

Towards a National Strategy for Volunteering

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1 Executive Summary

The future of volunteering in Australia would be aided by a National Strategy for Volunteering. This finding is the result of preliminary sector-wide consultation providing solid evidence that further consultation on, and development of a National Strategy would deliver positive outcomes for the sector and Australian communities in general. Overwhelmingly, respondents to the Discussion Paper: *Towards a National Volunteer Strategy* expressed support for moving beyond discussion to exploring the potential for a national approach to the sector issues that impact on volunteers and volunteer-involving organizations. Feedback was supportive and creative in its outlook and fell into broad themes that provide an evolving structure for further required consultation and development. These themes are:

- Volunteering Infrastructure Development & Support
- Skilling of Volunteers
- Excellence in Volunteer Management
- Quality Standards and Accreditation
- Legislative and Administrative Reforms
- Marketing and Communication
- Advancing Research and Social Policy



As part of moving forward, an all-inclusive and well defined consultation process is strongly advocated by respondents as being one of the fundamental ways to get support for a

National Strategy across the not for profit sector, all levels of government, community and business sectors.

Measurement of a successful National Strategy was articulated in many diverse forms - from the tangible and measurable, such as an increase in the number of volunteers, to the visionary of a national landscape of volunteering that maintains, even enshrines, its local focus and connection in regional, rural and metropolitan Australia.

Many volunteer-involving organisations, large and small, and the volunteering infrastructure itself, operate under resourcing constraints. Participation in the ongoing process of establishing a roadmap for greater national consistency, while valuing and upholding diversity, would require support from all levels of government.

Volunteering Australia is now seeking commitments from governments at all levels to:

- Support the development of a National Strategy for Volunteering
- Provide adequate funding for a sector driven project to develop detailed strategies to address the seven framework elements
- Provide adequate funding to resource implementation of the strategies developed through this process.

2 Introduction

The Discussion Paper *Towards a National Volunteer Strategy* was circulated to all State / Territory Volunteering Centres, Volunteer Resource Centres, Volunteering Australia members and all Local Government Authorities across Australia, in their capacity as volunteer-involving organisations. Recipients were asked to forward the Discussion Paper to other relevant bodies and individuals who would have interest in commenting at this initial stage of sector consultation about the relevance and need for a National Strategy.

Comments were received from 46 organisations and individuals, with high representation from Local Government (55%) and metropolitan / regional Volunteer Resource Centres (16%). Feedback was received from all States and Territories. Respondents were representative of metropolitan, regional and rural environments and some respondents were volunteers themselves. A link to the online survey tool, SurveyMonkey, was provided via email within which were the same questions as in the Discussion Paper.

To focus the emphasis more appropriately on volunteering as a whole, '*National Volunteer Strategy*' has been changed to '*National Strategy for Volunteering*'. It was suggested that 'volunteer' relates to an individual for whom a national strategy cannot exist. For the purpose of this report, '*National Strategy for Volunteering*' or the shorter, '*National Strategy*' will be used throughout until such time as further consultation and development occurs.

Across the board, respondents commended the spirit and intent of the Discussion Paper. Respondents felt that the Discussion Paper gave strong positioning for a National Strategy and that the development of a National Strategy is critically important for the future of volunteering in Australia. One response stated that focusing on volunteering only was too

narrow and should focus on not-for-profit strategy including paid workers as well as volunteers.

Volunteering Australia acknowledges that throughout the Discussion Paper volunteering was discussed as a whole concept without specific reference to aspects of difference that impact the volunteering experience, for example, gender, culture, language, indigenous, disability, socio-economic, educational and generational diversity. Whilst seen as an omission in the Discussion Paper, the resources required to address diversity aspects of volunteering, including the barriers and enablers to volunteering for different groups and individuals have been preserved for the consultation and development process for a National Strategy. This is seen by Volunteering Australia as an imperative to the successful development and implementation of a National Strategy.

