

Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland

Submission No:	544
Submitted by:	Volunteering Queensland
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volunteering
queensland

Submission on Current Data, Trends and Research for the Parliamentary Inquiry into Volunteering

Introduction

Volunteering Queensland submits this information as pertinent background and context for the review of all submissions and public hearings included in the Parliamentary Inquiry.

The following research and papers have been conducted in the last 5 years and span both National and State jurisdictions.

These include:

1. National Strategy for Volunteering
2. National Standards for Volunteering Organisations
3. State of Volunteering in Queensland Reports:
 - 2021
 - 2024
 - Focus on Older Queenslanders
 - Focus on Younger Queenslanders
4. The Five Forces That Are Changing Volunteering in Queensland
5. Queensland Volunteering Strategy and Action Plan

This submission highlights the importance of the Inquiry having fully reviewed all of the above documents.

National Strategy for Volunteering

The National Strategy for Volunteering was developed through a comprehensive 12-month co-design process led by Volunteering Australia and funded by the Australian Government Department of Social Services. This collaborative effort engaged thousands of stakeholders from across the volunteering ecosystem, including volunteers, volunteer-involving organisations, researchers, government departments, and members of the public.⁵

The Vision of this Strategy bears repeating in this context of this important inquiry. This Vision recognises that volunteering is the heart of Australian communities”. It looks to a society where more people volunteer more often, feel respected and know their contribution makes a difference; a society where at all levels of government “volunteering is valued and properly considered in policy settings, service design, and strategic investment”, where “diversity in volunteering is recognised, celebrated, and supported”, and “where people individually and collectively realise their potential for creating thriving communities.”⁶

This is why the Strategic Objectives in the existing National Volunteering Strategy are so important, as they provide good signposts for how best to do this. These include:

- Ensuring a good volunteer experience, which is essential to achieving the best outcomes for individuals, organisations and society. Apart from maximising the prospects of positive outcomes, this also is highly significant in improving improve retention.
- Making volunteering inclusive and accessible to everyone. It should be easy to access and participate in volunteering, where everyone is able to feel welcome and given the opportunity to contribute their time, skills, and passion to activities and causes they care about, while also ensuring these match the needs of VIOs and the community.
- Ensuring volunteering is not exploitative. It must be both safe and ethical, and appropriate supports and protections need to be in place. Volunteers should not be exploited as ‘free labour’, used to replace paid workers or compensate for shortages in the paid workforce.
- Diversifying and improving the understanding of volunteering to include different cultural expressions and interpretations as a way to help ensure volunteering in all its forms is well supported across Australian communities.
- Reshaping and deepening the public perception and understanding of volunteering.

- Recognising the inherent value of volunteering by celebrating and supporting it as an activity with inherent value that benefits Australian society. While estimates of the economic value of volunteering are important, this innate value can be better measured by going beyond dollars and cents and better detailing all the areas of personal and societal benefit that good volunteering is acknowledged to bring.
- Empowering and enabling communities to be drivers of how volunteering occurs can help ensure everyone who wants to participate is able to do so, irrespective of their level of power or access to resources. It will also increase the chances of it having maximum positive impact.
- Making volunteering a cross-portfolio Issue in Government, considering volunteers and volunteering across all domains. Comprehensive policy and investment in volunteering should be recognised as an essential remit of governments at every level and across most Ministerial portfolios.
- Committing to strategic investment in common enabling infrastructure, including technology, research, resources, and support services will improve capacity and capability across the volunteering ecosystem.
- Recognising the crucial importance of Volunteer Management through adequately resourcing it as a role and as a profession will improve the experience of volunteers and amplify the impact of volunteering.

Read more about the National Strategy on Volunteering and its accompanying action plan here: <https://volunteeringstrategy.org.au/the-strategy/>

National Standards for Volunteering Involvement

The National Standards for Volunteer Involvement (National Standards) are a best practice framework to guide volunteer involvement. They were developed in 2015, and refreshed in 2023 following extensive consultation. They are an essential resource for all organisations and groups that engage volunteers. The National Standards can be used flexibly, recognising that volunteering takes place in highly diverse settings and ways.

Adoption of the National Standards has direct benefits to both volunteers and to organisations and groups:

- They help improve the volunteer experience and ensure that the wellbeing of volunteers is supported and their contributions are valued.

- They provide best practice guidance and benchmarks to help organisations attract, manage and retain volunteers and support effective risk and safety practices.

There are eight standards:

- 1: Volunteering is embedded in leadership, governance and culture
- 2: Volunteer participation is championed and modelled
- 3: Volunteer roles are meaningful and tailored
- 4: Recruitment is equitable, and diversity is valued
- 5: Volunteers are supported and developed
- 6: Volunteer safety and wellbeing is protected
- 7: Volunteers are recognised
- 8: Policies and practices are continuously improved

Read more about the National Standards for Volunteer Involvement here:

[National Standards for Volunteer Involvement 2024](#)

State of Volunteering in Queensland Reports

Over the last 5 years Volunteering Queensland has commissioned 4 State of Volunteering Reports to provide trends and insights into volunteering in Queensland.

Here in Queensland, over a 10% decline in volunteering has been reported between 2021 (participation rate of 75.7%) and 2024 (participation rate of 64.3%) by the respective State of Volunteering in Queensland Reports.

