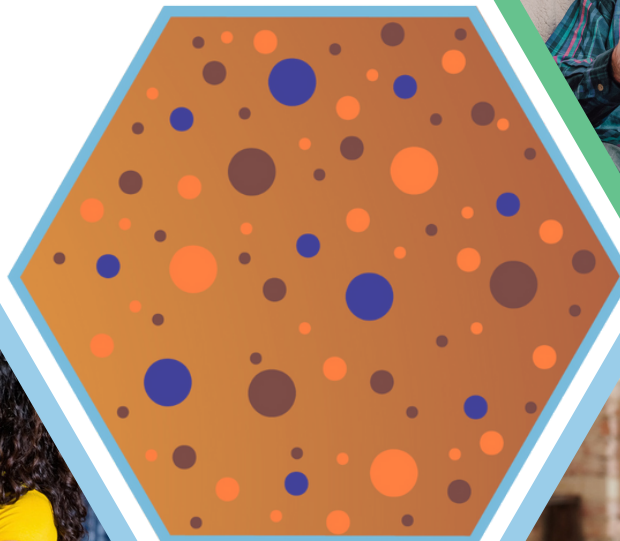


# CANBERRA'S VOLUNTEERING LANDSCAPE

## 2021-2023

### LISTENING REPORT



# VOLUNTEERINGACT

## Foreword



### **Jean Giese**

Chief Executive Officer  
**VolunteeringACT**

Canberra's diverse network of volunteers contribute each day to strengthening the fabric of our community, giving their time to help or empower others through a range of initiatives. Volunteers share their knowledge and skills for no financial reward and the impact they have is all around us every day - helping to run our region's many sports clubs, responding in emergencies, supporting people with the life challenges they face, serving on community organisation committees and boards, supporting educational engagement and achievements, and guiding visitors to get the best out of our national and local attractions.

Volunteering strengthens social capital in Canberra – creating bonds between people, building bridges across diverse communities, and linking us to people and opportunities that we would not have without it. Volunteering underpins and enhances the lives of Canberrans in so many ways, including a huge contribution and flow on effect within the local economy.



To date, VolunteeringACT has made some great progress in establishing effective partnerships - including working closely with ACT Government- to gather intelligence, understand the core issues facing the volunteering sector, and identify key opportunities for action to address the needs of volunteers, and provide effective support to our region's volunteer-involving organisations. This Listening Report articulates the key priorities, risks, and challenges for volunteers and the organisations supporting them during the past two years and is already guiding work within government and community organisations as we collectively maintain our momentum in strengthening the ACT Volunteering Sector.

The insights in this Listening Report – as well as emerging trends in respect to the impact of contemporary cost of living issues on the volunteering sector – will continue to guide our work, including formulating our local response to the objectives and actions recommended in the National Strategy for Volunteering, released in February 2023. Our aim is to support efforts to develop an ACT Volunteering Strategy for the Territory which is informed by community expertise and brings together government and non-government resources to ensure timely investment and effective implementation over the next few years.

**Jean Giese**  
Chief Executive Officer  
**VolunteeringACT**  
May 2023



# MINISTER'S

## Foreword



### **Emma Davidson MLA**

ACT Assistant Minister for Families and Community Services

Canberrans are no strangers to volunteering, and our community's core value of supporting each other during the toughest of times, helps us continue to build a strong, resilient, and connected community. Our city's diverse network of volunteers strengthens the fabric of our community. Volunteers give so generously their time to help or empower others through a raft of initiatives – from organising local sports and cultural activities, to protecting and preserving our natural heritage.

Simply put, volunteering makes our city a fairer and more sustainable place in which to live, increases inclusivity for all, enables participation and connection, and contributes significantly to our economy through delivery of services and support. Volunteers truly are the backbone of our community.

Canberra's volunteering sector was, and continues to be, significantly impacted by the global COVID-19 pandemic. Ordinarily, the Territory has the highest rate of formal volunteering in the country at more than 30 per cent of the population. While the pandemic has reduced that figure, conversely it is believed it has led to an increase in informal volunteering across the capital.



