Connecting communities: Engaging informal volunteers in local contexts

A pilot project in partnership with Chorus

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[OFFICIAL]

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Executive Summary

Informal volunteering can strengthen social connectedness and community cohesion by fostering strong neighbour-to-neighbour relations within local communities which can reduce the negative impact of loneliness and isolation increasingly being experienced in Australia. A greater understanding of informal volunteering can afford opportunities to strengthen collaboration and engagement between informal volunteers and provide volunteer involving organisations with valuable insights.

This pilot study, funded by Volunteering WA, was undertaken by Murdoch Business School at Murdoch University in partnership with Chorus to investigate whether informal volunteering where meaningful contributions are smaller, less structured and potentially independent of organisational membership, can be mobilised to build stronger local communities.

A mixed methods approach was adopted to address the research objectives drawing on both qualitative and quantitative research methods. The quantitative component comprised an online survey which did not provide enough responses to enable differential or inferential statistical analysis. The survey data was used to provide demographic analysis and qualitative responses to open-ended questions. For the qualitative component, 17 in-depth interviews were conducted, 12 with volunteers and 5 with experts in the field of volunteering. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, deidentified and thematically analysed.

The findings of this report identify the evolving nature of volunteering and the challenges and opportunities presented by informal volunteering.

Key findings

Definitions, concepts and boundaries: In the literature and from our data, volunteering is often seen through a binary lens, however, informal and formal volunteering are better understood as existing on a continuum of volunteering.

Informal volunteering activities: Informal volunteering includes everyday acts which are relational and ongoing. These activities include person focussed support such as companionship, mentoring, counselling and emotional support or task focussed assistance. In many communities, helping is grounded in reciprocity and mutual support. Informal volunteering activities span practical help (transport, errands, minor repairs), emotional support, informational guidance, and activities that approximate caregiving.

Measurement challenges and approaches: The literature highlights the challenges associated with measuring informal volunteering, and this has been borne out by our pilot research. Although definitional variability and instrument design are among the challenges of measuring informal volunteering, they are not the only problems. Measurement estimates, capturing informal activities accurately, time consuming alternative data collection approaches and being able or willing to appraise value in relation to informal volunteering also represent significant barriers that warrant attention.

Participation in informal volunteering: People, motivation, barriers: The profile of participants in informal volunteering is difficult to characterise, partly due to the measurement challenges identified above and partly because of the heterogeneous nature of informal volunteers. There is mixed evidence in the literature on rural/urban differences. Age

and life stage have also been found to be related to informal volunteering. Personality, identity and social roles were also found to play a role in informal volunteering as well.

Places, practices, and platforms that enable informal volunteering: The evidence in the literature and supported in our data, is that informal volunteering needs different infrastructure to promote participation in order to navigate complexities, retain flexibility and manage contradictions.

Recent emerging topics: Wellbeing and risks: The social connection of volunteering was well documented in the literature and supported in our data. Some of the risks that were identified in both places, were over-commitment, burnout and boundary issues.

Diverse communities and volunteering: The survey for the pilot study did not provide access to a diverse community of volunteers and while the interviewees afforded greater diversity in terms of education, age and volunteering experiences, there were a limited number of interviews undertaken. Access to diverse communities is limited which necessitates a greater reliance on both academic and grey literature.

The volunteering continuum: Our thinking is that there are five sections on a volunteering continuum comprising one-to-one, group, organisation-adjacent informal, organisation-based informal and organisation-based formal, with volunteering becoming increasingly organised culminating in the conventional understanding of formal volunteering.

Implications

This pilot study, complemented by an analysis of the academic and grey literature has afforded an in-depth examination of informal volunteering. We have found that informal volunteering is a dynamic and evolving phenomenon that requires careful consideration and thoughtful stewardship. Drawing on the findings of this research and the broader literature, we have identified key implications for Chorus and for the future development of informal volunteering. We also highlight several priorities for future research in this complex and evolving space.

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Foreword from Volunteering WA CEO Tina Williams

Volunteering is vital to Western Australia's social, cultural and economic life. Every day, people give their time, skills and care to help others and make their communities better places to live. While much of this contribution takes place through established organisations, a great deal happens informally, through everyday acts of neighbourliness, friendship and mutual support.

This research provides an opportunity to look more closely at these informal contributions and consider what they mean for our understanding of volunteering. Volunteering is often associated with an organisation, a formal role or a defined commitment. Yet people contribute to their communities in many ways, sometimes without seeing themselves as volunteers.

For the volunteering sector, recognising and valuing these contributions is important. It encourages organisations to recognise the many ways people help one another and consider how they can support these connections to grow. Sometimes the role of the volunteering sector is simply to facilitate connections, remove barriers and create the conditions for people to help one another.

As the peak body for volunteering, Volunteering WA is pleased to support this research through its Research Grants Program, which funds work that builds knowledge and strengthens the sector. We congratulate Murdoch Business School at Murdoch University and Chorus on undertaking this important study.

We hope the findings add to our understanding of volunteering, prompt further discussion across the sector and encourage greater recognition of the many ways people support others and their communities.

Tina Williams

CEO

Volunteering WA

A few words from CEO Dan Minchin

At Chorus, our purpose is to enable local communities to thrive. Our strategy starts from a simple belief: people live well when they connect with others, have opportunities to contribute, and feel they belong. This is why we are committed to becoming not only a good provider of care and support, but also an organisation that helps strengthen the communities in which that work happens.

Informal volunteering goes to the heart of that aspiration. This research reminds us that most of what makes a community work is not organised by an organisation at all. It happens through everyday acts of help, reciprocity and neighbourliness. Often, the people involved do not think of themselves as volunteers.

That presents Chorus with both an opportunity and a challenge. We want to use our unique localised model, relationships and resources to create more possibilities for connection and contribution. But we also need the discernment to resist assuming we should organise, own or even be at the centre of what emerges. This research makes the polarity clear: our role may sometimes be to provide a place, make an introduction, remove a barrier or offer support – and then to step back.

This can be challenging, as formal service systems rightly require accountability, safety and assurance. Community life depends on different qualities, elements that cannot simply be designed or managed into existence: trust, reciprocity, agency, participation and relationships. Our task is to learn how these can be woven together, without one overwhelming the other, and to develop practices, cultures and enabling systems that bring our vision to life.

This research does not purport to be a finished model. We welcome the insight it provides, as a foundation for practical experimentation and learning.

On behalf of Chorus, I would like to gratefully acknowledge the Murdoch University research team's leadership, along with the valued support of Volunteering WA.

Dan Minchin

October 2026

Chorus – an interest in informal volunteering

Chorus was formed in January 2017 through the merger of Volunteer Task Force, Community First International and Care Options. Volunteering was already strongly embedded within the predecessor organisations, most notably Volunteer Task Force where volunteers were seen as the lifeblood of the organisation, and its vision concerned communities supporting the wellbeing of one another, while its mission explicitly included building community through volunteering. Consequently, the volunteering legacy inherited by Chorus consisted of more than a substantial unpaid workforce. It also included an underlying philosophy of community participation: people within communities possessed capabilities that could be mobilised for the wellbeing of others.

This principle was consistent with the broader philosophy expressed when Chorus was established. The first Chorus manifesto (Chorus, n.d.) argued that communities contained an abundance of goodwill and resources that were frequently untapped. It also deliberately acknowledged paid employees and volunteers together as people capable of making a difference in the lives of others. Chorus's stated approach was to connect people creatively and courageously rather than see individuals simply as recipients of services.

At this stage, however, volunteering remained predominantly formal and organisationally mediated. Volunteers generally became associated with Chorus and contributed through organised activities. This remains an important part of Chorus's model, with formal volunteers participating in activities including gardening, transport, meal delivery, social support and other community-based programs.

In a study undertaken with Curtin University of Technology during 2017–18 and released in January 2019 (Harris & Same, 2019), volunteering trends, recruitment and retention, processes and training were explored and how Chorus could sustain volunteering in the future was investigated. The study found that volunteering itself was changing with volunteers increasingly contributing for shorter periods and fewer hours. Volunteer motivations and expectations varied, and flexibility was becoming increasingly important. As a result, Chorus shifted its volunteering focus to an increased emphasis on person-centred and flexible volunteering, recognition of differing volunteer motivations, opportunities outside conventional working hours and attention to emerging forms such as micro-volunteering and digital volunteering.

Micro-volunteering was seen as a bridge to informal volunteering. Micro-volunteering was presented as a way in which people with limited available time could make small contributions that nevertheless strengthened other people's lives and community connection. Chorus examples included checking on a neighbour, helping with shopping, baking for someone or assisting a neighbour to put out their bins. These ordinary examples do not require a formal volunteer position, regular roster or necessarily any relationship with an organisation. Indeed, it was identified that partnering with Murdoch University in the current research can be seen as a logical progression in Chorus's developing interest in community contribution. This research can therefore be understood as extending an inquiry that had

become increasingly important to Chorus. The Curtin University research asked how changing volunteering patterns should influence the future of Chorus's volunteering model. The emergence of micro-volunteering subsequently demonstrated that meaningful contribution could be smaller, less structured and potentially independent of organisational membership. The development of Chorus Locals then created an increasingly local and relational organisational setting for understanding community capacity. This research takes the next conceptual step: if informal contribution is important to connected communities, what does it actually look like, what enables it, and what should be the relationship of a formal organisation to informal volunteering?

The historical arc in relation to Chorus can therefore be conceptualised as a progression through three overlapping understandings of volunteering.

> **Volunteering as organisational resource**: In the inherited model, formal volunteers contributed alongside employees to enable Chorus and its predecessors to provide services.
> **Volunteering as reciprocal participation**: research into volunteer motivations and experience brought greater attention to what volunteers themselves gained from participation: purpose, social connection, skills, recognition and belonging
> **Volunteering as community capacity**: micro-volunteering and the later emphasis on locality created space for a broader understanding in which contribution could occur outside organisational membership altogether. The important outcome was increasingly the relationship or community connection, rather than whether the contributor could be counted on an organisational volunteer register.

These understandings are not mutually exclusive. Chorus continues to require and value formal volunteers. Rather, informal volunteering expands the conceptual field within which formal volunteering sits.

Chorus inherited formal volunteering from its predecessor organisations, particularly Volunteer Task Force. Over time, it came to understand volunteering less as a supplementary source of labour and more as an expression of community connection. That led Chorus progressively towards the idea that its role need not always be to recruit and manage the person providing support to others. Instead, Chorus could help create the conditions in which people living in a local community support one another. Informal volunteering was therefore not simply a new volunteering program, it represented a shift in Chorus's conception of its own role, from service provider towards community enabler.

At the centre of this research is a paradox. A formal organisation cannot wholly organise informal volunteering without changing its character. The challenge for Chorus is therefore not simply to find better ways to manage community contribution, it is to understand when management is necessary, when facilitation is sufficient, and when the most constructive role of the organisation is to enable relationships and then step aside.

This represents a potentially important development in the conception of the community service organisation itself. Rather than viewing the organisation solely as a provider that brings resources into communities to address identified needs, the informal volunteering

perspective asks it to recognise, connect and strengthen resources that already reside within those communities. Informal volunteering shifts Chorus' objective from delivering a specified quantum of services to helping create the conditions in which a person can live well within a connected community. In this way the development of the Locals and informal volunteering are mutually reinforcing ideas. The Local gives informal community contributions somewhere to germinate; informal contribution gives the Local a purpose beyond simply being a decentralised branch office.

In that sense, perhaps the most ambitious measure of success is to consider: To what extent are people within local communities increasingly able and willing to contribute to one another, including in ways that do not require Chorus to organise the contribution?

That question locates informal volunteering not at the periphery of the Chorus model, but potentially at the centre of its aspiration to enable connected communities.

Dr Moira Watson

The Local Lead role

Local Leads sit at an important intersection in Chorus. They lead a small team in the day-to-day delivery of safe, high-quality services in a local area. They also, in some cases, work to build relationships, connection and participation in the communities around them. There is a real tension between these two parts of the role: service and operational demands can easily consume the time and attention needed for slower, relational and community work. Chorus' strategy aims to free up capacity and support a shift in mindset from organising and providing, towards connecting and enabling – including catalysing the potential of informal volunteering.

This Pilot Study

It is acknowledged that volunteering is a means to build social connectedness and community cohesion (Biddle, Boyer, Gray & Jahromi, 2022). Where volunteering occurs, local communities have strong neighbour to neighbour relations (Wilson & Son, 2018), which can reduce the increasing social isolation and loneliness being experienced in Australia (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2023). Understanding the role informal volunteering plays in this dynamic will enable the development of policy and practice guidelines that facilitate engagement of these informal volunteers and how they could interface with volunteer involving organisations.

Three broad research questions were posed for this pilot study:

> What is the nature and extent of informal and formal volunteering in a local community?
>
> To what degree does neighbour to neighbour relations in a local community influence the level and type of informal volunteering?
>
> What is informal volunteering's potential relationship with more formal volunteering activities and volunteer involving organisations and what are the policy implications?

These research questions sought to guide the specific research objectives:

- Catalogue the spectrum of volunteering in diverse local communities.
- Determine how neighbour to neighbour relations interact with informal volunteering.
- Explore the practices, platforms and people required to build informal volunteering in a local community and identify practice and policy implications.
- Determine where funding could be obtained to undertake a wider research project.

