

Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland

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Parliamentary Inquiry into Volunteering

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Prepared by

Meals on Wheels Queensland

with contributions from:

Meals on Wheels Brisbane South

Boonah & District Meals on Wheels

St Andrews Meals on Wheels - Townsville

Maroochydore Meals on Wheels (Suncare Community Services)

Meals on Wheels Rockhampton

Yeppoon Meals on Wheels

Geebung Meals on Wheels

Gin Gin Meals on Wheels

Gympie Meals on Wheels

Approved for Submission by:



Evan Hill
CEO

MOWQ Ltd
info@qmow.org

16/27 South Pine Road, Brendale, QLD 4500
07 3205 5588

Dear Committee

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to this vital inquiry into volunteering within Queensland.

Meals on Wheels in Queensland reflects a journey of compassion and growth and from visionary beginnings in Ipswich in 1956 through our founder, the late Rhoda Cameron of Ipswich (the wife of the then Commonwealth Health minister), who saw the need for a service to help feed the poor. Mrs Cameron had been on an overseas trip to England, where she saw a form of meal service in operation and felt this was something needed in her own community. Mrs Cameron returned to Ipswich and endeavoured to promote the idea.

Although not initially successful, Mrs Cameron's determination was not dampened, and together with the late Mrs Russell, she commenced a "Meals on Wheels" service in her backyard gardener's cottage, serving meals from a thermos flask and a pudding basin, the price being two shillings (20 cents) per meal. At this time, there were no such funds as meal subsidies or Government Grants, so they went ahead in faith, relying upon the sale of the meals to self-fund their activities. It is from these humble beginnings, the concept of Meals on Wheels in Queensland has grown.

Meals on Wheels across Queensland has expanded its reach, and in 2024 delivered a record 2.7 million meals and welfare checks across the state. Through our community network of providers, operating across 142 locations, Meals on Wheels in Queensland serves approximately 22,000 Queenslanders, powered by 6,326 volunteers, their efforts valued conservatively at over \$50 million per year. It is in the fabric of our community organisations to recognise and celebrate the invaluable contribution of volunteers, who have formed the backbone of Meals on Wheels and together we will celebrate 70 years of community service in 2026.

We are committed to our communities all across Queensland, continuing to provide essential services to those who rely on us. We are not just a service; we are a lifeline for communities reflecting the steadfast dedication of providing essential support to those who rely on them.

Why Volunteer for Meals on Wheels:

- **Make a Meaningful Impact:** Joining Meals on Wheels allows individuals to directly impact the lives of vulnerable individuals and families in their community by delivering essential meals and welfare checks.
- **Be Part of a Lifeline:** Volunteers form the backbone of Meals on Wheels, providing crucial support to those who rely on the service. By volunteering, individuals become part of a lifeline for communities across Queensland.
- **Experience Personal Growth:** Volunteering with Meals on Wheels offers opportunities for personal growth and development. It allows individuals to develop valuable skills, gain new experiences, and foster a sense of fulfillment by helping others.

- **Build Connections:** Joining Meals on Wheels provides an opportunity to build meaningful connections within the community where volunteers meet like-minded individuals, forge new friendships, and become part of a vibrant and supportive volunteer network.
- **Contribute to Health and Well-being:** Research shows that volunteering has positive effects on mental and emotional well-being. By volunteering with Meals on Wheels, it not only contributes to the physical health of recipients but also enhances volunteers' own well-being.
- **Be Part of a Proactive Community:** Meals on Wheels Queensland is actively working to expand its reach and enhance its services. By joining as a volunteer, volunteers become part of a proactive community dedicated to making a difference and shaping a brighter future for generations to come.

Our insights in this submission have been driven by volunteers themselves, volunteer managers and senior leaders within our network of community organisations, and our own experiences from working with our Meals on Wheels across Queensland.

Current state of volunteering in Meals on Wheels across Queensland

Meals on Wheels Queensland (MOWQ) is a member-based organisation currently consisting of 106 Members across 142 locations in Queensland. Our Membership data illustrates a peak in volunteer numbers in 2020, with approximately 8,500 volunteers in 2019-2020 FY. This has trended downwards since that time (as seen in figure and table below).

