

## **Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland**

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## Submission to the Queensland State Parliamentary Inquiry into Volunteering

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Date: 11 March 2025

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#### Introduction

Tablelands Regional Council is pleased to submit this response to the Queensland State Parliamentary Inquiry into Volunteering. As an active participant in the volunteering sector, we are acutely aware of the critical role volunteers play in shaping our communities. Volunteers are the backbone of many services and initiatives within our region, and their contributions span a wide range of sectors, from the arts and environment to emergency response and social services. This submission highlights both the benefits and challenges associated with volunteering, drawing on the experiences of local volunteers, and provides recommendations on how to strengthen and grow the volunteering sector across Queensland.

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#### 1. The Current State of Volunteering in Queensland and its Value

Volunteers contribute significantly to Queensland's economy and social fabric. They provide essential services across arts, culture, emergency management, community health, environmental sustainability, and more. The value of volunteering extends far beyond the work performed, volunteers gain a sense of purpose, develop new skills, and build strong social connections that contribute to a more cohesive and resilient society.

In our local area, volunteers are deeply involved in a wide range of community-driven initiatives such as wildlife rescue, environmental conservation, cultural promotion, and local tourism. They also play an essential role in emergency services, including the SES and community-led disaster management teams, stepping in when communities need them most. As one volunteer put it: 'Volunteers are the scaffolding of what makes a community liveable.' The collective impact of these efforts often goes unnoticed, but without volunteers, many crucial community activities—from sports programs to environmental projects, cultural events, and disaster relief efforts—would simply not be possible.

Additionally, volunteering fosters a sense of pride in local achievements, with volunteers often noting that their efforts help shape the lives of young people and strengthen their communities. Volunteers also step in spontaneously, driven by a deep sense of purpose, especially in times of crisis, emergency, and need. Whether they're supporting youth sports, assisting in community science projects, serving on committees, or responding to urgent situations, the diverse roles volunteers play are crucial for local and statewide development.

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#### 2. Barriers to Volunteering

Several key barriers to volunteering were identified through feedback from local volunteers:

- **Time and Financial Costs:** Many prospective volunteers are deterred by the time commitment and financial costs associated with volunteering. Travel expenses are a significant barrier, especially in rural areas where distances are vast, and public transport options are limited or non-existent. Suggestions such as a fuel rebate for volunteers have been put forward to alleviate this concern.
- **Lack of Awareness:** Many community members are unaware of volunteering opportunities, and volunteer-run organisations often lack the resources to promote their needs effectively. This results in missed opportunities for volunteer recruitment.
- **Health and Demographic Trends:** Many of our long-serving volunteers are in their retirement years, and as they age, their ability to volunteer decreases. Continual engagement and recruitment of volunteers, including younger volunteers, is essential to ensure the continuity of services and sporting clubs. However, younger people often face time constraints due to work, study, and family responsibilities.
- **Stigma and Status of Volunteering:** There is sometimes a stigma associated with volunteering, particularly in rural areas, where volunteering is seen as a role for retirees or those seeking to

“work for the dole.” More needs to be done to promote the benefits and elevate the status of volunteers, and to encourage a more diverse volunteer base, including younger and culturally diverse individuals.

