

Submission to the Parliament of South Australia Inquiry into the National Trust of South Australia

Addressing Term of Reference (e): the role of volunteers and community stakeholders in the operation and decision-making processes of the National Trust

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Summary

- **Volunteers are the backbone of the National Trust movement:** nationally, the constituent National Trusts rely on a volunteer workforce many times larger than their combined paid staff, and the National Trust of South Australia's own branch structure depends on sustained volunteer commitment at the local level.
- **Meaningful participation, not just labour:** our national research into Australia's volunteer-run heritage organisations shows that volunteers' motivation, retention and wellbeing depend heavily on whether they are genuinely included in decisions that affect the places and collections they care for.
- **Governance structures matter:** where decision-making is centralised without clear, codified mechanisms for volunteer, branch and community stakeholder input, organisations risk disengagement, burnout, loss of local knowledge and, in more serious cases, open conflict between volunteers, local communities and central management.
- **Contemporary relevance for South Australia:** widely reported tensions in 2026 between National Trust of South Australia's head office and its Moonta branch volunteers demonstrate that these are not abstract governance questions but issues with immediate consequences for community trust, heritage tourism and the sustainability of volunteer-run heritage attractions.
- **Recommendations:** we recommend the Committee consider formal volunteer and branch representation in National Trust of South Australia's governance structures; codified consultation protocols for decisions affecting local branches; investment in communities of practice and mentoring; accessible dispute resolution processes; and stronger recognition of volunteer labour as foundational to the Trust's operations.

Introduction

This submission responds to Term of Reference (e) of the Committee's Inquiry into the National Trust of South Australia: the role of volunteers and community stakeholders in the operation and decision-making processes of the National Trust.

We are heritage researchers at Griffith University. Our Australian Research Council-funded project, 'Co-creating a sustainable future for the community heritage sector' (Australian Research Council Discovery Project, 2025–2028), examines the organisational sustainability of Australia's volunteer-managed community heritage organisations, including galleries,

libraries, archives, museums and historical societies. We are working directly with volunteers from community heritage organisations across the country to develop benchmarks of organisational sustainability, building on more than a decade of published research into volunteer experience, motivation and governance in Australia's community heritage sector.

We hold limited data specific to the National Trust of South Australia. The issues currently being experienced by some local National Trust of South Australia branches first came to our attention during fieldwork with a historical society in metropolitan Adelaide. In discussing broader challenges facing volunteer-managed heritage organisations, those participants referred to concerns about the relationship between some National Trust of South Australia branches and the state organisation, including questions of volunteer participation in organisational decision-making and governance. This submission does not comment on the merits of any individual dispute or management decision. Rather, it draws on our national, comparative research to identify the conditions under which the meaningful participation of volunteers and community stakeholders is effectively incorporated into organisational decision-making – and the organisational consequences when those mechanisms are weak or absent. We offer this evidence in the hope that it assists the Committee's consideration of Term of Reference (e).

The National Trust of South Australia, like its counterparts in other states and territories, combines a central governing Council, established under the *National Trust of South Australia Act 1955*, with a network of local branches and committees that are substantially volunteer-run. This combination of central governance and distributed local volunteering is common across the National Trust movement nationally, and it is precisely the kind of structure in which questions about where decision-making authority sits, and how volunteer and community stakeholder voice is built into that authority, tend to matter most.

1. Volunteers as the foundation of the National Trust movement

Nationally, the eight state and territory National Trusts collectively manage a volunteer workforce of around 7,000 people, compared with roughly 350 paid staff, and are custodians of more than 300 heritage places (National Trusts of Australia 2026). This pattern, in which volunteer labour substantially outweighs paid staffing, is repeated across Australia's wider community heritage sector: volunteers can outnumber paid heritage staff by four to one or more in some jurisdictions, with the great majority of local museums and historical societies operating with wholly or predominantly volunteer workforces (Museums & Galleries NSW 2023; Museums & Galleries Queensland 2021).

