

Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland

Submission No: 79

Submitted by: Rural Fire Brigades Association Queensland Inc.

Publication:

Attachments:

Submitter Comments:



**Local Government, Small Business and Customer Service Committee inquiry into
volunteering in Queensland.**

RFBAQ submission – Friday 7th February 2025

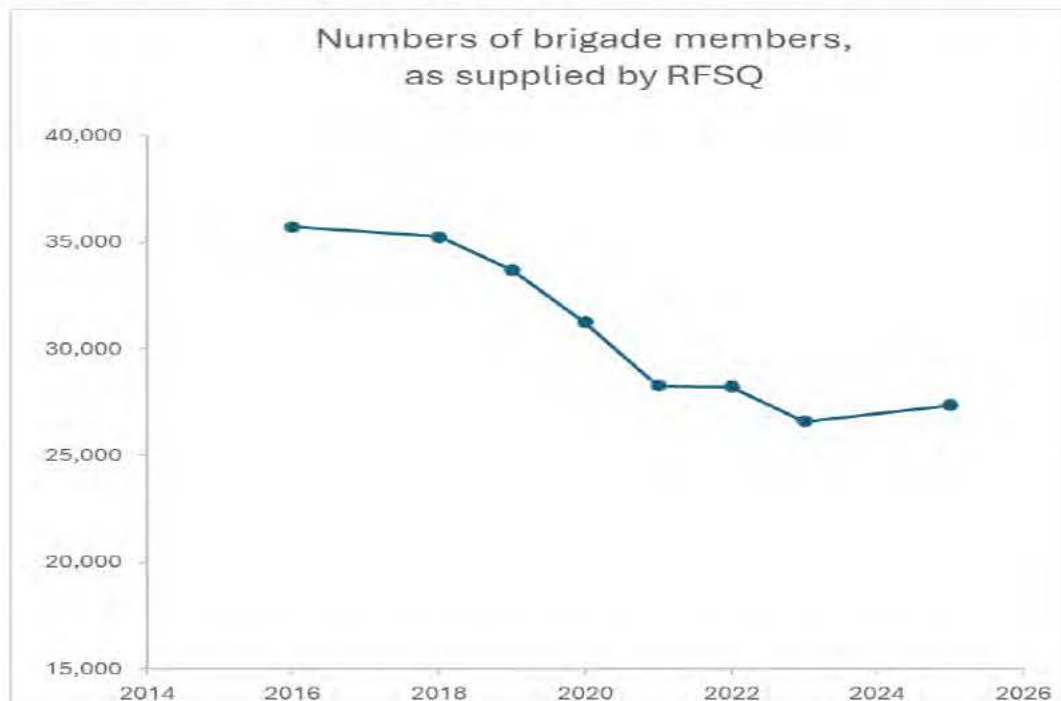
‘Volunteering is the ultimate exercise in democracy. You vote in elections once a year but when you volunteer, you vote every day about the kind of community you want to live in.’ - Anonymous

Across Australia, irrespective of your state or territory, over the last 100+ years people have chosen to come together and form volunteer fire brigades. These brigades were formed out of community need and desire and not by direction of a central authority.

These brigades, while geographically different and facing differing risk types all produced models of self-governance that looked remarkably similar, and these brigades were well supported by their communities.

In 2015 the Council of Australian Volunteer Fire Associations (CAVFA) estimated that there were approximately 250,000 brigade members across Australia. Those numbers reflected both the importance of the brigade and the popularity of the community led model.

Queensland brigade membership numbers are in decline, and while very welcome new recruits are volunteering the total numbers are falling. The experience and local knowledge that is walking out the door or quietly fading away is irreplaceable.



The rise of the centralised fire bureaucracy has seen a corresponding decline in brigade membership. The QFES Regionalisation of 2019 saw, for the first time, Kedron achieve critical mass in achieving a public service 'circle of self validation'.

