

Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland

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Queensland Fire Department Submission

to the Local Government, Small Business and
Customer Service Committee Inquiry into
Volunteering in Queensland

February 2024

Respect

Integrity

Courage

Loyalty

Trust



On 11 December 2024, the Legislative Assembly agreed to a motion that the Local Government, Small Business and Customer Service Committee (committee) inquire into and report on volunteering in Queensland.

As one of the State's largest frontline public safety agencies and one of the largest volunteer organisations in Queensland, the Queensland Fire Department (QFD or the Department) has a significant interest in the Inquiry. QFD has particular interest in Item 7 of the Terms of Reference, which calls upon the Committee to consider 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.

The Department acknowledges the significant value of all of its volunteer cohorts in delivering critical emergency services to Queensland communities. It should be noted that the services provided by QFD volunteers are key elements of the Department's service delivery to the community and are not ancillary to the roles of the paid workforce.

It is important to note that solutions and options for enhancing emergency volunteering into the future consider more than just increasing the number of volunteers, but ensuring there are resources and supports in place to recruit and maintain, skilled, equipped and committed volunteers.

Points 1, 3, 4, 5 and 8 from the Terms of Reference will also be touched on within this submission in relation to the functions of the Department.

INTRODUCTION

QFD was formally established on 1 July 2024 comprising Queensland Fire and Rescue (QFR), Rural Fire Service Queensland (RFSQ), State Operations, Strategy and Corporate Services and the Office of the Chief Fire Officer to deliver fire prevention, preparedness, response and emergency services to Queensland communities. The Department also plays a pivotal role in supporting Queensland communities to prevent, prepare for, respond to, and recover from, fire and a range of disaster and emergency incidents.

As one of the most disaster-prone states in Australia, Queensland communities rely on volunteers to deliver frontline operations and support before, during and after an emergency. Volunteers are critical to the successful delivery of frontline services contributing to the strength of QFD and are essential in building community capacity and enhancing community resilience.

Volunteers also contribute greatly to social and community cohesion and outcomes for rural and regional communities. Volunteering within the emergency services gives community members an opportunity to serve their local communities in rewarding and fulfilling roles as well as providing professional development, training, and expertise that may benefit them within their own chosen careers. Volunteering with the emergency services sector can also be challenging given the unique nature of disaster events. Safety and well-being are particularly significant for emergency services volunteers given some of the high-risk activities that are undertaken, and is a key focus of the Department.

The Department's biggest cohort of volunteers is within RFSQ which has approximately 27,350 volunteer members as at 30 June 2024. RFSQ is a community-based, volunteer emergency service and the lead service for the control and prevention of bush and grass fires in Queensland. RFSQ operates in rural, semi-rural and urban fringe areas, providing bush and grass fire prevention, mitigation and response capabilities, community engagement services, assistance during other emergencies and disasters, and, in some instances, road crash rescue.

Approximately 1,400 rural fire brigades operate across Queensland. The largest proportion of brigades are primary producer brigades which account for almost 60 percent of all brigades, with other brigade types including rural, zone, village and special brigades.

A rural brigade area contains a significant number of rural properties and may contain small rural residential developments. The brigade may have or share an appliance and may have a fire station or shed. In addition to funding from the State, brigades may also receive funding from local government and obtain grants from a variety of sources.

In addition to responding to fires in their local and surrounding areas, in support of other brigades and emergency services, volunteer brigades undertake a range of planning and preparation activities to ensure communities are well prepared for the bushfire season. This includes community education and hazard reduction and mitigation activities to reduce the risk of fire to people and property. Volunteer Community Educators also play a key role in their local community promoting and delivering safety and bushfire preparedness education packages.

A primary producer brigade may operate where the land in that area is used for primary production and the area does not contain a settlement, village, or any rural residential areas. Primary producer brigade members are generally owner occupiers of properties within the brigade area. The brigade has no appliances, no station, does not typically receive local government funding and relies mainly on property-based equipment for firefighting purposes.

