



Inquiry into Barriers and Opportunities in Community Sports in the ACT

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About VolunteeringACT

VolunteeringACT acknowledges the Ngunnawal people as the traditional custodians of the Canberra region and recognises any other peoples or families with connection to this Country. VolunteeringACT is committed to reconciliation and will continue to walk alongside First Nations Peoples and embrace the traditions, stories and wisdoms of the oldest continuing cultures in the world.

Volunteering and Contact ACT Ltd (trading as VolunteeringACT) is the peak body for volunteering and represents over 200 community organisations and advocates for volunteers and those organisations that involve volunteers. We provide community information services in the Canberra region. We also deliver programs for people experiencing disadvantage and isolation, people with disability, and people needing support for mental wellness. VolunteeringACT has a vision of an inclusive Canberra, and a mission to foster inclusion by enabling participation and connection. VolunteeringACT is part of the National Network of Volunteering Peak Bodies in Australia.

This submission has been made as part of our commitment to ensuring the perspectives and expertise of volunteers, VIOs and volunteer leaders informs development of public policy and contributes to achievement of positive social, economic, and environmental outcomes. The content has been informed by the experiences of our member organisations and networks, with their input gathered through targeted consultations.

Introduction

VolunteeringACT welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Standing Committee on Economics, Industry and Recreation on the Inquiry into Barriers and Opportunities for Participation in Community Sport in the ACT.

Volunteering plays a critical role in sport and we are dependent on volunteers to keep our community clubs open and our players playing.¹ In 2022, 3.1 million Australians, or 14.4% of the population, volunteered in sports and recreation activities and contribute an estimated \$4 billion of labour value each year² with the most common types of organisations volunteered for being sport and recreation (25.0 per cent)³. In the ACT, 21.1% of the ACT's volunteers volunteer in Sport and Recreation support.⁴ Volunteering in sports also plays a crucial role in fostering community engagement and sport volunteering is linked to a wide range of health, social, and community benefits.⁵

Volunteers perform many roles in community sport from committee members, team management, coaching, organising registrations, administration, refereeing, scoring, social media management, writing newsletters, match day set up, canteen duty, fundraising, washing uniforms and bringing oranges on match day. These volunteers are integral to the achievement of sport development outcomes.⁶

The Clubs Under Pressure report shows that almost one in four small clubs are considering closing due to decreasing revenues and declining participation numbers including volunteers. Almost two in three clubs (63%) state that their main challenge in the last 12 months has been not having enough volunteers. In the last 12 months, 25% of sporting clubs have experienced a decline in volunteers. Clubs are citing that parents are less willing to volunteer, with 17% of clubs reporting a decrease in volunteers aged 35-54 years old. Volunteer losses are coupled with an increased administration load for 61% of clubs. This had led to an even greater pressure on remaining volunteers and committee members.⁷

There are significant challenges for sporting organisations and sport volunteers that have been exacerbated by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Between 2019 and 2021 the estimated

¹ [Sport-Volunteering-National-Plan-Final.pdf](#)

² [36994_Sport-Volunteer-Coalition-Action-Plan-update.pdf](#)

³ [National Strategy for Volunteering 2023–2033](#)

⁴ [State of Volunteering ACT 2024 Full Report.pdf](#)

⁵ [Clearinghouse for Sport | Australian Sports Commission](#)

⁶ [AJV v13-2.3 indd.indd](#)

⁷ [ASF Clubs Under Pressure Report.pdf](#)

number of Australians aged 15+ who took on a non-playing role in sport fell by 106,000, a 3% decline and the proportion of volunteers doing just one role has declined, while those doing three or more has increased. The roles that lost the most volunteers were officials and ad-hoc helpers (carrying out tasks such as setting up, packing down, cleaning etc). In 2021, there were an estimated 75,000 fewer Australians aged 15+ putting their hand up to be officials and 73,000 fewer offering to do ad hoc tasks. Only 82% of pre-COVID and current volunteers are likely to volunteer in the next 12 months.⁸

VolunteeringACT has addressed the following Terms of Reference of the inquiry in this submission:

2. Effectiveness of the implementation of the Sport and Recreation Strategy 2023-2028
4. Barriers to participation in community sport
5. Lessons from successful strategies used in the ACT and around the world that effectively increase sports participation
6. Opportunities to improve participation rates, focusing on policy changes, community programs, and infrastructure improvements.

