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THE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC SUSTAINABILITY OF WA'S RURAL VOLUNTEER WORKFORCE

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Executive summary

Volunteering is critical to the survival and success of rural communities in Western Australia (WA). The past two decades have seen an increase in the community services delivered by volunteers and demand on the volunteer workforce has intensified. Yet, according to data collected by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) over the same period there has been a decline in volunteer participation across Australia, resulting in a shortage of volunteer labour.

Our study identified how rural communities in WA are addressing the challenges of recruiting and retaining volunteers at a time of unprecedented demographic change and increasing pressure on the rural volunteer workforce. We identified the critical role of volunteering in creating a sense of community wellbeing and delivering essential services in rural areas. We also present the strategies volunteers and voluntary organisations are using to sustain the rural volunteer workforce.

We used multiple sources of data including secondary analysis of the WA Department for Regional Development's Living in the Regions Survey and an in-depth case study of the Local Government Areas (LGA) of Bridgetown-Greenbushes and Boyup Brook.

Our findings confirmed the importance of rural volunteering in WA, with a very high level of participation across the state's rural communities. We identified particular problems including structural population ageing, a reliance on key individuals to take on multiple volunteering roles; pressure from increased accountability and regulation; and rural organisations being governed from metropolitan headquarters with little apparent consideration for differences in rural service provision.

Key findings

The volunteering landscape in rural Western Australia

- Rural Western Australians have a very high rate of involvement in local volunteer activities, with more than 50% of the population engaged in local volunteering.

- There is an extensive variety of volunteer activities in rural towns, reflecting the diversity of each community and their specific needs.

- The most numerous volunteer involving activities are sport and emergency services.

- Volunteers shift the nature of their participation in response to changes in their life stage. Starting a family and entering retirement are key stages when people become more engaged in volunteering.

- Volunteers become and remain involved in volunteering because they believe it is integral to the survival of the community.

The value of rural volunteering

- Volunteer participation is linked to social wellbeing, with those engaged in volunteering more likely to be happy with their sense of community.

- Volunteering greatly relies on the goodwill of individual volunteers to contribute to their communities out of a sense of the greater good and a desire to leave their communities better off. The value of this goodwill can not be adequately measured.

Risks facing volunteer supply in rural communities

- Outmigration of volunteers is a major threat to the viability of the volunteer labour force. 9% of the rural WA volunteer workforce are planning to move within two years, threatening the viability of the volunteer workforce.

- Structural ageing of the population is underpinning increased demand for volunteer provided services.

- The established trend of outmigration of young people for schooling, training and employment removes this cohort from the volunteer labour pool.

- Existing data on volunteering does not enable the identification of frequency and intensity of volunteer participation. This causes difficulties for planning future volunteer supply.

Challenges faced by rural volunteer involving organisations

- Volunteer involving organisations report that increases in regulation impact negatively on volunteer participation.

- The uptake of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) by central volunteer umbrella organisations causes major difficulties for rural counterparts, with rural volunteers having limited Internet and mobile phone coverage.

- Funding insecurity related to the short term nature of government funding shemes undermines the capacity of volunteering organisations to develop long term initiatives.

- Volunteer involving organisations require increased certainty regarding funding schemes, particularly related to longer term initatives.

- Rural volunteer involving organisations need to proactively manage the workload of their volunteers.

- Volunteer involving organisations need to engage local employers to support their staff to meet the demands of volunteering commitments.

Challenges faced by individual volunteers

- Volunteer burnout is a major risk facing rural volunteer organisations.

- The workload created by volunteering activites can be a major source of stress for individual volunteers, particularly those volunteers managing multiple volunteering commitments.

- Volunteers have a range of coping mechanisms for managing their volunteer workload. Some seek to combine tasks with their other work and family commitments, some simply say no to further roles, while others actively plan their withdrawal from particular volunteering roles.

- Volunteers are primarily responsible for succession planning, which is finding someone else to take on their volunteer role(s).

There is a need to develop data driven strategies to support rural volunteering

- There is a need to better understand the type, frequency and intensity of volunteer participation for which existing data sources are not sufficient.

- Few volunteer involving organisations have strategic plans. An audit of the legislative and public policy framework affecting rural volunteering is required to guide and support volunteer involving organisations develop strategic plans.

- Further data are required to understand the impact of volunteers employment type, rural background, rural migration flows and structural ageing on volunteering.

- Further data are required to understand the challenges related to the enhanced use of ICT in organising and delivering volunteer services.

Introduction

Volunteering is essential to ensure the viability of Australia's rural communities. In many parts of rural Australia, essential services are delivered by volunteers – and only by volunteers. For many communities, there is simply no alternative to volunteer provided services. Volunteer involving activities also underpin community wellbeing through the networks and social connections that they create. Without volunteers, the social, economic and environmental sustainability of rural communities would be seriously compromised.

The ageing of the rural population, coupled with an overall slow rate of population growth, presents challenges for both volunteer supply and demand.

This study examines how rural communities in Western Australia (WA) are addressing these challenges. We recognise that little is known about the dynamics of rural volunteering and this study provides baseline data on the role and nature of volunteering and volunteer involving organisations.

The objectives of the study were:

1. To identify the volunteering participation rate in rural WA and characteristics of the volunteering workforce.
2. To identify the contemporary experiences of rural volunteer involving organisations and groups in recruiting and retaining volunteers.
3. To understand how and why rural volunteers become involved in volunteering and document the strategies they use to manage their volunteering participation over the life course.
4. To document supply-side vulnerabilities of the rural volunteering workforce and identify potential measures to address these.

We have structured the report into seven chapters. Following this introductory chapter, Chapter one provides background on the research problem and outlines the methods used in this study to meet the objectives. Chapter two provides background information on rural volunteering, from the diversity of roles undertaken by volunteers to the challenges that they face. The chapter also summarises the state of volunteer participation in WA, with attention given to geographical and demographic variations.

This research involved examining the nature of volunteering through an in-depth case study. Chapter three introduces the case study communities, providing background demographic information and details about how the case study communities were selected.

Chapter four presents the results of the questionnaire and in-depth interviews with representatives from volunteer involving organisations. The focus in this chapter is the specific challenges facing these organisations in terms of volunteer recruitment, retention and succession planning as well as how the broader social, economic and policy environment impacts on their operations.

Chapter five presents the results of the in-depth interviews with individual volunteers. This chapter reviews the experiences of the volunteers, stressors that impact on their volunteer participation, and strategies they have used to reduce this stress and avoid burnout.

The final chapter, Discussion and conclusion, summarises the major findings of the study, provides policy recommendations and sets out priority areas for future work.

Background

and methods

The nature of rural volunteering

Volunteering is essential to both the survival and success of rural communities in WA, yet a number of factors are challenging the continued sustainability of rural volunteer workforces. These include the intensification of volunteer work, which is most acutely observed in rural areas; the biggest demographic shift experienced by rural communities as the population ages (Davies & James, 2011); and significant changes in volunteering, both in the ways in which individuals choose to volunteer (Merrill, 2006; Hustinx & Meijs, 2011) and the decline in volunteer participation in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2015).

Volunteering has always been a key feature of rural life in WA with volunteers involved in diverse activities and organisations including bush fire brigades, local historical societies, the Country Women's Association, Lions Clubs and wild flower societies (Pick *et al.*, 2011). However, the past two decades have seen an increasing reliance on volunteers to deliver essential services previously provided by Governments (Alston, 2007). This growing reliance on volunteer labour has been identified as increasing the vulnerability of rural communities to inadequate services, which throws doubt on the future viability of such communities. Volunteers and voluntary organisations have not had the necessary investment or capacity building to be able to replace paid services. In addition, it is more resource intensive to provide these services in rural WA, where distances are greater and often volunteers are managed remotely.

A further threat to the rural volunteer workforce is the ageing of the population (Productivity Commission, 2013). This is a double threat as it is likely to generate increased demand for volunteer provided services while reducing the pool of labour available to fill volunteer positions (Davies, 2011; Munoz *et al.*, 2014). In rural areas aged care services, such as transport for health care visits and Meals on Wheels, are more likely to be provided by volunteers. Rural communities are therefore at greatest risk from structural ageing.

Rural communities are also facing difficulties in recruiting volunteers as a result in a shift in the way some parts of the volunteer workforce choose to volunteer. Rather than participate in the traditional, sustained volunteering that service delivery organisations have relied upon, increasingly individuals choose to volunteer episodically, occasionally and for one-off activities (Merrill, 2006). At the same time, these 'new volunteers' seek individual relationships with volunteer involving organisations, which are based on meeting the volunteers' needs, rather than those of the organisation or the organisation's clients (Hustinx & Meijs, 2014).

These challenges combine to place unprecedented pressure on current volunteers in rural WA thereby increasing their risk of burnout. Volunteer 'burn-out' is a major threat to the sustainability of the rural volunteer workforce (Lewig *et al.*, 2007). Burn-out occurs when volunteers become so overwhelmed by the burden of continued volunteering they leave the volunteering workforce (Lockstone-Binney *et al.*, 2016). With more volunteer work needing to be done by fewer volunteers, the risk of burnout is increasing and volunteer involving organisations need to proactively adopt strategies to support their volunteers.

While volunteering in Australia has been estimated to be worth in excess of $43 billion per year (ABS, 2017), the data on volunteer efforts in Australia are spatially and organisationally incomplete. Nationally, information on volunteering involvement is collected by the Australian Bureau of Statistics as part of the Australian Housing and Population Census (AHPC) and also as part of the General Social Survey. The AHPC collects information about the entire Australian resident population. The data collected through the AHPC provide information about the total number of people who had been involved in volunteering in the previous year, it does not provide information on the nature or frequency of their involvement. The ABS does collect data about the nature and frequency of volunteering through the Australian Bureau of Statistics' General Social Survey (GSS), which is conducted every 4 years. However, the GSS uses a sample of the Australian population, with a sample size of approximately 12,000 people. Given the primacy of Australia's large metropolitan areas in its settlement pattern, the GSS data do not reliably capture the experiences and practices of residents of rural Australia.

The differences in sampling approach and question design between the APHC and the GSS mean that they provide different results about the national volunteer participation rate. The 2016 APHC recorded that 15.47 per cent of the population had been involved in volunteering in the previous year. This was an increase from the 14.35 per cent rate recorded in 2006. The 2014 GSS recorded a volunteering rate of 31 per cent which was a decline from the 34 per cent participation rate recorded in 2010

The Australian Government's Department of Social Services (DSS) recognised the limitations of existing data about volunteering in Australia and commissioned a national survey of volunteering. The 2016 DSS survey of just over 6,000 people identified that 43.7 per cent of the population had been involved in volunteering in the previous year (McGregor-Lowndes *et al.*, 2017). The DSS survey was conducted by telephone, using a range of prompting questions designed to elicit information about different types of volunteering. As such, the data are not comparable to the APHC or the GSS. Furthermore, the GSS and DSS surveys provide more detail about the nature of volunteering and frequency and intensity of involvement, but the data can not be spatially disaggregated. This limits the insights that can be gained from the data about the different types and patterns of volunteering in rural areas and our ability to track trends about volunteer participation.

