

Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland

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Executive Summary

Volunteering matters for society¹ in an increasingly complex world; the willingness of an individual to dedicate their time, capacity and capability for no financial reward is fundamental to the fabric of a functioning society².

Volunteering provides for social cohesion and resilience in all communities, offering individuals a sense of purpose, fulfilment, and opportunities for skill development. In First and Third World countries, individuals dedicate their time and expertise to various causes that support, protect and preserve, with emergency services being among the most demanding yet rewarding fields of volunteering.

At a macro level, understanding why people volunteer, particularly within the emergency services of Queensland, provides important insights for the committee as it seeks to understand and improve volunteer outcomes. This submission will address the terms of reference underpinned by data and research.

Volunteering in Queensland plays a key role in the community and the economy. The decline is more complex than the often cited organisational barriers; macroeconomic factors significantly justify the decline in volunteering. In the current economic climate, households focus on basic needs³, limiting the time and money they can donate.

The author (a volunteer) focuses solely on the observations of the Rural Fire Service of Queensland (RFSQ), a fundamental frontline service of Queensland. While not Queensland's most extensive volunteer base, it is the most significant as a formalised frontline service of the Queensland Government. The RFSQ has undertaken the most crucial transformation in a generation; the changes across people, processes and systems have brought positive outcomes for those willing and open to embrace the opportunities. The next generation of RFSQ volunteers is now better placed than ever before.

This submission would not have been possible without the hard work and dedication of countless volunteers and RFSQ and Queensland Fire Department (QFD) staff who drive the changes. Volunteer training is readily available, more money is available, increased support from paid staff is available, and some processes are simplified. As a volunteer, personal and Brigade improvement opportunities are available 'if' you embrace change.

The positive impact of the work delivered to this point inspired the author to provide this submission. The author's intent is genuine: to improve the volunteer experience and organisational capability for community outcomes.

This submission, while focused by design on business improvement to achieve optimal volunteer outcomes under the terms of reference, does not seek to take away from the momentous achievements that occurred post 01 July 24. This submission aims to support the RFSQ volunteer experience and the organisational service delivery from **good to great**.

The RFSQ volunteer experience still faces challenges with data accuracy, asset suitability, administrative burdens, and capability maturity, creating frustrations for volunteers. Internal inconsistencies and barriers to information sharing challenge the service daily, and while not unique to the volunteer environment, the details outlined in this document should be considered, given the potential impact on public safety.

A small population spread over a large area makes every volunteer crucial in the RFSQ.

The author makes 14 recommendations for consideration by the committee; these are:

Recommendation 1 - Ensure data integrity when reporting Rural Fire Service Queensland (RFSQ) numbers. Categorise members as:

- Operational Members (active firefighters),
- Operational Support (administrative and logistics support),
- Community Educators (public education roles),
- Fire Wardens and,
- Inactive Members (not engaged in activities).

Data should be collected and published quarterly via a public dashboard.

Recommendation 2 - Conduct a policy gap analysis in areas that create service delivery barriers, resulting in the second-tier status of the RFSQ as an emergency response capability that has the potential to compromise public safety.

Recommendation 3 - Enable innovation of the RFSQ administration to be driven from the front line, specifically focusing on lowering the burden of administrative tasks while increasing compliance using existing digital tools and capabilities (like the finance and banking initiative).

Recommendation 4 - Create non-monetary incentives for RFSQ volunteers (under a given criteria) to support the volunteering experience beyond intrinsic motivations:

- Access to sporting events.
- Access to external training opportunities.
- Discounts on vehicle registration.
- Public sector-wide negotiated discounts.
- Partity of benefits found in other jurisdictions.

Recommendation 5 - Engage, fund and empower Volunteering Queensland to work with an academic partner to conduct a long-term study into Queensland RFSQ volunteering, including detailed contemporary research into Emergency Management Volunteering similar to that of the NSW Government.

Recommendation 6 - Engage, fund and empower the Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC research team to work with RFSQ to uplift Emergency Management Non-Technical Skills as part of **all** RFSQ training.

Recommendation 7 - Enforce the organisational values and standards at all levels of volunteering, emphasising empowering and directly engaging with brigade-level leadership on all matters relating to individuals.

