

# Western Australian Auditor General's Report



## Support and Preparedness of Fire and Emergency Services Volunteers



Report 17: August 2015

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WESTERN AUSTRALIAN AUDITOR GENERAL'S REPORT

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**Support and Preparedness of  
Fire and Emergency Services Volunteers**

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Report 17  
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**THE PRESIDENT  
LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL**

**THE SPEAKER  
LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY**

### **SUPPORT AND PREPAREDNESS OF FIRE AND EMERGENCY SERVICES VOLUNTEERS**

This report has been prepared for submission to Parliament under the provisions of section 25 of the *Auditor General Act 2006*.

Performance audits are an integral part of the overall audit program. They seek to provide Parliament with assessments of the effectiveness and efficiency of public sector programs and activities, and identify opportunities for improved performance.

This audit looked at how effectively the Department of Fire and Emergency Services were supporting and preparing fire and emergency services volunteers.

My report outlines a number of issues including an upward trend in volunteer turnover, a declining number of volunteer groups, especially in regional areas, and a rising concern about volunteer fatigue. The Department has a number of projects that should deliver improvements in these areas though many are still in planning or early implementation stages.

I wish to acknowledge the staff at the Department of Fire and Emergency Services and the many volunteers around the state that contributed their time to assist with this audit.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'C. Murphy'.

COLIN MURPHY  
AUDITOR GENERAL  
20 August 2015

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## Auditor General's Overview

Western Australia relies heavily on fire and emergency services volunteers. Well over 20 000 volunteers in 800 volunteer emergency service units provide an essential response capability across the state. In 2013-14, over 31 000 fires, road crashes, natural disasters and other incidents were recorded, with volunteers responding to around a third of these.



Volunteers often respond to situations that are dangerous and stressful. They work alongside career fire fighters and other paid staff, but can also be the only responders at an incident. They perform a diverse range of tasks, from frontline responses to logistics, communication and administration. Maintaining the wellbeing and safety of volunteers and by extension, the people and infrastructure they protect and serve means that our volunteers must be well trained, equipped and supported to do their work.

Responsibility for training, equipping and generally supporting volunteers rests primarily with the Department of Fire and Emergency Services (DFES) and to a lesser extent local government councils to whom nearly 80 percent of the volunteers are logistically tied.

Since its establishment in 2012, DFES has significantly improved the management of emergency service volunteers. But volunteer numbers, training, equipment, support and fatigue are ongoing issues. The importance of DFES and local governments staying on top of these issues cannot be overstated.

I would like to thank DFES and the fire and emergency service volunteers we spoke with during our site visits and the 1 316 volunteers that took the time to respond to our statewide survey. This report would not have been possible without their cooperation and contribution.

# Executive Summary

## Introduction

This report assessed if the Department of Fire and Emergency Services (DFES) effectively recruits, prepares and supports fire and emergency services volunteers.

Our audit considered both DFES and local government (LG) volunteers. DFES are not responsible for, but are reliant on and involved in the recruitment, preparation and support for LG volunteers.

## Background

Volunteers are a critical part of the state's response to fires and emergencies that occur every day. They freely give their time to perform what is often demanding and dangerous work. To do this they need to have support for their recruitment and retention, training, counselling, and insurance. Volunteers also require personal protective clothing and specialised vehicles and equipment.

DFES is Western Australia's lead hazard management agency and is directly responsible for 1 100 career firefighters as well as about 23 per cent of the state's reported 29 000 fire and emergency services volunteers.

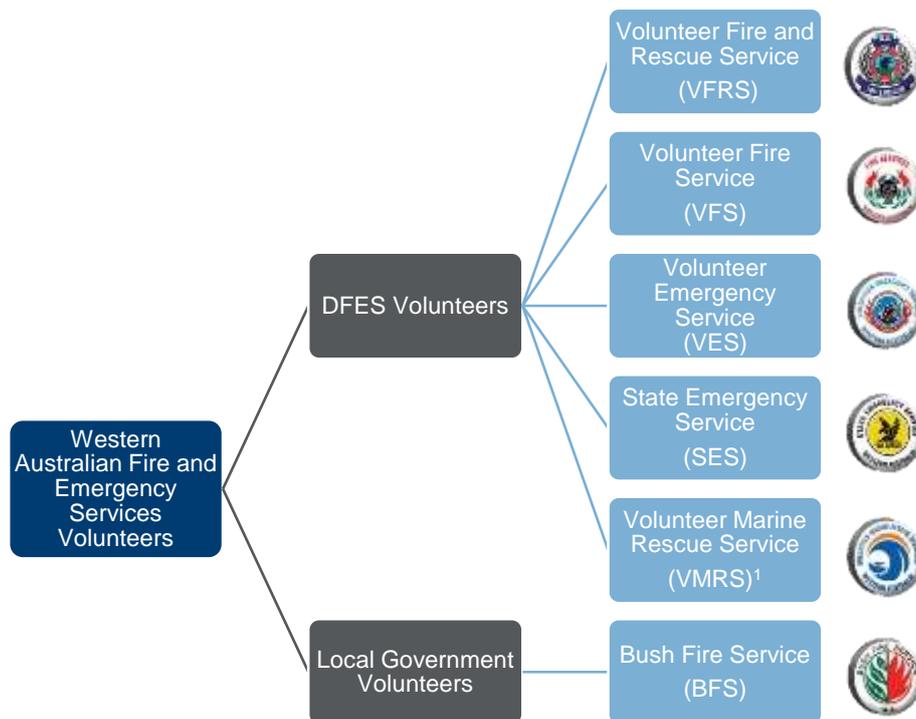
The remaining 77 per cent of volunteers fall under the authority of local governments. LGs administer their own Bush Fire Brigades, with support from DFES. This means that while DFES is accountable for fire and emergency responses, it is not responsible for all volunteers that respond to incidents.

WA's fire and emergency services protect people and assets during emergencies and natural disasters like fires, storms, road crashes and land and sea searches. In 2013-14, DFES spent around \$350 million to deliver these services to the state.

Regional and remote WA rely heavily on fire and emergency volunteers. Of the 800 volunteer service groups across the state, around 700 are located outside the Perth metropolitan area. Of the 28 career fire and rescue stations, only four are located outside of the Perth metropolitan region.

The location of a volunteer will influence the types of incidents to which they respond. For example, in regional areas with low populations, volunteers mainly respond to bushfires. But, near major roads, in large regional towns and in the Perth metropolitan area, there is a mix of incidents such as bushfires, structural fires or road crash rescues.

All volunteers must complete induction training and receive ongoing training to maintain and enhance their skills. Volunteers will train in a range of areas including operational activities, incident control, management, and leadership. Some volunteers actively respond to emergencies and work on the front line. Others perform support roles, doing communication, logistical and administrative activities.



**Figure 1: Volunteer Fire and Emergency Services**

DFES is involved in the recruitment, training and support of all volunteers. However, its level of involvement is less for volunteers that report to LG.

Most funds for supporting volunteers come from the Emergency Services Levy, which DFES administers. Each year, LGs apply to DFES for funds to cover capital and operating costs of their fire and emergency services.

DFES has undergone considerable change since it formed in 2012 from the Fire and Emergency Services Authority (FESA). The restructure was recommended following the *Perth Hills Bushfire Review 2011*<sup>2</sup> and criticism that FESA had lost focus on operational readiness.

Since its formation, DFES has been an agency in transition. DFES is aware of a number of important issues regarding the management of its volunteers.

In November 2012, DFES started a review of the emergency services Acts, including the *Fire Brigades Act 1942*, the *Bush Fires Act 1954* and the *Fire and Emergency Services Act 1998*. The aim of the review is to create ‘a single comprehensive emergency services Act which will improve community safety and better support all emergency services in the future.’

In April 2014, DFES released a *Concept Paper: Review of the Emergency Services Acts*. At the time of this audit, the review had entered its final stage, which includes seeking approval to draft and enact Bills.

<sup>1</sup> The Volunteer Marine Rescue Service (VMRS) accounts for less than five per cent of all fire and emergency services volunteers. They do not fight ground fires and therefore receive different training to other services. In June 2015 changes to legislation meant that the VMRS was funded through the Emergency Services Levy. Prior to this, the VMRS were funded by the state and federal governments.

<sup>2</sup> *A Shared Responsibility: The Report of the Perth Hills Bushfire February 2011 Review*.