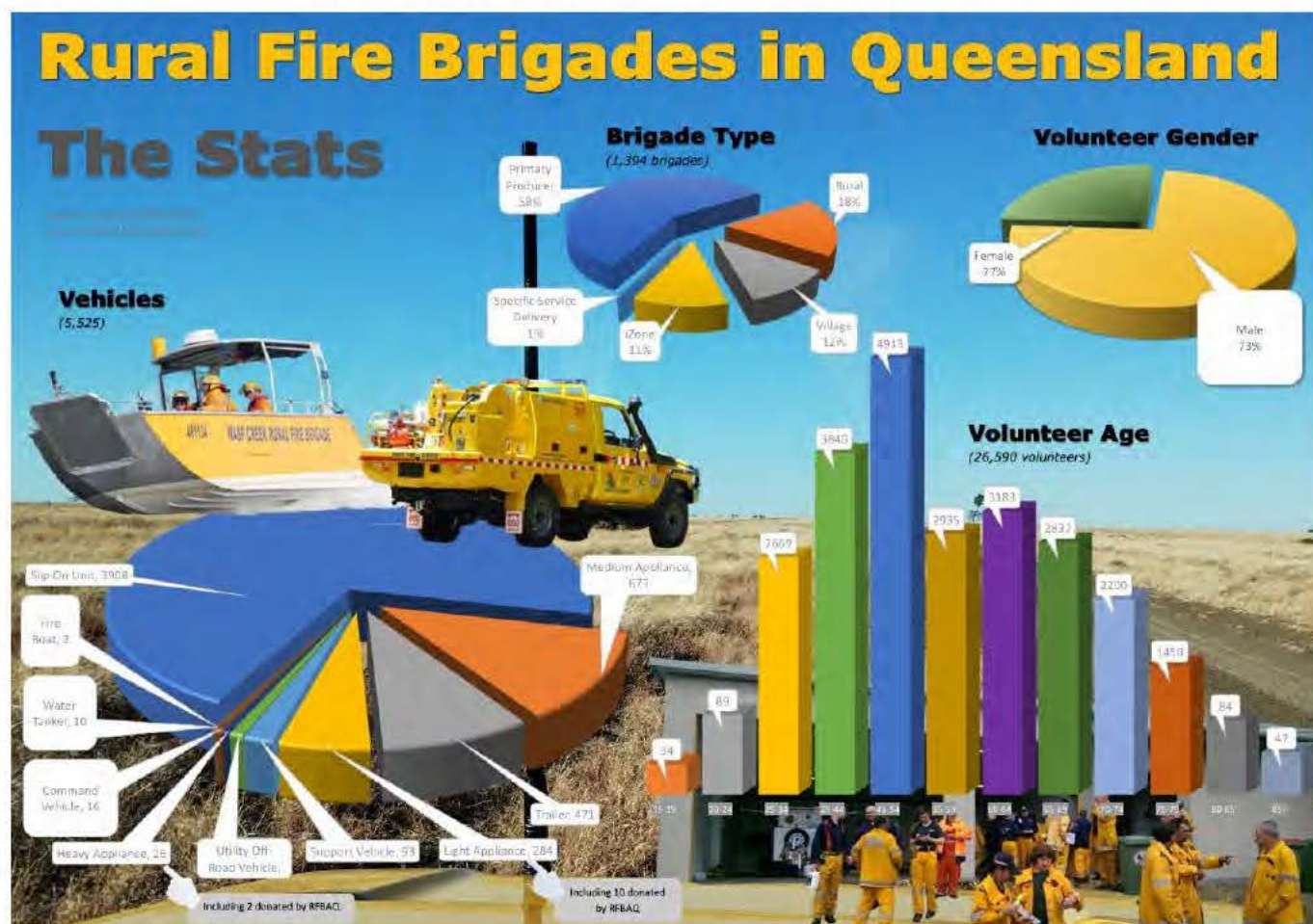
This is where an idea can be born in Kedron, have internal assessment / validation, then policy / planning / testing, rigor / governance, policy sign off, then procurement and production commenced without any input from rural fire brigades or volunteers. This is done under the all encompassing guise of 'commercial in confidence'.

There is also the misconception that as the fire service is the customer it is also the consumer, this then obviates the need to talk to brigades about what they want.

Here is an example from January of this year as to the secrecy of information regarding Rural Fire.

Each year the RFBAQ requests 'The Stats' from the Rural Fire Service Queensland (RFSQ) to be able to inform the brigades and brigade members of the size and composition of the organisation that they belong to. This also helps the RFBAQ advocate to the fire service for more trucks, training and equipment to help the brigades defend 93% of Queensland.

