

Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland

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28 February 2025

Local Government, Small Business and Customer Service Committee
Parliament House
George Street,
Brisbane Qld 4000

By email: lgsbcsc@parliament.qld.gov.au

Dear Committee Members,

Inquiry into Volunteering in Queensland

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission into this important inquiry into volunteering in Queensland.

About Neighbourhood Centres Queensland

Neighbourhood Centres Queensland (NCQ) is the peak body representing over 155 Neighbourhood and Community Centres across Queensland. Together, Neighbourhood Centres in Queensland support over 2.4million visitors a year, with about 2,500 people volunteering through Neighbourhood Centres each week. As the peak body, our vision is for place-based leadership for regenerative, equitable and inclusive communities. We can achieve this by growing the resourcing, recognition and relationships of the Neighbourhood Centre sector.

NCQ supports Neighbourhood Centres across the state through research, advocacy, capacity building, and networking. We listen deeply to what is happening on the ground in communities and what is impacting the work they do. We provide support, updates and guidance on best practices in numerous areas such as community engagement, volunteer management, and sustainable service delivery. We work closely with our members, government, partner organisations, and the private sector to ensure that Neighbourhood Centres have the resources and support they need to support Queensland communities to thrive.

This submission provides information on volunteering in Neighbourhood Centres and is informed by our ongoing consultation with NCQ's member organisations, insights from research undertaken, Neighbourhood Centres Sector Impact Reports from 2019, 2021, 2022 and 2023, as well as the Volunteering Queensland's State of Volunteering in Queensland report, and other trusted data sources.

The Role and Value of Neighbourhood Centres in Queensland Communities

Neighbourhood Centres are the heart of Queensland Communities.

Neighbourhood Centres are on the ground embedded in their communities, opening their doors to provide Queenslanders with opportunities to benefit from locally led responses to community issues across a wide variety of areas, from social isolation to housing insecurity. They also offer excellent investment value. For every \$1 invested in Neighbourhood Centres by the Queensland Government, the sector delivers \$4.09 in community value.¹

Neighbourhood Centres welcome everyone and play a crucial role in building connected and empowered communities. Walk into a Neighbourhood Centre, and you'll meet committed, caring and resourceful people. Whether volunteers, staff or board members, they care about their communities and work hard to deliver extraordinary outcomes every day. Each Neighbourhood Centre is as unique as the community it is a part of, operating in metropolitan areas to rural and remote regions, and tailoring programs and services in line with local contexts.

Neighbourhood Centres benefit a broad spectrum of individuals, from those seeking opportunities to connect with or contribute to their community, to those who face hardship and vulnerability. They link people with a range of services and supports and often act as key points of contact for government and other services.

Neighbourhood Centres are increasingly popular in their communities, with attendance growing year on year, from over 1.6 million visitors in 2019-2020FY, to 2 million in 2021/2022FY and a remarkable 2.4 million in 2022-2023FY.¹ Neighbourhood Centres are helping increasing numbers of people affected by issues such as the soaring cost of living, homelessness, lack of affordable housing, social isolation and loneliness, as the tail end impacts of Covid-19.

Neighbourhood Centres also play a critical role in responding to crises, including natural disasters. During emergency situations, they become frontline support hubs, with a wealth of knowledge and relationships with the community and the skills to effectively adapt approaches to distribute essential supplies, provide information and referrals, and offer emotional and practical assistance to those affected. Neighbourhood Centres are uniquely positioned to coordinate volunteer responses during disasters due to their deep connections with the community. They can quickly mobilise volunteers, ensure resources are distributed effectively, and provide critical on-the-ground support long after the immediate crisis has passed.

The Role and Value of Volunteers in Neighbourhood Centres

Over 90% of Centres¹ rely on volunteers to provide vital supports such as food relief, transport, community programs and delivery of services.

In 2024, approximately **2,811 volunteers** contributed **11,179 hours per week (558,950 hours annually)** to NCs in Queensland, generating an estimated social value of **\$28.86 million per year**².

