



Pre-Budget Submission 2024-25

January 2024

Overview

This Pre-Budget Submission, drafted in partnership with the state and territory Volunteering Peak Bodies, sets out the investment needed in the 2024-25 Budget for volunteering to thrive in Australia's future. It demonstrates how targeted, strategic investment in volunteering will enable the Australian Government to meet key priorities.

Volunteering in Australia

Volunteering is vital to the nation's wellbeing but is facing increasing challenges. Volunteering underpins our communities and the Australian lifestyle. Volunteers are an essential workforce, spanning major sectors, including in aged care and disability care; community welfare; sports and the arts; crisis preparedness, response, and recovery; and in environmental sustainability and protection. In 2019, nearly six million Australians volunteered through organisations across the nation. Around six million people volunteered informally in their local communities, helping neighbours and strangers, especially in times of crisis and adversity.

However, a myriad of factors is critically impacting the ability of Australians to volunteer. The COVID-19 pandemic hit formal volunteering especially hard. Volunteering is not free, and the current cost of living pressures are adding significant barriers for participation. Over the long-term, formal volunteering has been in decline in Australia. As recently noted by the Productivity Commission, the formal volunteering rate fell from 36 per cent in 2010 to 25 per cent in 2020¹ and has yet to recover from the significant impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The National Strategy for Volunteering (2023-2033)

The Australian Government is a key enabling partner in the implementation of the National Strategy for Volunteering. The National Strategy for Volunteering was designed and is owned by all members of the volunteering ecosystem. Launched in February 2023, the National Strategy provides a blueprint for a reimagined future for volunteering in Australia. It provides strategic direction for volunteering to be effective, inclusive and sustainable.

Priority recommendations

1. Provide volunteering cost of living relief through an expanded Volunteer Grants program.
2. Fund volunteering infrastructure and the continuation of the Volunteer Management Activity.
3. Resource National Strategy for Volunteering implementation.
4. Develop a National Volunteer Passport.
5. Establish an Environmental and Climate Change Volunteering Capacity Building Program.
6. Implement a national initiative to address loneliness through volunteering.
7. Develop a National Disability Services Volunteering Framework.

¹ <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/current/philanthropy/draft/philanthropy-draft.pdf>, 35

Introduction

The criticality of volunteering to Government priorities

Volunteers play an essential role in many Government priorities,² for example in:

- Improving aged care and supporting health services
- Enhancing support for people with disability
- Responding during emergencies and improving disaster readiness, recovery and resilience
- Protecting the natural environment and acting on climate initiatives
- Strengthening charities and non-profits
- Advancing First Nations justice and wellbeing
- Community and high performance sport
- Supporting rural and regional communities
- Providing pathways for young people to employment, training and education
- Protecting mental health

Volunteering brings social, cultural, and economic benefits to the nation. As identified during the development of the new National Strategy for Volunteering, volunteering is a workforce issue.³

While responsibility for volunteering at the Commonwealth level sits within the Department of Social Services, volunteers are involved across an array of sectors that fall within the remit of other Commonwealth Government portfolios. Volunteers involved in community services, welfare, and homelessness represent only one fifth of Australia's formal volunteers. Other large sub-sectors, such as sport and recreation, and religious, faith-based, and spiritual each engage over one million volunteers,⁴ and there are over 800,000 volunteers in environmental charities,⁵ yet the government portfolios for these domains do not have explicit responsibilities for volunteering.

Data also reveals sizeable volunteer workforces in mental health (4.4 per cent of volunteers), aged care (8.8 per cent), and disability (4.7 per cent).⁶ Based on estimates of the current Australian population, each of these sectors engage more than 300,000 volunteers. This means that key government initiatives, such as *A Matter of Care: Australia's Aged Care Workforce Strategy*, *Australia's Disability Strategy*, and the *National Mental Health Workforce Strategy*, need to plan for the involvement of volunteers and consider how underpinning initiatives will affect volunteering to avoid unintended consequences to those volunteer workforces and sectors, and the people they aim to assist. The success of these strategies will depend on their volunteer workforces and the enabling environment.

Beyond workforce implications, a detailed understanding of volunteering is necessary to advance other priorities across government. For example, in 2022, 32.5 per cent of volunteers identified that

² See the 2022 Incoming Government Brief for information on how volunteering contributes to many of these priorities.

³ <https://volunteeringstrategy.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/National-Strategy-for-Volunteering-Discovery-Insights-Report.pdf>

⁴ <https://volunteeringstrategy.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Volunteering-in-Australia-2022-The-Volunteer-Perspective.pdf>, 42; estimates based on a population of 25,422,788 as reported in the 2021 Census

⁵ <https://www.acnc.gov.au/tools/reports/australian-charities-report-9th-edition>, 46

⁶ Biddle, N., Boyer, C., Gray, M., & Jahromi, M. (2022). Volunteering in Australia: The Volunteer Perspective. Available online at <https://volunteeringstrategy.org.au/wpcontent/uploads/2022/10/Volunteering-in-Australia-2022-The-Volunteer-Perspective.pdf>

their volunteering primarily aimed to assist children and youth. This suggests that an estimated 2.2 million people may volunteer with children and young people in Australia.⁷ This illustrates the importance, for example, of considering volunteering in the work of the National Office for Child Safety. More generally, understanding the many ways volunteering can be affected by policy, and the significant ways it supports key government and societal priorities, requires a comprehensive approach that acknowledges all types of volunteering.

