



**FRRR**  
Foundation for Rural  
Regional Renewal

# Heartbeat of Rural Australia Research Study

How are community groups and not-for-profits faring?

Survey Findings  
November 2021

# Contents

	Page
Foreword	3
Key Findings	4
Executive Summary	7
Respondent Profile	12
Community Organisations: Unlocking the Economic, Social and Community Benefits	14
Adverse Events: Understanding the Impact on Community Organisations	20
People: Keeping Volunteers and Staff Together	27
Place: Digital Capability - Understanding the Digital Divide	34
Future Outlook: Building Stronger Community Organisations	44
Methodology	57
Glossary	59
About Survey Matters	60

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia and their connections to land, sea and community.

We pay our respects to their Elders past and present and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

# Foreword

The Foundation for Rural & Regional Renewal (FRRR) is a national charity focused on ensuring social and economic strength in remote, rural and regional communities. We connect the good will of government, business and philanthropy, with the good purpose of local communities to contribute to a vibrant, resilient and revitalised remote, rural and regional Australia. Since we were established in 2000, FRRR has granted more than \$135 million to more than 12,000 community projects.

The vitality of these communities is driven by many interdependent factors, but the work of community-led not-for-profit organisations in providing programs, services, activities, and opportunities, is at the core.

Through our work, we identified a gap in data that quantifies the role of these organisations, and that tells the story of the social and economic contributions of grassroots community groups and not-for-profits in the context of rural, remote, and regional communities. In addition, we saw a gap in data that could help to quantify and qualify the effects of the cumulative shocks and stressors of the last two years on these organisations and their communities.

And so the Heartbeat of Rural Australia study was born, building on The Xfactor Collective's RESET 2020 study. FRRR greatly appreciates the efforts of the nearly 640 respondents in sharing their story and experiences. We also acknowledge the support of our partners and other sector stakeholders in helping us reach so many groups across remote, rural and regional Australia.

This seminal study, conducted independently by our partners Survey Matters, specialist members of The Xfactor Collective, confirms much of what we know anecdotally. Volunteers are feeling overwhelmed and community groups are finding it tough to keep going and supporting their communities. However, as ever, they are still optimistic.

The research points to ways in which funders and policy-makers can better support communities. However, it also serves as a useful benchmark for community groups and, perhaps most importantly, we hope will be a tool to help community groups amplify their story and attract the support they need to continue to play the range of critical roles that this study confirms they do. We are also delighted to make the dataset available through the SEER data platform, to facilitate this.

We trust that you find this report useful and welcome any questions or observations that you may have. We will certainly be using these insights to ensure that FRRR's actions help remote, rural and regional communities to respond to the challenges they face.

**Natalie Egleton**

Chief Executive Officer  
FRRR  
on Dja Dja Wurrung Country

November 2021

# Key Findings – Challenges and Opportunities





# Community organisations are fundamental to the survival of remote, rural and regional areas, and vital to Australia.

Far from being a 'hobby', grassroots organisations provide vital services to their communities. Without them, there would be significant impacts to the economy, and to the physical, mental and emotional health of the people who live there. In some cases, the community would simply not exist. This research has discovered the challenges they face, and the opportunities to help them thrive.

## Challenges



### The cumulative effects of natural disasters have meant fewer volunteers, exhaustion and frustration

- Drought, fires, flooding, the mouse plague and other adverse events have had a devastating impact on communities, and the cumulative effects of these are bigger than the sum of their parts.
- It has increased fatigue and stress, and made it harder to provide essential support within the community.



### COVID-19 was the 'last straw' for many remote, rural and regional communities

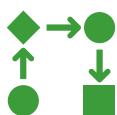
- The onset of the pandemic has weakened the ability of community organisations to play their role in the community. They have lost vital income from funders and supporters, or the inability to run events.
- Forced isolation and restrictions has meant that many have been unable to provide their services.
- Many have lost volunteers due to caring, illness or isolation, placing a greater strain on already scarce resources.



### The pandemic has highlighted the 'digital divide' between capital cities and country areas

- Many country communities have highly unreliable internet coverage, so even if their services could be provided virtually, 'pivoting' to online service delivery has not been possible for them.
- Poor connectivity has meant community organisations have been unable to maintain vital social connections that are taken for granted by metropolitan residents.

# Opportunities



## Small changes in funding arrangements will make a big difference

- Greater flexibility in how and when funding can be used would make an enormous difference to community organisations.
- Community organisations want their funding providers to 'get to know them' and better understand their unique situations.
- They want their funders to work with them to understand how funding is used and the positive effects that can be realised.



## Simplify grant application processes

- Applying for grants is a lengthy process, made more onerous because static information needs to be completed anew for each application. Streamlining or simplifying the application process would reduce the time required to apply for grants.
- Understanding the requirements for success would help community organisations decide whether it is worth the time needed to apply for funding.
- Having assistance available to complete applications would reduce the time and resources needed to apply for funding, meaning more resources are available to deliver services.



## Longer-term or ongoing funding allows community organisations to plan and execute their strategies for better outcomes

- Many lament the 'stop, start' approach to funding, and there is a constant fear that funding won't be renewed, which hinders the ability to provide services effectively.
- Providing assurance through longer-term funding allows community organisations to plan more effectively and use resources more efficiently.
- A longer-term approach also reduces the administration burden on both the grant recipient and the funder.



## Offering training or providing 'pro bono' assistance will improve community organisations' effectiveness

- Beyond funding, many noted that training courses in areas where they have little experience will make a difference.
- Marketing, governance, grant writing and leadership training will help them run their organisations more efficiently.
- The ability to access resources from local businesses under short-term 'pro bono' models in specific disciplines would strengthen knowledge and capacity.

# Executive Summary



# Executive Summary

In September 2021, the Foundation for Rural & Regional Renewal (FRRR) commissioned a study through The Xfactor Collective Foundation to explore how not-for-profits and community groups in remote, rural and regional Australia were faring. While FRRR sees and hears about the challenges that these groups face every day, there was little quantifiable research about the impact of consecutive disasters on these communities, nor of the pivotal role that community groups play in the economic, social and cultural fabric of society.

FRRR felt it prudent, therefore, to shine a light on these organisations – what they do, how they are funded and what they need to continue to provide their services, particularly after years of natural disasters and a global pandemic.

The research was **firmly focused on remote, rural and regional communities**, and what needs to change to allow them to survive, recover and thrive. More than half of the almost 640 responding community organisations have a turnover of less than \$50,000, employ no paid staff, and are run by volunteers.

## The multiple roles played by community groups

Groups play **multiple roles** that are core to community. Without them, Australia would be poorer, both financially and culturally. **Economically, nine in 10 organisations contribute to the economy, bringing vital income into their communities. Almost all community organisations provide some form of cultural and social support.** They offer opportunities for community members to volunteer, connect with each other and with Country, and improve their health and wellbeing.

Many also **provide practical support and emergency relief** to those who have been impacted by adverse events. Without them there would be “no capacity to address recovery issues that continue to emerge and which impact the physical and mental health of fire-affected residents”.

When asked about the **consequences** for their community **if their organisation did not exist**, many spoke about the loss of vital community infrastructure, saying “the hall, with its gym, library and other facilities would not exist” or that the “most likely outcome is that the shire ... assumes this role at an expense of \$50k pa”. And without this infrastructure, reduced opportunities to hold events, entertain cultural and creative pursuits and generally come together would cause **“the community to wither and die”**.

## How are community groups funded?

In general, the study found **smaller organisations** tend to be **funded through donations**, community **events** and other **fundraising** activities. Those with revenue less than \$50,000 tend to derive their income from events and fundraising activities, and 45% obtain funds directly through donations from their community.

In contrast, **larger community organisations** are mostly **funded by government and philanthropic grants**. Almost four in five community organisations with revenue greater than \$1 million **list project-based government grants** as their primary source of income, while more than half (56%) obtain project-based grants from philanthropy. This compares to just 46% and 27% respectively for the smallest community organisations.

Very few smaller community organisations receive **ongoing government or philanthropic funding** although, again, it is **notable that 70% of very large organisations** (revenues more than \$1 million) receive ongoing funding from government to provide their services.

## The effects of cumulative disasters

In the past two years, **nearly half** of responding community organisations had to contend with **droughts**, **37%** have faced **bushfires**, **26%** have endured **floods** and nearly **one in five** have dealt with the mouse **plague**. Those in **NSW in particular** have been significantly impacted by **drought, bushfires, flooding and the mouse plague**.

The onset of the **coronavirus pandemic** soon after, or in some cases during, these disasters has had a **catastrophic effect**. Operationally, COVID-19 has "affected our ability to fundraise in the community", and although the **revenue generating activities have ceased**, "the need for services has increased".

Around a quarter of organisations report an **increased demand** for their services, most notably in community organisations that **employ staff**. This **increase in demand** may also be **contributing to volunteer fatigue**, which is reported by one in three organisations. **More remote (45%) and rural (35%) organisations** are managing **volunteer fatigue**.

More than half of respondents report that uncertainty is of greatest concern to them, **resulting in "increased general stress / mental health"**.

By far the most detrimental effect has been the **inability to meet with one-another**, resulting in **isolation, reduced wellbeing, and increased stress**. Lockdowns due to COVID-19 forced isolation in communities, which "no longer have the social interaction that is vitally important for good physical and mental health. There are a lot of people feeling isolated, frightened and/or angry."

When asked to describe in three words the **overall feeling** in the community at the moment, most responded that they were feeling "**uncertain**", "**frustrated**", and "**tired / fatigued**". However, there was also a sense of "**hope about the future**".

More than a third of respondents indicated that they had found **more efficient ways of operating** and have had **more focus on their community** and its needs as a result of recent events. They have also been able to **develop new relationships** within the community (32%) and have **diversified their activities** or broadened their focus (26%).

A quarter of community organisations however, could not articulate any positive outcomes from recent events.

## Impacts on staff and volunteers

Retaining volunteers and paid employees has become more difficult. Approximately **a third** of community organisations have **either reduced volunteer hours, lost volunteers altogether** to illness, isolation, relocation or caring responsibilities, **or lost them due to a lack of need**, as a result of COVID-19 restrictions. Unsurprisingly, community **organisations in Victoria** are **significantly more likely to have reduced volunteer hours or lost volunteers** due to a lack of need, than other states.

Conversely, **some** report that **volunteers are working more** to deal with demand (22%), and that they are **recruiting or trying to recruit** more volunteers (25%). Most respondents who are trying to recruit volunteers are finding it more difficult now than prior to 2020, placing even greater strain on their existing volunteer workforce.

It is a similar situation for those community organisations that have a **paid workforce**, with **around half** reporting that **staff are working longer hours** to meet increased demand or that they are **trying to recruit** more staff.

For those who report **reduced staff**, comments reflect that this was largely due to a **decrease in demand** for the type of service provided, or a **decrease in funding** due to COVID-19 restrictions. Some **pivoted** to having volunteers undertake some tasks to ensure basic services could be maintained, but **others were forced to close and/or reduce staff wages**.

## The digital divide

Exacerbating the challenges faced by remote, rural, and regional Australia, many areas have unreliable internet coverage, particularly in remote and rural areas. **Half of respondents** from remote communities reported either **no internet access** or **extremely or somewhat unreliable** coverage, and one in five rural respondents have no, or patchy, internet access. Overall, **only a third** of communities rate their internet access as 'extremely reliable'. This is **creating a "digital divide"** and leaving many communities feeling "**forgotten**" or "**left behind**".

Comments suggest that “while our venue has good internet, few of our volunteers have good internet access at home” and that there are “too many black spots. **Technology is not reliable in rural areas**”, something that “government and other funding bodies often struggle to understand”.

This creates even greater issues. Pre-pandemic, people could meet and talk face-to-face, but in a COVID-19 world with isolation and restrictions, it becomes very **difficult to deliver support and services**, particularly those that are designed to reduce stress and improve general health and wellbeing.

In addition, **it is often cost prohibitive to access technology**. Funding rarely extends to the **operating costs** required to maintain connectivity, with comments that “we applied for funds to help us build the new platform, but they only funded ‘innovative projects’ ... and not the ongoing service charges”. Instead, **funding needs to come from their own fundraising activities**, however COVID-19 means they have been **unable to generate the income** required to invest in technology and better connectivity. It has become an unfortunate catch-22 situation.

### Meeting operating costs a constant challenge

Operating costs are a fact of running any organisation, be it for-profit or for-purpose. Premises, staff, and utilities must all be paid to deliver services and support.

It is not surprising therefore that **running costs account for an average 58% of revenues** received by community organisations. The larger the organisation, the higher the costs, with **more than half of all respondents** allocating **over 75% of their revenue to operating expenses**.

In comments, community organisations expressed **frustration** that “grants and projects we receive funding for have approximately 10% admin costs” associated, but “**never enough to cover the base operational costs**” or “we can only access funding that is project specific. **There is no assistance to meet operating costs**”.

*Including provision for operational costs would “transform what we could achieve in our community”.*

### Capacity constraints on moving forward

When asked to describe the constraints or skills gaps that were preventing them from achieving their goals, around four in 10 comments included **funding** – from “capacity building, internet and wages and operations”, through to “ongoing secure funding both for existing programs and to investigate, plan and deliver new ones ...”. Access to enough **money to continue to operate and expand** their capabilities is by far the **largest constraint** facing community organisations.

The next largest constraint is “how to **retain volunteers / engage and recruit new volunteers**”. This lack of volunteers, coupled with volunteers not having enough time to devote to their community, results in “too much work for only a few people to do”, and a “lack of capacity to meet increasing demand”.

### More flexibility and less red tape

When asked what one thing they would change in the way donors provide their funding, the most often mentioned were **greater flexibility** in how funds are used, and **less red-tape** attached to the grants. While one-off grants improve their ability to provide assistance, particularly for small community organisations, nearly **four in five** want **greater flexibility** in the use of, and time to, utilise the grants they receive.

Comments that “less red tape - the effort to apply for even relatively small grants is becoming overwhelming” and “hours of time involved in funding applications with no guarantee of success” are common. These organisations are “grateful for what we receive”, but “it is a very time-consuming process for a government grant. We are all volunteers and it becomes tiring.” They want a “**simpler application form and process**”.



They also need funding providers “to allow us to be **more flexible in how we achieve the aim of the funding**” and to “**trust us** to use it effectively”. They “realise the requirements of knowing that funds are expended in the right way” but need some leeway to use the funds appropriately. Currently, only 45% agree that **funding providers are open to conversations about how funds could best be used in their community**.

**Longer funding cycles** and ongoing funding, coupled with funding providers who work in collaboration and partnership with these community groups is also needed.

Only around half of respondents agree that they are **able to influence decisions** made about their local area, **or that funders listen to, and consult them** about issues affecting their communities. These community organisations need “capacity to continue a project beyond one year or another limited time” because “it is difficult to best serve community with this restraint.”

Community organisations want a “consultative approach” that “focus on partnership and collaboration, rather than transactional relationships (funder / provider)”. “Ask us the question: **what is the best way we can help your organisation?**” and to “be open to negotiation on ways support can be offered”.

