



The Great Reset: Volunteering in Tasmania post-COVID-19

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Who we are

Volunteering Tasmania, as the peak body for volunteering throughout the state, aims to improve the support for and outcomes of volunteers, volunteer-involving organisations, the Tasmanian Government, and the greater Tasmanian public as we collaborate to create and maintain a resilient and robust volunteer sector across our state.

Through our 246 members we represent over 170,000 Tasmanians who give their time to volunteering and the betterment of Tasmania.

our purpose

**We connect and build
an inclusive community
to make a difference
through the impact of
volunteering**

our values

**be informed
be inspired
be connected
make a difference**



Acknowledgement of Country:

At Volunteering Tasmania we pay our respects to the palawa/pakana peoples as the traditional custodians of lutruwita and acknowledge their continuing connection to land, sea, sky, waterways and community.

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Thank you:

Thank you to the more than 4,000 volunteers and volunteer involving organisations that took part in the extensive consultation undertaken for this research.

Your views, thoughts and passion for your communities and fellow Tasmanians have contributed to this vital conversation about the future of volunteering across our state.

How can we can maintain Tasmania's vibrant volunteering sector?

Tasmania's communities are vibrant with volunteers. More than two-thirds of our population – about 300,000 individuals aged 16 years and older – lend a hand across our communities in myriad ways.

Volunteers contribute on average 229 hours a year or 4.4 hours every week to their fellow Tasmanians.²

How we lend a hand depends on our own skills, lifestyles and resources. And where we lend a hand does too.

Throughout the COVID response and lockdown, the desire of Tasmanians to reach out and do something when they saw something needed doing did not change. However, the sudden intensity of the COVID disruption did serve to illuminate some of the issues sitting at the core of volunteering and volunteer management trends in our state.

This project drew on consultations and conversations Volunteering Tasmania has had with organisations and volunteers throughout the two years since the pandemic first disrupted Tasmanian lives in March 2020.

We then consulted with more than 4,000 Tasmanian volunteers and volunteer organisations specifically for this report, using a combination of channels and tools including:

- online surveys (questions were integrated as part of the University of Tasmania's *The Tasmania Project*),
- individual consultations, and
- focus groups

By drawing these collected experiences, views and observations together within the context of what we already know about volunteering trends and projections, we were able to develop a view on how the COVID-19 pandemic period has already and will continue to shape volunteering into the future.

Leading up to the COVID-19 disruption in March 2020, volunteer participation in the state had experienced a downward trend for years, with the numbers of people volunteering (supply) decreasing while the number of volunteers needed (demand) continued to increase. If this trend had continued without disruption, available volunteer supply in relation to projected demand was forecast to hit a 42% shortfall by 2029. The modelling showed that only 7% of this shortfall was due to a lack of volunteers (supply), the remaining 35% was due to projected increasing demand, particularly in the area of human services. The pandemic's impact shed a clarifying light on the key characteristics of this trend.³

Volunteering reflects the changing demographics of the population which were impacting the sector before COVID-19 and need to be considered in the context of this discussion.

This means that as society changes we need to adjust our expectations of volunteers in line with lifestyles and work trends. For example we know that as a result of interest rate rises and generally increasing cost of living pressures, in many two-parent households both adults must now work full-time to make ends meet, drastically reducing these households' capacity to volunteer.

“The lockdown worked like a chemical experiment that suddenly illuminated hidden things.”

- Arundhati Roy. The Financial Times. 4 April 2020. *The Pandemic is a Portal*¹

1 <https://www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca>

2 Volunteering Tasmania. State of Volunteering Report Summary. 2019. p.2. <https://www.volunteeringtas.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/State-of-Volunteering-Report-%E2%80%93-Summary.pdf>

3 <https://www.volunteeringtas.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Tasmanian-Volunteer-Profile.pdf>



Additionally, these days many people hold multiple jobs in insecure and seasonal industries, creating difficulties for them to volunteer regularly. This is another aspect of society that volunteering must reflect and support.

