



Volunteering Victoria Submission

A stronger, more diverse and independent community sector

NOVEMBER 2023

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Introduction

Volunteering Victoria welcomes the Australian Government Department of Social Services' Issues Paper, [A stronger, more diverse and independent community sector](#) (the Issues Paper). The design and administration of grants to the sector, including more meaningful working partnerships and options for greater innovation, needs to provide the stable conditions requisite for building up sector capacity and capability for impact. Short-term 'projectisation' of grants and funding 'hollows out' the social sector and does not equip service providers to address complex social problems requiring long-term and sustained effort.

To build communities that are strong, more diverse, and independent, it is critical that governments work with the sector through partnerships and funding that appropriately and adequately address what the sector actually needs: control, resourcing (to minimum viable levels), and a tolerance for calculated failures from considered experimentation (that are necessary for innovation). Further, an important part of the sector is volunteering, supporting charities to deliver services as well as *leading* community action where social change occurs (and is under-recognised). Many government-funded services would not otherwise be delivered without the power of volunteers harnessed by supporting infrastructure, such as local and regional volunteer resources centres and state peak bodies for volunteering. Many community organisations are also volunteer-led due to the voluntary nature of their board; and the growing responsibilities (regulatory, fiduciary, risk management) on them are onerous.

Volunteering involves local individuals and groups contributing their time, skills, and effort to support their communities and address local area issues and needs. This uniquely allows for the development of local, place-based initiatives and solutions, valuing and prioritising lived experience and community-led responses. Strengthening place-based volunteer programs and support services (such as volunteer resource centres) will grow individuals' communities' capacity to address social challenges by activating their agency and resourcefulness.

Volunteering is thus a significant and essential part of community building and wellbeing:

- Fostering and advancing a successful, resilient, and more independent society;
- Contributing to building a more tolerant and respectful society in Australia;
- Supporting community building and upliftment;
- Providing pathways to employment and economic involvement;
- Supporting integration and social connection for and well-being of communities;
- Strengthening public understanding of diversity, multiculturalism, and the importance of community; and
- Supporting a cohesive and inclusive society, fostering a powerful sense of belonging to a place and community.

Volunteering Victoria endorses Volunteering Australia's submission to the Paper. Our submission supplements the recommendations made by Volunteering Australia.

We specifically address the 5 focus areas identified in the Issues Paper below.

About Volunteering Victoria

As a state peak body, Volunteering Victoria advocates, advises, and facilitates for an inclusive and thriving volunteering culture. This is done with and for all volunteers, communities, and organisations. Volunteering is a whole of community effort, but it needs to be more inclusive. Systemic barriers must be addressed, and strong foundations built for all forms of volunteering practices. Our strategic goal is to ensure volunteering and community building is appealing and accessible to all Victorians. Volunteering Victoria delivers the [Volunteer Management Activity](#)¹ program with eight consortia partners to address barriers to volunteering for priority cohorts, which includes newly arrived migrants. This program has developed new digital resources and insights into improving access to volunteering and mitigating structural barriers for newly arrived migrants. This experience, and the collective experience drawn from projects by our members, affirms that volunteering is an essential wellbeing activity that is central to the lives of diverse communities across Australia.

Overview of volunteering

Volunteering is a significant part of Australia's economic and social landscape. Over 25% of Australians volunteer their time within organisations,¹ while close to half of Australians volunteer 'informally'.² Volunteering provides individual and collective social, cultural and wellbeing benefits. These benefits exist alongside the tangible economic contribution of volunteers in excess of \$58 billion annually to Victoria alone³. If volunteers were paid, the volunteering sector in Victoria would be equal to 1.5 times the Victorian Government sector and nearly half the size of the Victorian private sector.⁴ This substantial contribution is crucial to the functioning of the NFP sector, who engage volunteers to deliver vital community supports such as community sports, religious organisations, education and training, and health and welfare.⁵

The reach of volunteering in Australian society is extensive and diverse, both as a 'formal', role-based activity within organisations with significant volunteer workforces or in semi-formalised organisational structures. It also includes 'informal' activity occurring outside organisations. This uniquely allows for the development of place-based initiatives and solutions, valuing and prioritising lived experience and community-led responses that strengthen communities' resilience and independence.