This study addresses the important research gap about rural volunteering, drawing on mixed methods to examine the nature of rural volunteering and how volunteers, volunteer-involving organisations and rural communities can support current and future volunteering in rural Australia.

Research methods

The key research questions addressed through this study are:

- What are the demographic characteristics of the volunteer workforce in rural WA and what are the major issues for volunteer supply?
- What are the experiences of rural volunteering organisations and groups related to volunteer attraction, retention and burnout?
- How do structural and personal factors influence individuals' decisions to participate in various types of volunteering activities?
- How do volunteer involving organisations attract and retain volunteers and what strategies do they use to prevent burnout among their volunteers?
- What, if any, succession planning strategies do volunteer involving organisations have in place to ensure the future sustainability of their volunteer workforce?

This project used a sequential mixed methods approach (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2011) to examine the breadth and depth of volunteering in rural WA. The study involved four consecutive phases of data collection and analysis.

Stage one focused on identifying the demographic characteristics of WA's rural volunteer workforce using data collected through the WA Department for Regional Development's Living in the Regions Survey (LITR hereafter) and Australian Bureau of Statistics Census data. The raw data collected through the LITR survey, for which there were more than 10,000 valid responses recorded, was provided to the research team by the then Department for Regional Development. The analysis of the survey data provided the first state wide review of the demographic characteristics of the rural volunteer workforce.

Data from the LITR survey also informed the identification of case studies for the subsequent parts of this study. The Local Government Areas (LGAs) of Bridgetown-Greenbushes and Boyup Brook in the Southwest Region of Western Australia were selected. Chapter three provides detailed information about these communities and the rationale for selecting these LGAs.

Stage two examined the experiences of rural volunteering organisations and community groups, with a particular focus on volunteer attraction, retention and burnout within the three case study communities. The in-depth case study involved a desktop review of documents, reports and web material to identify the full range of volunteer activities and volunteer involving organisations within the locality (n = 177 organisations). Following this, in-depth, face-to-face interviews were conducted with representatives from 11 volunteer involving organisations to identify labour supply interrelationships between volunteer organisations/groups. Maximum variation sampling was used to ensure a diversity of organisations were included. The full list of organisations is presented in Table 1. This included four organisations from Bridgetown, six organisations from Boyup Brook and one from Greenbushes.

Table 1   Organisations represented in the stage two interviews

Organisation code	Organisation
Org 1	Meals on Wheels
Org 2	Country Women's Association
Org 3	Agricultural show
Org 4	St John's Ambulance
Org 5	Emergency services (local fire brigade and State Emergency Services)
Org 6	Community Resource Centre
Org 7	Country Music Festival
Org 8	Parents and Friends Association
Org 9	Blackwood Youth Brigade
Org 10	Hockey Club
Org 11	Community Resource Centre

In stage three, the data from the desktop review and interviews were analysed and used to develop and disseminate an online questionnaire to the volunteer involving organisations and groups in the case study community. The survey was administered to all organisations listed on the database created in stage two for which a contact email address was recorded (n = 55). The survey was administered during October 2017. At the close of the survey period 27 responses were received. The purpose of the questionnaire was to determine to what extent volunteer involving organisations and groups have experienced difficulties with recruitment, retention and burnout and what strategies they believed to be useful in overcoming these challenges.

Stage four sought to identify the structural and personal factors that underpin volunteers' participation over their life-course and the strategies volunteers use to address burnout. In-depth, face-to-face interviews were conducted with individual volunteers in the three case study communities to record volunteers' experiences over their life-course. The interviews sought to uncover why rural people volunteer, how this changes over their life-course, what personal and structural factors influence their volunteering experiences and how people deal with volunteer stress and burnout. Participants were selected based on recommendations from the organisations involved in stage three and the desk research. Again variation was sought within the sample both in terms of participants' demographic characteristics and the organisations in which they were involved. A total of 17 interviews were required in this stage of the fieldwork to reach theoretical saturation, whereby no new data was being uncovered by subsequent interviews (Guest *et al.*, 2006).

The
volunteering

landscape in rural
Western Australia

Introduction

Across rural Australia, emergency services, as a pertinent example, are provided by volunteers. For many places these volunteer services are not in addition to commercial or government provided services. In fact, volunteer emergency service providers, including paramedics and ambulance base operators, fire fighters and disaster response groups, are in most cases the only resource in place to provide emergency services to rural communities. Volunteering also underpins the day-to-day social, economic and environmental functions of rural communities. From running sporting clubs and skill development programs to undertaking environmental rehabilitation and bushfire prevention activities as well as organising tourist attracting events, rural volunteers are essential.
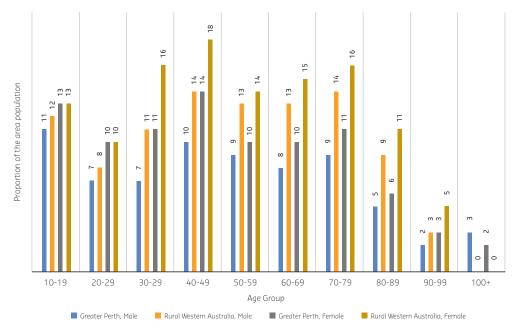
In Western Australia volunteering has always been a key feature of rural life, with volunteers involved in diverse activities and organisations including bush fire brigades, local historical societies, women's groups, community and services clubs and environmental groups (Pick *et al*., 2011). However, the past four decades have seen an increasing reliance on volunteers to deliver essential services that were previously provided by Governments (Alston, 2007). This growing reliance on volunteer labour has been identified as increasing the vulnerability of rural communities to inadequate services, which throws doubt on the future viability of such communities.

Research on rural volunteer organisations has revealed that, as with metropolitan based volunteer organisations, they are reporting difficulties in recruiting sufficient volunteers (Byron & Curtis, 2001; Tonts, 2005). A number of factors have been identified as challenging the continued sustainability of rural volunteer workforces. These include the intensification of volunteer work, the impact of structural population ageing, and significant changes in volunteering, both in the ways in which individuals choose to volunteer and the overall decline in volunteer participation in Australia (ABS, 2015; Davies & James, 2011; Hustinx & Meijs, 2011; Merrill, 2006). Compounding the difficulties of rural volunteering, it is often more resource intensive to provide volunteer emergency and social services in rural areas given the distances serviced are greater and often volunteers are managed remotely. An example of this is Meals on Wheels, where rural volunteer drivers incur substantially increased fuel costs when servicing rural communities (Pick *et al.*, 2011).

The importance of volunteering to Australia's rural communities has meant that, on average, rural communities have had a higher rate of participation in volunteering than their urban counterparts (ABS, 2015). However, volunteer participation nationally has been in long-term decline (ABS, 2017).

Characteristics of rural Western Australia's volunteer workforce

Rural Western Australians, on average, are more likely to be involved in volunteering than urban counterparts (ABS, 2017). This observation is true across the age profile, with rural residents more likely to participate in volunteering in each age group (as illustrated in Figure 1). For those living in Greater Perth and those living in rural WA it was observed that more females volunteered than males (as illustrated in Figure 1). By age, those most likely to be involved in volunteering were those aged between 40 and 80 years. These data for WA reflect national volunteering trends, with, nationally: rural residents more likely to volunteer than their metropolitan counterparts; more women involved in volunteering, and; people of working age participating more regularly in volunteering (ABS, 2015; 2017; McGregor-Lowndes *et al*., 2017).

Figure 1   Comparative volunteering rates in Western Australia

Source: ABS, 2017.

To gain further insight into the rural WA volunteer workforce, data were collected by the Department of Regional Development (DRD) through a 2013 survey of the rural population. The survey, called the Living in the Regions survey (here after LITR), was stratified to ensure a wide cross-section of the rural community, as well as representative samples of each region. In total, 10,444 valid responses were received[1,2].

The questionnaire addressed a wide range of issues relevant to rural communities, but of particular relevance to this study it asked participants 'In the past three months how often have you performed some local volunteer work?'. There were 6,666 valid responses recorded for the question. From the responses, it was found that across rural WA there was a very high level of participation in local volunteer work, with 66 per cent of the non-retired population indicating they had participated in local volunteer work within the previous three months. 60 per cent of those aged over 29 had recently performed local volunteer work (Table 2). Despite a slightly lower engagement in volunteering for people aged 20-29 being recorded, the results

1   Full details of the sampling approach and survey questions can be found at:
    http://www.drd.wa.gov.au/Publications/Documents/Living_in_the_regions_2013_State_Report.pdf.
2   There is considerable difference in the sample, approach and questions used to identify participation in volunteering in the Australian Population and Housing Census and the Living in the Regions Survey. The Australian Populatoin and Housing Census is a compulsory survey of the entire population and the Living in the Regions Survey is a voluntary survey of a sample of the population. Therefore, the data can not reliability be compared across surveys.

show that younger people in rural areas were still much more likely to be involved in volunteering than their urban counterparts.

Table 2 Percentage of the non-retired population who participated in a local volunteer activity within the last three months

	Percentage of people in each age group							
	18-20	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	70+	Total
Participate at least once	67	58	66	68	64	68	74	66
Never participated	33	42	34	32	32	32	26	34
	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Source: Davies *et al.*, 2018.

Additionally, it was revealed there was a significant relationship between gender and volunteer participation, χ^2 (2, n = 6626) = 30.798, $p < .001$. This relationship was influenced by higher female participation in local volunteer work. This finding reflects that of previous research on volunteering (Midgley, 2006; Davis *et al.*, 2012). Further reflecting the findings of previous studies on volunteering (Casto, 2016) was the observation that in rural WA people with family caring responsibilities were more likely to be involved in volunteering than those without. In particular, rural residents with school aged children were the most likely to be involved in volunteering. Indeed, a Pearson's chi-square analysis revealed there was a significant relationship, χ^2 (2, n=6666) = 41.671, $p < .001$, with those with children at home more likely to have participated in local volunteer work. Further, a Pearson's chi-square analysis examining how the age of children in the home related to volunteering found that those with children aged 6 – 12 years were significantly more likely to volunteer, χ^2 (2, n=3205) = 34.185, $p < .001$. Given the widely acknowledged dependency of rural schools on volunteer involvement it is reasonable to assert that many parents of young children in rural WA are volunteering to support their children's activities, including schooling.

Employment responsibilities are often cited as reasons for why people do not volunteer. However, when considering how people become involved in particular types of volunteer activities these employment responsibilities are also often cited as being of particular importance. The LITR data confirmed that rural Western Australian's employment status did not have a significant association with participation in local volunteer work (a finding previously observed by Warburton and Stirling, 2007). However, the data did show that there was a significant relationship between volunteering and job type. In rural Western Australia, more than 80 per cent of farm workers volunteered, more than 70 per cent of small business owners volunteered, 66 per cent of those engaged in home duties volunteered and 53 per cent of skilled tradespersons volunteered.

