

Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland

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Parliamentary Inquiry into Volunteering

Submission by Play Matters Australia

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Overview of Play Matters Australia:

Operating for over 50 years, Play Matters Australia (PMA) was founded in Brisbane, Queensland, and now operates nationally, with the vision for *Playful Connected Communities*. PMA is the heart and science of play, driven by a purpose to *enrich lives through the power of connection and play*.

At PMA, we believe every child has the right to play. Recognising families as their child's first teachers, we emphasise enhancing the quality of parent-child relationships and boosting family capabilities and confidence. Our programs are designed with this foundational element in mind, ensuring they are both universal and targeted, based on need and built on evidence-based methodologies.

Our comprehensive services range from universal volunteer-led playgroups and supported playgroups to inclusion programs and specialist therapeutic services. As a national organisation, we deliver the evidence-based Sing&Grow program with dedicated staff across every State and Territory in Australia.

Who We Are:

- Facilitate over 500 playgroups in Queensland, 158 volunteer-led.
- Present in 51 of Queensland's 77 LGAs (66%).
- 307 active volunteers, 118 employees (FTE 74).
- 37,000 volunteer hours annually, valued at \$1.7 million (source: [Cost of Volunteering Calculator - The Centre for Volunteering](#)).
- Currently 24,713 members across Queensland who are supported by PMA playgroups.
- Volunteer-led playgroups include 13 intergenerational, 6 LGBTQI+, 10 CALD (culturally and linguistically diverse), 5 First Nations, and 44 regional/remote.
- Volunteer numbers are limited by PMA's capacity to provide support and fund volunteer manager's wages. PMA has 8 staff who directly support the 307 volunteers, equating to 5.0 FTE.

1. Current State of Volunteering in Queensland and the value it contributes, including benefits to volunteers, organisations, communities and the State:

- **To Volunteers:** Play Matters Australia (2024) volunteers had an 86% satisfaction rate in 2023-24. Benefits to volunteers include new friendships, personal growth, skill development, support in isolated or challenging situations, and career progression. Volunteers also reported positive impacts on their children's development (social, motor, language skills).

- **To Communities:** Builds support networks, fosters social connectedness, and provides developmental benefits for children (specifically – social competence, cognitive development and communication skills). Volunteers create inclusive groups (eg. CALD, LGBTQIA+, language-specific) and increased access to services. Intergenerational playgroups promote social inclusion (Airey & Smart, 2015; Williams et. al., 2012) and contribute to improved self-esteem of older people (Skropeta, Colvin & Sladen, 2014), and improved health outcomes for aged-care residents including impact on mood and mobility (Airey & Smart, 2015).
- **To PMA:** Volunteers are essential for playgroup operations. They create diverse and inclusive community spaces and contribute to successful community partnerships. For example, Queensland State Library in South Brisbane hosts two volunteer-led language-based playgroups. Volunteers also provide \$1.7 million dollars' worth of labour to PMA each year (source: [Cost of Volunteering Calculator - The Centre for Volunteering](#)), providing a huge economic benefit to PMA as a not-for-profit (NFP) enterprise.
- **To the State:** Volunteering supports statewide initiatives (eg. culturally-specific playgroups and community events) and enhances local services. Goodstart Early Learning (2023) identified that rural and remote Queensland communities have limited access to educational early-years services (eg. daycare), and that playgroups are one of the few services available that supports childhood development and early years education.

Recommendations:

1. **Enhanced Training:** The Queensland Government develop, in consultation with the sector, free streamlined training for volunteers that address minimum compliance (eg. WHS, child safety, first aid).
2. **Equitable Resources:** The Queensland Government to provide subsidised or free access to translation services to support NFP's to: 1- translate onboarding forms, policies and resources into other languages and 2- provide translation services for screening interviews. This will remove the financial burden on NFP's and support a more inclusive volunteering sector in Queensland.
3. **Better Volunteer Support and Recognition:** The Queensland Government to fund initiatives that support networking between volunteer-involving organisations and volunteer managers in Local Government Areas (LGA's).
4. **Improved support for NFP's:** The Queensland Government to fund membership expenses NFP's pay to Volunteering Queensland, and in consultation with Volunteering Queensland, fund more resources/support for NFP's implementing the National Standards for Volunteer Involvement.

