

Submission to the Queensland Parliament Inquiry into Volunteering in Queensland

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Summary

- **Vital role of volunteers:** Volunteers are the backbone of Queensland's community heritage sector, preserving diverse and often underrepresented histories.
- **Challenges faced:** Funding limitations, ageing volunteer base, regulatory burdens, and governance issues threaten the sustainability of volunteer-managed heritage organisations.
- **Economic and cultural contributions:** Volunteer-run institutions contribute to local tourism, particularly in rural areas, and enrich Queensland's cultural infrastructure.
- **Barriers to volunteering:** Excessive compliance requirements, financial precarity, demographic challenges, and lack of leadership succession planning.
- **Volunteer experiences and motivations:** Volunteers engage in heritage work for personal fulfillment, social connections, and skill development but also face burnout and financial burdens.
- **Recommendations:**
 - Sustainable funding and policy support for volunteer-run institutions.
 - Intergenerational knowledge transfer initiatives.
 - Recognition programs to acknowledge volunteer contributions.
 - Streamlined regulatory processes for small organisations.
 - Enhanced government support through dedicated funding and training programs.

Introduction

This submission responds to the Queensland Government's inquiry into volunteering by drawing on our research into the role of volunteers in the community heritage sector.

Volunteering plays a crucial role in Queensland's community heritage sector, supporting the delivery of cultural and historical services by volunteer-managed galleries, libraries, archives, museums (GLAM) and historical societies. Such organisations are a vital component of the State's cultural infrastructure, dedicated to collecting, preserving and sharing local, everyday, niche or marginalised histories that may be left out of larger public heritage institutions.

Despite the value of volunteer-managed heritage organisations (Baker et al. 2022), these places face significant challenges, including funding limitations, ageing volunteer bases, and growing regulatory burdens. Our work highlights the contributions, challenges, and opportunities in the sector and offers evidence-based recommendations.

In our submission, we address items 1, 2, 3 and 5 in the terms of reference for this inquiry.

1. The current state of volunteering in Queensland and its value

Community heritage organisations prioritise values of democratisation, self-determination, and social engagement over commercial gain. These organisations safeguard ephemeral and underrepresented histories, offering spaces where volunteers can actively participate in the curation and interpretation of their own cultural narratives. Despite operating with limited resources, volunteers provide meaningful visitor experiences, balancing educational and entertainment aspects while fostering a strong sense of ownership and connection among niche audiences (Baker et al. 2022; Hanley et al. 2018). Volunteer-managed heritage institutions contribute significantly to the State's cultural vitality by ensuring diverse histories are preserved and appreciated beyond mainstream heritage frameworks. Although they are not-for-profit endeavours, community heritage organisations contribute significantly to local tourism economies, especially in rural and regional areas where attractions or infrastructure dedicated to tourism may be limited (Baker et al. 2022; cf. submission 40).

Fairley (2020) reports that up to 80% of the approximately 719 public museums across Queensland and NSW are volunteer-run initiatives. According to peak body Museums & Galleries Queensland (2021, p. 3), volunteers outnumber paid staff in the sector by 4 to 1, contributing \$22.2 million in labour annually. Evidently, then, the State's heritage sector depends on volunteers. The Queensland Jazz Archive, Queensland Maritime Museum and the Gold Coast Light Horse Education Museum serve as indicative case studies of the challenges and contributions of volunteer-managed heritage institutions operating in Queensland.

The **Queensland Jazz Archive** is a volunteer-driven institution that preserves the material history of jazz in Queensland. Volunteers at the archive engage in preservation initiatives in conjunction with the State Library of Queensland, providing an essential link between past and present jazz communities in the State (Baker 2018; see also Istvandity 2021). The custodial relationship the volunteers have established with the State Library provides the Queensland Jazz Archive with an opportunity to have its collection preserved at the highest standard. However, for the volunteers, the administrative requirements attached to this arrangement can be constraining. For example, there are a limited number of volunteers available to complete the paperwork attached to making deposits (Baker 2018). Delays from the administrative burden can result in volunteers needing to store materials in their own homes for significant periods of time (Baker 2018).

The **Queensland Maritime Museum**, historically reliant on volunteers, has faced financial instability, regulatory pressures, and governance issues, leading to threats of closure and operational disruptions (Ruddick 2020; Seselja 2020; Crockford, 2020a, 2020b). The volunteer base and experience were hit hard by the COVID pandemic, a situation reflected across Australia more broadly (Museums & Galleries of NSW 2023; Cole 2022; Fairley 2020). The pandemic accentuated the precarious position of the Queensland Maritime Museum, highlighting the need for sustainable support mechanisms that can alleviate the

impacts of public health crises and/or disasters on volunteering and help volunteer numbers bounce back after such disruptions. The museum also highlights funding challenges faced by organisations in the community heritage sector. In 2023, the museum was forced to dismantle and sell one of its most significant assets – a 98-year-old tugboat that had been anchored by the museum for almost 40 years – due to a lack of funding (Sato 2023a). The future of the museum's entire collection was put at risk the same year when it was announced it would receive no government funding in the state budget (Sato 2023b).

