# Understanding the Youth Volunteer

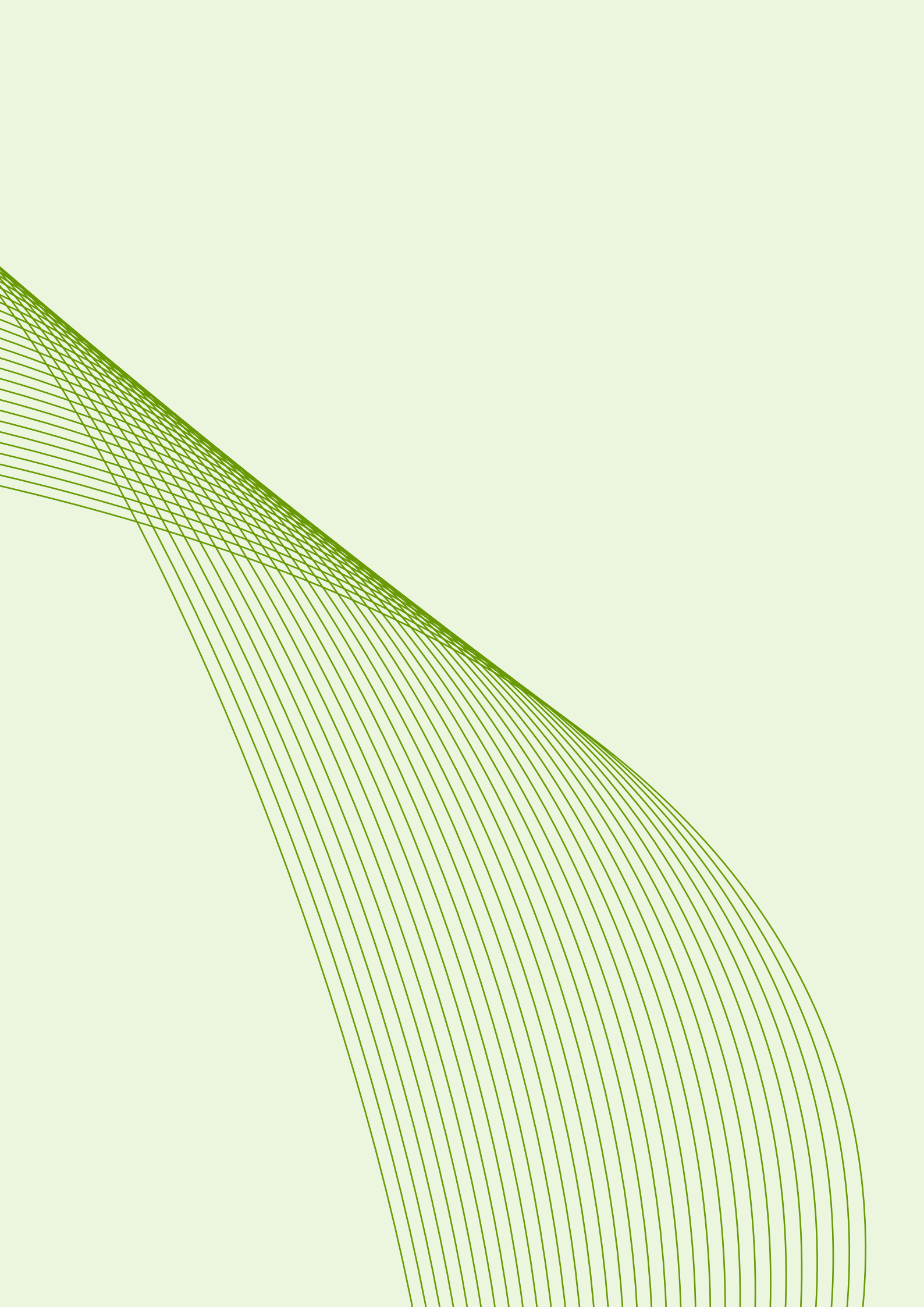
## Insights Report

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PUBLIC SKILLS AUSTRALIA

PUBLIC SAFETY SKILLS AUSTRALIA LTD



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# Acknowledgement of Country

Public Skills Australia pays its respects to Elders past, present and emerging, and extends its respect to all First Nations people of this land. We acknowledge and thank them for their continuing role as the caretakers of land, water, and country.

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# Introduction

Volunteer figures are a concern across Australia, with the number of fire and emergency management volunteers decreasing over the 10 years from 2015/2026 by 16 per cent.

Public Skills Australia's *2025 Public Safety Workforce Insights Report* identified a challenge for the Fire and Emergency Services industry-sector in recruiting and retaining youth volunteers[1]. To address this, the project 'Understanding the Youth Volunteer' was established to understand more about drivers for volunteer youth attraction, recruitment and retention. This Insights Report shares experiences and perspectives of young people volunteering in Fire and Emergency Services, providing insights for organisations seeking to engage and retain youth volunteers to consider.

This report is divided into the following sections:

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Attraction and recruitment** | **The volunteer experience** | **Opportunities to strengthen the experience** | **Building skills beyond volunteering** |

The Insights Report emphasises insights obtained from surveys and facilitated workshops with participants.

## Methodology

The insights were drawn from a mixed methods approach, combining survey analysis and workshops, facilitated between February – April 2026. Hearing directly from young people about their experiences volunteering in the Fire and Emergency Services was powerful, contributing insights to an evidence base for a previously identified evidence gap. Participants were aged under 30 years and currently volunteering in Firefighting, State Emergency Services (SES) and Surf Lifesaving (SLS) organisations. As participants brought a passion for their volunteering to the project, this Insights Report thematically analyses their experiences, to capture a sample of perspectives on the youth volunteering experience.

[1] The rates of young people volunteering overall are also falling. Young people represented the largest decline in volunteering in Australia in 2020, with the formal volunteering rate (with an organisation or group) for the 15-24 years age group falling from 28.8 per cent in 2019 to 19.4 per cent in 2020. See Key Volunteering Statistics (March 2024), Volunteering Australia, available at https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/Volunteering-Australia-Key-Volunteering-Statistics-2024-Update.pdf, p.13.

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# What do you enjoy the most about volunteering?




Public Skills Australia is grateful to the dedicated young people who participated, their families that supported their input, and the people and organisations who coordinated their participation.

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# Attraction and Recruitment

## Why do young people volunteer?

Young people who participated in this project indicated that they share the aspirational and altruistic motivations of other volunteers and that they are driven in part by three motivations:

| Attraction and recruitment | The volunteer experience | Opportunities to strengthen the experience |
|---|---|---|

## Family and social motivation

Some young people volunteer due to their family history of volunteering and influence from parents and older siblings. Others joined first and subsequently inspired their family to join. This suggests that family and social influence are strong motivators for young people to volunteer. Seeing family members actively participate as a volunteer builds awareness and engagement around the possibilities created by volunteering, with some participants indicating that they volunteer to "*to keep the family tradition going*". Surf lifesaving participants referenced a shared love of the beach with their family as motivation, and cited volunteering as a way for the family to continue enjoying the ocean together. Some participants shared that their parents were motivated to sign up children to join the Nippers programs to learn new water and safety around water skills. Family ties and social influence were identified as an 'informal recruitment pathway' with some noting that close proximity to a brigade motivated them in a similar way.

## Skills motivation

The potential for skills development in Fire and Emergency Services was identified as a strong motivator for volunteering. The fact that most training is undertaken in person and involves practical life skills was also a strong motivator. Participants indicated that the skills development challenge and variety associated with fire and emergency services work were among the most enjoyable aspects of volunteering, "I learn something new every day – no two fires or administrative activities are the same". The benefits of structured training were also referenced, including entry-point programs such as Cadets, Nippers and community service components of Duke of Edinburgh programs (while at school). Some participants enjoyed the benefits of skills development through structured training, while others cited enjoying the Duke of Edinburgh pathways as a reason for continuing their skills development. Another group cited the appeal of cumulative pathways available (e.g. scouts at age four, marine rescue at age nine) as attractive.