Community spirit and compassion was shown throughout the height of the pandemic, including community members placing grocery orders to assist neighbours, community groups preparing and delivering household goods and food, working bees, and several other immediate local responses.

The Listening Report you are now reading, prepared by VolunteeringACT with the support of the ACT Government through the Community Services Directorate, highlights the impact and efforts of the volunteering sector over the past three years, and looks to move forward in supporting recovery of our local volunteering landscape, and develop the ACT's response to the National Strategy for Volunteering recommendations.

The ACT Government is pleased to support VolunteeringACT through the provision of peak body funding each year, and welcomes the release of this Listening Report, its analysis, and available data on the current state of the sector as we continue recovery from the impacts of COVID-19.

Thank you to the VolunteeringACT team for your ongoing representation and support for the volunteering sector. To all our city's volunteers, who so freely give of their time through formal or informal volunteering opportunities, thank you. You each make our city a better place in which to live.

**Emma Davidson MLA**

ACT Assistant Minister for Families and Community Services

May 2023



# THE ACT

## Volunteering Context



The ACT Government's [ACT Volunteering Statement 2018-2021](#) expired in December 2021. VolunteeringACT is driving development of a new ACT Volunteering Strategy, which will guide support and investment in the local volunteering landscape, over the coming years.

The new strategy will align with the [National Strategy for Volunteering](#), released in February 2023, which will shape volunteering policy and sector development over the next 10 years across the nation.

The volunteering landscape has shifted significantly over the past three years, presenting new challenges to which volunteer-involving organisations, and volunteers themselves, need to respond and adapt. For many organisations, service design and delivery have been recast in response to economic uncertainty, COVID-19 disruptions, and extreme weather events. These factors have had compounding impacts on demand for volunteer provided essential services, our collective capacity to sustain emergency responses and strengthen our volunteer led activities in sport and recreation, health, education, environment, tourism, major events, emergency services, libraries, and community services – all of which are vital to social recovery and future flourishing of our environment and economy.

There has been a significant uplift in online service delivery requiring volunteer involving organisations to invest in infrastructure changes, adapt recruitment and onboarding processes and to further upskill volunteer managers and volunteers.[1] Evidence also suggests greater numbers of people are engaging with more informal or fluid models of volunteering, rather than traditionally organised and managed volunteering models and programs.[2]

### REFERENCES

[1] [Pulse-of-the-For-Purpose-Sector-Report-Wave-2.pdf](#).

[2] [National-Strategy-for-Volunteering-2023-2033.pdf](#) ([volunteeringstrategy.org.au](http://volunteeringstrategy.org.au)).



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# WHAT THE data tells us

Recent research on the state of volunteering clearly demonstrates the sector has not yet recovered from the impacts of COVID-19 and significant support is required to understand and assist the sector in adapting to changes in the external environment, recover volunteering programs, re-engage volunteers they have lost, and attract new volunteers.[3]

Volunteering plays a vital role in the ACT – including through sector partner representation with ACT Government – and contributes to building healthier and more resilient individuals, communities, and natural environments. Volunteering yields significant social and cultural benefits, alongside an economic contribution estimated to be worth over \$1.5 billion to the ACT economy every year.[4] People are motivated to volunteer for a variety of reasons, including to give something back directly to their community or contribute to their chosen cause, and are motivated by wanting to make a difference to the lives of others.

## **Where Canberrans Volunteer**

There are thousands of volunteer-involving organisations in the Canberra region operating within areas such as sport and recreation, health, education, environment, arts, tourism, major events, emergency services, and community services. In addition, the city benefits from the vital services and programs delivered by the ACT Government which rely on the tireless and skilled contribution of volunteers, such as the Annual Multicultural Festival, the ACT Library Service, and in ACT Government schools.

