

Submission to Select Committee on Fire Services Reform 2017

The Hamilton Fire Brigade members wish to submit to the Select Committee its thoughts and concerns over the proposed change to how the Country Fire Authority operates based on the proposed Fire Services Reform legislation. This submission has been created from feedback received from members at a brigade meeting and has endeavoured to reflect the sentiment of the entire brigade.

The following points have been raised as items of concern, support or issues which we do not have sufficient information on proposed changes that we feel needs greater clarification before a clear decision can be made as to the future of fire service delivery models in Victoria.

The Hamilton Fire Brigade has a very strong and longstanding relationship with career staff stations in the South West region and we work closely at a range of incidents and training events. This must remain and we will not support any proposed reform that undermines or endangers this relationship. Collectively we are stronger working together as can be seen at technical rescues, hazmat incidents and significant fires. The Brigade recognises the skill set, and specialist equipment that career fire-fighters have access to, and see the interoperability between career and volunteers as an important part of providing a comprehensive fire service to the community of Victoria into the future.

In reviewing the proposed reforms in relation to the terms of reference for the Select Committee the Brigade has the following feedback, suggestions and concerns.

Impact on fire service delivery across Victoria

- The Brigade members were concerned about the impact the proposed changes will have on surge capacity. Particularly within outer metro brigades where a large number of volunteers and appliances are currently available to respond to campaign fire events. While it is recognised that the proposed model for reform does not set out to reduce this capacity, there is concern that unless volunteer engagement is managed throughout the change period there is a risk of a reduction in volunteers through disenchantment, lack of involvement and skills utilisation potentially resulting in membership decline.
- There is also concern that over time there will be an erosion of bushfire fighting skills within FRV, due to them primarily being a metropolitan based fire service. This has the potential to impact on the fireground and Incident Management Team (IMT) capability for large scale fire events as well as the desirable skills mix of senior FRV Officers available for secondment to CFA as Operations Officers and Operations Managers.
- We are concerned that the proposed reform limits campaign fire response. The current capacity for staff to be released for campaign response is complicated (shift, rank mix and budget implications)
- We are concerned over the lack of strength in the current arrangement regarding utilisation of volunteers in fire ground and IMT roles (skills based vs rank based). It is felt that the proposed MOU arrangement is not sufficient, and could be changed by agencies and should

be replaced with legislation. Examples of resistance to command and control in both directions must be addressed and stopped otherwise communities will be at risk.

- Concern over FRV staff being unable to have roles as volunteers as currently exists for CFA staff. Current CFA staff across the state turnout and otherwise support brigades as volunteers and in some locations this is a vital additional role.
- While current indications are that where it is identified that an FRV presence is required the opportunity exists for a volunteer brigade to either collocate or have a new facility built, we are concerned that this will cease beyond the current planning cycle. Assurance that in the future when FRV area expansion is reviewed/recommended that the volunteers retain the option to either collocate in one station or a separate station is constructed.
- That the need for extensive staff engagement on all appliance typology and station construction may be relaxed under the proposed change to CFA structure. While we accept that many advancements in fire fighter safety and operational efficiencies are jointly a result of staff and volunteer negotiations there are examples of significant delays in project delivery due to procedural signoff processes. We recognise that consultation in some form should remain in place to ensure future interoperability is maintained and reduce the risk of rushing change through.

Effect on Volunteer engagement and participation in fire service

- We have concerns regarding the delivery arrangements for community engagement and education programs where FRV stations are the primary structural brigade. Will CFA brigades still have an involvement in delivery of Fire Safe Kids and other equivalent programs in their community?
- Access to and participation in training and professional development is vital, and we do not currently see how this will be effective with two fire services conducting training independently unless there is an over arching policy similar to the EMV Incident Management Project. To ensure common operating arrangements, interoperability and confidence on the fire ground there needs to be similar levels of training and development made available to both CFA and FRV personnel.

Short term and long term cost impact on fire service

- Of significant concern is the potential impact of the reform on short and long term budgets. If the potential duplication of stations or accommodation needs for FRV and Volunteers as mentioned over the last few months eventuates will this impact on CFA budgets short term?. If this proposal is correct we would like to understand the funding arrangements and potential to impact on front line delivery (less appliances, build program delays, reduction in support staff, and impact on other Public Sector providers (Forest Fire Management)). The rebadging and additional appliance costs need to be explained and budget transparency is required.
- In relation to the Fire Services Levy there is a concern over what the proposed funding breakdowns will look like following the 2019 expiry of the current rural – urban support model. If FRV takes over management of the majority of the metro and suburban area of

Victoria which generates a substantial percentage of the state's FSL funds, will the funding be only returned to this fire service or will there remain a distribution to support country areas of Victoria (CFA)? This is a major longer term concern, and measures need to be put in place to ensure CFA volunteers have sufficient funds to operate as a professional fire service with equivalent appliances, training and support staff and infrastructure into the future.

- There needs to be a clear and fair funding model for the future to ensure that rural Victoria is not left with a second rate fire service which is under-funded due to the lack of population density.

Underlying policy rationale

- There is a concern that the proposed reform/restructure has been driven by a political agenda and one of convenience to manage EBA related issues rather than major deviancies in the current fire services operations.
- The proposed reform looks at moving all operational staff into FRV with secondment arrangements back to CFA. The concern is that this may result in conflict of interest situations (FRV and CFA management/policy) and limited flexibility to second suitable staff rather than being provided with a list of available staff.
- Current legislation is silent on fire restrictions and fire danger periods in proposed FRV areas of Victoria. This is a particular issue in locations like Warrnambool, Portland, Bendigo etc. Where there is a significant urban / rural interface which would be at risk if there is no declared fire restrictions.