Volunteering will persist; humans are kind and they want to connect and give back.

But as a society and particularly as a volunteer sector, we must continue to understand how the changing demographic profile impacts on people's availability to volunteer as well as their willingness to give their time.

We must accept that volunteering needs to be done differently, fitting into busy schedules by being simultaneously flexible and purposeful. Most of all we must resist the temptation to blame people for not volunteering. If we truly want to safeguard and increase civic participation, including volunteering, we need to interrogate the underlying structural issues that impact on people's ability to give their time and contribute to their communities.



The impact of the COVID-19 disruption on volunteering in Tasmania

Connection with community is paramount for volunteers

Before the COVID-19 disruption, we knew that the majority of people who volunteer did so in their own communities, with 76% of Tasmanian volunteers doing so within 50km of their homes.⁴ This desire to connect with our local communities was highlighted during the pandemic response when the majority of Tasmanians worked from home and travel was restricted.

For many of us, we were suddenly spending all of our time within our residential neighbourhood rather than commuting out of that area to an office, school or other activities.

“I’m a people person, I live by myself and I love the connection with work and volunteering.”

Consultations confirmed this data with volunteers, noting a preference to engage in spontaneous volunteering that has a clear purpose for themselves and their communities. Volunteers voiced appreciation for the opportunity to contribute to fellow community members in ways that had a tangible impact.

We saw a myriad of examples of people reaching out in their local neighbourhoods to support others in so many ways.

- Local Facebook groups mobilised residents to create fairy gardens, teddy bear trails and Easter egg hunts for young children during the lockdown.
- Online communities were established where people mobilised to support each other in their communities by delivering food, medicines and other essential items.
- Local sporting clubs that could no longer operate deployed their players, families and club volunteers to make and deliver meals around their local area.

This unique period highlighted the need of people in our communities to connect with one another and act in small but meaningful and purpose-driven ways.

⁴ Volunteering Tasmania. State of Volunteering Report Summary. 2019

The impact of COVID highlighted the great contribution that volunteers make to service delivery areas.

This became evident when volunteers were not able or didn't feel safe to engage in service delivery activities because of public health restrictions, especially those restrictions that were directed towards older more vulnerable people.

Nearly everywhere in Tasmania, anyone who was over 65 was reluctant to go face-to-face [when volunteering]. [In 2020], whenever we were in the real throes of closing things down it was because of the face-to-face issue.

When the regular volunteer workforce couldn't participate because of public health restrictions, there was a shortfall of service delivery options, placing strain

on service delivery agencies to fulfil their obligations.

Dependence of social services on volunteering became evident, causing some to question the disproportionate funding allocated to organisations that rely on volunteers to fulfil their contractual obligations to governments.

Volunteers fill resource gaps in delivery of essential and frontline services

Tasmania's public health response to COVID-19 highlighted the core, frontline nature of many volunteer roles in the state.

During the initial response, essential emergency services such as Tasmania Police, Tasmania's health and hospital services and the volunteer-based State Emergency Service (SES) provided frontline support as they do during natural disasters such as fires, floods and storms.

A new frontline was also revealed in the form of community services providing emergency food, food delivery, airport and ferry information and essential supplies for quarantining travellers, mental health and wellbeing support for people in quarantine, and for isolated Tasmanians through deliveries of groceries, pharmaceuticals and other essential items and transport to health treatments.

While some of these services were unique to the pandemic response, most of these services are generally resourced at levels where volunteers are depended upon to fill service gaps during non-pandemic times.

The response to COVID-19 intensified this dependency while simultaneously requiring these unpaid workers to take on risks and adapt continuously to complex regulations, policies and procedures related to the health crisis (including but not limited to training in use of PPE and infection control processes).

Services were required to adapt quickly and, in many cases, with little or no additional financial support.