A great example of this contribution is the amount of support provided to schools via ACT Parent and Citizen (P&C) Associations. Research shows that in 2019, over 130,000 volunteer hours were logged across 93 ACT P&C Associations, via delivery of hundreds of community events, working bees and direct services provided to families and children. These activities improved community connections, supported 38 healthy and affordable school canteens, provided nine after care school services to around 1500 students, ran 50 low-cost uniform shops and generated around \$1.3m in donations to add to school resources.[5]

## **Delivering Social, Economic, and Environmental Returns**

Investment in initiatives that support volunteering provide clear value for money, and immediate social and economic returns on that investment. Research demonstrates that for every \$1 invested in volunteering, there is a \$4.50 return to the community.[6]

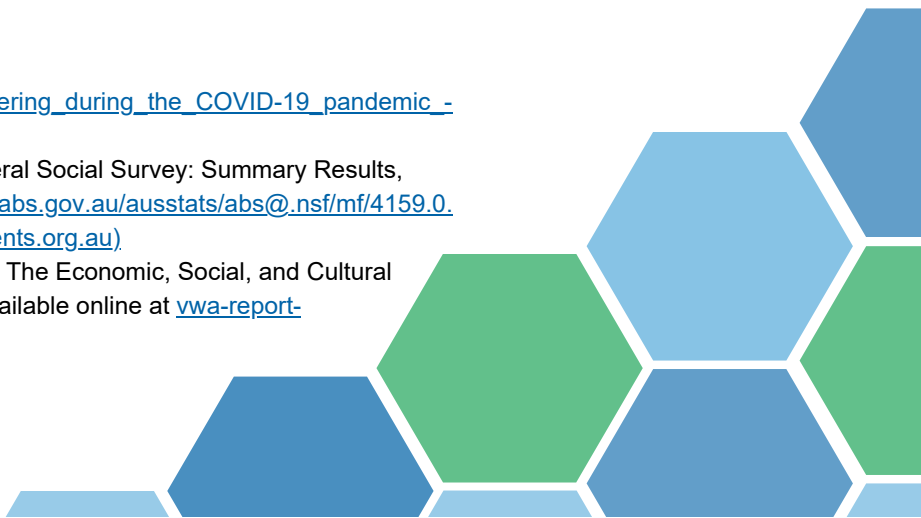
## **REFERENCES**

[3] Nicholas Biddle and Mathew Gray, [Volunteering during the COVID-19 pandemic - April 2021.pdf \(anu.edu.au\)](#)

[4] Australian Bureau of Statistics (2015) General Social Survey: Summary Results, Australia, 2014, available online at <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/4159.0>.

[5] [Get involved in your school's P&C! \(actparents.org.au\)](#)

[6] Volunteering Western Australia (May 2015) The Economic, Social, and Cultural Value of Volunteering to Western Australia, available online at [vwa-report-book\\_web.pdf \(volunteeringwa.org.au\)](#)



Volunteering initiatives in the ACT often operate with modest budgets yet generate a great amount of added value via their contribution to achieving economic, social and wellbeing outcomes. In 2020 the equivalent wage value of ACT environmental volunteering alone was estimated to be over \$21.5m, via delivery of 85,657 hours of on-ground environmental work, 69,268 hours for citizen science, 121,935 hours for wildlife management, and 30,158 hours for administration.[7]

### **Supporting Canberrans' Wellbeing**

There is a strong connection between volunteering and good overall health and wellbeing, often with the dual impact of improving the wellbeing of people undertaking volunteering, as well as volunteering activities contributing to enhancing the wellbeing of others. Volunteering has been found to help individuals develop stronger social networks and interpersonal relationships, improve self-esteem, relieve stress, alleviate symptoms of depression, and help with mental health recovery.[8] This important link is reflected in the ACT Wellbeing Framework, within the Social Connection and Time domains, with volunteering used as a key indicator of Canberrans being connected with family, friends, and community, and having the time to live life well.[9]

Volunteering also contributes across several other ACT Wellbeing Domains. Volunteer programs are often at the forefront of the ACT's core support services to individuals and communities, providing interaction via different one to one and/or group programs such as education programs, befriending or volunteer mentoring with extremely effective results. For example, the Mentoring Young Men Program – 'Bro-Gram' operated by Menslink, pairs volunteer male mentors of all ages and backgrounds with young males aged 10-16 needing a constructive influence in their lives, to benefit from the support and friendship a mentor provides. Following engagement in the program, feedback from parents shows that 80% report positive/very positive impacts on their sons' confidence and self-esteem, 71% report positive/very positive impacts on their sons' willingness to seek support and 86% report positive/very positive impacts on their sons' relationship with peers and family.[10]

