and IT, also comes through strongly in the feedback we receive.
- iii. FRRR recognises that the volunteering sector plays an outsized role in RRR communities compared to their metro counterparts. Inefficiencies and market failures common across RRR Australia, including Queensland, mean that communities are forced to get things done themselves to keep their towns alive and thriving.

For many of these communities, volunteering is not a choice; it is a necessity for the effective functioning of the community. As such, reductions in volunteer numbers are magnified in remote RRR communities compared to other parts of Queensland. The challenges of recruiting and retaining volunteers have broader societal impact in RRR Queensland communities. Further to this, the efforts of these volunteers are not always calculated adequately when it comes to assessing the true cost of delivering programs and services, and this can factor into a cycle of resource scarcity that is amplified in RRR communities. But with adequate funding, and appropriate support for volunteers, community organisations and their volunteers can implement critical programs and projects that strengthen both social capital and built infrastructure (broadly building community resilience) in RRR Australia.

They also act as intermediaries to facilitate coordination and cooperation for preparedness between stakeholders, including government agencies, NFPs, business and local communities and important connection to on-ground volunteer activity, systems, and processes.

### **3. The current experiences, motivations and challenges for volunteers and volunteer-involving organisations and their recommendations for addressing challenges and improving the volunteering experience**

- In 2021, FRRR published the findings of our "Heartbeat of Rural Australia" study. This work is still very relevant to the state of the sector. Nationally, the Heartbeat study identified that approximately a third of community organisations had either reduced volunteer hours; lost volunteers altogether to illness, isolation, relocation or caring responsibilities; or lost them due to the effects of COVID driving volunteers away. The organisations that had managed to retain volunteers reported:



- 22% said their volunteers were working more to deal with increased demand (22%), and that they were recruiting or trying to recruit more volunteers (25%);
  - Recruiting volunteers had become more difficult since 2020; and
  - Because there were fewer volunteers, there was more strain on their existing volunteer workforce.
- Our research shows that increasing training opportunities is the most important (non-financial) factor that would support Queensland's volunteer involving organisations. As this quote below illustrates, volunteers - generally those from an older demographic - are feeling pushed into a digital environment that they often do not feel able, nor supported, to navigate.:

“We have a majority of older volunteer committee members who don't use digital technology. We are trying to recruit new younger members who are familiar with the changes that have been brought about by the 'technical' age. It is difficult to attract volunteers of any age these days.”

(Heartbeat of Rural Australia study – QLD respondent)
- FRRR is attempting to help communities address these challenges through our granting and capacity building programs. For example, in partnership with Telstra we are delivering the Connected Communities grants program, which supports digital upskilling across regional communities, where volunteer capacity building is a focus for FRRR. Results from our Investing in Rural Communities Futures program in NSW also show that investing in capacity building for RRR NFPs has significant impact.
- In RRR Queensland, we hear consistently that as well as digital literacy support, NFPs and their volunteer workforces need training in governance and support for succession planning. This need is amplified as older volunteers, who hold a significant portion of governance roles in Queensland, look to leave the sector ([Volunteering Queensland: State of Volunteering in QLD report 2024](#)). At the same time, we are seeing an increasing trend across RRR communities, including in Queensland, where local NFPs are looking to new technologies, such as Starlink, to improve connectivity and expand opportunities for their work, and for their communities. Policies and programs that support RRR NFPs to build capacity and to access new technologies would significantly improve the volunteer experience and outcomes for RRR communities, but currently this is primarily being driven by private philanthropic bodies. Government support for these initiatives would help to speed the pace of roll out and amplify the benefits to the sector.
- Adding to the pressure on RRR volunteer-run NFPs, many rural and remote Local Governments are struggling with financial viability and are unable to maintain vital infrastructure or provide basic services. Over our 25 years of operation, FRRR has observed a nationwide trend of local governments handing responsibility for maintenance and management of community halls, reserves and other community facilities to community committees. This is particularly troubling as local volunteer-based organisations are relying on a dwindling volunteer base to undertake increasing responsibilities of running costs, maintenance and upgrades. For these community committees, there are limited opportunities to secure funding to ensure the spaces are fit for purpose – particularly in the \$25,000 to \$250,000 range. The burden of such upgrades and associated fundraising is putting further pressure on often ageing volunteer committees. If government is to be an effective enabler of healthy RRR community life, there is a pressing need to reduce obstacles to ensure volunteering and participating in governance roles are easier, not harder.