- **Existing Volunteer Burnout and Mental Health Concerns:** Many community groups are relying on the same core group of contributors, who are involved in several different organisations. For those already involved in volunteer work, the risk of burnout can be a significant barrier. Volunteers may experience emotional fatigue, particularly when they are regularly involved in demanding roles such as emergency services or crisis response. Mental health challenges, such as stress or anxiety, can also prevent individuals from continuing their volunteer work, especially if support systems are lacking. The load on core volunteers is causing more to not return to groups or feel reluctant to put their hand up for additional tasks and roles.
- **Competing Priorities and Flexibility:** Many potential volunteers face competing priorities—whether it’s work, family, or other personal commitments. A lack of flexible volunteering opportunities that fit into their schedules can deter individuals from participating, particularly those with limited availability. Offering more flexible, short-term, spontaneous, or project-based opportunities could help address this issue.
- **Lack of Childcare or Family Support:** For many, especially those with young children or dependent family members, the inability to secure childcare or the need to balance family duties can be a significant barrier to volunteering. Offering family-friendly volunteering opportunities or support with childcare could help overcome this challenge.
- **Lack of Recognition or Career Benefits:** Volunteers, particularly younger individuals, may not see the direct benefits of volunteering in terms of career advancement or personal recognition. Creating more structured pathways for volunteers to gain professional experience, certifications, or recognition for their efforts, may increase their willingness to participate, especially if it helps enhance their resumes or professional networks.
- **Cultural or Language Barriers:** For people from culturally diverse or immigrant backgrounds, language differences or cultural misunderstandings can be significant barriers to volunteering. These groups may not feel confident or comfortable participating, especially if volunteer roles do not cater to or accommodate their specific needs.
- **Administration Burden:** Barriers to volunteering often include complex administrative and accounting requirements, including insurance, which can be overwhelming for both local governments and community groups. Recent changes to financial reporting regulations have made it even more challenging for volunteer-led organisations to comply. Those introduced in June 2024, for example, altered the tax filing requirements of not-for-profit organisations with active Australian Business Numbers that are not registered charities. Many volunteers are passionate about their work but find these administrative burdens discouraging.

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### 3. Motivations and Experiences of Volunteers

Volunteers in our community highlight several motivating factors driving their involvement. These include:

- **A Sense of Purpose:** Volunteers often feel a sense of fulfillment from giving back to their community and contributing to something greater than themselves.
- **Social Interaction:** Many volunteers enjoy the social aspect of their roles, with opportunities to meet new people and form lasting friendships. One volunteer shared: “Meeting and talking to people, sharing knowledge, and making new friends” are the most rewarding aspects of volunteering.
- **Team Environment:** Volunteers appreciate being part of a supportive team, where they can share ideas, collaborate on projects, and receive recognition for their contributions. Ensuring volunteers feel valued and appreciated is key to maintaining their commitment.
- **Skill Development and Personal Growth:** For many volunteers, the opportunity to learn new skills and develop professionally is a significant motivator, especially since these opportunities come free of charge. Whether it’s through taking on leadership roles, gaining experience in event coordination, or learning technical skills, volunteers often view their involvement as a valuable way to enhance both their personal development and career growth, all while contributing to their community. However, challenges such as the lack of recognition, insufficient training, and the need for more structured feedback have been noted. One

volunteer suggested the implementation of formal individual check-ins every six months to assess progress and ensure volunteers feel supported and valued in their roles.

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#### 4. Opportunities to Improve Volunteering

To better support and grow the volunteering sector, several initiatives have been identified:

- **Incentives and Support:** Some form of remuneration, not necessarily a financial payment but in the form of tax incentives, reduced car registration, or local government discounts, would help alleviate the financial burden of volunteering. These incentives could make a significant difference in attracting and retaining volunteers.
- **Training and Capacity Building:** Training and development opportunities are critical for ensuring volunteers are confident and effective in their roles. For example, committee and computer literacy training could encourage more volunteers to take on leadership or organisational roles, particularly in rural and remote areas. While membership numbers of many community and sporting groups are relatively healthy, committees are lacking the ability (or perhaps understanding of how) to tap into their membership base for help. When members would once voluntarily come forward to help, there is now a common attitude of, "I've paid my registration fees, I've made my contribution". If organisations and clubs can shift priority to knowing their members and proactively seeking help by being more direct and pinpointing the right people for smaller tasks, more people would be likely to help in a voluntary capacity.
- **Government Funding:** Local governments should be supported with funding specifically targeted at enhancing the volunteer experience. This could include providing equipment or facilities, or funding community events for example training programs to increase volunteer engagement and retention.
- **Insurance:** The government should ensure adequate insurance coverage for spontaneous volunteers in disasters, recognising their critical role, and removing barriers that deter their willingness to help
- **Recruitment of Younger Volunteers:** With an ageing volunteer base, attracting younger individuals is crucial. A more targeted approach is required. Efforts should include offering flexible, diverse volunteering opportunities that align with the interests, skills, and schedules of younger generations. Volunteer programs should be designed to appeal to students, working professionals, and younger people in urban and rural areas alike, by integrating technology and digital platforms, or promoting opportunities that fit into part-time schedules. Making volunteering more flexible and inclusive will boost participation and create a culture of lifelong volunteering.
- **Indigenous and Culturally Diverse Volunteering:** Outreach to First Nations peoples and culturally diverse communities is critical. Local programs should be designed to build trust, with targeted initiatives reflecting the values, traditions, and needs of these communities. Creating more accessible volunteering opportunities, supported by mentorship and culturally appropriate training, will encourage participation. Collaboration with local leaders and community representatives can ensure these groups are not only included but also empowered to lead and participate in volunteer-driven initiatives.
- **Volunteer Recognition and Well-being Programs:** Volunteering can be emotionally and physically demanding, and as such, providing well-being programs is essential. This can include mental health support, volunteer appreciation events, and initiatives that recognize the emotional and physical effort volunteers put in. Creating a culture of gratitude and making sure volunteers are regularly recognized for their contributions, whether through certificates, social media shoutouts, or thank-you events, can significantly boost morale and retain volunteers in the long term.
- **Reduce and improve the administration barriers for volunteer and community groups:** To support volunteer groups, clearer guidance and tailored assistance should be provided when regulatory changes occur. This could include simplified reporting templates, accessible training sessions, and dedicated support contacts. Recognising the difference between small businesses and volunteer organisations in reporting requirements would also help ease the