Other than financial assistance, community organisations want support, training, and partnerships and collaboration.

### People are the key to success

The final question in the research asked community organisations what they need, outside of financial assistance, to improve their ability to provide their services.

In keeping with the themes throughout the survey, respondents simply need “volunteers, volunteers and volunteers, and a little extra money!”.

There was a suggestion that “a **register of skilled volunteers** offering services to groups (that is like a library, perhaps), where groups can seek relevant help for the skills or local experts, would be of great help”.

However, they also want **access to support and training to help them run their organisation**. They need “in-kind support via **provision of services** - admin, training, social media and web ...” and “access to experts in different fields for advice and assistance, e.g. grant writers, accountants, lawyers, marketers.

They are also **keen to learn from others** and to “**network** with other organisations from outside our region to allow for sharing of ideas and project details that have worked elsewhere that could be considered locally” and to have “more collaboration and communication with other similar groups”.

### Conclusion

This research was designed to give everyone involved with remote, rural, and regional communities a better understanding of the value provided by community organisations, the difficulties they face, and the support they need to continue their vital role.

We trust it offers valuable insight and information.

*“Get to know our community. We are in this together, they say. What does this mean, really mean? This pain isn't going away any time soon and it would be good to see innovative ideas and solutions coming from this survey.”*

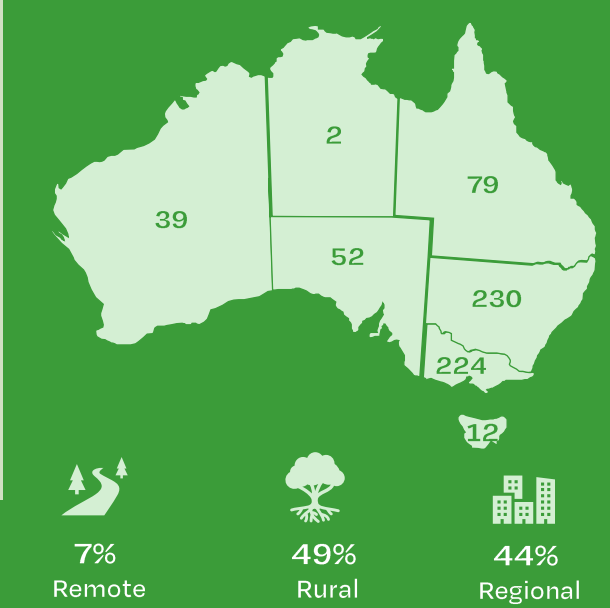
# Respondent Profile













Maldon, VIC



# Snapshot of the organisations supporting remote, rural and regional Australia



Respondent organisations support a diverse range of primary focus areas, with many working across more than one area or issue.

 23% Community Development	 5% Agriculture & Farming
 11% Arts & Culture	 4% Health Related Services
 7% Sport	 3% Employment, Education & Training
 6% Environment	 3% Ageing & Disability
 5% Child, Youth & Family	 26% Other / Multiple Focus Areas

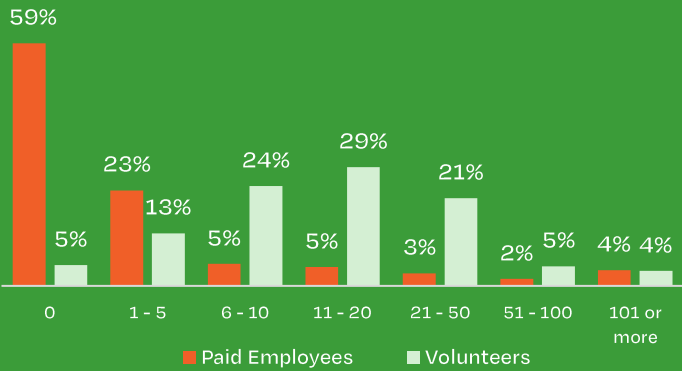


Over half of all community organisations have a turnover of less than \$50,000, employ no paid staff and are run primarily by volunteers.

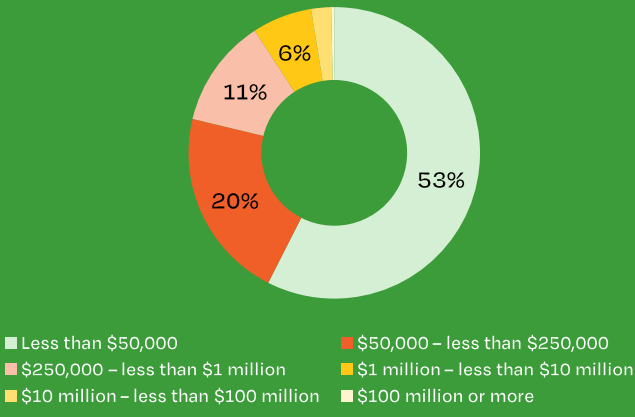
## Charitable Status

 38% ACNC Registered	 15% DGR-1 Endorsement	 4% DGR-2 Endorsement	 30% None
--	---	--	--

## Employees and Volunteers



## Turnover Last Financial Year



# Community Organisations:

Unlocking the Economic,  
Social and Community  
Benefits



# The Role of Community Organisations

Community organisations play an important economic role, advocating for new community projects, supporting community infrastructure, encouraging visitors to their region and providing links to government agencies.

## An Economic Contribution

Around **87% of organisations** indicated that they play some of kind **economic role** in their community. Most commonly, this involves advocating for new community projects (44%), supporting other community infrastructure (38%) or encouraging tourists to the region (32%).

Interestingly, while community organisations with **paid staff or a turnover of \$1 million or more** last financial year were generally **more likely** than others to provide an **economic benefit** to their community, those with a **turnover of less than \$50,000** and those that only had **volunteer members** (38% for each) were significantly more likely to **encourage tourists** to their region.

Economic Role of Organisation	Proportion
Advocacy for new community projects	44%
Supporting other community infrastructure	38%
Encouraging tourists to the region	32%
Links to government agencies for assistance	25%
Employment opportunities	20%
Local business support or training	15%
Innovation and enterprise development	15%
Grant writing services for other groups	13%
Emergency financial aid	12%
General financial assistance	10%
Rural industry hubs	6%
Other	17%
No economic role	11%
Don't know	2%

Almost all community organisations provide some form of social or cultural support, with a majority providing opportunities for community members to volunteer, connect with each other and improve their health and wellbeing.

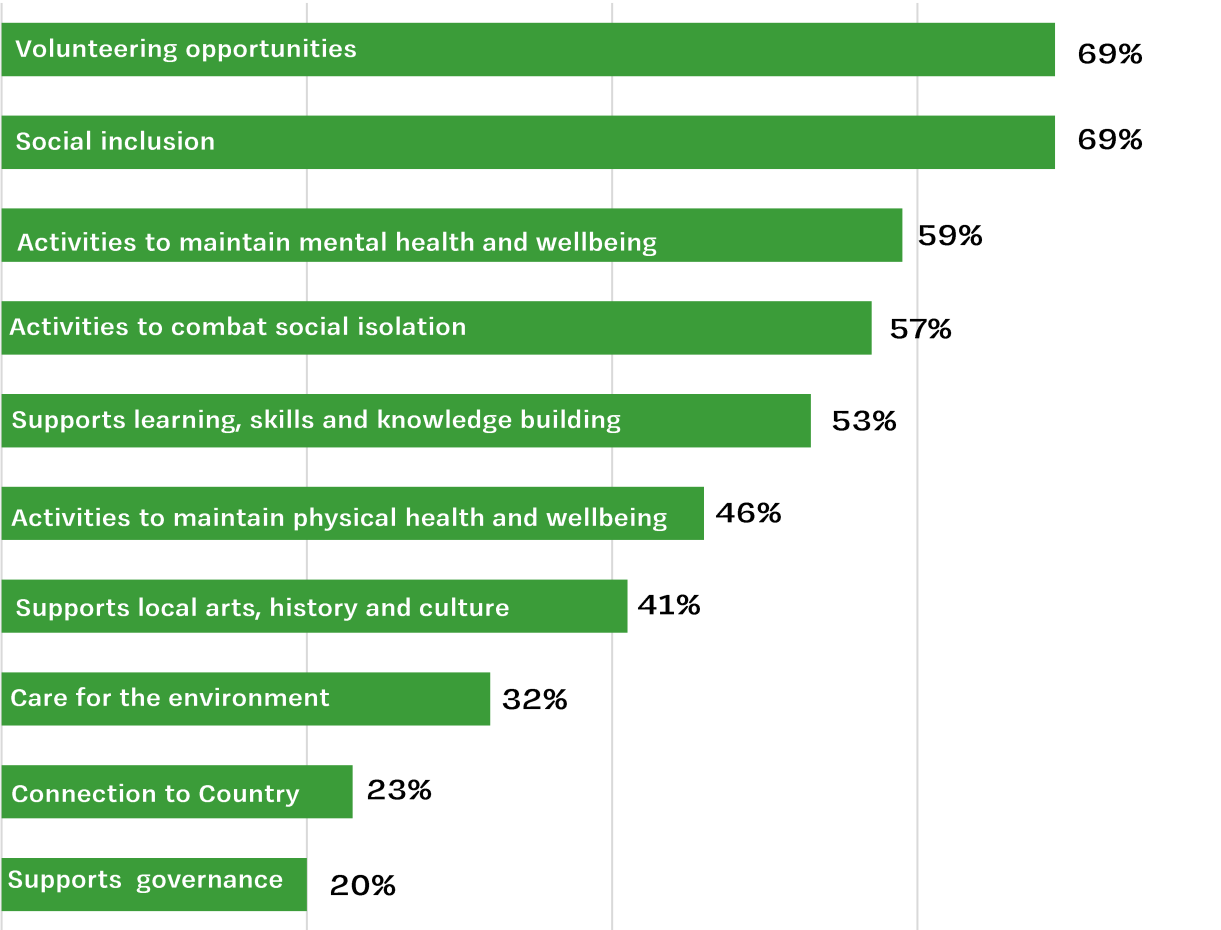
## A Social & Cultural Contribution

While delivering economic benefit is important, the social and cultural role played by community organisations is vital for small and remote areas of Australia.

More than **two-thirds** of community organisations provide opportunities to **encourage volunteering** (69%) and/or **social inclusion** (69%). Over **half** provide activities to help **improve the mental health and wellbeing** of their communities, either directly (59%) or indirectly by combatting social isolation (57%), and supporting learning (53%). A little under **half** also provide activities to help **maintain the physical health** of their communities (46%).

This was relatively consistent across different organisation types and locations. However, organisations with turnover of more than \$1 million last financial year, and those with paid employees, are significantly more likely to support learning, skills and knowledge building (80% and 70% respectively), connection to Country (46% and 29% respectively) and governance of other community organisations (31% and 27% respectively) than those with lower annual revenue or volunteer-only organisations. They are also more likely to be involved in reducing crime in the community, providing care, respite or in-home care and emergency housing.

Organisations with paid staff were also more likely than those with only volunteers to provide activities to maintain mental health and wellbeing (68% vs. 53%) and combat social isolation (65% vs. 52%).



## Life Without Community Organisations

**A loss of community organisations would result in isolation and a loss or degradation of critical infrastructure and facilities that support the local area.**

### Increased social isolation and lack of connection

When asked to say in their own words what the consequences could be for the community if their organisation did not exist, a vast majority of comments mentioned **social isolation** and **lack of connection**.

Often, these local organisations are “the heart of our small town”, and fewer opportunities to hold events, pursue cultural and creative pursuits and other activities that combine to provide mental, emotional and physical wellbeing would be “devastating, as we are the hub of the community”.

*“Damaging. Our role is to support children aged 5-12 and their families. Our community is predominately low socio-economic, and their overwhelming attitude is poor and defeated. If we did not exist, the vicious cycle these families are caught in may continue and/or escalate. Violence, isolation and trauma are strong underlying themes in our community, and we strive to combat that with connection, support, opportunity and direction.” Rural QLD*

*“Indigenous youth unemployment rate would increase. Higher rates of Indigenous youth incarceration. High rates of Indigenous youth mental illness, self harm and suicide. Lower numbers of apprentices / trainees available to WA remote businesses / industry.” Rural WA*

*“Community break down. There would be increased isolation to rural members.” Regional VIC*

*“The community would be greatly impacted if our organisation did not exist. Our organisation provides information and links to services and organisations in the community. We support and advocate for the needs of the community and are deeply embedded in the community. We provide a free counselling service for individuals to support mental health issues and challenges. Our organisation provides a variety of activities and supports groups that encourage social engagement and reduce the risk of social isolation, helping individuals to build connections with people in their local community.” Rural WA*

### Degradation of community infrastructure and facilities

Additionally, many of these organisations manage or raise funds for local facilities, like sports grounds, playgrounds, community halls, etc., and **without these buildings the community would have nowhere to go, or to meet**.

*“No venue for industry-related workshops, workplace health safety and information days, meeting place for Rural Fire Brigades, social events to improve mental health & wellbeing. There would be no centre for families to come together.” Rural QLD*

*“We would not have any community infrastructure (hall, oval, pool etc.) because we lease these from Council and run the town infrastructure at almost no cost to Council. It is likely that the majority of these assets would be sold off if we didn't run them, because Council can't afford to do it. The town infrastructure provides meeting, sporting and social spaces, a small level of employment, and provides a sense of solidity and continuity in troubled times.” Rural SA*

*“There would not be any community facility in our community.” Rural VIC*

*“There would be nobody within this remote town that maintains the community facilities and activities or is an advocate for local concerns.” Remote SA*

*“The management and improvements of the sports ground would fall back to the local council and be lost / buried in the projects for the larger townships in the shire. The community would lose its voice, control of projects and facility improvements.” Regional VIC*



## Lack of basic services and practical support during disasters

Community organisations also provide **practical support and emergency relief** to those who have been impacted by adverse events, such as bushfires. **Without them**, these groups felt that there would be **"many civic projects left not done, loss of key support in emergencies..."**.

*"We play a vital role providing learning programs, access to government information and resources, emergency food services, community programs and community support. Our town and district would be a lesser place if we did not exist."* Regional VIC

*"We are the only healthcare provider with a sustainable workforce in most of the communities in which we operate. Without us, most of our communities would have lost their local health and hospital services 20 years ago. This remains our core role in rural and remote Australia - supporting communities to maintain local on-site healthcare."* Remote NSW

*"The community would not have a local organisation to help them in times of need."* Rural VIC

*"Slower recovery from natural disasters, poorer resilience to natural disasters, weaker community connections and support for each other."* Regional VIC

*"Significantly reduced services for homeless people, people experiencing/ escaping domestic violence, people experiencing mental ill-health, care for people with disabilities, service / community collaboration."* Regional NSW

*"No rescue services, no storm / flood response services, no bushfire support services, no snake removal services, no medical response support for Ambulance. Loss of life and increased pain and suffering, increased damage to property."* Rural NSW

## Other consequences for communities related to business outcomes, healthcare and living outcomes, support and advocacy and other areas of import and interest

Other commonly identified potential consequences if community organisations did not exist were:

- **Economic outcomes**, including a lack of community projects or a withdrawal of important funding and support for such projects; reduced income from tourism; increased unemployment and reduced volunteering; and a reduced capacity of emergency services, such as fire services.
- **Healthcare and living related outcomes**, including increased mental health issues; reduced or removed child and family services; increased incidence of incarceration, suicide and domestic violence; increased homelessness and related issues, such as inability to access food; and decreased or removed disability and aged care services.
- **Reduced support and advocacy related outcomes**, including a lack of connection or referrals to other important services; reduced support for disadvantaged groups or other people in need; reduced advocacy for the communities' needs to government or other bodies; a lack of community events to bring connection within the community and reduced town pride.