Recommendation 8 - Adopt an off-the-shelf application, already available to the service, at no cost to communicate directly with frontline volunteers about non-emergency response activities.

Recommendation 9 - Urgently review external advocacy and external fundraising connected with the RFSQ to focus on transparency of finance and governance. This includes referrals to the Queensland Government, the Office of Fair Trading, the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission, and the Office of the Information Commissioner.

Recommendation 10 - That a long-term plan for the disbursement of RFSQ functions and training be expedited as follows:

- Leadership & governance in South East Queensland.
- Training, innovation & assets in a rural location.

- Administrative functions dispersed across rural Queensland.

Recommendation 11 - Empower RFSQ to that of other Australian jurisdictions, with equivalent status and responsibilities.

Recommendation 12 - Seek to augment the current organisational structure, allowing merit-selected volunteers to rise into roles within the chain of command in operational functions such as specialist capabilities leadership, for example: First Officer of the individual specialist capabilities provided by RFSQ, Inspector and Superintendent level positions across a range of operational and non-operational areas, most importantly, on-duty roles in supporting brigades with Firecalls.

Recommendation 13 - Undertake a full review of mental health support services offered and delivered to volunteers.

Recommendation 14 – Suitably qualified, experienced and approved (through merit selection) RFSQ Volunteers at Level 2 and 3 Incident Controller and Australasian Inter-service Incident Management System (AIIMS) functional leads should form part of a 'ready reserve' that can be mobilised under if required a paid arrangement to support the ever-increasing natural disasters of Queensland and interstate.

Question 1 - The current state of volunteering in Queensland and the value it contributes, including benefits to volunteers, organisations, communities and the State.

Volunteering in Queensland is fundamental to the social and economic fabric of the State. Volunteering is vital given the small population, highly dispersed across vast distances of Queensland. Like all other jurisdictions in Australia, Queensland has seen a decline in volunteering. Data provided by Volunteering Queensland for 2024⁴ demonstrates that all volunteer-based organisations are faced with similar challenges.

Australia faces complex economic headwinds; multifactor productivity continues to be a challenge⁵, combined with slow economic growth⁶. Many households have prioritised their basic needs to sustain the family environment over all other factors. Data from the Australia Tax Office supports this statement⁷: as a society feels financial stress, its capacity to give time (volunteering) and money diminishes.

The theme of volunteer numbers is consistent in the context of volunteer fire services across Australia; retaining and recruitment remain challenging⁸. The author would observe within Queensland that the Rural Fire Service of Queensland (RFSQ) has fluctuated around the mid-25,000 over the past five years. Evidence viewed by the author suggests that higher numbers in the past years resulted from administrative issues. Thus, the drop in the number of RFSQ volunteers is less significant than some more strident stakeholders have suggested.

While Australia and Queensland are exceptional places to live, work, and play, our disaster-prone environment requires a volunteer surge capability for emergency management. The Rural Fire Service sits on the frontline of this need, providing that capacity and capability at short notice at a tremendously low cost to the taxpayer. Beyond intrinsic motivations, clarity of purpose and the feeling of adding value are vital to recruiting and retaining RFSQ volunteers.

While the Rural Fire Service of Queensland remains busy throughout the year, it reaches peak activity during the fire season⁹. The author would observe that the Rural Fire Service of Queensland could deliver more value if provided with a border mandate that created an ongoing sense of purpose, combined with being truly empowered; the author will magnify this point during this submission.

Recommendation 1 – Ensure that data integrity occurs when reporting RFSQ numbers. Beyond the demographics, data should be categorised as follows:

- **Operational Members** – Those who are appropriately skilled, trained and physically capable of carrying out the duties and tasks of an active firefighter.
- **Operational Support** – Those appropriately skilled and trained to support the Brigade's organisational areas.
- **Community Educator** – Those appropriately skilled and trained to deliver community education messages to local communities.
- **Fire Wardens** – Those approved as Fire Wardens.
- **Inactive Members** – Those no longer attending are not appropriately skilled, trained, and current.

Data should be collected and published quarterly for public consumption, in a dashboard and as open data.

Question 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.

