

Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland

Submission No:	291
Submitted by:	Toowoomba Regional Council
Publication:	Making the submission and your name public
Attachments:	See attachment
Submitter Comments:	



Inquiry into Volunteering in Queensland

21 February 2025

Submission on behalf of
Toowoomba Regional Council



Authors: Margot Ross & Rory Attleigh

Email: [REDACTED]

Phone: [REDACTED]

Authorisation: Darryl Bates, Manager Community Development, Facilities & Tourism

Acknowledgement of Country: Toowoomba Regional Council acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the Toowoomba Region whose song lines traverse these lands and pay our respect to Elders past, present and emerging, for they hold the knowledge, rich traditions and bold ambitions of Australia's First Peoples.

Introduction

Volunteering plays a crucial role in sustaining the social, economic, and cultural fabrics of the Toowoomba Region. As a regional local government, Toowoomba Regional Council (TRC or 'Council') relies on the expertise and dedication of over 600 active volunteers across a range of internal program areas, from event support and visitor information to library and cultural services.

Despite the clear benefits of volunteering, TRC, like many other regional councils, faces challenges in supporting a thriving volunteer sector. Volunteer recruitment in regional townships remains a persistent challenge in the post-COVID era, and while local volunteers are strongly motivated by civic duty and social connections, factors such as changing demographics, time constraints, financial costs, and a complex risk environment are placing increasing strain on volunteers and volunteer-involving organisations. These challenges reflect statewide trends reported by Volunteering Queensland.

This submission provides a local government perspective on formal volunteering, with a focus on the realities faced by regional councils. It draws on insights from volunteer program supervisors, TRC's Annual Volunteer Survey, and commissioned research conducted by the University of Southern Queensland.

TRC thanks the Queensland Government for undertaking this Parliamentary Inquiry into Volunteering at a critical time, and hopes the findings will ensure volunteering remains a sustainable and valued pillar of community life in regional Queensland.

Value and benefits of volunteering

As a regional council, TRC is responsible for a broad range of local government functions, including the provision of community infrastructure, facilities, and services. Volunteers play an essential role in supporting this work, and TRC is among the local governments in Queensland that take an active role in directly managing volunteer programs. Alongside a workforce of 1,602 paid staff in 2023/24, TRC engages over 600 active volunteers in formal roles across the Toowoomba Region.

TRC volunteers are engaged in both regular and episodic roles across dozens of internal program areas. Many provide support in bushland parks, nurseries, historical sites, visitor information centres, libraries, and art galleries. Others serve on local Australia Day and ANZAC Day working groups, expert advisory committees, or as Regional Youth Leaders. Volunteers are especially vital to the Toowoomba Carnival of Flowers, an event which attracts hundreds of thousands of visitors each year and delivers significant social and economic benefits to the region.

The contributions of TRC volunteers—which last financial year totalled an estimated 24,439 volunteer hours—equated to nearly \$1.4 million¹ in economic value in 2023/24. Their true impact extends far beyond financial figures, however. Volunteers foster community connection, sustain the region's social, cultural, and ecological heritage, and enhance local services, programs, and events.

¹ Based on the replacement cost of a volunteer for the May 2024 reference period following Assoc. Prof. Lisel O'Dwyer's methodology for calculating a dollar value figure for volunteering. More information available online: <https://vsant.org.au/value-of-volunteering/>

