



The Emergency Management Sustainable Volunteering Blueprint Summary

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Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians across all the lands on which we live and work, and we pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging. We recognise that these lands and waters have always been places of teaching, research and learning.

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Introduction

“Our change in thinking has come from an understanding of where the national and international trends are going around sustainable volunteerism models and the emergence of new volunteerism groups and what makes them attractive. You look at that and go, ‘Okay, here’s what we’re up against’. Our traditional models will not survive in this area.” — Manager, Emergency Management Volunteering (McLennan, 2019)

The emergency management (EM) volunteering sector is ripe for change. An ageing but dedicated workforce is slowly declining in numbers, while the demand for their services is increasing. The number of informal volunteers who gather spontaneously when emergencies occur has increased, while those who wish to volunteer formally have decreased. This is challenging traditional notions of what EM volunteering is and does.

Successive Productivity Commission Reports on Government Services track these changes in formal volunteering:

- > State and Territory Emergency Services volunteering workforce decreased from 27,206 in 2009–2010 to 24,357 in 2023–2024.
- > Fire service organisations volunteering workforce decreased from 221, 848 in 2009–2010 to 189,041 in 2023–2024.

The majority of the services provided by emergency management organisations (EMOs) rely upon volunteer contributions. Although volunteers are part of the EM workforce, they are not paid employees. This places them in a unique position within the EM ecosystem, which cannot function effectively without them. However, due to a lack of standardised reporting, and patchy data and measurement, volunteer contributions lack visibility and are often underreported and undervalued.

The changing emergency management volunteering context

The broader context in which EMOs and their communities exist is rapidly changing due to a number of drivers and influences (Figure 1).

