

Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland

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Inquiry into Volunteering in Queensland
Queensland Parliamentary Committees
Parliament House
2A George St
Brisbane
Qld 4000

28th February 2025

To Whom it may concern

Please find attached a submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Volunteering in Qld from
Volunteering Sunshine Coast Inc.

I can be contacted at the above address or on [REDACTED]

Kind Regards

Caroline Patton
President
Volunteering Sunshine Coast Inc.

Volunteering Sunshine Coast Response to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Volunteering

The purpose of this document is to provide a submission to the Qld Parliamentary Inquiry into Volunteering.

Volunteering Sunshine Coast Inc:

Incorporated in 2004, Volunteering Sunshine Coast (VSC) is the leading provider of volunteering services on the Sunshine Coast. VSC recruits, selects and deploys volunteers to Volunteer Involving Organisations (VIO's).

VSC has over 1,000 registered volunteers and 99 VIOs, which provide services throughout the Sunshine Coast community across a range of key sectors including human services, the environment, animal and wildlife, culture and heritage, and sports and recreation.

Relevant statistics are:

- 12 volunteers run the office and administrative functions of VS
- 1,249 volunteers are active on our databases (as at June 24, 2024)
- 3,603 is the number of hours the VSC office team generously worked keeping our operations running in the 2023~2024 financial year
- \$152,250 is the value of these hours donated to Volunteering Sunshine Coast (valued at \$42.25/hr) for the 2023~2024 financial year
- 612 is the number of website referral
- 1,452 is the number of volunteer consultations, referral, and placements into roles in the community over the 2023~2024 financial year

VSC Submission:

VSC appreciates the opportunity to provide a submission to the Inquiry. We do not intend to provide a comprehensive submission to the Inquiry addressing all of the terms of reference. Our objective is to address the issues relevant to us as a Volunteering Resource Centre (VRC) operating in a regional location in Queensland. Accordingly, our submission will only address the following terms of reference:

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

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

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;

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;

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.

The focus of our submission will be to raise the issues as we see them and where possible provide suggestions and/or solutions for improvement to the Inquiry. We would welcome the opportunity to appear before the Inquiry to clarify any points of interest and elaborate on any of the issues we have raised.

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

As mentioned above Volunteering Sunshine Coast (VSC) is a Volunteer Resource Centre (VRC) which provides volunteering services to the Sunshine Coast. We recruit, select and deploy volunteers for approximately 100 VIOs. We do not currently provide any training for volunteers nor do we charge our VIOs a fee for our services. We do this as many of our partner organisations are charities with limited funds and we are committed to maximising the opportunities for our volunteers.

At the outset we believe the current system of VRCs in Qld is broken and requires a major rethink and rebuild. The Inquiry is the opportunity to do this. We do however support a regional network of VRCs throughout the state, with each VRC governed by a properly constituted board representing the interests of volunteers and the local community. The role of a VRC to be defined by the inquiry with particular emphasis on recruiting, selecting and deploying volunteers. Other functions such as training and ensuring the safety and quality of volunteer services by VIOs should also be considered. Ideally there should be a single point of contact for information and registration for volunteering within a region however this maybe difficult to achieve because of the number and diversity of organisations engaged in volunteering.

VRCs should be restricted from engaging in raising other forms of revenue utilising volunteers because of perceived and actual conflicts of interest. If fees are to be levied on VIOs these should be set independently of VRCs.

We do not support the current arrangements in Qld of a peak body for volunteering representing to Government the interest of volunteers and VRCs. Functions such as planning, funding and evaluation of volunteering should be undertaken by the recently established Volunteering Unit in the Department consistent with any recommendations of the Inquiry. Further comments about funding are provided below but we support a single contract with the Department that articulates VRC deliverables and performance criteria. VRC funding should be sufficient to meet the basic requirements of a not for profit (NFP) to ensure good governance and a safe and quality work environment.