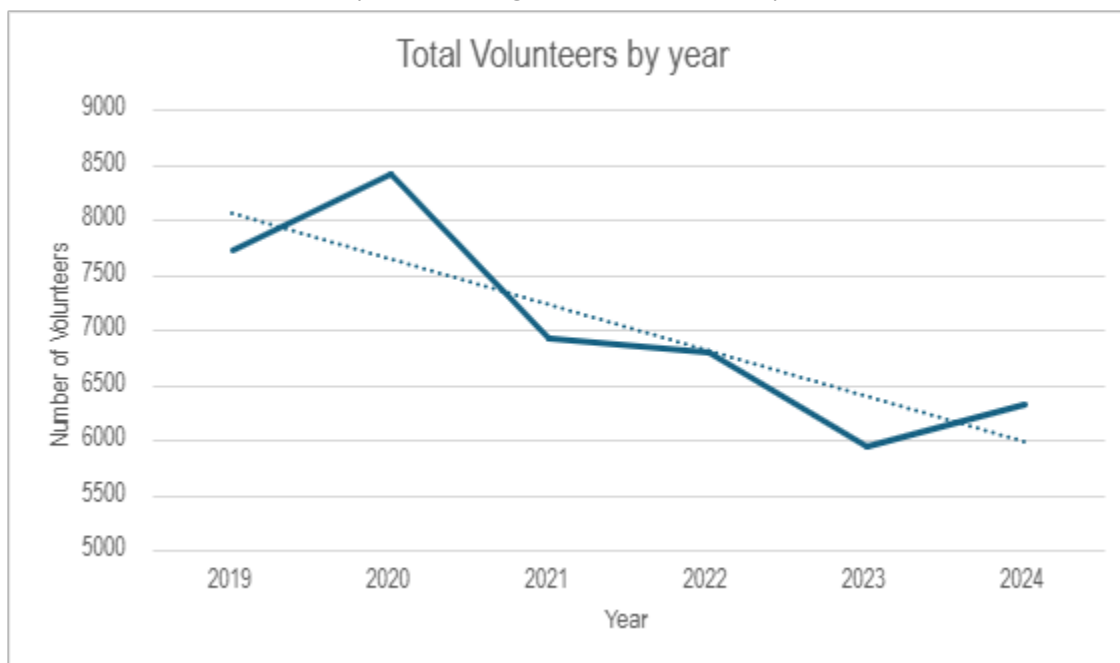


Figure 1 Total number of volunteers by year from 2019-2024.

Table 1 Percentage difference in volunteer numbers from 2020 to 2024 by Aged Care Planning Region.

Aged Care Planning Region	Number of Volunteers in 2020	Number of Volunteers in 2024	Difference in Volunteer Numbers from 2020-2024 (%)
Brisbane North	686	566	17.5% decrease
Brisbane South	1580	897	44% decrease
Cabool	760	623	19% decrease
Central West	174	168	4% decrease
Darling Downs	882	788	11% decrease
Far North	566	480	16% decrease
Fitzroy	450	421	7% decrease
Logan River Valley	352	185	48% decrease
Mackay	249	166	36% decrease
North West	44	45	0%
Northern	473	349	27% decrease
South Coast	190	138	18% decrease
South West	152	114	15% decrease
Sunshine Coast	957	659	32% decrease
West Moreton	392	380	4% decrease
Wide Bay	515	352	32% decrease

The reduction in volunteer numbers is a direct consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic. Members across Queensland experienced a significant reduction in volunteers as older Queenslanders, who formed the majority of Meals on Wheels' volunteer cohort, were encouraged to stay at home and many did not return once restrictions eased. Significantly, during COVID-19 Meals on Wheels was identified by the Commonwealth Government as an essential service, with demand increasing by 35% over this time (and has not abated). This required members to reorganise their delivery logistics, not only in line with social distancing requirements, but a reduced number of volunteers available to support the service. The ability and agility of Meals on Wheels members to adjust and respond so effectively to these circumstances is a credit to each Meals on Wheels organisation across the state.

Our members report the average age of the Meals on Wheels volunteer cohort being 70 years, indicating we are an ageing workforce. But with this come great experience, wisdom and compassion for the community, with some active volunteers holding in excess of 50 years of voluntary service.

Meals on Wheels has evolved from community organisations operated solely by volunteers with the majority of Meals on Wheels in Queensland employing staff to undertake key roles within the business. This underpins the growing complexity in operating a community organisation deeply embedded in government funding programs such as Aged Care and the NDIS. This places more emphasis on generating income to cover costs ensuring the organisation is financially sustainable. That said, 22% of Meals on Wheels in Queensland, particularly rural and remote Services, continue

to operate solely on volunteers, noting the majority of these organisations “buy-in” meals from an external source, predominantly local hospitals as opposed to cooking meals within a local community kitchen.

The main volunteer roles within Meals on Wheels are as follows:

- Committee members (including office bearers)
- Drivers / Deliverers
- Kitchen hands
- Administration, including client liaison and volunteer coordination
- Cleaning and gardening
- Maintenance
- Cooks (minimal volunteer cooks)

The largest cohort and most popular volunteering role is Driver / Deliverer which engages directly with our clients providing the meal, social connection and welfare check. This demonstrates the value of our volunteers who play a key role in the early intervention, that is, before requiring higher levels of care and essentially when a person enters the ageing continuum. Meals, combined with social support, delivered through our volunteers are addressing the following on a daily basis:

- A vulnerable person's nutritional needs, noting it is difficult to reverse the effects of malnutrition.
- Vital social connection, noting it is easier to socially engage and support older Queenslanders when the service is incidental.
- Nutrition outcomes are enhanced with the more time someone spends as part of delivering, preparing and/or eating a meal.

Should volunteer numbers continue to decline, for many Meals on Wheels in Queensland, having fewer volunteers, will require reconsideration to operational models. Alison Maclean, Business Manager at St Andrews Meals on Wheels - Townsville stated, *“We simply couldn’t operate without volunteers”*. For Sandgate Meals on Wheels, having less volunteers means they can’t grow their service to meet the demand, and it also limits their capability to work on projects to improve their service. While some areas are challenged with volunteer recruitment and retention, others like Boonah Meals on Wheels, a small service in West Moreton, state they are *“never short of volunteers”* as they *“have lots of volunteers who have been with [them] for many years”* (Debby Burgess, Secretary, Boonah Meals on Wheels). Whilst Boonah did experience a reduction of volunteers through the pandemic they have returned to and exceeded pre-Covid volunteer numbers.