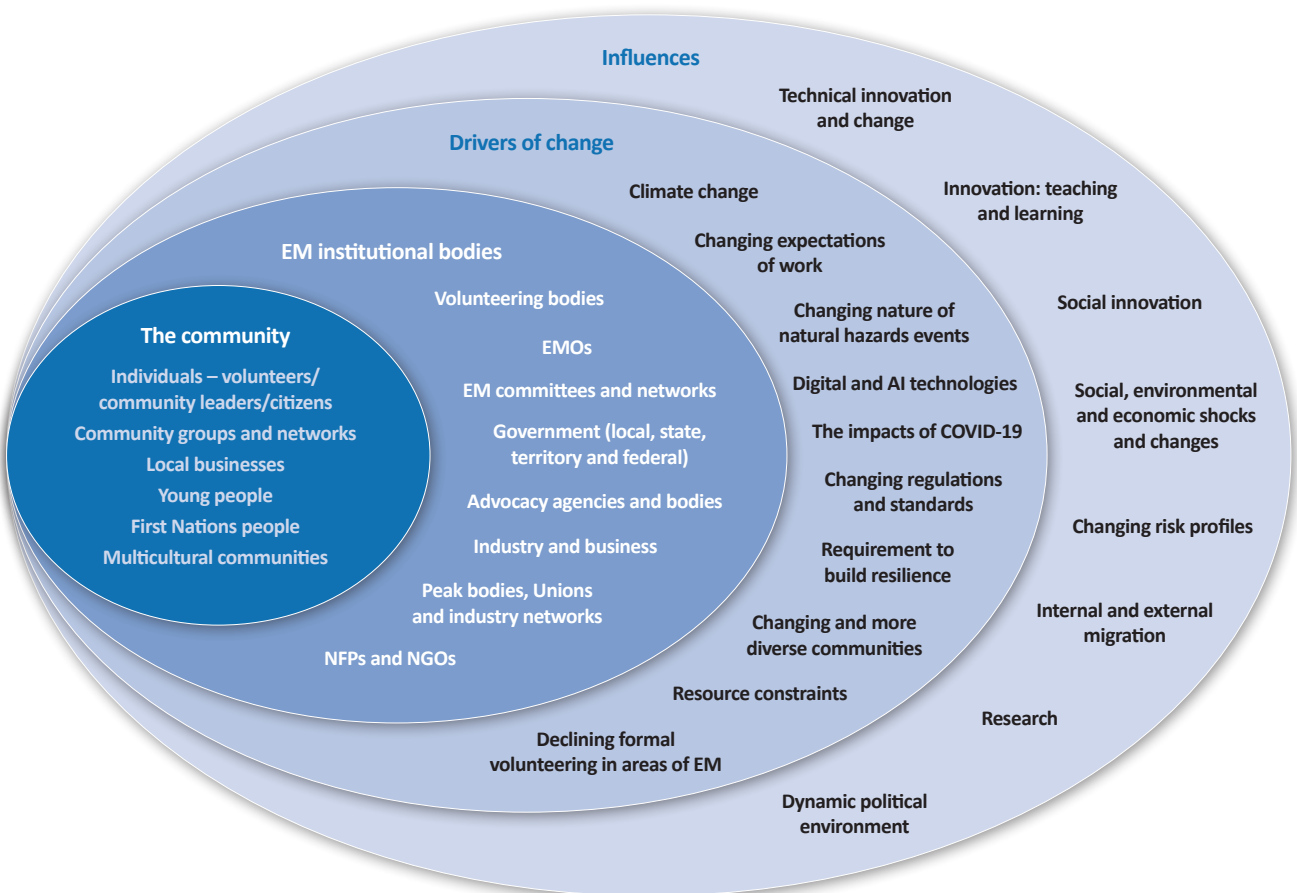


FIGURE 1: THE EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT VOLUNTEERING CONTEXT



These factors amplify long-standing issues, such as the administrative burden and cost to those who volunteer. They create compression points for communities and EMOs and present new challenges for EMOs, which include:

- > Securing the necessary investment to support transformation in an environment of constrained resources and increasing service demands.
- > Building on the emergence of new volunteering models – particularly in communities (e.g., digital volunteering, spontaneous and fluid volunteering) – and coordinating between them.
- > Navigating changing relationships and expectations as EMOs make the transition to working *with* communities on an ongoing basis rather than *for* them during emergencies.
- > Fostering innovation and the integration of new technologies and ways of working, particularly the application of systems-based approaches.
- > Understanding what the impacts of the changing context, composition and expectations of communities means for the future volunteering workforce.
- > Managing trauma and fatigue in impacted communities and the volunteering workforce.
- > Increased competition for volunteers and the need to enhance the volunteering experience and accommodate new ways of working.

These factors are also contributing to how risks are being conceived and managed by the EM sector, leading to an expansion of volunteering roles beyond response to longer-term recovery and resilience building. In locations experiencing repeated disasters, this has led to open and ongoing discussions about the lack of time to recover and the need to increase resilience.

The social contract between communities and the EM sector is also changing, influencing:

- > how people wish to volunteer
- > their ability to volunteer
- > their expectations of the organisations they volunteer with
- > the roles they are willing to undertake, and
- > the changing psychological contract volunteers wish to have with EMOs.

These changes are occurring as community roles and responsibilities increase, and capacity in EMOs is becoming stretched. They highlight the interdependent nature of EMOs and their communities, emphasising the need for EMOs to strengthen trust and build new relationships with their communities and volunteers.

Although existing strategies for attraction and retention have met with some success, the systemic nature of the solutions needed to address the above issues cannot be managed using a ‘predict- and-act’ approach. The following challenges were identified as hampering action:

- > A lack of strategic structure and cohesion with other national initiatives and strategies to enable effective national action(s).
- > Solutions are systemic in nature, resulting in action paralysis due to ‘overchoice’ and a need to build capability to manage complexity.
- > Solutions have tended to focus on symptoms rather than root causes, resulting in long-standing issues being left unaddressed.
- > A lack of collaboration and clarity of roles that volunteers undertake across the broader EM volunteering ecosystem and the prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery (PPRR) spectrum.
- > Patchy reporting and inconsistent collection of data on volunteers by EM sector, leading to a lack of a comprehensive national picture of volunteering and what volunteers do within the system.