**4. The unique challenges experienced by people from diverse backgrounds, genders, age groups, abilities and locations, and opportunities to improve volunteering participation, accessibility and experience for these groups**



- FRRR recognises that while volunteering is a keenly needed community service, it is also an activity that can be limited to those with the privilege of available time for unpaid work. Volunteering provides significant benefit for the community, but also infers a sense of belonging, companionship and wellbeing on individuals. A factor exacerbating this divide between those who volunteer and those who don't is that barriers to volunteering often fall along the lines of existing societal inequities: aside from time, in Queensland the biggest barriers to volunteering reported in 2024 included costs and health. Providing wrap around supports for volunteers could expand the opportunity to a wider group of people e.g. funding childcare, transportation/fuel vouchers.
- These barriers, along with other existing market failures, are often amplified in RRR communities. For example, declining investment in infrastructure and public services (for example, public transport or health services) combined with significant distances in RRR communities are barriers for some to participate in volunteer activities. Reversing the declining investment in physical infrastructure and provision of essential publicly funded services in RRR communities would reduce barriers associated with these market failures.
- FRRR's work in RRR communities in NSW has shown that fairly compensating key co-ordination or managerial roles within NFPs provides significant flow on benefits. These benefits include, making the roles of volunteers more manageable and sustainable, attracting a greater number and diversity of volunteers to the organisation, improving how the organisation works with other service providers and the services they provide to communities. FRRR also strongly supports the compensation of volunteers who are being asked to provide their expertise or lived experience (for example through panels).
- There are numerous existing barriers to engaging younger volunteers in RRR communities. Young people in RRR areas are often forced to look to larger centres for further education, careers and life experiences. This uprooting can be countered through volunteering, as it provides a sense of belonging and wellbeing, strengthening ties to place and potentially anchoring youth more deeply to their RRR communities as they explore a broader range of possibilities offered in the community sector.
- Through FRRR's deep community capacity building work, we have also seen a need to invest in closing the generational knowledge gap and to create spaces for listening and connection between older generations of volunteers and the next generation of community leaders. Multiple barriers will need to be overcome for young people to take up existing volunteer opportunities and structures in greater numbers than they currently do - from addressing basic logistical barriers like flexibility to creating more appealing options for younger people in communities. An opportunity exists for Government to support existing volunteer-led organisations to engage the next generation in co-designing what a thriving volunteer sector might look like in their community and RRR Queensland more broadly.
- When younger people are actively engaged in NFP volunteer roles, their impact can be transformative:  
"We lost a few of our older volunteers that chose to retire when the demands and uncertainty around COVID happened. However, we have found this has meant some younger members, who frankly found it difficult to have their voices heard, have come forward to replace them and this has led to the committee thinking differently about how things can/should be done. For a maverick like me - this is a welcome change."  
(Heartbeat of Rural Australia study – QLD respondent)





- Younger people in Queensland often volunteer their technical skills in their roles, providing a significant opportunity in a sector that is struggling to stay abreast of this decade's rapidly changing digital environment. Government policy that engages RRR youth in community service at a younger age (the very demographic that has least awareness of volunteering opportunities) through the education sector has the potential to support the wellbeing of not just the sector, but RRR communities more generally. Educational opportunities that make volunteering accessible, relatable, provide recognition and showcase the opportunities that volunteerism can provide will be more likely to engage younger cohorts.
- Understanding, supporting and promoting new and more flexible models of volunteering such as virtual /online volunteering and on demand/episodic volunteering across Queensland will help attract a new cohort of volunteers that may be highly skilled but time poor, or do not have the resources or energy to commit to longer-term or more regular volunteer roles.
- A 2023 report on barriers to volunteering commissioned by all Australian volunteering peak bodies ([Barriers to Volunteering : National Knowledge Base](#)) identified several key areas that could help revitalise volunteering in Queensland through improving access and inclusion for First Nations peoples, people with disability, and newly arrived migrants. Educating and resourcing the volunteer sector to provide cultural safety and co-design opportunities, and reducing barriers through eliminating unnecessary paperwork, reimbursing volunteer costs and providing appropriate training would help to open the door to volunteering for community members from diverse backgrounds.