## **REFERENCES**

[7] [Values of Volunteering in the ACT - ACT Enviro Volunteers](#)

[8] [Benefits of volunteering | healthdirect](#) and [Purposeful activity - volunteering | Head to Health](#)

[9] [Explore overall wellbeing - ACT Wellbeing Framework](#)

[10] [Menslink-ImpactSurvey-Report-2022.pdf](#)



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# INTENT OF the Listening Report

This Listening Report reflects the views and experiences of VolunteeringACT members and other volunteer involving organisations and provides insights from VolunteeringACT's engagement in national volunteering policy and service development work. It is published as our community:

- Responds to the impacts of the past three years of the pandemic.
- Recovers from multiple extreme weather events.
- Adapts volunteer engagement and management to fit the changing context for volunteering.
- Steps up to the increased pressures on volunteer provided services as a result of economic hardship and cost of living pressures.
- Ensures sustainability of volunteer roles and volunteer involving organisations across their diverse activities throughout the ACT.

Its intent is to aid in guiding our work, including formulating our local response to the objectives and actions recommended in the National Strategy for Volunteering, released in February 2023.

Our aim is to support efforts to develop an ACT Volunteering Strategy for the Territory which is informed by community expertise and brings together government and non-government resources to ensure timely investment and effective implementation over the next few years.



# WHO HAS BEEN involved?

VolunteeringACT has been communicating with a range of stakeholders over the past two years, to understand the key issues impacting the volunteering sector, agree the solutions and supports that are needed to facilitate an effective and sustainable recovery of volunteering after the disruptions of the past three years, and identify gaps in information/data that can inform future sector development.

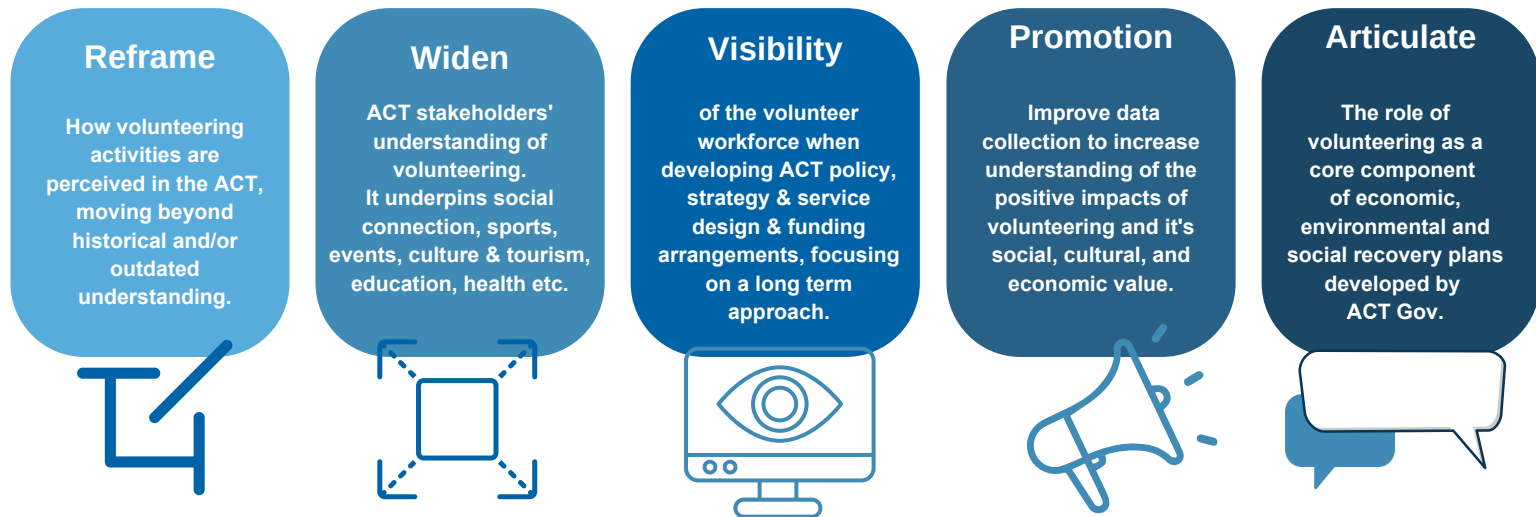
We have been working with our colleagues in other volunteering peak bodies to scope the changing landscape, contribute to inclusive practices, and better understand the diversity of volunteering concepts, practices, and aspirations in our community, including the National context and implications for the ACT.