¹ Mundy, C. (2025) Neighbourhood Centres Queensland 2024 Sector Impact Report. Neighbourhood Centres Queensland.

² Ibid

When volunteers cannot be recruited, retained or managed effectively, the impact is often the loss or reduction of a valuable community service, program or project. In regional and remote areas where service users may have nowhere else to go, the loss of supports can be life changing for people.

“Without volunteers, some programs just can’t run. This is devastating for some of community members, especially if they’re living alone and don’t have many other opportunities to meet up with people”. (Neighbourhood Centre Manager, South West Region)

Volunteers contribute to a wide variety of roles across NCs, ensuring that services and programs run smoothly and effectively whilst benefitting personally from helping others or enjoying the activities. Some of the key roles and activities volunteers undertake include:

- **Administration and Reception:** Receptionists, data entry clerks, and program coordinators.
- **Food Support and Catering:** Food pantry assistants, cooks, and delivery drivers.
- **Community and Social Support:** Mentors, group facilitators, and justice of the peace services.
- **Education and Tutoring:** English tutors, digital mentors, youth program supports, and homework club helpers.
- **Gardening and Maintenance:** Groundskeepers, cleaners, and community garden coordinators.
- **Retail and Donations:** Op-shop assistants and donation sorters.
- **Event Support:** Festival volunteers and setup crews.
- **Wellness and Therapy:** Meditation group facilitators, Tai Chi instructors, and wellness program volunteers.
- **Transport and Delivery:** Transport drivers for community members in need.
- **Governance and Leadership:** Board members and strategic advisors.
- **Technology and digital support:** Helping community members access technology, providing repair café services and providing IT support.

Volunteer Engagement through Neighbourhood Centres

Volunteering Queensland's *The State of Volunteering in Queensland 2024 Report* revealed a decline in volunteer participation of over 10% between 2020 and 2023. However, in general, this decline in volunteer numbers was not reflected at the statewide level for Neighbourhood Centres. The number of volunteers engaging through Neighbourhood Centres has remained consistent over the past five years, even throughout COVID restrictions. However, this consistency is not reflective of smaller communities where volunteer engagement is declining.

Numbers range from an estimated combined total of 2,255 volunteers a week in 2019 to 2,454 people a week in 2024 (see Figure 1). Volunteers in Neighbourhood Centres continued to be active throughout lockdowns and numbers even showed signs of growth, providing food relief, shopping runs, check in phone calls and virtual services.

Additionally, 909 local volunteer board members contributed 4,338 hours per week (216,900 hours annually), providing essential governance and strategic direction to Neighbourhood Centres. A further 5701 episodic volunteers supported once-off community events reaching approximately 243,969 people. Event volunteers have more than doubled since COVID restrictions in 2021 (2751 volunteers).

While Neighbourhood Centres are maintaining volunteer numbers, they still need to increase current volunteer engagement levels to keep up with rapidly growing demand for their services, programs and supports.