Volunteering, as community building, requires adequate and appropriate resourcing. Government grants generally fund physical infrastructure. This fails to recognise and understand the importance of both 'soft' and 'hard infrastructure - that is, *people and built infrastructure* - comprising of public sector especially local councils, NGOs/community-based organisations, private sector organisations involved in making volunteering 'happen'. Declining volunteer participation rates are a reflection of this failure to build the people-based wraparound supports and local places that are pillars for active community building and participation.² Moreover, the [Scanlon Mapping Social Cohesion Report \(2022\)](#) found that local and interpersonal ties during the pandemic is likely to be a great asset for Australia in managing future threats to social cohesion.³

¹ <https://www.volunteeringvictoria.org.au/leading-volunteers/vma-2022-2026/>. See also the Volunteering Victoria VMA Highlights document on *Breaking Down Barriers and Building Sector Capacity* - https://www.volunteeringvictoria.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/VMA-Highlights-Year-1_2023.pdf

² For other indicators reflecting the growing social disconnect, see <https://scanloninstitute.org.au/mapping-social-cohesion-2022>.

³ See note 2 above.

Focus Area 1: Giving the sector the voice and respect it deserves through a meaningful working partnership

Evidence and experience have shown that community building is necessarily community led. Meaningful partnerships require governments to listen, support and resource the solutions identified by and with communities. The multitude of community organisations and their volunteer workforces are by their very nature deeply embedded into community and offer the greatest opportunity to build capacity to deliver quality programs for sustained impact. Establishing the most effective methods for involving community to build partnerships must be a priority.

The voices of certain segments of communities must be supported to be escalated to policymakers and decision-makers. Coordination of voices, capturing of communities' needs, require effort and resourcing, and those organisations or groups with adequate resourcing are better positioned to elevate their needs. The diverse voices and needs of volunteers, particularly those of local and diverse volunteers outside institutional settings are often under-resourced (and under-reported).

We direct your attention to submissions from local volunteer resource centres (VRC) and volunteer support services (VSS), including any submission made by networks of these bodies such as the Victorian Volunteer Support Network (VVSN) that emphasise the importance of place-based infrastructure, and funding models that appropriately consider the unique and significant role they play in communities and in building and supporting stronger, more diverse, and independent communities. They form the strong threads of the trampoline that communities need to 'bounce back' in times of crisis and economic downturn. Volunteering Victoria works closely with these bodies and supports the importance of the experiences that may be detailed in these submissions.

Moreover, it is also critical that government proactively broker access and direct engagements with local and place-based cohorts, who may be beyond the reach of state based peak bodies (given that state peak bodies themselves face resource constraints).

Government grants designed with and for communities are an opportunity to share power, control, and resources necessary for active and place-based community initiatives to strengthen and build up those communities.

Focus Area 2: Providing grants that reflect the real cost of delivering quality services

Many community organisations rely on volunteers to provide essential community services. Adequately resourcing these organisations to properly support their volunteers will significantly impact the services that can be provided. Volunteers need the protection, insurance, reimbursements, access to technology, and support of staff that may not be appreciated in full by funders or governments as part of the ‘core’ funding of community organisations nor program funding⁴.

Government cannot expect to make a significant impact on community capacity building and ‘unlock’ the power of volunteering without providing the minimum funding levels and environments for that to occur. The result is a sharpening decline in volunteering participation rates (in institutional and organisational settings) over the decades.

There is a wealth of experience and research that can assist governments in identifying the administrative and overhead costs that are not being considered in current grant funding. It is critical that this is accessed and if not available, sought.

Further, grant-seeking activities are also costly to community organisations. The rise of the fundraising and business development professionals attest to the time, community development skill and effort required. Grant funding rounds are generally oversubscribed and more so in contracting economic environments (e.g. [Emerging Stronger Community grants](#)⁵ in Victoria where only 19 applications out of 320 were successful for a \$1.3million pool). The real ‘unintended consequence’ of the over-subscription to relatively small grant grounds is a further compounding of fatigue and sense of dejection in community already feeling the brunt of reduced donations and government investment. Lastly, the total cost of time and effort expended at an aggregate level (preparing 320 applications, letters of support, collaboration conversations to design programs to meet funding requirements⁶) would likely outstrip the \$1.3 million funding pool. This is a productivity drain on community in terms of diverting resources and energy to grant-applications rather than productive service delivery and community building. By way of comparison, business development costs in the private sector are recouped in their pricing and profit mechanism, a practice that is heavily constrained in the NFP sector (relative to the private sector) and borne disproportionately by small to medium community organisations and volunteer-led groups.

To build community (and not continue to increase the burden on stretch resources), the real aggregate costs to the sector of grant rounds need to be assessed and provided for in the design of grant making mechanisms. The government therefore should consider: (a) the size of grant pools to meet the level of subscription and that outweighs the aggregate cost of grant-seeking and application efforts; and (b) alternative approaches to getting funds to community such as a UK model of grant lottery that sees less system-level loss of scarce community time and effort.

