

Analysis of the 2024-25 Federal Budget Measures

The Federal Budget includes a number of measures that will support volunteers and the volunteering ecosystem, including continued core funding from the Department of Social Services for the 'Volunteering and Community Connectedness' stream. However, in our Budget response, Volunteering Australia is emphasising that volunteers are central to key government priorities identified in the Budget across portfolios, including the environment, aged care, disability, domestic and gender-based violence, and cost-of-living. While volunteering is mentioned throughout the Budget, it lacks a strategic, whole-of-government approach to resourcing and supporting volunteering in Australia. More strategic support for a thriving volunteering ecosystem is essential to addressing these priorities.

Highlights

- Funding for the Volunteering and Community Connectedness stream (which includes the Volunteer Management Activity and Volunteer Grants) is continuing into the forward estimates.
- The Budget includes funding to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) to deliver an enhanced annual General Social Survey, which has previously collected key national data on volunteering. There is also funding for other data initiatives that include volunteers, such as the Aged Care Provider Workforce Survey.
- The centrepiece of the Budget was a range of cost-of-living measures and a new Future Made in Australia package.
- The Government is providing \$18.6 million over five years from 2023–24 and \$3.1 million per year ongoing to support Carer Payment recipients by changing the 25 hour per week participation limit rules from 20 March 2025. Travel time, study, and volunteering activities will also be excluded from the limit, and the use of single temporary cessation of care days will be allowed, rather than the current seven day minimum.
- The Budget includes \$138 million in funding for emergency and food relief and financial support services, many of which rely on volunteers. It is not clear whether this is included in, or in addition to, the funding boost delivered in February 2024.
- No further funding is specified for the finalisation and implementation of the National Strategy for the Care and Support Economy.
- The Government is committing \$1.0 million in 2025–26 to extend the Community Refugee Integration and Settlement Pilot to 30 June 2026, to continue settlement services provided by community volunteers.
- Other key government priorities, such as the Independent Review into the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS Review) and the Government's response to the House of Representatives Select Committee on Workforce Australia Employment Services, are referenced in the Budget. However, it is not yet clear what funding will be allocated to these larger reform processes or how they will consider volunteering.
- \$227.6 million has been allocated for a new specialised disability employment program to support approximately 270,000 Australians with disability to prepare for and find work.
- A pledge of \$11.6 million over two years was made towards creating a "foundational supports strategy" in the 2023-24 mid-year budget update. Volunteering Australia is advocating for this work to consider the critical role of volunteers in foundational support activities across Australia.

The Treasurer's speech

The Treasurer's speech focused on cost-of-living help and the Future Made in Australia package, while emphasising the need for "responsible economic management".

The Treasurer identified the following key budget initiatives:

- "Helping with the cost of living.
- Building more homes for Australians.
- Investing in a Future Made in Australia – and the skills and universities we'll need, to make it a reality.
- Strengthening Medicare and the care economy.
- And responsible economic management, which is set to produce another surplus and help fight inflation."

Volunteering and Community Connectedness

The 'Volunteering and Community Connectedness' funding stream contains funding for various programs including the Volunteer Management Activity and Volunteer Grants. Allocated funds for Volunteering and Community Connectedness are: \$100,079,000 (2023-24 Estimated actual), \$77,188,000 (2024-25), \$65,736,000 (2025-26), \$66,517,000, (2026-27), \$66,281,000 (2027-28).

Cost-of-living relief

The Budget includes a significant focus on cost-of-living through a package of measures, which include:

- Tax cuts for all Australian taxpayers, with an average tax cut of \$1,888.
- \$3.5 billion in energy bill relief for all Australian households and one million small businesses.
- \$1.9 billion to increase Commonwealth Rent Assistance by a further 10 per cent.

It also includes a \$138 million to boost funding for emergency and food relief and financial support services, many of which involve volunteers.

Investing in a future made in Australia

The 2024-25 Budget will invest \$22.7 billion over a decade to "help Australia succeed and remain an indispensable part of the global economy as the world undergoes the biggest transformation since the industrial revolution". This plan aims to help Australia build a stronger, more diversified, and more resilient economy powered by clean energy, to create more secure, well-paid jobs, and encourage and facilitate the private sector investment required to make the most of this opportunity.

