

ITEM 6 VOLUNTEERING ILLAWARRA - FUTURE DIRECTION

Wollongong City Council has supported the delivery of volunteering services within the Wollongong community since 1998 through its Volunteering Illawarra program. Changes to the volunteering sector, and in particular the national policy and funding context, mean that it is no longer viable for Council to continue with the delivery of this service.

This report seeks Council endorsement of the proposed closure of the Volunteering Illawarra service.

RECOMMENDATION

- 1 Council discontinue the Volunteering Illawarra service, from 31 August 2022.
- 2 Arrangements be made for the continued delivery of critical elements of the Volunteering Illawarra program, including sector development and support services which are funded under the Commonwealth Home Support Program until 30 June 2023.

REPORT AUTHORISATIONS

Report of: Jenny Thompson, Manager Library and Community Services

Authorised by: Kerry Hunt, Director Community Services - Creative and Innovative City

ATTACHMENTS

There are no attachments for this report.

BACKGROUND

Volunteering Illawarra (VI) is one of the three teams within the Community Support Services (CSS) Business Unit of Council's Library and Community Services Division. VI commenced operation in 1998, as part of the National VCR (Volunteer Resources Centre) network and has been auspiced by Wollongong City Council since its inception.

Function and Services

VI provides a range of direct and indirect services to support volunteering in the Wollongong community. The service scope includes:

- promoting volunteering and facilitating opportunities for members of the community to volunteer with non-government organisations, including the annual Wollongong Volunteering Expo
- supporting and resourcing non-government organisations within the Wollongong, Shellharbour and Kiama LGAs to recruit and manage volunteers within their organisations
- supporting Council Divisions in the recruitment, induction and recognition of Council volunteers across a range of Service Streams
- training, coaching and supporting service development to local aged care organisations, with funding from the Commonwealth Home Support Program
- researching the volunteering and sector support needs of local organisations and acting as a point of contact for government and non-government agencies, media, researchers and other parties seeking information and data on volunteering.

Funding Arrangements

VI budget has been funded since 1998 under the Commonwealth Volunteer Management Program (VMP) and (for Sector Development) under the Commonwealth Home Support Program (CHSP). Limited indexation, along with increasing costs over the more than 20 years that VI has been operating mean that the funding Council receives for this service does not cover the cost of service delivery. Since 2012-2013 financial year, Council has subsidised the budget for delivery of the VI service from \$20,000 initially to a figure in the vicinity of \$134,000 for the 2021-2022 financial year.

Changes to Operating Environment

Over the past two years the COVID-19 pandemic has restricted frontline services and impacted on both the number of potential volunteers and the capacity of local organisations to host volunteers. Along with other impacts, such as reduced focus on compliance for people aged over 55 years who are unemployed; fewer overseas students; and increased participation in employment, the number of people presenting for information and referral and the number of organisations offering volunteering opportunities has declined.

Further, the Commonwealth policy approach to volunteering has changed, reflecting changes to the volunteering landscape that include population ageing, the advent of spontaneous and 'one off' volunteering, an increased need for volunteers during emergency events and enhanced online technologies. Commonwealth policy directions indicate that the future of volunteering will be designed around online volunteer recruitment, referral, training and support.

In 2021 the Commonwealth stepped back from direct funding of the VMP, now re-labelled Volunteer Management Activity (VMA), passing financial and grant administration for the next five years to the peak body for volunteering in each state – in the case of New South Wales, to the NSW Centre for Volunteering (NSWCfV). NSWCfV administered a grants program for the 2021/2022 financial year which saw VMA funding continue at previous levels.

However, while the detail of future VMA program arrangements is yet to be provided, it is anticipated that NSWCfV will not offer a similar level of funding in future years. It is likely that future funding programs will provide grants for short-term projects that target three groups within the community that have been identified as facing possible exclusion from online volunteering opportunities: people living with disability; First Nations people; and newly arrived migrants and refugees. It is not anticipated that the quantum or consistency of funding that will be available will be sufficient to support VI service delivery and, philosophically these projects are best delivered by organisations that represent these target groups.

While Sector Development services under the CHSP are currently funded until June 2023, there is no guarantee of continued funding for this aspect of VI's service scope beyond this date.

PROPOSAL

The uncertainty of future policy directions and loss of substantive funding mean that Council is no longer in a position to deliver the VI service. It is therefore proposed that:

- the VI program ceases as a service of Council from 31 August 2022;
- elements of the program for which Council has continued accountability, such as CHSP functions, are re-allocated to other portfolios within Council;
- the staff of VI are managed and supported under the terms of Council's Enterprise Agreement; and
- the relevant funding bodies, member and partner organisations and other stakeholders are informed of the closure of the service via a community information and media strategy.

CONSULTATION AND COMMUNICATION

Finance Division

Human Resources/Organisational Development Division

Volunteering Illawarra Staff

Media Unit

Volunteering Illawarra member organisations, community partners and stakeholders

Funding bodies

PLANNING AND POLICY IMPACT

The VI service has contributed to the delivery of Wollongong 2022 goal “Goal “4”- We are connected and engaged community.” It specifically delivers on the following:

Community Strategic Plan	Delivery Program 2018-2022	Annual Plan 2021-22
Strategy	4 Year Action	Annual Deliverables
4.2.1 Support Residents, business and visitors to be actively involved in diverse community activities helping to connect neighbourhoods	4.2.1.1 Increase opportunities for the community to connect with volunteering organisations	<p>Deliver the Volunteering Illawarra Services</p> <p>Continue to review and adapt the Volunteering Illawarra program to support service quality and sustainability, in line with changes to funding and the volunteering sector</p>

The Annual Operational Plan and Delivery Program, as well as Council’s Service Stream descriptors will be updated to reflect the discontinuation of VI services.

RISK MANAGEMENT

The risks in relation to this proposal and potential mitigations have been considered. They relate mainly to the impact on Council employees who are employed in the VI service; the reduction in the level of service to community; and the need to manage perceptions and maintain Council’s reputation.

These risks will be managed via a risk plan, which includes:

- . continued delivery of elements of the VI service for which we have CHSP funding accountability;
- . consultation with relevant stakeholders;
- . support for our employees within the terms of Council’s Enterprise Agreement;
- . winding down of services over the two month period and a comprehensive communications plan.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

The revenue budget for VI service delivery for 2021-2022 is \$298,000. This is comprised of four funding streams: the VMA grant from NSWCFV (\$105,000); CHSP funding (\$49,000); the Council subsidy (\$134,000); and a small component from Council’s Community Transport (CT) service (\$10,000), as fee for service for recruitment of CT volunteers. This budget covers the expenditure budget for salaries and service delivery.

Preliminary estimations indicate a maximum one-off cost to Council of approximately \$183,000 to close the service. These costs will be absorbed within operational budgets and reductions to the long term financials will be adjusted via the September Quarterly Review.

CONCLUSION

Volunteering Illawarra has provided a significant service to the Wollongong community since 1998, that contributes to the achievement of Council's goals and aspirations for the city. The changing policy and funding context in which the VI program is delivered mean that it is no longer viable for Council to subsidise or deliver this service.

There does not appear to be an alternative to winding up this valuable service, while acknowledging the outcomes that it has delivered for Council and for the Wollongong community over many years and developing options for the continuation of critical elements of the VI service portfolio.