## Values-driven motivation

Participants shared values-driven motivations for joining volunteer organisations: "*to do something that was bigger than myself, be part of a community, give back to my area and challenge/develop myself*". They further shared how motivating it is to see "*a very small snapshot of when [volunteers] made a pretty big difference*" in social media and the news. Volunteering to contribute to the 'public good'[2], motivations "*to give back*" and altruistic motivations to "*to protect the risk of the community*" were all shared and connected by participants to values-driven motivations.

Regionally-based participants expressed that they were motivated by a volunteering-focused community culture. Some indicated that after volunteering elsewhere (e.g. the Lions Club), they were motivated to volunteer at a Fire and Emergency Services organisation.

Having a positive experience with receiving emergency services assistance was also shared as motivation to volunteer. Some participants indicated that having a positive experience as a community member requiring Fire and Emergency Services, motivated them to join to volunteer. Being on the receiving end of positive service is recognised as a motivation to be part of providing a positive experience to others[3]. Motivations to contribute for some participants outweighed challenging impacts on work-life balance, (such as disliking getting home at 2am). Some participants agreed that the drive to contribute outweighed any frustration at practical impacts on their lives.

[2] See Nursey-Bray, M., Kamal, M., Di Giacomo, G., 'Building a Culture for Encouraging Regional Youth into Volunteering', final report (2020), p.3; available at https://nylga.sa.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Final-Report-Youth-Volunteering-20-April-2020.pdf

[3] See 2025 State of Volunteering Report, Volunteering Victoria, p.24, available at https://www.volunteeringvictoria.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/VV0012-VV-SOVR-Report-FINAL.pdf

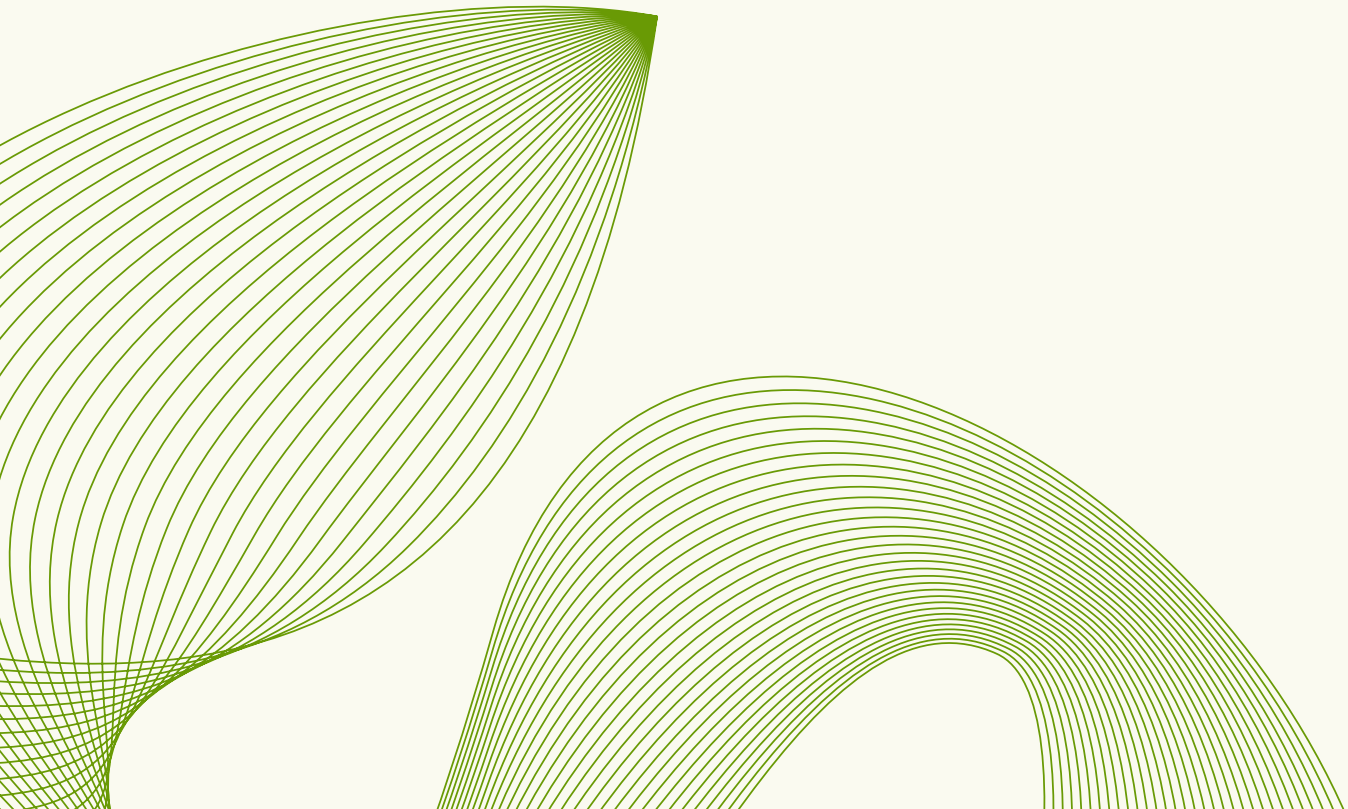
# Considerations

**Fire and Emergency Services organisations may wish to consider:**

Consider the potential of focusing recruitment and retention campaigns on attracting families rather than individual young people, as participants acknowledged the influence of family on their decision to commence volunteering.

Celebrate and promote the practical and in-person skills development in recruitment and retention campaigns, as participants viewed these skills as being personally beneficial and a motivator to volunteer.

Focus on the values that support the objective of protecting life and property during recruitment and retention campaigns, as participants acknowledged this as an aspirational motivator.



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# The volunteer experience

## What are the benefits and opportunities for young volunteers?

Participants found benefits in the volunteer experience but broadly acknowledge that there are opportunities to strengthen this experience. This section focuses on the opportunities available to young people through volunteering in Fire and Emergency Services and identifies ways to strengthen the youth volunteer experience.

## Benefits for young volunteers

Four broad benefits associated with a positive volunteer experience were recognised by participants:

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Expanding social connections** | **Working with others** | **Growing personally** | **Making a positive impact** |

[4] For example, the Youth Barometer 2025 found that 42 per cent of young people agreed or strongly agreed that it is easier to connect with others online than in person. See Walsh, Lucas; Huynh, Thuc Bao; Deng, Zihong (2025). The 2025 Australian Youth Barometer, Monash Centre for Youth Policy and Education Practice; Monash University, p.60, available at https://doi.org/10.26180/30184270.v2

[5] Volunteering Australia's Pre-Budget Submission 2026-2027 (December 2025), p.4, https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/Volunteering-Australia-pre-Budget-Sub-2026-27.pdf

[6] Social connections go beyond family and friendship networks to include neighbourhoods, online, school and workplaces. 'Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community', 2023, p.8, available at https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf

## Expanding social connections

Connecting and spending time with like-minded people was a strong focus for participants. They emphasised that this was one of the aspects of volunteering that they enjoyed most: "*being able to be part of a community of people working towards a common goal is invaluable*". Volunteering in-person in Fire and Emergency Services may provide important social connection experiences, at a time where young people tend to generally connect with others online[4]. More broadly, volunteering provides significant social benefits, including enhanced physical and mental wellbeing, a sense of purpose through meaningful contribution, and stronger connections to local communities .

Sustaining social connections is critical to individual wellbeing[6] , with broader research findings recognising that volunteering is an opportunity to build important connection experiences[7].

