

Submission on a stronger, more diverse and independent community sector Issues Paper

November 2023

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Overview

Volunteering is a key part of the community services sector. Efforts to progress the Australian Government's commitment to a stronger, more diverse and independent community sector must be progressed in consultation with the volunteering ecosystem, ensure that the real cost of engaging volunteers is appropriately and consistently resourced in grant agreements, and actively progress the National Strategy for Volunteering 2023-2033.

Volunteering Australia and the State and Territory volunteering peak bodies make the following recommendations to be presented to government to support both short and longer-term reform to the operation of community sector grants:

1. Ensure grant agreements with volunteer involving organisations, administered by all relevant departments and agencies, fully fund the cost of engaging volunteers.
2. Continue to fund and support the Volunteer Grants program, with a commitment to a five-year program.
3. Continue to fund and support the Volunteer Management Activity program, with a commitment to a further five-year program.
4. Conduct an analysis of other grant agreements to ensure that the costs of volunteering, to both volunteers and community sector organisations, is adequately funded.
 - The Department's analysis of the composition, scope, and funding flows of the community sector should include a specific focus on volunteering, including how and where volunteers are involved and how existing funding arrangements support, or inhibit, volunteering.
5. Consult with the volunteering ecosystem in the development and delivery of community sector grant programs.
 - The invaluable contributions of sector to consultation and co-design processes must be resourced appropriately.
6. Enhance coordination with state and territory government grant programs to ensure the most efficient use of resources and reduce duplication of funding efforts.
 - This should include mapping the roles and responsibilities of local, state/territory, and Commonwealth governments in resourcing different parts of the volunteering ecosystem, including community sector organisations that involve volunteers. This work should align with Strategic Objective 3.3, Commit to Strategic Investment, of the National Strategy for Volunteering (2023-2033).

Introduction

Community sector organisations (CSOs) play a vital role in Australian society, delivering essential services in communities and fostering strong community connections across the country. The valuable work of these organisations is supported by the contributions of millions of volunteers. However, available data shows that volunteering in Australia has been in decline over the past decade, and demand for volunteers in the community sector has increased.

Efforts to progress the Australian Government's commitment to a stronger, more diverse and independent community sector must be progressed in consultation with the volunteering ecosystem, ensure that the real cost of engaging volunteers is appropriately and consistently resourced in grant agreements, and actively progress the National Strategy for Volunteering 2023-

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2033. Strategic Objective 3.3 underscores the importance of strategic investment in the infrastructure needed to support volunteering, and Strategic Objective 3.4 emphasises the crucial role of volunteer managers. Efforts to improve community sector grants to support a stronger, more diverse and independent community sector must actively advance the Strategic Objectives of the National Strategy for Volunteering 2023-2033.

About a stronger, more diverse and independent community sector

As part of the Australian Government's election commitment for a stronger, more diverse and independent community sector, the Department of Social Services is exploring opportunities to better support Australian communities through the design and administration of grants to the sector, including more meaningful working partnerships and options for greater innovation.¹

The Issues Paper aims to reflect what the Department has already heard from community sector organisations about current challenges and ideas for how the Australian Government could support a stronger, more diverse and independent community sector.

This feedback will inform the development of a package of recommendations to government, for consideration, on innovative approaches to grant funding that will support both short and longer-term reform to the operation of community sector grants. This issues paper is organised around 5 focus areas drawn from the government's commitment:

1. Giving the sector the voice and respect it deserves through a meaningful working partnership.
2. Providing grants that reflect the real cost of delivering quality services.
3. Providing longer grant agreement terms.
4. Ensuring grant funding flows to a greater diversity of CSOs.
5. Partnering with trusted community organisations with strong local links.

About this submission

This submission was drafted by Volunteering Australia in collaboration with the State and Territory volunteering peak bodies. It provides feedback on each of the five focus areas included in the Issues Paper, and concludes with recommendations to support the volunteering ecosystem and progress the National Strategy for Volunteering 2023-2033 through changes to grant funding arrangements for community sector organisations.

It responds primarily to the following questions in the Issues Paper:

- 2.2 What administrative and overhead costs are not being considered in current grant funding?
- 2.3 How are rising operational costs impacting the delivery of community services?
- 2.4 What have been your experiences with, and reflections on, the supplementation and change to indexation?

¹ <https://engage.dss.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/stronger-more-diverse-independent-community-sector.pdf>

- 5.1 What is your experience with and reflections on place-based funding approaches?