A small number of members indicate they sometimes are unable to place volunteers immediately because they don’t have any available shifts. A discussion in one of our focus groups explored this further with the General Manager of Brisbane South, Monique Belousoff, saying *“We will always require more volunteers, but we have to respect the volunteers that we have and keep them gainfully*

employed in their volunteering role, give them challenges and growth". There is a delicate balance involved in volunteer management, where it is important to welcome new volunteers without compromising the opportunities for current, and particularly long-term volunteers. All care must be taken to integrate new volunteers into the team without displacing or disrupting the roles and shifts of existing volunteers. This very much speaks to the culture of the volunteering involving organisation and the capability of those responsible for leading the operations.

Volunteer recruitment, an increasingly difficult challenge for some areas, is primarily reliant on word of mouth and strong brand recognition. The majority of Members indicated word of mouth is their most successful recruitment method, while there is also to a lesser degree, contributions from social media, radio and Volunteering Queensland's, Viktor. For Maroochydore Meals on Wheels (Suncare Community Services), brand recognition has been a key factor for attracting younger volunteers to Meals on Wheels. Volunteer Team Leader, Debbie Orman, explained, *"We identified that [our younger] volunteers had a connection already with Meals on Wheels. For example, their mother used to volunteer, or they remember their grandparents receiving Meals on Wheels. It was a feel-good role and they wanted to be part of that as well. So somehow connecting in with that legacy of Meals on Wheels from the past is what's worked for us."* Most of Maroochydore's younger volunteers have a recognition of the Meals on Wheels brand from a family legacy of involvement with the organisation.

Benefits of Volunteering

There is agreeance among Meals on Wheels across Queensland that the benefits of volunteers to the organisation are invaluable. In our focus groups, members commented on the economic value that volunteers contribute, the costs saved for the organisation but also highlighted the need for more recognition of the volunteer contribution at a higher level in government.

The benefits of volunteering cited consistently by members are the benefits accrued to volunteers themselves. Volunteering with Meals on Wheels provides a sense of enjoyment, fulfilment, purpose and belonging. There is a personal satisfaction that comes with the feeling of contributing to a valuable community service. The social connections, friendships and relationships formed are priceless. Other benefits to volunteers include gaining new skills and indicating improvements in their own mental health and wellbeing.

Rockhampton Meals on Wheels Manager, Margo Haks, said, *"We have our volunteers come back and say this is their happy place."* Margo also said, *"What we find most successful is we actually make time to listen to volunteers as well. We find they want to share their stories with the staff and we in turn try to remember grandchildren's names and children's careers and things like that."* A great deal of effort is put into volunteers because of the value they bring to the organisation, and therefore, volunteer retention is high in most locations with many long-term volunteers involved.

In 2023, Huber Social conducted a Social Impact Report on behalf of Meals on Wheels Australia, which included engagement with volunteers from across Queensland, as well as other states. The report showed Meals on Wheels volunteers have 10% higher wellbeing than a sample of comparable Australians. Long term volunteers also reported significantly higher scores across factors related to their sense of belonging.¹ This report demonstrates the benefits of volunteering to volunteers themselves, as well as the community.

Barriers to Volunteering

Time/Availability

There are a diverse range of barriers to volunteering, however common themes often emerge when discussing this topic. The majority of our members believe the time available now for people to volunteer is a barrier. In our focus groups, comments were made about the impact of people working for longer and retiring later in life, demonstrating our dependence on retirees as volunteers. This is highlighted by Members indicating they have turned new volunteers away because they are not available within our operating hours.

Family Commitments

On a similar note, time is often limited due to other priorities, including family commitments, which the majority of members believe is a barrier. This applies to both parents and grandparents, with grandparents frequently caring for grandchildren while parents are at work. The rising cost of living further exacerbates this issue, as financial pressures necessitate dual incomes, reducing the time available for volunteer roles. Additionally, Services have observed a trend of volunteers stepping back during school holidays due to the increased responsibility of caring for grandchildren, resulting in gaps in the volunteer roster.

Some Meals on Wheels Services have adjusted their operating models to allow for an earlier delivery time which they find suits their current volunteers better (and offers more flexibility to the client) albeit not necessarily attracting new volunteers. Instead of meals being delivered hot at lunch time, they are delivered chilled or frozen earlier in the day so that volunteers have the remainder of their day available for other activities. This has, for example, improved volunteer satisfaction at Maroochydore Meals on Wheels and reduced the number of meals being returned to the kitchen due to client absentees.

Excessive Legislative and Regulatory Burden

Many members indicated excessive legislative and regulatory burden is a barrier to attracting new volunteers. At Meals on Wheels there are a number of laws that apply and are viewed as ‘red tape’

¹ Huber Social, *Meals on Wheels Australia Social Impact Report* (May 2023). Available at: https://mealsonwheels.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/HS_MoWA-Social-Impact-Report-2023.pdf

for volunteers. These include important laws under the Work Health and Safety Act, Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ) for food safety, and grant obligations for Commonwealth Home Support Program (CHSP) providers, such as meeting obligations under the Aged Care Quality Standards. This includes ensuring all volunteers have suitability checks and complete ongoing training in required areas, along with other obligations.

