



Summary Report

ESA Roundtable Meetings

Conducted during January – March 2017

April 2017

## 1. Introduction

The commitment to hold Emergency Services Agency (ESA) Roundtable consultations was made as part of the Parliamentary Agreement for the Ninth Legislative Assembly for the ACT: to 'progress jointly-committed investment in firefighting equipment, personnel and facilities, and establish a rigorous ongoing consultation process, including through a roundtable meeting, to discuss wider resourcing, structural and organisational reform, and increasing diversity in the firefighting service'.

Initial work was to commence within 100 days of the Government commencing the new term.

## 2. Methodology

The ESA Roundtable Consultations were held over four days, each with a separate morning and afternoon session. They were scheduled on days that took into account the rosters of the ESA's 24/7 workforce and availability of volunteers, to enable opportunities for all interested staff, volunteers and other stakeholders to participate.

Roundtable Consultations were held on:

- Wednesday 18th January 2017 (Sessions 1 and 2);
- Tuesday 7th February 2017 (Sessions 3 and 4);
- Sunday 5th March 2017 (Sessions 5 and 6); and
- Friday 17th March 2017 (Sessions 7 and 8).

All ESA staff and volunteers received invitations and reminders before each of the consultations. The Unions representing members of the ESA workforce and other stakeholders were also invited. The consultations were well-attended with 40-60 participants at each session.

Attendees at each session included members of ACT Fire & Rescue Service (ACTF&R), Rural Fire Service (ACTRFS), Community Fire Units (CFU), ACT State Emergency Service (ACTSES), ACT Ambulance Service (ACTAS) and support services. Attendance by all of the Services that comprise ESA ensured the discussions were informed by the views of volunteers as well as career personnel. The ACT Parks and Conservation Service (PCS) was represented at sessions 1 and 2. There was union representation at all the sessions.

The ESA Executive Group also attended each session. Their brief was to listen to the ideas, comments, concern and feedback offered by participants.

Each session was facilitated by an independent facilitator, Annebelle Davis.

### **3. Recording Input**

All comments were recorded in summary form during the meetings and a summary report produced for each of the meeting days. In addition, input was invited and received through Suggestion Boxes in each Station and Shed, by email and by post.

Input from all sources was included in the Consolidated Report. Where the same item was raised multiple times, it was entered into the report once. However, care was taken to ensure that the intent of all participants who raised the item was represented. Where there were several inputs to the same topic, they appear as blended comments that include input from several sessions.

The Consolidated Report contains the ideas, comments, concerns and feedback offered by participants. Items have not been checked for accuracy. The items expressed may not be factually correct, nor necessarily represent the views of all stakeholders. In many cases opposing and varied views were offered on the same topic.

This Roundtable Consultation aimed to give operational personnel a chance to have their say. In keeping with this aim of the ESA Roundtable consultation process, the report contains stakeholder input only. No input from the ESA Executive has been added.

### **4. Ideas, Comments, Concerns and Feedback**

The Roundtable consultations sought ideas, comments, concerns and feedback on a range of issues that included:

- jointly-committed investment in firefighting equipment, personnel and facilities;
- wider resourcing, structural and organisational reform; and
- increasing diversity in the firefighting services.

Stakeholders used the Roundtable consultations to raise issues that related directly to the intent of the Parliamentary Agreement. The main themes that emerged from discussion of Roundtable-specific issues form the content of this report.

Stakeholders also took the opportunity to raise other issues and these have been listed in the Consolidated Report, along with the issues that relate directly to the Parliamentary Agreement, in keeping with the intention to foster an ongoing consultation process.

The main issue raised in the Roundtable consultations, outside the scope of the Parliamentary Agreement points, was the Communications Centre (ComCen) reforms announced by the Government in June 2016. Comments focused on the way in which the ComCen currently operates, and how it could operate into the future. ACTF&R staff discussed the need for professional firefighters to continue in the ComCen, with minimal changes to the current structure. Other stakeholders indicated the need, and their support, for ComCen reform.

## **Roundtable-specific issues – discussion arising from staff, volunteers and other stakeholders are listed under the Parliamentary Agreement Points**

### **Point 1 – Jointly-committed investment in firefighting equipment, personnel and facilities**

#### ***Equipment***

##### *Minor equipment investments can make a big difference to individual incidents*

Different stakeholders listed different specific equipment they thought they needed to improve firefighting and other emergency responses. Many examples were provided that will be referred to ESA management for their review and consideration.

The general rationale behind these practical requests from both volunteer and career firefighters was to improve individual safety and comfort, or to standardise equipment used across the Services, while enhancing the capacity to work together during prolonged or complex emergency responses.

Stakeholders did not limit themselves to discussions about firefighting equipment. ACTAS personnel drew on a similar rationale to support their equipment needs, including a focus on preventing work-place injuries to individual employees while enhancing long-term workforce and job planning.