Anecdotal understandings about volunteering often link individuals' sense of connectedness to their community and satisfaction with living in their community to participation in volunteering. The results from the LITR data provided support for this anecdotal understanding, with a Pearson's chi square analysis of the relationship between individuals' happiness with sense of community and involvement in volunteering finding χ^2 (18, N=6599) = 468.928, $p < .001$. Importantly, more than 67 per cent of those people that indicated they were 'very happy' with the sense of community had also volunteered. The relationship between how participants felt about their connectedness to the community and their involvement in volunteering provided a similar significant result, χ^2 (18, N=6625) = 786.741, $p < .001$. Those involved in volunteering were the most likely to be happy with their connectedness to their community.

Volunteer supply risks for rural Western Australia

It is well known that the social, economic and environmental wellbeing and sustainability of rural communities is dependent on the activities undertaken by local volunteers. The already very high rate of engagement by rural residents in volunteering in Western Australia means that there is little scope for increasing the pool of volunteers from within the population. Therefore, ensuring that the existing volunteer workforce is retained, and replenished, is critical.

A perennial threat to the sustainability of the rural volunteer workforce is population outmigration. Migration decisions are complex and relate to personal and locational factors. For rural Australians, research shows that employment and lifestyle reasons are the major factors underpinning migration decisions (Davies, 2008).

Understanding the future migration intentions of the existing volunteer workforce is critical to understanding related sustainability issues. To investigate if and how future migration intentions might impact volunteer labour supply, the research team interrogated the data from the LITR survey. Participants were asked about their plans to remain or move away from their rural community. Table 3 presents the results for this query. It can be seen that just over 400 of the volunteer respondents were planning on leaving their rural community within 2 years. This group alone represented 9 per cent of the volunteer workforce. Within a decade from the survey, more than 1,000 people who indicated they were active in local volunteering (or 23% of the volunteer workforce) indicated they would move from their community. Given the very high dependency on volunteers, and the fact that the volunteering participation rate is already very high, it is plausible that the projected loss of volunteers from workforce is problematic.

Table 3 Respondents' plans to move by participation in a local volunteer activity

	Number of people who participated in a local volunteer activity			
	Never	Once	More than once	Total
No plans to move	925	476	1,546	2,947
Don't know	177	68	220	465
Plan to stay indefinitely	140	74	278	492
No time frame but will probably move	381	172	441	994
Will move in less than 2 years	240	116	292	648
Will move within 2-5 years	228	89	233	550
Will move within 6-10 years	158	71	211	440
Will move in more than 10 years	38	26	66	130
Total	**2,287**	**1,092**	**3,287**	**6,666**

Source: Davies *et al.*, 2018.

Conclusion

Data from the Census and the LITR survey confirmed that rural Western Australians have a very high rate of involvement in local volunteer activities, with more than 50 per cent of rural residents engaged in local volunteering. Participation trends follow those observed at the national level whereby women are more likely than men to be involved in volunteering and those with young children in the home are the most likely to be involved in volunteering. For residents in rural Western Australia, involvement in volunteering was linked to social wellbeing, with those who were engaged in volunteering more likely to be happy with their sense of community and connectedness to their local community.

While the high level of engagement in volunteering paints a picture of socially connected communities it also points to risk. With a very high dependency on volunteers, and, arguably, all potential volunteer labour already engaged, any increased demand or loss of volunteers could undermine the viability of Western Australia's rural communities. This noted, it is of particular concern that the LITR survey recorded that 9 per cent of the volunteer workforce was planning on moving away from their community within two years. This comes at a time when, with the structural ageing of the population, demand for volunteer provided services is expect to increase (Productivity Commission, 2013).

While the Census data and the LITR data provide useful insights into volunteering in rural Western Australia, the data do not reveal the nature, intensity or frequency of volunteering involvement.

Volunteering

in Bridgetown-Greenbushes and Boyup Brook

Introduction

Given the vital role that volunteering plays in rural communities and the importance of ensuring its long-term sustainability, a case study approach was utilised to gain further insight into the nature, intensity and frequency of volunteering involvement in rural Western Australia. The Local Government Areas (LGA) of Bridgetown-Greenbushes and Boyup Brook in the Southwest Region of Western Australia were selected for review due to their diverse, yet typical representations of the dynamics evident in many rural communities across Australia. While over the last decade the Southwest Region has experienced the largest per capita population growth (outside of greater Perth) in Western Australia, Bridgetown-Greenbushes and Boyup Brook LGAs, and the townships within these LGAs, did not grow at the same rate. These communities are experiencing structural ageing, and their prospects for growth remains limited given their economies are tied to traditional agricultural and mining activities. However, that noted, with high natural amenity value, they do attract lifestyle in-migration.

Within the Bridgetown-Greenbushes LGA there are two main settlements – the Town of Bridgetown and the Town of Greenbushes. 89.3 per cent of the LGA's population live in Bridgetown and 10.7 per cent live in Greenbushes. The main settlement in the Boyup Brook LGA is Boyup Brook, with 100 per cent of the LGAs population.

Bridgetown, formerly dominated by the agriculture and timber industries, has undergone significant change in recent decades. With the decline of timber milling, the area has attracted lifestyle in-migrants. Changes to planning regulations permitting the subdivision of agricultural land around the township to enable the formation of small 'hobby' farms and lifestyle lots has supported the locality gaining a reputation as an affordable and accessible rural retirement destination. Located within a 1.5 hour commute from the coastal regional city of Bunbury, most of the community's secondary and tertiary services are located in that regional city. Indeed, with the local high school only supporting learning to year 10 level, students seeking to complete their schooling or gain tertiary training or education must travel to Bunbury (or further afield). Bunbury is also the major services hub for Boyup Brook and Greenbushes.

Boyup Brook is broadly considered as a traditional farming community, with farming remaining a major source of employment. The town's identity remains closely tied to agricultural activities, with a rodeo, country music festival and agricultural fair yearly events. Like many traditional farming towns, the population has remained stable over the last decade and there is little to indicate that there will be any significant change in the population size over the next decade.

While Greenbushes is less than a 20-minute commute from Boyup Brook and Bridgetown it has a considerably different economic base. The town's activities largely revolve around the Talison Lithium owned and operated mine that has been operating under a number of guises since 1888 (Discover Greenbushes, 2016; ABS 2017). Lithium is a growth mineral and the mine is undergoing a significant expansion. The town's population is heavily dependent on the mining industry, and over the decades changes in the town's population size have closely reflected the fortunes of the mine. Currently, the expansion to the mine is attracting new residents to the town.

Volunteering is an important component of life in these communities, with 26.3 per cent of people in Bridgetown-Greenbushes and 29.3 per cent of Boyup Brook residents undertaking unpaid work for an organisation or group in 2016 (compared to 14.5% in Greater Perth) (ABS 2017).

Community profiles

Population ageing presents one of the biggest risks to the sustainability of volunteering in rural communities. Population ageing not only potentially reduces the pool of available volunteers, it is also associated with increased demand for volunteer provided services. Similar to many rural towns, the populations of Bridgetown, Greenbushes and Boyup Brook are structurally ageing. This change is particularly evident when contrasted to the population of the Greater Perth Statistical Area and Australia as a whole (as shown in Table 4). In the decade from 2006, the median age of those in Bridgetown-Greenbushes rose from 44 to 49, while in Boyup Brook, the median age rose from 43 to 49 (ABS 2007, 2013, 2017). In contrast, the median age of those within Greater Perth remained at 36, with the national median age rising only fractionally from 36 to 37 (ABS 2007, 2013, 2017).

Table 4   Median age of Bridgetown-Greenbushes, Boyup Brook, Greater Perth and Australia population in 2006, 2011 and 2016

Location	Median age		
	2006	2011	2016
Bridgetown-Greenbushes	44	46	49
Boyup Brook	43	44	49
Perth (Statistical Division)/Greater Perth	36	36	36
Australia	37	37	38

Source: ABS (2007, 2013, 2017).

Within the target LGAs, the proportion of those in full time employment is notably lower than the levels exhibited in both Greater Perth and Australia (ABS, 2017). Bridgetown-Greenbushes displays the lowest rate (22% of the population), 5 per cent less than Greater Perth and 6 per cent below the national average of 28 per cent (ABS, 2017). The proportion of those in both Bridgetown-Greenbushes and Boyup Brook who are unemployed and seeking work, either full or part time, are also lower than in Greater Perth and Australia. This equated to only 2.1 per cent of those in Boyup Brook and 2.6 per cent of people in Bridgetown-Greenbushes seeking work, in contrast to 4.2 per cent in Greater Perth and 3.4 per cent in Australia (ABS, 2017). These findings are not unsurprising for structurally aged communities, where a relatively large proportion of the workforce are retired (for further discussion see Davies & James, 2011).

As noted earlier, agriculture is the major economic driver of the case study area (Table 5). With a considerable proportion of the labour force directly employed in agriculture, it is important to note that this sector also underpins the function and viability of many small businesses in the area. With mining activities dominating employment in Greenbushes, it is unsurprising that across the LGA 11.6 per cent of the labour force is employed in the mining sector.

As is the case for many Australian rural communities, public sector employment, in particular that associated with primary and secondary education, was important – providing stable employment for more than 10 per cent of the workforce. Employment in tertiary service providers, such as financial and insurance services and professional services, was underrepresented in the area. However, this underrepresentation is not uncommon for rural areas as these services tend to be concentrated in larger urban settlements.

Table 5   Structure of employment by industry sector

Industry of employment	% of area labour force employed in each industry			
	Boyup Brook	Bridgetown-Greenbushes	Greater Perth	Australia
Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing	48.0%	10.6%	0.8%	2.6%
Mining	3.5%	11.6%	5.2%	1.7%
Manufacturing	1.8%	5.7%	5.9%	6.7%
Electricity, Gas, Water and Waste Services	0.6%	1.9%	1.2%	1.1%
Construction	5.0%	8.5%	10.4%	8.9%
Wholesale Trade	1.8%	1.8%	2.8%	3.0%
Retail Trade	6.7%	9.4%	10.2%	10.3%
Accommodation and Food Services	3.1%	6.9%	6.8%	7.2%
Transport, Postal and Warehousing	3.5%	3.5%	4.8%	4.9%
Information Media and Telecommunications	0.0%	0.3%	1.2%	1.8%
Financial and Insurance Services	0.4%	1.1%	2.8%	3.8%
Rental, Hiring and Real Estate Services	0.6%	1.1%	1.9%	1.8%
Professional, Scientific and Technical Services	2.2%	3.3%	7.6%	7.6%
Administrative and Support Services	1.9%	2.4%	3.5%	3.6%
Public Administration and Safety	5.1%	6.3%	6.7%	7.0%
Education and Training	6.8%	9.2%	9.3%	9.1%
Health Care and Social Assistance	7.0%	11.7%	12.9%	13.2%
Arts and Recreation Services	0.4%	0.9%	1.8%	1.7%
Other Services	1.7%	3.9%	4.2%	3.9%

Source: Excluding Inadequately described, Not stated and Not applicable, ABS 2017.