The feedback in this report is presented under emerging themes that encapsulate the main thrust of commentary from respondents.

3 Question: How relevant is a National Strategy to the future of volunteering in Australia?

Feedback from respondents was unanimous in saying the development of a National Strategy is critical to the future of volunteering in Australia. These strong statements of support from respondents are clear demonstration of this sentiment:

Strategies to increase and support volunteering by all levels of government are necessary to meet the challenges ahead for our community – global warming, an ageing population, and the need for increased social inclusion and cohesion.

Develop a sustainable structure for volunteering that formally connects volunteer organisations at a national, state and local level.

A strong and vibrant sector will only be enhanced by a National Strategy that incorporates all levels of government.

We need a comprehensive national strategy to address current barriers to volunteering in a co-ordinated and collaborative process.

A strategy will give greater impetus for planning at a state and local level for volunteer development.”

A National Strategy is important to support grass roots and local volunteering – particularly in rural areas.

Highlight nationwide similarities, issues, resources to assist in uniting volunteering across Australia.

It would improve the chances for consistency, support and a vision for volunteering.

Address the inconsistencies of government support in the volunteer sector.

If volunteering is to grow, then a National Strategy is an inevitable precursor. The importance demonstrated at a state government level needs to be replicated at a

federal government level – hand in hand with state governments. Needs to include all levels of government.

Current research within the volunteering sector supports the development and strengthening of one national voice on volunteering and improved connection and co-ordination on volunteering across and within government.

3.1 The Importance of Leadership

Clearly articulated was that leadership, including ‘leading by example’ is an imperative to secure the future of volunteering. Leadership underpins all aspects of an emerging strategy framework: sector leadership, political leadership, issues leadership, organisational leadership and individual leadership. Implied in much of the feedback is the need for change across and within the sector (infrastructure, volunteer-involving organisations, image of volunteering etc) and in government’s approach to, and support of, volunteering. Effective leadership to manage change is required as part of a successful process.

The leaders in our country showing a co-ordinated approach to volunteering will be the benchmark for the community.

(A National Strategy) provides a strong foundation and legitimacy for implementing change in both large and smaller organisations that involve volunteers.

As a Volunteer Development Office in Local Government, I need tools such as a National Strategy to convince senior management of the need for change and innovation in our volunteer programs.”

Beneficial to those organisations who would currently co-ordinate volunteers without any guidance from a higher body.

The success of a National Strategy would provide the sector with appropriate leadership, structure and a road map for growth.

Respondents acknowledged Volunteering Australia’s unique position in having developed foundation, national positions such as a definition of volunteering and clear principles of volunteering, ‘which have been agreed to and are respected by many people who volunteer and the organisations that seek to involve and support volunteers’. These established and accepted principles, together with the *National Agenda for Volunteering* and the *National Standards for Involving Volunteers in not-for-profit Organisations*, give Volunteering Australia a strong national perspective to take a key leadership role in a change process.

A multilevel approach co-ordinated by Volunteering Australia and managed by a steering committee incorporating volunteering bodies from each state, filtering down to local and individual initiatives. A separate process from government.

As a VRC operating across a large region with significant challenges we wholeheartedly support VA in putting forward the recommendations for a National Volunteer Strategy to address the future development of volunteering in Australia. This support is offered in recognition of the important role the national body plays in linking government and advocating on behalf of the sector.

4 Question: What issues need to be in a National Strategy?

This section deals with the emerging themes of a proposed National Strategy as distinct from the process for consultation and development of a National Strategy, which will be addressed under 'Resources required'.

4.1 Infrastructure Development and Support

A strong thread through all feedback to the Discussion Paper was the significance and the variation in Australia's volunteering infrastructure. This includes the National Peak body, State Centre network, Volunteer Resource Centres and Local Government Authorities that often have the dual role of supporting community involvement in volunteering as well as engaging volunteers for their own service delivery.

