

Department of Social Services – Developing a Not-For-Profit Blueprint

Response to the Synthesis Report

Introduction

An issues paper for the development of The Not-for-profit (NFP) Blueprint was released by the Blueprint Expert Reference Group (BERG) in November 2023 on behalf of the Department of Social Services.

The NFP Blueprint is to provide a roadmap for Government reforms and sector led initiatives that will provide NFP and charity sector organisations with sustainable solutions and business models. The NFP Blueprint will include options for reform to strengthen social capital and to build a vibrant sector.

The Centre for Volunteering made a submission to the BERG last year, alongside other volunteering peak bodies.

In June 2024, the BERG published a Synthesis Report outlining the common themes of the responses that it received and the recommendations that it will make to Government regarding a NFP Blueprint. Given that many volunteer-involving organisations (VIOs) are not-for-profit organisations, we expect that this Blueprint will impact the volunteering sector.

Executive Summary

The Synthesis Report is based on 163 written submissions to the BERG and 97 NFP organisations participating in online roundtables. The core issues identified were:

- A need to rectify relationships between different levels of government and the NFP sector to make the sector's work more visible to government and the public.
- The importance of the sector actively committing to First Nations self-determination and community control.
- The need to build a legal and regulatory environment that better supports the sector by achieving consistency between NFP and Industry standards and both broadening and simplifying the deductible gift recipient system.
- The need for substantial reform to funding and procurement from the NFP sector, including provision of full funding to the sector.
- The importance of planning for and investing in the development and wellbeing of paid staff and volunteers in the NFP sector.
- The democratic and social value of preserving the sector's rights to advocacy.
- The need for rapid improvement of the sector's digital and data capabilities.

Most submissions focused on urgent issues facing the NFP sector to ensure it can continue its valuable work. The Synthesis Report also observes that the main themes covered in this inquiry are largely the same as similar inquiries conducted over the past 30 years that have not been addressed by government.

Volunteering impacts

Many of the recommendations in the report will impact VIOs since many of them are also NFPs, or they work closely with NFPs. The following observations are made of the sector:

- The report recognises the impact that sustained under-resourcing, underfunding, and neglect of the NFP sector has had on volunteers and workers, especially those working in community services.
- Short-term funding cycles impact retention of staff and volunteers in NFPs and services that can be offered. Lack of funding and uncertainty around ongoing work also impacts the nature of people's volunteering. As a result, some groups of people are more likely to volunteer informally because this offers more flexibility around changing work obligations and other commitments.
- A decline in formal volunteers is noted in the report. A range of reasons are suggested for this including the impacts of COVID-19 and the impact of "red tape" discouraging volunteers.
- Other submissions suggest that volunteering has changed, with people volunteering episodically and across multiple organisations.
- Several submissions also recognised that there was an over-reliance on volunteers and that some key roles needed to be undertaken by paid staff to meet requirements for the quality-of-service delivery, regulatory compliance, and sound industrial practices.
- Several submissions also note under-resourcing (or complete lack of resourcing) for volunteer leadership and management. This is particularly problematic considering the reliance on volunteers in the sector.

Relevant proposed actions are:

- Recognise and properly resource volunteer management.
- Enable sector voices in decisions that affect workforce development and retention.

Conclusion

We are pleased to see most of The Centre's recommendations around the volunteering sector included in the Synthesis Report. We recognise that many organisations are facing challenges recruiting volunteers and that many aspects of bureaucracy and funding contribute to this. This can be compounded by a lack of resourcing for volunteer managers.

We await the final recommendations to be made to government from the BERG and look forward to seeing material commitments to support the NFP sector and recognise the invaluable contribution of volunteers.