It is important to highlight that the 2024–2034 ACT Volunteering Strategy⁹ outlines several outcome areas where this inquiry presents a valuable opportunity to integrate and apply its recommendations across ACT Government planning and delivery for sports volunteers to achieve the outcome areas. These included *ACT Strategic Outcome 1.1: More ACT community members are engaged in meaningful and enjoyable volunteering in a way that works for them*, *ACT Strategic Outcome 3.1: The importance of volunteers, volunteer managers and VIOs is considered in relevant ACT Government strategic planning, service design and delivery* and *ACT Strategic Outcome 3.2: ACT Volunteers and VIOs have strong links with each other, collaborate well, and regularly share good practice*.

We have provided a list of key recommendations for consideration below, with further details provided on the following pages. Throughout the submission, the recommendations address several of the terms of reference and are therefore repeated in different sections.

⁸ [36994_Sport-Volunteer-Coalition-Action-Plan-update.pdf | Australian Sports Commission](#)

⁹ <https://volunteeringact.org.au/act-volunteering-strategy-2024/>

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Build ACT Sporting Club Capacity through funding Sector-Wide Volunteer Management Training (TOR 2 and 4)

Recommendation 2: Establish a data collection process to measure Sport Volunteering in the ACT (TOR 2 and 4)

Recommendation 3: Fund the establishment of an ACT Community Sport Volunteer Network to facilitate knowledge sharing and collaboration across the sport ecosystem (TOR 2 and 4)

Recommendation 4: Improve Regulatory Processes for Sports Volunteers in the ACT including WWVP checks and permit applications (TOR 4)

Recommendation 5: Expand Inclusion and Access Initiatives in ACT Community Sports (TOR 6)

Recommendation 6: ACT Government to promote sport volunteering as a pathway to skills development and community connection (TOR 6)

2. Effectiveness of the implementation of the Sport and Recreation Strategy 2023-2028

VolunteeringACT welcomes the recognition within the ACT Sport and Recreation Strategy 2023–2028 of the critical role that volunteers play in the delivery of grassroots sport and active recreation. We are particularly pleased to see the Strategy acknowledge the growing concern around volunteer burden and the challenge of attracting new volunteers to the sector. We strongly support the emphasis on creating meaningful and rewarding volunteering opportunities as a key component of capacity and capability building within the sport and active recreation ecosystem.

VolunteeringACT also commends the inclusion of *Priority 5.2: Capability and Capacity*, which highlights the need to build the skills and scale of the sport and active recreation workforce, including volunteers. We welcome the identification of the following key project: *“In partnership with the community, helping to develop the volunteering opportunities offered in sport and active recreation.”* We also support the associated outcome and success indicators: *Outcome: More volunteers are attracted to and retained in the sport and active recreation sector. Indicators of Success: Number of volunteers in the sector and strategies to meet the challenges of retention.*

Also, we acknowledge and support the activity outlined in the 2025 Sport and Recreation Implementation Plan to: *“Facilitate sharing of initiatives within the ACT sporting community to support volunteers.”*

In reviewing the early implementation of the Strategy, VolunteeringACT notes positive developments such as the funding of some community sporting groups through the 2024 and 2025 Sport and Recreation Investment Scheme for volunteering initiatives. We also welcome the delivery of the ‘Building Better Boards’ program in 2024 to ACT Peak Sporting Bodies, which supports governance capacity and may have flow-on benefits for volunteer engagement and retention.

