



Australian Government

Australian Government response to the Foreign Affairs,
Defence and Trade References Committee report:
National Volunteer Incentive Scheme (Climate Army)

June 2026

Introduction

On 26 August 2025, the Senate referred the National Volunteer Incentive Scheme (Climate Army) to the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee (the Committee) for inquiry and report by 6 November 2025. The inquiry was a re-referral of the inquiry on the same topic that lapsed at the end of the 47th Parliament, and the terms of reference remain unchanged in the 48th Parliament.

The terms of reference for the inquiry were:

The formation of a National Volunteer Incentive Scheme (Climate Army) to respond to the immediate aftermath of natural disasters in Australia, with particular reference to:

1. establishing targeted initiatives to encourage young people to participate in the National Volunteer Incentive Scheme (Climate Army);
2. exploring strategies to enhance volunteer engagement, including systems to recognise and compensate volunteers to promote satisfaction and positive culture;
3. integrating volunteer opportunities within educational institutions to increase student participation in volunteer organisations;
4. creating a nationally recognised qualification scheme that provides tangible benefits to volunteers and formally acknowledges their skills and contributions across sectors;
5. investigating whether there are appropriate laws and safeguards to protect the health and safety of volunteers;
6. the structure and governance of the National Volunteer Incentive Scheme (Climate Army);
7. comparison of relevant overseas models and best practices; and
8. any other related matters.

On 6 November 2025, the Committee tabled its report. The Australian Government thanks the Committee and the secretariat for the report, and everyone who contributed to the Inquiry.

The Government recognises the many Australians who volunteer, dedicating themselves to saving lives and supporting communities in the face of extreme weather and disasters. We value their contribution to Australia's preparedness, and their role in building Australia's national resilience.

The Government will continue to work collaboratively with state and territory governments to enhance volunteering arrangements across Australia. This is to support the volunteers who support our communities, and to maintain Australians' trust and confidence in the nation's disaster preparedness, response and recovery capabilities.

Recommendation 1:

The committee recommends that the Australian Government undertakes deeper consultation with the emergency response and broader volunteering sectors before any decisions about the feasibility, risks and benefits of establishing a national volunteer incentive scheme are made.

The Australian Government **notes** this recommendation.

The Australian Government acknowledges the importance of consultation in developing any strategies seeking to address challenges in attracting, supporting and retaining volunteers who serve communities facing extreme weather and disasters.

As many submissions to the Inquiry noted, establishing a national-level scheme to mobilise volunteers for disaster response would duplicate functions delivered by existing organisations at the national, state and local levels. The Australian Government supports working collaboratively with states and territories, who are responsible for many emergency services organisations that rely on volunteers within their jurisdictions, and in consultation with the non-government sector, to address the barriers and challenges specific to emergency volunteering.

This engagement is already underway. The Australian Government, together with state and territory governments is supporting the development of a National Emergency Volunteering Strategy, through the National Emergency Management Ministers' Meeting

The Minister for Emergency Management chairs the National Emergency Management Ministers' Meeting, which brings together emergency management portfolio ministers from all Australian jurisdictions, and the President of the Australian Local Government Association. Together their purpose is to drive national cooperation and a consistent approach to managing emergencies. Their focus is addressing long-term, strategic issues in disaster management and resilience, reporting to National Cabinet each year.

The draft National Emergency Volunteering Strategy is based on six priority areas identified through consultation as being vital to strengthening emergency volunteering across Australia. The six priority areas are: Training and Compliance; Incentives; Insurance and Protection; Disaster Funding; Honours and Awards; and Surge Capability. Many of these are consistent with issues canvassed by the Inquiry. The National Emergency Volunteering Strategy also considers the roles of volunteers beyond response, extending to those involved in prevention, preparedness, relief and recovery roles.

Consultation on the draft National Emergency Volunteering Strategy will continue in 2026.

Recommendation 2:

The committee recommends that the Australian Government avoid using the term 'Climate Army' if any type of a national volunteer incentive scheme is implemented in the future.

The Australian Government **agrees in principle** with this recommendation.

The Australian Government acknowledges the term 'Climate Army' is not supported by volunteers, as detailed in evidence to the Committee. The Government considers this military-style framing does not accurately capture the nature and spirit of emergency volunteering, nor is it an appropriate way to describe the diverse functions volunteers provide in an emergency context, including community relief and recovery.

