

External Review of Culture and Issues Management to support the Country Fire Authority of the Future

Summary of Key Findings and Recommendations
April 2022



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



The original artwork in our Acknowledgement of Country was produced by
Emma Walke.

Emma is a Bundjalung Aboriginal woman from northern NSW.

This Review Team has had the privilege to learn about the extraordinary work of the Country Fire Authority (CFA), the dedication of its more than 55,000 members (of which more than 54,000 are volunteers and more than 1300 are staff/secondees) and the generosity and commitment of so many who freely give their time to ensure the safety of others. During the Review, we were privy to concerning disclosures relating to bullying, harassment and discrimination across the organisation. However, we were also heartened and reassured by the commitment of the leadership group at CFA to reconciling and acknowledging the wrongs of the past and investing in a bright future that seeks to build on initiatives that are already under way and celebrate the successes of this formidable organisation.

We take this opportunity to thank all members of CFA for the assistance we have received during the Review. The Executive Leadership Team through the Chief Executive Officer, Natalie McDonald and the Chief Officer, Jason Heffernan, ensured that we had regular communication and that we had ready access to the resources necessary to complete this review. The Review included a significant desktop review and extensive stakeholder engagement across Victoria. This was supported by several people across the organisation at state, regional and district level and in particular, we thank Tracey May, John Hussey and Kylee Bates, for their extensive support.

During our stakeholder engagement, many CFA staff at all levels of the agency, and many Assistant Chief Fire Officers (ACFOs) and Commanders were generous in their time and their feedback.

We thank all those CFA members, both past and present, who spoke to members of the Review Team between September 2021 and March 2022. Hundreds of CFA members freely gave us their time and organisational knowledge. They reflected on the positive aspects of CFA – the unitary purpose of protecting those around them, the opportunities to expand their skills and the sense of camaraderie. Members also came forward and showed enormous courage to trust us with disclosures relating to bullying, harassment, discrimination and more broadly behaviour that should not be tolerated. All of these conversations were crucial to support us to develop our understanding of the challenges being faced by CFA.

Finally, there were other organisations that are part of the framework that form our emergency services, including Fire Rescue Victoria (FRV) and the Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria (VFBV) – we also thank them for their time and input into this report.

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Scope of the Review



SCOPE OF THE REVIEW

This Summary Report provides an overview of the findings and recommendations from the independent review of culture and issues management to support the CFA of the future (the Review).

The independent review was undertaken by Allen + Clarke Consulting, with Dr Helen Szoke AO as the Lead Reviewer.

The Review was focused on supporting CFA to make improvements in the following areas:

1. The way it establishes and manages the behavioural and cultural expectations of its members and staff
2. The way it supports its leaders and leadership teams to set expectations and to manage issues when they arise
3. The way it manages grievances, complaints and issues and the escalation paths and options for matters that cannot be resolved
4. Its overall organisational culture to support diversity, productivity and innovation.

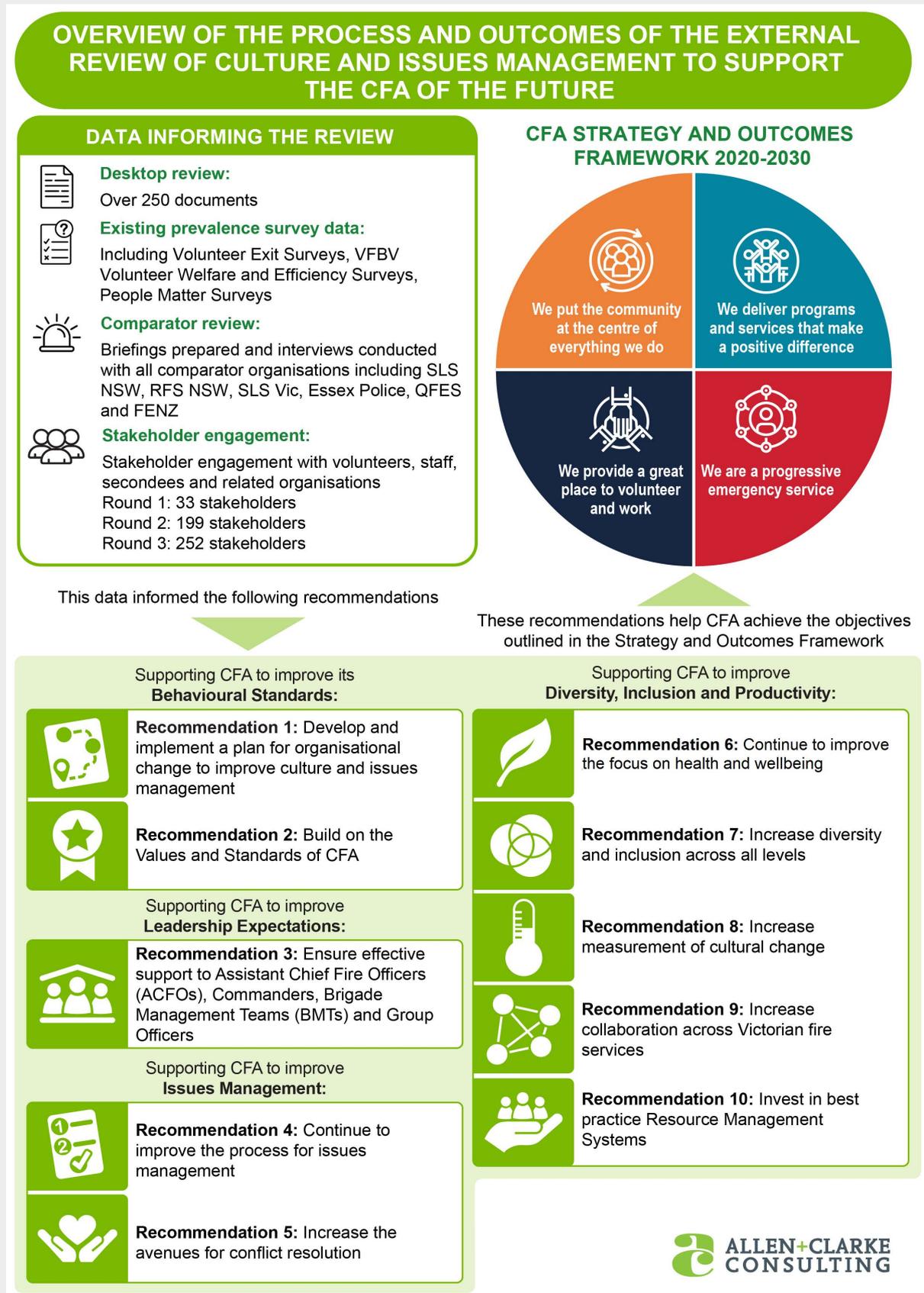
The recommendations from this Review have been informed by the following:

1. The Review Team evidence and data gathering process including:
 - a. consultative processes with members and key stakeholders,
 - b. review and assessment of existing prevalence survey data, policies and procedures, and
 - c. a review of comparator organisations and best practice guidance
2. Internal reforms which have been developed by the Chief Executive and Chief Officer since the 1 July 2020 as outlined in [Figure 2](#) below.

The voices of stakeholders including volunteers, staff and secondees are included in the [full report](#). The consultations during phases three and four of the Review involved a self-selected sample of stakeholders (including volunteers, staff and secondees) who had both positive and negative comments and experiences with CFA. It was not the Review brief to investigate, corroborate nor act on any of the matters raised with the Review team. Necessary support or information about CFA processes to raise complaints was provided at each of the stakeholder meetings.

[Figure 1](#) provides an overview of the process and outcomes for the External Review into Culture and Issues Management for CFA of the Future. A full report is available at www.cfa.vic.gov.au.

Figure 1: Overview of Process and Outcomes for the Review



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Context from the Reviewers



CONTEXT FROM THE REVIEWERS

On the 1 July 2020, new legislation came into effect which made CFA a volunteer firefighting service (Fire Services Reform). It followed eight significant reviews of fire-fighting services since the tragedy of the 2009 fires in Victoria and the Royal Commission established following those fires.

Fire Services Statement May 2017

Volunteers are, and will remain, vital to our response. It's why, under these changes, Country Fire Authority (CFA) will revert to a volunteer firefighter organisation. CFA will continue to serve the same communities and be enshrined under law.

The Hon James Merlino MP Minister for Emergency Services

In addition to legislative changes that reinforced the importance of volunteers and their role in CFA, it resulted in paid fire fighters being transferred from CFA and incorporated as part of the newly formed Fire Rescue Victoria, and a plan for how to manage the transition of 35 integrated brigades where historically CFA operated jointly with the then Metropolitan Fire Brigade. These structural and legislative changes, whilst part of an overall Government plan to modernise fire services, are significant changes for CFA, and are still being bedded down and understood.

This Review was initiated by CFA in this context, with a view to building on the important history of CFA, meeting the challenges of the transition pathway of the Fire Services Reform, and the opportunities to build for the future.

It is important to recognise the history of CFA to inform the strengths of how to build for the future. CFA was formed from the tragedy of the 1939 fires, following a Royal Commission. It builds on the history of localised fire services dating back to the nineteenth century. CFA is now one of the largest volunteer organisations in the world.

There are enduring features of CFA which define its core – more than 54,000 volunteers across the state, 1212 local brigades, over 1300 staff/secondees who support the large volunteer membership, and a significant proportion of these staff also volunteer in their local communities. CFA provides a continuous response to fire and emergency incidents, working with other emergency management services across Victoria. The brigades are local, they know their community, they know their landscape, and they know their partners in other emergency services. This means they know how to manage a response and make the judgement calls to ensure that their mission, keeping the community safe, can be met.

This Review has been initiated as we re-emerge as a State from two years of disruption from the impacts of COVID-19, which have affected communities across Victoria and how CFA has been able to keep connected with its members. The Review also recognises that Victoria, as with other parts of Australia, will face more extremes of weather patterns that may herald fiercer fires, and more demand as we cope with a changing environment. We can be certain that CFA will face continuous change to successfully respond to demands in the future.

This Review acknowledges that there is still a process of recognition for the harm that some members have experienced in CFA of the past. We have included the voices of those people who shared their experiences of behaviour which is bullying, harassing or discriminatory and which has made them feel unsafe and unwanted. We have heard of the tensions in some local brigades, where disputes may be long running and challenging to resolve, and cases where early intervention may have resolved issues at the community level much earlier.

We have heard of the perceived shortcomings of CFA as a government agency supporting volunteers and the negative impact of the churn of leadership in the last decade, the lack of consistent leadership at a district and regional level and the impact of the most recent Fire Services Reform which many CFA members feel have devalued their contribution, notwithstanding decades of experience accumulated in voluntarily fighting fires and responding to other emergencies. A number of the initiatives implemented since July 2020, that seek to remedy these matters, are still being understood by members.

Conversely, we have also heard the strengths of what keeps CFA going. That it is an organisation with a strong recognition across Victoria, that not only delivers services to the community, but which offers opportunities. There is a recognition of the strong leadership demonstrated by the Chief Executive Officer and the Chief Officer in initiating a strategy of improvement since the 1 July 2020 reforms were put in place, and cautious and growing recognition of the improvements that are being made (see [Figure 2](#) below).

This Review proposes establishing a plan for organisational change – a plan that builds on recent reform initiatives and proposes some steppingstones to build on their strengths. Volunteers are at the heart of CFA and this plan recognises their ongoing contributions, identifies ways they can continue to be supported in their roles, proposes how they can broaden the base of volunteers into the future and makes clear the leadership capabilities that are needed and should be supported at the local level – not just to fight fires but to build teams and to empower new volunteers to join, to stay and to contribute.

