

Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland

Submission No:	497
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Publication:	Making the submission and your name public
Attachments:	See attachment
Submitter Comments:	

28 February 2025

Attention: Committee for Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland
<https://volunteeringqld.org.au/parliamentary-inquiry-into-volunteering/>

**Historical Society Cairns North Queensland Inc. submission to
Queensland Government Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland**

Dear Committee Members

Background

The Cairns Historical Society (CHS/ the Society) is a not for profit membership based organisation established in 1958 by the Cairns community. Since then the Society has grown into a significant repository with a substantial collection of far north Queensland history, with two key areas of operations: the Cairns Museum and the Research Centre. The Society is a Registered Charity and Not for Profit organisation. It has a Board including President and eight members who are supported by an Executive Officer, Accounts and Sales Manager, and Front of House Coordinator (3 full time staff) and a Volunteer/ WHS Coordinator, Collections Officer and Exhibitions Curator (3 part time staff). Their roles are supported by 51 volunteers.¹ The Society is supported by the Cairns Regional Council through a Performance and Resource agreement (R & P), which provides financial support for the operational running of the Cairns Museum. Other sources of income for the Society come from visitation, grants and sponsorship.

The Society's collections are maintained to best practice Collection Standards and are the heart of the Historical Society and its values. As custodians of far north Queensland's memories, stories and objects, the Society collects, preserves and makes available history and heritage through its Research Centre to locals, visitors and researchers alike. The region's stories are also made available to the public through our carefully curated Cairns Museum and supplemented by thrice yearly temporary exhibitions through our Ground Floor Gallery.

Operational Areas

The Research Centre and Collections Care Team manage the collections, namely archives, images and objects, making this material available internally for exhibition, education programs, public lecture series and publications as well as externally to researchers, architects, writers and family historians. The Research Centre is supported by 26 volunteers who are nearly all retired professionals and the quality of volunteers in this area to understand and undertake best practice collection management is essential. Our volunteer programs in this area are supported by in-house training and support for new recruits. Our longest serving volunteer in this area has been with the Society for 36 years with most having over 15 years' service. Nearly all of the volunteers

¹ As of 30 January 2025



who work “back of house” (public enquiry research area, Archives, Exhibition, Collections care and at the Offsite Collections Store), are committed volunteers who are aligned to the values of our Organisation. Volunteers who work back of house remain engaged with the Society for a long time – years at a time.

The “front of house” of the Cairns Historical Society is the Cairns Museum. Staff in this area are assisted by 25 volunteers who are rostered on in reception, as guides and hosts, education guides for children and international students, as well as Cruise Ship Walking Tour guides. Many work across the different areas of operations. The Cairns Museum is a prominent destination attraction for tourists and locals alike. As an organisation in Cairns, the Cairns Museum contributes to the local and regional economy by providing a cultural experience for tourists and locals. Visitation numbers are essential for the sustainability of our business model. Visitation through our Museum enables the Society to sustain its collection and collecting activities for the community now and into the future. In the 2023-2024 financial year, the Cairns Museum welcomed 23, 506 visitors through our facility.

Volunteers working ‘front of house’ volunteer for a range of reasons which are often quite different to the back of house cohort. “Front of house” volunteers are often recent retirees looking to do something to contribute back to the community, older women having to meet mutual obligation for Services Australia, and a few younger people looking to gain skills in reception while looking for employment. While many are passionate about the Cairns Museum and have a general interest in history, the cohort in this area are not the traditional member volunteers of a member based organization, invested in the organisation itself (with the exception of a few). They are more like a professional volunteer who, if the Society does not suit, will find another place to volunteer instead. They reflect the broader change of volunteerism itself, and changes to member based organizations such as ourselves which often started from the 1950s onwards. Their reasons for volunteering contrast to back of house volunteers and turnover in this area is high, especially on reception.

Importance of volunteering contribution to our organisation

In the 2023-2024 financial year, volunteers at the Cairns Historical Society contributed 14, 535 volunteer hours making a significant contribution of \$337,648 in saving for the organisation when calculated against Australia’s minimum wage. The relationship between volunteers and organizations such as the Cairns Historical Society is changing. The older member volunteers who were committed to grow and maintain the organisation into the Society it is today, are either no longer with us or reaching an age where they want to retire and step back from volunteering to enjoy their last few years. Currently out of our total cohort, we have 43% volunteers in the 70-80+ age group and 18% of those are 78-85+ years. Only 17 % are below 50 years of age. This places the Society in a precarious position: either adapt or pivot to attract new volunteers not aligned with our core objectives, or fold because sustainability through volunteer and membership renewal is no longer viable.