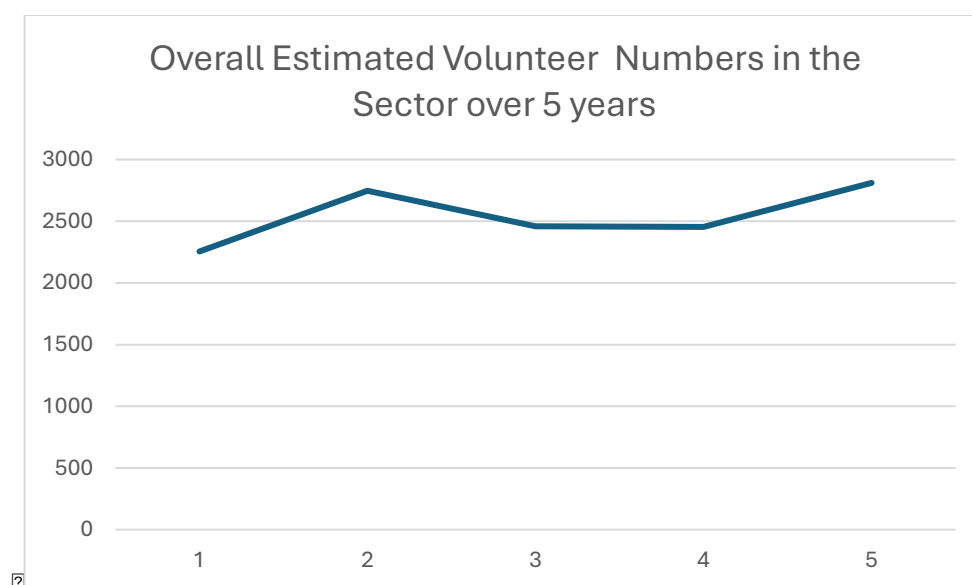


Figure 1 – Estimated Volunteer Numbers for the Neighbourhood Centre Sector from 2019 to 2024.

In general, the nature of volunteering is shifting, influenced by broader social and economic trends.³ Research suggests that traditional, long-term volunteering commitments are declining, while short-term, project-based, and skills-focused volunteering is increasing⁴. Younger generations, particularly millennials, are more likely to volunteer for specific causes and professional development opportunities rather than committing to a single organisation for extended periods⁵.

Furthermore, digital platforms have transformed how volunteers engage with Neighbourhood Centres. Online volunteering opportunities, social media campaigns, and digital advocacy efforts are growing, yet face-to-face engagement remains a fundamental element of community development. Centres

³ Mundy, C. (2016) "Community Development and Neighbourhood Centre Volunteering", Deakin University

⁴ Ife, J 2012, 'The Future of Community Development', New Community Quarterly, vol. 10, no.1, pp 4-10.

⁵ McLay, K 2015. 'Engaging Millennial Volunteers: Understanding a New Breed of Volunteers', Volunteering Queensland, Brisbane, retrieved 7th October 2016,

must adapt by offering diverse and flexible volunteer opportunities to attract and retain individuals with varying levels of availability and commitment.

Volunteer engagement varies significantly across different-sized communities, and numbers vary from 1 to 160 volunteers per Centre. While volunteer numbers in mid-sized communities (3,000-10,000 residents) have remained stable and even shown slight growth, as stated earlier, smaller communities (under 3,000 residents) have experienced a considerable decline in volunteer participation since 2022 (Fig 2).

