



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

STANDING COMMITTEE ON LEGAL AFFAIRS

(Reference: Annual and financial reports 2004-2005)

Members:

MR B STEFANIAK (The Chair)
MS K MACDONALD (The Deputy Chair)
DR D FOSKEY

TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE

CANBERRA

FRIDAY, 25 NOVEMBER 2005

Secretary to the committee:
Ms R Jaffray (Ph: 6205 0199)

By authority of the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory

Submissions, answers to questions on notice and other documents relevant to this inquiry which have been authorised for publication by the committee may be obtained from the committee office of the Legislative Assembly (Ph: 6205 0127).

The committee met at 10.07 am.

Appearances:

Mr John Hargreaves, Minister for Disability, Housing and Community Services, Minister for Urban Services and Minister for Police and Emergency Services

Emergency Services Authority
Mr Peter Dunn, Commissioner

THE CHAIR: This is a continuation of the hearings on annual reports, and the caution directions still apply. I refer to page 108, output 1.1. The number of community awareness and education activities conducted was 1,206 and the target was 1,500—a 19.6 per cent drop, close to 20 per cent. Why was the measure close to 20 per cent below target? Aren't the community education and awareness levels really one of the most important activities in the planning and preparation stages of bushfire risk reduction? I note file note 1, but could you answer that, and also whether you are taking any steps to improve community awareness?

Mr Hargreaves: There are two answers to your question. The first is that the quantum in the report is explained by note 1, particularly as you relate to the second sentence in that note.

THE CHAIR: Is that about fire safety—

Mr Hargreaves: Yes. The second part of your question was about what we are doing in terms of awareness campaigns—

THE CHAIR: Can I just stop you there, minister. You are saying that note 1 entirely explains that drop?

Mr Hargreaves: I believe so. It is in a sense the equivalent of an accounting treatment; it's how you count them. There is an accounting methodology change, which we have explained in note 1. What is useful is to address the second part of your question, which will put a picture about it. I will ask the commissioner to talk about the types of campaigns we have done in the context of this report. Remember that this report ends on 30 June 2005, so you need a picture of what occurred in the 12 months prior to that, because that is what this report is about. We are not examining in the context of annual reports things happening in the future. But it would be helpful, I believe, for the committee and you to know what we have done between, say, 30 June 2005 and now, and what this particular 12 months is all about, to show you the change in approach for campaigns, and then you will see why the methodology had to change.

Mr Dunn: The previous treatment was that we would record every single activity. For example, if we did three radio broadcasts on three different radio stations about a launch, as we did for our *Bushfires and the bush capital* magazine, those three interviews were counted as three separate community education activities. I do not believe that accurately reflects the community education campaign structure that we have and therefore those sorts of activities are counted as a single community education activity. Thus the number

of target activities drops.

Similarly, when we did awareness on preparation of houses to prevent storm damage—to clean out gutters, to clean up gardens, to remove loose garden furniture and put it inside if there is a severe storm warning coming—on each individual occasion that the activity was undertaken that used to be counted as a single event. That is now counted collectively as a single event.

This year, for example with the distribution of the emergencies guide, there have been a very large number of television, radio and print media interviews, articles and the like, not to mention a significant number of community council meetings. That program is ongoing. We have gone and discussed the use of that guide. All of those activities are considered to be a single activity relating to community education for the management of emergencies in the ACT. So we have obviously adjusted the target down to better reflect the community education strategy we are undertaking.

Mr Hargreaves: What you will see next year, of course, is the same methodology being applied, so you will see the targets matched up against each other.

THE CHAIR: Okay. My second question does not have a note to give some explanation and it does worry me somewhat. The number of activities conducted to reduce hazards was 6,907 and the target was 8,200—a decrease of close to 16 per cent. Why was the number of activities so far below the target and what has changed to allow that drop to occur? I would have thought that hazard reduction is absolutely critical in terms of stopping bushfires.

Mr Hargreaves: Again I will give you some overarching stuff and then get the commissioner to give you the details. Firstly, it is our practice, as you know, in annual reports to report on variations of five per cent or greater. This is in fact a 1.6 per cent variation on the amended target.