In addition to the two holistic reports that have been undertaken, in 2024, a further deep dive was done into both older and younger Queenslanders to take a look at the nuances of these demographics.

All four of these reports provide essential information and trends that need to be taken into consideration when looking at where the opportunities are to build a better volunteering infrastructure.

All State of Volunteering in Queensland Reports can be found here:

<https://volunteeringqld.org.au/state-of-volunteering-in-queensland/>

Five Forces That Are Changing Volunteering in Queensland

Given the decline in volunteering, not only in Queensland but nationally and globally, Volunteering Queensland found it pertinent to not only look at the trends within the volunteering sector, but to give consideration to the factors outside of the volunteering sector that are impacting this decline and to see where we could influence, mitigate or adjust for these forces.

This paper outlines that there are five social and economic forces that are changing the way Queensland residents both volunteer and consume volunteer services. These forces are environmental and demographic change, macro- and micro-economic volatility, and declining public trust in institutions.

These forces are collectively conspiring to:

- Reduce the pool of available volunteers
- Reduce the pool of resources available to support volunteering
- Reduce the quality of volunteer service delivery.
- Increase the demand for volunteer-run services.

This analysis projects some concerning scenarios for the continuing decline of volunteering which will have profound economic and social impacts. These impacts will be felt by organisations delivering critical services, people / the environment / animals etc who won't be able to receive services, and the loss of the benefits that people who participate in volunteering receive themselves.

The paper can be accessed here: [Five Forces that are Changing Volunteering in Queensland – Volunteering Queensland](#)

Queensland Volunteering Strategy 2024 – 2032 & Action Plan 2024 – 26

The Queensland Volunteering Strategy, developed by the previous Government, aimed to:

- Acknowledge the important role that volunteers already play in Queensland and celebrate the significant value that volunteering delivers for individuals, organisations and communities
- Set an actionable roadmap that responds to the significant challenges and opportunities the sector advised, including attracting and retaining more volunteers

- Improve the way the sector works together and strengthen partnerships to realise a future where volunteering is thriving in Queensland

The strategy was developed through codesign workshops, consultations with the sector and detailing learnings from a variety of evidence bases. The consultation was robust and positive. It was a huge disappointment to the stakeholder group involved, and the sector as a whole, that the resultant strategy wasn't launched, supported and resourced as it should have been, given it was only finalised days before the government went into caretaker mode.

The Strategy and Action plan were also somewhat less than the stakeholder group would have liked to see. The Action Plan became more a list of what had already been done, than a bold setting of activities and targets to propel the sector to change and grow. It is nonetheless an excellent source document, and it would be beneficial for the current government to consider re-engaging the previous stakeholder group to assist with developing an exciting and visionary new strategy that can take the Inquiry recommendations and bring them to life in a targeted and practical plan.

The Strategy and Action Plan can be accessed here:

<https://www.tatsipca.qld.gov.au/our-work/community-support/communities-2032/queensland-volunteering-strategy>

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Submission to the Inquiry into Volunteering in Queensland

**Volunteering is seen as the
single most impactful way
to realise individual and
collective potential to
create and sustain thriving
communities¹**

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Foreword

Volunteering is more than just an act of giving; it is the foundation of our communities, culture, and shared humanity. In Queensland, volunteering is deeply embedded in our way of life. It connects us, supports each other, and builds resilient communities.

Despite the convenience of digital connections, technology has inadvertently led to a greater sense of social isolation. In this context, the simple act of offering help to others is more important than ever. It not only nurtures our empathy but also strengthens the ties between us and maintains the very essence of community.

Volunteering is who we are – or who we used to be. Volunteering rates in Queensland are in serious decline, and the pressure on both volunteers and the organisations that rely on them has never been more evident. Demand is increasing rapidly alongside cost-of-living increases. The expectation that volunteers will always be available to fill these gaps is no longer realistic. We are now at a critical crossroads. This calls for immediate action – action that not only revitalises volunteering but ensures it adapts to the challenges of the present and future.

To address this, we must ensure that anyone who wishes to volunteer has the access, support and opportunities to do so. At the same time, vulnerable individuals, communities, and causes must be able to access the volunteers they need. Barriers to volunteering must be removed.

Volunteering in Queensland contributes a staggering ~\$30 billion annually in social and economic benefit, just below the Tourism sector (\$34.7B). This impact is especially significant in remote, rural, and regional areas, where volunteers often fill gaps that government resources cannot cover. However, these gaps are widening, and without new approaches, vulnerable Queenslanders will continue to fall through the cracks.

This Inquiry presents a rare opportunity to reshape the future and fabric of volunteering in our state. Not to apply a quick fix, but to build a strong volunteering legacy for the future. We have a unique chance to establish a sustainable ecosystem to strengthen social services, combat isolation, engage young people, and support Queensland communities now and into the future.

We are deeply grateful for the positive working relationships and collaborative support we have built with the Government, our Minister, local Members, Federal and State Government Departments, Local Councils, our Volunteers, Members, Board, broader networks and the Far North Qld, North Qld and Gold Coast Volunteer Resource Centres, as well as so many volunteer involving organisations that we interact with. Together these stakeholders are a positive and productive community who will passionately commit to the recommendations of this Inquiry in the service of our volunteers.

