

# Submission to the National Sport Plan Consultation

December 2023

Written by: Sarah Wilson, National Strategy Advisor (Volunteering Australia)



## Overview

Volunteering is critical to the success of Australian sport. Approximately 1,697,000 people volunteered for sport and recreation organisations in the 12 months prior to April 2022.<sup>1</sup> In addition to the considerable contribution of volunteers to Australian sport at every level, from club-level to high performance and major events, community sport makes a critical contribution to Australian society in a wider context. This includes fostering a sense of community, facilitating social cohesion, and providing physical infrastructure that is used for diverse purposes.

The Office for Sport, within the Department of Health and Aged Care, is developing a new National Sport Plan (NSP). The NSP will be an important mechanism to deliver on the Australian Government's commitment and priorities for sport, and to ensure success for Australian throughout the 'green and gold decade' (2022 – 2032) and beyond. The NSP will provide an overarching framework to align with and leverage key national strategies, frameworks, and policies for sport.

The following recommendations should be adopted in the new National Sport Plan:

- Comprehensively recognise volunteering in the National Sport Plan as the foundation of sport participation in Australia by adding a guiding principle and priority area on volunteering.
- Align the Sport Volunteer Coalition Action Plan, which works in concert with the National Strategy for Volunteering, with all strategies and plans considered in the NSP.
- Recognise that improving diversity and inclusion is both an action and an outcome and consider how this will be proactively addressed and progressed.

## About the National Sport Plan Consultation

In November 2023, the Department of Health and Aged Care published a Public Consultation Paper<sup>2</sup> that introduced the proposed components of the NSP, including:

- Vision
- Guiding Principles
- Priority Areas
- Positioning of the NSP and its links to other strategies and plans, and
- Approach to measuring progress and success of the NSP in achieving outcomes.

The public consultation process is the second phase of a two-phase process, which was preceded by targeted consultations with invited stakeholders. The Public Consultation Paper was developed in response to findings from these targeted consultations. The second phase of the consultation process is being undertaken to ensure that the views of the wider sport sector are represented in the NSP.

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://volunteeringstrategy.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Volunteering-in-Australia-2022-The-Volunteer-Perspective.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> [https://consultations.health.gov.au/office-for-sport/national-sport-plan/supporting\\_documents/National%20Sport%20Plan%20Consultation%20Paper%20%20November%202023.pdf](https://consultations.health.gov.au/office-for-sport/national-sport-plan/supporting_documents/National%20Sport%20Plan%20Consultation%20Paper%20%20November%202023.pdf)

## About this Submission

This submission was drafted by Volunteering Australia in collaboration with the State and Territory volunteering peak bodies. It highlights the critical need to strategically recognise volunteering in the National Sport Plan. The draft NSP positions volunteering under the 'inclusion' and 'participation' priority areas yet volunteering spans every aspect of sport from 'clubland' to high performance sport and major events.

Alarming, the proposed guiding principles make no mention of volunteering at all. This submission emphasises the importance of comprehensively recognising volunteering as the foundation of Australian sport. As recognised in the National Strategy for Volunteering, comprehensively valuing volunteering means recognising that volunteering makes a unique social, cultural, and economic contribution, and requires ongoing, strategic investment. This includes a shift in culture and attitudes which recognises that sport in Australia would not happen without the ongoing contribution of nearly two million people.

## Feedback to the National Sport Plan Consultation

The National Sport Plan Consultation occurred through an online form, which contained the 14 questions from the Public Consultation Paper. Our responses to these questions have been copied below.

### 1. What benefits and opportunities do you see in having a new National Sport Plan?

The National Sport Plan (NSP) provides an opportunity to highlight the critical role of volunteering in sport. The Plan will bring together the suite of strategies that are in place (or being developed) to promote and sustain sport participation in Australia, including the Sport Volunteer Coalition Action Plan. Whilst we recognise that the intent of the NSP is to bring various strategies and plans into a cohesive framework, reduce duplication, and identify areas for collaboration and cross-strategy implementation, it is essential that volunteering is recognised as a foundational pillar. Sport does not happen without volunteering, and the survival of sport at every level, from clubland to high performance sport, is reliant on volunteers. The full benefits and opportunities of a new NSP cannot be realised without acknowledging and comprehensively valuing the role of volunteering in Australian sport.