The Australian Government's 2023 Budget Statement *Measuring What Matters* aims to provide a foundation for Australia's effort to "lift living standards, boost intergenerational mobility, and create more opportunities for more people."⁸ It recognises that traditional macroeconomic indicators do not provide a holistic view of community wellbeing. Volunteering is a uniquely good indicator for community wellbeing as it captures social connectedness, physical and mental health, sense of purpose, and connection to place.⁹ Recognising this, formal and informal volunteering were included as measures of social cohesion in the *Measuring What Matters* framework. This inclusion highlights the importance of establishing volunteering as a cross-portfolio issue in government, underpinned by robust strategic and financial planning processes to ensure volunteering is adequately resourced (see below).

Implementing the National Strategy for Volunteering

Funded by the Department of Social Services and led by Volunteering Australia, the National Strategy for Volunteering is the culmination of a 12-month co-design process with individuals and organisations from across the volunteering ecosystem. This included state and territory Volunteering Peak Bodies, volunteers, volunteer involving organisations, researchers and academics, volunteering support services, staff in local, state, and federal government departments, staff from companies with employee volunteering programs, enabling organisations, and members of the general public.

The National Strategy for Volunteering sets out the desired outcomes for volunteering in Australia for the next decade. It provides a clear and compelling case, underpinned by robust data and evidence, for targeted and sufficient investment in volunteering and recognition of the role it plays in creating and maintaining thriving communities. Following the launch of the National Strategy for Volunteering in February 2023, a coordinated effort has seen stakeholders across the volunteering ecosystem considering how to collaborate on implementation.

The Australian Government is a key stakeholder in the volunteering ecosystem and an essential enabler of the National Strategy for Volunteering. The Department of Social Services has funded Volunteering Australia to coordinate the Establishment Phase of the National Strategy and initiated an advertising campaign which will take place in 2024. Some additional funding to volunteering support services and to support youth volunteering has also been provided in the last year.

⁷ Based on a population of 25,422,788 as reported in the 2021 Census. Note: no weighting of survey responses was applied in calculating this figure.

⁸ Commonwealth of Australia. (2022). *Measuring what matters*. Available online at <http://budget.gov.au/2022-23-october/content/bp1/index.htm>

⁹ Increasing the number of volunteers in Australia should be a natural outcome of the National Strategy for Volunteering if structural changes are achieved. Growing participation in volunteering cannot be progressed in isolation. Improving the volunteer experience and comprehensively valuing volunteering will pay dividends when it comes to increasing volunteer participation.

This Pre-Budget Submission sets out proposals for how the Australian Government can support the implementation of the National Strategy going forward.

About this Submission

This Submission was drafted by Volunteering Australia in collaboration with the state and territory Volunteering Peak Bodies. It draws on the extensive consultation that took place during the development of the National Strategy for Volunteering (2023-33) and the subsequent first-year Establishment Phase. It builds on our ongoing policy and advocacy work in partnership with the state and territory Volunteering Peak Bodies and their extensive networks, and incorporates feedback from the Volunteering Australia 2023 Stakeholder Survey.

This Budget Submission has been provided to the Australian Government via the Treasury. It has also been provided to the Department of Social Services (the Minister for Social Services has lead responsibility for volunteering), the Department of Health and Aged Care, the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, the National Office for Child Safety in the Attorney General's Department, the National Emergency Management Agency, the Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, and the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet.

Budget Recommendations

1. Provide Volunteering Cost of Living Relief

As part of the Australian Government's commitment to a stronger, more diverse and independent community sector and its overall cost of living response, funding for Volunteer Grants should be increased in line with inflation and to reflect the growing cost of living. The 2024 Volunteer Grants should be expedited, and a key objective of this round of grants should be to support cost of living pressures being faced, particularly by small, volunteer-run organisations.

Investment: An increase of \$5million per annum

This funding would help organisations to survive and continue undertaking their vital work during the current cost of living crisis, particularly small, volunteer-run organisations.

Direct support to organisations providing vital assistance to Australians experiencing cost-of-living pressures, from food to shelter, will demonstrate the Australian Government is addressing cost-of-living pressures through a range of avenues, including already established and successful non-government organisations working on the ground and in communities.

Cost of living and housing pressures in Australia sharpened in 2023, with the Australian Bureau of Statistics recording the largest quarterly increase in living costs in over 20 years.¹⁰ The cost of living has also increased slightly over the past decade, particularly for pensioner households and households that rely on government payments.¹¹ Cost of living and housing pressures will challenge both the capacity of people to volunteer and the work of volunteers in Australia. People

¹⁰ Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2022). Selected Living Cost Indexes, Australia. Available online at <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/economy/price-indexes-and-inflation/selected-living-cost-indexes-australia/latest-release>

¹¹ Commonwealth of Australia. (2022). Australia's cost of living over the last decade. Available online at https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/Briefing_Book46p/CostLiving

experiencing financial difficulties were more likely to have stopped volunteering during COVID-19 and are less likely to have recommenced, and financial barriers to volunteering can be significant.¹² Further, this creates significant costs for volunteer involving organisations and for individual volunteer managers, many of whom are unpaid. According to the 2023 NSW State of Volunteering Report, significant direct and subsidised costs were incurred by volunteer managers in NSW in the performance of their duties. 11 per cent of paid managers and a significant 24.7 per cent of unpaid volunteer managers personally absorb the costs of volunteer activity.¹³ A further 13.1 per cent of paid managers and 18.1 per cent of unpaid managers pay for the costs up-front and are later reimbursed by their organisations. This means that a total of nearly a quarter of paid volunteer managers (24.1 per cent) and nearly half of unpaid volunteer managers (42.8 per cent) in some way pay up-front for volunteering activity.

These pressures are acutely felt by volunteer involving organisations, many of which are experiencing increased demand for services and rely heavily on volunteers to meet this need.¹⁴ Operational costs for volunteer involving organisations have increased sharply, and indexation payments have not kept pace with these increases. 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, resulting in an annual shortfall of 9.5 per cent.¹⁵ Volunteer recruitment, management, and training costs were significant contributors to increased operational costs over this period.¹⁶ Out-of-pocket expenses for volunteers have also increased (for example, petrol costs) and organisations need to reimburse volunteers for these costs.

