

Submission to the Parliamentary Select Committee for the inquiry into the Firefighters presumptive rights compensation and the fire services legislation amendment (reform) Bill 2017

Ballan Fire Brigade



Fire Services Bill Committee
Parliament House
Spring St
Melbourne
Victoria 3000

Preface

Thank you for the opportunity to enter a submission.

The Ballan Fire Brigade is a CFA volunteer brigade formed in 1896 and has proudly served the community since inception. The Brigade has also always had close ties with career firefighters due to our proximity to the now closed CFA Training College at Fiskville.

Our Brigade believes that change is both necessary and vital to the future of Victoria's Fire Services, however we have some concerns around the Bill and the proposed reforms. The biggest concern is the apparent lack of consultation with any parties from the emergency services sector.

1) Impact on fire service delivery across Victoria

Splitting of Career firefighters and Volunteers:

Splitting of career staff and volunteers into separate services is probably warranted given the large increase of CFA career firefighters in recent times. CFA as an organisation has struggled to fully meet the needs of both career and volunteers in equal measures and the demands of both can be difficult to prioritise. There are some advantages and disadvantages in undertaking this model:

Advantages

- FRV becomes a service fully catered for and focused on an operational career firefighting workforce
- FRV becomes a service fully catered for and focused on delivering appropriate coverage for the everchanging high population dense / higher risk areas
- CFA's focus becomes a volunteer organisation supported by career staff

Disadvantages

- Closing of an organisation with a long and proud history in the MFB
- The experience and expertise of current on station firefighters driving training and equipment innovation for the benefit of both career and volunteer firefighters within CFA
- Further segregation of Volunteers and Career staff when this relationship dynamic is at an all-time low

Concerns:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The loss of experience and expertise of current on station firefighters driving training and equipment innovation for the benefit of both career and volunteer firefighters within CFA • Further segregation of volunteers and career staff when this relationship dynamic is at an all-time low
Opportunities:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a Fire Services model where learnings, expertise is regularly shared across both organisations • Define a short and long term strategy so that the segregation between Volunteers and Career staff is reduced and not organisationally engrained

Independent Fire District Review Panel:

The concept of an Independent Fire District Review Panel is an interesting one and it may work well. However, there are a number of items that should be taken into account:

Concerns:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How will the legislation maintain and ensure that the panel is fully independent? • How will the panel ensure it is not influenced in its decisions by outside parties including the government of the day (ie: election promise to close or open x amount of Fire stations in the next term)
Opportunities:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For there to be any confidence in this process there must be full transparency in the dealings of the panel • Clear process and communication about how, what and why rulings are handed down from this panel is important • Clarification around what key criteria needs to be achieved / not achieved before submissions can be made to the panel and also what the panel can and can't rule on

2) Effect on volunteer engagement and participation in fire service delivery

CFA and FRV staffing relationship (Operation Officers, Operation Managers, Instructors, etc):

A key issue with the proposed changes is CFA being locked into having all operational staff coming from FRV and seconded back to CFA. It is paramount that CFA should have the ability to be a fully autonomous organisation and have the freedom to engage and hire its own staff.

<p>Concerns:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CFA being locked into a set pool of resources from FRV alone in a secondment relationship, restricting CFA's ability to be a fully autonomous organisation • FRV being unable to fill key roles that have been vacant in CFA for some time (ie: Operations Officers and Structural instructors, etc.) • FRV providing unsuitable candidates for CFA operational roles • CFA unable to hire suitable candidates from other organisations (ie: DELWP, NSWRF, etc) • CFA being dependant FRV conditions for it operational staff
<p>Opportunities:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CFA should be able employ its own operational staff • CFA should have a relationship with FRV where staff can be easily seconded to the organisation to assist with flexibility and career development • CFA should be able to have multiple means of recruitment ie: via FRV secondment, hiring, lateral entry etc.

Surge capacity, volunteer retainment & volunteer workload (including co-located stations):

Surge capacity is vital for large bushfire events such as Black Saturday. The majority of the volunteer surge capacity comes from outer metro Melbourne so keeping outer metro volunteers engaged, valued and relevant is key. Workload on volunteers also needs to be considered as some Brigades can thrive under high workloads and others struggle. Finding a model that strikes the balance between meeting and servicing the risk profile of the community and keeping volunteers engaged is perhaps the biggest challenge in this space.