THE CHAIR: It is 15.8.

Mr Hargreaves: I take your point, but when we talk about the provision of information in our report we measure the result against the amended target and that is why there is not a note attached to it.

THE CHAIR: I see.

Mr Hargreaves: But I take your point—

THE CHAIR: That amended target is low, though.

Mr Hargreaves: Indeed, and I will get an explanation to you now as to the difference between 8,200 and 6,800, and it has to do with the urban fire brigade. I will ask the commissioner to give you detail on that.

Mr Dunn: The 8,200 figure was a carry forward from the previous practice in the ESB. It was not based on an assessment of what should be done in the community; rather, it was a rough guide target. What we have done in the production of this amended target is

to go through in detail the sorts of activities that are, in particular, carried out by the fire brigade in reducing hazards within the ACT and to put a more accurate target. Therefore, people could be held to account for it if it were a sensible target. If you have a target that is clearly not going to be achieved because it is unnecessary, you cannot hold people and organisations to account for not achieving that; it's a meaningless target.

In adjusting the target, we took into account all of the activities that the fire brigade undertake, in particular. That includes public displays, home reviews, the conduct of building inspections, childcare centre inspections, school visits, incident exercises, pre-fire planning, skills acquisition, skills maintenance training, operational debriefs, smoke alarm installations—

THE CHAIR: All under hazard reduction?

Mr Dunn: This is all under hazard reduction.

Mr Hargreaves: Can I just interpose for a second: one of the misunderstandings people have when they see hazard reduction is to think of fuel hazard reduction and burns. That is not the case. Those activities, the actual burns themselves, are undertaken by land managers—for example, by urban services or by Environment ACT. What happens is that the ESA in fact supervise those sorts of activities. It is not their activity per se to be reported in the annual report. What you see here are the activities to reduce hazards inside the ACT—building hazards, building fire hazards, school fire hazards, those sorts of activities. It is not about bushfire fuel reduction hazards.

Mr Dunn: The sorts of activities that I have just described are conducted by the ACT Fire Brigade. I was going to add that they include public meetings and other inspections and loading inspections. I list those sorts of things through, including the installation of smoke alarms in homes, to indicate that it is possible to get a much more accurate target, and therefore measure accurately how well parts of the organisation are meeting those requirements.

THE CHAIR: I have another question on page 108. At the bottom of the page the original target for cost per head of population for prevention/mitigation seems to have ballooned out to 18.9 per cent; it was amended upwards from \$33.66 to \$39.08 and the actual result was \$40.03. Even though there was such a large amendment, the result still is significantly above the revised target there. Can you tell me why the cost per head of population has risen so dramatically, especially given that those other statistics are below their amended targets, such as the number of hazard reduction activities. You have explained my first question. That has been reduced, yet we have a significant increase in cost here.

Mr Hargreaves: Firstly, it is only a 2.4 per cent variation against the amended target. This is solely due to pay increases for our staff—for the firefighters, the ambos and people like that.

THE CHAIR: Is that the 2.4 per cent or is that the 18.9 per cent?

Mr Hargreaves: No. That is the movement between \$33.66 and \$40.03.

THE CHAIR: All pay increases?

Mr Hargreaves: Yes, and look at our amended target. You amend your target sometimes in advance of enterprise bargaining agreements being signed off, so when they come online you get the accurate reflection. The other thing that you have to recall is that, when you put additional staff on, if you put them on at a higher rate you get a higher figure.

THE CHAIR: How many additional staff have you put on?

Mr Hargreaves: I cannot recall that at the moment.

THE CHAIR: Take it on notice, if you like.

Mr Hargreaves: No, we told you that in the previous hearing.

Mr Dunn: We have the staffing numbers here.

Mr Hargreaves: Yes, we've got the staffing numbers here, but we did tell you that in the previous hearing.

