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STATE EMERGENCY SERVICE (SES): VOLUNTEER VIEWS ON EXPERIENCES, WELLBEING, AND MOTIVATIONS

Findings from the Cultural Assessment Tool (CAT) Survey 2019-20

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Between September 2019 and February 2020, The University of Western Australia and Curtin University collaborated with the Department of Fire and Emergency Services (DFES) to conduct a follow-up survey to obtain information on the current state of volunteering in Western Australia (WA). Comparing the results with the initial survey conducted in 2018-19, we intended to gain more insight into changes in practices regarding volunteer recruitment, retention, wellbeing, and diversity within the State Emergency Service (SES). The key survey information and findings are presented below:

KEY SURVEY INFORMATION

Survey themes:

Reasons to Stay	**Volunteer Needs**	**Volunteer Role and Identity Fit**
Volunteer Wellbeing (E.g., role satisfaction)	**SES Unit Environment** (E.g., climate for inclusiveness)	**Intentions to Remain**

Responses:

- **226** SES volunteers across WA.
- Approximate response rate of 11% from all SES volunteers across WA.

PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

	2018-19	2019-20
Number of respondents	398	226
Average age	46.1 years (SD=15.5 years)	46.9 years (SD=14.5 years)
Gender breakdown	Male volunteers (61.6%) Female volunteers (37.4%)	Male volunteers (55.1%) Female volunteers (43.0%)
Born in Australia	70.4%	71.9%
Average tenure	**SES:** 9.0 years (SD=9.8 years) **Current unit:** 7.2 years (SD=8.3 years)	**SES:** 10.0 years (SD=10.2 years) **Current unit:** 10.0 years (SD=10.2 years)
Volunteer roles	Unit Managers (11.6%) Non-managers (88.4%)	Unit Managers (16.4%) Non-managers (83.6%)

KEY FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

Based on the survey findings, the list of key implications is presented below:

Key Areas of Strength	Key Opportunities to Improve
- Volunteers are thriving through their learning experiences in the SES. - Volunteers overall felt valued and respected for their individual differences. - Unit leaders are seen very positively in their behaviours towards volunteers, both during and outside of call-outs. - Volunteers indicated that they had strong social support from team members who are non-leaders.	- Investigate targeted recruitment to attract members from specific groups. - Facilitate activities to allow more autonomy in tasks for volunteers. - Improve volunteers' identification with DFES. - Increase how energetic volunteers feel about their roles. - Improve levels of psychological safety for women and volunteers who are non-leaders. - Improve volunteer inclusivity in unit decision-making processes. - Focus on improving how competent and autonomous women and non-leaders feel in their volunteering roles.

KEY COMPARISONS BETWEEN THE 2018-19 AND 2019-20 SURVEY RESULTS:

Comparing the data from both 2018-19 (18-19) and 2019-20 (19-20) CAT surveys, we have listed below which areas of volunteering in the SES have improved, have stayed relatively the same, in addition to highlighting which areas are in need of some work.

Key Areas that were Maintained	- Overall, volunteers reported feeling as competent and socially connected with other volunteers in the SES in 19-20, as they did in 18-19. - Volunteers identied equally as strongly with their volunteering role and with their SES units. - Volunteers similarly had high levels of role satisfaction across both years. - Leader behaviours were generally rated as being rather positive during and outside of call-outs. - Volunteers also felt similarly across both years that their differences were rather valued and respected by other volunteers in their unit.
Key Areas that Improved	Volunteers indicated four motives that strongly influenced their decision to continue volunteering in 19-20, more so than it did in 18-19; reputation as an emergency volunteer, using existing skills, learning new skills, and meeting new people.

	• Volunteers identified more strongly with DFES in 19-20 than 18-19. • Volunteers reported more learning and developing in 19-20 than in 18-19 (though still high at that time). • Volunteers were more likely to recommend SES as a place to volunteer to others in 19-20 than in 18-19.
Key Opportunities to Improve	• Overall, volunteers indicated low levels of autonomy in 19-20 and 18-19. • Volunteers also reported that they did not feel energetic about their roles. • Volunteers generally felt relatively low levels of 'psychological safety' (i.e. that it was safe to speak one's mind) across both surveys. • Inclusion in decision-making was also reported to be low, and should be a key area to improve on.

END-USER STATEMENT

Jennifer Pidgeon, *Department of Fire and Emergency Services (DFES), Western Australia.*

It is always extremely useful to see the movement and progression of the volunteer base. This piece of research again reaffirms areas of focus for our work with the SES and the broader volunteer emergency services. The project in its entirety continues to provide DFES with knowledge and information that works to improve the recruitment and retention of volunteers. This is extremely important for the sustainability of the volunteer workforce. As social and economic conditions change, understanding the challenges and opportunities of volunteers assists us to ensure that we are able to provide the best possible experiences for highly valued emergency services volunteers.

END-USER STATEMENT

INTRODUCTION

In 2017, the University of Western Australia (UWA) began a research collaboration project with the Department of Fire and Emergency Services (DFES), funded by the Bushfire and Natural Hazards Cooperative Research Centre (BNHCRC), to investigate ways to improve the retention rates of their emergency service volunteers. Thus, researchers from UWA and Curtin University collaborated with DFES to develop and administer a Cultural Assessment Tool (CAT) in the form of an online survey from September 2018 to February 2019.

The CAT survey conducted in 18-19 was intended to learn more about the SES volunteering experience from the volunteers' perspectives. The goal was to obtain information on how to improve volunteer recruitment, retention, wellbeing, and diversity practices within the overall SES volunteering journey. The findings of the 18-19 survey were then used to inform the design of the follow-up CAT survey conducted in 19-20. The key purpose of the 19-20 survey was to assess the current state of volunteering within the SES in 2019 and 2020, in addition to tracking changes in the SES volunteering experience over the last 12 months. The CAT 18-19 findings served as the basis for comparison, such that the 19-20 survey was used to investigate which areas of the volunteering experience have remained the same, improved from the previous year, or have room for improvement.

SURVEY INFORMATION

The CAT 19-20 survey was administered on the Qualtrics online survey platform, allowing the research team to collect data from multiple Western Australian regions in a short amount of time. We also offered paper and pencil versions of the survey to volunteers upon request.

Individuals who completed the CAT 19-20 survey did so anonymously, to encourage transparency in their responses. In the CAT 18-19 survey, participants were asked to supply their email addresses to be contacted for future research. Of the 398 participants from the 18-19 survey, 307 gave their email addresses. These volunteers were invited to participate in the 19-20 survey and were given three reminders to complete it. The survey was also launched at the Western Australian Fire and Emergency Services (WAFES) conference in September 2019. The survey was later promoted through stakeholder meetings and online means (i.e., volunteer e-newsletters, the DFES online volunteer portal, and Facebook).

There were six main themes in the CAT 19-20 survey (see below), and a total of 90 individual survey questions, plus ten demographic questions.

Reasons to Stay	Volunteer Needs	Volunteer Role and Identity Fit	Volunteer Wellbeing
	SES Unit Environment	Intentions to Remain	

Compared to the 18-19 survey (see themes below), the theme of 'Meeting Expectations' and the sub-theme 'Reasons to Join' were removed due to sufficient information collected from the previous year. However, several open-ended questions were included in the 19-20 survey to measure; any leadership or role changes in the unit, changes in the personal lives of volunteers that affected their ability to volunteer, and any changes in the incluvieness of their unit climates in the last 12 months.

Meeting Expectations	Reasons to Join and Reasons to Stay	Volunteer Needs	Volunteer Role and Identity Fit

Volunteer Wellbeing	SES Unit Environment	Intentions to Remain

Of the 2033 registered SES volunteers across Western Australia (WA), we received 226 complete responses for the CAT 19-20 survey, with an overall estimated response rate of 11%. Of the 226, 136 participants had also participated in the CAT 18-19 survey. However, due to incompleteness in the CAT 18-19 survey, the final total number of matched participants for both surveys is 95 respondents. In comparison to 18-19, the survey response rate has reduced from 21% to 11%. One possible explanation for the lower response rate in 19-20 is due to the survey overlapping with other SES volunteer surveys being conducted by different organisations using similar timeframes.

2033 SES volunteers in Western Australia	226 survey participants	Response rate of 11 %

The document will now proceed with discussing the participant demographics and findings for the CAT 19-20 survey. This will be followed by a comparison of the findings between the CAT 18-19 and 19-20 surveys. Finally, the document will conclude with key implications; highlighting group differences, key areas of strength, and key opportunities for improvement.

PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

The CAT 19-20 survey requested participants to provide demographic but non-identifying information so that different groups (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity, service tenure, and unit location) could be compared.

AGE (YEARS)

The average age of the participants was 46.9 years (standard deviation = 14.5 years) and ranged from 18 to 85 years. As shown in Table 1, the youngest cohort (aged 25 years and under) represented the smallest age group in the participant pool, with a representation of 7.6%. This was followed by the oldest cohort (aged 66 years and older) with a representation of 12.0%. The cohort aged between 36 and 45 years had the highest representation of 22.8%. Similarly, this cohort was also largely represented in metropolitan units (23.5%). Conversely, in regional units, volunteers aged between 46 and 55 years had the highest representation (23.4%). Lastly, the smallest representation in regional units was by the youngest cohort with 3.1%. All remaining cohorts were somewhat equally represented between unit locations with a percentage ranging between 10.1% and 21.9%. Overall, with the exception of the youngest cohort in regional units, all age groups were relatively well represented, and differences between metropolitan and regional units were fairly minimal.

	Overall	Metropolitan	Regional
Below 26 years	7.6%	10.1%	3.1%
26 – 35 years	16.8%	17.6%	15.6%
36 – 45 years	22.8%	23.5%	21.9%
46 – 55 years	20.7%	19.3%	23.4%
56 – 65 years	20.1%	19.3%	21.9%
Above 65 years	12.0%	10.1%	14.1%

Table 1. *Age representation within the survey sample.*

GENDER

As of March 2020, the overall SES population in WA consisted of 61.1% men and 38.9% women. Observing Table 2 below, it can be noted that the gender representation within the survey sample is fairly representative of the SES population in WA at the time that these data were collected. However, a significant difference was found when comparing the number of leaders between male and female volunteers in the survey sample, with women being less represented. Moreover, the gender representation in metropolitan units was more characteristic of the overall SES population, in comparison to regional units.

	Gender breakdown	
	Male volunteers	**Female volunteers**
Overall SES population in WA	61.1%	38.9%
Participant sample	55.1%	43.0%
Metropolitan units	66.0%	37.3%
Regional units	34.0%	62.7%
Leader representation	19.6%	5.3%

Table 2. *Gender representation within the survey sample.*

NATIONALITY AND ETHNICITY

From the sample, 71.9% of participants were born in Australia, and 28.1% of participants were born in a different country. Participants were also asked which ethnic group they identify with most and the results are shown in Table 3 below. The overwhelming majority identified as being of Australian ethnicity, followed by European. Nonetheless, the many other ethnic identities were represented by at least one member of the SES. While these results suggest that ethnic diversity is relatively low in the SES, there are some members who identified with non-Caucasian ethnic groups.

Ethnicity	Percentage (%)
Australian	64.2
Indigenous/Torres Strait Islander	0.4
New Zealander	2.2
Asian	2.7
Indian	0.9
Middle Eastern	1.3
European	15.5
Prefer not to say	0.4
Other	1.8

Table 3. *Ethnicity representation within the survey sample.*

TENURE (YEARS)

The average number of years spent volunteering for the SES by the respondents was 10.0 years (SD = 10.2), with an average of 10.0 years (SD = 10.2) spent volunteering for their current SES unit. As can be observed in Figure 1, about 25% of the sample were relatively new to the SES (volunteering for two years or less), and the remaining 75% had been with the SES for two years or longer.

Figure 1.
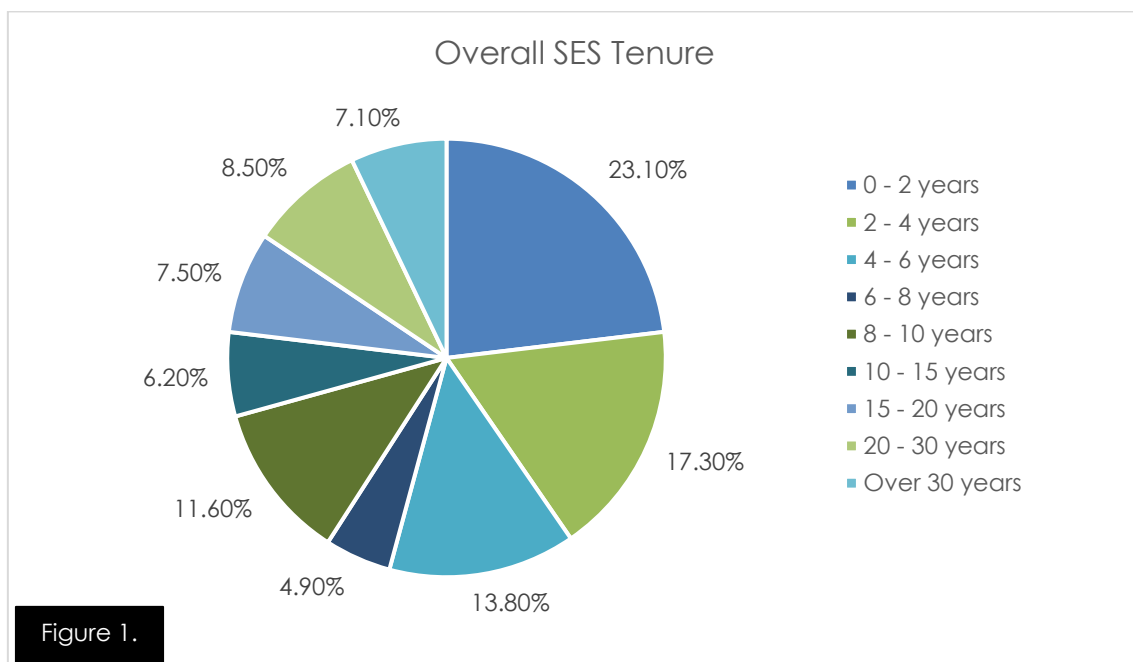
VOLUNTEER ROLES

Of the 226 participants, 37 (16.4%) identified themselves as Unit Managers. Out of the 66 SES units across WA, 26 units were represented by at least one Unit Manager, resulting in an overall leader representation percentage of 39.4%.

METROPOLITAN AND REGIONAL REPRESENTATION

Out of the 66 SES units in WA, 52 (78.8%) were represented by at least one respondent. The representation from each of the 12 regions can be observed in Figure 2 below (with SWORD[1] and the four metropolitan regions grouped as one). Approximately 68% of the respondents were metropolitan volunteers, with the remaining 32% of the survey respondents volunteering in the remaining regions. Observing the overall regional data from the time of data collection, it can be noted that the Goldfields Midlands and Metropolitan regions were relatively over-represented in this survey sample. While the Lower South West region was similar to the overall SES population in WA, the remaining regions were under-represented.