Decline in numbers and effect on Organisation and Operations

Since 2020, there has been a gradual decline in membership and volunteer numbers. This puts collections management, research and conservation services at risk as the “back of house” struggles to undertake core tasks associated with answering public research enquiries, archiving, collections care and museum management. Similarly, the staffing of operations in “front of house” with reduced volunteer numbers, affects not only the appearance of a first class facility (best practice presentation) but has the potential to limit ability to take on education and engagement programs which bring in income (due to lack of capacity to deliver). Further reduction of volunteer numbers in the long run may affect museum opening hours and overall



sustainability of Cairns Museum in the future. This places the organisation under stress due to a potential lack of human capital to realise our goals for community, which is compounded by shrinking membership numbers.

Reflections

It is a dilemma faced by many traditional member based grass roots organisations across the region. This is exemplified by an increase in enquiries from other organisations who contact the Society to donate their organisational records due to closure. An example of this is a recent donation of a long standing community club, the Cairns Navy League Inc. which had been in operation for over 65 years. Last year it had to dissolve. Reasons provided at time of conversations are all too similar: aging population of members, no volunteers to carry out tasks, poor membership renewal and younger generations not interested. The Society would argue the problem is more complex.

The cost-of-living crisis has affected individuals and their ability to participate. While the 50cent bus fare has assisted public movement around Cairns city, volunteering for many still remains prohibitive due to travel/petrol costs, and lack of parking for vehicles for those out of town, or worrying about the risk of parking infringement fines if they cannot get out to move their car in time.

Other noticeable barriers reflected through discussions by the Society Volunteer Coordinator with our volunteer members includes: a waning or lost interest due to lack of free time with the new 24/7 daily cycle of society; intergenerational change in attitude towards committing to members-based organisations; greater pressure to assist family members such as helping out with children or grandchildren; cost-of-living stress which invokes an urgency to earn money for as long as possible – especially for women who may have small superannuation totals and are worried about retirement; registering/renewing a Blue Card being a complicated and time-consuming process for both organisation and volunteers, especially if they are not digitally literate; ‘shame’ or ‘not valued’ felt by many who are not eligible for the aged pension or part pension and have to meet Mutual Obligation requirements. In particular, this last point is expressed privately by many of our older women between mid-50s and pension age 67 who find it difficult to get a job after the age of 50. In addition, finding volunteers who are digitally literate and able to adapt to new technology remains difficult with many reluctant to engage.

Actions taken

The Cairns Historical Society has over the last 12 months made considerable effort to reach out to potential volunteers as well as pivot our operations to meet the problems associated with this issue. We have broadened our traditional areas of intake to include non-traditional volunteers such as members of the community on Work Cover Back to Work plans; Accessibility and neurodiversity sector; and cultural diversity sectors. However, despite this pivot along with active marketing campaigns through media, online and newspaper channels, the Society has made little inroad into increasing the number of volunteers, or managed to attract culturally diverse volunteers.

Suggestion

The community is at a tipping point for generational and attitudinal change with the impact particularly felt by volunteer, member based community organisations. The Cairns Historical Society would benefit from:

- Assistance for not for profit community organisations to compensate their volunteers for travel and/or petrol costs to alleviate Cost of Living issues.



- Assistance for not for profit community organisations to meaningfully provide incentives through rewards programs to attract the “New” professional volunteer (ie: those not aligned to traditional member based organizational values).
- Greater access and connection to Workplace Providers by not for profit organisations, to build up partnerships between each as a source for non-judgmental volunteer placement for set periods of time e.g. six month placements. This provides an opportunity for placement, builds skills and self-worth for individuals looking for work, and provides a 6 month volunteer for organisations. This in turn can create interest in the organization by these volunteers, who may decide to stay on, even if only as members.
- Elevation of Volunteerism by government at all levels, as a worthy societal choice to promote the positive benefits of volunteering and reduce feelings of shame and stigma associated with Mutual Obligation requirements - especially in those years of limbo before people are eligible for Aged Pension.

We thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to this very important inquiry into volunteerism, volunteers and community participation.

Yours sincerely



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Executive Officer
Cairns Historical Society