To fully achieve the Strategy’s priorities and ensure the sustainable growth and support of volunteering in community sport, VolunteeringACT recommends several strategies. For the ACT Government to achieve the project in the 2025 Sport and Recreation Implementation Plan *“in partnership with the community, helping to develop the volunteering opportunities offered in sport and active recreation”* VolunteeringACT recommends building club capacity through sector-wide volunteer management training. This will allow clubs to develop best practice management of volunteers to recruit, recognise and retain their volunteers.

To achieve the outcome in the plan of *More volunteers are attracted to and retained in the sport and active recreation sector*, VolunteeringACT recommends the establishment of a data collection process to measure volunteer engagement across the sector. This should include baseline and annual data on volunteer numbers, surveys on volunteer satisfaction, motivation, and reasons for leaving and sector-wide retention rates and trends. If funded, there is an opportunity for the ACT Government to partner with VolunteeringACT as part of the ACT State of Volunteering Report to publish a supplementary report on volunteer engagement and trends across the sporting sector. The NSW Government has achieved this with the NSW Centre for Volunteering outlined in section five.

To achieve the activity in the ACT 2025 Sport and Recreation Implementation Plan to facilitate *“sharing of initiatives within the ACT sporting community to support volunteers”*, VolunteeringACT recommends funding a formal peer network focused on volunteer engagement and management to share best practices and build cross-sector alignment in the ACT. If funded, VolunteeringACT could provide coordination of this as one of our specialised volunteering sector networks.

Recommendation 1: Build Club Capacity through funding Sector-Wide Volunteer Management Training

- Invest in ongoing volunteer management training and professional development for community sport organisations in volunteer recruitment, recognition, retention, and succession planning.
- Partner with organisations like VolunteeringACT to deliver workshops and toolkits tailored to the sport context designed with sporting organisations.
- Promote VolunteeringACT’s services to ensure clubs are aware of the support and tools available.

Recommendation 2: Establish a data collection process to measure Sport Volunteering in the ACT

- Fund initiatives to improve the collection of ACT sports volunteer data to inform planning, support targeted interventions, track volunteer engagement over time and to contribute to the ACT Wellbeing Framework data.

Recommendation 3: Fund the establishment of a Community Sport Volunteer Network to facilitate knowledge sharing and collaboration across the sport ecosystem.

4. Barriers to participation in community sport

The Sport Volunteer Coalition Action Plan (2022-2026)¹⁰ identifies key environmental and societal changes such as increasingly busy lifestyles, demand for flexibility, and technological distractions that are contributing to new challenges in sport volunteering. These challenges impact both the recruitment and retention of volunteers and require system-wide reforms to ensure sport remains accessible, inclusive and community-driven. The State of Volunteering in the ACT 2024 report¹¹ highlight a consistent set of barriers to volunteering:

- Financial costs- such as transport, uniforms, and registration
- Burnout and over-reliance on a small core group of volunteers
- Language or cultural barriers- especially for people who speak a language other than English at home
- Limited awareness of volunteer opportunities- particularly among underrepresented groups

A key point of difference to note about the sport sector, is the absence of paid volunteer managers that are often present in other volunteer involving organisations. In local sporting organisations, and some state and national sporting organisations, it is volunteers who are managing volunteers, exacerbating the challenges for these clubs and organisations.¹²

Our consultations with local sport clubs reveal systemic and operational challenges in recruiting, supporting and retaining volunteers. These include:

Regulatory and Compliance Burdens

Within the ACT clubs, compliance requirements create significant barriers to volunteering:

- Working With Vulnerable People (WWVP) checks are often described as time-consuming, outdated, and difficult to manage. Many clubs are unsure which members require a check and, as a risk management measure, adopt a blanket rule requiring all volunteers to obtain one. It is recommended that the ACT Government provide targeted education to sporting groups to help them assess whether their activities are considered

¹⁰ [36994 Sport-Volunteer-Coalition-Action-Plan-update.pdf](#)

¹¹ [State of Volunteering ACT 2024 Full Report.pdf](#)

¹² [The Australian Sports Commission \(ASC\) 2025](#)

regulated activities and that community sporting organisations be included in the upcoming WWVP review.