Characteristics of the volunteering workforce in Bridgetown-Greenbushes and Boyup Brook

As stated in Chapter 2, rural areas often exhibit high rates of volunteer involvement due largely to community reliance on the services they provide. This dynamic is reflected in the LGAs of Bridgetown-Greenbushes and Boyup Brook, with 26.3 per cent and 29.3 per cent of the population undertaking volunteering in 2016. This contrasts to participation levels recorded for Greater Perth and Australia (as shown in Table 6), with only 14.5 per cent and 15.5 per cent respectively of those populations involved in volunteering.

Table 6   Percentage of people undertaking voluntary work for an organisation or group in Boyup Brook, Bridgetown-Greenbushes, Greater Perth and Australia in 2016

Voluntary work for an organisation or group	Boyup Brook	Bridgetown-Greenbushes	Greater Perth	Australia
Not a volunteer	43.8%	48.0%	60.1%	59.2%
Volunteer	29.3%	26.3%	14.5%	15.5%
Not stated	8.2%	8.0%	6.4%	6.6%
Not applicable	18.9%	17.6%	19.1%	18.7%

Source: ABS 2017.

However, as shown in Table 7 and 8, rates of volunteering in these communities have changed over the decade from 2006 to 2016. The proportion of the working age population in Boyup Brook who volunteered declined from 34.1 per cent in 2006 to 29.3 per cent in 2016. In Bridgetown-Greenbushes, involvement increased from 25.2 per cent to 26.3 per cent over this time period (ABS, 2007, 2017).

Table 7   Number and percentage of people undertaking voluntary work for an organisation or group in Boyup Brook, 2006, 2011 and 2016

	2006		2011		2016	
Voluntary work for an organisation or group	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Not a volunteer	611	41.2%	693	43.6%	745	43.8%
Volunteer	506	34.1%	483	30.4%	499	29.3%
Not stated	56	3.8%	79	5.0%	139	8.2%
Not applicable	305	20.6%	337	21.2%	322	18.9%

Source: ABS 2007, 2013, 2017.

Table 8   Number and percentage of people undertaking voluntary work for an organisation or group in Bridgetown-Greenbushes, 2006, 2011 and 2016

	2006		2011		2016	
Voluntary work for an organisation or group	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Not a volunteer	1902	48.1%	2172	50.3%	2239	48.0%
Volunteer	995	25.2%	1091	25.3%	1224	26.3%
Not stated	215	5.4%	166	3.8%	375	8.0%
Not applicable	836	21.1%	893	20.7%	821	17.6%

Source: ABS 2007, 2013, 2017.

Volunteer involving organisations in Bridgetown-Greenbushes and Boyup Brook

A thorough desk examination of local publications and Internet resources identified 177 volunteer groups within Boyup Brook, Bridgetown and Greenbushes. These groups represented a wide variety of activities and interests, reflecting the diversity of each community and their specific needs. The two areas that had the most number of volunteer groups were sport (35) and emergency services (32). Volunteer Fire Brigades were the most common sub-group of the emergency service group identified, with 29 Brigades across Bridgetown, Greenbushes and Boyup Brook. This included both the more formal Department of Fire and Emergency Service (DFES) organisations and those formed predominantly by farmers to protect their land.

There were two Ambulance Sub Centres within the area examined, one located in Boyup Brook and another in Bridgetown. Due to the size of Greenbushes and its proximity to Bridgetown, it does not have as many emergency services groups located within its bounds, relying on the services provided by its larger neighbour - Bridgetown.

Among the 35 sporting organisations that were identified, there are a wide variety of activities catering to a range of interests and age groups. These ranged from conventional rural sports such as Australian Rules Football, golf, bowls and netball, to more niche pursuits, including darts, badminton and endurance horse riding. All of these sports are organised and enabled predominantly by volunteers, with their success largely dependent on the support they received from the community.

Between the three communities, seven organisations that aimed to provide support for individual schools were identified. These ranged from groups that provide support and fundraising for the school as a whole, to committees that focus on the needs of specific age groups. Each town has at least one group with the aim of facilitating and promoting tourism, these included visitor's centres, tourism associations and museums. In recent years, variations of these groups were shown to have emerged in the form of organisations aiming to progress their communities both in terms of external appeal and resident satisfaction with their town. Service clubs were shown to be highly active, with Apex, the Returned and Services League (RSL), the Country Women's Association (CWA), Lions and Rotary all present within the examined area. These are accompanied by an array of other community groups including variants that focus on environmental issues, local infrastructure, healthcare support, agricultural shows, music events and many more.

Conclusion

Boyup Brook, Bridgetown and Greenbushes represent diverse yet typical examples of Australian rural communities, continuing to be largely reliant on traditional land-based industries such as agriculture and mining. Despite experiencing modest growth, the populations of these towns are likely to remain stable in size, with the majority of in-migration stemming from retirees seeking an affordable tree change. This ageing dynamic is exacerbated by a lack of educational options within the LGAs, with the majority of young people leaving to access a wider range of opportunities. With a predominantly static economy and population, these towns are ageing more quickly than Greater Perth and Australia, with the median age rising across successive Census periods.

Volunteering is an essential element of these communities, with a far greater proportion of the population taking part in unpaid activities in comparison to their urban and national counterparts. Local needs and interests have led to the creation of a multitude of voluntary groups, including essential services, sporting organisations and support for the area's schools. Through an examination of ABS Census data, local publications and Internet resources, the volunteering rate as well as the number and variety of community groups was able to be ascertained for the target LGAs, however, this data only provides part of the picture, with the type, frequency and intensity of volunteer participation unable to be identified.

Rural

volunteer involving organisations

Introduction

Each of the case study communities, Bridgetown, Greenbushes and Boyup Brook, had a very high level of volunteer engagement with volunteers involved in almost every aspect of running the communities. To understand how volunteering was organised and managed within and across the communities, data elicited through an online questionnaire that was disseminated to 55 volunteers whose email addresses were sourced in the construction of the database and in-depth interviews with 11 leaders of volunteering organisations were interrogated.

Following this introductory section, this chapter commences with an overview of what leaders of volunteering organisations understood to be the major factors influencing peoples' decisions to become involved in volunteering. Following this, leaders' observations of the major changes that had, and continue to face, rural volunteering are presented. The discussion then turns to the funding environment for volunteer involving organisations as a core factor relating to the sustainability of rural volunteer involving organisations. The final two sections document leaders' understandings about the challenges in recruiting and retaining volunteers and concerns about succession planning. Overall, this chapter provides insights about the nature, functions, challenges and future of rural volunteer involving organisations from the perspective of those most closely involved in the day to day running of these. Additional results from the organisational survey are detailed in Appendix 1.

Why do people volunteer?

A core challenge facing volunteer involving organisations is maintaining an adequate supply of appropriately skilled volunteers. One of the key points of inquiry for understanding supply side factors of volunteering is understanding why volunteers become involved in particular types of volunteering. Generally, volunteering provided residents with a way to meaningfully engage with their community and to create and maintain valuable social relationships. This was true for life long residents through to recent arrivals. Indeed, many of the representatives of the volunteering organisations who participated in the interviews reported that they first become involved in volunteering as a way of creating social networks and connections in their community. This was further supported by the survey results with organisational respondents reporting high levels of connectedness to their local communities (see Appendix 1, Table 1). Additionally, for those who had moved to their community for retirement, undertaking organisational leadership positions provided an outlet that they could focus on in which they were able to transfer skills from their working life.

A fundamental reason people remained involved in volunteering, often taking on multiple volunteering roles in the community, was that they believed volunteering was integral to the survival of the community. The notion of 'survival' extended beyond the value of providing many of the essential services to include the importance of volunteering to the atmosphere and identity of rural communities. Volunteering was characterised by several of the interviewees as an activity that all members of the community should participate in, particularly young people as it was seen to increase the likelihood that they would continue to volunteer, thus ensuring the sustainability of the community. Summarising the nature of rural volunteering one participant stated "Your general rule everybody is doing at least one if not two or three things you know from the golf club to ambulance to fries to the library or whatever" (Representative Organisation 4).

Changes in rural volunteering

Organisation representatives reported that the most noticeable change in volunteering over the last decade was an increase in the accountability and regulation that they were subject to. This included increased training, safety practices, liability and government oversight. Some reported that such changes had been of benefit to their organisation resulting in higher levels of certainty and efficiency. Others, and indeed the majority of interview participants, saw increased regulation as needless stating that it hampered their organisation's ability to make a difference and made people less likely to volunteer.

The increased regulations informing the operations of volunteering organisations and the nature of volunteering activities contributed to a perception that volunteering had become increasingly professionalised. This was particularly evident in the emergency service organisations studied. Volunteers were subject to time and efficiency expectations, which potentially deterred new recruits.

In recent years, some rural volunteer involving organisations had recruited employees to undertake duties that had traditionally been fulfilled by volunteers. For example, St John Ambulance had moved to a model in which ambulance members who conducted first aid training were paid, with consideration being given to the recruitment of paid officers to conduct hospital transfers in the future.

Several volunteers involved in traditionally male dominated organisations suggested that gender stereotypes were increasingly being challenged as women became involved in a wider range of roles. One individual noted, "the other thing that's happened is there are far more women involved. And that encourages more women to be involved. Initially there were very few. There were a couple but if we had 28 people there might have been two. Now it would be closer to half so that's a major difference" (Individual 2).

The nature of volunteering and volunteering organisations was also reported to be changing in response to advances in technology. ICT advancements had shifted the mode of communications between volunteers as well as the nature of some activities. Providing an example of the impact of technological advances, a volunteer who had been involved in an environmental support group noted how the ease of finding information on the Internet had negated the need for their organisation to provide community information workshops. As this was central to the charter of the group, the group ultimately dissolved.

Increased access to the Internet was also noted as having changed the delivery of training for some volunteer roles, with an increase in online education and support resources. While this medium was shown to have improved the accessibility of training for rural community organisations, volunteers questioned its utility in conveying many essential practical skills. An interview participant commented "Well they've changed all of the training completely and it went from like you go to weekend courses run by a paramedic from Perth to doing a lot of training online and reading online and all of that kind of stuff" (Representative organisation 4). Also, given a core reason people volunteer was to make and sustain social relationships, moving to online training had reduced opportunities for this social interaction for some volunteer organisations, thereby lessening one of the key attractors for recruiting and sustaining volunteers.

The move in some volunteer involving organisations, particularly those involved in essential services, towards centralised online recruiting of volunteers was noted as a major barrier to rural communities. This finding is unsurprising given that 42 per cent of survey respondents indicated their organisation or association was part of a larger central branch or body (see Appendix 1 for results table). Many rural communities have limited Internet coverage and services. Research also indicates that older rural Australians are particularly disadvantaged when it comes to accessing the Internet. Volunteer organisations noted concern that online recruiting processes could deter many potential volunteers.