Toowoomba Regional Council – Volunteer program areas in 2024

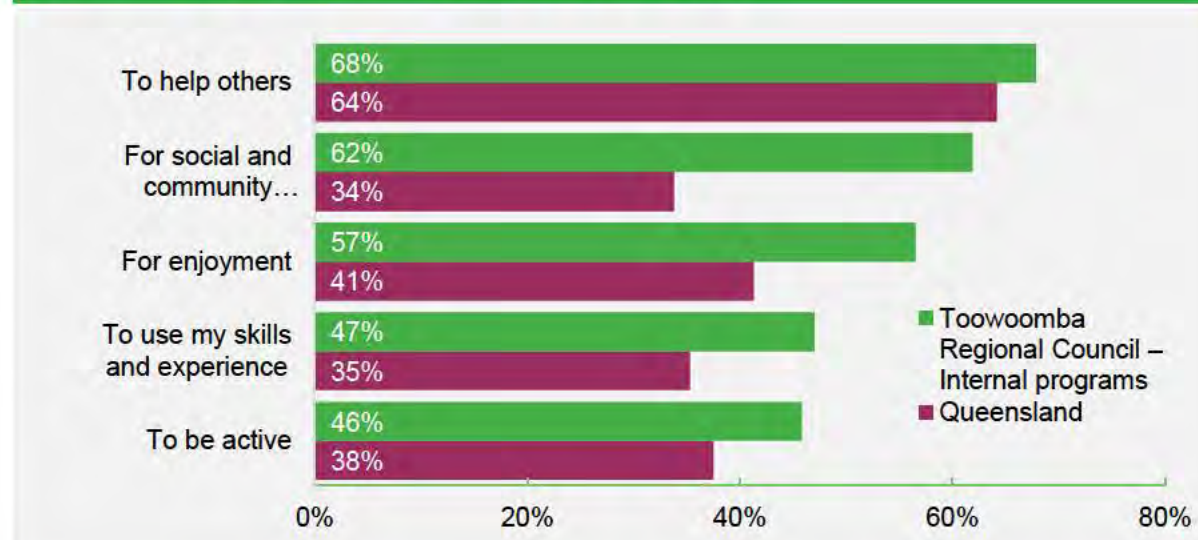
- Advisory Committees
- ANZAC Day Working Groups
- Australia Day Working Groups
- Crows Nest Community Nursery
- Crows Nest Gallery
- Drayton & Toowoomba Cemetery
- Franke Scrub Bushcare
- Hampton Visitor Information Centre
- Highfields Library
- Jondaryan Woolshed
- Millmerran Community Support Service
- Millmerran Community Volunteers
- Millmerran Library
- Pittsworth Pioneer Village
- Regional Youth Leaders
- Rosalie Gallery
- Toowoomba Carnival of Flowers
- Toowoomba City Home Library Service
- Toowoomba Regional Art Gallery
- Toowoomba Visitor Information Centre

In many cases, volunteer involvement is crucial to the continued operation of specific work areas. Council-operated visitor information centres, for example, would struggle to function without the contributions of volunteers. Other services are wholly contingent on volunteer labour, such as the operation of Toowoomba's Home Library Service and the Crows Nest Community Nursery.

Beyond sustaining these program areas, volunteers also bring energy, expertise, networks, and local knowledge that complement the work of paid staff. In regional townships, the social capital and direct connections to community that volunteers bring are extremely valuable. Their contributions broaden TRC's reach and ensure community needs are addressed with greater care and responsiveness.

Research by Volunteering Queensland² underscores the significant civic and individual wellbeing benefits associated with volunteering, including improved mental health, stronger social connections, and a greater sense of purpose. These findings closely align with TRC's Annual Volunteer Survey, which shows that local volunteers are primarily motivated by a desire to help others, a deep sense of civic duty, and social enrichment.

Top motivations for volunteering at local and state levels



² Volunteering Queensland. (2024). *State of Volunteering in Queensland 2024: Report*. <https://volunteeringqld.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/State-of-Volunteering-in-Queensland-2024-Report.pdf>

This emphasis on service, altruism, and personal fulfillment reflects the substantial social returns on investment in volunteering, as well as the subtle factors influencing rates of participation in regional areas. Volunteering often serves a dual function in regional communities, not only in sustaining local groups, programs, and services but in fostering resilience and alleviating the effects of social isolation.

Case study: Toowoomba Carnival of Flowers

The award-winning Toowoomba Carnival of Flowers has grown into a nationally celebrated event, and its month-long program of renowned horticultural displays, arts, culture, and live performances is a showcase of the Toowoomba Region's heritage and economic vitality. In 2024, Carnival's 75th anniversary attracted over 470,000 attendees, generating \$29.4 million in direct and incremental spending in Queensland.