This includes a focus on:

- Attracting investment in key industries and making Australia a renewable energy superpower
- Value adding to our resources and strengthening economic security
- Investing in skills for priority industries and higher education
- Strengthening our digital, science and innovation capabilities
- Supporting small business and our regions

Entrenched disadvantage

The Government will provide \$4.7 million over three years from 2024–25 (and an additional \$0.8 million from 2028–29 to 2033–34) to establish, manage, and evaluate an ‘Outcomes Fund’. The fund will focus on outcomes for families and children to prevent cycles of intergenerational and community disadvantage, barriers to employment and inclusive employment models, and housing needs of vulnerable and homeless Australians and moving beyond short-term crisis care.

This measure builds on the 2023–24 Budget measure titled *Targeting Entrenched Community Disadvantage*, which provided \$199.8 million over 6 years from 2023–24 to target entrenched community disadvantage, including through “place-based approaches, engaging with philanthropy and promoting social impact investment”.

Strengthening Medicare and the care economy

The Government announced a number of measures aimed at strengthening Medicare and the care economy. These include:

- \$2.8 billion to strengthen Medicare and boost the health system.
- \$3.4 billion for new and amended listings on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme.
- \$825.7 million to continue to test for and vaccinate against COVID-19.
- \$888.1 million on mental health over 8 years.
- \$2.2 billion to improve aged care.
- \$468.7 million to support people with disability and get the NDIS “back on track”.
- \$1.8 billion to support additional frontline staff at Services Australia.
- \$630.3 million to sustain, secure, and enhance the myGov system.
- \$314.1 million to enhance safety and security at Services Australia.
- Funding set aside towards increased aged care and early childhood education and care wages.

The new rights-based Aged Care Act is a reform that aims to put older people at the centre of the aged care system and ensure those who access Government-funded aged care services are treated with respect and have the quality of life they deserve. It will also support the Government’s response to the Aged Care Taskforce. Consultation is continuing on the details of the Act and the Taskforce response.

No further funding is specified for the finalisation and implementation of the National Strategy for the Care and Support Economy.

People with disability, the NDIS, and the disability workforce

The Government is investing \$468.7 million in the NDIS. This includes:

- \$129.8 million over two years from 2023–24 for design and consultation work to respond to the findings of the NDIS Review.
- \$227.6 million to be invested in a new specialised disability employment program to replace the existing Disability Employment Services program by 1 July 2025. This includes investing in a modern digital platform to deliver better supports to providers and participants. These reforms aim to support more people with disability into sustainable work, through a program with greater flexibility, increased individual supports, and better service quality.

- A pledge of \$11.6 million over two years was made towards creating a "foundational supports strategy" in the 2023-24 mid-year budget update. The Government says national cabinet will consider that strategy later this year, with an investment in the supports themselves "to be detailed in future economic updates."¹ Volunteering Australia is advocating for this work to consider the critical role of volunteers in foundational support activities across Australia.

No further funding was specified to support the Government's commitment to develop a comprehensive NDIS workforce strategy to ensure NDIS participants can access the supports they need, included in the 2023-24 Budget.

Mental health

The Government is investing \$361 million to strengthen the mental health system. This includes:

- \$163.9 million to establish a nationwide low intensity mental health service that can be accessed free of charge without the need for referral.
- \$71.7 million for Primary Health Networks to commission the services of mental health nurses, counsellors, social workers, and others, to provide ongoing and wraparound care to people with complex needs, in between their GP and specialist appointments.
- \$7.1 million will be provided to address workforce capacity and composition by undertaking a National Census of the lived experience (peer) workforce, providing one off seed funding to establish a national professional association for peer workers, and exploring a new psychology assistant role.
- \$27.6 million will upgrade and establish a network of 61 Medicare Mental Health Centres, through a clinical upgrade to the established Head to Health network to ensure that every centre can provide free access to a psychologist and psychiatrist.
- \$29.7 million to fund the headspace Early Career Program and to commission and co-design fit-for-purpose models of care for mental health services for young Australians.
- \$21.0 million for Primary Health Networks to continue the Targeted Regional Initiative for Suicide Prevention.
- \$10.0 million to the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation to boost mental health supports for First Nations People.
- \$3.0 million to the MATES suicide prevention program for Fly-in-Fly out and Drive-in- Drive out workers.

Emergency and disaster response

The Government has committed to providing the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) with ongoing sustainable funding to enable the Agency to continue supporting Australian communities, including through: supporting national approaches to coordination, resource sharing, and best practice to equip states and territories and other sectors to prevent, respond to, and recover from significant disasters.