The author would observe that 2024 has brought the most significant change for the Rural Fire Service of Queensland in decades. Volunteers have, for the first time, been deeply involved in the process of consultation and change that was urgently required based on findings that included the Queensland Audit Office¹⁰, which is laid out in detail within the Independent Review in 2021 by KPMG¹¹.

The nature of the (volunteer) inquiry by the current State Government highlights the importance of all volunteers; however, it underscores the political nature of volunteerism. While political support is crucial, like all things, the use, abuse, and overuse of political capital should always be considered, particularly with the frontline service of the RFSQ. Actions must flow for this inquiry, as volunteer time is being used for submissions; not acting on responses will further compound negative perceptions about the value of volunteers to the State of Queensland.

It is also crucial to stress that the RFSQ is not the State Emergency Service (SES). Emergency service volunteering is a universal term, but the two services differ in many ways, notably in culture, ethos, and approach to problem-solving. Any volunteering solution from this inquiry must reflect that the two services differ.

The legislation changes¹² within the RFSQ are welcomed¹³ despite the narrative portrayed by a vocal group; the much-needed updates have been long overdue, and the benefits are tangible to many on the ground. However, the changes require individuals to self-motivate and seek opportunities; thus, those willing to grasp the opening thrive.

The author can see that many RFSQ staff are working hard to deliver the much-needed transformation, but the changes have fallen short in key areas that are diminishing the volunteer experience. While it remains a desired vision within RFSQ to be a standalone agency of volunteers, what has been achieved to date in legislation has only enabled the RFSQ to move forward and should be celebrated by all sides of politics.

Volunteer Perspective

The RFSQ is unlike any other volunteer fire service within Australia, as many key functions of being defined emergency service personnel are **withheld** from the RFSQ volunteers. These barriers signal to volunteers that their service is not truly valued or trusted and constrain their ability to help the people they joined to serve – the community. These Queensland-centric RFSQ barriers include but are not limited to:

- Advantages to volunteering within RFSQ (the only advantage is to current public sector employees).
- Definition of an RFSQ Firefighter (a volunteer is known as a member, not a firefighter or emergency services officer).
- Capability: A Rural Brigade is the only emergency service or government entity in many parts of Queensland, yet its capabilities are limited. Barriers to helping the community include being unable to directly support structure fires, using specialist equipment that would offer greater volunteer safety (breathing apparatus), and conducting road traffic crashes and rescue activities (this occurs in places but is based on common sense relationships, not a formal policy position).
- Exemptions related to emergency response capabilities significantly signal the lack of trust in RFSQ volunteers, most notably driving exemptions.
- Limited career progression for RFSQ staff. Unlike in other states, the attraction and retention of senior leaders who cannot reach Commissioner level (of the Rural Fire Service)

puts Queensland at a significant disadvantage when retaining and attracting senior paid Rural Fire Leaders.

An inequity of treatment continues to drive an unnecessary division and only impacts community service delivery. It creates a more significant community risk given the vast State of Queensland; other jurisdictions are perplexed that Queensland distrusts the RFSQ volunteers to the point that it has the potential to compromise community safety. While it could rightly be argued that the RFSQ maturity has not merited equity in key areas, nearly 12 months from key adjustments, the question must be posed: why is the RFSQ being held back from providing improved community outcomes at no higher cost to the taxpayer?

Administrative Challenges

While RFSQ has undergone much-needed and welcomed changes, the author would observe that it remains highly administratively inefficient with basic business activities. This significant inefficiency results in many unnecessary manual processes flowing to volunteers, who use their time to complete administration over what they sought to undertake when they joined (helping the community). The lack of business sophistication within RFSQ is extremely notable compared to other public sector entities in Queensland. This low business maturity, overly process-driven and lack of digital literacy frustrates staff and volunteers alike.

The author does not suggest that the administrative activity should not be completed; all activities could be completed in a fraction of the time and cost to the taxpayer with tools already available within the service.

To balance this negative observation of the RFSQ, the author provides the transformation of brigade banking and finances; this has been an excellent initiative in reducing the administration and compliance to volunteers and directly addressing the Queensland Audit Office recommendations¹⁴. While there have been teething issues, this is an outstanding example of what can be achieved when the right people (RFSQ Staff and Volunteers) are empowered.