Yeppoon Meals on Wheels said an *“Aged Care Quality and Safety Audit nearly caused a loss of older volunteers who have been volunteering for years due to new requirements which left them feeling as though they were suddenly not good enough to volunteer”*. Another Service suggested the regulatory requirements give older volunteers the perception of being monitored. A focus group discussion revealed the perception of the severity or perceived strictness of some rules and requirements for Meals on Wheels in comparison to other organisations has driven volunteer resignations. Maroochydore Meals on Wheels highlighted the need to educate and spend time with volunteers on the reasons behind policies and procedures to motivate them to adhere to their requirements.

As an outcome of an increased regulatory environment and rising community expectations for quality care, greater responsibilities are placed directly on governance committees, making the volunteer committee roles less attractive due to increased risks and consequently, increasingly harder to fill. People feel as though they don’t have the skills or qualifications to perform the duties required of committees as they believe they are at risk e.g., in the face of a workplace incident.

Compliance Training

Aligned with the challenges posed by legislative and regulatory burdens, compliance training for volunteers represents a significant challenge. This equates to the amount and depth of training a volunteer requires to undertake for the Service to meet its compliance obligations. In addition to the extensive mandatory training associated with many volunteer roles, the method of delivery is a common issue. Many volunteers lack the technological resources or digital capabilities to complete training online. Meals on Wheels in Queensland have made a concerted effort to make training available in various formats, including paper-based, online and face-to-face group training. Another factor contributing to volunteer disengagement is the necessity to complete training that mirrors training they may have previously undertaken for their workplace or other volunteer roles e.g., anti-discrimination training. The duplication of training efforts is often met with resistance from volunteers. Members cite compliance training as one of the most difficult barriers to overcome in our volunteering experience.

Cost of volunteering

Cost was indicated as another barrier to volunteering. Volunteering as a delivery driver for Meals on Wheels frequently requires the use of personal vehicles, contributing to expenses such as fuel and general vehicular wear and tear. Meals on Wheels compensate volunteers for fuel costs or other out-of-pocket expenses associated with volunteering, however it is noted too not everyone accepts

compensation. Out-of-pocket expenses likely contribute to an individual's decision to volunteer and to a higher degree more recently, with increased cost of living. In recent times, MOWQ is frequently asked by potential volunteers whether they would have to use their own vehicles, indicating this is a factor in their decision making. Whilst some members have "fleet vehicles" available for deliveries, this is in the minority.

Other Barriers

Other barriers to volunteering perceived by MOWQ members include a lack of understanding of the time commitment needed i.e., only 2-4 hours as opposed to a whole day, emphasising it doesn't take a whole day to make a difference. Others indicate there is a lack of understanding of what volunteering entails, it is seen as a burden, and it is not something people think about or consider doing. There is also the opinion if people knew the benefits of volunteering, it would help to drive participation, however they don't truly connect with that until they have volunteered and experienced it for themselves.

Whilst not a barrier to the volunteer themselves, the rising cost of insurance and the lack of certain insurances available continue to be a strain on volunteering involving organisations. Insurance premiums in Meals on Wheels' group scheme have on average increased by 225% over the past 2 years.

Current experiences, motivations and challenges for volunteers and volunteer-involving organisations and recommendations for addressing challenges

Volunteer Experiences

Volunteer Story #1: Glennis – Meals on Wheels Gin Gin

Glennis has been volunteering at Meals on Wheels Gin Gin for 14 years, since retiring from work, now holding the position of secretary on their committee alongside her husband, John, who is the Treasurer. Upon reflection of her volunteer journey, Glennis said she has *"enjoyed every minute of it"*. She expressed that volunteering is rewarding and makes her feel like she is doing something for her community, saying *"clients are appreciative, it makes you realise it's a service that's needed."*

Glennis is motivated to volunteer because she enjoys being part of a community and feels that *"it's like family when you're involved in the community; they become your family."*

Volunteering does not come without its challenges and Glennis acknowledged it's challenging at times in her role on the management committee. She said just delivering meals, she has no challenges, but on the committee, time is a challenge, as well as implementing government changes. Glennis finds that keeping up with government change is difficult and stressful and believes that age contributes to that.

At Gin Gin they also have challenges with recruiting volunteers despite advertising widely. Many volunteers have recently been turned off from volunteering when police checks are mentioned believing it is unnecessary red tape.

Volunteer Story #2: Lillian – Meals on Wheels Eidsvold

Lillian works at Eidsvold State School, who have recently started a volunteering program, allowing their senior students in Years 10 to 12 to volunteer with Meals on Wheels. Sparked by a conversation between their principal and a Meals on Wheels representative at a conference who encouraged volunteer participation at a young age, Lillian was tasked with arranging the volunteering opportunities for students.

Eidsvold State School has been volunteering for approximately seven months, with either Lillian or the Vice Principal accompanying a small group of students on a meal delivery run. It is an optional program for students to participate in, with three Year 12 students involved currently, two Year 11 students joining the program this year and the opportunity extended to Year 10 students to participate as well.