The Permit to Light Fire system, which ensures the controlled use of fire across the state (refer to section 145c of *Fire Services Act 1990* (FS Act)), is overseen by RFSQ staff, but is largely implemented by volunteer fire wardens.

Volunteer brigades are often called upon to assist other emergency service agencies during disasters such as floods and storms and in the recovery phase undertaking wash-outs, clean-ups and chainsaw operations. Volunteers may also be deployed to assist other states, territories and internationally during bushfires.

The average age of an RFSQ volunteer is 54 years. Only 1.5 percent of RFSQ's 27,350 volunteers are aged 16 to 19 years, with a further 3.5 percent of RFSQ volunteers aged 20 to 24 years, as at 30 June 2024. Alongside community recruitment efforts, RFSQ partners with the PCYC Emergency Services Cadets initiative, which provides a pipeline for younger recruits.

RFSQ volunteers are supported by a framework of paid staff who provide services through regional, district and area offices throughout the state. There are approximately 229 paid Rural Fire Officer positions as at 23 February 2025, equating to approximately 119 RFSQ volunteers for every paid Rural Fire Officer¹. Volunteer members receive training aligned to their role, with further optional training available for those volunteers who choose to access it. Volunteers are also provided with personal protective equipment (PPE) and communication technologies to support them in undertaking their role.

While RFSQ volunteers are unpaid, all expenses related to deployment travel, meals and accommodation are either pre-paid or reimbursed by RFSQ. This includes an incidental allowance for ancillary items. Volunteers individually manage leave agreements with their employers.

Outside of RFSQ, QFD also has a network of other volunteers who provide critical services related to the disaster and emergency sector. This includes Research and Scientific Branch Volunteer Scientific Officer network, AUS-1 Disaster Assistance Response Team, Auxiliary Support Officers and Peer Support Officers (refer to Appendix 1 for further detail on the functions of these QFD volunteers). While the focus of this submission is on RFSQ volunteering, given the size of that cohort, certain aspects may also apply to other QFD volunteers.

QFD Reform

The structure of RFSQ has recently undergone significant change to meet the needs of a modern rural fire service. These changes arose out of the *2021 KPMG Independent Review of the former*

¹ NB: These figures do not include a small number of paid RFSQ Senior Executives nor Strategy and Corporate Services paid staff who may perform functions that support volunteers.

*Queensland Fire and Emergency Services*² (QFES) - which preceded the establishment of a dedicated QFD. The Emergency Services Reforms that followed the Independent Review involved significant amendments to the legislation governing the fire services in 2024 and came with a focus on supporting frontline volunteers and their communities. The aim of the restructure of RFSQ has been to streamline processes and improve frontline service delivery by allocating resources where they are needed most, and supporting volunteer firefighters and fire wardens in the local communities they protect.

The Independent Review of QFES and its associated volunteer services was to ensure the long-term sustainability of service delivery and outcomes for the Queensland community and its safety. The review specifically considered a number of different options for the design of the future fire and emergency services. The review identified that a model involving the fire, rescue and emergency related functions of Fire and Rescue Service (FRS) and RFS (including volunteer brigades and fire wardens) remaining within a single organisation, would be the strongest long-term model for effective service delivery.

Legislative amendments to the FS Act, which commenced on 1 July 2024, also introduced changes to the Act to acknowledge the contribution of volunteers in supporting communities and the fire services, and importantly strengthening protections for volunteers from liability. These latter changes are in recognition of the increasingly complex legal environment in which volunteers in RFSQ operate and the need for government to support volunteers to deliver services safely.

Funding and Resources

The RFSQ budget for 2024-25 is \$121.80 million, comprising \$80.70 million operating budget and \$41.10 million capital budget, a total increase of more than \$20 million since 2023-24. The 2024-25 QFD fleet budget includes \$19.5 million for replacement and new rural fire appliances.

RFSQ funding is primarily provided from the Emergency Management Levy. Thirty-six local governments also collect a Rural Fire Levy which is distributed directly to rural fire brigades (RFBs) in their area. The RFSQ also receives support through general community donations.

