

# Management of volunteer disputes in South Australia

An initiative to explore:

- Existing mechanisms which help to prevent and resolve conflict
- what contributes to a positive and negative volunteering experience
- what the sector needs to put in place to manage conflict and ensure volunteering is a positive and safe experience.

## About

**December 2017** - Volunteering SA&NT election proposal: *Establish a Volunteering Advocate position to fill gaps in dispute resolution, protection for volunteers and risk mitigation.*

**February 2018** - The Marshall Liberal Government commitment to work with the sector to determine how best to manage volunteer disputes, including governance training, resourcing and potential changes to legislation.

**June 2020** - Working group comprising of people from across the sector was established, under the auspice of the Volunteering Strategy for SA to explore mechanisms which will help to prevent and resolve conflict.

## What we knew

Volunteering is richly rewarding – for volunteers and for the organisations that work with them. But sometimes things can go wrong.

We know that while many volunteers have positive experiences, some don't go so well, and we want to make volunteering a positive and safe experience for all.

## Who we heard from

- Across government jurisdictions
- Alternative Dispute Resolution experts
- Consumer and Business Services
- Equal Opportunity Commission
- Ombudsman SA
- SafeWork SA
- Volunteer Resource Centres
- Volunteering SA&NT
- Volunteers and volunteer involving organisations through a survey hosted on the YourSAy website

## What we found

The process of discovery found:

- There is an abundance of material to support volunteer management, education and training. Services and tools are well developed however the information is dispersed and access to it is hit and miss, therefore its value is not maximised.
- Although it is known that there are disputes involving volunteers and volunteer involving organisations there is poor visibility of how and where the information on such events is collected. It is largely ad hoc, therefore a holistic system view of the numbers and or severity of disputes is not available. Therefore, there is inadequate evidence on which to form a recommendation for a new power to manage disputes.
- There may be a case to support expanding the powers of an existing Office, i.e. Ombudsman SA to include investigation of disputes from community volunteers and organisations. (Ombudsman SA, already has powers over state and local government volunteer disputes)
- Future focus overwhelmingly supports effort geared towards prevention. Some mechanisms through which this could be achieved include
  - Advocacy for inclusion of a dispute resolution clause in Model Rules of Associations, to be delivered through the Office of Business and Consumer Affairs
  - Training and development
  - Ongoing communication and stakeholder development through quarterly networking events.
- The further development of recommendations regarding expanding of scope of powers of existing organisations and the development of a centralised information hub and centralised data repository will be subject to individual project scope, definition and resourcing.

## Potential actions

### 1. Data collection

- 1.1 Explore the merits of developing a centralised database to capture number of disputes and conflicts involving volunteers, establishing a baseline against which to measure activity over time.

### 2. Tools and resources

- 2.1 Maintain a catalogue of existing resources related to preventing and resolving volunteer disputes.

### 3. Awareness raising and promotion

- 3.1 Develop a communication strategy to promote existing resources and services for preventing and resolving volunteer disputes.

### 4. Build strong networks

- 4.1 Continuation of quarterly network meetings across sectors to encourage good practice in volunteer management.

Current networks are:

- Public Sector Volunteer Policy Network.
- Local Government Volunteer Managers Network.
- Metro and Regional Volunteer Managers Networks.
- Business SA Networks.

### 5. External support

- 5.1 Referring volunteers and organisations to existing external supports, such as Alternative Dispute Resolution services, as an early intervention option for resolving disputes.
- 5.2 Explore expanding the current powers of Ombudsman SA to include community volunteers, in addition to their current dispute resolution responsibilities for local and State government volunteers.
- 5.3 Advocate for the addition of a dispute resolution process to be included in the model rules for incorporated associations in South Australia. This process should specify that mediation be chosen as the first external option to resolving disputes. To raise awareness of the new process, training and education should be provided.

### 6. Leadership

- 6.1 Encourage peak, umbrella bodies and government agencies to highlight the options available to volunteers and organisations when internal processes and mediation are unsuccessful.