One volunteering challenge that was reported to not have changed in recent years was the difficulty organisations faced in recruiting volunteers. Interviewees contended that the numbers of volunteers had fluctuated over time, with those in some organisations finding it particularly difficult in recent years to attract volunteers to particular roles. For example, a local sporting club had moved away from elections to fill office vacancies as there were not sufficient nominees for positions. It was contended that difficulties in finding volunteers was dependent on a variety of factors including: access to sufficient funding to support the organisation's activities; the type of community group/ organisation, and; the population demographics of each town.

More positively, a number of volunteers in Greenbushes reported that the volunteering landscape had become increasingly vibrant in recent years, with community groups undertaking a wider range of activities that benefited their town. The community garden was seen to be at the centre of much of the change, with the enthusiasm that had been created since its inception transferring to other groups and positively impacting volunteer recruitment and retention. When discussing the community garden, an organisational representative stated "I think that's when things really started moving in Greenbushes, when that started. And it just sort of took off and everyone got interested in it and little branches things come out from that" (Representative organisation 2).

The survey results supported some of the more pessimistic qualitative voices with 40 per cent of respondents indicating they currently had volunteer shortages, a further 16 per cent reporting expected shortages in the next 12 months to five years, and an additional 12 per cent suggesting shortages were a constant concern for their organisations. In the minority, 32 per cent of organisations reported no issues with their volunteering numbers (see Appendix 1, Tables 3 and 5).

The funding environment for volunteer involving organisations

Rural volunteering organisations run not only on volunteer labour, but also frequently depend on other resources donated by the volunteers. In the case study towns, volunteers had contributed cash and equipment to support volunteering activities where other funding sources were not available. Unsurprisingly therefore, the funding environment was identified as a core factor influencing the nature of rural volunteer organisations and volunteering.

Unlike their urban counterparts, rural essential services such as emergency fire services and ambulance are often entirely volunteer based. All sporting clubs and community clubs are volunteer based. Many of the bush reserves and walk trails, tourist attractions and small business support services are volunteer based. Volunteers involved in these activities note that without them, the social and economic viability of the towns would be undermined. This understanding of the importance of volunteering underpinned the willingness of individuals to contribute private resources to activities. However, it also underpinned a dominant feeling that volunteer activities were not being appropriately recognised or funded by the State or Australian Government.

The issue of funding emerged repeatedly, with volunteers noting that, in recent years, it had become particularly difficult for organisations to obtain the fiscal resources needed to successfully conduct their operations. Interviewees asserted that grants for community groups had become more challenging to access due to a decreasing number of funding sources and the increasingly complex nature of applications. Within these discussions it was apparent that many people felt let down by successive governments, seeing policies as favouring volunteer organisations in urban areas. There was a dominant understanding that the government organisations responsible for administering grants that support volunteering had given little consideration to the pressures being experienced by rural volunteering organisations.

Those who referenced the provision of government support contended that funds were continuing to diminish, as schemes designed to benefit rural projects, such as Royalties for Regions, were downgraded. Organisational representatives cited numerous projects that they had been able to complete with Royalties for Regions funds. Following major changes to the Royalties for Regions funding in 2017, which resulted in a major decline in funding available for small scale community projects, interviewees noted their organisations had come under immediate increased stress as they were forced to try and find other sources of support. The flow on effects have seen the cutting back of services or organisations ceasing operation completely.

Amid the instability created by the flagged and then implemented changes to the Royalties for Regions schemes and other small grant schemes in 2016 and 2017, some community groups reported that they were turning away from government grant funding altogether, instead focusing their efforts on attracting funding from private companies or other philanthropists. This was particularly apparent in Greenbushes, where Talison Lithium was deeply entrenched in the community, providing a high level of support and indirect funding to environmental, social, emergency services and education initiatives.

While many community groups were dependent on grants for their operations, other volunteer organisations favoured more traditional methods of fundraising such as cake stalls, raffles and small social events. One of the Parents & Friends (P&F) representatives interviewed explained that they held yearly community events such as auctions, art shows and themed evenings that raised significant funds for projects within the school. Volunteers noted that, while there was still support within the community for these activities, they had become more difficult due to the implementation of more stringent regulations. As an example, volunteers were no longer allowed to sell cakes with cream and all food items for sale had to include a complete ingredient breakdown for those with allergies. This considerably complicated the process of holding small scale cake stalls for fundraising purposes. Adjustment to the regulations surrounding holding raffles had also caused issues for fundraising, with permits restricting the funds that community groups could raise through this method.

Interestingly, an important mechanism for many groups to raise operational funds was through providing services such as catering and gate attending at other volunteer organised events. Reciprocal relationships had been forged between community groups, with larger volunteer organisations employing smaller community groups to provide such services. Organisations that operated in this manner included the Bridgetown Blues Festival, the Boyup Brook Country Music Festival and the Upper Blackwood Agricultural Society, with them 'employing' other groups including the Country Women's Associations, Parents and Citizen's groups and sporting organisations to provide catering and support services.

Challenges in recruiting volunteers

As noted in other points of this report, rural volunteer involving organisations have long faced challenges in recruiting and retaining volunteers. With a high base level of volunteer engagement in rural areas, there are few sources in the existing population to attract new volunteers. Therefore, attracting new in-migrants to volunteering roles, retaining existing volunteers and ensuring that young people are encouraged to participate in volunteering is critical to the long-term sustainability of rural volunteering.

An aspect that was seen to contribute significantly to the decreasing sustainability of rural volunteer organisations was the inability to interest, recruit and retain people aged under 30 into volunteering roles. One interviewee noted that, while there were many active volunteer groups in their community, members were often of retirement age, struggling to find younger people to replace them when they wanted to cease their involvement.

Interviewees identified that while younger people were available to participate in volunteering, it appeared that an increasing number expected recompense for any effort expended within their community. Volunteering organisation leaders contended that this issue had stemmed from a change in terms of how youth had been exposed to volunteering. Of concern was that a traditional 'first step' to volunteering - participation in volunteering roles in sporting clubs – now often attracted payment. For example, the Lower South West Football League, in response to league regulations, now paid young people to undertake boundary umpire duties. Previously, this job was undertaken on a voluntary basis, providing young people with critical exposure to the nature of volunteering and, for the players, the importance of volunteers. Respondents voiced their opposition to this commodification, noting concern that this would have long-term consequences for rural communities.

Volunteering organisations, acutely aware of the need to expose young people to volunteering at a young age, had commenced various initiatives to do this. One example was an initiative that involved the Bridgetown High School in which students undertook cadetships with voluntary emergency services groups such as the State Emergency Services (SES). Reportedly, involvement in such programs had helped to encourage a greater understanding of the importance of volunteering and young peoples' willingness to participate in volunteer organisations.

When considering participation in volunteering of younger people, particularly those of school age, it is important to note that the limitation of a lack of local schooling meant that young people had to commute for schooling, or board away from their home community. This considerably limited the opportunities for young people to remain involved with their sporting and social clubs. Reportedly, once young people left the community and formed social networks and bonds elsewhere, it was difficult to entice them back into the community and back into volunteering roles.

While many organisations noted difficulty in attracting young people, they also detailed significant challenges in attracting people of working age. Many of the volunteer roles in the three communities required a very high level of commitment and workload. Few people were able and prepared to take on such a commitment, with the work pressures and family commitments making it difficult to volunteer regularly and reliably. This was particularly the case for emergency service organisations. For example, volunteer paramedics noted that they were required to commit a large amount of their time to the service, completing regular training as well as undertaking

both emergency call outs and hospital transfers. These transfers often necessitated travelling large distances. It was suggested that the high level of commitment limited the number of people that were able and willing to volunteer, with crews dominated by those of, or nearing, retirement age.

A noted barrier to recruiting volunteers was the perception of community members that they did not have the necessary expertise to be involved. While this was most apparent for essential service providers, other community groups also noted this issue particularly when trying to recruit new volunteers to committee positions. Interviewees noted that this often led to those with perceived experience taking on further voluntary positions, later encountering difficulties when they tried to divest themselves of these roles. Organisation leaders noted that there was some truth to the perception of community members about needing expertise to be involved given rural volunteering was becoming increasingly regulated, with many volunteers now expected to have knowledge about the compliance parameters for their activities.

Succession planning for rural volunteer involving organisations

With volunteer involving organisations identifying issues with the ageing of their workforce and difficulty in attracting and retaining younger volunteers, succession planning was identified as a major need for these organisations. For the most part, leaders of volunteering organisations were unable to say what would happen or who would take over their positions if they were unable or unwilling to continue. When asked about their organisation's current succession planning, organisation leaders replied that it was often extremely difficult to find people to take over committee roles due to their demanding nature, with repeated face-to-face approaches to people within their own social network found to be most successful strategy.

This strategy often involved the holder of the role gauging the interest of individuals over a protracted period leading up to the time that they planned to step down so that the transfer of office could be as smooth as possible. One interviewee noted that to extricate themselves from a role it was necessary to be highly assertive, forcing others to accept the need for a replacement to be found. Another interviewee contended that it could be necessary to let the organisation face dissolution in order to force people to step forward to fill these roles.

A strategy adopted by a number of community groups was the implementation of term limits for members of their committees. This allowed people to take on positions knowing that they would not have to hold them indefinitely - "it's not such an onerous thing to ask of someone, to say you only have to be in that role for three years, max, and then you can move on" (Representative organisation 6).

Particularly problematic to succession planning was that while many people in rural communities were involved in volunteering, the organisation and management of community groups and essential service organisations were found to be undertaken by a small group of 'core volunteers'. These people were often involved in key roles in multiple organisations or groups. For these individuals, a large amount of their time was spent fulfilling their volunteer roles. This reliance on a core group of volunteers was evident in all three communities. While there were noted benefits from having a core group of individuals committed to supporting their community, it was also noted that this reliance created vulnerability. With rural communities facing increased demand for volunteer provided services and the dual processes of youth outmigration and population ageing potentially reducing the pool of available volunteers, reliance on a small number of people is, arguably, inevitable. Confirming, the enormity of these challenges, 44 per cent of survey respondents indicated that they were concerned about the future sustainability of their local community (see Appendix 1, Table 2).

Conclusion

The organisational leaders interviewed for this project reinforced the central role that volunteering played in their communities, highlighting its growing importance in the face of continued government withdrawal. Interviewees noted that despite the value of their work, the majority of volunteer organisations lacked adequate numbers of appropriately skilled volunteers, with considerable effort needed to source enough members to ensure continued functionality. The age of those volunteering was found to be a problematic element, with interviewees noting commonly that people were of or nearing retirement age, undermining the long-term sustainability of community organisations and complicating succession planning. This dynamic stems from the problems experienced in the recruitment and retainment of young people, with a growing culture of payment undermining their involvement in volunteer activities. Of those that did commit to volunteering, many were found to do so in order to enmesh themselves more deeply within their community, often utilising skills they developed in other aspects of their lives. The workload and commitment associated with some volunteering roles was thought to deter people from involving themselves, with a core group of individuals often dedicating significant time and resources to multiple organisations.