Volunteering in Australia

Australian society relies on volunteers to provide a myriad of activities and programs, including in the community sector. Many key community service areas, such as mental health, disability support, food and emergency relief, aged care, and youth services, depend heavily on volunteer involvement. Further, through the resilience and innovation of volunteers and volunteer involving organisations, voluntary action has been a vital pillar in supporting communities through recent challenges, such as recent natural disasters and the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, the rate of volunteering has decreased considerably over the past two decades. The rate of formal volunteering has been gradually declining from around one-third of adults in 2002 to around one-quarter in 2022.² The most recent national data, collected in April 2023, reveals the post-COVID recovery of volunteering remains slow. The proportion of people volunteering has increased between 2022 (26.7 per cent of adults) and 2023 (32.6 per cent) but is still below pre-COVID levels, and the average number of hours people have volunteered has declined.³ This has occurred at a time when cost of living has increased significantly and demand for services provided by many volunteers and volunteer involving organisations has increased.

The decline in formal volunteering in Australia has had a direct impact on the programs and services that rely on volunteers. In 2022, 88 per cent of volunteer involving organisations surveyed as part of the Volunteering in Australia research identified COVID-19 as a key driver of change, and 83 per cent reported that they need more volunteers immediately or in the near future.⁴ This trend has significant implications for government-funded programs in key sectors. For example, the number of volunteers in Commonwealth Residential Aged Care programs fell from 23,537 in 2016 to 11,980 in November 2020—a decrease of 49 percent.⁵ The reduced capacity of crucial programs and services, many of which are the responsibility of the government, raises the question of how these programs can be delivered and supported in the future.

If volunteering is to recover and thrive in communities across Australia, targeted investment for the volunteering ecosystem is needed as a matter of urgency and must be sustained into the future. Faced with these challenges, recent increases in cost of living have placed further strain on volunteers and volunteer involving organisations. The Government's commitment to a stronger, more diverse, and independent community sector depends fundamentally on a thriving and well-supported volunteering ecosystem.

² <https://volunteeringstrategy.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Volunteering-in-Australia-2022-The-Volunteer-Perspective.pdf>

³

https://csrcm.cass.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/docs/2023/10/Ongoing_trends_in_volunteering_in_Australia.pdf

⁴ <https://volunteeringstrategy.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Volunteering-in-Australia-2022-The-Organisation-Perspective.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/AGED-CARE-CENSUS-2020-factsheet-Final.pdf>

Current Commonwealth funding arrangements for volunteering

Volunteering is resourced through an array of funding arrangements in Australia. At the Commonwealth level, volunteering is funded through the Volunteer Grants initiative and the Volunteer Management Activity (VMA).⁶

Volunteer Grants provide small amounts of funding (between \$1,000 and \$5,000) to help not-for-profit organisations to:

- Purchase portable, tangible, small equipment items to help their volunteers
- Contribute to the reimbursement of fuel costs for their volunteers who use their own car to transport others to activities, deliver food, assist with medical appointments or help people in need
- Contribute to the reimbursement of transport costs incurred by volunteers with disability who are unable to drive
- Contribute to the costs of training courses and/or undertake background screening checks for their volunteers.

The Volunteer Management Activity aims to increase opportunities for people to participate in the social and economic life of their broader community through volunteering. The VMA focuses on the state and territory volunteering peak bodies developing and implementing strategies to build the capacity of volunteer involving organisations, through online volunteer management services, and breaking down barriers to volunteering for identified priority groups.

In addition, programs that involve volunteers are funded through an array of grant programs administered by Commonwealth and state/territory government departments and agencies. Volunteering plays a key role in major community service areas such as preventative health, mental health, employment, multicultural and settlement programs, social cohesion, and disaster relief, which are also funded by various other departments and agencies outside the Department of Social Services.⁷ These grant processes should also be considered with respect to strengthening grant funding for volunteering.

Giving the sector the voice and respect it deserves through a meaningful working partnership

Volunteering Australia supports the position of the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS) that grant arrangements should place the people and communities who use services at the centre of planning, design, procurement, management, and governance of all services purchased using a commissioning approach.

⁶ <https://www.dss.gov.au/our-responsibilities/communities-and-vulnerable-people/programs-services>

⁷ <https://engage.dss.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/stronger-more-diverse-independent-community-sector.pdf>, 10

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To facilitate this, the Government should allow adequate timeframes for genuine consultation and co-design processes to occur, and commit to properly resourcing community sector organisations to support ongoing engagement on public advisory groups, bodies, and other decision-making structures to properly acknowledge and value lived experience and expertise. Due to the cross-cutting nature of volunteering, and the diversity of people who participate in volunteering, it delivers added value and positive impacts across many other Government responsibilities including preventative health, mental health, employment, multicultural and settlement programs, social cohesion, and disaster relief. In alignment with Strategic Objective 3.1 of the National Strategy for Volunteering, a whole-of-government approach to volunteering would therefore strengthen the partnership between government and the volunteering ecosystem.

