



▶ **Submission to the Department of Internal Affairs on the 'Fire Services Review Discussion Document'.**

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▶ **Contact Details**

This submission is by a group

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► **Background**

Volunteering New Zealand

1. Volunteering New Zealand is the “voice of volunteering” in Aotearoa. Our vision is for a New Zealand that promotes, values and supports effective volunteering for the benefit of individuals and communities – and our mission is to promote, support and advocate for volunteering.
2. We are the only national organisation in New Zealand that focuses purely on volunteering. We hold the ‘big picture’ and are in a position to liaise, work with, and advise volunteers, government and business sectors. This helps ensure that volunteering occurs within a positive environment where it is encouraged and fostered.
3. Over the past 13 years, VNZ has raised the profile of volunteer groups, activities, and management. We promote volunteering and its value to New Zealand society through advocacy, sharing stories, and producing tools like the Best Practice Guidelines and Competencies for Managers of Volunteers.
4. We have a membership of 60 national and regional member organisations that involve volunteers in their work programmes. We advocate on behalf of these organisations and other groups that are not members, but are aligned to our mission and values.

New Zealand’s Voluntary Sector

5. New Zealand has more than 97,000 non-profit organisations, contributing 2.6% to GDP. This increases to 4.9% of GDP when taking into account the volunteer labour contribution and is similar to the contribution of the entire construction industry.
6. The most up-to-date data on the volunteer sector state that in New Zealand there are more than 1.2 million volunteers who give more than 270 million hours of unpaid labour to the sector. In 2008, 67% of the Community and Voluntary Sector workforce was made up of volunteers; 90% of New Zealand non-profit organisations employ no staff, and rely solely on volunteers¹.

¹ From the *The New Zealand Non-profit Sector in Comparative Perspective*, 2008

► **Submission**

The Fire Services Discussion Document (“the Discussion Document”) sets out several issues faced by the current Fire Services model. VNZ agrees generally that the framework for managing the volunteer Fire Service in New Zealand requires a comprehensive review, such as that provided for in this Discussion Document.

This submission focuses on volunteers within the Fire Service and the role they currently perform and the roles they will likely perform in to the future. Further, this submission does not address all the issues raised in the Discussion Document. Rather, we have proposed recommendations that do not fall neatly within any of the three options proposed or directly answers the questions asked in the Document. Nonetheless we believe our submission will strengthen the Department’s final recommendations.

For the purposes of this submission, we use the term “Fire Service” interchangeably to encapsulate all three categories of fire services described on page 4 of the Discussion Document.

Consistent with the United Fire Brigades Association submission, Volunteering New Zealand agrees on the issues of coordination of volunteers; national leadership and representation of volunteers; and the necessity of community support for volunteers. Any reforms must address these issues.

► **Context**

Across the whole of the voluntary sector the nature of the volunteering is changing. In rural areas populations are shrinking and aging² and in urban areas, changing demographics and economic pressures are increasingly challenging volunteer recruitment and retention.³

The Fire Service is particularly dependant on volunteers; with over 80% of fire service staff being considered volunteers (NZFS 2014 Annual Report).⁴ This pool of volunteers are being put under additional pressure by the increasing scope and professionalisation of their expected roles and duties.⁵ Professionalisation includes increased management and reporting that can be at odds with the traditional nature of volunteering. As discussed below in detail, volunteers have motivations unique from professional staff and respond differently to their roles and responsibilities.

² New Zealand Fire Service Commission. (2013). *Motivating, recruiting and retaining volunteer fire fighters in Rural Communities in New Zealand*. New Zealand Fire Service Research Report. Wellington, New Zealand.

³ Wilson, C. Hendricks, A. & Smithies, R. (2001) *‘Lady Bountiful’ and the ‘Virtual Volunteers’: The Changing face of Social Services Volunteering*. Ministry of Social Development. Wellington, New Zealand.

⁴ New Zealand Fire Service Commission. (2014). *Annual report*.

⁵ Department of Internal Affairs (2015). *Fire Services Review: Discussion Document*. Department of Internal Affairs. Wellington, New Zealand.

► **Issues**

The Discussion Document states that there is a lack of coordination and oversight of volunteers (p. 12). This point was raised before by the Swain report (p. 45).⁶ The Swain report also held that there are cultural issues within the fire service that make the effective use of volunteers problematic. The Discussion Document also identifies community support and financial matters as issues. We have addressed the role of communities in relation to volunteers but refrain from commenting on the non-volunteer related financial aspects of the Document.

Leadership of the voluntary firefighting workforce

From our understanding of the Discussion Document there appears to be issues of coordination and leadership of the volunteer workforce in the Fire Service. There appears to be no senior management position directly responsible for coordinating and promoting volunteer interests within the Fire Service. This finding was previously identified in the Swain report (2012).⁷ VNZ believes that for the Fire Service to be fit for purpose, volunteers need adequate representation on the Board and/or executive team. From VNZs perspective, it is important that this person is a current volunteer firefighter, or at least has experience as a volunteer firefighter.

As recognised in the Discussion Document, volunteers have different motivations to paid employees and therefore require different leadership and management requirements.⁸ We believe that if the Fire Service was adequately resourced with senior leadership of the voluntary firefighting workforce, the Fire Service will be in a better position to ensure volunteer firefighters are better understood and managed.