The community are our volunteers, and our volunteers are our community.

Community contexts and composition are changing and EMOs are now in the position where they must change with them. The challenge for the EM sector is to navigate its way through this process in a principled and informed way. It needs to do so in partnership with communities, who are the source of volunteers, and whose safety their volunteers take responsibility for.



Key considerations for the sector moving forward will be how to:

- > Build new structures, capabilities and ways of working, whilst maintaining functionality and cost effectiveness.
- > Address long-standing issues whilst enhancing the experience for existing volunteers to ensure retention of their existing workforce.
- > Maintain a strategic overview of volunteering at national scale while ensuring salience and applicability for the diverse players involved in their local contexts.
- > Expand the pool of available volunteers safely to meet surge needs in the face of increased trauma and fatigue, and reduced resilience in some communities.
- > Secure longer-term funding and commitment for this agenda within a volatile and evolving policy environment.

Developing the understandings, systems and practice capable of achieving sustainable outcomes will require an honest and open conversation about the limits of current structures, the lack of diversity and inclusion across much of the sector, and the return on investment (ROI) for volunteers, organisations, and the community. Building the necessary infrastructure – such as the social, governance, financial, and knowledge systems to support and enable implementation is a long-term proposition.

Key factors needed to achieve effective outcomes are:

- > active collaboration with communities and other organisations across the EM volunteering ecosystem
- > appropriate resourcing, commitment and leadership to support the long-term actions
- > robust national data sets that provide a more comprehensive picture of EM volunteering to support investment, management and resourcing across the sector
- > reliable data to assess the progress of strategic actions and to ensure that the value of volunteers and the work they do is visible and measurable, and
- > coordination between different national initiatives to reduce duplication and optimise the impact of actions across the sector as a whole.

The Blueprint

The Emergency Management Sustainable Volunteering Blueprint (The Blueprint) was initiated by the AFAC Volunteering Management Technical Group (VMTG) and funded by Natural Hazards Research Australia (NHRA). Its aim is to provide the foundation for the strategic infrastructure to support implementation of actions across the EM sector to progress the sustainable volunteering agenda.

The Blueprint is comprised of living documents that can be adapted to changing circumstances and needs. It identifies an initial set of solutions and evidence-based projects that can be supported by action-based research. It links three core components – a theoretical evidence base, strategy, and practice to support and enable effective national outcomes.

The high level of risk that EM volunteers work with places them in a different category to other volunteers. This, and the inclusion of Australia and New Zealand, differentiates The Blueprint from the *National Strategy for Volunteering 2023–2033* (Volunteering Australia, 2023). Although the focus of The Blueprint is volunteers within the SES and Fire Services in Australia and New Zealand SES and Fire Services, it also considers the broader volunteering ecosystem that interacts with these agencies and their communities before, during, and after incidents.

Two areas were identified as underpinning almost all ongoing actions:

- > **innovation:** taking well-informed and calculated risks for greater reward, which is essential when engaging in transformative change, and
- > **education and learning:** a continuous process that supports innovation and change through experiences and the development of new knowledge. This will also support a wider recognition of volunteers' skills and capabilities.

The AFAC VMTG is the champion for The Blueprint and steward of The Strategic Framework and The Interim Action Plan.



Development of The Blueprint

The ‘Emergency management volunteering: more than just words’ project was conceived with a clear goal in mind – to move the EM sector beyond discussing challenges for EM volunteering and the need for change in the sector, into practical, tangible action that addresses long-standing challenges.

The Blueprint considered volunteering in its many different contexts and has been developed using a collaborative and iterative process to meet the need to:

- > reframe and envision EM volunteering challenges and opportunities in different ways to the past to reveal new kinds of solutions
- > guide and support strategic, sector-wide collaborative action that sustains EM volunteers (the people), volunteering (the activities), and volunteerism (the culture), and
- > create opportunities to influence the sector toward investing in new, innovative, and sustainable approaches.