Volunteering is not just an "industry" it is a critical service. We must innovate, invest, and lead to create a robust, flexible sector that can respond to major events, disasters, and growing social needs, benefiting generations to come. When we consider that the 10% decline in volunteering has come at a cost of around \$3 billion across the state – we can't afford not to invest now to properly underpin this generous community giving and guarantee it survives and prospers.

Jane Hedger
Chief Executive Officer
Volunteering Qld

Volunteering Queensland's history

Founded in 1983 as the Volunteer Centre of Queensland, we began in Brisbane's CBD with nearly all operations driven by volunteers. In 1997/98, we earned Quality Assurance Certification to provide accredited training in volunteering and volunteer management across the state and became a registered training organisation (RTO). This milestone saw us rebrand as Volunteering Queensland, establishing our role as the peak body representing and advancing volunteering in Queensland.

Today, we support over 400 member Volunteer Involving Organisations (VIOs) and extend our free resources and programs to thousands more through networks and online training. Volunteering Queensland represents 2.8 million volunteers, advocating for their rights and highlighting the positive impact they have on our communities. We advise VIOs on implementing the National Standards, deliver workshops, collect data, run campaigns, conduct community development activities, fund community projects and connect spontaneous disaster volunteers for critical events. We collaborate with peak bodies in other states and territories, Volunteering Australia, and the international volunteer community.

We work closely with Federal, State, and Local Governments, volunteers, VIOs, and other organisations to foster a thriving volunteering culture across Queensland. We partner with three Volunteer Resource Centres; Far North Queensland, North Queensland, and the Gold Coast, to share support, advocacy and resources. These partnerships are essential to drive collaboration and innovation that grows volunteering, share resources to prevent duplication, and strengthen local delivery of volunteer activities.

Our core goals are to:

- Inspire more people to volunteer regularly
- Advocate for conditions that enable volunteering to thrive
- Build the capacity of the volunteering ecosystem
- Ensure volunteering is impactful, effective, and rewarding
- Empower individuals to find purpose and connection through volunteering
- Strengthen communities in times of crisis

Volunteering Queensland generates income through our community partnerships program and our RTO services. Our primary support comes from a five-year Queensland Government contract, which provides an annual allocation of around \$550k. We regularly apply for grants and have a federal grant (as do all state peaks) under the Volunteer Management Activity (VMA) program where Volunteering Queensland runs grant rounds and on-funds community volunteering projects across the state. For 24-25/25-26 periods the Department of Social Services contracted us to manage the final two years of the old VMA grants program to the Volunteer Resource Centres from the previous VMA program.

Our team of 12 staff hold customer-facing roles and are encouraged to be active volunteers as part of our workplace program. We organise high-impact events, such as the State Volunteering Awards, which celebrate exceptional volunteer contributions, and the Queensland Volunteering Conference. We deliver accredited and non-accredited training in schools and communities across the state. Our RTO is one of only two in the country that offers the Certificate 4 in Volunteer Management. We have a highly regarded Board who volunteers their expertise in governance and strategy, and we stand up advisory groups and undertake member and community consultation to ensure inclusive, consultative decision-making. We all share a passion for volunteering.

What is volunteering?

In 2015, Volunteering Australia updated its formal definition of volunteering to state: "time willingly given for the common good and without financial gain."

Volunteering is typically divided into formal and informal categories. While both differ in structure, many individuals participate in both forms at various times. The Productivity Commission highlights that while formal volunteering has declined, informal volunteering – where people assist non-family members outside their households – has increased.

It's important to understand that volunteering is not "free." While volunteering is "time willingly given without financial gain," there are real costs involved – for both volunteers and the organisations (VIOs) they support. Volunteer management often incurs significant costs that are overlooked or underfunded, leading to stress on volunteer managers and a diminished experience for volunteers. For volunteers, especially those on limited incomes, there are additional costs such as transportation, appropriate clothing, participation in group activities, and providing personal equipment or PPE.

Reimbursing volunteers or offering honorariums for these incidental costs is not only acceptable but encouraged when resources allow. Similarly, it is crucial for VIOs, regardless of their size, to allocate sufficient resources to support and develop their volunteers. Volunteers should not be viewed as "free labour." They must be treated as workers who deserve the same core human and workplace rights as paid employees, including opportunities for skill development and experience.

Volunteering should not replace paid work. The Human Rights Impact Assessment accompanying the Minister's Cabinet Submission clearly stated that, while unpaid, volunteering is freely and willingly given and should never be considered a substitute for paid positions. However, smaller organisations, which lack the funding for paid staff, face challenges in ensuring volunteers are not exploited to perform work that should be done by paid employees. In some cases, organisations are entirely volunteer-run.

As society evolves, so too must volunteering. To sustain volunteer participation for future generations, we must think and do, differently.

The context of volunteering in Australia and Queensland

The National Strategy for Volunteering envisions volunteering as "the heart of Australian communities." It aims to foster a society where more people volunteer more frequently, feel respected, and understand the impact of their contributions. This vision also calls for volunteering to be recognised and valued at all levels of government, integrated into policy, service design, and strategic investments. It emphasises the celebration of diversity in volunteering and the collective potential for building stronger, thriving communities.

These local efforts will also directly contribute to the broader national strategy, ensuring that Queensland's volunteering programs are aligned with and support the national vision for volunteerism in Australia.

However, volunteering rates – both globally and in Queensland – have significantly declined over the past five years.