Metropolitan and Regional Representation

Region	Overall SES Representation	Sample Representation
Goldfields Midlands	3.51%	5.80%
Great Southern	12.83%	7.60%
Kimberley	3.12%	0.40%
Lower South West	7.76%	7.10%
Metropolitan	52.24%	67.50%
Midwest Gascoyne	6.68%	3.60%
Plibara	5.66%	3.10%
South West	8.20%	4.90%

Percentage of volunteers in the survey sample

Figure 2.
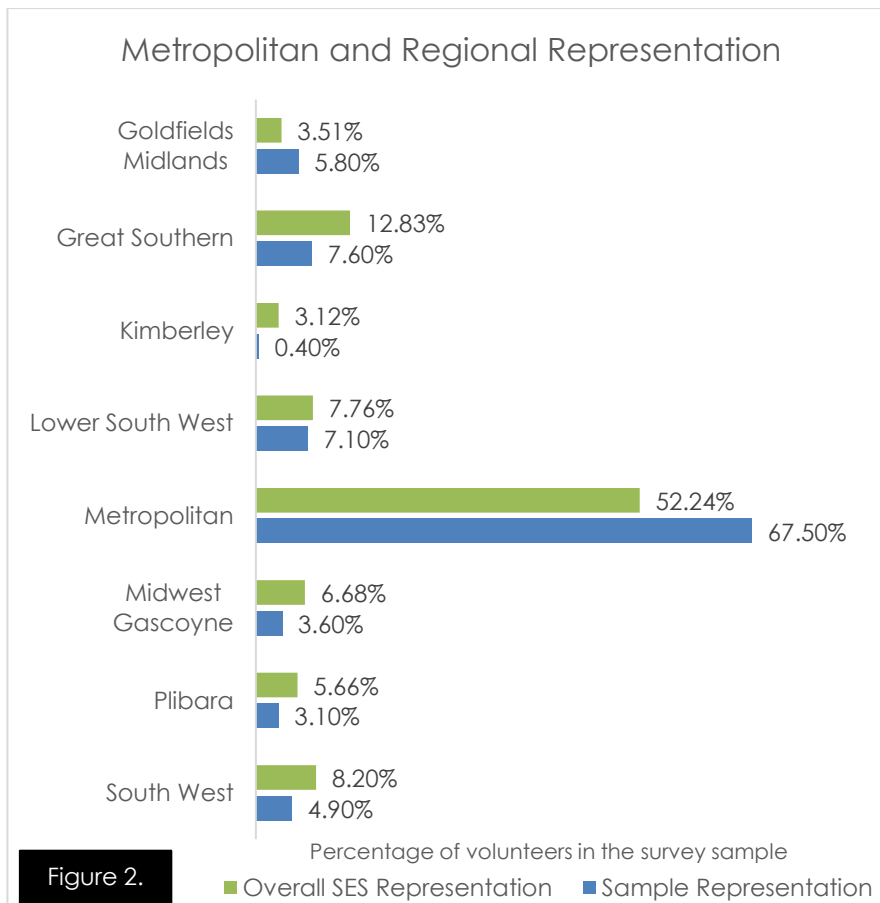
[1] It is important to note that at the time of data collection, SWORD was treated separately as its own region.

OTHER VOLUNTEERING ROLES

Lastly, we asked volunteers to indicate if they volunteer with another service and/or organisation. Based on Figure 3, it can be noted that 43% of the volunteers in the survey sample indicated that they do volunteer with another service and/or organisation. While no cohort differences were found, it should be noted that there was a significant difference between metropolitan and regional volunteers, with metropolitan volunteers being more likely to volunteer for multiple emergency services or with different organisations.

Figure 3.
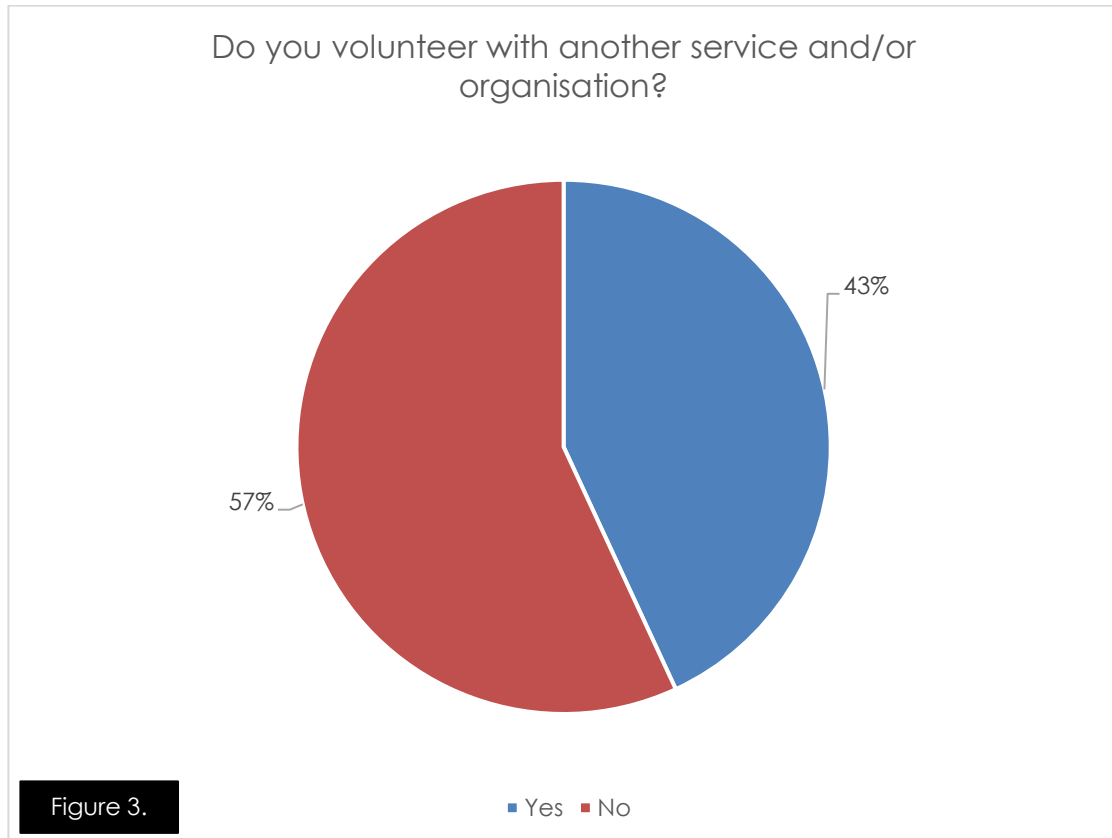
FINDINGS

REASONS TO STAY

IMPORTANT NOTE:
All bar charts with mean responses include error bars as pointed out by the red arrow in the diagram on the left. It is important to allow some degree of uncertainty when examining the results; thus, error bars (as illustrated in the figure below) show the range that we are 95% certain that the true mean score lies.
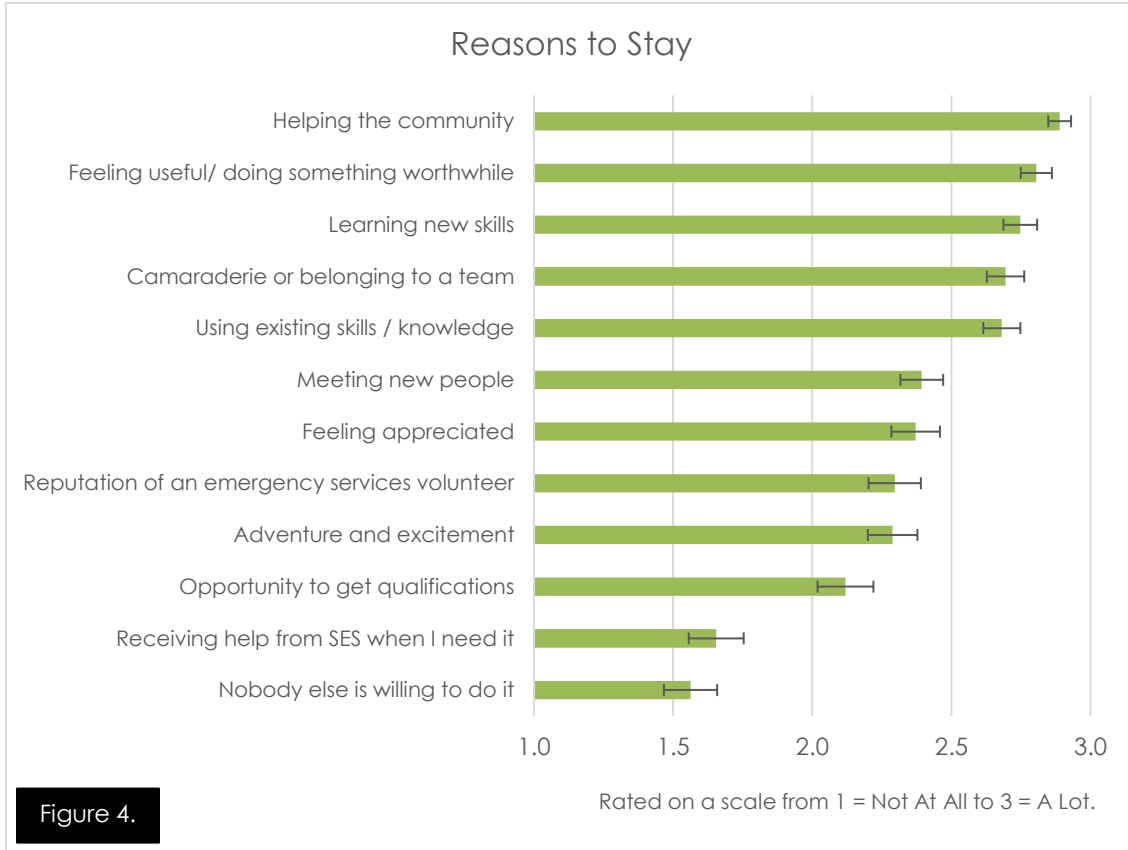
Reasons to Stay

Reason
Helping the community
Feeling useful/ doing something worthwhile
Learning new skills
Camaraderie or belonging to a team
Using existing skills / knowledge
Meeting new people
Feeling appreciated
Reputation of an emergency services volunteer
Adventure and excitement
Opportunity to get qualifications
Receiving help from SES when I need it
Nobody else is willing to do it

Rated on a scale from 1 = Not At All to 3 = A Lot.

Figure 4.

The first section of the survey asked volunteers why they continue volunteering with the SES. Figure 4 shows the possible motives along with the *mean response* showing the extent that that motive keeps the participants volunteering with the SES. Below, we listed the **top five reasons why volunteers stay with the SES** (listed in order of importance):

- To help the community
- Feeling useful/wanted to do something worthwhile
- Learning new skills
- For camaraderie or belonging to a team
- To use existing skills/knowledge

We next compared male to female volunteers and we found that their reasons for staying with the SES were generally quite similar. Their top reasons for volunteering were similar to the list above. However, men and women significantly differed in mean scores for two motives. First, women reported that meeting new people was a stronger motive for them to continue volunteering in comparison to men. Second, men reported being more driven to continue volunteering out of a sense of obligation (i.e., nobody else being willing to do it).

This may suggest that women are more motivated by the social aspects of volunteering, whereby men are more motivated by a sense of duty.

Overall, volunteers from metropolitan and regional units were very similar in their motives to continue volunteering with the SES. Generally, the top five reasons for volunteering were consistent with both metropolitan and regional volunteers. However, continuing to volunteer because nobody else was willing to do it was a stronger motive for regional volunteers, in comparison to metropolitan volunteers. A possible explanation for this result may be attributed to regional volunteers having a stronger sense of duty and obligation to their service as a result of the limited number of volunteers available in regional locations.

When looking at the differences between volunteers of different ages, it was also found that older volunteers continued volunteering as a result of their sense of obligation, their need to use their existing skills, and their need to belong to a team. Younger volunteers, on the other hand, were more motivated to continue volunteering in order to obtain adventure and excitement. From these results, we can ascertain that the top five reasons to continue volunteering is consistent across all groups. However, some groups may be more motivated to stay for other specific reasons. Thus, individual SES units should work proactively to ensure that their volunteers' motivations are satisfied within their roles.

VOLUNTEER NEEDS

The survey also asked questions on whether the psychological needs of volunteers were satisfied in their role, and whether or not they believe their volunteering work to be beneficial to the society and people around them.

Needs Satisfaction

Previous research has demonstrated that the satisfaction of the needs of *competence*, *autonomy*, and *relatedness* is essential for psychological growth and wellbeing (Deci & Ryan, 2000), in addition to reducing the likelihood of an individual leaving an organisation (Gagné, 2003). The need for *competence* refers to the extent in which an individual feels capable in performing effectively in their role, whereas the need for *autonomy* refers to an individuals' desire to have the freedom to carry out an activity in their chosen way (Van den Broeck et al., 2010). Lastly, the need for *relatedness* refers to an individuals' need to relate and connect with others (Van den Broeck et al., 2010).

Figure 5.

Figure 5 shows that, overall, the SES volunteers who completed our survey tended to agree that their need for relatedness and competence in their role were satisfied. However, the volunteers were more neutral regarding the extent that their need for autonomy was satisfied by the role. In particular, volunteers reported that they often felt like they had to follow other people's commands, and that they would do things differently if they could. Furthermore, volunteers felt like they had less freedom to do their work in the way they think it could best be done.

Figure 6.
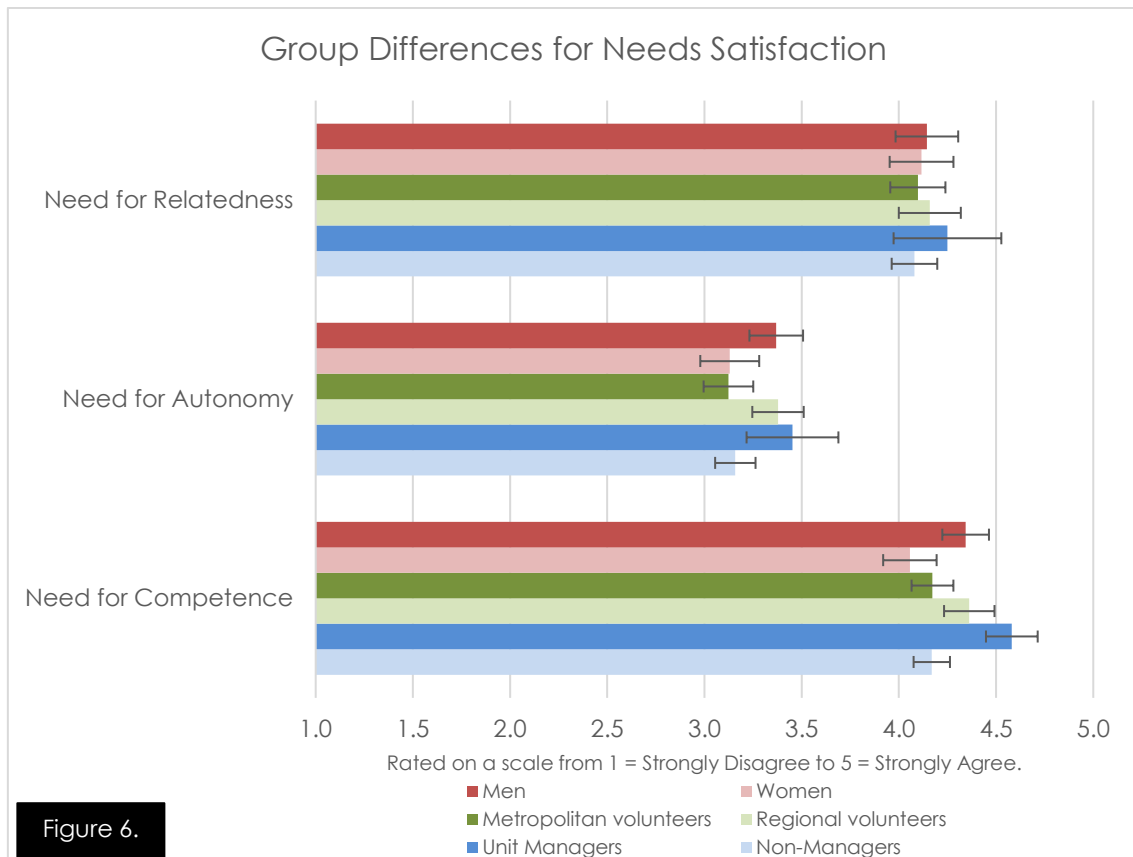
When comparing cohort differences, female volunteers reported feeling less competent and autonomous in comparison to their male counterparts. Similarly, metropolitan volunteers also reported feeling less competent and autonomous in comparison to volunteers from regional units. Managers, however, felt more competent and autonomous in comparison to non-managers, although this is partly attributed by their SES tenure and experience.

