



Submission to the Consultation by the Australian Government Treasury

Measuring What Matters

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VolunteeringACT

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Volunteering and Contact ACT Ltd (trading as VolunteeringACT) is the peak body for volunteering and provides 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 values collaboration, diversity, equity, innovation, integrity and participation. VolunteeringACT is a people driven, service-focused organisation that represents the interests of 189 members, advocates for and supports volunteers, and engages with the broader Canberra community. Through our activities, we improve inclusivity, enable sustainable volunteering, and create a more resilient Canberra community.

VolunteeringACT connects people to volunteering opportunities; supports volunteer involving organisations with training, advice, and volunteer recruitment; makes sure information on services and supports is easily accessible to everyone through our Community Information services; supports people experiencing disadvantage; and provides programs to help people reconnect with their community and access supported volunteering roles.

VolunteeringACT is part of the National Network of Volunteering Peak Bodies in Australia.

VolunteeringACT acknowledges the Ngunnawal people as the traditional custodians of the Canberra region. VolunteeringACT pays respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their vital ongoing contribution to our lands.

VolunteeringACT acknowledges volunteers of all genders and sexualities, with all abilities and from all cultures. Their skills, expertise, and time are critical to delivering services and programs, and in making Canberra a better place to live. We also acknowledge the contribution of the volunteer involving organisations that contribute to the health and happiness of our community.

This submission is written as part of our commitment to ensuring the perspectives and expertise of volunteers, volunteer involving organisations and volunteer leaders informs development of public policy and contributes to achievement of positive social, economic and environmental outcomes. This submission is informed by our experience of delivering Inclusive Volunteering Programs for people with disability and ongoing consultations with these stakeholders.

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Overview

This submission makes a case for including volunteering as an essential indicator within Australia's Framework for measuring what matters to improve the lives of all Australians. Volunteering is heavily connected to a range of determinants of wellbeing and there are already several existing examples of volunteering successfully being used as an indicator within different wellbeing framework domains, both within Australia and internationally.

Volunteering, when understood as including cultural obligation and reciprocity – is embedded in the everyday cultural lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities and people from communities that experience discrimination, stigma and exclusion. Measuring volunteering presents an opportunity for greater visibility and recognition of this vast community contribution to human, economic and environment flourishing that has always occurred but has been too often under-recognised.

It is important to recognise and measure the vast contribution and 'ripple effect' that volunteering has across several important policy and service delivery areas including health/mental health, conservation and environment, tourism and events, sports, arts and culture, education, aged care, community welfare and emergency response.

Recommendations

1. That formal volunteering through an organisation or group, and informal volunteering in the community, are included as indicators in Australia's Wellbeing Framework, with the data collected via relevant questions pertaining to voluntary work included within the General Social Survey.
2. That volunteering is considered as an indicator in the Social Connections domain, but also given consideration as a potential indicator in other OECD Domains such as Health, Civic Engagement, and Work and Life Balance.

Introduction

Volunteering has a far-reaching impact as a key determinant of social inclusion, participation, and connection, and as a proven pathway to both education and employment.¹ These are all important aspects of a person's overall quality of life and generate social and economic wellbeing for them, the people they connect with and the community in which they live.

Volunteering spans every aspect of Australian life, with over 5 million Australians engaged in formal volunteering through an organisation or group in 2020.² These volunteers make an estimated annual social and economic contribution of \$290 billion³ and the volunteer workforce underpins delivery of a wide range of key services, adds value across multiple portfolios and key policy areas, and across every age and demographic group.

The Australian Government is drawing on the OECD Framework for Measuring Wellbeing and Progress as a starting point for determining what to measure to fully understand our economy and society and inform policy decisions; and stipulates the need for the final framework to reflect the uniqueness of Australian conditions and national priorities. Historically, Australia's commitment to volunteering and individuals actively getting involved to support others in their community can be traced back tens of thousands of years within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural norms, and has since evolved over the years through our colonial past, through Federation, and more recently through migration and the multicultural landscape of Australia today. This is framed as the 'Australian way of volunteering', which perfectly encapsulates our uniqueness as a nation within the volunteering context.⁴

It is important to acknowledge that volunteering may be perceived and occur quite differently in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. There is a need to learn from our First Nations colleagues and improve our understanding of the more fluid, and informal responses to supporting others in community and their long history of doing so. This important contribution to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander wellbeing and self-determination requires greater visibility.

There are already examples of wellbeing frameworks where volunteering is included as an indicator:

- The Measures of National Wellbeing Dashboard: Quality of Life in the UK has volunteering as an indicator within their 'What we Do' Domain. This domain acknowledges how personal satisfaction with and a balance of participation in work and leisure activities influence wellbeing and quality of life. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) recently updated and expanded volunteering indicators in July 2022 to reflect the GSS Social Capital harmonised standard and now capture involvement in and frequency of volunteering.⁵

¹ Spera, C., Ghertner, R., Nerino, A., & DiTommaso, A. (2013). *Volunteering as a pathway to employment: Does volunteering increase odds of finding a job for the out of work?* Office of Research & Evaluation, Corporation for National and Community Service.

² Australian Bureau of Statistics (2020) 'General Social Survey: Summary Results, Australia, 2020

³ Flinders University (31 October 2014) [Volunteering worth \\$290 billion a year - InDaily](#)

⁴ [VRP The Seven Waves of Volunteering in Australia a brief history..pdf \(volunteeringstrategy.org.au\)](#)

⁵ [Measures of National Well-being Dashboard: Quality of Life in the UK - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](#)

- New Zealand’s Living Standards Framework also includes volunteering as a measure of wellbeing in more than one of their core domains.⁶
- The ACT’s Wellbeing Framework also has volunteering as an indicator within two of the 12 wellbeing domains.⁷

Volunteering and Wellbeing – The ACT Context

In the ACT, our diverse network of volunteers contribute each day to strengthening the fabric of our communities. Volunteering strengthens social capital in our region – creating bonds between people, building bridges across diverse communities, and linking us to people and opportunities that we would not have without it. Volunteering helps make our city a fairer and more sustainable place to live, increases inclusivity for all, enables participation and connection, and contributes significantly to our economic prosperity – all necessary for individual and collective wellbeing.