THE CHAIR: Okay. On page 109 there is the estimated number of incidents attended. For the bushfire service the number of incidents is 97, which is probably good considering the target was 130. There would appear, hopefully, to have been fewer bushfires than predicted. However, it is stated in the notes that community education levels were one of the factors that contributed to the lower number of bushfires; that might be good too. I think you have explained about your target of community awareness. What can be done, apart from just education and awareness, to decrease the likelihood of bushfires? What is being done in relation to hazard reduction to decrease the number of bushfires outside of Canberra or indeed in those green fringes and green belts of Canberra?

Mr Hargreaves: There are a couple of things that the community may be interested to know. You have been told before but it is worth while reiterating here. The community education program, particularly the most recent booklet that was put out to everybody's house about how to prepare themselves, brings an actual awareness to people so that they are a bit more careful about having grass clippings at the back of their fence lines and all those sorts of contributing factors. As for things that we have been doing a bit differently, we now have two land managers instead of three. We have one basically for the rural activity and one for the urban activities. We require from land managers, including rural lessees, bushfire operational plans. In there they indicate to us exactly what they are doing about bushfire mitigation and of course we have a programmed hazard reduction burn program, in conjunction with Environment ACT and rural leases.

So in my view the change in the way we are doing things is contributing to a real-time reduction in the possibility of a bushfire of any real size appearing within our urban edge. What we cannot control are arsonists. We cannot control them; we can only pick them up after the event and lock them up. We cannot stop them doing it. These are sick people, by the way. We are trying, as you well know, to draw a link between cruelty to animals and, later on in life, cruelty to humans, including arson. We are trying to track

those sorts of people and there is a bit of work being done on that.

With regard to the border areas, we have an MOU with New South Wales, which talks about cross-border cooperation in bushfire mitigation and response. The other thing that I have is a rejuvenated bushfire council. It is a very, very good council, and now we are having a lot closer conversations, either through its aegis or directly through the commissioner and his staff, with a lot of our rural leaseholders who frequent those areas. I cannot control bolts of lightning. As you know, the bushfire was started by 20-something bolts of lightning. I can only control one or two; I only have two hands. All that we can really do is to make sure that we have the capability response. Mr Pratt was not there but I know Mr Smyth came out and saw the demonstration of the compressed air foam tankers that we have put out into the rural fire service. These are modified vehicles; they are higher off the ground and they can go into terrain that the others cannot do. The three of those cost us \$900,000. We are going to roll out another three next year into the rural fire service. So we are increasing our capability to attack stuff out in the nature parks. One of those tankers can do, at full bore, if you like, up to six or seven times more than water can do. It can travel a lot further and it can probably operate in bursts of about 4½ times that. But that comes with a cost, I have to say. Water is free and the chemicals that make up the foam are not, so there is an additional burden that the ESA has to carry. But we are doing a hell of a lot more than we ever did before on this.

THE CHAIR: Anything arising out of any of my questions?

MS MacDONALD: On page 109, I am looking at the targets and the actual results. The estimated number of incidents, of course, is a difficult one to predict, so it is understandable that there will always be quite a variance between what you predict and what occurs. Then on quality/effectiveness I note that for survival rate from out of hospital cardiac arrest the target was 18 per cent but you have had a 23.8 per cent result, which seems to be a good result, a better result than you had expected.

Mr Hargreaves: There has been a change in note 3—

MS MacDONALD: Yes, I note the footnote.

Mr Hargreaves: There are two reasons. One is that there have been those changes nationwide in the way in which we count that and the other is that we have an absolutely splendid paramedic service.

MS MacDONALD: Commissioner, can you explain how that has been changed nationally, in the simplest possible terms for those of us who are illiterate in these things?

Mr Dunn: I will need to get some detail from the ambulance service, but essentially it relates to measuring the times for delivery to hospital and the response to the incident. We have nationally now operating guidelines to respond to cardiac situations and we certainly place a very high priority on that response. Quite clearly, there are also better guidelines in place for the treatment of patients when our first responders arrive and that all contributes to the saving of life. The administration of some drugs—beta-blockers and the like, without going into the detail—is managed nationally and those guidelines are

being implemented. Across the country you are seeing a much better survival rate from a cardiac situation, so it is both response and the initial treatment by the paramedics. I have to say from my experience with New South Wales Health that there is now a much greater acknowledgment that the treatment that is received from paramedics, if that is focused on, dramatically increases the chances of survival. That is why we have a program running this year to introduce more capable defibrillators, which has been agreed within the budget, to equip all of our ambulances with more sophisticated defibrillation equipment. All this focus is on the initial treatment of the casualty before transport.