Beneficence

Beneficence is defined by the extent in which one believes that they are doing good for the society as well as others (Martela & Ryan, 2015). Overall, volunteers in our sample tended to agree that their work as a volunteer has a positive impact on their community and the people around them (average rating of 4.42 out of 5). When comparing cohort differences, it was found that men reported stronger feelings of beneficence in comparison to women (see Figure 7). However, women overall tended to agree that their work as SES volunteers had a positive impact on the community and welfare of other people.
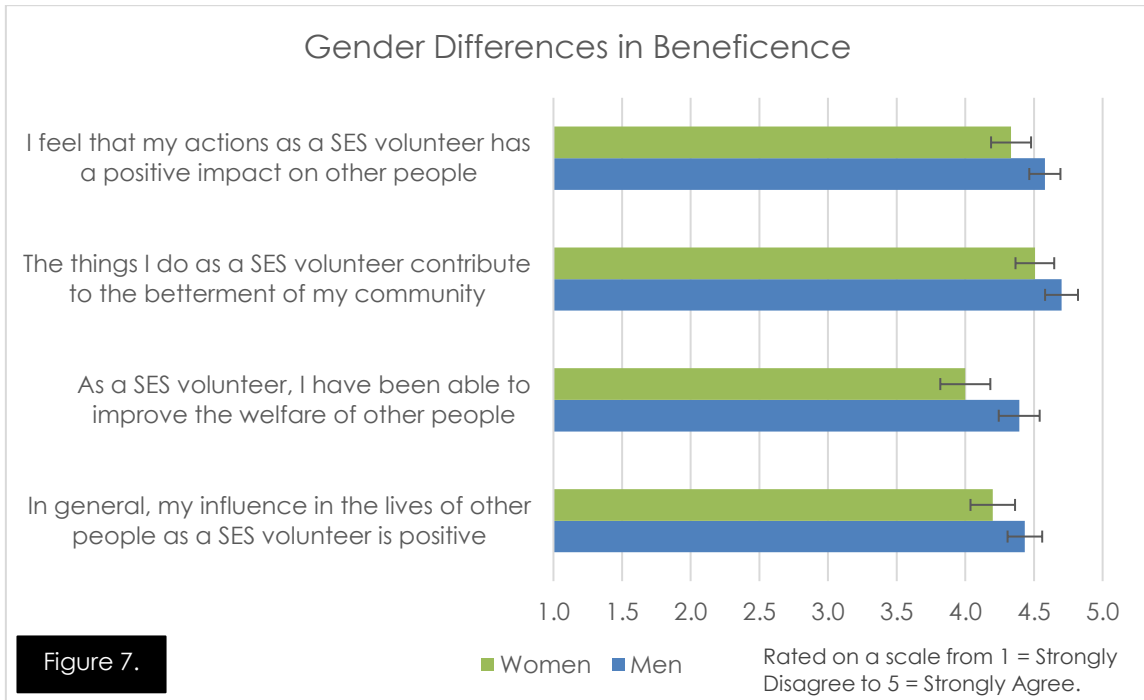
Figure 7.

VOLUNTEER ROLE AND IDENTITY FIT

In this section of the survey, participants were asked questions on the extent to which they identified with their volunteering role. Participants were also asked how strongly they identified with their current SES unit and the broader Emergency Services organisation (i.e., DFES).

Volunteer Identity

Overall, as Figure 8 shows, all participants agreed that being an SES volunteer was a strong part of their identity. However, volunteers who have volunteered longer with their units and with the SES were shown to have a stronger sense of identity with their role as a SES volunteer, compared to those with shorter tenures.

Figure 8.

Identification with Current SES Unit and Organisation

When comparing how much a volunteer identifies with their SES unit, in comparison to the wider DFES organisation, it can be observed that volunteers identified much more strongly with their unit (rating of 5.15 out of 7) than with the broader organisation (rating of 3.55 o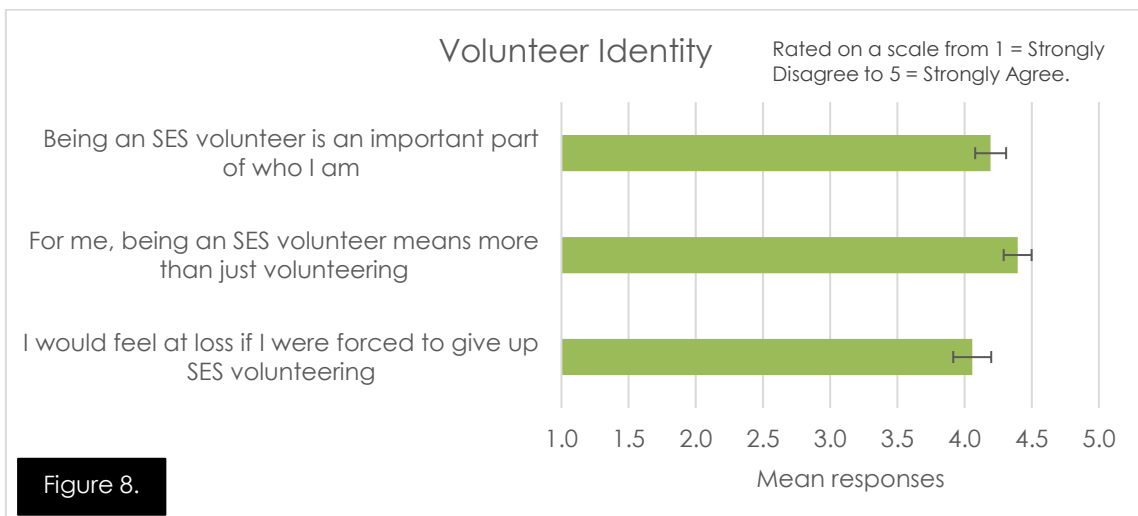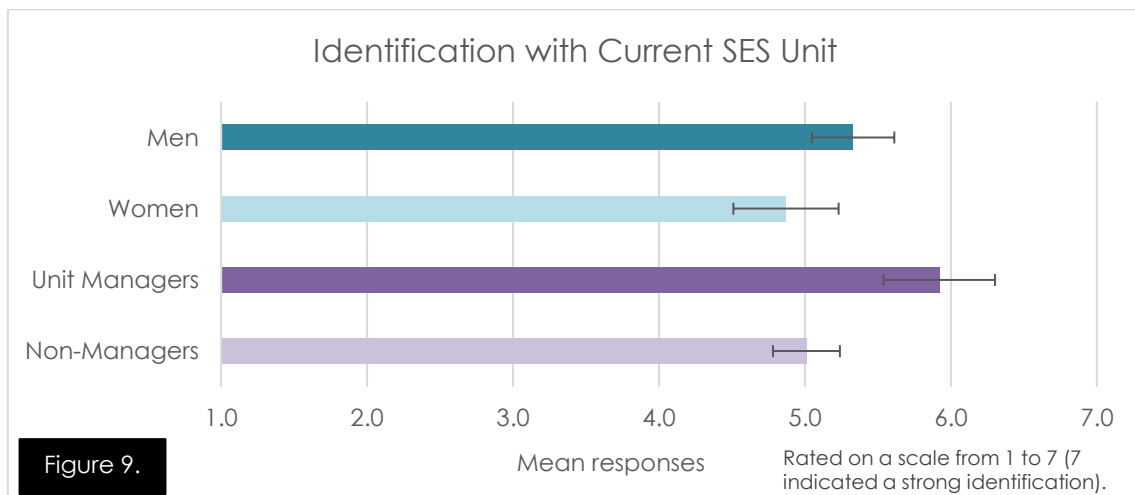ut of 7). The two diagrams below illustrate the differences in the volunteers' identification with their unit and with DFES.

Across all SES units in WA, it was found that metropolitan and regional volunteers were quite similar in how strongly they identified with their units and with DFES. Differences were observed when comparing volunteers of different genders. As shown in Figure 9, men were shown to identify more strongly with their SES units, in comparison to women. As men were found to have higher SES and unit tenure in comparison to women, this gender difference could be attributed to the fact that men volunteer for longer for their current SES units, and therefore, identify more strongly with their units as a result. Unit managers also reported stronger identification with their units, in comparison to non-managers. This result may be attributed to their leadership role that results in them being more involved with their unit overall. Lastly, age, unit tenure, and SES tenure were found to be postiviely associated with stronger unit identification.

Figure 9. Identification with Current SES Unit. Mean responses. Rated on a scale from 1 to 7 (7 indicated a strong identification).
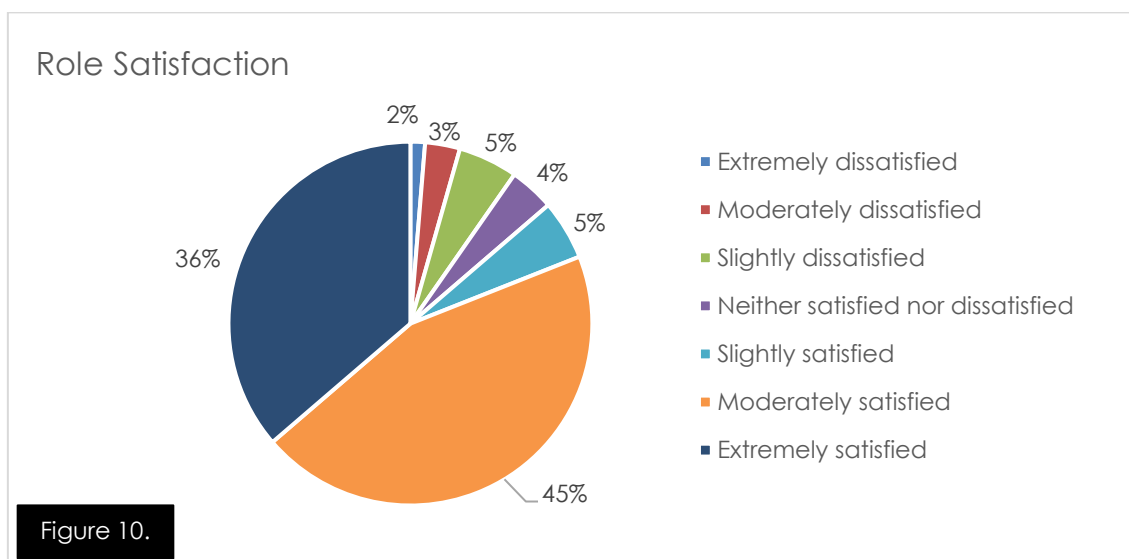
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VOLUNTEER WELLBEING

This section of the survey asked participants questions relating to their wellbeing. Specifically, volunteers were asked if they were satisfied with their role overall, and if they perceived themselves to be thriving in their role (i.e., developing and learning, as well as feeling energetic about their role).

Role Satisfaction

From Figure 10 below, it can be observed that most volunteers who responded to the survey were either moderately or extremely satisfied with their role as an SES volunteer. Although volunteers aged between 36 to 45 years reported the highest level of satisfaction, there were no meaningful age differences in role satisfaction, thus implying that volunteers overall were satisfied with their role.


Role Satisfaction

- Extremely dissatisfied
- Moderately dissatisfied
- Slightly dissatisfied
- Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
- Slightly satisfied
- Moderately satisfied
- Extremely satisfied

Figure 10.

Thriving

Thriving is a psychological state consisting of two components: *Vitality* (i.e., feeling alive and energetic) and *learning* (i.e., feeling like you are continuously developing and improving; Porath et al., 2012). Overall, participating volunteers thrived in their role to some extent. In particular, volunteers reported experiencing high levels of learning and personal development in their roles but that overall, they experienced somewhat less vitality (see Figure 11). This result implies that volunteers perceived their volunteering experiences to be conducive towards their learning and personal development, whereas their role was not so much of a source of energy for them.

When comparing cohort differences, it was found that volunteers from regional areas reported higher levels of learning and development in comparison to volunteers from metropolitan areas. A possible explanation for this result may be due to the smaller numbers in regional units resulting in managers being more able to focus and personalise the individual learning of their volunteers. Furthermore, while no other cohort differences were found, thriving was found to be strongly associated with role satisfaction and the volunteers' intentions to remain, thus highlighting thriving as an important aspect to focus and improve

on in order to promote volunteer retention. High levels of learning and development might also be attractive to new SES members; the SES could potentially promote learning and development opportunities in recruitment campaigns as it appears to be highly important to survey participants overall.

Figure 11.
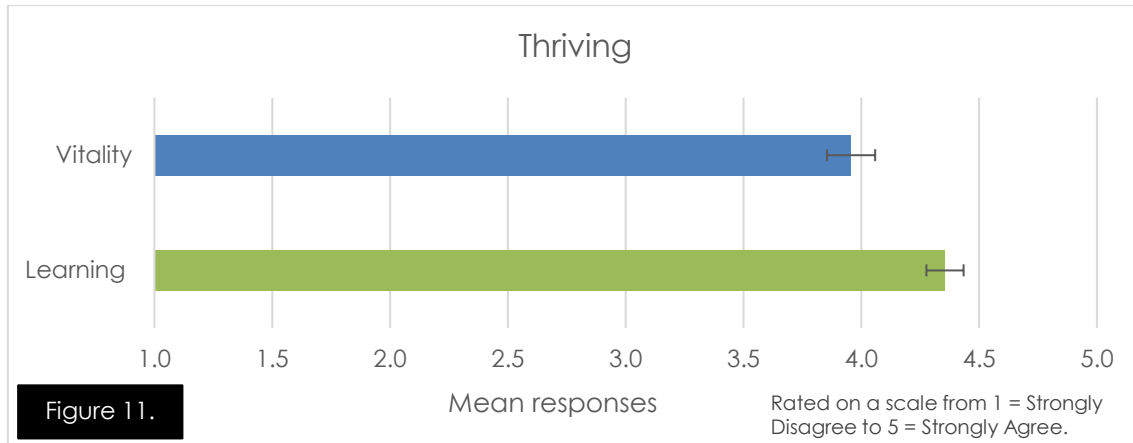
SES UNIT ENVIRONMENT

Psychological Safety

A "psychologically safe" climate describes a group atmosphere that allows and encourages open, supportive communication, and it allows individuals to speak up if and when issues arise (Gibson & Gibbs, 2006). Overall, it can be noted that volunteers were relatively neutral regarding how psychologically safe they felt in their units.