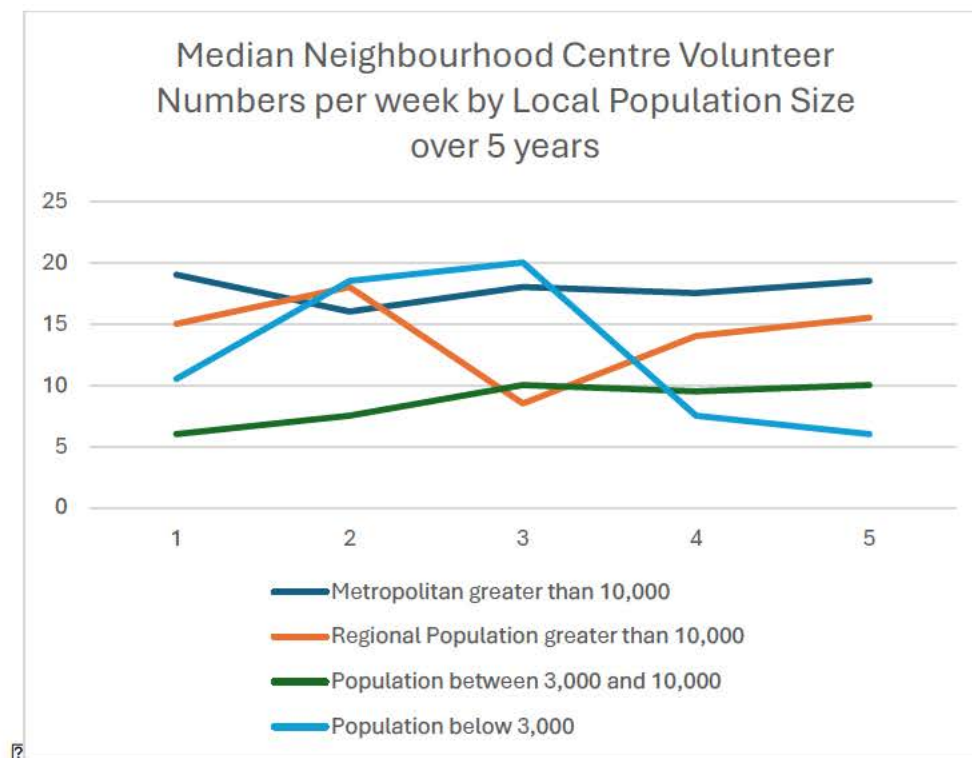


Figure 2 – Median volunteer numbers per week per centre by population size

Volunteer hours saw spikes in 2021 and 2023, reflecting short-term surges in engagement related to specific community needs or crisis responses (Figure 3).⁶

⁶ Mundy, C. (2024) Neighbourhood Centres Queensland 2023, Sector Impact Report. Neighbourhood Centres Queensland.

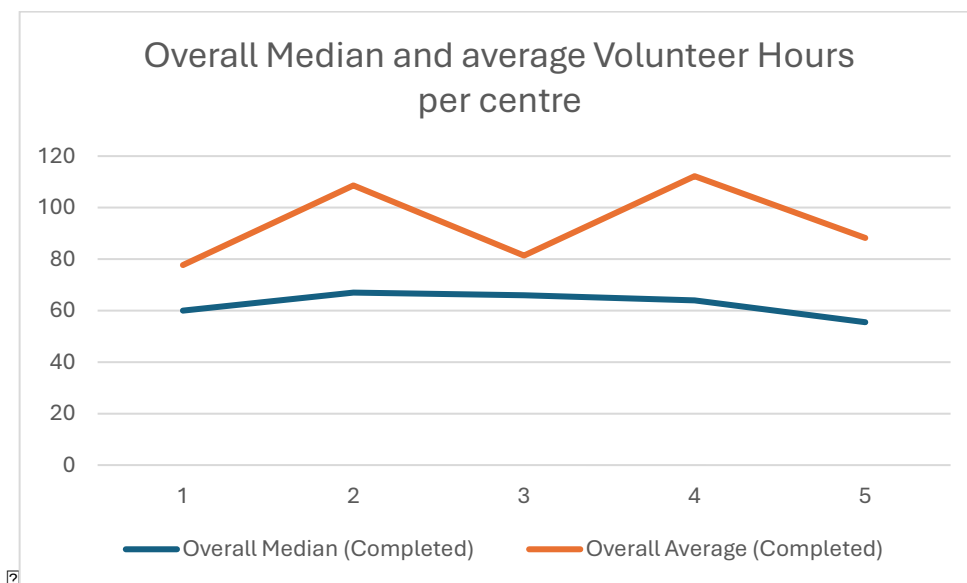


Figure 3 – Median and Average Volunteer hours per week per centre in 2024

Neighbourhood Centres in smaller communities often face the most challenges with volunteer recruitment as they rely heavily on a small pool of dedicated individuals who may already be engaged in multiple roles. Rural and remote communities are also faced with aging populations and when core volunteers retire or relocate, there are often insufficient replacements to sustain operations, leading to service reductions or the closure of programs. This trend underscores the need for targeted strategies to support volunteer recruitment and retention in small and rural communities.

“While we have opportunities to access volunteers through Centrelink or Probation and Parole, they’re sometimes not able to volunteer at the Neighbourhood Centre due to Blue Card constraints,” (Neighbourhood Centre Manager, Far West Region).