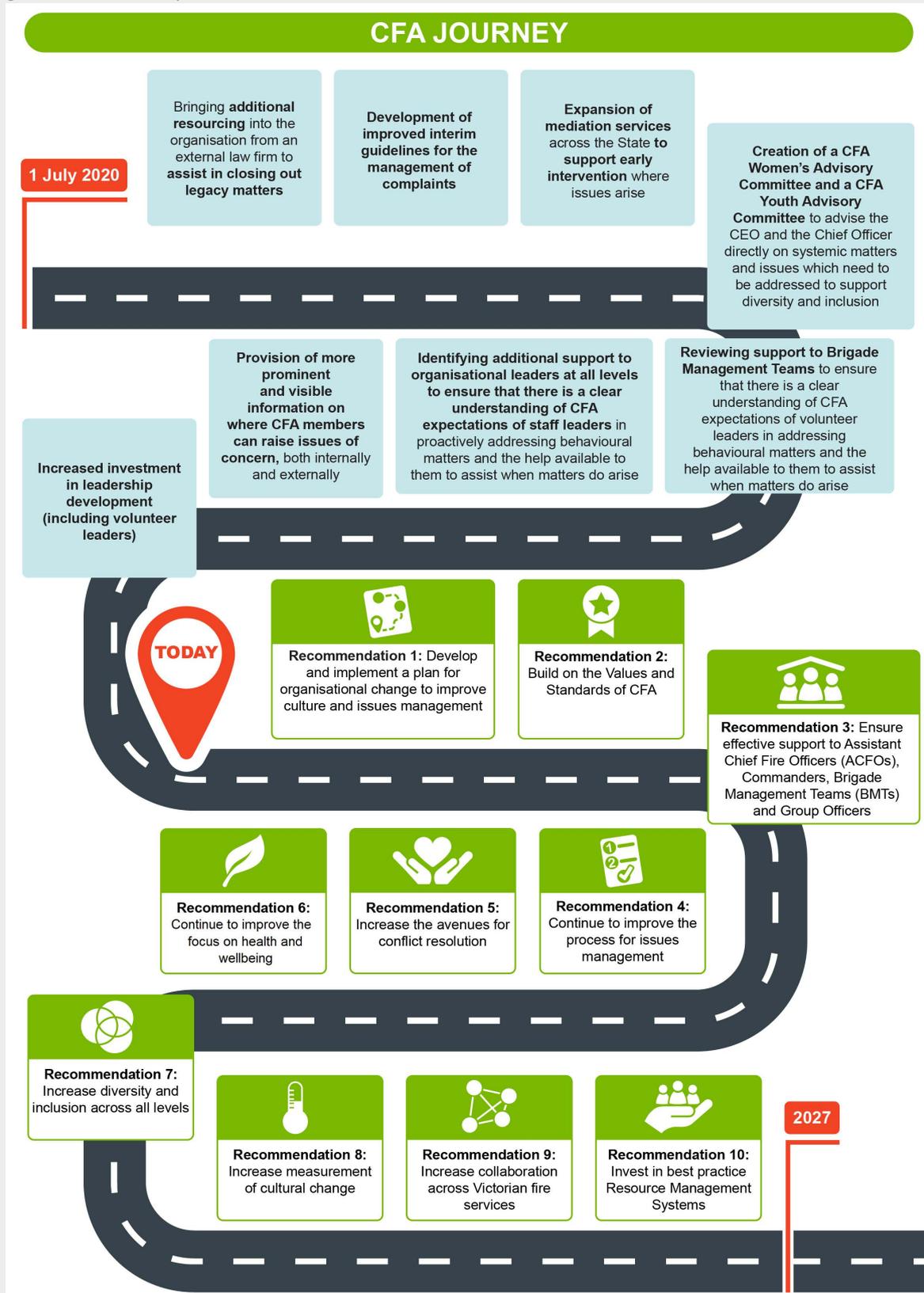
The Review recognises that culture is led from the top, nurtured at the middle and supported by all. The current secondment arrangements from Fire Rescue Victoria must be bedded down to ensure that ACFOs and Commanders feel welcome as part of the CFA community during their secondment time, notwithstanding their formal employment arrangements, and are as invested and supportive of building the volunteer brigades as is the rest of CFA. Leadership is also needed at a governance level, with the Board playing a crucial role to not only provide good oversight and governance, but to also to be visible champions of the work of CFA.

Consistency, clear communication, accountability and transparency have been constant themes, and the recommendations in this report speak to the need to unite the CFA community in understanding their purpose and the outcomes that are sought. The work that has already been done to meet the vision and purpose of CFA needs to continue to be shared and developed with the membership. This includes the recent reforms to current complaints and grievance processes, and how to develop better responses in the future.

This Review does not seek to diminish the challenges of CFA. Our brief was to have an eye to the future. CFA is a resource that no government could replace and as our climate changes, it becomes even more critical to have well supported highly functioning and localised groups of community champions across the State. We have approached our task in this spirit, and hope that each volunteer, each staff member, each secondee and each community member will see what their role is, as well as the collective responsibility of CFA to build a strong, safe and resilient organisation into the future. The Review recommendations seek to build on the initiatives the CFA has implemented to support positive changes, particularly since the Fire Services Reform of 2020.

Figure 2 summarises both the internal reforms that have been initiated since 1 July 2020 and the recommendations of this report. Its purpose is to demonstrate that this Review builds on existing internal reforms and proposes how these can be extended to respond to the findings of this Review.

Figure 2: CFA Journey



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Review reflections and Recommendations



The way CFA establishes and manages the behavioural and cultural expectations of its members and staff

Concluding comments and Review reflections

A safe and positive culture is at the heart of the Review, to reflect the values of CFA, to build on its strong history and to create a productive environment for all members of CFA into the future. A strong and positive culture will reflect a safe and productive working environment. In the last 18 months, the leadership have put the building blocks in place to address many of the legacy complaints that have lingered too long with the churn and changes that typified CFA until the Fire Services Reform was implemented. There are signs of improvements in some areas, and these must be built on. The process of reconciling the past will take time to enable people to build trust and confidence as these changes are implemented, and the recommendations from this Review take effect.