Given the vast array of skills business skills within Rural Fire Brigades, the author would observe that many have already reduced the administrative burden on volunteers with observable recruitment and retention (positive) results. Ironically, this administrative burden is lowered via the tools Microsoft¹⁵ already provides to the Rural Fire Service of Queensland. Supporting evidence of the importance of streamlined administration can be found in the NSW government's Review of Emergency Volunteering - The Current State of Emergency Volunteering¹⁶.

Recommendation 2 – Conduct a policy gap analysis in areas that create service delivery barriers, resulting in the second-tier status of the RFSQ as an emergency response capability that has the potential to compromise Queensland public safety.

Recommendation 3 – Enable innovation of the RFSQ administration to be driven from the front line, specifically focusing on lowering the burden of administrative tasks while increasing compliance using existing digital tools and capabilities (like the finance and banking initiative).

Recommendation 4 – Create non-monetary incentives for RFSQ volunteers (under a given criteria) to support the volunteering experience beyond intrinsic motivations. Examples include:

- Access to sporting events.
- Access to external training opportunities.
- Discount on vehicle registration.
- Negotiated discounts consistent with the wider public sector.
- Partity of benefits found in other jurisdictions¹⁷.

Question 3 - The current experiences, motivations and challenges for volunteers and volunteer-involving organisations and their recommendations for addressing challenges and improving the volunteering experience.

Within Queensland, the importance of volunteers cannot be overstated. With a small population spread across a large land mass, a volunteer base is the only way to maintain landscape fire service delivery. With the growth of housing in or near the bushland of key population areas, the role of the RFSQ will only grow in the coming years. It is well documented¹⁸ that the RFSQ provides coverage for 93% of Queensland.

The Macro Picture of Volunteering.

To answer question three for the committee, there is a need to review the macro picture of why people volunteer. Volunteering can be broken down into two primary motivations: intrinsic, a goal of personal accomplishment, and extrinsic, recognition and reward.

Volunteering comes in many forms, from donating blood to supporting or protecting a community. An often-cited study, 'The Functional Approach to Volunteerism'¹⁹, highlights six primary motivations that applied to the committee's terms of reference can provide a greater insight into the enhancements needed within the Queensland volunteer experience.

The study defines six primary motivations, which can be further broken down into intrinsic and extrinsic; they are:

1. **Values:** A desire to express altruism and contribute to societal well-being.
2. **Understanding:** Opportunities to learn new skills and gain knowledge.
3. **Social:** Building relationships and belonging to a community.
4. **Career:** Enhancing professional prospects and gaining work experience.
5. **Protective:** Addressing personal issues or enhancing self-esteem.
6. **Enhancement:** Personal growth and development.

These six motivations vary among individuals and can be further influenced by cultural, demographic, and situational factors. Given the geography of Queensland, these influencing factors are essential to understand and reflect that one size will rarely fit all. For example, research²⁰ has shown that a younger demographic often prioritises career development when volunteering. In comparison, an older demographic (the dominance of RFSQ at this stage) is more motivated by social connections and giving to a given community (location or need).

Global Perspectives on Emergency Service Volunteering

Globally, emergency service volunteering reflects both universal and context-specific motivations. For example:

- **Australia:** In Queensland, volunteers with the Rural Fire Service often cite²¹ a deep connection to their land and communities as a primary motivation, particularly during bushfire seasons.
- **United States:** Volunteer fire departments, which constitute 67% of all fire departments, rely on individuals motivated by community service and a sense of duty.²²
- **New Zealand:** The New Zealand Fire and Emergency Service underscores community protection and social responsibility as key drivers for volunteer engagement²³.

- **Canada:** Research by the Canadian Centre for Community Engagement (2019)²⁴ highlights the importance of camaraderie and the opportunity to contribute meaningfully to society.