Volunteering Queensland has conducted multiple studies during this period, including two State of Volunteering in Queensland Reports, with additional research focusing on demographic trends, particularly among older and younger populations. The data reveals a concerning trend: volunteering in Queensland has dropped by over 10%, from a 75.7% participation rate in 2021 to 64.3% in 2024.

To better understand the factors driving this decline, Volunteering Queensland commissioned a review that identified five key social and economic forces shaping volunteering patterns.

These forces include:

- Environmental and demographic change
- Macro and micro-economic volatility
- Declining public trust in institutions

Together, these factors are contributing to:

- A shrinking pool of available volunteers
- A reduction in resources to support volunteering
- Deteriorating quality of volunteer service delivery
- Increased demand for volunteer-run services

This analysis paints a bleak picture for the future of volunteering, predicting significant economic and social repercussions. The effects will be felt by organisations that deliver critical services, as well as by the people, communities, and animals who rely on them. Moreover, the loss of volunteer opportunities will deprive individuals of the personal benefits that come from volunteering.

National Volunteering Strategy

The National Volunteering Strategy envisions a society where more people volunteer regularly, feel valued, and understand the significance of their contributions. It aims for a future where all levels of government recognise the importance of volunteering and integrate it into policy, service design, and strategic investments. The strategy advocates for a society that not only celebrates the diversity of volunteering but actively supports it, enabling individuals and communities to thrive through collective effort.

The Strategic Objectives of the current National Volunteering Strategy offer clear guidance on how to achieve this vision. They include:

- Ensuring a positive volunteer experience
- Making volunteering inclusive and accessible
- Ensuring volunteering is not exploitative
- Diversifying the understanding of volunteering
- Reshaping public perception
- Empowering communities to drive volunteering
- Making volunteering a cross-portfolio issue
- Investing strategically in infrastructure
- Recognising the importance of volunteer management

These objectives align with Volunteering Queensland's approach to ensuring a future where volunteering is accessible, ethical, and impactful, and form a guiding framework for change within the sector.

Opportunities Summary

To connect our identified priority areas with concrete steps, the following summary outlines the key opportunities that Volunteering Queensland believes need to be explored to increase volunteer engagement across Queensland. It is time for bold, innovative solutions and a long overdue commitment of funding to create a functional and inspiring volunteer legacy.

Priority Areas

Embed a strong, connected, and supported statewide volunteering ecosystem

Opportunities to increase volunteering rates

1. Ensure operationally funded statewide coverage to support volunteers, volunteer-involving organisations, and local communities through local place-based Volunteering Hubs
2. Connect the volunteering ecosystem through enhanced technology and a volunteer and volunteer involving organisation register
3. Develop and implement a Queensland Volunteering Strategy and Action Plan

Remove the barriers to entry for volunteering and volunteering more

1. Remove red tape for volunteers and volunteer involving organisations by making checks such as blue cards portable
2. Reduce the cost of volunteering to both volunteers and organisations through a volunteer reimbursement fund or similar mechanism
3. Increase accessibility to volunteering for all Queenslanders
4. Implement a government marketing campaign around volunteer appreciation to improve awareness of, and interest in, volunteering, as well as recognise the amazing 2.8 million Queenslanders who volunteer
5. Improve the structure, support, and management of disaster volunteering to enhance community recovery efforts

Protect and value the work of volunteers

1. Engage Queensland Treasury to model feasibility and cost estimates for a statewide volunteer insurance framework
2. Implement a formal complaints mechanism for volunteers
3. Develop consistent policies and reporting for volunteering across all Queensland Government Department
4. Implement suggested legislative changes

Promote best-practice volunteer management

1. Upskill volunteer managers in the National Standards for Volunteer Involvement
2. Recognise the important role of volunteer managers by enabling more people to complete the Certificate IV in Volunteer Coordination

Improve the volunteer experience

1. Support the development and operation of a statewide volunteer passport
2. Implement a tool to evaluate and track the volunteer experience
3. Allocate ongoing funding for regular two-yearly State of Volunteering reports
4. Leverage the opportunity of the 2032 Olympic and Paralympic Games
5. Leverage the opportunity of the 2032 Olympics to create a legacy for more accessible volunteering in Queensland

Priority Areas

We have identified five priority areas for attention, all of which link back to the main goal for volunteering in Queensland—creating an improved environment to increase volunteering rates so that the supply of volunteers grows to meet the rapidly increasing demand for volunteers involving organisations to support the vulnerable communities who rely on them.

1. Embed a strong, connected, and supported statewide volunteering ecosystem

The trend of fewer people volunteering for fewer hours can be reversed, but it can only be done by tapping into and enhancing people's desire and willingness to volunteer. They need to understand and value what is needed in their local community and then want to be a part of meeting those needs.

In order to properly develop and mature policy and practice and grow volunteer connections in all Queensland communities, investing in specialised place-based volunteering-specific support is needed. The previous federal VMA program found that concentrating separate pockets of funding into a number of regional local Volunteer Resource Centres brought duplication, poor use of resources and a lack of shared learning and growth. The current VMA system of centralising resources, training and advocacy centrally to the Peak Body has reduced duplication and allowed for better advocacy, shared resources, training and professional support, but has taken away the resources to provide community-specific advocacy, support and local connections in order to match up opportunities and people at their local level.

