



28 August 2026

Commonwealth Department of Health, Disability and Ageing

Re: Inclusive Communities Fund Consultation

Volunteering Australia is the national peak body for volunteering, working to promote a sustainable volunteering ecosystem in Australia through leadership at the national level and advocating for policies and infrastructure that enable volunteering and communities to thrive. 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.

This submission responds to the [Inclusive Communities Fund Consultation Paper](#). It follows previous related submissions available on our website,¹ notably:

- [Submission on National Disability Insurance Scheme Amendment Legislation](#)
- [Submission on the Review of the Disability Discrimination Act](#)
- [Submission to the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, Response to the Issues paper on Promoting Inclusion](#)

Volunteering is an important way for people to participate in society. As outlined in the National Strategy for Volunteering,² a healthy and sustainable volunteering eco-system is inclusive and works to ensure everyone can participate in volunteering opportunities that matter to them. As previously highlighted, there may be adverse consequences from halving community and social participation funding for NDIS participants which cannot be entirely mitigated through the Inclusive Communities Fund (the Fund).

In that context, Volunteering Australia recommends that:

1. Volunteering activities and organisations in the volunteering ecosystem be eligible for support under the Fund.
2. Supported activities under the Fund include advice, training and resources to improve inclusion and accessibility in the volunteering context as well as communication and promotion activities to raise awareness of these tools and address attitudinal barriers.
3. Priority should be given to supporting community organisations, in particular smaller organisations and those that are wholly or predominantly volunteer run.
4. The role of volunteer managers in supporting and maintaining inclusive volunteering practices be recognised and funded through the appropriate mechanisms.

¹ <https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/policy/submissions/>

² <https://volunteeringstrategy.org.au/the-strategy/> Strategic objective 1.2: Make Volunteering Inclusive and Accessible



5. The restriction on funding activities organisations are already legally required to do, such as make reasonable adjustments, be reconsidered as funding is rarely available to help community organisations become compliant with these requirements.

The context: volunteering ecosystem

Volunteering Australia defines volunteering as time willingly given for the common good and without financial gain.³

A volunteer involving organisation is defined as a not-for-profit, private or government organisation that engages volunteers. They operate across Australia from major cities to remote areas and range in size from very small local groups that are entirely volunteer run to large national and multinational organisations that also employ paid workers.

While there is no aggregated figure that captures all forms of volunteer involving organisations in Australia, data is available on charities (a subset of not-for-profit organisations).⁴ According to the Australian Charities and Not-For-Profit Commission, 53,641 charities provided Annual Information Statements for the 2024 reporting period. Fifty three percent (53%) of these charities were operating with no paid staff, relying entirely on volunteers. The data also showed that smaller charities were more likely to be volunteer-run with 89.3% of extra small charities being entirely volunteer run, compared to 4.9% of very large charities.⁵ In fact, extra small charities made up 30.1% of all volunteer-run charities while very large charities made up 4.7%.

Volunteer involving organisations operate across a wide range of sectors, including sport, religion, health, disability, aged care, community services, education, environment, emergency services, justice, arts and cultural groups and represent a substantial part of the workforce in these sectors.

Support to make volunteering more accessible and inclusive should be in the scope for the Fund

Volunteering is an important way for everyone, including people with disability, to participate in and contribute to their communities.

As noted in previous submissions, volunteering supports social connectedness, physical and mental health, sense of purpose, and connection to place. Research shows that volunteering has been found to improve self-assessed psychological wellbeing, self-esteem, happiness, and satisfaction with life.⁶ Volunteering enables people to contribute to their community through causes that matter to them and are valuable to their communities. In addition, volunteering can be a pathway to employment, helping people to build skills and confidence.

³ <https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/get-involved/resources/definition-of-volunteering/>

⁴ <https://www.acnc.gov.au/tools/reports/australian-charities-report-12th-edition>

⁵ The ACNC measures charity size by revenue: total revenue for extra small charities is less than \$50,000 and for extra large charities is \$10 million or more but less than \$100 million

⁶ https://volunteeringstrategy.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/VRP_Volunteering-and-Mental-Health.pdf



The latest ABS data⁷ shows that in 2025 people with disability volunteered formally through an organisation at similar rates to the overall population (24.5% compared to 22.6%) which amounts to an estimated 740,000 people with disability already involved in volunteering. People with disability also volunteer informally at an identical rate to the general population (29.5%). All of this occurs despite evidence suggesting people with disability still face barriers to volunteering, as they do in other areas of life, such as access to transport, the accessibility of volunteering venues and locations, and attitudinal barriers such as the assumptions, stereotypes and misconception of people with disability.⁸

It is also important to recognise that organisations (and their communities) also benefit from including people with disability in volunteering. Inclusion brings volunteers with different skills and experiences, better representation of the community and valuable learnings for all volunteers.

Volunteering Australia recommends that volunteering activities and volunteer involving organisations should be in scope for the Fund, with a focus on community and not-for-profit groups, particularly those that are smaller organisations and are wholly or predominantly volunteer run, as these face the greatest challenges in changing how they operate to become inclusive. Large organisations or those that operate as a part of a network have greater reach, but also benefit from economies of scale and the ability to share resources and learnings created in one part with the rest.

Response to discussion paper questions

1. What support, resources or changes would help organisations become more inclusive and accessible for people with disability? How could community organisations partner with disability-led organisations to achieve this?

The Inclusive Volunteering Program has been delivered in different forms for over a decade by Volunteering ACT, Volunteering Tasmania and The Centre for Volunteering (NSW). By understanding the goals of participants and organisations, it supports people with disability to connect with volunteer opportunities that meet their needs and interests and for volunteer involving organisations to become more inclusive and accessible. This initiative is currently funded under the Information, Linkages and Capacity Building (ILC) Program.

The biggest lesson learned from the Volunteering Peak Bodies who have delivered the Inclusive Volunteering Program is that organisations must be ready to change to succeed in becoming more inclusive and accessible. This means not just an intent and commitment to be more inclusive but also being willing to be challenged on current practice and prepared to identify and address the barriers to participation in volunteering that exist in the organisation (because a person's disability is not a barrier).

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⁸ https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/wp-admin/admin-ajax.php?juwpfisadmin=false&action=wpfd&task=file.download&wpfd_category_id=275&wpfd_file_id=58736&token=&preview=1 pp.7-9.



Beyond leadership and cultural barriers to becoming more inclusive, the biggest challenge most volunteer involving organisations face is resourcing. This can include financial resources, since not-for-profit organisations often rely on government funding, donations and fund-raising activities with money for organisational development the hardest to come by. It could also be resources such as time, staff (paid or unpaid) and capacity to make improvements to organisational culture, processes and practices. It may also include understanding what supports and resources are already available to them.

Partnering with disability-led organisations is extremely valuable provided those organisations are resourced for the effort required of them and have the skills and capacity to provide advice and training. Additionally, other organisations that hold expertise, such as the Volunteering Peak Bodies or other relevant organisations can be useful partners, helping to address the specific circumstances of each organisation and their mission. Where feasible, volunteer involving organisations should also be encouraged to create internal mechanisms for disability inclusion that draw on the lived experience of people with disability, such as a committee, advisory group or individual. The Inclusive Volunteering Program is currently delivered in partnership with disability-led organisations.

2. What activities should the Fund support, given that it will not pay for service delivery? For example, staff training, advice on how to make services more inclusive, or other accessibility changes.

Based on the experience of those currently delivering the Inclusive Volunteering Program, we advise that the following activities can enable volunteer involving organisations to become more inclusive and accessible:

- access to expert advice that draws on the lived experience of people with disability
- help to design/re-design and manage volunteer roles that are inclusive and accessible
- matching people with disability to suitable volunteer opportunities and support to make each placement a success
- advice and resources on how to better support volunteers from all backgrounds, including through accessible spaces and online platforms
- training, workshops and resources on inclusion and accessibility in the workplace and being trauma-informed
- checklists to help build inclusive practices
- expert review of organisational processes, procedures, and practices and support to improve them.