The views of stakeholders interviewed, the research that looked at past reviews and the collection of information that inform culture have been canvassed extensively as part of this Review. Workplace misconduct including harassment, discrimination and bullying was found in existing prevalence data and raised during interviews with members of the Review Team. There is an uncomfortable history where behaviour has impacted badly on individuals and where there have not been clear ways to address this. That is changing with this Review and prior initiatives previously mentioned. There is also much that is positive that will continue to inform the work of the future.

CFA has a strong profile and recognition across Victoria and is a mechanism to mobilise communities and encourage self-protection and self-sufficiency. This strength should not be underestimated nor taken for granted. There is no doubt that the Fire Services Reform of 2020 has left many feeling suspicious and uncertain. The collaboration with other fire services to work as one response needs all parties to be part of this process (under the Victorian Emergency Management Framework).

Volunteers are the backbone of Victoria's fire response and have decades of valuable experience to contribute. Many are operationally trained to a high standard, and governments depend on them for fire response and protection of the community. In addition to the service that these thousands of volunteers make to the community, there is a strong benefit to being a volunteer. CFA provides an opportunity for people who volunteer to join and learn new skills, to have development experiences that they would not get in other walks of life and provide meaningful employment which contributes to the community in regional areas.

CFA members display a unitary purpose of protecting communities (lives and property) across Victoria and a strong commitment when responding to an event. This commitment is extended to the staff, of whom a significant proportion are also volunteers in their own communities.

The Review outlined the challenges for CFA going forward, to address past challenges, but also to ensure that CFA can operate effectively within the requirements set out in the Fire Services Reform of 2020. This is a changed landscape organisationally, even though its impacts may not be immediately understood by all Brigades across Victoria.

CFA has a Strategic Framework that outlines the values, and there are requirements to be met by all brigades across Victoria. These include occupational health and safety, regulatory checks, prerequisites to meet government policies and regulations. This is challenging as there are understandably a range of different cultures that exist across the more than 1,200 Brigades within CFA. Culture is impacted by local determinants including size, volume of call-outs, distance from other brigades/HQ, multiple geographical boundaries, and different workplace arrangements. The challenges of roll out requirements, communication, training and ensuring consistency across more

than 1,200 brigades cannot be underestimated. It is also impacted by the facilities that are available across Victoria, and CFA of the future must reflect facilities that are inclusive and safe for all. This necessarily will need to be supported through government funding as well as local fundraising.

Recent efforts have also sought to address the ageing profile of volunteers and to bring the best of diversity to CFA – not only in relation to gender diversity but also in all other attributes including age and cultural backgrounds. CFA has been described as a very masculine culture, and this is being addressed with various measures which need to be aligned and consolidated. It is also challenging when the operational level of ACFOs and Commanders rely on Fire Rescue Victoria meeting their own diversity requirements to reflect diversity at the middle management level of CFA. Ensuring a sustainable volunteer workforce is also challenging in the face of changing demographics in country areas, changing work demands, availability of volunteers during work hours, and declining volunteerism. This is exacerbated by changes in climate and bigger weather events. Broadening the pool of potential volunteers and ensuring that they are welcomed, accepted and given a meaningful role in brigades becomes even more important. Good practice, positive local initiatives and efforts should be recognised and supported going forward.

The initiatives to support diversity will also be enhanced by the measures to address bullying, discrimination and harassment that have been reported in the past. There has been a concerted effort to address outstanding complaints which fester and create a negative environment and which also undermine current efforts to implement the latest reforms. Defining the Interim Behavioural Standards,¹ setting the expectations and improving the mechanisms to address behaviour when it does not meet these standards are all parts that will continue to build a positive culture in the future. It will take time to regain confidence in some quarters, and to finally resolve some areas where parties have persisted with their matters long after resolution has been given. Going forward, the cultural journey of CFA must be built on consistency, transparency and a strong communication strategy. All of these matters are addressed in the recommendations.

¹ The Review Team understands that feedback has now been received by key stakeholders in relation to the interim Behavioural Standards and the final draft will shortly be considered by the CFA Executive.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1

Since Fire Services Reform was implemented on 1 July 2020, CFA has sought to develop changes that support volunteers and to respond to the expectations that resulted from Fire Services Reform. This work has been done against a legacy of many changes over the past decade and significant churn in key leadership positions within CFA leading up to the Fire Services Reform. This has eroded trust and led to inconsistency in how expectations are developed and established around behaviour and culture, notwithstanding the significant internal reforms already developed by the current Chief Executive Officer and the Chief Officer. This recommendation proposes a pathway for the next phase of reform.



Recommendation 1: Develop and implement a plan for organisational change to improve culture and issues management

Develop, communicate and implement a 5-year action plan (the Plan) for organisational change to improve culture and issues management which builds on positive initiatives already underway, embeds the recommendations of this Review, provides a 5-year timeline for implementation, including consideration of independent monitoring

The Plan should incorporate the following features:

- a) a public recognition of past harms to members of CFA
- b) a clearly communicated 5-year implementation process for the Plan, that incorporates accountability measures that are transparent to members of CFA including consideration of independent monitoring at key milestones
- c) a commitment to reporting against progress of the Plan, alongside the requirements of the Fire Services Implementation Monitor, which includes the development of a monitoring and evaluation framework to support consistent, regular and systematic communication about progress against the recommendations of the Review.

Recommendation 2

To support the Plan outlined in Recommendation 1, the work that has been done to develop the Behavioural Standards and to confirm the intent of the Volunteer Charter, further work must be done to communicate, set and apply the behaviours that will embed and support a positive culture in CFA.



Recommendation 2: Build on the Values and Standards of the CFA

Build on the Values of CFA as set out in the organisation's Strategic Framework, the Behavioural Standards and the Volunteer Charter, and support adherence to these values in all aspects of the engagement and work of the members of CFA.