The remainder of this report is presented as follows:

> Brief Profile of the Literature
>
> Research Approach
>
> Thematic Discussion of Data Incorporating Literature
>
> Our Thinking – The Volunteering Continuum
>
> The Research Questions
>
> Implications
>
> Future Research Directions

Brief Profile of the Literature

Volunteering is defined by Volunteering Australia as "time willingly given, for the common good, without financial gain". This broad definition updated by extensive consultation across Australia in 2015 (Ellis et al., 2015), with a focus on brevity and clarity, also obscures the profound diversity in how, where, with and for whom people contribute time in the form of volunteering. In much of the literature, 'formal' volunteering, a contribution mediated by organisations, is separated from 'informal' volunteering, those enacted directly between people and within communities without organisational intermediation. The focus of this overview and summary of the literature is on informal volunteering, but as demonstrated, this is not a simple binary or static phenomenon; rather volunteering is continually evolving, and the discussion remains ongoing.

The literature suggests that across a wide variety of contexts, informal volunteering is more prevalent than formal volunteering, especially during crises, in communities with fewer formal services, and among groups for whom organisational barriers (time, language, transport, childcare, digital access, and potentially mindsets) raise the costs of participation. Despite its scale and value for social cohesion, reciprocity, and resilience, informal volunteering is conceptually contested, methodologically difficult to measure, and often under-recognised in policy frameworks that privilege readily measurable organisational metrics such as registered volunteers and hours.

Rather than presenting the literature review as a standalone section, it has been integrated throughout the discussion to provide context. Our review illustrated the depth and breadth of the discourse. What emerged was a set of concepts with fluid boundaries, and definitional and measurement challenges, as well as some overshadowing by formal volunteering literature. Some key elements of what is known about who participates in informal volunteering and why, were also present in the literature, as were discussions about inequalities and contextual effects. Relevant academic theories in use, are included as an appendix (Appendix 1).

Four key strands of literature were identified:

Informal volunteering specific literature comprised both stand-alone articles (e.g, Dean, 2022; Einolf et al., 2016) and where informal volunteering was explicitly included with formal volunteering, sometimes in a comparative form (e.g., Potluka et al., 2025).

Informal volunteering-adjacent literature was in areas such as development studies, community development, caring, and placemaking, where volunteer activities can occur and where volunteering and related terms are sometimes referred to but are not shown as key words (e.g., Lamping et al., 2024 was located in the placemaking literature).

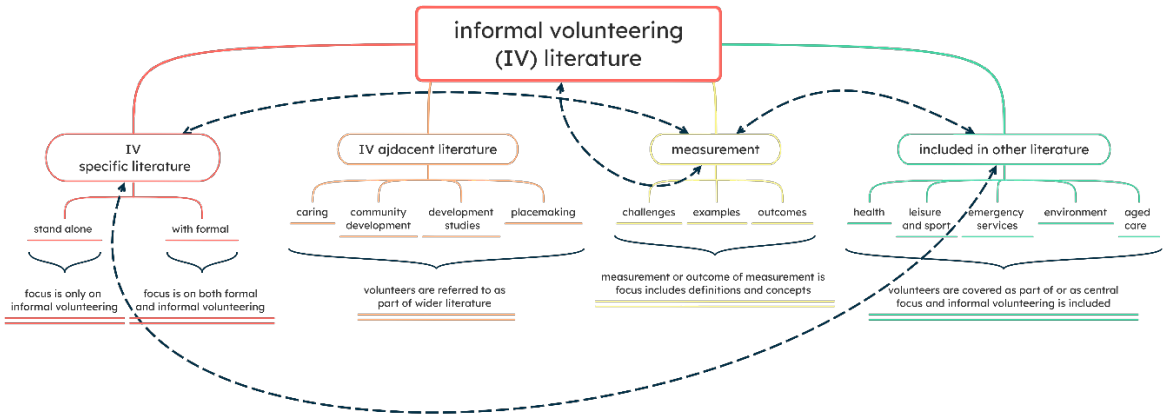
Included in other literature. Informal volunteering also emerged in explicit ways in literature associated with specific fields of volunteering such as emergency services, health, leisure and sport, and volunteering for the environment (e.g., Kingsley 2019 refers to informal connections in community gardens; Walker et al., 2022 within community housing; Whittaker et al., 2015 in emergency services).

Measurement. A final focus identified in the literature was on measuring volunteering, which has re-emerged in recent times (e.g., Fonovic et al., 2026; Qvist, 2024).

Figure 1 provides the groupings used in this review. What became evident was that search strings and keywords often failed to identify key pieces of research which were later identified by reverse searching using the reference lists of published work.

Relevant grey literature from organisations such as the United Nations Volunteers and Volunteering Australia, was consulted due to its significant contribution to our understanding of volunteering.

Figure 1: Location of the academic literature on informal volunteering



There are a number of observations which can be made about the body of literature reviewed. Firstly, while there was early mention in some of the volunteering literature about the nature and types of volunteering outside organisations (e.g., Ellis Paine, Hill, & Rochester, 2010), there was an understanding of informal volunteering that emerged from around 2015 and which was accelerated by the onset of the pandemic. Community responses during the pandemic increased understanding of the need for informal volunteering as well as an appreciation of the significant role it plays in supporting communities. The pre-and post-pandemic difference in informal volunteering in the literature is marked, for example, there has been a noticeable increase in volume and a broadening of understanding.

Across the literature it is apparent that cultural understandings and translation of terminologies can be nuanced, and geographic differences exist between understandings of types of informal volunteering. These differences have an influence on terminology and on measurement, as well as on the separation of volunteering from other related activities. This means that comparisons between research undertaken in Europe, North America, Asia, Africa and Australia are likely to be influenced by both culture and language translations.

In the period since the scoping review was undertaken several important references have emerged which have been incorporated into this report, including: Høgenhaven (2026) proposing a typology, and Barford, Karkee and O'Higgins (2026) reporting on trends and characteristics for United Nations Volunteers and the International Labor Organization, and an Australia-specific research note on the evolution of definitions and measurement in Australia (Oppenheimer et al., 2026).

Before outlining the project itself, a brief overview of the definitions of informal volunteering in the literature is presented. This is further discussed later in relation to the data.

Informal volunteering definitions in the literature

The Volunteering Australia definition of volunteering (see p. 14), although widely accepted in the volunteering ecosystem in Australia, is far more complex than it first appears. Concepts such as "willingness," "common good," and "no financial gain" vary in interpretation across different cultural and social contexts. Regardless of the specific wording used by different organisations, this definition frames volunteering as voluntary, prosocial, and non-remunerated beyond reimbursement of out-of-pocket expenses. "Willingness", however, can be complicated by social obligation, gift exchange, and reciprocity norms; "the common good" may mean different things within different cultural contexts and from different even opposing (sometimes political) stances, and "without financial gain" often sits alongside funding, stipends, or honoraria that blur the boundary between purely unpaid work and modest forms of compensation (Ellis et al., 2015).

The volunteering literature, both academic and not, often distinguishes between formal and informal volunteering, as a binary. Formal volunteering denotes unpaid contributions organised through an entity (e.g., nonprofit, association, public agency, private enterprise) with defined roles and procedures. Informal volunteering refers to unpaid help provided outside organisational auspices often embedded in norms of reciprocity and community care. Terminologies vary by field and jurisdiction, and some institutions prefer 'direct' to 'informal' to avoid misrecognition of culturally embedded practices, whereas others offer culturally embedded practices as exemplars of informal volunteering. There are also blurred boundaries with concepts such as helping, and caring, some researchers include examples of these in their descriptions of informal volunteering activities (e.g., Cnaan et al., 2022). Other researcher explicitly state that they include aspects of helping and caring (e.g., Einolf, 2016), and some differentiate between volunteers and informal caregivers, but not between formal and informal volunteers (Skinner, 2021). There are also examples with do not separate informal helping from formal volunteering (e.g., Celdrán & Chacur-Kiss, 2025; Han et al., 2023). The level of 'organisation', and the beneficiaries, and who is included or not included in informal volunteering (inclusion or exclusion of 'household' and/or 'family') also vary considerably.

Consistently, however, informal volunteering is defined by what it is not: *not* mediated by an organisation or formal entity and *not* part of a formal role. Despite these differences, however, there is a broad understanding that informal volunteering is referred to as a subset of volunteering performed directly for individuals or communities outside formal organisational structures.

Table 1: Inclusion or exclusion of household, family, non-household family

Organisation/reference	Household explicitly excluded	Family explicitly excluded	Non- household family explicitly excluded
ILO (2026)	yes	no	no
ABS (2025)	yes	yes	yes
AIHW (2025)	yes	yes	yes
Statistics Canada (2025)	yes	no	no
DCMS UK (2024)	no	yes	yes
NCVO (2022)	no	no	no
United Nations (2026)	no	yes	yes

Table 1 provides a snapshot of the inclusion or exclusion of household, family, or non-household family. At the level of distinction based on household or family, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) explicitly excludes assistance to people in the volunteer's household (ABS 2018; 2025). Further, ABS uses the term unpaid help at a more broad level that includes volunteering, indicating this help can be provided to "a relative living in another household…, followed by a friend", but then makes a distinction with "Informal volunteering is the provision of unpaid work/support to non-household members, excluding that provided only to family members living outside the household" (ABS 2025, section unpaid help). This latter elaboration means that if an individual is providing support or voluntary service to a wider group of people which includes a family member, then the ABS still consider it informal volunteering.

Statistics Canada (2025, p. 5) indicates that informal volunteering can include help to family members outside the household and makes a distinction between direct help and improving the community. Direct help "includes help given to friends, neighbours and relatives, but excludes help given to a person living in one's household.", while improving the community includes "help given… to improve the community directly through activities that are not on behalf of a group or organization such as maintaining a public space, participating in public meetings, producing or disseminating information to make others aware of an issue, organizing or coordinating a group or an event, helping to develop an economic or social project for their community, or in some other capacity."

In the UK, the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) excludes help to close relatives but does not frame the exclusion through household membership (NCVO, 2022). The NCVO definition is based on the official volunteering statistics in the UK government Community Life Survey (DCMS, 2024).

While some definitions restrict informal volunteering to direct interpersonal help, more recently there is an increasing recognition of the inclusion of community-improvement activities such as park clean-ups or public-space maintenance, similar to the distinction made by Statistics Canada. Volunteering Australia's framing extends even further to mutual aid, grassroots civic action and community-led problem solving, in keeping with the United Nations changing stance.

Informal volunteers frequently “organise” without being part of an organisation. Such organising is especially evident in crises, where neighbours self-coordinate before formal responders arrive (e.g., Trautwein et al., 2020). Over time, these efforts may develop routines or leadership structures that resemble formalisation, even though they are community-led (Bang Carlsen & Toubol, 2025; Whittaker et al., 2015). Similarly, a group who gather frequently to share an activity such as cleaning up a beach, or weeding a local park can shift from a loose grouping to an entity that behaves like an organisation, with persistence, routines, and protocols, without ever becoming a formal organisation. In other words, informal volunteering can evolve toward more formal patterns when coordination becomes enduring. The threshold at which coordination tips into formalisation can be a gradual, context-dependent transition, and can sometimes be dependent on requirements of societal structures such as funding and insurance, rather than a preference of the volunteers.

While there is no universal definition of informal volunteering, and indeed no standard terminology in use, in contrast to some of the more rigid segregations of formal and informal volunteering, the United Nations/International Labor Organization report released early in 2026 includes a concept of organisation-based informal volunteering (Barford et al., 2026, p. 14). Previous UN publications referred to direct volunteering in preference to informal volunteering (e.g., United Nations Volunteers, 2020) and the UN now refers to “direct informal” and “organisation-based informal”, with Barford et al. indicating these are “internationally agreed” (Barford et al., 2026, p. 14). The distinction between direct volunteering and organisation-based volunteering refers to informal volunteering occurring “directly within communities on a person-to-person basis, or occurs through informal structures or organizations”, segregating organisation-based volunteering into both formal and informal, where organisation based means the volunteering is “intermediated by any form of organization”.

Many discussions of informal volunteering rely on whether participation is mediated by a formal organisation. Woolvin and Hardill (2013) identified “groups” as being self-organising without formal structure, but there are differences between organisations with formal structures, policies and governance, and the act of organising people to achieve a goal. This is part of the evolution of the consistent with the definitions discussed by Barford et al., (2026), and in keeping with the changing nature of our understanding of volunteering outlined by Oppenheimer et al. (2026). (see Our Thinking – the volunteering continuum, p. 18).

Table 2 provides a selection of academic definitions of informal volunteering. There is a reliance on the definition provided by Lee and Brudney (2012) as a base, however, it is also the case that example activities which are considered to be informal volunteering are evident across much of the literature, and some authors include discussion on the absence of organisational structures.

Table 2: Sample of current academic definitions of informal volunteering.

Cnaan, et al., 2022, p. 418	informal volunteering can be, at times, long-term and still informal, such as caregiving to a sick relative. At other times, informal volunteering can be carried out as episodic volunteering, such as in helping another person move, watering someone's plants, or feeding someone's pets when they are on vacation.
Dean, 2022, p. 528	informal volunteering (giving one's time, perhaps on an ad hoc basis, to help one's friends, neighbors, or community),
Einolf et al., 2016, p. 223/4	*Informal volunteering* is defined as unpaid, voluntary work/volunteering not coordinated by an organization or institution. It is evident in helping individuals living outside one's household, informal political participation, informal religious activity, and membership in informal mutual assistance groups is relevant.
Lee & Brudney, 2012, p. 160	*Informal volunteering* is any assistance given directly—that is, not through a formal organization—to non-household individuals, for example, helping a neighbor or friend
Ramaekers, et al., 2025, p. 347	Informal volunteering is here defined as helping behaviours for people outside the household, such as friends, neighbours and acquaintances, that do not involve any organizations or institutions
Whittaker et al., 2015, p. 361	informal volunteerism refers to the activities of people who work outside of formal emergency and disaster management arrangements to help others who are at risk or are affected by emergencies and disasters. Such volunteerism may take place before, during or after an event. Informal volunteers may participate as individuals or as part of a group, on a short or longer-term basis, regularly or irregularly, and in situ or ex situ.
Wang, 2022 p. 474	scholars generally agree that INV [informal volunteering] takes place outside of the organizational context or formal settings ..... It may include a number of unpaid, informal neighbourly support activities (e. g doing yard work, providing childcare, coaching sports to kids in the neighbourhood, taking care of pets, cooking meals, doing household repairs, helping someone move, helping with shopping and errands and offering rides to appointments), and other unpaid activities helping a stranger, such as a homeless or hungry person, which are not usually thought of as volunteering

Research Approach

In order to explore the research questions, we adopted a mixed methods approach (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; DeJonckheere et al., 2024) to capture both breadth and depth in relation to informal volunteering. This mixed methods approach sought to facilitate story gathering and understanding of the perspectives of informal volunteers' participation in their local communities.