For participants, the positive impact of volunteering with others has momentum to mitigate social disconnection and loneliness[8]. Several participants shared the benefits of connecting with others as a key motivator to continue to volunteer. Many participants agreed that the 'vibe and culture' of their organisation were positive as reflected in the quotes below:

*"I would 100% recommend it, or getting involved somehow, because you meet amazing people who might have a background somewhere else and they bring amazing knowledge to the fire ground and to training. You meet lifelong friends as well and the training you receive from your crew and DFES is amazing".*

*"My only regret is not joining sooner (I was 16 when I joined). You get to spend time with like-minded people and help the community at the same time. There are multiple pathways that cater to most people".*

*"The thing I love most about RFS is the people in the service and the way we are all here for the same goal: the community. It has also been a really good social aspect of my life – providing new friendships and networking opportunities".*

[8] The 2025 Australian Youth Barometer outlines how in 2024, 70.3 per cent of young people aged 18–24 reported feeling lonely at least some of the time. See Walsh et al (2025), p.61.

[7] Research on the decline in volunteering following the COVID-19 pandemic has also pointed out that during future crises, supporting people to volunteer could bolster both their wellbeing and social connection. See Biddle, N., & Grey, M., 'Ongoing trends in Volunteering in Australia', ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods, Australian National University, October 2023, p.14.

## Working with others

Learning on the job how to work with others was valued by participants, who viewed it as an opportunity to develop critical teamwork and collaboration skills. On a professional level, participants flagged this as an opportunity to develop strong networks, gain new perspectives and build friendships and mentorships.

Several participants emphasised the importance of a strong support network during stressful times:

> *"I've been able to expand my network and seek support beyond my immediate reach, which has helped in those tougher times".*

> *"Being part of [my brigade] has shown me how powerful teamwork really is. No one does this job alone — you trust the people beside you, and they trust you back".*

Having an effective 'social safety net' was important to participants, including how the ability to rely on others in a crisis is critical. They further indicated that the subsequent camaraderie and cohesion resulting from the 'social safety net' supported their resilience to respond to the demands of fire and emergency services work[9] .



## Growing personally

Personal growth and confidence were strong drivers discussed by participants. They discussed learning something new every day (and growing personally) from their varied experiences as a volunteer, as demonstrated below:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| *"No two incidents are the same" and how "the life lessons and skills I've gained… have been invaluable".* | *"Volunteering hasn't just been a role – it's shaped who I am today and continues to influence my choices, goals and outlook on life".* | *"The opportunities are endless, I have witnessed experiences no ordinary 17-year-old has. I have heard stories like no other and I have explored Western Australia with my teams".* |
| *"Given me immense confidence".* | *"I am a stronger, more confident version of myself and I've been able to expand my network and seek support".* | *"Just how it has made me so much more confident in myself and how I can share my knowledge for a positive impact".* |

Increased self-confidence from volunteering was also viewed as extending beyond the initial volunteer experience, with examples such as having more confidence in public speaking, getting out of a comfort zone, staying grounded and being calm under pressure, carrying over into work, study and everyday life.

Resilience and perseverance were also discussed by participants as supporting their own ability to act independently and be more prepared. Personal growth became central to most participant discussions when sharing their volunteering experience.

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[9] Beyond Blue researchers also found how cohesion at the team level was an important workplace factor linked to resilience in first responders. See Hilbrink, D. 'Social connection and resilience', Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience, excerpted from Australian Journal of Emergency Management Volume 38 No. 4, October 2023, p.29, available at: https://knowledge.aidr.org.au/media/10398/ajem-2023-04_12.pdf

## Making a positive impact

Supporting the community during an emergency response was a key motivator to continue volunteering amongst participants. Further, the challenging nature of emergency incidents provided important tangible markers showing the value of volunteers' contributions. Being able to serve their local community was important to them and featured strongly when recommending others to engage in volunteering. Some also indicated that they recommended volunteering in life as "*we all benefit from volunteers at some point*":

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| *"The feeling of genuinely helping people on one of the worst days of their lives — and knowing that what we do actually makes a difference"* | *"Being able to serve my own community means a lot to me. It's not just a role — it's something I'm proud of"* | *"It's rewarding – being able to help people during some of the hardest moments in their lives is an incredibly fulfilling experience"* |
| *"Volunteering has been one of the most rewarding experiences of my life. It's taught me resilience, teamwork, and leadership, and given me a sense of purpose in my community"* | *"I love that on the emergency side I get to help people on what could potentially be the worst day of their life. I can try and help to make it that little bit better by having a chat"* | *"Go beyond just volunteering [when getting] to contribute directly to the safety and wellbeing of your local community"* |

Making a positive impact was also discussed as influencing how some young volunteers formed their personal identities in relation to who they are and who they want to be. This aligns directly on how participants indicated they want the world to view and value them. This could feed into a self-sustaining culture of volunteering, where an identity as a volunteer acts as a key driver to continue to volunteer.

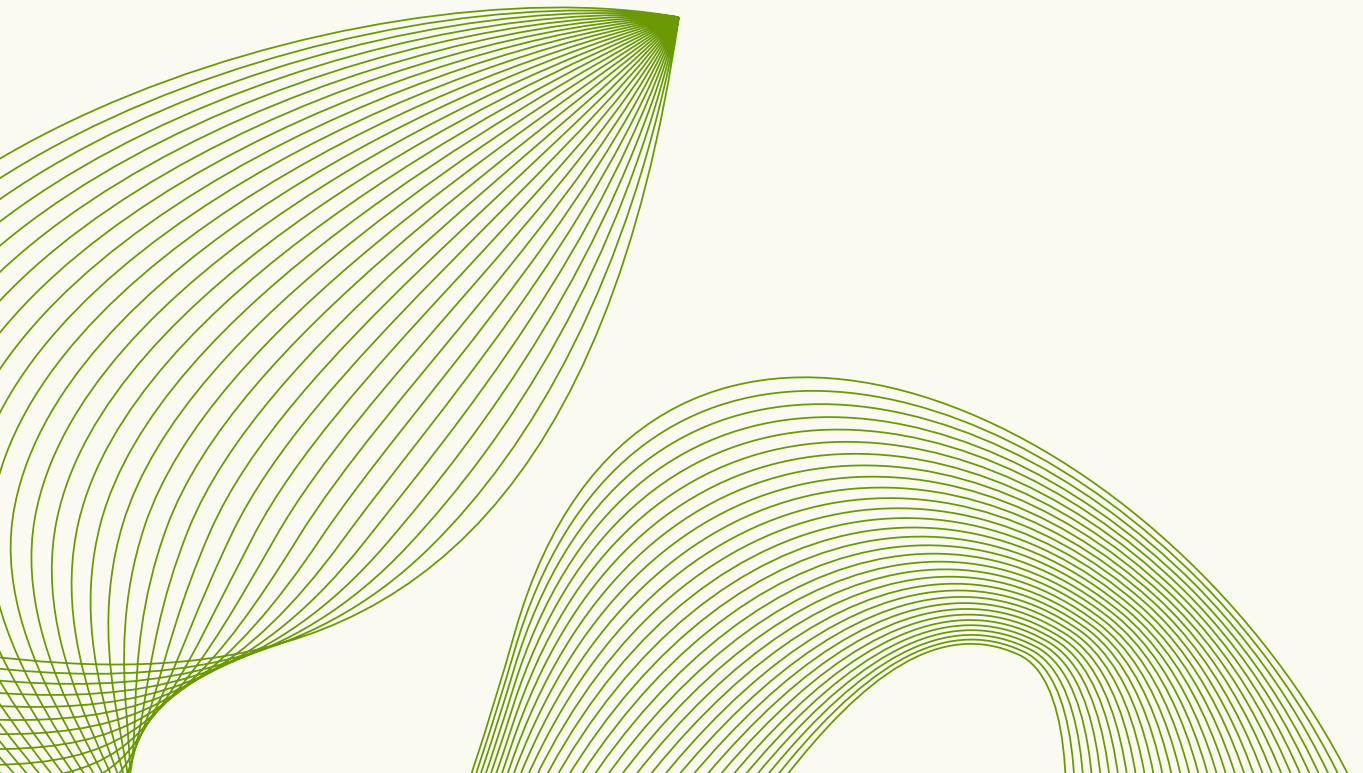
# Considerations

**Fire and Emergency Services organisations may wish to consider:**

Build and share the benefits of social connections to enhance the volunteer experience, as participants acknowledged that an individual's positive experience may impact whether they continue volunteering.