burden, ensuring these groups can focus on their valuable community work and potentially aid in the retainment of volunteers.

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## 5. Government Support and Recommendations

The Queensland Government plays a pivotal role in supporting the volunteer sector. Increased investment in volunteer recruitment, retention, and support is crucial. Specifically, we recommend:

- **Expanding government-funded initiatives to assist volunteer organisations** with training, recruitment, and the development of volunteer programs.
- **Establishing funding programs to support local councils** in providing resources for volunteers, particularly in rural and remote areas where distances can be a significant barrier.
- **Promoting the benefits of volunteering more widely** to elevate the profile of volunteers and recognize their contributions to community life.
- **Continuing to prioritise volunteer support in disaster management** by providing more structured training and communication channels for volunteers involved in natural disaster responses including practical support mechanisms for managing spontaneous volunteers during disaster events.
- **Incentivising Volunteering for Youth and Students:** Offering incentives for younger individuals to volunteer, such as school credit, academic scholarships, or work experience opportunities, would encourage more youth participation. This can also help foster a culture of lifelong volunteering by integrating volunteerism into educational and career pathways
- **Recognising Prior Achievements and Skills of Volunteers:** Volunteer organisations should have a system in place to recognise the prior skills, qualifications, and professional achievements of individuals. This allows people with diverse backgrounds to contribute in roles that align with their expertise, enhancing both their personal experience and the overall effectiveness of the volunteer programs.
- **Create Family and Group Volunteering Opportunities:** Encouraging families or groups (e.g., work teams, schools, or organisations) to volunteer together can increase participation. These opportunities can be structured in a way that accommodates varying skill levels and can foster a spirit of teamwork and shared community responsibility.
- **Incentivise Volunteer Recognition:** While many volunteers are driven by intrinsic motivation, public recognition and rewards can make them feel appreciated and valued. Governments, councils, or organisations can create structured recognition programs to highlight the contributions of volunteers. Examples include volunteer of the month awards, annual volunteer appreciation events, or certificates of appreciation. These initiatives can boost morale and increase retention.
- **Encourage Workplace Support for Disaster Preparedness and Response:** Employers should provide employees with dedicated hours for volunteer training and participation in disaster preparedness, response and recovery activities. This could include offering paid leave or flexible work hours for volunteering in emergency response teams, participating in disaster training programs, or engaging in community preparedness efforts. By doing so, employers contribute to building a more resilient community while also enhancing employee skills, teamwork, and morale.

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## Conclusion

Volunteering is an essential part of life in Queensland, contributing significantly to the state's social and economic development. While the volunteer sector faces challenges, there are also many opportunities to enhance the experience for volunteers and to encourage greater participation across all demographics. We strongly urge the Queensland Government to consider these recommendations to support and grow volunteering, ensuring its future sustainability and continued success.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry.