

DISCOVERY INSIGHTS



Towards a
**National Strategy
for Volunteering**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of country throughout Australia and their connections to land, sea, and community. We pay our respect to Elders past and present.

We would like to acknowledge and thank everyone who participated in the Discovery Phase of the National Strategy for Volunteering project and generously shared their knowledge, expertise, and lived experience with us. Stakeholders across the volunteering ecosystem were unfailingly generous with their time and participated with passion and enthusiasm.

We would like to acknowledge and thank the representatives on our National Strategy for Volunteering Council, Corporate Volunteering Working Group, Research Working Group, and Volunteer Management Working Group. Their contribution has provided invaluable expertise, which has strengthened the project in a myriad of ways.

We would like to acknowledge and thank the Australian Government Department of Social Services for funding this critical national project and for working in partnership with us to ensure the project genuinely seeks to co-design a National Strategy for Volunteering that will provide a roadmap for volunteering over the next ten years.

Finally, we would like to acknowledge and thank ThinkPlace who have shared their expertise in user-centred design and participatory futures work and provided mentorship and guidance throughout the project as our design partner.

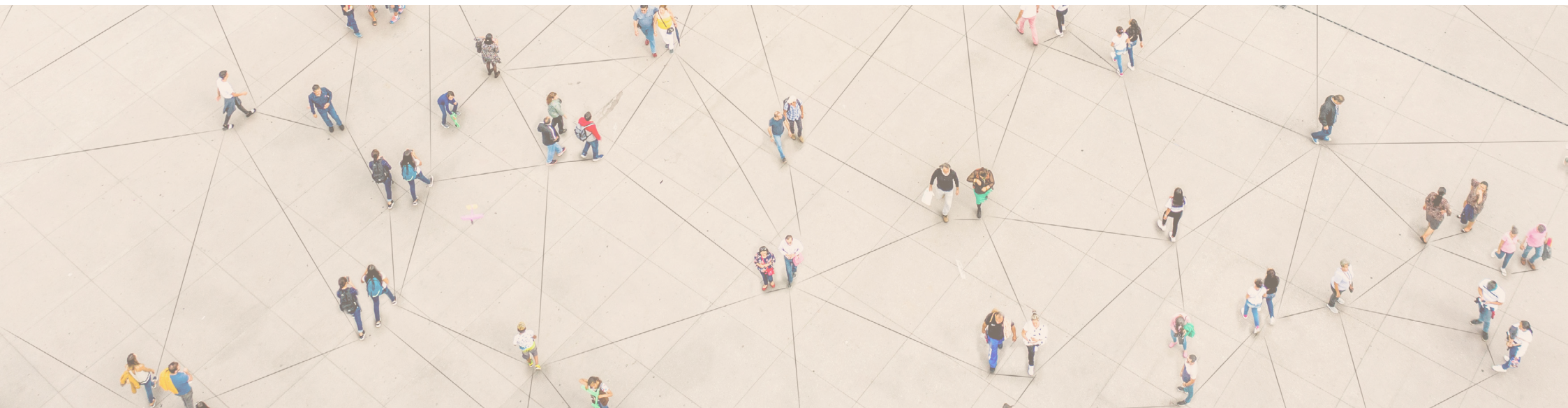


PURPOSE OF THE DISCOVERY INSIGHTS REPORT

This report sets out what we have heard so far from our conversations with the volunteering ecosystem. It summarises the themes of the consultations, focus groups, and interviews we undertook from April to June. The different sections of the report provide an overview of who we spoke to, how they are connected to volunteering, and what they thought about the current state of volunteering and their ideas for the future.

The often divergent viewpoints we heard during the Discovery Phase speak directly to the vastness and complexity of the volunteering ecosystem. The purpose of this report is not to seek consensus, but to present what we discovered and generate further debate and discussion. As such, we anticipate and welcome diverse views on the relevance, validity, and framing of the Insights.

This iteration of the report marks the completion of the first stage of the National Strategy for Volunteering project. Subsequent iterations will bring together other aspects of the project, including the findings from the *Volunteering in Australia* research and the volunteering ecosystem's collective vision for the National Strategy for Volunteering. We hope you enjoy reading this report and we look forward to your continued engagement with this critical national project.



CO-DESIGNING THE NATIONAL STRATEGY FOR VOLUNTEERING

PROJECT VISION

To deliver a National Strategy for Volunteering designed and owned by the volunteering ecosystem that will provide a blueprint for a reimagined future for volunteering in Australia.

Project Purpose and Aims

The purpose of the project is to co-design a National Strategy for Volunteering with stakeholders across the volunteering ecosystem.

The project provides an opportunity to deepen our understanding of volunteering in Australia. It aims to chart a roadmap for an inclusive and sustainable future for volunteering that is informed by a robust evidence-base and recommends purpose-built solutions to enable volunteering to thrive.

The project will deliver two main outputs:

1. A National Strategy for Volunteering co-designed with the volunteering ecosystem that encompasses the views of all stakeholders and puts forward a shared vision for the future.
2. A *Volunteering in Australia* research report, which will provide a comprehensive understanding of the volunteering landscape, map current trends, and provide insight into how volunteering may evolve into the future.

Background and Timeline

The National Strategy for Volunteering project comes at a critical time. Environmental factors such as the changing nature of work, our ageing population, rising costs of living, and increasing digitisation all impact volunteering. These factors, and others, will have both positive and negative implications for volunteering. Despite the challenges facing volunteering, opportunities also exist to do things differently. Volunteers, organisations, and the Australian community have shown great resilience and adaptability during recent crises. The National Strategy for Volunteering project, including the *Volunteering in Australia* research, provides an historic opportunity to collaboratively co-design a shared vision for the future of volunteering.

Volunteering Ecosystem

The volunteering ecosystem is the network of organisations and people that enable and benefit from volunteering. The term was coined through this project to better encapsulate the broad range of stakeholders involved in volunteering. Throughout the project we will be working with stakeholders to create a map of the volunteering ecosystem that represents its breadth, complexity, and interdependencies.

Timeline



More information on the project timeline and volunteering ecosystem can be found on pages 37-38.



Definition of Volunteering

‘Volunteering is time willingly given for the common good and without financial gain.’

In developing the National Strategy for Volunteering, we are being guided by the current definition of volunteering. This definition was introduced in 2015 following an extensive review. Since then, it has been widely adopted across Australia and is consistent with international definitions.

Importantly, this definition captures both ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ volunteering i.e., it recognises that whilst many volunteers offer their time formally through organisations, others self-organise and volunteer informally in the community.

We are keen to understand the breadth, diversity, and richness of volunteering activity in our communities and how it is evolving over time. This also means that we will be endeavouring to shed light on activity that might not be labelled ‘volunteering’ by those involved.

More information about the definition of volunteering can be accessed [here](#).

Project Methodology and Engagement Protocol

Volunteering Australia partnered with ThinkPlace, world-leading experts in human-centred design and inclusive engagement, to design the methodology for the project. Co-design, through genuine and meaningful interactions with stakeholders, is the foundational pillar of the project methodology.

Focus Areas

The Discovery Phase of the project investigated different lines of inquiry based on four focus areas:

- 1. *Understanding the current state, perspectives, and reflections of volunteering in Australia.***
People's experiences, motivations, opportunities, and pain points, including successes and learnings from activities currently taking place across the ecosystem.
- 2. *Identifying perspectives for preferred futures, as well as priorities, interventions, and actions to reach those destinations.***
'Stretch goals' and provocative ideas for where volunteering in Australia needs to go over the next ten years based on constructive collaboration between stakeholders.
- 3. *Eliciting expectations for the National Strategy for Volunteering and determining criteria for success.***
Understanding stakeholder views on the need for a National Strategy for Volunteering and how it can create meaningful change, including a clear idea of what success looks like from different perspectives.
- 4. *Determining the structure and governance arrangements for the National Strategy for Volunteering.***
Getting a sense of the necessary components of the National Strategy for Volunteering and identifying a governance structure and process based on shared accountability.



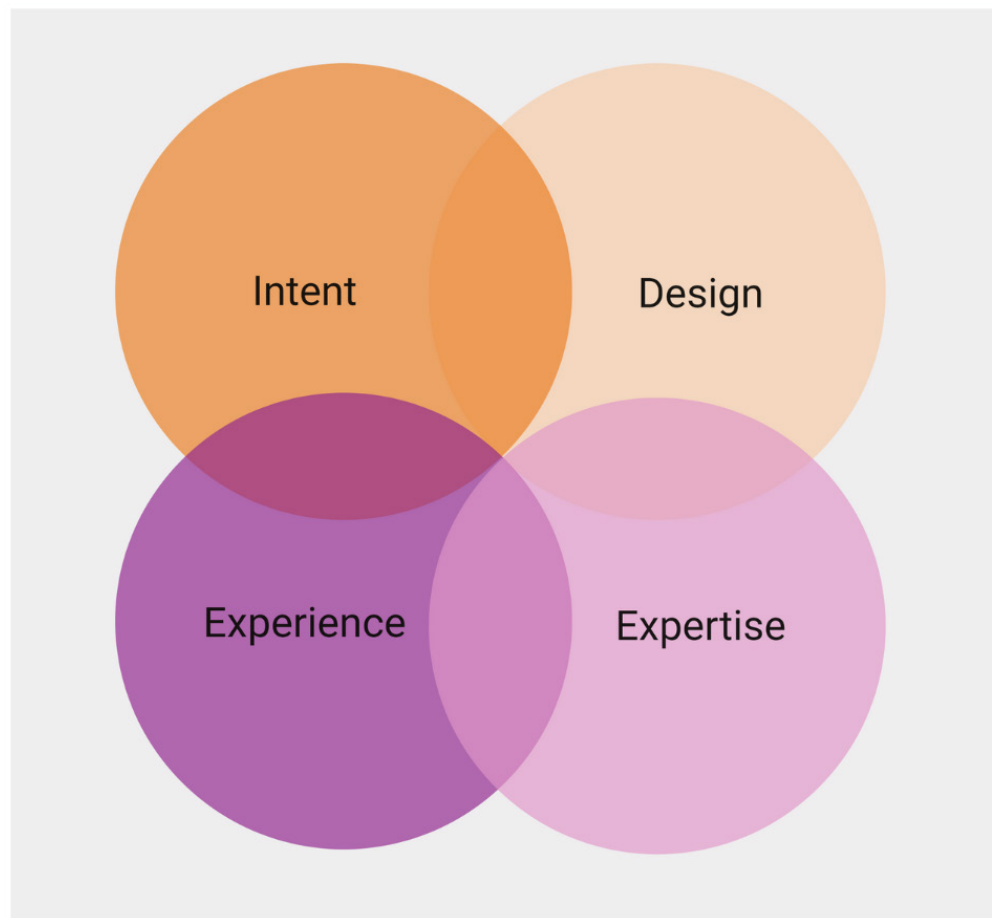
The project is using ThinkPlace's *Four Voices of Design* approach to ensure multiple and diverse perspectives are included:

The Voice of Intent

those responsible for setting the direction of the project and with accountability for decision-making during the co-design activities. This is the Department of Social Services, Volunteering Australia, and the National Strategy for Volunteering Council.

The Voice of Experience

the user and those who will be affected by the project. This includes those with practical experience in volunteering, managing volunteers, providing infrastructure that supports volunteering, or working with the beneficiaries of volunteering.



The Voice of Design

the broker between voices, ensuring all are heard in the right balance. This is Volunteering Australia and ThinkPlace.

The Voice of Expertise

those who have subject-matter expertise through practical or research experience. This includes the Corporate Volunteering Working Group, Research Working Group, Volunteer Management Working Group, Cross-Government Workshop participants, and other subject-matter experts interviewed during the Discovery Phase.

Project Components

The National Strategy for Volunteering project's co-design approach is made up of several different components, which will inform the Strategy in different ways. This version of the Insights Report presents the input from consultations, focus groups, and interviews conducted during the Discovery Phase. It also includes findings from Volunteering Australia's Story Project, which was conducted concurrently with the Discovery Phase and provides insight into volunteering in multicultural communities.

National Strategy for Volunteering Activity Streams

Project Steering: National Strategy for Volunteering Council and Working Groups (Corporate Volunteering, Government, Policy, Research and Volunteer Management).

Consultations and Engagement: discovery workshops, interviews, focus groups, online submissions, and participatory design workshops.

Research: *Volunteering in Australia* research, Volunteering Research Papers Initiative, and evidence review.

DISCOVERY INSIGHTS



DISCOVERY INSIGHTS

From April to June we heard from 400 stakeholders through various means about their thoughts on the current state of volunteering in Australia, strengths, challenges, and ideas for the future.

The vastness of the volunteering ecosystem was reflected in our consultations. Across the 12 Insights contained in this report, we heard a spectrum of views. Challenges and opportunities varied by stakeholder type, size, and geography and there was rarely consensus across discussions. This speaks to the diversity of the ways volunteering takes place and how it is resourced and supported.

The Insights are all interconnected and the relationship between them will be considered in future conversations. For example, whilst many recognised volunteering as a vital workforce issue, the wide spectrum of volunteering means that much activity, including leisure volunteering, is not seen as ‘work’ by those involved.

Finally, these Insights represent consultations to date, but there are notable gaps, including hearing from stakeholders we are yet to comprehensively connect with. The project will fill those gaps in the next stage.

Insights at a Glance

- Volunteering has an identity crisis
- Volunteering is a workforce issue
- Volunteering is an incubator for inclusion
- The profession of volunteer management is invisible
- Volunteering is a catalyst for systemic change
- Expectations of the volunteering ecosystem are becoming untenable
- The ecosystem needs stronger leadership
- Strategic investment is a pre-requisite for sustainability
- The ecosystem needs fit-for-purpose regulation
- Volunteering is a wide spectrum of activities
- We need to re-focus on the volunteer experience
- Research needs to underpin volunteering policy and practice

VOLUNTEERING HAS AN IDENTITY CRISIS

INSIGHT

A seminal challenge for the volunteering ecosystem over the next 10 years will be around how to lift volunteering's profile in the national conversation. Whilst the value that volunteering creates for communities is intuitively recognised by many, it is not always explicitly recognised, and volunteering is rarely visible in key national debates, such as workforce challenges or crisis response.

The low profile of volunteering creates flow-on effects, which exacerbates other issues identified by stakeholders. The lack of visibility of volunteering means its resourcing profile is constrained, resulting in limited investment in capability and capacity building. Stakeholders told us this can affect the perceived legitimacy and professionalism of the volunteering ecosystem and result in underinvestment. Others noted that while volunteers may be individually valued, the collective impact that volunteering creates for society remains largely hidden.

We also heard that some people are surprised that what they do is considered volunteering – they simply see it as helping. Volunteering has many conceptualisations and motivations that may be faith-based and culturally nuanced. The dominant understanding of volunteering tends to include formal, role-based positions within established organisations, but we heard that in many multicultural communities volunteering is more fluid, unbounded, and value-driven. We heard that in many First Nations communities volunteering is regularly framed as ‘community giving’ and some cultures don’t even have an equivalent word for volunteering in their language.

The diversity of conceptualisations of volunteering in Australia is a strength, but many interpretations are not currently recognised and are therefore not actively considered in policy or practice development. In reimaging how we define and understand volunteering we need to take an approach that does not operate from the assumption that the current language or structures are a predetermined way forward.

VOLUNTEERING HAS AN IDENTITY CRISIS

OPPORTUNITY

A National Strategy for Volunteering can set a clear ambition for an improved public consciousness around volunteering, to drive a long-term lift in the profile of volunteering in Australia. Through storytelling about the collective impact of volunteering, we can highlight the diversity of volunteering taking place across Australia and harness the dynamic ways that different communities perceive and participate in volunteering.

WHAT IF...

- Our collective conceptualisation of volunteering reflected the diversity of Australia's population.
- Volunteering, its impact, and its inherent value was recognised on the national stage and included in national policy decisions and debates.
- Volunteering was not just understood, but deeply ingrained in people's daily lives.

"I would say volunteering is an act of love. An act of shared love. It is just about caring and helping others."

"We need to change the perception of volunteering through this National Strategy."

"Participation in volunteering is a profound aspirational statement about the communities in which we want to live."

VOLUNTEERING IS A WORKFORCE ISSUE

INSIGHT

Volunteering is a core workforce issue, but the social, cultural, and economic contribution of volunteers is absent from workforce conversations. Volunteers and the organisations that involve them are the engine room of Australian communities and are increasingly providers of public services and programs, yet the volunteering ecosystem finds itself in a constant battle for legitimacy.

Organisations are not established to involve volunteers; they exist to mobilise community for community and how they achieve this is a resourcing and workforce issue. Employment is a form of paid work and a labour force status, but it is not the only form of work. Unpaid work includes student placements, training, and volunteering. It is well established that unpaid work helps people build the skills and experience required for employment. What is less recognised is that volunteers significantly supplement the paid workforce, provide critical surge capacity in times of crisis, and build inclusive and resilient communities. In many cases, volunteers *are* the workforce and undertake their roles without the support of any paid employees.

Stakeholders highlighted the enduring tension between volunteering and paid work. Whilst this tension isn't new, there is concern that the boundary between what could be done by volunteers and what should be done by paid employees is increasingly being blurred. This tension was particularly noted by organisations in rural and regional areas that are facing critical workforce shortages. They told us over time there has been a shift to a greater reliance on fewer volunteers.

Australia's domestic workforce is often defined as including people engaged in work, seeking work, wanting to work more, and those not actively seeking work. Yet, discussions around Australia's workforce do not reference volunteering. Not-for-profit organisations employ 10 per cent of Australians and involve millions of volunteers. It is critical that volunteers are strategically considered as an indispensable workforce and consistently accommodated for.

VOLUNTEERING IS A WORKFORCE ISSUE

OPPORTUNITY

There is an opportunity to re-position the volunteer workforce alongside the paid workforce and promote an understanding that both forms of work make different but equally important contributions to Australian society.

WHAT IF...

- An improved understanding of the critical importance of the volunteer workforce led to a more robust National Workforce Strategy that included, planned for, and resourced volunteer involvement.
- The volunteer workforce was considered equal to the paid workforce and included in public policy considerations and subsequent expenditure.

"Overall, the volunteer workforce and the costs associated with developing and managing this workforce are poorly understood."

"Our point of difference is that our paid staff exist to support our volunteers. Volunteers are blended throughout our organisational structure and have a seat at all tables for decision-making."

"The workforce issue can be sensitive in some sectors. We grapple with not wanting to limit people's contribution but not giving them work that should be paid."

VOLUNTEERING IS AN INCUBATOR FOR INCLUSION

INSIGHT

Volunteering fosters social inclusion by enabling participation and connection. Volunteer involving organisations can be a potent environment for inclusivity by providing a safe and welcoming space for those experiencing exclusion, but many face and perpetuate systemic barriers to inclusion.

Volunteer involving organisations told us that operating in a localised way enables them to hear directly from their community and instantly respond to community need. They mentioned the significant benefits gained from involving volunteers with diverse backgrounds, highlighting how diversity improves organisational culture and enables better outcomes. Conversely, they identified the significant challenge of integrating lived experience within existing frameworks and boundaries. They told us the systems and structures they operate within are inflexible and fail to adequately meet the inclusion and diversity needs of their clients and volunteers.

Some volunteers told us that volunteering afforded them access to opportunities they might not have otherwise had. They told us that volunteering was less daunting than paid employment and gave them the confidence and skills to participate in other aspects of society. They said volunteering made them feel included and gave them a sense of community and belonging. Volunteers also told us that volunteering is rarely intersectional and the Western system of volunteering in Australia excludes vast proportions of the population. They felt they were forced into structures that don't work for them and access was often mistaken for ability. People with disability told us they're tired of being seen as inspiring for doing everyday tasks and they pay a 'disability tax' to participate.

These diverse viewpoints demonstrate that whilst volunteering plays a critical role in creating inclusive communities, the systemic barriers to inclusion can actively prevent access and participation by people who are most at risk of being excluded.

VOLUNTEERING IS AN INCUBATOR FOR INCLUSION

OPPORTUNITY

Volunteer involving organisations are uniquely placed to foster inclusion. They are already leading by example and provide a salient case study for the ways in which we can work towards a more inclusive society in general. There is an opportunity to leverage this experience in combination with the lived experience of those experiencing exclusion or disadvantage to create a better Australia for all.

WHAT IF...

- Inclusion was the foundation of volunteering programs and policy, which recognised and amplified lived experience and were grounded in intersectional approaches that confronted systemic discrimination.
- We stopped retraumatising people by continuously asking them to re-tell their story and we compensated them for the value of their lived experience.
- We better recognised and enabled diversity and inclusion in volunteering without requiring people and organisations to participate in Western systems.

"Funding relies on identifying a problem, which perpetuates the idea that we will forever be vulnerable."

"Lived experience adds so much value but we face the problem of trying to include it within existing frameworks and their limitations."

"There is a difference between capacity and willingness to be inclusive. Organisations and institutions need both."

THE PROFESSION OF VOLUNTEER MANAGEMENT IS INVISIBLE

INSIGHT

Managers and Coordinators of Volunteers are the lynchpin of effective and impactful volunteer involvement, but the profession is under-recognised, under-valued, and under-resourced.

The profession of leading and managing volunteers is largely invisible and is not recognised as a legitimate career. The role requires extensive skills and expertise – it is not simply administrative; it involves relationship-building, marketing, recruitment, training, ongoing support, and a myriad of other competencies. Despite this, it is not promoted as a career pathway and many people ‘fall into’ volunteer management without the necessary support to foster their professional development.

Managers and Coordinators of Volunteers can be responsible for managing tens or sometimes hundreds of volunteers – something we would never ask of someone supporting paid employees. The role is fundamentally more challenging (and often more rewarding) than managing a paid workforce. At an individual level, we heard people working in volunteer management were likely to find it an isolating experience, with limited opportunities to connect with others doing similar roles. They also reported a constant, uphill battle in getting internal legitimacy for their role from colleagues and leadership. Without adequate internal decision-making about resourcing, including recruiting people with the appropriate skills and experience, organisations perpetuate false narratives about the profession of volunteer management.

The identified challenges are exacerbated by the cost of volunteer management rarely being considered in grant and tender opportunities or being recognised as a unique profession. We heard that accounting for the true cost of volunteer involvement could often price organisations out of a funding opportunity, with many cross-subsidising volunteering programs or passing costs on to volunteers or service users. Opportunities for training and professional development in volunteer management exist but are very limited.

People also told us volunteer management is a rewarding and enriching career that sparks joy and provides daily meaning and purpose. They told us they don’t fit the traditional definition of a profession – no other profession requires the unique complexity of skills and experience that volunteer management does. They also told us that their contribution, including sharing expertise and supporting the next generation of leaders, often transcends their own organisations and creates a ripple effect across their entire community.

THE PROFESSION OF VOLUNTEER MANAGEMENT IS INVISIBLE

OPPORTUNITY

Volunteer management is a profession, and the National Strategy for Volunteering can re-position it as a critical centrepiece of the volunteering ecosystem. Awareness raising could happen in tandem with higher and vocational education institutions developing more courses to formalise learning and development opportunities and positioning volunteer management as a viable career pathway.

WHAT IF...

- Volunteer management was widely regarded as an occupation, backed by formal, professional accreditation and standards.
- The role of Managers and Coordinators of Volunteers was valued and routinely invested in.
- All funding and grant opportunities accounted for the true cost of volunteer involvement and prioritised investment in volunteer management.
- There was a professional network or association that supported volunteer management professionals and allowed inter-sectoral learnings to be shared and valued.

"Without Leaders of Volunteers there is no volunteering."

"Managers of Volunteers are the conduit between the frontline of communities, organisations, peak bodies, and government. There is no other role like it."

"I spent years fighting for legitimacy of my role within my own organisation."

VOLUNTEERING IS A CATALYST FOR SYSTEMIC CHANGE

INSIGHT

Volunteering transforms communities and transforms lives and is a lead indicator of social change. Likewise, volunteers have been at the forefront of innovation for centuries and the ripple effect of their impact is exponential. However, progress is often inhibited by the tension between an innovation mindset and the capacity of organisations to innovate.

Volunteers and volunteer involving organisations observe emerging trends at a community level and in real-time – a vantage point rarely experienced in any other part of society. They are at the forefront of understanding how to design and implement bespoke solutions to the most immediate problems facing communities, yet programs and services are routinely scoped without their involvement.

We heard that volunteer involving organisations tend to be poorly resourced to implement change and are rarely provided with sufficient investment to test new ideas. This leads to a piecemeal approach to innovation, which can result in short-term or unsustainable solutions that require premature replacement. A salient example is adaptation to COVID-19, which required significant investment from organisations with little support or resourcing. While most were able to implement technological interventions to provide continuity of service (if not out of want, then out of necessity) they lamented how resource-intensive and unnecessarily duplicative this process was.

Some volunteer involving organisations told us they don't have sufficient resourcing to invest in new ideas. They also identified that they need assurance that piloting new initiatives is encouraged and they wanted 'failure' to be re-framed as learning. They told us sometimes you can't know what will work until you know what doesn't. Meanwhile, 'informal' problem-solving volunteering in the community is by its very nature innovative, but often takes place without safeguards or support.

VOLUNTEERING IS A CATALYST FOR SYSTEMIC CHANGE

OPPORTUNITY

Leveraging the innovation happening by volunteers and within volunteer involving organisations can enable purpose-built and evidence-based solutions to pressing social issues. Resourcing the volunteering ecosystem properly and in the first instance will have significant long-term benefits by improving effectiveness and efficiency, resulting in greater impact and return on investment.

WHAT IF...

- The volunteering ecosystem was valued as a source of subject-matter expertise and routinely consulted in public policy and program design.
- Accredited tools and platforms were recommended for adoption across the volunteering ecosystem and resourcing was provided for implementation.
- Volunteer involving organisations were recognised as having similar business requirements to other entities and resourced accordingly.

"Volunteer involving organisations have the most to teach. We need to reverse the assumption that we need to learn from business and government."

"The greatest investment a community can make is in its people."

"I work in local government and see so much creativity, dynamism, and goodwill in organisations, but limited systems, assistance, and software to support that work."

EXPECTATIONS OF THE ECOSYSTEM ARE BECOMING UNTENABLE

INSIGHT

Expectations of volunteers and volunteer involving organisations have steadily increased over time. This often happens without a commensurate increase in funding or support, introducing further instability to the ecosystem.

Public services and programs have been increasingly outsourced to not-for-profit and community organisations, but ever-increasing expectations have resulted in an unstable ecosystem that is facing systemic challenges to its very existence. We were told that this instability is particularly significant in regional and rural areas, which are becoming progressively reliant on fewer volunteers.

Volunteers, such as those in emergency and community services, told us that requirements for training and administration increase year on year. The investment required for many formal volunteering roles is becoming too onerous for volunteers who are simultaneously grappling with fundamental changes to paid work, familial obligations, and other demands on their time.

Likewise, volunteer involving organisations are expected to navigate increasingly complex regulatory and policy environments and the changing expectations of volunteers, service users, and the Australian public. This is exacerbated by insufficient resourcing to underpin success and a continuous expectation that organisations and volunteers will do more with less.

EXPECTATIONS OF THE ECOSYSTEM ARE BECOMING UNTENABLE

OPPORTUNITY

It is time to change the narrative that the volunteering ecosystem is a 'third sector' and instead recognise it as a thriving environment for progress and a foundation of inclusive and resilient communities.

WHAT IF...

- Everyone agreed that the sustainability of the volunteering ecosystem was a non-negotiable pre-requisite for our vision of the future.
- We re-considered what constitutes reasonable expectations of volunteers and empowered them to participate in a flexible and meaningful way.
- We recognised the unique subject-matter expertise and lived experience of volunteers and volunteer involving organisations and empowered them to play an active role in influencing and designing programs and services.

"Some of our volunteers can do more than 60 hours a week. This is not a reasonable expectation, but it's the reality of what happens."

"We had no support managing change when COVID-19 hit, we were left to do it ourselves. It was a waste of resources that every organisation did this independently."

"The public's expectation of volunteers is increasing and managing this is an additional challenge for our organisation."

THE ECOSYSTEM NEEDS STRONGER LEADERSHIP

INSIGHT

An ambitious future for volunteering in Australia needs to be backed with strong, purposeful, and collaborative leadership at every level of the volunteering ecosystem.

Currently, the volunteering ecosystem is disjointed and siloed. There is no shared understanding of what the ‘volunteering ecosystem’ is, which makes it confusing and exacerbates fragmentation.

Some stakeholders do not see themselves as part of the ecosystem and other stakeholders do not recognise the expansiveness of volunteering and its interlinkages.

At an organisational level, we heard people felt they were more often positioned as competitors than collaborators. A perceived absence of thought leadership in the ecosystem was a commonly cited challenge, with people telling us they found it difficult to access reliable information and support.

Conversely, those with leadership roles told us they felt frustrated by their advocacy efforts being consistently ignored or misunderstood. The COVID-19 pandemic put the vacuum of leadership under a spotlight. Volunteer involving organisations felt they were left to fend for themselves as they simultaneously had to stand down their volunteers whilst juggling an increase in service demand. They lamented the absence of consideration of volunteering in discussions on economic stimulus, the vaccination roll-out, and workforce shortages. Leaders in the ecosystem reported a constant tension between trying to meet the needs of their members, volunteers, and/or clients and failing to get the buy-in needed from third parties to effectively meet those needs. Volunteering is often absent from policy and regulation discussions, but the flow-on effects are born by volunteers and the organisations that involve them.

The Volunteering Peak Bodies have been an established part of the volunteering ecosystem for decades, often acting as an intermediary between stakeholders, including volunteers, volunteer involving organisations, and governments at every level. This connecting function is a crucial component of a sound leadership structure and requires specialist expertise due to the complexity of the volunteering ecosystem. Stakeholders expressed a strong desire for this intermediary and felt a properly resourced leadership structure with clear roles and responsibilities would enable benefits to flow to organisations, volunteers, and beneficiaries at the community level.

THE ECOSYSTEM NEEDS STRONGER LEADERSHIP

OPPORTUNITY

There is a critical impetus to re-shape what leadership looks like across the volunteering ecosystem. The opportunities are endless – from new communities of practice to stronger peak bodies and new ways of amplifying impact through collaboration. One message though is clear: we need to do better when it comes to future-ready leadership for volunteering.

WHAT IF...

- There is a reimagined leadership structure in the volunteering ecosystem based on shared accountability and genuine collaboration.
- There are more and better opportunities for the volunteering ecosystem to network and share good practice.
- There is more clarity on the role and impact of the volunteering peak bodies, including Volunteering Australia.

"Siloes and lack of connection is causing us to lose power."

"The state and national bodies haven't been given enough support in managing change. Volunteer involving organisations need to be backed by strong peak bodies."

"Where there is good, dynamic leadership people follow."

STRATEGIC INVESTMENT IS A PRE-REQUISITE FOR SUSTAINABILITY

INSIGHT

Long-term strategic investment in volunteering is required to ensure sustainability. This investment needs to be about more than just funding and success requires both internal and external investment.

Strategic investment in the volunteering ecosystem has historically been lacking and is a significant impediment to growth. Stakeholders told us that resourcing volunteering is becoming increasingly difficult. Grants are not fit-for-purpose and eligibility requirements are becoming prohibitively narrow. Public services and programs outsourced to volunteer involving organisations are inequitable and procurement processes consistently fail to recognise or provide for the true cost of volunteer involvement. They also fail to consider the additional value that volunteers provide as a unique and tangible benefit.

We heard that many organisations do not strategically invest in their own volunteering programs. Boards, CEOs, and senior leadership may not understand the nuances of volunteer involvement and the importance of including volunteering in their strategic planning and annual budgets.

Investment isn't just about funding – it's also about collaboration and capacity-building. Many stakeholders told us about the innovative ways they engage in purposeful partnerships with Government, industry, philanthropy, and academia to progress volunteering-related issues. These partnerships commit shared resources and expertise towards a common goal, which provides significant benefits that would not be achieved in isolation. However, being able to connect with potential partners and disrupt power imbalances (perceived or real) is a challenge for many.

STRATEGIC INVESTMENT IS A PRE-REQUISITE FOR SUSTAINABILITY

OPPORTUNITY

There is enormous potential in the volunteering ecosystem to drive the changes needed today to position volunteering for the future – including new visions and orthodoxies, investments in core foundations, alternative ways of working, and better approaches to organising the ecosystem. Strategic investment in volunteering can reduce duplication, leverage best practice, and promote collaboration.

WHAT IF...

- Public services and programs were co-designed with service users, volunteers, and organisations and resourced sustainably.
- The conversation about strategic investment recognised the additional social, cultural, and economic value generated through volunteer involvement.
- Purposeful partnerships became a norm in the volunteering ecosystem, leveraging the unique skills and experiences of different stakeholders to build collaborative and innovative solutions and programs.

"Volunteering is incredibly vibrant and important, yet somewhat misunderstood. People are stuck in the past and we seem to be always lacking true investment."

"We can be victims of our own success. Volunteers often step up to address gaps in the system and this can encourage governments to continue outsourcing to volunteers."

"The value that is placed on volunteering is inadequate. We need an improved understanding of the costs of volunteering and volunteer involvement."

THE ECOSYSTEM NEEDS FIT-FOR-PURPOSE REGULATION

INSIGHT

The current regulatory regime forces volunteer involving organisations to sacrifice relationship-building for administration and is a significant disincentive for prospective volunteers.

Organisations, companies with employee volunteering programs, and volunteers alike shared their criticisms of the current regulatory settings affecting the volunteering ecosystem. We heard examples of ‘over-regulation’ and that regulation across jurisdictions is inconsistent and duplicative. Organisations identified they were overcompensating risk because of the rigid requirements imposed on them by frameworks that never considered them in the first place.

Volunteers told us they are routinely trained to the highest level of risk management irrespective of their role. Volunteers who undertake roles with more than one organisation are usually required to undertake multiple background checks and repeat onboarding processes, hampering their enthusiasm for being involved. Some volunteers felt the system didn't treat them like adults with unique skills to contribute and instead operated from a basis of mistrust and skepticism.

These perspectives were balanced by strong agreement that some regulatory conditions are essential – especially around child protection and working with vulnerable people. Some stakeholders told us they felt that strong regulatory frameworks gave their volunteers more confidence in their programs. There appears to be a direct relationship between resourcing levels and the ability to effectively navigate and implement risk and regulation – organisations with few financial resources or those who did not have internal risk management capabilities found regulation more oppressive and onerous.

THE ECOSYSTEM NEEDS FIT-FOR-PURPOSE REGULATION

OPPORTUNITY

There is an opportunity to advocate to, and collaborate with, Government on proportionate regulatory settings, which balance accountability, risk management, and innovation. Background checks could be digitised, streamlined, and simplified to create a better experience and reduce duplication.

Empowering and upskilling organisations to undertake risk management that meets regulatory standards while not imposing an undue burden would enable time and resourcing to be redirected to service-delivery and better meet the needs of volunteers.

WHAT IF...

- There were simplified and digitised background checks for volunteers where records could be easily verified and shared across organisations and jurisdictions.
- 'Red tape' took a flexible, risk-based approach, removing unnecessary requirements and freeing up time for organisations to deliver better experiences for volunteers and enhance their community impact.
- Inclusion and accessibility were core tenets of regulation and risk management, reducing systemic barriers for people to get involved.

"Our volunteers appreciate why robust systems exist, but it is important how we frame the need for regulation."

"We need simplified regulations that take a harm reduction approach. Regulation should be nationalised, or at least uniform."

"We need to remove privilege from access. Not everyone has 100 points of ID or transport to attend a shopfront."

VOLUNTEERING IS A WIDE SPECTRUM OF ACTIVITIES

INSIGHT

Volunteering exists on a spectrum from very informal helping to highly formal roles that require extensive training and ongoing commitment. Different types of volunteering add value in different ways and this diversity is a cornerstone of volunteering.

Formal and informal volunteering are often presented as a binary, but in reality volunteering is a fluid activity that takes different forms in different contexts. Official statistics tell us there has been a continuous decline in formal volunteering, but there are some indications that rates of informal volunteering are increasing. We are still investigating these trends but they may reflect that informal volunteering better meets a modern desire for flexibility. If this is the case, it could pose challenges for organisations and roles that require a structured and ongoing commitment.

Recent emergencies including the COVID-19 pandemic and 2022 floods demonstrate the myriad of ways that people engage in helping behaviour. Capturing the breadth of activity undertaken by volunteers is complicated and informal volunteering eschews definition by nature. The volunteering ecosystem is increasingly having to grapple with the challenges posed by the divide between formal and informal volunteering.

The mismatch between supply and demand is a preeminent challenge for the volunteering ecosystem – there is often a misalignment between the roles that organisations need filled and the roles volunteers want to undertake. This is placing increasing pressure on an already stretched workforce, which has implications for service users and the beneficiaries of volunteering activities.

VOLUNTEERING IS A WIDE SPECTRUM OF ACTIVITIES

OPPORTUNITY

Rather than trying to demarcate formal and informal volunteering, there is an opportunity for us to consider how existing volunteering infrastructure can support informal volunteering without interfering. Greater recognition of the ways informal volunteering takes place in communities will aid our overall understanding of volunteering in Australia and help us plan for the workforce challenges currently facing the volunteering ecosystem.

WHAT IF...

- The volunteering ecosystem embraced informal volunteering and found ways to support it without forcing people to participate in the structures imposed in formal volunteering.
- People were recognised as the experts in their own lives and empowered to participate in community-led change that acknowledges decisions which impact them should be made by, with, and for them.
- We routinely involved volunteers in service and program design to ensure roles aligned with their interests and skills and were flexible to meet their needs.

"We need to preserve informal volunteering whilst allowing access to the support of the formal volunteering ecosystem."

"People who participate informally do not necessarily wish to volunteer in a more formal capacity."

"Technology is creating new channels for informal volunteering. We need to leverage these opportunities."

WE NEED TO RE-FOCUS ON THE VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCE

INSIGHT

A good experience of volunteering is paramount to sustained involvement. Volunteers want to feel that their role meets their motivations, provides them with autonomy, and enables them to contribute effectively to causes they care about.

Currently, volunteering roles tend to be designed based on the needs of an organisation – not dissimilar to recruitment for paid positions. This overlooks the fact that volunteering is a unique experience: people are not looking for volunteering to replicate the experience of paid work. Organisations tend to recruit volunteers to fill specific roles without involving volunteers in the design of those roles or adapting roles to better meet the motivations of individual volunteers.

Volunteers are increasingly valuing choice and flexibility. They want to engage with opportunities that meet their needs and provide a sense of agency. Volunteers do not necessarily seek recognition for their contribution, but they want to know their involvement is taken seriously and makes a difference. We heard that volunteers sometimes feel like an afterthought – their input is either not sought or not taken seriously and they get frustrated by what they perceive as unnecessary constraints on their role.

We also heard that volunteering can be a function of privilege. Rising costs of living, combined with fewer resources for sustainable volunteer involvement, is impacting the ability of people to get or stay involved. Whilst volunteers give their time freely, volunteering is not free, and mechanisms must be put in place to minimise the impact of financial barriers to participation.

WE NEED TO RE-FOCUS ON THE VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCE

OPPORTUNITY

The volunteering ecosystem can navigate and embrace the future of work shifts currently impacting volunteering by designing person-centred roles that are flexible and inclusive. This will improve the attractiveness of volunteering and positively impact participation rates.

WHAT IF...

- There was a common charter across the volunteering ecosystem that prioritised volunteer-centred role design to ensure roles simultaneously meet the needs of volunteers, service users, organisations, and funders.
- There were tax offsets and other benefits to compensate volunteers for out-of-pocket expenses and to recognise their critical role in Australian society.
- We recognised and celebrated volunteering as an end in itself, rather than always positioning it as a means to another outcome.

"Volunteers today are busier and what they can offer is different. If someone has a passion or skillset, we need to consider how to involve them, not try to fit them into an existing role."

"Volunteering is a life-affirming activity."

"Volunteering is the most meaningful thing I do with my time. It is proof that the world is full of kindness, there is always hope, and you should never underestimate the power of human connection."

RESEARCH NEEDS TO UNDERPIN POLICY AND PRACTICE

INSIGHT

Research on volunteering is crucial to informing policy and practice and strengthening the volunteering ecosystem. There exists a plethora of evidence on volunteering that can be harnessed to future-proof volunteering and amplify its impact.

Volunteering is somewhat of an enigma – it is an activity in constant flux. As new ideas emerge, we need to embrace them conceptually and empirically. There are two important layers to the research agenda as it pertains to volunteering: research being done (or needing to be done) and the use of research.

One of the enduring challenges for volunteering research relates back to the definitional ambiguity of volunteering. This has historically led to a fragmented and inconsistent data landscape, with data collection disparate across sectors and over time. We heard that volunteering research struggles to attract sufficient funding and practitioners are unable to access the evidence that does exist. The latter is a policy-level issue, whereby much research is hidden behind paywalls, but this has resulted in poorer outcomes for people at the coalface of implementing research findings.

Research translation was another issue raised by stakeholders. Journals often use technical language and people without an academic background told us they often found it hard to interpret and apply findings. Other stakeholders told us they fundamentally didn't know where to start looking for research, finding themselves developing things from scratch. We need research on volunteering and related issues to be collated and provided in a structured and accessible way, and there is a strong desire to embed research in program design and delivery.

RESEARCH NEEDS TO UNDERPIN POLICY AND PRACTICE

OPPORTUNITY

Robust data and evidence will be crucial to a strong future for volunteering, so a formative challenge for the National Strategy for Volunteering will be resolving some of the definitional complexities and building a strong case for investment in research on emerging topics, such as informal volunteering, that are urgently in need of exploration.

There is already a significant body of research on volunteering, covering a wide range of topics, which presents an exciting opportunity for the volunteering ecosystem to consider how to better utilise this evidence-base to enhance volunteering outcomes.

WHAT IF...

- Volunteering research was easily accessible and translated for diverse audiences.
- A future volunteering research agenda was collaboratively developed by the volunteering ecosystem and resourced sustainably.
- Volunteer involving organisations, Governments, and businesses consistently utilised volunteering research in the design of policy and programs.

"When I started in my role I had to do research from scratch. There was nowhere to go to find everything in one place."

"We often compete with external consultants that undertake what they call 'research' that can perpetuate myths which are hard to undo."

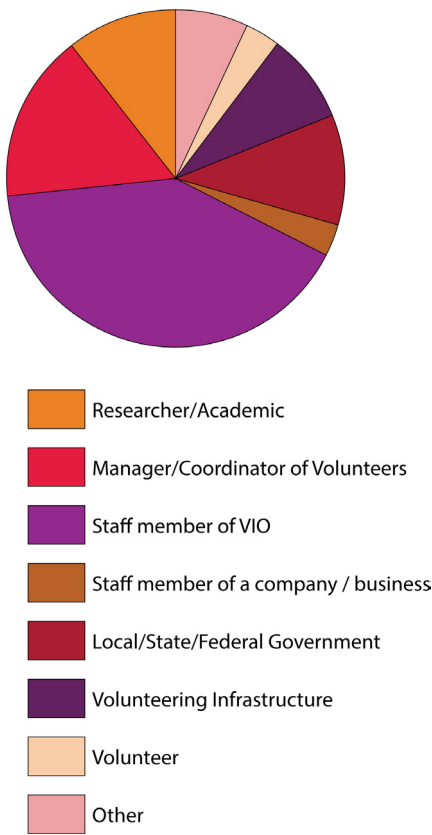
"Some research points out the more uncomfortable aspects of volunteering and it's important to bring those perspectives to the fore."

PARTICIPANT PROFILE

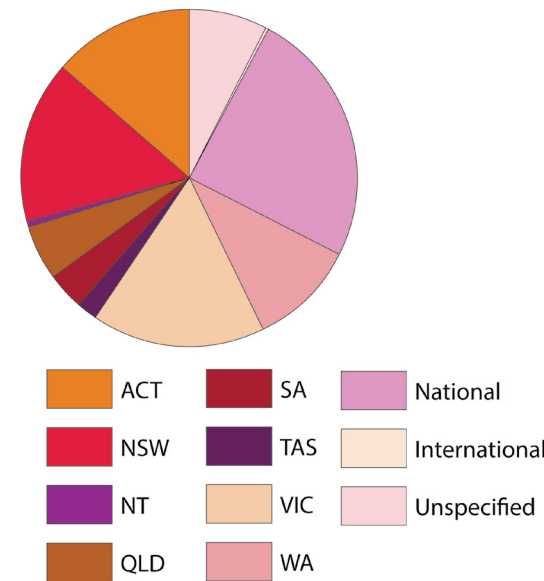
Number of Stakeholders: 400
Number of Engagements: 84

Number of Organisations Represented: 276
Open Submissions Received: 44

Stakeholder Type



Jurisdiction



Engagement Types

Consultations	7
Focus Groups	19
Interviews	16
Council/Working Group Meetings	17
Meetings/Presentations	25

Service Focus/Organisation Type

Academic Institution	39
Aged Care	63
Animal Welfare	5
Arts/Heritage	4
Children/Youth	29
Community Services/Welfare/Homelessness	69
Company/Business/Foundation	9
Cultural/Ethnic Groups	3
Disability	8
Education/Training	20
Emergency Services/Disaster Relief	12
Environment	8
First Nations Groups	3
Health	46
Human Rights/Justice/Legal	3
International Stakeholder	6
Local/State/Federal Government	22
Mental Health	11
Migrants/Refugees/Asylum Seekers	6
Sport/Recreation	6
Volunteering Infrastructure	45

Some stakeholders represented more than one service focus.