Our research describes volunteer engagement in heritage as a form of 'serious leisure' – sustained, skilled and identity-forming activity through which volunteers apply and develop expertise, build community, and derive genuine personal meaning (Cantillon & Baker 2020a). Heritage organisations frequently function as 'third places' for volunteers: spaces of sociality, care and belonging that sit alongside their custodial and educational functions (Cantillon & Baker 2022a). Decisions about how these organisations are run are rarely experienced by volunteers as purely operational matters; they are also felt as decisions about

a community, and about a shared sense of ownership over local heritage. Volunteers in heritage organisations should never be treated as a low-cost labour supply.

2. Why participatory governance matters

Our national research consistently finds that governance and organisational culture – specifically, whether volunteers feel they have genuine input into decisions affecting their organisation – are recurring factors in volunteer motivation, retention and wellbeing as well as organisational sustainability (Baker & Cantillon 2020; Cantillon & Baker 2020b, 2025; Kirry, Baker & Cantillon 2026).

Where volunteers are excluded from, or inadequately consulted on, decisions that affect the places, collections or funds they have contributed to build, our research finds this is experienced as a serious cost of volunteering, contributing to disappointment, burnout and, in some cases, volunteers leaving the organisation altogether (Cantillon & Baker 2020b). Conversely, our work on communities of practice within heritage organisations shows that structured channels for skills development, mentoring and dialogue between volunteers, paid staff and central management strengthen both individual motivation and organisational capacity (Baker 2017; Baker 2018).

This has particular relevance to organisations, such as National Trusts, that combine a central governing body with semi-autonomous local branches. Our national research on organisational sustainability identifies governance instability, unclear lines of authority, and the absence of succession or consultation planning as recurring risk factors for volunteer-run heritage organisations of this kind, regardless of jurisdiction (Baker 2018; Baker & Cantillon 2020; Cantillon & Baker 2025).

3. The risks of excluding volunteers from organisational decision-making

Recent public reporting on tensions between National Trust of South Australia's head office and its Moonta branch volunteers illustrates how quickly disputes over decision-making authority can escalate, with consequences for site operations and community relationships (Plane 2026). Reports also suggest other branches have concerns about the behaviour of the Trust, including Millicent (Yankovich & O'Brien 2026) and Renmark (Yankovich & Pearce 2026). There are very real consequences when governance decisions are not, or are not seen to be, adequately informed by volunteer and community input.

We raise the examples of Moonta, Millicent and Renmark here because they demonstrate, in a very current and local context, precisely the dynamic our national research identifies as a recurring risk in volunteer-involving heritage governance: when decisions with major consequences for local branches are made without volunteers feeling they have had a genuine role in shaping them, the result can be public conflict, reputational damage, disruption to heritage tourism and, most importantly for the Committee's purposes, a weakening of the volunteer base on which these organisations depend.

This pattern is consistent with, though distinct from, our findings in relation to independently governed volunteer-managed organisations elsewhere in Australia, where governance instability and unclear authority have been linked to declining volunteer numbers, loss of institutional knowledge and, in the most serious cases, the closure of heritage organisations altogether (Baker & Cantillon 2020; Cantillon & Baker 2025).

4. Community stakeholders: partners in heritage governance

While volunteers form the operational foundation of the National Trust movement, heritage organisations also depend upon the trust, knowledge and participation of broader community stakeholders. These include local residents, Traditional Owners, source communities, members, donors, former volunteers, researchers, local government and others with long-standing connections to heritage places. Their relationship with heritage extends beyond service delivery; they are often the holders of historical knowledge, community memory and cultural values that cannot readily be replicated through organisational records alone.

Heritage organisations exist to conserve places on behalf of the communities they serve. Their legitimacy therefore depends on maintaining the confidence of those communities through transparent and meaningful participation in decision-making. Our research across a range of Australian heritage contexts, including World Heritage-listed sites, demonstrates that heritage governance is strengthened when these communities are recognised as active participants in decision-making rather than passive audiences for consultation (Baker, Cantillon & Evans 2025). People with long and deep connections to heritage places frequently possess forms of expertise that complement professional heritage practice, contributing local histories, lived experience and an understanding of the social and cultural significance of places that may not be visible through formal management processes (Baker & Cantillon 2025). Effective governance therefore depends on creating genuine opportunities for community knowledge, values and lived experience to shape decisions before they are finalised. Participation should be understood as a core governance practice rather than an adjunct to communication or public engagement.