*"It would be fragmented and disconnected. There would be no child-care, no-one dealing with emergency assistance, mental health issues and support. Our older people would have no access to social opportunities, outings or a shopping bus to the nearest supermarket... Youth would have nowhere to hang out. There would be no playgroup, no social groups. This place would be an emotional and social desert. We don't have the usual government and shire agencies providing anything for us. We do it all. And we struggle to get funded for it..."* Rural WA

# Adverse Events: Understanding the Impact on Community Organisations





# Understanding the Impact of Adverse Events on Community Organisations

An accumulation of negative events and natural disasters over the last 18 months has left remote, rural and regional Australia feeling exhausted and uncertain about the future.

Communities in remote, rural and regional Australia have been hit by a **number of different adverse events over the last 18 months**. They have faced everything from seemingly unending drought to fires and floods, mouse plagues and cyclones. Through it all, they have banded together to provide “support, compassion and companionship” to help their communities re-group and recover. Then the coronavirus pandemic arrived.

Already under strain thanks to the compounding effect of multiple disasters, the restrictions and forced isolation that came with **COVID-19 lockdowns** were “crippling” for some communities, leaving people feeling “**socially and emotionally isolated**”. It **hampered their recovery** efforts both emotionally and financially, and has led to an increase in mental health concerns in these communities.

Natural disasters had already left many local organisations and businesses (particularly in farming communities) in financial crises. Community organisations had been working hard to ensure that their communities were provided not only with much needed funds and material resources, but also with opportunities for “social interaction and connection”. This was almost as important as material assistance in their communities, as it helped provide essential “emotional support” through hard times.

With a reduced ability to organise fundraising and social events to help their communities, community organisations have found it hard to provide the same level of support during COVID-19. Many organisations that largely provided opportunities for social interaction and education have had to shut their doors entirely, being unable to operate remotely in their location. Others, particularly those providing essential services or emergency relief, have had to work twice as hard, often with fewer resources.

Many community organisations have had a **reduction in volunteer numbers**, either because “older volunteers are preferring to stay safe at home” or because their volunteers are “too busy trying to manage the aftermath of disasters” to continue to volunteer. This, coupled with a decreased ability to run fundraising events, has made **many feel “stretched” and “exhausted”**.

While there is currently an overwhelming sense of “**frustration and uncertainty**” in these communities, coupled with feelings of overwhelming “exhaustion and isolation”, they are largely a resilient group of people who care deeply about each other and their communities. Underlying everything is a feeling of “hope” that things will get better.

Where possible, community organisations have used the opportunities that these disasters have afforded them to **try and find more effective ways of operating**, and are looking forward to a better future.

# The Community Experience of Adverse Events

## The implications of COVID-19 have been far reaching, impacting almost all community organisations in regional and rural Australia.

The cumulative effects of different disasters (including COVID-19) over the past 18 months has had devastating effects on remote, rural and regional Australian communities - particularly for those hit by multiple disasters.

Compared with those living in other states, community organisations from **NSW** were more likely to have been **impacted by drought (70%), bushfires (63%), floods (51%) and mouse plagues (38%)** in the last 18 months. **WA** organisations were the most likely to have been impacted by **cyclones (18%)**.

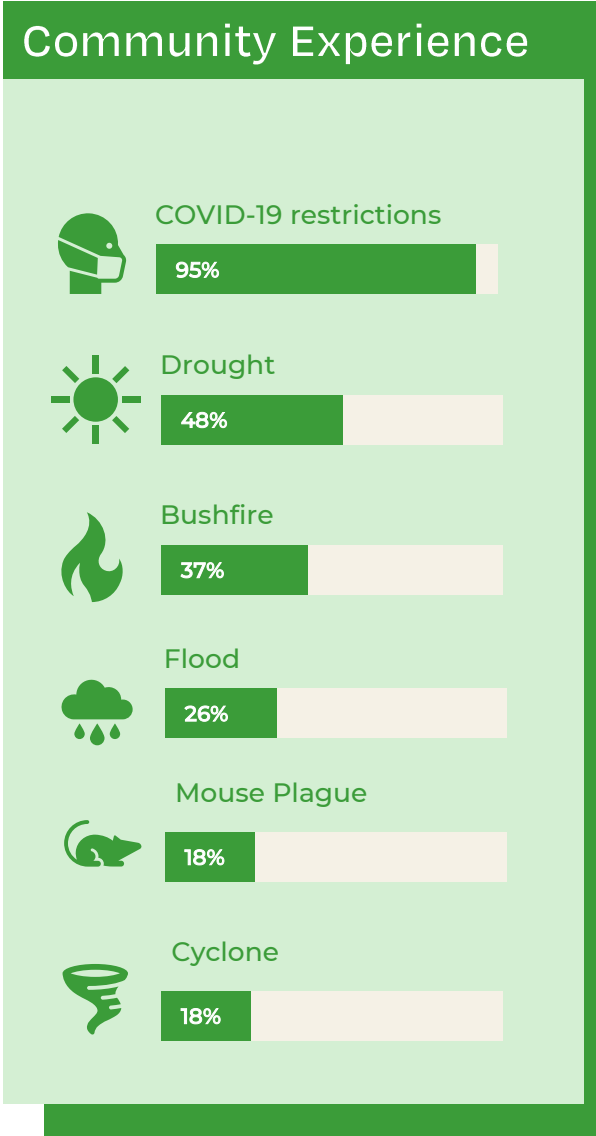
**Drought** was far more likely to impact those living in **remote (71%) or rural areas (54%)** than regional cities or towns (38%).

Organisations with an **annual turnover of \$1 million or more** last financial year were more likely to cite being impacted by **bushfires (54%) or floods (41%)** than those with lower turnovers.

Organisations that employ **paid staff** were also more likely to have been **directly impacted by bushfires (45%) and floods (35%)** than those run only by volunteers (31% and 20% respectively).

When asked to describe the current overall feeling in the community, most respondents indicated that their communities were feeling **frustrated, uncertain, and tired or fatigued**. There was also a large number of people feeling isolated or forgotten, and anxious about their current situation.

Positively, there was also a **strong sense of hope** coming through, with many looking forward to a better future.



Q. Which of the following has your community experienced in the past 18 months?  
Q. Please describe in three words the overall feeling / attitude in your community at the moment.  
Base: All respondents n=638

The impact of the events of the past 18 months on community organisations has been severe. Most commonly they have been unable to perform their usual activities, have suffered from reduced funding or reduced income from fundraising - leading to lower revenue, with some experiencing financial stress.

### Inability to hold events or perform services effectively

When asked to share a sentence about **how the events they have experienced have affected their organisation**, many spoke of the **inability to meet**, hold regular events or **raise the funds** that support the community. A common theme throughout the verbatim comments was the ability of communities to **band together** to help overcome natural disasters such as bushfires and floods, however, this **became harder when COVID-19 restrictions came into force**, further compromising their ability to hold events or deliver services.

*"Bushfires devastated us both economically and socially with over 100 homes lost. However, the community spirit that arose after the fires is a real positive. Unfortunately, COVID-19 problems arose soon after and have hampered recovery and community events, business and social activities since."* Regional NSW

*"Well, we couldn't meet as a community due to COVID-19 and we were down in numbers of volunteers because of the strain that the drought put on the volunteers - they had to work more on the farm and were unable to volunteer."* Rural NSW

*"Bushfire & drought have emphasised the continuing need for the group to support our mainly farming membership with projects & training to help them through these very challenging times. This has been affected by COVID-19 restrictions with cancellation of events and reducing our ability to connect with members, particularly those who are less able to connect with technology."* Regional VIC

*"COVID-19 made it difficult to impossible to run events. Drought causes lack of community donations."* Remote NSW

### Reduced income, financial hardship

Many respondents spoke about the **loss of income** as a result of cancelled activities, with some indicating they, and some of their communities, were experiencing **financial stress**. In addition, funding from governments or philanthropy had been reduced.

*"We have not been able to hold functions and the bar is shut, so we are not generating income but maintenance and bills still continue to come in."* Rural VIC

*"We can't pay accounts. Patronage has dropped off. Increased costs due to mouse plague."* Rural NSW

*"These events cause many hardships in the community. Financially, farmers' crops, livestock & produce; residents' jobs, and extra costs and work incurred. They can be very distressing and cause mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety, and other social issues."* Rural NSW

*"The bushfires of 2019/20 caused significant emotional and financial hardship across all of our members. We were struggling to recover when the COVID-19 pandemic hit. We are in the middle of a lockdown and our community is experiencing issues around financial hardship, inability to access affordable housing, disconnection due to poor internet coverage and high levels of emotional stress and related mental health impacts."* Regional NSW

*"Reduced income in the community flowed to less income for us while there is greater community need."* Regional SA

## Social isolation and increased mental health concerns

COVID-19 forced **social isolation** within communities, and this is considered the **greatest contributor to increased mental health concerns**. In some cases, the enforced isolation, off the back of many other and ongoing disasters, has led to an increase in instances of domestic violence and suicides within these communities.

*"We were subject to extreme drought, followed by COVID-19, the bushfires and most recently major flooding... The compound trauma of these events has impacted negatively on individual and family wellbeing. Relationship and financial stress is giving rise to increased domestic and family violence, and children and young people are experiencing increased levels of anxiety and other mental health issues, now compounded by the social isolation of lockdown."* Regional NSW

*"Morale is low, no events for 12 months, loss of purpose; expect membership will not recover in numbers for some years. Members are ageing much quicker - again loss of purpose and enthusiasm."* Rural NSW

*"Drought - bad economically but worse in regard to mental health for everyone in the community. COVID-19: big increase in DV, homelessness, mental health (suicide). Staff managed extremely well by adapting service delivery, but everyone is exhausted."* Rural QLD

## Emotional and mental hardship

While a single event on its own can cause some level of stress, the **cumulative effects of different events have compounded**, leading to severe income loss, increased fatigue and lowered resilience among particularly vulnerable members of the community.

*"There have been high levels of depression and stress-related illness as the community has gone from coping with drought to coping with possible further drought plus COVID-19 issues relating to being on the SA / VIC border. Our organisation was set up to support the community to build resilience and improve health. COVID-19 in particular has made implementation of our project much slower but is allowing learning to shape a way forward."* Rural SA

*"Recovery, meeting needs and finding appropriate services is difficult. Staff were coping in helping others but now we are fatigued personally by the never-ending COVID-19 cloud. Resources everywhere are stretched, and folk do not always fit into the required boxes or have the access online."* Regional NSW

*"Our organisation often works with people affected by crisis... it affects our organisation, or more importantly, the people who manage the programs. It's tiring, always trying to be 'up', to be encouraging to others, and at the same time having to be empathetic and not dismissing their situation."* Regional QLD

## Other impacts of recent events include:

- **Decreased services:** Services being closed, project and recovery timelines being impacted, and decreased membership or attendance at events, and services still operating.
- **Workforce and financial impacts:** Negative impacts on volunteers or volunteer numbers, increased unemployment, increased costs (to be able to meet or adapt to COVID-19 related changes) and decreased tourism to the region.
- **Increased services:** Increased demand for services and increased pressure on resources to meet the increased demand, general increase in activities to meet increased needs in the community or moving activities online.
- **Property loss:** Loss or damage to property and crops, and/or an inability to access properties for a portion of time.
- **Impacts on essential services:** Community members being unable to access essential services, community organisations being unable to access the people and communities they would normally support or finding a change in their clientele, or changing the activities or procedures used to meet community needs.

# The Impact of Adverse Events on Community Organisations

Operational issues are having the greatest impact, with around half of respondents uncertain about future restrictions and facing a reduced ability to hold fundraising events for much needed income.

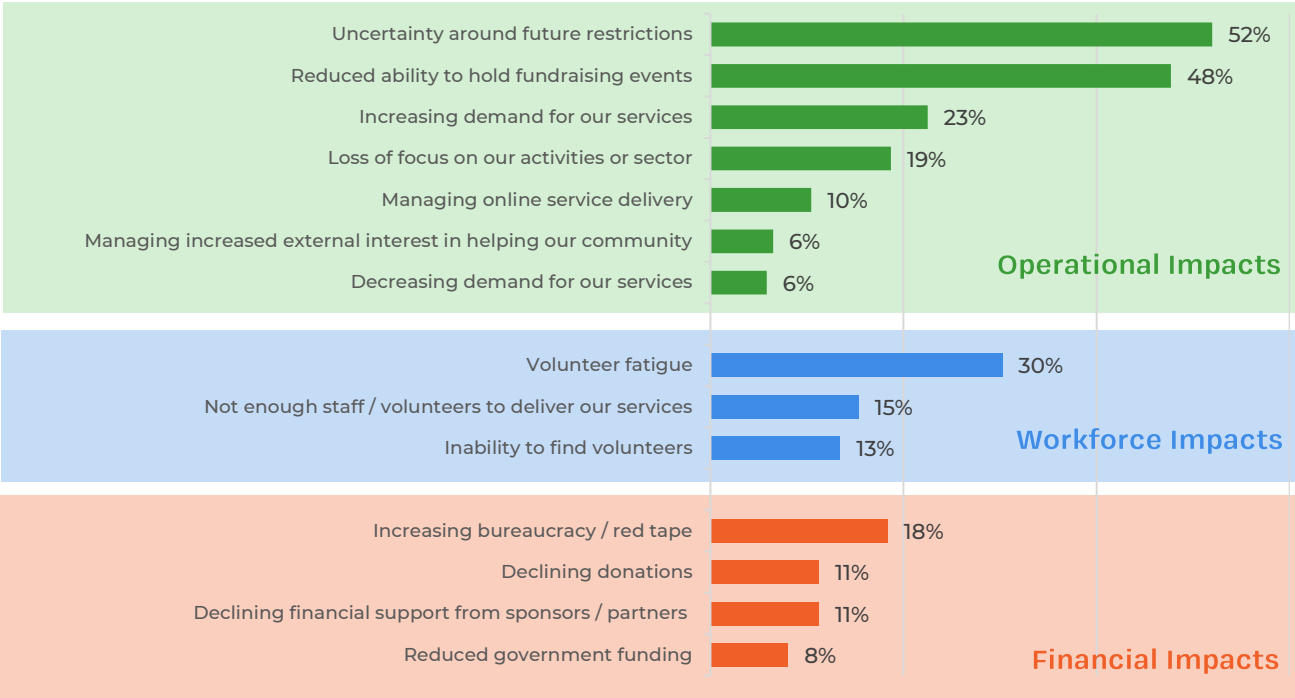
The effects of recent events were generally felt across **three key areas**: **operational** impacts, **workforce** impacts, and **financial** impacts. By far, the most commonly felt impacts were operational, largely related to the uncertainty of restrictions and the inability to host fundraising and other events. However, it should be noted that those in **Queensland** were **less likely** to be **uncertain** about the future (34%) than others, and those in **WA** were **less likely** to have had a **reduced** ability to hold **fundraising events** (21%).