The Blueprint has been informed by VMTG, community and volunteer representatives. It is also informed by an analysis of relevant industry documents and previous research.

The Blueprint structure and function

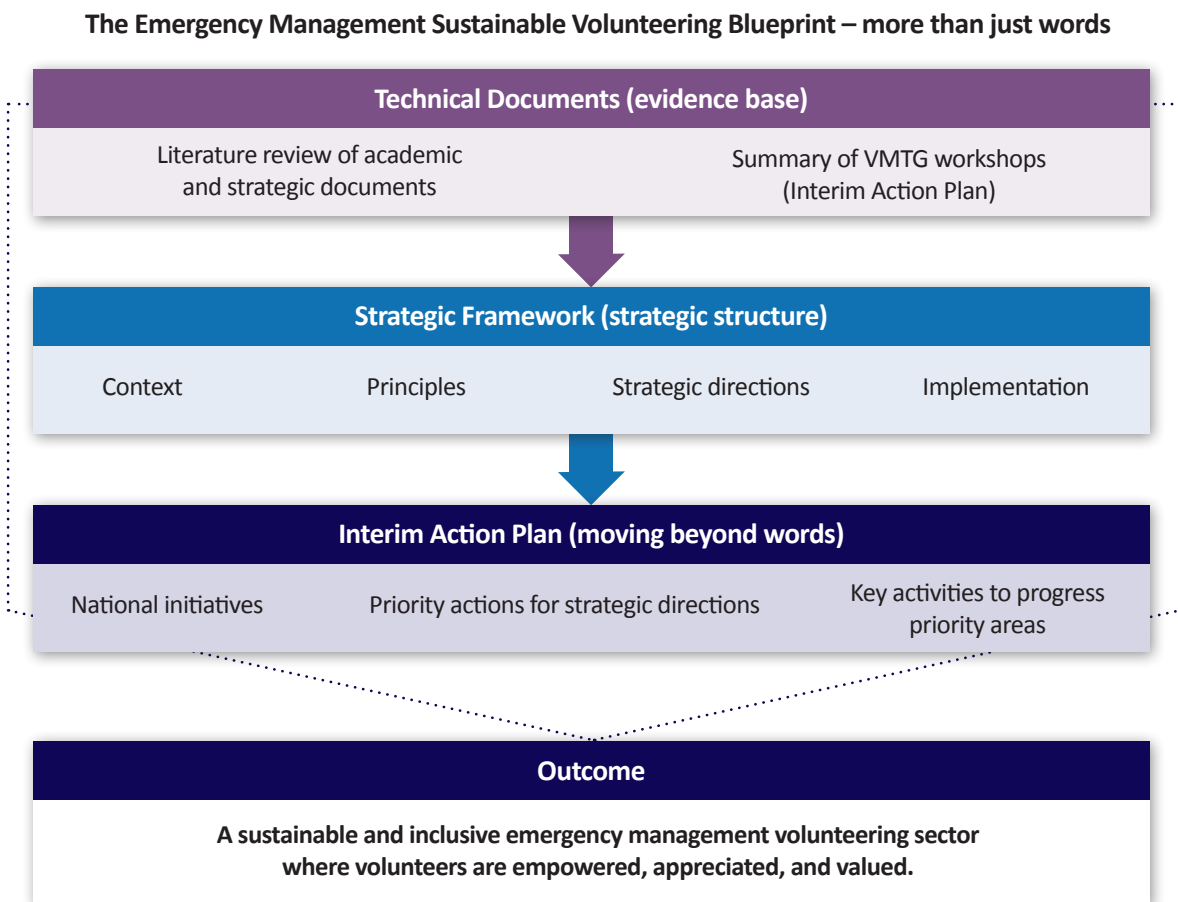


FIGURE 2: THE EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT SUSTAINABLE VOLUNTEERING BLUEPRINT

The Blueprint comprises of three components (Figure 2):

- > research and industry knowledge
- > the Emergency Management Sustainable Volunteering Blueprint: Strategic Framework (The Strategic Framework), and
- > an Emergency Management Sustainable Volunteering Blueprint: Interim Action Plan (The Interim Action Plan).