2. The views of volunteers, prospective volunteers and the volunteering sector on the current barriers to volunteering, including excessive legislative and regulatory burdens and other restrictions adversely limiting active volunteers:

Play Matters Australia (PMA) has over 300 volunteers who facilitate playgroups across Queensland. PMA discussed this topic with its Volunteer Advisory Group, who noted the following barriers to volunteering:

- **Financial Stress:** Playgroup volunteers often need to source funds to pay for venue rentals, purchase resources, and cover training expenses. The current cost-of-living also places financial strain on families, with parents feeling pressure to return to paid work before they would choose to. One PMA volunteer noted that the Child Care Subsidy (CCS) didn't recognise her volunteering with PMA as an 'approved' method of volunteering, which limited her access to CCS. Insufficient financial and material support leads to stress and dissatisfaction of volunteers.
- **Accessibility and Inclusion:** As a volunteer-involving organisation, PMA aspires to supporting greater inclusion and diversity of volunteers, but the time and expense associated with making these adjustments is not always affordable. Volunteer involving organisations are reliant on inconsistent grant funding, affecting long-term sustainability. In addition, managing and connecting with remote volunteers and providing them with training and support can be difficult.
- **Strain on staff time and allocated wages:** Volunteer coordination is often not costed correctly in government grants. Grants and funding also limit the time and resources that can be allocated towards updating policies and procedures, adapting to changes in legislation, appropriately screening and onboarding new volunteers and developing resources and training to support volunteers in their roles.
- **Equity in support offered to volunteers:** Difficulty offering equitable support and training opportunities to remote volunteers (eg. accessibility to first aid training), and travel to remote locations is too expensive to provide face-to-face support.
- **Long onboarding process times:** The combined time to screen, onboard and obtain BlueCards can be lengthy and deter potential volunteers.
- **Consequences of Fewer Volunteers:** Reduced volunteer numbers places additional pressure on remaining volunteers and reduces access to playgroup experiences, resulting in social isolation of families, increased vulnerability, and can impact childhood development.

- **Competition for grants:** Many NFPs (there are over 600 000 in Australia) apply for the same grants. Many grants don't allow allocation of funds to the costs associated with supporting volunteers or meeting regulatory requirement, this includes wages for a staff member to train and support volunteers.

Recommendations:

1. **Financial Support:** The Queensland Government advocate for the creation of tax incentives or tax breaks for volunteers. Additionally, implement Volunteer Vouchers (similar to Fair Play vouchers) to incentivise volunteering which can be used towards food, petrol or essentials.
2. **Corporate volunteering:** The Queensland Government endorse corporate volunteering through all government agencies, including additional paid leave every calendar year for government employees to volunteer with NFP organisations. The Queensland Government should also endorse corporate volunteering in the private sector, creating opportunities to diversify funding sources beyond grants (eg. create a platform to support partnerships between businesses and NFP's).
3. **Accessibility & Inclusion:** The Queensland Government offer free translation of volunteer training programs for volunteers with disability and those who speak another language.
4. **Support Volunteer Managers:** The Queensland Government fund an annual Volunteer Managers Conference to build sector relationships, increase professional development and showcase volunteering across Queensland.
5. **Fast track BlueCard processing times:** The Queensland Government conduct review of BlueCard processing times and streamline to deter potential volunteers from losing interest during waiting times.
6. **Increase number of grants offered to volunteer sector:** The Queensland Government to support volunteer-led initiatives through additional grant opportunities and allocate funds in these grants to staff wages to support the recruitment, supervision and training of volunteers.