Around a **quarter** of organisations (23%) have experienced an **increasing demand** for services. This is likely a **contributing factor** to three in 10 organisations (30%) noting that they are now needing to manage **volunteer fatigue**. Volunteer fatigue generally became **more pronounced** with location, with around 22% of organisations in regional areas noting it was an issue, compared with 35% of those in **rural** areas and 45% of those **living remotely**. For rural and remote communities, there have been a high proportion of areas impacted by **compounding events**, as well as **fewer people and other organisations to share the load**, leading to higher rates of burnout among the critical working group.

When looking at the primary focus of organisations, those working in **health services** (48%) and **housing and homeless services** (89%) were **significantly more likely** to have found an **increasing need** for their services, reflecting a rise in mental health related issues and people in financial crisis within the community over the last two years.

Interestingly, those working in **community development** were significantly more likely than others to note that there had been an **increase** in **external interest in helping** their community (14%). Compared to organisations with paid staff, **volunteer-managed community organisations** were **significantly more likely** to be impacted by a **reduced ability to hold fundraising events** (61% vs. 29%) and declining donations (15% vs. 6%), but **less likely** to be impacted by **reduced government funding** (4% vs. 14%) – which reflects how they are funded.

Reflecting the kind of role performed within the community, organisations with **paid staff** were **significantly more likely** than those with only volunteers to have had an **increasing demand for their services** (40% vs. 10%) and **be moving to online service delivery** (20% vs. 4%).





While almost a quarter of community organisations could not articulate any positive outcomes from recent events, others have found some benefits.

Around one in three community organisations indicated that as a result of recent events, they have been able to find **more efficient ways of operating** by using **digital technology** (37%), and they have been able to develop **new relationships within their communities** (32%). They have also found they have had a **greater focus on the community and its needs** (32%). Organisations focusing on community development were significantly more likely than others to have had more focus on their communities' needs (44%) and to have developed new relationships (44%) than those working in other areas.

Respondents from South Australia and the Northern Territory (23%), Queensland (21%), and WA (21%) were significantly more likely than those in the more restricted states of NSW (6%) and Victoria (2%) to indicate that, thanks to border closures, there has been an increase in local tourism. Remote communities (24%) were also significantly more likely to indicate that this had been the case for them as well, as were those whose primary focus was community development (15%).

Around one in four **felt that there had been no positive outcomes** as a result of recent events (23%). This was particularly the case for those with lower turnovers, with 32% of those with a turnover of less than \$50,000 feeling there had been no positive outcomes, compared with 23% of those with a turnover between \$50,000 and \$250,000, 7% of those with a turnover between \$250,000 and \$1 million, and 4% of those with a turnover of \$1 million or more. Respondents in Victoria (30%) were also significantly more likely than their state counterparts to believe there had been no positive outcomes, as were volunteer managed organisations (33%).

Around a third of community organisations have developed new relationships and have had more focus on the needs of the community as a result of negative events.

Positive Outcomes	Proportion
We have found new / more efficient ways of operating using digital technology	37%
We have had more focus on the community and its needs	32%
We have developed new relationships within the community	32%
We have diversified our activities / broadened our focus	26%
We have developed new relationships with government / sponsors / philanthropic organisations	21%
Our community is more connected and involved	20%
An increase in local tourism	9%
We have seen an increase in our organisation's revenue	6%
An increase in the number of volunteers	6%
There have been no positive outcomes	23%

# People: Keeping Volunteers and Staff Together



# The Workforce Impacts of Adverse Events

With many organisations dealing with operational restrictions, isolation orders, reduced funding and increasing need for services, retaining staff and volunteers has become more difficult.

Since the start of 2020, community organisations have seen a **reduction in the number of volunteers working** for them, either due to volunteer choice or because of a lack of need. Others have reduced volunteer hours.

In contrast, those who **employ staff** were more likely to indicate that their employees had **increased their hours** to meet demand.

**One in four** indicated that they have **either recruited, or tried to recruit more volunteers** over this time to meet ongoing needs within their communities.

In addition, where demand had exceeded the availability of existing staff or volunteers, organisations have **tried to employ more people**; however this has been **harder** to do than prior to 2020. This was largely due to a **lack of suitably qualified candidates in their local area** – commonly attributed to COVID-19 related travel restrictions and an inability (rather than unwillingness) to travel to remote, rural and regional Australia.

For **volunteers**, organisations noticed a number of differences compared to past years.

Current volunteers are **getting older** and have used the advent of **COVID-19 to accelerate their exit** from volunteering. The **compounding impact of cumulative disasters** has meant that many **younger people are too busy managing their families' needs to volunteer**, and others find it hard to navigate the lockdown rules leading to feeling uncertain about or unable to volunteer. This has led to a **severe decrease in "incidental volunteering"**, putting more pressure on the few "stalwarts" remaining to meet their communities' needs.

This, in turn, is leading to **increased fatigue, exhaustion and burnout** among remaining volunteers, with many organisations becoming concerned about "succession planning" to ensure that they can continue their work into the future.

They believe that the desire to help each other is still strong within their communities, but feel that (at a minimum) restrictions and social distancing requirements need to ease before people will feel comfortable returning to volunteering.



Photo: David Freund



# Maintaining a Volunteer Workforce: Attraction and Retention

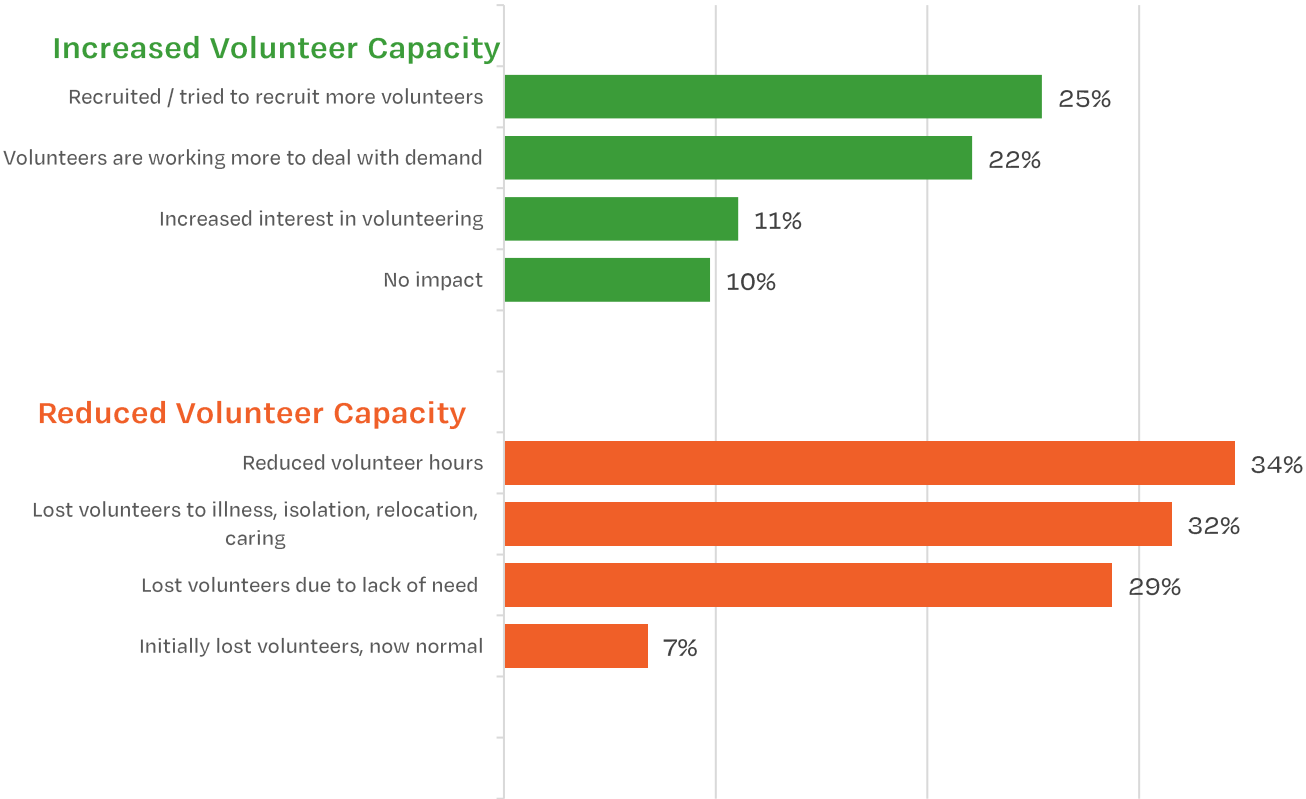
By far, the biggest change in volunteers since the beginning of 2020 is reduced capacity, with nearly a third of community organisations reporting they have reduced volunteer hours - either due to lack of need or volunteer-led restrictions such as isolation or caring responsibilities.

Around one in three organisations indicated that their **volunteers** are now **working reduced hours** (34%), or have decided to **stop volunteering altogether for personal reasons**, such as illness, isolation, relocation or caring responsibilities (32%). A further **29%** have **reduced** the number of volunteers due to **lack of need**, largely due to COVID-19 restrictions and/or an inability to hold events and fundraisers.

However, **some** organisations indicated that their volunteers have been **working harder than ever** in order to meet **increased demand** in their communities (22%). **One in four (25%)** have either **recruited**, or tried to recruit more volunteers over this time to meet ongoing and increased needs.

**Victorians** were the most likely to have either **reduced volunteer hours** (44%) or **lost volunteers** due to a lack of need (36%). **Queenslanders** were most likely to have had their **volunteers need to work more to deal with demand** (36%), or have initially lost volunteers but now returned to normal (15%).

## Impact on Volunteers

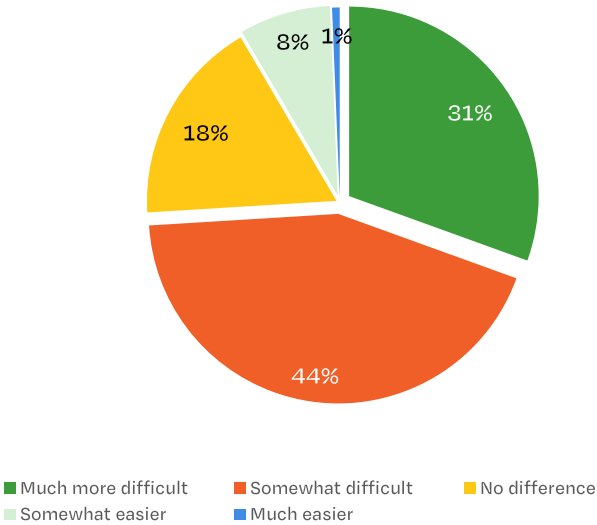


Three-quarters of respondents who had **tried to recruit new volunteers** indicated that it has become more difficult over the last 18 months (75%), with 8% finding it easier to some degree. Organisations **working in child, youth and family services** were more likely than others to find it **‘much easier’ to attract and retain volunteers** (17%) than others.

Of the organisations with volunteers, one-third have noticed a **change in who is volunteering** (34%), with 57% indicating they have not experienced any change in the types of volunteers they attract.

For the most part, **new volunteers** were more likely to be people who were **new to the community** (38%) rather than long-standing community members (29%). **Volunteers generally had less time** available to volunteer (32%) rather than more (16%). Around **one-third** noted that their volunteers have a **different set of skills to contribute** to the organisation (31%). Additionally, similar proportions noted that their **current volunteers tend to be either older (30%) or younger (25%) than in the past.**

Volunteer Recruitment Experience, Last 18 Months



34%  
of organisations have noticed a change in who is volunteering

Change in Volunteers	Proportion
They are generally new to the community or have relocated from the larger cities / towns	38%
Usually, they have less time available to volunteer	32%
They have a different set of skills	31%
They are generally older	30%
They are generally long-standing community members wanting to give something back	29%
They are generally younger	25%
Their knowledge about the community and its needs is limited	18%
They now have more time available to volunteer	16%
They have a lot of knowledge about the community	16%
They have little or no experience in volunteering	14%
They have a lot of experience volunteering for other organisations	13%
Other	11%

Q. Compared to 18 months ago, how difficult has it been to attract and retain volunteers? Base: n=606  
Q. Have you noticed a change or shift in who is volunteering for your community organisation in the last 18 months? Base: n=154  
Q. What has changed about the volunteers you are recruiting? Base: n=206



Arthur's Creek CFA and Strathewen Primary School Fire Awareness Program, VIC  
Photo: Julie Millowick

**Despite a strong desire to continue to help and support their community, volunteers are fatigued, and looking to decrease or cease the time they spend giving back to their communities.**

Of those who indicated that their **volunteer cohort has changed over the last 18 months**, by far the biggest concern is that current **volunteers were getting older and looking to retire**. For some, this desire has been **accelerated by COVID-19**, with many feeling unsafe about returning to volunteering.

*"Many older aged people are reluctant to volunteer due to the uncertainty and fear of COVID-19. This has been a great loss to the sector."* Rural NSW

In addition, **those who were continuing to volunteer are feeling fatigued or burnt out**. This is due, in part, to the pressure from an increased demand for services, and also to carrying extra loads for others who have left over the last 18 months.

*"We have lost some volunteers due to them getting burnt out and the young people... are hesitant to volunteer."* Remote SA

On a **positive note**, there was still a **strong desire from volunteers to support each other and their communities**, and volunteers were continuing to work hard to ensure that people in their community who are disadvantaged, isolated or facing financial or emotional crisis were supported and given the help they required.

*"They are wanting to bring the community together."* Rural QLD

*"They are our 'Angels' & we would not be able to deliver the services we do to assist the community without their help."* Rural VIC

Where they were **recruited**, it was noted that **younger volunteers tended to have more energy and drive and could bring a new set of skills** to the organisation that previous volunteers lacked. However, this is tempered by the fact that **many of them were unwilling to take on leadership roles**, suggesting that succession planning for many groups that utilise a volunteer base is still a few years away at best.

*"The incidental volunteering has decreased. Only the committed and regular volunteers. Increases pressure on the volunteers left."* Rural VIC

*"The number of every day people needing help from us & others letting us know some are too proud to put their hand up for help. Every day we receive many calls from people not only down on their luck - they are depressed, angry & they hear along the grapevine that we may be able to help them. We are very lucky to have big hearted supporters who have helped... if it was not for everyone helping, this country would be much worse off."* Regional NSW

## Staff Capacity: Too Many or Not Enough

Over the last 18 months, many community organisations have found that staff are working longer hours to meet demand. Others, however, have had to reduce staff hours as a result of event cancellations and decreasing revenues.

