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SAFECOM – SECTOR REFORM
A Safer Community Discussion Paper – September 2014

COMMENTS – DISTRICT COUNCIL OF GRANT

Overview

The District Council of Grant acknowledges the extent of engagement with emergency services and other stakeholders in the development of this Discussion Paper, and the need for some level of sector reform.

Council is generally supportive of overall reform, but with our focus being on maintaining and improving front-line emergency services, and more specifically our front-line CFS volunteers who are critical in providing the bulk of regional emergency services.

The structure of Emergency Services above Regional level could definitely benefit from restructure that would deliver improved leadership and coordination across all emergency services. It is acknowledged that the different emergency services do operate reasonably well across sectors, but the existing structure can at times be detrimental to cross sector cooperation. It is critical that front-line services can be delivered effectively as per community and emergency needs and expectations, and barriers to effective service delivery need to be removed or improved.

Governance

Current governance structures provide for inefficiencies in funding and capital/equipment provision. Due to the structure of funding each sector separately, and the identified needs of each sector (and within each Region) there may well be a high level of duplication in equipment and resourcing.

Volunteers

Emergency Services volunteers remain the most critical and important component of front-line services, and as is generally the trend, volunteerism is becoming increasingly difficult to undertake and source. Significant care needs to be taken within any reform to ensure further barriers are not provided to volunteerism through additional 'red-tape' or bureaucracy.

Across most industries, the level of bureaucracy and administrative requirements are becoming more challenging, and ultimately many of our volunteers volunteer to 'get the job done' rather than the increasing level of administrative tasks and bureaucracy. If local administrative tasks can be streamlined or simplified, then this may assist in the level of volunteerism across emergency sectors.

Providing employment opportunities through the public sector is somewhat difficult, as this should be viewed quite separately from any reforms. There should not be an entitlement for a volunteer, above any other individual, to be able to access employment opportunities. This would appear to go against volunteerism.

It is concerning that there appears to be challenges for some employers to release volunteers for emergency duties, but the Emergency Services Sector also need to recognise the added financial and economic pressures that exist within the business sector. Should the State Government assess incentives for employers that allow their employees to volunteer? These incentives could be linked to Emergency Services Levy reductions, other tax/levy incentives, employer recognition and reward programs, etc. Any reductions in levies would ultimately provide additional pressure on the overall Levy, but this could be viewed as an incentive for those employers who do allow volunteerism, and a disincentive through higher charges for those employers who do not support volunteerism.

Continued assessment of clarity and provision of appropriate insurance cover for volunteers is required, as there still appears to be an inequitable approach to volunteers/professionals.

Staff

It appears that staffing and resourcing across various government sectors have diminished, and this is most likely due to State Government budgetary pressures rather than actual demand or workloads. Short term savings through reducing resources (particularly in Regions) can have long-term detrimental effects, and cause localised solutions to be improvised – and the lack of coordination or efficiency is then difficult to measure or realise.

It is recognised that different industrial award provisions may be providing challenges for effective staffing arrangements and flexibility – but this challenge should not be insurmountable in negotiating a flexible workplace agreement which applies sector wide. State Government needs to lead changes within the public sector to enable more effective industrial mechanisms, which in turn enable a more flexible workforce. Human resource principles should not be that different across the sector, as such principles are what they are – and most likely require leadership within the sector to implement a sound and sector wide basis for human resources. A merged management structure should be able to more effectively provide a more consistent and effective sector wide staffing and human resource approach.

Operations

From a community perspective, the operational or 'front line' service is the most prominent, visible, and valued part of the Sector. In saying this, we are not necessarily convinced that those in need of emergency services are that concerned with which services provides assistance (MFS, CFS, SES). The hierarchical nature of the Sectors appears to at times be detrimental to effective coordination and service delivery in emergencies. It may also provide for some duplicity in emergency service provision, and this in turn can place greater pressures on the front-line volunteers.

The skill and knowledge base approach of CFS and SES would appear more valid than the MFS approach of seniority and longevity – and it could be suggested that the MFS approach is an antiquated approach.

The challenges in reducing duplicity and operational barriers would appear greater within regional management/coordination rather than the front-line volunteers.

Training

As with all organisations, continued training provision is critical to enhance the skills of all personnel, and within an emergency services context and the high risk nature of their roles – training is even more critical.

Given the spread of front-line volunteers across the state, and most likely the 'time poor' nature of many volunteers, it is essential that the provision of training on a regional basis is maintained. It should also be recognised that a high level of training is provided from within CFS Volunteer resources and brigades, and this approach should be encouraged and maintained. If this approach is lost through reforms, then the effect on volunteerism and the necessary skills required may see front-line services decimated to the detriment of regional community's and their safety and protection in emergencies.

The existing RTO provision may be subject to reforms, but care needs to be taken in ensuring that any training arrangements that would be provided by a singular (or more) RTO does not provide disincentive to continuation of existing training provision from within experienced and skilled volunteer ranks.

Accessibility to training remains a key component, as it will always be an expensive exercise in providing a centralised training program (ie city centric) due to distance, cost of travel, accommodation, etc. and time required by volunteers to attend such training. Any time required for training needs to take into account the absence required from paid employment/self-employment, and the additional pressures that this can create on volunteerism.