This will require:

- a) ensuring that recruitment, induction and transfer documentation and processes reflect CFA values and the Behavioural Standards are understood and used to inform decision making processes at all levels
- b) ensuring position descriptions for Brigade Management Teams and leaders at the Group Officer level support the values and behaviours and recognise the importance of diversity and inclusion
- c) working with Districts to ensure that the Volunteer Charter is embedded in organisational practice and Commanders, ACFOs and Group Officers are supported to understand their responsibility in this area and to address localised challenges and opportunities
- d) enhancing and expanding training opportunities to support best practice across the organisation
- e) working with ACFOs and Commanders to set clear priorities in their roles to support the implementation of the plan for organisational change (outlined in Recommendation 1) and the role of all members of CFA
- f) incorporating into the current review of the recognition scheme for volunteer members of CFA, a process which is consistently applied to all members, and which enables nominations by local communities, includes assessment input by volunteer CFA members, and which builds local and less formal recognition processes at the community level
- g) increasing leadership of Board members in endorsing the values and standards of CFA including ensuring alignment with the values and standards of CFA on selection as well as alignment with the Victorian Government Guidelines on diversity and inclusion in recruitment and appointment processes including application of the Victorian Government's Board skills and diversity matrix template²
- h) developing formalised and regular engagement opportunities at senior levels of CFA with the VFBV to ensure mutual understanding of the work of CFA and transparency and communication about how this engagement is incorporated by the management of CFA.

² Victoria State Government (2022), *Diversity on Victorian Government Boards: Guidelines on diversity and inclusion in recruitment and appointment processes*. Retrieved from: <https://www.vic.gov.au/diversity-victorian-government-board-guidelines>

The way CFA supports its leaders and leadership teams to set expectations and to manage issues when they arise

Concluding comments and Review reflections

CFA has been subject to significant leadership change and churn in recent years. In 2016, the CFA Board was replaced by the Victorian Government. In the 10-year period (2012 – 2022) the CEO position has been held by eight different people and the CO position held by four different people. In the 5 years to February 2022, CFA has also experienced a total of 44 executive departures. Since the Fire Services Reform, CFA has also undergone an organisational realignment to support CFA in its role as a volunteer fire service. This realignment has also seen an improvement in gender diversity at the Executive level with the appointment of two female Group General Managers and two female Deputy Chief Officers. Whilst there was recognition of the significant change in leadership over recent years including at the CEO, CO and Executive level, members consulted by the Review Team generally spoke positively about efforts the current CO and CEO had made to work together, and their investment in organisational change.

This is a positive indication. Leadership is central to the success of any cultural change process and to restoring trust and confidence in CFA. To restore that trust, CFA must now provide consistency and stability to its members to facilitate and support cultural change. It is incumbent on leaders at all levels of CFA to lead this change. This includes volunteer, staff and seconded leaders - from the brigade level to the executive and governance level. Leaders across CFA should model alignment with CFA values and clear communication, consistency and transparency of practice.

CFA is unique in that its leadership opportunities are not limited to the executive level. It provides leadership opportunities to members across the organisation – for staff, volunteers and secondees. This devolved leadership style has both positive and negative outcomes. It provides opportunities for members to demonstrate leadership at various levels of the organisation. However, it also leads to inconsistency in approaches to leadership and a lack of clarity in relation to priorities for leaders, with flow on effects for Brigades. Since the Fire Services Reform, the organisation also has diminished capacity to influence its own middle management, as 16 per cent of its staff are seconded from Fire Rescue Victoria. The devolved nature of leadership across CFA contributes to blockages between HQ and Districts/Regions and Brigades, which prevent the different parts of the organisation working together as a cohesive organisation. There is a perception that these barriers to communication are exacerbated by a lack of understanding and awareness from HQ about what is happening at the district/region/brigade level and a lack of transparent and clear communication from leadership at HQ to members. There is also a perception that some leaders at lower levels actively prevent communication between HQ and members. This can, at times, be compounded when leaders rely on communication based on command-and-control management styles, rather than adopting a more consultative management approach.

During the Review, some concerns were raised about how volunteer leaders are appointed. Issues such as the current election process for the Brigade Management Team (BMT), the absence of additional values-based eligibility and broader selection criteria prior to appointment to the BMT, the election of some members who do not have people management skills - all these create challenges to achieving diversity at the BMT level. It can also lead to the election of some members on factors other than merit.

A range of initiatives have been implemented to support and promote leadership skills across CFA. These include volunteer leadership development programs and the Captain's Peer Mentoring Program. Whilst there are many leadership courses in place, there seems to be inconsistent awareness of their availability and how to access them. The level of turnover that has existed within

CFA including at staff, volunteer and secondee level also creates challenges to implementation of training.

In an organisation based on volunteerism (where 41% of paid CFA employees and 42% of secondees are also, or have been, CFA volunteers in their own community),³ recognition of contribution and service by the leadership is critical to supporting positive cultural change. Whilst there are formal recognition processes in place for members including awards, post-incident debriefing support and wellbeing support, there is a perception amongst some members that there is inadequate recognition and respect for the commitment of members, particularly for those who invest additional time in leadership roles at the Brigade and Group levels. There is also a perception amongst some staff that non-operational staff are less valued than operational staff. This lack of recognition is a gap identified by CFA who are seeking to address this by way of an internal review into their recognition program.

Finally, there is also a perception of a lack of accountability and transparency of leaders for behaviour that is inconsistent with CFA's stated values. Stakeholders highlighted the importance of the CEO and CO holding leaders in the organisation to account and communicating the consequences for actions that do not align with organisational values for those in leadership roles. Improved processes around issues management outlined in the section relating to systems and processes relating to issues management below seek to address the concerns raised around scrutiny, transparency and accountability.

³ Volunteers including non-active and/or non operational volunteers. This statistic draws on internal data provided by the CFA Business Intelligence Team (March 2022)

Recommendations

Recommendation 3

Volunteerism is at the heart of CFA, where highly trained and effective responses to emergencies are executed daily across Victoria. This needs to be supported in a consistent and enduring way to ensure the best and safest outcomes for the Victorian Community and for members of CFA. A key resource to supporting this function are the staff at ACFO and Commander level. Notwithstanding the changes to employment status of this group of seconded staff, they should be supported to provide the critical middle management expertise to achieve the strategic objectives of CFA.