Consultations and collaborations that have informed this Report include input from:



# WHAT WE HEARD

Five overarching themes have emerged from the feedback gathered in the ACT over the past two years.



There is a need to:

- **Reframe perceptions of volunteering** and the types of activities supported by volunteers, moving beyond a historical view that these activities occur just within the community/welfare and emergency services sectors.
- **Broaden understanding across the whole of government** that volunteering underpins a range of social, sporting, arts, cultural, education, health, events, and environmental activities; and contributes to delivery of strategic policy priorities and government managed services across most ACT Government portfolios.
- **Improve visibility of volunteer roles and volunteer workforce needs** when developing ACT policy, strategy and services and determining funding requirements for implementation of policies, strategies, and services, particularly focusing on a more strategic and longer-term approach to volunteer workforce planning, investment, and development.
- **Promote understanding of the positive impacts of volunteering and its social and economic value.** Data collection and analysis of volunteering impact requires more planning and investment, to support volunteer involving organisations to measure and communicate effectively, and to support strategic decision-making and tactical investment in government and non-government sectors.
- **Articulate the role of volunteering as a core component** of economic, environmental, and social recovery and inclusion of volunteer relevant content in recovery plans being developed by the ACT Government.

**Several core issues impacting across the ACT have been identified as current priorities for action:**

## Addressing the ongoing impact of COVID-19

- There is a need to re-engage volunteers and support the recovery of volunteering programs in response to past and ongoing disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic.



- A significant number of organisations are still struggling to attract former volunteers back to their programs and recruit new ones, to return to their pre-pandemic levels of activity and volunteer workforce capacity.

### Ensuring adequate funding and flexible/adaptive funding models to sustain volunteering

- A significant number of organisations report that they do not have an adequate level of ongoing funding to properly resource volunteering activities and volunteer management functions. This is proving more challenging in recent months, as service demand remains high or is increasing, with organisations expected to do more within a funding envelope that is already not covering all their volunteering costs.
- Volunteers and those who support/manage them are often not recognised or considered in important State/Territory and National planning conversations that impact them and volunteer involving organisations – and VolunteeringACT – are sometimes not invited to these conversations at a crucial point in the influencing process, putting the volunteering sector at a disadvantage.
- Organisations would like to see decision makers and funders include the volunteer workforce in strategic and financial planning processes, service design and workforce development requirements from the beginning, as standard.
- For many organisations, one of the biggest cost burdens they face - particularly for smaller organisations and those that are entirely volunteer run - is properly resourcing the onboarding and induction process and enabling volunteers to complete core competencies training in line with National Standards for Volunteer Involvement.

### Funding pressures

- Organisations report not having a budget to enrol their volunteer managers and volunteers in all the core areas of training that would be required for best practice – a key one is First Aid training - and would like to see more grant funding to support training and development.
- Several of the very small volunteer involving organisations have also raised additional challenges with securing affordable meeting spaces, venues for training or events, or even affordable premises from which they can conduct their operations - especially when they are an emerging or micro-organisation and are just getting started.
- Some organisations reported that affordability of transport and parking costs can sometimes place barriers in the way of volunteers, in terms of their ability to get to where volunteering opportunities are, travel between sites where they are volunteering, or travel during 'out of hours' times to undertake a volunteering shift when public transport options are limited. It is difficult for volunteer involving organisations to absorb these transport costs themselves, when their budgets/funding levels to run volunteering programs are often inadequate.
- More recently, several ACT volunteer-involving organisations have highlighted cost of living impacts on areas such as operating costs, but also in terms of having a knock-on effect on availability of volunteers. For example, some people who have been volunteering are no longer able to do so as they need to spend more time working in paid employment, with some taking on second or third jobs to cope with financial pressures. Another example is older volunteers who are also grandparents are often taking on more caring responsibilities for grandchildren, resulting in them reducing or withdrawing from their volunteering roles.