In contrast to findings for volunteers, employers in community organisations are more likely to have increased staff hours to meet demand (31%), than to have had to reduce their hours (22%). Those who had increased their hours were either needing to meet increased demand from the public, or were trying to meet the same level of demand with fewer resources, largely due to reduced volunteer availability as a result of COVID-19 restrictions.

Larger organisations, with a turnover of more than \$1 million were significantly more likely to have tried to recruit new staff (37%) than those with a turnover of \$50,000-\$250,000 (6%) or less than \$50,000 (3%).

For those who had their hours reduced, comments reflected that this was largely due to a decrease in demand for the type of service provided, or a decrease in funding due to COVID-19 restrictions. Some had pivoted to having volunteers undertake some tasks to ensure basic services could be maintained, but others had been forced to close and reduce staff wages. Organisations with an arts / culture focus were significantly more likely than others to have reduced staff wages (36%).

### Impact on Staff Capacity



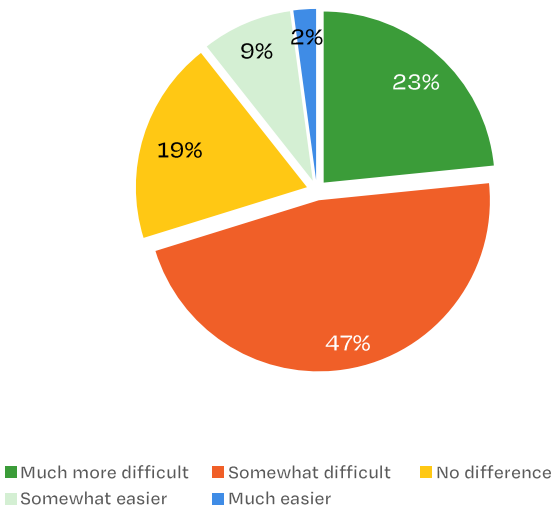
# Most community organisations who have tried to recruit staff have found it more difficult.

Of those organisations who had tried to recruit employees over the last 18 months, most (70%) indicated that it had been **more difficult than previously**, with only 11% finding it easier.

Those who found it more difficult to recruit employees noted that they found it particularly **hard to find local talent** with the right skill set to meet their needs, saying “small rural towns like us have limited expertise to call upon locally” and “finding experienced staff is harder than ever”. Some added that travel restrictions had further hindered this process, with candidates generally unwilling to permanently move to their locality and now unable to travel for work.

Those few who **found it easier** to recruit noted that it was **largely because people were able to work from home**, or (in a very few cases) were willing to relocate to the region for the role.

Staff Attraction & Retention  
Last 18 Months



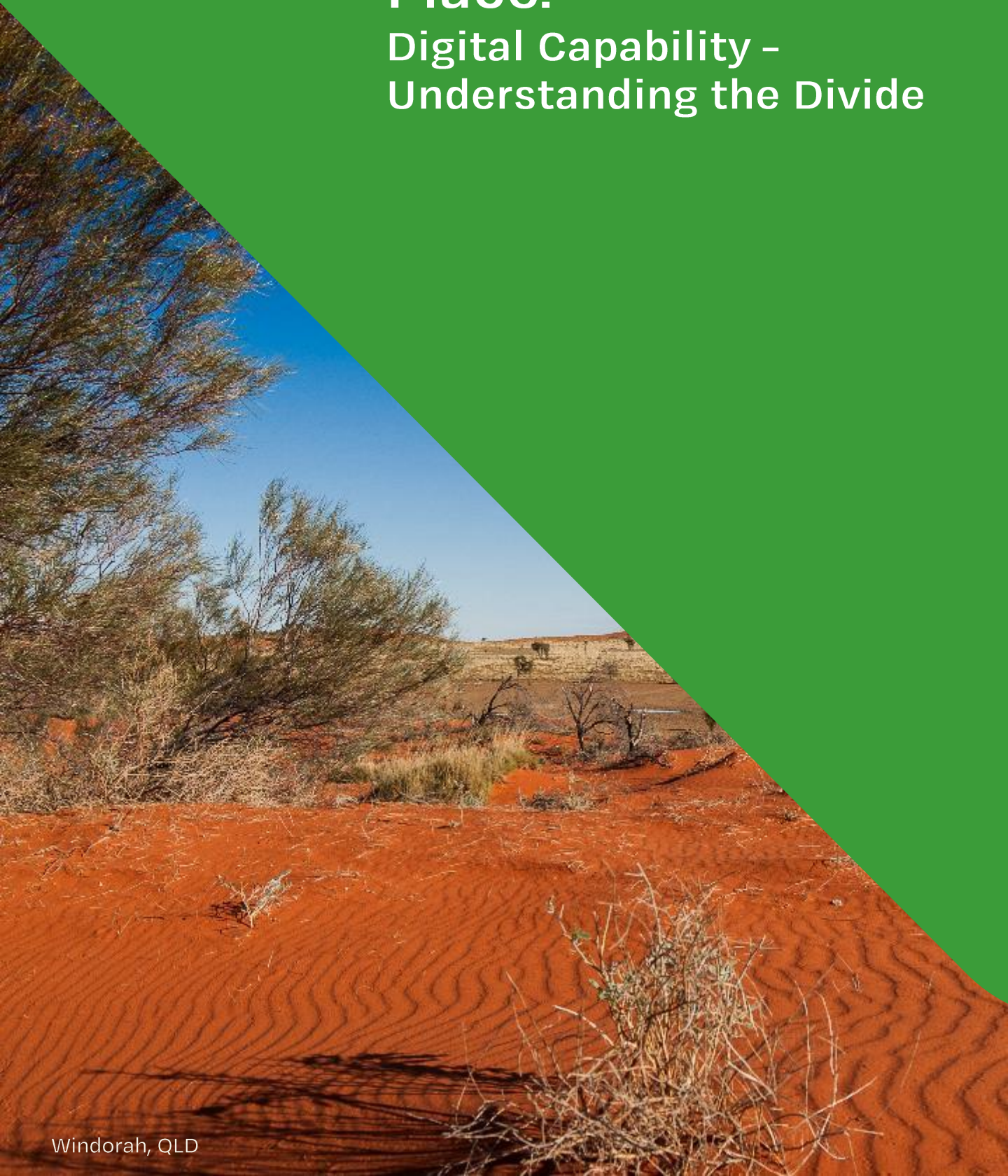
Q: Compared to 18 months ago, how difficult has it been to attract and retain staff?  
Base: Organisations who had tried to recruit staff n=47



“We have a lack of skilled workers in our region. Skilled migration has decreased due to borders closing. There are less people applying for jobs.” Regional NSW



# Place: Digital Capability – Understanding the Divide



# Understanding the Digital Divide

A number of respondents made particular mention of the divide between metropolitan areas and remote, rural and regional areas around digital access.

The most pressing difference, which “government and other funding bodies often struggle to understand” is that many remote, rural and regional areas of Australia have **highly unreliable internet** coverage. With many metropolitan organisations moving their business online, **community organisations in rural Australia are feeling “forgotten” and “left behind”**. This is creating a strong digital divide, and has meant that the methods of maintaining social connection in metropolitan areas are simply not available to those in more regional or remote areas across Australia.

Largely because of the **poor internet connectivity** in many parts of rural and remote areas, there is a **reluctance from locals to take up digital methods of communication**. Some respondents spoke about the “futility” of such an effort for their organisation, when **even though their centre of operations might have internet, “our volunteers and the community we help do not”**. With people living many kilometres away from the town centre, the topography of the interceding land often means that internet simply isn't available at individual residences and farms. People don't want to invest in the hardware required to “move online” if they aren't going to be able to use it anyway.

**Cost** impacts were a **major contributor** in decisions to move online. Organisations with higher revenue generally had greater disposable income that could be utilised for improving digital access.

Those with a **lower turnover** were far more likely to “struggle to meet operational costs, let alone have money to spend on technology”. They were **more reliant on volunteers** using their own devices to meet organisational needs, rather than funding it as a business.

Where digital methods of communication were used, it was largely passive, such as email and social media. They tended to be used as an adjunct to, rather than a replacement of more traditional methods, which were seen as more “tried and true” and “preferred, particularly with older members” of their communities.

However, recognising the need to do something different to continue to work in these times of social isolation, many community organisations had tried to make some investment in digital technology. Where investments had been made, they were largely in providing hardware, such as new laptops, computers or tablets to enable them to start or make it easier to digitise important documents. Smaller organisations in particular indicated that more funding was needed to help keep this going.

In the future, people felt that without better internet coverage little else would change in their use of technology beyond upgrading hardware. They want government bodies to understand these issues and work to fix them for the whole community, not just for their organisation.



Injalak Arts, Gunbalanya, NT  
Photo credit Alex Ressel



# The Digital Capabilities of Remote, Rural and Regional Australia

In total, three in 10 respondents rated their **internet connection as being 'extremely reliable'**. This rose to 37% among those in regional cities, and dropped to 23% and 21% for those in rural and remote areas respectively.

Overall, 42% rated their internet as being 'somewhat reliable', mainly those in regional and rural areas.

Around one in five (18%) rated internet access as 'somewhat unreliable', with **those in remote areas significantly more likely** to say their access was somewhat unreliable (36%) than their rural and regional counterparts. One in 20 indicated that they either had **no access** to the internet, or had 'extremely unreliable' (6%) access.

Compared with others, community organisations with a **turnover of less than \$50,000** were **significantly more likely to have no access to the internet** (8%), compared with only 2% of those with a turnover of \$50,000-\$250,000. All organisations with a turnover of more than \$250,000 had access to the internet.

All organisations who employ staff had internet access, whereas **8% of volunteer-only organisations indicated that they did not have access**. In addition, volunteer-only organisations were much less likely to have extremely reliable internet (25%) than those with employees (34%).

These results suggest that overall internet access may be patchy, however, it is important to remember that they are referring to internet access for the community organisation, which is usually located in a town centre. Respondents commented that for many of these organisations, particularly those in rural and remote areas, the reliability of the internet is considerably lower at individuals' homes or farms.

For some organisations, where they do not provide direct face-to-face services to clients (such as maintenance committees) this only impacts their internal functions. With communication using platforms such as Zoom being untenable for many organisations, board meetings and communication with volunteers needs to be over the phone. It's cumbersome in some instances, but they are **"persevering"**.

For organisations that provide critical support such as managing mental health issues or during instances of domestic violence, not being able to meet face-to-face **"can be crippling"**. While the organisation may have internet access, those they help often do not. Even telehealth appointments can be hard for the most remote areas, where **"telephone reception is patchy at best"**.

Q: How reliable is access to the internet for your organisation? Base: All respondents n=638



29%  
only three in 10  
organisations  
rate their  
internet access  
as 'extremely  
reliable'.



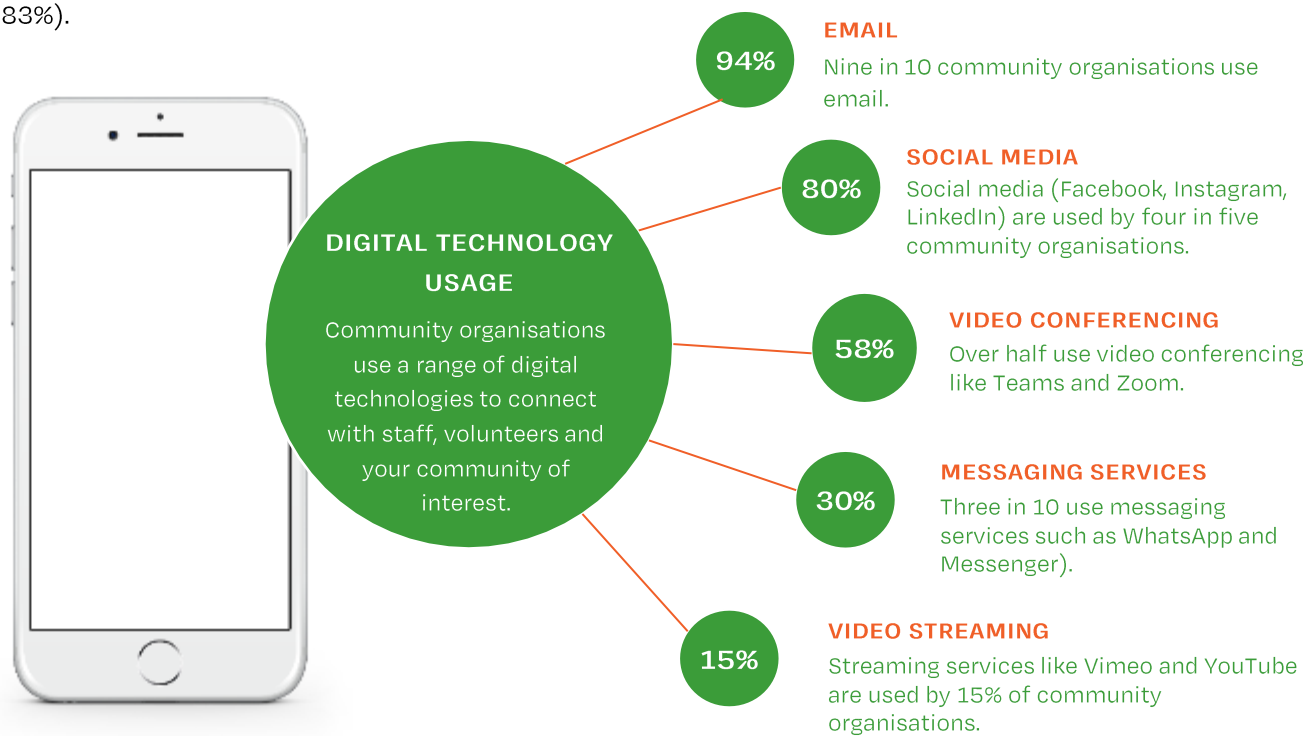
# Digital Service Usage

Most community organisations use passive methods of mass communication, such as **email and social media**. Given the high proportion using these methods, it is highly likely that they were already heavily in use prior to the beginning of 2020.

A little under three in five (58%) were using **video conferencing services such as MS Teams and Zoom**. Video conferencing services have almost become the “**new normal**” for communication for **many metropolitan-based organisations** over this time. However, the lower uptake of this platform in remote, rural and regional communities is likely a reflection of the fact that many of these community organisations do not have reliable enough internet access – which is essential for effective use of a video conferencing system. This is in fact reflected in the results, with 67% of those in regional cities indicating a use of video conferring, compared with 57% in remote and 51% in rural areas.

In general, volunteer-only organisations were significantly less likely to be using most forms of digital technology than were their counterparts with paid employees, with the largest difference being in their use of video conferencing (41% vs. 83%).

While email is the most common way community organisations connect with staff, volunteers and their communities, social media is also widely used.