The Relational Value of Volunteers

Volunteers bring a unique perspective to Neighbourhood Centres. From a community perspective, people seeking support often view volunteers as being there because they genuinely want to help, rather than as paid workers. This can be especially important for individuals who may feel vulnerable or hesitant to ask for help, as they recognise that volunteers are motivated by compassion rather than obligation promoting a sense of support without judgement. This perception enhances authenticity and trust and provides validity to the role of Neighbourhood Centres as grassroots, community-driven support systems.

“Volunteers are not just helping out; they are the heart and soul of what we do. Without them, many of our essential programs would simply not exist,” (Neighbourhood Centre Team Leader, Wide Bay Region).

The act of volunteering can have significant personal benefits. Sometimes, a volunteer will begin as participant in a Neighbourhood Centre activity or come to the Centre seeking support while experiencing hardship. Through the connections made with the Centre and the support offered, the individual might take up a volunteer role. It is not uncommon for these individuals to be later employed by the Centre.

“When a project or program we deliver without funding becomes funded, the volunteer delivering the program can be offered a paid role. Volunteering can be a pathway to employment,” (Neighbourhood Centre Manager, Logan Region).

Why People Choose to Volunteer in Neighbourhood Centres

People volunteer for a variety of reasons, including a desire to give back to their communities, personal fulfillment, and professional development. Some of the key motivations for volunteering include:

- **Community Contribution:** Many individuals volunteer to help others, make a positive impact, “give back” to community and support causes they are passionate about.
- **Social Connection:** Volunteering helps individuals build relationships, reduce loneliness, and strengthen their sense of belonging within the community.
- **Personal Growth and Well-Being:** Many volunteers experience increased self-confidence, improved mental health, and a sense of purpose through their contributions.
- **Skill Development:** Volunteering offers opportunities to develop new skills, gain experience, and build professional networks, which can enhance employability.
- **Lifelong Learning:** Volunteers often engage in ongoing learning, acquiring knowledge about different social issues, cultures, and services in their communities.
- **Mutual Arrangements:** Neighbourhood Centres often benefit from individual volunteering arrangements as part of Centrelink requirements, particularly from those who are experiencing employment challenges or nearing retirement.

Barriers to Volunteer Recruitment, Retention and Management

Despite the essential role of volunteers, Neighbourhood Centres face several challenges in recruiting and retaining and managing a sustainable volunteer workforce.

Recruitment Challenges:

- **Limited Interest:** Low interest in volunteering, particularly for less visible or “back-office” roles like administration, gardening, and maintenance.
- **Economic Pressures:** Cost of living and delayed retirement age result in fewer people having the time or financial ability to volunteer. The high cost of fuel has a significant impact on the capacity of volunteers in rural and regional communities where they may be required to travel a long distance from home to the Centre.
- **Time Constraints:** Many individuals face work and family commitments, limiting their availability.
- **Lack of Promotional Skills/Dedicated Role to Recruit Volunteers:** Lack of a dedicated volunteer coordinator can make it difficult to implement effective recruitment strategies, undertake volunteer promotion and advertise for positions. Many volunteer platforms are state based rather than place based.

- **Mismatch of Skills and Roles:** Volunteers often lack the necessary skills or interests for available roles.
- **Reliability Issues:** Difficulty finding volunteers who reliably attend shifts or consistently commit to their roles, e.g. volunteers who are retirees sometimes go travelling for extended periods.
- **Aging Volunteer Pool:** A large proportion of volunteers are retirees, and younger volunteers prefer short-term, high-impact opportunities. Additionally, some insurance products do not cover volunteers over a certain age.
- **Specific Role Challenges:** Lack of interest in roles involving physical tasks like cleaning or difficulties finding volunteers with specific skill sets for roles involving vulnerable groups.
- **Lengthy Onboarding Processes:** Delays caused by requirements such as Blue Card applications and the significant time investment in training and induction. Neighbourhood Centres governed by large non-profit organisations or Local Government have expressed particular challenges with extensive recruitment processes.
- **Volunteer Competition:** Neighbourhood Centres in small communities or locations where multiple volunteer organisations exist are often competing for a limited pool of volunteers.
- **Formal vs Informal Volunteering:** Some community members prefer to be involved in community organisations through less formal means, through civic participation in action groups, community planning or active citizenship.