Some of these activities might be considered service delivery, which is proposed to be out of scope for the Fund, but they are included to demonstrate activities we know work, based on the lessons learned from the Volunteering Peak Bodies delivering the Inclusive Volunteering Program. It is not clear how the Fund will work alongside the Disability Peer Support and Connections Program, Community Capacity Building stream and what each will fund but both programs need to support sustainable and meaningful change. We know



that structural and systemic change takes time and effort and service delivery may be the best way for an organisation to effect real change. This, along with the sheer number of volunteering involving organisations, points to the importance of ongoing funding for community capacity building to improve the inclusiveness and accessibility of community and volunteer involving organisations.

It is also important to recognise the role of volunteer managers in supporting and maintaining inclusive volunteering practices over time, after the initial intervention has ceased.⁹ While beyond the scope of the Fund, it is relevant to achieving the desired outcome to note that volunteer management is a crucial enabling function that is often not funded.

Data¹⁰ shows that 54.2% of volunteer managers who responded to a survey, manage volunteers as volunteers themselves (i.e., they are unpaid). In addition, while paid volunteer managers were more likely to manage large numbers of volunteers than unpaid volunteer managers, 23.8% of unpaid volunteer managers managed 51 or more volunteers, including 3.7% who managed 251 or more volunteers. The combined number of unpaid volunteer managers and volunteer board and committee members means a lot of organisational culture and change is enacted by volunteers (unpaid workers).

Finally, we recommend that the restriction on funding activities organisations are already legally required to do, be reconsidered as funding is rarely available to help community organisations become compliant with these requirements. In addition, as we pointed out in [our submission to the Disability Discrimination Act review](#), the Act does not currently provide adequate protections for volunteers with a disability (although some state and territory legislation does) meaning current obligations towards voluntary workers are inconsistent. As highlighted above, volunteer involving organisations also vary considerably in their resources and capacity, so we recommended that the Disability Discrimination Act improve protections for volunteers with disability while ensuring any additional legal obligations on volunteer involving organisations are reasonable and proportionate and accompanied by resources and a transition period to help volunteer involving organisations meet any new obligations.

3. What role could local governments play in supporting community inclusion?

Local governments play multiple critical roles in the volunteering ecosystem, helping connect people with volunteering opportunities in their LGA and also engaging substantial numbers of volunteers themselves. This makes them well placed to support community inclusion through volunteering, but also gives them responsibility to lead through action, demonstrating inclusive volunteering through their own culture and practices. Volunteering Peak Bodies work with local government to equip them with best practice resources and tools to provide this support.

⁹ National Strategy for Volunteering, strategic objective 3.4: Recognise the Importance of Volunteer Management

¹⁰ <https://www.volunteering.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/04058-TCfV-Snapshot-of-Volunteering-2023-FULL-Report-Final.pdf> 21



There is also a need to address the large number of community venues and pieces of infrastructure provided by local governments and relied on by volunteer involving organisations that remain inaccessible.

4. What is the best way for community organisations to build meaningful and lasting inclusion? How can we make sure the benefits of the Fund continue after the 3-year funding period ends?

As highlighted above, Volunteering Australia believes that ongoing funding is required to continue to support the large number of community organisations to become more accessible over time, in addition to the three-year funding provided by the Fund.

That said, resources such as guides, e-learning modules, checklists, videos and self-assessment tools can be used at a large number of organisations and may stay relevant and current for longer than the project to create them. However, awareness that these sorts of tools and resources exist is the biggest barrier to them being effective. Funding should therefore also cover promotion and communications activities that help raise awareness of available tools and resources.

As acknowledged in the discussion paper, funding for activities that help address attitudinal barriers is also important, which could encompass a wide variety of things such as events or communication campaigns. It should also encompass support to volunteer board and committee members who are responsible for driving change in the community and are already under pressure from the growing range of obligations they need to be across.

Finally, it is important that the rest of the social system in which volunteer involving organisations operate acts on improving inclusion and accessibility as well. This includes funding the individual supports NDIS participants may require to participate in volunteering, if they choose to do so. We commented on the potential impact of the proposed funding cuts that would affect the ability of people with disability who, for example, require support workers to assist them to volunteer in [our submission on the NDIS Amendments legislation](#).

Thank you for the opportunity to share our views on this issue, we would welcome the opportunity to consult further.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'Mark Pearce', written over a light blue circular stamp.

Mr Mark Pearce
Chief Executive Officer



Endorsements

This position statement has been endorsed by the seven state and territory Volunteering Peak Bodies.



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