When examining psychological safety between cohorts, significant differences were found. Firstly, regional volunteers evaluated psychological safety within their units more positively than metropolitan volunteers. This result may be due to the smaller number of volunteers in regional units, resulting in a more inclusive environment that encourages volunteers to speak up. Women also reported feeling less psychologically safe in comparison to men (see Figure 12), and this was found to be especially more prominent in regional units than metropolitan units. This result indicates that women in SES units, but particularly regional SES units, may feel less comfortable and less accepted to be speaking up about issues within their unit.

Further, non-managers evaluated their unit as being less psychologically safe than unit managers. This difference could potentially be explained by differences in status between the leader and non-leader roles. Thus, some unit leaders might be surprised that their group members do not feel as psychologically safe as their leaders.
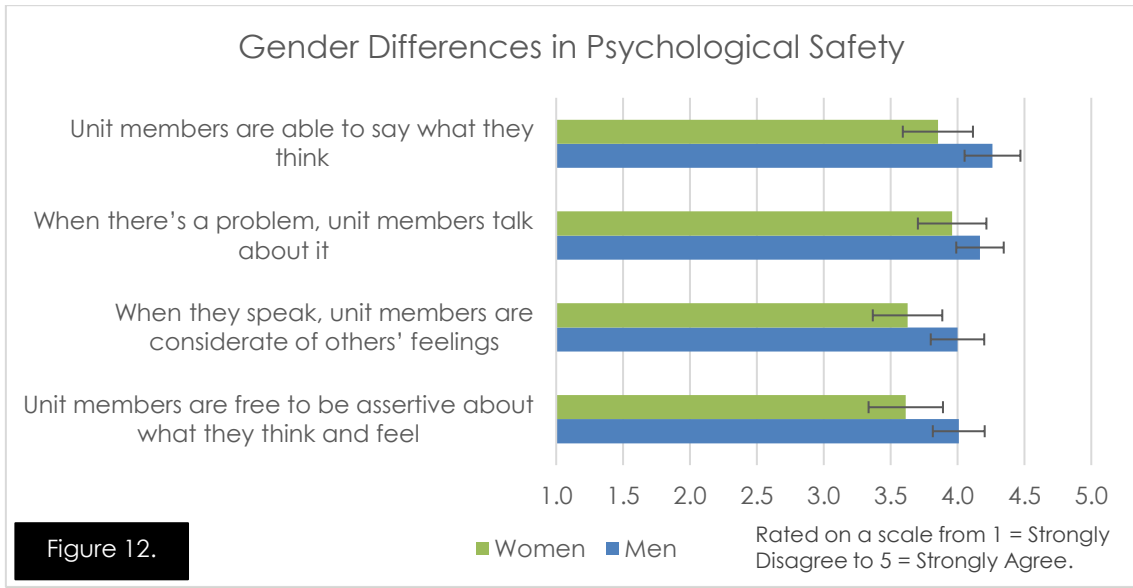
Figure 12.

Climate for Inclusiveness

An inclusive climate is defined by the extent in which individuals of different backgrounds feel valued, integrated, and included in decision-making processes (Nishii, 2013). On average, volunteers felt valued for their differences and only somewhat included in their unit's decision-making processes. While the differences between those born in Australia and those that were not born in Australia were not significant, there was a significant difference between metropolitan and regional volunteers with regards to feeling valued for their differences and included in decision-making processes. In comparison to metropolitan volunteers, regional volunteers tended to report significantly higher integration of differences and inclusion in decision-making processes occurring within the unit (see Figure 13). This result informs us of a need to explore ways to include metropolitan volunteers in decision-making processes that occur in SES units that are potentially larger, in addition to finding ways to make them feel more valued for their individual differences.
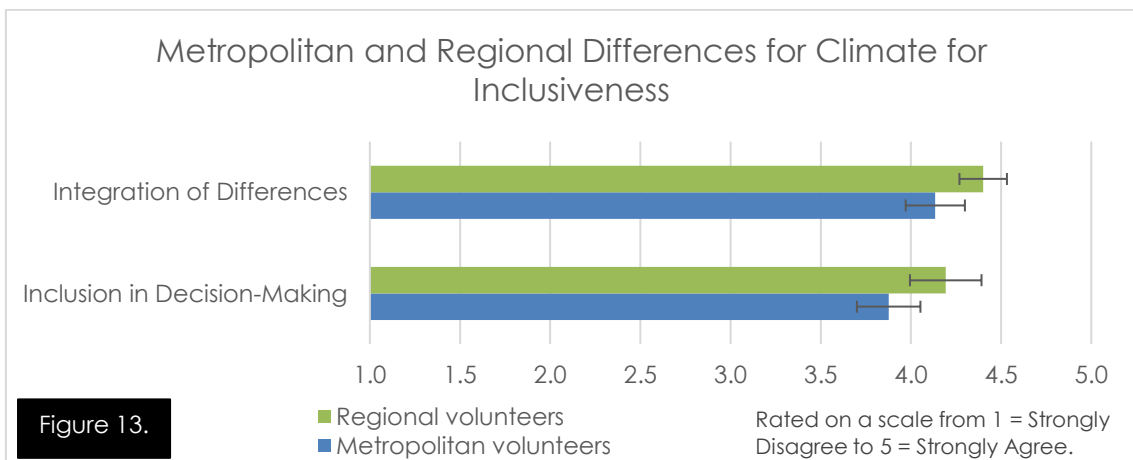

Figure 13.

Similarly, non-managers reported lower levels of integration of differences and inclusion in decision-making processes. However, this result could be attributed to the leaders' status within the unit, which may result in them feeling more valued, in addition to having more control over the decision-making processes

occurring within the unit. Women also reported feeling less included in decision-making processes in comparison to men (see Figure 14), and similarly to psychological safety, this was found to be more prominent for women volunteering in regional SES units than those volunteering in metropolitan units.

Figure 14.
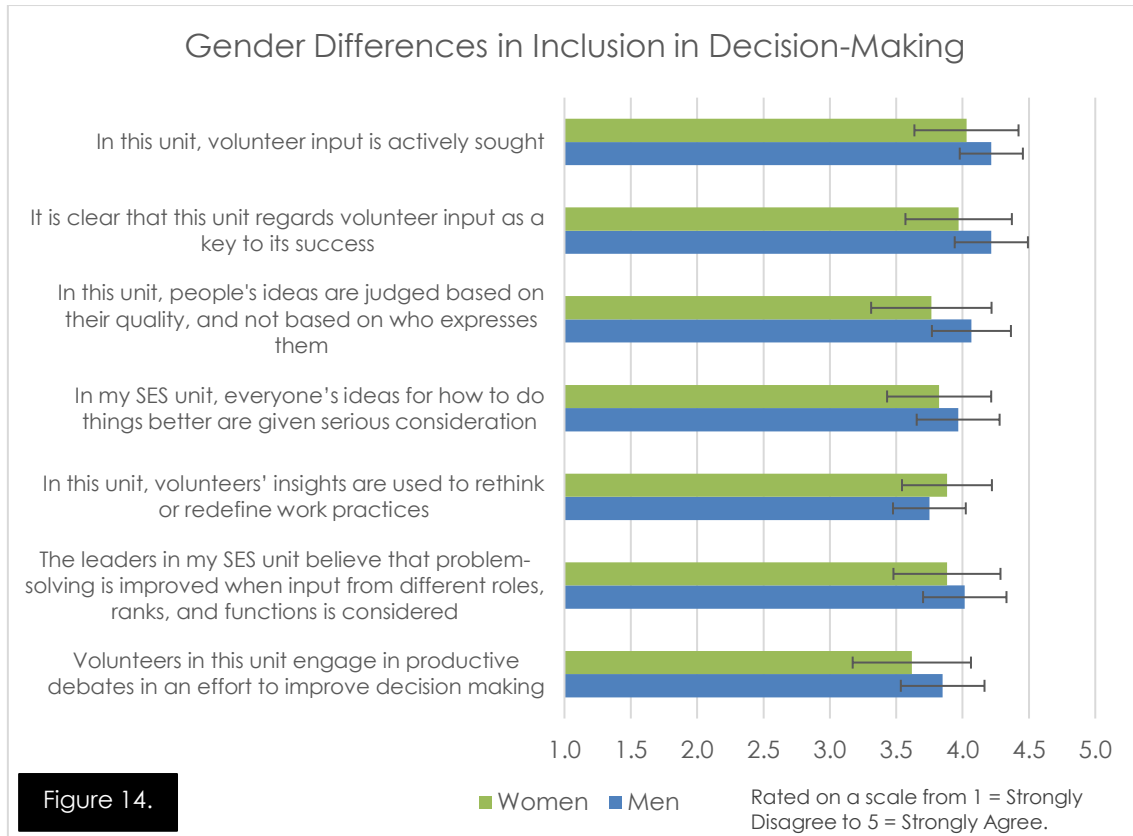
Leader Behaviours

Two types of leadership behaviours were measured in the survey: *consideration* and *initiating structure*. *Consideration* is a type of leadership behaviour that centres on concern for the wellbeing of organisational members. It involves providing organisational members with expressions of support, or displays of approachability and warmth (Lambert et al., 2012). *Initiating structure*, refers to the act of clarifying task responsibilities and setting up performance expectations (Lambert et al., 2012).

The questionnaire asked participants about their leaders' behaviour both during call outs and outside of it (i.e., day-to-day). Importantly, volunteers generally reported that their unit manager typically behaved in positive ways (refer to Figure 15) for both considerate and initiating structure behaviours across both types of situations. While no significant cohort differences were found across the situations, it was discovered that perceptions of positive leadership behaviours during call-outs and day-to-day were strongly associated to both the volunteers' role satisfaction and intentions to remain.

As no significant cohort differences were observed, this indicates that, as a general rule, leader behaviours within the SES are regarded very positively by the volunteers.

Leader Behaviours

Figure 15.

Rated on a scale from 1 = Almost Never to 5 = Almost Always.
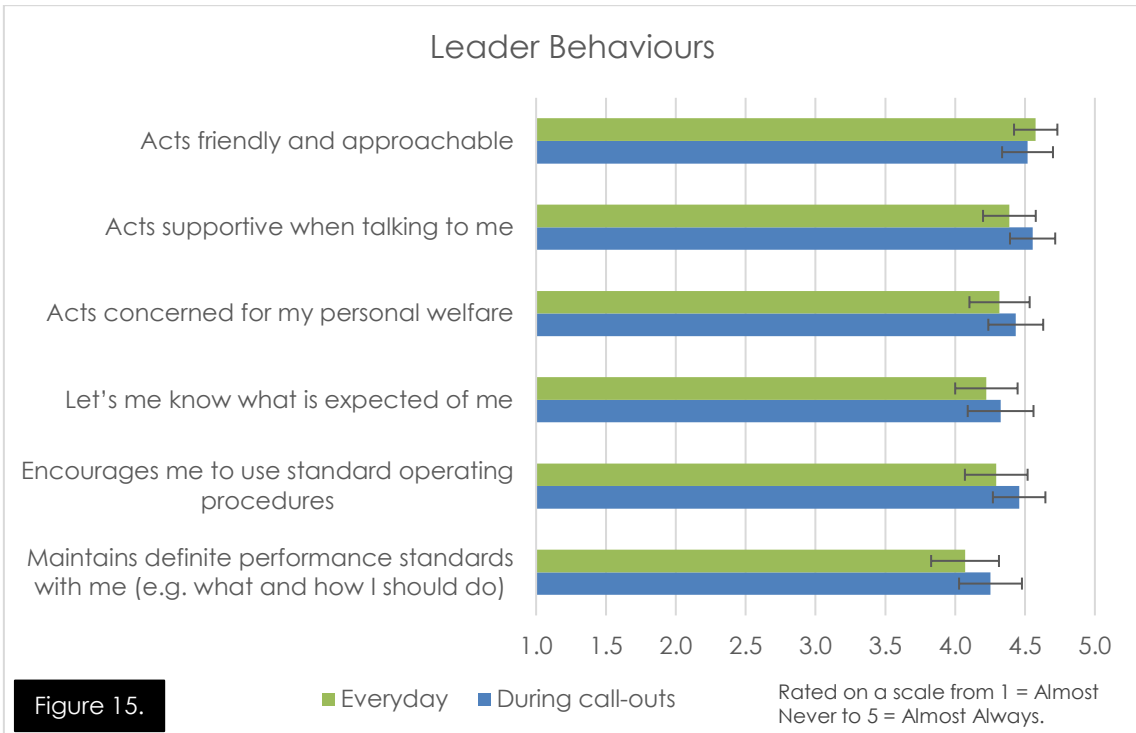
Social Support from Team Members

To further assess social support within the unit, we added in an additional measure to evaluate the level of social support that volunteers receive from their team members who are non-leaders. Overall, volunteers reported that they often received social support from their team members. As shown in Figure 16, volunteers reported that they feel respected by their team members, and could reach out to their team members for help and support if they need it. There were also no significant differences between cohorts, thus implying that overall, social support from team members is regarded very positively by volunteers who responded to the survey.

Social Support from Team Members

Figure 16.

Rated on a scale from 1 = Never to 5 = Always.
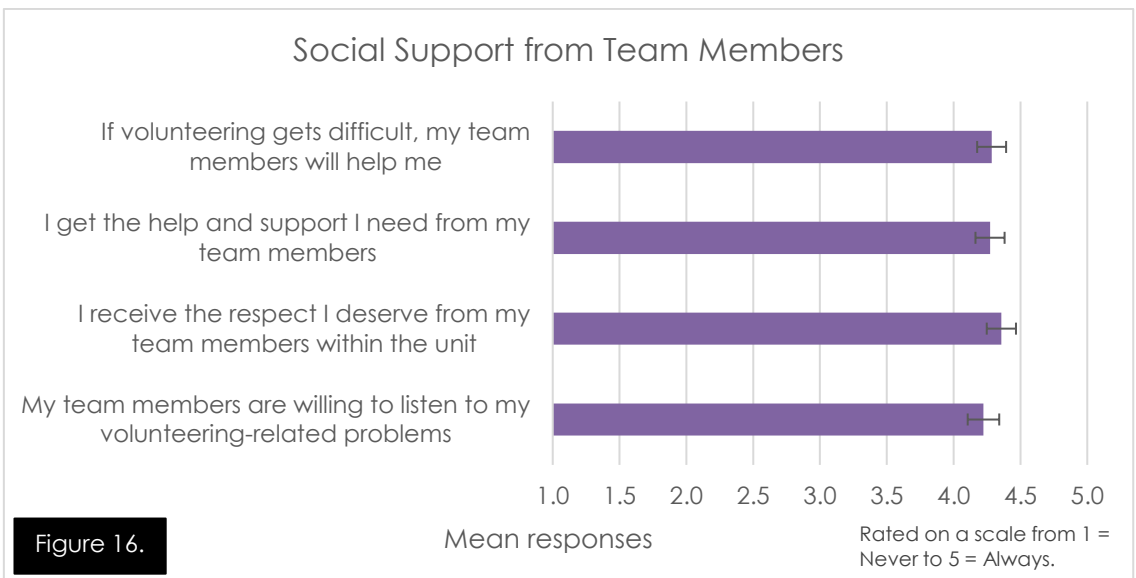
INTENTIONS TO REMAIN

Volunteer Retention

More than half of the volunteers from this sample were intending to stay within their current unit and the SES for at least the next two years (see Figure 17). Turnover in the SES nationally has hovered around 25%, and the results of this survey suggested that approximately 10% were likely to leave within the next two years, with a further 13% being undecided.