Retention Challenges:

- **Cost of Volunteering Pressures:** Cost of living pressures have made the cost of volunteering too high for some existing volunteers, who can no longer afford the out of pocket expenses required to volunteer.
- **Lack of Volunteer Coordinator:** Lack of a dedicated Volunteer Coordinator can make it difficult to retain volunteers and ensure their needs are met.
- **Volunteer Fatigue:** Volunteers being overburdened may lead to increased burnout rates, particularly when dealing with escalating community issues such as cost of living, domestic and family violence, homelessness, mental health issues and substance abuse.
- **Short-Term Commitment:** Volunteers often leave after fulfilling job-seeker obligations (e.g., Centrelink-mandated hours), finding employment or commencing study.
- **Availability and Scheduling:** Volunteers sometimes take extended breaks or are unavailable when needed, especially during holidays. Dependence on volunteers during peak times leaves programs vulnerable to gaps in services at these times.
- **Lack of Progression:** Lack of development, upskilling or employment opportunities at the Centre can lead volunteers to seek other roles.
- **Personal and Life Changes:** Changes in personal circumstances including illness, retirement, moving out of the area and obtaining employment. An aging volunteer base can reduce physical capacity for demanding roles or consistent attendance.

Challenges in Managing Volunteers in Neighbourhood Centres

Managing volunteers in Neighbourhood Centres presents unique challenges, particularly given the diverse range of roles they fill and the limited resources available to support them. High turnover increases management workload, such as frequent training and recruitment. As well as creating welcoming community spaces, Managers need to ensure their volunteers are made to feel included and meaningfully engaged within their organisations.

A majority (68%) of Neighbourhood Centres do not have a designated Volunteer Coordinator, and this results in a reliance on existing staff to manage volunteers. This lack of structured oversight can lead to disparities in recruitment, training gaps, and difficulties in volunteer retention. Additionally, some volunteers require extra supports, such as those facing barriers related to age, disability, or mental health challenges. This can place extra demands on staff and existing volunteers.

Neighbourhood Centres with a dedicated Volunteer Coordinator report greater success in volunteer engagement and retention. They benefit from structured and well-managed volunteer programs, leading to improved efficiency, volunteer satisfaction, and long-term engagement.

Key advantages of employing a dedicated Volunteer Coordinator in the Neighbourhood Centre include:

- **Efficient Recruitment and Onboarding:** Coordinators streamline the recruitment process, ensuring a better match between volunteers and available roles.
- **Stronger Retention and Support:** Volunteers are more likely to stay engaged when they receive ongoing training, supervision, and recognition.
- **Better Supervision and Development:** Dedicated oversight allows for structured volunteer training, development programs, and a clear pathway for skills growth.
- **Improved Communication and Engagement:** Volunteer coordinators serve as a direct point of contact, ensuring volunteers feel valued and supported.
- **Better Compliance and Risk Management:** Coordinators ensure adherence to policies and procedures, reducing liability risks.

Specific Challenges for Volunteer Neighbourhood Centre Boards

Volunteer boards play a crucial role in the governance and strategic direction of locally governed Neighbourhood Centres across Queensland. These boards, often composed of dedicated community members, oversee the organisation and ensure compliance with legal and financial obligations. However, the reliance on volunteer boards presents significant challenges, particularly in a landscape where increasing governance requirements and operational complexities demand high levels of expertise and commitment. Many board members have limited experience in governance, financial management, or strategic planning, leading to knowledge gaps that can impact decision-making. The challenge of recruiting skilled board members and succession planning is ongoing, with many Neighbourhood Centres struggling to find volunteers willing to take on leadership roles. Furthermore, volunteer boards must navigate regulatory requirements, funding applications, and organisational sustainability, which can be overwhelming without adequate training or support.