An online survey promoted through Chorus, and by Volunteering WA, sought feedback about respondents' volunteering experiences. The survey was developed based on an initial rapid review of the literature, comprised both closed- and open-ended questions focussed on informal volunteering, and included questions about the connection between formal and informal volunteering.

After several rounds of promotion, we received a total of 83 responses to the survey. This meant that demographic and qualitative data could be obtained from the online survey, but inferential statistical analysis could not be undertaken. This low survey response has been identified as a barrier to quantitative research in the sector since at least 2019 (Harris & Same, 2019). There is a growing body of evidence relating to what is sometimes known as survey fatigue (e.g., Ghafourifard, 2024) where people are not interested in responding to surveys, are not motivated to complete them thoughtfully or do not answer all of the questions.

Follow up interviews were conducted with twelve individuals randomly selected from the 28 survey respondents who agreed to be interviewed. The interview schedule was developed collaboratively by the research team, with a semi-structured approach seeking to have consistency between interviews, but allowing participants to tell their stories, offer their experiences and express their opinions (Belina, 2023). The volunteer interviews were conducted by a research assistant experienced in qualitative interviews and lasted between forty minutes to an hour. The interviews were conducted online using Microsoft Teams and were recorded, transcribed and de-identified.

Thematic analysis (DeJonckheere, et al., 2024) of the surveys and the interviews was then compared to the themes which were identified in the parallel literature review. Following a presentation to representatives of Chorus, follow up questions were developed based on the themes which had emerged from the project to date. These questions were then the basis for interviews with five experts across the volunteering spectrum, from researchers to community leaders, identified from recommendations by Volunteering WA.

The expert interviews were conducted by the lead researcher on the project online via Teams and were recorded and transcribed. The same coding framework was used to analyse the expert interviews and compare these to the themes identified previously, and to the literature. The iterative process for this research has been in response to a range of challenges, but has also enabled cross-checking, and corroboration of both data and themes as they emerged, and of areas in need of further investigation.

In parallel to the primary data collection via the survey and the interviews, a wide-ranging scoping review of the literature was conducted.

Participants

The sample of 83 respondents to the survey was mostly female (74%), and the largest age group was 41-50 years of age (30%). No respondents identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders. The nationality was predominantly Australian (77%), and English was the most common language spoken at home (89%). Most respondents live with their family (65%), and work full-time (36%). The highest level of education of respondents was TAFE graduates (30%), university – undergraduate degree (30%) and post graduate degree (23%). The majority did not identify with a religion or belief system (61%) and the majority lived in the metropolitan area (87%).

Most survey respondents had undertaken some informal volunteering activities in the last four weeks in relation to someone not living with them (71%). The time spent on these activities varied considerably, 51% spent anywhere between 0.25 hours up to 9 hours per week on informal volunteering activities, whereas 31% did not provide any indication of time spent. As such, weekly time spent on informal volunteering activities is very subjective and needs to be interpreted with caution. Tables 3 and 4, relating to the survey respondent profile are included over the page.

Seventeen interviews were conducted; twelve (12) were with informal volunteers, and five (5) were with volunteering experts. There were 13 female and 4 male interviewees with an age range of 30 to 70 years of age. Most identified as English speaking with Australian or British background.

Table 3: Informal volunteering survey demographics

Answer	Options	Count (n=83)	Percentage %
Gender	Female	61	74
	Male	21	25
	Non-Binary	1	1
Age	18-30	6	7
	31-40	10	12
	41-50	25	30
	51-60	19	23
	61-70	14	17
	71-80	7	9
	> 80	2	2
Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander	Yes	0	
	No	83	100
Nationality	Australian	64	77
	Other	19	23
Language spoken at home	English	74	89
	Other	9	11
Postcode	Metropolitan	71	87
	Regional	5	6
	Rural	6	7
Current living arrangements	Live with family	54	65
	Alone	21	25
	Friends	3	4
	Sharing	3	4
	Non-disclosure	2	2
Education Level	High School	13	17
	TAFE	25	30
	University – UG	26	30
	University – PG	19	23
Religion or belief system	Yes	32	39
	No	51	61
Employment	Full-time	20	36
	Part-time	24	29
	Retired	16	19
	Casual	7	8
	Unemployed	6	7

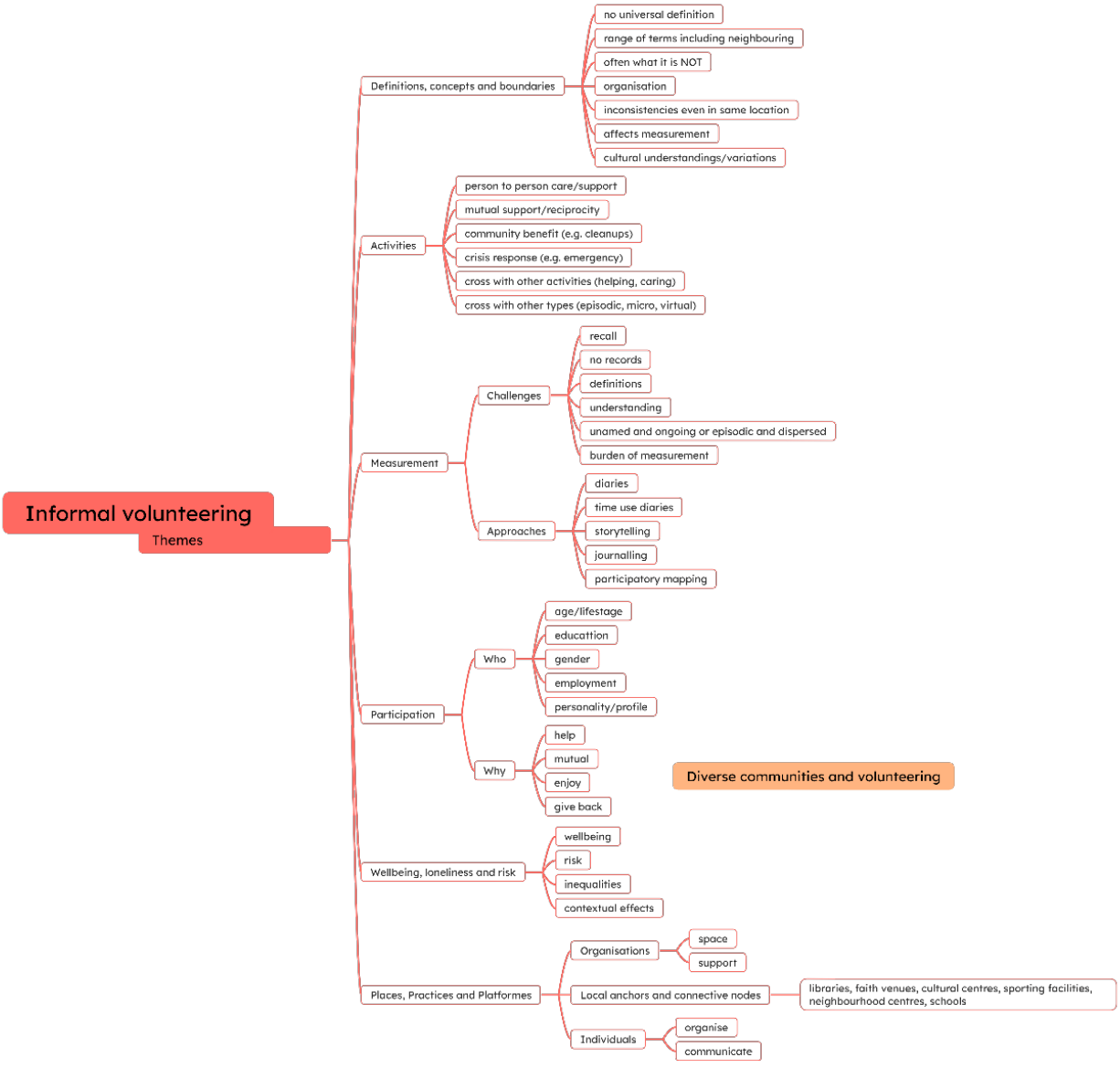
Table 4: Respondent hours involved in volunteering

Answer	Options	Number (n=83)	Percentage %
In the last four weeks did you help anyone (not living with you) undertake any of the following activities?	IV Activities	59	71
	Did not provide unpaid help	24	29
Average time spent in informal volunteering each week in last month	No response	26	31
	0.25-9 hours	42	51
	10-20	9	11
	>20	2	2
	Unsure	4	5
Was informal volunteering affiliated with organisation	Yes	9	11
	No	74	89

Thematic Discussion of Data Incorporating Literature

Across the data from the survey, the interviews and the literature, six key themes were identified. These themes are interconnected and dynamic underscored by the evolving nature of volunteering (Oppenheimer et al., 2026). An additional theme – diverse communities and volunteering – was evident in the literature and was mentioned by our experts but was not a strong theme in the survey or volunteer interviews.

Figure 2: Key themes in Informal Volunteering



Definitions, concepts, and boundaries

To ascertain the level of understanding about informal volunteering, survey respondents were asked in the first instance to reflect on their understanding of formal volunteering. Across the 79 responses to this question, understanding of formal volunteering was seen to be characterised less by the type of activity undertaken and more by the way the volunteering relationship is organised.

Five themes were identified across the data:

Structured and organised: Respondents repeatedly describe formal volunteering as *structured*,[1] *organised*, *coordinated*, *managed*, or occurring within an established framework.

Organisational affiliation: Formal volunteering is strongly associated with working through or for an organisation, particularly a nonprofit, charity, community group, or recognised agency.

Regular commitment: A recurring distinction is ongoing, scheduled and reliable participation, expressed through regular hours, shifts, rosters, attendance, or commitment over a specified period.

Unpaid contribution: Respondents frequently define volunteering through the giving of time, work, skills or knowledge without payment, often using terms such as *unpaid work*, *giving time freely*, and *for free*.

Formalised roles and expectations: Formal volunteering is associated with defined roles, responsibilities and organisational processes, including agreements, onboarding, induction, training, supervision, policies and procedures, and specified tasks.

An interesting secondary level theme in these responses is community contribution / giving back. This is prominent in respondents' descriptions of why they volunteer, whereas the five themes above illustrate what respondents understand formal volunteering to be. There was a clear distinction between the structural characteristics of formal volunteering, and the respondents' views on its perceived purpose or value.

[1] In this section, *italics* is used to denote words taken directly from the qualitative data in the survey and the interviews.

Table 5: Sample quotes on defining formal volunteering

Theme	Sample quotes from respondents
Structured and organised	*"Organised, structured, managed volunteering though an agency."* *"Giving your time to others in a way that's organised"* *"Organised, structured volunteering via a group or organisation with set guidelines"*
Organisation affiliation	*"Providing unpaid help or support to others in my community, in a way that's organised or coordinated by an organisation or group."* *"Someone who does not get paid, giving their time to a non-profit organisation"* *"Volunteering in the community with support of an organisation, the organisation is my vessel of support"*
Regular commitment	*"ongoing regular commitment"* *"Regular and ongoing commitment to an organization or activity"* *"regular booked in shifts where you have shown up in a space, unpaid on a regular and reliable basis giving your time willingly"*
Unpaid contribution	*"Unpaid work"* *"To give my work and my time voluntary for free"* *"Giving of time and/or skills to an organisation in order to benefit the organisation"*
Formalised roles and expectations	*"When you have an agreement with a provider regarding expectations and commitments regarding your volunteering work."* *"having a formal arrangement on hours and times that you volunteer your time and specific tasks that you are expected to complete in this time. A formal roster"* *"Person gives their time without pay in a structured non-for-profit organisation, receives training and works under policies and procedures."*

Respondents were also asked to define informal volunteering in their own words. Seventy-six (76) respondents chose to answer this question. Five themes were identified which contrast clearly with formal volunteering through their emphasis on spontaneity, flexibility, interpersonal helping and the absence of organisational structures.

Unstructured and informal: Helping occurs without formal processes, roles, agreements, onboarding or organisational structures.

Ad hoc and spontaneous: Assistance is provided when a need or opportunity arises rather than through scheduled or ongoing participation.

Community, family and neighbour focused: Helping is oriented toward individuals and immediate social or community networks, including friends, family, neighbours and strangers.

Flexible and self-directed: Individuals have greater autonomy over when, where and how they contribute, with fewer expectations concerning commitment.

Helping and acts of kindness: Informal volunteering is understood as voluntarily responding to others' needs through everyday assistance, care and kindness.