Mr Hargreaves: It is also important to note that this is a six-year average, and the ESA has only been alive for about 18 months or so. It is also important to note the rapidity of technological advance and education in the field of paramedics. When I first became involved with the ambulance service, they were just that: ambulance officers trained for an ambulance officers qualification. It was a technical qualification; it was not degree quality. Then the ambulance service advanced into what they called the advanced life support. That, I think, was the introduction of defibs into the system basically and they started talking about a bit of IV stuff but not really huge. That was in the mid-eighties. In the nineties we had this exponential increase in the medical side, as opposed to the manual, carrying side of paramedics' work and the qualifications that they needed. We now have got in the back of our vehicles a mobile emergency room. That wasn't the case. The advance over the last six years has been phenomenal. So you will see, I hope, as those advances increase, the percentages go right up. The challenge for us is to come up with a target so that people can judge it. We put in targets based on the previous six-year average and then in, say, the last 12 months we have had this incredible advance. Naturally, it is going to go right up. That really doesn't help people much. The challenge for us is to determine that target.

MS MacDONALD: I just wanted to make a comment on the positives I noted before I go back to the structural fire containments. With the timeliness I note that for the ambulance, fire service and other timeliness targets you have exceeded those in pretty much all cases, except the 90 percentile, where it has been more than—

Mr Hargreaves: I will get Commissioner Dunn to do that. I just remind you, though, chair, that I really do have to go at 10.30 as I have a tribe of people waiting for me.

THE CHAIR: Could we do this quickly, then, as I would like Mr Pratt to get one question.

Mr Hargreaves: I've got no problems. It is up to the commissioner. I am not going to respond to this one.

Mr Dunn: The response times are excellent. They are the best in the country. That is a factor of our good road networks and the levels of traffic. The issue with containment of fires to room of origin is, of course, dependent on when we are advised of the fire, not just the response time, and what the nature of the fire is when we get there, as to whether or not that can be handled by the initial response. So those two things are not directly connected. A fast response time certainly helps us and is a great advantage in containing room of origin but does not necessarily mean that we will succeed in the aim; it depends when we are told.

THE CHAIR: Thanks for that. I will let Mr Pratt ask one question and I think Ms MacDonald has another one. I won't worry about any more.

MS MacDONALD: No, it has just been answered.

DR FOSKEY: You didn't ask me if I had any, but fortunately for everyone I don't, because I put all my questions on notice.

THE CHAIR: I'm sorry, Deb, but if you do think of anything let me know as quickly as possible.

MR PRATT: I refer to a briefing that the CO of the RFS gave on Tuesday evening, I think, at the Woden community centre in relation to Firelink.

Mr Hargreaves: Can you tell me what page of this we are talking about? I understand that we are only talking about the amended figures, chair.

MR PRATT: I think we have exhausted pages 108 and 109. I just thought I'd take the opportunity—

Mr Hargreaves: I'm sorry, Mr Pratt and chair. The agreement was that we would talk about the amended figures.

THE CHAIR: What is your question and then I'll rule on it?

MR PRATT: My question is—

Mr Hargreaves: What page is it?

MR PRATT: I'm sure the minister would like to answer it. I'm sure the minister wouldn't need to duck the answer.

THE CHAIR: Minister, just let him ask the question. If you've got a problem, you can say and I will rule on it.

Mr Hargreaves: Okay. I will.

MR PRATT: Thanks, minister. I appreciate you coming on board there. On Tuesday evening the chief officer of RFS indicated that they still hadn't quite put all the Firelink equipment into vehicles and this was still being implemented over the next three or four months. I'm looking at an answer I got back from you recently, where you indicated that the reason that you agreed to a single select tender process for Firelink was to ensure that Firelink could be got in and mobilised in time for the 2004-05 bushfire season. If that was the target, to have everything mobilised and up and going by then, how do you reconcile that objective with the briefing that would indicate that Firelink is yet to be fully implemented and mobilised—a bushfire season later than that which was previously targeted?

