

My name is Greg Plier and I have been involved in Victoria's fire services for 23 years; 8 years as a CFA volunteer and 15 years as a career firefighter with MFB. I am currently based at West Melbourne fire station and hold the rank of Senior Station Officer (SSO). As a Station Officer (SO) I was previously based at Glen Waverley fire station on the border of the Metropolitan Fire District (MD). I address this committee to express my support for the proposed and important fire services reform including the creation of Fire Rescue Victoria (FRV).

Victoria's current fire service model is outdated; other states have used a similar model in the past, but have reformed their fire service and delivery models. Victoria now has an opportunity to do the same. As is the current case in Victoria and Melbourne, in the past both NSW (Sydney) and Queensland (Brisbane) have been home to Metropolitan Fire Brigades (MFB). However this model has been reformed and updated. See a brief summation of their histories below:

#### NSW

1884 - The Fire Brigades Act comes into effect, creating the Metropolitan Fire Brigade (MFB).

1910 - The Fire Brigades Act is extended across the state and the Board of Fire Commissioners comes into being, replacing the MFB. The organisation now becomes known as the New South Wales Fire Brigade (NSWFB).

2011 - The NSWFB becomes known as Fire & Rescue NSW (FRNSW)

<http://www.fire.nsw.gov.au/page.php?id=9187>

#### QLD

1881 - Fire Brigades Act of 1881 and Brisbane Fire Brigades Board instituted.

1921 - Metropolitan Fire Brigades Board (MFB) formed in Brisbane.

1990 - Formation of the Queensland Fire Service (QFS).

1997 - QFS restructure into the Queensland Fire and Rescue Authority (QFRA).

2001 - Restructure of QFRA into the Queensland Fire and Rescue Service (QFRS).

2013 - QFRS becomes the Queensland Fire and Emergency Services (QFES).

<https://www.qfes.qld.gov.au/about/Pages/History.aspx>

As can be seen in the timelines above both NSW and Queensland have moved from a Metropolitan model to a state model; Queensland did so 27 years ago, with NSW instituting the change 107 years ago. At best Victoria is three decades behind when looking at national fire service reforms.

Both NSW and Queensland also have Rural Fire Services, front line services for both of these organisations are provided for by wholly volunteer crews, much the same as is proposed for the Country Fire Authority (CFA) following the proposed restructure. NSW RFS has a membership of more than 2,065 rural fire brigades and 70,701 volunteers. <http://www.rfs.nsw.gov.au/about-us/history>. Queensland RFS has approximately 1500 rural fire brigades, made up of approximately 36,000 volunteers.

<https://www.ruralfire.qld.gov.au/Volunteering/Pages/default.aspx>. Whilst volunteer engagement and recruitment will always present ongoing challenges, the numbers above show that this model can work, that volunteer engagement and participation in fire service delivery will continue and that rural/country fire services can continue to thrive.

Fire service models along the lines of an urban career service and country/rural volunteer service are not a new thing. Victoria has a perfect opportunity to finally update our model. We can bring our services in line with other state reforms, but also improve and refine the model. The FRV and CFA proposal whilst similar to the other states reforms, does improve on the other models. The proposed Victorian model will provide for best practice in community and firefighter safety. With a minimum of 7 professional firefighters being responded to all FRV calls (in metropolitan; and highly urbanised suburban and regional areas) the community will receive a fast response and heavy weight of attack along with an increase in firefighter safety. Fire service reform is not a radical idea throughout Australia, it is time that Victoria caught up and reformed our fire services. The community, businesses, the organisations themselves and fire service personnel will all benefit.