Lillian said, *“Right from starting with the online volunteer training [through Rosterfy], it has been really easy. Students found the training simple to navigate and everyone has been really welcoming.”* Although the students’ volunteer journey is just beginning, their experiences so far have been very positive. Lillian has observed the interactions between students and clients and commented, *“the students love it”*.

One of the student volunteers relates the experience to assisting her grandmother in recent ill health, Lillian recounted, *“The student often says volunteering with Meals on Wheels is good for other students to see the importance for elderly people to have contact with young people.”* Lillian observed that volunteering has sparked conversations between students, with some quieter students even starting to talk about their family members also.

Interactions between the different generations in the small town that have stemmed from volunteering with Meals on Wheels, have helped to connect the community. Eidsvold State School have also been able to distribute their school newsletter to Meals on Wheels clients which assists them to maintain connection with the community.

In a small town, the school’s volunteer participation has already made an impact, creating more connections and engagement between generations in the community. Lillian said, *“I have noticed students come across clients at the shops in town and they will stop and have a chat with them.”* Volunteering has been a positive experience for the students and staff at Eidsvold State School and has assisted Meals on Wheels Eidsvold greatly, providing benefits to the clients and community.

Volunteer Motivations

Rewards and Recognition

Currently, MOWQ provides rewards and recognition annually for volunteers at a state level with members responsible for local reward and recognition programs. There is a MOWQ Roll of Honour for volunteers who have contributed 30 years or more of volunteering with Meals on Wheels as well as the Mary Lowe Living Legend award. This is awarded each year to a volunteer who has made a valuable contribution and paved the way in Meals on Wheels. It is a way of showcasing the wonderful work of volunteers and inspiring ‘up and coming’ volunteers by honouring those who have dedicated their lives to caring for people in their community.

In 2024, the Mary Lowe award was presented to Jack Pool, a volunteer who has been a dedicated force within Stafford and District Meals on Wheels since 1998. Jack’s journey with Meals on Wheels started after his retirement, when he joined as a delivery driver, devoting three hours each day to ensuring meals and friendly connections reached community members in need.

In 2000, Jack joined the Stafford Meals on Wheels Committee, quickly advancing to President in 2003. He held this leadership role for nearly two decades, overseeing the service’s operations, advocating for the organisation, and engaging closely with government and council departments to secure vital facility improvements. His dedication to inclusion led him to foster opportunities for people with disabilities to gain confidence and purpose through volunteering with Stafford Meals on Wheels.

As a major supporter of Meals on Wheels across Queensland, Jack also served as a state Board Member for eight years, lending his expertise and leadership to the organisation at the state level. Up until 2024, he continued to attend at least two full days each year at community, aged care and disability exhibitions, showcasing all that Meals on Wheels has to offer for both clients and volunteers. Jack’s influence extends far beyond Meals on Wheels, leaving a lasting impact across various community sectors and extending the reach of Meals on Wheels into new parts of the community. Jack embodies the heart and soul of Meals on Wheels, his dedication inspiring those he volunteers alongside, making him a truly deserving recipient of the Mary Lowe Living Legend award. When asked about his efforts, Jack simply says, “I do it because I love doing it.”

We often hear from Members their volunteers do not volunteer for recognition or rewards, but for their own intrinsic motivations. However, the majority of Members still offer rewards and recognition to their volunteers and provide incentives. These include concepts such as awards for years of service and certificates of appreciation, special volunteer events and luncheons, merchandise, food, social gatherings, lucky door prizes and vouchers.

Gympie Meals on Wheels provide a \$20 gift card that each volunteer goes in the draw to win each month. Meals on Wheels Brisbane South like to broaden the ‘More than Just a Meal’ slogan to volunteers as well as clients. General Manager, Monique, said, *“We also recognise that for our volunteers, a lot of them need the social connection through volunteering as much as our clients do.”*

So we have tried to engage them. We have these things called local supporters groups...And some of those go out and do things, like they have a lawn bowls day. We've had a cooking day where a chef's shown them how to make spring rolls at home and different things like that. So that's an opportunity for them to actually meet, form friendships, develop connections. And that's completely, again, voluntary, but it's a way that we like to extend that 'More than Just a Meal' also to our volunteers as much to our clients."

Volunteer Environment

It is important to recognise volunteers have different motivations for volunteering and the environment created in the workplace can have a significant impact on the volunteer experience. Rockhampton Meals on Wheels have created a great volunteer community and have a dedicated volunteer room which helps to foster the relationships and connections between volunteers.

Manager, Margo, explained, *"Our first volunteers arrive at nine o'clock in the morning. The meals go out at 11, but it's the men's club. They sit out the back and they solve all the problems. But it's amazing, these men. There's mechanics, there's this, and then you'll find one of them out fixing somebody's car while they're waiting to go. The advice that they share and their knowledge amongst themselves is fantastic."* Margo also has the local Toyota dealership and accounting firm volunteer regularly. They've received positive feedback about the enthusiasm of the staff to volunteer, to the point of debating over who gets to volunteer each time. It is a valuable partnership for Rockhampton Meals on Wheels.

Volunteer Engagement

Maroochydore Meals on Wheels conducts surveys and focus groups with volunteers to develop a volunteer value proposition that addresses the preferences and motivators for volunteers, ensuring they receive the support they desire. They find that this enhances the volunteer experience and is crucial for volunteer retention. They also ask for a 6-month minimum commitment from their volunteers at onboarding, understanding that sometimes unexpected circumstances prevent that from happening. Most volunteers are happy to commit for that time.