Value teamwork and collaboration more deeply, as participants acknowledged that strong support networks with fellow volunteers are important for resilience in emergency services work, and may provide valuable supports beyond volunteering.

Focus on using community-focused messaging that emphasises making a positive impact, which may support recruitment and retention of young volunteers, as participants acknowledged this as a key driver.



# Opportunities for young volunteers

This section identifies opportunities to enhance the young volunteer experience, by considering both short-term and longer-term investments for organisations to consider. These investments are further delineated on the next page.

| SHORT-TERM INVESTMENT | | LONGER-TERM INVESTMENT | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Balancing commitments | Increasing support | Growing culture | Supporting cost pressures |

## Balancing commitments

Job and education and training commitments were flagged as challenges by participants. For example, one participant shared a personal experience of informing their employer that they were still attending an emergency incident from the night before – which was not well received by the employer. Participants agreed that such circumstances are not always understood by employers and could appreciate that this would be challenging for employers to accommodate within working hours.

Participants indicated that they would appreciate if such consideration could be taken into account when decisions are made about paging them to attend an emergency incident. They did indicate that they personally take these considerations into account when deciding whether to respond to being paged:

*"On a brigade level, we really struggle cause most people work 9 till 5, but emergencies happen twenty-four-seven. I'm a teacher and I know that if the pager goes off at 4:00 in the morning, I'm really pushing my luck cause I don't know if I'm gonna [sic] be there for 20 minutes or 4 hours, and I can't just take a day off on that kind of short notice"*

*"Balancing with work. Fire calls and deployments are mostly within work hours – without a supportive employer, your opportunities are significantly decreased"*

*"I work, I'm a full-time student, I volunteer with [emergency services] and I volunteer in other places and then obviously you want to have a social life on top of that. So it's finding that balance. It becomes really hard, especially when you're out at 2:00 in the morning for a call out and then have to get up to go work the next day"*

Participants indicated that time pressures broadly factored into their decision-making to volunteer, as the dedication of time required is "*heavier than most hobbies and interests*". This is important as other research shows that those working over 35 hours a week are already less likely, comparatively, to volunteer due to time commitments required . Additionally, finding time to commit to volunteering was getting harder to justify due to cost-of-living pressures and family commitments.

Although travel to and from volunteering activities is a time pressure, participants only peripherally identified travel as somewhat of a challenge. Recommendations from other research to offer flexibility to young volunteers by providing remote options and digital participation[11] are not directly adaptive to Fire and Emergency Services, as delivering face-to-face services remain a core component of attending emergency incidents.

## Increasing support

The importance of support services was identified by participants, particularly services related to mental and physical wellbeing. This presents an opportunity for organisations to offer enhanced support services, particularly in relation to seeking help and overcoming stigma (for mental health issues in particular).

The challenging nature of emergency incidents, of "*seeing horrible things*", was not identified as a deterrent by participants, with teamwork recognised as an effective mechanism to debrief:

> *"I think because the severity of some of the stuff that we go to really forces you almost to actually reconsider how you think about your own mental health and how a lot of people think about their mental health. When we're looking at some of the training (in this area) that's there, there's some really good learning for people that are open to accepting it"*

> *"I have reached out to [the support services provided] and now I sit down with someone every 3, 4 or 5 months whenever I need to so. I do get help when I need it now, but it probably took me longer just because the stigma around it and oh, you have to speak to someone about this"*

As volunteer roles in Fire and Emergency Services are often physically demanding, with "*long shifts, heavy equipment, and extreme conditions take a lot out of you*", this highlights the importance of an organisational focus on physical wellbeing, and opportunities to teach healthy habits and promote physical fitness training.

[10] Those working over 35 hours are less likely to volunteer than those working part-time or not working at all, see Biddle & Grey (2023), p.10.

[11] Volunteering Victoria found that while a legacy from the COVID-19 pandemic was a push for greater flexibility of volunteering opportunities, sectors like emergency relief services where volunteer roles could not be performed remotely negatively affected volunteers. See 2025 State of Volunteering Report, Volunteering Victoria, pp. 34, 44.

## 'Growing' culture

Participants reflected positively on their volunteer organisations, citing a feeling of belonging and discussed how organisational culture shapes and impacts their experience. These discussions further identified leadership styles and broader interactions where interpersonal conflict, organisational 'politics' and an overall 'resistance to change' were identified as impacting participant experience.

To appeal more broadly to all communities across Australia, the *National Strategy for Volunteering* identifies that organisations need to translate what volunteering looks like from the perspective of different communities, including from different cultural perspectives and interpretations of volunteering . Several participants referred to 'ego' prevalent in Fire and Emergency Services organisations as challenging; mostly related to perceptions about age – directly connecting age and capability. Participants felt that young volunteers were indirectly assumed to not be as capable as older volunteers while, regardless of age, volunteers undergo the same training. They felt that capability training should be distinguished from experience, as training builds the same capability regardless of age.

As feeling ostracised due to their younger age was identified as a theme, some participants further connected this to resistance to change and a lack of openness to new ways of volunteering. Several participants suggested that organisations could focus on ways to empower new members to succeed and support young people to "*deal with negative views from the older generation*". The concept of inclusion for participants was also expanded to include gender, which holds different nuances to age only:

*"[With] the negative end of I feel like I belong, and not necessarily because I'm not supported by the people in my brigade or [organisation] in general, but I am a young girl in a mainly male dominated service, where most of the men are older as well. So no matter …, I'm still always gonna [sic] be the odd one out in one way or another, even if they do try and support me. It's not necessarily their fault, but it is very … isolating at times"*

*"It doesn't matter where you're from or where you're going to a fire. You could be travelling 80 hours to get there and you just see these faces you've never seen before in your life, but somehow they're still a familiar face. No matter who you are, no matter whether you know each other or not and you just know everyone that's doing it all has a similar interest. So everyone just gets along"*

Building inclusion and fostering a sense of belonging across an organisation appeals to young people and enables the attraction of an age-diverse volunteer group. Participants shared that they recommended volunteering to others as it's fulfilling, rewarding and "*a place to belong in such a diverse group*".

This was further emphasised with some commenting how they were enthused by finding commonality with volunteers across hundreds of brigades in their state or territory, despite coming from different places.

The hierarchical nature of Fire and Emergency Service organisations can also be challenging for young volunteers. The prompt 'I feel supported by my leaders' scored comparatively lower than other prompts about organisational culture, highlighting the important impact of leadership on young volunteers.

## Supporting cost pressures

Cost pressures impacting volunteer engagement have been flagged by Volunteering Australia, with suggestions for the government to consider providing cost-of-living relief options such as expanded volunteer grants programs[13] . Cost-of-living pressures impacting participants include costs such as fuel prices, which may also suggest specific cost pressures for regionally-based young volunteers who need to travel across larger areas. Although some participants suggested alternative incentives to increase volunteering such as a volunteer stipend, no other types of direct financial incentives were raised[14]:

*"Because one of the main barriers for young people to join is the cost of living, the incentives for volunteering need to be advertised more. Things like the free national parks pass and NRMA discounts are a good example. If these incentives were expanded / advertised, recruitment will be easier"*

[13] Volunteering Australia's Pre-Budget Submission 2026-2027, p.3.

