

DRAFT Volunteer Strategy

Supporting our volunteers. Strengthening our community.

August 2026

Prepared by:

Cardinia Shire Council
Active and Connected Communities

Draft Published August 2026

© Cardinia Shire Council 2026
ABN: 32 210 906 807
20 Siding Avenue, Officer

PO Box 7, Pakenham Vic 3810

Phone: 1300 787 624
Email: mail@cardinia.vic.gov.au
Web: cardinia.vic.gov.au

Cardinia Shire Council acknowledges the Bunurong and Wurundjeri peoples as the Traditional Custodians of the land and waterways across our region. We pay our respects to Elders past and present and recognise their deep and enduring connection to Country.

Guided by our community, we strive for a future grounded in truth, respect, equity, and cultural safety, where everyone feels connected and has the opportunity to thrive.

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1. Mayor's message - placeholder

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2. Executive summary

Volunteers are at the heart of community life in Cardinia Shire. Volunteers manage our reserves and halls, restore our bushland, run our sporting clubs, advise on local issues and support the community in ways that no service or program can replicate. Their contribution to our region is immense, and it matters deeply.

This strategy sets out how Cardinia Shire Council will promote, support, recognise and, where appropriate, govern volunteering across the shire. It draws on community consultation, national and state policy, and a genuine commitment to supporting volunteers into the future.

2.1 What we heard from our community

In early 2026, Council heard from nearly 300 volunteers and community members across Cardinia Shire. They told us:

- Volunteering is deeply valued. Almost all community volunteers told us it has a positive impact on their own wellbeing, and that it gives them a sense of purpose and belonging.
- The volunteer ecosystem is under strain. An ageing volunteer base, difficulty attracting younger people, burnout from too few people carrying too much, and administrative burden are pressures felt across almost every volunteer group.
- Council support is greatly appreciated, and it has the most impact when Council teams and staff are visible, responsive and invested in the relationship.
- Process and red tape are the most consistent barriers. Simpler, more proportionate processes would make a real difference.
- Volunteers value feeling recognised regularly and personally.

2.2 Priority areas

This strategy is built around four priority areas:

Pillar one: Inclusive and accessible participation	Everyone in Cardinia should be able to volunteer. This pillar is about promoting opportunities, removing barriers and making sure Council's support reaches the full diversity of our community.
Pillar two: Modernisation and flexibility	Volunteering is changing, and Council needs to change with it. This pillar focuses on designing roles that suit contemporary lifestyles and reducing the process burden that can make volunteering harder than it needs to be.
Pillar three: Quality governance and safety	Safe, well managed volunteering is good for everyone. This pillar builds a consistent, proportionate governance framework so volunteers, Council and the community can all have confidence in how volunteering is managed.
Pillar four: Valued and measured impact	Volunteers deserve to feel genuinely valued, not just at formal events but through everyday acknowledgement. This pillar builds a stronger culture of recognition and makes sure the contribution volunteers make is captured and celebrated publicly.

A 2026 internal audit found that Council's volunteer management practices are inconsistent across teams. This strategy responds directly to that finding. It builds on what already works well, while setting a clear direction for improvement.

3. Introduction

Volunteering is one of the most genuine expressions of community spirit. In Cardinia Shire, thousands of residents give their time and skills to support Council programs, manage community assets, protect the natural environment, run sporting clubs, staff neighbourhood houses and care for wildlife. They do it because they care about the places and people around them.

Cardinia Shire is one of Victoria's fastest growing municipalities, with three new households arriving every day. As our population grows, so does the importance of volunteering. New residents bring new energy and willingness to contribute, and established communities depend on volunteers to keep the things they love running.

At the same time, volunteering is under pressure. People are busier. Compliance requirements have grown. The volunteer base in many organisations is ageing, and succession is a real challenge. This strategy does not shy away from that reality. It sets out practical ways to make volunteering in Cardinia Shire more accessible, better supported and more valued, now and into the future.

3.1 What is volunteering?

"Volunteering is time willingly given for the common good and without financial gain." - Volunteering Australia (2023)

Volunteering takes many forms. It includes formal volunteering, structured activities within organisations, and informal volunteering, such as helping a neighbour, mentoring someone in the community or contributing skills to a local cause.