One way of supporting volunteer involving organisations is through Volunteer Grants. It should be noted that, over the last decade, there has been an ongoing reduction to the quantum of Volunteer Grants. In 2010, \$21 million of Volunteer Grants was distributed. The 2021 Budget allocated only \$10 million per annum in the forward estimates. In the 2019-20 Supplementary Volunteer Grants round, 780 volunteer involving organisations received grants totalling \$2.7 million; however, the grants were 670 per cent oversubscribed. More than 5,300 organisations across Australia submitted application requests totalling \$20.8 million. Consideration should be given to restoring Volunteer Grants to 2010 levels of funding with ongoing indexation, through use of a transparent indexation formula.

Volunteer Grants are an effective means of stimulating volunteering in local communities and supporting the adaptation of volunteering programs. The grants, while only representing a nominal value for the Federal Budget, make a large difference to the operation of small community and cause-based organisations and the volunteers they engage. It should be noted that half of all

¹² <https://volunteeringstrategy.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Volunteering-in-Australia-2022-The-Volunteer-Perspective.pdf>, 36-38

¹³ <https://www.volunteering.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/NSW-State-of-Volunteering-Report-2023.pdf>, 28

¹⁴ Cortis, N. and Blaxland, M. (2022) Helping people in need during a cost-of-living crisis: findings from the Australian Community Sector Survey. Available online at https://www.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/ACSS_demand_snapshot_2022.pdf

¹⁵ <https://www.uwa.edu.au/schools/-/media/Not-for-profits-UWA/Policy-and-Economics/TASCOSS-Indexation-Core-Report-2022.pdf>

¹⁶ *ibid*

charities are entirely volunteer run.¹⁷ The grants are also an important signal from Government that volunteers and volunteer involving organisations are valued, appreciated, and supported in this complex environment.

The immediate priority is to meet the cost-of-living challenge facing organisations. Beyond this, we would encourage the Government to review the administration of the grants program, with the view to the program being administered through the state and territory Volunteering Peak Bodies as was the case in the 2020 Supplementary Volunteer Grants program.

More broadly, grant agreements for community services organisations should better reflect the real cost of service delivery, in support of the Government's commitment for a stronger, more diverse and independent community sector. Grant arrangements at the Commonwealth and state and territory levels should be analysed to ensure crucial supports for volunteering can be appropriately funded.¹⁸ This includes allowing volunteer management and other infrastructure costs to be eligible for funding through the Volunteer Grants program.

During consultations for the National Strategy for Volunteering a significant number of stakeholders raised the cost burden of volunteering. It was suggested that enabling volunteers to claim their out-of-pocket expenses in their tax returns could reduce the financial burden of volunteering. Volunteering Australia and the State and Territory volunteering peak bodies included this recommendation in our submission to the Productivity Commission Review of Philanthropy¹⁹.

2. Fund volunteering infrastructure and the continuation of the Volunteer Management Activity

The 2024-25 Budget should extend funding for the Volunteer Management Activity with indexation into the forward estimates. We recommend that the Australian Government continues to fund and support the Volunteer Management Activity program, with a commitment to a further five-year program.

Investment: continuation of circa \$6m plus indexation per annum

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 program 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.

The review of the Volunteer Management Activity was completed in 2021. From 1 July 2021, the Australian Government commenced the distribution of up to \$33.5 million (excluding GST) over five years under the new Volunteer Management Activity to state and territory Volunteering Peak Bodies across Australia. Peak bodies are partnering with other services to develop and support the revised program to increase and strengthen volunteer participation.

Volunteering Australia welcomed the inclusion of funding indexation for the Volunteer Management Activity (VMA) in the 2019-20 budget, and a commitment to the program's continuation. The 2021-22 Budget allocated funding for the Volunteer Management Activity at circa \$6 million p.a. plus

¹⁷ <https://www.acnc.gov.au/tools/reports/australian-charities-report-9th-edition>

¹⁸ [Submission on a Stronger, More Diverse and Independent Community Sector Issues Paper](#)

¹⁹ [Submission to the Productivity Commission Review of Philanthropy](#)

indexation to 2024-25 (\$33.5 million over five years)²⁰. However additional priority target groups were added to the program in 2023 without additional funding. It is therefore imperative that further funding is allocated to enable effective engagement with the additional priority population cohorts.

It is vital, particularly at this time when volunteering is being impacted by cost of living pressures and still recovering from COVID-19, that investment in volunteering infrastructure is sustained. Additional investment in volunteering infrastructure is required if volunteering is to thrive into the future. A commitment to a further five-year Volunteer Management Activity program is a vital contribution to enabling vibrant, resilient and inclusive communities through volunteering.

3. Resource National Strategy for Volunteering Implementation

Funding is sought to enable the implementation of the National Strategy for Volunteering. This would support initiatives in the first Three-Year Action Plan and continued coordination of the strategy.

Investment: circa \$18million to fund initiatives in the first Three-Year Action Plan

The Australian Government is a vital member of the volunteering ecosystem. Volunteering is critical to the delivery of many of the Government's priorities, the resilience of our communities, and the wellbeing of Australians. Several opportunities are available to the Australian Government to participate in the implementation of the National Strategy for Volunteering and strengthen its outcomes. The following proposals are made:

- a) Funding is allocated to deliver key initiatives in the first three-year Action Plan. This funding would flow to a range of organisations in the volunteering ecosystem including the state and territory Volunteering Peak Bodies.
- b) Resourcing a whole of government approach to volunteering. This would include the Australian Government Department of Social Services leading the implementation of Strategic Objective 3.1: Making Volunteering a Cross-Portfolio Issue in Government²¹
- c) Funding is allocated to Volunteering Australia to lead the ongoing coordination of the National Strategy for Volunteering.