Care also is required to not provide a 'one size fits all' training approach, as there are clearly differences in operational requirements, WHS requirements, and other training requirements across the three sectors.

Community Education & Community Resilience

It would appear that a more consistent and targeted approach could be taken to community education programs, advertising, and promotion of emergency strategies from a community perspective. The requirements across the various sectors may be different, but a more coordinated and consistent message could be achieved.

Procurement & Capital Management

There are definitely inefficiencies within procurement and capital management functions being treated separately across three sectors, and greater efficiencies should be able to be achieved from a strategic and high level purchasing program.

This is not to say that a centralised shared services approach is the best solution.

Government purchasing processes are at times impractical, and do not necessarily deliver purchasing outcomes on a timely basis.

There needs to be a balanced and practical approach with procurement, with a need to provide/maintain some level of delegated authority to regions/brigades for purchasing. There also needs to be some level of 'buy local' policy within purchasing requirements, as this is complimentary to community/business support for emergency services and volunteers in regional communities.

From a capital management perspective, there is some merit in co-location across services, and this could also see some efficiencies in administrative tasks, reduction in duplication of equipment, etc.

Administration & Business Support

As outlined within Volunteers section of this submission, care needs to be taken to not overload emergency services volunteers with administrative functions.

The Discussion Paper does outline that volunteers do have a tendency to just absorb additional administrative functions, and it is difficult to ascertain the effects or level of input. Additional regional resources, or streamlined administrative functions may assist in securing ongoing volunteers through the reduction or frustration with administrative requirements as opposed to the actual volunteer activities on the front-line.

Community Emergency Services Fund

It is recognised that the Emergency Services Funding Act 1998 outlines the requirements of the use of any Levy.

The issue of appropriate recognition of volunteers is important, and I would suggest that a remission or removal of Levy for volunteers is not the answer, as the Fund is needed to fund emergency services.

What is the frustrating part of the ESL is the significant increases in the Levy across the board due to State Budget issues – and that this increased Levy will provide no additional on-ground services, as the additional levy on only compensates for the State Government Budget reduction. The ES Budget remains unchanged.

This has caused a high level of frustration within community and volunteers, as the level of effort in providing front-line services is being maintained or increased, but the State Governments efforts (monetary) is decreasing markedly. It would be fair to say that the State wishes to maintain control, direction and responsibility – but someone else can pay for it and provide the front-line services. This is not a shared or cooperative approach.

Although there are threats of volunteers relinquishing their roles and services, and leaving it to the State to deal with – in reality this will most likely not occur as regional communities and volunteers do pull together when emergency situations arise – and this is a matter of life and death which cannot be measured in budget savings from a State Government perspective.

Proposed Structure

The proposed structure does deliver a more streamlined approach to leadership (one CEO), and combining of administrative and governance structures through to Tier 3.

The Tier 4 – Regions/Zones may require considerable thought as whilst it is beneficial to have greater cooperation across frontline services, there are distinct service differences from CFS/SES being largely volunteers, and MFS being a profession/paid sector. The requirements of these two distinctly different structures requires some differences in approach.

There is also a well-grounded fear that recruitment/appointment of personnel in Tier 1-4 positions could be skewed to provide greater opportunity for MFS or unionised staff due to their public sector tenure/arrangements and what might be deemed as the States inability to effectively deal with personnel that are surplus to the State's needs. Rather than have recruitment based on skills and needs, the State may be more focussed on budget implications and a shifting of costs within a 'reform disguise'. This has previously been mentioned in the

Staff section of this submission – and highlights the States inability or lack of leadership in developing a more flexible approach to management of human resources.

The Proposed Structure needs to include a direct link for front-line volunteer's association/representative group back to the Minister – and this could be in the form of a Volunteers Advisory Group. A direct link mechanism needs to be maintained to enable such advice and discussion to occur between on-ground volunteers and the Minister – as to rely on the organisational structure and bureaucracy as per the Proposed Structure will generally provide for a sterilised and 'ministerial palatable' opinion reaching the Minister after the organisational filtering mechanism have taken place rather than frank and fearless advice from volunteers to the Minister.

Summary

Generally, I would consider the Discussion Paper a reasonable approach to encourage input and opinions from various stakeholders on potential reforms.

We are generally supportive of some level of reform being required and useful but with a focus being required on the maintaining and/or improvement of front-line volunteer services.

We maintain generally that:-

- some level of reform from a management structure is required and welcomed
- there needs be an improvement in cross-service cooperation
- support for maintaining/improving front-line volunteer services is required, and this remains the most critical component of emergency services. The State could never be able to fund such regional services if volunteers did not exist.
- support and recognition, and retention of 'in-house' training by CFS volunteers is critical
- retention and/or delegation of local purchasing and procurement needs to be retained – but with an emphasis on strategic/higher level purchasing efficiencies done centrally
- recruitment and appointment of any future positions within a reformed structure should not be biased towards paid MFS or public sector staff, which would be to the detriment of the focus of volunteer based services of CFS and SES.

Thank you



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