Why People Volunteer for Emergency Services

Volunteering in emergency services like the Rural Fire Service of Queensland requires a unique combination of courage, commitment, and community spirit. Data shows that motivations specific to this field often include:

1. **Community Protection:** Many individuals are motivated to protect their local communities from harm. This community protection motivation is particularly evident in rural and remote areas where emergency services, such as Queensland, are often volunteer-based.
2. **Sense of Duty:** Research within the United States - FEMA (2020)²⁵ highlights that a strong sense of civic duty and patriotism drives many emergency service volunteers. In Queensland, data shows this is the 'Common Good'²⁶.
3. **Adrenaline and Challenge:** The Rural Fire Service of Queensland provides a physically demanding and higher-risk environment that attracts individuals seeking adventure and personal challenges.
4. **Recognition and Belonging:** The Rural Fire Service of Queensland provides individuals a sense of belonging and recognition within their communities.
5. **Skill Acquisition:** Many volunteers view The Rural Fire Service of Queensland as an opportunity to gain practical skills, such as first aid, leadership, and crisis management, which are transferable to other areas of life and work.

Benefits of Volunteering for Individuals

Volunteering, particularly in high-risk environments like emergency services, offers numerous personal benefits:

1. **Enhanced Well-being:** Studies, including those by the UK's Office for National Statistics (2019), show that volunteering improves mental health, reduces stress, and provides a sense of purpose.
2. **Skill Development:** Volunteers gain valuable skills, including teamwork, leadership, and technical abilities, which can enhance employability and personal growth.
3. **Social Connections:** The camaraderie and shared experiences of emergency service volunteering create strong bonds among participants.
4. **Recognition and Fulfilment:** Volunteers often feel a sense of pride and accomplishment in their contributions, as noted in research by Volunteering Queensland (2022).

Challenges and Barriers to Volunteering within RFSQ

It is the author's observation there are three main barriers to volunteering within RFSQ:

Barrier 1 - Inconsistency and culture. The RFSQ is not immune to internal challenges. The leadership and management of volunteers and supporting staff are complex, and while significant progress has been made since 01 July 24, more work is required to support the volunteer experience. Daily, three inconsistency and culture areas challenge the RFSQ volunteer experience:

- Overreach by RFSQ staff, rewarding volunteers who do little for their community brigade with specialist activities (Remote Area Operations, Arduous Firefighting, Courses, Deployments national and international). When the local level of leadership (the Brigade) does not support an individual's case due to not adhering to organisational values and standards or not committing to the Brigade itself, ignoring this undermines everything about volunteering. This type of overreach is **profoundly demoralising** and extremely common. It encourages poor behaviour by individuals who feel empowered to sidestep their local leadership and disregard their community-focused Brigade in pursuit of their own goals at all costs.
- Failure to sanction the poor behaviour of volunteers is a **significant demoralising** factor. In many cases, the answer is merely to move the person to another brigade, which compounds the problem for another day. The author would observe that more time is spent appeasing poor behaviour in the RFSQ, than affirming good behaviour.
- The RFSQ seems unwilling to mandate standards concerning volunteer training, resulting in a 'free for all' and a less-than-optimal outcome for fire ground safety. For volunteering to advance in RFSQ, the Queensland Government must be willing to impose training, attendance, and behaviour standards to stem the **demoralising impact** on the vast majority of volunteers who commit without a mandate.

Barrier 2 – Passage of information. The author would observe that the delay, filtering or censorship of information on the frontline is a key barrier. The author would also note that most issues are resolved promptly when data and information are received. Placing information in the hands of the frontline volunteer through a digital device will resolve countless matters. From 01 July 24, the open and transparent approach to town halls, surveys and providing continual feedback has been a game changer.

This passage of information requires leadership at all levels; while many have embraced the new transparency of information, the filtering at lower levels of volunteers continues. The RFSQ must continue to transmit directly at the frontline with open and transparent communication and feedback loops. The recent departure of the Acting Chief Officer has seen this style of communication cease, which is profoundly troublesome and underscores the need for contemporary leadership to drive the volunteer experience.

Barrier 3 - A **significant** ongoing and **serious reputational barrier** to the organisation's enthusiasm, retention, trust and growth is the representation of the RFSQ from those external with political, personal and dated views about what the organisation should be. Often founded without data or insights, these views have become an internal narrative holding back the RFSQ and damaging our credibility. The tyranny of the vocal minority sows division²⁷; it is crucial for the RFSQ volunteer experience that the Queensland Government act to moderate this political and sometimes personal agenda.