This is an example of what 'The Stats' looks like previously—



The email from the A/Chief Officer of the RFSQ in January states - Notwithstanding this may have been provided previously, I do not support the release of brigade, membership and fleet in the format sought as this is data captured by RFSQ for capability and planning purposes.

Now we have no idea as to the breakdown of age, gender, general location, vehicle type or number of brigades by region or area. Rural Fire Service data is now for the sole use of the 'circle of self validation'; or as was pointed out to me earlier in February by a person in Kedron. *"The Queensland Fire Department is not legislatively or industrially obliged to talk to any external organisation that is not a union."*

This statement is undeniably true and this statement encompasses why brigade numbers are falling and local empowerment has disappeared.

The new fire service legislation that was rammed through by the previous government created a legislated RFSQ advisory committee under section 130.

This committee membership is chosen by Kedron, the meeting agenda is set by Kedron, the information given to members is provided by Kedron, and the minutes that are written in Kedron are unable to be distributed due to being commercial in confidence. If this is not enough to ensure committee compliance, the new fire service legislation specifies that the committee has no power to make change –

Part 2 Section 130 (5) To remove any doubt, it is declared that the RFSQ advisory committee is not a decision-making body.

Legislation that is written to specifically disempower a group of volunteers from effecting change is bad legislation.

There is little wonder that the LNP and Katter Party voted against the rolling of Fire & Rescue and RFSQ into a new department run by the people from the old department

Here is what the then opposition spokesperson for Fire, Dale Last MP had to say on 2nd May 2024 following the vote on the Disaster Management and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2024 –

Earlier today the LNP voted AGAINST the section of the Bill relating to the establishment of a single entity combining Queensland Fire & Rescue and the Rural Fire Service Queensland. Despite our votes and best efforts, the Bill passed, mainly on votes from the government members.

I am proud to have led the LNP's fight against the government's proposal for a single entity on behalf of volunteers.

The elected RFBAQ representatives are in agreement with the above statement and unanimously seek a fully independent Rural Fire Service Queensland (RFSQ).

- For the RFSQ to have a Chief Officer, from a brigade background, who reports directly to the Minister.



- For RFSQ to have separate legislation and budget and for the reformed RFSQ to be comprised of rural fire brigades, Fire Wardens and rural fire staff.
- Rural Fire Service staff are to provide support and training to the brigades and their members. These brigades and support staff help landholders mitigate risk from bushfire, respond to fires and other emergencies, provide education to Queenslanders relating to fire and perform other rescue functions as delegated by the Chief Officer of the RSFQ.

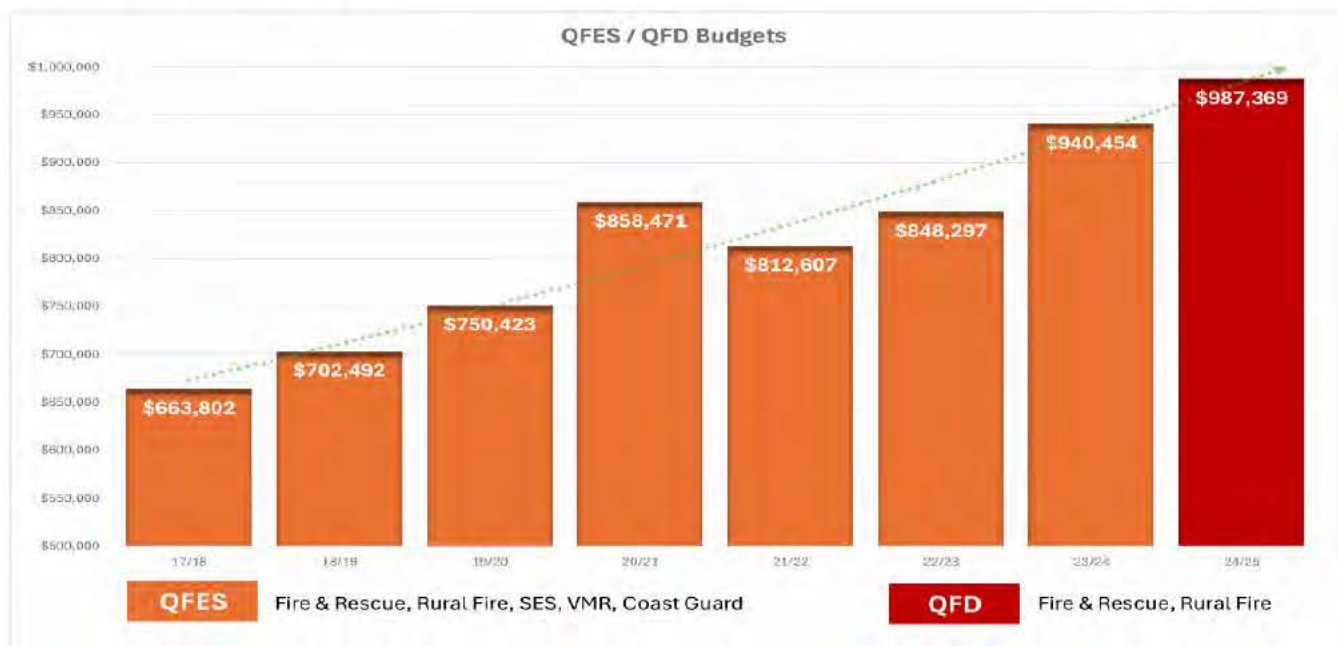
Money – the Queensland Fire Department (QFD) is a new entity that had Volunteer Marine Rescue, Marine Rescue Queensland, Emergency Management and the State Emergency Service (SES) removed. This has left a small department comprising Fire & Rescue and Rural Fire Service Queensland.