### Impacts on recruitment timeframes

- A significant number of organisations had previously reported they experienced delays with processing of Working With Vulnerable People (WWVP) checks for volunteers, which potentially had a detrimental impact on volunteer recruitment timeframes and retaining a person's interest in volunteering in a program or role. Organisations provided feedback on a more streamlined or fast-tracked process for volunteers, and some have supported the creation of a 'Volunteer Passport' scheme (more information below).

As of late March 2023, many organisations have reported a significant increase in WWVP processing times, with most applications, at the time of publication, complete or almost finalised.

### Improving connectivity and streamlining across organisations and activities

- Many organisations are in favour of a more structured volunteering sector that can support 'sub networks' for organisations that all work around the same remit e.g. Youth, Mental Health, Food Relief, Education etc. with a view to promoting better information exchange and links across organisations so volunteers can experience different programs within those sub-networks and perhaps operate more as a 'shared-pool' of volunteers, on rotation with different organisations. Current processes around regulation and recruitment of volunteers make that challenging.
- The ACT Volunteering sector is broadly supportive of piloting new approaches to streamline volunteer recruitment and engagement in a more fluid and responsive way – for example, there is a high level of interest in the ACT piloting a 'Volunteer Passport' model, enabling volunteers to be recruited more against their skills/areas of interest and then enabled to move more easily across different roles and volunteer-involving organisations within the ACT. VolunteeringACT is continuing discussions with the sector on the core elements needed for a successful ACT scheme.

#### Resourcing

ACT funding models cover the real cost of volunteering, are sustainable and are flexible to cater for the diversity of ACT VIOs.



#### Connectivity

Stronger links and greater streamlining across ACT VIOs, volunteering activities, and volunteering sub-sectors.



#### Demographics

Mapping the changing face of volunteering in the ACT, improving inclusion, and increasing volunteer diversity.



#### Adapting

Enhancing and changing volunteer management models/resources to keep pace with changing ACT landscape.



#### COVID impact

Addressing the ongoing impact of COVID on volunteering recovery and volunteer recruitment and re-engagement.



Monitor impact of cost of living pressures on volunteers and VIOs



### **Stronger and broader awareness and communication about impact**

- Several organisations have expressed an interest in assistance with Marketing and Communications to improve the relevance of messaging around volunteering, reach new audiences with their volunteering offer and promote the benefits of volunteering to individuals, organisations and communities. Many volunteer-involving organisations do not have the funding or structure to support a dedicated marketing and communications role and would be in favour of an ACT specific marketing campaign framed around the specific needs of our jurisdiction.
- A shared priority for many organisations is marketing and communications to support recovery of volunteering, including encouraging people who previously volunteered to reconnect with volunteering after a period of absence.
- Many organisations feel there is a lack of understanding and awareness around the benefits and impact of volunteering, particularly in relation to health and wellbeing, social connection, as a pathway to employment or a change in career, and in removing barriers to social and economic participation due to disability, physical and mental health, and other discrimination factors.

### **A need for enhanced data collection**

- There is a lack of good data on the scale and scope of volunteering in the ACT, including on the number of organisations operating in the local volunteering landscape, the widespread positive impacts volunteering has across several key government portfolio responsibilities, and how volunteering activities directly contribute to achieving outcomes against the ACT Health and Wellbeing Framework, and other ACT policy agendas. Organisations need more assistance and resourcing to collect this information more effectively, and to track and report on it over time.
- The need for improved data collection on volunteering activities and impacts has also been identified as an important objective within the National Strategy for Volunteering and establishing better processes for State and Territory volunteering data collection is essential for effective implementation of the Strategy, going forward.