## Audit Conclusion

Maintaining a sustainable volunteer workforce is a looming issue. Identified errors in DFES' records of volunteer numbers suggest that the actual number is about 20 per cent less than the reported 29 000 members. Compounding this is an upward trend in volunteer turnover, a declining number of volunteer groups, especially in regional areas, and a rising concern about volunteer fatigue.

But since forming in November 2012, DFES has made considerable progress in identifying ways to improve how it recruits, prepares and supports its volunteers. A number of projects should deliver improvements in these areas though many are still in planning or early implementation stages.

DFES rely on local governments to provide it with data about their volunteers but records on volunteer availability, training and attendance at incidents is often inaccurate. As a result, DFES lacks data to identify gaps in volunteer service capability and to inform its recruitment and retention efforts.

Since 2012, DFES has been developing good training programs for volunteers and has made major changes to its professional development branch. However, volunteers are often unable to access training due to unavailability of DFES trainers and assessors and cancellation of training courses.

Volunteers generally had the equipment they needed to perform their roles. However, there is room for improvement in DFES' consultation and engagement with volunteers around equipment decisions.

DFES provide recognition and support services to volunteers but communication around which services are available to volunteers needs to improve. There is a gap in the awareness and understanding about what services are available to both DFES and LG volunteers.

## Key Findings

- DFES does not know how many volunteers it needs. It has not assessed the number of volunteers required in specific locations to respond to incidents. Without a clear understanding of this, DFES cannot know if it has gaps in its service capability and the seriousness of those gaps. DFES advised it will be creating risk profiles for all services, that take into account physical and human resources before the end of 2015.
- DFES knows that volunteer membership records are inaccurate and that volunteer numbers are about 20 per cent less than the reported 29 000. This is due in part to both DFES and LGs relying on manual systems to update volunteer records. Further, a significant number of volunteers do not regularly respond to incidents. DFES records do not accurately reflect volunteer availability. Incomplete volunteer training records contribute to this issue, as DFES does not have a clear picture of volunteers trained to respond.
- Data trends show that volunteer turnover has been an ongoing issue since 2006, with an annual turnover of around 15 per cent across all services. Exit surveys and our discussions with volunteers identified issues around management and supervision styles (of other volunteers and DFES staff) and not feeling valued. To address increasing turnover, DFES is developing an Emergency Services Volunteer Workforce Sustainability Strategy. Although aimed to start in 2014, the draft strategy has still not been circulated for consultation. DFES expect to circulate the strategy by September 2015.

- DFES knows what operational skills its volunteers need and has developed training programs based on this. However, geographic isolation, availability of trainers and assessors, and inaccurate training records affect training delivery. This means, volunteers may not be appropriately skilled to respond to incidents, potentially leading to significant safety risks.
- Almost 82 per cent of the respondents to our statewide survey of volunteers said that they had all or most of the equipment they needed to perform their roles. This result was backed by our discussions with volunteers at the sites we visited. However, a few volunteer groups raised concerns around the suitability of some equipment for their local conditions and delays in getting equipment, particularly personal protective clothing.
- Existing DFES policies do not address volunteer fatigue and as a result, volunteers must self-manage their fatigue. This carries considerable risks when volunteers do not manage their fatigue effectively. For example, it is not unusual for volunteers to respond to an incident after already having worked a full day of paid employment. Fatigue can be physically and mentally hazardous for volunteers and may be a significant occupational health and safety risk during an incident.
- While volunteers were generally happy with the recognition, counselling, and insurance provided by DFES, some issues exist. Primarily, volunteers and some DFES staff are confused around what services are available to which volunteers. This means that volunteers may not access services such as counselling when required. Planned changes to legislation should help address these issues, but DFES will need to communicate availability of services more effectively.

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## Recommendations

### The Department of Fire and Emergency Services should:

- **Continue to implement the major change projects it has in place, including Professional Pathways, and review them to assess if they will address all the key findings in this report. In particular, within six months DFES should set priorities and begin implementing the Emergency Services Volunteer Workforce Sustainability Strategy.**
- **Within 12 months, improve its processes for collecting and maintaining volunteer membership, availability and training records. To do this it will need to work with local governments to improve the accuracy of LG volunteer membership information.**
- **Within 12 months, develop volunteer specific policies and procedures, including fatigue management, consistent with the *Guidelines for Successful Partnerships between Public Sector Agencies and Volunteers*.**
- **Within six months, consider improved processes for consulting with and engaging volunteers and continue to work with LGs to improve information sharing and communication. Specifically, DFES should improve communication around its decisions on equipment and training as well as provide better information about access to services.**

## Response from Department of Fire and Emergency Services

The Department of Fire and Emergency Services (the Department) welcomes the Auditor General's report into the support and preparedness of emergency services volunteers. Volunteers are an essential component of Western Australia's (WA) emergency response capability. They play an important role in preparing for, and protecting the community during emergencies.

We are three years into a major reform program. Our strategic plan initiatives focus on building more contemporary emergency services and working more cohesively with our emergency management partners. Many of these initiatives will impact positively on our support for emergency services volunteers.

The Department has acknowledged for some time that improving the sustainability of its volunteer workforce and building their capacity and emergency response capability are among its key challenges going forward. We are progressing several strategic initiatives to value, protect and develop WA's fire and emergency services volunteers:

- Following widespread consultation a 10 year volunteer sustainability strategy will be released at our annual Volunteers Conference in September.
- To improve volunteer retention the Department is implementing a volunteer leadership program and providing training on working with volunteers to its District Officers.
- A structured DFES training platform is being developed to better structure volunteers' access to the skills and standards needed to support a successful hazard and emergency response. Volunteers can also opt to participate in an educational pathway if they choose to, accommodating those seeking nationally accredited qualifications.
- Communicating with, and hearing from, volunteers will be improved through regular surveys and an improved volunteer internet portal.
- The Department has undertaken significant work to ensure legislation adequately reflects the needs of volunteers. Proposed changes to legislation will equalise access to insurance for all volunteer groups and provide cover for those volunteer fire fighters who develop prescribed cancers. A similar provision for prescribed cancers was made recently for career fire fighters.

Like all areas of emergency management, volunteers are a shared responsibility. Effective volunteer partnerships require collaboration with local government, volunteer associations, other government agencies and non-government organisations. We will continue to work with our stakeholders to ensure our volunteer liaison and support is well-coordinated.

The Department has also thoroughly reviewed the emergency services Acts which govern its activities. It is intended that the revised legislation would deliver a number of benefits, including volunteers who are increasingly better trained and resourced and who strive to keep themselves and others safe. The new legislation will also enable the Department to address several of the issues raised in this report.

The Department would like to thank volunteers for the services they provide and their commitment to keeping our State safer, particularly in times of emergency.

## Audit focus and scope

This audit looked at whether the Department of Fire and Emergency Services (DFES) is effectively recruiting, preparing and supporting fire and emergency services volunteers. We focused on the following lines of inquiry:

- Does DFES effectively recruit and retain fire and emergency services volunteers?
- Does DFES effectively train and equip fire and emergency services volunteers?
- Does DFES provide sufficient support to fire and emergency services volunteers?

The *Guidelines for Successful Partnerships between Public Sector Agencies and Volunteers Fifth Edition – March 2014* developed by the Department of Local Government and Communities informed our audit plan.

We conducted an online volunteer engagement survey. The survey closed on 6 March 2015 with 1 316 responses. A summary of the survey results is shown in Appendix 1.

The audit conduct did not include the Volunteer Marine Rescue Service (VMRS), Education and Heritage Volunteers or the Emergency Services Cadet Corps. However, we did invite VMRS volunteers to respond to our online volunteer engagement survey.

The audit primarily focused on DFES management of volunteers during 2013 and 2014.

We attended the WA Fire and Emergency Services Conference 2014 to hold focus groups with volunteer attendees from all services.

We also visited three regional locations and met with volunteer Brigade, Unit and Group Leaders, DFES and LG staff and held focus group discussions with both DFES and LG volunteers.

We reviewed DFES documentation, sampled membership, training and equipment records, and interviewed relevant DFES staff.

We conducted the audit in accordance with Australian Auditing and Assurance Standards.