For the purpose of this strategy, there are two distinct types of volunteer involvement in Cardinia Shire:

Council-engaged volunteers	Individuals formally endorsed by Council to volunteer on Council's behalf. This includes members of Community Asset Committees and Advisory Committees working directly for Council. Council is responsible for the governance and safety of this group.
Community and ecosystem volunteers	Individuals and groups who partner with Council to support the community. This includes sporting clubs, special interest groups, cultural groups, environmental groups, faith-based organisations and community groups. Council supports these volunteers through grants, training, facilities and recognition, while responsibility for how they are recruited, managed and supported sits with the organisation itself.

This strategy does not capture informal volunteering, such as a neighbour helping a neighbour, which remains an important and largely unmeasured part of community life in Cardinia Shire.

4. Volunteering in Cardinia Shire

4.1 About Cardinia Shire

Cardinia Shire spans 1,280 square kilometres of diverse communities. Our urban areas of Pakenham, Officer and Beaconsfield, together with our railway towns of Nar Nar Goon, Tynong, Garfield and Bunyip, blend traditional rural lifestyle with new metropolitan living. Our hills area at the Dandenong Ranges foothills is home to villages including Emerald, Gembrook, Cockatoo and Upper Beaconsfield, while our southern rural area supports farming and rural living across townships such as Koo Wee Rup and Lang Lang.

We welcome an average of three new households every day, and our population is projected to grow to around 183,000 by 2041. This rapid growth brings energy and opportunity, and it also places pressure on services, infrastructure and community connection. It makes the role of volunteers more important than ever in helping communities connect, stay active and support one another as the Shire continues to evolve.

Cardinia Shire is home to a growing and increasingly diverse community. Around 18 per cent of residents speak a language other than English at home, with significant populations originally from India, Sri Lanka and the Philippines. Our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community numbers approximately 1,145 residents.

Families with children make up 38 per cent of our households, and with a median age of 34 we are younger than greater Melbourne. This diversity brings richness to community life and broadens the ways people can contribute through volunteering.

~135,000	~183,000	3/day	34 yrs
Estimated 2024 population	Projected population by 2041	New households arriving	Median age (below state average)

4.2 Our volunteer community

~13,900	11.8%	500+	\$58.1B
Cardinia residents who volunteered formally in 2021	Formal volunteering rate (2021 Census)	Volunteer organisations across the Shire	Value of volunteering to Victoria annually

Cardinia Shire's volunteering rate is below the Victorian and national average for similar growth corridor municipalities. We want to change that, by making volunteering easier to find, easier to do and better recognised.

4.3 Why volunteering matters

For individuals	Better mental health and wellbeing. A sense of purpose and belonging. New skills and connections. Pathways to employment and leadership. Improved physical health, particularly for older volunteers.
For our community	Activities and services that simply would not exist without volunteers. Stronger social connection and community resilience. An economic contribution worth tens of millions annually in Cardinia Shire. Greater civic participation and local pride. Less social isolation, particularly for older residents.

4.4 Where volunteers contribute

Volunteers and the people who manage them support an enormous range of activities across Cardinia Shire, including:

- Community asset committees, managing recreation reserves and community halls across the shire.
- Advisory committees, providing expert advice on access and inclusion, arts, heritage and other priority areas.
- Environmental and heritage programs, including friends' groups, conservation care, bushland restoration and the Emerald Museum.
- Sporting clubs, supporting active and healthy communities in every corner of the shire.
- Neighbourhood houses and community centres, providing connection, learning and support for residents.
- Emergency services, CFA, SES and community emergency preparedness.
- Faith-based organisations, providing welfare, care and community connection.
- Community events, from National Volunteer Week to local festivals and cultural celebrations.

5. The sustainability challenge

Our community told us that volunteering is under pressure. This is not unique to Cardinia Shire, it reflects what is happening across Victoria and nationally. But it is real, and we take it seriously.

5.1 What we heard about sustainability pressures

- An ageing volunteer base and difficulty attracting younger volunteers, raised by respondents across sporting clubs, environmental groups, hall committees and community organisations.
- Burnout, too few people carrying too much, with succession a growing concern in many organisations.
- Cost of living pressures reducing available time and increasing the personal cost of volunteering.
- Administrative and compliance burden: paperwork, checks, permits and approvals that feel disproportionate to the actual task.