As part of the reform of Emergency Services, QFD received an uplift in funding to directly support its volunteers. This funding uplift included an additional 114 positions committed for training, management and roles to directly support volunteers across Queensland.

Firefighting entities in jurisdictions across Australia and internationally are grappling with service delivery and operating models that must consider climate change and emerging workforce trends, among other factors including management of the rural/urban interface for bushfire and structural fires. RFSQ and QFR are very aware of this and are focused on ensuring an effective and efficient service delivery model based on seamless interoperability and complementary capabilities.

The Australian Productivity Commission's Report on Government Services (RoGS)³ provides some useful data to make comparisons across jurisdictions in terms of paid and unpaid workforces in firefighting and proportional budgets by rates per population. Geographic considerations for a state as widespread as Queensland, with changing typology of bushfires, are an important factor also when considering future workforce needs.

The training, uniforms, PPE, communications, fleet and other support requirements for volunteers are costly and currently corporate support for the Department is based on paid staff ratios. Any adjustments to the model of volunteering for RFSQ would have potential flow on effects in terms of future resourcing.

² <https://www.fire.qld.gov.au/sites/default/files/2022-10/Independent-Review-of-QFES.pdf>

³ Available at www.pc.gov.au/ongoing/report-on-government-services/2025/data-downloads

CHALLENGES AND QFD INITIATIVES

There are further unique challenges associated with maintaining a dedicated and consistent volunteering emergency services sector which are detailed below, along with initiatives that the QFD is implementing in response.

Recruitment and retention

The 2025 RoGS data indicates that between 2018-19 and 2023-24 volunteer firefighters and support staff numbers have fallen from 33,625 to 27,382, equivalent to a reduction from 666 volunteers per 100,000 population to 495 volunteers per 100,000 population. Due to a revised counting methodology, Queensland's firefighter volunteer data prior to 2018-19 is not comparable. It should however be noted, there has been an approximate 3 percent increase in volunteers from 2022-23 to 2023-24⁴.

Regional and remote areas are disproportionately affected with a decline in the number of registered and available volunteers, which is not unique to the RFSQ. Similar challenges exist when it comes to recruiting paid support staff in such locations, compounding the downturn in some areas that need a supported volunteer workforce the most.

The availability of volunteers on any given day, and their active participation fluctuates and is dependent on many individual factors. Similarly, volunteers may not be exclusively dedicated to any one volunteer organisation. For example, RFSQ volunteer members may also volunteer for the State Emergency Service or for other organisations particularly in rural and remote communities. Volunteers themselves can also be impacted by disaster events. As such, the total number of volunteers may overstate Queensland's emergency response volunteer capacity to respond to disaster events.

Like other emergency services and volunteer agencies across Australia, QFD faces pressures regarding volunteer recruitment and retention. The ability to maintain reliance on a volunteer workforce is becoming more difficult. Adapting to a changing climate requires the fire and emergency services sector to be prepared for more frequent and severe weather-related incidents and the extension and overlapping of severe weather and bushfire seasons - which may lead to a reduced ability for jurisdictions to share resources.

Factors affecting the volunteer sector include the compounding effects of Australia's ageing population, the ongoing impacts of COVID-19, and housing and cost of living pressures. Demographic shifts, retirements, and changing skill requirements will impact recruitment, training and retention, and agencies may face difficulties in maintaining viable volunteer workforces. Sociodemographic changes including work-family lifestyle shifts, rural population changes and preference for flexible volunteer participation are contributing to these challenges. The cost of specialised PPE is also a factor.

Volunteering models in the emergency management sector still rely heavily on the traditional style of volunteering, requiring a more significant, long-term commitment. There are limitations to the extent to which emergency management agencies can engage shorter-term or more casual "spontaneous" volunteers, given the need for skilled and highly trained volunteers that are able to respond to call outs on very short notice in high-risk environments. Spontaneous volunteers often do not have relevant training, skills, or experience and therefore, utilising a volunteering model that engages a high proportion of unskilled or untrained spontaneous volunteers in the emergency management sector presents risks. The traditional model of volunteering attracts individuals that provide a long-term commitment to the organisation and are often devoted to community service and motivated by altruistic values.