The National Strategy for Volunteering has identified eleven Strategic Objectives, which, if achieved, would transform volunteering in Australia. These objectives were developed directly from consultations with stakeholders from communities across Australia, including those volunteering, living, and working in geographically diverse and unique places. The National Strategy for Volunteering was intentionally designed to leverage the efficiency of implementation at a national level to ensure benefits flow directly to individual communities.

a) Delivering the first Three-Year Action Plan

The first Three-Year Action Plan is currently being co-designed with the volunteering ecosystem and will commence in July 2024. Whilst this is in development, we are recommending that the Government earmark funds as part of the Budget process to enable the implementation of the Action Plan. This funding can be allocated to specific initiatives once the co-designed Action Plan has

²⁰ Note: not all S/Ts have Volunteer Support Services/Resource Centres and so did not receive additional funding that was introduced in 2023 (Tasmania and ACT).

²¹ See page 58 <https://volunteeringstrategy.org.au/the-strategy/>

been completed. A vital part of the development of Action Plan initiatives will be to consider how the initiatives enhance and avoid duplication of existing initiatives.

The volunteering ecosystem is vast and funding will need to flow to various parts of the ecosystem to ensure the Action Plan can be implemented. Allocation of funding will consider how various stakeholders, such as the state and territory Volunteering Peak Bodies, volunteering support services, and enabling organisations can co-deliver Action Plan initiatives to ensure maximum reach and impact.

The Action Plan may include some of the initiatives that have consistently emerged as priorities from stakeholders during the development of the National Strategy and its first year Establishment Phase. For example:

- An outcomes measurement tool that volunteer involving organisations can use to evaluate the volunteer experience and to assess and improve the impact made by volunteers.
- A volunteering passport (developed further below; see Funding Measure 4)
- A corporate/employee volunteering initiative, which could involve setting up a national Community of Practice and developing tailored resources for different sectors – private, public, and not for profit.
- A national leadership development and capability framework. This might include strengthening the Continuing Professional Development program for Professional Leaders of Volunteers and/or projects to implement the refreshed National Standards for Volunteer Involvement.
- An innovation grants project to support volunteer involving organisations to enhance their practices and programs to align with specific Strategic Objectives of the National Strategy.
- A national Centre for Volunteering Research to generate new research and enhance research translation to ensure research has impact on policy and practice, and the development of a national volunteering research agenda.
- A whole of Australian Government regulatory review of volunteering, which considers both national and state/territory regulation.
- Re-alignment of the Volunteer Grants program (in the short-term we are recommending that the Volunteer Grants program support immediate cost of living pressures; see Funding Measure 1).
- A national bank of case-studies of the ‘National Strategy in action’ to enable sharing of good practice and enhance collaboration opportunities.
- A national initiative to develop and provide better integrated guidance/resources for states and territories to support child safe volunteering and the implementation of the National Principles for Child Safe Organisations in volunteering settings.

b) Resourcing a whole of government approach to volunteering

One of the strategic objectives of the new National Strategy for Volunteering (Strategic Objective 3.1) is to make volunteering a cross-portfolio issue in Government. This would entail governments consistently considering the needs of volunteers and supporting volunteering through comprehensive policy and investment. Making volunteering a cross-portfolio issue at all levels of government will ensure that policies that affect volunteers are developed with careful consideration of the opportunities and challenges they may create for volunteer involvement. Repositioning volunteering as a whole of government imperative will ensure it is routinely considered and invested

in. Making volunteering a cross-portfolio issue is a critical step for both safeguarding and elevating volunteering in Australia.

The Minister for Social Services has lead responsibility for volunteering policy in the Australian Government. Therefore, the Department of Social Services is best placed to lead the development of a whole of government approach. This could involve the establishment and resourcing of an Inter-Departmental Committee which would develop a whole of government volunteering framework aligned with the National Strategy for Volunteering.

c) Coordination of the National Strategy for Volunteering

The Australian Government Department of Social Services funded Volunteering Australia to lead the co-design of the National Strategy for Volunteering and the first year Establishment Phase. The Establishment Phase involves the development of:

- A Governance Blueprint
- A Model of Shared Accountability
- A Monitoring and Evaluation Framework (MEF)
- The first Three-year Action Plan

The Establishment Phase will conclude at the end of June 2024 as the first Three-year Action Plan begins. Funding is sought to enable Volunteering Australia to support the ongoing delivery of the National Strategy for Volunteering and enable collaboration across the volunteering ecosystem. Activities could include: tracking the delivery of the Action Plan through enacting the Monitoring and Evaluation Framework (MEF); facilitating collaboration and the sharing of good practice across the volunteering ecosystem; continuing to build awareness and engagement with the National Strategy; developing National Strategy resources, hosting workshops/training; updating the Establishment Phase deliverables (e.g., updating the MEF and Model for Shared Accountability); conducting the first review of the National Strategy; and developing the second Three-year Action Plan (based on the outcomes of the first).

4. Develop a National Volunteer Passport

To increase efficiency and reduce administrative burden on volunteer involving organisation, the Australian Government should fund the development of a volunteer passport. This platform would aim to increase volunteer mobility and enable better planning through improved data collection.

Investment: development funding of \$8m in 2024/25 plus ongoing funding of \$2m per annum.

Volunteers play a significant role in many key sectors, such as mental health, disability support, aged care, and emergency management. However, navigating administrative requirements can be a challenge for volunteers and a significant cost to volunteer involving organisations. Onboarding of volunteers is often delayed or complicated by duplicative training requirements and worker screening processes, which are often not portable between jurisdictions. This can be a significant burden for organisations, particularly national organisations that engage volunteers in multiple states and territories. Improved data management and portability of volunteer clearances and skills are needed to improve the onboarding experience, increase efficiency, and better plan for volunteer involvement.