##### *Joint-purchasing to make the most of new technology and spending choices*

A perceived gap emerged around opportunities for joint procurement of equipment and supplies.

There is a level of practical communication among members of the different Services who share news about advances in technology and equipment purchases as part of working together on the ground. But operational staff could see no obvious counterpart at the management level.

Many stakeholders also wanted to be seen as spending tax payers' money responsibly.

Stakeholders are unaware of opportunities to combine their business cases or to approach management jointly to facilitate joint forward planning, and to purchase minor and major equipment in more coordinated ways.

##### *Equipment investments create opportunities to invest in personnel and service delivery*

Stakeholders regarded major equipment investments as crucial to providing the capacity to protect the community now and in the future. There was a level of general knowledge about, and support for, major acquisitions underway or planned across the different Services.

Many stakeholders stressed that delivery of new equipment creates opportunities for joint approaches at operational, management and executive levels that should not be wasted, including joint training initiatives and knowledge transfer.

All stakeholders recognised that bringing new equipment into service requires specific competency training for the members who operate it. Stakeholders in some Services would value engagement at the forward planning, specification and consideration stages of major equipment purchases.

Stakeholders in general identified both a need and a willingness to collaborate ahead of deploying new equipment to assess the operational impacts of it on their Service and personnel, and to mitigate these through Service-specific preparedness and training. This was particularly important for the volunteer-based Services.

## ***Point 2 – Personnel***

### ***Don't get boxed in by a colour***

All stakeholder groups were concerned about the future of their Service's workforce at individual, team and business unit levels.

At the individual level, stakeholders identified strongly with their chosen career orientation as a specific kind of emergency responder whether fire-fighter, ambulance officer or volunteer, and to remain aligned to their Service. The overwhelming preference was to be able to do their chosen role forever.

Individual, team and business unit challenges emerged from the identified need to place front-line staff in non-operational roles while unfit or unable to perform their normal duties, within their operational Service.

For ACTF&R, this orientation created personal and organisational tensions that present challenges at the same individual, team and business unit levels to resolve. If a member is injured on the job or wishes to initiate time out there are relatively few choices of employment slots to do so, as a result of both some self-limiting and management-embedded constraints. This is manifest as a perceived career fragility, with the strong affiliation members feel towards their Service potentially inhibiting the exploration of developmental opportunities outside strictly operational roles. This was despite the need expressed by some stakeholders for more and better coordination at the business unit level which could provide opportunities for alternative placements.

For ACTAS stakeholders, a flexible employment strategy for the whole Service was seen as a way forward, providing that it took into account the need to evolve service delivery in step with changing community needs and where the ACT Health sector is heading. They raised the need to make the most of technical improvements in equipment that would allow members to keep working physically in ambulances as they age and to avoid workplace injuries.

The capacity to develop new technical roles in addition to paramedic training, and to explore how to help members plan and live a career where their ACTAS training could take them to team leadership and business roles at the interface with other Services was raised. Members of all Services with the advantage of experiencing other opportunities reported it positively. Their feedback to encourage colleagues and management to move forward was 'Don't get boxed into a colour'.

All stakeholders reported a strong team ethos when they work with members of other Services on the ground, and they understood operationally what their respective operational response roles entail. It was reported that this team ethos did not extend up to the business unit level.

#### *Updating volunteer management systems*

For the ACTRFS, ACTSES and CFUs, updating volunteer management support, policies, and resourcing, is perceived as key to the future of their Services at individual, team and business unit levels. Operational priorities for these Services are preparedness and training. They also reported volunteer retention as an emerging priority at the organisation level.

Each Service has its own volunteer management system and separate data bases or files. Volunteers and ESA staff were united in their assessments that these systems are outdated, and stakeholders were unanimous in their calls for an upgrade.

An opportunity was identified to implement a single system that could manage volunteer members' data across all the Services, allow volunteers to update their own details, and include training records and a link to ESA training and accreditation records.

It was reported as being hard to sustain high levels of interest and commitment among newer volunteer cohorts due to a perceived lack of training and operational opportunities and no opportunity to use the professional skills and experience they bring to Service activities from their day jobs. For the ACTRFS, ACTSES and CFUs, generating more opportunities for active volunteer service was seen as a way to help future proof existing front-line roles by providing an enabling surge capability, and providing incentives for volunteers to stay at the same time.

*Welfare successes thrive on non-judgement*

Welfare was a cross-cutting issue that generated a wide range of ideas, suggestions, concerns and feedback. It was a space where individuals and teams were motivated to act. Many stakeholders were looking to management to support change, including shifting the organisational norm away from managing welfare issues in Service silos towards an holistic approach.

Stakeholders' requirements for an holistic approach are that it is non-judgmental, provides options for members inside and outside the Services, and mentoring and support for individuals through any career transition that may occur.