Recommendation 3: Ensure effective support to Assistant Chief Fire Officers (ACFOs), Commanders, Brigade Management Teams (BMTs) and Group Officers

The relationship of ACFOs and Commanders with Group Officers and Brigade Management Teams (BMTs) should be reviewed to ensure that they are effectively supported, not only in their operational duties, but also in their key roles of recruiting new members, ensuring understanding and application of values and the behavioural standards, and localised conflict resolution.

This will require:

- a) the development of Volunteer Consultative Committees at the District levels which reflects the diversity of the community, and which is used as the avenue for engagement from Brigades to CFA Headquarters
- b) ensuring that ACFOs and Commanders are welcomed, inducted and supported in their roles within CFA, to support the values, ethos of volunteerism and to understand how to develop a volunteer friendly culture within CFA
- c) reviewing the current regional and district support to BMTs and Group Officers, to ensure that their needs are being addressed and that they are able to work with their communities effectively
- d) the addition of training, particularly for BMT members, Group Officer and District and Regional members, which incorporates a focus on the development of leadership attributes, managing teams, conflict resolution, and difficult conversations
- e) ensuring that access to training is equitable, and where members have not been able to access training, they are able to seek a review of the decision
- f) assessing the applicability and effectiveness of the current performance development plans for employed members to ensure they include sufficient accountability against the values of CFA and the organisation's commitment to support volunteers.

The way CFA manages grievances, complaints and issues and the escalation paths and options for matters that cannot be resolved

Concluding comments and Review reflections

Whilst significant inroads have been made in relation to improving systems and processes for issues management, these systems are still being bedded down. This lack of robust systems and processes for addressing and managing issues at CFA has contributed to a lack of organisational trust and confidence amongst members to raise concerns relating to bullying, harassment and discrimination. The Strategy and Outcomes Framework which supports the implementation of the Fire Services Reform notes the importance of systems and processes in ensuring a great place to volunteer and work. Since Fire Services Reform, CFA has invested significant efforts in improving systems and processes for issues management most notably through the Right Environment Initiative which includes Interim Behavioural Standards and Interim Complaint Resolution Guidelines, and through a concerted effort to deal with the backlog of issues lodged as formal complaints. The backlog of 'legacy complaints' has now largely been resolved, yet this does not seem to be understood nor accepted by many members.

Currently, there are still identified delays, significant communication gaps and inconsistency in the application of processes across the organisation in addressing and managing issues. Processes for managing formal complaints have historically been slow and these processes have at times been opaque and inconsistently applied. The investment in the Right Environment Initiative must be built on to drive a continuous improvement in complaints processes and to regain confidence and trust.

Stakeholders who talked to the Review team, whilst small in number relative to the membership of CFA, often seemed unaware of the existing complaints system and processes, including new processes that had been implemented. Greater communication from leadership is required to ensure these changes are understood. There is likely to be a lack of confidence in the implementation of new systems and processes and in change management expertise across the organisation.

How disclosures are made at CFA in the future must build trust, and this requires an understanding across all members of how confidentiality is protected, how members can be protected from fear of recrimination and confidence must be built in how misconduct will be addressed. The provision of pastoral care and support to both respondents and complainants during the complaints process must also be consistently applied and understood. Enabling and supporting a safe environment in which to raise issues is critical to support bystander intervention, and to broader cultural change and will need to be central to CFA's journey to improving systems and processes.

Whilst incremental improvements have been made, there continue to be challenges to procedural fairness in addressing issues when they arise. This includes issues relating to timeliness, impartiality, transparency and power imbalances as well as barriers to confidentiality of process and disclosures. This has led to a culture of silence, lack of bystander intervention and a perception that reporting could lead to political repercussions, recrimination and victimisation – all of which will make further reforms from this Review challenging.

The Review Team also identified concerns relating to the overly legalistic and the formal manner in which conflicts were sought to be resolved. Many volunteers consulted by the Review Team sought increased involvement in decision-making processes relating to their peers. The Review Team also identified challenges with the existing legislative and regulatory framework as they relate to complaints processes and dispute resolution.

Concerns were also raised about the way in which the complaints system was sometimes misused. This related to the vexatious use of the complaints process (including the suspension process and

counter complaints) with some stakeholders indicating that the process was being used to achieve personal gains, political gains or for ulterior purposes. There were also concerns raised about the complaints management process being used by complainants to persistently lodge the same complaint multiple times to frustrate processes and divert resources.

To support cultural change and restore trust, the systems and processes at CFA must provide consistency, transparency, timeliness, accountability, procedural fairness and continual improvement. Where appropriate, members should also be empowered to manage and address complaints locally, and to understand the appropriate mechanism for escalating certain complaints. Since 1 July 2020, CFA has committed significant investment to restoring faith in its own systems and processes. The investment of leadership in managing this change has been apparent to the Review Team, evidenced by their initiation of the Review and their continued involvement and availability to the Review Team. This has been complemented by the design and implementation of a range of initiatives since the establishment of the Fire Services Reform including:

1. bringing additional resourcing into the organisation from an external law firm to assist in closing out legacy matters
2. the development of improved guidelines for the management of complaints
3. expansion of mediation services across the State to support early intervention when issues arise
4. reviewing support to BMTs to ensure a clear understanding of CFA expectations of volunteer leaders in addressing behavioural matters and the assistance available to them when matters do arise
5. the identification of additional support to organisational leaders at all levels to ensure a clear understanding of CFA expectations of staff leaders in proactively addressing behavioural matters and the assistance available to them when matters do arise
6. provision of more prominent and visible information about where CFA members can raise issues of concern, both internally and externally.

This investment is the beginning of CFA's journey to restoring trust and to developing a system that supports its members in a confidential, victim-centred, trauma-informed and safe way.