While volunteering infrastructure has evolved to provide invaluable service to volunteers and volunteer-involving organisations, this evolution has been, in the main, by virtue of serendipitous rather than strategic development and often in an environment of competitive spirit to secure available funding.

(A National Strategy is) very important if it assists in resolving the debilitating "survival" competition that exists between not-for-profits as they struggle to source sustaining funding. (It would also) address issues of staff uncertainty, that goes beyond just keeping their job, but sustaining programs of value in the community.

Collaborative is the only way to go – not protecting territory as happens between state (government) Office for Volunteers, Local Government, and Resource Centres.

Too many of the larger organisations are only looking after their own TURF and are not willing to meet and talk with other state and local organisations who are carrying out vital volunteer work within their local areas or states.

The cycle of funding is relatively short term and has not allowed for optimal strategic planning for sustainable development of the infrastructure (or many volunteer-involving organisations). It is acknowledged that there is often duplication of resourcing and functions within the volunteer infrastructure. This includes volunteering services provided by the various state government offices of volunteering. The role of government offices elicited mixed responses.

Adequate and realistic resourcing in volunteer-involving organisations. 5-10 years of planning, not just 1-3 years.

Eliminating duplication of services saving time and money.

(A National Strategy requires) Government offices specific to volunteering at national, state and regional levels.

It is not only a concern of "overlap and duplication of resources across governments" but with the State Centres also." The duplication is not only of resources, but also key functions. This has led to confusion and a lack of clarity in the sector as to the role of Office for Volunteers, with many stakeholders suggesting that the government should de-fund the Office for Volunteers.

Provide a co-ordinated approach in the use and application of resources and effort.

Too many organisations are duplicating services throughout Australia and it is hoped this Strategy would recognise this fact.

Currently the support to the volunteer sector is very segmented with a complex series of layers creating duplicity of services. A National Strategy would provide the 'bones' around which a structure could be melded.

The infrastructure operates at local levels, regional, state and a national level. The distinction and preservation of the various levels of support are considered imperative for the success of a National Strategy. At the same time, refining and sustaining volunteer infrastructure is desirable.

Only favoured if it complements all existing tiers of volunteer support, must not diminish the role of regional / local volunteer centres such as Volunteer Resource Centres.

Standardising core infrastructure will assist in reducing barriers to management of volunteers.

Recognise that local volunteering centres are unique in their ability to capture and respond to local issues which vary between urban, rural and regional areas.

Sustainability of volunteering infrastructure including provision of funding and support.

Financial resources to maintain the VRC network at national, state and regional level – with face to face and IT communication and interaction.

Provide a sustainable structural framework for volunteering that formally (constitutionally) connects volunteer organisations at national, state and local levels.

4.2 Skilling of Volunteers

A National Strategy requires a strong focus on the training and skilling of volunteers. Feedback highlights the importance of sustainable funding for training in recognition of volunteering as a pathway to employment, and a vehicle for social inclusion. Volunteering offers society a way of tapping into skill resources that may not be accessed through paid employment.

The link between volunteering and employment pathways, in particular women returning to work.

Skilled migrant women and men looking to increase their employability in Australia.

We accept that people use volunteering to enhance their sense of social inclusion then the opposite is also true, people who are for one reason another held back from being able to volunteer are at grater risk of being socially excluded.

Better funding for training, and specific training resources for governance and staffing / personnel issues.

Train people – free – on how to be an effective volunteer.

Greater utilisation of skills, experience and knowledge of the every-increasing number of older Australians.

4.3 Excellence in Volunteer Management

The important professional role held by managers of volunteers, some of whom are volunteers themselves, was seen as requiring critical focus in a National Strategy. Through the broader promotion of core competencies, accredited training and qualifications that are available and accessible nationally (through various sources) volunteer management can increase its ability to support and sustain volunteering.

The profession of volunteer management and professional networks need profile with the strategy.

