



28 February 2025

Volunteering in Queensland

Discussion Paper

WESTERN DOWNS REGIONAL

Western Downs Regional Council
PO Box 551
Dalby, Queensland
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28 February 2025

To Whom It May Concern

RE: Volunteering In Queensland

Western Downs Region Council (Council) is a local government Council in Queensland, Australia. The Council manages an area of 37,937 square kilometres with a population of approximately 35,000. Council is at the forefront of the changing world and works to support our growing region, with our Corporate Plan underpinned by progress, people, place, and performance.

Thank you for the Invitation to share our insights into volunteering and the impact to community. Western Downs Regional Council is a strong advocate for volunteerism and is proud of the volunteering culture present within the community.

Council offers a variety of volunteering opportunities across multiple locations and values the significant contribution made by community members who volunteer their time to support several diverse Council programs and services. Council aspires to make the volunteer experience an enjoyable and rewarding one and to encourage personal and professional growth for volunteers. In addition, Council also recognises that it is important for members of the community to have the opportunity to participate in other community organisations and develop their skills, interests and expertise.

We support the Local Government, Small Business and Customer Service Committees inquiry, please find enclosed a copy of the Council's submission.

For any further information or questions, please contact Lidewij Koene-Sloss, Economic Development Manager via email lidewij.koene-sloss@wdrc.qld.gov.au or phone (07) 4679 4526.

Yours Sincerely,

Jodie Taylor
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER

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About the Western Downs Regional Council

The Western Downs is located on the Darling Downs, approximately 207 kilometres north-west of Brisbane and 83 kilometres north-west of Toowoomba. The region encompasses the centres of Dalby, Chinchilla, Jandowae, Miles, Tara and Wandoan, covering nearly 38,000 square kilometres. Combining country lifestyle with modern living, excellent retail offerings and conveniences, the area is home to a population just under 34,000 and has a large working age population of 60.9% aged 15-64 years.

Built on agriculture and thriving in intensive agriculture, energy and manufacturing industries, Western Downs Regional Council is focused on making our region a great place to live, work, visit and invest and to ensure our future generation can do what they love whilst enjoying a regional lifestyle and continue the strong economic growth of the region.

Council manages Australia's second largest road network of over 10,000 km with highways leading into the region including the Bunya, Leichhardt, Moonie and Warrego Highways. Located in the heart of the resource rich Surat Basin, the Western Downs has a diversified energy portfolio with five pillars of energy generation: Coal, Gas, Solar, Wind and soon Hydrogen cementing our reputation as the Energy Capital of Queensland. This contributes to the region's strong economic growth, investment, and consistently high employment with a GRP of \$5.9 billion and \$7.5 billion in the development pipeline.

The Western Downs Region is a place where you can indulge in the quiet calm of country living and immerse yourself in the natural splendour of a country landscape, however you decide to spend your time in the Western Downs, one thing is for sure - it's the people that make it.

Executive Summary

The Western Downs Regional Council (Council) deeply values the significant contributions made by community members who volunteer their time to support various Council programs and services. Recognising the importance of community participation, Council aims to make the volunteer experience both enjoyable and rewarding, fostering personal and professional growth. A variety of volunteering opportunities are offered across multiple locations.

Volunteering is a crucial component of community development, with the Western Downs boasting a higher participation rate (19.5%) compared to the national average (14.1%).¹ Volunteers contribute significantly to libraries, galleries, visitor information centres, animal centres, and parks and gardens, with 164 active Council volunteers dedicating thousands of hours annually.

In addition to this, there is a significant number of volunteers that support other important community organisations and services. Our Western Downs 'brand' is *It's the people that make it*, and this reflects the considerable value that volunteers provide to our communities.

We know that volunteers are motivated by the desire to give back to their community, share skills, and follow recommendations from friends. Challenges such as administrative burdens and conflicting commitments for younger people need addressing as numerous community organisations report a reduction in volunteers, further exacerbated by an ageing group of volunteers. As an example, 73% of Council volunteers is over 66 years of age.

A study titled "*Factors Influencing Older Adults' Decisions to Volunteer*" highlights that whilst Australia has an ageing population, 75% of retired adults do not engage in volunteering, due to health limitations, economic hardship and social isolation. Despite these challenges, volunteering has been shown to offer significant benefits to older adults and can positively enhance psychological well-being and provide a sense of purpose.²

Given Queensland's and Western Downs' significant history of environmental disasters, increasing emergency response volunteering in disaster response and community recovery efforts needs to be incorporated. In addition to this, insights should be incorporated from academic research, national reports, and other states' experiences in order to provide valuable perspectives for enhancing the volunteering sector in Queensland.

In conclusion, the Western Downs Regional Council acknowledges the invaluable contributions of volunteers and aims to create a supportive and enriching environment for all community members to participate and thrive in volunteering activities. By addressing current barriers and leveraging opportunities, Council seeks to enhance the overall volunteering experience and community well-being.

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, Census of Population and Housing 2021

² Volunteering Australia, Factors influencing older adults' decisions to volunteer, July 2023, https://volunteeringstrategy.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/VRP_Factors-influencing-older-adults-decisions-to-volunteer.pdf?