Volunteers also need the support of their employer to be effective in their role. Employers may be unable to release staff to attend to their volunteer duties or employers may experience difficulties

⁴ <https://www.pc.gov.au/ongoing/report-on-government-services/2025/emergency-management/rogs-2025-partd-overview-and-sections.pdf>

or financial hardship when staff are required to be released to attend training and extended deployments. This is particularly the case for those volunteers that are in senior management roles within their employer organisations, where it is often difficult for them to respond to emergencies and attend face-to-face training during work hours. Note that this can also be an issue for the Department's highly qualified scientific volunteers. It should also be recognised that primary producers and other small business owners incur impacts to their livelihoods when investing in volunteering.

QFD Initiatives for Recruitment and Retention

The Department does offer supportive resources to promote awareness and provide tools to volunteers to discuss arrangements with their paid employers. Policy, legislative and financial options to further incentivise (through financial assistance or other supports) and encourage volunteering in the disaster sector are key issues that are being canvassed internationally and within Australia.

QFD aims to attract and retain a mobile, skilled, flexible, and diverse workforce to meet its strategic objectives and fulfil operational requirements. RFSQ is leading initiatives to boost volunteer recruitment and increase volunteer retention through enhanced training and development, flexible practices, recognition and member engagement and consultation. The Department is considering a new Framework that supports volunteering, ensuring alignment with volunteer services and implementation of industry best practice. Place based and service specific volunteer recruitment strategies and campaigns are conducted by QFD to ensure that the services can meet the identified community risks.

Volunteer recruitment is also supported by:

- A dedicated page on the QFD website that supports recruitment and printed marketing materials to help raise awareness of volunteer roles in local communities.
- A range of recruitment materials which includes recognition of the commitment made by employers who support volunteers.
- Targeted recruitment campaigns in regional areas designed to attract members with specific skills and interests.
- Social media, which is increasingly being used as a platform for advertising volunteer roles and is a useful tool for localised recruitment processes.

The volunteer recruitment and onboarding process requires candidates to meet several prerequisites, including a minimum age, criminal history check (CHC) and Working with Children check and provision of a Blue Card. The Department is also looking to establish a digital application process for prospective volunteers which will increase efficiency in processing memberships and enhance information security, with the aim of attracting more volunteers.

As part of the RFSQ reform and uplift, a new RFSQ Pathways Team has been established to provide end-to-end support for the recruitment of staff and volunteers. Progress has already been made in reducing CHC and Blue Card process timeframes, but further work is being done to find efficiencies for processes surrounding medical assessments and delegations related to volunteer application processes.

RFSQ Volunteer to Career has also been launched with targeted resources supporting a pathway for volunteers seeking employment with RFSQ including writing an application, highlighting transferable skills and providing ongoing support via online materials.

A volunteer recruitment and retention framework is also being developed through a phased approach during 2025 with a focus on improving the application and onboarding experience and recognising the valuable work that volunteers continue to do right around the State.

The Department has undertaken significant work and is continuing to improve the accuracy of its RFSQ volunteer data. While there is always a local impact where a reduction in volunteer numbers is experienced, there has been no overall impact on rural fire brigade capability. Brigade capability is being strengthened through additional training, equipment and appliances as highlighted later in this submission. Membership recruitment and retention trends remain positive over the short-term and RFSQ staff continue to work closely with brigades to monitor volunteer membership support needs and impacts on service delivery from membership fluctuations. This enables support and assistance to be provided at the local level.

Training and certification

Volunteers often require extensive training and certification to exercise their powers appropriately and perform their roles effectively. Ensuring volunteers receive adequate training and stay up-to-date with evolving skills and knowledge can be a significant pressure. Training delivery is heavily reliant on volunteer trainers and their availability. Leadership development within localised contexts also provides challenges. Availability for specialist training and disaster response and deployment are key considerations for individuals who balance their paid employment with volunteering hours.

There are also different training and certification standards required across jurisdictions for many of the volunteer roles within the emergency management sector. In addition, there are differences in protocols, communication systems, and priorities across jurisdictions and some roles also require specific equipment which is not interoperable across jurisdictions.