The success of Carnival would be impossible without the passion and commitment of TRC's volunteers, with some having contributed in various roles for decades. Each year, volunteers warmly welcome visitors at Carnival info hubs, support the operation of the Festival of Food & Wine, and manage the flow of guests during the iconic Floral Parade. They scan tickets, sell merchandise, run activities, lead bus tours, perform letterbox drops, and assist with setup and pack-downs. It is an especially busy time for the 70 volunteers who provide friendly faces and frontline services at the Toowoomba and Hampton Visitor Information Centres, which TRC operates year-round to assist the public with a wealth of local knowledge on the region's history and attractions.

Overall, 150 TRC volunteers dedicated 1,370 hours to Carnival operations in 2024, with their efforts complemented by more than 2,000 volunteers from community groups and local businesses. The scale of this volunteer involvement underscores the essential role volunteers play in delivering an event of this magnitude. This collective spirit of volunteering not only enhances the festival experience but also fosters an atmosphere of community pride and belonging throughout the Toowoomba Region.

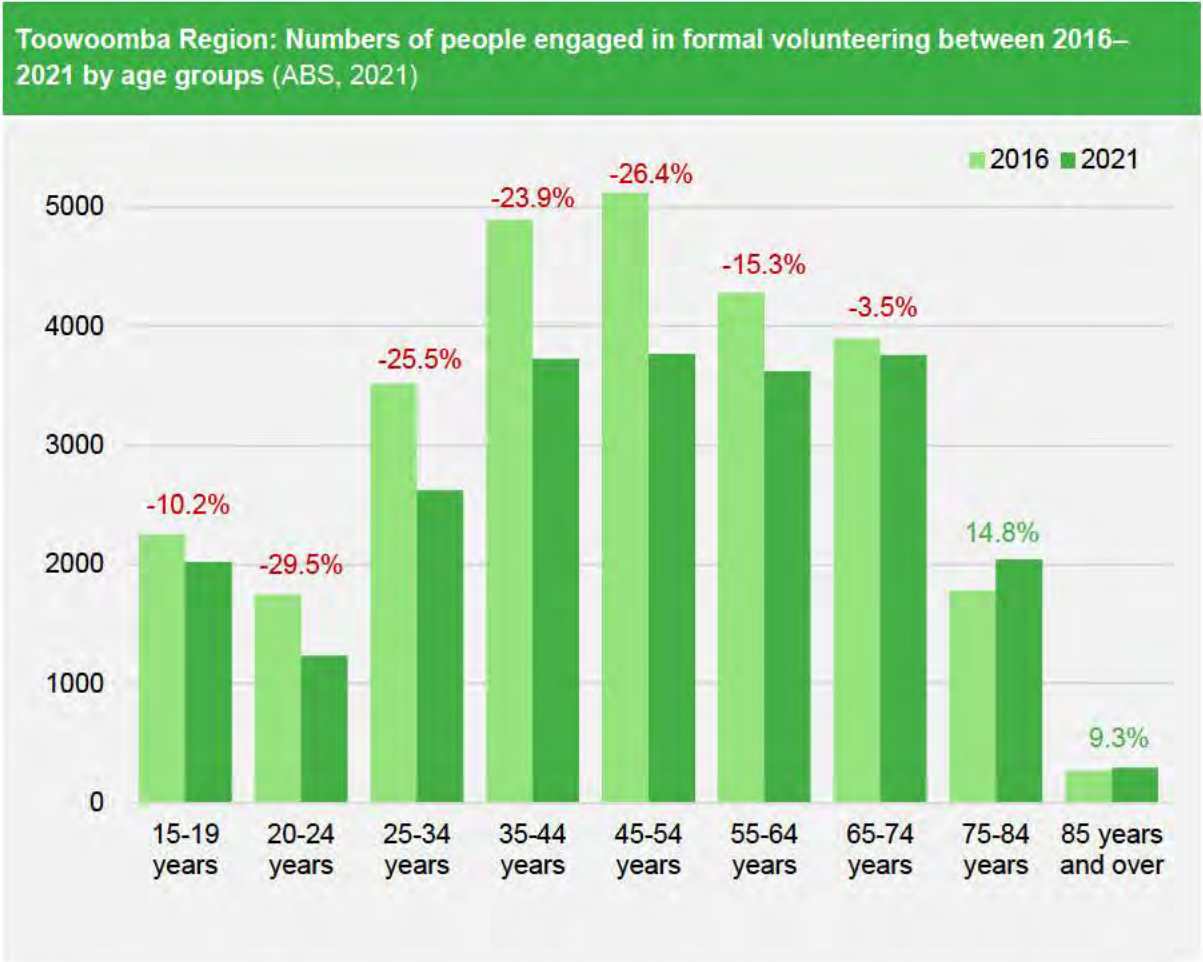
Current trends in volunteering

As the Parliamentary Committee is no doubt aware, the volunteering landscape has seen significant shifts in recent years, influenced by changing demographics, the lasting effects of COVID-19, and increasing constraints on volunteers' time and resources.

Across Queensland, formal volunteering has declined, with fewer community members committing to long-term, structured roles. According to 2021 Census data³, the rate of formal volunteering across Queensland fell from 18.8% in 2016 to 14.1% in 2021—a 17.3% decrease in total volunteer numbers. This trend reflects broader societal shifts, with many volunteers now preferring short-term or flexible engagements which better align with changing work patterns, lifestyle choices, and personal commitments.

³ Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2021). *Queensland: 2021 Census – All Persons QuickStats*. <https://www.abs.gov.au/census/find-census-data/quickstats/2021/3>

In the Toowoomba Region, volunteering remains deeply embedded in community life, with strong civic participation and social ties continuing to drive engagement. However, local trends echo the statewide decline, with Census data showing a drop in formal volunteering rates from 21.7% in 2016 to 16.6% in 2021, representing a 16.8% decrease in total volunteer numbers. The decline has been most pronounced among younger, working-age cohorts, but even those approaching retirement age are volunteering at lower rates.