The function of The Blueprint is to provide a foundational structure that:

- > presents an evidence base, which brings together existing knowledge with sector intelligence to provide a synthesis of what is known and what is needed to progress the agenda, and
- > organises and makes visible the different aspects of the EM volunteering system to support identification, planning and coordination of actions being undertaken across the sector.

The outcome sought is a sustainable and inclusive volunteering sector where volunteers are empowered, appreciated and valued.

What is needed to enable The Blueprint

The following factors are needed enable The Blueprint and the successful implementation of its proposed actions:

- > a shared understanding between organisations and communities of what EM volunteering is and does
- > responsive and flexible structures that support learning and continuous improvement, and adaptive responses
- > inclusion of community volunteers and other related organisations, where appropriate, in the development of programs and decision making of actions associated with The Blueprint and other plans that may emerge
- > appropriate resourcing at local and agency levels
- > stories of success and lessons learnt, and collaborative narratives that illustrate the value of actions
- > new ways of valuing and evaluating the contribution of volunteers and volunteering programs
- > strong strategic and inclusive leadership across the sector, agencies and communities to support and drive actions
- > trusted and maintained relationships, and
- > sector-wide collaboration and coordination (government, organisations and community).

An authorising environment and a mandate to operate are also essential for the forward progression of The Blueprint, requiring:

- > endorsement from sector leaders
- > buy-in from participating organisations, and
- > continued auspicing of actions by relevant AFAC committees and agencies.

The proposed process to achieve this is illustrated in Figure 3.