Mr Hargreaves: Chair, I had agreed to come down here to discuss the changes to this

annual report. I do not propose to address Mr Pratt's questions today. I am happy to take his question on notice and we will get a response to the committee in the normal time.

THE CHAIR: Commissioner, do you want to say something?

Mr Hargreaves: He can do it if he can do it in 30 seconds.

THE CHAIR: If you can answer that, it saves a lot of paper.

MR PRATT: I wouldn't expect any other answer from the minister, by the way, chair.

THE CHAIR: Mr Dunn is going to answer it and he has got about—

Mr Dunn: The through life—

Mr Hargreaves: You are not going to betray a confidence; I'm not going to let you do it.

THE CHAIR: The commissioner seems quite capable of answering it. Go, commissioner.

Mr Dunn: The through life support was not adequately in place for 2004-05 and the decision was taken to continue with the development of that rather than put it into the field and not be able to support it. That was in relation to establishing the InTACT support and the support of other agencies for that system. The system has been deployed; it is in the vehicles. It will be operated throughout the season and what we call introduction into service, the formal acceptance into service, will occur at the end of the season.

THE CHAIR: A good short answer there. Ms MacDonald, do you have one further question? I note that we have about a minute.

MS MacDONALD: My questions were answered but I would like to put my annoyance on the record, because when we had a discussion about this last week I said the reason we were supposed to be meeting today—and the only reason that I understood that the committee agreed to meet—was to discuss the changes to the original annual report. So I am annoyed that Mr Pratt has come in here and chosen to ask questions that do not relate to the amended report.

THE CHAIR: I direct you to the summary of major changes, the two-page sheet. Page 11 does refer to Firelink and it seemed that the commissioner didn't have a problem with answering that. If that wasn't on there, I would have disallowed his question.

MS MacDONALD: But his question did not relate to replacing reference to Firelink as a commercial term with the system, which is what the only change was in the annual report.

THE CHAIR: Well, we are a democracy and I think the committee system is fairly important and—

Mr Hargreaves: Chair, can I think the committee for the opportunity to come along and do this and I make two observations for the sake of the record. The first is I express an apology to the committee for having to produce a second version. Errors were discovered, the correction of which was so extensive as to require a reprint. That was regretted. I have experienced, when in opposition, having two documents sitting in front of me and it is very confusing. So I apologise for that.

I also observe that members who have been guests of this committee have been critical of me and of the ESA in relation to the way in which information was provided to non-members of this committee. You would know that I am permitted to provide additional copies, or amended copies, to this committee. It was my choice, however, to give members of the Assembly copies of the amended one when it was tabled. So I record my disappointment that accusations of trying to keep things hidden from other members of the Assembly have been levelled, and I reject them out of hand.

In respect also of Mr Pratt's question today, I take your point about the question of Firelink being on page 11, but I observe that Mr Pratt didn't have the faintest idea what page his question referred to, and so in spirit he has breached the agreement that I reached with your committee. But, again, I appreciate the committee's patience over this; I really do appreciate it.

THE CHAIR: In relation to your points, firstly, thank you for the apology. On behalf of the committee I accept that. It is very difficult when you are comparing two documents. I also thank you and the staff of the ESA for turning up quickly for this additional meeting. I appreciate that. Apart from the Speaker, I have been in the Assembly longer than anyone else. Certainly from my experience, when an amended report goes out, it goes out to every member of the Assembly and it is traditional that people other than committee members turn up to these annual report hearings. So I urge you next time—if this ever happens again, which I'm sure it probably won't because you're an efficient organisation—if you have amended reports going out, they should be sent to all members of the Assembly. I stand by what I said earlier in relation to page 11 on Firelink and I think that was probably an appropriate question from Mr Pratt. Thank you for your attendance; it is greatly appreciated.

The committee adjourned at 10.37 am.