During consultations for the development of the National Strategy for Volunteering, many volunteers and organisations raised the idea of a 'national volunteer passport' as a means of

reducing administration, increasing portability of skills, qualifications, and screening checks between organisations, and recognising skills, training, and credentials of volunteers at a national level. A volunteer passport aims to address these challenges by establishing a unified platform that makes worker screening checks, skills, and credentials held by volunteers visible in an integrated database which is accessible and volunteer-controlled.

The volunteer passport project would aim to:

- Establish a National Volunteer Register: create a centralised database where volunteers can register their worker screening checks, resumes, certifications and qualifications, emergency contacts, language capabilities, and other relevant information.
- Develop a Volunteer Passport and App: introduce a digital volunteer passport and mobile app.
- Improve mobility of volunteers: allow volunteers to upload and manage their details and experience, and share these with registered volunteer involving organisations and other agencies at their discretion.

The volunteer passport should be developed in consultation with the volunteering ecosystem, including the state and territory Volunteering Peak Bodies, to ensure the passport meets the needs of the ecosystem and interfaces effectively with existing platforms.

5. Establish an Environmental and Climate Change Volunteering Capacity Building Program

The Australian Government should invest in foundational work to establish a program which builds environmental and climate change volunteering capacity.

Investment: a development fund of \$1m in 2024/25

This foundational measure would ultimately inform the development of a national program which amplifies and accelerates participation in environmental volunteering specifically, with the aim of directly benefiting the environment and contributing to efforts to mitigate the global environmental threat of climate change.

If Australia is successful in its bid to host an Australia-Pacific COP²² in 2026, targeted measures such as this will complement the more substantial structural interventions required to achieve the Government's commitment of 43 per cent emissions reduction by 2030. This measure will help demonstrate the Australian Government's commitment to community-led environmental initiatives on climate change through more effectively engaging volunteers.

The challenges presented by climate change require critical investment in prevention, education and resilience measures. Volunteers can and will play a leading role in this effort. They are already the backbone of environmental protection and action in Australia. Volunteers are also at the heart of emergency response to climate-related extreme weather events for Australian communities, increasingly called on to react to the impacts of climate change and support community and environmental recovery. Climate change disproportionately affects low-income, vulnerable and minority groups and regional and remote communities, including First Nations' communities. **The**

²² COP stands for Conference of the Parties which is an international climate meeting now held each year by the United Nations.

time has come to invest in environmental volunteering activities that focus on prevention, restoration, education and recovery to boost Australia's environmental and climate-change actions at the community level.

The opportunity to better align and grow this segment of Australian volunteering is significant. The 2022 Volunteering in Australia research found that 7.0 per cent of volunteers (around 475,000 people) are engaged in 'Environment' organisations in Australia. However, *interest* in volunteering for environmental organisations was very high among non-volunteers, with 23.0 per cent of those who did not volunteer indicating that they would be interested in doing so for environmental organisations in the future - the second highest of any volunteering cause.

The gap between action and interest presents a timely opportunity to engage and support not only current environmental volunteers and volunteer involving organisations, but to galvanise those with intent or interest in participating.

There are more than six million formal volunteers in Australia²³ and further work is needed to better understand the motivations, needs and barriers to environmental and climate change volunteering specifically.

The foundational phase of this measure would allow for targeted qualitative research to ascertain what is needed to support this segment of the volunteering ecosystem, to map the space and understand its complexities, with recommendations for next steps to leverage the untapped interest in environmental and climate change volunteering.

A subsequent visioning and co-design process with stakeholders, wider community-groups and volunteers would allow for the creation of a well-designed national environmental volunteering program and tools to increase participation and, importantly, tangible positive environmental and climate change outcomes.

6. Implement a national initiative to address loneliness through volunteering

The Australian Government should invest in a national initiative to promote and support volunteering as a form of social connection to target loneliness in Australia. This should include a public promotion campaign profiling volunteer involving organisations with a focus on social connection and a grants program that resources these organisations to expand to accommodate more volunteers and participants.

Investment: development and ongoing funding of \$3m per annum.

Loneliness has a major impact on mental and physical wellbeing, and affects an increasing number of people in Australia. A national initiative should be established to address loneliness through volunteering, aimed at strengthening volunteer involving organisations addressing loneliness. Targeted funding to increase the capacity of volunteer involving organisations and an awareness campaign could strengthen the network of support created by volunteer involving organisations to more effectively reach those most in need.

²³ <https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/VA-Key-Volunteering-Statistics-2022-Update.pdf>

Young people have much to gain from volunteering and were disproportionately affected by the economic impacts of COVID-19, with subsequent impacts on their mental health and future wellbeing. Throughout the pandemic, people aged 18-24 had the highest levels of loneliness.²⁴ Further, the rate of volunteering among young people decreased significantly during COVID-19 and has yet to show signs of recovery.²⁵ Research demonstrates that volunteering can provide a protective effect against poor mental health.²⁶

A national initiative to address loneliness through volunteering would include:

- Grant allocation: establish a grant program to financially support volunteer involving organisations dedicated to alleviating loneliness. These grants will fund initiatives that facilitate companionship, community engagement, and outreach efforts²⁷.
- Capacity building: provide resources and training to enhance the capabilities of volunteer involving organisations. Workshops on effective volunteer management, community outreach, and mental health training will be organised.
- Promoting volunteering: highlight the invaluable role of volunteers in combating loneliness. Showcase success stories, testimonials, and the positive impact of volunteer companionship programs, encouraging more people to get involved.