A range of changes were noted by the interviewees, with an increase in accountability and professionalisation affecting both the way in which volunteering is undertaken and the number of people who were willing to involve themselves, leading to a rise in the creation of paid positions. Other changes included the growth in ICT resources, which was shown to change both the conveyance of information and the provision of training within volunteer organisations. While some interviewees stated the benefits this had provided, others noted the disadvantage created for those who were uncomfortable or unfamiliar with advanced technology. One of the most substantial changes was the reduction in government support that had been experienced by the majority of organisations. Decreases in government funding and the complexities of grant procedures were increasingly leading groups to seek private backing, undertake traditional fundraising or provide services to other community groups in return for payment. Proposed changes to the Royalty for Regions program were of particular concern to those spoken to, with interviewees highlighting projects completed with this funding and questioning what they would be able to achieve if this ceased. The commitment of government to supporting rural communities and volunteering was questioned more broadly.

Factors

affecting participation in volunteering

Introduction

The organisational perspective provided in the Chapter 4 is followed by the views of individual volunteers in this chapter. These views mirrored many of the concerns raised by the volunteer-involving organisations related to recruitment, retention and succession planning, however they also identified how stressors impacted on volunteer participation. The sense of obligation to volunteer as a part of belonging to a rural community can be a major source of stress, as volunteers sought to manage their varied commitments. Some volunteers feel pressure to continue in roles long after they want to relinquish these and some volunteer roles are stressful either due to the activity they involve or the workload associated with the role. However, few of the individual volunteers report experiencing burnout but they have taken deliberate steps to avoid it. The strategies they employ are informed by their own social and economic circumstances and resources and have enabled them to continue to volunteer within their community albeit for different organisations.

Managing the volunteer workload

The greatest challenge facing individual volunteers is the ability to manage their volunteer commitments alongside their paid work, family, leisure and other volunteering. All of the interview participants were 'serial volunteers' and these competing commitments varied at different times in their 'volunteering career'. Family related commitments were more likely to be demanding when children were young and this often impacted volunteers' capacity to be involved in particular activities. For example, one participant commented: "Oh we've got children and there's things to do on the weekend and its priorities. They're busy. So you can be someone who only thinks about yourself and your family and what's important or you can have a balance of community" (Individual volunteer GB5).

Work commitments are a particular problem for farmers and associated small business owners, where work tasks were likely to be seasonal and 'essential'. Emphasising the seasonal pressures faced by rural volunteers one participant stated: "So the times of the year where it gets challenging is when there's lots of watering to be done up there, and that also coincides with the lovely time of the year when you want to run more workshops. So, it does tend to cluster in that six months that it starts to feel a little bit overwhelming" (Individual volunteer GB5).

Chapter 4 reports that high levels of commitment and heavier workloads are increasingly being shouldered by a small number of volunteers. These core volunteers are involved in multiple groups, often in multiple roles that require a large time investment. There are varying reasons for this reliance on a few key individuals, including a lack of other volunteers to fill roles, high skill levels required (and lack of training provided) and an inability to say no. Some organisations have taken steps to reduce the workload of their volunteers, breaking roles up to make them more achievable. The reliance of volunteer involving organisations on core volunteers means that individuals often have multiple volunteer roles, which also contribute to this competition for volunteers' time. On this matter a participant candidly pointed out "Yeah, it's another night, it's another Monday night whereas the Monday nights we have ambulance training and we have a committee meeting. So, it's another Monday night, I think I might get divorced" (Individual volunteer BB1).

Committee positions are perceived as particularly problematic due to the perceived high workload and lack of organisational succession planning and there was pressure for the same people to carry on in these positions often for many years. Some turnover in volunteer involving organisations is viewed as beneficial - bringing in new ideas and skills. However, organisations relied on the individual volunteers to recognise when they had been in a position for too long and when they felt it was time to move on. One participant who had served in various executive level positions pointed to the relinquishing of these positions as a way of "making the community group sustainable...a group can become stale because that's the way [a person has] always done it so that's the way they always do it and you don't get any change or growth" (Individual volunteer GB5). In these organisations, individual volunteers are forced to take the initiative to encourage others to step up for committee positions, usually by resolutely vacating a role and often giving several months' notice of their intention to do so. One participant explained: "there comes a point where you just say 'no I have to step back' and you make a hole and someone will come and fill it because that's what happens" (Individual volunteer BT3).

Managing the obligation to volunteer and burnout

Volunteers reported that they considered volunteering to simply be "a way of life in rural WA". This acknowledges the dependence of their community on volunteer involving organisations for both essential and ancillary services as well as the act of volunteering itself as being a way of contributing to the local area. In the words of volunteer GB3, "I suppose it's just having lived and worked for so long in this community, I suppose I just feel an obligation". Having benefitted from living and operating in their respective environments, these largely action-driven volunteers often adopt the attitude of "Just crack on and do it. Someone's got to" (Individual volunteer GB1).

This sense of responsibility towards the community is a key factor that allows them to deal with stressors. For example, despite facing some health issues, volunteer BB4 continued to volunteer as an umpire for a local sports club, viewing weekend games as instrumental to keeping young people occupied and out of trouble.

As emergency services depend almost entirely on the voluntary efforts of community members, those involved in volunteering in this sector were particularly aware of the critical importance of their continued involvement in volunteering. As volunteer BT2 described "[in times of need] just about everyone in the district then joins the local Fire Brigade and yeah because a fire starts up, jump in the ute and rush off to it".

While some volunteer roles are vital to the protection of the local community, all acts of volunteering are perceived as examples of the 'core' values of rural residents. Volunteers valued their volunteering efforts for the role they provided in providing an example to children, with one participant stating that volunteering was "an opportunity in the community to show my children that if you want something in a community, you get out there and you do it" (Individual volunteer GB5).

As noted in Chapter four, there is a dependence on core volunteers, which can lead to burnout, where the demands on the individual become too great and the volunteer withdraws from the volunteer role. On this topic one volunteer commented, "Well it's always very flattering to be asked because people think that you're good at something. But over time – initially I probably found it quite hard. I'd take it on and then you can get burnt out if you take on too much" (Individual volunteer GB2). Another commented, "There was really no-one else that was wanting to take on the treasurer's position. So, I took on the treasurer's position, handed the secretary's position over, and I'm still treasurer of that group" (Individual volunteer GB3). It was this sense of responsibility to ensure that positions do not go unfilled or improperly filled after volunteers leave their role that leads some volunteers to continue in their volunteer roles beyond what they are comfortable with.

Aside from this obligation to continue in roles, the limited pool of volunteers also means that rural volunteers are sometimes put in difficult situations where it is assumed by others in the community that they will take up committee roles due to their success in similar roles elsewhere. In the words of volunteer GB2, "Sometimes you're expected to take on roles just because people know that you might be secretary in another group". Such assumptions place more stress on the remaining core volunteers, as being seen as successful in their volunteer roles leads to them being volunteered (unwillingly) for similar roles in other volunteer organisations, feeding into the cycle of the few taking on the most responsibilities.

All volunteer groups have traditionally had committees including chairs, secretaries and treasurers and the need for such a committee or the roles that are required is rarely queried or reviewed. While alternative governance models for rural volunteer involving organisations are needed to address this risk of burnout, change can also have a negative impact on volunteer participation. If volunteers disagree with the direction their volunteer organisation is heading in, they may leave their role(s) in protest, "it was just too political and I thought no, I don't need this sort of rubbish" (BB6). Therefore, managing change in this environment is challenging.

Implications of increased accountability and regulation

Individual volunteers, similar to volunteer involving organisations, identified that they experience overwork, frustration and uncertainty stemming from legislative and policy shifts requiring greater accountability and regulation of volunteer activities.

Largely relating to mandatory training associated with health and safety related volunteer roles, such as for ambulance or fire brigades, the requirement for such training translated into further commitment for volunteers, which not all were willing to undertake. In relation to ambulance services, BB1 mentioned that "you have to maintain the skillset because you need to be current to go and do what we do... for me I like that so that's good for me. But other people have left as a result of that. So they go, I just drive, why do I need to come and keep my skills up? I just drive an ambulance". Some interviewees also saw such detailed regulation as a barrier to attracting new volunteers, given the amount of commitment they had to invest before contributing to the community: "It's hard enough to get young people to sort of give their time but when you say well you'll come along every fortnight and you'll do this training and before you get behind the wheel you've got to go away for two or three weekends training to get your levels up. And then every year you'll be signed off on your skills" (Individual volunteer BT4).

This increased accountability was regarded as changing the nature of rural volunteering from the proactive, do-it-yourself spirit that attracted volunteers to quickly and effectively help their communities by pitching in, in times of need. This was especially apparent in food-related fundraising efforts, where "There's a lot of regulation I think that is impinging on what community groups can do. When you hold stalls you've got to have permits...when you do cake stalls, the [organisation] we've all had to do the council food handling course and you're not allowed to sell cakes and stuff with cream and stuff like that in it" (Individual volunteer GB2). Older volunteers commented that where they would have simply organised a cake stall, now groups have to apply for specific grants, requiring substantial paperwork and the development of new skills.

Despite this, the increase in accountability and regulation was not always viewed as a stressor – it is a double-edged sword that is welcomed by some volunteers as it improves processes which these interviewees have previously found their organisation to be lacking. As an example, volunteer BB1 pointed out that previous committee members "like to be able to do it the way they've always done it, which is a little bit loose... like the arrangement with the Shire was a handshake. I was sort of going, really? There's nothing in writing". Those who view this accountability and regulation as a positive development cite knowledge transfer as a key part of successful succession planning, which in turn reduces stress on successive committees.

Stressful volunteer roles

Rural communities are highly reliant on volunteers to provide their emergency services. Not surprisingly, emergency service volunteer roles – particularly ambulance and fire brigade activities – are inherently stressful. The emergency services volunteers both at an organisational and individual level all discussed the stressful nature of their volunteering, noting the high impact and potentially upsetting situations they had to deal with. "I'll say emergency services is very demanding, and if you've been a first responder in the ambulance, you see lots of things that stay with you forever and a day now. So you've got to be able to sleep, in that sense, and put those things, visions, to one side. It's not always easy" (Representative organisation 5). As a result, burnout is a particular risk for individuals taking on these roles, indeed one participant stated that it was inevitable – that there was only so much trauma an individual could cope with. The vital importance of these services and the work the volunteers do was recognised by their communities, with one individual volunteer commenting that in the world of volunteering, emergency services had the highest status.

Interviewees contended that the intensity of involvement with emergency services groups limited the duration that volunteers were able to stay with an organisation. This meant that ongoing recruitment and training was a necessity for emergency service organisations.

In addition to the stressful nature of the work, involvement in emergency service organisations necessitated a considerable commitment that was non-negotiable. Emergency service volunteers have to be prepared to 'drop everything' and attend the situation whenever they are required. For example, the commitment required for involvement in volunteer Fire Brigades was significant, but was largely seasonal, with the majority of incidents occurring within the summer months. This limited the activities that volunteers could undertake, with one interviewee noting that they chose not to take holidays in this time period due to the increased likelihood of fire, as a way of managing their volunteer commitments. For those who made a living from their land through farming and other pursuits, the commitment that comes with being involved in their local volunteer fire brigade was an inherent part of their lives, similar to the sense of community obligation that other participants discussed. The involvement of landowners in their volunteer fire brigades was so ingrained that interviewees did not see it as volunteering – it is just part of living on the land in rural Australia.