Recommendations

Council wishes to provide the following recommendations in response to Volunteering in Queensland

- **Recommendation 1:** Opportunities for improvement include removing cost barriers, simplifying administrative processes, and providing targeted support for priority groups.
- **Recommendation 2:** Increasing emergency response volunteering involves optimising engagement, support, reduction of onboarding processes and integration of volunteers in disaster response and community recovery efforts.
- **Recommendation 3:** Excessive legislative and regulatory burdens, including WHS, insurance, and data protection requirements, create significant administrative challenges. These burdens can deter both volunteers and organisations.
- **Recommendation 4:** Focus should be on intentional programs to build connections between young people and community. This can enhance intergenerational connections and create a sense of belonging and responsibility among young people and the clubs/organisations they may come to serve.

These recommendations aim to improve the overall volunteering experience, address current barriers, and foster a more inclusive and supportive environment for volunteers across Queensland.

Submission

1. The current state of volunteering in Queensland and the value it contributes, including benefits to volunteers, organisations, communities and the State;

Volunteering in Queensland, particularly in areas like Western Downs, plays a significant role in community development and well-being with the region boasting a higher participation rate at 19.5% compared to the national average of 14.1%.

There are 164 active Council volunteers in various sectors such as libraries, galleries, visitor information centres, animal centres, and parks and recreation. In the 2023/24 period, volunteers contributed 9,722 hours, and this is set to be exceeded in the current financial year, with 6,028 hours already contributed.

Volunteering provides personal satisfaction, skill development and social connections. It also helps volunteers feel a sense of purpose and accomplishment. Council and community benefits from the diverse skills and perspectives provided by volunteers. This includes improved community services, enhanced cultural and recreational activities, and stronger social cohesion.

Volunteering contributes to the overall economic and social wellbeing, addressing social issues, supports disaster response and recovery, and fosters a culture of civic engagement.

Volunteering is a vital part of the Western Downs social fabric, and the contributions of volunteers are invaluable to the state's progress and well-being.

2. The views of volunteers, prospective volunteers and the volunteering sector on the current barriers to volunteering, including excessive legislative and regulatory burdens and other restrictions adversely limiting active volunteers;

Council and volunteers are impacted from extensive regulations and requirements, such as WHS (Work Health and Safety), insurance, data protection, and reporting, creating significant administrative burdens. While these measures are intended to protect volunteers and Council, they can also be overwhelming and time-consuming.

Maintaining a comprehensive volunteer program involves a lot of paperwork and administrative tasks, which can be a barrier to growth and future planning. These administrative aspects of volunteering can impact future planning and the ability to recruit and support new volunteers. Council is in a position to have staff dedicated to administering a volunteer program to ensure compliance, however this burden on our volunteer community organisations is excessive and creates a barrier for volunteer participation.

The volunteer base tends to be skewed towards older age groups, with 73% of Council volunteers being over 66 years old and only 4% being 25 years or younger. This age distribution can impact the sustainability and diversity of volunteer programs. This older demographic is motivated to volunteer for the social aspect or to give back to the community. Over regulation is seen as intrusive and unnecessary by the volunteers who just want to offer time to help others.

3. The current experiences, motivations and challenges for volunteers and volunteer-involving organisations and their recommendations for addressing challenges and improving the volunteering experience.

An annual survey of Council volunteers provides insight into people's motivation for volunteering. These include:

- Social interaction with others
- Helping the community
- Sharing knowledge to help others

These motivations are important to understand to ensure that an appropriate recognition program is implemented. 96% of current Council volunteers surveyed expressed that they feel appreciated for the work they currently undertake as a Council volunteer. Council run a multi-faceted recognition program that offers a sense of reward and achievement which requires dedicated staff time and administrative budget and support.

Council uses a simple, user-friendly app and online platform to streamline volunteer recruitment, training, and deployment, making it easier for people to sign up, stay engaged, and access information when they need it. Real-time updates, interactive training modules, as well as digital rostering can be used to improve coordination, making sure volunteers feel connected and prepared when called upon. Again, this takes significant resources to administer and would be prohibitive for most volunteer based organisations. Using this digitised model for emergency services volunteers needs to be explored to improve engagement and recruitment.

4. The unique challenges experienced by people from diverse backgrounds, genders, age groups, abilities and locations, and opportunities to improve volunteering participation, accessibility and experience for these groups;

We experience a lack of young volunteer engagement, most of which is contributed by conflicting commitments such as sport and recreation, study, part time work and home duties. Considerations for improving youth volunteer engagement include:

- Incentives for students who do volunteering outside of school hours.
- Consider curriculum in high schools that require some time in community service
- Incentives for young people whilst studying to serve with a community organisation

Being a local government in a rural area, transport to and from volunteering opportunities, including the cost of such, is also considered a barrier for some.

There is a need to improve processes and opportunities and be more aware of diverse needs, to ensure volunteering is truly inclusive. Reaching out to community leaders to understand how best to engage their networks will ensure an inclusive model is developed. There's also an opportunity to work more closely with First Nations communities - not just inviting participation, but genuinely engaging with, understanding, and integrating their knowledge, strengths, while valuing their leadership qualities. Creating spaces where different cultural perspectives are valued and embedded in our approach will only strengthen our ability to respond effectively as a community.