Providing grants that reflect the real cost of delivering quality services

While volunteers offer their assistance without expectation of financial gain, volunteering is not free. Resourcing is required to recruit, induct, train, and manage volunteers, and these costs can place significant pressure on community sector organisations when they are not adequately funded.

Volunteering is a vital part of the charity sector, with charities reporting that 3.2 million volunteers helped deliver services in the 2021 reporting period.⁸ 50 per cent of the charities that operated in 2021 reported having no paid staff – meaning they relied solely on volunteer efforts.⁹ Research has shown that the sector was already facing significant financial pressure prior to recent cost of living increases. A recent survey found that one third of not-for-profit organisations believe that COVID-19 created a significant threat to their viability, and 78 percent experienced a downturn in revenue due to COVID-19, with 40 percent reporting a revenue decrease of more than 15 percent.¹⁰ These challenges, combined with increased demand for services, place significant pressure on many volunteer involving organisations.

To ensure grant agreements reflect the real cost of delivering quality services, costs associated with engaging volunteers must be covered under grant agreements. This means ensuring that management, equipment, administration, and other costs are fully covered, that grant agreements allow organisations to fund volunteer management roles, and that indexation keeps pace with increases in the cost of service delivery.

Costs of volunteering not covered by current grant funding

Volunteer involving organisations often struggle to appropriately resource volunteering under existing grant agreements. The most significant costs include funding paid volunteer managers, equipment, administration, and recognition. These costs are often not adequately covered by available grant funding. In a survey of community sector organisations in the ACT, only 25 per cent of

⁸ <https://www.acnc.gov.au/tools/reports/australian-charities-report-9th-edition>, 19

⁹ *ibid*

¹⁰ <https://www.mckinsey.com/au/our-insights/building-from-purpose-unlocking-the-power-of-australias-not-for-profit-sector#/>

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surveyed organisations were adequately funded to manage volunteers.¹¹ The report found that “the costs of managing volunteers is high and completely unfunded. These costs are not just in management of people, they also need access to professional development, supervision, workplace health and safety etc.”¹²

Administrative requirements, such as facilitating onboarding processes, worker screening checks, insurance, and training for volunteers, can create significant costs for volunteer involving organisations. The following examples provided by Volunteering Tasmania highlight how administration creates costs for volunteer involving organisations:

A member of Volunteering Tasmania recently advised that it costs their organisation approximately \$600 to onboard a single volunteer. This does not include the costs to provide ongoing management, training, or support.

Another member highlighted that it costs their organisation \$239 to provide a volunteer with mandatory first aid training. With first aid certificates expiring after two years and with an unpaid workforce of approximately 800 volunteers, this is an unfunded cost of \$191,200 that must be absorbed by the organisation every two years to meet their contractual obligations.

Many of the costs associated with running volunteering programs are not adequately covered under existing grant programs. One specific example is the Volunteer Grant 2023-24 program,¹³ operated by the Department of Social Services. The Grant Guidelines specifically exclude costs of managing volunteers, volunteer insurances, and ‘subscriptions,’ which can include online volunteer recruitment platforms. These are costs associated with engaging volunteers which must be covered by other funding sources. Further information is included in the table below.

Under the grant guidelines, the following costs to operate a volunteer program cannot be claimed:

Excluded from funding (section 5.4 Grant Guidelines)	Comment
Administration costs such as leasing, rental, hiring, labour, utilities, insurance and travel	<p>Volunteer accident insurance, some utilities (eg. phone bills for volunteer phones), travel (for volunteers to attend shifts, training etc.) are essential costs that must be covered for volunteering programs to be safe, compliant, and effective.</p> <p>Many volunteer manager roles are paid. Appropriately resourcing volunteer management is a key pillar of the National Strategy for Volunteering, highlighted in Strategic Objective 3.4: Recognise the</p>

¹¹ https://actcoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/2021-report-Counting-the-Costs_1.pdf, 20

¹² https://actcoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/2021-report-Counting-the-Costs_1.pdf, 21

¹³ <https://www.grants.gov.au/Fo/Show?FoUUid=7b57b89b-ac76-4fc9-ac36-0cfa6523f0c3>