Recommendations to Strengthen Volunteer Engagement and Impact in Neighbourhood Centres

To ensure the sustainability of volunteering in Neighbourhood Centres, the following recommendations are proposed:

Recommendation 1: Create Flexible, Diverse and Digital Volunteer Opportunities through Neighbourhood Centres

- 1.1** Implement an initiative through the Neighbourhood Centre sector to develop a range of volunteer opportunities, including short-term, project-based, and skills-based roles to accommodate different participation levels.
- 1.2** Enhance digital volunteering options while maintaining face-to-face engagement opportunities, by upskilling the sector in technology skills and enhancing the digital infrastructure of Neighbourhood Centres

Recommendation 2: Invest in Dedicated Volunteer Coordinators Based in Neighbourhood Centres

- 2.1** Recognise volunteer coordination as an essential function that strengthens community resilience and participation.
- 2.2** Secure funding for dedicated place-based Volunteer Coordinators within Neighbourhood Centres to improve recruitment, training, and retention.
- 2.3** Provide professional development opportunities for Volunteer Coordinators to enhance recruitment and retention activities, streamline onboarding procedures, provide upskilling opportunities and build a stronger volunteering program across the sector

Recommendation 3: Establish a Cost-of-Volunteering Reimbursement Fund

- 3.1** Establish a fund for Neighbourhood Centres to assist with out-of-pocket expenses such as transport, clothing, meals, and incidental costs associated with volunteering.
- 3.2** Expand this initiative beyond immediate cost-of-living relief to provide long-term sustainability with consideration to the extra costs associated with rural and remote locations
- 3.3** Recognise and incentivise Neighbourhood Centre volunteers through awards, appreciation events, and networking opportunities.

Recommendation 4: Strengthen Governance and Board Support in Neighbourhood Centres

- 4.1** Fund NCQ to develop accessible training programs and resources for volunteer community board members on governance, financial management, and compliance, particularly in rural and remote locations. This includes online and in-person training modules and 'how to' guides tailored to the needs of Neighbourhood Centres, delivered in a manner specifically relevant for small community-based organisations.
- 4.2** Establish regional hubs that provide mentorship, training, and ongoing guidance for board members to ensure leadership continuity. An example of this is the Coalition of Community Boards on the Sunshine Coast that receives funding from the Sunshine Coast City Council.⁷

⁷ <https://www.cocb.org.au/>

4.3 Establish a Statewide Community Board Support Network, facilitating knowledge sharing and peer support.

4.4 Explore hybrid collaborative models where key administrative, IT and financial duties are managed by paid professionals while volunteers focus on strategic oversight.

4.5 Provide flexible funding models that allow centres to allocate resources toward governance capacity building.

Recommendation 5: Promote Volunteering in Neighbourhood Centres

5.1 Promote volunteering through local outreach campaigns, partnerships with schools and businesses, and digital engagement strategies.

5.2 Collaborate with local governments and organisations to create a cohesive volunteer support network in each locality, rather than a state-wide approach.

5.3 Develop strategies to address the significant volunteer challenges in small rural, regional and remote areas.

Recommendation 6: Invest in Regional Place-Based Volunteering Hubs

6.1 Provide ongoing operational funding for 10-12 place-based regional hubs⁸ to improve recruitment, retention, and support for volunteers across Queensland and consider co-location with Neighbourhood Centres.

6.2 Neighbourhood Centres have vast local relationships and partnerships in localities and have proven to be effective place-based volunteer hubs in numerous locations. One example includes HBNC's Volunteer⁹ program for the Fraser Coast Region.

6.3 Improve mapping and capacity to match people to various opportunities in each location that align with their skills and interests, including community organisations, sporting clubs, social groups, churches and faith-based organisations, environmental initiatives, local government and other local opportunities.