## DFES does not know how many volunteers there are or how many it needs

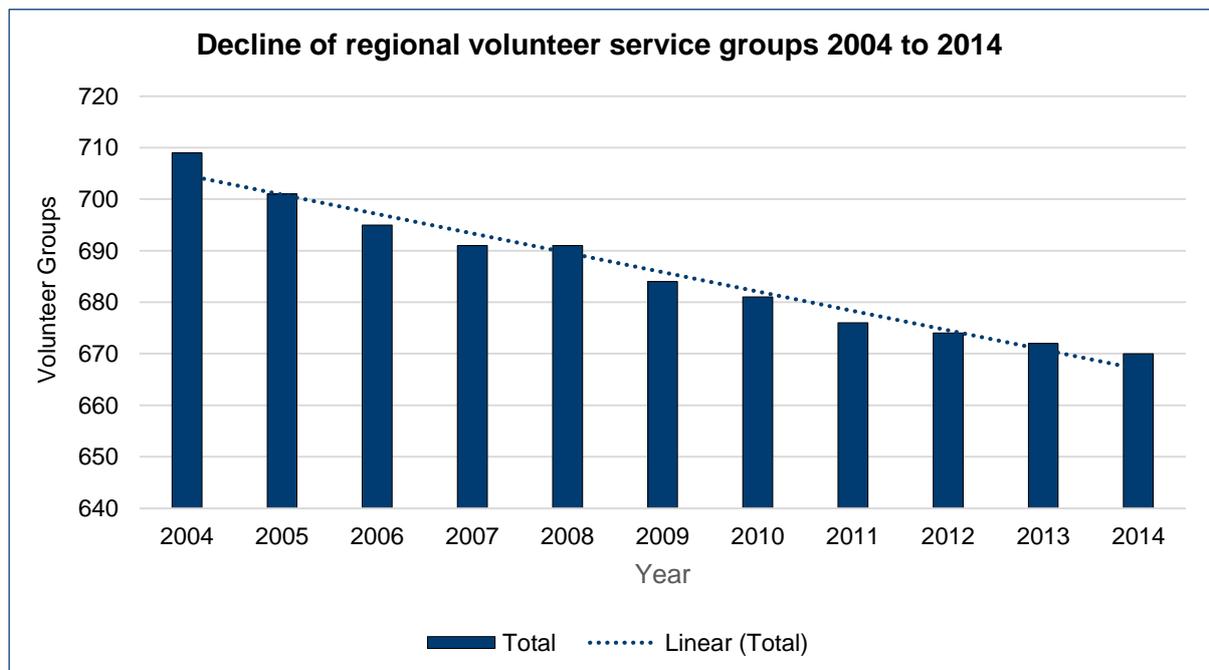
DFES provides some support to volunteer groups for the recruitment of new members. However, its capacity to identify current and emerging service gaps across the state is affected by a lack of information. DFES needs information about the type and number of volunteers it requires in each location, backed by accurate and reliable data on volunteer membership, availability, and training.

DFES has recognised that the annual volunteer turnover of around 15 per cent across both DFES and LG volunteer services is problematic and is developing a strategy to reduce turnover.

## Volunteer numbers are determined by who is willing and able to volunteer

DFES does not have risk profiles to help it determine what kind of volunteers it needs and where. Risk profiles include identifying the nature, likelihood and severity of potential incidents occurring, and using this to determine the numbers and types of resources required to address these risks. Past attempts to develop regional risk profiles involved five out of 10 regions in the state before the project ceased due to other priorities. These issues will become more significant if current recruitment and turnover trends continue though we noted that DFES was able to manage the 2014-15 bush fire season which was one of the worst in many years.

By their nature, volunteers are those with the motivation and ability to donate their time. But in many regional areas, motivation is losing the battle to population decline. Any decline in volunteer numbers places added strain on current volunteers and in the worst case, communities will lack the numbers to operate a volunteer unit (Figure 2). As discussed later in this report, volunteer fatigue is an increasing problem that can have significant short and long terms impacts.



Source: DFES and OAG

**Figure 2: Decline in the number of regional volunteer service groups 2004 to 2014\***

\*Does not include VMRS.

While the Volunteer Marine Rescue Service (VMRS) was out of scope for this audit, the work they are doing in this space is relevant. DFES is currently trying to determine a Resource to Risk Decision Support Model for the VMRS. The aim of the model is to ensure that the risks that exist in various locations correspond with the resources (in terms of type, size and number) available to deal with those risks. DFES advised it would roll out a similar model for all volunteer units by December 2015.

Without an understanding of how many volunteers it needs in specific areas DFES cannot predict service gaps across the state. DFES currently manages this risk by calling on volunteers from other regions to fill gaps as they arise. In situations where there is no volunteer capability, DFES can deploy career firefighters. For major incidents, DFES has also called for assistance from other states.

## Skill profiles partly determine how many volunteers are required

In the absence of full risk profiles, DFES relies on skill profiles for each volunteer group to identify the number of volunteers it needs and the training they require to respond safely to incidents. According to its policy, DFES should review profiles every three to five years, but in practice, reviews occur infrequently.

Profiles are developed from incident response information. We noted the potential for delays in the development or review of profiles as DFES relies on volunteer groups to provide the relevant incident information, which is not always timely. We also noted that the profiles do not take account of local conditions that may affect the number of volunteers needed in a community. For example, a regional area with a high fly-in, fly-out population may need more volunteers to respond than an area with a regularly available population base.

In 2013, DFES commenced undertaking Operational Readiness Reviews for the Volunteer Fire and Rescue Service. The purpose of the review is to determine if the volunteer groups are meeting appropriate standards, including skills profiles. The reviews therefore provide important assurance about the readiness of the groups.

DFES conducted 24 such reviews in 2014. We looked at the readiness reports on five groups and found that none met their full skill profile. The plan, in part, is for these reports to inform the training needs of the service, but inaccurate training records hamper this. Later in this report, we discuss the challenges DFES has in delivering training.

For regional and remote volunteer groups that struggle to recruit members, meeting these skill profiles is difficult. DFES recommend that when skill profiles are not met, the volunteer groups should increase recruitment and upskill existing volunteers to achieve the required profile. However, this recommendation reflects an approach that some volunteer groups say is not realistic. Table 1, taken from a DFES District Officer's Station Inspection Report, further demonstrates this point. The report notes that *'.....despite constant efforts to recruit it is a very difficult town to encourage volunteers and highly unlikely that we will ever fully achieve the required profiles.'*

Skill	Operational Minimum	Available Number	Difference
Hazmat	10	0	-10
DFES Advanced Structural	10	0	-10
CPR, Oxygen & Cervical Collar	10	0	-10
Off Road Driving	8	0	-8
Pump Operations	8	2	-6
Road Crash Rescue	10	4	-6
On-Road Driving	8	2	-6
Incident Control L1 Natural	4	0	-4
Incident Control L1 Bushfire	4	0	-4
Incident Control L1 Urban	4	1	-3
Breathing Apparatus Wearer	10	8	-2
Structural Firefighting	10	14	4
Bush Fire Fighting	10	16	6

Source: DFES and OAG

**Table 1: Example of a VFRS skills report, required against actual skills**

## Membership and training data is inaccurate

DFES knows volunteer records are inaccurate. A 2012 DFES review found inaccuracies in key volunteer information and concluded that this posed operational and administrative risks. The review attributed the inaccuracies to the membership system, manual processing and workloads at regional offices. Three years later, we found that the same risks remain.

In 2012, prior to the introduction of Operational Readiness Reviews, DFES commissioned an internal review of its volunteer workforces' capacity to meet operational needs. The review assessed the records of both DFES and LG volunteers (whose records are incorporated in DFES' systems).

The review found that out of date volunteer membership records had caused a 24 per cent overstatement in volunteer numbers. Our own sample in 2015 found a 21 per cent error rate. DFES depends on its regional offices to update and maintain volunteer membership data for its own volunteers and for LG volunteers. Our site visits confirmed that heavy workload and low task priority affect the capacity to do this job.

Considerable uncertainty exists about the reliability of DFES systems on whether a volunteer is active or non-active. The DFES review showed that around 55 per cent of volunteers self-identified as active, while 89 per cent of these said they responded to incidents giving a response capability of 49 per cent.

However, DFES incident records show that of the 29 000 registered DFES and LG volunteers, only 4 733 (16 per cent) actually attended an incident in 2013-14. It is likely that the incident records are inaccurate given that DFES relies on volunteers to record this information and input it into its incident database. Nevertheless, volunteers confirmed during our site visits that only a core group of volunteers turn out for most incidents.

