



VOLUNTEER FIRE BRIGADES VICTORIA

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by Adam Barnett, VFBV Chief Executive Officer

Volunteers run one of the largest and most expansive networks of volunteer consultative forums in the State. Through an interconnected network of 21 VFBV District Councils we provide an opportunity for all members to connect with this network at the local level, both through formal channels as well as informal ones.

The strength of this network lies in the fact that by design – it is run, led and managed by volunteers themselves. It is a beacon of volunteer ingenuity, commitment and professionalism and aptly demonstrates what volunteers are capable of.

Our District Council structures are closely aligned and complementary to other CFA structures to avoid unnecessary duplication and the council's endeavour to work in good faith and in close cooperation with other CFA processes to ensure our forums are connected at the State, Regional and District levels. Ultimately, this ensures these networks are well aligned and informed of volunteer views and offer CFA an invaluable opportunity to better connect and engage with volunteers. They also provide a wonderful opportunity for fellow volunteers to contribute, share their ideas and help solve some of the problems and issues other volunteers are experiencing.

And while others may bemoan the responsibility and courage required to speak truth to power in this age of big government, the volunteer associations have been diligently doing just that since the early days of Federation, well before CFA even existed and it was the local communities banding together to do whatever needed to be done. That is why our District Councils were quite deliberately established at arm's length of CFA and embody the yin and yang paradox of simultaneous unity and duality.

And far from a theoretical exercise, our District Councils embody the principles of volunteer empowerment and trust. In fact, these highly organic, professional and deeply connected networks rely totally on the contribution and leadership of volunteers for volunteers. Each District Council is led by CFA volunteers drawn from the local brigades and groups. From District Council Presidents all the way to brigade and group delegates, every member of the District Council is a volunteer nominated by other volunteers. Each Council's brigades and groups independently elect their own leaders and form a District Council executive who coordinate their own agendas, provide a regular forum for all local CFA volunteers to contribute and pursue and advocate the issues most relevant to them through the VFBV network.

Similarly, the VFBV State Council is led by the State President (also a volunteer) and entirely made up of CFA volunteer delegates, elected by each District Council. It is for these reasons that I consider our State and District Councils to be one of the most authoritative and trusted networks in the State.

Between the VFBV Board, State Council and our District Councils, almost 200 separate meetings take place each and every year to assist gather, discuss and debate volunteer views, ideas and concerns. And that figure grows exponentially when we start to include working parties, joint committees, and other processes we regularly run. The ability for anyone to raise an issue, suggest an idea or seek clarification on various topics is what ensures VFBV keeps informed on the issues most important to CFA volunteers. Our formal structures compliment the informal ones and include mechanisms that allow for peer review and brigade/group endorsement for difficult issues where volunteer views may be quite broad and diverse.

I spoke last month about the importance of empowering volunteers, trusting them and engaging with them as equal partners to consider issues, challenges and opportunities and how this will be fundamental to volunteers rebuilding confidence and trust in CFA and ensuring it prospers and is restored to a confident and proud volunteer and community organisation of choice. I also spoke about the fact that we have some really good existing consultative structures and processes in place that are simply not being used to their potential and are being hampered by a lack of accountability and commitment by CFA to properly engage with them.

Therefore, I have been very pleased to recently observe a renewed focus and attention led by some of the CFA Deputy Chief Officers of Regions to commence better engagement and connection with their local VFBV District Councils. I want to thank and acknowledge this terrific work being undertaken and encourage it to continue. This can only be a good thing and should continue to be encouraged and is hopefully a sign of a growing respect and appreciation for these critical volunteer structures and forums.

FEEDBACK

Within our suite of consultative mechanisms, the annual VFBV Welfare and Efficiency Survey is one of the most critical tools we use to gather targeted feedback direct from volunteers, and guides how we inform CFA of what is important to you, and the issues recording the highest and lowest satisfaction.