## Vision

### 2. Do you agree with the intent of the proposed vision?

We agree that the intent of the proposed vision captures the main benefits and outcomes of sport participation and applies to a wide variety of stakeholders, including volunteers. The focus on community recognises that sport is integral to Australia's social fabric and a key indicator of connectedness, cohesion, and mental and physical wellness.

### 3. Are there any key elements missing?

The proposed vision includes the right key elements. 'Sport for all' highlights the importance of inclusion and other measures of success are picked up by 'thriving communities'.

### 4. Do you see yourself/your organisation reflected in the proposed vision?

Volunteering Australia and the State and Territory peak bodies for Volunteering work to advance volunteering in the Australian community. The proposed vision aligns with the vision in the National Strategy for Volunteering (*Volunteering is the heart of Australian communities*) and the vision for the

Submission to the National Sport Plan Consultation

future of sport volunteering (*People from all walks of life see and realise opportunities to contribute to individual, club and community goals in a way that suits them*).

Volunteering is correlated with physical and mental wellness and is a key enabler of participation and inclusion. The Volunteering in Australia Research, undertaken in 2022, indicates that 19 per cent of prospective volunteers identified Sport/Recreation as their sector of choice.<sup>3</sup> This demonstrates the latent potential that exists in the broader community, which can be leveraged to advance sport volunteering. The National Sport Plan, including the Sport Volunteering National Plan and the Sport Volunteer Coalition Action Plan, will be key mechanisms for amplifying sport volunteering over the coming decade.

## Guiding Principles

### 5. Are the proposed principles relevant and contemporary?

The proposed principles are relevant and contemporary. They broadly capture the key considerations that will ensure sport is safe, supported, and sustainable into the future. However, the descriptions do not extensively capture the scope of the principles. Whilst the principles are broad, no mention of volunteering is a serious oversight. The National Strategy for Volunteering, co-designed by the entire volunteering ecosystem, including sport volunteers and sporting organisations, highlights that volunteering requires ongoing, strategic investment. Although this consultation paper refers to the Sport Volunteer Coalition Action Plan, it is insufficient for volunteering to be buried in a subsidiary plan several layers down. For volunteering in Australia to survive, let alone thrive, there needs to be structural reform of how we recognise and invest in volunteers and the organisations that involve them. For this reason, we recommend the addition of an additional principle on volunteerism as follows:

#### **Volunteerism**

Strategically investing in volunteer involvement, including proactive consultation with all stakeholders, to ensure volunteers are comprehensively valued and volunteering is embedded in all aspects of Australian sport.

In the absence of such an addition, volunteering will continue to remain a secondary consideration, demonstrating a lack of understanding of the role that volunteers play in Australian sport. Further, achieving the other four principles is almost wholly reliant on volunteers, who are at the coalface of leadership, capability, diversity, inclusion, equity, safety, education, and development. Failure to recognise the critical role that volunteers will play in achieving these principles is a threat to the NSP.

We also recommend the following expansions across the other proposed principles

#### **Leadership and Capability**

This principle is about more than governance and decision-making. It includes creating pathways for leadership development, ensuring people at all levels have a voice and feel heard. It also includes capability enabled through infrastructure and human resourcing, which are critical pillars for success.

---

<sup>3</sup> <https://volunteeringstrategy.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Volunteering-in-Australia-2022-The-Volunteer-Perspective.pdf>

***Diversity, Inclusion and Equity***

This principle is about fostering a culture of inclusion and belonging, which includes reducing and removing barriers to access. Culture change is a prerequisite for inclusion. Sport must do more than embrace diversity, it requires a dedicated plan for improving inclusive practices, which must be enacted at the club-level and continue all the way up to high performance sport and major events.

***Safety***

Safety must also include cultural and psychological safety. This principle includes safeguarding and compliance but must be broadened to ensure that sporting environments are safe in every respect. This principle must also recognise that at the club-level, those responsible for safety are often volunteers who are required to take on safeguarding responsibilities in addition to their other duties. Consideration must be given to how safety can be embedded at the community-level in a way that does not place an undue and increasing burden on volunteers.

***Education and Development***

This principle should be expanded to include a reference to the personal and communal benefits of sport participation. There is no direct reference to the benefits for participants, whether athletes, officials, or volunteers. Further, this principle currently focuses on growth and development, but does not recognise the importance of celebrating success. There is ample evidence of outstanding practice in the current sport ecosystem and a focus on improvement fails to recognise sports and clubs that are already succeeding, usually through the dedication and hard work of volunteers.

