

Jane Garrett MP Minister for Emergency Services announced a Review of the Fire Services on 29 July 2015. The reporting date is 30 September 2015, a time frame of two months. An even shorter timeframe exists for preparation of submissions, which need to be presented to the Inquiry by the end of August. The short time frame and the wording of the Terms of Reference, raises concerns that the outcome may be predetermined and the opportunity for consultation is offered as a means of justification of the subsequent recommendations. The time frame given limits opportunity for significant and considered input (except to parties who may have had earlier notification of the proposed review).

Should the report recommend major structural changes to the Victorian Fire Services, any model/s proposed should be open to discussion, input and revision, and all responses given equal and honest consideration prior to the implementation of any change.

Training

Mechanisms for Recognition of Prior Learning have been slow to evolve and we have anomalies of skills recognition between agencies providing fire fighting capacity in Victoria as well as the skills volunteers bring to the service from their normal work life.

Commonality of training facilities, standards and procedures should be worked toward. State training facilities should be equally available to all firefighters from all agencies as appropriate regardless of being paid or volunteer.

Volunteer brigades should have opportunity to train as Emergency Medical Responders in areas where it is operationally justified. This function should not be limited to UFU members.

Resourcing

Processes for determining new equipment, upgrades and replacements should be based on issues such as best practice and fit for service rather than best price. Increasing the cost of providing fire cover by increasing paid staff places more pressure on the budget and encourages the best price approach.

Concerns of the increasing reliance on electrical components and systems on new tankers. These tend to be less reliable and vulnerable to the firefighting environment – heat dust vibration and water are not friendly to electronics. Manually operated robust mechanical systems have stood the test of time and exposure. Reliance on electrical systems to operate valves that are placed in inaccessible locations potentially places firefighters at risk if electronics fail.

Fire Services Levy is a finite fund. Any increase in paid staff must be accompanied with at least an increase to the CFA budget at least equivalent to the cost of not only the wages but the additional cost of station upgrades and associated expenses. Unless this happens, increasing numbers of paid firefighters will come at a cost to community through increase levy or reduction of funding available for all other areas including support to volunteer brigades.

We currently have a situation where 500 additional paid firefighters are to be provided as part of an election promise made by the Victorian Govt. The source of the funding is yet to be determined. There has been no announcement regarding an increase to the CFA budget to pay for the expense involved with the increase. The additional firefighters were a deal done between the UFU and the Labour Party – not an operationally justified decision from the heads of the fire agencies.

CFA fleet management and vehicle replacement program. Brigades are often frustrated by the secrecy surrounding the tanker replacement program. The CFA should have a clear understanding of the status of all vehicles in their fleet and perhaps they do. Brigades with aging appliances are kept in the dark as to when these vehicles will be replaced and with what. My brigade was in this situation for quite a few years. We had an aging Hino 3.4D Tanker. 25, 26, 27 years came and went. Finally it was replaced at 28 years. It was replaced with a Medium Tanker carrying a lower water capacity. The reason given for a Medium as opposed to a Heavy Tanker was that there weren't any being built. Certainly the CFA should know when vehicles are approaching the end of their service life and be able to plan for a build program to match the replacements. The planning process and timing of vehicle replacement should be transparent. Lift the veil of secrecy!

Operations

Any barriers to the seamless operations between all fire agencies in Victoria should be removed. Treating the interoperability of the CFA & MFB (c)* as one issue then the interoperability of all fire agencies (d)* as another issue seems misguided. The interoperability of all agencies should be the only matter requiring attention unless it has already been determined that there will be separate structures for fire agencies in Victoria.

Qualifications and competencies attained by volunteers must have equal recognition to those of paid staff.

In order for AIIMS to work there must be an acceptance of paid staff to work above, beside and below volunteers performing roles within the Incident Management Team. There have been incidents when paid staff have not accepted this.

CFA/UFU EBA (2010) limits flexibility in delivery of service to the community

Support to volunteer brigades

Increases in staff numbers should include % to provide support to volunteer brigades (eg training), not just to increase numbers of fire fighters

Volunteers provide every day responses to fire and emergencies across Victoria. They should not be seen as simply providing surge capacity for times when paid staff capacity is exceeded. Limiting volunteer fire fighters regular response and activity will lessen opportunity for skills development and lower the level of preparedness, placing firefighters and the community at risk.

Opportunities for volunteers to train to and perform in roles should be based on the risk environment they are likely to be working in, not based on paid/volunteer status.

Volunteer brigades experiencing difficulties with daytime response should be supported by CFA staff, eg day shift, until a time that it can be determined that full integration is operationally justified or the brigades capacity for response has improved and day staff are no longer required. Day shift should not simply be seen as a precursor to full integration as set out in the CFA/UFU EBA. Supporting volunteers is more cost effective than replacing them. Reduction in level of activity or relegating them to lesser roles will lead to a further decline in volunteer numbers and a greater reliance on paid staff. Volunteers live and or work in the community they serve and have a wealth of knowledge of the area and its risks, the community and local networks.

Continued implementation (and monitoring) of Jones Inquiry (2011) Recommendations

Consideration on any proposed changes must also include reference to the principles and values contained in the Volunteer Charter (2011). This is a legal obligation under the CFA Act.

*(c) & (d) refer to Review of Fire Services – 1. Terms of Reference