QFD Initiatives for Training and Certification

RFSQ provides a range of specialist training. Training is based on locally identified needs and promotes the ethos of volunteers training volunteers, ensuring a clear recognition of their life skills and experiences. At the brigade level, there are numerous opportunities for volunteers to undertake essential training in various areas, particularly where there is an identified risk. This includes firefighting, first aid and advanced resuscitation, operational driving, rural fire appliance awareness, mastering pump operation activities such as relay pumping, managing hoses at incidents and equipment maintenance and the use of hand tools. Additionally, volunteers can focus on skills maintenance and practical firefighting skills through scenario-based exercises, basic bushfire awareness, and mapping and navigation training.

Volunteers can further hone their skills with radio communications training, working in a team environment, dealing with difficult situations and leading community education and engagement initiatives. The Rural Fire Development Framework (RFDF) has been established to support and enhance skills of RFSQ volunteer members and staff. It outlines strategies and initiatives aimed at improving rural fire management and volunteer safety, including aspects such as prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery. The framework is also using contemporary training methods (e.g. online/virtual) tailored to meet the needs of volunteers' busy lives, making the training more accessible to more volunteers. All components of the framework have been developed and implementation is well underway across the RFSQ regions. This comprehensive training ensures that volunteers are well-prepared and equipped to handle diverse firefighting situations safely and effectively.

QFD has been addressing concerns raised by volunteer members that training opportunities were inadequate and minimum training requirements unclear, and has recruited additional staff dedicated to training and development. A State Training Calendar has been launched where members can see where courses are being held across the State and apply electronically. A draft minimum training policy is being finalised which recognises both formal and informal qualifications within the RFDF. A new Crew Leader training course was also released in 2024.

QFD initiatives to move to electronic and digital approaches also need to take into consideration access, connectivity and digital literacy of volunteers.

Legal and Regulatory Compliance

Volunteer powers and responsibilities

Compliance with various laws, regulations and standards related to emergency services and volunteer organisations can be complex. Training and skills development and knowledge of processes, policies, procedures and documentation requirements provide an essential foundation to ensure all of our workforce, including volunteers, meet their workplace obligations. While some of these compliance requirements can be perceived as barriers to volunteering, balancing volunteers' expectations with legislative obligations and workplace standards that are necessary to protect employers, volunteers and vulnerable members of communities is critical. QFD is conscious of trying to avoid additional burdens on volunteers, without undermining the protections and frameworks that are in place.

This is particularly relevant in light of the powers that can be exercised by volunteers under the FS Act. For example, in certain circumstances Rural Fire Brigade members and Fire Wardens can exercise authorised fire officer powers. These powers are significant, covering matters such as the power to enter premises in certain circumstances, close access to a road, cause the disconnection of a gas, electricity or other power supply or destroy or damage certain property.

QFD Working with Children requirements

QFD staff and volunteers, who undertake regulated employment, are required to hold a current blue card pursuant to the *Working with Children (Risk Management and Screening) Act 2000* (the WWC Act). This legislation was established to promote and protect the rights, interests and wellbeing of children and young people in Queensland.

Section 139 of the FS Act prescribes the functions of RFBs as "firefighting and fire prevention and other functions as the QFD Commissioner may direct". RFBs are involved in many community-based activities such as education programs; incident management; and disaster response and preparation. These functions performed by brigade members fall within the WWC Act definition of 'regulated employment'. Compliance with the blue card screening process is part of QFD's commitment to community safety and an assurance to parents and guardians that the Department takes the protection of children seriously.

QFD has a dedicated Blue Card Team to assist and support QFD staff and volunteers in adhering to the mandates of the WWC Act, which is administered by the Department of Justice. To facilitate compliance, QFD has initiated a set of measures aimed at offering specialised assistance to regional and rural volunteers, helping to streamline the Blue Card application and renewal processes so that the administrative processes required to obtain a Blue Card are as smooth as possible for volunteers.