¹ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-05-15/federal-budget-2024-ndis-disability-support/103846506>

The Government, through NEMA, committed to work with the National Aerial Firefighting Centre to shape a future fleet of aircraft that can be used across the country. Establishing a sovereign aerial capability was a key recommendation in the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements and will aim to ease the pressure on Australian Defence Force personnel and aerial assets. This funding includes:

- \$1 billion over five years from 2023/24 through the Disaster Ready Fund for projects that manage the physical and social impacts of climate change-driven disasters and other natural hazards. In 2023-24, 187 projects were funded and Round 2 projects are due to be announced soon.
- \$114.8m over 5 years through the Financial Wellbeing and Capability funding stream, to be split across 196 Commonwealth-funded Emergency Relief providers. This includes a large number of volunteer involving organisations.

Reform of the not-for-profit sector

The Department of Social Services recently announced the development of a community sector partnership framework to underpin how the Government and the community sector can work together to support Australians in need, as part of the *stronger and more diverse and independent community sector* election commitment.

The Government will provide \$2.4 million over two years from 2024-25 for the Department of Social Services to develop a community sector partnership framework, in consultation with the Community Services Advisory Group (CSAG).

Migration

The Government is committing \$1.0 million in 2025–26 to extend the Community Refugee Integration and Settlement Pilot to 30 June 2026, to continue settlement services provided by community volunteers.

Skills and employment

The Government is taking incremental steps in the 2024–25 Budget towards larger scale reform to the employment services system. These measures are presented as an initial response to the immediate issues identified through the House of Representatives Select Committee on Workforce Australia Employment Services. The Government states that further reform will be necessary to achieve its vision and has committed to working closely with stakeholders and the broader community to improve employment services in the longer term.

The Government will continue to progress scoping of a National Skills Passport, announced as part of the 2023 Employment White Paper and supported by the Australian Universities Accord. While the development of a national *volunteer* passport, recommended by Volunteering Australia and the State and Territory Volunteering Peak Bodies, is not funded in the Budget, members of the volunteering ecosystem have been engaged in scoping of the National Skills Passport. Whether this project includes volunteers, and how it would interface with a potential national volunteer passport, must be considered further as scoping work continues.

Jobs and Skills Australia will receive a further \$9.5 million in this Budget. 10 Jobs and Skills Councils have been established, with the aim to bring together businesses, unions, and training providers to supply government with the current and future skills needs specific to their respective sectors. Many

of the Jobs and Skills councils, such as HumanAbility, cover sectors that engage a significant number of volunteers and consider volunteers in their work.

The Budget invests in employment services initiatives that align with the employment services reform directions outlined in the Employment White Paper. This includes:

- Paid Employment Pathways Package will invest \$54 million to trial two new work programs:
 - o *Real Jobs, Real Wages* aims to support jobseekers experiencing long-term unemployment to build their capabilities by providing a tapered subsidy to employers who can provide secure and supportive job opportunities.
 - o *WorkFoundations* aims to support social enterprises and businesses who can provide tailored paid job placements for jobseekers facing high barriers to employment.
- \$68.6 million for the Digital Contact Centre to provide better support for people using Workforce Australia Online.
- Strengthening the complaints mechanism for people using employment services, and introducing further safeguards in relation to payment suspensions and penalties.
- Adjustments to compliance settings to give people in receipt of certain income support payments greater opportunity to familiarise themselves with their requirements before a payment suspension can be applied.
 - o From March 2025, compliance measures will not be applied the first time a person has not met a mutual obligation requirement.
 - o In addition, from March 2025, people who are working 30 hours or more per fortnight will not have their payment suspended for failing to attend an appointment at an employment services provider. This will ensure that if they are engaged in paid work at the same time as an appointment is scheduled with their employment services provider they will not receive a payment suspension for not attending the appointment.
- Changes to mutual obligations rules with the aim to better recognise individuals' circumstances.
- \$10.9 million for improvements to the Workforce Australia IT system with the aim to make it easier for people to use and to reduce administrative burden.
- \$76.2 million to replace the Time to Work Employment Service with the aim to improve the transition from prison to work.

More significant reform, including potential changes to how volunteering is considered in the Workforce Australia system and how it relates to mutual obligations for people receiving certain income support payments, is not referenced in this Budget.