A National Strategy is important to ensure that all volunteers have the same opportunities and are managed by the principle of best practice in volunteer management.

Professional development of managers of volunteers is crucial to ensure we have skilled and qualified people working effectively with volunteers.

A National Strategy needs to ensure that volunteer management is recognised as a profession.

4.4 Quality Standards and Accreditation

One of Volunteering Australia's foundation documents is the *National Standards for Involving Volunteers in Not-for-profit Organisations*. Frequent reference was made throughout the feedback that standards need to be an important part of a National Strategy. Having quality standards is only one aspect of the feedback: awareness and accessibility of standards, ability to implement and comply with standards, resourcing requirements for standards are all issues that require focus as part of a National Strategy. A common understanding of which organisations standards do or might apply to and the linking to a formal accreditation process are further issues for consideration. Volunteering Australia is currently working through a process of review of its *National Standards* as well as developing a process of quality accreditation standards for volunteering infrastructure organisations, locally, regionally and nationally.

Extra government funding to enable smaller not for profit organisations meet the National Standards.

Ensure strategies reflect and uphold the principles of volunteering.

Need for National Standards – greater awareness of VA's Standards.

4.5 Legislative and Administrative Reforms

The regulatory burden on volunteer-involving organisations and volunteers is well documented and discussed elsewhere as having an adverse effect on volunteer effort. Respondent feedback identified a National Strategy as a much required vehicle to aid achievement of greater consistency across public policy areas that impact organisations'

capacity to comply with regulatory requirements that have an adverse affect on volunteer effort. These issues include (but are not necessarily confined to) the costs of volunteering, background checking, insurance, compliance with relevant legislative frameworks such as occupational health and safety, equal opportunity as well as establishing effective mechanisms to deal with workplace grievances for volunteers.

Tax concessions for volunteers.

Government support for insurance for volunteers.

Advice and counsel on volunteering-related Government activity including regulatory reform, funding perspectives and partnership models.

Free background checks.

Portability of background checks and qualifications – useful for grey nomads, people who volunteer for multiple organisations or one off events.

The establishment and resourcing of state based Volunteer Ombudsman positions.

4.6 Marketing and Communication

Respondents strongly identified that a National Strategy would provide opportunity for raising the profile and value of volunteering at all levels (in local communities – rural, regional and metropolitan, across governments, nationally, by sector etc). A marketing and communication approach to volunteering, developed as part of a National Strategy would have the impact of addressing:

- the decline in volunteering that many sectors are reporting or anticipate;
- promoting the health and well-being benefits of volunteering;
- raising awareness about the breadth and depth of volunteer roles available; and
- aiding the development of creative strategies to attract different demographic groups to volunteering where take up is lower.

Signals to the community the importance of volunteering which goes hand in hand with education, lifelong learning and community welfare and well-being.

Strong and vibrant sector will be enhanced by a National Strategy.

Acknowledgement of where volunteers work in our communities – governance, management, and service delivery.

Volunteering as a health promotion strategy – individual and community health and well being. Healthy people contribute to making a healthy and active society.

The volunteer “image” needs to be enhanced and promoted in a way that will be attractive to people.

Promotion and advertising of volunteering essential to combat declining numbers particularly in some areas (meals on wheels).

Benefits to the individual of volunteering needs promotion.

Community services / volunteering should be promoted in all schools as part of higher school certificate.

Volunteering needs to be 'rebranded' to get past negative associations but also to enable people to recognise themselves as volunteers – many people are involved in volunteering but don't label themselves as such.

4.7 Advancing Research and Social Policy

A continuing but extended focus on research and social policy relating to volunteering (across all its diverse aspects) is seen as an imperative in a National Strategy. This includes strong advocacy for volunteering and the sector in public policy development and legislative review. To understand trends, needs and barriers, to develop strategies and sustain the future of volunteering, research and evidence-based policy formation need to be at the core of activity and systematically funded within the sector and within government.