And while the survey creates a snapshot of volunteer views and perceptions at a fixed period in time, the successive surveys and annual consistency helps us track trends and monitor the success or otherwise of what is being done to rectify those areas. The sheer number of volunteers participating relevant to the sample size and the high level of consistency with other tools provides for an extremely credible source of information. The fact the survey is extended across every State in Australia though each State's volunteer association provides an unrivalled perspective of Australia's fire service emergency management volunteers.

We created the VolWEL indicator from measuring the gap between how closely performance meets the expectation of importance. The VolWEL outcome for each theme and question is a way to simply illustrate where things are working well or what needs attention. The higher the number – the larger the gap and



VOLUNTEER EMPOWERMENT AND FEEDBACK

therefore the higher the dissatisfaction. Any gap over a 2.0+ indicates a large to critical gap has emerged and requires immediate attention.

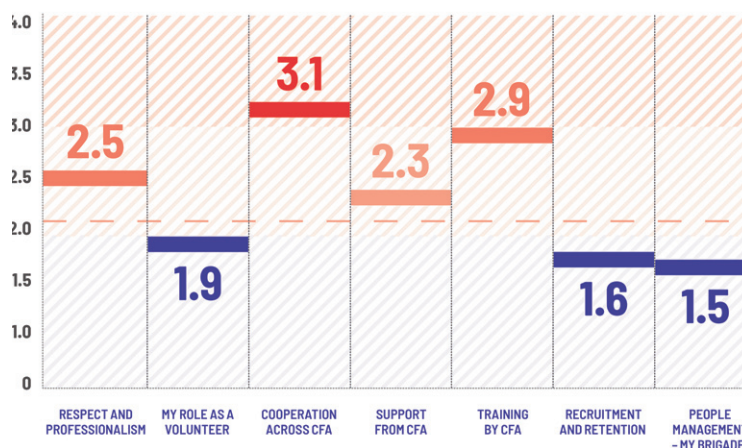
The most recent results show that all areas with gaps greater than 2.0 (where volunteers have been reporting the highest dissatisfaction) all got worse with each of these themes recording increasing levels of dissatisfaction when compared to the year before.

One observation of the results are that many of the areas that recorded the highest levels of satisfaction (and therefore have a lower VolWEL) are all areas where the decision making or responsibility is typically made closer to the brigade or group level.

This aptly demonstrates the direct relationship between better engagement and empowerment of volunteers leads to higher levels of trust, confidence and satisfaction amongst volunteers.

And this general principle remains fairly consistent when we extract the top five individual statements that display the most positive outcomes, and the bottom five poorest outcomes.

VOLUNTEER WELFARE AND EFFICIENCY LEVEL (VoIWEL) – OVERALL



NOT WORKING WELL

2.1

OVERALL VoIWEL SCORE

WORKING WELL

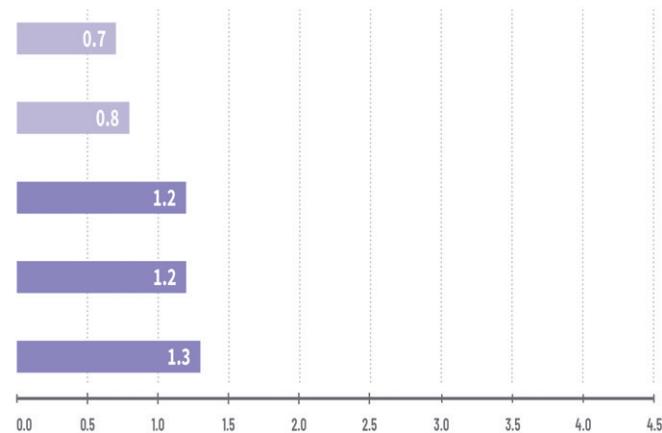
teer views, but equally important in informing our advocacy back to CFA and Government on what is required to better meet the needs of CFA volunteers.