In this way, the administrative, risk and governance burdens on the volunteer sector escalated through the pandemic and it became obvious that our systems were not set up to account for the essential role volunteers play in service delivery. Public messaging had to be adapted to ensure volunteers were included as a part of the essential workforce and many volunteer organisations struggled to have the resources, support systems and infrastructure to continue to support their volunteers in the essential service delivery required.

In particular, this situation exposed aged, community and hospice care service providers' dependence on volunteers and raised questions in volunteers' minds about the appropriateness of them delivering these services in place of paid workers. This issue was raised by participants throughout the consultation process.

"A lady at the hospice thought I was a paid worker and said, 'I cannot believe the time and care you give us and you don't get paid for it.'"

More than a quarter of all Tasmanian volunteers are engaged in the welfare and community sector.⁵ It is essential for the Community Sector and Governments to reflect on when it is appropriate to use volunteers and when a role is more appropriate as a paid role.

⁵ Kocar (2022) Volunteering during COVID-19: attitudes and behaviours: The Tasmanian Project https://www.utas.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0010/1589608/TTP5-6-volunteering-report.pdf

Volunteers and volunteer organisations are adaptable and resilient

There is no doubt COVID-19 disrupted the way people volunteer, but it also highlighted the beautiful resilience of Tasmanians. While some volunteers were stood down temporarily through the lockdown, many readily re-engaged with volunteer opportunities as soon as they were able, adapting to different tasks, roles and ways of working.

Our consultations combined with data from the UTAS survey makes it clear that Tasmanian volunteers and volunteer-involving organisations are both adaptable to sudden change and resilient in their determination to support each other.

Many volunteers continued to volunteer despite the restrictions of the pandemic. Although we know that nearly 70% of the volunteer workforce was stood down in the first weeks and months of the pandemic, the remainder (32%) maintained their volunteering roles or pivoted rapidly within their organisation to take on new roles. There were also regular volunteers (7.9%) who had volunteered prior to the pandemic and may have stood down or taken some time out due to lockdowns, work or health reasons but re-engaged and continued to volunteer as we have moved through the pandemic. Some sporadic volunteers saw opportunities to support others at a specific time (8.1%), and then a new cohort of people (6.3%) saw a need during the pandemic and stepped into volunteering for the first time. Unfortunately, a small number of volunteers (4.1%) stopped volunteering permanently during the pandemic.⁶

During the pandemic period, twice as many men as women started volunteering for the first time, and respondents over 65 years of age were seven times less likely to volunteer than people in younger age groups.⁷

Tasmania had a unique response to the pandemic compared to interstate, with only one major period of lockdown (March-June 2020) rather than the continual lockdowns experienced in some other states. This created the opportunity for a period of slow recovery as restrictions were lifted and the Tasmanian borders remained closed. By the end of the first year of the pandemic the net impact on volunteering numbers had been a 10-20% decline from pre-pandemic numbers (the Tasmanian Project Study⁸ and Volunteering Tasmania surveys of member organisations). This impact varied depending on the volunteering sub-sector. Tourism related volunteering did not recover in the first year. Aged care and disability, as well as other health related volunteering also remained suppressed into the second year of the pandemic due to the lockdowns in aged care facilities and the public health restrictions. Vaccination requirements and the opening of the Tasmanian borders in December 2021 placed further pressure on an already fatigued and under resourced sector. The risk assessments and mandatory requirements of vaccinations drew down heavily on the resources of all volunteering organisations that were trying to attract and keep volunteers.

The need for volunteers to pivot to digital and remote tools was not without barriers as Tasmania's digital literacy and access rates remain below the national average.⁹ The need to shift to remote volunteering also raised issues among volunteer organisations attempting to stay connected with volunteers to keep them up to date with changing conditions and regulations when many were not digitally connected. Lack of digital readiness in volunteer organisations was also exposed.

“I know that [organisation] may not have been ready for the switch to digital connectivity.”