We are responding to these pressures with practical action: flexible role design, simpler processes, a focus on youth engagement, and better support for the organisations doing this work.

6. Development of the strategy

This strategy has been developed through research, consultation and a considered assessment of Council's current practice. The approach was designed to balance national and state policy direction with the lived experience of Cardinia Shire's own volunteers and volunteer organisations.

The strategy was informed by:

- A benchmarking review of how other Victorian Councils approach volunteering.
- A review of national, state and local policy, including the National Strategy for Volunteering 2023 to 2033 and the National Standards for Volunteer Involvement.
- A review of Council's current volunteer management practices across departments.
- Community consultation where we heard from nearly 300 volunteers and community members, including Council-engaged volunteers, asset committee volunteers, general community volunteers and residents who do not currently volunteer.
- Engagement with Council staff across the teams that work directly with volunteers.

The findings from this work shaped the four strategic pillars and the commitments set out in the following sections. Where further investigation is needed, commitments have been framed as reviews so that community input and deeper analysis can shape specific outcomes before resources are committed.

7. Strategy context

This strategy has been developed in line with:

- Cardinia Shire Council Plan 2025 to 2029, specifically Strategic Objective 1: Thriving Communities.
- The Liveability Plan and Active Cardinia Strategy.
- The National Strategy for Volunteering 2023 to 2033 and the National Standards for Volunteer Involvement.
- Volunteering Victoria's state-level frameworks and resources.

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8. Our vision and approach

8.1 Our vision

A Cardinia Shire where volunteering is valued, accessible and sustainable, and where every volunteer feels genuinely supported and recognised for the difference they make.

8.2 Our guiding principle: proportionate and enabling

Good governance matters. But governance should make volunteering easier, not harder. Across this strategy, we apply a lens that our governance requirements are proportionate and that where possible we remove unnecessary burden on volunteers.

Volunteers across Cardinia Shire told us clearly that administrative burden, red tape, complex approvals and paperwork, is the single greatest threat to participation. We cannot remove all compliance requirements, but we can commit to reviewing, simplifying and calibrating them.

8.3 How Council engages with volunteers

Council plays two distinct but connected roles in volunteering across Cardinia Shire.

For Council-engaged volunteers, those formally appointed by Council with a signed agreement and role profile, Council holds direct accountability for governance, safety and support. This includes members of community asset committees and advisory committees working directly for Council.

For the broader community and ecosystem of volunteers from sporting clubs, multicultural groups, neighbourhood houses, environmental groups, special interest groups, arts groups, faith-based organisations and community groups, our role is to support, facilitate and connect. We provide grants, training, spaces, information and relationships. We are not responsible for making every volunteer organisation run smoothly or remain sustainable, but we can make it easier for them to do so.

8.3.1 *How Council works with volunteers, and the people who manage them*

- **Respectful of people's time:** recognising that volunteers give freely and that every unnecessary burden is a cost to them personally.
- **Clear about expectations:** ensuring volunteers know what is asked of them, who to contact and what support is available.
- **Proportionate in its requirements:** applying governance and compliance measures that match the risk.
- **Supportive of positive experiences:** ensuring volunteers feel welcomed, valued and genuinely connected to the outcomes of their contribution.
- **Inclusive and accessible:** designed to reflect the diversity of Cardinia Shire's community, not just those who have always volunteered.

9. Our four strategic pillars

The strategy is built around four priority areas that together cover the full picture, from how people find and access volunteering, to how Council governs it, supports it and recognises its value.

9.1 Pillar one: inclusive and accessible participation

Everyone in Cardinia Shire should be able to volunteer, regardless of age, background, ability, cultural identity or life circumstance. Council has a key role to play in making that a reality, promoting opportunities, removing barriers and helping people find their way in.

We also recognise that the broader volunteering community, sporting clubs, multicultural groups, neighbourhood houses, environmental groups, special interest groups, arts groups, faith organisations and community groups, is what makes Cardinia Shire tick. Supporting those organisations and the people who manage volunteers within them is part of our responsibility too.