Volunteer coping strategies

Given the stressors facing rural volunteers and the essential services they provide, it is vital to understand how individual volunteers responded to these stressors. We found surprisingly little evidence of burnout in the case study communities. While this is raised as a concern and a risk, the research revealed that individual volunteers are particularly skilled at avoiding burnout. While volunteers might withdraw from a particular role or organisation, they still continue to volunteer and while this is very positive for rural communities, the consequence is that specific organisations may struggle to keep their volunteers.

The strategies identified among the volunteers in these communities included:

- Combining volunteering with other commitments.
- Establishing boundaries around their volunteering.
- Learning when to say 'no' to requests for help.
- Personal interest sustaining their volunteer efforts.
- Adopting a flexible and adaptable approach to their volunteer commitments.

These strategies are detailed in the following sections.

Combining volunteer commitments

In order to eliminate competition between family obligations and volunteering, people often choose to volunteer where their family obligations take them. This involves volunteering with P&C groups, or in activities their children participate in. Some volunteers are able to do this very effectively, such as volunteer BB4, who presented their solution to low P&C participation rates as "we changed the P&C day to coincide with kids training at hockey, which was a Thursday, or swimming club which was on a Tuesday. So, you tended to move things around to actively encourage people to be part of it". By combining volunteer meetings with family activities, potential volunteers are more willing to participate. Many volunteers view their volunteer commitment as an extension of their child's commitment to their school or sport activity, encouraging them to excel at the activity while supporting their child and the team. For example, volunteer GB4 supported their children's sporting teams by driving their own and other children to regional and state competitions. This active role also extends to education, where BB2 mentioned that having a say in their child's education was important to them, therefore they took up volunteering because "I wanted to know what was going on, and be part of the decision making". It is important to note that this is not particular to rural volunteering and children's sports clubs and P&C groups in metropolitan areas rely on parent volunteers. However, more data would be needed to compare parental volunteer rates between rural and metropolitan areas to note if this is more widespread or intense in rural Australia.

Volunteers are also able to combine their volunteering with work to cope with the stresses of being a rural volunteer. Some people volunteer in roles that use their professional skills or are closely related to their employment. Support from employers is very important, particularly for emergency service volunteers who need to be able to attend an emergency at any time, "I just used to say, 'I'm sorry, I've got an ambulance call, I'll have to catch up with you later' and leave them in mid-sentence and off I went and not everybody would do that" (Individual volunteer BT4). Major employers in Perth frequently operate a corporate volunteer program, organising

volunteer activities, which can take place in and outside work time. While we did not identify any formal corporate volunteer program, some employers did operate an informal program, whereby they encouraged their staff to engage in local projects and groups and providing practical and technical support to these groups. Some employers allow those in administratively-heavy volunteer roles to complete their volunteer paperwork during office hours, "But my boss is very obliging and does allow us to do some of our volunteer work, in our worktime as well" Individual volunteer GB3.

The interconnection between work, family and volunteering reinforces the role of volunteering as fundamental to the viability and vitality of rural communities. LITR data show that small business owners are among the groups most likely to volunteer and this was also reflected in the case study. Volunteer small business owners saw synergies between their personal businesses and volunteering with their volunteer activities leading to indirect growth of their own businesses. For example, one volunteer had established a new community resource, which is cited as a catalyst for rejuvenating the town and has strong synergies with their own business, "as I continued doing it I realised that the two worked nicely together and the community garden is in line with my values in my business as well as my life so it wasn't a burden to be doing that I suppose in a way" (Individual volunteer GB5).

Establishing boundaries and learning when to say 'no'

One of the most commonly described ways of coping with volunteer stressors is the exercising of boundaries around what volunteers were willing to do and when. The risk of burnout and the obligation to continue in a role in the face of dwindling volunteer numbers has already been discussed. Those individuals who wish to continue volunteering develop a keener awareness of what their limits are, and enforce these boundaries strictly. Volunteers develop boundaries in relation to two areas: taking up committee positions and performing everyday volunteer tasks.

The competing commitments of work, family and volunteering are also sometimes dealt with by drawing clear boundaries around each activity, such as in the case of volunteer BB1, who professes that they have time "that I've set aside personally for me to deal with those. So, everything can wait normally until that Thursday afternoon so it doesn't impact on my other things I do, work wise and for our own business and family". By setting aside clear time for each commitment, volunteers are able to reassure others that tasks will be completed, but not at the expense of other commitments that may be equally or more important to them.

Another strategy that volunteers use to manage their volunteer commitments is learning when to say 'no' to additional requests for their help. Being able to reject invitations to volunteer enables the individual volunteer to sustain long-term volunteer involvement in other organisations or indeed the same organisation, "over time I've learnt to say no. So basically I only do what I want to do because I do them because I enjoy doing them" (Individual volunteer GB2). Volunteers learn how to recognise when volunteer work has crossed a threshold into tedium and helps them identify activities and organisations where they actively want to contribute and the areas beyond which they will reject further involvement. The ability for volunteers

to turn down requests for their time and skills is beneficial for volunteering in their community as a whole as it ensures that the current volunteer workforce is happy and content with their commitments. Of course, some volunteer involving organisations will find it harder to recruit and refresh their volunteers in such an environment and will need to review the reasons behind any rejection. New volunteer groups are springing up within the case study LGAs and these offer competition for existing groups for the available volunteer workforce. Occasionally, volunteer groups are closing down if their work is no longer relevant or is being completed in other ways, for example online, but this is rarer.

Personal interest sustaining volunteer efforts

This report emphasises the importance of volunteer delivered essential services to rural communities, however, much of the volunteering in rural WA and the case study LGAs is related to ancillary activities, hobbies and leisure. For volunteers, having a strong personal interest in the activities of their organisation is instrumental to sustaining interviewees' volunteer efforts to cope with stressors. Volunteers are more likely to start and continue with volunteer positions if there is an innate attraction to the activity or cause. These interests range from music and outdoor activities, to supporting sports in which their family members are involved. Indeed many of these groups can be described as mutual aid organisations, where they enable the volunteer to pursue their own hobbies or passions as well as benefit others. These may not be essential services but they are vital in supporting vibrant communities, "I suppose being a natural person who likes to get things done, like I helped set up the toy library and I helped set up the four year old playgroup" (Individual volunteer BT3) and can bring economic benefits through tourism. Personal interest is particularly important as a reason for remaining in these volunteer positions for longer periods of time, "But I'm into music and dance and I've got involved in the country music club for probably, the last four or so years and it was just, yes to help out" (Individual volunteer GB3).

Volunteering for organisations that align with the volunteer's personal interest, hobby or passion also expands the volunteer's social network, enabling them to meet like-minded people. This facilitates friendships that extends and sustains beyond the volunteering sphere, with long-term volunteer BB4 commenting, "I've got some friendships that developed out of that which I've still got, you know nearly thirty years ago". These social networks benefit the individual volunteer. They benefit the organisation by providing a personal connection and support network to help the volunteer deal with stressors and stay involved. They also benefit the community by bringing people together, forging new links and helping to build social capital.

Flexibility and adaptability

The final coping strategy identified in this study was the willingness and ability of volunteers to be flexible and adaptable and to arrange volunteer commitments around their other life demands and each other. This approach reinforces the active ways in which volunteers manage their whole life commitments and their volunteer portfolios. The ways in which volunteers achieve this takes several forms. For example, emergency service volunteer BT5, schedules their day's commitments around the organisation's roster, "So we have an emergency roster for the day...So I'll come into town, because I live out of town, come into town, spend the day at mum's place, when my roster, or when my shift finishes I can pack up the kids and go home".

Adaptability, however, is about much more than physically being able to attend when needed. Mental adaptability and resilience to changes is also needed to avoid being overwhelmed by volunteer commitments. Volunteers need to maintain perspective about the relative importance of their volunteer role (depending on what that role might be), "And then I say to myself oh, this is volunteer work, it shouldn't be stressful, but it can be. It can be stressful. And laugh. Laugh about the fact that the volunteering is making you feel stressed" (Individual volunteer BT3). Others find that simply going with the flow and accepting changes both with an organisation and also their role – for example ageing might mean that a more active role is no longer possible. Volunteers also need mental adaptability to acquire and perform well in a new volunteer roles, which often involve training or developing new skillsets. Chapter four notes that training is not always provided by the organisation, which requires volunteers to seek out training themselves. Being able to learn new skills has helped the volunteers in this study to cope with increases in accountability and regulation, discussed as a stressor earlier in this chapter.

Much is written about the need for rural communities to be adaptable to the social and economic changes they have experienced over the past few decades. Adaptability is also important for individual volunteers in sustaining their volunteer contribution over their lifecourse.

Conclusion

Sustaining the rural volunteer workforce depends on the continued participation of individual volunteers. While the increased reliance on a group of core volunteers is increasing the risk of burnout, serial volunteers have actively managed their volunteer contribution over their lifecourse. For rural volunteers, giving their time to the community is a vital part of rural life.

There are a range of stressors which impact on individual volunteers. These include competing demands, volunteer burnout, obligated volunteering due to difficulties finding new volunteers, changing role responsibilities, greater accountability and regulation, the inherently stressful nature of some forms of volunteering and the management of multiple volunteering commitments within their communities. Volunteer involving organisations had rarely developed methods of addressing these stressors.

Volunteers adopted a range of coping strategies to address the stressors associated with volunteering, which were distinct from any organisational or policy driven interventions designed to ameliorate them. These strategies include combining volunteering with other commitments, establishing boundaries around their volunteering, learning to say 'no', the prioritisation of roles that reflected personal interests, adopting a flexible and adaptable approach to juggling volunteering commitments and recruiting through personal connections.

These coping strategies greatly rely on the goodwill of individual volunteers to contribute to their communities out of a sense of the greater good and a desire to leave their communities better off. The volunteers themselves are at the front line in recognising potential gaps in service provision in their towns and are willing, where possible, to contribute to cover these shortfalls. Whilst admirable, several of the stressors identified in this chapter are beyond the scope of individual volunteers to address, despite their best efforts.

Summary
and discussion

Summary and discussion

In this chapter we use the objectives of the project identified in Chapter one to frame the discussion and conclusion section.

Volunteering participation rates in rural WA, characteristics of the volunteering workforce and potential vulnerabilities for the sustainability of the rural volunteering workforce

This multi-method study has confirmed the vital importance of volunteers and volunteering in supporting rural communities in WA. Contextualised to the case study Local Government Areas (LGA) of Bridgetown-Greenbushes and Boyup Brook in the Southwest Region of WA, the study found volunteering was at the heart of these communities in providing essential services for individuals, businesses and properties, support for education through schools and libraries and support for a raft of leisure activities. The ABS Census data revelated the rate of volunteering in Boyup Brook and Bridgetown-Greenbushes to be 29.3 per cent and 26.3 per cent respectively in 2016, far outstripping the rate in Perth's metropolitan area (ABS, 2017).