This new entity, QFD, has a greater budget than the previous larger entity QFES, and unlike other government departments the QFD raises its own funding. This means that the money to achieve a separate RFSQ is there.

Below is a graph that shows funding for the last 8 years. These numbers are drawn from the Controlled Income Statement; Service Deliver Statements from the Budget Papers.

From it you can see that income has greatly increased, yet there are no trucks, training or any of the key elements that brigade volunteers need to defend Queensland.

This means that the QFD does not have the same funding challenges that the rest of the Queensland Government has.



Options for remediation –

Low - Mandatory internal departmental instruments like a Volunteer Impact Statement that will be included on all departmental forms. This would ensure that staff stop and complete a form explaining on how the proposed changes affect volunteers.



It has a catchy name, can be made into an acronym and extra compliance could even be called 'Hi VIS'. There would be an announcement, uniforms, medals, party pies and sausage rolls.

It would also have little impact beyond the announcement date and would quickly be forgotten.

Medium - Individual departmental legislation to enforce consultation.

Fire Service Act Part 2 Section 130 (5) shows that this didn't work and even if consistent and supportive legislation was introduced across the departments that have emergency volunteers, individual departments amend their legislation over time and these sections would grow away from the original intent.

High - Emergency Volunteer Respect Act

A Queensland Emergency Volunteer Respect Act (EVRA) will recognise that emergency service volunteers work in unique operating environments and organisational resource models, alongside paid workers and delivering professional levels of service equivalent to that of paid workers, but without the rights, protections, recognition etc. of paid workers.

The most recent experience of this was the 2024 wholesale legislative and detrimental change to all the Rural Fire Brigades in Queensland without real or honest consultation. An action that would not have been permissible to paid staff covered under industrial agreements or instruments.

A Queensland EVRA would:

- Ensure consultation with Emergency Volunteer (EV) organisations happens as there currently is no requirement for consultation;
- Enable Government to communicate or enquire on Emergency Volunteer (EV) organisations as there is currently no ability for them to do so;
- Be non-operational;
- Ensure that correct process were followed.
- Ensure Emergency Volunteers have a voice that is recognized;
- Identify potential issues early and internally;
- Support a process that brings Emergency Volunteer representative organisations together;
- Decouple money from having a voice;
- Provide advice and feedback to Minister for Volunteers and Government;
- Increase in Emergency Volunteer recruitment.

What is an Emergency Volunteer?

The inclusivity of the EVRA will be driven by defining what an "Emergency Volunteer" is and by doing so will:

- Develop parameters for form and function of Emergency Volunteers and representative associations;
- Will include agencies that meet interpolative guidelines;
- Ensure inclusive and adaptable voice;
- Allow for associations to migrate in/out as form and function changes.