Challenges for Volunteer-involving Organisations and Recommendations to Address Challenges

Challenge: Volunteer Recruitment and Onboarding

As a volunteer-involving organisation, volunteer recruitment and onboarding are critical steps in the volunteer journey. Whilst packing and delivering meals may sound easy, we operate in a heavily regulated environment. As mentioned, compliance training is a major challenge, particularly ensuring volunteers receive the training required to perform their duties safely.

Solution: Automated Volunteer Onboarding System

At MOWQ, we have deployed an online volunteer management system purchased from “Rosterfy” as an online front door for new volunteers to address these challenges. We have configured the Rosterfy platform to automate workflows, stepping people through the basic compliance training and induction and ultimately linking volunteers directly to their local Meals on Wheels Service. We have been using Rosterfy since July 2024 to help reduce the administrative burden of volunteer onboarding for Members and improve consistency of compliance training. This has seen over 180 new volunteers complete the online onboarding. Feedback from Members has been positive, for example Geebung Meals on Wheels Coordinator, Naomi Harper, said, *“This is amazing! So much information condensed down and has made the new volunteer induction process so much easier! Thank you. So much time saved.”* Naomi also noted their first volunteer through the system commented they found the process simple. User-friendly volunteer management systems, like Rosterfy, can help to address challenges faced by volunteer-involving organisations. It also has the capability to create and manage rosters and assign volunteers to shifts and may also be delivered through an App allowing volunteers to manage their shifts remotely.

Challenge: Succession Planning

It was mentioned by multiple participants in our focus groups succession planning is difficult because there are no younger volunteers who are stepping forward to fill the roles of ageing and retiring volunteers. This is particularly emphasised when trying to fill management committee roles. A specific example of this challenge has occurred recently in Meals on Wheels at Cunnamulla. The small community primarily relied on one person leading the Service on a voluntary basis as their secretary. This person is ageing and has their own health challenges which eventually meant they could no longer continue to lead the Service. There was no obvious succession plan as no one in the small rural town has come forward to take on the responsibility required to coordinate the service. In instances such as these, MOWQ has developed alternate models of operation to ensure the essential service continues in the community.

Solution: Alternate Models of Operation

As the peak body in Queensland, we will always assess the options, looking locally first to see whether a neighbouring Meals on Wheels Service or another community group may be able to step in. In 2020, we invested in a strategic project to address the preservation and growth of Meals on Wheels in Queensland by exploring different models, including the creation of ‘Hub and Spoke’ models to enhance the sustainability of Meals on Wheels into the future. This model aims to amalgamate Services to reduce the governance requirements from multiple committees to one, while ensuring the local presence and connection in each location is maintained. This reduces the number of volunteers needed for the management committee roles, while also streamlining operations and compliance processes. For instance, in Brisbane South, the amalgamation of 11 services into a single ‘Hub’ created Meals on Wheels Brisbane South and resulted in the consolidation of administrative and corporate services, enabling the management of a single

government contract. Consequently, the Hub leads the way in meeting the mandated set of obligations, creating greater value than fulfilling these requirements and trying to solve the same issues multiple times through each individual committee and service.

In the case for Cunnamulla, with no one identified within the small community to fill management committee roles, they have relinquished their government contract. At MOWQ, to ensure the service to the community is preserved, we will manage and coordinate the operations from Brisbane (as the Hub) with local volunteers continuing to deliver meals in Cunnamulla (as the Spoke). This has been successful in building a regional capability to continue service in multiple regional locations across the state including Longreach, Gayndah, Mundubbera, Biggenden, Biloela and Eidsvold.

Another model of operation to help address this challenge is implementing a service deed. This allows for the local committee to remain in place should they choose to, and MOWQ is able to provide direct assistance and support through the service deed to meet their various obligations. This essentially shares the compliance risk and is most common for solely volunteer-run Services with no paid staff.

Challenge: Attracting a Diverse Workforce

A challenge expressed by some Members in the focus groups was having a diverse workforce of volunteers. It was expressed more diversity is needed in Meals on Wheels' volunteer cohort to better reflect the community we operate in. Rockhampton Meals on Wheels expressed they have some diversity in their volunteer cohort, particularly through individuals who have a mutual obligation requirement with Services Australia. These volunteers are aged 55 and older, unemployed and receive income support payments requiring them to contribute 30 community service hours each fortnight as a mutual obligation requirement. However, this diversity is not widespread across Meals on Wheels locations, and it was agreed connection and outreach to other diverse parts of the community can be improved to support social inclusion.

Solution: Corporate Volunteering

To help break down barriers to attracting a diverse cohort of volunteers, building partnerships with the private sector may prove beneficial. These partnerships encourage volunteer participation and may diversify the volunteer pool to better reflect the broader community. By leveraging the networks and diversity of these businesses, volunteer-involving organisations can help bridge volunteer gaps and connect with a wider cross section of the community.

Utilising corporate volunteering opportunities also helps to address the issue of declining volunteer participation. MOWQ is acutely aware of the value of volunteers to the organisation and places a high importance on taking action to address the reduction of volunteers we have experienced over recent years. As a result, our Board has included 'Volunteers' as one of four pillars of our strategic plan to focus on successful retention and attraction of volunteers. Included in this plan is to create a corporate volunteering model to target the recruitment of volunteers from the business community.