Developing this initiative would require a scoping exercise with partners from the volunteering ecosystem, including state and territory Volunteering Peak Bodies who have place-based relationships with youth organisations, mental health organisations, local and jurisdictional governments, and others to determine how best to operationalise the program. Ending Loneliness Together²⁸ will be a vital network to consult on scoping this work. Consideration should be given to that age range of young people who would benefit from this initiative, and whether it should include school aged young people. Young people leaving education systems would have the opportunity to develop greater social capital and deeper connection with community as they undergo a period of significant life change. This should complement social prescribing initiatives that include volunteering, such as the Local Connections social prescribing trial recently launched in Victoria.²⁹

7. Develop a national disability services volunteering framework

To support the vital role of volunteering in the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), the Australian Government should invest in the development of a national disability services volunteering framework. This must be based on robust data on volunteering in the disability services sector, underpinned by a new Disability Sector Workforce Census.

Investment: to be determined as part of implementation of the NDIS Review

Volunteering is integral to the aims of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), and yet government understanding and support for the involvement of volunteers in the NDIS has been

²⁴ <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/social-isolation-and-loneliness>

²⁵ <https://volunteeringstrategy.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Volunteering-in-Australia-2022-The-Volunteer-Perspective.pdf>, 26

²⁶ <https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/Evidence-Insights-Volunteering-and-mental-health-Final.pdf>

²⁷ This should build upon and learn from existing initiatives, for example the ACT 'Connections' Program.

²⁸ <https://endingloneliness.com.au/>

²⁹ <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/mental-health-wellbeing-reform/local-connections-social-prescribing-initiative>

largely lacking. Volunteers can add significant value to care and support services, and volunteering can play an important role in the lives of people with disability, offering opportunities for social, economic, and cultural inclusion. The latest national data on volunteering in Australia, collected as part of the Volunteering in Australia 2022 research, found that 4.7 per cent of volunteers were engaged by organisations in the disability sector.³⁰ This equates to around 319,000 volunteers across Australia,³¹ who perform a broad range of roles across the disability services landscape. However, existing policy frameworks, funding models, and data collection efforts under the NDIS are poorly equipped to facilitate volunteer involvement in the sector.

Although volunteers offer their time without financial gain, there is a cost associated with running volunteer-supported programs. It is therefore important for volunteering programs to be appropriately funded to ensure their viability.

Research on volunteer-supported disability services has found that the outcomes reported of most programs align with those outlined in the Information Linkages and Capacity Building (ILC) framework.³² Despite this, a study of NDIS-funded volunteer programs in Victoria found that only a small minority—8 of the 152 programs detailed by organisations in the study—received any funding through ILC.³³ Most NDIS-funded programs are funded through individual NDIS packages. A recent report from Per Capita and National Disability Services (NDS) found that annual expenditure on activities under the ILC program was insufficient to meet the intended goals of the scheme.³⁴ In our submission to the NDIS Review, Volunteering Australia and the state and territory Volunteering Peak Bodies recommended that funding for the Information, Linkages and Capacity Building (ILC) Program is increased and extended to resource volunteer involving organisations that deliver services under the NDIS.³⁵ In its interim report³⁶, the Royal Commission heard evidence about the involvement of volunteers in services and support for people with disability. Further, while volunteers are acknowledged as workers by the NDIS Commission,³⁷ they are not included in key workforce planning initiatives for the sector, such as the NDIS National Workforce Plan: 2021-2025.³⁸ Given the scale and importance of volunteering in the disability sector, the desired role of volunteer involvement in the NDIS workforce, and how this aligns with reform objectives, should be clearly articulated.

³⁰ <https://volunteeringstrategy.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Volunteering-in-Australia-2022-The-Volunteer-Perspective.pdf>, 42

³¹ Based on the count of the Australian population reported in the 2021 Census; <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/population/population-census/2021>

³² <https://www.interchange.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Value-Added-Volunteer-Supported-Services-and-the-Challenge-of-the-NDIS.pdf>

³³ <https://www.interchange.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Value-Added-Volunteer-Supported-Services-and-the-Challenge-of-the-NDIS.pdf>

³⁴ https://www.nds.org.au/images/per_capita_report_march_2023/Not_a_One_Stop_Shop_-_Summary.pdf, 19

³⁵ <https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/download/199/2023/44411/july-2023-submission-to-the-ndis-review.pdf>

³⁶ [Interim Report | Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability](https://www.ndiscommission.gov.au/workers)

³⁷ <https://www.ndiscommission.gov.au/workers>

³⁸ https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/06_2021/ndis-national-workforce-plan-2021-2025.pdf

Participation in volunteering can also play an important role in the lives of people with disability, offering opportunities for social, economic, and cultural inclusion. Volunteering can be particularly beneficial to people with disability in offering self-empowerment and pathways to paid employment. It is therefore urgent that volunteer involving organisations receive the resources needed to remove barriers to volunteering for people with disability.

It is imperative that the contributions of volunteering, both in the disability services workforce and in the lives of people with disability, are recognised and resourced in this and future Budgets, in the Targeted Action Plans established to support Australia's Disability Strategy, and in the Government's ongoing response to the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability³⁹.

This should involve collecting robust data on volunteering in the disability services sector, underpinned by a new Disability Sector Workforce Census. Data collection should also consider how people with disabilities are supported by volunteer involving organisations that do not operate in the disability services sector or as NDIS providers, such as mental health support programs and companionship programs.

Other Priority Issues

The following issues involve activity which require ongoing government investment, but we do not have specific funding asks at this stage. We would be keen to continue working with the relevant government departments to further develop this work, including the scoping of funding requirements.

