



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

(Reference: [Review of Auditor-General's report No 5 of 2013: Bushfire Preparedness](#))

Members:

MR B SMYTH (Chair)
MS M PORTER (Deputy Chair)
MS M FITZHARRIS
MS N LAWDER

TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE

CANBERRA

TUESDAY, 24 FEBRUARY 2015

Secretary to the committee:
Dr A Cullen (Ph: 620 50142)

By authority of the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory

Submissions, answers to questions on notice and other documents, including requests for clarification of the transcript of evidence, relevant to this inquiry that have been authorised for publication by the committee may be obtained from the Legislative Assembly website.

WITNESSES

REYNOLDS, MR STEPHEN, Registrar, Hall Volunteer Rural Fire Brigade**87**

RICHS, MS MELISSA JANE, President, Hall Volunteer Rural Fire Brigade**87**

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Amended 20 May 2013

The committee met at 3.30 pm.

RICHERS, MS MELISSA JANE, President, Hall Volunteer Rural Fire Brigade
REYNOLDS, MR STEPHEN, Registrar, Hall Volunteer Rural Fire Brigade

THE CHAIR: Good afternoon, and welcome to this afternoon's inquiry by the public accounts committee into Auditor-General's report No 5 of 2013—*Bushfire preparedness*. I now declare the hearing open.

In accordance with the committee's resolution of appointment, all reports of the Auditor-General stand referred to the public accounts committee after presentation. The committee has established procedures for its examination of referred Auditor-General's reports. The committee considered Auditor-General's report No 5 of 2013 in accordance with these procedures and resolved to inquire further into the audit report. While the terms of reference for the inquiry are the information contained within the audit report, the committee's inquiry is specifically focusing on three areas: elements underpinning strategic readiness for bushfire prevention and preparedness; the farm firewise program; and the implementation of audit recommendations.

I welcome you this afternoon, Ms Riches and Mr Reynolds, appearing on behalf of the Hall Volunteer Rural Fire Brigade. Thank you for appearing today and for the brigade's interest in the work of the committee. The committee also thanks you for your patience with the rescheduling of the hearing; our apologies.

Can I remind witnesses of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the pink-coloured card on the table before you. Could you confirm for the record that you understand the privilege implications of the statement?

Ms Riches: I understand.

Mr Reynolds: I am familiar with the term, but can I clarify that this means whatever we say today cannot be used against us in a disciplinary hearing by the RFS if we say something that people do not agree with?

THE CHAIR: It is all covered by privilege.

Mr Reynolds: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: I also remind witnesses that the proceedings are being recorded by Hansard for transcription purposes as well as being webstreamed and broadcast live. Before we proceed with questions from the committee, would you like to make an opening statement?

Ms Riches: Thank you. Good afternoon, chair and committee, and on behalf of the Hall Volunteer Rural Fire Brigade we thank you for this opportunity to present our views on bushfire preparedness in the ACT.

We are of course well into the 2015 bushfire season, but we do not believe there is any particular date stamp on anything that we have submitted. Indeed, as bushfire

fighters we are taught that, under the worst reported conditions, grassfires can travel up to 18 to 20 kilometres in an hour and that fires more than 60 kilometres away may threaten the ACT within half a day; that it is possible for an area of more than 60,000 hectares to be burnt in eight hours; and that, if two or three fires break out at the same time, it is possible for them to burn out most of the ACT in just 48 hours.

In 2003 the Canberra region experienced a major bushfire conflagration, described by many as the worst fire incident in history in the area. The reality of this fire incident, which produced a month's worth of 24-hour-a-day active firefighting for our brigade, is that it will occur again. Most major fire incidents have occurred in southern New South Wales approximately every 10 years since 1903. We cannot so much stop these incidents as learn from them and mitigate their ferocity. This also means that for most rural firefighters in the ACT they will see more than one of these major bushfires in their service.