	<p>Importance of Volunteer Management.¹⁴ The importance of these roles was also recognised in the Royal Commission into Aged Care, which recommended that all aged care services that engage volunteers to deliver in-house coordinated and supervised volunteer programs must assign the role of volunteer coordination to a designated staff member.¹⁵</p> <p>It may be that the best contributor to a successful volunteer program is the incorporation, and funding where possible, of skilled volunteer management roles.</p>
<p>Fees, charges and subscriptions</p>	<p>This terminology is vague and confusing, as it covers most costs.</p> <p>The trend towards subscription-based models for many key products and services, such as volunteer management and recruitment IT platforms, makes it increasingly difficult to adequately resource volunteering through Volunteer Grants.</p> <p>Similarly, it excludes membership of organisations such as peak bodies which may provide substantial support and capacity building for volunteer programs.</p>
<p>Conferences, events and functions for the organisation</p>	<p>These may provide substantial support and capacity building for volunteer programs.</p>

Supplementation and indexation

Indexation applied to grant funding for community sector organisations has not kept pace with increases in the cost of service delivery.¹⁶ A study of community sector organisations in Tasmania found that yearly increases in expenses were significantly higher than Tasmanian Government indexation and relevant Consumer Price Index figures in the 2019-20 and 2020-21 financial years,

¹⁴ <https://volunteeringstrategy.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/National-Strategy-for-Volunteering-2023-2033.pdf>, 62

¹⁵ <https://www.royalcommission.gov.au/system/files/2021-03/final-report-recommendations.pdf>, 238

¹⁶ With the exception of the announced 9.5 per cent indexation rate for the 2023/24 financial year, which projections indicated is appropriate to match costs for CSOs: <https://www.uwa.edu.au/schools/-/media/Not-for-profits-UWA/Policy-and-Economics/TASCOSS-Indexation-Core-Report-2022.pdf>

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resulting in an annual shortfall of 9.5 per cent.¹⁷ Volunteer recruitment, management, and training costs were significant contributors to increased operational costs over this period.¹⁸

Indexation should reflect increases in service delivery costs for community sector organisations. Volunteering Australia supports calls from ACOSS for fair, transparent, and timely indexation of community sector grants. The Government should commit to appropriate indexation, that is consistent across funded organisations, published annually, and reflects the actual increase in costs incurred by funded organisations.

Analysis of grant agreements to fund the real cost of engaging volunteers

As outlined above, allocating funding for volunteering is not always possible under grant agreements. This prevents volunteer involving organisations from appropriately covering the cost of service delivery through grant funding and limits capacity building in the sector.

The Department notes that it may be useful to undertake analysis of the sector to understand its composition, scope, and funding flows.¹⁹ This will inform further work and determine the impact and adequacy of the additional funding committed by government (over the last two Budgets) that has already started to flow through to the sector. Volunteering is crucial to the work of community sector organisations and requires sufficient and effective resourcing. To make informed policy decisions, it is imperative to undertake an in-depth analysis of the volunteering landscape. This analysis should aim to:

1. Assess current funding arrangements: Volunteering in community sector organisations is supported by the Commonwealth Government directly through the Department of Social Services, as well as by a number of other departments and agencies with responsibility for particular service areas, such as preventative health, mental health, employment, multicultural and settlement programs, social cohesion, disaster relief. The cumulative impact and adequacy of funding for volunteering in the community sector should be understood and assessed.
2. Identify limitations within grant agreements: Grant agreements often carry restrictions that prevent organisations from investing in volunteer management and coordination. Reviewing these specifications is essential to ensure efficient resource allocation and strengthen supports for volunteering across the community sector. This may involve further consultation with the volunteering ecosystem to identify key funding gaps.
3. Map funding flows: Mapping the flow of funds within the sector is essential to ascertain whether government funding reaches the intended beneficiaries effectively and whether it addresses the sector's pressing needs. This should examine how funding from the Commonwealth and state and territory governments interact.

¹⁷ <https://www.uwa.edu.au/schools/-/media/Not-for-profits-UWA/Policy-and-Economics/TASCOSS-Indexation-Core-Report-2022.pdf>

¹⁸ *ibid*

¹⁹ <https://engage.dss.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/stronger-more-diverse-independent-community-sector.pdf>, 20

The proposed analysis of the composition, scope, and funding flows of the community sector should be undertaken in alignment with Strategic Objective 3.3 of the National Strategy for Volunteering 2023-2033, which emphasises the importance of common infrastructure to the effective engagement of volunteers across Australia. The National Strategy for Volunteering states: “For volunteering in Australia to thrive, investment priorities need to be broadened to understand and account for the true costs of enabling volunteering and facilitating volunteer involvement. This will require conversations that challenge the status quo and generate new ideas about how volunteering should be funded and which actors in the volunteering ecosystem should have a responsibility for providing financial and other support.”²⁰ It should also be guided by Strategic Objective 3.4, which highlights the imperative of investment in volunteer management as an urgent priority for the ecosystem.²¹