The Department is aware that concerns have been raised that implementation of the blue card requirements caused a subsequent drop in RFSQ membership. While reductions in membership were recorded at the time of implementation, this largely reflected the outcome of data refreshing and record cleansing activities.

Mental health and Wellbeing

Exposure to traumatic incidents and prolonged stress can take a toll on the mental health and wellbeing of all first responders including volunteers. Providing support and resources for mental health and well-being is essential but can be challenging. QFD has invested heavily in initiatives to support its workforce. QFD's Fire and Emergency Services Support Network (FESSN) is dedicated to promoting and supporting positive mental health and well-being for staff and volunteers. FESSN provides access to a team of highly qualified psychologists and counsellors, as well as trained Peer Support Officers (volunteers), ensuring confidential and professional support. Counselling

services are also available to immediate family members. Services include 24-hour access to the Counselling Callback Service, offering support before, during, and after critical incidents, activations, and deployments as well as leadership advice and training and critical incident response and management.

Additional protections for volunteers

Amendments made through the *Disaster Management and Other Legislation Amendment Act 2024* enhanced protections afforded to volunteers and maximised their safety when performing functions on behalf of Queensland communities. RFSQ volunteers now attract civil liability protections under the *Public Sector Act 2022* and the *Civil Liability Act 2003* for a range of actions when representing the state or undertaking community work when they are performing those actions in good faith. These amendments bring the protections for rural fire brigades and their volunteers into line with other volunteer organisations and all other QFD staff.

The 2024 legislative amendments also go further by bringing volunteer members of rural fire brigades within the definition of 'public officer' in the *Criminal Code Act 1899* (Criminal Code) such that an assault on a brigade volunteer will attract a maximum of seven years imprisonment. These amendments were aimed at protecting volunteers and officers when performing the functions conferred on them. As part of these legislative changes, RFBs and volunteers were brought within the membership of RFSQ which resolved issues regarding the legal status of brigades. These changes also mitigated issues relating to the legal exposure of individual volunteer officer holders who previously may have acted on behalf of, or taken on the legal personality of, their brigade.

Presumptive legislation

Following a 2023 Review of the Operation of the Queensland Workers' Compensation Scheme, a further 11 cancers were added to the list of deemed diseases (bringing the total to 23) that are presumed to be work related as long as a qualifying period of active service is met, for both paid and volunteer firefighters. The legislative amendments came into force in August 2024 and provide greater certainty of entitlement to compensation. This increase in the number of deemed diseases for Queensland firefighters including volunteers make the compensation scheme among the most expansive of any Australian jurisdiction.

Resources and technology

As technology advances, volunteer organisations must adapt to new tools and systems for communication, data management, and emergency response. Advancements in technology including the use of drones, robotics and artificial intelligence, will continue to shape emergency response operations. The adoption of digital tools can enhance communication, coordination and data analysis for fire and emergency services, leading to more efficient and effective responses. Fire services are likely to benefit from improved situational awareness, faster response times, enhanced and safer firefighting capabilities and decision-making through technology enhancements. Keeping up with these changes can be a pressure point and can be costly in terms of implementing contemporary new systems and associated training and communication requirements.

RFSQ has undertaken a number of initiatives to increase field mobility and deployment systems for volunteers. These include the support of tablets for use in the field and the Frontline Activation Support Tool (FAST) to improve information access on the fireground and also enhance operational response and mobilisation notifications.

In 2025, the QFD will be moving volunteers and staff into a single Fire information technology domain which will significantly increase information access and communications to brigades and volunteer members and open up greater opportunity for self-service for volunteers to QFD and RFSQ systems.

Listening to our volunteers

During the reform period in 2024, QFD staff and volunteers were kept updated via regular town halls and communications opportunities, including through a dedicated intranet page, frequently asked questions and informative videos. The QFD remains dedicated to increasing its flexibility and being more responsive to the needs and constraints of volunteer members availability and their valuable time.

Dedicated RFSQ Volunteer Online Forums were and are increasingly held outside of business hours and broadcast to ensure maximum availability of volunteers. Regional roadshow sessions also keep volunteers up-to-date with QFD initiatives.

