

Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland

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Submission to enquiry – volunteering in Queensland

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RESUME'

Boy Scout, Queen Scout, Rover and cub leader, 1st Salisbury Scout Group (SA)1961-1968.

Army Cadets, Salisbury High School (SA)1962-1963

South Australia Police: Cadet to Sgt 1964 -1989(City, country, Emergency operations Group, Underwater Recovery Section, Special Tasks and Rescue Force)

National Service 1969-70, Royal Australian Army Provost Corps, service in South Vietnam

Society for Underwater Historical Research (SUHR), 1974-1989.

Workplace Health and Safety, diving inspector/investigator, 1989 -2009

Military Police Association Australia (Sth Qld branch)

Dayboro RSL sub-branch

Dayboro and District and Ripley Valley Rural Fire Brigades. 2001 to present.

Introduction

This personal submission is made in response to the Queensland Government Legislative Assembly agreed motion that the Local Government, Small Business and Customer Service Committee (committee) inquire into and report on volunteering in Queensland on 11 December 2024,

This submission addresses aspects, in my view based on my experiences, observations and knowledge, that arise within the terms of reference of the inquiry particularly where applicable to the functions of Rural Fire Brigades in this modern era.

The terms of reference considered in this submission relate to volunteering in the Emergency Services sector and more specifically Rural Fire Brigades

- 1. The current state of volunteering in Queensland and the value it contributes, including benefits to volunteers, organisations, communities and the State.**
- 2. The views of volunteers, prospective volunteers and the volunteering sector on the current barriers to volunteering, including excessive legislative and regulatory burdens and other restrictions adversely limiting active volunteers.**
- 3. The current experiences, motivations and challenges for volunteers and volunteer-involving organisations and their recommendations for addressing challenges and improving the volunteering experience.**
- 4. —**
- 5. The extent, effectiveness and efficiency of current government support at all levels for the volunteering sector in Queensland and sustainable opportunities for improvement.**
- 6. Opportunities for the Queensland Government to leverage all portfolios to support growth in volunteering across Queensland, including through hosting the Brisbane 2032 Olympic and Paralympic Games.**

7. Opportunities to increase emergency response volunteering in Queensland, including how to optimise the engagement, support and integration of volunteers assisting with natural disasters and community recovery.

8. —

9. —

Discussion

While we may have a broad understanding of what volunteering and a volunteer is, I provide the following interpretations:

‘Volunteering is time willingly given for the common good and without financial gain.’ (Volunteering Australia)

A volunteer is a person who freely offers to take part in an enterprise or [undertake](#) a task. (Oxford dictionary)

With respect to each of the terms of reference identified I submit the following

1. State of Volunteering in Qld

Main points

- **Value of Rural Fire Brigades to the state**
- **Coverage of the state by Rural Fire Brigades**
- **Impact**

Rural Fire Service Queensland is an arm within the fire emergency service administered by the Queensland Fire Department utilising the services of 28,000 rural fire brigade volunteers who look after 93 percent of the state.

This number is distributed between ‘Primary Producer’, village/town and interface (IZone) areas of this state.

Without the efforts of the rural fire brigades operating throughout the state, often deployed away from their own brigade areas, many communities would be severely impacted be it personally, financial, life style or psychologically.

2. Barriers and restrictions

Main Points

- **Core business and other roles**
- **Suitability**
- **Accountability**
- **Utilisation**
- **Succession planning**
- **Training**
- **Recruitment**
- **Retention**
- **Paid staff relationship**
- **Interpretation issues**
- **External employment**

The Rural Fire Service is an emergency service that deals with, primarily, vegetation fires, large, small, static or fast moving, either in isolation or in proximity to habitation either dense or sparse with varying terrain, fuel type, state utilities, human involvement and climatic conditions.

Brigades also undertake hazard reduction as part of bush fire mitigation

The core business of fighting fire in the above conditions is inherently dangerous and life threatening.

Since 2011 much has changed on the Rural Fire Brigade landscape and is still changing, flood and cyclone clean up, community education in areas affected, assistance to Urban and Auxiliary brigades or Queensland Ambulance Service in terrain traversing or providing water to urban appliance in remote locations or areas in which water is not readily available.

While most who apply to be members of a brigade wish to serve on the fire ground, 'Operational Fire fighters' must be trained, competent, physically and psychologically fit.

Other roles within the service/brigade include Community Educator, Peer Support as well as operational support and administrative support.

Generally the support roles are undertaken by members of the brigade who can no longer act in response to fire for a variety of reasons and/or have skill sets appropriate to the administrative roles.

Barriers to involvement in a rural fire brigade, can be, age, physical, medical, psychological, criminal or blue card issues.

To ensure **Quality** over **Quantity**, such barriers need to remain or increased.

In my view, to ensure a strong efficient transparent brigade, a formal documented interview followed by a probation period needs to be put in place for each applicant. Not only does this process provide information to the management group of the brigade but to the applicant with which to make an informed decision to continue with their application.

Ultimately, the First Officer of the brigade is responsible for the well being, conduct and function of the brigade and its members during brigade operations and attendance.