The environment and climate change

This Budget provides significant environmental and climate change measures to support better legal and regulatory systems, industry and energy transition, nature positive policies, expanded research programs and further support for rehabilitation and threatened species programs. However, there has been criticism that the measures do not go far enough, particularly on climate change and biodiversity protection and restoration. The Government is investing \$307 million in nature positive improvements through laws and institutions, including:

- \$121 million for Australia's first national independent Environment Protection Agency with strong new powers and penalties to protect nature.

- \$51.5 million for more accountability and transparency with a new body called Environment Information Australia.
- \$134.2 million to strengthen and streamline environmental approval decisions on priority projects, including renewables and critical minerals projects:
 - \$19.9 million to process assessments for priority renewable energy related projects.
 - \$17.7 million to reduce the backlog and support administration of complex applications under the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Protection Act, and progress the reform of Australia’s cultural heritage laws.
 - \$7 million for more support for staff to assess project proposals from business, and more tailored support to help business more effectively comply with environment law.
 - \$65.1 million for extra research into threatened species.
 - \$24.5 million to improve planning – working with state and territory governments – in seven priority regions.
- \$371.1 million over nine years from 2024-25 to rebuild and upgrade our research station on World Heritage listed Macquarie Island.
- Expansion of the Antarctic science program. This includes an additional \$17.6 million over two years to enable the Nuyina, Australia’s icebreaking research vessel, to undertake more expeditions for scientific research, including its first dedicated marine science voyage to the Denman Glacier. If this glacier melts, sea levels could rise by 1.5 metres.
- Establishing the world’s first nature repair market – driving business and philanthropic investment in nature repair and threatened species protection. The Budget commits \$35.6 million over two years from 2024-25 to continue developing the processes and systems needed to administer the scheme.
- \$23 million in 2024-25 to develop a new national circular economy framework.

The measure proposed by Volunteering Australia and the State and Territory Volunteering Peak Bodies, to fund the foundational aspects of a national environmental and climate change volunteering capacity building program, has not yet been funded. The Budget does allow for further expansion of the Nature Positive approach to economics and environmental protection, including a major summit, and for continued work on an Australia-Pacific hosted COP31.

First Nations

The Remote Jobs and Economic Development Program is due to start in the second half of 2024, and aims to support self-determination through economic opportunity and community development. The \$777.4 million program aims to be implemented in partnership with First Nations people, build skills and experience, and deliver services that communities want.

The Government will invest \$12.8 million in suicide prevention, including the Indigenous Youth Connection Culture program (Suicide Prevention) for 12 communities.

The Government will provide \$74.8 million over four years to develop a new National First Nations Education Policy, extend a number of First Nations education programs, and provide partnership funding to the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Corporation and SNAICC – National Voice for our Children.

The Government continues work to deliver the plan for A Better, Safer Future for Central Australia, which was included in the 2023-24 Budget. In addition to the \$250 million Plan, the Government will

increase its support by investing \$18 million for a capital works fund to build new and improve existing boarding facilities in Central Australia for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from remote Northern Territory communities.

Sport

The Government will provide \$132.7 million over three years from 2024–25 to the Australian Sports Commission and the Department of Health and Aged Care to continue Commonwealth sport participation and high performance programs, as well as provide additional funding to support preparation for and delivery of key international events. Funding includes:

- \$62.9 million over two years from 2024–25 towards the Sporting Schools Program to help students to build the confidence and capability to be active for life.
- \$34.2 million over three years from 2024–25 towards the Water and Snow Safety Program to reduce water and snow-related injuries and deaths through research, vocational education, and training.
- \$17.0 million over two years from 2024–25 towards the Local Sporting Champions and Local Para Champions programs to support junior competitors aged 12-24, coaches, and officials to participate in state, national, or international championships, including athletes with disability.
- \$10.5 million over two years from 2024–25 towards the Participation Grants program to implement priority activities under the Play Well strategy and to build sector capability to support sports participation.
- \$6.8 million over two years from 2024–25 towards the Play Well priority and capability sector activities to ensure individuals of all ages, backgrounds, genders, and abilities can access the benefits of sport.

A key outcome of this funding is to increase participation in sport, which the Australian Sports Commission defines as ‘having participated/played and/or been involved in a non-playing role (such as coaching, officiating, volunteering, etc.) at least once in the last 12 months.’ Sport is the sector with the largest number of volunteers, with over 1.6 million people volunteering for sport and recreation organisations in 2022.