Table 6: Illustrative respondent quotes defining informal volunteering

Theme	Illustrative respondent quotes
Unstructured and informal	*"Supporting / helping others in my community without a formal agreement"* *"Unpaid help not managed through an organisation"* *"Doing something that helps but doesn't have a description or specific role"* *"No onboarding process, and no agreement between the individual and any organisation."*
Ad hoc and spontaneous	*"Helping out when you see someone needs it"* *"Assisting anyone, at any given time, with no schedule or agreement, just being there to 'lend a hand'"*. *"Casual or ad hoc volunteering"*. *"Just stepping in to assist to help out due to changing situations."*
Community, family and neighbour focused	*"informal volunteering to me is helping family and friends and providing support"*. *"Assisting with a neighbour helping a friend helping the community because you want too"*. *"Unstructured helping out, usually lending a hand with family and friends"* *"Supporting others in the community"*
Flexible and self-directed	*"flexible"*. *"The ability to commit to volunteering as suits your lifestyle and availability"* *"Choose my own hours, days, type/nature of volunteering, community who I volunteer for, type of activities I do as part of my volunteering"* *"Volunteering off your own bat"*
Helping and acts of kindness	*"Being there for people"*. *"micro-opportunities to do good."*. *"Comes from seeing a need for help and acting on it. simply being human and kind to others"*. *"Small acts of service completed as needed within the community."*

The two sets of responses provide a strong conceptual contrast:

Table 7: Survey respondent perspectives across formal and informal volunteering

Formal volunteering	Informal volunteering
Structured and organised	Unstructured
Organisation-based	Individual/community-based
Regular commitment	Ad hoc/spontaneous
Defined roles and expectations	Flexible/self-directed
Unpaid contribution	Helping/acts of kindness

This comparison suggests a useful initial higher-level finding: both forms involve freely contributing time, effort or skills for the benefit of others, but respondents distinguish them primarily based on the degree of structure, organisational mediation, regularity and formality surrounding that contribution.

The volunteers who were interviewed, however, were unclear about what informal volunteering was, and offered comments such as it being an *incredible grey area* and *I don't really know*. The lack of structure and time commitment was apparent in comments such as that it is *more reactive than formal volunteering* and that people *do it without thinking about it,* as well as *because it's informal, it's kind of ad hoc* and *something you are just thrown into.* Respondents' focus on the action being towards others was illustrated by comments such as *support other people* with one interviewee indicating they *think about it as just helping a mate,* and *a*nother: *I use words like lend a helping hand*.

Expert interviewees also had varied perspectives on what constitutes informal volunteering, with comments including *the distinction between formal and informal volunteering isn't always as clear cut as it seems to be* and *It's a big grey area, it's almost a neighbourliness.* Some of our experts observed that the understanding of what constitutes informal volunteering is potentially culture bound, and this is discussed in the section Diverse communities and volunteering (see p. 38).

In both the survey and interviews, individuals often appeared to be talking about formal volunteering when providing their responses, thus illustrating the dominance of formal volunteering in their thinking. Interviewees offered comments which showed caution in committing to regular volunteer activities: *I'm a little commitment shy;* and *the main challenge is trying to look for volunteering opportunities that will fit in around my full-time work commitments* as well as f*ull-time work takes most of my energy;* and referring to r*isk of overcommitting* and *my own health concerns* even when asked about the possibilities of being involved in informal volunteering. To some degree this might be related to many of the volunteers being actively involved in formal volunteering and not wanting to be further stretched. Some respondents however did offer observations such as *short-term would be okay* and *as long as it is random, I'm happy to do it.*

The literature illustrates that the formalisation of volunteering may inadvertently diminish the visibility and perceived value of informal helping activities because dominant understandings of volunteering continue to be shaped by organisation-based models that prioritise formal participation over community-based and relational forms of support (Høgenhaven, 2026). Where informal volunteering is compared to formal volunteering, often the comparison is based on the organisational involvement discussed above. Some literature, however, examines other aspects such as participation, evolution into formal volunteering, crisis volunteering, and whether informal and formal volunteering compete for volunteers. Evidence generally indicates positive correlations between informal and formal participation, shared predispositions, skills, and networks or contacts apply in both modes. For many, informal helping provides a low-threshold entry that later connects to formal roles (Potluka et al. 2025); conversely, training and experience in formal settings enhance the safety and efficacy of informal action (Harris et al., 2017). There is evidence, however, of the limits to complementarity of formal and informal volunteering. When informal helping obligations reach high loads, for example, formal volunteering time can decline, suggesting a threshold beyond which involvement is constrained (Overgaard et al., 2018; Tanskanen et al., 2024).

Crisis contexts routinely prompt citizen action that is unaffiliated, fluid, and short-lived; often described as spontaneous, convergent, or emergent volunteering (Harris et al., 2017; Whittaker, et al., 2015). During crises, informal networks act as first responders while formal organisations bring coordination, risk management, and sustained capacity. Recently, volunteering stakeholders have identified the role of unaffiliated volunteers during crises, with caveats about skills, and safety leading to recognition of volunteering situations where integration with official response requires light protocols: safe sign-in points, rapid briefings, tiered tasking, and liaison roles (Ahmad, 2024).

An area under discussion is whether organisations looking for volunteers are competing with informal forms of volunteering, with the evidence suggesting that "If people engage in one form of volunteering, the likelihood of their engagement in the other form increases. Thus, the two forms of volunteering do not compete but rather complement each other" (Potluka et al., 2025, p 10).

Informal volunteering activities

Survey respondents were asked to indicate whether they had undertaken any of a list of activities in the previous four weeks, consistent with data collected in other settings (e.g Volunteering WA, 2023).

Table 8: Informal volunteering activities – survey responses

In the last four weeks did you help anyone (other than family) undertake any of the following activities? (Select all that apply)	**Count**	**%**
Did not provide unpaid help outside my family	22	27%
Domestic work, home maintenance or gardening	14	17%
Providing transport or running errands	19	23%
Visiting an elderly person for companionship	18	22%
Visiting a sick person for companionship or help	9	11%
Unpaid childcare outside my family	4	5%
Teaching, coaching or practical advice	15	19%
Providing emotional support	31	38%
Personal care / assistance	5	6%
Lobbying / advocacy	11	14%
Community assistance/organising	17	21%
Environmental protection/looking after bushland/wildlife	6	7%
Collation, curation, cataloguing	3	4%
Any other help (please specify)	10	12%

Those who specified other help had provided meals to others, both cooked and purchased, minded a non-family member's pet, helped with household administration in finance matters, encouraged others in creative artwork, created free resources, and mowed a neighbour's lawn.

Of interest in the responses was the high level of provision of emotional support (n=31) and the number of volunteers who did not provide unpaid help outside their family (n=22) (other than as a formal volunteer.

Volunteers who were interviewed elaborated on some of these activities: *for three months, we delivered an evening meal to a neighbour going through a severe illness,* and *take neighbour with dementia shopping,* as well as c*ollect mail and put bins out* and *driving people to appointments.* Interviewees also talked about *mentoring,* and one referred to *taking [their] dog to a nursing home.*

These responses were consistent with the literature. Often seen as part of prosociality in community, informal volunteering includes everyday acts which are relational and ongoing. These activities include person focussed support such as companionship, mentoring, counselling and emotional support or task focussed assistance such as transport, meals, errands or help with household matters such as hanging out washing or mowing the lawn. In many communities, helping is grounded in reciprocity and mutual support, for example neighbours taking care of each other's children, or sharing tools or expertise, carpooling or organising to buy bulk items to reduce costs, a beach clean-up organised following a storm, putting the bins out for a neighbour on holidays, keeping an eye on a vacant property, reporting a hazard to the authorities, and cooking meals or bringing in the washing for a family with a new child or ill family member. Informal volunteering activities span practical help (transport, errands, minor repairs), emotional support, informational guidance, and activities that approximate caregiving.

The blurring of the boundaries between formal and informal volunteering definitions can become apparent, not only in understanding, but also in practice. Many informal volunteering activities are also included in formal organisations which have evolved from the needs of the community, and in recent times are also featured in digital and neighbourhood-based support networks. A recent Australia example is volunteering for social support or companionship in the aged care sector, which is now one of the options for volunteers and for clients in aged care settings. Lee (2024, p. 528) identifies that "driving a neighbour to a doctor's appointment and watching a friend's child are examples of informal volunteering. If the same tasks are conducted through an association or a group, they are formal volunteering activities."

Scholarship cautions against conflating informal volunteering with unpaid family care yet also recognises blurred boundaries in policy rhetoric that shifts responsibilities from state to households (Cnaan et al., 2022). In Australia and New Zealand, the caring literature and infrastructure also incorporate caring and volunteering, including in an environment where private organisations can send volunteers into client's homes for companionship as part of a contract for care (DHDA, 2026), and clients do not always see the volunteer or organisation in this role (Lilburn et al., 2018), seeing the volunteers instead as companions.

The emergency services volunteering literature has identified the informal activities of neighbours and locals in times of crisis, using a range of terms including spontaneous, convergent, unaffiliated, walk-in, and emergent volunteering (Ahmad, 2024; Harris et al., 2017; Nissen et al., 2021; Trautwein et al., 2020; Whittaker, et al., 2015), and identifying that the responses can be individual, unorganised, group organised, extensions of existing organisations, and/or the beginning of a new and ongoing organisation. From a practice

perspective, the activity often matters more than the label. When individuals undertake unpaid, uncoerced actions for the benefit of others or the wider community, checking on a neighbour, offering transport, sharing food, clearing a verge, coordinating a street-level response to an urgent need, they contribute to community wellbeing. These actions may be sporadic or sustained, relational or anonymous, reciprocal or purely altruistic. What is common across all these activities is the voluntary redirection of time and effort toward the benefit or others.

Measurement challenges and approaches

The literature highlights the challenges associated with measuring informal volunteering, and this has been borne out by our pilot research. The blurriness of definitions, and of people understanding that what they are doing could be classified as informal volunteering, overlap. Interviewees illustrated this with their statements such as *you do without thinking about it* and y*ou know, it's just something that happens* fit with this. Interviewees also observed *I just consider it a normal part of life* and *Most of the time it's only something small and little.* They also identified that: *if people are saying, "oh, that's just what I do," then it's not visible* and that there may need to be *more of an awareness that you're doing it.*

One of the expert interviewees identified the lack of measurability of informal volunteering, *It's not captured anywhere. So government-wise, they, so for example, aged care or something like that, if lots of people are being helped by their next-door neighbours or whatever, … that's not being captured by government, so that means there might be a service mismatch.*

Definitional variance and instrument design are only one of the challenges of measuring informal volunteering. The definitional differences lead to a lack of comparability between studies but are also likely to influence how individuals respond differently to the same questions (Walker et al., 2022). Some studies refer to informal volunteering as ''unstructured giving of one's time to friends, neighbours, or the community'' (Dean, 2022, p. 527), and include activities such as childcare, grocery shopping, and social support for people outside the family. In contrast, however, these actions are referred to by some scholars as informal help, informal support or neighbouring rather than included in volunteering (van Tienoven et al., 2022). Lee and Brudney (2012, p. 160) clearly highlight the inclusion of such helping as informal volunteering in their seminal work indicating that "in a number of ethnic groups and communities, informal volunteering is often a more dominant type of helping behavior than formal volunteering".

Measurement estimates vary with question wording, recall window, and whether instruments cue behaviours (e.g., 'did you give someone outside your household a lift?') versus identity labels ('did you volunteer?'). Informal acts are frequent, small, and often not self-labelled as volunteering, leading to systematic undercounting and poor comparability across surveys, particularly where the individual is determining what is and is not volunteering (Wang, 2022). Variations in how surveys and interviews ask about "help," "support," or "unpaid work", including about specific activities such as "caring", produce inconsistent results. These variations are also included in different cultural understandings of what is considered to be part of community roles and expectations where normative approaches to volunteering are embedded, even without being labelled (Wang, Mook & Handy, 2017). Sometimes the

variability can be associated with the disciplinary focus of the measurement, for example, ILO based measurement is related to labour participation, and unpaid “work” (ILO, 2021).

Alternative data collection approaches to surveys include time use diaries, journalling, storytelling, participatory mapping and/or/ micro prompts. Time-use diaries and brief experience-sampling prompts capture episodic, low-salience acts better than annual retrospectives. Combining short surveys with diaries, qualitative story capture, and participatory mapping can reveal patterns and meanings while maintaining proportionate burden. These alternative data collection methods, however, are often time consuming and, can be onerous for participants leading to lower response rates or incomplete records. In some circumstances these approaches might be construed as surveillance or might foster to impression management behaviours further contributing to inaccuracy. Measurement must remain proportionate and ethical, while at the same time seeking to be comparable and providing sound data. Høgenhaven (2026) warns not to seek to shoehorn informal volunteering into frameworks developed for formal volunteer settings.

Finally, in the measurement literature, Einolf et al. (2016, p. 232) suggest that attempts to monetise informal volunteering are rare but suggest substantial economic value, in some contexts exceeding formal volunteering. Appraisals of the value of volunteering, however, are sensitive to assumptions about replacement costs and some authors argue that these estimates should be used cautiously. Dean (2022) cautions that applying formal volunteering frameworks centred on employability and individual gain to informal volunteering, risks reinforcing neoliberalism and could "hollow out" community life. Similarly, Hendriks, Klein and Regan (2023) warn that policy approaches should not stifle the informality, responsiveness and creativity that characterise community-led forms of informal volunteering. Together, these studies suggest that formalisation and measurement may overlook important relational and social dimensions of informal volunteering. This is discussed further under Diverse Communities (see p.38).

Participation in informal volunteering: People, motivation, barriers

The profile of who participates in informal volunteering is somewhat difficult to outline, in part due to the measurement challenges discussed above. Despite this, the literature offers some insights into the characteristics that motivate informal volunteering. There is a consensus, that informal volunteering occurs at a much higher rate than formal volunteering, and this is borne out by evidence presented in reports on the state of volunteering at local, national and international levels (e.g., Volunteering WA, 2023).