Currently, very few members engage corporate volunteers despite the majority being open to the concept. Focus group discussions revealed often when corporate businesses approach Meals on Wheels, they want a large number of staff to volunteer on one day, creating an administrative load for Services to accommodate them and risk of offending regular rostered on volunteers. Members would prefer an ongoing commitment as part of a corporate volunteer program, where they commit to filling a shift once a month, for example.

This is why MOWQ will work towards establishing pathways for integrating corporate volunteers into the existing volunteering program.

Challenges for people from diverse backgrounds, genders, age groups, abilities and locations

Location-based Challenges

With a broad geographical spread of Meals on Wheels Services across Queensland, it is often the more regional and remote Services who express location-based challenges. Gympie Meals on Wheels echoed the sentiments of many, commenting they have at least 35 organisations who recruit volunteers in their small community from only a small pool of available volunteers. Many Meals on Wheels committee members in small towns also volunteer on several other committees. This reliance on volunteers across community organisations can lead to volunteer fatigue and burnout.

Extent, effectiveness and efficiency of current government support at all levels for the volunteering sector and sustainable opportunities for improvement

Current Support

Currently, the majority of Members receive a federal funding subsidy and, in most cases, a contribution from the state government which allows volunteer-involving organisations, like Meals on Wheels, to cover certain operating costs. This supports volunteer reimbursements and volunteer management but is largely fixed funding not adjusting with population growth nor as expenses increase above CPI.

Facilities provide important utility value through a place for volunteers to congregate and have fellowship. With a mix of models existing in Meals on Wheels, some Members operating from local government pepper corn rents but responsible for facility maintenance and upgrades, others responsible for higher rents and different local maintenance arrangements. Community kitchens are a valuable piece of community infrastructure and more structured investment, similar to Neighbourhood Centres, may improve the value proposition for volunteers and, more so, the communities our members serve.

Opportunities for Improvement

Government Promotion for Volunteering

Promotion and awareness of volunteering and volunteer opportunities at all levels of government is considered effective in supporting the volunteering sector. As already mentioned, some individuals are unaware of the volunteering opportunities available to them and may not have ever been asked to volunteer. Promoting opportunities and raising awareness for volunteering is often not an activity many time-poor volunteer-involving organisations can afford to do well or at a large scale for a long duration.

Funding for Volunteer Managers

Specific funding for volunteer manager roles would provide relief for many volunteer-involving organisations, as in the case of Meals on Wheels, this role is usually currently incorporated into the coordinator or service managers role for a large proportion of Meals on Wheels Services. In some cases it may be filled by a volunteer. A potential solution could involve creating a shared regional volunteer manager position/s or capability, responsible for traveling within the region to provide support to organisations that require assistance with volunteer management. This approach would enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of volunteer coordination across multiple locations.

There may be opportunity to expand the role of Volunteer Queensland (VQ) to assist in addressing the volunteer management challenges at a systems level. VQ have provided useful resources and assistance in the past e.g., the development of the My Governance Journey tool is an excellent resource for new and current committee members to build their governance skills.

Government Incentives for Volunteering

Government could incentivise volunteer participation, particularly in schools, corporations and small to medium businesses. A suggestion was made in a focus group that universities could be engaged to integrate compulsory volunteering into their social work, caring and nursing programs to help students better understand the needs in the community at the frontline. Along with more education and promotion around the benefits of volunteering, partnering with schools and universities to incorporate volunteering into their programs may assist in addressing the widespread issue of attracting younger volunteers. Meaningful engagement from students would hopefully encourage continuation upon completion of school programs or graduation.

In some locations, schools are already involved in volunteering with Meals on Wheels and it provides a mutual benefit to the school and organisation. For example, Eidsvold State School has recently started volunteering with Meals on Wheels Eidsvold. A teacher accompanies students on a meal delivery run twice a week. In Eidsvold, where the meals are produced by the local hospital, Covid-19 policies reduced the volunteer cohort to just one person. The school recently responded to the need for volunteers, enabling the high school students to fill a large gap for Meals on Wheels Eidsvold.

A strong commitment at a systems level to a Schools Program will also improve connection to civic life. By integrating volunteerism into the school curriculum, students will gain valuable life skills while contributing to their communities. Encouraging a culture of service early in life can instil a lifelong commitment to volunteering.

Given the financial barriers volunteering presents for some individuals, there may be benefit for government to address this by providing volunteer involving organisations with a volunteer subsidy. Rockhampton Meals on Wheels surveyed their volunteers and sought responses to understand views on why other people they know are not volunteering. A recurring response related to having to use their own motor vehicles, highlighting the perceived or real costs associated with this as a deterrent to volunteering. For Meals on Wheels, a government fuel subsidy for volunteers, aligned with mileage allowances set by the Australian Tax Office, may encourage volunteer participation. While the federal government currently provides funding to Meals on Wheels for expenses related to meal preparation, the organisation faces high costs in compensating volunteers for out-of-pocket expenses, particularly fuel.

