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## **A personal submission to the Review of the Fire Services.**

My name is Robert Byrne. I am a volunteer member of the CFA. I am a member of Seymour brigade. I have previously been a brigade officer for 10 years, and have recently been elected Deputy Group Officer for the Mitchel Shire Group.

This submission is entirely my own opinion, and does not reflect the collective opinions of my brigade, or group.

It is difficult to work out what this review is about, as the terms of reference are vague, and there is no explanation attached as to why this review has been called at this time. It seems like another example of political micro-management that only builds long-term mistrust. It's easy to become cynical and to think "what's the point of working hard to do a good job when it will be overridden by some micro-managing politician anyway? Better to just coast along, do what I'm told and keep my head down." I want to be part of a group of passionate people who work hard to do a good job. Not one where people keep their heads down out of fear.

Anyway, I'll take this opportunity to put my head up, and to voice my ideas about how to start improving our fire services for all stakeholders, especially the citizens of Victoria.

I have no experience of the MFB, so my submission is written entirely from my perspective as a CFA volunteer. My objective as a fire fighter is to provide a good fire service to my community (however large that is). I have always been happy to volunteer my time, as I believe there are only so many dollars available from the tax payers, and there are not enough dollars to pay the required workforce to cover the risks Victoria faces.

This submission mostly addresses the term of reference labelled (f), concerning workplace culture.

My greatest area of concern is the culture within CFA. There seems to be a prevailing idea that fire fighters are untouchable. That fire fighters cannot be criticised in any way. That anything done while wearing fire fighting gear is always heroic. Always praiseworthy. When in fact, just as in any workplace, there are some who are good performers, and some who are poor performers. I want to be part of a team who provides praise and support to the good performers, and constructive guidance to the poor performers. Always striving to improve the performance of the fire service overall.

I can't tell if I'm a good performer, or a poor performer. The praise I receive is indistinguishable from the praise given to those whom I observe to be poor performers. Maybe I'm one of them?

In my opinion it is not sustainable to continually have external reviews into this organisation. We know the CFA organisation is dysfunctional; this has been documented many times, by many other inquiries. Please this time implement lasting, meaningful change. Not just re-ordering of the same characters.

There needs to be built in subtle internal pressures that push everyone towards better performance.

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It's all about accountability. Currently there is no accountability at any level within CFA. The closest we have come to accountability is the Royal Commission. The outcome being one guy resigned, the others with red faces got bigger budgets and loftier titles. How embarrassing.

A recent example of poor service delivery that I personally observed was a fire last summer where a caravan was destroyed by a CFA back burn. What was the response? Everyone was congratulated on what a great job they had done. No one was even asked why the caravan was destroyed. In my opinion fire ground management could have easily saved that caravan. This is a classic example of incompetent managers not being held accountable in any way. Instead being congratulated for their incompetence. A simple, knee jerk, response to this would be "ban all back burns without Operations Manager approval", but this would be unworkable. No solution at all.

### **How to fix it.**

Four ideas: Service delivery standards, Reports of events, Open communications and Project management.

### **Service delivery standards.**

Currently service delivery is measured by the time a fire-fighting appliance departs its station, and the time it arrives on scene. There is no measure of the appliance's appropriateness for the task, or it's ability to be of any effect. Dispatching a slip-on appliance with one bushfire fire-fighter to a major structure fire currently satisfies the service delivery standard.

I propose a much more sophisticated system that classifies events after the fact, and measures if an appropriate response was mounted. For example: let's imagine a structure fire in a single storey dwelling of less than 500 square meters. A typical house. This fire would require at a minimum, two appliances, each capable of pumping 900 litres of water per minute. Two people who can operate the pumps, six people who can enter the structure to fight the fire (two in, two ready, two spare) plus an incident controller. Enough water to extinguish.

This example would be inappropriate for a Road Rescue event, which would have its own standard.

The idea is to measure how often the brigades in an area are able to mount an appropriate response, and to grade managers on that ability.

The incentive in this kind of standard would be to train and equip those people who are responding to fires. This would be the simplest way for those who control the money to use it to meet the measurement standards. This would also lead, in very busy areas, to making it better to employ full time people to do the work, rather than train large numbers of volunteers to have enough people available to meet the standard. In less busy areas, the incentive would be to train the local active volunteers.

The data is already collected by FIRS. The standards would need to be developed, and would also describe a structured system of work that brigades could use to develop their response capabilities.

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## **Report Events**

Publicly report what happens at incidents. What time the call arrived, what time fire fighters arrived, what time the fire was put out. This is a very large job to implement, so start with one level at a time.

Every time a level 3 incident control centre becomes operational, it should be required to publish a timeline of events. For example, start with a summary of the circumstances of the event. When CFA was notified, when CFA arrived on scene. Then what actions CFA took. Specifically what actions management took: When were additional resources requested, when did they arrive. When were people appointed to positions within the management structure, such as sector commanders etc.

This public record would embarrass some people, and would provide an incentive to develop a system of work so that we could be proud of the work we do. Currently everyone is just congratulated on what a great job they've done, regardless of the outcome.

I, as an officer, could use these reports to learn how fires are fought in other districts. Currently I need to have a personal relationship with someone who was involved in an incident, if I am to learn anything from it.

These reports could be used to collect lessons, and to develop standards to follow.

As an example, the standard of reports I'm thinking of are available from the USA federal government at <http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/fire/>

## **Open communications**

This has been begun. Publishing dispatch radio traffic on the Internet is a good, simple, way of providing public accountability of performance. I would expand this to online recordings of the radio traffic so that any member of the public can go back and review what radio traffic occurred around any incident that they may take an interest in. This would also be a resource for creating the Event Reports mentioned earlier.

## **Project Management**

Everything at CFA is a project, but CFA seems very poor at finishing any project. It seems to me that CFA's definition of a finished project is the money has run out.

If the thing to be delivered by the project is complete before the money runs out, then more work is created to use up the money. For example the retro fit of crew protection sprays to existing tankers. The business case was made to retro fit a number of tankers, and money allocated. Savings were made through the process so that the identified tankers were retro fitted for less than the original cost estimate. In response, more tankers, for which there was no business case, were also retro fitted. There are many areas in which this money would have been more effectively used.

If the thing to be delivered is not complete before the money runs out, then the thing is simply never completed. This is the most common type of project. What ever happened to pod-transporters, or Mobile command busses? Have we

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finished boundary re-alignment? I know our brigade is still administratively tied to one of our neighbouring brigades who moved to another district years ago.

My proposal is that every project should publish on the CFA web site the business case that was used to justify establishing the project in the first place, as well as milestones the project will achieve. Then the project would be required to publish periodic reports of the milestones it has achieved, and when it achieved them. If it were missing its planned milestones, then a new business case would be required. If none were forthcoming, then the project would be cancelled. What is the point of continuing to spend money on a project that cannot deliver anything of value? If the business case is “we have signed a contract, and it’s cheaper to continue than it is to pay out the contractor”, then this is a valid, if embarrassing, business case. Perhaps publishing this would lead to better contract negotiation in the future?

### **Summary**

The type of accountability I propose basically boils down to this. The more people who are embarrassed by the publication of their own poor performance, the more likely they are to work to improve their performance, or move on and make room for someone else who may perform better.