- ACT clubs also reported the high cost and time burden of meeting compliance requirements like First Aid certification for volunteers, getting approval for road closures for sporting events and insurance.

Volunteer Experience

Across both national¹³ and ACT contexts, sport volunteering is struggling to align with the evolving needs and motivations of volunteers:

- Volunteer roles are often too time-intensive and inflexible, deterring participation especially for those with family, work, or personal commitments. The volunteer experience is not meeting individual needs and volunteer roles tend to be time consuming and rigid, discouraging some people from getting involved. Sport clubs often do not have a complete understanding of what volunteers need and how to respond to these needs.
- Clubs rely heavily on informal structures, with minimal capacity to tailor roles to individual interests or to provide proper onboarding and supervision.
- Volunteers often lack awareness of the range of roles available, including non-sporting functions like administration, communications, and events.

Volunteer Management

Sport organisations across Australia face significant gaps in volunteer management infrastructure and our local consultations show that the ACT is no exception:

- Volunteer management skills are often lacking across many clubs and vary widely, with many club administrators feeling unequipped to engage and support a diverse volunteer base effectively.
- Succession planning is poor or non-existent in many clubs.
- Clubs report ageing volunteer bases, volunteer burnout and over-reliance on a small group of people.
- Volunteer recognition varies widely, some clubs offer tangible rewards, others do not.

¹³ [1018632-HV2EGbKX8jSn3YvX9BDL0w \(1\).pdf](#) The Future of sport Volunteering 2021

- ACT clubs reported limited awareness of support services, including those offered by VolunteeringACT and a desire for more accessible resources and training.
- There is a lack of data and insight into volunteer engagement.

To address the barriers identified and strengthen the sport volunteering ecosystem, the following actions are recommended:

Recommendation 1: Build Club Capacity through funding sector-wide Volunteer Management Training (as above)

Recommendation 2: Establish a data collection process to measure Sport Volunteering in the ACT (as above)

Recommendation 4: Improve Regulatory Processes for Sports Volunteers in the ACT including WWVP checks and permit applications.

- It is recommended that when the ACT Government undertakes its review of the WWVP Scheme, local community sporting groups are included to ensure that their issues are addressed.
- The ACT Government to provide education to sporting organisations around the WWVP process.
- Streamline permit applications (e.g. for road closures) to reduce administrative time for volunteers and club organisers and provide education to the sporting community on the processes.

5. Lessons from successful strategies used in the ACT and around the world that effectively increase sports participation

Both the Northern Territory (NT) and Victorian Governments have implemented targeted initiatives to strengthen the sport volunteer workforce. The NSW Government has partnered with the NSW Centre for Volunteering to collect data to analyse volunteering trends among people who volunteer in sports in NSW.

Northern Territory initiatives

- [Northern Territory Sport Volunteer Action Plan 2023](#): released by the Northern Territory Government (NTG), the Action Plan outlines how the NTG will support sporting organisations through volunteer workforce promotion, support and grants. The Action Plan is explicitly aligned with the ASC's Sport Volunteering National Plan and Sport

Volunteer Coalition Action Plan 2022 – 2614¹⁴. To support implementation the NTG have formed a collaborative partnership with Volunteering SA/NT and provided funding of \$200,000 towards grants, initiatives, and activities.¹⁵

- Sports volunteer development and education are also a priority for the NT Government and fund free workshops and masterclasses for coaches, officials and support volunteers. The primary focus of the volunteer development programs is to improve the development, recruitment, retention and recognition of sports volunteers. The volunteer development programs include an annual assessment of sport and active recreation organisations' volunteer profile, needs and gaps that helps inform the design and delivery of promotional, educational and developmental activities. The activities address National Sporting Organisation accreditation requirements and Volunteering Australia's national standards.
- The NT Government have established the [Northern Territory Sport Volunteer Network](#) which provides a platform for learning, connection and resource sharing for sport clubs that involve volunteers.