RFSQ conducts volunteer member engagement through a number of different methods. In 2024, two dedicated RFSQ surveys were conducted to gauge member sentiments, showing some positive results regarding communication and the future direction of RFSQ. The Chief Officer RFSQ regularly issues updates and written communication as well as area office staff providing face-to-face visits alongside other senior executives where volunteers can directly engage with leadership.

In addition, the Queensland Government annually administers the Working for Queensland Survey (WfQ) which enables employees to have their say in creating better workplaces. Alongside the WfQ, Queensland Fire Department designs, builds and administers the Volunteering for Queensland Survey to better understand the day-to-day experience of its volunteer workforce and provide an evidence base to support culture change and program development in a meaningful and targeted manner.

Through an in-principle agreement with the Queensland Police Service, QFD's Workforce Experience Unit (WEU) will administer the 2025 VfQ survey for both agencies' emergency service volunteers in March-April 2025. The survey results will be publicly reported and provide important data to identify strengths and areas of improvement and help guide the design and delivery of tailored interventions and programs to enhance the work environment.

As part of the 2024 legislative reforms, a Rural Fire Service Advisory Committee was established to provide advice to the RFSQ Chief Officer on matters relevant to rural fire brigades and members, including (but not limited to) the administration and management of RFBs. The formalisation of consultation through the Committee ensures that the views of RFSQ volunteers are taken into consideration in decision-making of the Chief Officer RFSQ.

The Committee is comprised of 14 representatives from the RFSQ including five staff (including a First Nations representative) and nine volunteer members drawn from each of the new Districts established across the State (including one Rural Fire Brigades Association Queensland representative). This approach will be widened during 2025 to include the establishment of Region/District Advisory Groups – providing a wider and locally more contextual input directly from volunteers to inform RFSQ decisions.

First Nations volunteering

Queensland is home to the nation's second-largest Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population representing 4.6 percent of the total resident population⁵.

According to the 2021 census data, 10.7 percent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander persons in Queensland reported spending time doing voluntary work.

QFD does not currently capture data on how many RFSQ volunteers self-identify as First Nations, therefore the Department is unable to quantify the extent of First Nations volunteering engagement within RFSQ specifically. The Department is in the process of revising its onboarding and application process to capture this information should applicants wish to self-identify.

⁵ <https://www.qld.gov.au/knowyourcommunity>

Volunteering activity can provide a pathway to paid employment and has a role to play in progressing employment and economic inclusion⁶. QFD is aware that several identified Bushfire Mitigation Officer (First Nations) positions have been filled by former RFSQ First Nations volunteers. These Bushfire Mitigation Officer (First Nations) positions are part of the paid workforce and support bushfire mitigation and cultural burning in consultation with traditional owners. Research has shown that First Nations people are more likely to volunteer whilst employed, which may be attributed to cultural values, practices and concepts of reciprocity and a focus on making it easier for the next generation⁷.

QFD is considering how service delivery models for rural fire service brigades could encompass enhanced ways of working with Traditional Owners and First Nations communities as well as recruiting more First Nations people to RFSQ. This includes potential partnerships with First Nations communities that may be wanting to establish their own brigades; support mitigation efforts or build fire capability through joint training or other opportunities.

There are unique barriers for volunteering for some First Nations communities including access to accepted identification (e.g. ID card, proof of age) and complexities in the CHC and blue card processes.

QFD is uniquely positioned in its role in protecting human life, infrastructure, the environment and cultural assets from fire that aligns with aspects of First Nations culture and perspectives on protecting Country. Greater recognition of cultural practices such as cultural burning may create stronger volunteer engagement as pathways to business development and/or employment which may help to close the gap in regard to employment targets and economic inclusion.

CONCLUSION

Initiatives that help to address barriers to volunteering within the disaster sector are welcomed and should be explored to ensure that critical services continue to be delivered to Queensland communities. The Department looks forward to the outcomes of this Inquiry to further understand the barriers and potential solutions and opportunities for strengthening the emergency volunteering sector.