For example, qualitative comments repeatedly highlight the perception of double standards, where strict adherence to paperwork, rules and procedures are often enforced from above to

MOST POSITIVE VoIWEL OUTCOMES

Volunteers responded most positively to the following statements;

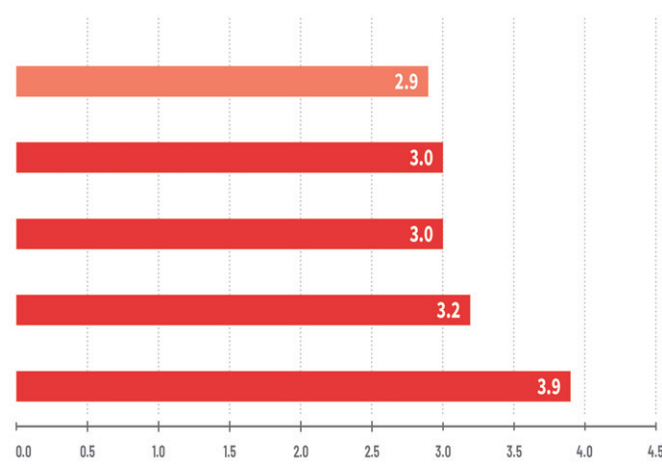
- Q: There are no barriers to the roles women can occupy in my brigade. (0.7)
- Q: People from all cultural backgrounds, different religious, political and personal beliefs are all made welcome at my brigade. (0.8)
- Q: The environment at my brigade is volunteer-friendly, welcoming to new members and creates good morale. (1.2)
- Q: Volunteers are effectively consulted and involved in decision making at my brigade level. (1.2)
- Q: I feel the time I devote to CFA is productive and worthwhile. (1.3)



POOREST VoIWEL OUTCOMES

Volunteers responded most negatively to the following statements;

- Q: Volunteers are effectively consulted and involved in decision making at my local District/Regional level. (2.9)
- Q: CFA's workforce arrangements allow the paid staff and volunteers to work cooperatively as an integrated team. (3.0)
- Q: CFA corporate policies and leadership supports an effective volunteer based and fully integrated organisation. (3.0)
- Q: CFA provides enough training opportunities in formats, at times and at locations that make it easy for me to participate. (3.2)
- Q: Volunteers are effectively consulted and involved in decision making at CFA Corporate level. (3.9)



Now, rather than turning the results into a stick to beat people over the head with, the poorest results actually present the perfect opportunity to assist with the prioritisation of upcoming actions for us to work with CFA on. It will be the corresponding improvements that can be made to address the areas of highest dissatisfaction that will form the holy grail of changes required to pivot to a more volunteer focussed organisation in the future. This year's survey will shortly be commencing, and I urge all volunteers to participate and lend their voice to this incredibly important work.

You have heard me speak regularly about strengthening the role of groups, and why this is so important to our future organisational culture. And I include in that work any initiatives aimed at supporting, empowering and improving trust for all levels of volunteer leadership - including at brigade level with Captains, Lieutenants and other senior officers. In fact, it is this paradigm shift that will be central to embracing the opportunities ahead.

And below all the figures and statistics in the results – are a treasure trove of qualitative comments that provide heartfelt examples and personal perspectives direct from volunteers, on many of the things that matter the most to them. Both the qualitative and quantitative results are critical to understanding volun-

meet corporate needs. But when it comes time to meet some of the things vitally important to volunteer and community needs - sadly many volunteers are reporting that it is common practice for those needs not to be addressed with perhaps the same vigour or priority.

This highlights the palpable perception amongst volunteers that the 'needs' of the modern organisation is too often at odds and in stark contrast with the needs of its volunteers and the communities they serve. One of the biggest risks to CFA's future sustainability will come down to whether volunteers from our 1,219 brigades across Victoria see themselves reflected and mirrored back to them through the organisations future priorities, strategies, budgets and policies.

To paraphrase a 1973 Victorian Government publication commissioned by the then Chief Secretary; This is the volunteer fire fighter. An 'organisation person' if ever there was one, for without the organisation provided by the C.F.A. the volunteer would not be the force in the defence of their community that they are today. But, more important, without them the C.F.A. would not have achieved its present standing.

In the fully rounded description they cannot be seen apart, for each has helped in the evolution of the other. Without this united force it would be the people of Victoria who would be the losers.