The **Gold Coast Light Horse Education Museum**, entirely volunteer-run, relies on the dedication of volunteers in managing collections, educating visitors, and maintaining historical displays. Volunteers are responsible for preserving artifacts, sharing historical knowledge, and providing engaging experiences for visitors, particularly school groups. Many of the volunteers have personal or family connections to military history, which enhances their commitment to preserving and interpreting the museum's collections. However, research undertaken with volunteers at the museum also reveals key challenges, including the need for more volunteers, difficulties in accessing funding, digital skills gaps, the administrative burden associated with running educational and public programs, and the ongoing need for resources to sustain such programs. The museum's reliance on an ageing volunteer base underscores the need for long-term support and strategies to ensure sustainability (Hanley et al. 2018; see also Hanley 2017).

2. Barriers to volunteering

Our research identifies several barriers limiting volunteer participation in volunteer-managed heritage organisations:

- **Regulatory burdens:** Volunteers often struggle with excessive compliance requirements, including occupational health and safety and grant application processes (Baker & Cantillon 2020; cf. submission 83).
- **Financial constraints:** Many volunteer-run institutions face financial precarity due to limited government funding and reliance on irregular grants (Cantillon & Baker 2020a) as captured in other submissions to this Inquiry (cf. submissions 40, 83)
- **Demographic challenges:** Many volunteers are retirees, and there is difficulty in attracting younger participants due to their competing work and study commitments (Cantillon & Baker 2020b). Demographic challenges are highlighted in other heritage-related submissions to this Inquiry (cf. submission 13). Volunteer-managed heritage organisations require short-term strategies to increase engagement of retirees combined with long-term strategies of youth engagement (Baker 2018). Community heritage organisations note a unique challenge for volunteering in their sector in that young people may not recognise the cultural necessity of heritage preservation (Baker 2018).
- **Governance and management issues:** Many volunteer-run organisations suffer from governance instability, lack of leadership succession planning, and internal conflicts (Baker 2018). Organisational sustainability challenges can make volunteering in

volunteer-managed heritage institutions seem precarious and place emotional strain on volunteers (Cantillon & Baker 2020b).

3. Experiences, motivations, and challenges of volunteers

Our research on volunteer-managed heritage institutions in Australia and globally demonstrates that these volunteer-led spaces foster social cohesion, preserve cultural heritage, and enhance community wellbeing (Baker 2017; Cantillon & Baker 2018). Our findings are supported by statements in other submissions to this Inquiry (cf. submissions 13, 40, 59). Volunteers in these institutions engage in ‘serious leisure’ – deriving personal fulfillment while contributing to the state’s cultural infrastructure (Cantillon & Baker 2018). Volunteers also benefit from the extent to which these organisations act as ‘third places’ – promoting sociality, nurturing friendships, creating environments for caring and living, and enabling a productive retirement (Cantillon & Baker 2022; Istvandity et al 2019).

Volunteers engage in heritage institutions for a mix of intrinsic and extrinsic rewards, including social interaction, skill development, and a sense of purpose (Baker 2018; Cantillon & Baker 2020a), describing their work as a ‘labour of love’. Volunteers often experience personal enrichment, self-actualisation, and skill development, allowing them to apply and refine their expertise in meaningful ways (Cantillon & Baker 2020a, 2022). Many find joy in preserving cultural history, contributing to a cause they are passionate about, and gaining a sense of accomplishment (Cantillon & Baker 2020a, 2022). Socially, volunteers benefit from a strong sense of community in these organisations, forming friendships with like-minded individuals and working collaboratively on preservation projects (Cantillon & Baker 2018, 2020a). Additionally, the work can provide a sense of purpose, especially for retirees, by keeping them mentally engaged and active, improving overall well-being and life satisfaction (Baker 2018; Cantillon & Baker 2020a, 2022). We witnessed many volunteers looking out for each other’s health and well-being – these places aren’t just about caring for artefacts, but caring for one another. They are institutions for living (Baker 2018).