The author alleges that money is being raised externally in the name of the Rural Fire Service of Queensland, which lacks transparency and accountability. The sums of money are significant, and a cursory investigation should raise serious ethical and moral questions for the Queensland community and the Government. Questions must be asked about the mandate to raise this money, the need for the sums involved, how this money is used and the percentage that has reached the intended recipients. Countless RFSQ staff, brigades, and volunteers have been obstructed regarding the external association's role, function and governance.

The author would observe that any entity (beyond a genuine Rural Fire Brigade defined under the Act²⁸) raising money in the name of the Rural Fire Service of Queensland, with individuals

receiving significant financial compensation from the fundraising, must gain explicit approval from RFSQ and provide full transparency to all volunteers. Numerous complaints have been aired from community members and brigades of 'cold calling' in the name of the Rural Fire Service, occurring after unplanned fires or planned mitigation activities. The cold call is seeking donations in the name of RFSQ. To date, no action has been taken despite repeated requests to RFSQ, which is causing serious harm to our social licence to operate across many communities.

As many of the RFSQ costs are now covered by central funding through government consolidated revenue, the opaque nature of external fundraising (this is not referring to brigade-level fundraising) should be reviewed by the Queensland Government and Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission²⁹.

The representation of an external organisation as the 'Rural Fire Service' must be reviewed. The author does not suggest that such an organisation should not exist; it must do so on the highest basis of fiduciary standards. Such an organisation gains its mandate for an association under a subscription model to ensure the legitimacy of representation from the individual. Despite claims that an independent election occurs for such an association, this process is shrouded in mystery to suit the organisational needs and outcomes, with many of those in governance roles also questioning (*hearsay*) the legitimacy. The author would allege that the current approach to external representation is **profoundly counterproductive** to community outcomes, morale and the volunteer experience.

Lastly, the author is concerned that personal data (in past years, pre-01 Jul 2024) has been provided externally from RFSQ. The Office of the Information Commissioner should review such a matter³⁰ as a breach of the Information Privacy Act 2009³¹, as RFSQ members provided no consent, again an action (if proven) that merely serves to undervalue volunteers.

Recommendation 5 – Engage, fund and empower Volunteering Queensland to work with an academic partner to conduct a long-term study into Queensland RFSQ volunteering, including detailed contemporary research into Emergency Management Volunteering similar to that of the NSW Government³².

Recommendation 6 - Engage, fund and empower the Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC³³ research team to work with RFSQ to uplift Emergency Management Non-Technical Skills as part of **all** RFSQ training.

Recommendation 7 – Enforce the organisational values and standards at all levels of volunteering, emphasising empowering and directly engaging with brigade-level leadership on all matters relating to individuals.

Recommendation 8 – Adopt an off-the-shelf application, already available to the service, at no cost to communicate directly with frontline volunteers about non-emergency response activities.

Recommendation 9 – Urgently review external advocacy and external fundraising connected with the RFSQ to focus on transparency of finance and governance. This should include referrals to the Queensland Government, the Office of Fair Trading, the Office of the Information Commissioner, and the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission.

Question 4 - The unique challenges experienced by people from diverse backgrounds, genders, age groups, abilities and locations, and opportunities to improve volunteering participation, accessibility and experience for these groups.

The author would observe that the centralisation of significant amounts of activity for the RFSQ is counterproductive. Such an approach compounds the 'bush v city approach', which does little to support the core 'rural' nature of RFSQ. The RFSQ Ways of Working and Organisational Structure has started to address this, but more decisive action is required to enable the volunteer experience. The immediate focus should be a dedicated Rural Fire Service Training Academy and Centre of Excellence that will directly support an improved volunteer experience.

Recommendation 10 – That a long-term plan for the disbursement of RFSQ functions and training be expedited as follows:

- Leadership and governance – South East Queensland, co-located with Queensland Fire and Rescue.
- Training, innovation and assets – Located in a rural location with proximity to transport and South East Queensland.
- Administration – Dispersed across rural areas of Queensland.

Question 5 - The extent, effectiveness and efficiency of current government support at all levels for the volunteering sector in Queensland and sustainable opportunities for improvement.