<p>Concerns:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The reforms a legislation don't address the need to find a balance between the work career staff do and keeping volunteers engaged particularly in the outer metro areas and some regional centres • That in the short term co-located stations may exist however, if there is no meaningful application or work for volunteers to do these volunteers will fall away • Maintaining surge capacity, meeting the delivery standards and servicing the risk profile of the community through both career staff and volunteer brigades is the biggest challenge in this space
<p>Opportunities:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Find a flexible model that can be adapted to each community where volunteers and career staff can co-exist with the right workload balance and

	<p>engagement. Each situation will be different ie: some volunteer brigades will want retain a firefighting function be it a smaller or more specific response area. Some volunteer brigades may be happy to provide support functions like Hazmat support, technical rescue, IMT or Ops support, specialist response (hose layer etc), or maybe a combination of these or another model. Not every situation will be the same but there needs to be some options explored before these stations are replaced or made redundant by an FRV station doing all the workload.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The option of retained or part time firefighters should also be explored in this vain. This model works successfully in both NSW and QLD
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CFA structure:

There have been a number of restructures undertaken within CFA over the past decade and have left the organisation in a state of disarray and a confusion about weather CFA is it an emergency service or a business. It is also debatable whether the positions of the CFA CEO and the CFA Board add value to the organisation. The governance failures in recent times by both these positions particularly in regards to the operation and closure of Fiskville raise questions around the need for these roles.

<p>Concerns:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A number of restructures undertaken within CFA over the past decade have left the organisation in a state of disarray and a confusion about weather CFA is it an emergency service or a business • CFA Board and the CFA CEO are offering no value to the organisation. Past history suggests numerous governance breeches particularly in regards the operation and closing of Fiskville
<p>Opportunities:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review with intent to change the CFA structure as per the FRV structure, removing the CFA Board and the CEO and hand control of the organisation back the CFA Chief Officer. If it is determined that a separate administrative or organisational functions need to come under its own management stream then appoint a General Manager that reports directly to the Chief. Remove the confusion, define what CFA is and give control of the service back to the Chief Officer.

3) Short term and long term cost impact on fire service provision

There is a need for the funding model of both services to be reviewed under the proposed changes. There is also a need to understand the long term impact on the Fire Services Levy to ensure that it will not rise to unsustainable levels in the future.

<p>Concerns:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • That the money announced will be spent on wasteful things like dividing walls in fire stations for co-located brigades. \$100 million could provide a lot of new fire trucks, equipment or train thousands of volunteers or career staff. • The Fire Services levy will rise sharply once the reforms are implemented. The policy states the Fire Services Levy is only capped for two years.
<p>Opportunities:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review the funding models for both services and make sure both services are adequately funded into the future. Ensure that any extra allocated funds are going into right areas and not wasted.

4) Underlying policy rationale

As previously stated change is required in the Victorian Fire Services. Morale of all parties is at an all-time low, relationships are strained to boiling point, even close mates and colleagues find themselves at odds disputing current issues.

A number of issues have culminated over a number of years within the Fire Services these include but are not limited to organisational, industrial, historic, cultural and political and these have all come to a head in recent times.

In the end it doesn't really matter how we got to where we are today, what matters is how we move forward and get our focus back on what we do best: putting out fires, helping others and serving the community.

Through all this talk of reform and change there is yet to be any real leadership about how we start to do exactly that. How do we start to build bridges that have been burned? How do we heal rifts? How do we get trust back with each other. Real leadership is needed to do this not just from the organisational leaders but also from politicians, as stated above rightly or wrongly part of the problem here is rooted in politics.

There is a key opportunity to provide strong organisational and political leadership and define a strategy to heal the wounds inflicted over the recent times.

Conclusion

While there are a number of concerns with the proposed reforms and legislation there is also a number of opportunities that can enhance the Fire Services from where they are today. The Ballan Fire Brigade hopes the Select Committee will embrace these opportunities to improve the Fire Services for the better.

Regards

Kaine Myers
Captain, Ballan Fire Brigade