⁴ ‘Volunteers are free’ are sticking biases. See further *National Strategy for Volunteering 2023 – 2033* at <https://volunteeringstrategy.org.au>

⁵ <https://www.volunteer.vic.gov.au/emerging-stronger-grants-program>

⁶ That may not readily marry up with community identified needs.

Focus Area 3: Providing longer grant agreement terms

Most grant funding is short term in nature, funding physical infrastructure. Soft and hard infrastructure are necessary to ‘activate’ the full potential of community. The wraparound supports - people power - are as important to fund as the ‘hard’ infrastructure such as buildings. The evidence is overwhelming for longer term funding that adequately supports a community organisation in funding programs that require proper design, be accessible and inclusive, encourage diversity and resource management to be effective. This is readily envisioned and implemented by government in the private sector, where investments in industry capabilities provide the stable investments for businesses to thrive for the long-term. Yet, this logic unfortunately has not been applied to the NFP sector where complex economic and social building need to occur to deal with perennial and wicked problems.

By way of illustration, some government funded programs like the Victorian Government’s [weVolunteer](#), required the involvement (time and effort) of community organisations to be part of the digital-based platform to support organisations and volunteers. Evaluation of the program (and similar programs by the Commonwealth funded HelpOUT program for Spontaneous Emergency Volunteering in Victoria⁷) found that the short-term nature, combined with the digital-based approach, discouraged such involvement and investment in business process changes on the part of organisations.

Finally, grants need to recognise the importance of program sustainability provided by longer term funding as pre-conditions for innovation.

Focus Areas 4 & 5: Ensuring grant funding flows to a greater diversity of CSOs; Partnering with trusted community organisations with strong local links

Building relationships with community organisations, and building trust over time, will go a long way to developing strong partnerships.

Grant funding procedures need to be accessible and easy to encourage and allow applications from a diversity of community organisations, particularly those vulnerable and disadvantaged cohorts often targeted by government programs. Funding levels need to be more appropriate and take into consideration the needs, resources (or lack thereof) of the community organisations targeted to increase their capability to access the funding opportunities. For example, providing grant funding through Members of Parliament does not encourage meaningful partnerships or build trust with communities. Nor does it encourage a diversity of applicants who may not be comfortable with the avenue of engaging political leaders.

Other measures to support local and diverse CSOs can be part of collaborative commissioning practices. Finally, opening of the process to be simpler for applications such as translated information, community forums brokered in-language to explain the grant process, will ensure awareness of funding opportunities reaches the very people who need them to deliver community-led solutions. The process itself should be simplified and user-friendly (e.g. due diligent informational requirements can be triaged for later gathering of shortlisted candidates

⁷ <https://www.volunteeringvictoria.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Volunteering-Victoria-HelpOUT-Final-Report.pdf>

so that there is less burden upfront on the applicants). Finally, funding evaluation and impact measurement must also factor in the value of capacity building of local communities and social capital; the ‘invisible’ gold of a relational-based community development by diverse CSOs.


Volunteer West, a regional volunteer resource centre (VRC), identified in their [Submission, Review of Volunteer Management Activity \(2020\)](#) the “intrinsic value in investing intentionally in the activity of building and maintaining coalitions of organisations, especially in peri-urban, regional and rural regions”⁸. The submission found that coalitions, formal, informal and organic, provide the critical – often intangible – social capital for community resilience in times of disaster (e.g. bushfires) and especially during the pandemic⁹. They advocate for local, place-based, and cross-sectoral ‘soft and hard’ infrastructure. These local and regional ‘trampolines’ would be focused on strengthening access to meaningful, inclusive and active volunteering that builds community and wellbeing as the common goal. They point out that VRCs already take on the responsibility of coalition-building for strengthening volunteering and community building. VRCs have place-based advantages: local networks, grassroots understanding of the social and community context (demographics, needs, strengths, particularly local champions to galvanise community), and a mandate focused on volunteering as community building in their region.

Concluding Recommendations

The Issues Paper provides an important opportunity to review the design and administration of grants to the sector, including more meaningful working partnerships and options for greater innovation. Significant work must be further pursued to ensure that all aspects and forms of volunteering are made more visible and adequately resourced in grant funding to communities. Volunteering activity, akin other activities (such as sporting activity), bring about social and economic outcomes, including employment, wellbeing, social connection, belonging, and active citizenry.

We welcome the opportunity to discuss our recommendations with you further.

Yours sincerely


Chief Executive Officer
Volunteering Victoria

⁸ Page 3; see <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5f1e61b22056001e99212c01/t/5f69571452632060c2157fab/1600739095141/VW+DSS+Submission+April+2020.pdf>

⁹ See also [Scanlon Mapping Social Cohesion Report \(2022\)](#), note 2 above.