



Volunteering Australia

**Response to the *Strong and Resilient Communities (SARC)* Consultation
Department of Social Services**

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Volunteering Australia Contacts

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Response

About Volunteering Australia

Volunteering Australia is the national peak body for volunteering. We work to advance volunteering in the Australian community.

Volunteering Australia's vision is to promote strong, connected communities through volunteering. Our mission is to lead, strengthen, promote and celebrate volunteering in Australia.

We work collectively with the seven State and Territory volunteering peak bodies listed in Attachment A (**Peaks**) to deliver national, state/territory and local volunteering programs and initiatives in accordance with the Government's priorities.

Introduction

Volunteering Australia appreciates the opportunity to provide feedback to the outcomes of the consultative process of the proposed redesign of the Strengthening Communities grants program. This follows the Government's announcement that the redesign would enable a "greater focus on building strong, resilient and cohesive communities"ⁱ.

Volunteering Australia holds a number of concerns with the proposed changes and how they will impact upon the important work being done in Australian communities by Volunteering Support Services (VSSs). Volunteering Support Services and other volunteer management programs will now have to compete alongside other worthwhile and diverse programs from across the Social Services sector for broader grant categories that address "community resilience" and "inclusive communities". This removes a level of certainty for VSSs and forces them to tailor their programs in a way that fails to acknowledge the diversity and breadth of the impact of volunteering in Australian communities. It is important to acknowledge that volunteering in Australian communities does not happen on its own and it is not free: it requires consistent, professional management in order to remain responsive to the needs of local communities and sustainable in the face of a decrease in formal volunteer participation overall.

Volunteering Australia's Response to the SARC Consultations

Theme one: Collaboration

We commend that Grant Opportunity Guidelines will now reflect feedback from the consultations, including collaboration with other organisations. The Department cited feedback from the consultations as the reason that collaboration is encouraged, but will be optional. Volunteering Australia believes flexibility of collaboration will provide for additional opportunities for collaboration, and the prospect for smaller place-based organisations to involve themselves in partnerships.

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Theme two: Identification of specific locations

Volunteering Australia appreciates that the views of the sector have been considered in relation to Grant Opportunity Guidelines. Specifically, we welcome the identification of specific geographic locations and areas of need for Grant Opportunity Guidelines. By allowing organisations to self-identify locations or to select from a list of locations pre-selected by the Department, applicants can engage in the process using their own evidence-base and sector-specific insights. This could potentially lead to a greater breadth of opportunity, outcomes and service provision.

Theme three: Length of funding

Volunteering Australia is acutely aware of the challenges of short-term funding periods and the strain this puts on the capacity, resources, workforce planning and outcomes in the volunteering sector. While we acknowledge that the funding period has been extended under the Strengthening Communities Grants to up to three and a half years, from 1 January 2018 through to 30 June 2021, Volunteering Australia believes that short-term grants place immense stress on the sector and does not allow for strategic workforce planning that is required to operate and deliver successful programming.

In fact, the limitations enforced by short-term Grants were recognised by the Government in their Response to the Senate Community Affairs References Committee Report, which agreed that Grant terms offered by DSS should ideally be five years in length in order to “allow community organisations to better undertake long-term business planning and provide consistency of services” and ensure that “community organisations are able to dedicate more resources to service delivery, rather than administrative processes, in turn providing valuable support to vulnerable Australians”ⁱⁱ.

Volunteering Australia will continue to advocate for at least a five-year funding period, to ensure fiscal certainty to the sector, allow for workforce planning, strengthen outcomes and build resources and structural capacity.

Theme four: Demonstrating need

Volunteering Australia are pleased that the Grant Opportunity Guidelines will now provide additional flexibility for applicants to demonstrate their need. Following the consultative process, many organisations highlighted that mainstream quantitative data sources in isolation were not enough to provide a complete and precise representation of community needs. While the Department has stated they are willing to accept more than one data set, and will accept qualitative data to reinforce the evidence-base, there isn't enough detail on what is considered acceptable qualitative data. Volunteering Australia is seeking clarification on this thematic area, and looks forward to receiving further correspondence from the Department.

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Theme five: Change in scope

Volunteering Australia appreciates that the redesign of the *Strengthening Communities Activity* is based on the Commonwealth areas of responsibility. However, we are troubled that the shift to an “issues-based” funding model doesn’t seek to address specific areas of concern in the community. Of particular concern is the shift in scope under SARC is specifically aimed at programs that deliver outcomes for disadvantaged Australians, which excludes many organisations previously funded, but who now may lay outside of the scope.