VSC is a not for profit (NFP) charity with a volunteer management committee of local citizens. The VSC office is staffed by approximately 12 part time volunteers and a CEO. The CEO role is a paid part time position for 15 hours a week. Our office is located in the Maroochydore CBD with parking and excellent access for volunteers. The office is well equipped with computers operating a MS365 Office platform with associated web sites and social media platforms. The full potential of these systems has not been realised as they have not been fully commissioned and there are insufficient resources for training and managed ICT services.

The volunteers in the office are typically from an older age cohort often taking advantage of government schemes for early eligibility to the full pension by undertaking fifteen hours a week of volunteering. There is a similar scheme for younger people accessing unemployment benefits. Volunteering as a result of this scheme diminished at change of federal government where the eligibility requirements for unemployment benefits were relaxed.

There are essentially two groups of volunteers in the office: those that have been there for a long time and those that commence, stay for period, often a couple of months and then move on. Volunteers are looking for clearly defined and limited roles without complication or roles that are routine and repetitive. There is little interest in management roles or roles that involve supervising other volunteers. If there is conflict with other volunteers or the role becomes too demanding they often don't come in for a period and eventually leave. Cost of living pressures are having a significant impact on volunteers. Despite the perception that volunteering is free costs are incurred by volunteers to volunteer i.e. to dress appropriately, travel to the office and maintain a phone.

The primary motivation for volunteering in the office is the social interaction of attending the office and doing something to make a contribution. Within the parameters outlined above the commitment and quality of work demonstrated by individual volunteers is excellent but the ability

to operate as a functioning team is limited. Apart from the CEO there are insufficient resources to employ part time coordinators to provide continuity of support for volunteers in the office.

VSC essentially acts as a recruitment agency for partner VIOs recruiting volunteers. We do not manage on a day to day basis the majority of volunteers we recruit. Our service model for recruiting, selecting and deploying volunteers is best described as passive. We rely on people seeking to volunteer to be able to contact us and navigate our processes to register. We have a website, social media channels, job advertisements and community service radio advertising to facilitate this process. Potential volunteers are registered on a database (VIKTOR) together with a phone interview and the provision of a resume. We also organise for criminal record screening where appropriate. We have limited opportunities to provide outreach to encourage volunteering except where we have been successful with specific grant funding for this purpose. As a consequence we are only accessing a small percentage of potential volunteers with limited involvement by disadvantaged populations such as migrants and people with disability.

Recruitment of VIOs is by word of mouth with no formal processes in place to recruit VIOs. Apart from a registration process and insurance checks there are no other processes in place to assess the suitability of a VIO to support a volunteer. VIOs seeking a volunteer complete a position description for the role they are seeking a volunteer for and we then advertise that role on our website, social media and job advertisements such as Seek. The volunteer then applies and they enter our selection and recruitment process outlined above. The successful candidate is then 'handed off' to the VIO to undertake an induction and in some cases 'on the job' training. Contact with VSC at this point is normally lost with no records maintained on the suitability the volunteer, whether they had any issues with the partner organisation and the like.

There is considerable room for improving the relationship with VIOs especially regarding the welfare of volunteers. For example, a continued relationship with VSC would provide the opportunity for volunteers to provide feedback on their experience and also provide a mechanism to make a formal complaint should the need arise.

From an organisational perspective VSC appears to be a member of a loose coalition of Volunteer Resource Centres (VRCs) located across the state. There are five VRCs remaining in Qld:

- Volunteering Qld
- Volunteering Gold Coast
- Volunteering Sunshine Coast
- Volunteering North Qld
- Volunteering Far North Qld.

Volunteering Qld (Brisbane) represents itself as the peak body for all VRCs in Qld. There is no formal agreement with the other VRCs for these arrangements other than historical precedent presumably set by government preferring to have a central point of contact for volunteering for disaster recovery. The peak body arrangement appears to have been a requirement of the Commonwealth (DSS) made in 2022 to administer the VMA.

The relationship between VRCs is a fraught one and historically characterised by distrust and animosity. The number of VRCs has declined over time in Qld because of financial pressures. At least three of the remaining VRCs are experiencing financial pressures with the likelihood of closure. If the role of Volunteering Qld is to act as a peak body then it has failed in its efforts to advocate for funding for the sector. It is a common view that VQ receives funding for volunteering but does not pass it onto other VRCs. The issue of transparency is a major issue.

VSC experienced little involvement with VQ prior to the announcement of the Parliamentary Inquiry. VQ have increased their consultation with all VRCs in an attempt to resolve past grievances and improve working relationships with a view to create a more united front presumably in preparation for the Inquiry. VQ are currently leading a process for a joint submission from all VRCs to the Inquiry. VSC have decided not to participate in this process.

In addition to these arrangements in Qld there appears to be a network of volunteering organisations that operate at the national level. Volunteering is seen as a national priority, a

national resource that requires advocacy and by implication funding. There appears to be peak bodies in each state and at the national level. These organisations and activities consume time and resources with very little if any payback for organisations such as ours providing direct services. We would prefer a single point of contact in Qld preferably the Volunteering Unit in the Department. Any liaison with federal or national volunteer organisations should be performed by the Volunteering Unit in the Department.

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

The central issue for VSC is funding. VSC is currently planning to cease operation by the end of this financial year because of insufficient funds. This situation has arisen because there is no funding from either State or the Commonwealth Governments to resource the key functions of volunteering.

Modest funding from the Commonwealth (DSS) was previously provided by special purpose funding through a grant. We have been advised that this year (2024~25) is the last year this funding is available. For this financial year (2024~2025) VQ has assumed the role of contract manager from DSS. There was no advice provided by DSS or VQ as to the reason for this change. This decision has reinforced VQ's role as the peak volunteering body in Qld which in our view is a conflict and should be discontinued. Further, with the Commonwealth funding ceasing there is no reason for peak body arrangements to continue.

It appears that funding for VRCs has been pulled by the Commonwealth to fund Disaster Recovery Australia (DRA) a not for profit veteran's organisation established to provide disaster recovery services. The amount of Commonwealth funding provided to DRA is in the order of \$38.1M over 4 years from 2022~23 (NEEMA). This assumption has not been confirmed.

Other funding for VSC to date has been sourced from special purpose funding from Government with a modest grant from Council to assist with operating the office. All of these grants are special purpose and require VSC to deliver outcomes specified by the funder. There are significant overheads with the identification, application, delivery and reconciliation of these grants. This funding is also dependent on the organisation being self sufficient in its operations as there is little provision for overheads within the grants.

VRC revenue figures speak for themselves:

	2024	2023	2022
Volunteering Qld	3,492,757	4,545,955	
Volunteering Gold Coast	6,806,422	5,651,973	
Volunteering SC	243,220	89,560	
Volunteering North Qld	90,118	105,995	
Volunteering Far North Qld		69,182	148,373

Note: The exception in this list is Volunteering Gold Coast. Whilst identifying as a VRC Volunteering Gold Coast operates a funded aged care patient transport service utilising volunteers. We believe that the Volunteering Gold Coast's relationship with an internal business operation utilising volunteers is a conflict.

It is recommended that the Inquiry seek further details on the sources of revenue for all VRCs including VQ with a view that these funds be reallocated on an agreed formulae of distribution. Particular attention to be given to whether the funding for VQ to undertake the role of a peak body should continue in light of the creation of a volunteering unit in the Department.

Similarly, all sources of government grant funding including from Local, State and Commonwealth be reviewed to identify those grants available for volunteering and similar purposes such as social inclusion. These grants be prioritised and quarantined for VRCs to undertake volunteering. A consolidated single agreement between the Department and VRCs be developed to ensure delivery against agreed criteria. This initiative alone will remove a significant administrative overhead for VRCs managing individual grants with the further potential to increase funding from

existing grant funding sources. Special consideration be given to any funding from the Commonwealth. Commonwealth funding should be included in these arrangements as a priority.