There was strong collective support at the operational level for welfare reforms, and stakeholders demonstrated a willingness to link welfare reforms to service delivery reviews as a way to alleviate operational conflicts that currently act as disincentives.

**Point 3 – Facilities***Joint facilities have their pros*

Participants in the Roundtable consultations worked in stand-alone and joint facilities. Joint facilities were regarded as more efficient in the main, however they needed to be located in an area close to service delivery to be effective. Sometimes, it is not feasible to co-locate. The idea of joint engagement in the forward planning of new facilities was welcome, noting that operational personnel were keen to ensure that such decisions could be informed by their practical operation and coordination requirements.

**Wider resourcing, structural and organisational reform****Point 4 – Wider resourcing***Enabling support is an unmet growth area.*

Many full-time stakeholders considered there was a need for more uniformed staff. This call for more front-line personnel was isolated from discussions about the need for more flexible work options to enhance career resilience over the long term. As a first step, the volunteer Services sought to open up a conversation about how volunteers could provide an enabling surge capacity drawing on skills from their day jobs.

Sharing ESA resources is not a common practice. Suggested improvements in joint planning for equipment and facilities were seen as one way to alleviate perceived budget and staffing pressures. Some stakeholders were surprised to learn of initiatives and noticed duplication. Resolving these as a priority made sense to most stakeholders, and they would participate in a forum to do this, providing there was a clear agenda backed with managers empowered to act and short timeframes for action.

## **Point 5 – Structural and organisational reform**

The Roundtables were an opportunity to refresh corporate knowledge about what other Services do. However, stakeholders so strongly support their own Services that it has been easy to lose sight of where each Service fits in the broader Government and Justice and Community Safety (JACS) Directorate picture. So investments in corporate knowledge, particularly about the JACS operating environment and business requirements that flow from that, need to be ongoing.

### *Information sharing and coordination*

Information sharing is Service-specific and often only among people who know and trust each other.

Stakeholders saw a need to coordinate information better, even standing up a role to do this across all Services. They also wanted access to defined, simple and user-friendly communications internally. A communications strategy garnered strong support.

In the absence of a communication strategy, stakeholders have to rely on what they hear within their own Service with the risk that joint issues and wider resourcing considerations are filtered out.

Stakeholders are keen to know what happens to the ideas, suggestions, concerns and feedback they put forward in response to operational and organisational issues. Closing the loop would enhance inclusion and be a return on the investment in ongoing consultation from an operational point of view. Stakeholders foresaw that a dedicated information coordinator could assist.

### *Supporting service delivery*

Service personnel consider themselves technical professionals for life.

For some stakeholders, reforms that change existing procedures are perceived to increase risk, reduce personal efficiency and negate professional judgment. For others, reform is needed so they can change their delivery model to serve the community better.

Stakeholders considered that it is the role of managers to bridge the gap. There is latent support for coordinated management initiatives, particularly where operational staff could be engaged to inform both the priority and design of joint activities.



## **Point 6 – Increasing diversity in the firefighting service**

The firefighting services share the same challenges in increasing diversity as the other Services. ACTF&R recruitment initiatives have historically been less successful though, partly because of barriers posed by the public service formula for written applications, and also the need to obtain feedback from applicants who withdrew to understand why, and refine future recruitment campaigns. ACTF&R intends to do so.

On the job, stakeholders from all Services confirmed that there are still very few placements for staff away from the front-lines. Mothers compete with injured personnel for those non-operational places that are available.

The Roundtable discussions did not venture to link these diversity challenges with the potential developmental opportunities envisaged as part of a more flexible workforce, or with the potential created by the suggested coordination roles and activities. Probably due to the extensive discussions that have been underway since the announcement of a Women In Emergency Services Strategy in 2014. Ongoing consultation could be used to explore further linkages constructively, particularly if it canvasses flexible professional development and competency acquisition options as well.

## **5. Next Steps**

This report and the Consolidated Report will be sent to the Minister for Police and Emergency Services and distributed to all stakeholders.

All the issues raised during the Roundtable consultations have been recorded in the Consolidated Report and will be referred to ESA management for their review and consideration. Emails with more detailed input will also be forwarded to ESA management for their review and consideration.

The ESA Executive will take the time to ensure that all of the feedback is analysed and understood. This feedback will be used to inform decisions on future operational matters within the ESA.

## **6. Conclusions**

The ESA Roundtable Meetings provided ESA staff and volunteer members and other stakeholders with an opportunity to express their ideas, comments, concerns and feedback. It was encouraging that such a diverse range of views and ideas was canvassed at the Roundtable Meetings.

The ESA Executive would like to thank all those who participated in the Roundtable Consultation and those who provided input by email and phone. All of your time and effort is much appreciated.