Work conducted by Professor Sir Michael Marmot and his team at University College London (UCL), provides a good understanding of why the shift in scope is a cause of concern. Professor Marmot posits in the ‘Marmot Reviews’, that “focusing solely on the most disadvantaged will not reduce health inequalities sufficiently. To reduce the steepness of the social gradient in health, actions must be universal, but with a scale and intensity that is proportionate to the level of disadvantage.”ⁱⁱⁱ While the research has a specific health focus, it outlines that shifting the scope to focus on the most disadvantaged will not produce the optimal outcomes.

While the Department has acknowledged that activities performed by Volunteering Support Services align with the Government’s priorities of building socially cohesive and resilient communities, Volunteering Australia remains concerned that programs and activities that are beyond the area of social services or that do not address or specifically deliver outcomes for disadvantaged Australians, may not meet the criteria for funding. The removal of the discrete grants programs has decreased funding opportunities for many organisations, including those who were previously funded under the Volunteer Management Program.

In addition, we are concerned about the lack of support for volunteers and volunteering in other sectors, such as arts and heritage, environment, education, emergency services, sports and recreation, etc. There is also no indication of who will take responsibility for growing volunteering, beyond the area of social services. Volunteering Australia would like to ensure that there are volunteering opportunities available to everyone, and that all these opportunities receive funding.

Themes 6-9: Smaller organisations; Focus areas for research; What makes a community socially cohesive; Barriers to applying.

Volunteering Australia appreciates the consideration of feedback under theme six relating to concerns from smaller organisations on equity for the breadth of project types, and geographical locations under SARC.

Volunteering Australia identified volunteering, additional research on the value of Volunteering Support Services and volunteering to build community resilience, as key focus areas for research under theme seven. It is welcome that the Department is considering this information in the process of developing the National Research and Projects grants program.

During the consultation process, Volunteering Australia provided input on what makes a community socially cohesive. We appreciate that our input relating to the provision of opportunities to participate in the local community through voluntary activities will be reflected in the Grant Opportunity Guidelines.

Response

Recommendations were made to ensure that a reasonable length of time be allocated to potential applications to develop and submit proposals in relation to theme nine. Volunteering Australia welcomes the Departments assurance that a reasonable length of time will be allocated, and that a simplified application process will be implemented, ensuring a reduction in the amount of time that it will take to develop and submit an application.

Conclusion

The redesign of the *Strengthening Communities Activity* represents one of the most challenging issues that Volunteering Support Services face. The work of volunteering in local communities is spread across all Government portfolios, and the types of grants for which VSSs are eligible under the Department of Social Services, are inherently limited in their ability to support the work that they do.

Volunteering Australia appreciates the opportunity to contribute to the consultative process, provide input on the concerns of the sector, and expand on the Departmental responses. We remain concerned about the proposal to remove the specific stream of funding for Volunteer Management, that was available under the existing *Strengthening Communities* grants program. In addition, there is grave concern from the sector about the change in scope and the length of funding for the proposed redesign. We would welcome any additional opportunity to expand on any of the points raised in this response.

Response

Authorisation

This submission has been authorised by the Chief Executive Officer of Volunteering Australia.



Ms Adrienne Picone

Chief Executive Officer

Endorsements

This submission has been endorsed by the seven State and Territory volunteering peak bodies listed in Attachment A.

Glossary

Peaks	The seven State and Territory volunteering peak bodies (listed in Attachment A).
VA	Volunteering Australia is the national peak body for volunteering in Australia. It works collectively with the peaks to deliver national, state and local volunteering programs and initiatives.
VSSs	Volunteer support services (also known as volunteer resource centres or volunteer support organisations) provide place-based volunteer support services to volunteers and VIOs in their locality.

ⁱ Commonwealth of Australia (2016) 'Budget 2016-17: Budget Measures, Budget Paper No. 2 2016-17' p145, available online at http://budget.gov.au/2016-17/content/bp2/download/BP2_consolidated.pdf

ⁱⁱ Australian Government (2015) 'Australian Government Response to the Senate Community Affairs References Committee Report: Impact on service quality, efficiency and sustainability of recent Commonwealth community service tendering processes by the Department of Social Services' p6, http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Community_Affairs/Grants/Government_Response

ⁱⁱⁱ Marmot, M. (2010) *Fair Society, Healthy Lives: Strategic Review of Health Inequalities in England Post 2010*. London: Marmot Review. Available at: www.marmotreview.org