Additional Recommendations

Recommendation 1:

Establish a National Volunteer Resilience Framework to coordinate training, safety, recognition and data across states, integrating with existing emergency services rather than duplicating them.

Recommendation 4:

Develop a nationally recognised credentialing system to provide portable qualifications in disaster response, safety and leadership, with recognition across education and employment sectors.

The Australian Government **agrees in principle** with recommendation 1 and **notes** Recommendation 4

Enhancing volunteer training, education, safety and recognition are among the six priority areas being addressed through the National Emergency Volunteering Strategy. This includes modernising training and compliance systems and supporting the development of portable skills. The Australian Government will work collaboratively with state and territory governments to support these initiatives.

These efforts will build on a strong foundation. Australia's Vocational Education and Training (VET) system provides nationally recognised training and is designed to support a range of national needs and priorities.

This includes the Public Safety Training Package (PUA) which provides nationally endorsed qualifications to support emergency prevention, preparedness, response and recovery capabilities, including units designed for public safety roles, such as volunteers in Firefighting and State Emergency Services. It contains nationally recognised training products, including endorsed training package qualifications, units of competency and skillsets that support the delivery and maintenance of contemporary knowledge and skills across the public safety industry-sector.

Public Skills Australia is responsible for the implementation and development of the Public Safety Training Package, including updates to ensure the responsiveness and relevance of training products. Public Skills Australia is one of 10 established Jobs and Skills Councils in Australia, funded by the Australian Government. Jobs and Skills Councils provide industry with a stronger, more strategic voice to ensure Australia's Vocational Education and Training sector delivers better outcomes for learners and employers. As a national network of industry owned and industry-led organisations, Jobs and Skills Councils provide strategic leadership in addressing skills and workforce challenges for their sectors. Public Skills Australia is the Jobs and Skills Council responsible for the

Public Safety and Government sector, including career and volunteer workforces within Fire and Emergency Services.

Public Skills Australia is currently finalising a Volunteer Leadership Research project focused on leadership training opportunities for non-operational emergency volunteer roles. The project is expected to produce recommendations regarding existing training products and assess whether additional training products are required to better support volunteer leadership.

Recommendation 2:

Undertake further consultation with young Australians about volunteering, with a focus on identifying the barriers to participation and the incentives and supports needed to encourage sustained involvement in disaster preparedness and response.

The Australian Government **agrees in principle** with this recommendation.

The Australian Government recognises young people's resilience, strength and capacity to lead positive change across Australia. In November 2025, Public Skills Australia, whose role is outlined in response to Additional Recommendations 1 and 4 above, released its 2025 Workforce Insights Report for Public Safety, covering Defence, Fire and Emergency Services, and Police. This report highlighted youth engagement and retention in volunteering as a key workforce challenge within the sector. In response, Public Skills Australia proposes to undertake further work in partnership with volunteer organisations to examine the factors influencing youth attraction, recruitment, and retention in the fire and emergency services context.

The Australian Government has implemented a Youth Engagement Model to give young people opportunity to engage on the policies and programs that impact them. The Office for Youth is a dedicated unit in the Department of Education that supports the contribution of young people and advocates, improves and harmonises policy across government, and ensures government is communicating effectively with young people. This mechanism has been used to undertake consultation with young Australians about volunteering and emergency management, and remains available to support youth engagement moving forward.

Recommendation 3:

Ensure volunteers have access to adequate resources, equipment and nationally consistent training and support to carry out their duties safely and effectively.

The Australian Government **notes** this recommendation.

The Australian Government's support for nationally consistent training through the VET sector and initiatives underway to strengthen these arrangements are outlined in response to Additional Recommendations 1 and 4.

Responsibility for providing resources, equipment and a safe environment for volunteers rests with the relevant volunteering organisations, some of which are part of state and territory governments.

