# Government policy – supporting the fire services’ workforce

## Career and volunteer firefighters make up the fire services’ workforce

The workforce is geographically spread around the country; fire services are located in small settlements as well as large cities.

There are 1700 career firefighters, backed by about 600 support staff and managers, in the New Zealand Fire Service. There are about 150 paid staff working full time in the rural fire sector, supported by part-time staff and contractors.

There are volunteer firefighters in both rural and urban areas, with many rural towns serviced mainly by volunteers. There are about 8300 volunteers working in NZFS volunteer brigades and another 3500 volunteers working in volunteer rural fire forces. Fire services’ volunteers are often the “social glue” in communities.

## The move to a unified fire services organisation will deliver more support for the workforce

The intent of this change is to set up:

* “fit-for-purpose” 21st century fire services that are flexible, modern and efficient; and
* fire services that work well, are funded appropriately and that value the workforce, (paid and volunteers).

The new organisation will ensure firefighters are supported to be more effective in their community.

## The changes will address the issues facing the fire services workforce

The types of issues facing the workforce include:

* changing expectations with an expanding range of non-fire emergencies to respond to, the high degree of professionalism expected, and a greater focus on health and safety;
* variable leadership and lack of coordinated support for all volunteers; and
* volunteer shortages in some parts of the country, particularly in small communities.

During the transition to Fire and Emergency New Zealand workforce representatives will work with the transition team on matters affecting the workforce (paid and volunteer).

## Firefighters will be protected when responding to a range of emergencies

Firefighters now respond. 24/7, to a wide range of emergencies, including medical callouts, flooding, spills of hazardous substances, and road accidents. This “non-fire” activity now takes up more time – about 60 per cent – compared to responding to either building fires or vegetation or forest fires.

The new legislation that will set up Fire and Emergency New Zealand will also ensure that firefighters have the legal mandate for this non-fire emergency work. There will be legal immunity for those carrying out (in good faith) the broader functions of Fire and Emergency New Zealand.

## The industrial provisions in the legislation will be updated

The existing industrial provisions in the fire services legislation don’t reflect modern day practices and are not well aligned with current legislation such as the Employment Relations Act and health and safety laws. The new legislation to set up Fire and Emergency New Zealand will not include industrial provisions.

## A new organisation with new mandate and new name

When the new organisation is established in mid-2017, it will be much larger than any other fire services entity. It will need a structure to accommodate its broad sector responsibilities, its expanded legal mandate (non-fire activities and rural fire service), and in many regards (but not all), have new ways of doing things. It will also have a new name to signal that it is a new organisation.

While this is a significant and complex change for the sector, it does not pass the legal test of requiring a new legal Crown Entity. Therefore, the new organisation will be the existing Crown entity with expanded functions.

## Existing staff of the New Zealand Fire Service Commission

As the new organisation will be the existing Crown entity with expanded functions, legally, employees of the New Zealand Fire Service and the National Rural Fire Authority will therefore, already be employed by Fire and Emergency New Zealand. The “employer” does not change for these staff.

The existing workforce will retain their existing entitlements. For the purposes of clarity, this includes gratuities. Prior service will be recognised.

## Paid staff working full time on rural fire will transfer to the new organisation

There are about 150 paid staff who work full time in the rural fire sector, for Rural Fire Authorities, or an Enlarged Rural Fire District (which are amalgamated Rural Fire Districts). Staff employed solely on fire and emergency work are expected to transfer to the new unified fire services organisation as it is established from mid-2017. Employers will be fully involved in the transition planning affecting staff.

## Consultation to work out arrangements for other local authority fire staff

Local authorities have some staff who perform other unrelated work for the local authority and some fire work. A process will be established to work through arrangements for other staff by agreement. Employers will be fully involved in the transition planning affecting staff.

## DOC, Defence and Industry Brigades staff will stay with their employers

The Department of Conservation, the New Zealand Defence Force and Industry Brigades have people who sometimes fight fires, and may carry out other mandated emergency services, on their land and other land. DOC, Defence and Industry Brigade staff will not transfer to the new organisation, and operational activity will continue much like it operates today.

The current industrial brigade system will continue and will be promoted to property owners and occupiers, such as forest owners and airports.

Fire and Emergency New Zealand will agree its operational relationship with each of DOC and Defence in a three-year service agreement.

## No change expected for contract fire services staff

It is expected that the new organisation will continue to use contract fire services staff in the future.

## New and changed roles in new organisation

Fire and Emergency New Zealand will be larger and have a broader mandate than the current fire services. Firefighters represent the cornerstone of fire services and have a key role in supporting the resilience of communities. Local leadership functions will be retained, along with their deputies, and the workforce (volunteers and career firefighters) will still come together in ways much like a brigade or rural volunteer fire force.

In establishing the new organisation, there may be new roles required, and some roles may change, and some may not be required. It will be up to the Board to agree the design of the organisation so that it is fit for purpose. Where this design gives rise to technical redundancy, existing terms and conditions of employment, and consultation provisions will apply.

A technical redundancy does not arise where an employee’s role in the new organisation is equivalent (i.e. including being substantially the same position, same general locality and where entitlements are no less favourable than those that applied to the employee immediately before the new organisation is established).

## More support for volunteers was a key concern from the public

Better support for volunteers was one of the key themes in the submissions made during the public consultation on changes to fire services in 2015. Since 2009 on average about 17- 18 per cent of the New Zealand Fire Service volunteer brigades have been operating with less than 80 per cent of its target numbers. National statistics for rural are not yet available.