[14] Some future-scoping scenarios outline how different stakeholders disagree about the impact and effectiveness of offering rewards and incentives for emergency response volunteering. McLennan, B. (2022), Planning for an uncertain future: future scenarios for emergency volunteering in Australia. Volunteering Australia, p.8, https://volunteeringstrategy.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/VRP_Planning-for-an-uncertain-future-future-scenarios-for-emergency-volunteering-in-Australia.pdf.

# Considerations

**Fire and Emergency Services organisations may wish to consider:**

Offer variable timeslots for training sessions, as participants acknowledged that emergencies are unplanned, therefore activities that can be planned (such as training), should be flexible.

Provide opportunities for young people to become future leaders.

Promote mental and physical wellbeing through bespoke services for young volunteers.

Identifying the incentives available, particularly those that can impact costs associated with volunteering.

Promote success stories of young volunteers, and their contributions.



5

# Improvement opportunities

## What opportunities exist to improve the young volunteer experience?

This section identifies improvement opportunities that may support recruitment and retention strategies for young volunteers. These opportunities are based on participants' reflections on what appealed to them during different phases of their volunteer experience.

| During recruitment | After onboarding | Throughout volunteering | Seeking innovation |
|---|---|---|---|

## During recruitment

### Showcase real young volunteer experiences

Young volunteers may benefit from bespoke recruitment campaigns, as what appeals to other volunteers may not necessarily be a motivator for them. Participants indicated that increasing social media campaigns (targeted at teenagers and younger people) and promoting the rewarding nature of volunteering would be more appealing to this cohort. If this is partnered with showcasing real stories and experiences of young volunteers, the appeal may be enhanced exponentially.

Some participants indicated that didn't know what to expect before joining. They discussed the value of directly dispelling common myths and assumptions about volunteering to allow young people to be able to picture themselves volunteering.

*"I think it's a massive difference from what you get on the news and social media when you actually join that team and you realise what volunteering actually can look like"*

*"I had no idea. I started as a cadet and … I'm now a brigade captain, and there was nothing about how to know how to get there. It was just a bit different to show you how it all works"*

Promoting the variety of volunteering roles available was also identified as valuable, as this may appeal to a broader group. Participants indicated that demonstrating that not all volunteers need to be on the frontline and that there are other roles available in administration, youth mentoring and community events, may result in attracting more younger people.

## Use social influence strategically

Several participants expressed an interest in organisations expanding beyond a Facebook page to broaden points of contact with young people and include types of social media that are more frequently used by younger cohorts. Volunteering Victoria points to similar feedback, by using "*more age appropriate social media to our age group (TikTok, Instagram)*"[15]. Involving current young volunteers directly in the design and scope of targeted social media attraction campaigns presents an opportunity, with participants indicating that they enjoyed helping promote what young volunteers do by creating social media posts and content.

Fire and Emergency Services organisations will need to consider legislative changes regarding social media (in their recruitment campaigns targeting young people), noting the restrictions that came into effect in December 2025 for under-16s and their use of social media platforms[16]. Participants further discussed the potential appeal of creating practical, in-person experiences like a 'hands-on taster day', where young people get to use gear, drills and teamwork in a safe environment.

The importance of personal social networks was raised by the participants, who expressed an openness to engaging other young people directly via their friendship groups to promote volunteering.

[15] See 2025 State of Volunteering Report, Volunteering Victoria, p.73.w

[16] The eSafety Commissioner has been focusing on 10 age-restricted social media platforms: Facebook, Instagram, Kick, Reddit, Snapchat, Threads, TikTok, Twitch, X (formerly Twitter) and YouTube; https://www.esafety.gov.au/sites/default/files/2026-03/SocialMediaMinimumAgeComplianceUpdateMarch2026.pdf?v=1777270750007

# After onboarding

### Provide clearer communication and training supports

Participants identified that increasing the 'structure' of training, partnering this with clear and consistent feedback and limiting the length of training per activity, would strengthen the volunteer experience.

> "having someone to guide you through training or the first few call-outs can make a huge difference".

> "I'd like to emphasise that while it's challenging — physically, mentally, and emotionally — having support, mentorship, and clear training makes a world of difference. If the service can continue improving in these areas, more young people will feel confident and excited to volunteer, and the whole community benefits"

Participants further discussed the important role that effective mentoring played in their volunteer experience. Inclusive approaches to training were also emphasised, with participants advocating for more tailored training approaches for younger neurodivergent volunteers.

# Throughout volunteering

### Promote leadership pathways

Opportunities to join leadership forums, workshops and participate in broader state-level leadership activities were identified by participants as a way in which young volunteers could actively consolidate their leadership skills. The positive impact of developing leadership skills through peer leadership networks was also flagged, with one participant reflecting how their membership on a Youth Advisory Council was what they enjoyed the most about their volunteering role.

Participants also indicated that they found mentoring and supporting other young volunteers fulfilling. Fire and Emergency Services organisations also have a useful opportunity to learn directly from their young leaders and develop a greater understanding of the diverse communities their organisation serves[17].

[17] MacDonald, F., 'Young people and the emergency services: working towards inclusive partnerships', Institute of Sustainable Industries and Liveable Cities, Victoria University, 2021, p.4; available at: https://vuir.vu.edu.au/42004/1/young_people_and_the_emergency_services_2021.pdf

# Seeking innovation

## Promote digital technology and limit bureaucracy

Participants highlighted opportunities for Fire and Emergency Services organisations to embrace new digital technologies to reduce the burden of excess paperwork (bureaucracy). They also advocated for more administrative support for their local areas. Although participants understood the importance of regulatory reporting, they flagged how related administration was time consuming, limiting time intended for firefighting work. They discussed how greater use of digital technology could limit administration.

## Encourage consistency of practice and planning

Participants discussed the lack of consistency of practice between their areas and advocated for greater consistency. This suggestion is in line with broader momentum to build consistency in acknowledgment of volunteer training between different states and territories, noting that they may be expected to respond to an emergency incident across borders[18]. The theme of consistency followed through to consistency of planning which, when clear and reliable, provides a stronger sense of overall direction and purpose.

[18] Emergency management volunteering, April 2026; Volunteering Australia, available at: https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/policy/emergency-management-volunteering/. The National Strategy for Disaster Resilience also refers to standardisations, such as using consistency methods in risk and impact assessments across jurisdictions to enable information sharing, see National Disaster Resilience strategy (20 ), p.7, https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/emergency/files/national-strategy-disaster-resilience.pdf

# Considerations

**Fire and Emergency Services organisations may wish to consider:**

Targeting young volunteers to assist with using social media and social influence to promote volunteering.

Continuing and enhancing effective mentorship programs for young volunteers and similarly allow for young volunteers to mentor and coach others.

Reducing administration where possible using new digital technologies.

Continue to enhance youth leadership programs.

6

# Life skills

## What life skills are young volunteers gaining?

Participants expressed enthusiasm about transferring the skills they've acquired through their volunteering experience and spoke at length on how these skills could support them in pathways for employment and building careers. Beyond building specific career-orientated skills, participants valued the ongoing opportunities to learn from the practical hands-on nature of volunteering in Fire and Emergency Services. Participants recommended volunteering to others specifically as it provides access to continuous learning.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Employability skills** | **Stress management skills** | **Fire and Emergency Services Skills** |

## Stress management skills

Participants discussed that learning how to work with others in high-stress environments and manage harm during stressful situations were especially valued. Learning in pressurised situations was also flagged as important when building resilience to manage stress and wellbeing.

Working in high-stress environments was identified as enabling young volunteers to deal with unpredictability and intensity of challenging situations.

Particularly, participants shared that they had gained skills to stay alert and calm and make quick decisions to help keep themselves and others safe. They also discussed the emotional resilience skills gained by witnessing firsthand how their communities' homes and lives are impacted.

