

Supporting volunteers in place-based work

This tool is for place-based initiatives and for the people who coordinate or support volunteering within place-based work. It builds on insights from PLACE's 2025 Listening Tour report, which found that volunteers are the backbone of place-based work, yet their roles are often invisible and unsupported. Visit the PLACE website to read the full 2025 Listening Tour report.

When this work is overlooked, communities carry heavy responsibilities without the backing they need. People burn out, trusted relationships are lost and systems depend on unpaid effort that is at constant risk of collapse.

This guide helps you design volunteer roles that are meaningful and connected to community. It focuses on what makes volunteering sustainable; including trust, care and shared decision-making, so that both individuals and initiatives can thrive.

You can use this tool in team or community conversations, planning meetings, role reviews or reflection sessions to spark ideas and build on local strengths.

You do not need to use every part at once. Choose the section that best fits your team and start there.

1 Start with community voice

Community-led volunteering begins with respect for local knowledge, especially the knowledge held by Elders, cultural leaders and people with lived experience. It works best when decisions are shared, and volunteers help shape what happens.

Questions to explore together:

- Who helps decide what volunteers work on and whose voices are missing?
- How do we listen to and follow local cultural guidance or protocols?
- Do volunteers reflect the community and feel confident bringing their own experience to the role?
- How do we make sure roles build on local strengths and needs, not just what's easiest to manage?
- Are volunteers part of conversations about what's working, what's changing and what could be done differently?

2

Create a culture of care

People give their time and energy, and it is important they are supported to do it well. Support means clear communication, strong relationships and consistent follow-up. Volunteers should know what is expected of them, have someone they can turn to for help and feel part of the wider team.

When people feel supported, they stay involved. This matters most for those who bring lived experience or carry community responsibility. Recognising contribution and sharing the load helps everyone.

PLACE's Listening Tour heard the same call from many places. As one participant in Cummins, South Australia put it, "Support the supporter." Volunteers are carrying big responsibilities, and they need systems that share that load.

Questions to explore together:

- Is there a staff member, peer or Elder that volunteers can check in with for support?
- How do we recognise contribution in ways that are genuine and culturally appropriate?
- Are there chances for volunteers to learn, reflect and build skills through their work?
- Do volunteers know what's expected and feel able to speak up if something isn't working?
- How do we support wellbeing, especially for people who are helping others or working in lived-experience roles?

3

Build connection and trust

Volunteering works best when people are trusted, connected and part of something shared. Collaboration grows when staff, volunteers, Elders and community members work with a common purpose.

Trust was a consistent theme across PLACE's Listening Tour. It was not described in abstract terms but as something built through time, reliability and shared experience. Trust allows people to speak openly, work across differences and take shared risks.

Creating spaces where people learn from each other, share decisions and celebrate progress helps keep the work strong and grounded in community.

Questions to explore together:

- What draws people to give their time here, and what do they hope to experience or contribute through it?
- Are volunteers included in team meetings, planning sessions or community gatherings?
- Do staff and volunteers stay connected and share updates regularly?
- Is there opportunity for everyone to shape what happens next or suggest new ideas?
- How do people learn from each other's experience, culture and strengths?
- Do our ways of working build trust, care and shared responsibility?

4

Reflect and learn as you go

“Without trust, even well-intentioned efforts stall. Where trust is strong, coordination is easier, leadership is shared and momentum is easier to sustain.”

PLACE Listening Tour, 2025

This short reflection helps your team or community group check how volunteering is working in practice. It can highlight what's strong, where support could improve and where roles might need to change.

Try it in planning meetings, supervision sessions or community conversations – anywhere people come together to look at what's working and what could work better. Use the table below to capture what you notice.

What are we noticing?	Going well	Could use more care or focus	Needs a re-think	Next steps / who's involved
Volunteers help shape what they do				
Roles build on community strengths, not just fill service gaps				
Volunteers have clear support and recognition				
Everyone involved learns and benefits from the experience				
The role feels manageable, flexible and safe				

Revisit this reflection to track progress, celebrate improvements and keep learning together.

5 Turn insight into action

Once you've reflected on what's working, the next step is to turn those insights into action.

These prompts can help you review or design volunteer roles so they are clear, sustainable and built on mutual benefit. They work best when completed together with staff, volunteers or community members who know what the role looks like in practice.

Questions to explore together:

- What difference is this role meant to make and how will we measure or see that impact?
- What supports or resources will help the person in this role succeed?
- How will this role stay connected with staff, partners and community to keep the work aligned?
- What learning or development opportunities are part of the role over time?
- How will we review this role regularly to keep it realistic, flexible and sustainable?

6 Learn more and build your practice

Volunteering is part of the broader workforce that enables place-based change. When roles are well designed and supported, they build skills, relationships and local leadership that keep initiatives strong.

Organisations play a key role in creating the conditions for volunteering to succeed. Good practice means planning roles clearly, offering guidance and recognition and supporting the people who give their time.

If your organisation wants to keep building capability, the resources below are a good starting point. Visit the PLACE website for links and more resources on volunteering and workforce development.

Volunteering Australia

National peak body offering up-to-date research and tools for managing and supporting volunteers.

Volunteering Resource Hub

A national platform linking local volunteer resource centres, training and tools for organisations and coordinators.

Institute of Community Directors

Free and paid training, templates and governance resources for community organisations.

7 Stay connected to the bigger picture

PLACE is building the evidence, tools and partnerships that strengthen the national workforce for place-based change, including volunteering, lived-experience leadership and community contribution.

You can follow updates, learning opportunities and resources at placeaustralia.org.