Conversely, where community stakeholders perceive that decisions are made without genuine opportunities for participation, organisations risk weakening the trust and legitimacy upon which heritage stewardship depends. Our research has found that exclusion from decision-making can contribute to feelings of disenfranchisement, diminished agency and concern for the future of heritage places (Baker, Cantillon & Evans 2023; Cantillon & Baker 2022b), particularly where communities have longstanding custodial relationships with those places as is the case with Moonta and many other National Trust of South Australia branch locations.

For organisations such as the National Trust of South Australia, which operate through a combination of central governance and locally embedded branches, community engagement should therefore be understood as a governance function. Mechanisms that enable both volunteers and community stakeholders to contribute their knowledge, values and perspectives to decision-making are likely to strengthen organisational legitimacy,

community confidence and the long-term sustainability of the places entrusted to the National Trust's care.

5. Recommendations

Drawing on our national research into volunteer governance in the community heritage sector, we recommend the Committee give consideration to the following measures in its assessment of Term of Reference (e), and of the fitness for purpose of the current legislative and governance framework more broadly (Terms of Reference (b) and (c)):

- **Formal volunteer and branch representation:** structural mechanisms, such as guaranteed volunteer or branch representative positions on the Trust's governing Council, that ensure the volunteer and local-branch perspective is present at the point major decisions are made, not sought only after the fact.
- **Codified consultation protocols:** clear, publicly available protocols setting out how and when local branches and volunteers, as well as community stakeholders, will be consulted before decisions are made that affect their operations, finances or management arrangements, including minimum notice periods and avenues for volunteers to respond before decisions are finalised.
- **Investment in communities of practice:** structured mentoring and knowledge-sharing between National Trust of South Australia's central office, professional heritage staff and volunteer branches, of the kind our research finds increases volunteer motivation, retention and organisational capacity across the sector (Baker 2017; Baker 2018).
- **Regular stakeholder forums:** establish regular forums through which representatives of local branches, community stakeholders and the Trusts's governing Council can discuss strategic priorities, emerging issues and organisational reforms before formal decisions are taken.
- **Accessible dispute resolution mechanisms:** an independent, transparent process through which volunteers and branches, as well as community stakeholders, can raise concerns about decisions affecting them, separate from the same central authority whose decisions are in question.
- **Recognition of volunteer contribution:** ongoing, structured recognition of the scale and value of volunteer labour, consistent with the objects of the National Trust of South Australia Act 1955 and reflecting national best practice in the sector.
- **Legislative review informed by governance best practice:** in considering whether the National Trust of South Australia Act 1955 remains fit for purpose (Term of Reference (c)), we recommend the Committee examine whether the Act's provisions relating to membership, Council composition and branch representation provide sufficient structural opportunities for volunteers and community stakeholders to participate in organisational decision-making, drawing on comparative approaches used by other Australian National Trusts and volunteer-governed heritage bodies.

Conclusion

Volunteers are not incidental to the operation of the National Trust of South Australia; nationally, they are the workforce on which the National Trust movement is built. Equally, the long-term legitimacy of heritage organisations like the National Trust of South Australia depends upon maintaining the confidence and participation of the communities whose heritage that conserve. Our research demonstrates that organisations are strongest when volunteers and community stakeholders are recognised as partners in that stewardship. Recent events in South Australia underline why this Inquiry's attention to Term of Reference (e) matters, and why the Committee's findings are likely to have relevance well beyond any single dispute.

We would welcome the opportunity to provide further information to the Committee, including reporting in more detail on emerging results from our ongoing ARC-funded research research on organisational sustainability benchmarks for volunteer-managed community heritage organisations (communityheritagetoolkit.com).

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