Additionally, many volunteers at Rockhampton Meals on Wheels participate to meet mutual obligation requirements until they become eligible for a pension. However, it has been observed that once these volunteers begin receiving their pension, they often stop volunteering as the financial incentive to volunteer diminishes. Offering a government incentive for continued volunteering would likely enhance both volunteer participation and motivation.

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

Volunteer Passport

With volunteer training and compliance being a barrier to volunteering and many volunteers volunteering for more than one organisation, MOWQ supports the concept of a universal volunteer passport. This would allow for easier volunteer participation across multiple organisations, streamlining the volunteer experience and reducing administrative burden for volunteer-involving organisations. Implementing a passport system allowing individuals to carry transferrable suitability checks, general volunteer training and relevant certifications across multiple organisations would reduce duplication of work and increase consistency of standards across the volunteer sector. It may also create a more diverse and fulfilling volunteer experience, allowing individuals to easily transition volunteer roles and locations with minimal red tape. Implementation prior to the 2032 Olympics would also reduce the workload of volunteer onboarding in preparation for the Olympics.

Prioritising individuals with existing volunteering commitments who wish to volunteer at the Brisbane Olympics may provide incentive for people to become involved in volunteering prior to the Games,

supporting growth in volunteering. An obvious issue during the time of the Olympics will be the gaps left for our volunteer-involving organisations. It is likely that many volunteers will become unavailable for their usual volunteer roles due to volunteering at the Olympics. The Queensland Government must consider the impact this will have on communities and how to fill these gaps so that essential services like Meals on Wheels can continue to operate during this time.

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

Meals on Wheels applauds the efforts of all volunteers who engage with disaster preparedness and response. This may be through organisations such as the State Emergency Service and Rural Fire Brigades, but also the many members of the community who fill sandbags and support their neighbours and community in the response to natural disasters. Similar to the response to COVID-19, this continually reinforces the volunteering spirit is alive in Queensland.

During disaster preparedness and recovery, tropical cyclones being the most common, Meals on Wheels in Queensland are well drilled in supporting the needs of their clients, particularly the most vulnerable over these events. When responding to a natural disaster, Meals on Wheels works in the requirements and requests of the Local Disaster Management Groups, and, depending on each circumstance of the specific natural disaster, has capacity to provide meal support to a broader section of the community during the initial recovery phase. This is an area of opportunity to work closer with Local Disaster Management Groups and the State Government agencies throughout each event. Meals on Wheels is also a useful connection point for sharing of vital information to the community members during these events given our direct access and connection to vulnerable people.

First Nations peoples volunteering and its role in closing the gap

Meals on Wheels organisations have great potential to offer meaningful employment and volunteering opportunities for First Nations peoples. Key to this is designing opportunities with First Nations organisations and people to ensure culturally safe practices are embedded in volunteering programs and initiatives. Volunteering initiatives led in collaboration with First Nations communities would ensure programs align with their values, needs and aspirations. Empowering First Nations peoples to lead and engage in community-building through volunteering can help address historical social and economic disparities, providing a platform for building stronger relationships between First Nations communities and the broader society. Volunteering can play a role in supporting First Nations peoples and contribute to the National Agreement on Closing the Gap by promoting skills development and fostering greater representation of First Nations peoples in volunteer roles.

Recommendations

The spirit of volunteering in Queensland continues to shine. Meals on Wheels experiences this every day and have done so for almost 70 years. There is little doubt the increased complexities of operating a community organisation combined with the changing demographics, rising demand and costs for community services often delivered on behalf of government, translate to a growing challenge for volunteer involving organisations. There can be no doubt though, Meals on Wheels in Queensland are steadfastly committed to continue providing pathways and opportunities for the volunteering spirit to shine.

MOWQ recommends that:

- The government should establish a state-wide awards program celebrating volunteers who demonstrate exceptional service and long-term commitment. This initiative could be supported by media coverage and social media campaigns to amplify stories of volunteer contributions and promote a culture of service across Queensland.
- The government should fund a campaign to promote volunteering opportunities, establish grants or incentives to support partnerships between volunteer-involving organisations and the private sector, and develop a framework for structured corporate volunteering programs that encourage long-term volunteer commitments.
- The government should provide dedicated funding for volunteer manager roles, explore regional shared volunteer manager models, and expand Volunteering Queensland's capacity to deliver system-level and back-end support and resources for effective volunteer management.
- The government should incentivise volunteering through school programs, create a Schools Volunteering Program, provide a volunteer subsidy to reduce costs such as licenses and motor vehicle registration for vehicles used to provide volunteer services, and introduce financial incentives to encourage continued volunteering among pensioners.
- The government should develop a universal Volunteer Passport system to streamline volunteer training, compliance, and suitability checks across organisations, reducing administrative burdens and enhancing volunteer mobility. Implementing this system before the 2032 Olympic and Paralympic Games would support efficient volunteer onboarding for the Games while mitigating potential disruptions to essential community services by prioritising experienced volunteers and planning for service continuity.
- The government should incorporate Meals on Wheels into natural disaster relief planning to enhance community support during natural disasters, leveraging Meals on Wheels' direct access to vulnerable individuals for effective information dissemination and meal support in recovery phases.

We look forward to participating in the Inquiry and working together on solutions and innovation to ensure Queensland continues to be recognised as a leader in volunteering opportunities for generations to come.