There are also weaknesses in the collection and maintenance of volunteer training records. In 2012, DFES identified that its training record management system was not user friendly and accessibility was limited to a few key members of staff. It also found that there were different processes to enter data. For example, some DFES staff use manual records in addition to the information in the training system and these are sometimes different. Possible causes are changes in coding of training modules and human error in data entry. There are also no consequences or incentives for updating records. While on site visits, volunteers at all locations and from various services told us their training records were not kept up-to-date.

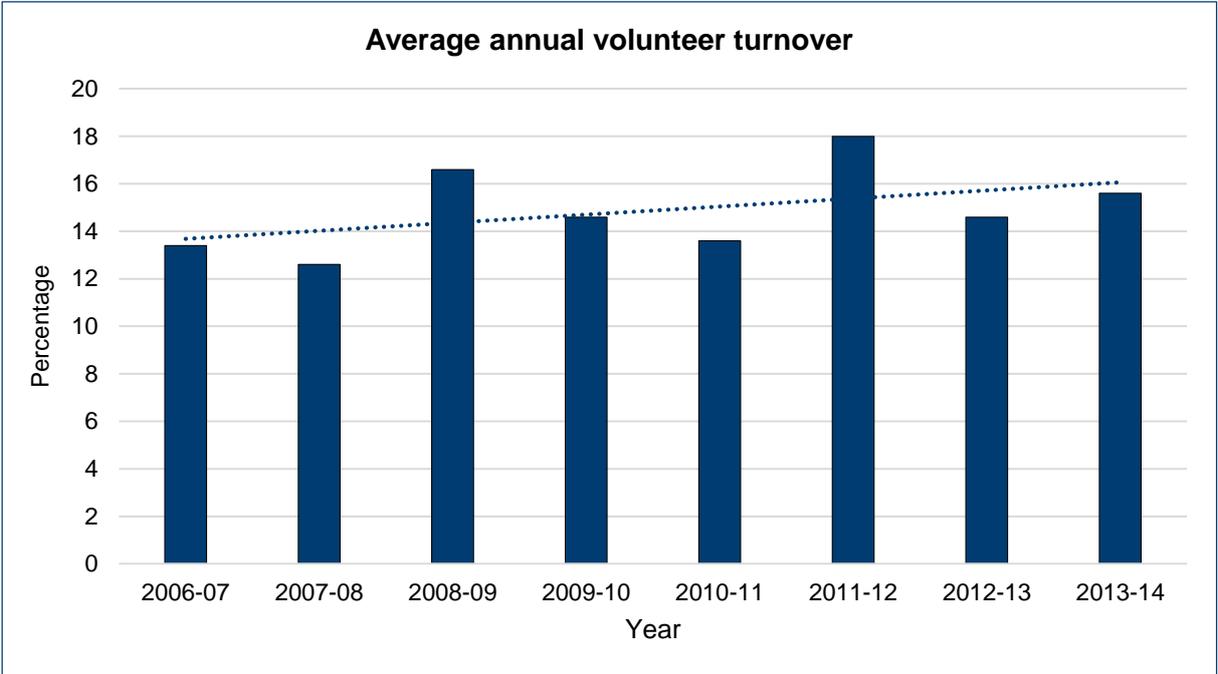
DFES is in the process of implementing an Enterprise Training Management System that should improve how it manages and maintains volunteer training records. More information on this is provided later under the heading ‘Volunteer training has improved but access can be difficult.’

As discussed earlier in this report, volunteer groups often do not meet their minimum skill profiles. The Volunteer Operational Readiness Reviews we reviewed pointed to inaccurate training records as a potential reason for capability against skill profiles being so low. DFES is limited in its ability to plan training for volunteers without reliable data. Poor data also affects DFES’ ability to make informed decisions about skill profiles and operational capabilities.

### Turnover is increasing across all volunteer services

Average annual volunteer turnover is around 15 per cent across DFES and LG volunteer services, but has fluctuated between 12 and 18 per cent since 2006. Significantly, it is in an upward trend (Figure 3).

DFES knows volunteer turnover is costly and impacts training and equipment provision, but it does not know the actual cost. A DFES 2013 Volunteer Engagement Survey (DFES Survey) identified turnover as an area that required further assessment.



Source: DFES and OAG

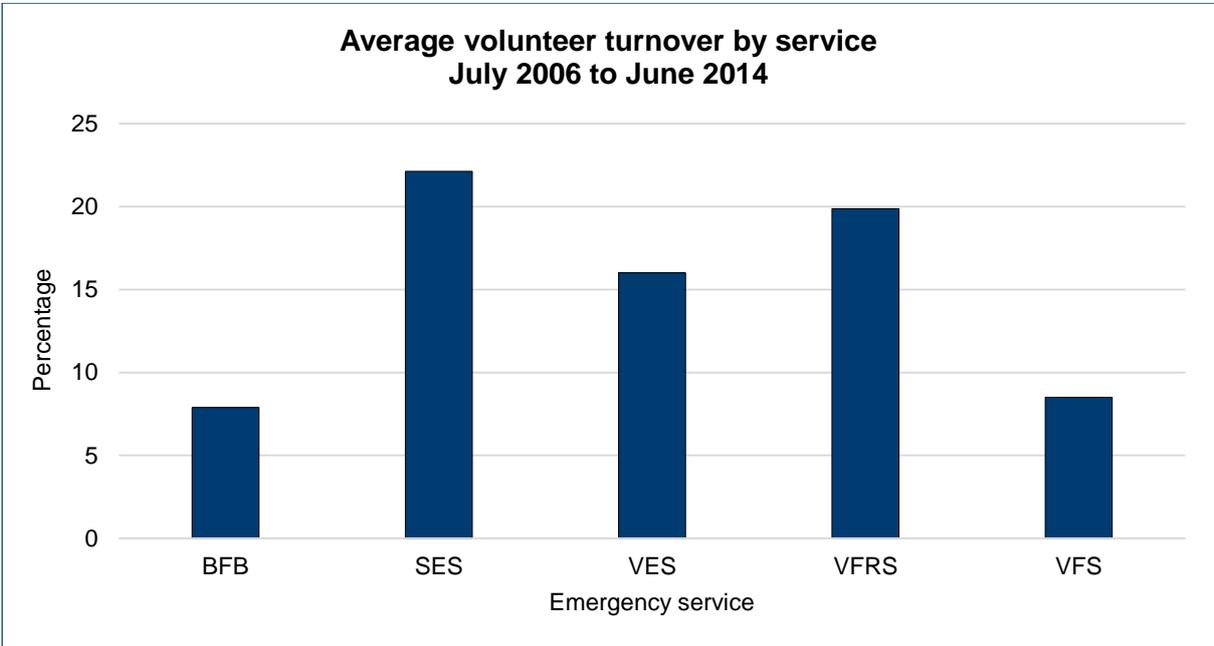
**Figure 3: Average annual volunteer turnover\***

\*Does not include VMRS.

DFES is currently developing its Emergency Services Volunteer Workforce Sustainability Strategy. The strategy includes activities to determine the cost of turnover. At June 2015, the work was not yet funded, though DFES has applied for federal funding to complete an economic modelling project for the recruitment, development and retention of emergency volunteers.

Not all services experience the same level of turnover. The SES and VFRS have the highest average turnover, at 22 and 20 per cent respectively (Figure 4). DFES does not know why turnover is higher in some services than in others. The DFES Survey suggested that cliques and cronyism are important factors in the turnover of volunteers, and could influence whether volunteers encourage others to join. While on site visits, we were told of other reasons for turnover including:

- volunteers moving out of the area
- no longer having the time to commit
- finding that the role was not what they expected.