Central to this is our brigade's belief that the very volunteers that fight these fires should be respected and supported. They should be respected and supported in their training, in their equipment issue, in their deployment, in their instant response, in their post-incident debriefing, in the administration of their brigade, in the operations of their brigade, in their resilience, in their service and in their views and opinions.

We appreciate being asked here today to provide the voice of our brigade, and we would now be happy to take any questions from the committee.

THE CHAIR: Thanks for that, and thanks for your submission. If we go to the bottom of the first page, you say:

Consequently we believe the need for emergency services will only continue to increase in the Hall area with a greater number of homes forming the urban interface with the surrounding bush and grasslands.

If there is a greater need, what should occur in terms of facilities and resources to combat that greater need?

Ms Riches: I think the brigades themselves need to continue to grow, but probably their proximity, to be able to fight those sorts of fires, is important. As you know, we sit in a village. We do not have any opportunity to expand our shed to get more resources, even though we have a membership that could support it. So I think it is about having a strategic oversight about where you have sheds, where you have CFUs and where you have those resources, to that urban edge, and to be able to fight fires as needed. Hall has been in existence since 1939. Although we had a period when we died out in the early 70s, when we re-formed after the Black Saturday fire, we have continued to fight fires in our area—as well as, obviously, much further away in 2003.

THE CHAIR: If the facility itself wanted an issue, what other tankers or resources would be reasonable?

Ms Riches: We would always say that a supertanker, in terms of water-carrying facilities, in our area would be very good. We have grassfires, largely, in our area, as you would know, around Wallaroo, and we do not really have vehicles that are 100

per cent suitable for grassfire capability.

THE CHAIR: Given that Hansard probably does not understand what a supertanker is—

Ms Riches: Sorry, a large water-carrying tanker. You mean you do not understand all of this terminology?

THE CHAIR: I may, but I am not sure if the recorders do. What sort of capacity are you talking about there?

Ms Riches: In terms of 5,000 to 10,000 litres of water.

THE CHAIR: If we then go over the page, the first full paragraph states:

We concur with the report's conclusion that there is a worrying lack of resource and IMT planning and that areas of development for volunteers in incident management are not being strategically developed.

What is the worrying lack of resource and what IMT planning needs to occur?

Ms Riches: For us it would be to do with training. The only opportunity in terms of IMT that we are offered is the introduction to AIIMS. I managed to do the introduction to AIIMS four times because they kept losing my paperwork. But it meant I was really good by the fourth time I did it. In terms of some of the other areas of IMT planning, I consider my brigade to have very good officers with great experience. It is about making sure that their skills continue to develop and making sure they can pass them on to our more senior ranks of people developing through our brigade.

Mr Reynolds: One of the issues we have is the training level at our brigade. We talk about training in the submission, but I will raise it here. The RFS publishes a report quarterly which shows how many members there are of each brigade and what their levels of training are. If you look at our brigade, we are one of the larger brigades, yet most of our members only have basic firefighter training. We have hardly any members qualified as crew leaders or advanced firefighters. This has been a real problem for us. The RFS does not have a training calendar. We cannot plan for training into the future. We get very short notice that courses become available. Recently, in the last few weeks, an advanced firefighter course has become available, but, given the very short notice, it is not something we can plan for.

We have gone to the extent of organising our own registered training provider so that we can get our members nationally accredited training. The response we get from the RFS is, "We're not going to recognise you," yet it is nationally accredited training. We have a real issue with getting our members trained, yet we are one of the largest brigades in the service.

Ms Riches: Obviously, as volunteers, it is about us being able to provide flexibility to our members about their training. Some of us have those fabulous kids' sporting commitments on the weekends. When they say, "On Saturday you have to do your

assessment,” some of us just cannot do it. If you are a single mother like me you just do not have the ability to drop everything and say, “Okay, I’ll do my assessment instead.” There just needs to be that flexibility built in so that different learning patterns, different opportunities to train, can actually be offered to all volunteers, not just our brigade.

THE CHAIR: You also say that there is “a worrying lack of resource”. Is that in relation to training or is that something else that you are talking about there?