From TRC’s perspective, these local trends have persisted in the years since the last Census. The impacts of this decline are felt most acutely in regional and rural townships, where volunteer availability is diminishing and reliance on older volunteers is increasing. This phenomenon is common both to Council-operated programs and community groups, with community-led organisations under the greatest pressure. As fewer younger and working-age people step in to replace retirees, long-running volunteer-involving programs, groups, clubs, committees, and associations—many of which depend on specialist knowledge and ongoing commitment—are facing growing sustainability concerns.

The demographics of TRC’s internal volunteer workforce reflect these trends. According to responses to TRC’s Annual Volunteer Survey:

Age	TRC volunteers tend to be older, with 41% of respondents aged 65–74, 22% aged 75 and older, 19% aged 55–64, and the remaining 18% under 55.
Sex	Women represent the majority (71%) of respondents.

Location	Most respondents (61%) reside in Toowoomba City, with the remainder based in surrounding regional townships.
Employment	The majority are retirees (61%), followed by part-time or casual workers (20%), full-time workers (13%), homemakers and caregivers (9%), and students (9%).
Volunteering	A significant proportion (59%) also volunteer with other community organisations in addition to their roles with TRC. Most (55%) intend to volunteer the same amount of time within the next three years.

As patterns of volunteer engagement shift, TRC and other regional councils must adapt to ensure volunteer programs remain sustainable, accessible, and well-supported. The following section explores the key challenges and barriers affecting volunteering.

Challenges in volunteering

The challenges facing local volunteers and volunteer-involving organisations are linked to the broader set of social, economic, and organisational pressures affecting the region. Many of these issues are structural and interrelated, making it difficult to fully disentangle their impact on formal volunteering. As such, this section seeks to briefly summarise the key barriers, challenges, and drivers of change identified by TRC's volunteers and program supervisors. Addressing these issues requires a coordinated approach across all levels of government, business, and the community to ensure the long-term sustainability of volunteer engagement.

