



SUBMISSION IN RESPONSE TO THE PROPOSAL TO DEVELOP A NATIONAL COMPACT

Subject: *The capacity of the National Compact Discussion Paper to encourage engagement of the volunteering community with the idea of a compact*

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From: Volunteering Victoria Inc.

Submitted to: australiancompact@fhcsia.gov.au

Introduction

While Volunteering Victoria supports the process of seeking detailed responses to a range of questions raised in the National Compact Discussion Paper (herein referred to as the consultation paper), as the peak body for the volunteering community in Victoria we have focussed on assessing the consultation paper as to its capacity to facilitate the engagement of volunteer community with the idea of a National Compact.

The volunteering community is a key component of the third sector, but it faces specific challenges related to sustainability given long term demographic, community and service system changes. It needs particular answers.

Looking at the question of the paper facilitating volunteer community engagement with the idea of the compact, while much of the consultation paper's content is relevant, the value of the paper to the volunteering community will be its success in framing and organising the relevant issues to make clear the value of the compact.

By this criterion the Consultation paper does not fully meet its purpose. While it is a collection of good ideas it does not make clear how the compact would address existing challenges or change relationships, except by implication.

The paper takes a summative approach aimed at check-listing existing sector concerns. There is little formative evaluation or analysis. A more positive approach is required for stakeholders to understand what is in the government's mind. An indication of some proposals for action at a level that is meaningful and which shows stakeholders what can happen is required. A general framing of types of actions aren't enough, in our submission.

An example of this problem is the treatment of the principles. These are sound, but if we look at the manner in which "Sustainability" principle is addressed, the discussion section raises a number of questions without addressing them and the "Consultation questions" largely restate the heading.

If we then look to the relevant actions (at page 14) for a clearer indication of what measures we can expect to see for increasing sustainability, there is a reference to supporting volunteering but no content as to how this could actually happen. "Initiatives to support effective volunteering", as an action descriptor, doesn't tell us much. Does this indicate some new thinking about support of volunteers?

In summary while the paper is a good restatement of sector concerns, it does little to positively engage stakeholders by promoting the value of, and commitment to, a compact. Restating the concerns is not enough. This is true particularly of the volunteer community who as a whole engage with contractual and program arrangements less directly than service delivery based organisations that are primarily concerned with paid staff and have much narrower defined outputs than community building, inclusion and support.

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Example of an effective process

The development by the Victorian State government of an Office of Community Sector was allied closely to the development of the Strengthening Community Organisations Action Plan (SCOP) which in turn was based on two objectives

- Improve the process of dealing with government
- Creating an environment for community organisations to invest in their sustainability and capacity

The SCOP puts forward 24 actions designed to meet these objectives. The use of positive proposals did not serve, in a truly consultative process, to limit discussion in the third sector. It demonstrated what government is saying is possible, and therefore offered clarity.

While the idea of a compact is not the same as the development of a strategy to support third sector organisations, it has the same aim, i.e. to support and make sustainable third sector capacity. Proposed actions offer clarity as to aim and intent and we submit that they would enhance engagement by volunteers.

As an under resourced part of the third sector the volunteer sector has limited capacity to develop its own coherent vision of what is possible when its main source of information is a long consultation paper that summarises. The risk of requiring stakeholders to form their own vision of what is possible is that only large organisations and peaks will engage with the compact's development. This would be a missed opportunity.

I note the example of the Queensland Compact adds some substance to the more general aims in the consultation paper. More concrete examples are required.

What is required for the consultation process to be meaningful for volunteering community

1. A clear policy context
2. Clear objectives, capable of interrogation
3. Clear subject matter of the proposed actions under the compact
4. Implementation process with clear timelines and a plan

The purpose of a consultation is to frame the discussion and promote engagement. We are concerned the Consultation Paper's summative format doesn't adequately do this.

Recommendations aimed at increasing the engagement of the volunteer community with the idea of a compact

The compact is designed to meet the needs of the partnership between the third sector and government. But at some point, the National Compact project will have to engage with the needs of key components of the third sector.

The volunteering community, i.e. volunteers, volunteering organisations and organisations that involve volunteers have particular sector development needs. This community won't engage until it is clear what impact the Compact will have on these needs, as well as the more general concerns of the third sector.

We make the following recommendations:

1. Government clearly identify what outcomes it is aiming to achieve to support volunteering, and how they will be actioned in the compact.
2. Government develop specific engagement strategies to facilitate the participation of volunteers in the compact process. One could be a "support volunteers" strategy that formally recognises the volunteering
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community as a key component of the third sector, with its own discrete interests and needs, and an indication of how these needs will be addressed.

3. Relate the compact more clearly to the aims of social inclusion and community strengthening, aims which the volunteer community plays a key role in achieving. This recognises the motivation behind volunteering, to make one's community better and stronger
4. Combine the development of the compact with the response by government to the sector development needs of the volunteer community. This should be aided by the by the Parliamentary Secretary for Social Inclusion and the Voluntary Sector being responsible for both initiatives. One key developmental issue is access to recurrent funding currently only available effectively to 50 centres nationally under the Volunteer Management Program (VMP)
5. Develop as part of the Compact process, a Volunteer statement of rights as part of the partnership framework. Make the volunteering community a real partner in achieving the aims of the compact.

Submission authorised by:

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