Ms Riches: In our case we would say we have more members than we have trucks. We have 74 active members. At a training day I cannot get all of my members on a truck. In fact, I drive myself to training and then we do exercises down at the polocrosse, rotating through the tankers.

MS PORTER: You talk about the communication tools that you have. You say that the TRN system is problematic. Since you wrote the submission has anything been done to address that?

Ms Riches: I think there have been some improvements. It comes down even to some simple things we have had to do. We have actually had to lend people at Wallaroo an ACT radio to make sure they know what we are hearing and that they are able to respond to the same fire calls we are getting. We have modified our radio in the shed to make sure we are picking up New South Wales communications. As you know, Hall sits right on the border, so it would be embarrassing for us to not know what is happening in Yass.

MS PORTER: Is there some kind of joint meeting that our hierarchy here is having with the hierarchy over there to make sure that those communication issues are sorted, so that each has the correct kinds of resources to talk to one another? Are you aware of any work that is going on in that area or have you requested that?

Ms Riches: I am not aware; you would assume that it does happen. When we recently had crews come back from the Blue Mountains, they complained about communication issues between New South Wales and ACT brigades.

Mr Reynolds: Also, we had the recent Sawyers Gully fire, just before Christmas. There were communication problems there. We turned up at about 6 pm or seven in the evening and the local New South Wales crew said, “About time you arrived; where have you been?” We were not really aware of what was happening in their area at the time, even though we could see the smoke.

MS PORTER: Is that to do with the fact that the information was not passed from A to B and then to C or was that to do with the actual machinery that you were using to communicate? I am just trying to unpick whether or not it is to do with technology or with human error.

Mr Reynolds: Largely human intervention.

MS PORTER: Or lack of?

Mr Reynolds: Yes.

MS PORTER: Does the technology itself talk to the other?

Mr Reynolds: No, we have to work around that. We have to use alternative radios to communicate. We went to a fire at Cooma 18 months ago and it was very difficult to communicate with our New South Wales counterparts. We had to use different radios.

MS PORTER: If there is a fire in Yass that you are responding to, you would have difficulty with the actual machinery—the communication machinery that you were using?

Mr Reynolds: Yes.

Ms Riches: We could do. Thankfully, our brigade, at its own expense, installed UHF radios, and we find that New South Wales sit on that bandwidth and we are able to talk to them. But that was an initiative from the brigade.

Mr Reynolds: Under the TRN system there is a capability to do it, but we just do not seem to be able to access that capability.

MS PORTER: So you have not been able to sort that?

Mr Reynolds: Yes.

MS PORTER: How do you decide what the CFU does on a day when you are stood up? What do you do? Do you work together? Is there some kind of agreement between the CFU and yourselves as to how you operate on a particular day? I know they have their boundaries. Ms Lawder and I are both on CFUs, so we are well aware of the boundary that they have, beyond which they must not step. But how do you work together?

Ms Riches: We actually work really well together in Hall. We have managed once a year to have community meetings that the CFU help chair. They bring members of the village of Hall down to hear about bushfire preparedness. One thing that has always alarmed us is the belief that the brigade will be there if there is a fire—that the brigade will be parked there, ready to go. We know from 2003 that we were in Tharwa. We were not anywhere near Hall. So there was that concern.

MS LAWDER: And well done for your work in Tharwa.

Ms Riches: Thanks. Working with the CFU, what we have done is to make sure that people are starting to get bushfire plans together. Most of Hall is reasonably elderly and really would evacuate. They are not going to stay and fight. The other thing is having an understanding of, if they are going to evacuate in the village, where they are going to go to and what that means for them. We have talked to them a little bit about what fire suppression would be for them, down at the Hall showground, and what that actually means.

The other thing we do is that on extreme fire days we usually set up one of our porta

dams towards the top of the village. We get them to assist in that process, honing their skills and using their skills. Also, on a regular basis I do radio training. I have discovered that often CFU members forget radio protocol. That happens when you do not use a radio; we are not super-surprised. We have also found that their batteries go flat, so we tend to swap them through the brigade radios.