The literature indicates that informal volunteering is more evenly distributed (Walker, et al., 2022) than formal volunteering, which typically skews toward higher socioeconomic status, education, and stable schedules. In some communities, informal volunteering may substitute for scarce services. In addition, migrants and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) groups often report lower formal participation due to barriers, but higher rates of informal helping within community networks (Greenspan & Walk, 2024).

There is mixed evidence in the literature on rural/urban differences, with some literature indicating that rural residents frequently report higher informal helping (Nesbit, Paarlberg & Jo, 2025). Discussion in the literature at times refutes these views claiming they form an

incomplete picture (Paarlberg et al., 2022) and providing evidence that some of the differences are related to social networks, and to opportunities (Pearce et al., 2023).

Age and life stage have also been found to have some interaction with propensity to volunteer, including informally. Older adults often pivot between formal and informal as capacities and roles change including employment and health status (Qvist, 2024). Youth engagement is shaped by social networks, place, and opportunities aligned to flexible modalities, including micro- and digitally mediated forms of volunteering (Pearce et al., 2023).

There was strong evidence of the influence of family in the volunteer interviews with participants offering: *Dad and Mum were huge volunteers*; and *definitely coming from a small regional community where my Mother was a volunteer* and well as *well my Dad was the man that always mixed up the burgers or the meats for the burgers at the fancy dress at the [region name deleted] primary school.* One interviewee talked about the influence of their parents being the *drivers of … meeting our neighbours, so I just follow along with them and help where I can.* Our expert interviewees also mentioned the influence of family: *I feel like I've been doing informal volunteering most of my life and that it started when I was a kid and that my mother was very involved* and *informal volunteering in a sense has always been part of my life, partly because growing up, my mother was always very active in our community, very active at the school in sort of formal and informal ways.* One expert referred to individuals who have not seen volunteering being modelled as a barrier as *they just have no idea how to get involved.* Recent Australian research has confirmed the influence of family on volunteering based on the HILDA data (Vu et al, 2026), consistent with the long-term view on behaviour modelling.

Einolf et al. (2016) identified that informal volunteering is more prevalent in individuals with prosocial personalities, good health, available time, trust, and social connections. Ackerman (2019) found that of the big five personality traits extraversion was related to formal, online *and* informal volunteering, but that agreeableness was the trait most associated with informal volunteering. Time constraints, networks, and location were also found to shape whether predispositions translate into action. Nencini et al, (2016) found that volunteers' social roles or identities play a more central role in formal volunteering than the volunteering activities themselves (Nencini et al., 2016, p. 223) Identity potentially plays a role in informal settings as well, if the informal volunteering activity is based on a decision to commit, rather than a spontaneous step in to help. A volunteer does not need to join an organisation to be seen as, or see themselves as, a mentor or a caring neighbour.

The importance of community and connection with others was a consistent theme that emerged in the interviews with informal volunteers, *I volunteer because it builds community*, for others it was the *sense of connection,* and *companionship* and *socialising with people* and *be part of something.* Other interviewees talked about what they got from volunteering, for one it was *intrinsic reward,* for another, a *sense of purpose, for* others it was about helping and obligation*, I want to help* and *seems like the right thing to do.* Our experts also thought helping others was a strong motivating force, *you're helping someone else. So, and it could just be that you, it might be a cause, but it's more just that you're feeling better about yourself because you can see that someone else needs help.*

Our expert interviewees also identified the need for human connection and community emphasising their role as powerful sources of motivation, *I think they gain a sense of connection with their own community, a strengthened sense of their own connection. I think ideally also they get some recognition for what the role they play in their own community, and so in that sense, I think that's quite powerful for people.* Another identified the importance of belonging, *I think volunteering is just one of the most profoundly human things we can do to connect with others and find our place in the world* and *a sense of making your place friendly, a welcoming place.* Another identified the importance of buy-in, *I think when you get a community where it's the people in the place that actually do the thing, then there's a lot more buy-in and satisfaction.*

The motivation to volunteer informally is further complicated by people not necessarily being focussed on the impulse, especially for one off acts or routine contributions to neighbours or neighbourhoods. Højgaard (2022), posits that there has been an overemphasis on motivation to volunteer in formal settings with "fluid forms of volunteering" neglected. Motivations in relation to informal volunteering have been less explored, with evidence emerging in investigations of person-to-person helping during the pandemic leading to conclusions about altruistic and social motivations (Cnaan et al., 2025).

The six motivations[2] outlined in the volunteer functions inventory (Clary et al., 1998), which have formed the basis of much of the volunteering motivation research for nearly 30 years, have not been fully explored in informal settings, in part because some of these will not fit the profile of informal volunteer activity.

Survey respondents were asked to contribute their thoughts on what might make it easier for them to become involved in informal volunteer activities. They were offered a range of options from which make a selection, as well as a free response option. Responses are shown in Table 9 (over page).

There were nine respondents who offered comments in the "other" section. Some respondents identified that there was no barrier to volunteering but other environmental factors were influencing their choices, *Nil - I have been a volunteer for 16 years and am now stepping down from all my volunteer roles.* Another respondent did not see barriers as an impediment to volunteering*, N*othing, *I would jump in anyway.* For others, family and work commitments were perceived as barriers, *If they were family orientated events that I can volunteer and bring the family along, that would help,* and *able to support from home (my professional skills can be done remotely),* for another it was the administrative burden*, Finding the balance between looking out for volunteers and not expecting them to engage in too much paperwork / workshops and similar.* Age was also perceived as a barrier of sorts, by one participant, *Having reached the age of 80 I have reluctantly been encouraged to hangup my shears.*

[2] Values (expressing or acting on beliefs/values); Understanding (learning, gain knowledge, exercise skills); Enhancement (boosting self-esteem, feeling positive); Career (gaining experience, build resume); Social (strengthen social ties, make friends); Protective (reduce negative feelings, coping)

Table 9: Survey responses on making informal volunteering easier

What, if anything, would make it easier for you to be more involved in informal volunteering in the future? (select all that apply)	Count	%
Health improvement	14	17%
More money / personal funds	19	23%
Stopped working / shorter working hours	31	37%
More spare time (not previously mentioned)	37	45%
Fewer other commitments	39	47%
Need children to grow up	11	13%
If someone I knew were involved	14	17%
If I were asked / approached	25	30%
More information / knew what was going on	15	18%
More convenient location / closer to home	18	22%
More convenient timings	10	12%
Driving license / transport	3	4%
Other	9t	11%

One of our experts observed: *I think a lot of people want to make the world a better place in some way* but *don't know how or where to do that. A barrier, whether it's to informal volunteering or formal volunteering, is not knowing where to put that good intention.* Another identified time availability and long-term commitment as barriers, *a lot of people think volunteering is going on the committee, putting your hand up to do something, means you're committed and I don't have time for that.* Also, *opportunities for people aren't flexible, they're not tangible, I think that is a big barrier as well.*

The expert interviewees noted that contemporary living pressures can reduce people's capacity and opportunity to help others, *People have to work. You know, people have to have two jobs to pay for the mortgage and pay for everything. And there's less time. So, there's less time to volunteer.* Another observed*, it's time, you know, it's flexibility as well.*

What stops people from volunteering informally, however, is not prevalent in the literature. Much of the literature is focussed on barriers to formal volunteering with two perspectives being noticed: identification of barriers to enable organisations to facilitate recruitment of more volunteers (Sveen, et al., 2024; Warburton et al, 2018) and identification of barriers which exclude participants (e.g., Lamping et al., 2024; Yanay-Ventura, 2019).

Understanding the barriers is helpful but informal volunteering is a complex issue with a lot of interconnected parts and addressing one issue, such as barriers, will not necessarily lead to the desired outcome of more informal volunteers. If people do not know how to connect to community, they are less likely to know about opportunities to volunteer informally. Data was collected from survey participants in relation to their connection to community. As discussed previously, the low response rate did not allow statistical interpretation of this data (see Appendix 2).

Places, practices, and platforms that enable informal volunteering

With the release of the UN/ILO report (Barford et al., 2026), a renewed focus on "organised" and what we have termed "organisation adjacent" informal volunteering has emerged (see page 40). The literature on informal volunteering has long recognised the importance of the types of volunteering which fall into the "organised" category, but the enablers have not been visible or explored in the same way as the enablers of formal volunteer activity.

The literature illustrates that there are some common factors which can be identified as enablers. One of these is from the health literature which uses the term "community anchor organisations" to refer to community centres, faith organisations, libraries, neighbourhood hubs, neighbourhood centres, faith and cultural venues, sports clubs, and schools, which serve as nodes where connections can be made and relationships formed, and information, and resources converge (e.g., Wojciechowska & Topolska, 2021). Organisations accumulate and can assist in mobilising people and creating environments which support volunteering. The report argues that local anchors often function as trusted intermediaries through which information flows and collective action is coordinated. The types of activities such anchor organisations can offer include dissemination of information about opportunities and activities, focal point for gatherings/meetings, and for storage of equipment or tools. Umbrella organisations can also operate with advice and support for groups who are not yet "formal", but whose activities align with the goals of the informal group.

In the UK research looking into youth volunteering has identified that "organisations aren't responding fast enough to what young people need and want. And in response, young people are finding other ways of giving their time, in the ways that they want: informal, flexible, creative, fun, social and embedded in their local communities." (Afterthought, 2026 p. 1). This notion of the need for fun in volunteering was reinforced by one of the experts referring to volunteering generally: *I'm a big advocate for volunteering has to be fun. I mean, you know, as soon as you take the fun out of it, it's just a job, isn't it?* The indications are that opportunities to engage which allow young people to discover or create informal and self-directed volunteering, and to broaden understanding and awareness of volunteering and its impact are required.

The evidence in the literature is that informal volunteering needs different infrastructure to promote participation. Grandi et al. (2019) identify these as "enabling environments, operational structures, and implementation capacities" (p. 39), referring to the need to navigate complexities, retain flexibility, and manage contradictions. They advise:

> "Areas with perhaps the greatest potential include applying flexible volunteering infrastructure models to create an enabling environment; addressing the contradictions inherent in volunteering infrastructure; tapping into innovation and digital infrastructure while also continuing to leverage established practices and "traditional" volunteers; fostering collaborative partnerships with fair contributions by each party; and catering to the different needs of diverse groups of volunteers." (p. 39/40).

Horsham et al. (2024, p. 51) identify that "policy should start with a strategy for building social cohesion within specific communities in ways that increase volunteer engagement and its benefits, and that the strategies must consider both the intragroup and intergroup implications of these interventions.".

United Nations Volunteers (2018, p. 12) 'local volunteerism, particularly when volunteer participation is informal, should not be romanticized. To be most effective, volunteers often require support from wider, more formalized structures. The self-organization of local volunteering is rooted in community power dynamics and politics, meaning that it may exclude some vulnerable groups."

The report published in 2026 by the United Nations on informal volunteering (Barford et al., 2026) made a clear distinction within informal volunteering between direct informal volunteering and organization-based informal volunteering, defining the latter as "when the activity is intermediated by any form of organization (whether formal or informal). This last offers the possibility for further distinction between the collective or group nature of much informal volunteering as identified in 2010 by Ellis-Paine et al. as "collective volunteering" (p. 19):

> *They lack a constitution or legal entity (as such they are a group of individuals rather than an organisation) and they lack clarity about who is and is not a member – people may turn up and join in on a very ad hoc basis. Unlike organisations, they have a tendency to fade away when the original purpose has been achieved (or failure admitted). Unorganised groups of this kind may play a major role in social welfare (Billis, 1993) but are perhaps more often associated with campaigning and self-help activities yet they clearly play an important role in volunteering.*

Barford et al.'s report focuses on direct informal volunteer work (p. 15).

Promotion of informal activities via social media, and other platforms, are also part of the support that formal organisations can provide. These, however, are often part of the self-organising taken on by individuals who seek to promote informal activity. Examples include "buy nothing" groups in neighbourhoods. Organisations, including local government, for example, also utilise digital platforms to promote informal volunteering, with examples including use of "snap send solve" which is an app to enable community members to report hazards to the local government.

One of the expert interviewees thinks that social media may have lost its impact as a platform for attracting volunteers, *I think static posts don't really work that well. I don't think. there is a lot of volunteering stuff coming through on social media, but I think it's just white noise now to people, really. I think you really have to do something quite different.* This expert thought that tactical recruitment, where you grow the tribe rather than trying to recruit volunteers would attract people who wanted to belong. Spark challenges were another initiative recommended by this expert. Spark challenges are about making sure that you have everything you need to attract the right people. Is the email address working? If you provide a phone number is there someone who will answer the calls? Does the social media promotion have relevant contact details, so that interested people cannot make contact if they want to.

Recent emerging topics: Wellbeing and risks

The literature identified several emerging issues which were also present in our data. Survey respondents referred to the social connection of volunteering, but some also referred to stepping back as they reached a level of over commitment to volunteer activities. There is discussion about the blurred boundaries between informal volunteering and informal caring

(e.g., Rodwell, et al., 2024), as well as the limits caring responsibilities put on volunteers (Andersen et al., 2022; Agotnes, et al., 2023).

Meta-analytic and longitudinal evidence links prosocial behaviour, including both formal and informal volunteering, with improved wellbeing and life satisfaction (Nichol et al., 2024). While wellbeing and volunteering have been found to be associated (Russell et al., 2019) there is less clarity about the relationship between wellbeing and informal volunteering, although Walker et al. (2022, p. 188) found that "mental well-being was significantly related to informal volunteering". Among older adults, volunteering is often associated with reduced loneliness and better quality of life (Akhter-Khan et al., 2023; Jiang et al., 2021). Volunteering effects on wellbeing appear stronger at higher intensities or when participating in multiple informal activities, with mixed findings on whether formal or informal modes confer greater benefits (Hui et al., 2020; Tanskanen et al., 2024).