Providing longer grant agreement terms

Longer term grant agreements could be greatly beneficial to volunteer involving organisations, reducing administrative work and improving long-term planning. A study by ACOSS found that the majority of community sector leaders called for longer contracts, ideally contracts that ran for five years.²² Leaders highlighted that they often received very little notice that a contract would be renewed or granted, and struggled to plan to meet future resourcing and staffing needs.²³ Conversely, while five-year contracts have been received by some organisations, they have been inflexible in terms of financial requirements and performance targets.

Longer and more flexible grant agreements, with sufficient notice of renewal, would be ideal to better support community sector organisations, improving service delivery and long-term sustainability. Indexation must also be applied appropriately to five-year grants.

Ensuring grant funding flows to a greater diversity of CSOs

Ensuring fair distribution of grant funding among diverse community sector organisations is vital, especially for smaller organisations. These organisations often struggle due to limited staffing and may lack the resources to prepare competitive grant applications. To promote equity, targeted support must be provided to allow these organisations to participate in grant processes. Additionally, extending grant application timeframes is crucial. Short timelines hinder meaningful consultations with stakeholders, which are essential for understanding community needs. By allowing adequate time for engagement and quality applications, grant providers can create opportunities for a greater diversity of organisations to draft quality funding applications, fostering a more inclusive and diverse volunteering ecosystem.

²⁰ <https://volunteeringstrategy.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/National-Strategy-for-Volunteering-2023-2033.pdf>, 60

²¹ <https://volunteeringstrategy.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/National-Strategy-for-Volunteering-2023-2033.pdf>, 62

²² https://www.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/ACSS-2021_better-contracting-report.pdf, 13

²³ *ibid*

Volunteering Australia also supports calls from ACOSS to ensure that everyone's voice is heard in our public debate by adequately funding peak bodies and advocacy organisations representing people facing disadvantage.

Partnering with trusted community organisations with strong local links

The National Strategy for Volunteering 2023-2033 highlights that volunteering is a vital community-driven activity, where individuals contribute to enact change and foster thriving communities.²⁴ A top-down approach, which lacks community input, inhibits volunteer agency, and diminishes the effectiveness of services. Rigid and prescriptive funding and grant agreements can also dissuade recipients from being innovative and agile.

The importance of community-led solutions is particularly salient in the context of disaster response and recovery. The Senate Inquiry into the 2019-20 Bushfires noted the grant application process was complicated, placed considerable burden on volunteers, and created an unnecessary level of competition.²⁵ It also noted that community groups are frequently small and largely volunteer-run, yet they are expected to execute professional and competitive grant applications on top of the recovery work they are trying to complete and alongside their paid jobs. The administrative and bureaucratic red tape was identified as so onerous that some groups decided not to pursue an application at all and sharing of information was described as a "gaping hole in the disaster recovery process." This example demonstrates the importance of community-led solutions. The volunteering ecosystem should be consulted extensively in the design and implementation of programs and funding processes.

Community-led solutions may be supported by place-based models, as well as through state and territory and national initiatives. Alternatives to place-based funding models should also be considered where relevant to the needs of the sector.

The government has also committed \$100 million towards establishing an Outcomes Fund, to be co-designed with stakeholders, including states and territories. An Outcomes Fund will make payments for programs delivered in local communities, based on these programs achieving agreed and measurable outcomes. This will support data-driven, evidence-based solutions, improving outcomes in a range of policy areas. The development of the Outcomes Fund should consider ways to fund supportive infrastructure in alignment with Strategic Objective 3.3: Commit to Strategic Investment, and the volunteering ecosystem should be consulted in the development of the fund. Partners engaged in co-design should be resourced appropriately for their contributions to the development of the Outcomes Fund.

²⁴ <https://volunteeringstrategy.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/National-Strategy-for-Volunteering-2023-2033.pdf>, 54-55

²⁵ Commonwealth of Australia. (2021). Lessons to be learned in relation to the Australian bushfire season 2019-20. Available online at https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/committees/reportsen/024627/toc_pdf/LessonstobelearnedinrelationtotheAustralianbushfireseason2019-20-FinalReport.pdf

Recommendations

Volunteering Australia and the State and Territory volunteering peak bodies make the following recommendations to be presented to government to support both short and longer-term reform to the operation of community sector grants:

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Authorisation

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



Mr Mark Pearce
Chief Executive Officer

Endorsements

This submission 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.

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