⁶ [april-2021-submission-to-the-pathways-and-participation-opportunities-for-indigenous-australians-in-employment-and-business-inquiry.pdf](#)

⁷ [Barriers-to-Volunteering_First-Nations-People-1.pdf](#)

APPENDIX 1

Rural Fire Service Queensland and other Queensland Fire Department volunteers

The QFD is supported by approximately 27,650 dedicated volunteers, as at June 2024, across the following areas.

QFD volunteers	
Rural Fire Service Queensland (RFSQ)	No. of Volunteers: Approximately 27,350 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Volunteer rural fire brigades provide bushfire management services, external structural firefighting and road crash rescue for rural and semi-rural communities and some urban fringe areas across the state. The services provided by RFSQ staff and volunteers include disaster management response and recovery. In addition to responding to fires in their local area and surrounding areas in support of other brigades and emergency services, volunteer brigades undertake a range of planning, preparation and response and recovery activities to ensure communities are well prepared for the bushfire season. Volunteer members are supported with training, personal protective equipment, and communication technologies. They operate and manage rural fire stations, firefighting appliances and equipment that are provided to service their community and to respond to fires both locally and to adjoining areas as required. Volunteer brigades are often called upon to assist other emergency service agencies during disasters such as floods and storms including by undertaking pump-outs, clean-ups, chainsaw operations and community engagement. Volunteers may also be deployed to assist other states and territories during fire disasters.
Research and Scientific Branch, Volunteer Scientific Officers (VSOs)	No. of Volunteers: 52 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The QFD Scientific Branch consists of a core of eight permanent staff, along with a network of regional volunteers who respond to fires and hazardous materials incidents across Queensland. VSOs come from private industry, local government and tertiary institutions across Queensland. The VSO network is a critical component of the branch's expert operational response and advice service. The network includes chemists and chemical engineers who provide prompt, at-the-scene responses to emergency incidents involving chemical hazards. The branch contributes to the safe resolution of approximately 800 incidents per year with up to 10 per cent of these requiring the activation of regional volunteers. Intensive, targeted scientific training programs are provided to all scientific staff and volunteers. Each year, a compulsory skills maintenance training program is offered to volunteers on several occasions in Brisbane and regional centres.
AUS-1 Disaster Assistance	No. of Volunteers: 21 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> QFD maintains AUS-1 DART which includes the Queensland Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) Team. This is a multi-jurisdictional, multi-disciplinary

Response Team (AUS-1 DART)	<p>USAR team made up of full-time and volunteer members, including firefighters, paramedics, hazardous materials specialists and communications operators and the volunteer network, who respond to natural and human-induced disasters across Queensland, Australia and internationally.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The volunteer network within this team is a critical component comprising doctors, engineers, and canine handlers. These specialists come from private industry, local governments and tertiary institutions across Queensland. AUS-1 DART is classified by the International Search and Rescue Advisory Group under the oversight of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance and is one of two in Australia. AUS-1 DART is available for immediate deployment to a range of disaster events including earthquakes, tsunamis, cyclones, landslides, severe weather and storms, flood assistance, and hazardous materials incidents. A range of training and exercising is undertaken each year for USAR functions including DART Workshops, Asia Pacific Earthquake Response Exercise and a USAR Course.
Auxiliary Support Officers (ASOs)	<p>No. of Volunteers: 32</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ASOs are volunteers who provide non-operational support to the auxiliary firefighting workforce of Queensland Fire and Rescue by assisting with a range of duties including community education and messaging activities, maintenance and repair of station facilities, training activities, and administration and recordkeeping.
Peer Support Officers (PSOs)	<p>No. of Volunteers: 177 (includes paid staff and volunteers)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Peer Support Program consists of PSOs from various roles, ranks and positions across the Department. PSOs are selected and trained to support colleagues who may be experiencing work or personal difficulties. By virtue of a common working environment and shared experiences, PSOs are equipped to provide early intervention, social support, understanding, practical assistance and links to professional services if necessary. PSOs are involved in supporting members following exposure to critical incidents, as well as providing informal individual support and delivering education sessions to promote mental health and wellbeing.