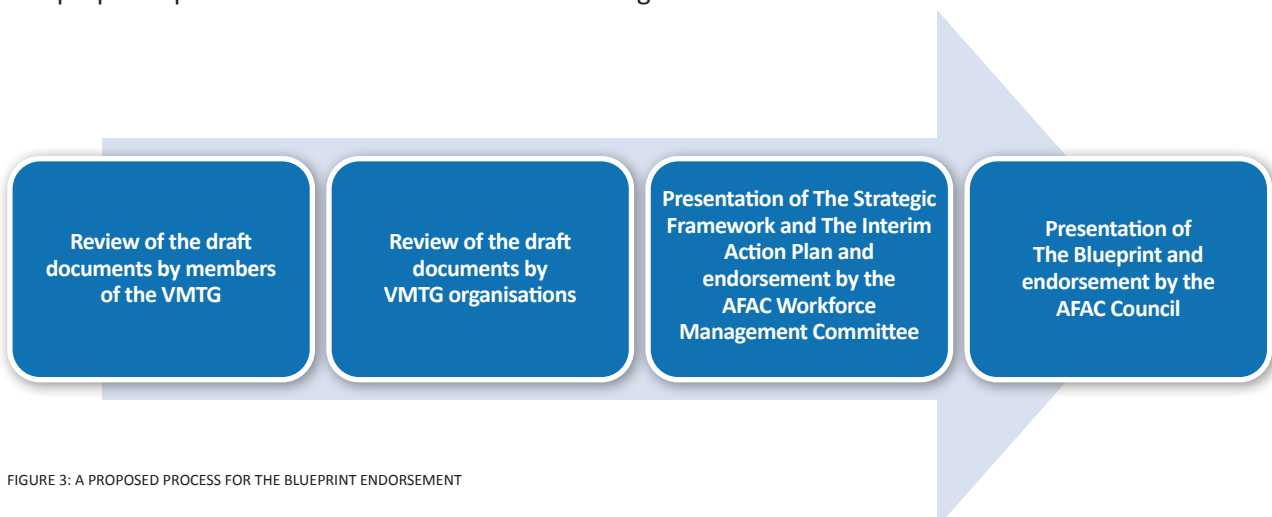


FIGURE 3: A PROPOSED PROCESS FOR THE BLUEPRINT ENDORSEMENT



The Strategic Framework

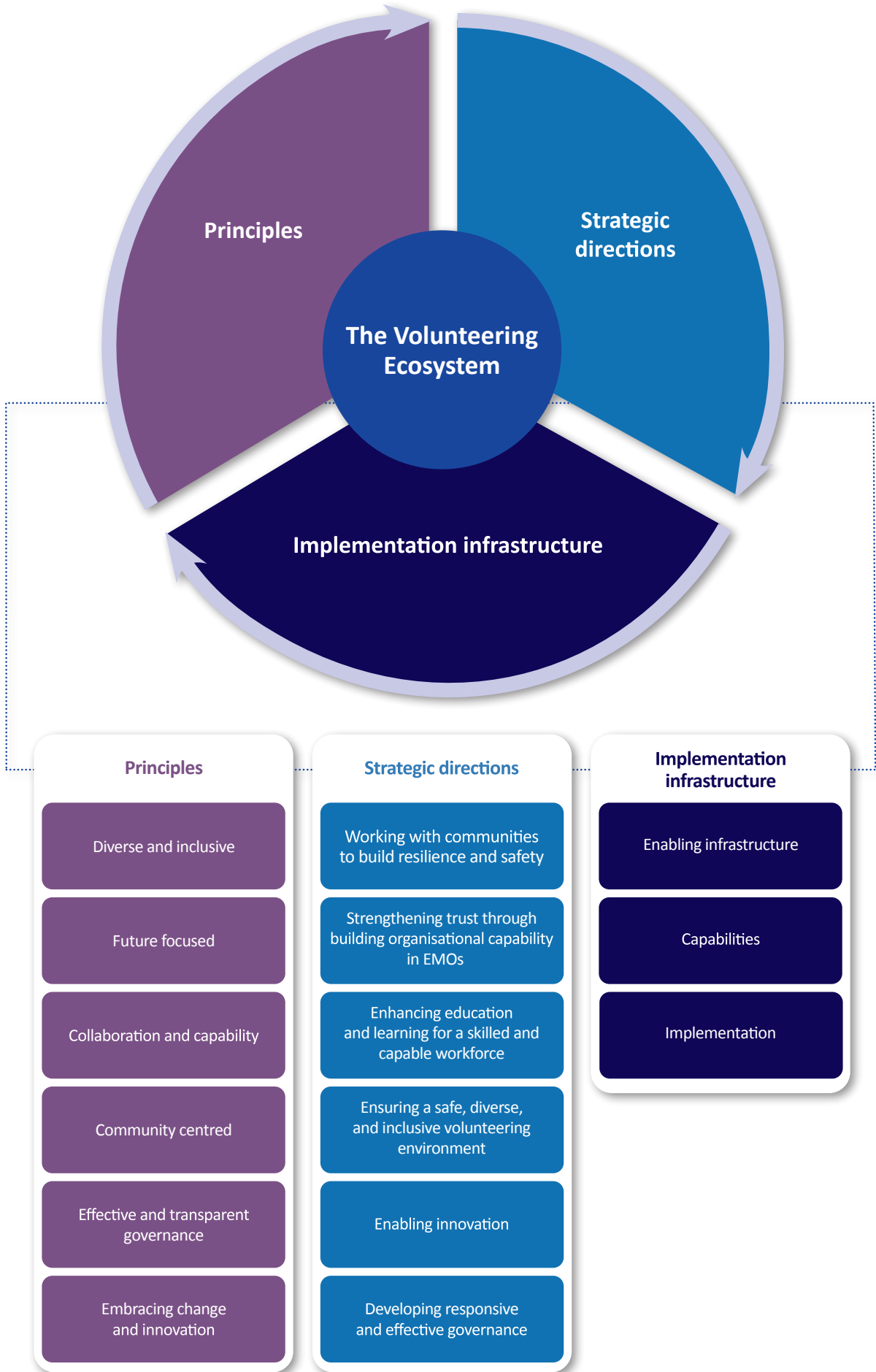


FIGURE 4: THE EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT SUSTAINABLE VOLUNTEERING BLUEPRINT: STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK



The Strategic Framework has been developed to work within current institutional and organisational settings but given the potential to grow beyond these. The overarching structure enables flexibility, allowing for the diverse and changeable contexts of agencies, communities, and wider stakeholder groups when building out from current settings.

Its objective is to provide a structure for the long-term transformational actions needed across the sector to secure the sustainability of EM volunteering. It does this by providing:

- > an overarching structure designed to strengthen coordination, standardisation, and the measurement of actions needed to progress the sustainable volunteering agenda, and
- > key areas of focus to improve effectiveness and visibility of actions and progression of the sustainable volunteering agenda.

It has four components (see Figure 4):

- > **Principles** that inform the ethical implementation of actions, and support collaboration, value learning, community, and connectedness.
- > **Strategic directions** that provide the overarching areas of focus for sector-wide actions.
- > **The volunteering ecosystem** provides the stakeholder and collaborative context for activities.
- > **The implementation infrastructure** and high-level guidance across three areas needed to support implementation.

As The Strategic Framework is intended to be a living document, it is recommended that:

- > overarching strategic directions are assessed every three years, and
- > potential actions are reviewed by members of the VMTG in line with their annual planning activities.

This review process will ensure that the focus actions remain salient to emerging EM volunteering sector needs and can capitalise on opportunities to progress the sustainable volunteering agenda as they arise.



The principles

The principles were developed through an iterative process based on previous research, a literature survey and interactive workshops. They are considered to meet the needs of both principle and practice while supporting the overall outcome of The Blueprint.

Diverse and inclusive

EMOs will provide an inclusive environment where all volunteers feel welcomed, respected, and valued. The sector will build upon current inclusion initiatives to develop the systems and processes that support and accommodate volunteers from diverse age groups, cultures, backgrounds, and abilities, so they can meaningfully contribute to the workforce.

Future focused

Future volunteering challenges need to be understood and managed strategically and systemically. These activities require the development of robust data and evidence, and strategic investment that maintains the current workforce whilst supporting the curation of the next generation of volunteers.

Collaboration and capability

EMOs will build capability by identifying and building upon existing strengths, capabilities, and skills within and across organisations and communities to support the necessary long-term change and innovation. This will be achieved through enhancing collaborative structures and building trusted long-term relationships within and across EMOs and communities.

Community centred

Community and volunteering knowledge and needs are central to EM workforce planning. EM volunteering activities will provide mutual benefits and opportunities for communities and EMOs. It will also ensure communities and volunteers have an active voice in decisions that pertain to them and their communities, and that community and volunteer concerns and needs are heard and responded to.

Effective and transparent governance

Working to ensure that structures and workplace culture are in place to ensure a safe and ethical workplace for volunteers. This requires the development of clear understandings of roles and responsibilities, and areas of accountability and liability across communities, organisations, and those who volunteer. Building robust monitoring and evaluation that makes visible the value of volunteering contributions, risks associated with volunteering, and effectiveness of actions.

Embracing change and innovation

Developing and implementing new understandings and integrating change and innovation models into organisational frameworks. Building systems and ways of working that support continuous improvement to support effective adaptive responses to the dynamic environment in which communities and EM volunteers live and work.



The strategic directions

Six strategic directions were developed from existing EMO strategies. These are consistent with Volunteering Australia's *National Strategy for Volunteering 2023–2033*, and AFAC's *Volunteer Inclusion Guideline* and AFAC *Strategic Directions 2022–2026*. They also list potential actions and outcomes, which were derived from a synthesis from three workshops and discussions with community and volunteering representatives, and members of the VMTG.