5. The extent, effectiveness and efficiency of current government support at all levels for the volunteering sector in Queensland and sustainable opportunities for improvement;

Western Downs Regional Council are members of Volunteering Queensland and utilise the resources provided by the organisation. Further government support to empower Volunteering Queensland to support the sector, will benefit all volunteers and volunteer involving organisations. This could include additional funding, resources, and strategic guidance.

The removal of cost barriers associated with volunteer checks (such as criminal history checks) to onboard volunteers is a priority. Removing or subsidising these costs could streamline the process and remove one barrier to volunteering.

Targeted Support for Priority Groups: Offering targeted support for groups such as people with disabilities, First Nations people, and newly arrived migrants can help overcome specific barriers they face.

6. Opportunities for the Queensland Government to leverage all portfolios to support growth in volunteering across Queensland, including through hosting the Brisbane 2032 Olympic and Paralympic Games;

The Games can raise awareness about the importance of volunteering, and create thousands of opportunities, including event management, hospitality, and community engagement. This influx of roles can help volunteers gain valuable experience and skills.

Volunteers will have the chance to develop new skills and enhance existing ones, which can be beneficial for their personal and professional growth. Ideally the Games will foster a sense of community and collaboration, encouraging more people to get involved in volunteering and supporting local initiatives.

The Games can leave a legacy of improved infrastructure and community facilities, benefiting volunteers and the wider community in the long term.

By leveraging the Brisbane 2032 Olympic and Paralympic Games, the Queensland Government can create a more vibrant and supportive environment for volunteers, including those in the Western Downs.

7. Opportunities to increase emergency response volunteering in Queensland, including how to optimise the engagement, support and integration of volunteers assisting with natural disasters and community recovery;

To boost emergency response volunteering in Queensland, it is recommended to think beyond traditional recruitment methods and look for fresh, engaging opportunities. A promising avenue is appealing to our youth, but not just through token programs or surface-level involvement. Council wishes to stress the need to offer young people meaningful, valuable positions where their time and contributions genuinely matter. Partnering with institutions with their focus on young people, (schools, sporting clubs, etc) to create pathways into real, hands-on roles - like assisting with communications during response efforts, supporting community recovery initiatives or contributing fresh perspectives to preparedness planning - can help young people feel heard and justified in giving their time. When youth are trusted with responsibility, and their ideas are taken seriously, they're more likely to stay involved and encourage their peers to do the same.

Collaborating with local businesses to promote employer supported volunteering, paid volunteer leave or team-based volunteering days, we can tap into skilled, community-minded professionals who might not otherwise get involved. Consideration should be given to micro volunteering opportunities for specific tasks (like post-storm damage works) making it easier for busy people to lend a hand when it matters most. We are lucky here in the Western Downs, in that we have a great deal of organisations who currently offer services like this - what we want to achieve however, is a sustainable way of having our other local businesses see the benefit in providing these types of services to their community, and how we as government can support them in that process.

Building strong, collaborative relationships between volunteers, local authorities, and community organisations will help set the tone for a successful volunteering - providing understanding and context beforehand will lay the groundwork for a clear and coordinated effort; and making this known in an ongoing and consistently nurtured way, will only prove to the people we are asking to contribute, that their time is valuable and welcome and that their efforts aren't wasted.

Ongoing support is also paramount, especially when it comes to mental health resources and peer connections to help volunteers manage the emotional demands of disaster response.

8. First Nations peoples volunteering, including in remote and discrete communities, and the role of First Nations volunteering in Closing the Gap; and

Council's recruitment targets all members of the community, not specifically first nations or multicultural demographics.

9. Any other relevant matters, including academic and other diverse sources, and any relevant reports and reviews at the national level and across other states and territories.

Council is a member of Volunteering Queensland and value their support and insights and encourage ongoing support for this organisation for the betterment of all volunteer organisations.

Conclusion

The Western Downs Regional Council recognises the invaluable contributions of community members who volunteer their time and efforts to support diverse Council programs and services. To enhance the volunteering experience and address current barriers, the Council proposes several key recommendations. These include optimising government support by removing cost barriers and simplifying administrative processes and specifically focusing on increasing emergency response volunteering to better integrate volunteers in disaster response and community recovery efforts.

Moreover, the Council emphasises the need to implement intentional programs that build connections between young people and community. Such initiatives can enhance intergenerational connections, create a sense of belonging, and encourage responsibility among young people. Considerations for these programs include offering incentives for students who volunteer outside school hours, integrating community service into school curricula, providing incentives for young people during their gap years, and addressing transport barriers in rural areas.

These recommendations aim to create a more inclusive and supportive environment for volunteers across Queensland, ultimately contributing to the overall well-being and resilience of the community.

Contact Details

Please do not hesitate to contact Lidewij Koene-Sloss, Economic Development Manager via email via email lidewij.koene-sloss@wdrc.qld.gov.au or phone (07) 4679 4526 should you wish to discuss any aspect of this submission.