Approximately 90% of volunteers indicated that they are likely or very likely to recommend SES to others as an organisation to volunteer with, suggesting that word of mouth from existing members is likely to be a good avenue for volunteer recruitment. Thus, a recruitment method involving word of mouth could potentially be explored and expanded on in the future (e.g., "Recruit a Friend" campaigns).

Figure 17.

Figure 18.
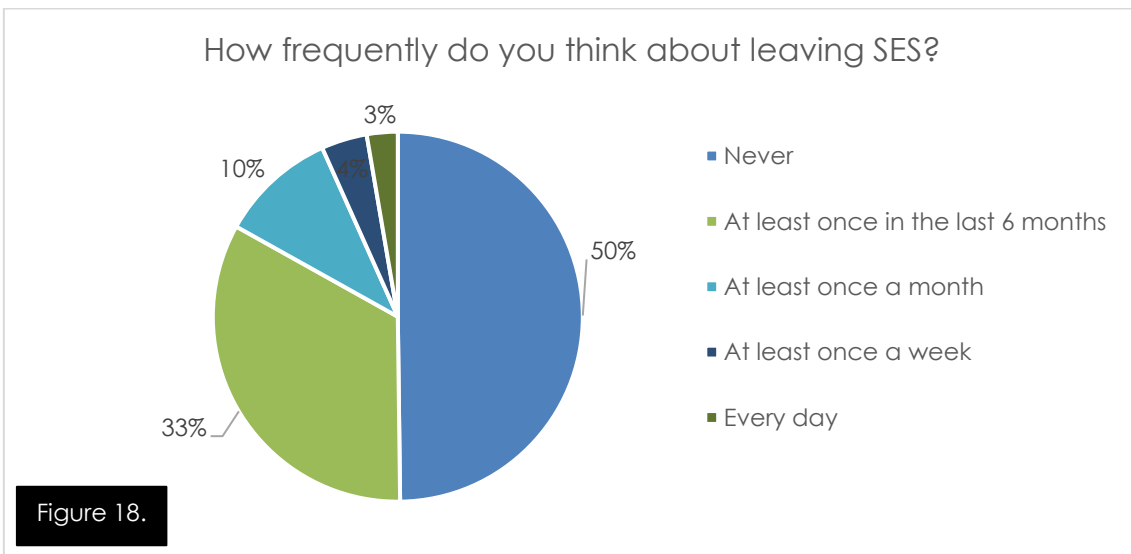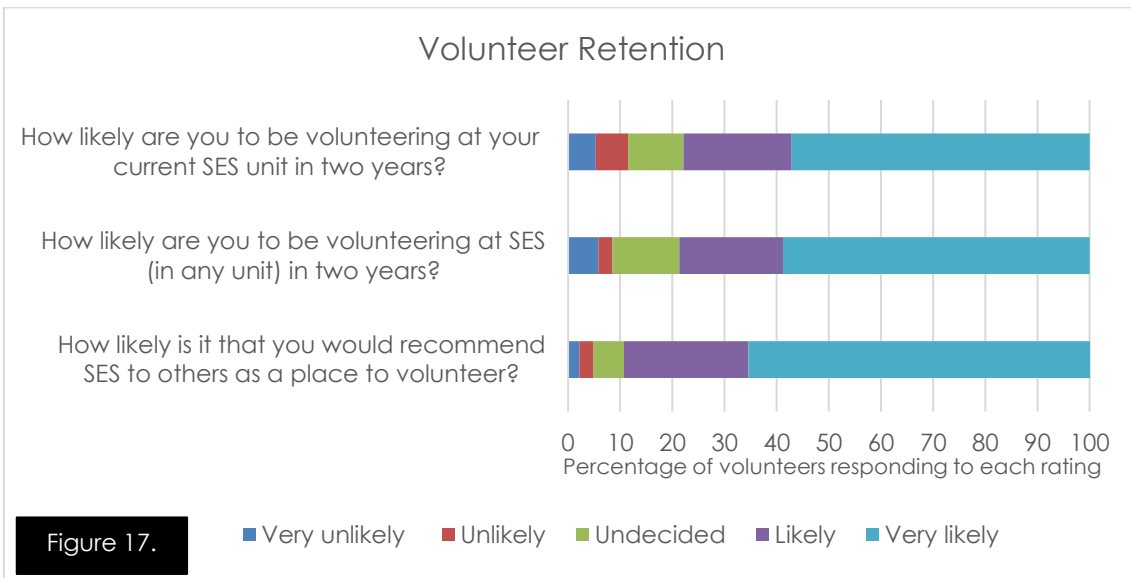
When asked how frequently a volunteer considers leaving the SES, approximately 83% of the survey sample either never thought about leaving or considered leaving the SES at least once in the last six months. Approximately 18% of men and 12% of women reported considering leaving the SES on an everyday, weekly, or monthly basis. When comparing cohort differences and its relationship with how frequently one considers leaving, no meaningful age differences were found. As can be noted in Figure 19, there were no significant age differences between those who considered leaving everyday and those who never considered leaving, thus highlighting that there is a strong likelihood that no specific age groups within this sample are at risk of turnover.
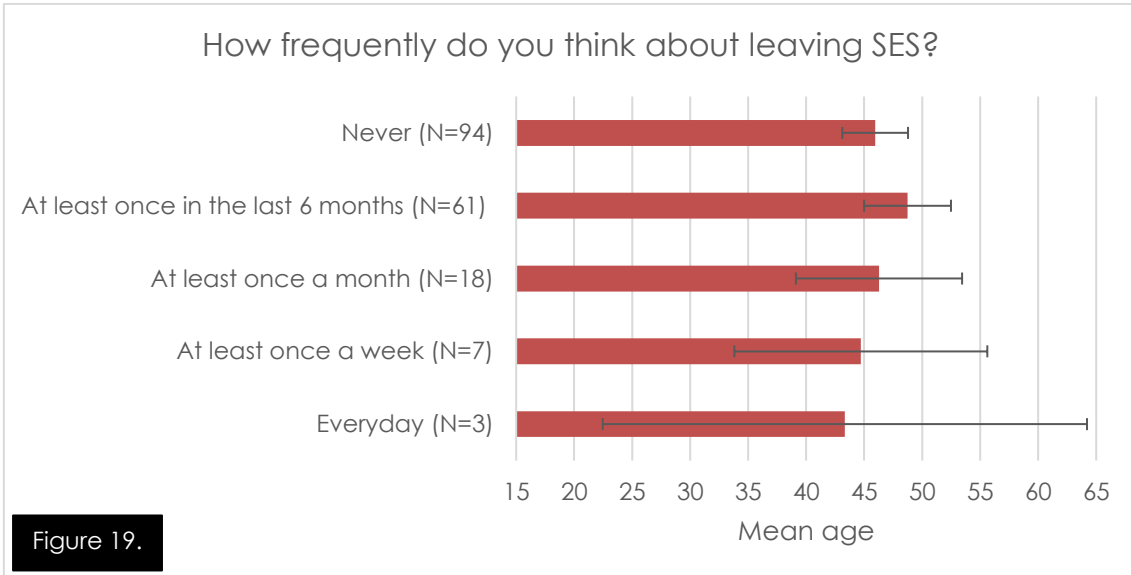
Figure 19.

The volunteers were also asked to pick one out of the four statements below to describe how they feel about volunteering with the SES, and majority of the participants responded that they can and want to stay with the SES (76.4%), with 14.2% of participants indicating that they want to stay, but may have to leave.

	Stayers	Leavers
Reluctant	I WANT TO LEAVE the SES but I feel like I HAVE TO STAY (**5.8%**)	I WANT TO STAY in the SES but I may HAVE TO LEAVE (**14.2%**)
Enthusiastic	I WANT TO STAY in the SES and I CAN STAY if I want to (**76.4%**)	I WANT TO LEAVE the SES and I CAN LEAVE if I want to (**3.6%**)

Table 4. *Statements describing how volunteers feel about volunteering with the SES.*

Volunteer Retention Drivers

As shown below in Figure 20, various aspects of the volunteering experience were found to be linked to the volunteers' intentions to stay with the SES. Thus, these aspects should be considered as key drivers to be focused on for volunteer retention. When comparing the significance of these different aspects on retention, it was found that an inclusive climate, social support from team members, role satisfaction, and feeling energetic about their volunteering role (as indicated in the green boxes), were particularly important in influencing the volunteers' intentions to remain. Therefore, special attention should be paid to these aspects of volunteering in order to further retain volunteers within the units.

Figure 20.   Key volunteer retention drivers.

///////////////////////////////////////

COMPARING CAT 2018-19 AND 2019-20 FINDINGS

In this section, we will use and compare the data of the participants who completed both the CAT 18-19 and 19-20 surveys. The purpose of this comparison is to examine changes in the overall SES volunteering experience in the last 12 months. This will help determine which areas have improved, which areas are in need of so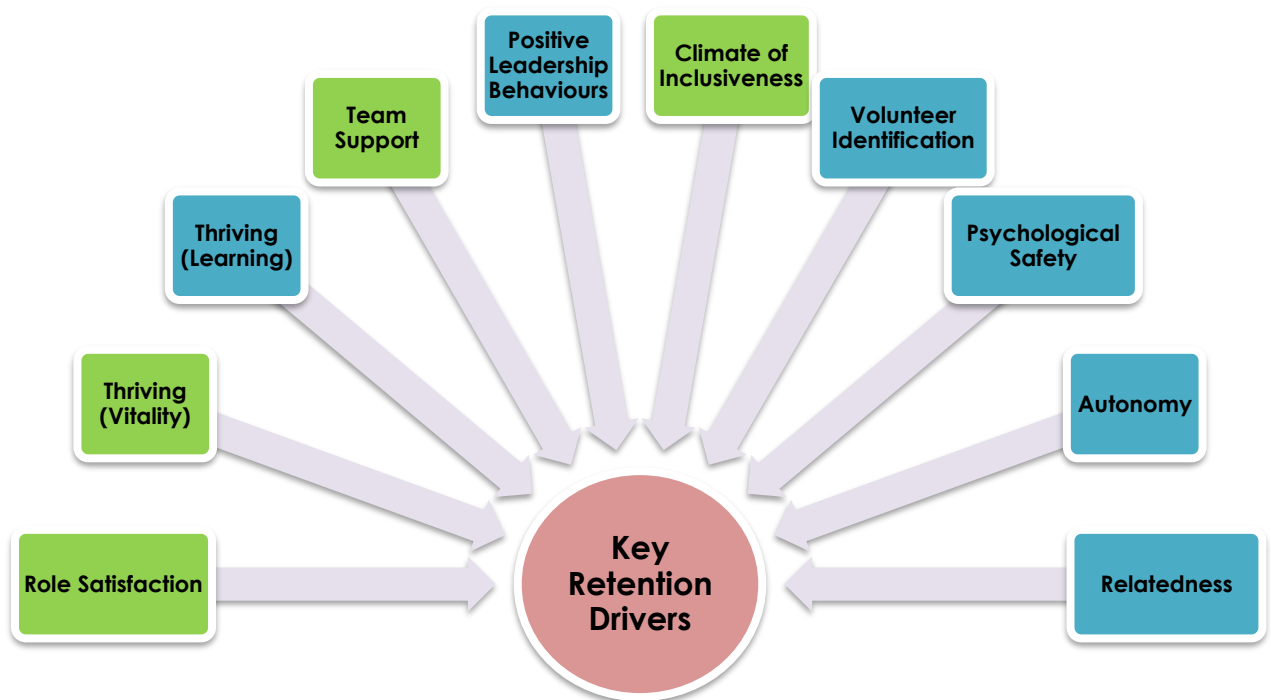me work, and which areas have stayed relatively the same. We will then discuss the overall key implications of these findings to better inform volunteer leaders and organisation managers on how to better improve the current state of volunteering for SES volunteers. It is important to bear in mind that when making comparisons like these, we are focusing only on participants who voluntarily completed both surveys, so the sample will be biased in some (unknown) respects.

PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

Of the 226 participants who responded to the CAT 19-20 survey, 136 were repeat responders (i.e., they also participated in the CAT 18-19 survey). However, due to incompleteness in survey responses, only the results of 95 participants will be discussed, and will be referred to as the comparison group for the remainder of this report.

Age

The average age of the comparison group is 48.8 years (standard deviation = 14.1 years), with participants ranging in age between 18 and 85 years old. As seen in Table 5 below, the cohort ranging in age between 36 and 45 years is well-represented in comparison to the overall SES population. Similarly, the cohort aged 66 years and older is also fairly comparable. Differences between the cohort ranging in age between 26 and 35 years is rather minimal. However, it should be noted that the cohorts ranging in age between 46 and 55 years, and 56 and 65 years are over-represented in the comparison sample. The opposite was true for the cohort aged 25 years and under. These differences should be kept in mind when comparing survey findings between different age groups.

	Overall SES population	Comparison sample
Number of participants	2033	95
Below 26 years	16.4%	5.4%
26 – 35 years	21.3%	17.2%
36 – 45 years	19.6%	19.4%
46 – 55 years	16.7%	21.5%
56 – 65 years	14.3%	22.6%
Above 65 years	11.6%	14.0%

Table 5. *Age representation within the overall SES population and the comparison sample.*

Gender

As of March 2020, the overall SES population in WA consisted of 61.1% men and 38.9% women. Observing Table 6, it can be noted that the gender representation

within the comparison sample is fairly representative of the SES population in WA at the time that these data were collected. There were also no significant differences found when comparing the number of leaders between male and female volunteers. Additionally, the gender representation across metropolitan and regional units were fairly characteristic of the overall SES population.

	Gender breakdown	
	Male volunteers	**Female volunteers**
Overall SES population in WA	61.1%	38.9%
Comparison sample	62.8%	35.1%
Metropolitan units	64.2%	32.8%
Regional units	59.3%	40.7%
Leader representation	20.3%	9.1%

Table 6. *Gender representation within the overall SES population and the comparison sample.*

Nationality and Ethnicity

From the comparison sample, 68.1% of the participants were born in Australia, and 31.9% of participants were born in a different country. Table 7 below illustrates the different ethnicities represented in the comparison sample. The majority of the sample identified themselves as being of Australian ethnicity. This is followed by European, representing almost a quarter of the sample. Other ethnicities were represented by at least one member of the SES. However, the ethnic diversity is particularly low due to the smaller sample size.