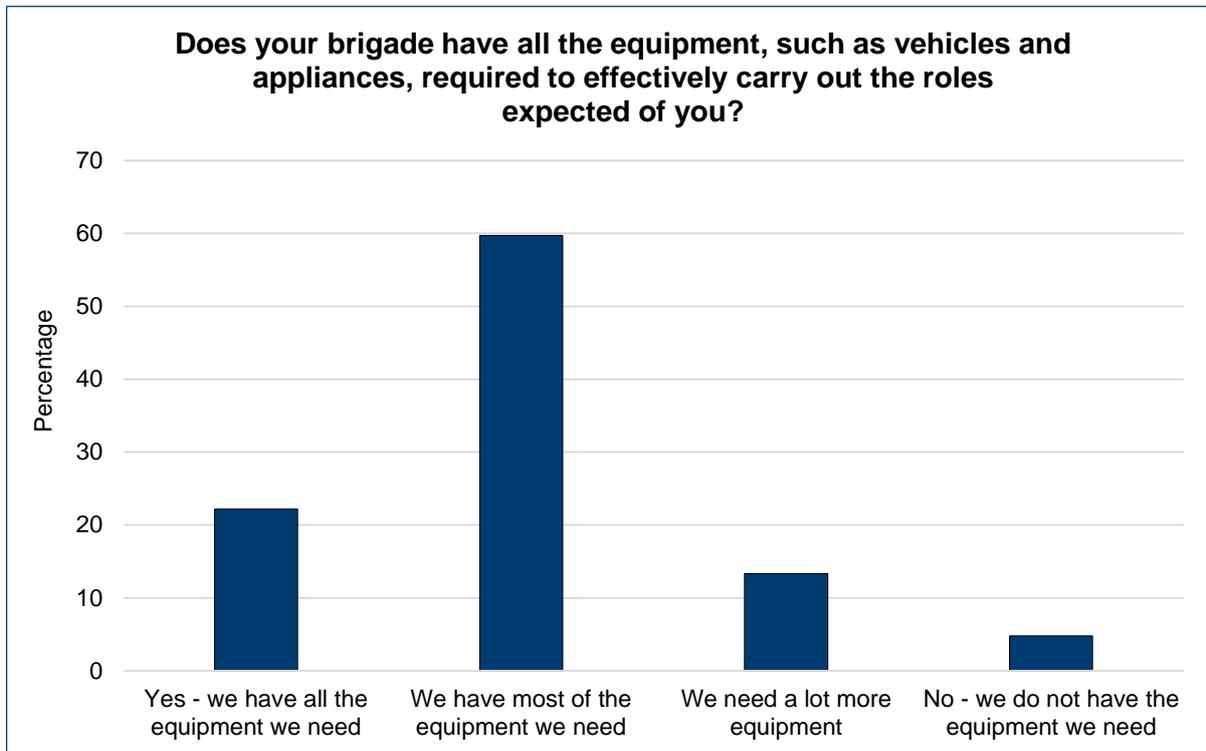


Source: DFES and OAG

**Figure 4: Average volunteer turnover by service**

## Most volunteers have the equipment they need

Almost 82 per cent of the 1 254 volunteers that responded to a question about equipment in our statewide survey of volunteers said that they had all or most of the equipment they needed to perform their roles (Figure 5). This result was backed by our discussions with volunteers at the sites we visited. Where volunteers had equipment concerns, these mostly related to whether the style of vehicle was best suited to their local conditions and the timely provision of personal protective clothing.



**Figure 5: Office of the Auditor General 2015 volunteer survey responses — Question 13**

In October 2013 during a DFES Volunteer Vehicle and Equipment Advisory Committee meeting, a volunteer representative raised concerns around the need for DFES to more effectively engage volunteers during vehicle design and selection. The minutes noted that 'Vehicle fit outs and designs have been raised by [Committee] members time and time again over the past years and it was determined that we need to revisit the issues holistically.' The Committee provided advice to DFES management on the performance and operation of vehicles and equipment. The Committee's membership included representation from both DFES and volunteer services, including LG volunteers.

We heard similar complaints while on site visits about the way DFES engage with volunteers. DFES advised it is looking at ways to improve its consultation and engagement, including through an online portal, visits from the Corporate Leadership Team, and when trialling new equipment. It has created a number of new committees and is also in the early stages of consultation to replace the Volunteer Vehicle and Equipment Advisory Committee.

In mid-2014 DFES established Volunteer Advisory Committees (VAC). VACs are responsible for advising the Fire and Emergency Services Commissioner about any issues that may impact the operation or administration of their particular volunteer service, for example equipment issues. At the time of our report, most services had operational VACs, but the BFS did not.

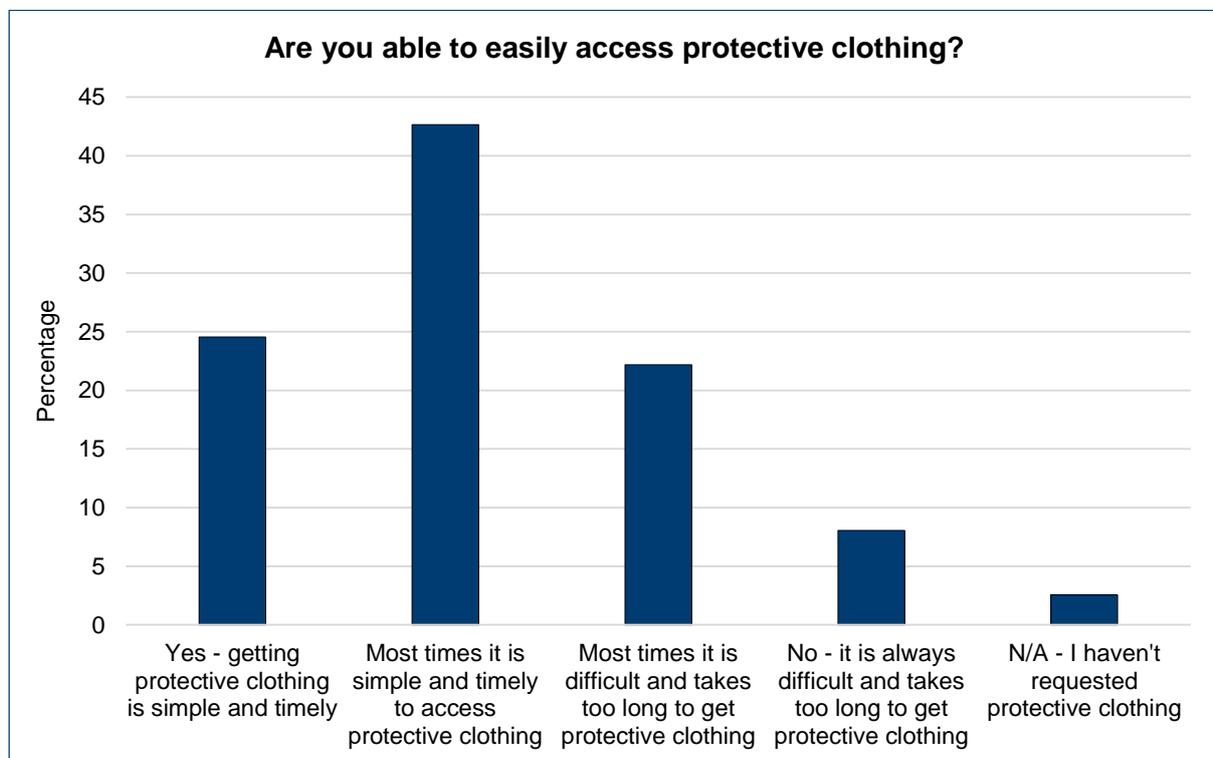
### Responses to our statewide survey of volunteers — concerns around vehicles:

*'Equipment is poorly designed and not suited to local conditions – equipment is over designed, costly and not suited to the more 'occasional' use of a volunteer brigade' – BFB, Male, 50-59 age group*

*'We need more equipment for off road use we are a bush fire brigade 99 per cent of our call outs are in the bush and we need decent four wheel drives' — VES & BFB, Male, 19 or under age group*

**Figure 6: Examples of responses to the Office of the Auditor General 2015 volunteer survey**

While on site visits, we also heard frustration from volunteers around the difficulties in ordering and delays in receiving personal protective clothing. Comments were that they would often receive only part of their delivery, with the rest on back order. Responses to our survey supported these comments. Although 67 per cent responded positively, 30 per cent said that access to protective clothing was difficult (Figure 7).



**Figure 7: Office of the Auditor General 2015 volunteer survey responses – Question 14**

In interviews with DFES staff, they blamed this problem, in part, on the following causes:

- a paper based ordering system with risks that orders could be misplaced
- multiple approvals are required before orders are processed
- some volunteer groups may not factor in supplier delivery timeframes. For example, placing orders a week before they are needed, when the supplier delivery may take three weeks
- DFES do not control which supplier LGs purchase through, which could impact processing times and delivery.

