

The Issue

From 1 January 2018 until 30 June 2021 the federal government provided \$19.95 million in dedicated funding to Volunteering Support Services (VSS) under the Volunteer Management Activity (VMA). Under the new funding arrangement VSS have been mandatorily required to collect data under the Data Exchange or DEX.

Service Matrix: The current service matrix does not reflect the VSS service type and program outcomes. Volunteering Australia highlights that there was no consultation on the service matrix which meant there was no opportunity to ensure targeted alignment to the work and nature of a Volunteering Support Service.

DEX Data Definitions: Varying data is being collected across the country due to VSS retrofitting into DEX. There is concern that the current data being collected is not an accurate reflection of the services being provided by these organisations, and could have an adverse effect on current or future decisions.

Evidence also indicates that services are measuring and reporting volunteer contacts in many different ways, guided by generic DEX data definitions. The DEX data definitions need to be aligned to the type and scope of service offering to ensure consistency of data collection and allow for benchmarking. These data discrepancies are of strong concern, with some services appearing to be either over/under performing and at risk of non-compliance.

Consultation with VSS indicates that since the introduction of DEX there are a range of issues with the system which stem from a mismatch between the service matrix and the nature of a Volunteering Support Service and the reporting being applied as per the current DEX Data Definitions.

We are calling on the Department of Social Services (DSS) to collaborate with the sector to review how DEX is applied to VMA funded organisations to enable national benchmarking and clean and consistent data collection.

Proposals

- 1. A review of the service type matrix with the sector to reflect the work that is currently being undertaken;**
- 2. Collaborate with the sector to review the DEX Data Definitions, with funding provided to Volunteering Australia to lead this significant work; and**
- 3. Nationally consistent communications and training regarding DEX is distributed to all VMA funded organisations, that is coordinated by the Department in Canberra and distributed to services by all FAMs.**

As part of the consultation process it is worthwhile looking at other best-practice reporting protocols that are currently being used in similar service types to see how they apply. An example that could be considered is the reporting and acquittal protocols that are currently utilised as part of the Commonwealth Home Support Programme (CHSP) for Sector Support and Development (SS&D) funded activities where DEX reporting does not apply. While consultation is occurring we recommend a DEX exemption for all VMA funded organisations. We will continue working with the Department on these issues and we request that current individual reporting arrangements are maintained without discrimination, while consultations are underway.

What is a Volunteering Support Service?

Volunteering Support Services (VSS) promote, resource and support volunteering in local communities across Australia. VSS provide infrastructure in communities to lead, enable and build organisational capacity to recruit and retain volunteers, from the human services and civil society groups, to environmental, animal welfare and sporting groups.

Volunteering Support Services are place-based and actively target people experiencing disadvantage, while also offering a range of services to individuals and organisations across the community. Effective, safe, productive and efficient volunteering does not “just happen” and it is not free. It requires targeted expertise, leadership and local knowledge, as well as effective workforce management.

The Federal Government’s Volunteer Management Program was established to fund Volunteering Support Services in 1992 and provides dedicated funding for volunteer management, and has been managed primarily by the Department of Social Services (or its predecessors). As of 2018 it is now known as the Volunteer Management Activity or VMA.

There are 52 Volunteering Support Services that have been funded under the Volunteer Management Activity to deliver 72 programs across each State and Territory in Australia. It is important to note that State and Territory Governments do not provide funding for organisations to operate as a Volunteering Support Service, with all funding provided federally under the VMA. However, these organisations may receive other sources of funding to deliver other programs and services.

Impact of DEX on Volunteering Support Services

There was no consultation with the sector on whether DEX was fit-for-purpose, or on the rollout of DEX across certain Government activities. There was also very little time to transition to DEX. Letters of Variation and Streamlined Grant Agreements to extend the Volunteer Management Activity were sent by DSS on Friday 22 December 2017 for agreements to begin on Monday 1 January 2018. As such, Volunteering Support Services had limited opportunity to familiarise themselves on the requirements for DEX and how their services needed to shift to comply with DEX. They were also provided with limited training on how to use DEX and no consistency on reporting requirements.