The 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission made two recommendations, including seven sub-recommendations relating to Organisational Structure. Six of these recommendations were implemented. The only one that was not implemented was contained in Recommendation 63 which stated that: (the Fire Commissioner) *'providing to government periodic advice on the metropolitan fire district boundary on the basis of triggers, frequency and criteria approved by government.'* <http://www.royalcommission.vic.gov.au/Commission-Reports/Final-Report/Summary/Interactive-Version.html>

The Metropolitan Fire District was originally implemented in 1891 and has undergone little change over the past six decades. However along with the growth of Greater Metropolitan Melbourne, Victoria's regional centres have also been continually increasing in population and risk. The creation of Fire Rescue Victoria (and an Independent Fire District Review panel) will

finally see the above recommendation implemented. However it will also improve upon the original recommendation, in that, regional and highly urbanised areas of Victoria outside of metro Melbourne will now be included in future reviews. Growing communities will be afforded the required fire response and service irrespective of geographical location.

I believe that the underlying policy rationale for these reforms is sound. It was the intent of the Fire Brigades Act 1890 that two fire services would protect metropolitan/urbanised areas and another would focus on country areas. It was also the intent that the MD would expand as required, in the past there had been an advisory panel to oversee this. However, as metropolitan and regional centres have grown this intent and vision has been lost. Whilst relatively recently there has been some reform, much at management and state level (i.e. Emergency Management Commissioner, ICC improvements) real and effective front line service reform has stagnated. The proposed fire service restructure will finally modernise our fire services, improve fire and rescue response and capability across Victoria, and allow volunteers continued engagement by protecting their local communities and providing capacity across the state during major fires.

I am also confident that the short term and long term cost impact on fire service provision will be catered for. The Fire Service Levy implemented in 2013, where all Victorians contribute to the states fire services provide surety around current funding and ability to meet the needs of future funding. Another consideration though is that with the reform improved response and service delivery standards will be provided. Where FRV provides full time career firefighters impacts of fire in these highly urban areas will be reduced. Faster response times and weight of attack will result in more fires being contained to the room of origin, less damage and a quicker recovery time for affected businesses, fewer fire related injuries and therefore reduced impact on the hospital and health system. This will all result in lower fire related costs to the Victorian community. As with all services to the community these expand and improve with population growth. Expanding suburbs and regional towns are provided with new or updated services in many areas to cater for a higher population and demand. New train lines or other public transport, new or upgraded hospitals, further schools, increased child care, a new police station or more police officers, an increase in ambulance units. The community should be able to expect the same in relation to fire service delivery. The current fire service model needs to reform, from a model stuck in time to a modern service delivery standard that can continue to keep pace with increasing challenges and a larger and growing state population.

My 23 years in Victoria's fire services (both as a volunteer and career firefighter) have provided me with a good oversight of how both career and volunteer models operate. Whilst all firefighters strive to do their best and help the community other factors affect how effective any response can be. I would like to highlight three important factors and how I have seen vast differences dependent on whether volunteer or career crews are responded.

#### Response models

As a career firefighter and SSO with MFB when turned out I can confidently rely on a minimum of two appliances responding and arriving on scene in an expedient manner.

Dependent on risk, the initial automatic response will be upgraded i.e. 3 appliances for calls to the CBD or 4 appliances for Major Hazard facilities. With the CFA there is no such guarantee.

At times due to various circumstances volunteer brigades can have a delayed response to calls or fail to respond. When response is delayed or unavailable the dispatch of another brigade will be delayed by up to six minutes. These delays can put community and firefighter safety at risk.

In my time as a volunteer there were a number of occasions where responses to fire calls were delayed due to unavailability of members. On one occasion response to a reported house fire took in excess of 15 minutes. On this occasion the neighbouring career brigade responded, however this meant they were on scene without the required back up and safety for an extended period.

As an SO at Glen Waverly fire station, I have responded to incidents in densely urbanised areas where response from neighbouring volunteer brigades has been delayed or failed. As stated above any delay in response puts community and firefighter safety at risk.