Ethnicity	Percentage (%)
Australian	72.6
New Zealander	2.1
Asian	4.2
Indian	1.1
Middle Eastern	2.1
European	22.1
Prefer not to say	1.1

Table 7. *Ethnicity representation within the comparison sample.*

Tenure (Years)

In the comparison sample, the average number of years spent volunteering for the SES was 10.3 years (SD = 9.7), with an average of 10.3 years (SD = 9.7) spent volunteering for their current unit. As shown in Table 8, about 14% of the sample were relatively new to the SES (volunteering for two years or less), whereas the remaining 76% had been with the SES for two years or longer. Thus, in the sample, there is a larger representation of long-term volunteers. This is in contrast with the overall SES population, in which almost 50% of the population in WA are new volunteers, with the remaining 50% having been with the SES for two years or longer.

Tenure breakdown				
	SES population (*N* = 2033)		Comparison sample (*N* = 95)	
	SES Tenure	Unit Tenure	SES Tenure	Unit Tenure
0 – 2 years	45.5%	48.9%	13.7%	13.7%
2 – 4 years	14.2%	14.5%	17.9%	17.9%
4 – 6 years	8.5%	8.6%	18.9%	18.9%
6 – 8 years	7.1%	6.4%	8.4%	8.4%
8 – 10 years	4.9%	4.4%	11.6%	11.6%
10 – 15 years	6.9%	6.3%	9.5%	9.5%
15 – 20 years	4.8%	3.6%	6.3%	6.3%
20 – 30 years	5.0%	4.7%	6.3%	6.3%
Over 30 years	3.1%	2.6%	7.4%	7.4%

Table 8. *Current unit and overall SES tenure of the SES population and the comparison sample.*

Volunteer Roles

Of the 95 repeat participants, 16 (16.8%) identified themselves as Unit Managers. Out of the 66 SES units across WA, 16 units were represented by at least one Unit Manager, resulting in an overall leader representation percentage of 24.2%.

Metropolitan and Regional Representation

Out of the 66 SES units in WA, 33 (50.0%) were represented by at least one respondent. The representation from each of the 12 regions can be observed in Figure 21 on the following page. Approximately 70% of the respondents were metropolitan volunteers (including SWORD[2]), with the remaining 30% of the sample volunteering in the remaining regions. Observing the overall regional data from the time of data collection, it can be noted that the volunteer representation from the Goldfields Midlands, Kimberley, Lower South West, and Pilbara regions were quite similar to the representation in these regions from the overall SES population in WA. However, the Metropolitan region was over-represented in the comparison sample. The remaining regions were under-represented.

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[2] It is important to note that at the time of data collection, SWORD was treated separately as its own region.

Metropolitan and Regional Representation

Region	Overall SES Representation	Sample Representation
Goldfields Midlands	3.51%	3.20%
Great Southern	12.83%	6.30%
Kimberley	3.12%	1.10%
Lower South West	7.76%	10.50%
Metropolitan	52.24%	72.60%
Midwest Gascoyne	6.68%	1.10%
Plibara	5.66%	4.20%
South West	8.20%	1.10%

Percentage of volunteers in the comparison sample

■ Overall SES Representation ■ Sample Representation

Figure 21.

REASONS TO STAY

Figure 22.

Rated on a scale from 1 = Not At All to 3 = A Lot.
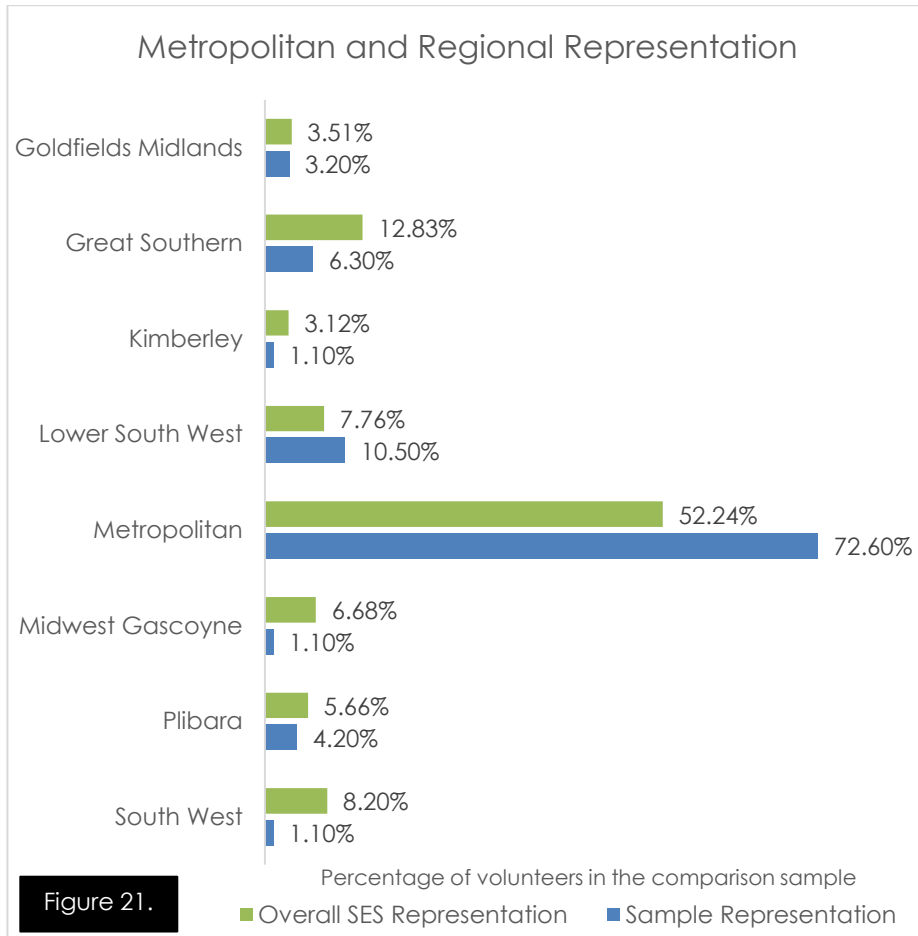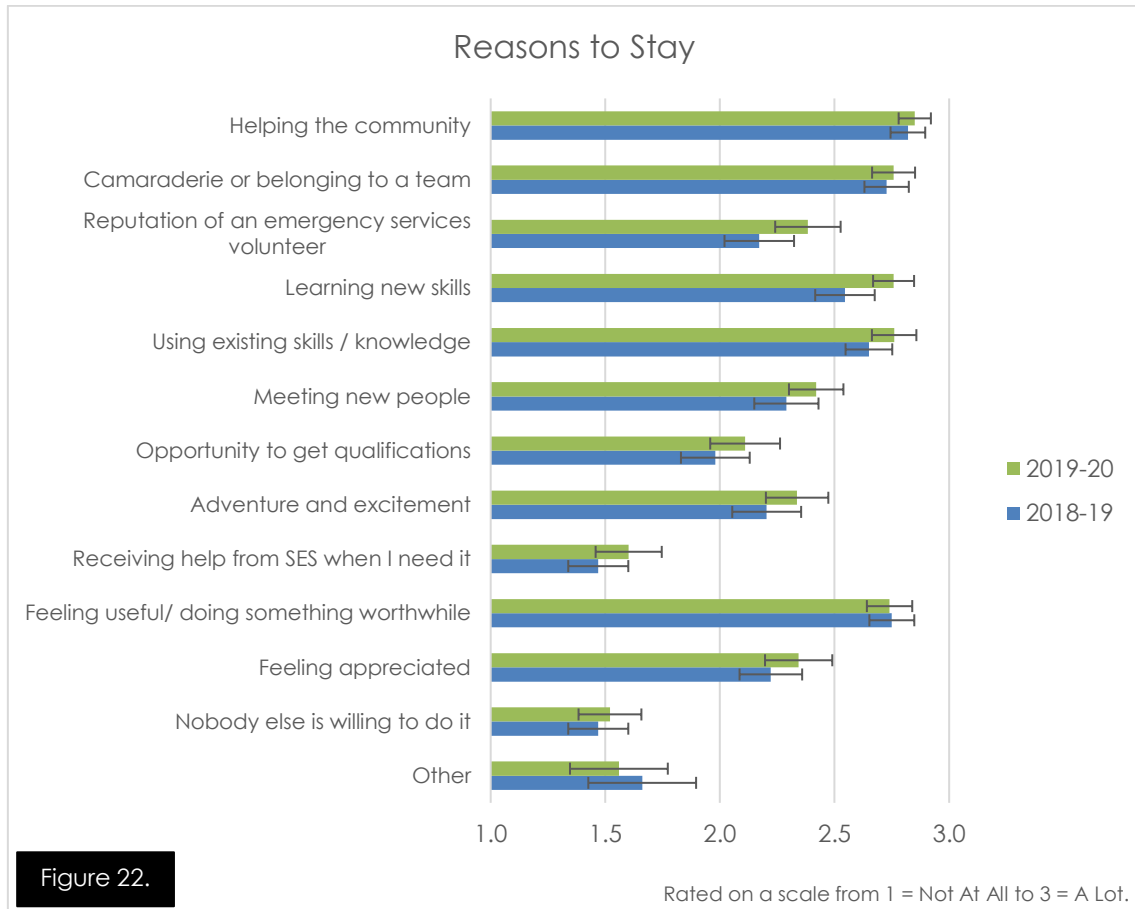
First, we compared the different reasons that volunteers have indicated as being key motives for them to continue volunteering with the SES. Figure 22 shows each reason along with the mean responses. It should be noted that the top five reasons why volunteers stay with the SES was similar in both 18-19 and 19-20:

To help the community

Feeling useful/wanted to do something worthwhile

Learning new skills

For camaraderie or belonging to a team

To use existing skills/knowledge

Of the 12 reasons to choose from, four were found to be stronger for the volunteers in 19-20, in comparison to 18-19. These include; having a reputation of being an emergency services volunteer, learning new skills, using existing skills and knowledge, and finally, meeting new people. These differences indicate a positive result as it implies that these areas have improved for the volunteers in the last 12 months. Based on this result, it is implied that in the last year, volunteers felt more recognised and acknowledged for their contribution as an emergency service volunteer, and that they were more able to learn new skills, use existing skills, in addition to being more able to meet new people.

VOLUNTEER NEEDS

This section will compare the differences in how autonomous, socially connected, and competent the volunteers have felt in the last 12 months.

Needs Satisfaction
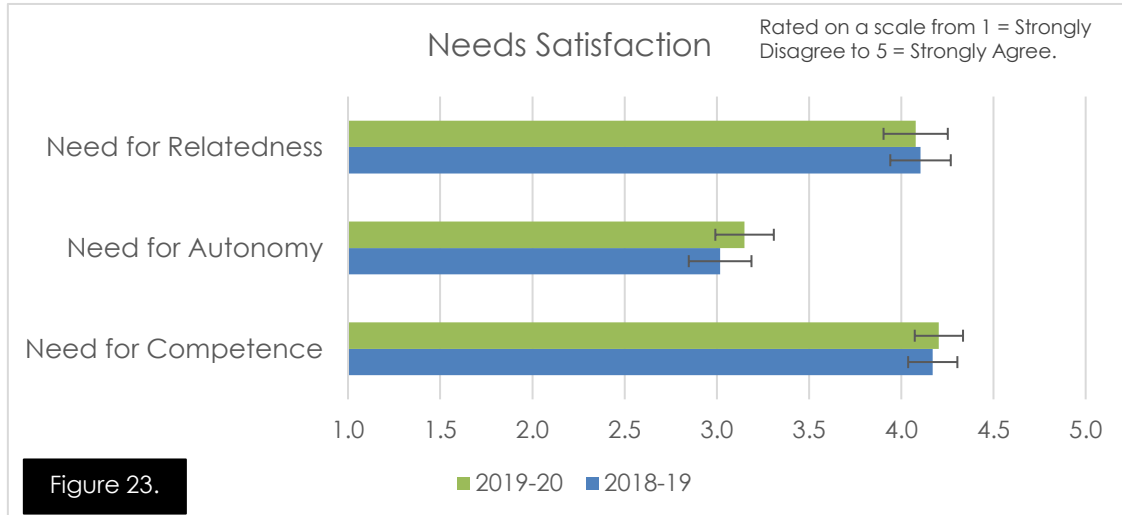
Figure 23.

When looking at the different psychological needs of volunteers in Figure 23, it can be observed that the volunteers' needs for relatedness, autonomy, and competence have all generally increased, although this result was not significant. A result that was consistent in both 18-19 and 19-20 was that volunteers generally agreed that their need for relatedness and competence was satisfied. However, volunteers in the sample were rather neutral (i.e., close to the middle point, 3, on the response scale) with regards to how autonomous they felt in their volunteering role.

Of the three, the need for autonomy increased the most, with volunteers reporting that they felt like they had more independence in the way they could perform their SES tasks. However, volunteers also reported that they felt like they had to perform tasks in their volunteering role that they did not want to do. As psychological needs are related to volunteer turnover intentions (Gagné, 2003), it is imperative that volunteers feel autonomous, socially connected, and competent in their roles. Thus, we will later outline different strategies to help a volunteer leader better satisfy their volunteers' psychological needs.

VOLUNTEER ROLE AND IDENTITY FIT

In this next section, we will compare the extent in which volunteers identified with their role, current SES unit, and the overall emergency services organisation in 19-20, in comparison to 18-19.

Volunteer Identity

Overall, from Figure 24, it can be noted that volunteers in the comparison sample generally agreed that they identified strongly with their volunteering role, in both 18-19 (rating of 4.18 out of 5) and 19-20 (rating of 4.25 out of 5). There was no significant increase or decrease in volunteer identification; thus, implying that in general, volunteers believed their role to be an important part of their identity.
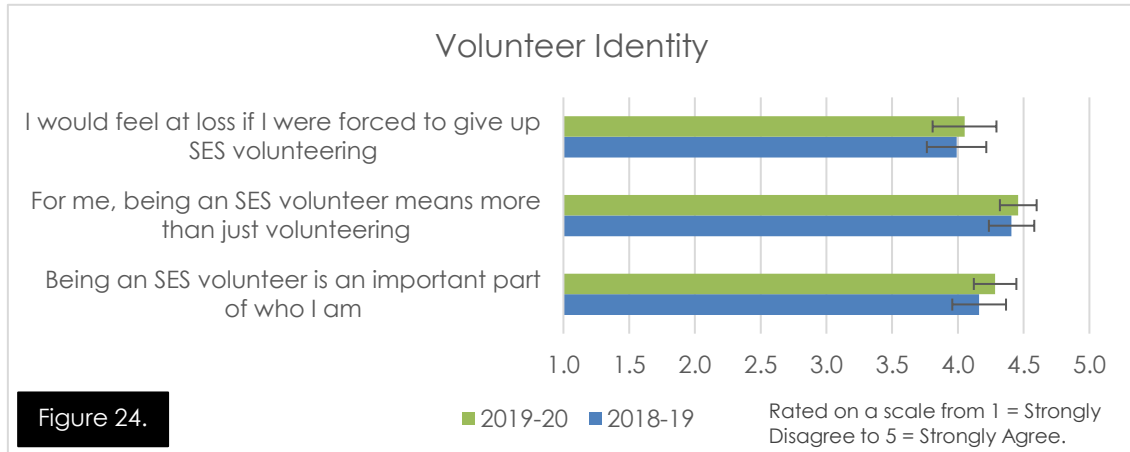
Figure 24.