DFES uses a single supplier for their protective clothing. At the time of our audit, DFES was trialling a new online ordering system. It expects this new system will provide improved order tracking, remove the risk of misplaced paper order forms and allow for improved auditing of equipment provision. Volunteers on site visits indicated that some delays related to supplier issues, rather than DFES processes.

While we expect the new system will provide some improvements, it may not fully address the timeliness issue. This is because at the time of our audit the new system did not monitor the time taken between an order being placed to when it was approved. DFES advised it would look at incorporating this control.

## Volunteer training has improved but access can be difficult

DFES developed its new training program, Professional Pathways, as part of its response to the Perth Hills Bushfire Review 2011. Between 2012-13 and 2015-16, DFES will invest nearly \$4 million in Professional Pathways (Table 2). The project identifies prerequisites, ongoing training and individual progression pathways as key requirements.

Approved Budget	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16
\$3 860 804	\$359 138	\$728 866	\$1 599 900	\$1 172 900

Source: DFES

**Table 2: Professional Pathways project budget 2012-13 to 2015-16**

The project aims to align training with roles and pathways. Effective allocation of resources will depend on DFES' planning of training needs.

An important component of the project will be the introduction of an online Enterprise Training Management System (ETMS). This will allow volunteers to view the courses they enrol in and monitor progression against their pathway.

DFES' 6 800 volunteers will be required to use the new system. However, the ETMS will be optional for the approximate 22 200 LG volunteers. The use of the ETMS requires that volunteers have access to a computer and the internet. Volunteers based in regional and remote locations do not always have reliable internet access. DFES also know that many of its older volunteers do not use computers.

Widespread uptake of the ETMS will provide DFES with improved information about training needs and training delivered to volunteers.

Inaccurate training records, discussed earlier in this report, has delayed the roll out of the pathways project. This is because the lack of training records prevented DFES from matching volunteers to their appropriate pathways. DFES is addressing this issue by distributing training packs to volunteers, who then verify if the records are correct or require amendment. At 27 February 2015, DFES had distributed around:

- 27 000 firefighter training record packs, amended records and issued 1 512 Volunteer Firefighter 1 Pathway Certificates
- 2 597 SES training record packs, amended records and issued 495 SES Fast Track 1 Pathway Certificates.

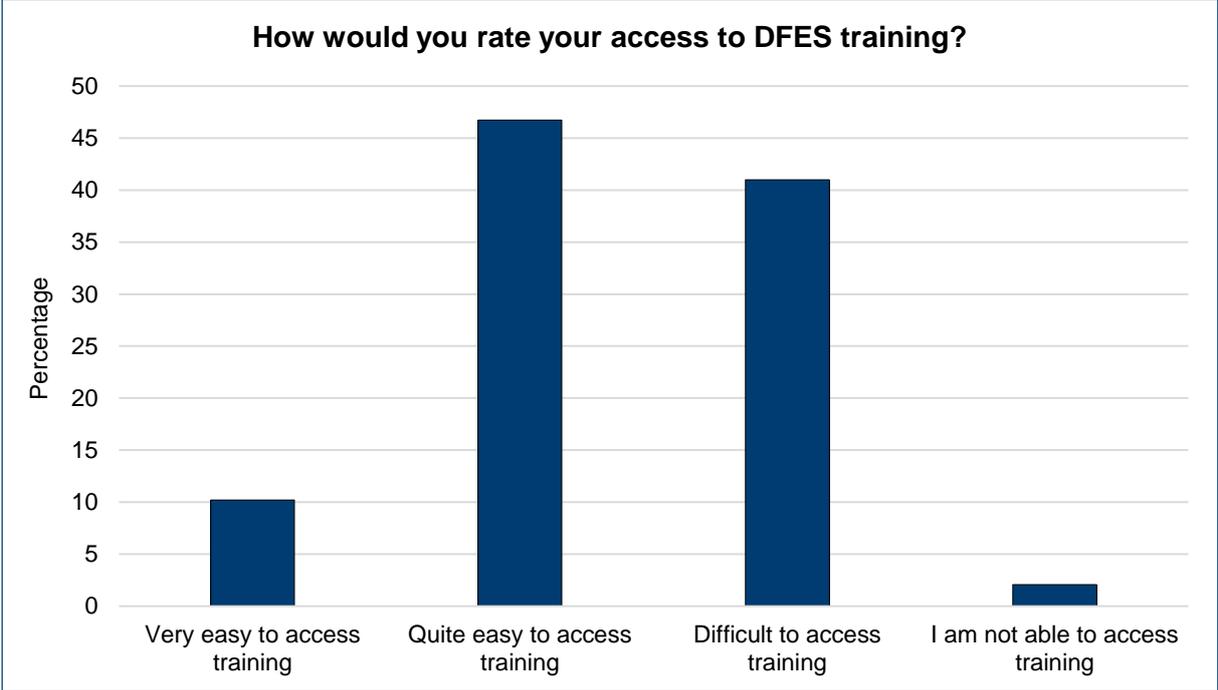
This represents around six per cent of volunteer fire fighters and 19 per cent of SES volunteers that have had their base training confirmed. Additional certificates are being issued monthly.

### Access to training is affected by cancellation of courses and limited availability of DFES trainers and assessors

Although DFES has made considerable changes to improve how training is structured and delivered, we found that volunteers are often unable to access training due to limited availability of DFES trainers and assessors and cancellation of training courses. Ensuring volunteers have easy access to regular training is important for operational capability as well as volunteer engagement and retention.

During our site visits, many volunteers talked about having had training cancelled at short notice. While we could not confirm this from DFES records, it was evident from our survey

responses that access to training needs improvement. Forty-one per cent of respondents said that it was difficult to access training with another two per cent saying that it could not be accessed (Figure 8).



**Figure 8: Office of the Auditor General 2015 volunteer survey responses – Question 12\***

\*This question did not specify if the training volunteers were trying to access was mandatory for their pathway or role.

Some of the evidence we gathered suggests that perhaps not surprisingly, the more remote groups wait longer for training. For example, one DFES volunteer group in the East Pilbara told us they had been waiting over a year for some of their refresher training. They explained this is due in part to District Officers attending major incidents, accumulating leave, then being required by DFES to clear that leave liability. When they go on leave, training is cancelled. The volunteers stressed that they did not feel this was a reflection on the District Officers but of the way DFES resource trainers and assessors.

The 2013 DFES Survey indicated that provision of advanced and refresher courses is limited. Our site visits confirm that this is an issue for volunteers. For example, in 2014 there were only 11 entries in the training records system for Advanced Bush Fire Fighting courses. However, there were 299 introductory Bush Fire Fighting courses in that same period. Advanced and refresher training plays an important role in operational capability as well as volunteer engagement and retention. The DFES Survey also found cancellation of training is another core issue for volunteers. Training is cancelled for a number of reasons, such as insufficient participants or trainer availability.

# Support services are provided to volunteers, but there are some weaknesses

## There are a range of support services available to volunteers

DFES knows the importance of providing volunteers with support services. These include the provision of recognition, counselling, insurance, and reimbursement of costs. Volunteers were generally satisfied with the support services provided by DFES. Further, DFES has revived its Peer Support Program.

DFES has a volunteer Reward and Recognition Policy as well as a number of recognition programs in place. One of the key events is the annual award ceremony at the Fire and Emergency Services Conference. Recognising and celebrating volunteers supports ongoing participation and promotes volunteering in the community.

Recognition also happens at a local level, through newspaper articles, LG recognition programs and through local District Officers. In 2014, DFES also expanded an innovation portal, 'Portal to Progress', which provided volunteers (and DFES staff) an opportunity to input their ideas to improve the way the organisation operates.

DFES has three key components to their counselling support services. These are their Chaplaincy, Employee Assistance Program and Peer Support Program. Volunteers were generally very positive about the support programs they could access. However, we noted inconsistencies between what LG volunteers thought they had access to and DFES policy.

Around 40 per cent of respondents to our survey had tried to access support services. Seven volunteers responded with the 'No – I cannot access support services when I need them' option and almost 10 per cent indicated that they found it difficult to access services (Figure 9).