- **Volunteering Data**

Data on volunteering in Australia underpins the development of effective volunteering policy and practice and will be vital in informing and monitoring the implementation of the new National Strategy for Volunteering. It is also essential to key government initiatives and for the future of Australia's budget process. Volunteering was included as a key measure of social cohesion in the *Measuring What Matters* Framework. As the Framework is developed further and embedded into government decision-making, it is essential that high-quality national data on volunteering in Australia is consistently collected. This means that reliable, nationally representative data on the rate of both formal and informal volunteering must be collected regularly to measure overall progress on wellbeing in Australia.

Further, ensuring data on volunteering is comprehensive, policy-relevant, and available at the state and territory level is vital to support good policy and program design. High-quality data on volunteering has recently been collected through the State of Volunteering surveys led by many of the state and territory Volunteering Peak Bodies in 2023 and the Volunteering in Australia research led by Volunteering Australia in 2022. While these projects have provided invaluable data on volunteering, they do not receive ongoing funding. Ensuring this data is consistently collected and made accessible is a key priority for Volunteering Australia and the state and territory Volunteering Peak Bodies.

³⁹ <https://disability.royalcommission.gov.au/publications/final-report>

It should be noted that the General Social Survey (GSS) conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics is the only official data source which consistently provides information on volunteers and volunteering using a sample of the general population. The GSS is currently being reviewed and the last data enumerated was in 2020. Recent surveys have included a limited module on volunteering which excluded questions on type of voluntary activity, reasons for volunteering, expenses incurred while volunteering, whether a respondent's parents volunteer, and how people become involved in volunteering, which were last included in the 2014 GSS.⁴⁰ The data generated from the GSS is vital to the volunteering ecosystem, is extensively used within Australia and internationally, and is listed as the source for volunteering data in the Australian Government's *Measuring What Matters* Framework.⁴¹ Regular collection of data on volunteering through the GSS should resume. The survey should include an expanded module on volunteering, developed in collaboration with the volunteering ecosystem.

- **Invest in the aged care volunteer workforce and build on current achievements.**

The Australian Government should continue to invest in the aged care volunteer workforce to comply with the Aged Care Royal Commission's recommendations and, fundamentally, to improve the care and wellbeing of older people. The Government should build on its constructive and considered approach to volunteers in the aged care sector by harmonising volunteer policy in the disability and veterans' support sectors.

The Australian Government's wide ranging aged care reforms need to ensure a critical part of the aged care workforce (volunteers) is rebuilt, maintained, and expanded in line with the Aged Care Royal Commission's volunteering recommendation to promote volunteers and volunteering in aged care to support older people to live meaningful and dignified lives.

The Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety reported in February 2021.⁴² The Commission recommended that aged care providers should increase their support for volunteering and volunteers. For providers who operate a volunteering program, the Commission identified a staff member must be assigned to the role of volunteer coordination and that they should provide induction and ongoing training to volunteers and supervise their activities. Recommendation 44 of the report stipulates how the Australian Government should promote volunteers and volunteering in aged care to support older people to live meaningful and dignified lives. The Australian Government accepted this recommendation.

Since the 2023/24 Budget, significant progress has been made in both recognising, embedding and considering volunteers and volunteering policy in the aged care reforms as they are developed and rolled out. This progress is welcomed and the collaborative approach shown to date should continue as the Government moves towards introduction of the new Aged Care Act, a focus on Support at Home provisions and other planned sector transition, education and supports that may impact volunteers.

⁴⁰ <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/people-and-communities/general-social-survey-summary-results-australia/2014>

⁴¹ https://treasury.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-07/measuring-what-matters-statement020230721_0.pdf, 119

⁴² <https://agedcare.royalcommission.gov.au/publications/final-report>

We continue to advocate for the Australian Government to take a more strategic approach to volunteers in the aged care sector, through the development of a national aged care volunteering strategy. A post reform check-in with the volunteering ecosystem and the aged care sector, to assess how the reforms have affected volunteers and volunteering, is also recommended.

In addition to continued consultation with the volunteering ecosystem, we highlight the potential for the Government to build on its constructive approach to volunteering in the aged care sector by harmonising volunteering policy in the disability and veterans' support sectors.

- **Invest in the Sport Volunteer Coalition Action Plan**

The Australian Government should continue to invest in sport volunteering by providing ongoing funding for the implementation of the Sport Volunteer Coalition Action Plan.

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, comprising 25 per cent of the total volunteer workforce. 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. Sport clubs are particularly vital in regional and rural contexts.

Investment in sport volunteering, including the infrastructure required to support volunteer involvement, is critical to support the 10-year Green and Gold Runway to Brisbane 2032. With a significant number of major sporting events on the horizon, efforts will be required to minimise volunteer burnout and consider how activities, such as community transport for athletes with disabilities and their families, will be supported. The Federal Government will also need to plan for the flow-on impact of volunteer participation in major sporting events, particularly those that involve travel, which may pull volunteers away from other roles such as surf life saving, emergency services, and other community-based volunteer roles.

Now in its second year, the Sport Volunteer Coalition Action Plan (SVCAP)⁴³ is a four-year plan that outlines the deliverables required to achieve a vision for the future of sport volunteering where people from all walks of life see and realise opportunities to contribute to individual, club and community goals in a way that suits them. The SVCAP is led and activated by the Australian Sports Commission, who work in partnership with members of the Sport Volunteer Coalition to advance the deliverables.

To achieve a vision where all Australians realise opportunities to participate in sport volunteering, the SVCAP requires ongoing investment, including funding. The Sport Volunteer Coalition's achievements to date demonstrate the powerful potential of Government/Industry partnerships that advance mutually beneficial outcomes. Continued investment in sport volunteering, via funding for the SVCAP, will ensure a thriving future for sport volunteering in Australia, which will have exponential individual, social, cultural, and economic benefits for Australian communities.