Coordination of the voluntary firefighting workforce

We strongly agree with the Discussion Document where it states that all three options should include a greater emphasis on including and engaging with volunteers (p16, 19 & 24).⁹

In regards to the coordination issues raised by the Discussion Document, recommendations should incorporate volunteers more effectively. As noted in the Discussion Document there is a conflict between the volunteer Fire Service workforce and the increased emphasis on formal learning (e.g. Unit Standards) and associated 'professionalisation'.

Given the scope of the Fire Services' duties, and the standards expected of its staff, structured and professional organisational management of volunteers is expected.

⁶ Swain, P (2012) *Report of the Fire Review Panel*. Department of Internal Affairs. Wellington, New Zealand.

⁷ Swain, P (2012) *Report of the Fire Review Panel*. Department of Internal Affairs. Wellington, New Zealand.

⁸ Department of Internal Affairs (2015). *Fire Services Review: Discussion Document*. Department of Internal Affairs. Wellington, New Zealand.

⁹ Department of Internal Affairs (2015). *Fire Services Review: Discussion Document*. Department of Internal Affairs. Wellington, New Zealand.

However several studies note that motivations of volunteers often contradict with the professional requirements of an organisation such as the Fire Service.

A recent research Report for the Fire Services Commission found that most rural fire volunteers join because of a sense of responsibility and duty to their communities.¹⁰ As the Discussion Document notes, the increase in professional standards takes time away from the activities that attracted volunteers in the first place. Stirling et al. (2011) found that “the practice of keeping a written record for volunteers showed significant negative effects on having enough volunteers”.¹¹ The authors go on to hypothesise that volunteers prefer management styles based on trust and interpersonal relationships. These reports and others, all emphasise that volunteers are distinct from paid employees: volunteers are compensated through a sense of purpose and achievement and not material rewards. Because of this, volunteers are less likely to embrace rigid directives that diminish or ignore their contributions.

To negotiate this organisational paradox, VNZ recommends that the Fire Service consider utilising the Volunteering New Zealand [Best Practice Guidelines](#) as a basis for approaching volunteer best-practice. The Guidelines provide a framework for organisations to assess their capability and capacity across the following four domains:

- How volunteers are viewed internally by the organisation?
- What steps the organisation can take to involve and recognise volunteers?
- Identify the support and resources needed for a strong volunteer programme.
- People with responsibility for volunteers have sufficient resources to effectively do their job.

We would also like to take this opportunity to reiterate the Government’s Policy on Volunteering (2002) where the Government commits to “ensuring good practice in volunteer programs which government directly manages”.¹²

Culture

The Swain report also found anecdotal evidence of a culture within the Fire Services which was not responsive to engaging, integrating and supporting volunteer’s firefighters (p45).¹³ VNZ consider this to be a closely related but separate issue to the point about coordination raised by the Discussion Document.

¹⁰ New Zealand Fire Service Commission. (2013). *Motivating, recruiting and retaining volunteer fire fighters in Rural Communities in New Zealand*. New Zealand Fire Service Research Report. Wellington, New Zealand.

¹¹ Stirling C, Kilpatrick S, Orpin P. (2011) *A Psychological Contract Perspective to the link between non-profit organisations management practices and volunteer sustainability*. Human Resources Development International. 2011; Vol 14, Issue 3.

¹² Government Policy on Volunteering (2002).

¹³ Swain, P (2012) *Report of the Fire Review Panel*. Department of Internal Affairs. Wellington, New Zealand.

It is the view of Volunteering New Zealand that if the recommendations above for increased volunteer engagement are implemented, then this cultural issue may become closer to being resolved.

Communities.

Volunteering is not a cost neutral exercise. Volunteers often make economic and/or social decisions to forego loss of income and/or personal time. Employers, and the families of volunteers also inevitable “pay” in similar ways.

For Fire Service volunteers, the demands on their time are particularly high, as most volunteer firefighters are effectively on call 24 hours a day. VNZ believes that it is critical that communities therefore continue to support volunteers. Providing communities with an easy way to have input and engage with their local/regional fire services is one way to develop stronger community links.

Recommendation 16 of the Swain Report recommends protection for the employers of volunteers from financial disadvantage when staff are responding to long duration events.¹⁴ This type of indirect financial support may also encourage community support for volunteers.

Conclusion

Volunteering New Zealand agrees with the findings of the discussion document that the framework of the fire service needs reconsideration.

We support the findings that there is a lack of coordination and leadership of volunteer firefighters. We also support the recommendation that volunteers be included and engaged throughout the organisation. To further resolve this issue we recommend that a senior management position be created with responsibility for volunteers, and their specific interests and needs. We also recommend that the VNZ Best Practice Guidelines are adopted or referred to as a means to engage with volunteers more effectively. We support local communities having input into their fire services.

Volunteering New Zealand is happy to provide further information and engage in discussion about these or other issues at the request of the Department of Internal Affairs.

¹⁴ Swain, P (2012) *Report of the Fire Review Panel*. Department of Internal Affairs. Wellington, New Zealand.