Participants noted the value of life skills (such as working in complex contexts and operating in dangerous and high-performance environments) as additional skills, over and above the technical skills they accumulate during training.

They also indicated that these life skills helped them feel confident that they could gain employment and work towards a career:

"There's no pay, sometimes the hours are long, unforgiving and you can't unsee some things, but there's benefits of free education, skills maintenance, friendship and a sense of purpose".

"I think when you go to a scene like that, being able to control yourself as well, not just the public but to manage yourself, that's a big skill I've learned".

"It has helped me understand how much simple events can affect someone's life and mental health, and how sometimes they just need someone to chat to for them to feel better again".

## Employability skills

Participants identified skills gained through volunteering that they felt contributed to making them more 'employable'. These included leadership, communication, problem-solving, time management, public speaking and interpersonal skills.

These were emphasised as participants felt they were transferable and could support employment and various careers:

"There's no pay, sometimes the hours are long, unforgiving and you can't unsee some things, but there's benefits of free education, skills maintenance, friendship and a sense of purpose".

"I think when you go to a scene like that, being able to control yourself as well, not just the public but to manage yourself, that's a big skill I've learned".

"It has helped me understand how much simple events can affect someone's life and mental health, and how sometimes they just need someone to chat to for them to feel better again".

## Fire and Emergency Services skills

Some participants indicated that one career that they considered for ongoing employment was in Fire and Emergency Services. Others felt more drawn to translating their volunteering experience into related careers, including in healthcare and public safety sectors:

"In general, any sort of logistics coordination with fire or SES, any of those incident management-type roles. I think that would be a very rewarding career path"

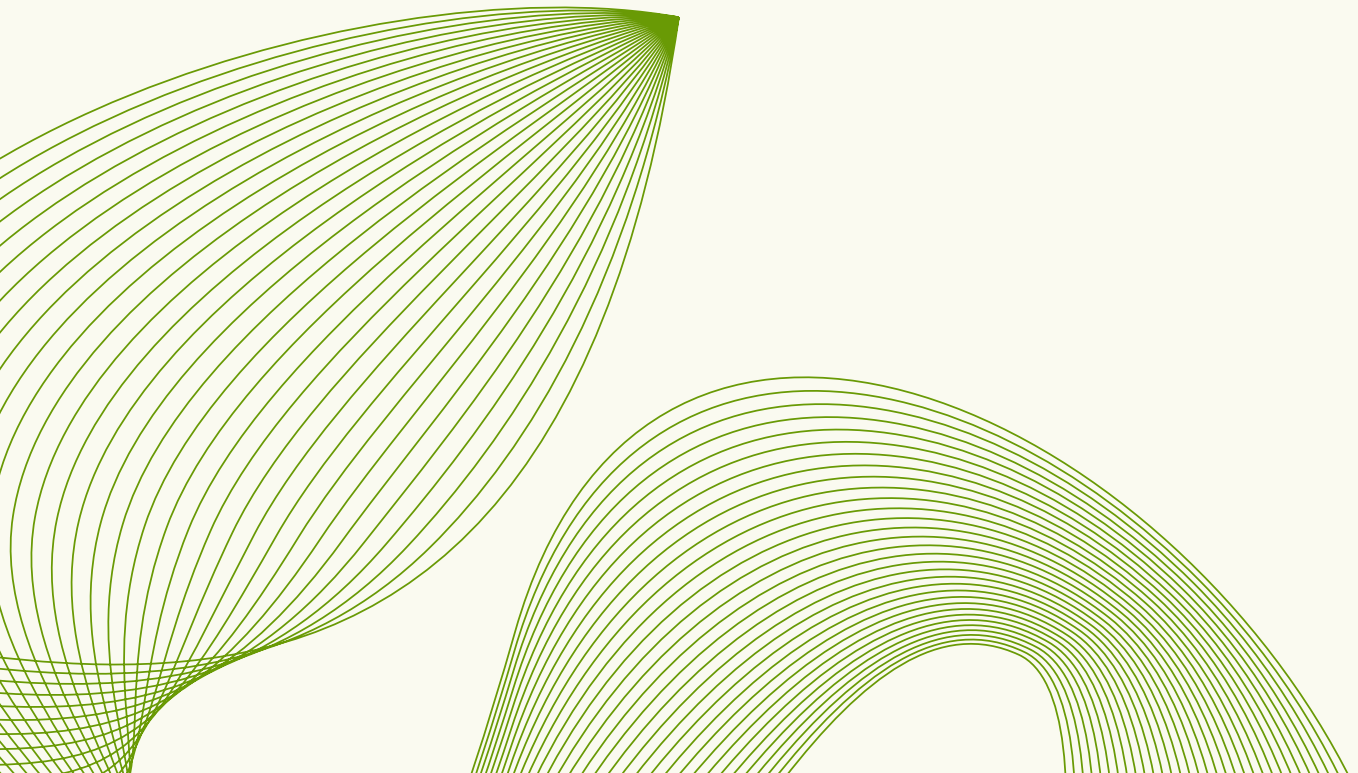
"[These organisations] make a good impact on the community and help and usually have good values"

# Considerations

**Fire and Emergency Services organisations may wish to consider:**

Training in relation to managing stressful situations as transferable life skills that young volunteers will be able to take with them throughout their career.

Pathways for young volunteers to transition to other health, public safety and Fire and Emergency Services operational roles.



7

# Conclusion

This report examined young people's experiences of volunteering in the public safety sector with the aim to identify key considerations for attraction and retention. The findings highlight that connection, belonging, purpose, and opportunities to develop skills are central to young people's participation and ongoing engagement in youth volunteering.

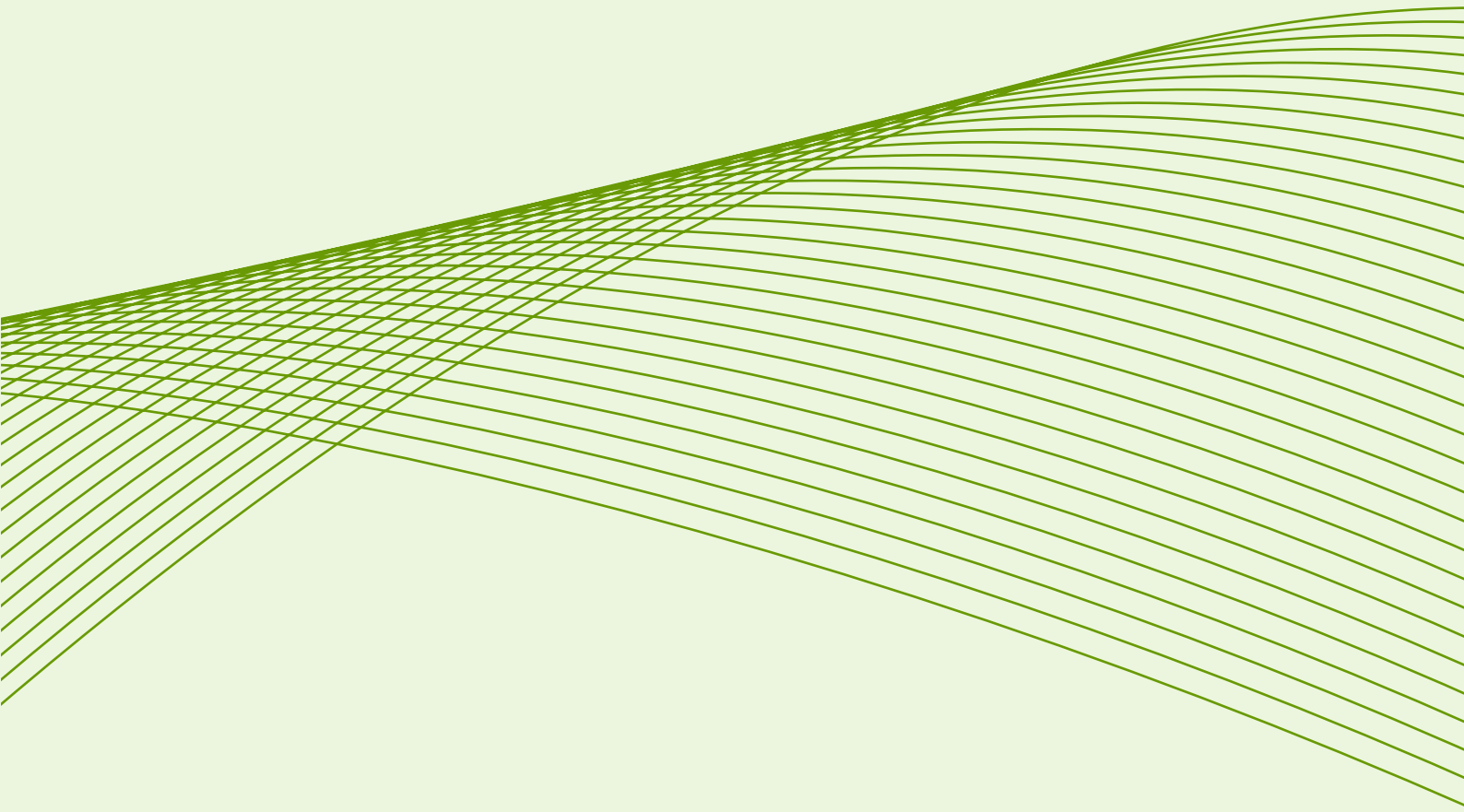
This Insights Report aims to provide Volunteer organisations with key insights on how they can strengthen the recruitment of young volunteers and retain them once in service. This report identifies practical considerations for volunteer organisations aligned to each of the chapters. Many of the opportunities to strengthen attraction and retention of young volunteers are practical, and often, may already be operating in volunteer organisations. Overall, this report identified that:

- Increased emphasis on sharing volunteer stories and experiences may encourage more young people to consider volunteering, while building on the positive experiences identified throughout this report can support organisations to strengthen recruitment, engagement and retention strategies.
- Volunteering provides young people with valuable opportunities to build skills, confidence and experience that extends well beyond their volunteer role. These transferable capabilities support education, employment and broader community participation, reinforcing volunteering as an important pathway for personal and professional development.
- Volunteering not only contributes to stronger volunteer workforces, but also supports the development of future skills and capabilities, including those relevant to employment within the public safety sector.

This provides an evidence base to inform organisations seeking to strengthen attraction, engagement and retention of young volunteers, while recognising the broader contribution that volunteering makes to developing the future public safety workforce.

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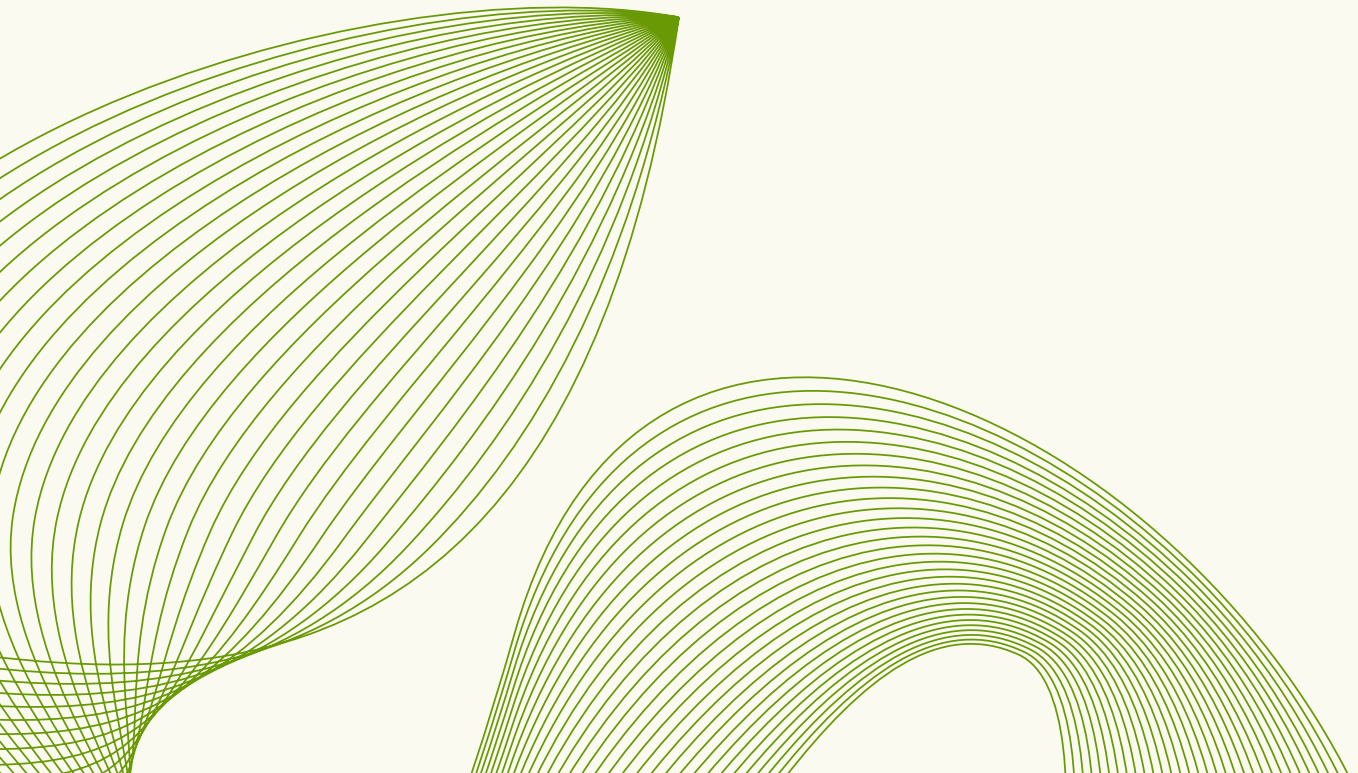
# Appendices



# Appendix A: Summary of considerations

| | Fire and Emergency Services organisations may wish to |
|---|---|
| 1. | consider the potential of focusing recruitment and retention campaigns on attracting families rather than individual young people, as participants acknowledged the influence of family on their decision to commence volunteering. |
| 2. | celebrate and promote the practical and in-person skills development in recruitment and retention campaigns, as participants viewed these skills as being personally beneficial and a motivator to volunteer. |
| 3. | focus on the values that support the objective of protecting life and property during recruitment and retention campaigns, as participants acknowledged this as an aspirational motivator. |
| 4. | build and share the benefits of social connections to enhance the volunteer experience, as participants acknowledged that an individual's positive experience may impact whether they continue volunteering. |
| 5. | value deeper value teamwork and collaboration, as participants acknowledged that strong support networks with fellow volunteers are important for resilience in emergency services work, and may provide valuable supports beyond volunteering |
| 6. | use community-focused messaging focused on making a positive impact, which may support recruitment and retention of young volunteers, as participants acknowledged this as a key driver. |
| 7. | offer variable timeslots for training sessions, as participants acknowledged that emergencies are unplanned, therefore activities that can be planned (such as training) should be flexible. |
| 8. | provide opportunities for young people to become future leaders. |
| 9. | promote mental and physical wellbeing through bespoke services for young volunteers. |
| 10. | review the incentives available, particularly those that can impact costs associated with volunteering. |
| 11. | promote success stories of young volunteers and their contributions. |
| 12. | target young volunteers to assist with using social media and social influence to promote volunteering. |
| 13. | continue with and enhance effective mentorship programs for young volunteers and similarly allow for young volunteers to mentor and coach others. |

14. reduce administration where possible using new digital technologies.
15. continue with and enhance youth leadership programs.
16. wconsider training in relation to managing stressful situations as a transferable life skill that young volunteers will be able to take with them throughout their career.
17. consider pathways for young volunteers to transition to other health, public safety and Fire and Emergency Services operational roles.