The ability of volunteering organisations to pivot to remote work and adapt service delivery to new conditions depended largely on the type of activity being delivered. Some adapted to online tools and some to telephone delivery while others had to suspend delivery of services/activities. Yet others grappled with just staying connected to their volunteers during lockdown. Many organisations worked to support the mental health and wellbeing of their volunteers, as well as keep connected to a workforce that they could deploy again after the lockdown.

6 Kocar (2022) Volunteering during COVID-19: attitudes and behaviours: The Tasmanian Project https://www.utas.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0010/1589608/TTP5-6-volunteering-report.pdf

7 ibid

8 ibid

9 Australian Digital Inclusion Index. 2021. <https://www.digitalinclusionindex.org.au/dashboard/National.aspx>

Volunteers want to help

“Volunteering allows you to be respected for what you do – without accolade – [you receive] respect from a ‘thank you’ and appreciation directly from the person who has benefited.”

Interestingly, what the thousands of thoughts and responses gathered through this project revealed most clearly is the core truth lying in the hearts of those of us who volunteer.

Post-pandemic our understanding of the why of volunteering in Tasmania remains clear and was confirmed in our consultations. Quite simply, Tasmania’s volunteers are driven by a desire to help when they see someone in need.

Informal volunteering levels rose during the COVID-19 response. With people suddenly working from home and limited movement within neighbourhoods, they identified local needs and pulled together or identified ways they could help each other.

Consultations documented many cases where people, forced to stay home, worked together to:

- source and deliver food boxes to those in isolation or who were cut off from services
- coordinate online neighbourhood networks to share resources and alert others to local needs
- band together to provide COVID-safe recreational opportunities for families with young children, and
- undertake remote and socially distanced celebrations such as ANZAC Day services.

These are just some examples of the many organic ways people reported they had volunteered within their local communities during the COVID-19 response.

Discussion in focus groups and throughout individual consultations about the simplicity of this kind of volunteering that is small-scale and immediately responsive to identified community needs.

Perceptions of volunteering structures

“I just want to go and volunteer, not be caught up with the rules and regulations”

We identified through many comments and responses that volunteers increasingly view the structures around formal volunteering as barriers to accessibility. During the COVID-19 response, the reality was that formal volunteering structures tightened (such as PPE requirements) while informal volunteering became more spontaneous and less structured than prior to the pandemic. Opportunities for informal volunteering also increased as people identified needs in their immediate neighbourhoods and took spontaneous action to assist.

“When I offered to volunteer at an organisation, I was told to fill out these forms and get these authorisations and permits and then come back. I never went back.”

Coming out of the COVID-19 affected period, many volunteers are now carrying a perception that formal volunteering is too filled with red tape and requirements to be satisfying. While this may not be reflected in reality, it has the power to slow the return of volunteers to volunteer organisations post-COVID.

This was exacerbated by vaccination requirements placing enormous burdens both on volunteers and volunteer organisations to adhere to public health directions. For volunteer organisations this included greater work, health and safety requirements and increased risk assessments. Although necessary, it has created both a greater complexity and a perceived as well as real barrier to volunteer participation.

(As told to Volunteering Tasmania by South Arm community volunteers)

There's ... a great range of spontaneous volunteering that goes on to help those more vulnerable people in the community.

This was especially evident during COVID as it brought volunteers 'out of the woodwork' and was a benefit to all because everyone in the community had an opportunity to give and receive through volunteering.

Some people continued to volunteer in other areas after the initial effects of the COVID-19 response lessened.

The internet allows things to be organised by individuals. Self-organised people are going to drive volunteering in the future, inspiring people to be part of their community. Making people more aware and getting them engaged, that's what volunteering will be in the future.

The future of volunteering in the South Arm community will depend on individuals continuing to do the things they are committed to through the current structures that support them to be involved.

"[I want] to get involved in things [I'm] passionate about and see as important and needed in the community ... doing what interests me and helps me to learn and grow."



The Reset.

The COVID-19 response period in Tasmania has shone a bright light on volunteering in our state, illuminating growing issues and confirming identified trends.