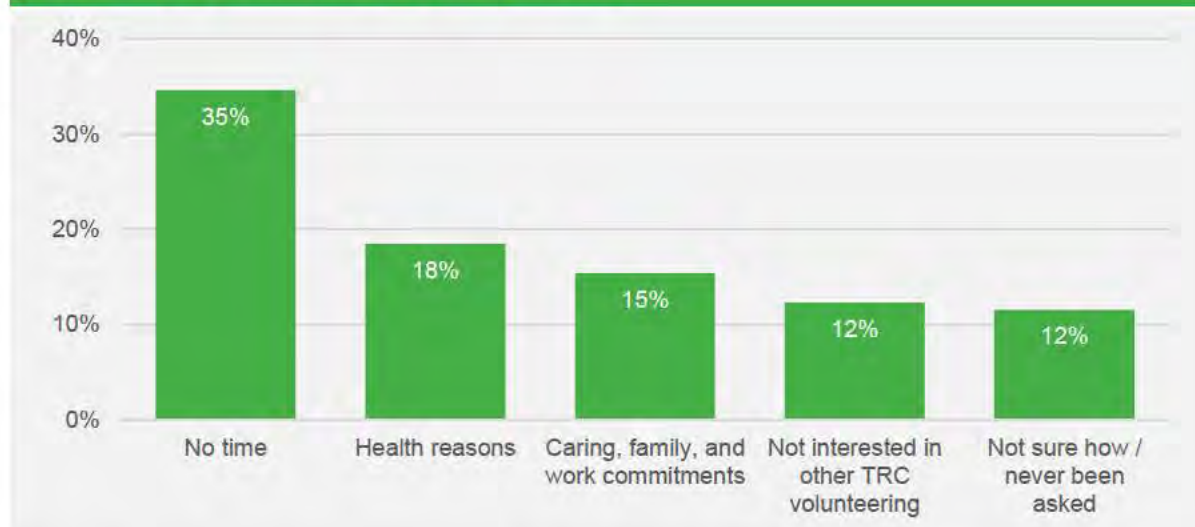
Changing social and economic conditions

From TRC's perspective, several broader societal shifts have contributed to the local decline in formal volunteering. In the long aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, many working-age individuals and families are now struggling with greater time pressures, rising living costs, and increased caregiving responsibilities, leaving little time or energy for volunteering. Burnout, illness, and mental health concerns are becoming more prevalent, particularly among households managing multiple competing commitments.

At the same time, older community members—who have traditionally formed the backbone of the volunteer workforce—are now working later into life, reducing their availability for volunteer work. Young people face a different set of challenges, including limited youth-focused volunteer opportunities, geographic isolation, and transport barriers for those in regional townships. Even those young people who are actively engaged in their communities often struggle to balance the demands of study, work, and time with family and friends, making it difficult for them to volunteer. Meanwhile, a growing number of young people are becoming increasingly isolated, disengaged, and disconnected from community life.

Findings from TRC's Annual Volunteer Survey are consistent with these observations. When surveyed on the top barriers affecting internal volunteers' ability to engage with TRC's programs, the most frequently cited challenges included time constraints, health reasons, and family, care, and work commitments. The direct costs of volunteering have also become a growing concern, particularly for volunteers travelling to regional work sites.

Top barriers to volunteering for TRC volunteers



For small community groups, clubs, committees, and associations, the difficulties of declining membership are compounded by rising operating costs and compliance requirements. Many of these organisations rely on grants to fund their activities and are ill-equipped to absorb increasing expenses related to utilities, maintenance, and insurance. These costs have become prohibitive for many such organisations, and in some cases, TRC has absorbed community groups under its governance structures to provide them public liability cover. Unfortunately, this approach tends to introduce additional complexity, risks, and compliance burdens for both parties.

In other cases, TRC has assumed a community development role, providing advice, resources, and links to support the governance capacity and succession planning of stressed community groups. These efforts remain ongoing. Speaking broadly, the combined impact of rising costs, compliance, and concerns about risk management and litigation have placed strain on community-based initiatives at all levels, including regional sporting clubs, events, and outreach programs.