The State of Volunteering in Queensland Report 2024 found that:

- The top way people find out about volunteer roles is by word of mouth
- The second most significant barrier to people starting to volunteer is that they are not sure how / have never been asked
- 79.6% of people are volunteering in their local community or at home

Place-based approaches to volunteering and recruitment are still the most prevalent and increasing volunteer rates requires calls to action and local intervention. The role of volunteering in connecting communities was highlighted in the 2021 Parliamentary Inquiry into Social Isolation and Loneliness in Queensland.

Funding at both federal and State levels has excluded volunteer matching from their funded activities. However, it is clear from the data that people need to be directly connected to local organisations and opportunities in order to take the first step into volunteering. We know that young people want to volunteer with friends, and older people volunteer to make friends – getting their first volunteering opportunity right requires someone to assist with placement.

Based on the data and trends we observe, a new coordinated multi-pronged approach focused on sustainable solutions is needed. This involves creating embedded, funded, place-based approaches with the flexibility to allow each community to have local solutions and connections while linking them to a central strategy and leveraging statewide best practice approaches, education, online resources and technology through the peak body.

Remote and rural communities are largely supported by volunteers – many events and critical community activities wouldn't occur without them. In these areas, the volunteer base is getting older, and recruiting younger volunteers can be difficult. These communities need targeted, practical, local support to assist them in recruiting and retaining a new volunteer cohort.

Opportunities

Ensure operationally funded statewide coverage to support volunteers, volunteer-involving organisations, and local communities through local place-based Volunteering Hubs

This is an opportunity to explore funding Volunteering Hubs across Queensland located either by Regions, Regional Organisations of Councils, or other method of determining where resource placements should be. The concept aligns with a resolution adopted by local governments in Queensland at their recent Annual Conference and contained within the 2024 Advocacy Plan of the LGAQ. It calls to “address the decline in volunteering numbers throughout Queensland, promote recruitment of volunteers across our communities, support the establishment of Regional Volunteer Hubs and integrate the activities of the Queensland Volunteer Network Resource Centre Network into the State’s volunteer framework.”

The Volunteer Connection Hubs could:

- Leverage existing local infrastructure that already plays an effective role in enhancing volunteering in the region, whether an existing functional Volunteer Resource Centre, or any other type of connected local organisation such as Gladstone Not-for-Profit House, a Neighbourhood or Community centre etc and fund dedicated resources to coordinate local volunteering services.
- Communicate and connect with all volunteer-involving and linking organisations in their region to strengthen their understanding of volunteering, collect relevant data, and provide connections within the volunteer ecosystem.
- Convene networks, information sharing and capacity building for volunteer involving and linking organisations in their region. Provide training, connect organisations, advertise volunteering opportunities, present to local community groups, raise awareness, and create opportunities for volunteers and volunteering opportunities to match up.
- Expand Volunteering Queensland’s Volunteer Ambassador program to work within each hub in their region to promote volunteering, understand local barriers and opportunities and work to deliver solutions in towns and communities across their hub.

Sustainable solutions are a cornerstone of this model. The intent is to create statewide coverage to ensure people can be connected to volunteering and ensure that volunteering meets each local community’s needs. The model is based on leveraging existing social, professional and built infrastructure by placing resources into an existing service.

Locals know local needs. This knowledge needs to be leveraged while being coordinated at the state level to build capacity across the state, ensure positive volunteer experiences, and apply best practices. Funding must be long-term. Ad hoc funding has been applied to this previously and 1-2 years is not enough time to build a function that a community can then self-sustain.



Opportunities

Connect the volunteering ecosystem through enhanced technology and a volunteer and volunteer involving organisation register

Volunteering Queensland manages a statewide volunteer register of over 80,000 EV CREW and Care Army volunteers. We have recently partnered with several large VIOs to grow this database towards a single register of all Queensland volunteers. This will allow us to better understand volunteers' experiences, behaviours, interests, and concerns, as well as provide them with training and information to enable them to get more out of their volunteering activity.

Volunteering Queensland has been trialling a register of VIOs across two pilot sites as one component of a project to reduce isolation and loneliness in seniors. We are also partnering in a platform to support better communication with VIOs. Through these, we hope to better understand, communicate with and support the local volunteering ecosystem. In expanding this across the state and connecting with all VIOs, the sector could gather impactful real-time data on volunteer roles, rates, shortages, policies, rewards programs, and skill gaps to share learnings and inform strategies that make a difference.

Supporting the expansion and broader development of these registers would align with the implementation of several other strategies that have been raised for some years across the sector, including incorporating a volunteer passport, facilitating a statewide volunteer insurance scheme, and providing a central repository of training and certification to make way for portable background checks.



3. Develop and implement a Queensland Volunteering Strategy and Action Plan

The re-development of a strong Queensland Volunteering Strategy is essential to have the entire volunteering ecosystem working towards the same goals together. Our state strategy will of course be underpinned by the National Strategy but should include strategies specific to our regional contexts and our unique sector challenges. This will align the efforts of government, business and community, and collect reporting metrics to assist the government and the sector to measure the impact of the strategy and to pivot or accelerate as needed.

There was significant sector stakeholder engagement on the previous strategy, and it would be good to re-engage those stakeholders to help build on that work to make a bolder and more impactful plan for the volunteering future we want to craft.