Emergency Volunteer Respect Act (EVRA) would have an Emergency Volunteer (EV) Council that:

- Will refer to appropriate established dispute processes.
- Is an environment which is apolitical, performing its functions in an impartial and professional manner.
- Is not a complaints process.
- Will ensure that most matters will be dealt with at local service committee level.
- Provide greater active voices for Emergency Volunteer Associations.
- Will have EVRA staff to support all EV Associations in finding their voice and to promote their EV organization.
- Report annually to Parliament.

Principles

- Respecting rights

Respect the rights of emergency volunteers to enable them to perform their roles without discrimination, no loss of legal standing, no disadvantage or loss of integrity and provide for all persons a means to volunteer according to their capacity without discrimination.

- Consultation

Enshrine for emergency volunteers the right to be consulted with, in advance on any matters which might impact on volunteer rights or duties and have agreement between the parties on any matters which might impact on emergency volunteers.

- Integration with legislation

Ensure all subsequent legislation, deeds and contracts as far as is permissible by law, is reviewed to ensure compliance with these principles does not unfairly impact on the rights of emergency volunteers in the performance of their duties.

- Resources

Enables emergency volunteers to have reasonable adequate resources to be able to perform their roles in a manner that is safe and without risks to their health;

- Education

Provide for an education fund for emergency volunteers to assist with enhancing skills of volunteers directly for the public good.

- Compliance

Enable breaches by persons or organisations to be properly dealt with according to Law.

- A fair go without hardship

Where not already provided for, to establish an emergency volunteer hardship support fund to assist emergency volunteers who meet certain criteria, to provide for their personal costs and losses incurred as a part of their volunteering efforts.

- Skills recognition

Provide for recognition of emergency volunteers' skills to agreed national competency levels and where an emergency volunteer has been competently assessed, not discriminate against a volunteer in any way including the basis of qualifications and experience.



- Out of pocket expenses

Where otherwise not expressly provided for, provide for the reimbursement for out of pocket costs incurred by emergency volunteers as a direct cause of them volunteering if they so wish to claim.

- Immunity from prosecution

Provide for immunity from prosecution for emergency volunteers and those who are directly supporting emergency volunteers whilst performing their duties and acting within the law and in good faith.

Conclusion

‘Managing brigades and volunteers is like trying to muster cats’ is a phrase that I have heard over the years; and it’s true, you can’t muster cats; what you do is make an environment that is good for the cat and it will come in of its own accord. Brigades are very similar as no two brigades in Queensland look the same. One centrally directed size / shape does not fit all.

We have seen it repeatedly in the fire service; Blue Card, whether you support the policy position or not, was rolled out in the most dictatorial and adversarial way by the fire service, against repeated advice that there is a more volunteer friendly way of achieving the outcome. Then when the disaster unfolded and volunteers left in their thousands the fire service just doubled down on making volunteers comply.

The fixation on recruiting new, which is a measured metric, instead of focusing on retaining experienced brigade members with local knowledge.

The belief that paid firefighters know more than volunteer firefighters and the commensurate dismissal of local knowledge in fire, floods and cyclones.

The stifling of dissent or free speech within volunteer ranks; the endless pursuit of brigade members over trivial complaints that drag on for years, the inability of people to have their paperwork for joining a brigade processed in a timely manner, overweight trucks, the list is very long and points to two key factors – LEADERSHIP and PURPOSE.

A volunteer community based organisation is being administered by a paid, paramilitary based, response orientated city centric organisation.

Rural Fire as a collective; brigades, volunteers, Fire Wardens and staff need to return to the ethos of community defence under an independent statutory authority and board comprising brigade members.

The RFBAQ would like to thank the committee for the opportunity to make submission and for the committee’s commitment to try and rebuild the most of Australian of activities; volunteering.

Brigades and volunteers, Australia does adore; in time of crisis, but not before.

Justin Choveaux - General Manager RFBAQ

The Rural Fire Brigades Association Queensland (RFBAQ) is the elected representative body for the 1,394 Rural Fire Brigades in Queensland who comprise 27,350 volunteers protecting 93% of the State. The RFBAQ is a non-political, self-funded and democratically elected association that reflects the views of volunteer fire brigades in Queensland.