#### Seven on the fireground

As a Senior Station Officer, to best provide for the safety of the public and my fire crews a minimum of seven firefighters on scene is vital. Where an internal attack and/or rescue is required roles are very quickly all allocated. These include; an Incident Controller, pump operator, two Breathing Apparatus (BA) firefighting crew, two BA back up/emergency crew, and a safety officer. Any reduction of the initial crew numbers can jeopardise rescue efforts and place firefighter safety at risk. Early on in my career some MFB primary appliances were crewed with only two firefighters, therefore, seven firefighters may not have been achieved. However, thankfully this is now not the case with an increase in firefighter numbers and minimum crewing. Once again with CFA brigades volunteer or career this cannot always be expected or achieved. Whilst a CFA career appliance will respond promptly with three or four firefighters on board, if the neighbouring station is a volunteer brigade the number of firefighters responding will be an

unknown quantity. Dependant on availability the response may fail or only one or two volunteers will respond. This places crews and the public in danger as there is not sufficient personnel to combat the incident swiftly and safely.

In my time as a volunteer I saw this same scenario occur at various times. Due to unavailability of members the volunteer response would be delayed whilst an individual waited for more crew to arrive at the station. Then at times only two personnel would be available to respond, which left the volunteer appliance responding with only two firefighters, not enough to conduct or support safe firefighting operations.

#### Training and competency standards

The third factor I would like to highlight ties together with the previous two; all are required for successful and safe fireground operations. All MFB and CFA career firefighters are trained in structural firefighting, have Breathing Apparatus (BA) qualifications and are equipped with structural Personal Protective Clothing (PPC). Whilst numerous volunteers do also hold these qualifications, many front line personnel do not. Even when a volunteer brigade responds promptly, and with enough firefighters, it still cannot be guaranteed that all of the firefighters present will have the required training or equipment. I have experienced this both as a career firefighter and volunteer. As an SSO in Melbourne I know that I can rely on the fact that all crews will have the necessary skills to undertake firefighting operations. I can task anyone of the firefighters to don BA, conduct an aggressive internal fire attack and conduct a life saving rescue.

When responding with or being supported by volunteer brigades, who responds and what qualifications they have can be an unknown quantity. A crew of three volunteers may respond where only one has a BA qualification, or only two are structural firefighters and therefore have the required PPC. In highly urbanised areas this unknown mix of qualifications hampers firefighting and rescue operations and again places the public and firefighters at risk.

#### Technical/Special Operations

In addition to the three factors mentioned above I would like to highlight an area where FRV could really value add to state preparedness and the safety of all Victorians. In conjunction to firefighting and rescue operations career firefighters from MFB and CFA (and in future FRV) can provide services in the area of Hazmat, Marine firefighting, High Angle Rescue, Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) and Damage Assessment. Highly trained technicians in all of the above disciplines can provide added benefit and safety to the state of Victoria. They would be able to support local crews across the state with specialist advice, expertise and personnel to help

mitigate these lower frequency but high risk events. For example, local CFA volunteers could have confidence that when responding to a large chemical incident they could rely on the support of Hazmat technicians, scientific advisors and associated specialist equipment. Also CFA volunteers undertaking the all encompassing job of protecting Victorians during bushfire could totally focus on this role; whilst tasks such as Damage Assessment (to assist in relief and recovery) could be undertaken concurrently by supporting ground or air based technicians. Whether in metropolitan/urban areas or country towns, communities and local volunteers across the state would benefit from this support and technical expertise.

None of above is stated to downplay the vital contribution volunteers make throughout the state of Victoria. These are just the facts of the current service delivery model which has not kept pace with urban growth, higher risk and increasing call volumes. The ability of volunteers to dedicate time based on other factors such as their full time employment, family commitments, and work/life balance place a strain on volunteers and their ability to maintain appropriate fire service coverage. All of the above goes to highlight why fire service reform is so urgently required for the state of Victoria. The creation of FRV and a volunteer CFA will provide clear scope going forward for both organisations, and in turn provide the best possible service to all Victorians and a growing state now and into the future.

Thank you for reading my submission. I really do hope that after decades of discussion, but little action, that this Parliament will finally decide to make this long overdue, monumental and positive change for the state of Victoria. You all have an opportunity to be part of this reform, please be part of this change.

**Greg Plier**

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Resident of the state of Victoria