While not an obvious 'barrier' to a person continuing to volunteer, limitation of their utilisation operationally within the brigade is a factor. A brigade has only a specific number of vehicles requiring varying classes of driving licence and trained experienced fire fighters.

Those not driving include the person in charge and other crew members. This precludes some brigade members from gaining operational experience where the same crews respond.

Further, succession planning within a brigade needs to be considered in a positive manner. While tempting, as in many volunteer organisations, re-election of the same person to lead or hold a position of power can lead to stagnation, despondency or disharmony within.

Because a person has led for X years does not necessarily mean they are the best person for the job. No one person is the font of all knowledge.

Similarly, a lack of enthusiasm or commitment from within the membership for some positions, normally falls on the incumbent office bearer retaining the position unless they chose to stand down or not renominate for the position.

Currently the requirements imposed by the training regimes can be quite onerous.

Brigade members come from all levels of society and backgrounds, some with tertiary education and others not.

The KISS principle should be applied.

Generally, trainers come from within the Brigade. It is an added role taken on board by some volunteers which requires preparation time.

Likewise, the management team faces further commitment of time.

These added commitments can be fractious to family life to varying extents.

I believe constraints to 'volunteering' overall with respect to recruitment, appears in line with current trends seen in numerous volunteer organisations and is the lack of patriotism, woke culture, self-centredness revolving around educative criteria, technology, lifestyle and ethnicity.

The brigade community is losing those elderly persons who have had a very strong connection to their livelihood and the community in which they belong due to declining physical capacity, medical constraints and greater demands within the training regimes, perception of control over their brigade activities by bureaucrats.

I observe retention and disenchantment in the RFSQ with newer members regarding the provision of uniform apparel other than PPE, apart from the time delays that seem to occur after being granted their 'volunteer number'.

Firstly, there is a specific dress uniform for the first 4 elected officers of a brigade, secondly, all members of the brigade are issued with polo shirt and cargo pants. Thirdly, elastic sided boots are issued only to the officers. The remainder are required to wear PPE fire boots, which one can rightly imagine would show the scars of fire-ground work.

There are numerous times when brigade members will be interacting in a public relation (PR) role or attending official occasions, station and vehicle dedication or medal/citation presentations and as such the rank and file use the black polo/cargo pants/fire boots as their dress uniform. While being volunteers, we still see ourselves as professionals and have pride in the service to which we belong and to be expected to present with dirty, worn and scarred work boots is not appropriate for such occasions.

Additionally, jackets issued for cold weather are also limited.

It must be pointed out that auxiliary urban fire fighters, who are also volunteers, receive the full compliment of uniform apparel.

It is then no wonder that brigade members feel like 2nd class citizens within QFD.

There are those who find that they are not being treated as they thought they might, having joined an arm of the emergency services of Qld who drop out or retire to the fringes of the brigade, partly for the reasons outlined above.

Also added to this mix is the view of salaried members of RFSQ currently not keeping a substantive role but rather acting up adding to instability which can lead to differences in interpretation of law, policy and procedure.

There exists a variance of views of what can and can't be 'attended' to by RFSQ. While we accept without question that our primary role is to deal with vegetation fires, the scope of tasks is becoming much broader since 2011 with the expansion of human habitation and movement within the state, there are times when RFSQ volunteers come face to face with incidents, particularly IZone areas, ie Road Traffic Crash, flood or cyclonic conditions. Apart from those in country areas, there tends to be a view that being trained to deal with the 'first on scene' or even follow up in the latter is the province of FRS or QPS even to the point a suggestion seeking or proposing such training is met with rebuke. Is RFSQ not part of the emergency service of Qld and should be prepared or even expected to deal with these situations at least in preparation for the arrival of the appropriate combatant authority?

As an example I recall in the early 1990s, as I travelled the coast as part of WHS work, when seeking a means of communication to seek assistance, should I come across an unattended RTC or other like situation, I was informed to drive on past. Today that mindset cannot be acceptable.

In todays world, employment opportunities or lifestyle desires in places elsewhere within the state or country entice members away from the originating brigade. While the knowledge gained by these personnel is advantageous overall and can provide grounding should they wish to join a local brigade, a shortfall in availability of response personnel takes place the originating brigade, thus requiring further recruitment, training and development to a level that is proper to the task in the brigade area.

Employment requirements, particularly in private enterprise is also a factor. The loss of an employee to an emergency response leaves the business at a disadvantage, particularly where efficacy is of primary concern. There is little incentive for businesses to support volunteer emergency services.

It could also be concluded that a lack of acceptance of threats to the community or resilience to emergencies may have a part to play.

It is also noted that some police forces of Australia and the Australian Defence Force have a recruiting issue in this modern era.

3. Experience with volunteering

Main

- **Overview of reasons to join**
- **Recognition**

I have observed serving and potential brigade members, and anecdotal interstate experiences the following motivations exist to join a rural fire brigade:

Being within an area at risk of fire as a landholder ie farmer, agriculturalist.

