

Why Volunteers Matter: A Guide for Boards

Volunteers are often seen as a “free” resource rather than a strategic one. This creates organisational risk, undervalues people, and limits impact.

Strong governance recognises volunteers as an investment that requires deliberate resourcing to be sustainable.

Volunteers Matter

Without volunteers, your organisation would likely be forced to reduce services, reach fewer people, or stop key programmes altogether. What volunteers contribute goes far beyond hours alone:

- Capacity : extending what your organisation can deliver without increasing costs
- Community connection: volunteers are often your strongest ambassadors
- Lived experience : they reflect the people you serve.
- Trust and credibility: communities engage with people, not just services

A Volunteer Budget Is Essential

A volunteer programme cannot succeed on goodwill alone. Expecting volunteers to give their time without adequate support creates risk for volunteers, staff, and the organisation itself.

A dedicated volunteer budget enables:

- Recruitment and onboarding
- Training and development
- Coordination and supervision
- Resources and equipment
- Health, safety, and wellbeing
- Recognition and appreciation

Well-resourced volunteer programmes experience higher retention, better performance, and stronger organisational culture.

Volunteer Recognition

Volunteers stay where they feel valued. Recognition is not an optional extra, it is a core sustainability practice:

- Reduces attrition and loss of institutional knowledge
- Strengthens organisational culture
- Reinforces expectations and values
- Protects reputation and community goodwill

Recognition should occur at every level:

- Operational : everyday acknowledgement and appreciation
- Organisational: stories, milestones, & visibility
- Governance: inclusion in reports, strategy discussions, and Board narratives

Good Governance in Practice

Strong Boards actively govern volunteering by:

- Treating volunteers as a strategic asset
- Allocating a dedicated and visible volunteer budget
- Reviewing volunteer data (numbers, retention, incidents, impact)
- Ensuring policies, systems, and support are fit for purpose
- Considering volunteer implications in strategic and financial planning
- Actively championing volunteer value internally and externally

Valuing volunteers is not just about appreciation; it is about sustainability, risk management, and impact. When Boards treat volunteers as a strategic asset and resource them well, organisations strengthen community trust, deliver their purpose, and remain resilient.

The key governance question is not “Can we afford to invest in volunteers?” but rather: “What is the financial impact if we don’t?”.