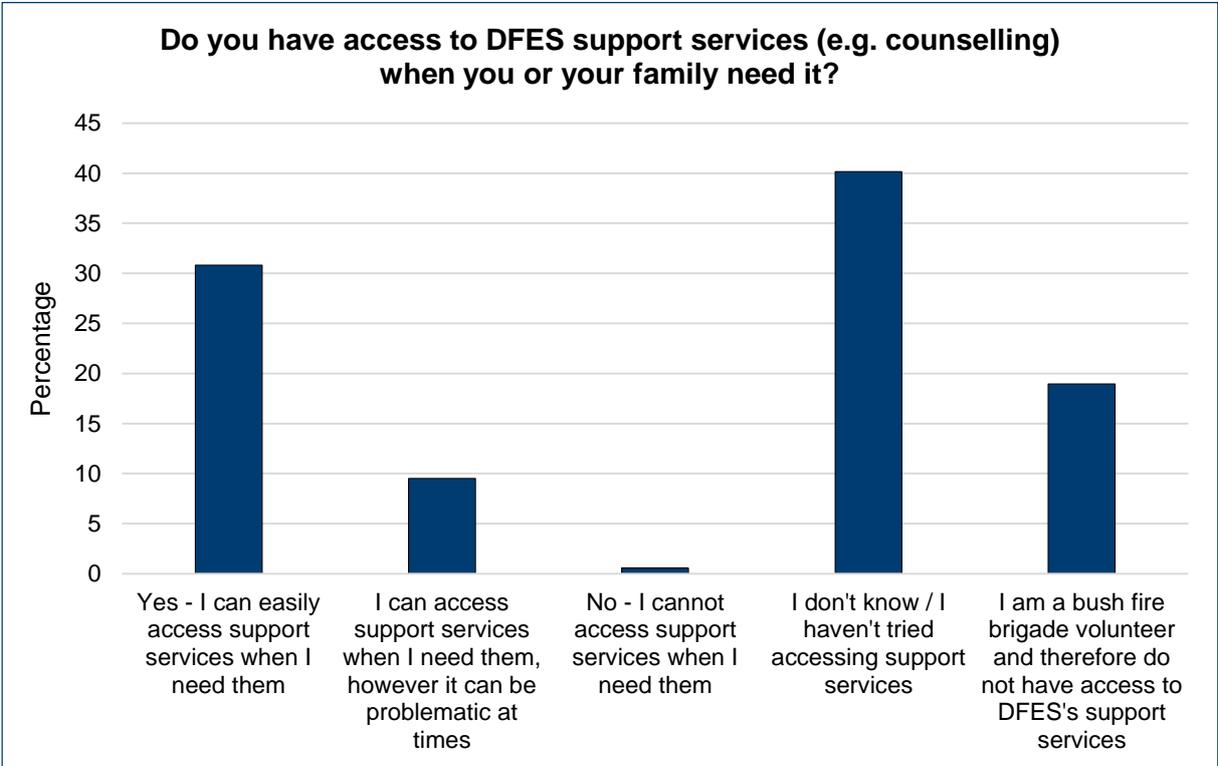


Figure 9: Office of the Auditor General 2015 volunteer survey responses – Question 18

Responses from some LG volunteers to this question highlighted confusion around what DFES services LG volunteers can access. Almost 19 per cent of respondents selected 'I am a bush fire brigade volunteer and therefore do not have access to support services.'

We spoke to senior DFES staff who explained that it would be 'highly irregular' for DFES to provide welfare type services to LG volunteers. They said that LG volunteers should be encouraged to seek support from their LG.

However, we understand that if LG volunteers respond to a DFES controlled incident that is identified as potentially traumatic, LG volunteers would then be included in the DFES support response.

Essentially, LG volunteers involved in an incident will be supported when DFES has a duty of care. Outside of this, DFES does not provide support for LG volunteers, nor is it resourced to. DFES needs to improve communication both internally and to volunteers about the type of support services available and the circumstances when LG volunteers can access them.

Requesting counselling assistance can be a difficult decision. Volunteers should be provided with clear information about how to access this assistance when necessary. Current legislation contributes to confusion around who is responsible for who. DFES are nearing the end of a legislative review process. One outcome of the legislative review will be changes that will enable LGs to hand over responsibility of volunteers to DFES, if they choose to.

In 2012, the Community Development and Justice Standing Committee (CDJSC) of Parliament released their Toll of Trauma Report, which identified weaknesses in the tracking of staff and the number of traumatic events they attended. Although the finding related to paid staff, volunteers also attend traumatic incidents and DFES should monitor them in a similar way.

DFES does not have an integrated system for their data management. This means that DFES cannot reliably identify who has responded to a traumatic incident and who may therefore require follow up and support.

DFES staff rely on incident response information to identify the need to offer support requirements for volunteers. However, DFES staff have told us that there can be significant delays entering incident response reports into its system. Delays in accessing those reports will have flow on delays to providing assistance.

All volunteers are insured by either LG or DFES. During our site visits, volunteers were generally comfortable with the process for making insurance claims, provided they followed correct processes and completed all required paperwork. We heard of one instance of a delay of almost a year to a LG volunteer's claim after it was sent incorrectly to DFES rather than processed through the LG.

DFES provides insurance for DFES volunteers and LG provide insurance to LG volunteers. However, because different services are covered under different insurance provisions, not all volunteers are entitled to the same level of insurance cover, even if attending the same incident. The *Bush Fire Act 1954* sets out insurance arrangements for LG volunteers and the *Fire Brigades Regulations 1943* detail the insurance levels for the VFRS. There is no legislative provision around insurance for the SES or the VES, in absence of this DFES covers these volunteers under its personal accident policy.

In 2012, the Minister for Emergency Services announced legislative changes to provide consistent insurance cover for all volunteers operating under the emergency services Acts and to simplify compensation claims for career and volunteer firefighters diagnosed with certain cancers. Cabinet authorised DFES to draft these legislative amendments in September 2014. DFES expects the Bill to be introduced to Parliament in 2015.

### Peer Support Program

DFES has revived its Peer Support Program as part of a need identified through the CDJSC Inquiry, 'Toll of Trauma'. The Inquiry received submissions from the VFRS and SES recognising the value of the Peer Support and Chaplaincy programs. In early 2012, DFES conducted a survey to gauge interest in the Peer Support Program. Overwhelmingly, 95 per cent of respondents indicated that they would use the service.

Development of the new Peer Support Program is based around 'a mate helping a mate' philosophy. DFES have released an updated Peer Support Officer Manual and in late 2014 advertised for Peer Support Officers. In 2014 DFES appointed 60 Peer Support Officers, with 38 of those being volunteers.

While conducting site visits we heard strong support for the program, but volunteers felt there were insufficient training opportunities and support for current peer support officers. The new program provides access to additional training for Peer Support Officers.

**Figure 10: DFES Peer Support Program**

## The management of fatigue amongst volunteers needs improvement

In their evidence to the CDJSC, DFES indicated they were developing a fatigue management policy. However, almost three years on, a fatigue management policy is still not in place. Fatigue management is mentioned across a number of other policies, but only at a high level.

Recognition by DFES of the very specific issue of volunteer fatigue management is important. Many volunteers are attending incidents after having already worked a full day in their paid employment or private businesses (e.g. farming). Unlike career firefighters, for whom DFES is their primary employer, volunteers are attending incidents in their own time. This significantly increases the risk of fatigue and may affect volunteer retention.

During our site visits, a number of volunteers identified the complexity of fatigue management. One volunteer gave the example of attending an incident after a long day at work, then spending several hours at an incident. The volunteer commented that a DFES policy may require them to stop working at that point but that this would then be at odds with leaving unattended a fire that puts the safety and livelihood of their friends and neighbours at risk. Volunteers commented that if there is no one to take over from them, they have few options.

The *Guidelines for Successful Partnerships between Public Sector Agencies and Volunteers* highlights that volunteers need to be recognised and managed appropriately, which is not always the same as paid employees. But, DFES do not have volunteer policies and procedures. Rather, volunteers are included under DFES standard policies and procedures, which overlooks some of the crucial differences in motivations of a volunteer workforce.

## Appendix 1 — Office of the Auditor General 2015 survey of fire and emergency services volunteers

In 2015 the Auditor General invited fire and emergency services volunteers to have input to this audit through a survey including taking comments on the objective and lines of inquiry.