PROJECT INFORMATION

Project Timeline

The National Strategy for Volunteering project is being conducted in four key stages:

1. *Discovery*

The Discovery Phase took place from April through June. This stage was about building up the evidence-base needed to underpin the National Strategy for Volunteering.

2. *Visioning*

The Visioning Phase is about prototyping. We provoke ideas based on what we heard during the Discovery Phase and stakeholders help us test and evolve them. This stage brings together diverse viewpoints and co-creates collective solutions and a shared vision.

3. *Build*

The Build Phase is an intense program that brings together the evidence-base produced during the Discovery Phase and the shared vision created during the Visioning Phase into a draft National Strategy for Volunteering.

4. *Test and Refine*

The Test and Refine Phase is an opportunity for the volunteering ecosystem to validate the draft National Strategy for Volunteering and provide feedback and suggestions for improvement.

The final National Strategy for Volunteering will be produced based on stakeholder feedback and launched at the National Volunteering Conference in February 2023.



Volunteering Ecosystem

The volunteering ecosystem is a network of relationships all working for the collective viability and recognition of volunteering in Australia.

Actors in the Volunteering Ecosystem

- **Volunteers** – those who give their time willingly for the common good and without financial gain.
- **Volunteer Involving Organisations** – any organisation/business/government department that engages volunteers.
- **Volunteering Support Services (also known as Volunteer Resource Centres and Volunteer Support Organisations)** – place-based organisations that promote, resource, and support volunteering in local communities. These organisations work with volunteers to ensure their experience is positive and safe and with volunteer involving organisations to provide support for recruitment, management, and recognition of volunteers.
- **Volunteering Australia** – the national peak body for volunteering, working to advance volunteering in the Australian community.
- **State and Territory Volunteering Peak Bodies** – the seven State and Territory volunteering peak bodies that advocate for volunteering and deliver state/territory/local volunteering programs and initiatives.
- **National Peak Bodies** – national organisations that represent a sector, industry, or the community.
- **Community Organisations/Groups (also known as Grassroots Associations)** – a broad range of organisations that provide activities, services, and/or programs in the community.
- **Philanthropy** – funders, social investors, and social change agents working to achieve positive social, cultural, environmental, and community change by leveraging assets and influence.
- **The Business Community** – businesses and companies with an interest in volunteering.
- **The Research Community** – researchers, academics, universities, and other educational institutions with an interest in volunteering.
- **Governments** – Federal, State/Territory and Local Governments in Australia.

The volunteering ecosystem is vast and complex. In many cases, certain actors might fit more than one category. For example, many government departments both fund and run volunteering programs. The role of actors can also be very different depending on jurisdiction, location, legislation, funding, or community need. Some actors might not have a specific focus on volunteering but will likely have members that involve volunteers or be representing interests or issues that rely on volunteers in some capacity. There are also many organisations, groups, and communities that don't see themselves reflected in the above categories, such as informal, cultural, and interfaith groups, yet many of their activities would be considered volunteering under the current definition.

Volunteering in Australia Research

As part of the development of the National Strategy for Volunteering, Volunteering Australia is also leading the *Volunteering in Australia* research project. The research project will produce a series of four reports that will serve as a core evidence base on contemporary volunteering in Australia. The four reports will be based on:

1. A representative survey of the general Australian population.
2. A survey of and a series of focus groups with volunteer involving organisations.
3. An analysis of supply and demand for volunteers among organisations across Australia.
4. A review of methods of valuing the contributions of volunteering in Australia.

The research will consider the following:

Volunteer Perspective

- Demographic information and the relationships between different variables and participation in volunteering
- Rates and patterns of volunteering behaviour (formal and informal)
- Barriers to volunteering and how they vary by demographic
- Individual costs of volunteering
- Motivations for volunteering
- Satisfaction with volunteering
- Trends and innovation

Supply and Demand

- The extent to which there is an alignment between available roles and the interests of prospective volunteers
- The needs of organisations and how this varies geographically
- Areas of volunteering likely to experience a shortfall of volunteers in the future

Volunteer Involving Organisation Perspective

- Characteristics of organisation
- Recruitment and engagement of volunteers
- Challenges and barriers to engagement of volunteers
- How engagement practices have changes over time
- The costs associated with volunteer involvement
- Inclusion and diversity
- Predictions for the future

Economic Valuation

- The value of volunteering in Australia
- Recommendations for measuring the value of volunteering going forward

Next Steps

This Discovery Insights Report presents what we have heard from stakeholders across the volunteering ecosystem so far. As we move into our Visioning Phase we will be looking to fill some key gaps in our understanding. Our focus will be on connecting with people and communities that are not professionally involved in volunteering or who do not identify as being part of the volunteering ecosystem.

Our Visioning Phase is about collaboratively designing a collective vision for the National Strategy for Volunteering. Through participatory design workshops, we'll come together to test 'seeds of change' we have developed using feedback from the Discovery Phase that formed the basis for this report. These seeds of change are ideas for the future of volunteering. You will help us evaluate the ideas and then we will co-create a collective vision for the future.

Workshops will be delivered face-to-face across the country and online throughout the month of September. If you can't make a workshop or would prefer to participate in a different way, we will also have a virtual activity you can complete to share your thoughts and vote for a vision.

We understand the importance of inclusion and accessibility. If you have ideas about how we can make the workshops or the project more inclusive, please get in touch. Your inclusion needs matter, and we want to provide a safe and welcoming space for everyone that recognises we all participate in different ways.



Get Involved

Everything you need to know about getting involved in the National Strategy for Volunteering project can be found on our [website](#). You can also [register for updates](#) to have information about the project, including workshop dates, sent directly to your inbox.

The participatory design workshops are for everyone: volunteers, non-volunteers, those who benefit from services provided by volunteers, those who manage and support volunteers, those who work in organisations with volunteering programs, those who volunteer through their workplace, and those who enable volunteering through funding, philanthropy, or by providing supporting infrastructure.

We want to hear from community leaders, service users, researchers and academics, young people, older people, First Nations People, people with disabilities, and people from all cultures and backgrounds. No matter your involvement with volunteering, even if this is your first time engaging with it, we want your voice included in the vision for the future.

If you know someone who should be involved, tell them about the project and encourage them to attend a workshop or reach out to us directly. You can also get in contact if you think there are people, groups, networks, or communities we should be talking to.

This project is an historic opportunity for us to imagine an aspirational future for volunteering in Australia. We can't do it without you.



Towards a
**National Strategy
for Volunteering**