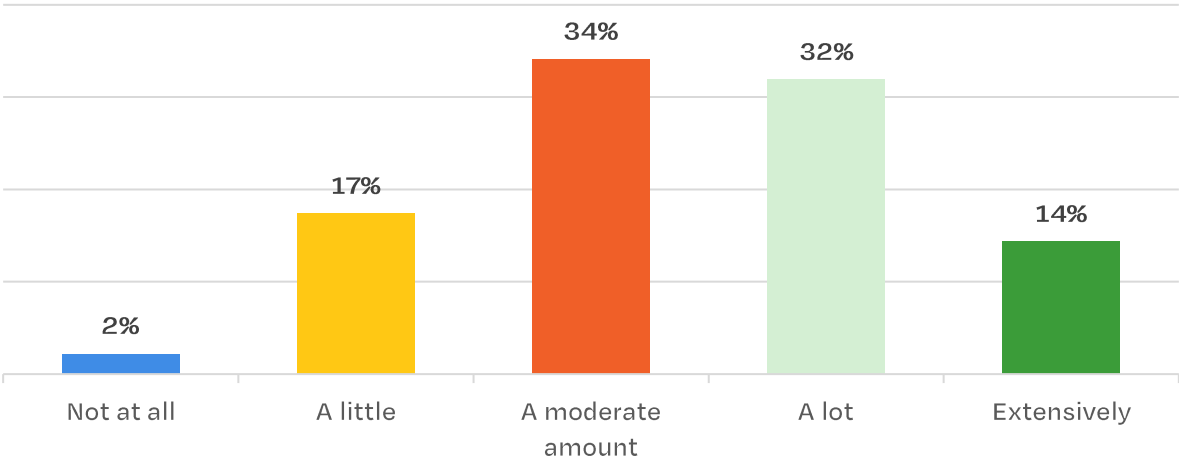
Digital Technology Used	TOTAL	<\$50,000	\$50,000- <\$250,000	\$250,000- <\$1M	>\$1M
Email (Gmail, outlook etc.)	94%	94%	94%	93%	100%
Social media (Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, etc.)	80%	74%	91%	90%	89%
Video conferencing (MS Teams, Zoom, etc.)	58%	42%	59%	90%	98%
Messaging services (WhatsApp, Messenger etc.)	30%	30%	32%	23%	30%
Video streaming sites (YouTube, Vimeo, etc.)	15%	7%	15%	24%	44%
Team management tools (Asana, Trello, etc.)	7%	4%	6%	8%	26%
E-commerce to sell products and services	5%	3%	10%	8%	7%
Podcasts	5%	2%	7%	6%	13%
Board portals	4%	1%	2%	6%	19%
Other	8%	11%	4%	6%	4%

Results significantly higher / lower than average

While use of **email and messaging services** were consistent across all organisations, there was considerable **divide in use of other forms of digital technology by companies with higher and lower turnover**. The most telling difference was in the use of **video conferencing** systems, which were used by 98% of those with a turnover of \$1 million or more, compared with 42% of those with a turnover of less than \$50,000.

Unsurprisingly, given the low reliability of internet in remote and rural areas, there remains a reliance on more **traditional methods of communication**, with a little under half (46%) of respondents indicating that they use traditional methods either “a lot” or “extensively”. This was relatively consistent across all organisations, even those with a much higher use of digital technology. Only environmentally focused organisations were more likely to say they do not use traditional communication methods at all (10%).

### Use of traditional communication methods



Q: What type of digital technology do you use to help you connect to staff, volunteers, your community of interest and to deliver your services?  
 Q: To what extent does your organisation rely on traditional communication methods, such as telephone, face-to-face, mail and paper?  
 Base: All respondents n=638

Increasing digital communication methods are being used as an adjunct to traditional methods of communication, rather than a replacement.

There has been a **shift towards digital communication**, with over two thirds (67%) indicating they are using digital methods of communication **more now than they were 18 months ago**. However, they are being used more as an adjunct to traditional communication methods than as a replacement.

The biggest shifts towards digital were among Victorians (72%), organisations with employees (84%), and those with an annual turnover of \$1 million or more (94%). By contrast, South Australians (52%), volunteer-based organisations (45%), and those with an annual turnover of less than \$50,000 (46%) were most likely to indicate that they have not changed their use of digital communication over the past 18 months.

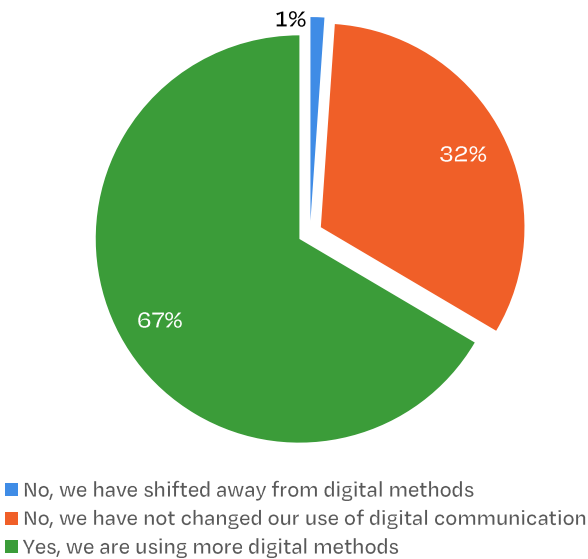
When looking at the use of **digital technology** as a **tool** to help run their organisation, and not just for communication, 60% of organisations indicated that they were using digital technology more now than they were 18 months ago. A little under two in five (38%) indicated their use of digital technology had not changed, and 2% indicated that it had decreased.

Again, **the increased use of digital technology was highest among Victorians (66%) and lowest for those from South Australia (35%)** who were most likely to feel their usage had stayed the same (61%). Regional towns (66%) and those with a turnover of \$1 million or more (89%) were most likely to have increased their use of digital technology, with rural areas (43%) and those with a turnover of less than \$50,000 (54%) most likely to have stayed the same.

60%

increased use of digital technology to run their organisations over the last 18 months.

Shift Towards Digital Communication Last 18 Months



Q. In the past 18 months, has your organisation shifted more towards digital methods of communication?  
Q. In the last 18 months, has the level of digital technology / services you use to run your organisation and / or provide your services changed?  
Base: All respondents n=638

# Investment in Building the Digital Capability of Community Organisations

Less than half of all respondents indicated that they had already, or planned to, invest in digital technology in the next 6 months.

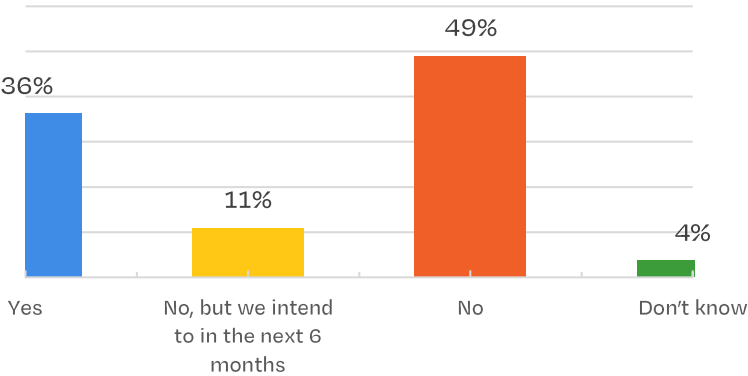
Investment in digital technology tended to increase with revenue; organisations with turnovers of less than \$50,000 (20%) were significantly less likely to have invested in digital technology, compared with 46% of those with a turnover of between \$50,000-\$250,000, 65% of those with a turnover between \$250,000-\$1 million and 74% of those with a turnover of over \$1 million per annum last financial year. Sport-based (73%) and volunteer-managed (68%) organisations were significantly more likely than others to say that they have not invested in digital technology.

The most common form of technology invested in were hardware such as laptops, computers and/or tablets (62%), website improvements (60%) and software (52%). Half had also invested in social networking (50%). Organisations with a turnover of \$1 million or more were significantly more likely to have invested in computers (82%), software (70%), smart phones (45%) and internet capacity (43%). Those with a turnover of less than \$50,000 were the least likely to have invested in software (38%), instead relying on programs that are freely available.

Organisations with paid employees were generally more likely to have invested in digital technology than those led by volunteers.

Less than half of all organisations have, or intend to, invest in training on how to use relevant technology (47%).

Investment in digital technology



36% of organisations have invested in digital technology due to recent events

Investments in relation to Digital Technology	Proportion
Laptops / computers / tablets	62%
Website improvements	60%
Software (Cloud computing, Office 365 / other licences or subscriptions, etc.)	52%
Social Networking (e.g. Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn)	50%
Training in how to use relevant technology	47%
Internet bandwidth / capacity	27%
Smart phones	23%
Other	13%

Q. Has your organisation invested in digital technology as a result of recent events?  
Q. What digital technology have you / will you invest in?  
Base: All respondents n=638 / organisation has invested in digital technology n=302



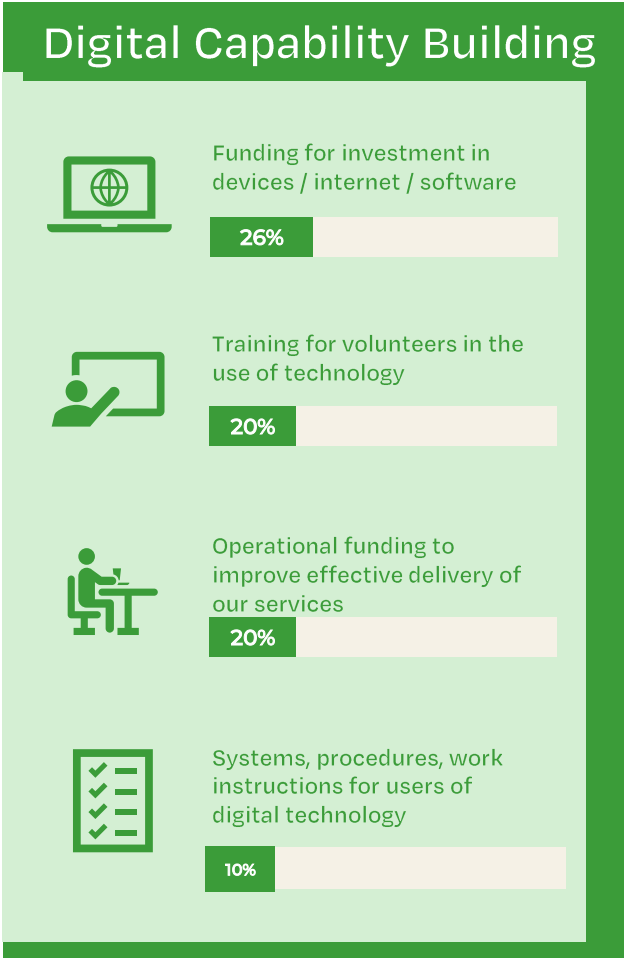
When asked to identify which one key area their organisation **needed to improve** its use or competency in with respect to digital technology, the most commonly identified areas were investment funding for hardware and software (26%) or operational funding to **improve service delivery** (20%).

Rural-based organisations were significantly more likely than others to indicate **a need for investment funding** (33%). **Operational funding** was most important to organisations with an **annual turnover of \$250,000 or more** (29%).

There was a higher need for training volunteers (20%) than staff (7%). **Volunteer** training was **most important** for organisations with a turnover of less than \$50,000 (27%), those working in community development (30%) and, unsurprisingly, those run only by volunteers (28%).

Around one in 10 indicated that they **needed systems, procedures and work instructions** or access to **technical support** (8%). Organisations based in regional cities were the **most likely to identify a need for systems and instructions** (14%).

Of the 9% of respondents who provided an 'other' answer, they most commonly identified a desire for **better internet** connectivity.



*“Better services from national networks such as mobile coverage, better speeds. Network services are appalling in our electorate, partly due to topography.”*

Regional NSW



Brophy Family and Youth Services, Warrnambool, VIC

## Despite digital technology becoming more widespread in metropolitan regions, a number of key limitations are preventing higher uptake in remote, rural and regional areas.

### Poor connectivity

The major issue impacting on community organisations operating in remote, rural and regional areas relates to **poor connectivity and internet access** in many areas. Respondents noted that connectivity is often **'patchy'** or simply does not work due to topography. As one rural-based respondent noted: "The NBN has been rolled out in our region, but is wireless, and as most people live in valleys, do not have reception. It is useless for the majority who live here."

*"A lot of Aboriginal people living in remote and outlying areas find it difficult to use digital communications. Wi-Fi access is a problem."* Regional NSW

*"Access = satellite - as Telstra is 99% unreliable for internet out here - have no computer system - only digital tech is from members' phones and landline phone and satellite NBN from Secretary's home 12 km from Shed. The 'galah' session still works well out here!"* Remote NSW

*"Access to digital technology varies across our service region. Some family farming businesses have good access and others have close to none or none that is reliable, e.g. even downloading a pdf can be problematic in dropping out..."* Regional VIC

*"Being rurally located is limiting access to digital connectivity. It feels like other centres often don't understand just how limited we are in regional communities in regard to connectivity and options for connectivity."* Regional NSW

*"Internet bandwidth is very limited, and internet is unreliable in our area..."* Remote WA

### Access to hardware is cost prohibitive

In addition to **connectivity issues** (or possibly because of it), getting **access to the hardware required** to use digital technology is **cost prohibitive** for many community organisations. Many "have to use private devices and cloud storage / software packages that our volunteers have paid for themselves because we have been unable to secure funding to pay for these items. We need them to keep going..."

Funding obtained through grants **rarely allows for upgrades to technology**. Instead, these funds often come from fundraising activities. However, **COVID-19 restrictions** have meant that they are **unable to fundraise** using traditional methods to get money for technology, which they need to be able to continue to operate and fundraise during lockdown. It's an unfortunate catch-22.

*"When the opportunity arises, we try and apply for grant funding to update and/or purchase new digital technology. More computers are required for the newer and younger volunteers."* – Rural VIC

*"We need to invest in digital technologies, but our lack of access to fundraising opportunities in a disaster-affected community limits our capacity to do so."* Rural NSW

*"It's something we can't fund right now but is needed."* Regional QLD

## Slow uptake of digital technology within the community

In many respects, the combination of poor connectivity and cost-prohibitive hardware has led to strong reluctance among the community to move to digital communication or use other forms of digital technology. There is a **"lack of interest"** in "getting onboard" with digital technology and digital communication. People **prefer more traditional methods**, not necessarily because of a reluctance to change but because of **fear that they would "miss connecting with many of their members"** due to others not being connected.

*"It is difficult because a lot of our clients are not confident with the use of digital technology, so for us to move some of our activities online is not an option, which is unfortunate."* Rural VIC

*"Because we have many older volunteers, they're not interested in accessing digital technology, and we are just grateful that they volunteer with us."* Rural VIC

*"As most of our volunteers are over 70, the use of digital technology is not seen as a necessary priority; we are endeavoring to change this, but don't hold out a lot of hope that it will be successful."* Regional NSW

## More training in how to use digital technology required

Where **increasing the use of digital technology** is viable, many respondents noted that they and/or their volunteers need **more training** in how to use it effectively to meet their needs.