Our commitments:

- Promote volunteering opportunities across multiple channels, digital and non-digital.
- Develop a clear, accessible guide to what Council offers volunteers and volunteer organisations: grants, training, spaces, contacts and connection pathways.
- Encourage diverse participation, including youth, older people, people from culturally diverse communities, people with disability, First Nations peoples, LGBTIQ+ communities and families, through flexible and accessible roles.
- Investigate and progressively implement micro-volunteering, episodic and project-based roles as entry points for people with limited time.
- Work towards a specific approach to engaging young people in volunteering, in partnership with schools, youth advisory bodies and community organisations.
- Strengthen partnerships with Volunteering Victoria, local community organisations and peak bodies to connect residents with volunteering opportunities.

9.2 Pillar two: modernisation and flexibility

Volunteering is changing. Fewer people can commit to ongoing, structured roles. More want to contribute in ways that fit around work, family and other demands. And the administrative load placed on volunteers and the people who manage them has grown, often beyond what the actual risk warrants.

We will respond to these trends by modernising how volunteer roles are designed and supported, and by actively working to reduce the process friction that makes volunteering harder than it needs to be.

Our commitments:

- Work towards volunteer roles that are purposeful and suited to the lifestyles of our residents, including short-term, skills-based and episodic options.
- Review the processes that volunteers and volunteer groups most frequently interact with, including approvals, grants, permits and compliance requirements, with a view to simplification proportionate to actual risk.

- Explore establishing a practical resource library, physical and digital, including guides, templates and governance resources.
- Investigate digital tools to reduce administrative burden on volunteers and program coordinators.
- Explore practical training and development opportunities for Council-engaged volunteers.
- Explore pathways linking volunteering to skill development, leadership and employment.
- Support volunteer organisations and people who manage volunteers through training, grants, venue access and resources.

9.3 Pillar three: quality governance and safety

The safety of volunteers, staff and the community come first. Good governance is not a burden, it is what allows volunteering to thrive with confidence.

This pillar sets out how we will build a consistent, proportionate governance framework that works for volunteers, for the people who manage them and for Council.

Our commitments:

- Establish a clear and consistent Council-wide approach to how Council manages its own volunteers, with shared standards set centrally and delivery led by the teams who work with volunteers day to day.
- Implement consistent minimum requirements for recruitment, background checks, onboarding and training, proportionate to the nature and risk of each role.
- Consider opportunities to improve the governance, support and sustainability of Community Asset Committees as part of ongoing continuous improvement.
- Establish regular checks to make sure practice is consistent across all Council volunteer programs.

9.4 Pillar four: valued and measured impact

Volunteers and the people who manage them give a great deal. They deserve to feel genuinely valued, not just once a year at a formal event, but through the everyday experience of volunteering.

Recognition is a shared responsibility. It can happen through Council awards and events, but also through the thank you from a Council officer, the acknowledgement from a fellow volunteer and the community's awareness of what volunteers make possible. No single organisation is responsible for recognising volunteering, a strong culture of appreciation is built together.

Our commitments:

- Develop, over time, a recognition framework for Council engaged-volunteers that covers formal milestone recognition and regular, personal acknowledgement throughout the year, because recognition should not be reserved for anniversaries.
- Include Council-engaged volunteer contribution data in Cardinia Shire's Annual Report.
- Publicly promote the economic and social value of volunteering in Cardinia Shire.
- Work towards a biennial volunteer experience survey so we can keep responding to what volunteers and volunteer managers need.

*“Volunteering starts to feel strained when appreciation disappears and expectations begin.” -
Cardinia Shire volunteer, 2026 consultation*

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10. Thank you

This strategy was developed with the direct input of the Cardinia Shire community. Nearly 300 community members from Council-endorsed volunteers, community volunteers, asset committee members, and people who do not yet volunteer but told us why, gave their time to help shape it. Their honesty, their passion for their communities, and their willingness to tell Council what is and is not working, is the foundation of everything in this document.

To every volunteer across Cardinia Shire, in the sporting clubs, the hall committees, the environmental groups, the neighbourhood houses, the emergency services, the faith communities and everywhere else, thank you. This shire would not be what it is without you.

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Cardinia Shire Council
Civic Centre
20 Siding Avenue, Officer

PO Box 7
Pakenham 3810

Phone: 1300 787 624
Email: mail@cardinia.vic.gov.au
Web: www.cardinia.vic.gov.au

National Relay Service (NRS)

TTY: 133 677 (ask for 1300 787 624)

Speak and Listen (speech-to-speech relay): 1300 555 727 (ask for 1300 787 624)



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