



Re-engaging Volunteers and COVID-19

February 2021


Volunteering
AUSTRALIA

Re-engaging Volunteers and COVID-19

Summary

Volunteers across Australia made a remarkable contribution throughout 2020 and organisations adapted and innovated to keep helping the community. Yet COVID-19 restrictions hit volunteering hard. As 2020 ended, Volunteering Australia asked the sector how well volunteering had recovered?

Volunteering has not 'snapped back' as COVID-19 restrictions are being lifted. The 'Re-engaging Volunteers and COVID-19' survey, completed by nearly 600 respondents over December 2020 and January 2021, found:

- Volunteering has not fully recovered. Nearly three quarters (72%) of respondents reported that their volunteer programs were either only partially operational (60%) or not operational (12%).
- Confidence is still weak. Four out of ten (42%) of respondents were not confident that their organisation will achieve pre-COVID levels of volunteering activity in the next six months.
- Demand for services has increased and more volunteers are needed. Four out of ten (43%) reported experiencing an increase in demand for services, with over half (56%) reporting that they need more volunteers.

Volunteering is essential to the social and economic recovery of the nation, helping sustain the wellbeing of volunteers and the organisations and communities they serve. Reinvigorating volunteering will require all elements of the volunteering ecosystem (including volunteer involving organisations, volunteer support services, peak bodies, and governments) to work together.

Volunteering Australia continues to call on the Australian Government to provide strategic leadership and investment, through a Reinvigorating Volunteering Action Plan and a whole of government national volunteering strategy.¹

Introduction

In 2020, volunteering was profoundly affected by COVID-19. Volunteering Australia commissioned the ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods² to undertake analysis of the experience of volunteers. This research found that two out of three volunteers (65.9%) stopped volunteering between February and April, an estimated 12.2 million hours of volunteering lost per week.

In April 2020, Volunteering Australia also sent out a survey to its stakeholders. Over 80% of respondents reported having stood down volunteers because of the COVID-19 situation, with around

three quarters of these reporting that they had stood down all or at least half of volunteers.

This impact of COVID-19 came on top of ongoing challenges and a decline in the likelihood of people volunteering. The latest official data³ from the Australian Bureau of Statistics estimated that, for people aged 18 years and over, the rate of formal volunteering⁴ has declined from 36.2% in 2010 to 28.8% in 2019. The decline is most evident for women, whose rate decreased from 38.1% in 2010 to 28.1% in 2019. Volunteers contributed 596.2 million hours to the community in 2019. However, this is a 20% decrease in the total number of volunteering hours from 2014 (743.3 million hours).

In 2019
6 MILLION AUSTRALIANS
VOLUNTEERED
600 MILLION HOURS 

In 2019 almost six million Australians volunteered almost 600 million hours to the community. However, these figures are a 7% decline in the rate of Australians volunteering compared to 2010 and a 20% decrease in the number of hours volunteered compared to 2014.

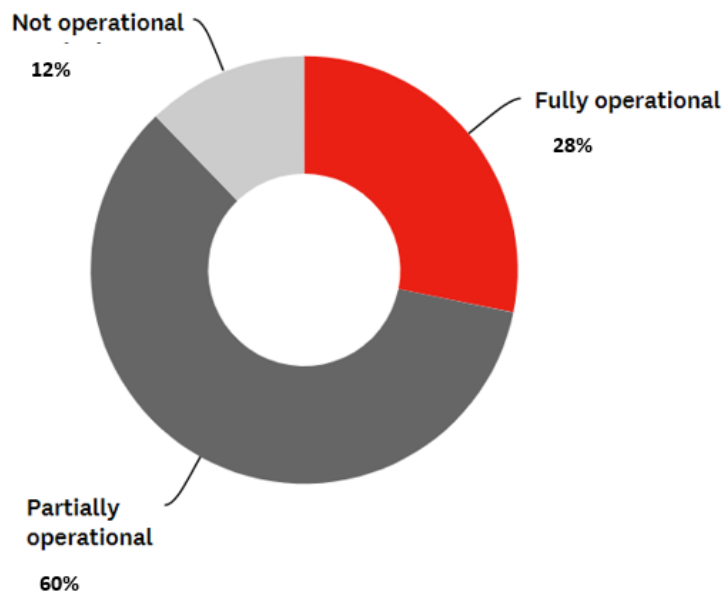
As 2020 ended, Volunteering Australia reached out to the volunteering sector to understand how well organisations had adapted to living with COVID-19. The 'Re-engaging Volunteers and COVID-19' survey received almost 600 responses. This document summarises the findings and highlights policy and practice implications.