Mr Reynolds: We also emphasise that it will be the CFU who will remain in the village and do their best to protect the infrastructure in the village.

Ms Riches: That is right. It will not be the brigade. I have to say that has been a shock to a lot of the village, who are just so used to seeing our shed there and they think that, obviously, that is where we will be.

MS PORTER: I have a question about training that is available. I am aware of a calendar of training that has been given to us for new members and to refresh existing members. That is a different kind of training; it is not what you are talking about?

Mr Reynolds: You are also trained by Fire & Rescue, not by the RFS. It is separate.

MS PORTER: It is a different standard of training.

Mr Reynolds: I do not know about the standard. Certainly it is a different organisation doing the training.

MS PORTER: I am not talking about a standard as to whether it is good or bad training; I am talking about the levels.

Ms Riches: We have to do things like basic firefighter and you are not trained at that level. I would argue that you probably should be, but that is another argument.

MS LAWDER: I want to go back to some of your comments about training and making it more volunteer friendly. We all have things going on in our lives. You volunteer with the best intentions, but other things also need to be done. What discussions have you had with the fire service about making training more volunteer friendly, and what are the barriers? I think you were suggesting a “train the trainer” approach where you then train your own volunteers, rather than relying on the brigade. What are the barriers?

Ms Riches: Our training officers attend the Rural Fire Service’s training officers meeting, so they certainly take our views forward. Up to now we have not had a calendar for 12 months that we can look at and say, “That one’s coming up. That one might be training that I want to do.” Rather than that, we just get ad hoc emails, which is not super-helpful. Given that being a volunteer firefighter is not my day job, if those get called up on an average day in the commonwealth public service, they sit well down my inbox before I get to them.

One of the things we are very strong on in Hall is getting basic firefighters to actually do some of the initial training of our new recruits coming through. I think that reinforces the lesson that you have learnt. If you keep using and showing your skill as soon as you have learnt it, it reinforces in your head just what that skill is. We

certainly use that as a technique. But for us it is also about making sure that those competencies are recognised. I have a lot of members that would probably get through for recognised prior learning, but it is about having the opportunity to get those people assessed as actually already having that skills base.

Mr Reynolds: One of the issues is the resources that the RFS has—the paid staff who are available to take over the administration of training. There was a period last year with staff absences when there seemed to be nobody there doing the job at all. Since then they have had two people in the office working on the training side; that is our perception. It is a little bit better. However, we made a submission to the Treasury review also that maybe there was a possible better use of resources across the whole ESA—a body devoted to training across all the emergency organisations, rather than each one of them doubling up and trying to provide their own training. Basic firefighter training, for example, is the same as what Fire & Rescue would do. Basic competencies would be the same. So why have we got two different organisations trying to run virtually the same training course when we can consolidate staff into the one?

MS LAWDER: In your submission you talk about relying on people to come and help with the training because you cannot deliver it yourselves. Is it due to operational requirements or is it due to some staffing issues which mean they are unable to assist, or a combination of the two?

Ms Riches: The RFS have a centralised model, and I can see the reasons why they have gone down that path. But for someone out in Hall, the travel time to Hume is not good, particularly if you do it at 5 o'clock after work. As I said, it does not meet the flexibilities of why people come to the brigade itself. People come to the brigade because they want to be part of that brigade. When I did my training, I did not do it under a centralised model; I actually did it at the brigade. I was trained by fellow senior firefighters who taught me to deploy hoses and operate pumps. I have to admit that I was not allowed near a truck until I knew the back end of a pump with my eyes shut. I have to admit that when I did the advanced firefighter course and operated pumps, I thought, "Wow! This is about a year too late. I've certainly done this course standing on my head, black and blue." Our brigade push that as a competency that they consider to be relevant way back at the beginning. Basically, that is what we do; we move water onto hot stuff.