Recommendations

Recommendation 4

This Review has reinforced the challenges around dealing with conflict, grievances, bullying and harassment within CFA. This area of practice has been exacerbated by the inability to finalise the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission (VEOHRC) review,⁴ a lack of trust in systems and processes, the challenge of dealing with complaints which escalate to vexatious and the backlog of matters that needed to be addressed. Much work has been done to deal with the legacy of complaints from the past and to increase transparency of the process in the future. The work that has already been achieved by the Right Environment initiatives need to be shared more broadly with CFA members to build confidence in the future of complaint handling and dispute resolution and to prevent harm to participants in the process.



Recommendation 4: Continue to improve the process for issues management

Processes for issues management should build on the work of Right Environment Initiatives to continue to bring transparency, timeliness and effectiveness in dispute resolution to all levels of the agency

This will require:

- a) continuing to build the transparency and accountability of complaints, through reporting of numbers, timeliness of process and final outcomes. This reporting should be published in aggregate for members, with appropriate protections for confidentiality, including anonymised case studies to build the understanding of breaches and consequences
- b) developing support for local resolution of conflict, through training and organisational support at the BMT, Group Officer, ACFO and Commander level, to prevent the unnecessary escalation of complaints, and to address vexatious complaints where appropriate
- c) ensuring that HR Business Partners, ACFOs and Commanders are clear about their responsibilities and accountabilities in dealing with complaints in a timely manner, and are provided with training and support to fulfil their role
- d) continuing to apply a specific framework to address the current backlog of complaints, in order to bring these matters to culmination ensuring that members can access information about the clearing of backlog of complaints and the outcomes achieved
- e) developing a framework for decision-making and any interventions relating to addressing vexatious complaints
- f) building an engagement strategy to ensure that members are aware of the processes, procedures and protections in place (including changes made as a result of this Review).

⁴ 2016 Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission Review into the programs and practices of the CFA and the MFB

Recommendation 5

Formal complaints handling processes on their own cannot deal with all of the issues that may bring harm to members of CFA. Other ways to address conflict and disputes should continue to be explored by CFA.



Recommendation 5: Increase the avenues for conflict resolution

Additional avenues for conflict resolution and surfacing of behaviours that have harmed people should be implemented.

These should include:

- a) mechanisms for identifying issues including:
 - (i) instituting appropriate, best practice anonymous complaints avenues to increase channels for making a disclosure and to also inform CFA about adverse behaviour as it occurs
 - (ii) ensuring regular organisational climate surveys are undertaken and include all members of CFA to collect data on those adverse behaviours which are not formally reported, and then to report back on action that will be taken in response to the surveys.
- b) mechanisms for more effectively and flexibly dealing with unresolved complaints including:
 - (i) focusing on local resolution by piloting new models of local resolution panels, with clear operational guidance to ensure consistency with CFA regulations, comprised of volunteers and independent expertise (where required) to address issues that may be mediated to resolution at the local level
 - (ii) as part of the scheduled 2024 review of the Regulations, ensuring alignment with changes arising from this Review and the Right Environment initiatives. To ensure that the Regulations are modernised to apply processes in a timely and flexible manner particularly in the areas of definitions, penalties, how procedural fairness is protected and how a 'human-centred' complaints process can continue to be built within CFA.

CFA's overall organisational culture to support diversity, productivity and innovation

Concluding comments and Review reflections

The prevention of bullying, harassment and discrimination at CFA is critical to support alignment with the Strategy and Outcomes Framework that supports the implementation of Fire Services Reform. Whilst significant work has already been undertaken, further investment is required to support the design, development and implementation of initiatives aimed at addressing the risk factors and core drivers which enable misconduct. Further work is also needed to ensure that when bullying, harassment and discrimination does occur, the response is quick and effective.

CFA has a range of documents which apply to its members which focus on mutual respect, including the Volunteer Charter, the Volunteer Code of Conduct and the VPS Commission Code of Conduct. Most recently, the implementation of the Interim Behavioural Standards seek to set the bar for behaviour across the organisation. The Interim Behavioural Standards were rolled out during the course of the Review and were not yet well understood by members interviewed by the Review Team.

There remains a widespread perception that CFA 'talks the talk' but does not 'walk the walk' in relation to prevention – that it publishes and distributes material relating to preventing harassment, discrimination and bullying but that this is not substantiated with action. This perception has been exacerbated by the level of turnover and change at CFA in recent years particularly at the leadership level, which has resulted in initiatives losing momentum and leading to members becoming disillusioned. The challenge going forward will be to demonstrate that change is happening and having appropriate data to support this.

Whilst there have been increased efforts to prevent bullying, harassment and discrimination, increased stability in leadership and increasing maturity of implementation of the Fire Services Reform, there is still a perception amongst stakeholders that standards across the organisation are inconsistently applied and that some members are not being held to account for their behaviour. This may be contributed to by a lack of widespread training and awareness around prevention of harassment, discrimination and bullying.

Each year, CFA interacts with thousands of children within CFA programs and in the community. Whilst the Review Team understands that CFA requires that new members and junior leaders are required to have working with children checks, some stakeholders indicated a lack of clarity about application of working with children checks. A Child Safety Compliance Plan 2021-2024 (the Plan) has been developed by CFA. However, it is not known how widely understood the Plan is. The Plan seeks to support an improved process around child safety including quarterly reporting by CFA to the Commission for Children and Young People.

Further, whilst efforts have been made since the Fire Services Reform to improve recruitment practices for staff members and to develop targeted recruitment strategies, the Review Team found that there is a lack of robust process when implementing recruitment and induction practices across CFA. This represents a lost opportunity to screen out applicants who exhibit behaviours and values that are inconsistent with CFA's values, and to explicitly set expectations for them about the organisation's Interim Behavioural Standards.

Investing in preventing bullying, harassment and discrimination across CFA is central to its organisational reform. Given the initiatives implemented to support prevention since the Fire Services Reform, it is apparent that there is recognition by the CEO and CO of the importance of this investment. However, in order to support cultural change and retain momentum, an enhanced and sustained commitment to supporting prevention of bullying, harassment and discrimination across the organisation will be required.