As highlighted by the University of Southern Queensland⁴, these changing social and economic conditions are coinciding with a significant cultural shift in patterns of formal volunteering. There is a growing preference among potential volunteers for short-term, flexible, and self-oriented opportunities, and many individuals seek engagement that aligns with personal interests and affiliations rather than long-term, structured roles. While this shift has created new avenues for participation, it has also posed challenges for organisations that depend on stable, ongoing volunteer commitments to sustain their services and programs.

Challenges of the local government context

Although TRC's remit and sphere of influence in the volunteering sector are limited, the organisation plays an active role in supporting volunteering—both by directly managing volunteer programs and supporting community initiatives through grants, sponsorships, and partnership arrangements. TRC is expected by local communities to provide leadership in this space, but this role comes with significant challenges. Like all local governments, TRC faces financial constraints which impact its ability to initiate and expand volunteer programs. Volunteering is fundamentally a cross-sector workforce issue, and as more responsibilities are devolved to local government, there is a growing awareness that more strategic coordination is necessary.

⁴ Hickey, A. (2024). *Toowoomba Regional Council Volunteer Climate Analysis*. Toowoomba: University of Southern Queensland.

One of the most significant barriers to local government-led volunteering is the risk environment and regulatory landscape. TRC's volunteer programs are subject to Council governance processes and public sector accountability, compliance, and risk management frameworks. As a consequence, developing, funding, and coordinating Council-operated volunteer programs is a complex, bureaucratic, and resource-intensive task, where risk mitigation is prioritised in organisational thinking. TRC's high public profile and its duty of care to volunteers and the community means that internal volunteer programs are, as a rule, carefully structured, which often limits the flexibility that is otherwise seen in private sector and community-led volunteer initiatives. Balancing organisational risk and duty of care with the benefits of volunteering remains a continuous challenge for TRC.

That said, TRC's stability and role as a local government has also afforded it a unique position to maintain volunteer programs which explicitly promote community wellbeing and public benefit. A key example can be found in TRC's Youth Leaders Program⁵, which seeks to represent best practice youth engagement in local government. At its core, a program of this nature requires robust risk management, including screening and ongoing safeguarding. Yet, through continued commitment and investment, TRC has developed an exceptionally successful youth development program which has provided hundreds of young people with opportunities to connect, learn, and grow as active, engaged community members. The positive social impacts of the Youth Leaders Program illustrate how local governments, despite the constraints they face, can excel in volunteer program innovation.

Volunteer management challenges

Within this local government context, TRC's volunteer program supervisors are facing several challenges in recruiting, managing, and retaining volunteers. These challenges primarily relate to:

- **Resource limitations.** Volunteer management is complex, intensive, and increasingly professionalised work. The time required to develop and coordinate volunteer programs is difficult to resource, as most supervisors must balance volunteer management alongside service delivery functions and other core business. This leaves little time to implement best practice approaches within their program areas, and tends to create a silo effect, duplication, and ad hoc volunteer management strategies.
- **Workforce turnover.** High staff turnover has led to additional pressures and loss of institutional knowledge in some program areas, and significant investment is required to develop new staff in volunteer management, program administration, and Council frameworks.
- **Integration challenges.** TRC recognises the value of volunteers. However, internal operational planning, policies, and procedures remain primarily designed for a paid workforce. As a result, volunteering is often not fully integrated into service models, budgets, or workforce planning—one example being the absence of travel reimbursements for volunteers. This is relevant across the public sector and raises broader questions as to the role of volunteering within government service delivery models.
- **Inclusive programs.** While TRC actively seeks to foster inclusive communities, most internal volunteer roles require specialised skills, experience, or a high degree of independence. For inclusion-focused volunteer programs to be effective, inclusivity must be embedded into their design, objectives, and resourcing.