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

Play Matters has regular advice and input from their volunteers through their Volunteer Advisory Group and annual membership survey. Issues that have been highlighted by PMA's volunteers include:

- **Administrative and Compliance Challenges:** Complex laws and regulations create administrative burdens and require resource-intensive compliance. For example, updates to legislation recently regarding WHS and psycho-social hazards have required the creation of new resources and reviews of current processes to ensure PMA is meeting its requirements in this area. The time invested by staff to support volunteers to stay updated adds additional burden on their limited work hours.
- **Recruitment:** The main free advertising platform to recruit volunteers is Seek Volunteer which is not a user-friendly system. Seek Volunteer does not allow for URL's to be included in advertisements, which limits how an organisation can ensure a good culture fit with potential new volunteers, as website are an easy way for potential volunteers to understand an organisation's values and objectives.
- **Financial Barriers:** Playgroup volunteers manage expenses for leases, transport, and resources. They face uncertainty about recouping expenses through fundraising and donations which can deter potential volunteers.
- **Resource Management:** Extensive paperwork and administrative tasks hinder volunteer time and can add to inefficiency.

Recommendations:

- 1. Streamline Compliance Processes:** The Queensland Government to provide funding to organisations such as Justice Connect (a NFP free legal service) and Volunteering Queensland (State peak body) to create a website that offers governance support to NFP's. Eg. provide simple checklists to support NFP's in meeting compliance and legislative guidelines, simplify administrative procedures, and support to volunteer-involving organisations to navigate legal requirements.
- 2. Financial Support:** The Queensland Government to increase funding for grants or subsidies to cover volunteer expenses. Ensure grants allow for allocation of funds to Volunteer Coordinator wages to ensure volunteers receive appropriate support, as most grants currently on offer don't allow for allocation of staff wages despite this being necessary to the success of projects.
- 3. Efficient Resource Management:** The Queensland Government fund a centralised website that hosts a knowledge base and links to resources relevant to volunteering in Queensland. This should be done in partnership with Volunteering Queensland. Resources should also support the implementation of the National Standards for Volunteer Involvement.
- 4. Develop a Recruitment Platform for Volunteers:** Free access to a new platform that is easy to use and allows organisations to post links to role descriptions and websites.
- 5. Certification for volunteer-involving organisations that implement the National Standards for Volunteer Involvement (NSVI):** The Queensland Government financially support Volunteering Queensland to implement a certification process for organisations implementing the NSVI. Incentivise and support organisations to implement the NSVI through a certification process that promotes best-practice in the volunteer sector, as this will likely create more sustainable outcomes in volunteering. Volunteer-involving organisations should be able to show a NSVI 'tick' once certified to show they are an organisation that follows best practice in their volunteer space.

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:

Play Matters Australia (PMA) has a high level of participation from people of diverse backgrounds, abilities and locations. Of the 158 volunteer-led playgroups PMA hosts across Queensland, 10 are language-based groups and 44 are located in rural and remote communities. PMA also offers inclusive volunteering opportunities for people with disability, one of whom

has had her volunteer journey featured in [Link Magazine](#) (p16). PMA also has a partnership with [The ORCA Project](#) where school-leavers with disability volunteer at playgroups to see if the early years is a career area they want to pursue.

Recommendations:

1. **Create LGA networks:** The Queensland Government to support Volunteering Queensland to implement volunteer sector network meetings in each LGA. These network meetings should focus on building connections and partnerships and expanding recruitment of volunteers to encourage participation from volunteers of diverse backgrounds.
2. **Break down barriers:** The Queensland Government provide grants that support volunteer-involving organisations to create more inclusive spaces for volunteers with a disability (eg. wheelchair access), or those who may not speak English (eg. provide free English language classes to immigrants who are actively volunteering).

5. The extent, effectiveness and efficiency of current government support at all levels for the volunteering sector in Queensland and sustainable opportunities for improvement:

Current government support for the volunteering sector in Queensland includes grants and funding programs (eg. Strong and Resilient Communities Activity). Support across local government areas (LGAs) varies significantly, with some being unsupportive. For example, a PMA volunteer-led playgroup of 10 families in a small community disbanded after the LGA imposed a \$200/week fee for the two-hour playgroup session to utilise the unused community hall. Despite the playgroup's benefits to the community, the LGA refused to negotiate. Other playgroups around Queensland typically pay \$50 or less per week.

Recommendations:

1. **Voucher System:** The Queensland Government implement a voucher system for volunteer-led groups to receive discounts on using council or state government owned buildings.