While the circumstances of the pandemic shone a light on issues that were already troubling the sector, it also exacerbated underlying challenges that we cannot afford to ignore. Although we can clearly believe in the kindness of humans and our willingness to reach out to support others in our community, we must take care that volunteering does not become 'something we used to do'. If we want to hold the identity of volunteering, particularly 'service delivery volunteering' we must act now to safeguard it.

There are four key areas of action for Volunteering Tasmania, the volunteering sector and all levels of government. These four are distinct but inter-related.

Volunteering for purpose

For people to be willing to give their time, they need to know that it will have an impact and that there is meaning to the work they are contributing too. To ensure this is the case we must make sure:

- Volunteers need to be able to seek out and create opportunities that are meaningful to them. As a sector and within government policies we need to make it easier for this to occur
- The volunteer sector continues to promote the impact of the work they do, highlight the inherent value of their activities. As a sector we often become focused on the activity we are involved in but it is important to move beyond this to understand the underlying motivation of why we do what we do and ensure we express this to our volunteers and the broader community.

Regulation and structures

The regulatory environment around volunteering has been increasing in complexity for decades and the COVID-19 experience escalated this phenomenon across the entire volunteering sector.

We must accept that there are requirements to keep ourselves and others safe while volunteering, however greater effort needs to be made to resource how and where regulation occurs.

- As the peak body, Volunteering Tasmania must continue to influence public policy and regulatory environments to consider the impact of requirements on the volunteering sector, as well as both the intended and unintended consequences. We must continue to amplify the voice of volunteering in public policy.
- A lack of resourcing of volunteer coordinators and infrastructure often results in volunteers being left to navigate administration and regulation without appropriate support. The volunteering sector must do everything possible to hold the burden of regulation within the organisation and not pass it along to volunteers.
- Governments need to recognise that the volunteer workforce must be considered during development of regulatory environments and public policy. To do this, governments must consider impacts on volunteers during the development of policy and regulation and build in appropriate funding to better support the sector to take on the burden brought by greater regulation.

Job replacement

Essential service delivery in health and community services and emergency services is a constitutional obligation of government.

For more than 30 years these services have been progressively outsourced to not-for-profit organisations, in many cases without adequate funding which then forces many not-for-profits to turn to a volunteer workforce to supplement their resources. There is no denying that there is a role for volunteers in service delivery volunteering. This is deeply meaningful work for volunteers, and it can make all the difference to a recipient to know that it is a volunteer providing them with support. But as a business model it is not sustainable. The enormous increase in demand particularly across the aged and disability sectors is making this type of volunteering unsustainable and further action must be taken.

- Volunteering Tasmania must continue to question the use of volunteers in different roles, highlighting the definition of volunteering and upholding the National Standards for Volunteer Involvement as well as working across sectors with the paid workforce including unions, Government and the volunteering sector to ensure that volunteers do not impinge on roles that should be allocated to paid staff.
- The volunteering sector must scrutinise its volunteer workforce to determine if the roles it places its volunteers in are appropriate and cost effective. With the level of training and oversight required in many volunteer roles in the aged and disability sectors it would be wise to consider the cost-benefit of allocating roles to multiple volunteers rather than fewer paid staff.
- Governments have a strong interest in service delivery volunteering as it does offset costs to government and the community to engage people's time for free. But there is an obligation on government to appropriately fund the costs associated with volunteering. People's labour may be given freely but volunteering itself does not come free to organisations and should be accounted for more fully by government. This includes volunteer coordination, safety, reimbursement and administration.

Local community-based volunteering

Informal volunteering has always been a feature of society; wherever social action has been required informal volunteering has mobilised.

The civil rights movement in the USA, the union movement, suffragettes, and more recently climate action are all clear examples of communities mobilising to action through informal volunteering. There has also been an increasing trend toward informal and community/grassroots volunteering over the years. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this trend as people reconnected with their local communities (physical and virtual) and reached out to support neighbours, friends and family. As people seek to give their time with impact and are increasingly reluctant to work within regulatory frameworks, informal, community-based action will continue to rise. This needs to be acknowledged and supported.