⁵ Toowoomba Regional Council. (2024). *Engaged & Active: Final Report – Toowoomba Regional Council Youth Strategy 2019-2021*. <https://www.tr.qld.gov.au/community-business/community-support/youth/16317-youth-strategy-2025-2030>

- **Regional recruitment.** As previously noted, recruiting new volunteers for regionally based programs has proven increasingly difficult as many regional townships contend with ageing populations and declining participation from working-age cohorts.

Despite the overall decline in local volunteer participation, it should be noted that TRC continues to receive a steady influx of expressions of interest from prospective volunteers in Toowoomba's urban centre. However, most Council-managed programs in Toowoomba are already operating at full capacity, which limits TRC's ability to match interested volunteers with suitable roles. This imbalance between volunteer availability in Toowoomba and regional townships presents both a challenge and an opportunity to expand and adapt existing programs to better distribute volunteer contributions across the region.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1

Invest in regional community centres as hubs for volunteering and community development.

Volunteering Queensland has previously recommended that a statewide network of regional Volunteer Resource Centres be established to support volunteering in regional communities.⁶ TRC supports this vision but recommends a broader, more integrated approach that aligns with the Queensland Communities 2032 Strategy⁷. The pressures affecting regional communities—such as distance, social isolation, economic hardship, and service access gaps—are deeply interconnected with the challenges facing formal volunteering.

TRC recommends a significant, long-term investment in regional community and neighbourhood centres, recognising them as essential social infrastructure that can revitalise volunteering and strengthen community resilience. While recent funding increases by the Queensland Government are welcome, further investment is needed to address long-standing underfunding and fully realise the potential of these centres.

This investment should focus strategically on expanding community centres' role as hubs for volunteering, social connection, community programs, service partnerships and outreach, and skill development. Community centres are well-placed to serve as sites for capacity-building, shared spaces, pooled resources (e.g., vehicles and equipment), and volunteer networks on standby to support local community groups and other initiatives. The most crucial element of this investment, however, lies in embedding coordinators, community development practitioners, and dedicated volunteer managers.

By embedding these positions and providing flexible funding contracts, community centres can be positioned as long-term solutions for strengthening the social infrastructure of regional communities. Local governments, as key partners in supporting these services, should be actively involved in funding discussions to ensure alignment with regional priorities.

⁶ Volunteering Queensland. (2024). *Volunteering Queensland: 2024 State Election Priorities*. <https://volunteeringqld.org.au/resources/2024-state-election-priorities/>

⁷ The State of Queensland, Department of Communities, Housing and Digital Economy. (2022). *Communities 2032*. <https://www.tatsipca.qld.gov.au/media/documents/our-work/community-support/communities-2032/communities-2032-strategy/strategy-report.pdf>

Recommendation 2

Fund LGAQ to strengthen local government-led volunteering.

TRC is among the local governments in Queensland that take an active role in volunteer engagement, and this experience has shown that councils are well-positioned to maintain volunteer programs which align with community need and public benefit. However, as community expectations continue to grow, many councils lack the financial resources to initiate or expand volunteer programs, or to implement best practice volunteer management frameworks.

To strengthen local government-led volunteering, TRC recommends dedicated funding for the Local Government Association of Queensland (LGAQ) to expand its role in supporting council-developed volunteer management frameworks. This investment should include funding for key positions within LGAQ to reduce duplication across the sector, support councils to meet the National Standards for Volunteer Involvement⁸, and develop local government-oriented resources, such as templates for policies or memorandums of understanding (MOUs). It would also enable LGAQ to work with councils to address integration challenges while delivering advisory, coordination, and sector development functions.

Enhancing LGAQ's capacity to provide sector-wide support would stimulate volunteer participation, improve program consistency, and ensure local governments have the resources they need to effectively manage volunteers across Queensland.

Recommendation 3

Scope incentives for workplace and corporate volunteering.

Workplace volunteering—including corporate volunteering—offers a practical solution to declines in volunteering amongst working-age people, enabling employees to contribute to their communities without sacrificing income or personal time. However, many businesses, particular SMEs, lack the resources to establish structured workplace volunteering programs. TRC recommends the Queensland Government consult with the Commonwealth, states, territories, and relevant peak bodies to scope the feasibility of incentives to encourage workplace volunteering, with a view to enabling the involvement of businesses of different sizes whilst ensuring the probity of incentives.