Identification with Current SES Unit and Organisation

When comparing how much a volunteer identifies with their SES unit, in comparison to the wider DFES organisation, it can be observed that volunteers identified much more strongly with their unit, than with the broader organisation. Referring to the diagrams in Table 9 below, volunteers indicated that they did not identify more or less with their current SES unit in 19-20 (rating of 5.16 out of 7) than they did in 18-19 (rating of 5.14 out of 7). In contrast, volunteers identified more so with DFES in 19-20 (rating of 3.60 out of 7) than they did in 18-19 (rating of 3.18 out of 7). Although volunteers identified more so with their unit than they do with the broader organisation, this increase signals a positive step towards volunteers feeling more aligned with DFES as part of their volunteering identity.

Table 9. *Identification with current SES unit and organisation in 2018-19 and 2019-20.*

VOLUNTEER WELLBEING

This section will compare results in 18-19 and 19-20 to assess for any changes in the volunteers' overall wellbeing. Specifically, this section will address volunteer role satisfaction and the extent in which volunteers were thriving in their roles.
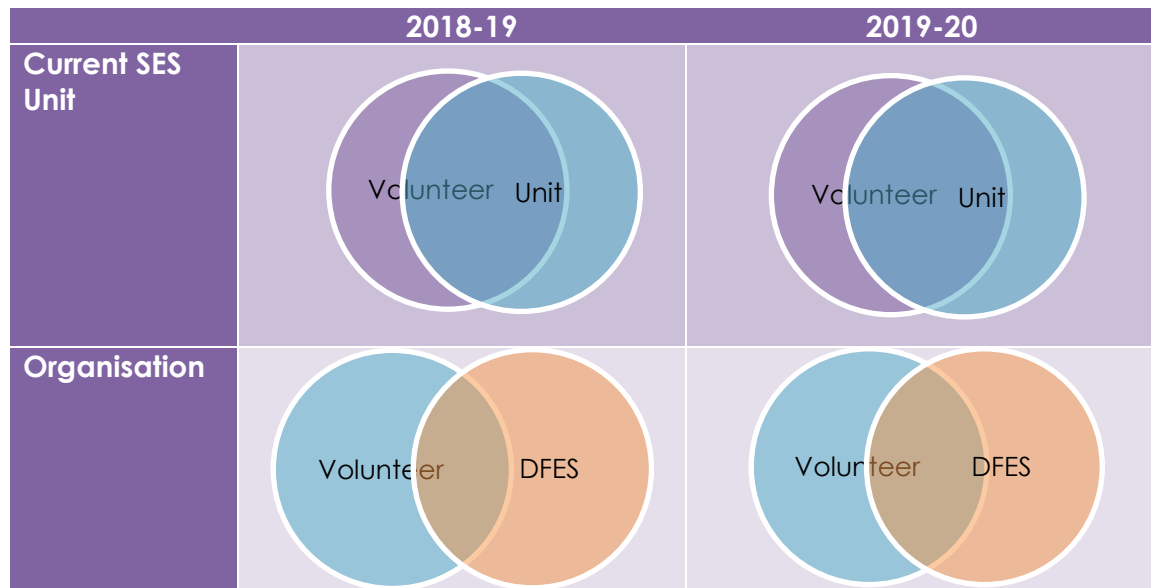
Role Satisfaction

Overall, most volunteers in the comparison sample were either moderately or extremely satisfied with their roles. This result was consistent and similar across 18-19 (rating of 5.75 out of 7) and 19-20 (rating of 5.82 out of 7).
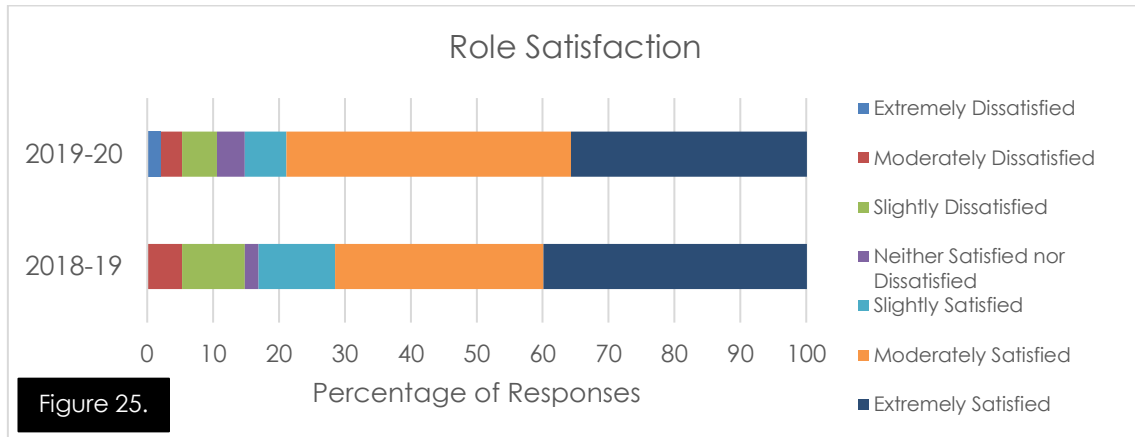
Figure 25.

Thriving

Thriving refers to the extent in which an individual is energetic about their role, and believes that they are continuously learning and developing in their role. Overall, volunteers agreed that they are thriving in their role, and that they are continuously learning. As shown in Figure 26, volunteers reported that they are learning and developing more in 19-20 (rating of 4.39) than they did in 18-19 (rating of 4.24). Specifically, volunteers reported that they see themselves continuously improving in their roles. However, volunteers were neutral with regards to their role being a source of energy for them, and this was similar across both surveys. As vitality was indicated as being an important driver of volunteer retention, it is imperative that this be improved for volunteers moving forward.
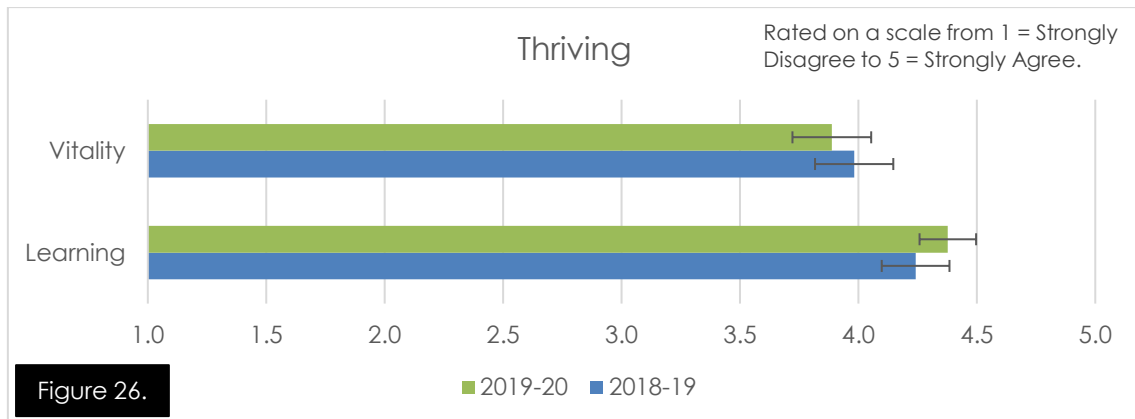
Figure 26.

SES UNIT ENVIRONMENT

This section will examine the SES unit environment with regards to how safe volunteers feel about speaking up in their unit, how inclusive they believe their unit environment to be, in addition to comparing their leaders' behaviours during and outside of call-outs.

Psychological Safety

When examining psychological safety, it can be noted that overall, volunteers reported that they felt neutral with regards to how safe they feel to speak up about issues within their unit, and be assertive with how they think and feel. This result was similar across both years. Although results in 19-20 show a slight increase in comparison to 18-19, this difference was not significant, thus highlighting a need to improve psychological safety in volunteers in order to allow them to feel like their units are a safe environment for them to have a voice.

Figure 27.

Climate for Inclusiveness

Figure 28.
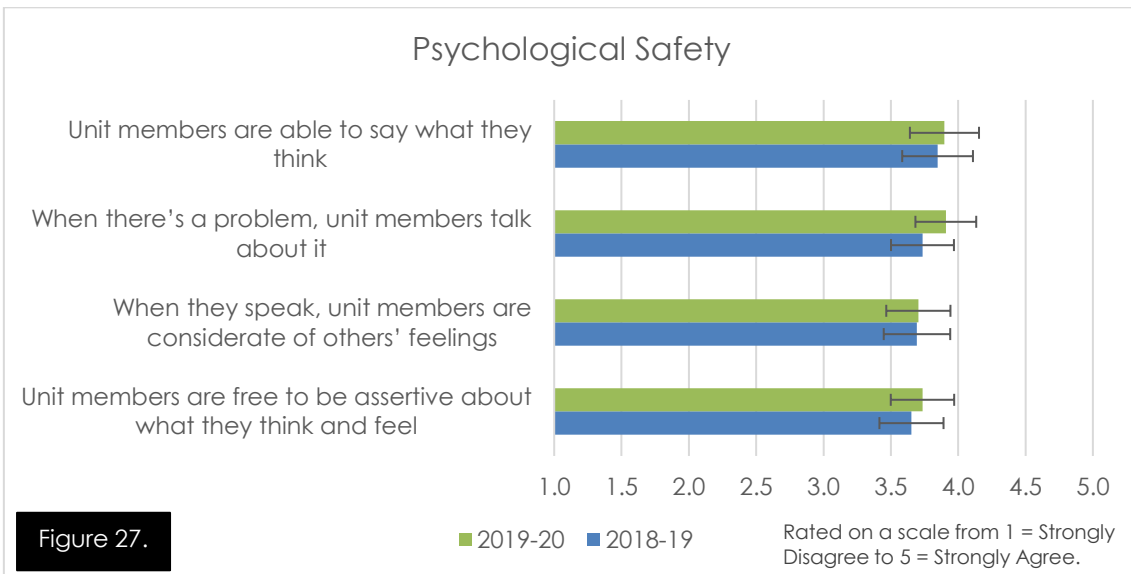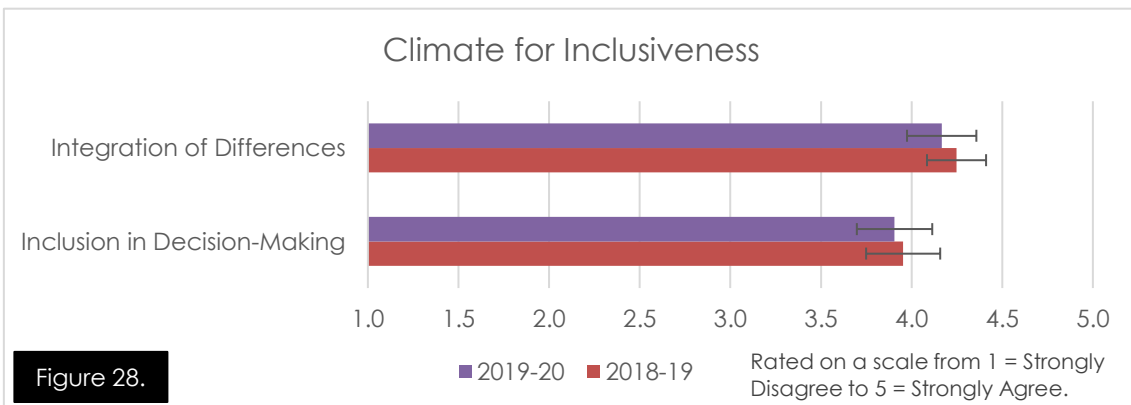
We also examined any changes to inclusiveness within a unit climate in the last 12 months. Specifically, we looked at the extent in which volunteers believed that their differences were valued and respected (i.e., integration of differences),

and the extent in which volunteers believed that they were included in decision-making processes occurring within the unit.

Based on Figure 28, it was reported that volunteers did not feel differently with regards to how inclusive their unit climate was in 19-20 compared to 18-19. Although volunteers felt valued and respected for their differences, volunteers were rather neutral with regards to how included they felt in decision-making; thus, highlighting an important need to allow volunteers to give input in decision-making processes occurring within a unit. Furthermore, volunteers were asked if they believed their unit to be more inclusive, less inclusive, or relatively the same in comparison to the year before. About 80% of volunteers reported that their unit, in the last 12 months, was either more inclusive or have stayed relatively the same.

Leader Behaviours
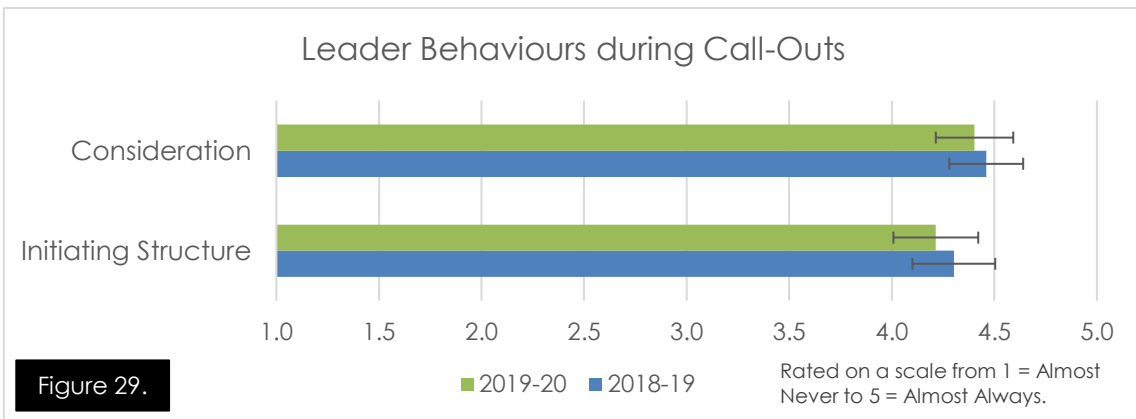
Figure 29.

Overall, volunteers viewed their leaders as behaving rather positively, both during and outside of call-outs. Two leader behaviours were assessed; *consideration* and *initiating structure*. From Figure 29, it can be seen that volunteers agreed that their leaders were supportive and approachable in their behaviours during call-outs. Furthermore, volunteers agreed that their leaders were consistent at setting task goals and expectations when on call-outs. Both behaviours were found to be similarly positive, regardless of the year. Likewise, outside of call-outs, leaders were also rated rather positively in both leadership behaviours, with volunteers reporting their leaders as being considerate and effective at initiating structure in their units' everyday activities (see Figure 30).