Mr Reynolds: If the training was devolved out to the brigades, we have the resources and facilities to be able to put everyone through all of these different training modules. We could get virtually everyone trained up within 12 months to a high standard—crew leader and advanced firefighter. But we are waiting years and years for the RFS to do it for us.

MS LAWDER: Do you think there is kind of a risk aversion in devolving that training out?

Mr Reynolds: There is. As my colleague said, it is for the purpose of consistency in training across all the brigades. You probably need some level of consistency. At the same time you mentioned "train the trainer" before. Why can't you do it like other organisations do it and just train the trainer, and make sure that your trainers have the

same consistency and train the people out in the brigade?

Ms Riches: It is also about making sure we think outside the box. A lot of our basic firefighters go to firefighter training and we are told to single-roll hoses. Our brigade has not single-rolled hose ever, I do not think. We double-roll hoses. It is quite common. New South Wales does it; I noticed the urban Fire & Rescue do it. Yet our people, when they went to do their assessment on that competency, were told, “No, you have to single-roll.” But the competency is about managing the hoses. If you plait it and you can still get it to be deployed and still work, you have actually passed the competency.

MS FITZHARRIS: Could I take a step back on the training? I am interested in the training. If someone joins your brigade today, what would they learn in the first 12 months and what does the training look like? What competency would they reach within the first 12 months?

Ms Riches: Basic firefighter; that would be the aim.

MS FITZHARRIS: How many hours would that involve for each individual?

Mr Reynolds: About 12 hours.

MS FITZHARRIS: And over time do you build up capability?

Ms Riches: The great retention issues for brigades will always be that you have to get them to a fire. We do not join the fire brigade, strangely, to come and appear in front of standing committees. We like the smell of smoke. Ultimately, once you have a new member and they smell smoke, you will generally keep them. With that, they would want to have some planning. Particularly with the younger members we see, they do say, “I want to get the next competency; I want to get to the next level.”

I have to admit that I am not driven in quite the same way. Maybe that is an age thing or maybe it is my years of service; I am not sure. But we do need to make sure that we offer that ability for people to climb the ladder if that is what they want to do, particularly when the focus is quite often on operations.

I do not think the administration of brigades gets quite the recognition that it possibly should, although we have incredibly competent people doing incredibly competent things and growing the brigade. As I said, our brigade is lucky; we have one of the largest percentages of women in our brigade. I am the only female president, but on my committee itself more than half are women. Probably 60 per cent are women. And they sit in some quite pivotal roles for us. But one of them is no longer an officer, and they probably do not get the recognition that they should.

MS FITZHARRIS: Recognition from?

Ms Riches: The wider service, and getting women into any emergency services, which is exactly what they are working towards. It is about recognising that you can be in different roles. We do not all have to be a captain or an officer; we can be different things in the brigade and still be very valuable in mentoring, coaching and

helping other people through. Yes, I am nicknamed “the mother” in the brigade, and everybody does call me “mum”, because I tend to have that role of making sure that people are okay and there is a wellness within the brigade.

THE CHAIR: The work capacity test: should there be such a test and what form should it take?

Mr Reynolds: No. We feel very strongly about this. We think that the current work capacity test is discriminatory. It is indirect discrimination because it discriminates against people with certain attributes. For example, with our president here, if she tried to do the test strictly under the guidelines, it would be impossible for her to do because of her stature. You cannot walk that far in the time required. And it is the same with older people. It does turn people off joining. There are functions that you can do on a tanker that do not require that level of fitness.

Ms Riches: And do not get me wrong; the brigade is absolutely committed to fitness, but we do not believe that the work capacity test is a fitness test and we do not think it is actually a relevant judgement of your capability as a tanker-based volunteer. I would like to say that is a unique thought process, but the fire note from the CRC says exactly the same thing—that in fact the work capacity test or the hike pack test as administered in the ACT overestimates the type of work we do on tankers. We would always be concerned about that.