2. Remove the barriers to entry for volunteering and volunteering more

Creating the right conditions for volunteering to thrive is a fundamental foundation for turning volunteer rates around. Volunteering Queensland has been working to address these through implementing the National Standards for Volunteer Involving Organisations with VIOs who want to grow their volunteer capability. Removing the barriers to entry for volunteers and VIOs in establishing volunteering programs is critical.

The State of Volunteering in Queensland 2024 report cited that the top barriers to volunteering more (for current volunteers) are time, costs and health, and for non-volunteers the barriers are time, health and that they are not sure how to volunteer or have never been asked. Volunteer managers cite that their three biggest changes over the last 3 years have been volunteer hours have decreased, volunteers need more training, and fewer people want to volunteer. The biggest issues volunteer managers face are volunteer retention, volunteer health and safety, and volunteer recruitment.

We can make it easier for people to volunteer and for volunteers moving between volunteer roles, by reducing red tape and administration, supporting the costs of volunteering programs and increasing reimbursement to volunteers. Creating more accessible volunteering opportunities will make it easier for many marginalised community members to get involved in their community. A volunteer recognition campaign to ask people to volunteer will positively reduce the barriers to entry for both volunteers and VIOs establishing volunteering programs.

Queensland faces frequent extreme weather events, making disaster volunteering a long-standing and complex challenge across the state for all stakeholders. This is an area where people do want to volunteer, but where the conditions for good volunteering management can be the barrier. This needs urgent review and innovative solutions.



Opportunities

Remove red tape for volunteers and volunteer involving organisations by making checks such as blue cards portable

Making background checks, application forms, waivers etc easier to fill out and portable (potentially through a volunteer passport) would reduce red tape for both volunteers and organisations, make volunteering more cost effective, reduce the time burden to get involved and make volunteering opportunities more accessible.

It is important to realise in our rush to offer everything “online” and through digital channels, that for many people information accessibility can be a barrier. For older volunteers they don’t always have the technology, for remote communities internet connections can be slow or inconsistent, for those with disability they may need specific accommodations. Asking the volunteers what they need and working with them to ameliorate the barriers will make it easier for them to participate. Allowing local Volunteering Hubs to implement specific strategies for their particular barriers will help improve accessibility.

Reduce the cost of volunteering to both volunteers and organisations through a volunteer reimbursement fund or similar mechanism

Developing a volunteer reimbursement fund or grant process for VIOs to access would significantly reduce the cost burden on both volunteers and VIOs. This would be particularly beneficial to rural communities where volunteers may have to drive for long periods to get to their volunteering shift, or as part of their volunteering work and where a petrol voucher might incentivise more volunteering. At a national level, there have also been ongoing discussions about tax incentives for volunteers. We think there is also a benefit in exploring a payment for supervisors/team leaders of spontaneous volunteers in disasters.

Volunteer reimbursement has always been somewhat controversial – but the most effective volunteer programs help volunteers to meet the rising costs of living (and therefore the rising cost of volunteering) by providing t-shirts/uniforms, lunches whilst volunteering, reimbursing petrol costs, sponsoring public transport etcetera. To supplement and support this moving forward, education could be implemented for VIOs to integrate volunteer reimbursements when developing new reward and recognition programs. Providing educational and training opportunities at no charge for volunteers to help them upskill is also an avenue to attract and retain volunteers.

Increase accessibility to volunteering for all Queenslanders

By specifically creating inclusive volunteer experiences that accommodate volunteer groups who may have difficulty with volunteering otherwise – people experiencing disability, older people, and those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds – the potential volunteer pool is widened. This also has social benefits, as the health and well-being benefits of volunteering and feeling connected to a purpose are widely known. Importantly we need to work in partnership with First Nations people to understand the relationship of Indigenous communities to volunteering and explore ways in which to grow and empower First Nations volunteering and to improve their volunteering experiences.

These groups are specifically targeted under the federal VMA grants, however as part of developing a long term volunteering infrastructure legacy across Queensland, we need to make inclusive and accessible volunteering the standard we set.

Implement a government marketing campaign around volunteer appreciation to improve awareness of, and interest in, volunteering, as well as recognise the amazing 2.8 million Queenslanders who volunteer

Tapping into the resource that is people who aren't volunteering as they haven't been asked is a significant opportunity, as is the opportunity to recognise and thank those who do. A statewide marketing campaign, supported by local strategies and support from the Volunteering Hubs and through local expos would be critical to maximising the cohort of people who would commence volunteering if asked. Reshaping and deepening the public perception and understanding of volunteering, improving the esteem in which volunteers are held by the government and community and recognising/thanking those who already volunteer will encourage people to volunteer and to volunteer more.

Improve the structure, support, and management of disaster volunteering to enhance community recovery efforts

Volunteers play a critical role during Queensland's frequent disasters. However, they face insufficient support in terms of training, resources, and insurance. There is often confusion between people just turning up to help, and properly coordinated volunteering activities that protect the volunteers and those they are helping. In previous years we have seen huge turnouts in communities to assist. In the recent 2025 cyclone event in the Brisbane area we have seen 65 volunteers register for an activity and only 6 turn up. We have reached out to over 500 volunteers in a suburb to only have 2 able to volunteer. By the time Council have assessed an area as safe for volunteers to enter – often several days after the event has passed – their desire to volunteer has faded. Volunteers working in community spaces, and in private homes, need safety and privacy protocols – and supervision. Fewer people are putting their hands up to supervise.