Figure 30.
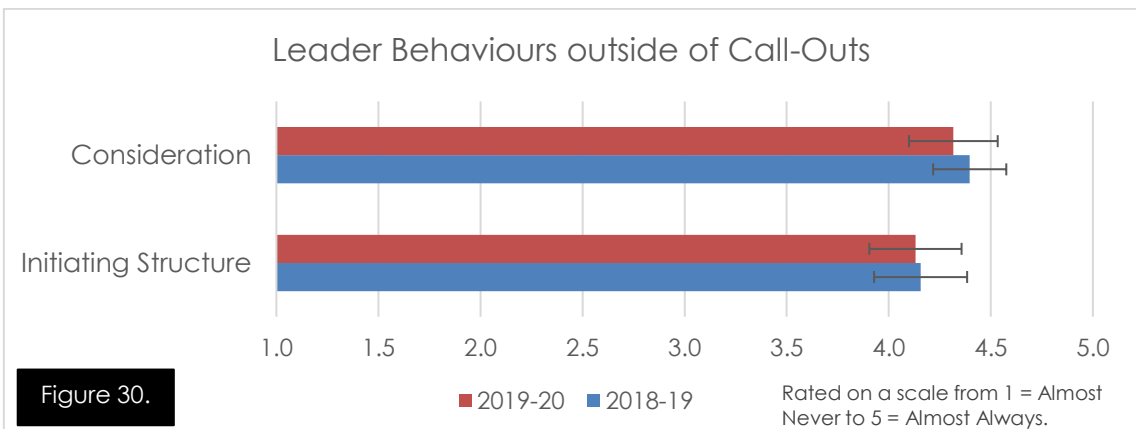
INTENTIONS TO REMAIN

Volunteer Retention

When asked if a volunteer was likely to stay with their current SES unit in two years' time, 68% of the sample indicated that they were likely or very likely to in 19-20. In comparison, 65% of the sample indicated as such in 18-19. While there is a slight improvement in the volunteers' intentions to remain within the unit, this difference is not significant. When examining the volunteers' intentions to stay within the SES (in any unit) in two years' time, 71% of volunteers in 18-19 indicated that they were likely or very likely to continue volunteering with the SES in any unit. Although their intentions to stay with the SES decreased to 68% in 19-20, the differences were minimal and not significant.
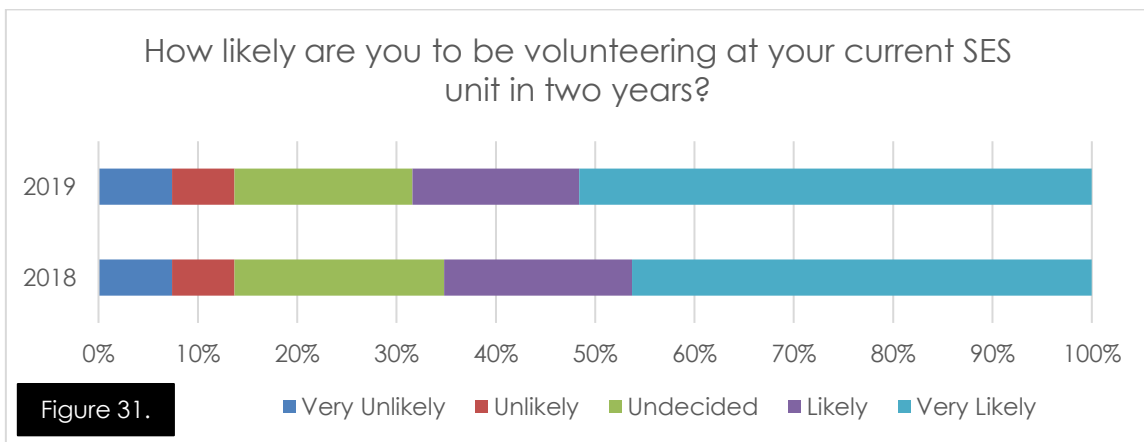
Figure 31.

Overall, volunteers have reported that they are more likely to recommend SES to others as a place to volunteer in 19-20, in comparison to 18-19. As shown in Figure 32, about 83% of volunteers responded that they are likely or very likely to recommend SES to others as a place to volunteer in 18-19. This result had an increase of 7% in the last 12 months, such that approximately 90% of the volunteers in the comparison sample would likely or very likely recommend SES as a place to volunteer in 19-20.

Figure 32.
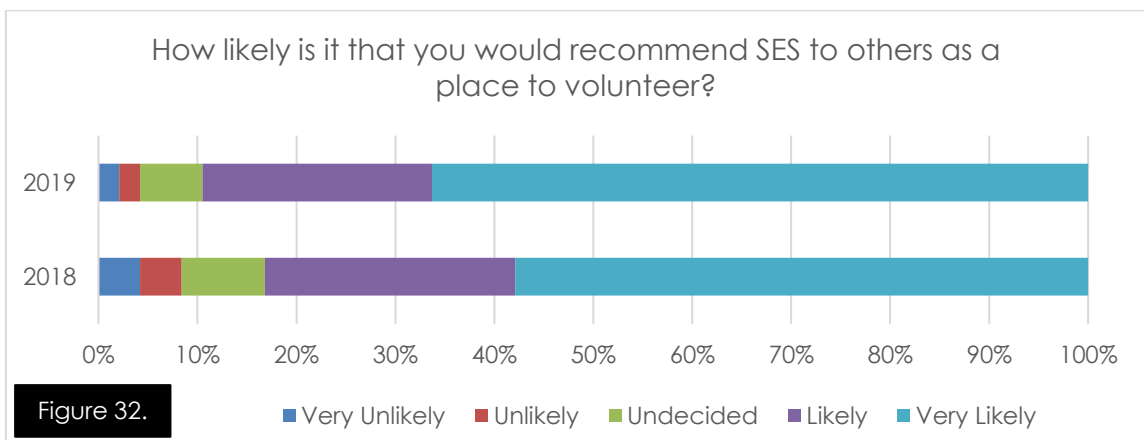
When comparing how frequently volunteers think about leaving the SES, it can be noted that overall, in 18-19 and 19-20, about 80% of the participant sample never considered leaving or considered it at least once in the last 6 months. Although 3% of the 19-20 sample indicated that they have considered leaving the SES on an everyday basis, the overall intentions to remain in the SES is strong and positive.

How frequently do you think about leaving SES?
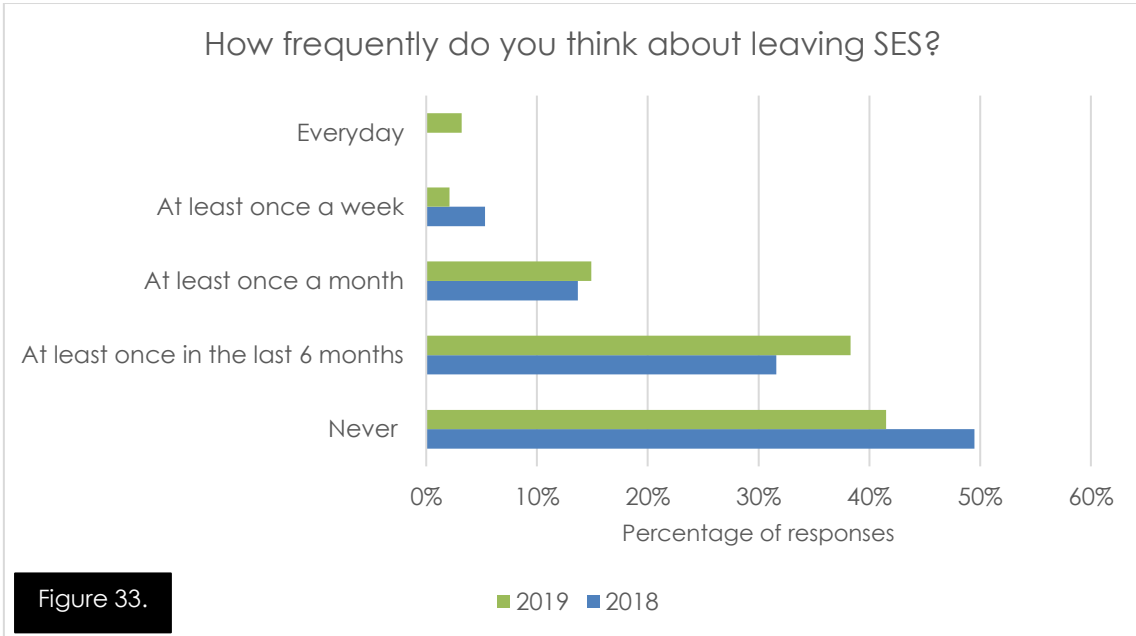
Figure 33.

The volunteers were also asked to pick one out of the four statements below to describe how they feel about volunteering with the SES. Overall, the responses were quite similar across both surveys, with approximately 70% of volunteers indicating that they can and want to stay with the SES. However, 18% of volunteers in 18-19, and 17% of volunteers in 19-20 responded that they want to stay in the SES but may have to leave.

	Stayers		Leavers	
Reluctant	I WANT TO LEAVE the SES but I feel like I HAVE TO STAY		I WANT TO STAY in the SES but I may HAVE TO LEAVE	
	2018-19	**2019-20**	**2018-19**	**2019-20**
	7.5%	5.3%	18.3%	17.0%
Enthusiastic	I WANT TO STAY in the SES and I CAN STAY if I want to		I WANT TO LEAVE the SES and I CAN LEAVE if I want to	
	2018-19	**2019-20**	**2018-19**	**2019-20**
	71.0%	74.5%	3.2%	3.2%

Table 10. *Statements describing how volunteers feel about volunteering with the SES in 2018-19 and 2019-20.*

KEY IMPLICATIONS

Based on the CAT 19-20 survey analyses, we will first identify several key comparisons between cohorts, followed by key potential implications that are relevant to the current state of SES volunteering in WA.

Firstly, we looked at key cohort differences in the CAT 19-20 survey:

Gender Diversity

- Women reported that 'meeting new people' was a stronger motivator for them to continue volunteering with the SES.
- Men, however, reported that volunteering out of a sense of duty or obligation was a stronger motive for them to continue volunteering.
- Women felt less competent and autonomous, in comparison to their male counterparts.
- Men scored higher in beneficence, implying that they believed more strongly that their work as a volunteer was beneficial to society.
- Men identified more strongly with their SES units.
- Women reported lower levels of psychological safety and inclusion in decision-making, which was more prominent in regional SES units.

Metropolitan vs. Regional Volunteers

- Regional volunteers were more motivated to continue volunteering out of a sense of duty or obligation.
- Metropolitan volunteers felt less competent and autonomous, in comparison to regional volunteers.
- Regional volunteers reported higher levels of learning and development.
- Regional volunteers felt more psychologically safe within their units.
- Regional volunteers reported higher levels of intergration of differences, and higher levels of inclusion in decision-making.

Unit Managers vs. Non-Managers

- Unit managers reported feeling more competent and autonomous in their roles, in comparison to non-managers.
- Unit managers had a stronger identification to their SES units.
- Non-managers reported lower levels of psychological safety, in comparison to unit managers.
- Non-managers also reported lower levels of integration of differences and inclusion in decision-making, in comparison to unit managers.

Tenure and Age Differences

- Volunteers of an older age reported feeling more motivated to continue volunteering as a result of being able to use existing skills, be part of a team, in addition to volunteering out of a sense of duty or obligation.
- Younger volunteers were more strongly motivated to continue volunteering by the adventure and excitement attached to the SES.
- Lastly, volunteers of an older age, with higher tenures, were more likely to identify more strongly with their SES units.

Examining the SES volunteering experience in 19-20, we will now outline several key areas of strength and key opportunities to improve, with recommended strategies.

Key Areas of Strength

- Volunteers generally indicated that they are learning and developing in their roles. Continue this by providing volunteers with skill-building and learning opportunities that will aid volunteers in their personal and professional development. If feasible, volunteers should be consulted individually as to what skills they would like to learn and develop in their roles.
- Volunteers overall felt valued and respected for the differences they bring into their units. An inclusive climate is critical to volunteer retention; thus, leaders and volunteers should work together to create an environment that incorporates and celebrates the individual differences between volunteers (e.g., asking volunteers what skills they would like to contribute to the unit).
- Leaders were generally viewed by their volunteers as behaving positively both during and outside of call-outs. Continue to encourage leaders to be both considerate and effective at initiating task responsibilities and expectations in order to help support volunteers on call-outs and with the day-to-day activities.
- Volunteers also indicated that they had strong social support from their team members who are non-leaders. As team support is also essential to volunteer retention, it is important that team members be encouraged to help and support one another (e.g., discussing volunteering-related problems, and looking out for one another).

Key Opportunities to Improve

- For future recruitment; target recruitment messages to specific groups based on their different motivations to stay, consider promoting learning opportunities that the SES offers, and explore ways to recruit new members via recommendations from current SES members.
- Improve and facilitate activities that provide volunteers with a stronger sense of autonomy (e.g., allowing volunteers to assign themselves a non-operational task that would contribute to the unit, and allow them to be creative in their task approach).
- Instill a stronger sense of volunteer identification with DFES. This can be done in the early stages of the volunteers' onboarding or socialisation process.
- Increase the vitality of volunteers, such that their volunteering role becomes more of a source of energy for them. Feeling socially connected and competent is associated with volunteers feeling energetic about their role, thus, activities that encourage skill and confidence-building, in addition to team bonding, will help volunteers feel more energetic about their role.
- Improve psychological safety for women and volunteers who are non-managers. This can be achieved by fostering an environment in which volunteers feel like it is safe for them to speak up about issues within the unit. Leaders and fellow volunteers should also be encouraged to be considerate of the opinions and views of others.
- Increase inclusivity of volunteers in decision-making processes occuring within the unit (e.g., through focus groups).
- Woman and non-managers should be involved in activities to specifically target how autonomous and competent they feel. Assigning them with a mentor to help support their training, and allowing them the freedom to engage in non-operational tasks of their choosing will help mitigate these issues.

KEY DIFFERENCES BETWEEN 2018-19 AND 2019-20

Lastly, we compared the results of the CAT surveys from both 18-19 and 19-20. We identified key areas that were maintained, improved, and key areas that still require attention and development in future years.

Key Areas that were Maintained

- Overall, volunteers reported that they felt as competent and connected with other volunteers in the SES in 19-20 as they did in 18-19.
- Volunteers also identified just as strongly with their volunteering role and with their SES units in 19-20 as they did in 18-19.
- Volunteers had high levels of role satisfaction across both surveys.
- Leader behaviours were generally rated as being rather positive during and outside of call-outs.
- Volunteers also rated that they believed their differences were rather valued and respected by other volunteers in their unit.

Key Areas that Improved

- Volunteers indicated that they continued volunteering in 19-20 than in 18-19 more so due to their reputation as an emergency volunteer, in addition to them being more able to learn new skills, use existing skills, and meet new people.
- Volunteers reported that they identified more strongly with DFES in 19-20 than in 18-19.
- Volunteers also reported that they felt like they were learning and developing more in 19-20.
- Volunteers indicated that they were more likely to recommend SES as a place to volunteer to others in 19-20 than in 18-19.

Key Opportunities to Improve

- Overall, volunteers indicated low levels of autonomy in 19-20 and 18-19.
- Volunteers also reported that did not feel their role to be a source of energy for them.
- Volunteers typically had low levels of psychological safety across both surveys.
- Inclusion in decision-making processes was also reported to be low, and should be a key area to improve upon.

Using some of the strategies recommended on page 40, volunteer leaders, district officers, and organisation managers should strive to improve the key areas indicated in the previous page. In doing so, it is our hope that more volunteers will remain with the SES long-term, which benefits not only the individual units, but also the broader emergency services organisation, as well as the welfare and safety of all WA communities and regions.

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