6. Opportunities for the Queensland Government to leverage all portfolios to support growth in volunteering across Queensland, including through hosting the Brisbane 2032 Olympic and Paralympic Games:

The Queensland Government could leverage growth in volunteering in the early years and community development portfolios through the following options:

1. **Build a culture of volunteering from a young age** through family volunteering events (eg. local clean ups).
2. **Partner with volunteer-involving organisations** and create events, share resources and provide grant opportunities that promote a culture of volunteering. For example, a volunteering EXPO or Roadshow where volunteer-involving organisations can showcase their volunteering opportunities, and members of the public can get a taste of what opportunities are in their local area.

Recommendations:

1. **Create intergenerational opportunities:** The Queensland Government endorse (through media and funding) cross-generational volunteering to build a culture of volunteering in younger people. Eg. An intergenerational community garden where older people can teach younger people how to grow foods, and the food grown can be supplied to a local food bank.
2. **Allocate further funding:** The Queensland Government to boost funding into existing volunteer initiatives in Queensland who can prove hardship due to dwindling volunteer numbers.
3. **Amplify media interest in volunteering:** The Queensland Government to utilise access to media to promote and endorse volunteering activities across the State. Ongoing endorsement and exposure to the wider community should build Olympic volunteering interest.
4. **Host a Volunteer Expo or Roadshow:** The Queensland Government to showcase volunteering opportunities by funding and hosting a Volunteer Expo or Roadshow.

7. Opportunities to increase emergency response volunteering in Queensland, including how to optimise the engagement, support and integration of volunteers assisting with natural disasters and community recovery:

Whilst Play Matters is not an emergency response organisation, it does have experience supporting families with young children post-natural disaster. Playgroups are already embedded in many communities and can support community recovery by:

- **Utilising existing relationships** - Families affected by natural disaster seeking support and comfort from their existing support networks, such as playgroups.
- **Trauma support** – Play-based environments support trauma recovery. For example, using children's story books which unpack natural

disasters, and creating safe spaces for children to regulate through movement and activities.

- **Providing consistency** – in a season where families affected by natural disasters may have uncertainty around accommodation and job security, playgroups remain constant and offer a safe place to connect.

Recommendations:

1. **Utilise existing community services:** In lieu of bringing external services into disaster zones, the Queensland Government should provide resources to existing local community services instead, as these existing relationships within a community can support families in their recovery.

8. First Nations peoples volunteering, including in remote and discrete communities, and the role of First Nations volunteering in Closing the Gap:

In our experience it can be difficult recruiting First Nations volunteers for several reasons:

- First Nations people offer cultural knowledge that should not be expected for free.
- Many First Nations Elders and community leaders are already stretched and time poor from offering support to their communities.
- The current BlueCard system is not culturally-fitting for many First Nations people and can be a deterrent to potential volunteers.
- In remote communities, access to internet, phone credit, or a device can also be a barrier.
- There is a cultural incongruence between what the mainstream culture defines 'volunteering' to be and what it means to some of the First Nations communities we work with. They can find the language and structures put around volunteering unnecessary and irrelevant.

Recommendations:

1. **Consultation with First Nations people:** The Queensland Government should acknowledge First Nations people are the experts in their own culture and consult with their communities to identify a culturally appropriate response to this need.
2. **Implement cultural responses:** The Queensland Government, in consultation with First Nations peoples, should ensure culturally appropriate opportunities are available in the volunteering sector. This should include implementing a culturally responsive process to obtain a BlueCard. Just as Murrie Court has been implemented into Queensland's judicial system, creating culturally responsive approaches in these areas is imperative.
3. **Close the Gap:** The Queensland Government to endorse and support the National Standards for Volunteer Involvement to be reviewed by a First Nations Advisory Group, to ensure cultural congruence with First Nations volunteering.

9. Any other relevant matters, including academic and other diverse sources, and any relevant reports and reviews at the national level and across other states and territories:

External Sources:

[Volunteer Research Papers – Round 1 – Volunteering Queensland](#)
[State of Volunteering in Queensland - QCOSS](#)
[Volunteering in Australia 2022 - Volunteering Australia](#)
[19_5205_Volunteering_Growing Up In QLD_5.pdf](#)

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