Key findings

Current volunteering activity levels:

- 72% of respondents reported that their organisation's volunteer programs were either only partially operational (60%) or not operational (12%).
- The remainder of volunteer programs, 28%, were reported as being fully operational.
- Smaller organisations seem more likely to have not reopened volunteering programs, with one in five (21%) stating they were still not operational.

How operational are organisations' volunteer programs?

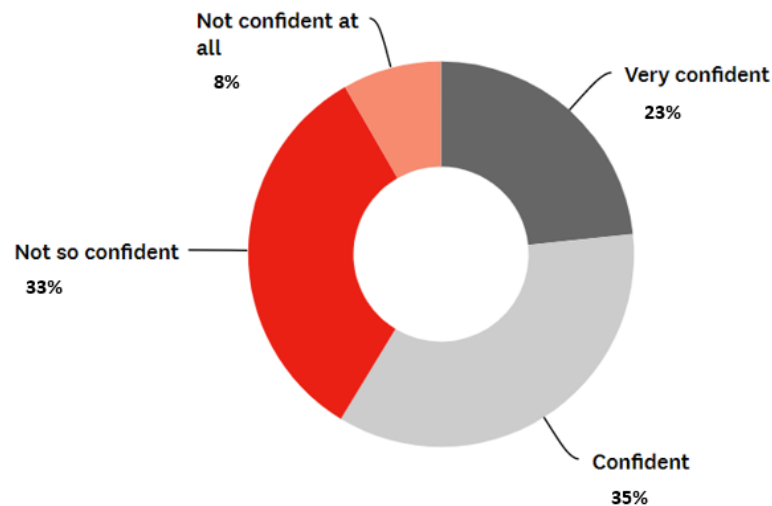


No. of volunteers	Fully operational	Partially operational	Not operational	No. of responses
0-10	29%	50%	21%	64
11-20	32%	50%	17%	76
21-50	30%	56%	14%	108
51-100	28%	62%	8%	82
101-150	17%	72%	11%	58
150+	28%	63%	8%	198

Confidence in future volunteering activity:

- 58% of respondents were confident (35%) or very confident (23%) that their organisation will achieve pre-COVID levels of volunteering activity in the next six months.
- However, 42% of respondents in total are not confident that their organisation will achieve pre-COVID levels of volunteering activity in the next six months.

Confidence of organisations achieving pre-COVID levels of volunteering in the next six months



Current experiences and opportunities:

- 43% reported experiencing an increase in demand for services, with 56% reporting that they need more volunteers.
- 25% are engaging more volunteers virtually or remotely than pre-COVID.
- 20% are seeing more young people wanting to volunteer and 30% is seeing more people wanting to volunteer as a pathway to employment.



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- 57% re-designed or adapted volunteer roles or programs in 2020; nearly 90% reported this was to comply with COVID-19 safe work practices.

Current experiences of volunteer-involving organisations



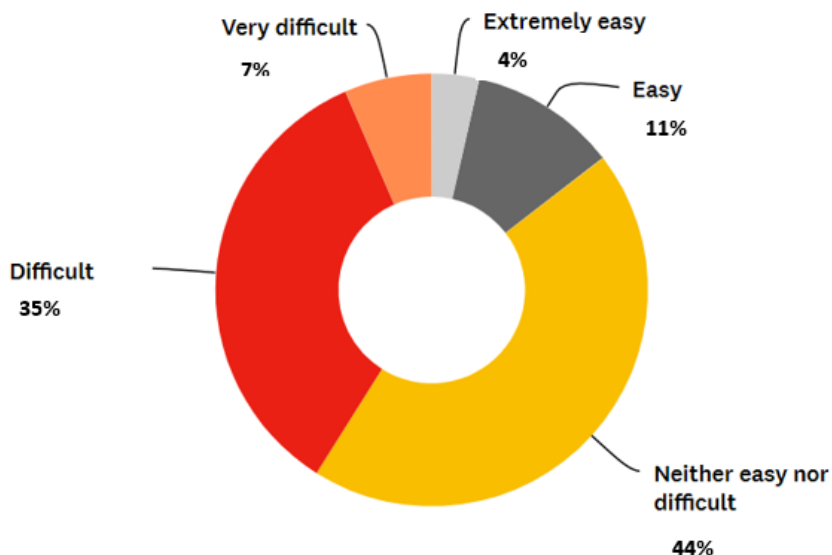
Current challenges:

- The most pressing challenge facing organisations was seen to be 'Re-engaging and recruiting volunteers' with 60% of respondents highlighting this challenge.
- This is closely followed by organisations seeing 'Maintaining connections and ensuring the mental health and well-being of volunteers' (52%) and 'Dealing with uncertainty or training volunteers because of COVID-19 requirements' (48%).
- 30% of respondents reported 'Ensuring organisational sustainability and funding' as a pressing challenge.

Re-engaging and recruiting volunteers:

- 41% of respondents reported their organisation is finding it difficult (34%) or very difficult (7%) to re-engage or recruit volunteers to the levels they would like.
- 70% report that this is because their volunteers tend to be older or in vulnerable groups.
- Other challenges included: 24% reporting that volunteers are 'more time poor and harder to engage' and 31% reporting that volunteers are 'less interested in regular, formal or longer-term volunteering commitments'.
- 23% reported that their capacity to recruit volunteers is limited.

Difficulty re-engaging or recruiting volunteers to desired levels



Support and guidance needed:

- Nearly half of respondents (48%) reported needing help with re-engaging volunteers in a COVID safe way.
- Support to ensure the mental health and wellbeing of volunteers (with 40% reporting this as a priority) and support to adapt volunteer programs to meet changing volunteer needs (again 40%) were the next two areas where people wanted help.
- 37% wanted to support or guidance in recruiting young volunteers and 20% to engage more volunteers virtually or remotely.

Policy and practice implications

This survey provides vital data on volunteering at the beginning of 2021 and how the sector has adapted to living with COVID-19. The findings have several implications for volunteering policy and practice:

- Volunteer involving organisations have shown tremendous adaptability and resilience but there is a clear need for ongoing support and new resources to help re-open volunteer programs safely, re-engage volunteers and recruit new volunteers, and support the health and wellbeing of all volunteers.

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- To reinvigorate volunteering fully will require all elements of the volunteering ecosystem to work together. This includes volunteers, volunteer involving organisations, volunteer support services, peak bodies, partner organisations and governments.
 - Governments have a distinct and vital role to play in providing strategic leadership and investment. Volunteering Australia has called upon the Australian Government to initiate a Reinvigorating Volunteering Action Plan and a whole of government national strategy for volunteering.
 - This survey provides a snapshot of how the volunteering sector has responded and current re-engagement levels. As 2021 progresses, further research will be needed to track levels of volunteer engagement and to better understand the long run decline in rates of volunteering.

About the survey

- The Survey was active from 11 December 2020 to 22 January 2021.
- In total, 584 responses were received.
- Most respondents were volunteer managers, co-ordinators or leaders (79%), followed by volunteers (16%) and other (5%).
- The survey provides a snapshot of the experiences of engaged stakeholders of Volunteering Australia.
- Organisations of all sizes participated in the survey. Organisations with 150+ volunteers were most strongly represented, making up a third (34%) of all respondents.
- Organisations from a highly diverse range of sectors responded. However, sport, recreation and religious organisations were under-represented.
- Response rates broadly correlated with State or Territory population size, except for Queensland which had a low response rate given its population.

¹ Volunteering Australia, January 2021, [*Pre-Budget Submission*](#)

² Volunteering Australia commissioned research – The Australian National University (ANU), Centre for Social Research and Methods, May 2020, [*The experience of volunteers during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic*](#)

³ The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), November 2020, [*General Social Survey: Summary Results, Australia – Voluntary work and unpaid work*](#)

⁴ Formal volunteering is volunteering through an organisation.

About Volunteering Australia

Volunteering Australia is the national peak body for volunteering, working to advance volunteering in the Australian community.

Volunteering Australia's vision is to promote strong, connected communities through volunteering. Our mission is to lead, strengthen, promote and celebrate volunteering.



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