The Australian Government does support the delivery of generalist training and resources to strengthen volunteer management practices nationally through the Volunteer Management Activity (VMA). The VMA is funded through the Department of Social Services and delivered by state and territory volunteering peak bodies. The VMA is designed to modernise and strengthen volunteering by building the capacity of organisations to recruit, train, manage and retain volunteers. It focuses on digital tools, best-practice training, improving regional coverage, and reducing barriers for priority groups. This includes training to support volunteer recruitment and retention, inclusive volunteering practices, and resources linked to the National Standards for Volunteer Involvement. It also provides free legal resources and services that are developed and delivered by Justice Connect for not-for-profit community organisations that engage volunteers.

The Australian Government's Volunteer Grants program, provides \$10 million annually to support eligible not-for-profit organisations to access resources such as online communication and insurance items, small equipment, training, reimbursement of fuel costs and background screening checks.

The Australian Government also currently funds targeted mental health support for emergency services workers including eligible volunteers, such as:

- the Mental Health Support for Emergency Services Workers Grant Program delivered by Fortem Australia;
- the Black Dog Institute's National Emergency Worker Support Service; and
- the Australian Psychological Society's Disaster Response Network.

Recommendation 5:

Explore options to incentivise youth participation, including education credits, HECS or TAFE fee reductions or integration of volunteering into secondary and tertiary curricula.

The Australian Government **notes** this recommendation.

The Australian Government acknowledges volunteering supports young people's civic engagement, skill development and career exploration.

Version 9.0 of the Australian Curriculum was agreed by all Education Ministers on 1 April 2022. It incorporates volunteering into secondary curricula, particularly in relation to career education and pathway planning, to build essential employability skills, enhance career development, and support transition planning. Volunteering is recognised as a valuable component of career pathways, fostering skills, community engagement, and personal, social, and emotional growth as part of the curriculum's general capabilities.

The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority is currently developing a curriculum connection resource that supports schools to better identify and plan career education using existing Australian Curriculum V 9.0 content from across learning areas. In response to requests to better integrate volunteering through education settings, the resource will reference volunteering in its key aspects as a meaningful context for career development learning and pathway exploration.

This work will be aligned to the Australian Blueprint for Career Development (a resource for career development practitioners and others with an interest in career development), and its core career management competencies. It will make clear how volunteering can support career development and build transferable skills. It will also support schools to embed volunteering as a meaningful learning context using existing Australian Curriculum content.

Recommendation 6:

Invest in community resilience projects to maintain engagement between disaster events and shift investment toward prevention and mitigation.

The Australian Government **agrees in principle** with this recommendation.

The Disaster Ready Fund is the Australian Government's flagship disaster risk reduction and resilience program, providing up to \$1 billion over five years from 1 July 2023. The program is delivered with funding contributions from state and territory governments. Three rounds of up to \$200 million in Australian Government funding per round have already been announced, providing investments in community resilience across Australia.

For example in Round 3, the Australian Government committed \$1.5 million for the Northern Rivers Community Resilience Alliance for the Connected and Prepared project, with a further \$375,682 co-contributed by the NSW Government. The project aims to deliver a step-change in disaster resilience by supporting at least 60 independent, grassroots volunteer-led resilience groups. Through tailored support for these groups to develop sustainable governance systems, processes, tools and structures, the project lays the groundwork for scalable, regional disaster preparedness.

The Australian Government also invests in community resilience and risk reduction through the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements, the joint cost sharing arrangements with states and territories for disaster response and recovery. Under the arrangements, the Prime Minister may agree to share the costs of a range of initiatives that states and territories request to support community recovery and to 'build back better' after a disaster. Examples include grants for small businesses and not-for-profit organisations, community mental health and wellbeing programs, and rebuilding communities and infrastructure to a more resilient standard.

Recommendation 7:

Ensure there is clear separation from Defence resources, by establishing the Climate Army as a distinct civilian capability that supports, but does not draw from, ADF personnel or funding.

The Australian Government **agrees in principle** with this recommendation.

The Australian Government is collaborating with states and territories to address the challenges to emergency volunteering through the approaches outlined in response to the Recommendations

above. These maintain a clear distinction between volunteering organisations and the Australian Defence Force.

Separately, the Australian Government will consider requests from states and territories for Australian Defence Force assistance with disaster preparedness, response or recovery when local capabilities are not sufficient, overwhelmed or no alternative is available. The *Defence Assistance to the Civil Community Guidelines* provide for this support, which remains an option of last resort to ensure Australian communities facing crisis are safe and protected.