Risks, on the other hand, include over-commitment, burnout, and boundary issues particularly where informal help becomes ongoing care without formal or organisational supports or recognition (Tanskanen et al., 2024). Despite this, Appau et al. (2019, p. 1127) found that "people who engage in informal volunteering [self] report higher wellbeing than those who engage in formal volunteering" and posit that this might in part be to do with psychological distance from formal organisations being greater than for informal volunteering.

Risks considered in recent literature include compassion fatigue, where personal self-care is required to manage the emotional aspects of volunteering in care focussed roles (Canas-Lerm, et al., 2022). A lot of the focus on burnout in volunteering is in formal roles associated with firefighting or palliative care (e.g. Dias et al., 2023; Huynh et al., 2013), and Holmes et al., (2026) have identified burnout in rural communities where there are fewer people to take on many of the roles fulfilled by volunteers. In formal volunteering there are opportunities for organisations to manage their volunteers, mitigate risks and provide support. The risks are also potentially the same for informal volunteering, especially where the activity is caring, or where the population is sparse and no other people are available to step in and take over. In informal volunteering there is no organisational oversight to mitigate these risks.

Diverse communities and volunteering

As can be seen from the profile of respondents (see p. 22), the survey did not reach a diverse range of people and our interviewees, while somewhat diverse, were limited in number. One expert, however, observed:

> *In some cultures, [informal volunteering]'s very... much more ingrained … that they help people and they wouldn't see that [helping]as volunteering. They just see that as part of their duty to the community and their duty to help other people and support people in their community, which I suppose is what I do too. But in other cultures, they wouldn't call it volunteering. That's part of being part of that community.*

Volunteering WA and the other volunteering peak bodies are very conscious of our diverse communities, and the literature, including grey literature, offers some insights.

Volunteering Victoria (2023, p. 6) in its CALD snapshot highlighted a need for recognition of "informal and culturally embedded" volunteering while at the same time illustrating that

volunteering "is not just a task or activity, but a powerful expression of identity, belonging and shared responsibility" (p. 3).

Al Adawy (2023) produced a report for Volunteering Australia on volunteering by multicultural communities which highlighted the scarcity of data and confirmed that much of the activity which might be considered informal volunteering is "invisibilised". Al Adawy's report explores the nuances of volunteering across cultures and identifies important perspectives on informal volunteering from different communities across Australia.

Dean (2022), in the academic literature, similarly referring to diverse communities, and to faith-based, cultural and community norms, argues that there may be a sense of obligation in some forms of informal volunteering, especially in settings where there are "strong norms of reciprocity and mutual assistance" and where non-participation may adversely impact status and/or friendships. Tanskanen et al. (2024, p. 1646) refer to volunteering as "unpaid activity directed towards parties with whom the actor does not have familial or friendship obligations (i.e. close personal relationships)", thus excluding friends from informal volunteering, something which is less explicit elsewhere.

There is recognition that "limited knowledge about volunteering is a major barrier against inclusion by CALD communities" with formal volunteering not being a familiar concept (Jedwab, 2023, p.3). A report produced for Centre for Volunteering (2022, p. 11), focussed on New South Wales, identified that some assumptions about multicultural volunteer involvement may be a barrier to formal volunteering for members of these communities. Robinson (2006) identified varied understandings of formal volunteering based on data collected from migrants from twenty countries[3] for the development of a handbook for volunteer managers. The focus of these publications was on formal volunteering but many of the nuances are relevant to this study.

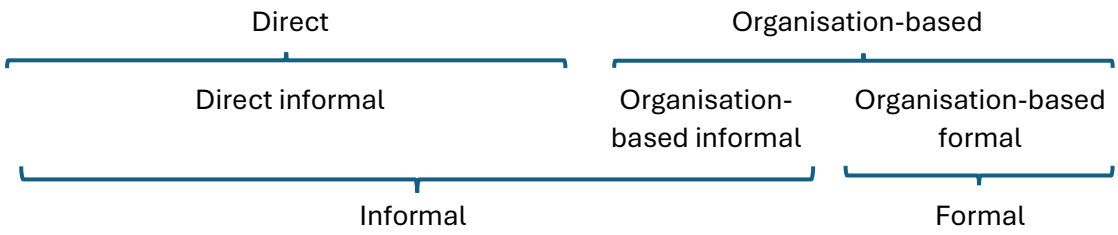
[3]"The countries featured were selected by taking into account Australian Bureau of Statistics and the Government of Western Australia's Office of Multicultural Interest information on Australia's highest ranking Non-English Speaking Background source countries for migrants, humanitarian entrants and international students." (Robinson, 2006, p. 25).

Our Thinking – The Volunteering Continuum

Across the research we developed an emerging understanding of volunteering not as a dichotomous binary of formal and informal, but a continuum where volunteer activities vary across the degree of organisation, and across the level of commitment required (largely in terms of time or regularity). This understanding is consistent with the changed thinking in the United Nations report (Barford et al., 2026), however we frame it slightly differently.

Barford et al. frame informal volunteering as follows:

Figure 3: ILO &United Nations Definitions of Volunteering

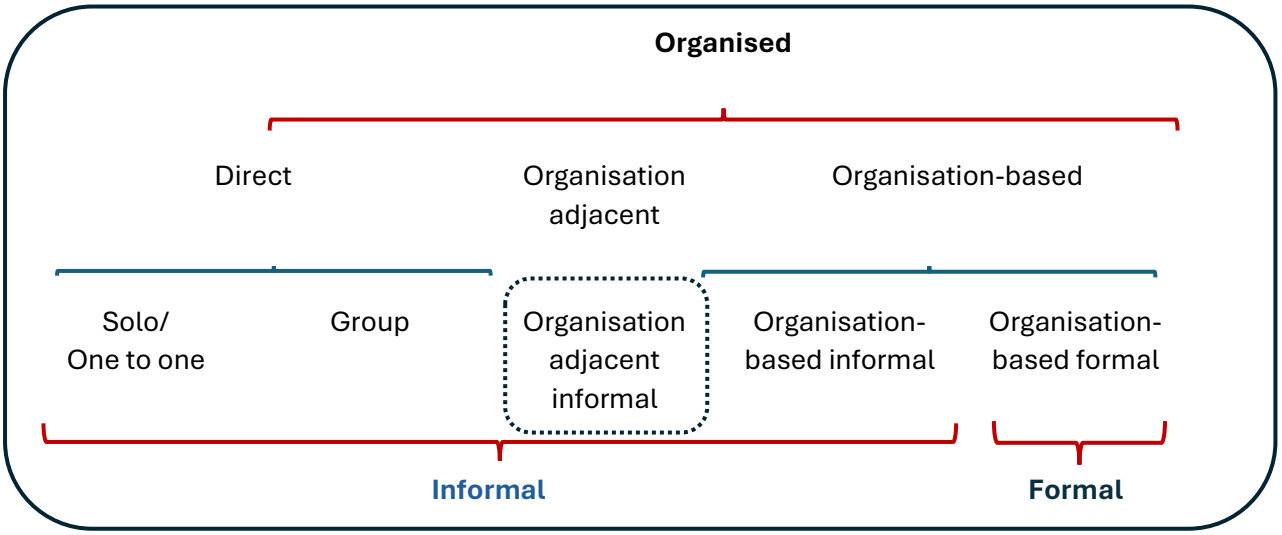


[Derived from: Barford et al., 2026, p. 15, Creative Commons Licence 4.0]

Woolvin and Hardill (2013, Figure 1 p. 283) framed the spectrum as four overlapping circles which started with individual help – one to one (helping a friend, a neighbour, a relative) without involving an organisation, progressed to group (participating in a protest group, sharing the babysitting, taking children to school) without involving an organisation, then to community action social participation (participating in a community centre, resident committee, community groups) involving an organisation of some kind to enable this; and finally to formal, regular commitment to voluntary work within an organisation.

Our thinking is that there is greater variation along the continuum, and that there are currently five sections along the continuum: One-to-one; Group, Organisation adjacent, Organisation-based informal, and Organisation based formal volunteering. This represents the incorporation of 'group' from Woolvin and Hardill (2013), and our 'organisation adjacent' categories of volunteering to the ILO/UN framework.

Figure 4: Expanded continuum of volunteering



This revised continuum recognises:

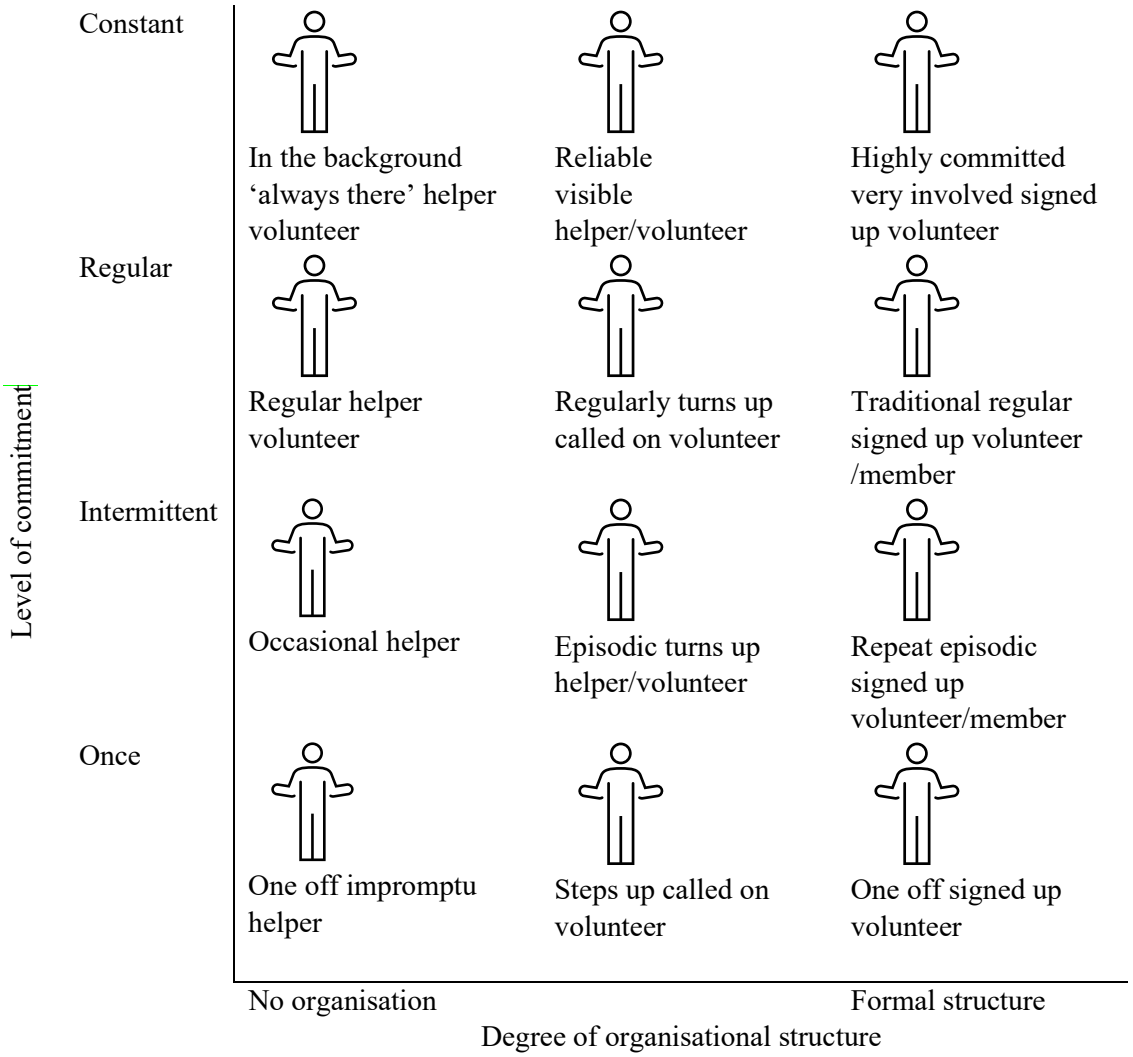
- **One to one informal volunteering**: the one-to-one nature of much informal helping or caring, and the one to community nature of actions such as removing litter from the beach.
- **Group informal volunteering**: the group nature of many community arrangements such as shared childcare, without involving an organisation, which still requires some co-ordination and connection between members of the group or community.
- **Organisation adjacent informal volunteering**: activities which arise when an organisation such as a library or community centre facilitates opportunities or provides a place or a platform for connection without being involved in any of the activities directly
- **Organisation-based informal volunteering**: which is associated with the activities of that organisation but does not require membership or commitment; and
- **Organisation-based formal volunteering**: the regular or episodic commitment of signing up to an organisation to volunteer through that organisation – formal volunteering.

Across the four types after one-to-one informal, volunteering is increasingly organised, culminating in the formal organisation-based volunteering.

Another recurring issue is the level of commitment or time, and Figure 5 below depicts examples of volunteers at the intersection of the level of commitment and the level of organisation/formality. There are a number of considerations for organisations which arise from understanding the level of commitment and the level of structure.

Where activities are considered to be part of membership or as signed up volunteers then a range of requirements such as insurance are often clearly part of the "signing up" process. Where activities are associated with an organisation, but not part of any formal signing up process, it is necessary to be clear about things like insurance, and, for example, representing – or not representing – the organisation. The reasons for formal volunteering and for incorporated organisations are associated with the frameworks and to some degree the protections these formalities offer. Organisations which are involved in organising or facilitating informal volunteer activities will need clarity about the boundaries in terms of frameworks, policies and formalities.