## New organisation’s design and structure will give more support to volunteers

New funding is being provided, including for transition, for Fire and Emergency New Zealand to provide better support for volunteers. The new organisation will design a structure and support programmes to deliver better support for volunteers through:

* better connections to the new organisation:
  + volunteers will have more support in areas such as administration support, leadership and management development, etc;
  + better volunteer management will help ensure volunteers’ views are heard by the organisation;
  + Fire and Emergency New Zealand will develop a principled approach to its management and interaction with volunteers;
* greater recognition of volunteers’ employers;
* health and wellbeing support (things being considered include flu vaccinations, and subsidised health insurance); and
* other opportunities are under consideration, such as development pathways for volunteers.

The government will be monitoring the progress of the transition in this regard.

## Local leadership of volunteers will continue be important

Volunteers will still be organised in a way similar to how brigades and volunteer rural fire forces are now – it’s important to retain the local identity of fire services, and their roles in communities.

## Volunteers to be in direct relationship with Fire and Emergency New Zealand

Agreement on how best to transition to the direct engagement model for urban and rural volunteers will be given a priority in the first stages of transition design. Prior service of volunteers will be recognised by Fire and Emergency New Zealand. Gratuities will be retained for existing volunteers.

The over-arching expectation is for modern volunteer principles to apply. Those principles will be drawn from research, local experience and input from volunteers, their representatives and other key stakeholders.

At a fundamental level, the relationship is one of engagement (not employment), and one that respects the democratic rights of a volunteer. The relationship should also honour, strengthen and build-on community strengths and relationships to lead to better delivery of services, greater inclusion and participation, and effective mobilisation of communities who come together to protect and serve their community.

Volunteer support and sustaining volunteerism are core to the reform. The Government will be monitoring the new organisation’s progress on the development of this vital relationship between communities, volunteers and the new organisation.

## Dedicated transition team to work with sector on volunteer reforms

Better support for volunteers is at the heart of the fire services reforms. The Board is establishing a dedicated transition team to work through these matters with the sector, to ensure that the organisational structure and the accompanying support programmes are fit-for-purpose.

## Advocacy and support organisations, like UFBA, can continue their work

With volunteers moving into a direct relationship with Fire and Emergency New Zealand, it is important they have access to independent advocacy and support services, at no cost to themselves.

The new legislation will enable Fire and Emergency New Zealand to fund appropriate organisations, such as the United Fire Brigades Association, to provide independent advocacy and support for volunteers, at no charge to the volunteer. There will be a service level agreement between Fire and Emergency New Zealand and the organisation that includes modern volunteer principles, as well as accountability, value for money, and fairness.

## Stakeholders will be involved in discussions around the new organisation and its workforce

The Board will establish a transition team to coordinate the programme of work to ensure Fire and Emergency New Zealand has what it needs to be effective on ‘day one’, and what matters can afford to be worked through during the anticipated four-year transition period.

Stakeholders will need to be actively involved in transition design to ensure the goals of the reform are fully realised. This involvement will help to inform sensible process and outcomes that relate to the direct relationship of volunteers with the new organisation, assets, legal entities, and new policy brought in by changes to the legislation, etc.

The Minister has made a commitment that stakeholders will continue to be actively involved in the transition design, not just deployment, and will be monitoring the new organisation in this regard.

## The new organisation will find efficiencies from operating costs, not staffing

The Fire Services Review was focused primarily on the governance, structure and support, funding and modern legislation for the fire services, not the terms and conditions of the workforce.

It is expected that a unified fire service delivering both rural and urban fire services will be more efficient than the current situation where fire services are provided by 40-plus organisations.

Fire and Emergency New Zealand will need to find efficiencies to fund ongoing activity and to repay the $112 million being provided by Government for the cost of transitioning to the new organisation.

It is not expected that those efficiencies would be found from job cuts or from reducing the increased support for volunteers or reducing the effort on closing gaps in rural fire services.

The new national fire services organisation will be larger than the New Zealand Fire Service and will require new roles to be formed to support the sector. There is likely to be a broader scope of roles available to both urban and rural staff, and this may open up new career paths and opportunities.

## New organisation will have clear processes for managing disputes

For paid employees, the management of disputes provisions are included in their current employment agreement and the Employment Relations Act.

For volunteers, there will be independent organisations that can provide advocacy and support, at no cost to the volunteer, where the volunteer feels unable to have their matter addressed by the leadership within Fire and Emergency New Zealand.

Fire and Emergency New Zealand will engage with stakeholders to develop a modern, fit-for-purpose and durable means of resolving disputes that:

* applies to all disputes under the Act, but with the ability to carve out specific dispute types (i.e. Levy disputes);
* flexes to adapt to new types of disputes;
* treats disputes in a like way;
* enables resolution at the earliest opportunity/lowest level (to be both cost-effective, and maintain relationships);
* parties understand and trust (including facilitators and decision-makers);
* largely consolidates the existing dispute resolution forums and mechanisms; and
* provides forums and processes proportional to the complexity of the issues.

In designing the scheme, the new organisation will apply principles informed by international best practice and adopted by the New Zealand Government Centre for Dispute Resolution. They are that the scheme will be user-focused and accessible, objective and fair, effective, efficient, and accountable.

When developed, the scheme must be published, and include a tiered dispute resolution process that includes an Alternative Dispute Resolution process including objective facilitators and/or decision-makers, and rights of appeal, as appropriate.