Early childhood education and care

The Government has committed to provide funding towards a wage increase for the early childhood education and care workforce. Details will be finalised following consideration of relevant Fair Work Commission processes.

The Government will invest \$30 million over two years from 2024-25 in IT and payment services to deliver on this commitment. The Government is building on its investment in Cheaper Child Care by investing:

- An additional \$84.1 million in resources to reinforce and safeguard the Child Care Subsidy system and protect against fraud and non-compliance.
- A further \$98.4 million for the Inclusion Support Program (ISP) to help child care services increase their capacity to support inclusion of children with additional needs.

The Government has indicated it will consider the recommendations of the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission’s report into the costs of early childhood education and care alongside

the Productivity Commission's inquiry which is due by 30 June 2024. The Government also stated it will continue to implement initiatives included in its youth strategy, *Engage! A strategy to include young people in the decisions we make*.

Veterans' affairs

The Government is investing an additional \$477 million to increase support to the more than 340,000 veterans and dependents accessing services through the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA). The Government is progressing its commitment to implement and deliver simplified and harmonised veteran compensation legislation, which was the first recommendation of the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide.

Funding for 'carer and volunteer support' is continued in the forward estimates.

The arts

The Government will provide \$216.6 million over four years from 2024–25 (and \$59.9 million per year ongoing) to further support Australia's arts, entertainment, and cultural sector under the *National Cultural Policy – Revive*.

Data

The Government is committing \$57.9 million over six years from 2023-24 to continue to modernise legacy systems and operations for the Labour Force survey and Business Characteristics dataset, and to deliver an enhanced annual General Social Survey to support *Measuring What Matters*.

The General Social Survey was last enumerated in 2020, and was the most reliable official source of national data on volunteering for a number of key figures, including rates of formal and informal volunteering. More comprehensive and frequent data on volunteering is vital to support the implementation of the National Strategy for Volunteering (2023-2033).

Gender

The Budget invests \$925.2 million over five years from 2023–24 to permanently establish the Leaving Violence Program (LVP). This investment aims to help people experiencing intimate partner violence to leave those relationships, providing those eligible with access to up to \$5,000 in financial support along with referral services, risk assessments, and safety planning. The Government is also committing:

- \$44.1 million in 2024–25 to support the National Legal Assistance Partnership and Family Violence Prevention Legal Services, including one-year indexation supplementation to the funding for Legal Aid Commissions, Community Legal Centres, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services, and additional funding to address community legal sector pay disparity.
- \$19.4 million over two years to establish a National Student Ombudsman to help to eradicate gender-based violence from universities.
- \$18.7 million over four years to establish a National Higher Education Code to Prevent and Respond to Gender-Based Violence.
- \$13.1 million in targeted investments to support refugee and migrant women, including funding for the Settlement Engagement and Transition Support program and support for visa holders experiencing domestic and family violence.

- \$11.7 million over two years to extend the First Nations Family Dispute Resolution pilot to support culturally safe family dispute resolution services.
- \$6.5 million in 2024-25 for the Age Assurance Pilot to Protect Children from Harmful Online Content.

The Budget invests \$427.4 million over four years to provide financial support to students on mandatory nursing (including midwifery), social work, and teaching placements. This aims to support these majority female student cohorts at the same time as helping to address workforce shortages in key industries.

The Government is also providing \$18.6 million over five years from 2023–24 and \$3.1 million per year ongoing to support Carer Payment recipients by changing the 25 hour per week participation limit rules from 20 March 2025. Travel time, study, and *volunteering activities will also be excluded from the limit*, and the use of single temporary cessation of care days will be allowed, rather than the current seven day minimum.

The Budget includes \$1.1 billion over four years to pay superannuation on Government-funded Paid Parental Leave for parents of babies born or adopted on or after 1 July 2025.

In addition, the Government is implementing a new voluntary pre-employment service for disadvantaged parents of children under six years of age from 1 November 2024, following the abolition of ParentsNext.

Under “Improving women’s and girls’ representation and participation in sport,” the Women’s Budget Statement notes that women and girls still face significant challenges in playing and volunteering in sport that stem from socio-cultural factors such as caring responsibilities, experiences of harassment, and lack of role models.