# Appendix B: List of survey questions

## Which emergency services organisation are you currently a member of?

### Section 1 – Attraction

1. How long have you been involved in emergency services?
2. Which emergency services programs have you undertaken? - *[various prompts, tailored to participant group]*
3. Why did you join?
4. Are any of your family members involved in the same emergency services organisation?

### Section 2 – Experience

5. Is emergency services what you expected?
6. What do you love most about emergency services?
7. What do you dislike most about emergency services?
8. What do you enjoy doing at your emergency services organisation when not volunteering there?

### Section 3 – Learning and training

9. What skills have you learned from being involved at your emergency services organisation?
10. How have these skills helped in other areas of your life?
11. What other learning experiences have you had in your volunteer service?

### Section 4 – Belonging and culture

12. Describe the culture of your volunteer organisation:

- I feel like I belong
- I feel supported by my leaders
- The vibe and culture of my volunteer organisation is positive
- I have made good friends from my volunteer experience
- I get help when I need it

**Section 5 – Challenges and barriers**

13. What is the hardest part about emergency services work?

14. What gets in the way of you volunteering?

    - Study/homework, Jobs, Other sport, Other extracurricular activities, Travel, Other.

**Section 6 – Impacts**

15. How has volunteering in the emergency services sector impacted your life?

16. Would you recommend volunteering in this sector to your friends? Why or why not?

17. Would you consider a long-term career in an emergency services organisation?

18. Would you consider a long-term career in a different public safety organisation?

19. Do you currently volunteer elsewhere? If you volunteer elsewhere, please provide further details

**Section 7 – Improvement**

20. If you were in charge of your volunteer organisation, what would you change?

21. What could emergency services do better to engage young people to volunteer?

22. Is there anything else you would like to share with us about your experience volunteering?

# Appendix C: Engagements and workshops

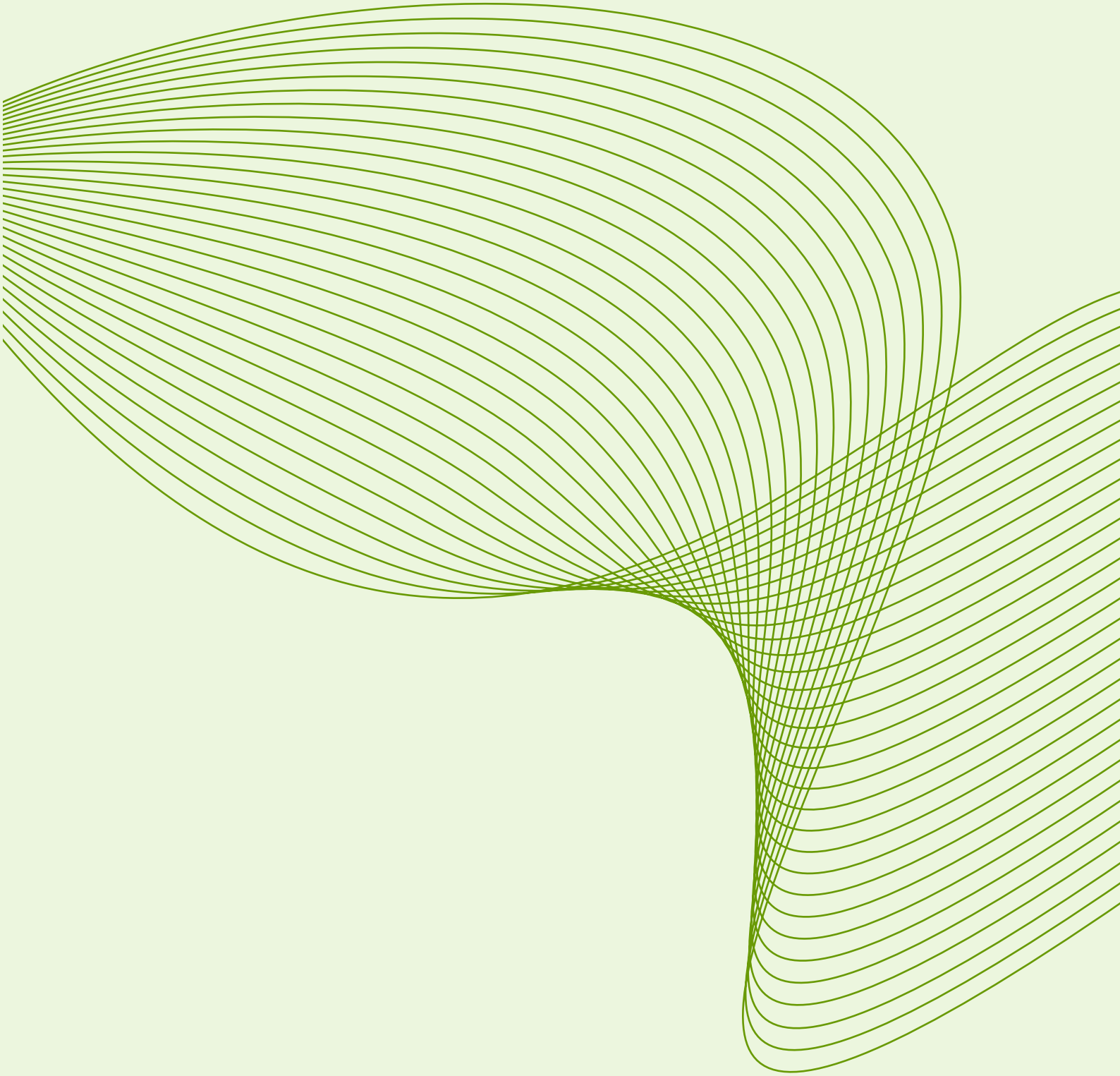
| Workshop date | Participating organisations | Jurisdiction |
|---|---|---|
| 12 February 2026 | Surf Life Saving Australia | New South Wales, Northern Territory, Queensland, South Australia, Victoria, Western Australia |
| 15 March 2026 | Country Fire Service South Australia | South Australia |

| Survey | Participating organisations | Jurisdiction |
|---|---|---|
| February-April 2026 | • Department of Fire and Emergency Services Western Australia<br>• WA Rural Fire Service<br>• NSW Rural Fire Service<br>• ACT State Emergency Services<br>• Country Fire Authority Victoria<br>• Youth Advisory Council Victoria | Australian Capital Territory, New South Wales, Victoria, Western Australia |

| Engagement | Participating organisations | Jurisdiction |
|---|---|---|
| September 2025 | • Department of Fire and Emergency Services Western Australia<br>• SA State Emergency Services<br>• VIC State Emergency Services<br>• ACT State Emergency Services<br>• NSW State Emergency Services<br>• Country Fire Authority Victoria | Australian Capital Territory, New South Wales, Northern Territory, Queensland, South Australia, Victoria, Western Australia |

| Engagement | Participating organisations | Jurisdiction |
|---|---|---|
| December 2025 | • Australasian Fire and Emergency Services Authorities Council (AFAC) Volunteer Technical Management Group:<br>• AFAC<br>• Department of Fire and Emergency Services Western Australia<br>• NSW Rural Fire Service<br>• Emergency Management Victoria<br>• South Australia Fire and Emergency Services Commission<br>• Country Fire Authority Victoria<br>• SA State Emergency Se rvices<br>• Bushfires Northern Territory<br>• Queensland Fire Department<br>• Fire and Emergency New Zealand | Australian Capital Territory, New South Wales, Northern Territory, Queensland, South Australia, Victoria, Western Australia |





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