This is a complex issue with many nuances and requires all stakeholders to come together to explore the problems and better articulate what they actually want and need from spontaneous disaster/community recovery volunteering and how we could ensure volunteers are insured, inducted, and protected. Identifying, training, and supporting team leaders year-round will strengthen disaster response capabilities. Expanding spontaneous community volunteering as a gateway to ongoing community service and a pathway into organisations like the SES and Australian Red Cross will further embed a culture of resilience and preparedness.



3. Protect and value the work of volunteers

If we are to keep people volunteering throughout their lives and encourage them to volunteer more, their volunteering experience needs to be positive and productive. Volunteers need to feel protected and have a process to support them if something goes wrong. Despite their immeasurable value, volunteers in Queensland face legal uncertainties that can create unnecessary risks and barriers to participation.

Many VIOs do not have adequate volunteer personal accident insurance. This is more prevalent in grassroots, entirely volunteer-run organisations, leaving volunteers unprotected and vulnerable. Adding to this vulnerability is the lack of a simple, formal complaint pathway for volunteers to seek assistance when mistreated or exploited. Unlike other sectors, no Volunteer Ombudsman or investigative function is appointed to assess the actions of organisations and/or volunteer managers and provide protection or redress for volunteers.

Opportunities

Engage Queensland Treasury to model feasibility and cost estimates for a statewide volunteer insurance framework

Statewide insurance coverage would provide universal protection for volunteers. In Volunteering Queensland's ongoing engagement with VIOs around the State, one of the most common concerns raised is the growing costs of insurance coverage or, in some cases, even the inability to obtain insurance at all.

Insurance policies that cover volunteers can contain age-based restrictions. We have received complaints from long-standing volunteers who have spent many years in low-risk areas like meal preparation or distribution who are advised they have to cease volunteering as they are no longer covered due to having reached a certain age. Similar restrictions can operate at the opposite end of the age spectrum, making it difficult for teenagers to be included in coverage. The costs and lack of adequate insurance coverage for some activity is becoming an ever-increasing barrier to volunteering and a significant impediment to the operation of many VIOs.

The state government already covers some emergency volunteers under its Workcover policy and has extended that on occasion for disaster recovery activities Such as ex-tropical Cyclone Alfred in 2025. There could be opportunities to explore this further if Queensland Treasury could be engaged to undertake some modelling around government-underwritten insurance coverage for a wider range of volunteers. This could include all formal volunteering with or under the auspice of registered organisations and considering coverage for a specified subset of activities, such as emergency response volunteering.

Insurance is a major blocker particularly for remote and rural communities, who run most of their events largely with volunteers (for example, their local RAS shows). These communities already face a lack of volunteers to deliver the events and are unable to afford the rising costs of public liability and volunteer insurance coverage. Providing insurance for anyone in Queensland registered to volunteer would be a game changer for remote and rural communities.

Implement a formal complaints mechanism for volunteers

Creating a clear and formal independent function and process for complaints from volunteers would give valuable insights into the factors that lead to volunteers exiting volunteering. It could provide data on areas for improvements. A process for dealing with complaints would also provide volunteers with a sense of safety, a clear voice for their volunteering experience, and an advocate for their experience. Understanding the barriers that poor volunteer management can create and implementing changes are integral to incorporating the volunteer's voice into future programs and policy and keeping people volunteering.

Volunteering Queensland receives 2-3 complaints a month from volunteers who have had a poor experience and either want to resolve it or prevent others from having the same experience. However, we have no authority to investigate these and can only provide referrals and advice about options they may have and strategies they might implement. We cannot intervene with the VIO to guide change, nor put anything in place to protect the volunteer.

Develop consistent policies and reporting for volunteering across all Queensland Government Departments

We welcome the new government's initiative to have a dedicated Minister for Volunteers, with accompanying departmental staff and resources focused explicitly on supporting volunteering.

The brief provided to the Inquiry Committee by the new Department of Local Government, Water and Volunteers (DLGWV) gave an overview of just how many different state government departments and agencies have direct volunteer-involving programs, fund programs with a heavy reliance on volunteers, and/or have a policy role which impacts directly on volunteers.

The breadth of the existing engagement with volunteering across so many areas of state government, which expands even further once local government is considered, presents an immediate opportunity for the government to set their standards for volunteering more clearly. Implementing consistent policies across all departments around staff volunteering, use of volunteers, volunteer management and volunteer data collection, along with including volunteering data in public sector reporting will help embed new strategies and create new cultures to support and grow best practice volunteering.

Explore necessary legislative changes

Gaps in civil liability protections, workplace rights, bullying, sexual harassment and coverage for government volunteers leave many individuals exposed to personal, legal and financial consequences. In contrast, inconsistent legal definitions confuse volunteers and the organisations that rely on them. Volunteering Queensland supports the Queensland Law Society submission that addresses these in more detail and identifies steps to improve them.



4. Promote best-practice volunteer management

Best-practice volunteer management underpins every other priority area in this submission. Equipping volunteer managers with the right tools, training, and resources directly impact volunteers' recruitment and retention, volunteer experience, and program impact. All volunteers want to make a difference and be helpful. We have to upskill Volunteer Managers to design better opportunities to enable them to achieve that.

