

Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland

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Mr James Lister MP
Chair
Local Government, Small Business and
Customer Service Committee
Inquiry into Volunteering in Queensland

Dear Mr Lister, *James*

Volunteering could not be more important to the successful social and economic wellbeing of our communities and broader Queensland.

The donation of time, expertise and skills touches every part of Queensland society from health and aged care, public safety, welfare, environmental issues, advocacy and so many more with volunteer organisations numbering nearly 400 in the Noosa electorate alone. Last year Volunteering Queensland estimated that the economic value of volunteering in Queensland was over \$117 billion in the 2022-23 financial year¹. Our communities, as well as government, are heavily reliant on volunteers and volunteer organisations, and we simply would not have our modern Queensland society without them.

Over the last decade we have seen a decrease in volunteering numbers, especially after COVID, and we have as a community worked to reverse this trend, whether through the callouts from individual organisations, or to providing grants from our office for fuel vouchers for existing volunteers during our cost of living challenges to prevent further losses. We must be doing everything we can to recruit, encourage and support our volunteers in the irreplaceable work they do for the betterment of us all.

In discussing the issues faced by volunteer organisations and volunteers in our electorate over the years, as well as this year, they raised a number of contributors to a decrease in numbers as below.

1. The recruitment and retention of volunteers – with societal changes including the volume of commitments that households now have, the diversity of volunteering options, as well as retirees immersed in travel, residents are more inclined to volunteer to a short term project or

¹ State of Volunteering in Queensland 2024 Report, Volunteering Queensland, p4.



campaign with a dedicated focus and time frame rather than longer term and generic endeavours.

It is important for government to encourage and facilitate Queenslanders to volunteer and commit to volunteering. Government could assist this by reducing the 'friction' that is also being experienced by funding additional training and resources such as Volunteer Resource Centres. Also make funding available to volunteer organisations to assist them with a nominal volunteer payment to help cover costs such as transport and food, and ensure volunteers are protected through a government supported state-wide community volunteer insurance program.

2. Volume and diversity of volunteer organisations - compared to previous decades, the volume of not-for-profit organisations, events and groups has expanded exponentially. Within the Noosa electorate as noted previously, we have nearly 400 organisations, multiple events both small and major, as well project or issue groups all vying for volunteers whereas decades ago key service organisations would 'co-ordinate' endeavours and resources direct. Again, governments can assist by the provision of resources including updated lists of organisations and what they do, to avoid replication of efforts and more effective use of resources including available volunteers.

3. Governance and management structures - for volunteers that sit within larger professional organisations such as in the disaster management area whether that be fire, SES, or marine rescue, the structures, governance, and interaction between the levels are crucial. This has been highlighted through the ongoing concerns raised by volunteers of the Rural Fire Service when legislation made significant changes that they opposed, and continue to seek be remedied. It is vital for government to demonstrate that volunteers are listened to, and that any concerns are addressed.

4. Rules, mandates, qualifications and administration – an increase in requirements for both volunteers and their organisations has become onerous, leading to less time being available to actually do what they donated their time to do, whether that be coaching or saving lives. Endless 'paperwork', lengthy processes and changing legislation have become a nemesis to volunteerism, with examples such as training that cannot be taken locally or online, Blue Card requirements, qualification renewals and onboarding paperwork all cited as reasons to leave volunteer positions.

5. Culture – The pressures on organisations both legislatively and financially can lead to a culture non-conducive to volunteer retention. One example was raised by a volunteer of 16 years who submitted the organisation had never asked him, or those around him, why they volunteered in the first place, why they left, nor reviewed the reasons when they were offered. A suggestion to address this was made during the creation of Marine Rescue Queensland – that a volunteer charter be embedded in legislation for the organisation setting a range of principles relating to the rights and responsibilities that apply to volunteers. This would ensure the unique perspective of unpaid 'staff' and how it differs to paid staff is taken into account. Of course such a charter would need to be more than just a statement and be built into how the organisation operates.

For organisations that do not have a structure where there is paid employees or higher entities, the culture can be impacted by the behaviour of committee, board members or other volunteers, with reports ranging from bullying to sexual harassment, poor governance to financial mismanagement. This would be assisted by entities such as the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission or the Office of Fair Trading having greater resources to ensure constitutions cover modern volunteerism matters including conflict resolution, and that there is a pathway for complaints and counselling for this.

6. Costs of volunteering – For many, increases in living costs have led to an inability to donate, whether that be funds or time. Many volunteers are using their own car and phones to fulfill their roles, of assistance would be fuel vouchers and contributions for mobile plans.

The above is just a sample of the reasons provided by volunteers and organisations as to the contributors to decreasing volunteerism, which have been raised in various realms over at least the last decade.

There has also been many suggestions on how to increase volunteerism, such as tax relief for low to mid income levels, through to a 'stipend' from government via the organisation annually for hours contributed.

Given the enormous contributions of volunteers which annually is in the billions of dollars, all avenues to increase and retain these invaluable members of our communities must be considered, and an essential investment for our future.

Thank you in advance for the work on the committee, and if you have any further questions on this submission please contact my office.

Yours sincerely



SANDY BOLTON MP
Member for Noosa