Recommendations

Recommendation 6

Harm is done to individuals and communities because of conflict, bullying or harassment at community levels. We also know that for many CFA members who are first responders, there are the traumatic impacts of that response. CFA must ensure that its health and wellbeing systems including support, are comprehensive, accessible and regularly checked to ensure they are working well.



Recommendation 6: Continue to improve the focus on health and wellbeing

CFA should ensure that its Health and Wellbeing Strategy is comprehensive, accessible to all members, regularly audited and that data is used to inform changes, training and operational responses.

This should include:

- a) further development of the peer support program to ensure that it is consistently available to all members for operational and non-operational advice and support
- b) an annual audit of all support services that impact on the member experience to ensure member feedback on efficacy and effectiveness and use of those services, and publish this with a response to any changes that will be made following the audit
- c) collecting information from Brigades on post incident debrief and whether members have sought help from the health and wellbeing service and if there are barriers to accessing this service and if so, address these barriers

Recommendation 7

A key challenge for CFA is to recruit, retain and create a safe environment for all its members, and for CFA to fulfil the Vision that communities are prepared for and safer from emergencies.⁵ This challenge is exacerbated by the impact of climate change and severe weather events, –the changing demographics of Victoria, and changing attitudes to volunteering. CFA is well placed to build on the strength of its history, the decades of commitment to local community protection and the confidence and recognition of the brand of CFA.



Recommendation 7: Increase diversity and inclusion across all levels

CFA must align and extend its current initiatives to develop diversity and inclusion in its membership, to expand the volunteer base of CFA and ensure contemporary and current perspectives guide the work for CFA into the future.

This should include:

- a) bringing a strategic approach to its diversity and inclusion programs, that is consistently understood across Victoria. The approach needs to clearly identify where the requirements and accountabilities for the success lie and include clear outcomes that are built into reporting, performance development plans and inform training and engagement
- b) encouraging districts to develop localised approaches to support diversity and inclusion, including mechanisms such as diversity and inclusion sub-groups, local community engagement and awareness activities with schools and other emergency services, investment in youth and common understandings of the safety requirements for young people, including compliance with Child Safety Standards such as Working with Children Checks
- c) encouraging diversity at the leadership level, with clear targets relating to diversity and inclusion for professional, technical and administrative (PTA) staff and suggested approaches for BMT and Group Officers which highlight and celebrate success and positive outcomes
- d) ensuring that the principles of the Gender Equality Action Plan are incorporated and underpin the Diversity and Inclusion Plan.

⁵ CFA. (n.d.) CFA Strategy and Outcomes Framework 2020-30. Retrieved from: <https://www.cfa.vic.gov.au/ArticleDocuments/521/FINAL-CFA-Strategy-Outcomes-Framework.pdf.aspx?Embed=Y>.

Recommendation 8

The BMTs are the local face of CFA and a critical link to communities across Victoria. They should be supported in their endeavours but also be clear about their accountability overall.



Recommendation 8: Increase measurement of cultural change

There should be regular audits of Brigades to identify structural, system and intangible barriers to improving culture and to identifying supports to make the necessary changes.

This should include:

- a) consideration of the physical facilities and how these are conducive to and welcoming of diverse communities
- b) reports of issues that have been successfully managed locally and outcomes achieved
- c) identification of adherence to recruitment and induction processes
- d) training outcomes and any issues arising.

Recommendation 9

CFA continues to work with other fire services and wider Victorian emergency services (within the broader framework of Emergency Management Victoria) to ensure the Victorian Community is safe. Its own cultural and productivity journey is interdependent with these services, and collaboration and partnership should continue to be fostered and engendered.



Recommendation 9: Increase collaboration across Victorian fire services

Prioritise the strengthening of collaboration and partnerships between the Victorian firefighting organisations, their leaders and members.

This should include exploration of:

- a) joint training opportunities for all CFA members with FRV and Forest Fire Management Victoria (FFM Vic)
- b) joint community engagement strategies particularly in regional Victoria where FFM Vic or FRV operations work alongside CFA
- c) continued dialogue with FRV with a focus on support for secondees within CFA, in relation to induction, understanding and fostering a volunteer ethos to ensure the ongoing growth and success of CFA volunteers consistent with Section 2A of the *Fire Rescue Victoria Act 1958*
- d) work with other fire services to ensure high standards of training and knowledge about training that encompasses safety in operational settings.

Recommendation 10

Successful implementation of the recommendations from this Review will require modernisation of CFA's current human resource systems that support data collection, case management, analysis, reporting and decision-making. In addition, improvements in systems will help with the administrative burden that is experienced at ACFO, Commander and BMT management level, thus ensuring that these critical positions can focus on the important work of building the people capacity and capability of CFA members. CFA Strategy and Outcomes Framework for 2020-2030 notes the importance of systems and processes in ensuring a great place to volunteer and work. The framework commits to protect "the physical, mental and emotional wellbeing of our people by strengthening our processes, systems and tools to identify and manage workplace hazards".⁶



Recommendation 10: Invest in best practice Resource Management Systems

To support the implementation of this Review, CFA should invest in best practice Resource Management Systems that enhance Human Resource Management and support prevention of bullying, harassment and discrimination across CFA.

This includes:

- a) reviewing current Resource Management Systems, and putting in place new tools and systems that support best practice people management
- b) seeking investment from the Government to scope, build and implement a suitable technology platform to support best practice people management.

⁶ CFA. (n.d.) CFA Strategy and Outcomes Framework 2020-30. Retrieved from: <https://www.cfa.vic.gov.au/ArticleDocuments/521/FINAL-CFA-Strategy-Outcomes-Framework.pdf.aspx?Embed=Y>

About Allen + Clarke

Founded in 2001, *Allen + Clarke Consulting (Allen + Clarke)* is an established and respected consultancy with offices in Melbourne and Wellington. More information about our work can be found on our website at: <https://allenandclarke.com.au>

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