**6. Is there anything you would add or remove?**

There is no reference to capacity-building. For sport to thrive, there must be a concerted effort to build capacity, including through removing barriers to participation. Formal volunteering has been declining in Australia for decades, and recent research indicates levels of volunteering have not recovered to pre-pandemic levels. Community sport was hit particularly hard by the COVID-19 pandemic, and ever-increasing compliance requirements, largely undertaken by volunteers, are an enduring threat. There must be capacity *and* capability within the system to respond to these challenges. In this respect, there must be consideration of how to build the capacity of the entire workforce, which comprises a significant number of volunteers.

**7. Which do you feel are the most important principles?**

Of the proposed principles, 'Diversity, Inclusion and Equity' is the most important; however, this cannot be achieved without strategic investment in volunteering. As outlined above, a specific principle on volunteerism will ensure that the role of volunteers in executing the NSP, and all the plans and strategies that underpin it, is not overlooked. Sport is a pivotal part of Australian culture, but it is not currently accessible and inclusive for all people and across all modes of participation. The current cost-of-living crisis is putting increased pressure on participation, particularly for volunteers. Volunteers incur considerable out-of-pocket expenses, such as transport costs, which are not always reimbursed. For many, the costs of volunteering in the current economic climate may inhibit their participation. Volunteering provides immense social, cultural, and economic benefits and is a key-mechanism for community building. Contemporary sport participation must have a dedicated plan for accessibility and inclusion if the National Sport Plan is to achieve its vision of 'sport for all'.

## Priority Areas

### 8. Do the proposed priority areas identify the most important areas of strategic focus over the next decade?

The proposed priority areas are comprehensive, but they do not adequately highlight the strategic investment required for volunteering to thrive. Volunteering underpins each priority area yet is only referenced in the 'participation' priority. It is critical that all six priorities consider the opportunities and challenges for volunteers, including the impact that volunteering makes to each priority.

Volunteering Australia recommends that volunteering be included as a specific priority area, as well as a specific principle as follows:

#### **Volunteering**

Elevate sport volunteering through ongoing, strategic investment to ensure that sport volunteering is safe, supported, and sustainable. Leverage the significant capability that already exists in the sport volunteering ecosystem and harness the latent potential of prospective sport volunteers to ensure volunteering is comprehensively valued and supported accordingly. Amplify the unique social, cultural, and economic contribution of volunteering to Australian sport and society.

### 9. Is there anything missing?

As identified above, there must be a specific priority on volunteering and recognition that the six priorities identified hinge on the availability and ongoing contribution of Australia's 2 million sport volunteers.

The 'economic and environmental sustainability' priority should be renamed to 'sustainability' and be more expansive. This pillar should reference the importance of empowering meaningful workforce participation, which includes both paid and unpaid work (i.e., volunteering). Sport in Australia is not sustainable without strategic investment in volunteering.

There is no direct reference to the personal benefits of participating in sport, including sport volunteering. The 'participation' priority references health, social, and community benefits, but there is an opportunity to better highlight individual benefits. The 'participation' pillar could consider referencing fun, personal enjoyment, and connectedness/cohesion.

Finally, the 'integrity' priority area refers to 'behaviours in sport'. We recommend this be amended to 'unsafe/unethical behaviours in sport' to better articulate this refers to harmful behaviours that do not align with the principle of integrity.

### 10. Which do you feel are the most important priorities?

As identified throughout this submission, elevating volunteering is the most important priority.

## Alignment to Other Strategies and Plans

### 11. Do you have any comments about the alignment of the Plan to sector strategies?

Currently the National Sport Volunteer Coalition Action Plan is positioned under inclusion and participation, but it spans all six priorities. Volunteering does not just happen; it requires ongoing strategic investment. The National Strategy for Volunteering identifies 11 strategic objectives that are required for volunteering in Australia to thrive. These strategic objectives are all applicable in a sport

Submission to the National Sport Plan Consultation

context, and are underpinned by co-designed, evidence-based rationales for investment. For volunteering to be comprehensively valued, there must be recognition that it permeates every aspect of sport in Australia. This includes high performance, integrity, international engagement, and economic and environmental sustainability. We recommend that Figure 2 (page 13) be amended to show that the National Sport Volunteer Coalition Action Plan (SVCAP) underpins all six priorities. The Figure should also reference the Sport Volunteering National Plan (SVNP), which is the foundational document upon which the SVCAP is based. The SVNP was co-designed with the sport volunteering ecosystem and should be explicitly recognised in the SNP. The current omission of any reference to the SVNP exemplifies our concern that sport volunteering does not receive the focus or investment it deserves.