Being within an area at risk of fire as a landowner with a residence on acreage ie hobby farmer or adjoining bushland

Being part of the community with the desire to assist in times of emergency.

A requirement of employment to undertake some volunteer work

A desire to protect environment and wildlife

Those seeking experience before application for employment into FRS or within RFSQ

Those seeking to garnish their resume' for future employment prospects

Those seeking to engage socially

Those seeking to find an outlet for personal issues.

Those with nefarious motives

It has been observed that the greater attendance at brigade operational activities centres around the first 3.

That is not to say that brigade members don't enjoy the company and social activities of like-minded members or networking for their own self advancement and that of the brigade.

Volunteers of brigades who have deployed interstate or intrastate, for which national recognition has been granted, specifically the 2019-20 fires in Qld and NSW, members are still awaiting the awarding of the medals, 5 years after. It is noted full time persons have received this recognition.

I question the delay, given that there are likely members of brigades that have since retired or passed away. This is not an acceptable situation if the service wants to retain their numbers and or properly recognise the effort and sacrifice these members make.

4. Diverse backgrounds, genders, age groups, abilities and location.....

Govt policy requires brigades to be inclusive of the above however because of the nature of the tasks undertaken by a brigade, applicants need to be vetted as to their suitability.

5. The extent, effectiveness and efficiency of current government support...

Main Points

- **Workers Compensation outlay**
- **Provision of fire fighting and other uniform matters**

All rural fire employees including volunteers are covered by worker compensation paid for by the state.

Additionally, there is the cost of personal protective equipment (PPE) fire fighting jacket, pants, shirts, fire fighting boots, gloves, goggle, P2 masks, and helmet and a uniform (as previously discussed) that is provided to all members (whether they are active or not), training and support costs to personnel provided by RFSQ.

The Code of Ethics that Brigades are bound by, as indeed all Qld Government employees are, includes the matter of financial management.

Brigades can be and in some instances are magnets for people to join but who do little to contribute to the brigade or community.

Therein lies a wastage of Government funding and resources for those persons who do not attend the varying brigade call-outs, functions or involved in a contributory way to the brigade or service.

In the case of rural fire brigade membership, the brigade and indeed the service needs to look at those members who do not contribute to efficient operation of the brigade to cater for the emergencies, including the core business of fire fighting and mitigating fire risks as directed.

I proposition that there are many non active and nonproductive members that fall within the last 5 groups of the above that fall within this category.

The matter of efficiency as an organisation and as a brigade needs to be considered. It is not appropriate that the state provides funding and resources that are not properly utilised, and those non productive members should be encouraged to reconsidering their options.

6. Opportunities for the Queensland Government t leverage all portfolios...including Brisbane 2032 Olympic and Paralympic Games

Main point

- **Previous non fire or emergency deployments**

Brigades in the past have contributed to G20 and Covid response by members, who are not utilised on other emergency activities during the whole or part of the duration. It is conceivable that a similar deployment would be considered dependent upon other operational requirements.

7. Opportunities to increase emergency response volunteering...

Main points

- **Existing emergency services**
- **Creation or Bolstering identified organisations to service localised or widespread significant emergencies**

- **Education**
- **Development of emergency response in youth organisations**

Already established volunteer emergency organisations exist to respond in the initial phases of developing emergencies (2022 flood emergency in Ipswich, rural fire brigades involved in flood monitoring heights and warning residents) . Other large scaled emergencies have seen the general public respond in large numbers as we saw with the ‘Mud army’ post 2011 and 2022 in the Brisbane metropolitan and Ipswich areas. We have seen ADF deployed also.

In the aftermath of a catastrophic event affecting the population there is a need for authorities, state, local Government or other accredited organisation to cater for registration, vetting as to suitability, coordination, supervision, accountability, staging areas and logistical aspects for those volunteering to assist. Obviously the blue card aspect seems to be over ridden in these situations.

Preparedness and resilience starts with home ‘education’ as is seen in the rural communities.

Education institutions should also be tutoring and encouraging these aspects. If current mainstream and social media content regarding the frailty of the world is to be believed one might conclude that such learnings would be a priority. Instead we have children and even young adults fearful of their time left on this planet without recourse.

There are youth organisations that should be positively fostering these aspects within their curriculum . Boy Scouts and Girl Guides motto is ‘be prepared’, Boy’s Brigade – ‘Sure and Stedfast’, Outward Bound and other like groups must be able to meet future challenges. Their practical involvement from this time on is essential and will be exponentially beneficial to the nation for the future in my view.

Conclusion

A tremendous change has occurred in Australia since the mid 1970’s where a greater percentage of the population appear very much less prepared for emergencies than before. The causes are many, including, immigration, education curricula and loss of patriotism.

Australia and indeed Queensland need to look to the future given the increasing population, suburban and town expansion. Government must put effort into

proper recognition of the volunteer emergency service and other volunteer organisations, promote the value of participation by youth organisations and ensure there is an uptake by education institutions in promoting preparedness and resilience to emergency situations, large or small.

This submission is forwarded for consideration.

Brian Marfleet

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