

# Case study: Youth Volunteer Forum

## How listening to youth can improve volunteer practices

**Delivered by the Ballarat Foundation and local partners, the Youth Volunteer Forum brought young people and volunteer organisations together to better understand the barriers and opportunities around youth volunteering in regional Victoria. By listening directly to students, the Forum challenged common assumptions and highlighted the skills, motivation and fresh perspectives young people bring when they're trusted with meaningful roles.**

There is significant opportunity to engage young people in volunteering, particularly in regional centres. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, young people in regional Victoria volunteer at a rate **43% higher** than those in metropolitan Melbourne when it comes to formal volunteering. Despite this strong foundation, many young people are still participating in informal volunteering because they struggle to find organisations willing or ready to engage volunteers under 18 years of age.

To better understand these challenges, the Ballarat Foundation, in partnership with the Highlands Local Learning and Employment Network and the City of Ballarat, hosted a **Youth Volunteer Forum**. The forum brought together high school students and volunteer organisations, creating space for young people to share their experiences firsthand and for organisations to hear directly about the barriers to youth participation.

### **Why the need for a Youth Forum?**

#### ***Learning from volunteer organisations***

Although volunteer numbers have increased since COVID-19, many volunteering organisations in Ballarat are facing an ageing volunteer workforce and high attrition rates. Some volunteer organisations, particularly smaller or lesser-known groups, continue to struggle to attract volunteers. Others – such as Foodbank, the Ballarat Community Care Centre, and opportunity

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shops – require volunteers for labour-intensive roles that are often unsuitable for older volunteers.

These challenges highlighted the need to better understand how young people could be part of the solution.

### *Learning from students*

Since 2019, there has been a **five-fold increase** in participation in the Certificate II in Active Volunteering delivered through Victorian schools. As a result, many secondary school students are actively seeking opportunities to complete their **mandatory 20 hours** of volunteering.

At the same time, the Mission Australia National Youth Survey identifies studying and a lack of confidence about entering the workforce as the biggest personal challenges facing 15-19 year-olds. The Youth Forum therefore presented an opportunity to demonstrate how volunteering can build confidence, develop workplace skills, and support young people in their transition beyond school.

### **Purpose of the Youth Forum**

The Forum aimed to:

- Introduce students to the benefits of volunteering
- Understand the barriers youth face when seeking volunteer opportunities
- Challenge common myths about young volunteers
- Facilitate connections between students and local volunteer organisations

Prior to the Forum, a survey was distributed. Volunteer organisations were asked about their experience working with youth and their readiness to engage young volunteers, while students were asked about their interest in volunteering and what motivates them to get involved.

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### What did we find out?

#### *Insights from volunteering organisations*

Interestingly, more volunteering organisations in Ballarat than expected reported they already engaged young people. Specifically, **61%** of participating organisations indicated they accepted volunteers aged 15-17.

The most common barriers identified were organisational or structural, including legislative requirements, insurance limitations, or a lack of capacity to provide individual mentoring. Several misconceptions about young volunteers also emerged, including beliefs that young people:

- Struggle to work alongside older people
- Do not see the value or benefit of unpaid volunteering
- Lack motivation to volunteer

#### *Insights from young people*

The Forum confirmed that young people are, in fact, highly motivated to volunteer. The strongest drivers identified were:

- A desire for **social connection**, including across generations
- Wanting to **contribute meaningfully** to their community
- A strong interest in **learning workplace and life skills**

These findings directly challenged the assumptions held by some organisations.

However, students also shared that their skills were often **undervalued**, leading to less meaningful or satisfying tasks when they did volunteer, causing boredom and dissatisfaction.

Many students also expressed nervousness about meeting volunteering time commitments while balancing school and part-time work.

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### *New realisations*

One Forum activity paired students with volunteer organisations and challenged them to create a one-minute video advertisement encouraging youth volunteering. This activity proved eye-opening for both the students and the organisations. Students demonstrated creativity, strong digital skills, and innovative thinking – often well beyond the existing capacity of the organisations. In one example, the State Emergency Service advertisement produced by students was so effective that the Ballarat Branch hoped to adapt it for broader use.

This experience highlighted the often-overlooked strengths young people bring and the value of trusting them with meaningful contributions.

### **Follow-up actions**

In response to the Forum's findings, the Ballarat Foundation has developed a [fact sheet](#) outlining common barriers for young volunteers and practical ways to address them. Participating organisations committed to sharing this resource with their leadership teams to explore changes that would make their organisations more inclusive and welcoming to youth.

### **Top tips for volunteer organisations**

Key learnings from the Youth Volunteer Forum include:

- **Listen first** – Create opportunities for young people to share what motivates and discourages them. Listening challenges assumptions and helps organisations design roles that align with youth interests.
- **Offer meaningful roles** – Avoid assigning low-value or repetitive tasks. Where possible, involve young people in areas such as communications, social media, events, or creative problem-solving. Young volunteers want to contribute meaningfully and be trusted with responsibility.
- **Value their skills and perspectives** – Young people bring energy, innovation and digital confidence. Being open to fresh perspectives benefits both organisations and communities.

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- **Be flexible** – Understand that school, study and part-time work limit availability. Offer micro-volunteering, weekend opportunities, or project-based volunteering so young people can volunteer without long-term commitment.
- **Partner with schools and training providers** – Work with schools, Local Learning and Employment Networks, and providers delivering Certificate II in Active Volunteering to connect students with suitable placements and promote pathways into long-term volunteering.
- **Keep it fun and social** – Emphasise social connection with offerings like group volunteer days, youth-led projects or intergenerational activities that can help create engaging and rewarding volunteering experiences.
- **Invest in mentorship** – Where possible, provide mentors who can balance guidance with independence, helping build confidence and support long-term engagement.

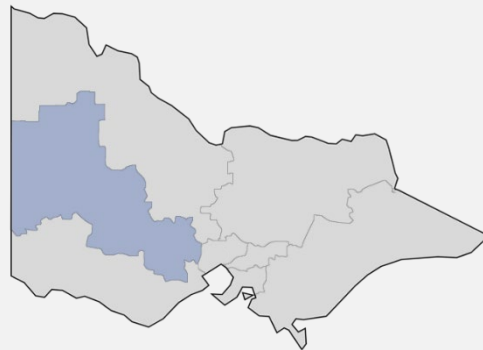
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<https://www.volunteeringvictoria.org.au/leading-volunteers/vma-2022-2026/>



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*Volunteering Victoria acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of country throughout Australia and their connections to land, sea, and community. We pay our respect to Elders past and present.*