Incentives within the Queensland Government's remit could include partnerships with peak bodies to provide businesses training opportunities in adopting workplace volunteer programs, grant funding to support program implementation, or public recognition through state-sponsored awards or accreditation. Given the Queensland Government's limited taxation levers over business, TRC also recommends engagement with the Commonwealth and other stakeholders to explore the feasibility of tax incentives, such as deductions or credits for businesses that actively support workplace volunteering. However, any tax incentives would need to be carefully designed to prevent rorting and maximise genuine community benefit.

As Volunteering Australia points out⁹, workplace volunteering benefits businesses, employees, and communities alike. It improves job satisfaction, strengthens workplace culture, and enhances corporate reputation, all while delivering support, expertise, and skills to volunteer-involving organisations. Investing in workplace volunteering, particularly in regional areas, is likely to stimulate social and economic benefits while addressing declining volunteer participation.

⁸ Volunteering Australia. (2023). *National Standards for Volunteer Involvement*.
<https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/nationalstandards/>

⁹ Volunteering Australia. (2025). *Corporate Volunteering*.
<https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/resources/corporate-volunteering/>

Recommendation 4

Build an evidence base for regenerating cultures of volunteering.

Volunteering plays a critical role in supporting the social, economic, and cultural fabrics of regional communities, and yet rates of formal participation—particularly among young people—are in sharp decline. Although barriers to engagement are well-documented, there is limited contemporary research into how to regenerate cultures of volunteering amidst evolving social, economic, and organisational pressures.

TRC recommends a targeted research investment by the Queensland Government to identify the root cause drivers of declining participation, particularly among young people. This research should evaluate best practice models for promoting cultures of lifelong volunteering through education, employment, and community pathways, with a strategic view to supporting community-led solutions across Queensland. Potential models include intergenerational mentoring, youth development or leadership programs, school-based volunteering (including formal qualifications in active volunteering), transition to employment initiatives, and micro-skilling or credentialing programs.

Recommendation 5

Support the development of a national volunteer passport.

TRC supports Volunteering Australia's recommendation¹⁰ for a national volunteer passport as a practical reform to increase volunteer mobility, reduce administrative burdens, and improve efficiency in volunteer management. Given the growing compliance requirements placed on volunteer-involving organisations, the case for a digital volunteer passport is now very strong.

Under Queensland Work Health and Safety (WHS) laws, volunteers are classed as workers, and as such, volunteer-involving organisations are responsible for ensuring they receive appropriate screening, instruction, training, and supervision. While these safeguards are essential, they frequently lead to duplication for volunteers engaged with multiple organisations, requiring them to repeat onboarding and training processes. Similarly, police clearances and working with children checks are not always portable between jurisdictions, which creates further duplication and barriers to volunteer mobility.

A national volunteer passport should be developed through consultation between the Commonwealth, states, territories, peak bodies, and the volunteering sector to ensure it is fit for purpose and integrates effectively with existing platforms. TRC also recommends local government involvement in shaping the system, as many councils operate volunteer programs that include standardised inductions and compliance processes. With the involvement of LGAQ, the passport could enable core induction modules while allowing site-specific training to be added as needed by councils and other organisations.

As outlined by Volunteering Australia, the national volunteer passport project should include an online portal and mobile app, and establish an onshore database where volunteers can store and manage their worker checks, qualifications, emergency contacts, and other relevant information. Such a system should remain strictly opt-in, maintain users' privacy and security, and contain integrity mechanisms to prevent abuse. By adopting such a system, Queensland could play a leading role in creating a more efficient, flexible, and accessible volunteering ecosystem.

¹⁰ Volunteering Australia. (2025). *Pre-Budget Submission 2025-26*.

<https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/download/275/2025/54913/pre-budget-submission-2025-26.pdf>