Figure 5: Commitment and formality in volunteering



Perhaps a more important consideration, however, emerged from the interviews, both with volunteers and with experts. This was a concern expressed by the volunteers in terms of being somewhat reluctant to *accept it as being a type of volunteering*, *putting a name on it feels like it takes away from the value of it* and for one volunteer *I prefer to call it neighbouring* when referring to neighbourhood helping activities. One of the experts referred to the need for informal volunteering to be organic, and to come from the community, and that it could not be forced. A contrast to this is the emerging understanding in the literature of the need for places for people to connect in order to get to know each other, find common ground and seek to help or support each other.

Expert opinion included concerns about

> *formal volunteering organisations want to bring all the formality to the thing. And so, then they can kill the goose that laid the golden egg in a sense. And that's the real danger. But if volunteering involving organisations can do it in a listening way and a generous way that actually says, we want to learn from this community, not just impose on them.*

Consistent with the views about diverse communities there was a view that informal volunteering needs to be supported, but that care needs to be taken:

> …*particularly in our sort of Western context, … not with a grand gesture of support, but rather, oh, you know, let's listen, let's understand those communities where informal volunteering is happening and hear from them what they want to do and how they want to do it.*

The other opinion which was expressed by experts relates to formal organisations over-stepping when informal volunteering is viewed as a pathway to formal volunteering. One observation was: *There's a danger that they could become viewed as possibly as a perhaps, who knows, as a like a channel, whatever, stepping stone into becoming every week and doing this job, this role every week* with another commenting: *you've got to be careful. It's a very fine line between somebody that wants to just, you know, go and pick up some litter occasionally and then they're suddenly part of the, you know, keep our town beautiful.* This last comment could be thought about in the context of 'potentials', a term used by Lockstone-Binney et al. (2022) to consider identifying potential volunteers through their helping behaviours. One outcome for organisations if they are not careful is deterring individuals from their informal volunteering or helping, for fear that they may get drawn into something for which they don't necessarily have time.

Lee and Brudney (2012, p. 174) suggested that their findings indicated "targeting people who already volunteer informally will be a more cost-effective strategy for nonprofit organizations than recruiting people at random." As Lockstone-Binney et al. (p. 790) conclude that potential volunteers [potentials] "have several attitudes, beliefs and greater social resources that separate them from other non-volunteers including association membership, more charitable attitudes and a greater sense of capability," consistent with the notion of prosociality. They also observe, however, that recruiting from among informal volunteers may not be inclusive as "barriers to volunteering are distinctly different between non-volunteers and potentials, and between potentials and volunteers". Organisations will need to be cautious and only target informal volunteers, as there are many people who may be interested and willing to volunteer, but who are not connected to a community.

All these considerations mean that volunteer involving organisations will need to set clear goals and boundaries associated with what they will or won't offer, what is in their playbook, and what is beyond their reach or scope. In the model we have presented the informal volunteering which is organisation-based, and the creation of organisation adjacent mechanisms to encourage informal volunteering illustrate the nuanced differences which will need to be recognised in determining organisational priorities.

The Research Questions

Three research questions were posited at the outset of this research. These are now considered in light of what has emerged from this study.

Nature and extent of informal and formal volunteering in a local community

There are several considerations in relation to determining the nature and extent of informal volunteering which emerged from this research. It is evident in the data, and in the literature, that understandings of informal and formal volunteering vary, and that these variations affect conceptualisation as well as measurement. There is evidence in the recent literature, of a growing understanding that formal and informal volunteering is not a binary, and that the spectrum of activities which could be classified as volunteering range from one off impulse actions towards helping another or helping the community all the way through to the regular organised contribution of a volunteer or volunteers through a legally constituted organisation. The changing nature of volunteering and of definitions, concepts and understandings is confirmed by the United Nations report which now distinguishes between direct informal and organisation based informal volunteering (Barford et al., 2026) and the evidence presented by Oppenheimer et al. (2026) showing the evolution of understanding to date.

Differing community understandings of what activities constitute volunteering also make determining the nature of informal volunteering difficult to ascertain. Faith-based, culture-based or kin-based activities which might be viewed as an obligation rather than voluntary action may not be seen by some as voluntary, and as has been identified by a range of researchers, this can lead to undercounting, and undervaluing, these activities. The WA State of Volunteering data collection process does ask respondents to "include seasonal, spontaneous, one-off or online" activities even if these are not thought of as volunteering (Volunteering WA, 2023, p. 68) – clear recognition of the challenges of measuring these activities.

Official statistics on the nature and extent of informal and formal volunteering come from a range of sources. Comparison is difficult due to the different questions posed to respondents, but there is a consistent indication that informal volunteering outweighs formal volunteering. See Table 10 (over page).

Different communities include differing profiles of the level of formal and informal volunteering with factors such as the need for services, what services are already provided, and the profile of the community itself. Rural communities, for example, rely on volunteers to provide many services which are provided by paid workers in metropolitan areas.

The spectrum of informal volunteering activities ranges from a one-off one-to-one impromptu act to an organisation adjacent helping hand without registering for formal volunteer involvement. Examples from participants and from the literature varied from personal service and care activities to community focussed activities in groups (see p. 29). Faith based communities, school-based communities, towns or municipalities all provide a place where people come together, meet one another and help out when help is needed. In diverse local contexts, particularly across multicultural settings like Western Australia,

modern frameworks such as the *National Strategy for Volunteering* reframe volunteering as role-based, fluid, and multidimensional.

Table 10: Official statistics on the nature and extent of formal and informal volunteering

	2025 General Social Survey (ABS)	A Snapshot of Volunteering in Australia (VA, 2023)	State of Volunteering Report WA 2023 (VWA, 2023)
Combined % of population formal and informal vol		64.3%.	65.1%
Combined volunteering hours (formal and informal)	618 million hours	3.2 billion hours	398.7 million hours
Total formal and informal volunteers		14.1 million people	750,00000 people
Informal volunteering hours in last 12 months		average hours per informal volunteer only	average hours per informal volunteer only
Formal volunteering hours in last 12 months	618 million hours (26% increase from 2020)	average hours per formal volunteer only	average hours per formal volunteer only
Informal volunteering	30% of Australians	42.7%	42.3%
Formal volunteering	23% of Australians	31.8%	32.2%

Neighbour to neighbour relations in a local community. and the level and type of informal volunteering

Informal volunteering relies on individual and community-led problem-solving without organisational oversight. This includes providing emotional care, running errands for vulnerable individuals, or participating in local "mutual aid" initiatives during a crisis.

Volunteering is not confined to in-person presence. While services associated with emergency relief, community services, aged care and wildlife care often require office support and field work volunteering, there are also opportunities which are part of the virtual volunteering suite of activities. These include online and telephone-based activities, and at times are based on individuals being connected up by need and willingness, and not by membership to an organisational system.

Traditional definitions of "formal volunteering" are often absent in CALD frameworks. For example, Volunteering WA emphasises that multicultural communities heavily practice spontaneous, faith-based hospitality, such as the Sikh tradition of community kitchen food relief. Many agencies now use the tools such as the *Volunteer West Culturally Inclusive*

Volunteer Toolkit (Luguetti & Giglia, 2023; Volunteer West, 2022) to ensure recruitment pathways are culturally appropriate.

It is difficult to ascertain the link between neighbour-to-neighbour relations in a local community and the level and type of informal volunteering due to the definitional and conceptual inconsistencies which influence measurement.

One of the experts interviewed for this project observed *it's more a form of neighbourliness* talking about noticing things in the neighbourhood and contributing. The evidence in the literature suggests that to some degree neighbour to neighbour relations are nuanced and depend on the community itself.

Informal volunteering's potential relationship with formal volunteering activities and volunteer involving organisations and the policy implications

The United Nations revised conceptualisation of informal volunteering as including organised informal volunteering (Barford et al., 2026) fits with our understanding of the spectrum of volunteering as being a continuum rather than a dichotomous concept, but we have also identified that the organised volunteering can be organisation adjacent and facilitated by more formal volunteer involving organisations. This facilitation can take on a number of forms including the provision of a platform or place for people to gather or come together with shared goals or interests, or to find social connection.

The literature identified the role of public places such as libraries or schools to connect people and to provide opportunities for momentum for informal volunteering. Social media and other platforms have already been used to "organise" informal volunteers and so activities such as beach clean ups or sharing of information, or, for example, buy nothing exchanges. Volunteer involving organisations can facilitate such activities but will need to consider policy frameworks to provide clarity, for example, about insurance. There was, however, a risk identified in the data about formalising informal volunteering which might take away from its organic nature, and which is consistent with the warning from Høgenhaven about the dangers of applying frameworks developed for formal volunteering to informal activities.

Implications

What this means for Chorus

This pilot research is consistent with Chorus' developing interest in moving beyond a model based predominantly on recruiting and managing formal volunteers towards a broader role in enabling community contribution. A focus on informal volunteering does not replace formal volunteering or funded service delivery. It adds the possibility of an organisation-adjacent role in which Chorus helps create the conditions for people to connect with each other and contribute to communities without necessarily becoming registered volunteers.

Understanding the complex, dynamic and evolving nature of informal volunteering is important for any volunteer involving organisation. This informal activity can occur between individuals, through self-organised groups, alongside an organisation (organisation-adjacent), or through an organisation without necessarily becoming a formal volunteer role. Community contribution should therefore be understood as a form of community capability that needs to be nurtured, developed and facilitated. The aim should be to foster relationships, provide support and enable community-led problem-solving, rather than seeking to direct, control or formalise informal volunteering activities.

Within this context, Chorus Locals have the potential to act as community anchors. Where they are accessible, welcoming and connected to their local communities, they can provide places, platforms, information and introductions that allow relationships and locally owned activities to develop. This requires trust to be built over time rather than assumed. An important starting point is therefore listening to what people already do, how they describe their contribution, what support they would find useful and what activities they would prefer to retain, before introducing new opportunities, structures or systems.

It is important to provide low-threshold and flexible ways for people to participate. Visible, occasional or short-term opportunities may be more suitable for people who prefer not to commit to a regular or longer-term role. This research indicates that participation can be influenced by time, employment, and other commitments such as caring responsibilities, location, access to information or how someone is approached. Providing different ways to participate can therefore enable people to contribute in ways that can accommodate their circumstances.

Individuals may understand what they do as helping, neighbouring, caring, or participating in their community. Their contribution can be recognised without requiring them to view themselves as a volunteer. Informal activity should not be viewed primarily as a recruitment pathway into formal volunteering. Some people may move between informal and formal participation, but others may wish to remain as occasional or infrequent contributors. Pressure to take on an ongoing role may undermine what attracted them to participate in the first place.

Chorus has an opportunity to support informal community activity through access to space, introductions, communication, equipment, information, resources or expertise. Wherever possible, however, ownership of the activity should remain with local community members. This distinction becomes particularly important when informal activity occurs alongside or through Chorus. In these circumstances there may be uncertainty about insurance,

representation, responsibility, privacy or safeguarding. Clear boundaries are therefore needed so that people understand when they are acting independently and when their involvement requires formal organisational processes.

Boundaries are also important in relation to service delivery. Informal community contribution can sit alongside formal responses, but it should not conceal gaps in those services or become a substitute for them. This is particularly important where there is sustained caring responsibility, dependency or complex needs.

Deliberate attention needs to be paid to inclusion. Informal networks can create opportunities for people who experience barriers to formal volunteering, but they are not automatically inclusive. Existing friendship, family or community networks can make participation easier for some, while making it difficult for people who are less connected. Chorus should therefore look beyond its existing networks to recognise community contribution that is already occurring, rather than working on the assumption that inclusion means bringing more people into Chorus-led activities.

Finally, learning, measurement and evaluation should remain proportionate to the nature of the informal contribution. Evidence can focus on relationships, participation, locally initiated activity and community agency without requiring every act of contribution to be recorded. The central question for Chorus is not simply *how can we increase informal volunteering, but rather,* when should Chorus step back and leave well alone, when should it enable, when should it facilitate, when should it formalise, and when should it refer the need to another service?

What this means for informal volunteering

Informal volunteering is a diverse, multi-faceted form of community contribution. It cannot be defined solely by the absence of an organisation, because organisations and informal groups may provide places, platforms, connections or coordination without creating a formal volunteer role. Rather than viewing volunteering through a binary lens, it is more helpful to think of formal and informal volunteering existing on a continuum that includes one-to-one informal activity, group-based informal activity, organisation-adjacent informal activity, organisation-based informal volunteering and organisation-based formal volunteering. The distinction is shaped by the degree of organisational mediation and formality involved, with the level of commitment as a related but separate consideration.

Commitment itself does not determine whether an activity is formal or informal. Informal help can be sustained, regular and involve considerable commitment, just as formal volunteering can be episodic or occur only once. People do not necessarily understand their activities through the language of volunteering. They may describe what they do as helping, neighbouring, support, care or community participation, and some may actively resist being described as volunteers. In this sense, the nature of the contribution is more important than the label attached to it.

Organisational involvement does not necessarily need to make an activity formal. An organisation might provide a place to meet, a platform, an introduction or an opportunity while leaving the activity flexible and largely directed by those involved. This suggests that the boundary between formal and informal volunteering does not simply lie in whether an

organisation is present, but in the extent to which it structures, controls or formalises the activity.