Recommendation 7: Invest in Emergency Volunteering and Disaster Response

7.1 Invest in IT infrastructure, suitable for use at a local level, to improve volunteer coordination and deployment during natural disasters, with an emphasis on locations experiencing compounding events

7.2 Provide flexible funding for ongoing preparation, response and recovery efforts beyond immediate crisis responses associated with acute events. Volunteers play a vital role in community resilience building during the disaster preparation phase.

Recommendation 8: Deliver a Statewide Volunteer Insurance Framework

8.1 Conduct a Treasury-led feasibility study on creating a universal volunteer insurance scheme to reduce costs for Neighbourhood Centres and other community organisations.

⁸ This is consistent with the Local Government Association of Queensland's Advocacy Plan.

https://www.lgaq.asn.au/files/assets/public/v/1/advocacy/publications-files/2024_advocacy_action_plan_1.pdf

⁹ <https://www.hbnc.com.au/listing/category/volunteering>

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8.2 Ensure that insurance products developed are suitable for Neighbourhood Centres, including providing adequate coverage that does not restrict typical Centre activities or age groups.

8.3 Address rising insurance barriers that prevent organisations from expanding their volunteer programs.

Recommendation 9: Review and Update the Queensland Volunteering Strategy

9.1 Rather than starting from scratch, build upon the existing volunteer strategy¹⁰ and support the implementation of a revised volunteer strategy with a clear action plan

9.2 Ensure the action plan is co-designed with the sector and that it is place-based, relevant and achievable in all locations across the state.

Recommendation 10: Improve Research and Data Collection on Volunteering in Neighbourhood Centres

10.1 Enhance data collection on volunteer participation in NCs with a focus on under-represented groups.

10.2 Enhance data collection on overall volunteering trends, particularly in rural and remote locations, among First Nations people, men, culturally diverse communities, and people with disabilities.

Recommendation 11: Deliver an Olympics and Paralympics Volunteering Strategy and Action Plan

11.1 Ensure that volunteering for the 2032 Brisbane Olympics does not negatively impact existing community volunteer programs including those in Neighbourhood Centres in South East Qld.

11.2 Develop a volunteering legacy that benefits all Queensland communities beyond the Games including a strategy to transition Olympics volunteers into Neighbourhood Centre programs post-Games. Consideration should be given to volunteering in rural, regional and remote locations outside the SEQ corner.

11.3 Fund strategic planning to avoid disruptions in essential social services due to high volunteer recruitment in SEQ for Olympic events.

¹⁰ <https://www.tatsipca.qld.gov.au/our-work/community-support/communities-2032/queensland-volunteering-strategy#:~:text=Queensland%20Volunteering%20Strategy%20Action%20Plan,volunteering%20is%20thriving%20across%20Queensland.>

Conclusion

Neighbourhood Centres are the heart of our communities, and the volunteers who give up their time to keep them alive are the lifeblood.

Volunteers in Neighbourhood Centres provide essential services, fostering social connections, and strengthening community resilience. Their contributions empower individuals, bridge social gaps, and enhance the overall well-being of Queensland communities.

Neighbourhood Centres face ongoing challenges in recruiting, supporting, and retaining volunteers. This is particularly the case in small rural and regional and remote locations. The demand for volunteers continues to grow, yet many Neighbourhood Centres struggle with limited resources, rising operational costs, and shifting volunteer expectations. Addressing these challenges requires a strategic, long-term approach that includes targeted funding, policy reform, and strengthened sector-wide collaboration.

By recognising the critical role of volunteers and ensuring adequate support structures, the Queensland Government has an opportunity to reinforce the strength of local communities. Through collaborative action with community stakeholders, innovative volunteer engagement strategies, and policy alignment, we can build a resilient, well-supported volunteer ecosystem. Strengthening these frameworks today will safeguard the future of Neighbourhood Centres, ensuring they remain a thriving force in community development for generations to come.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide our submission.

If you have any questions, please contact Cate Akaveka, Chief Executive Officer at

[REDACTED]

Yours sincerely, Yours sincerely,

[REDACTED]

Cate Akaveka
Chief Executive Officer