Despite its rewards, volunteering in heritage institutions comes with challenges: tensions, dislikes and disappointments (Cantillon & Baker 2020b). Volunteers may experience tensions, including interpersonal conflicts and management struggles (Cantillon & Baker 2020a). The financial and emotional costs can also be significant, as volunteers often cover expenses like travel and supplies while dealing with funding uncertainties underpinned by austerity policies (Cantillon & Baker 2020a, 2020b). Time commitments can be demanding, affecting work-life balance, particularly for those juggling multiple obligations. Frustrations may arise due to organisational change, unreliable team members, or unfulfilled funding applications, leading to burnout and disappointment (Cantillon & Baker 2020a, 2020b). While these costs do not necessarily deter participation, they require perseverance and strong community support to overcome (Cantillon & Baker 2020b). These findings are reflected in other submissions to this Inquiry (cf. submissions 40, 59).

Recommendations

- **Sustainability of volunteer-run institutions:** Ensuring that volunteer-run institutions can continue operating through funding, training, and support programs will require strengthening the inclusion of these places in policy at all government levels. The 2015 Queensland Heritage Strategy acknowledges the challenge of a declining and ageing volunteer workforce engaged in heritage conservation and interpretation across the state. While heritage grants are made available by the State as part of a strategy to maximise sustainable investment in Queensland's heritage, this funding is not intended to address significant financial burdens (e.g. capital works, utility expenses, rent) which continue to threaten the long-term viability of community heritage institutions. Without greater attention by the Queensland Government, there is a significant risk that local councils will increasingly have a burden of responsibility for the safeguarding of local history collections and the management of the associated volunteers (Baker & Cantillon 2020).
- **Knowledge transfer:** Many volunteer-managed heritage institutions operate effective informal communities of practice that cultivate volunteer learning through interactions between 'old-timer' and 'newcomer' volunteers (Baker 2017). Provision of knowledge transfer opportunities can increase volunteer motivation and retention (Baker 2018). Establishing inter-organisational mentorship programs that facilitate skills transfer between generations and across different organisational contexts may be of benefit. We recommend the Queensland Government continue its support of knowledge transfer between State-run heritage organisations and volunteer-managed heritage institutions through delivery of services provided by, for example, the Museum Development Officers of the Queensland Museum Network. Our research found that the provision of professional advice to volunteers by publicly-funded heritage organisations strengthens the skills and expertise of individual volunteers and supports capacity-building in these organisations (Baker 2018).
- **Recognition of volunteer contributions:** Expanding awards, tax incentives, and honor programs to acknowledge the work of volunteers in the community heritage sector is encouraged. The Queensland Government's ongoing support of Museums & Galleries Queensland is critical in this regard as this peak body plays an important role in recognising the work of heritage volunteers across Queensland through its volunteer-focused Achievement Awards.

5. Government support for volunteering

Current government support mechanisms for community heritage organisations are fragmented and inconsistent. While some funding is available through grants, it is often short-term and project-based, which limits long-term sustainability.

Recommendations

- A state-wide strategy for volunteer support

- Dedicated funding for volunteer training and infrastructure
- Streamlining compliance requirements for small volunteer-run organisations (Baker & Cantillon 2020)
- Incentives to encourage intergenerational volunteering, ensuring sustainability
- A greater focus on volunteering and volunteer-managed heritage organisations in the state's heritage policy (Baker & Cantillon 2020)
- Provision of additional support to, for example, the Queensland Museum Network and Museums & Galleries Queensland to expand their training and resources offerings to volunteers in the community heritage sector (Baker & Cantillon 2020)

Conclusion

Volunteers are the backbone of Queensland's community heritage sector, providing an essential service by safeguarding a diverse record of the State's past. Yet, they face significant challenges. Without supported and satisfied volunteers, there is a risk to the mid-to long-term futures of Queensland's volunteer-managed heritage institutions. As the Mary Valley Rattler highlights in its submission, the impact of the closure of community heritage institutions 'would be profound and far-reaching ... leav[ing] gaps in community support systems' (cf. submission 40). They also note flow-on impacts that closures would have on tourism and the economic vitality of small towns, underscoring the importance of safeguarding such institutions and supporting their volunteers to thrive.

To support the sector's volunteers, we urge the Queensland Government to adopt a holistic strategy that includes streamlined regulation, sustainable funding, and targeted programs to enhance volunteering experiences and retention in the community heritage sector. By doing so, Queensland can strengthen its volunteer base for public history-making and maximise the social, cultural, and economic benefits of volunteering across the state.

A concerted effort to support volunteers through policy innovation, financial investment, and community partnerships will ensure that Queensland remains a leader in volunteer-driven heritage initiatives that contribute to a vibrant and engaged society. Volunteer-managed heritage organisations play a significant role in Queensland's cultural infrastructure and this inquiry is an opportunity to better understand the challenges and opportunities in this space.

We will be following the inquiry with keen interest as it coincides with the commencement of our latest research project, 'Co-creating a sustainable future for the community heritage sector' (Australian Research Council Discovery Project, 2025–2028). In this project, we will be working closely with volunteers from 30 community heritage organisations across Australia to develop benchmarks of organisational sustainability.

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