The other thing is that overwhelmingly it has been shown that heart attacks affect firefighters on grounds. This test will not pick that up. Going to your doctor regularly and making sure you have regular health checks actually will. When you do have a lot of young males in the brigade, which is what I had when I joined, I can tell you that, after 2003, mental health issues—no, they “did not have one of those”! And they “did not have health issues”. If I had suggested to them they should actually, as part of their own wellness, go and visit doctors regularly and have check-ups, they would have thought I had two heads. They would have said, “Thanks, mum, but no.” So I think it is a strategy about making sure you have opportunities to stay fit. It is about opportunities to understand crew management, making sure that we have stress and fatigue, hydration, covered, as well as keeping your crew rotated and managed through the whole process. You do not keep them on the same task all the time. No crew leader ever does that. That is a really important thing about keeping people fit on the fire ground.

Mr Reynolds: Can we offer this document to the committee?

Ms Riches: Have you seen this document?

THE CHAIR: If you want to table it that would be lovely.

Ms Riches: We will table it for you.

THE CHAIR: We will include it in the report; thank you.

MS PORTER: With regard to the fitness test and the kinds of work that people can and cannot do, obviously I am not young anymore, so in my CFU, for instance, there

is recognition of the kinds of things that I can do and the kinds of things that other people can do. Although we have all done the training, we all make decisions about the type of work that we are most effective at. Is there not room for different levels of fitness training or capability so that, if you are going to do a certain type of work, your fitness has to be to this level? You said, “You don’t have to be at this level to do this task.” You gave an example to do with the trucks.

Mr Reynolds: There is plenty of work that you could be doing—good work for which we do not need that level of assistance. I refer, for example, to operating the pump on a truck. You do not have to carry full hoses and go around the fire ground. There is driving a truck. We have some great truck drivers who are not the fittest people in the world, but I would rather have them driving my truck than somebody who can run a marathon.

MS PORTER: Do you think there is any validity in that idea of having a different kind of fitness for different tasks? You would have a ticket or whatever it is and you are not allowed to do certain tasks?

Mr Reynolds: We are the only jurisdiction in Australia that insists on a fitness test. The other organisations across Australia admit that they would lose most of their members if they insisted on a fitness test.

MS PORTER: So you would prefer not to have it at all, and not a graduated one?

Ms Riches: If you are going to do it, you need to have a commitment to fitness, which is not training eight weeks before you do the test and then you do not do it for another year. That is not a commitment to fitness. I think it has to be an ongoing thing. I do think that is where brigades need assistance. We have a fitness thing we do before training, which is doing different step-ups, up and down the ladder. It certainly gives you a good workout. But we tend to do that as an ongoing thing, because it is an ongoing commitment to fitness, and not a matter of, eight weeks out, doing the test and then not worrying about it for the rest of the year. We need to be teaching our members that fitness is part of the whole cycle of being a volunteer firefighter. It is part of being out on the fire ground.

I have to admit, my reservation about having different levels of fitness is that you do not always know what you are going to do. For example, I have been a scribe for a div commander, and halfway through there has been an injury on another tanker and I have jumped on the tanker and that person has come across. So you do not always know what you are going to get on a fire ground, and you have to be conscious of that too.

Mr Reynolds: There is documented evidence, including in that report, that one of the greatest killers of firefighters is heart attack. While most urban vehicles have an AED device on them, our trucks do not at all. In fact, we have AEDs on our command vehicles and they were paid for by the volunteer brigade association, not by the RFS.

MS PORTER: Perhaps the full name needs to be said, for the record.

THE CHAIR: Automated external defibrillators.

MS PORTER: Do you believe you need to have more of those attached to the trucks?

Ms Riches: Absolutely.

Mr Reynolds: The command vehicles are not always available at the scene, if somebody does have a heart attack.

Ms Riches: If a command vehicle is doing what it should be doing on a fire line, you could be running a whole sector, which means it is nowhere near your tanker. When we did our AED training—and we are lucky because the guy who did the training happens to be one of our paramedics and sits in our brigade—he was saying that the window is very small. It is about two minutes. If you have somebody miles away on a fire line with the AED and he is nowhere near your tanker, your chances are not great.