There are a range of insights we have from volunteer managers from a range of research, including:

- Wanting access to volunteer management technology and tools
- Information sharing and free professional development
- Having a more comprehensive understanding of the National Standards

Opportunities

Upskill volunteer managers in the National Standards for Volunteer Involvement

There is room to implement a broader professional development and Professional Volunteer Leader program across the state by connecting volunteer managers in local areas (utilising the Volunteering Hubs to deliver local training) focusing on the National Standards for Volunteer Involvement.

Recognise the important role of volunteer managers by enabling more people to complete the Certificate IV in Volunteer Coordination

After many years of advocacy, the specialised role of Volunteer Manager has been formally recognised as a distinct occupation in the Occupation Standard Classification for Australia (OSCA). The position of Volunteer Coordinator – alternative title Volunteer Manager – is described as someone who plans, organises, and coordinates volunteer programs in volunteer-involving organisations.

Skilled volunteer managers deliver valuable organisational leadership in enhancing volunteer satisfaction and effectiveness, crucial to improved retention rates. Delivering more affordable and accessible options for managers to access the Certificate IV in Volunteer Coordination will increase the quality and effectiveness of volunteer management across the sector.



5. Improve the volunteer experience

Having observed a steep decline in volunteering over the last 5 years and continuing to observe the supply and demand for volunteering heading in opposite directions, understanding the volunteer experience is pivotal to ensuring volunteering meets the needs of Queensland communities. The volunteer experience is underpinned in all priority areas and is fundamentally focused on inspiring more people to volunteer more often to meet community demand.

Opportunities

Support the development and operation of a statewide volunteer passport

This is an online platform that supports volunteer engagement by hosting personal details, background checks, completed training, credentials, and volunteering contributions. It would facilitate efficiencies and consistency through a common platform. Volunteers could move between opportunities that suit their needs seamlessly to keep them in the volunteer pool. Ideally, this could integrate with the Volunteer and VIO Registers to make it easier for volunteers, streamline data collection, and have a single and consistent source of truth.

The first Three-Year Action Plan flowing out of the National Strategy for Volunteering 2023 – 2033 includes an action to develop a national volunteer passport. Efforts to develop a national volunteering passport are currently operating in parallel, involving many stakeholders. While Queensland are part of efforts to develop this, a common national platform will take some time. We need to develop something sooner that could operate at the local, regional, and State levels. It is important to develop something like this well before the 2032 Olympic and Paralympic Games, when the passport is likely to form part of volunteer application assessments.

Implement a tool to evaluate and track volunteer experience

This methodology would provide a statewide, consistent approach to measuring the volunteer experience. Everyone would use the same set of questions or assessments annually. Ideally, VIOs could use it to gauge the volunteer experience within their organisations and make internal improvements with anonymised data being aggregated at local and state levels. This would provide an ongoing temperature check for the volunteer experience across the state whilst increasing the capacity of VIOs to gauge and respond to any necessary changes internally, taking a collaborative approach to using the voice of the volunteers to improve and grow the volunteer experience.

Allocate ongoing funding for regular two-yearly State of Volunteering reports

This will allow the sector to continuously monitor sector performance, assess the success of interventions and identify where the strategy or activities might need change. The Volunteering Hub network could facilitate greater insights for drilling down into details for specific geographical and social communities. This should be augmented by funding for Queensland-specific academic research, including assessing and tracking ongoing volunteering benefits from the Games.

Leverage the opportunity of the 2032 Olympic and Paralympic Games

Deadlines get things done. The Games provide a targeted opportunity to rapidly have our new volunteering systems and funding in place and delivering improved volunteering uptake by 2032. We must ensure that volunteers for the Games are well-supported and that the Games provide a positive experience, encouraging continued involvement in volunteering across the state. This must be coupled with efforts to avoid gaps in volunteering for essential community services during this period.

Organisers for the Olympics will likely be able to source the very large number of volunteers explicitly needed for the Games, however there is much that should be done to ensure those people have a positive volunteering experience and to build strong volunteering outcomes from the Games that can provide long-lasting benefits for the entire state. Despite good intentions, many previous Games have not had great success with building a strong volunteering legacy beyond the events and we would like to see the 2032 Games do this differently.

Conclusion

The way people volunteer, can access volunteering, and are able to participate has changed, and the systems and supports around volunteers must also change to ensure volunteering remains an integral part of the infrastructure serving our communities and vulnerable populations.

We are at a tipping point. As volunteer participation continues to decline, the consequences for our communities and economy are becoming increasingly severe. We are not broken yet – there is still so much good work being done – 2.8 million people (64% of Queenslanders) still volunteer. But we need to reverse the decline before we reach the point of no return.

Together we need to ensure that volunteering continues to play a vital role in supporting our communities, strengthening resilience, reducing loneliness, and driving positive social and economic outcomes for Queensland, now and into the future.

This Inquiry's recommendations are our chance to intervene. Through the many and varied voices who have submitted their ideas, we will have numerous exciting possibilities to provide a springboard for collaborative sector-wide work to design and drive a clear, actionable roadmap backed by evidence, and a comprehensive strategy for revitalising volunteering across the state.

The time to act is now. If we invest in volunteering now, we safeguard Queensland's future – ensuring it remains a place where community spirit thrives, and no one is left behind.