*"Most of our volunteers are retired, some do not want to be involved, others are hesitant, doubting their own ability. This requires additional time in training & encouragement."* Rural NSW

*"Older members find it difficult to operate smart phones & computers. Some rely on hard copy communications, e.g. newsletters."* Regional SA

*"Our volunteers see the need for training but are hard to get motivated to do it, as for many it will only help in their volunteering work not their income producing work as they see it."* Remote VIC

*"Support and training would be huge in making a difference. We have invested in multiple platforms over the past 18 months but still need support to operate and integrate."* Remote NSW

## Technology being used more by some, but seen as inappropriate by others

Other themes raised by some respondents related to the fact that digital technology was being used more and more in their organisations, and has become essential for service delivery, particularly over the last two years. However, many were still **reliant on using free technology and services**, or on **hardware owned by volunteers themselves** due to cost limitations. Finally, a portion of respondents indicated that they thought digital communication or technology was **not appropriate** or **lacked the personal** connection essential for the type of work their community organisation undertook.

# Future Outlook: Building Stronger Community Organisations





# Building Stronger Community Organisations

In general, **smaller community organisations** tend to be funded through monies raised via **fundraising events**. By contrast, **larger organisations** are mostly funded by **government and philanthropic grants**.

Subsequently, smaller organisations were **hit harder by lockdowns** and an inability to raise funds in their communities via traditional methods. Being forced to **cancel or postpone fundraising events** has had a **"crippling"** effect on some organisations and on the wider communities they traditionally serve. For some, they **"don't qualify for JobKeeper"** and **"don't fit the requirements"** for many funding grants, making it hard to meet their ongoing costs.

These organisations want to see a **change in grant funding applications** to allow coverage of operational costs, not just specific projects, particularly when those projects are unable to continue during lockdowns.

For other organisations, there was a **strong desire to see a change in funding models** to allow for **"long-term funding"**. Some felt that short-term grant funding made it hard for them to **"achieve long-term change"** in their communities, as they were **"stuck in a 6 month funding cycle"**. They want funding that focuses more on the people than the project, and allows them to pursue longer goals, noting **"we need longer funding, five years not six months. Real change takes time."**

However, recognising that a change in funding models is unlikely to happen in the short term at least, community organisations were also hoping for **support or training in the administration and governance** of their organisations. They want to know **"how to use their funds more effectively"** and how to **"manage their organisations for efficiency."**

They generally understood what they were trying to achieve internally, but found it hard to get financial support for their long-term goals. They therefore wanted to know how to better manage their organisations so that they didn't need to rely on external funding to the same extent.

In recognition of the fact that many are suffering financially at the moment, and are likely to be so for a while, community organisations wanted to build partnerships and collaborations with other organisations **willing to offer and share "in-kind support"**; thereby reducing the **"financial burden"** and allowing groups to **"work together to achieve shared aims"** to **"better their communities"**.

Q. Which of the following has your community experienced in the past 18 months?  
Base: All respondents n=638



# Sources of Funding, Decision-making and Governance

The vast majority of community organisations are incorporated associations. Around three in five are ACNC registered, and over half were funded by community events and fundraisers (54%) and/or project based government grants (53%).

Organisations with an annual turnover of less than \$50,000 per year were predominantly funded by income from community events and fundraising activities (60%) or membership fees (51%), and were less likely to receive project-based grants from government (46%) or philanthropic bodies (27%).

Highlighting the calls from many smaller organisations for consideration of long-term grants and funding, ongoing funding from government (70%) and philanthropic bodies (13%) is mainly only available to the very large community organisations, those with revenues over \$1 million. Only 22% of those with revenue between \$50,000 and \$250,000 receive ongoing government funding.

Primary Source of Funding	Total	<\$50,000	\$50,000-\$250,000	\$250,000 - <\$1M	>\$1M
Income from community events and fundraising	54%	60%	62%	39%	37%
Project-based government grants	53%	46%	60%	70%	78%
Membership fees	44%	51%	54%	28%	13%
Through donations from our community	43%	45%	49%	42%	30%
Project-based grants from philanthropic organisations	34%	27%	34%	48%	56%
Income from our products / fee-for-services	31%	25%	36%	49%	46%
Through donations from the public	26%	23%	30%	21%	37%
Ongoing funding from government	23%	5%	22%	48%	70%
Corporate / business sponsorship	16%	13%	23%	18%	20%
Ongoing funding from philanthropic organisations	4%	1%	4%	8%	13%
Some other way	8%	10%	6%	1%	7%

Significantly higher / lower than average

Positively, most organisations have enough authority to manage their organisation, and believe they have the appropriate governance systems in place to ensure they can manage the organisation well.

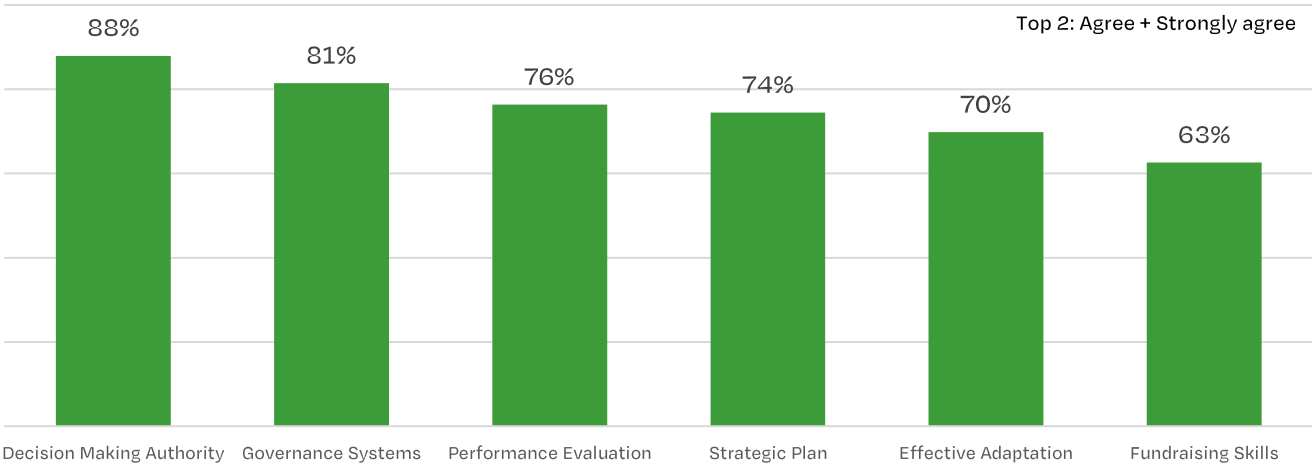
More than four in five respondents indicated that they had enough **authority to manage their community organisation** (86%) and an **appropriate governance system in place** to manage their organisation well (81%).

Organisations in **regional** cities were significantly **less likely** than rural and remote communities to agree that they had the **necessary skills to fundraise** within their communities (53%), as did those working with an environmental focus (37%) and those with paid employees (53%).

Organisations with a turnover of \$250,000 or more per annum were significantly more likely than others to agree that they have **appropriate governance** systems (90%), have a **strategic plan** (90%), undertake **program evaluation** (88%), and are **adaptive** (85%).

However, they were significantly less likely than others to feel they have the necessary **skills to fundraise effectively** within their community (44%). This is somewhat unsurprising given that the majority of their funds come from government and philanthropic grants, rather than from fundraising activities.

**Sports-focused** organisations were the least likely to agree they **adapted to recent changes effectively** (44%), which is likely a reflection of the fact that many sports are dependent on face-to-face contact to exist. For the most part, other than fundraising capability, organisations with **paid staff** were **significantly more likely** than **volunteer-led** organisations to agree with all other elements related to the **administration of their organisation**.



	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
Our Board / Committee of Management / Director gives me / the organisation enough authority to manage the business	1%	4%	7%	37%	50%
We have appropriate governance systems / management structures in place to manage our community organisation well	3%	6%	9%	37%	45%
Our organisation evaluates its programs to ensure that they are achieving the desired outcomes	2%	7%	15%	44%	32%
We have a strategic plan, and know where we are taking our organisation	3%	8%	15%	36%	39%
Our organisation has been able to effectively adapt in response to recent events affecting our community	3%	10%	17%	43%	27%
We have the necessary skills to fundraise effectively within our community	3%	14%	21%	41%	21%

Excludes 'Don't know' responses

# Lack of funding and not enough volunteers or employees are the primary constraints to achieving organisational objectives.

## More funding

When asked to identify the **constraints or skills gaps** that were preventing them from achieving their goals, around a quarter of all respondents indicated that they needed assistance with **funding**. In particular, organisations were wanting ongoing funding to break the cycle of constant grant writing, which they saw as taking them away from their key reason for existing.

*"...Our biggest constraint is operational funding and lack of assets. We need a better building for our offices, and ongoing sources of income so we're not wholly reliant on government. We have employed a contractor to assist us with grant writing and social enterprise modelling, which was funded by an FRRR grant (for which we're very grateful) but we could do with a full-time person to do this work." Regional NSW*

*"The biggest barrier to achieving our goals is a lack of secure, recurrent funding." Rural VIC*

*"Recurrent funding for a community development officer." Remote NSW*

## More staff, volunteers and/or their time

Many respondents also indicated a desire for **more human resources** (either **employees or volunteers**), or for existing resources to have more time to dedicate to their organisation. For many organisations, their volunteers not only have other paid jobs, but also volunteer with other organisations as well, limiting their time even further.

*"Apart from more members needed, we have been struggling for years to find a treasurer - all those in town who are prepared to volunteer are already in half a dozen organisations, the same as all of us on this committee." Regional WA*

*"We have no paid staff. The organisation relies on one or two volunteers who have community management skills and the workload is not spread. We could do with some paid staff who could address issues with the committee and instigate strategic planning." – Regional NSW*

*"Volunteers often short of time as most are farmers or work fulltime off-farm." Rural SA*

## Better digital technology and access, or support and training in their use

A number of respondents indicated that they needed more in the way of digital technology. For some, this related to **access to digital technology**, including internet access, which is sporadic or non-existent in some locations. For others, it related to needing to have relevant **hardware**. For others it related to needing **training and support** in how to use digital technology more effectively.

*"We also need to digitise all our records which are currently paper based. To do this, we need more digital technology and the training to show our volunteers how to use it." Regional NSW*

*"Training in the benefits of moving to online technology. Upskilling of volunteers to meet current and future demand of running events. More funding for purchase of basic IT equipment to embrace future technology." Rural VIC*

*"Lack of internet access means a lack of research and current information. Technology infrastructure and training. Updating of website and better use of social media." Regional VIC*

*"Our organisation needs to develop on-line capacity in its hall and to train members to connect from home. Through services such as Zoom, members would be able to have a meeting from home and create a different dimension to its voluntary social activities. Zoom would mean the members are safe during COVID-19 lockdown and also they would not have to travel at night on a country road with kangaroos." Rural NSW*



## Other commonly suggested areas of need included:

- Assistance with the **management, administration and governance** of their organisation.

*"Desperately in need of governance training for our volunteer committee of management."* Regional NSW

- **Specialist training** of staff to help them deliver on their organisational **goals**. Alternatively, organisations wanted the opportunity to be able to employ someone to focus on administering specific projects.

*"A paid Secretary would be amazing!! to take the pressure off! And would also create a job for a remote person."*  
Remote NSW

- Assistance with **business development and marketing** to increase reach both locally and nationally.

*"We could use more expertise in marketing our services."* Regional VIC

- **Advocacy, support and partnerships** with other organisations and government departments. They wanted greater connections and trust, and less "red tape" in their dealings with others to ensure they get more better outcomes for their communities.

*"Removing political agendas from the committee and focus on delivering to the members."* Rural NSW

*"It would be great to have support from Local Govt, as other tourist attractions seem to have."* Rural VIC

- A clear **succession plan** (including engaging with younger volunteers).

*"Succession planning to ensure a flow of skilled volunteers to maintain the delivery of service."* Remote NSW

- Help with **grant writing** or **making the grant writing process easier** so that it doesn't require them to provide the same information each time. Other comments relating to grants included greater flexibility in how grant funding is used or how long funding would last for.

*"We take a lot of time applying for grants... we have the skill, however it feels inefficient as we just want to help improve the natural environment not answer repetitive questions... trying to flex to the grant's focus."* Rural VIC

*"We are dependent on Federal Govt environmental funding and we get very stressed when applying for funding in each political funding cycle. It's a nightmare!"* Regional TAS

*"Government grant funding needs to change. The processes and requirements to meet grant funding are unrealistic and not possible for small community organisations."* Rural NSW

- **Processes, systems and strategic plans** to help develop and achieve long-term goals.

*"It's not so much our organisation but strategic planning and lack of long-term vision is a real weaknesses right across the community."* Rural NSW

- **Better equipment or dedicated facilities** from which to operate.

*"More funds for our community garden; a visiting room for residents through COVID-19 restrictions; a bus to overcome community transportation issues."*  
Rural VIC

## Operational Costs

Half of all respondents say that funding providers place constraints on the amount their organisation can spend on operating costs.

Operating costs are a large drain on revenue, particularly for larger organisations that employ staff. At an **overall level**, **half of all respondents** indicated that **over 75% of their revenue** is allocated to **running their organisation**, with **28% of organisations using all of their revenue for running costs**.

Unsurprisingly, organisations with revenues of more than \$50,000 are significantly more likely to allocate **76-99% of their revenues to operating costs** (32%) than their smaller counterparts.

**Environmentally-focused organisations** were significantly more likely than other organisation types to say that **none of their revenues were directed towards running their operation**. Over a third of environmental organisations do not allocate any of their revenues to running the organisation, as do 17% of volunteer-led organisations.

Only three in 10 said **funding organisations did not impose limits on operational costs** – higher among volunteer-led organisations – and a further 19% did not know whether operating costs were capped under their arrangements.

58%

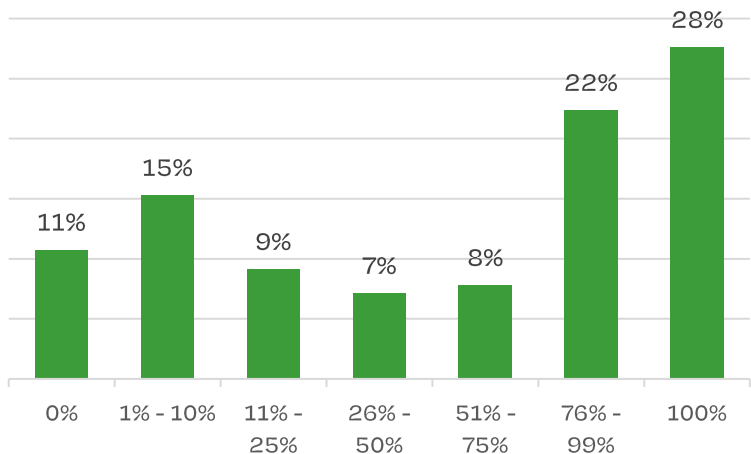
Average proportion of revenue allocated to running costs

51%

Say funding providers limit the amount they are able to spend on operational costs

Q: Do the organisations that provide you with funding limit the amount you are able to spend on running your organisation?