LITR data reveal that farmers and small business owners are more likely to volunteer than those employed in other sectors or those not in the workforce. However, the factors underpinning the overrepresentation of farmers and small business owners in the volunteer workforce are not clear. It is possible that these cohorts are volunteering for organisations that directly benefit them such as bush fire brigades, or perhaps their work is more flexible and enables them to fit in volunteering more easily. However, it is also possible that these people have a greater sense of community as they are spatially tied to the local area through their work. LITR data also revealed that older (over 40 years) people are more likely to volunteer and this reflects the structural ageing in rural WA which is partly due to young people having to leave their rural communities to access high school, tertiary training and employment opportunities (also see Davies, 2009).

The already very high rate of engagement by rural residents in volunteering in WA means that there is little scope for increasing the pool of volunteers from within the population without in-migration. Critically, the LITR data showed that 9 per cent of the rural WA volunteer workforce was planning on moving away from their community within two years. This comes at a time when, with the structural ageing of the population, demand for volunteer provided services is expect to increase.

Through examining the ABS Census data, local publications and establishing a database of 177 volunteer involving organisations and associations in the case study areas, the volunteering rate as well as the number and variety of community groups was able to be ascertained for the target LGAs. However, these data only provide part of the picture, with the type, frequency and intensity of volunteer participation unable to be identified.

The contemporary experiences of rural volunteer involving organisations in recruiting and retaining volunteers

Interview data collected from both volunteer involving organisations and volunteers in the case study areas highlighted a range of issues and challenges for volunteer involving organisations working in rural WA. These data were supplemented by a survey of organisations intended to highlight some of the topline issues.

Organisations reported noticeable changes which impacted rural volunteering over the last decade, most of which negatively affected their operations. Increased accountability and regulation, whilst intended to improve 'professionalism' in service delivery, has many unintended consequences for these organisations in rural settings, including curbing their fundraising potential (e.g., due to regulations relating to food handling affecting the conduct of school fetes). Furthermore, shifting training courses, information resources, registration programs and funding applications to online platforms has negatively impacted many volunteering organisations as they do not have appropriate Internet connectivity, computing resources or technical support.

Systemic difficulties in recruiting volunteers are unchanged, leading to problems of volunteer burnout and poor succession planning. Indeed, 40 per cent of survey respondents indicated that their organisation/association is currently experiencing volunteer shortages, with further shortages expected within the next five years. A particular concern is the lack of young people who are available to volunteer. Census data shows that there is a demographic gap in the 20-30 years age group.

It is notable that many volunteer involving organisations have no strategies for recruiting, training or succession planning for their volunteers. As discussed below, these activities are frequently done by individual volunteers acting on their own initiative.

The perception among participating organisations is that there is a decline in volunteer participation. However, our interviews with individual volunteers suggest that much 'face-to-face volunteering' is now being done through online fora. Volunteer groups are no longer meeting in person, rather they have moved to virtual groups. This suggests that some volunteering is simply being done in different ways. Confirming, the enormity of these organisational challenges and the importance of volunteering for rural areas, 44 per cent of survey respondents indicated that they are concerned about the future sustainability of their local community.

How and why volunteers become involved in volunteering and strategies they use to manage their volunteer participation

Interviews with individual volunteers revealed that most participants have been actively involved in volunteering over their whole lives but for a range of organisations. Participants accepted that volunteering and the associated responsibility it brings is a part of living in a vibrant community.

For in-migrants to the area, volunteering offers particular benefits to the individual. They participate in roles and organisations that are connected to their business or to family activities. For others, they want to contribute to the community, which they have recently joined and volunteering offers an entry point to becoming part of it.

Many of the individuals who were interviewed are prolific serial volunteers and this highlights the reliance of rural volunteer involving organisations on a small number of key individuals, often shared across a range of organisations. The result is a heavy workload for these individuals, which has grown in recent years due to the increased accountability and regulation for volunteer involving organisations. Although, some volunteers welcome more formal procedures as an improvement of their organisation's operations.

While the participants in this study have volunteered throughout their lives, they move between organisations depending on their, and their families', interests. Individuals often begin volunteering for a sports organisation in their high school years, moving onto an organisation that is more related to their work, such as young farmers. When they have young families, they volunteer for playgroups and toy libraries. As their children grow, they give their time to schools and clubs associated with their children's activities (for example, Scouts or sport). Adults with older or no children might be involved with community services, emergency services or leisure. The competing commitments over the volunteers' life course vary the amount of time they have available to volunteer. Intriguingly, participants commented that there is a hierarchy of volunteer roles and organisations, with emergency services not surprisingly being viewed by the community as the most important and prestigious volunteer role.

As noted above, volunteer involving organisations are rarely strategic in their management of their volunteers. Recruitment of new volunteers is frequently done by individual volunteers, increasingly by use of social media but mostly from face-to-face, through conversations with their acquaintances. There is little training provided for new volunteers. Rather individuals teach themselves the necessary skills for a particular role, such as treasurer, and then take these skills to other volunteer involving organisations when they move roles. Neither is succession planning done strategically by organisations. Rather, if an individual volunteer wants to give up their role, they find their own successor. It is particularly difficult to pass on 'committee roles' because of the perceived workload and skills needed, which is exacerbated by the lack of training provided.

In spite of these pressures, volunteers rarely report experiencing burnout. Rather these prolific volunteers have developed a series of coping strategies that prevent them from experiencing burnout and as such they are all still involved in volunteering. Coping strategies include:

- Combining commitments for different volunteer involving organisations;
- Support from family and work;
- Simply saying 'no' when asked to take on a new role;
- Actively managing their volunteer portfolio;
- Setting clear boundaries between volunteering and their work and personal life;
- Only volunteering for roles and organisations where they have a passion or strong interest;
- Flexible volunteer roles, which fit around other life commitments.

Recommendations to address supply side vulnerabilities of the rural volunteer workforce

Based on the collective findings of the mixed-method study, we conclude that there are significant vulnerabilities affecting the rural WA volunteer workforce. Many of these are wicked problems (e.g., structural ageing, population out-migration, etc.) that cannot be systematically addressed at the level of the individual volunteer or volunteer involving organisations.

Informed by the findings, the following strategies are proposed to support volunteers and volunteer involving organisations to sustain the WA rural volunteer workforce now and into the future.

Policy recommendations

The WA Government audit the legislative and public policy framework affecting rural volunteering at the individual and organisational level to identify where there are significant pressure points particularly in the way volunteering is regulated. For example, many volunteer involving organisations ask for police checks, which could be shared across different organisations.

The WA Government investigate opportunities for removing uncertainty around funding schemes for volunteer involving organisations.

Organisational recommendations

Greater use of strategic planning processes for and by volunteer involving organisations to guide volunteer labour recruitments, training, retention and succession planning.

Larger centrally located volunteer - involving organisations audit their rural based operations to ensure volunteers managed at a distance are effectively supported.

Rural volunteer - involving organisations proactively manage the workload of their volunteers (e.g., set terms for committee members) and provide, where possible, flexible rostering and volunteer assignments.

Volunteer - involving organisations to engage employers to support their staff to meet the demands of volunteering commitments. This could include flexible rostering or use of employers' resource and equipment.

Research recommendations

Further data are required to understand how volunteers' employment type, rural background and migration intentions influence their involvement in volunteering.

Further data are required to understand the challenges related to the enhanced use of ITC in organising and delivering volunteer services.

Further data are required to understand how structural ageing is impacting the nature of rural volunteering and demand for volunteer provided services across a variety of types of rural communities.

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Appendix

Appendix 1
Results tables from organisational survey

Table 1   Community connectedness and sense of community

	Mean	Std deviation
How connected you feel to the local community	82.04	19.96
How happy you feel living in this region	89.74	18.96
The lifestyle you have in this region	90.91	18.72
The sense of community in this area	85.74	18.22

N = 23, Measured on 10 point scale (0 = very unhappy – 10 = very happy)

Table 2   Volunteer organisation/association managed as part of a larger group

	%	Count
No, the organisation / association is completely independent	50.0	13
Yes, the organisation / association is part of a larger grouping but operates mostly independently	26.9	7
Yes, the organisation / association is part of a larger grouping and operates somewhat independently	15.4	4
Yes, the organisation / association is part of a larger grouping and the operations are largely controlled by the larger grouping	0.0	0
Other arrangement (please describe)	7.7	2
Total	100	26

Table 3   Volunteer organisation/association expectations of volunteer shortages

	%	Count
No	32.0	8
Yes, we currently have shortages	40.0	10
Yes, in the next 12 months	8.0	2
Yes, in the next 5 years	8.0	2
Yes, for as long as I can predict	12.0	3
Total	100	25

Table 4   Future sustainability of local community

Do you have any concerns about the future sustainability of your local community	%	Count
Yes	43.5	10
No	56.5	13
Total	100	23

Table 5   Factors preventing people from volunteering in the case study regions

	Important		Moderately important		Not important		Total
	%	n	%	n	%	n	n
Caring commitments	54.2	13	37.5	9	8.3	2	24
Work commitments	72.0	18	24.0	6	4.0	1	25
Not interested in nature of volunteering work available	28.0	7	60.0	15	12.0	3	25
Do not want to commit to regular participation	52.0	13	44.0	11	4.0	1	25
Not free on weekends	24.0	6	40.0	10	36.0	9	25
Can't commit due to shift work / FIFO work	28.0	7	28.0	7	44.0	11	25
Can't use technology	0.0	0	24.0	6	76.0	19	25
Too old	8.0	2	36.0	9	56.0	14	25
Too young	8.0	2	32.0	8	60.0	15	25
Expect payment	24.0	6	12.0	3	64.0	16	25
Involved in other volunteering	37.5	9	50.00	12	12.50	3	24
Don't see the benefits from volunteering to them personally	16.0	4	40.0	10	44.0	11	25
Live too far away	16.0	4	40.0	10	44.0	11	25

Respondent Profile

Table 6   Organisation/association type respondent representing

	Count
Music Festival	2
Community Resource Centres (Youth support, progress association, gardens, agricultural societies)	7
Sports club	4
Support programs/associations (mental health, professional, disability)	6
Historical Society	2
School volunteer program	3
St John Ambulance	1
Visitor centre	2

Table 7   Gender

	%	Count
Male	8.0	2
Female	92.0	23
Other		
Total	100	25

Table 8   Age

	%	Count
15 - 19 years	0.0	0
20 - 20 years	0.0	0
30 - 39 years	24.0	6
40 - 49 years	20.0	5
50 - 59 years	16.0	4
60 - 69 years	32.0	8
70 - 79 years	8.0	2
80 +	0.0	0
Total	**100**	**25**

Table 9   Length of residence in Boyup Brook/Bridgetown/Greenbushes

	%	Count
Less than 1 year	4.2	1
2 - 5 years	25.0	6
6 - 10 years	8.3	2
10 - 20 years	29.2	7
20 + years	33.3	8
Total	**100**	**24**

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