1. Working with communities to build resilience and safety

Outcome: To empower communities to lead and effectively manage their natural hazard risks in collaboration with volunteering EMOs in a way that provides mutual benefits.

2. Strengthening trust through building organisational capability in volunteering EMOs

Outcome: To ensure that volunteering EMOs are sustainable and have the capability to support and enable a positive volunteering experience.

3. Enhancing education and learning for a skilled and capable workforce

Outcome: To build upon the current skills and capabilities through a pragmatic and strategic approach to ensure that volunteering EMOs have a skilled and capable workforce for the future.

4. Ensuring a safe, diverse, and inclusive volunteering environment

Outcome: To ensure that volunteers work in a safe environment where they feel welcomed, valued, and their diverse needs are accommodated.

5. Enabling innovation

Outcome: To build the understandings and infrastructure to support effective innovation throughout the EM volunteering sector.

6. Developing responsive and effective governance

Outcome: The development of formal and informal governance and monitoring and evaluation that supports and enables a positive volunteering experience and ensures an accountable and ethical workforce culture.



Implementation infrastructure

Implementation of The Strategic Framework requires the practical application of its strategic aspects. For this to be achieved, EMOs will need to build the supporting structures, capabilities, and skills needed to support practitioners. Its key aspects are:

- > **enabling infrastructure** – this provides an overview of key areas of infrastructure needed to provide the structures that support practice.
- > **capabilities** needed to support and enable implementation
- > **implementation practice** – this section provides guidance of specific areas of practice that will need to be strengthened or developed. It includes summary guidance, key questions for practitioners and a maturity matrix to assist measurement of the strategic directions, and
- > **innovation case studies** from across the sector.

The Interim Action Plan

The Interim Action Plan provides a national focus for action in two priority areas. These were selected by the VMTG through a consensus decision-making process undertaken during two workshops. The time frames are indicative only, as it is recognised that the SES and Fire Services work in highly volatile and, at times, unpredictable circumstances, so need to be flexible. The Interim Action Plan will be used to inform implementation planning by the VMTG over an 18-month period. As it is a live document, additional actions, activities and task owner may also be added as the agenda evolves.

The priority actions

Two priority areas for action were selected based on the understanding that:

- > achieving the desired outcomes is a long-term proposition, so that the actions contained within this plan are first steps and will be built upon, and
- > potential owners of those actions have been identified within the AFAC collaboration structure.

The actions identified by the VMTG focus on Strategic Directions 3 and 5 within The Strategic Framework, and these actions are:

- > **Action 1:** Enhancing and building on the current national education curriculum to support volunteering skills pathways focusing on future capabilities needs and skills transferability.
- > **Action 2:** A national initiative to assist organisations incorporate emergent and innovative models of volunteering and understanding of where and how they can be applied across the PPRR spectrum.

Conclusion

“The growth of informal volunteering shows Australians are still willing to volunteer, if volunteering can fit in with the other demands of their busy lives.” (Davies, 2023)

There is widespread agreement in the EM sector that making volunteering sustainable in the long-term requires transformation at all levels. However, resistance to change and a lack of appropriate infrastructure to support action have created barriers. The Emergency Management Sustainable Volunteering Blueprint has been designed with innovation at its core to turn the changing context that organisations and communities find themselves in into opportunities. It provides processes designed to bridge the emerging gap between current and future capability created by the changing needs and expectations of those who volunteer, and to encourage investment in decisive action over the longer-term. Understanding the evolving relationship between volunteers and their communities and how to positively leverage this to enhance the volunteering experience, is central to this strategy.

There is a substantial opportunity for the EM sector, in collaboration with their communities, to embrace the change and innovation needed to sustain and grow EM volunteering for the future.



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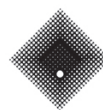
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