To raise the importance of research and development for decision making and mapping future trends.

Keeping abreast of emerging national needs and perspectives – research.

Volunteering specifically named in social inclusion agenda – strategies that engage marginalized and disadvantaged communities.

Volunteering must be given greater prominence in financial reporting – the billions that it contributes needs to be reflected in financial sector reporting.

Advocate at a national policy level – issues that are common to all organisations that deal with volunteers, such as engaging youth.

Reports and surveys conducted yearly as an indicator of trends.

Quite apart from feedback to the Discussion Paper, research and policy areas for consideration have been well identified, but some key areas of research and policy identified in the feedback were:

- How demographic changes are affecting volunteering such as an ageing population, and the greater needs in aged care
- The impacts gender has on participation in volunteering, and the role of women in informal caring
- The enablers and barriers to participation for different population groups – people of diverse cultural and language groups, young people, older adults, people with different abilities, and people of low socio economic status etc.
- Barriers such as the cost of volunteering – transport, childcare
- The definitions of formal and informal volunteering. Identify and recognise new forms of volunteering ie: virtual volunteering.
- Understanding different interpretations of volunteering for people from different cultural backgrounds

- Role of IT and networked technologies in supporting and expanding volunteering.
- Understanding why people cease to volunteer.

5 Question: What resources are required for the development of a National Strategy?

Resource needs were interpreted broadly in respondent feedback and often went beyond the needs of development of a National Strategy to include the broad needs of the sector. Strong themes emerged from the feedback in relation to the *process* of consultation and development of a National Strategy. Feedback was emphatic that it needs to be 'sector driven' or sector owned, having broad, inclusive and transparent consultation processes, engaging a wide range of stakeholders (including organisations that do not involve volunteers) through diverse and creative means, undertaken in a reasonable but realistic timeframe, and appropriately funded. A sustainable National Strategy that is not dependent upon the government of the day for its support was seen as necessary.

No cost to organisations to participate – not to put stress on volunteer run organisations that are resource poor.

Consultation and development to be undertaken in a reasonable timeframe.

Use local government in the process.

(Requires) funding and human resources.

Resourcing forums and specific engagement techniques at state and local level – must not be seen as a top down strategy.

Inclusive approach by consulting in each state, separately and as a nation. Comprehensive community strategy at the national level.

Independent consultants – not serving the interests of one single group.

Not just 'including' target groups but 'engaging and involving' people from diverse backgrounds.

Not for profits and volunteers included. Volunteer rights need to be upheld. Make sure volunteers' opinions are included.

Sector driven proposals can be too easily discarded by the government especially when money and resources are asked for.

Resources needed to develop the strategy and resources needed to implement the strategy. Recognise the difference.

A bipartisan national approach should position Volunteering Australia to work with political and corporate entities to ensure success within all legislative constraints.

A National Strategy that would not change when new governments take office.

6 Question: What would success of a National Strategy look like for you?

Suggestions for measuring the success of a National Strategy also covered a broad range. Some feedback articulated tangible, measurable success outcomes such as:

Dedicated Federal Ministerial office that maintains a separate identity from the current placement of volunteering under the Department of FaHCSIA.

Development of a comprehensive knowledge/resource database for all issues around volunteers and volunteering with appropriate management and controls.

All governments have acknowledged the importance of volunteering. Setting up volunteering units in administrative structures of government, including personnel and funding.

A steady increase in volunteering levels across sectors and states.

Volunteering would have a stronger presence on the federal government's agenda.

A central place for volunteer organisations to turn to for assistance – governance and human resource issues.

*A more direct connection with governing bodies and community groups (volunteers).
A more effective communication flow and a set of standards to be implemented at a national level.*

It would address the issues for both layers of volunteering – formal and informal.

Peak bodies that are innovation driven, community development oriented, inclusive of broader definitions of volunteering and oriented towards and driven by their membership.