⁴³ <https://www.ausport.gov.au/volunteering/sport-volunteer-coalition-action-plan>

- **Multicultural Volunteering**

The Australian government should take appropriate measures to support multicultural volunteering in building inclusive, cohesive and resilient society.

In a recent submission to the Multicultural Framework Review, Volunteering Australia and the state and territory Volunteering Peak Bodies highlighted the abundance of volunteering within multicultural communities. We emphasised its role in fostering a sense of belonging to place, in facilitating economic and social integration in society, and in supporting the settlement journey of newly arrived migrants. Our recommendations were based on two pillars: 1) better recognition, and 2) better support for multicultural volunteering in its breadth and diversity. Proposals in our submission included that the Australian Government should:

- Support further research and data collection on multicultural volunteering in relationship to social cohesion and wellbeing, with possible case studies on the following: emergency volunteering and community mobilisation in multicultural communities; community led problem solving in multicultural communities; volunteering among Australians from humanitarian backgrounds.
- Recognise the significance of informal community networks and initiatives as conduits of information and resources for newly arrived migrants, and engagement with multicultural communities.
- Promote volunteering as a potential pathway to employment and integrate this approach in migration and settlement support services.
- Support the access of multicultural volunteers and the capacity of volunteer involving organisations. This includes developing appropriately designed connection services to connect new arrivals with volunteering opportunities; supporting volunteer involving organisations to undertake cultural safety and inclusive practice training; supporting the development and dissemination of volunteering resources in languages other than English; and building proactive recruitment strategies to increase diversity and match interests with existing skillsets of new arrivals.
- Support informal community initiatives through infrastructural support, including affordable venues, registration support (when required) and readily available information. This includes providing convenient and affordable venues for grass-roots community initiatives in organising their events, with preferential/sliding scale fee structures for volunteer involving organisations and community organisations; incentivising public-private partnerships to support and assist informal initiatives through relational, in-kind, and infrastructural support; and promoting funding opportunities and support for registration of organisations and information on grant application procedures to multicultural volunteers and informal networks.

- **Employment Services and Workforce Australia**

The future development of employment services should invest in the role volunteering plays in providing pathways to employment.

The House of Representatives Select Committee on Workforce Australia Employment Services was established to inquire into and report on matters related to Workforce Australia Employment Services. In our recent submission to the Committee on the ParentsNext program, Volunteering Australia highlighted the value of volunteering to the employment services system, both as a

pathway to employment and as a meaningful activity in its own right. We also emphasised the challenges of the mutual obligations system under the broader Workforce Australia and the previous *jobactive* systems, including the lack of consultation with the volunteering ecosystem and the under-resourcing of volunteering support services.

Future employment programs should 1) include participation in volunteering as an optional activity, ensuring that volunteering opportunities are supported and accessible to participants on their own terms, 2) consult with the volunteering ecosystem on how to include volunteering and what resourcing is needed to support volunteering, and 3) fund volunteering support services and other organisations that provide local volunteering support for their role in the Workforce Australia system, ensuring that strategic investment is provided to volunteer involving organisations to support the referral and placement of volunteers. In our submission on the New Disability Employment Support Model, we also recommended the funding of programs which connect people with disability to tailored and meaningful volunteering opportunities, the resourcing of volunteer involving organisations to improve accessibility, and that people with disability who receive income support have the flexibility to fulfill their mutual obligation requirements by volunteering virtually or remotely if they choose to do so.

The Workforce Australia Select Committee reported in December 2023 and recommended a new employment services model be developed. The role that volunteering should play needs to be considered further in the development of the new model.

Mental Health Services

The contribution of volunteers in the mental health workforce needs to be better understood and strategically considered in workforce planning and development.

The National Mental Health Workforce Strategy Taskforce has acknowledged the valuable role of volunteers in the mental health workforce, and that volunteering should be supported as part of the implementation of the National Mental Health Workforce Strategy 2022-2032.⁴⁴ Volunteering Australia and the state and territory Volunteering Peak Bodies provided a submission to the Workforce Strategy highlighting the extensive contributions of volunteers in the sector, and the need to recognise and support volunteer involvement.. This means including volunteers in proposed data collection efforts for the sector, acknowledging and planning for the involvement of volunteers in key service areas such as suicide prevention, targeting loneliness and social isolation, mental health education, peer advisory, and supporting volunteering as a pathway to paid employment in the mental health sector.

Participation in volunteering can also play an important role in supporting good mental health, both in prevention and recovery. The mental health benefits of volunteering were acknowledged in the final report from the Productivity Commission Inquiry into Mental Health.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ <https://www.health.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-10/national-mental-health-workforce-strategy-2022-2032.pdf>, 21

⁴⁵ <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/mental-health#report>

In line with the recent call from the House of Representatives Select Committee on Mental Health and Suicide Prevention,⁴⁶ volunteers should be explicitly included in strategic initiatives. The valuable role of volunteers in the mental health workforce is acknowledged in the National Mental Health Workforce Strategy, and should also be considered in the implementation of the National Preventive Health Strategy.

Conclusion

This Pre-Budget submission sets out the investment needed in the 2024-25 Budget to chart the course for volunteering to thrive in the future. It demonstrates how targeted strategic investment in volunteering will enable the Government to meet its key priorities.

Our priority recommendations are:

1. Provide volunteering cost of living relief through an expanded Volunteer Grants program.
2. Fund volunteering infrastructure and the continuation of the Volunteer Management Activity.
3. Resource National Strategy for Volunteering implementation.
4. Develop a national Volunteer Passport.
5. Establish an Environmental and Climate Change Volunteering Capacity Building Program.
6. Implement a national initiative to address loneliness through volunteering.
7. Develop a National Disability Services Volunteering Framework.

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https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House/Mental_Health_and_Suicide_Prevention/MHSP/Report

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.

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