

Fire Services Review

Dear Mr. O'Byrne,

I write on behalf of the Eastern Metropolitan Region District Council of Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria (District 13). Our District council has delegates from over 40 brigades representing over 2,000 CFA volunteers from communities including: Bayswater, Belgrave, Boronia, Gruyere, Hillcrest, Healesville, Lilydale, Monbulk, Warrandyte, Wonga Park and Yarra Glen.

I have been Vice President of VFBV District 13 since 2011. I have been a member of the Warrandyte Urban Fire Brigade for just over ten years. I have also been a secondary member of the District 14 Headquarters East Brigade for just over two years and have held the position of 3rd Lieutenant in that brigade.

I am qualified in Wildfire Fire fighting, Low Structure Fire Fighting and have attained Advanced Pumps, Drive Vehicles On Road and Drive Vehicles Off Road. I am a qualified Staging Area Manager. I have attained nationally recognised competencies including AIIMS.

I have been awarded the CFA Ten Year Service Medal and the National Emergency Medal for Operational Service during the 2009 Black Saturday Bushfires.

I hold a Bachelor of Arts (Linguistics) through Monash University and a Graduate Diploma Special Education & Human Services through La Trobe University.

I am a Silent Voter and as such have not supplied my residential address but can show my licence to this review as required if kept confidential.

Our VFBV District Council has recently convened a special meeting of delegates to discuss the Fire Services Review, its ToR and timeframes. Our delegates hail from a diverse range of professional backgrounds and have provided more than 500 years combined service to the CFA. I thank the delegates for their input into this submission and summarise the views of the delegates as follows:

Our concerns:

1. This review affords CFA volunteers a completely inadequate timeframe to convene and discuss concerns and ideas. We are a large and democratic group which is our very strength; however this review offers no genuine opportunity for proper discussion of what are complex issues. The CFA 's current service delivery model has formed since our genesis over 70 years ago and has been refined by subsequent reviews, inquiries and law reforms after major incidents including: the Ash Wednesday fires of 1983, the Black Saturday fires of 2009 and the Hazelwood Mine Fire of 2014. Outcomes of this current review will likely have significant and long-lasting impacts on CFA volunteers and on the communities we serve. The Volunteer Charter is enshrined within the CFA Act and is clear that volunteers should be consulted on matters which affect them. We respectfully request that a more significant period of time be allowed to conduct more robust and thorough consultation with CFA volunteers.

2. The limited review period will allow for only hastily compiled submissions to be made as well as a very limited period in which to properly analyse submissions and make recommendations. We are concerned this could lead to recommendations which are not well founded, which may prove impractical to implement or for which there is no forecast budget to properly implement.
3. The ToR do not specifically address surge capacity. By remaining active operationally throughout the year and undertaking regular skills maintenance training, CFA Volunteers retain critical capability and readiness to respond to the larger scale, complex incidents experienced in Victoria every few years. Increasingly, it is not just fires to which we respond but also flood events. Through regularly responding to a wide range of local tier incidents including structure fires, motor vehicle accidents and grass and scrub / bushfires, CFA volunteers maintain the capability to work effectively under the emergency management arrangements outlined in the Emergency Management Manual Victoria. This readies us to work under those same arrangements during larger scale incidents as more agencies become involved and more complex incident management structures are applied. We feel it is lacking that the ToR do not make any specific assessment of the valuable contribution made by CFA volunteers to Victoria's surge capacity and capability.
4. CFA volunteers' contribution to community resilience is not considered within the ToR. The Emergency Management Reform White Paper and the Emergency Management Strategic Action Plan 2015 – 2018 outline Victoria's commitment to promoting community awareness and promoting shared responsibility. Under CFA's current service delivery model, CFA Volunteers in the peri-urban fringe contribute significantly to community resilience. We bring an array of skills and experiences to our volunteering, enabling us to add valuable professional skills on top of the nationally recognised competencies we undertake through CFA. Likewise, we return the skills gained through CFA such as First Aid and fire preparedness, back into our communities including: sporting groups, service clubs, local business, community fire-guard groups and through the school community. CFA volunteers know their local communities because we use local services and facilities and have multiple points of connection within communities. We believe that to review the fire services without assessing this component could result in flawed recommendations which could erode community resilience.
5. The ToR do not include any evaluation of the cost savings made by CFA volunteers to Victoria. Victoria's CFA Volunteers contribute significant expenditure savings to the state by providing a free fire service in regional and rural Victoria and on the peri-urban fringe, as well as providing vital surge capacity during larger scale and complex incidents. We encourage the review to consider re-scoping the ToR to include a more comprehensive evaluation of these cost savings to properly inform any other recommendations around service delivery.

Our proposals:

1. That the review considers the current limitations on the use of career Firefighters (24/7 only) and examines more flexible use of career staff including day-time only manning.
2. This District Council fully supports the retention of the powers of the Chief Officer to determine the location and number of career Firefighters required.
3. That options be explored to make CFA fire stations fit for purpose as community hubs, suitable to facilitate CFA volunteers who are self employed working from their fire stations. This would include basic office amenity and Wi-Fi internet access. This option has a number of potential benefits including: cost efficiencies, efficient utilisation of existing facilities which are often

vacant during day time, enhanced community emergency response, improved SDS (response) times and may provide a method in which to retain volunteers where work-life-CFA pressures are impacting. This could also provide a valuable facility to the broader community, particularly in rural communities where public meeting spaces may be limited. Whilst Workcover constraints would be need to be considered, CFA buildings already have public liability insurance and volunteers are already covered for any injuries sustained during CFA activity via the scheme which CFA self insures.

Sincerely,

A large black rectangular redaction box covering the signature area.

Catherine McLeod

Vice President

On behalf of the VFBV District 13 Council (Eastern Metropolitan Region)