Victorian Initiatives

- The Victorian Government partnered with Volunteering Victoria, Vicsport and Regional Sport Victoria to create sporting club focused resources and a volunteering support network¹⁶. The partnership was supported with funding of \$225,000 from the Victorian Government¹⁷.
- Building upon this, [the Sustainable Volunteer Workforce Program](#) (2024-27): Sport and Recreation Victoria provide grants for initiatives which aim to build a sustainable volunteer workforce, supporting volunteer engagement, retention and ways to better support the workforce to deliver sport and active recreation in regional Victoria. Funding of up to \$450,000 over 3 years (2024–25 to 2026–27) is available to eligible organisations.¹⁸

New South Wales initiatives

- In 2024, the NSW Government partnered with The NSW Centre for Volunteering to produce the first dedicated supplementary report on sport volunteering in NSW as part of the NSW State of Volunteering 2023 project.¹⁹ This report analyses volunteering trends among people who volunteer in sports in NSW, and aims to provide an understanding of the motivations, challenges, and societal benefits associated with volunteering in sports.
- To achieve the outcome in the ACT Sport and Recreation plan of *More volunteers are attracted to and retained in the sport and active recreation sector*, there is an opportunity for the ACT Government to partner with VolunteeringACT as part of the ACT State of

¹⁴ [Volunteer development | Department of People, Sport and Culture](#)

¹⁵ [Northern Territory grassroots sports volunteers given greater access to resources and funding - Sustainable Sports News](#)

¹⁶ [Sport Volunteers – Thrive With Support – Regional Sport Victoria](#)

¹⁷ [Ramping Up Support For Community Sport Volunteers | Premier](#)

¹⁸ [Sustainable Volunteer Workforce Program 2024 to 2027 | Sport and Recreation Victoria](#)

¹⁹ [NSW State of Volunteering Report 2024 - Sport \(1\).pdf](#)

Volunteering Report to publish a supplementary report on volunteer engagement and trends across the sporting sector. This is outlined in section two.

Drawing on these approaches from other states and territories, they offer valuable lessons and can provide guidance to the ACT Government to strengthen support for sport volunteers and enhance the sustainability of community sport.

6. Opportunities to improve participation rates, focusing on policy changes, community programs, and infrastructure improvements

Opportunities for Growth and Inclusion

Research shows that people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are less likely to both participate in organised sport and volunteer in sport than those from English speaking backgrounds. Other groups that are underrepresented in organised sport are people with disability and those on the lowest household incomes.²⁰ There are strong opportunities to grow and diversify the sport volunteering base in the ACT by engaging:

- Culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities
- Retirees and older Canberrans
- People with disability
- Low-income individuals and households

Recommendation 5: Expand Inclusion and Access Initiatives in ACT Community sports

- Facilitate partnerships between sport clubs and CALD, disability, and community groups. This can be achieved through the development of a network outlined in recommendation three.
- Support sporting organisations to engage with under- represented communities to co-develop strategies that support their involvement in sport volunteering.
- Offer grants or subsidies to address transport, training, and equipment costs for under-represented groups.

As volunteering in sport can also serve as a pathway to skills development, community connection, and personal wellbeing, particularly for those not traditionally involved in sport, there is opportunities for the ACT Government to promote volunteering in sport in their social media, newsletters and other publications promoting the value of volunteering in sport, celebrating the contribution of volunteers and highlighting the personal and community benefits.

²⁰ SportAus Ausplay A focus on volunteering in sport October 2021 sportaus.gov.au

Recommendation 6: ACT Government to promote sport volunteering as a pathway to skills development and community connection.

Conclusion

The future of community sport volunteering in the ACT depends on a modern, inclusive, and well-supported volunteer ecosystem. VolunteeringACT looks forward to working collaboratively with the ACT Government and sector stakeholders to ensure that the community sporting volunteer workforce is supported, recognised, and empowered, contributing to the long-term success and sustainability of sport and active recreation across the Territory.

Authorisation

This submission has been authorised by the Chief Executive Officer of VolunteeringACT.

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