The value of informal contribution is also relational as well as practical. Alongside providing assistance or achieving a particular outcome, it can create connection, belonging, trust and recognition and contribute to broader community capacity. Its flexibility allows people to contribute according to their available time, health, interests, resources and other responsibilities. Autonomy is therefore an important part of its value.

Formal and informal participation may complement each other, and individuals may move between them at different times. However, neither should be understood as a pathway to the other. People should be able to remain as an occasional or informal contributor without an expectation that their involvement will eventually develop into a formal volunteer role. Attempts to convert informal participation into formal volunteering may inadvertently remove some of the flexibility and autonomy that make informal contribution attractive.

Informal volunteering may increase opportunities for participation, particularly by different cultures, however, informal networks are not automatically inclusive and can reproduce existing patterns of participation and exclusion.

Although informal volunteering may take place outside formal organisational structures, it does not occur without infrastructure. Relationships, community spaces, local connectors, informal groups, schools, libraries, cultural and faith settings and digital platforms can all create conditions in which people can engage with one another, develop relationships and take collective or individual action. Supporting informal contribution may therefore be less about creating volunteering opportunities and more about strengthening the conditions that enable people to socialise and connect.

There are also relational and organisational risks that require attention. Informal contribution may involve overcommitment, burnout, compassion fatigue, social obligation, exclusion, dependency or the blurring of caring roles. Where organisations are involved, even indirectly, questions can also arise about responsibility and appropriate boundaries. Recognising these risks does not mean that informal activity needs to become formalised, but it does mean that the limits of organisational and community responsibility need to be well understood.

Importantly, recognising informal volunteering should not result in its capture by organisations or formal systems. Attempts to register, monetise, convert or intensively monitor informal activity may change its meaning and discourage the very participation they are intended to recognise. Measurement therefore needs to be proportionate and focused on behaviour rather than relying solely on whether people identify themselves as volunteers. Stories, examples, behaviour-based prompts and light-touch mapping may make visible forms of contribution that conventional questions about "volunteering" fail to capture.

Overall, informal volunteering can be understood as a diverse range of locally embedded community contributions, rather than as a single category of activity. For Chorus, the opportunity lies in supporting the conditions in which these contributions can emerge and flourish, while remaining clear about the boundaries between independent community action, organisation-adjacent activity, formal volunteering and professional service delivery.

Future Research Directions

This pilot project has afforded a glimpse into the world of informal volunteering as it is connected to Chorus. There is scope for more detailed research on a number of fronts.

There is a need to undertake research which further explores the definitional complexity around informal volunteering. Over time it will be important to reconsider definitional boundaries and develop crosswalks among ‘informal volunteering’, informal helping’, ‘direct volunteering’, ‘mutual aid’, and ‘informal care’ to improve comparability. An important aspect of this acknowledgement is the need to co-produce evidence with First Nations partners, and with culturally and linguistically diverse communities to surface locally embedded practices otherwise obscured by mainstream definitions and understandings. Working alongside partners will enrich understanding and enhance community relationships.

As part of the increasing understanding, data collection approaches need to be developed in consultation with communities, and alternative mechanisms adopted. Low-burden diary and micro-prompt methodologies with embedded ethics will assist in capturing episodic and relational helping. Further, longer-term perspectives via longitudinal studies that disaggregate outcomes by intensity, duration, relational context, and life-course stage; identify wellbeing thresholds and risks will acknowledge the evolving nature of communities and volunteering.

Research is also needed to investigate and evaluate policy at both the community and organizational level for effects on participation, equity, safety, and outcomes. Grantmaking, insurance, regulation and community consultation all have an impact on community participation.

Future research on informal volunteering to build on this project will be required to better understand this important community contribution.

Chorus next steps (Dr Moira Watson)

Define Chorus' intended role

Before launching an initiative, Chorus should decide which forms of contribution it is seeking to support:

- one-to-one informal activity
- group informal activity
- organisation-adjacent activity
- organisation-based informal activity
- formal volunteering.

It should also define what it will not support and the circumstances requiring service referral.

Listen and map before designing

Map existing networks, spaces, communication channels, community groups, informal connectors and current patterns of neighbouring and mutual support. Consult people about what already occurs and what, if anything, they want from Chorus.

Test the Locals as organisation-adjacent infrastructure

Test whether selected Locals can add value by offering:

- welcoming space
- information
- introductions
- equipment or storage
- communication support
- connection to partners
- small enabling resources
- links to formal support when required.

The purpose should not be to create a new managed volunteer program.

Use low-threshold invitations

Test specific, flexible and time-bounded invitations. Make the duration, task, location and contact point clear. Do not imply that a one-off contribution creates an expectation of continuing involvement

Establish a boundary and escalation framework

Clarify:

- who owns the activity
- whether participants represent Chorus
- insurance coverage
- privacy and information handling
- safeguarding
- when registration is needed
- when formalisation is needed
- when a professional or statutory referral is required
- when Chorus should step back.

Learn without capturing

Assess whether the Local is helping relationships and activity emerge while avoiding unnecessary administration. Examine who is participating, who remains excluded, where Chorus adds value, and where its involvement creates bureaucracy or dependency.

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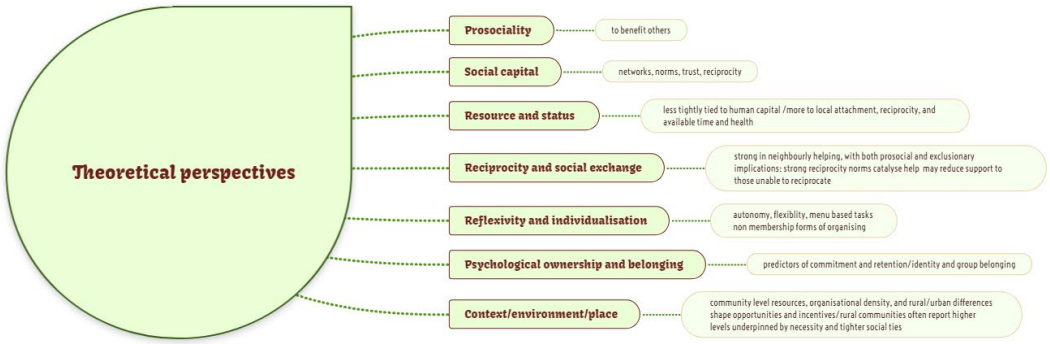
Appendix 1: A Sample of Theoretical Perspectives

Theoretical perspectives which emerged during the review of the literature come from across the myriad disciplinary perspectives included and reflect the cross-disciplinary nature of volunteering research. The summary here captures some of the key perspectives to illustrate the range of thinking applied to informal volunteering, although, is not comprehensive, detailed or exhaustive. The theories briefly mentioned here should be considered in light of the emerging discussion on "inequalities", which is elaborated on in the following.

Dean (2022) contends that informal volunteering has received less attention from researchers in part because of who participates. He suggests that informal volunteering should receive the same amount of attention and be valued in the same way as formal volunteering, but that it should not be considered using the same frameworks, arguing that to do so, would have the undesirable effect of contributing to the decline of community. The inequalities he notes, include that while informal volunteering is more prevalent in "disadvantaged" communities, this is likely to be because it is more accessible than its formalised counterparts. He also notes that rather than worrying about terminology researchers and policy makers should be paying attention to "the core work of inclusion, representation, and the politics of legitimacy." (p. 537).

In the same year, Hustinx et al. (2022) were also identifying the need for a broader perspective, referring to the predominant models of participation as the core of research to data. They call for scholars to take a critical view and to explore the "production/reproduction of inequality through volunteering" (p. 13). Lough (2021) had commenced a critique in the same vein, investigating the influences of power, institutions, traditions and constructions of volunteering, and arguing that research should seek to better understand informal volunteering and its role in communities.

Figure A1: Theoretical perspectives and informal volunteering



Prosociality frames informal volunteering as voluntary action to benefit others, linked to subjective wellbeing through mechanisms of purpose, relatedness, and positive affect (Hui et al., 2020; Lee, 2024; Nakamura et al., 2025; Paarlberg et al., 2022). Yang and Konrath (2023) observed that "people on average may not increase their prosocial behaviour in response to increasing social needs" (p. 1908) and in fact, may "reduce it slightly".

Social capital accounts emphasise networks, norms, and trust (Bleck et al., 2024; Potluka et al. 2025). Dense, reciprocal ties can foster and facilitate helping, but can also risk exclusion, and policies designed to promote and support formal volunteering may inadvertently "crowd out" informal helping behaviours (Einolf et al., 2016). Despite the evidence on social capital "there is still limited knowledge concerning how individuals' position, or embeddedness, in civil society correspond with the specific voluntary tasks they engage in." (Høgenhaven, 2025, p. 1346).

Resource and status theories distinguish correlates of formal versus informal engagement. Education and income consistently predict formal volunteering, whereas informal helping is less tightly tied to human capital and more to local attachment, reciprocity, and available time and health (Piatak et al., 2019; Potluka et al., 2025)..Life-stage, and integration into neighbourhoods and communities also align with these theories (e.g., Stewart et al., 2024). Reciprocity and social exchange operate strongly in neighbourly helping, with both prosocial and exclusionary implications: strong reciprocity norms can catalyse help but may reduce support to those unable to reciprocate (Ramaaekers et al., 2025).

Individualisation and the 'reflexive' volunteer thesis describe increasing demand for autonomy, flexible roles, and menu-based tasks, producing fluid, non-membership forms of organising that complicate conventional management and evaluation logics (Fechter & Schwittay, 2019; Guidi, 2022; Hojgaard, 2022; Hojgaard & Egholm, 2025).

Contextual (environmental/place) perspectives argue that community-level resources, organisational density, and rural/urban differences shape opportunities and incentives to help. Rural communities often report higher levels of informal volunteering, underpinned by necessity and tighter social ties (Paarlberg et al., 2022; Pearce et al., 2023). Psychological ownership and belonging within communities create a cycle of community wellbeing predicated on individual opportunities to engage with the community, and operation across the community in terms of place, identity and shared values (Lee, 2024; Russell et al., 2022)[4].

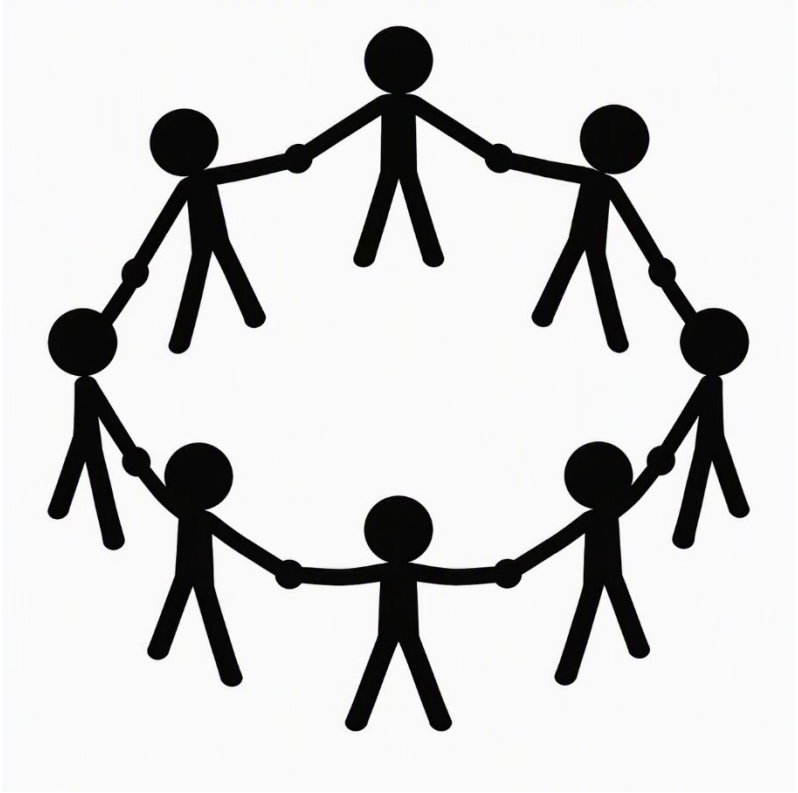
[4] While data was collected in relation to community connection in the survey, the limited response rate meant that no interpretation could be undertaken on that date. See Table A1 in the appendices.

Appendix 2: Survey Respondent Connection to Community

Data was collected from survey participants in relation to their connection to community. As discussed previously, the low response rate did not allow statistical interpretation of this data. Table A1 below, however, provides a view of the group of respondents. Responses were either neutral or strongly in agreement or disagreement, or the question was not answered – and the categories of agree or disagree were not used.

Table A1: Respondent connection to community

No.	Statement	Strongly Agree Count	Neutral Count	Strongly Disagree Count	No Response Count
1	I feel connected with my local community	16	20	1	46
2	I would feel comfortable approaching a community organisation if I wanted to	31	13	0	39
3	I would like to have more companionship/friendship/relationships	16	29	6	32
4	I am aware of the community organisations in my local area	13	16	8	46
5	I would like to help out more in my local community, but I don't know how	6	27	12	38
6	I would like to help out more in my local community, but I don't have the time	18	23	3	39
7	I am happy to contribute to my community, even if it doesn't directly benefit me	44	9	2	28
8	I contribute more to my community than I get back from it	11	27	10	35
9	The main role of the community sector is to help people who are most in need of support	30	10	0	43
10	The more time people have to be involved in community activities the stronger the community is	33	9	3	38
11	Community organisations are good at helping address problems that the government and private sector ignore	24	22	0	37
12	People who are better off have a responsibility to help those who are less well off	20	29	4	30
13	There is enough social and economic support in my community for people who speak languages	2	36	11	34
14	Overall, the world is a better place because of the work done by community organisations	41	5	4	33



Thank you to all the volunteers who generously gave their time to this research.