Mr Reynolds: If you are insisting on fitness for firefighters, we think that an AED device is far more effective at saving lives than making sure everyone is—

Ms Riches: Than a work capacity test.

MS FITZHARRIS: There is a sense of maybe some general frustration that is expressed in these pages. I am wondering what it is with. Is it with the national standards? Is it with New South Wales? Is it with the RFS here? Is it with resourcing to the RFS and they have their hands tied behind their back because they do not have the resourcing, or is it a combination of all those things?

Ms Riches: For us it is probably what we feel can be at times a lack of responsiveness—that you can write to the ACT Rural Fire Service and ask for things, such as when we asked to modify Hall 31 after it went to the Gooromon Ponds fire and it was shown to be a really ineffective vehicle for grassfire. Although the suggestion was to use the hose outside the passenger door, the hose was dragging on the ground; it was completely ineffective. So it essentially became a mop-up vehicle. The modifications are not difficult for this vehicle. You could easily put a ride-on cannon-bay capability if you needed to. Our members drew up some plans and showed them; they are in that industry and they did understand what it was they were drawing. We said that at worst you could just put a monitor on it. You could just put a hand-held monitor, a bit like a joystick, in the cabin, and that is what the person next to the driver could do. We got absolutely no response back. When we actually asked for the risk assessment about why you should not have a ride-on capability because of rollover, it was never forthcoming. I think it is more that we keep saying, “These are things we think you can fix,” but we think there is a lack of responsiveness.

Mr Reynolds: A lot of our volunteers are very highly qualified people. We have lawyers; we have high level public servants. We have tradespeople. We just get extremely frustrated with the RFS because they do not have the resources, they do not have the talent, the people skills, the administrative skills or the strategic management skills to run an organisation like this. When they use terms like “managing volunteers”, we do not want to be managed; we want to be supported. That is where you see that frustration in the document.

MS FITZHARRIS: Are there existing mechanisms for that? Are there regular meetings?

Ms Riches: There are regular meetings at operation levels. There is a thing called a captains group. But never in the history of the Rural Fire Service has there ever been one with the administrative heads of the brigade.

Mr Reynolds: Never.

Ms Riches: I have never met with all the other fellow presidents, ever.

MS FITZHARRIS: So you do not organise as a group yourselves, of volunteer presidents?

Ms Riches: No. The only other avenue we have is through the Volunteer Brigades Association. I think Ian Harding presented in front of you. It is made up of eight brigades, as opposed to individual members and individual volunteers. I have to admit Hall is the only brigade that takes that delegation seriously enough that, by default, the president of the brigade is always the VBA delegate.

Mr Reynolds: The RFS insists on working through the captains group. They think that the captains are the head of the brigade. That might be so under the ESA. The Hall Volunteer Rural Fire Brigade is an incorporated body. We are subject to the incorporation act; we have a constitution. The captain is responsible to the committee and the president.

MS FITZHARRIS: So your governance is strong within the brigade?

Ms Riches: Yes. I think we have the largest committee of any of the brigades, because we see that as a real opportunity for inclusiveness and to get people's opinion. I do think our brigade thinks outside the box. I think it is because we give people the opportunity to voice that.

Mr Reynolds: It is very democratic. The document that you see before you contains ideas from the committee members themselves. They are things that our committee wanted to put up to yours.

Ms Riches: And the document was vetted by the committee.

THE CHAIR: Unfortunately, we have come to the end of our time. I am sure we could keep going for a lot longer. Thank you for the document and for your answers and opening comments today. I do not think you have taken anything on notice, so there will be no questions to follow. When a proof transcript is available we will forward that to you so that you have an opportunity to check the transcript and make any suggestions for corrections, which the committee would then look at. Thank you very much for your attendance today. I formally close the hearing.

The committee adjourned at 4.06 pm.