Red Tape Burden

Volunteering Support Services strongly support the need to collective meaningful, consistent data, with many already doing so for other purposes. These services receive anywhere between \$47,000 and \$152,000 from the Department of Social Services through the Volunteer Management Activity. This is a very small amount of funding which often equates to a part time staff member who is often supported by volunteers to manage administrative requirements.

Bulk uploading has been highlighted as an issue by VSS, with organisations stating that current systems have not been built to be DEX-compliant. Volunteering Support Services often do not have the time and human and financial resources for onerous reporting requirements. VSS cite not having the infrastructure or budget to modify systems to allow DEX-compliant reporting. Meanwhile, many others have stated having to make significant changes to systems and processes in order to comply with DEX.

The most widely used online volunteer recruitment and referral system is Volunteering Western Australia’s database, VIKTOR. However, VIKTOR needs further adjustments to be compatible to DEX so that organisations do not have to struggle with duplicative reporting. Volunteering Australia and Volunteering WA have asked the Department to support the alignment of VIKTOR so that it is compatible with DEX, to eliminate duplicative reporting and allow for automatic processing.

Compliance

DSS expects that 10 per cent of clients or less should be recorded in DEX as unidentified ‘group’ clients in each reporting period; and where services are delivered to the community/ other organisations, DSS expects that 50 per cent of clients or less should be recorded in DEX as unidentified ‘group’ clients in each reporting period. The requirement for 90 per cent and 50 per cent correct/ real data is negated by the data fields in DEX being ‘optional’.

As such, some Volunteering Support Services have been notified by the Department that they are non-compliant

with the DEX component of their funding agreement. This is after initially being notified that they were compliant, and that the data being entered into DEX was correct. There is significant concern from VSS about how compliance issues will affect future funding decisions.

Volunteering Support Services have entered their second reporting period and there is significant anxiety that if the data is being entered incorrectly, that they will continue to be non-compliant. There have also been issues raised with Activity Work Plans, DEX reporting and contracts not being aligned for many VMA funded organisations. However, many of these organisations have not received regular communications or clear instructions on what they need to do in order to be DEX compliant, creating inconsistencies in VMA funded organisations across Australia.

Changes to Business Model

As part of DEX, services are required to collect information on a range of indicators. VSS have highlighted that asking invasive and personal questions when an individual is coming in to volunteer is outside the scope of their role as a support service. Volunteering Support Services are not a case management type service. These organisations are not funded as case management services and do not have the trained staff to perform these roles.

Volunteering Support Services note the inability to report the full scope of their service provision presents a problem. A key aspect to service provision provided by these organisations is to support Volunteer Involving Organisations to engage volunteers, provide training and distribute resources. This does not fit with what DEX is asking in terms of 'client' data, as they do not fit the descriptor of a client.

Privacy Concerns

Privacy remains a significant concern for VSS, with services unsure whether there is conflict with the Privacy Act on collecting 'client data'. Some Volunteering Support Services report that they are not always able to gain consent to share information with the Department. A more detailed understanding is required on how the Privacy Act interacts with DEX.

Volunteering Australia also highlights confusion relating to the current Data Exchange Protocols – particularly in regard to Section 4.3. This Section outlines that "Organisation obligations when not using the Data Exchange for their own client management purposes" that "consent and notification arrangements identified in Section 4.2 (organisation obligations when using the Data Exchange web-portal)" do not apply to organisations if they choose not to use the Data Exchange for their own client management purposes." However, VMA funded organisations have been advised that they are not-compliant unless they design their registration forms or other activities to collect a person's personal information for entry on DEX. We seek clarification on what this Protocol denotes and how it applies to VMA providers.

Funding Agreement Managers (FAMs)

There have been significant staffing changes in the Department, across the country, since 1 January 2018, which has resulted in mixed messaging on DEX, inconsistencies on how to collect data, and discrepancies in communication from Funding Agreement Managers (FAMs). This has meant there have been multiple FAMs for some Volunteering Support Services who are not well-acquainted with the VMA, how a VSS operates, what the DEX requirements are and what a service needs to do in order to be compliant.

Volunteering Australia has been advised by the Department that indicators 4 and 5 of the funding agreement are not mandatory for VMA funded services. Meanwhile, some FAMs have stated to services funded under VMA are required to complete indicators 4 and 5 in their funding agreement.