Respondents articulated process issues such as clarity of purpose, alignment with higher order principles, implementation plans, ongoing consultative mechanisms and evaluation strategies as key success factors necessary for a National Strategy.

A successful strategy clearly identifies key areas to improve, the stakeholders involved, the environments where it will occur and who will be responsible. It needs to be achievable and realistic.

We want action, informed decisions, realistic vision and little paper shuffling.

It would be put into practice and take effect in the near future with a thorough implementation and evaluation plan.

Have an evaluation mechanism, including ongoing consultation with key stakeholders.

Needs to have clarity of objectives, not just rhetoric. Get beyond 'motherhood' statements.

Compatibility with vision of United Nations and other relevant national strategies.

Needs to have implementation strategies and monitoring abilities to move beyond in principle agreements to outcomes focused initiatives.

Non-interventionist – how each organisation operates should be left alone.

Needs to ensure it is responsive and flexible to local communities and driven by local communities.

Maintaining and understanding the differences and challenges of volunteering at rural, regional and metropolitan levels across Australia are keys to the success of a National Strategy and this was strongly emphasized in respondent feedback to the Discussion Paper. A National Strategy needs to preserve the very local nature of volunteering and recognise that a 'one size fits all approach' would not equate with success.

Regional variations dictate different strategies, needs flexibility, particularly with promotional strategies.

VRCs are great but are located in urban or big city centres. Smaller Shires are unable to maintain similar centres and find them difficult to establish.

Recognising the difference between metropolitan and regional/rural volunteering and the need for different support in each of these areas. Regional / rural council's lack of resources and funds that their metropolitan counterparts have access to is one of the contributing factors, and this in turn may make it difficult for a NVS to succeed.

Acknowledge government support for volunteering but this has not always benefited rural & remote regions/communities – blanket policies and strategies are ineffective.

Rural communities and the more isolated rural communities especially, are facing severe shortages of volunteers.

Recognise that the network is broad and includes other practitioners such as professional networks, volunteer management practitioners, trainers, researchers, students.

7 Question: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the stated recommendations?

The following four recommendations were made in the discussion paper:

1. That all levels of government make an in principle commitment to the development of a National Volunteer Strategy with a long term vision to strengthen volunteering in Australia;
2. That an appropriate level of government funding be allocated to support the development and ongoing viability of a National Volunteer Strategy;
3. That a National Volunteer Strategy be sector-driven with input and support from all stakeholders – community, government and business;

4. That the development of a National Volunteer Strategy would serve to expand volunteering infrastructure of national, state and regional organisations avoiding duplication of resources in the creation of parallel infrastructure.

The majority of respondents to the Discussion Paper agreed with all or most of the recommendations as stated.

It was suggested that in relation to Recommendation 1, that different levels of government cannot make an in principle commitment on behalf of other governments. A better articulation was offered: 'The Federal Government obtain / extract a commitment to the development of a National Strategy from all levels of government with a long to term vision to strengthen volunteering in Australia.'

There was comment about specific wording such as 'appropriate levels of funding' needing to be changed to 'agreed levels of funding' in Recommendation 2.

In Recommendation 3 it was suggested that 'sector driven' should make specific mention of what this means, such as 'everyone will be involved in the process including urban and regional groups, VRCs, volunteers, state centres etc'.

8 Conclusion

The respondents to the discussion paper have articulated strong support for the development of a National Strategy for Volunteering. Broader consultation that engages all aspects of the sector and upholds the voice of the individual volunteer is now required.

From this initial consultation a clear framework has emerged which provides the blueprint for the development of a National Strategy for Volunteering. The seven elements of this framework are illustrated in Figure 1 below.



Figure 1

Volunteering Australia is now seeking commitments from governments at all levels to:

- Support the development of a National Strategy for Volunteering
- Provide adequate funding for a sector driven project to develop detailed strategies to address the seven framework elements
- Provide adequate funding to resource implementation of the strategies developed through this process.