The survey was open from Monday 2 February 2015 to Friday 6 March 2015, and promoted by the Western Australian Local Government Association, and Department of Fire and Emergency Services websites, volunteer portal, 24Seven magazine and District Officers. We also worked with volunteer Prescribed Associations to circulate the survey to their members.

Not all 1 316 respondents completed every question. Some questions included space for limited comments. Respondents wanting to provide additional comment were invited to write to [consultation@audit.wa.gov.au](mailto:consultation@audit.wa.gov.au). We received seven responses via the consultation email.

The following is a summary of the survey results<sup>3</sup>.

**Question 1:** Which service do you volunteer for? (You can select more than one option.)\*

Answer Choices	Responses** (%)
State Emergency Service	23.33
Volunteer Emergency Service	2.20
Volunteer Fire and Rescue Service	17.63
Volunteer Fire Service	5.62
Volunteer Marine Rescue Service	7.29
Bush Fire Brigade	57.37

\* Total is greater than 100 per cent as some volunteers are members of more than one service.

\*\*Number of survey respondents who answered this question: 1 316

**Question 2:** What is your service number — all 1 316 answered this question.

**Question 3:** Which region are you based in?

Answer Choices	Responses* (%)
Midwest Gascoyne	8.51
Perth Metropolitan – Metro North Coastal	8.59
Perth Metropolitan – Metro North East	16.11
Perth Metropolitan – Metro South Coastal	11.63
Perth Metropolitan – Metro South East	9.88
South West	16.26
Lower South West	8.89
Kimberley	1.60
Pilbara	3.65
Goldfields Midlands	8.28
Great Southern	6.60

\*Number of survey respondents who answered this question: 1 316

<sup>3</sup> Although VMRS volunteers were out of scope for the audit they were invited to respond to our survey. Their responses have been included in our survey findings.

**Question 4:** Are you: male or female?

Answer Choices	Responses* (%)
Male	77.74
Female	22.26

\*Number of survey respondents who answered this question: 1 316

**Question 5:** What is your age group?

Answer Choices	Responses* (%)
19 or under	1.44
20 – 29	9.12
30 – 39	14.82
40 – 49	21.20
50 – 59	22.34
60 – 69	23.33
70 or over	7.75

\*Number of survey respondents who answered this question: 1 316

**Question 6:** What type of volunteer are you?

Answer Choices	Responses* (%)
Operational	89.13
Support	8.59
Other	2.28

\*Number of survey respondents who answered this question: 1 316

**Question 7:** How long have you been a fire and emergency services volunteer?

Answer Choices	Responses* (%)
Less than 12 months	5.55
1 to 5 years	29.79
6 to 10 years	19.98
11 to 20 years	23.10
21 to 30 years	10.49
More than 30	11.09

\*Number of survey respondents who answered this question: 1 316

**Question 8:** How would you rate your experience of joining as a volunteer?

Answer Choices	Responses* (%)
Very positive	19.39
Positive	24.00
Okay	8.91
Negative	1.33
Very negative	0.47
N/A – I joined before 2012**	45.90

\*Number of survey respondents who answered this question: 1 279

\*\*DFES formed in 2012, prior to this it was FESA. FESA operations are out of scope of this audit.

**Question 9:** How much effort does your brigade invest in retaining volunteers?

Answer Choices	Responses* (%)
My brigade has a major focus on retaining volunteers	46.60
We put some effort in, but it is not a priority	31.59
We only make effort when absolutely necessary	9.30
We make little/no effort and could do a lot more in this space	7.27
I don't know	5.24

\*Number of survey respondents who answered this question: 1 279

**Question 10:** Do you feel your brigade is provided with adequate support by DFES to recruit and retain volunteers?

Answer Choices	Responses* (%)
I feel that we are very well supported	15.79
We are given some support	33.70
We are given very little support	28.69
We are not supported at all	13.84
I don't know	7.98

\*Number of survey respondents who answered this question: 1 279

**Question 11:** Do you have any other comments regarding recruitment and retention? (please comment in 50 words or fewer) — 567 respondents answered this question, 749 skipped it.

**Question 12:** How would you rate your access to DFES training?

Answer Choices	Responses* (%)
Very easy to access training	10.21
Quite easy to access training	46.73
Difficult to access training	40.99
I am not able to access training	2.07

\*Number of survey respondents who answered this question: 1 254

**Question 13:** Does your brigade have all the equipment, such as vehicles and appliances, required to effectively carry out the roles expected of you?

Answer Choices	Responses* (%)
Yes – we have all the equipment we need	22.17
We have most of the equipment we need	59.73
We need a lot more equipment	13.32
No – we do not have the equipment we need	4.78

\*Number of survey respondents who answered this question: 1 254

**Question 14:** Are you able to easily access protective clothing?

Answer Choices	Responses* (%)
Yes – getting protective clothing is simple and timely	24.56
Most times it is simple and timely to access protective clothing	42.66
Most times it is difficult and takes too long to get protective clothing	22.17
No – it is always difficult and takes too long to get protective clothing	8.05
N/A – I haven’t requested protective clothing	2.56

\*Number of survey respondents who answered this question: 1 254

**Question 15:** Do you have any other comments regarding training and equipping? (please comment in 50 words or fewer) — 657 respondents answered this question, 659 skipped it.

**Question 16:** Have you received recognition from your brigade for your contribution as a volunteer?

Answer Choices	Responses* (%)
Yes – I have received recognition	67.98
I have received some recognition, but it was not enough	12.18
No – I have not received any recognition	19.84

\*Number of survey respondents who answered this question: 1 240

**Question 17:** Have you been reimbursed for approved expenses in a timely manner?

Answer Choices	Responses* (%)
Yes – I am always reimbursed in a timely manner	25.16
I am usually reimbursed in a timely manner	23.39
Most times it takes too long to be reimbursed	6.29
I am never reimbursed in a timely manner	2.98
My reimbursement claims are never approved	1.05
N/A – I have never claimed for expenses	41.13

\*Number of survey respondents who answered this question: 1 240

**Question 18:** Do you have access to DFES support services (e.g. counselling) when you or your family need it?

Answer Choices	Responses* (%)
Yes – I can easily access support services when I need them	30.81
I can access support services when I need them, however it can be problematic at times	9.52
No – I cannot access support services when I need them	0.56
I don't know/I haven't tried accessing support services	40.16
I am a bush fire brigade volunteer and therefore do not have access to DFES's support services	18.95

\*Number of survey respondents who answered this question: 1 240

**Question 19:** Do you have access to support services (e.g. counselling) through your Local Government or elsewhere when you or your family need it?

Answer Choices	Responses* (%)
Yes – I can easily access support services when I need them	9.01
I can access support services when I need them, however it can be problematic at times	7.30
No – I cannot access support services when I need them	5.58
I don't know/I haven't tried accessing support services	78.11

\*Number of survey respondents who answered this question: 233

**Question 20:** Do you have any other comments regarding volunteer support? (please comment in 50 words or fewer) — 516 respondents answered this question, 800 skipped it.

**Question 21:** Please let us know if you do not wish your comments to be quoted in our report?

Answer Choices	Responses* (%)
You may use my anonymous comments in your report	90.51
Do not use my comments in the final report	9.49

\*Number of survey respondents who answered this question: 1 222

## Auditor General's Reports

Report Number	Reports	Date Tabled
16	Follow-On: Managing Student Attendance in Western Australian Public Schools	19 August 2015
15	Pilbara Underground Power Project	12 August 2015
14	Management of Pesticides in Western Australia	30 June 2015
13	Managing the Accuracy of Leave Records	30 June 2015
12	Opinions on Ministerial Notifications	25 June 2015
11	Regulation of Training Organisations	24 June 2015
10	Management of Adults on Bail	10 June 2015
9	Opinions on Ministerial Notifications	4 June 2015
8	Delivering Essential Services to Remote Aboriginal Communities	6 May 2015
7	Audit Results Report — Annual 2014 Financial Audits	6 May 2015
6	Managing and Monitoring Motor Vehicle Usage	29 April 2015
5	Official Public Sector Air Travel	29 April 2015
4	SIHI: District Medical Workforce Investment Program	23 April 2015
3	Asbestos Management in Public Sector Agencies	22 April 2015
2	Main Roads Projects to Address Traffic Congestion	25 March 2015
1	Regulation of Real Estate and Settlement Agents	18 February 2015

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