We are fortunate to already have a Wellbeing Framework in place in our jurisdiction, where core determinants of wellbeing are captured via a series of indicators across 12 domains: access and connectivity; economy; education and lifelong learning; environment and climate; governance and institutions; health; housing and home, identity and belonging; living standards; safety; social connection and time.⁸

There is often a two-fold connection between volunteering and good overall health and wellbeing, providing a 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.⁹ 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.¹⁰

In terms of enhancing the wellbeing of others, volunteer-operated 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 activities or volunteer mentoring with extremely effective results. Volunteers can sometimes provide support and help facilitate solutions for people in a way that cannot always be achieved within conventional service system models. For example, the *Mentoring Young Men Program – ‘Bro-Gram’* operated in the ACT 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.¹¹

⁶ <https://www.treasury.govt.nz/sites/default/files/2021-10/tp-living-standards-framework-2021.pdf>

⁷ [Explore overall wellbeing - ACT Wellbeing Framework](#)

⁸ [Explore overall wellbeing - ACT Wellbeing Framework](#)

⁹ [Benefits of volunteering | healthdirect and Purposeful activity - volunteering | Head to Health](#)

¹⁰ [Explore overall wellbeing - ACT Wellbeing Framework](#)

¹¹ [Menslink-ImpactSurvey-Report-2022.pdf](#)

Volunteering also contributes across several other ACT Wellbeing Domains as a ‘secondary’ or ‘indirect’ indicator – even when not directly included as a specific measure within a domain. For example, within the ACT Wellbeing Domain of Environment and Climate, a core indicator is ‘*connection to nature*’, which acknowledges the importance of people living in primarily urban areas needing to connect with our natural environment/waterways for physical and mental wellbeing and measures access to these spaces. The ACT currently has very high levels of environmental volunteerism, resulting in a huge contribution to land care and preservation of the parks and reserves that make up more than 60% of the ACT land mass. Our region would not be able to maintain the current quality and care of our green spaces and waterways, and provide this connection to nature to the local population and visitors, without volunteers.¹²

How to Include Volunteering as a Wellbeing Indicator

We recommend that both formal and informal volunteering be used as measures within the framework. In terms of the OECD Framework, a volunteering indicator could fit within the Social Connections Domain. However, it would be useful to also consider where volunteering could be used as an additional indicator in other Domains such as Health, Civic Engagement, Work and Life Balance etc. This can be easily achieved via an existing ABS data collection via the General Social Survey (GSS).

The GSS is widely regarded as the most accurate and reliable estimate of the rates of volunteering in Australia and was most recently collected in 2020, with comparative data available via collections occurring in 2022, 2019, 2014, 2010 and 2006.¹³ The GSS data is more robust than other collections such as the Census or Time Use Survey because the GSS collection includes specific questions relating to both formal and informal volunteering, providing solid data on volunteering numbers across different types of activities, and with important demographic and geographical breakdowns available.¹⁴ This is important as the spread of volunteering activities helps to demonstrate the contribution of volunteers and impact across several different policy areas. The specific questions and structure are summarised below:

General Social Survey Module 7.9: Voluntary work (VOL)

Formal volunteering (***VOL_Q02***): In the last 12 months, did you do any unpaid voluntary work for any of these types of organisations?

- *Organised sporting group / team*
- *Youth group (such as guides, scouts, a choir)*
- *A charity organisation or cause*
- *Student government*
- *Religious organisation*
- *School or preschool*
- *Some other kind of volunteer work*

¹² [Values of Volunteering in the ACT - ACT Enviro Volunteers](#)

¹³ [General Social Survey: Summary Results, Australia, 2020 | Australian Bureau of Statistics \(abs.gov.au\)](#)

¹⁴ [General Social Survey: Summary Results, Australia methodology, 2020 | Australian Bureau of Statistics \(abs.gov.au\)](#)

Informal volunteering (**VOL_Q81**): In the last 4 weeks, did you help anyone [not living with you] with the following activities?

Please select all that apply:

- 10. Domestic work, home maintenance or gardening
- 11. Providing transport or running errands
- 12. Any unpaid child care
- 13. Any teaching, coaching or practical advice
- 14. Providing any emotional support
- 15. Personal care / assistance
- 16. Lobbying / advocacy
- 17. Community assistance
- 18. Environmental protection
- 19. Any other help
- 20. Did not provide unpaid help [Exclusive]

If this question is to be used, it is important to recognise that in some First Nations and Culturally and Linguistic Diverse communities, there are cultural protocols that may mean that informal activities outlined above may occur within the family home if extended family or community members are residing there for periods of time (although not actually living in that home permanently).

Research conducted as part of developing the National Volunteering Strategy 2023-2033 confirms that the volunteering landscape in Australia is changing and volunteering programs and activities are evolving. More informal models of volunteering are gaining in popularity – particularly amongst certain sections of the population, including Culturally and Linguistically Diverse communities.¹⁵ Therefore, it is important that any volunteering indicator captures informal as well as formal volunteering activities.

Authorisation

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

This submission endorses and complements the submission by Volunteering Australia.

Ms Susan Helyar
Acting Chief Executive Officer

¹⁵ [Volunteering-in-Australia-2022-The-Volunteer-Perspective.pdf \(volunteeringstrategy.org.au\)](#)