Organisational Running Costs, % of Revenue



Q: Approximately what proportion of your revenue is allocated to running the organisation?

NB: Don't know responses have been excluded.

Base: All respondents n=638

While one-off grants, particularly for smaller organisations, do provide assistance, more flexibility in the use of funds would enable organisations to better meet the needs of their communities.

More than **four in five** respondents (83%) say that **one-off grants improve** their ability to **deliver their services effectively**. However, **79%** also agree that **more flexibility** in their funding would allow them to **better meet the needs** of their community.

In addition, although **nearly three quarters** of organisations agree that the **services** they provide are **well understood** by those who fund them, only **around half** are **able to influence decisions** that are made about their local area (52%), or agree that **funders listen** to them about issues affecting the community (**51%**). Only 45% agreed that funding organisations were open to discussing how funds could best be used within the community.

**Smaller organisations** (<\$50,000) and those with **only volunteers** were **more likely** to agree that **one-off grants improve** their ability to deliver services (**84%** and **90%** respectively) and facilitate their ability to deliver long-term sustainable solutions and services to their community (71% and 77% respectively).

**Volunteer-led** organisations were **less likely** than those with employees to **need more flexibility** in their funding (74% vs. 86%).

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	Top 2
One-off grants improve our ability to deliver our services effectively	3%	7%	7%	41%	41%	83%
More flexibility in our funding would allow us to better meet the needs of our community	1%	3%	17%	32%	47%	79%
Our organisation and the service(s) we provide are well understood among those who help to fund us	2%	10%	14%	47%	27%	74%
One-off grants facilitate our ability to provide long-term, sustainable solutions and services to our community	6%	15%	11%	32%	36%	68%
We are able to influence decisions that are made about our local area	5%	16%	27%	35%	17%	52%
Our funding allows us to adapt and meet new challenges as they arise in our community	7%	13%	29%	37%	14%	51%
Our funders listen to, and consult us about issues affecting our community, and our community of interest	4%	18%	27%	37%	14%	50%
Funders are open to conversations about how funds could best be used in our community	4%	18%	33%	32%	13%	45%

\*Excludes Don't know responses. Small differences due to rounding

When asked if they were able to ask for one change in the way organisations provided funding to them, community organisations were very vocal! Many want a reduction in 'red tape' and a more efficient grant application process.

### More efficient grant application process

The **most common suggestion** was for an **easier and more efficient grant application process**. The amount of "red tape" required to apply for funding was often seen as a **significant barrier**. Some respondents indicated that their organisation had looked to appoint a professional grant writer to assist them in writing grant applications, because they found the process and requirements laborious and confusing. Others indicated that the process often took so long, that by the time they got funding, their circumstances had changed.

*"When we get quotes for a project, by the time we get funding the quotes are outdated."* Rural SA

*"A simplified and streamlined application process."* Remote NSW

*"Applying for grants is VERY time consuming & as we are all volunteers & not generally skilled in this area, it is quite daunting. We have spent many days / weeks applying for grants over the years, only to be unsuccessful, with no feedback on why we were unsuccessful. It's very hard to find volunteers who are willing to commit the time & effort & skills required to lodge a grant application."* Rural VIC

### Flexibility in how funds are used

Many also indicated that they would like greater flexibility in how they use their funding, because the "one size fits all funding framework" did not enable them to achieve their local needs and priorities. This is especially true for those in remote locations.

*"We need community-led, place-based planning with funds allocated to support the local priorities and employment in rural and remote towns."* Remote NSW

*"To allow us to be more flexible in how we achieve the aim of the funding... as often the gap between the application writing and actually getting the funding is so long that the circumstances change."* Remote NSW

*"Funding bodies usually have a criteria the organisations need to adhere to, however one change to implement would be to have a wider understanding of why the organisation is requesting the certain item - it may fit the criteria in the organisation's understanding, but the funding body may not have the same view and believe the item may not fit the criteria."* Rural QLD

### Longer or ongoing funding

Having funding provided over a longer timeframe is also a common request. Many respondents spoke about "grant fatigue" and how short-term funding made it hard for them to implement real changes in their community. There were also comments that the process is "exhausting" and "frustrating", and they feel as though their funders are unwilling to take a long-term view.

*"A longer time to implement the activities the grants are for, as with COVID-19, and other disaster scenarios, and also just being rural and having to secure trades / services from regional centres a long way away, always takes longer..."* Rural QLD

*"Certainly, about future funding to allow the organisation to plan."* Remote SA

*"Provide larger sums of money that recur for at least three years. Pilot after pilot and innovation after innovation is honestly exhausting. It takes time to do community work well."* Remote VIC



## Cover running costs

With an average of 58% of revenue allocated to operational costs, **respondents also called for funding to cover some of the cost of running their organisation.**

*"What about assistance with operating costs? Especially when shutdown and unable to cover costs."* Regional SA

*"We can only access funding that is project specific. There is no assistance to meet operating costs - to be able to be supported in this area would mean a big difference to the sustainability of the organisation and its volunteer base."* Rural VIC

*"We are grateful for funding but I think a small proportion should go towards overheads. Funders want value for money but it can leave organisations struggling to pay overheads. At least in our situation."* Regional NSW

*"Ongoing small income for admin and operation would allow us to provide much more broad and consistent programs to our community. 1 or 2 days funding a week would transform what we could achieve for our community."* Rural NSW

## Partnering with funding bodies

Taking a **more consultative, partnering approach** to funding and ensuring that funding is **targeted to specific circumstances** was also mentioned frequently. In particular, respondents were wanting to see funding that was **more people focused, rather than project focused** – with success criteria based on meeting people's needs, rather than implementing a particular program.

*"Invest in the people, not the idea or the product - allow innovation and ideation and approval processes to be funded and not just projects, which are often redundant by the time the funds are allocated. We apply for grants to meet the criteria, but we are increasingly frustrated with this process. It is one-off, piecemeal funding, which does not allow a five-year plan to be executed to its full potential. The Government and Local Councils are preventing innovation and progress and hiding behind paperwork."* Rural NSW

*"I would ask that it be more interpersonal. The funding that is driving the changes should be associated with people... not just money. I would love to see more connections with people, such as the funders attending the school with ideas and helping to implement the changes. Back to old school. Take away the money and get back to exchanging skills and support and services. Taking the time to connect, face-to-face."* Rural QLD

## More equitable, timely funding, with feedback when unsuccessful preferred

Other commonly nominated changes that respondents would like to see included ensuring that the funding would be **more targeted to match their needs**; that the **application process** to apply for funding would be **more fair, transparent and equitable**; and that the **entire process** of applying for funding (and getting a response) would be much **faster**.

A few respondents also indicated that they would benefit from **training on how to complete funding applications**, and/or would like some **feedback on why funding applications were unsuccessful**.

*"It's always tricky with grants because very few of them allow for the costs of 'keeping the doors open'. This is fine if you have a reliable revenue stream, but it means we don't go for some grants because delivering them would eat into our savings."* Regional QLD

An aerial photograph of a rural landscape, showing a small town or village with several buildings and a large area of dry, brownish vegetation. The sky is a clear, pale blue. A large, solid green shape, resembling a stylized 'C' or a large quotation mark, is overlaid on the right side of the image, framing the text.

”

*“Less red tape and an easier process to apply for funding - we're farmers, not office workers who have experience in grant writing... I'm not saying dumb it down; we are intelligent people with a different skill set... The other thing to note is that communities are traumatised and it's hard enough to get through each week without added responsibility and time needed to complete an application. We are exhausted... What if the government hired people to work with us and get the funding application and approval in a more direct way?”*

Rural NSW



In addition to organisational / administrative support, community organisations also wanted to see an increase in their volunteer numbers to ensure they would remain able to deliver on their goals into the future.

#### More volunteers; organisation's "lifeblood"

Outside of funding, respondents indicated that they needed **more human resources**, particularly volunteers. Volunteers are the "lifeblood" of many of these organisations, particularly in remote areas, and with not enough funding to support even a part-time paid employee, **having enough volunteers to ensure successful succession planning is critical**.

*"Access to community volunteers for input on the board as independent directors. Always difficult to find the best ways to reach the right people with the right skills."* Rural VIC

*"Increase in volunteers that have time to support local community initiatives. The community can at times be fragmented by access to facilities, public transport and education facilities."* Regional VIC

*"Some way of getting more volunteers or else funding to provide a paid employee to manage the organisation."* Regional WA

#### Governance and administrative support or training in these elements

Other common needs related to the **running of the organisation**. Most community organisations were started by locals who saw a need, rather than professional business managers, and many have boards and committees made up of people from a raft of different professions. Subsequently, there is often uncertainty around how to effectively manage an organisation to ensure its continued success. Support or **training in governance, management, administration, finance, marketing and technology** would be useful to help these organisations to become more self-sufficient, and make better use of the funds they receive.

*"Admin / financial - the volunteer secretary and treasurer roles are incredibly difficult to fill with suitably skilled and reliable people. It'd be a huge help if we could outsource or get external support with these."* Regional QLD

*"Expert advice and guidance on digital technologies; business planning; marketing; attracting and sustaining volunteers."* Regional VIC

*"Our participants feel that because they are volunteering, they cannot be subjected to legal oversight (i.e. feel above the law / regulation). Therefore, it will be good to ensure that there are some basic policies and procedures in place (e.g. codes of conduct, conflicts of interest, transparent decision making & financial acquittals)."* Rural SA



## Deeper partnerships, collaborations and in-kind support

Respondents want to **build real relationships and partnerships** with funders and other key stakeholders. They would like to work with people and organisations that have the same **passion** and want to see their goals met. They want these partnerships to **run deeper than simple transactions**, with organisations willing to offer in-kind support to help each other achieve their goals.

*"More meaningful consultative process with funding body."* Regional NSW

*"More of a focus on partnership and collaboration rather than transactional relationships (funder / provider)."* Regional VIC

*"Maybe a website where groups from regional Victoria could chat and support each other and exchange ideas and information on fundraising events. I think most country groups have a lot in common, and being able to share ideas with each other, and publicise each others' events would be beneficial to all."* Rural VIC

*"Connection to other donors to increase a network of supporters. Connection to in-kind donations (like frequent flyer miles to underwrite travels costs) etc."* Regional QLD

*"In-kind support from business and government."* Regional SA

## More recognition from government, promotion and infrastructure appreciated

Other elements that respondents considered to be important included:

- **Recognition:** Have more support and recognition from all levels of government about the goals they are trying to achieve. They want to be recognised for the essential role they play within their communities. They perform vital roles and want to be recognised and appreciated for this work, and not feel like they have to fight for recognition, particularly when applying for funding.
- **Marketing and promotion:** Some respondents felt that they would benefit from assistance with marketing and promoting their organisation to either increase membership, increase reach within their communities or attract more tourists to their region.
- **Infrastructure:** Respondents indicated that they would benefit from assistance with building and maintaining infrastructure. For some this largely related to capital equipment and building works, for others this related to technological infrastructure, including better access to the internet.



*"Facilitate learning communities and networks to help us challenge ourselves to be the best we can be for our communities. We know for us to get flourishing landscapes... we need flourishing communities with flourishing economies... At least partner with us and help us connect all the other good organisations helping in these areas, not keep us in silos etc."*

Regional QLD

Batemans Bay, NSW



# Methodology



Hannaford Club, Western Downs, QLD



# Methodology

## Survey Method and Length

The FRRR Heartbeat of Rural Australia project was a 30 minute online survey of Australians living in remote, rural and regional areas of the country who were members, volunteers or employees of not-for-profit community organisations.

The survey contained a mixture of closed and open questions. It was designed in collaboration between Survey Matters and FRRR.

## Survey Timing and Distribution

The survey was distributed by FRRR and their stakeholders via an open link between 30 August and 30 September 2021.

## Sample Composition and Screening

Ensuring that the sample, and thereby the results, accurately reflected the experiences and opinions of remote, rural and regional Australians, the survey contained some important screening questions.

It screened out anyone who was not a member, volunteer or employee of a community organisation. It then screened out any community organisations that were based in a capital city, or was a business or sector supplier to the region.

## Response Rate

Given the open nature of the survey and the stringent screening criteria, it is a testament to both the importance of this research, and the hard work of FRRR, that 638 completed responses were received from across a range of remote, rural and regional areas of Australia. The response sample provides 95% confidence that the results are within a +/-5% margin of error. This is considered a reliable indicator of response validity.

FRRR and Survey Matters sincerely thank everyone who participated in this survey.

We recognise that many of you are volunteers and took time out of your day to contribute to this research for everyone's collective benefit.

Your contribution is greatly appreciated.

# Glossary

Term	Definition
Community organisation	Throughout this report, the term 'community organisation' is used to mean any grassroots, not-for-profit community-led organisation that provides services to the communities in which they are based.
Remote, rural and regional	Areas that are outside of Australian capital cities. Respondents self-selected whether their community organisation was based in a regional city / town, rural or remote location. Unless otherwise specified, these terms are used interchangeably throughout the report to encompass all three areas.
Smaller organisations	The size of a community organisation has been determined by turnover. Smaller organisations have an annual turnover of less than \$50,000.
Larger organisations	The size of a community organisation has been determined by turnover. Larger organisations have an annual turnover of more than \$1 million.

# About Survey Matters

Survey Matters is the only research agency exclusively servicing the association, membership and non-profit sector. We offer member engagement and satisfaction surveys, association benchmarks, industry statistics and public opinion research.

Survey Matters has helped a wide range of associations understand their value proposition. We also work with associations to generate and build industry data and knowledge to support advocacy, promotion, industry development and marketing activities.

Our research provides the evidence to make better decisions, improve performance and increase value to members and stakeholders.

[www.surveymatters.com.au](http://www.surveymatters.com.au)

## Report prepared by:

**Rebecca Varley**

Senior Research Consultant

Survey Matters

E: [rvarley@surveymatters.com.au](mailto:rvarley@surveymatters.com.au)

T 61 3 9452 0101

**Brenda Mainland**

Co-founder & Director

Survey Matters

E: [bmainland@surveymatters.com.au](mailto:bmainland@surveymatters.com.au)

T 61 3 9452 0101

This report was commissioned by FRRR through The Xfactor Collective Foundation, as a collaboration with Survey Matters and Seer Data, with support from JAW Communications.

**THE XFACTOR  
COLLECTIVE  
FOUNDATION**

**survey matters.**

**Seer**  
Data & Analytics

**JAW**  
communications



# Thank you and keep in touch

[info@frrr.org.au](mailto:info@frrr.org.au)

[frrr.org.au](http://frrr.org.au)



followFRRR



FRRR\_oz



FRRR\_au



FRRRAustralia



foundation-for-rural-&-regional-renewal



**FRRR**  
Foundation for Rural  
Regional Renewal

Foundation for Rural & Regional Renewal  
on Dja Dja Wurrung Country

PO Box 41  
Bendigo VIC 3552

[info@frrr.org.au](mailto:info@frrr.org.au)  
Ph: 03 5430 2399  
[www.frrr.org.au](http://www.frrr.org.au)

ABN: 27 091 810 589