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 Brisbane 2032 Olympic and Paralympic Games represent both significant opportunities and risks for volunteering.

VSC has been approached by a local group SC2032 established to mobilise interest and support for Sunshine Coast participation in the Olympics. Prior to approaching VSC SC2032 had progressed an agenda to establish a separate volunteering organisation to recruit volunteers for the Olympics on the Sunshine Coast. The issue with this approach was any new organisation would be a competitor to VSC with not only its current volunteering activities but also any future role with the Olympics. This situation was outlined to SC2032 and they are now reconsidering their position.

It is likely that as the Olympics approach similar initiatives will appear in other locations in South East Qld. As a general policy for Government across all portfolios existing services should be funded and enhanced in preference to the creation of dedicated competing services for the Olympics.

The Qld state government if it wishes to support the growth of volunteering in consideration of the Olympics should ensure that funding for volunteering be directed to those organisations for volunteering services established as a result of this Inquiry.

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;

A major activity undertaken by VSC is the provision of spontaneous volunteers for disaster recovery. We have an MoU with the Sunshine Coast Council to provide spontaneous volunteers for disaster recovery. The MoU details the various roles and responsibilities of VSC and Council. Council is our connection to the disaster management infrastructure of both the State and Commonwealth governments.

We receive a modest grant from Council to support our office operations for assistance with rent, insurance and the like. Similar to all grants there are stringent criteria on what the grant can be used for with detailed acquittal processes. We receive no specific disaster recovery funding from Council.

We have been fortunate recently to have been awarded a Qld Floods Grant from the Qld Government to recruit team leaders, develop policies and procedures and purchase basic equipment. Prior to this grant we were in no position to meet the requirements specified in the MoU. Under our current funding it will not be possible to maintain the disaster recovery infrastructure established by the Qld Floods grant unless specific funding for disaster recovery is provided.

The Qld Floods grant was awarded to VSC as a result of a grant application by VSC. It is important to note that It was not awarded to VSC because we represented an obvious capability gap in our ability to perform disaster recovery as part of an overall local strategy for disaster recovery. There has never been an assessment by Council of VSCs capability to meet the MoU requirements.

On 14 September 2023, the Senate Select Committee on Disaster Resilience (the Committee) tabled its *Interim Report*. On 8 August 2024, the Committee tabled its final report *Boots on the Ground: Raising Resilience*. This report and the Australian Government Response published on December 2024 will have a significant impact on disaster recovery in Australia for the immediate future. On August 9, 2024 Monica Taylor and Fiona Crawford from QUT published

an article in 'The Conversation' critical of the Senate Inquiry and its failure to empower local communities.

It is not the intent of this submission to provide an analysis of these reports or support a particular outcome rather to make the observation that the Inquiry should investigate whether the provision of spontaneous volunteers should be provided by local communities e.g. volunteering organisations such as VSC or should it be provided by a national body such as Disaster Recovery Australia (DRA) funded by the Commonwealth. There are arguments for and against. Should the Inquiry recommend that spontaneous volunteers be provided locally e.g. through a VRC such as VSC resourcing for this activity be made available directly from State and Commonwealth disaster recovery funding and not from funding for volunteering.

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.

The volunteering sector in Qld will fail to progress as a major contributor to the Qld economy and community if it is not supported by evidenced base research. Without this input the sector will be driven by opinion, ideology and in some instances misinformation. Serious consideration be given by the Inquiry to establish a volunteering research centre preferably at a regional university in Qld. This centre once established be funded by research grants and the University. VRCs or their replacements become foundation members of the research centre.

The research centre should also for fill the role of a knowledge centre where publications, research publications and other material are held or alternatively catalogued. This facility will be invaluable in facilitating further research into volunteering in Qld. The Inquiry report would be a foundation document for the research centre.

Volunteering Sunshine Coast Inc.

February 28, 2025