### **Changing volunteer demographics and the need to diversify**

- For many organisations, their core volunteer base is predominately made up of older people, who are often retired and have more time availability. However, this pool of volunteers is increasingly 'ageing out', and succession planning to fill those volunteer roles with new volunteers and a younger demographic is challenging.
- There is a need to be more open minded about the nature of volunteering and in particular, how this may look different from a normative view of volunteering.
- Many First Nations and culturally and linguistically diverse communities have always engaged in activities that strengthen the fabric of their communities by giving their time to help or empower others through a range of initiatives. They have shared their knowledge and skills, and supported others for no financial reward, but these activities may not be conceptualised as volunteering within their culture. There are opportunities for learning and information sharing with those communities that can diversify and strengthen the volunteering landscape and future development agenda in the ACT.



## Expanding opportunities for young people to volunteer

- Most organisations wish to attract a younger cohort of volunteers but are struggling to connect meaningfully with this demographic and understand their volunteering needs and motivations. Young people and agencies supporting them report experiencing barriers to volunteering, including prejudice against them due to age and experience.
- There is no clear pathway between education institutions and volunteer involving organisations who could provide a bridge for young people between completion of education and gaining employment relevant to their qualifications. Many organisations would like to see a stronger link with the local student population and a more coordinated approach across the ACT to engage with tertiary and higher education institutions to establish a more effective system facilitating student volunteering.
- Often, students have a desire to volunteer, but this can be on a very time limited basis, which doesn't always suit the needs of the hosting organisation. This can result in a student volunteering placement being a greater administrative burden than it should be, where the organisation doesn't actually see many benefits to them. On some occasions, students are directed or mandated to volunteer by their education institution, but this is not in line with the core definition of volunteering as 'time willingly given' and further scrutiny of such directions is required, to ensure volunteering activities are safe and ethical.
- In response, VolunteeringACT has established a new partnership with 180 Degrees, a Student Consulting arm of the Australian National University (ANU), to conduct research into student volunteering in the ACT University/Higher Education institutes over the coming months. This project will examine the needs and motivations of student volunteers currently involved in university/higher education. Research findings will be incorporated into the ACT Volunteering Strategy development process.

## Adapting volunteer management models to a changing landscape

- Greater numbers of people are engaging with more informal or fluid approaches to volunteering, with an overall decline over the past few years of volunteering levels within traditional volunteering models or programs.
- We need to evolve our thinking and practices in volunteer management. However, little is known about the official scale and scope of informal volunteering activities in the ACT and what information and support may be needed to strengthen safety, capacity, impact, and sustainability of these forms of volunteering.



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# CURRENT FOCUS

VolunteeringACT is funded as a peak body service in partnership with ACT Government. Given this, VolunteeringACT has been working with the ACT Community Services Directorate over the past two years to identify commitments from the previous ACT Volunteering Statement which require ongoing attention and determine which actions are still relevant within the current volunteering landscape.

VolunteeringACT has invested in additional policy resources to work with our members and to confirm priorities for building the future strength and viability of volunteering activities that are vital to social, economic, and environmental recovery in the ACT after several years of the pandemic and extreme weather events.

In December 2022, we commenced a policy/research project to conduct research into existing data sources on volunteering activities and their impact, consult with VolunteeringACT members and other volunteer-involving organisations in our networks, and grow the evidence base to better reflect the vast impact of volunteering activities across the ACT, and to inform future funding applications, including developing and supporting the implementation of a five-year ACT Volunteering Strategy.

Our ongoing policy work is also considering how best to align ACT priorities with the National Volunteering Strategy and the ACT Wellbeing Framework to help ensure that investment in the ACT complements National volunteering sector development funding and implementation of the ACT Wellbeing Framework.

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# NEXT STEPS

We thank everyone who has taken the time to engage with us over the past two years, and for their generosity in providing expertise, insights, and ideas for how we can strengthen volunteering in the ACT and ensure volunteer-involving organisations have the sustainable support and

investment they need in the coming years. We look forward to continuing our cross-sector collaboration and information sharing as we work towards our common goals of achieving a fit-for-purpose ACT Volunteering Strategy to carry us into the future.