- Volunteering Tasmania needs to better understand the basis for and trends in informal volunteering so it can harness and support this type of community mobilisation. Given this type of volunteering sits predominantly outside the traditional frameworks of volunteering, a new language and approach also need to be developed to support people wanting to contribute to their communities through these mechanisms.
- The formal volunteering sector has often been built off the actions of informal volunteers that coalesce into a more formalised structure. There is enormous scope for the volunteering sector to embrace community-based, grassroots volunteering without disrupting its essence. Several organisations are exploring how to encourage and support self-led volunteering that makes a positive contribution to community without the constraints of regulation.
- Governments rely on the informal and spontaneous acts of volunteering that occur through social movements that drive community change, but also in every natural disaster, as communities mobilise to support one another. The COVID-19 pandemic was a stark example of communities reaching out to support one another in ways governments simply could not have done. Governments need to explore how they can support this mobilisation but not interfere with it. One example could include underwriting the insurance cover of spontaneous volunteers in times of natural disasters.

A new generation of volunteers

Of all the information about volunteers and volunteering illuminated during our response to the COVID-19 pandemic, perhaps the most profound is that volunteering in our communities will never stop; it will adapt and change according to need, it will increase and decrease in response to barriers and regulations and it will remain a profound part of what connects us to each other.

“It feels ... more meaningful than work. I can give [the people I spend time with] good quality time.”

The COVID-19 pandemic and response did stop some people from engaging in volunteering, especially older and more vulnerable people who were concerned for their health. It also triggered the retirement of some volunteers who took the opportunity to take a step back from their roles and consider whether to continue with them.

At the same time, new volunteers identified themselves, acted in their communities and took on volunteering roles that have continued beyond the pandemic response. And some rediscovered an interest in volunteering through the freedom found in informal opportunities to address needs in their local areas.

In the wake of the pandemic and the opportunities it provided to shift attitudes and practicalities associated with work patterns and locations, the volunteer sector is also experiencing opportunities to shift the way we expect and support people to volunteer.

A new generation of volunteers with new skills and new definitions of connection is rising and volunteer organisations and communities will need to adapt to this and take advantage of it.

“The internet allows people to organise by themselves. Self-organised people are going to drive volunteering in the future.”

Volunteer vignette

Community radio stations encourage people to come along, share their talents in specific areas and draw in audiences that want to feel engaged and entertained.

This is part of the sustainability model of community radio ... and means managing a wide range of people with varying needs. And while this works well in creative areas, it is difficult for volunteer coordinators.

If we had more paid staff to do the higher-level work like fundraising, grants applications and advertising for training contractors, volunteer coordinators could focus on recruitment and supporting volunteers.

COVID-19 shone a light on the roles of volunteer coordinators especially during times when volunteers were not able to visit the station.

A lot of the volunteers are senior and were fearful of contracting COVID-19.

When COVID-19 hit, it made volunteers rethink why they were volunteering.

Many volunteers got out of the groove, and the longer they were away the harder it was to go back.

Other volunteers chose to stay, and it has turned out that they are the right ones for these environments. Now is the time to review recruitment of volunteers and the policies and procedures to support and manage them.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic was a unique moment in time that will inform and further catalyse the work of Volunteering Tasmania and the volunteering sector to connect and build an inclusive community that makes a difference through the impact of volunteering.

The next steps are to take these essential learnings and translate them into actions that complement current safeguarding strategies. Above all, this exploration of how the COVID-19 disruption has impacted Tasmanian volunteering confirms the resilience of volunteers and volunteering in our state.

When our frontline volunteer organisations had to adapt and change practices, they did so with innovation and speed. When people across our communities found their daily lives thrown into uncertainty and shut down to their neighbourhoods, we responded by reaching out to help each other and respond to needs we felt must be met. It is time to learn the lessons from the pandemic and ensure that volunteering is vibrant and vital for generations to come.





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