## Measuring Success

### **12. What are your views on the proposed approach to monitoring and evaluation of the Plan?**

The proposed approach, including acknowledgement that measures of success are interconnected, is sound. Consultations on the monitoring and evaluation framework must include diverse stakeholders, including peak bodies, governments, and researchers and academics. This includes stakeholders that work in partnership with sporting organisations, such as the State and Territory volunteering peak bodies.

### **13. Are there any additional measures of success that should be included in the Plan?**

Volunteerism metrics must cut across all pillars. Further, such measures need to consider more than just participation rates and hours contributed. Effort must be made to measure and articulate the unique individual, social, and cultural impact of sport volunteering.

## Final Comments

### **14. Is there anything else you would like to tell us about the Plan?**

As identified throughout this submission, volunteering needs to be considered a fundamental, strategic priority in the new National Sport Plan. Whilst we recognise that there is an existing mechanism to advance sport volunteering (Sport Volunteer Coalition Action Plan), this is not sufficient to achieve the structural reform required for sport volunteering to be sustainable into the future. Without a principle and pillar on volunteering, it will not be elevated. This presents a serious threat to the future of Australian sport.

The National Strategy for Volunteering recognises that volunteering is a workforce issue, yet the social, cultural, and economic contribution of volunteers is absent from workforce conversations. Volunteers and the organisations that involve them are the engine room of Australian communities and are increasingly providers of public services and programs, yet the volunteering ecosystem finds itself in a constant battle for legitimacy. For the National Sport Plan to succeed, conceptualisations of the workforce must consider the critical role of volunteers and leaders of volunteers, whether paid or unpaid, and resource this aspect of the workforce accordingly.

Further, whilst we recognise that inclusion has been identified in the guiding principles as a priority, this must be underpinned by a specific plan that identifies the mechanisms and initiatives through which inclusion will be prioritised. In this regard, it must be acknowledged that those fostering inclusion, particularly in community-based settings, are typically volunteers.

## Authorisation

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



Mr Mark Pearce

Chief Executive Officer

## Endorsements

This position statement has been endorsed by the seven State and Territory volunteering peak bodies.



## About Volunteering Australia

Volunteering Australia is the national peak body for volunteering, working to advance volunteering in the Australian community. The seven State and Territory volunteering peak bodies work to advance and promote volunteering in their respective jurisdictions and are Foundation Members of Volunteering Australia.

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

## Volunteering Australia Contacts

Mark Pearce  
Chief Executive Officer  
[ceo@volunteeringaustralia.org](mailto:ceo@volunteeringaustralia.org)  
0428 186 736

Sue Regan  
Deputy CEO & Policy Director  
[policy@volunteeringaustralia.org](mailto:policy@volunteeringaustralia.org)  
0480 258 723

## State and Territory Volunteering Peak Bodies

VolunteeringACT  
[www.volunteeringact.org.au](http://www.volunteeringact.org.au)  
02 6251 4060  
[info@volunteeringact.org.au](mailto:info@volunteeringact.org.au)

Volunteering Tasmania  
[www.volunteeringtas.org.au](http://www.volunteeringtas.org.au)  
03 6231 5550  
[admin@volunteeringtas.org.au](mailto:admin@volunteeringtas.org.au)

The Centre for Volunteering (NSW)  
[www.volunteering.com.au](http://www.volunteering.com.au)  
02 9261 3600  
[info@volunteering.com.au](mailto:info@volunteering.com.au)

Volunteering Victoria  
[www.volunteeringvictoria.org.au](http://www.volunteeringvictoria.org.au)  
03 9052 4524  
[info@volunteeringvictoria.org.au](mailto:info@volunteeringvictoria.org.au)

Volunteering Queensland  
[www.volunteeringqld.org.au](http://www.volunteeringqld.org.au)  
07 3002 7600  
[reception@volunteeringqld.org.au](mailto:reception@volunteeringqld.org.au)

Volunteering WA  
[www.volunteeringwa.org.au](http://www.volunteeringwa.org.au)  
08 9482 4333  
[info@volunteeringwa.org.au](mailto:info@volunteeringwa.org.au)

Volunteering SA&NT  
[www.volunteeringsa-nt.org.au](http://www.volunteeringsa-nt.org.au)  
08 8221 7177  
[reception@volunteeringsa-nt.org.au](mailto:reception@volunteeringsa-nt.org.au)