Effectiveness

For the Rural Fire Service of Queensland, given the size of the voluntary workforce and the small budget, RFSQ is an incredible value for the State of Queensland and its taxpayers. The recent changes are an essential step forward; while more work is needed, the Government has created a platform to improve the organisation's maturity. While it would be easy to suggest that increased funding is the answer, it would also be naïve of the author to believe that this would occur given the poor financial State of the Queensland accounts.

The author would suggest that uniformed volunteer firefighters are perceived as incompetent by some public sector employees (including other uniformed services) due to the barriers created by unique circumstances in Queensland, as outlined in this submission. The effectiveness and efficiency of RFSQ is directly connected to its use. If the organisation were empowered and treated with equity of purpose, it would achieve far more public safety outcomes for the State of Queensland with no more investment.

Organisational Structure

The recent organisational structure has been welcomed, but while still finding its way, it has created much-needed clarity and realignment. Additionally, the Rural Fire Service Advisory Committee (RFSAC) that has been formed is now the **rightful peak body** for advising the organisations' leadership. The merit-selected volunteers, going above and beyond their daily volunteer commitments, are a shining example of the passion and progress the organisation has made post 01 July 24.

The author would observe that further steps could be taken to advance volunteer empowerment. Similar to other Rural Fire Service jurisdictions, elevation beyond the brigade level should be a pathway for volunteers, such as a posting away from their home Brigade for a set period. Some of

our most senior and respected firefighters who do not wish to be paid staff have much to offer but flounder when there are no growth opportunities.

Providing operational roles through a merit selection process of supported, funded, and empowered senior operational volunteer roles will drastically move the organisation's culture forward. While paid staff are vital, and the author is not undervaluing their contribution, volunteers have the capacity and capability to be part of the broader solution to many of the matters highlighted in this submission.

Supporting Volunteers

While valued and appreciated to date, the mental health support offered to volunteers urgently needs transformation. Despite documented feedback, the services and processes delivered to volunteers seeking help are less than ideal. The lack of contemporary approaches, given the diverse base of volunteers and the growing exposure to (willing) risks, detracts from the volunteer experience. As such, the number of those who wish to access a service but do not proceed is, the author would suggest, significant.

Recommendation 11 – Empower RFSQ to that of other Australian jurisdictions, with equivalent status and responsibilities.

Recommendation 12 - Seek to augment the current organisational structure, allowing merit-selected volunteers to rise into roles within the chain of command in operational functions such as specialist capabilities leadership, for example: First Officer of the individual specialist capabilities provide by RFSQ, Inspector and Superintendent level positions across a range of operational and non-operational areas, most importantly, on-duty roles in supporting brigades with Firecalls.

Recommendation 13 – Undertake a full review of mental health support services offered and delivered to volunteers.

Question 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.

RFSQ volunteers should be given priority to volunteer activities during the games with limited barriers, given the extensive approvals and training they have already undergone. Such a fast-track approach offers 'approved volunteers' and demonstrates the value of volunteering for RFSQ.

The showcase of the Brisbane 2032 games in LA at the closing ceremony and the event itself (2032) are opportunities to put committed RFSQ volunteers in the global spotlight.

Question 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;

RFSQ provides significant capabilities to support natural disasters (Prevention, Preparedness, Response, and Recovery). The author highlights that volunteers should be more integrated into the incident management roles, when appropriate, to support such events (Level 2 & 3 Incident Controllers and functional leads). This approach would augment Queensland's limited capacity and capability of qualified and experienced people.

Recommendation 14 – Suitably qualified, experienced and approved (through merit selection) RFSQ Volunteers at Level 2 and 3 Incident Controller and Australasian Inter-service Incident Management System (AIIMS) functional leads should form part of a 'ready reserve' that can be

mobilised under (if required) a paid arrangement to support the ever-increasing natural disasters of Queensland and interstate.

Question 8 - First Nations peoples volunteering, including in remote and discrete communities, and the role of First Nations volunteering in Closing the Gap.

The author understands that RFSQ has been focused on supporting First Nations volunteering. Current programs available around First Nation land use practices have only enriched the RFSQ.

Question 9 - Any other relevant matters, including academic and other diverse sources, and any relevant reports and reviews at the national level and across other states and territories.

The author believes all information has been presented in the eight questions proceeding this one.

References

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