

ASSETS, PREMISES AND FUNDING OF THE NSW RURAL FIRE SERVICE

Organisation: Hornsby Shire Council

Date Received: 10 May 2024



10 May 2024

The Chair
Public Accounts Committee
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000
Via online submission

Dear Mr Li,

Re: Inquiry into the assets, premises and funding of the NSW Rural Fire Service

Reference is made to the invitation to submit comments to the *Inquiry into the assets, premise and funding of the NSW Rural Fire Service* (RFS) and the relevant Terms of Reference.

Hornsby Shire Council has 15 RFS Brigade Stations as well as the RFS District Fire Control Centre, Support Station and Catering Station in our Local Government Area (LGA). We acknowledge the service and contribution of the RFS as a combat emergency service in our bushland shire. We currently have an excellent relationship with the Hornsby Ku-ring-gai District of the RFS and are an active committee member of what is considered a very effective Bush Fire Management Committee (BFMC), which meets regularly.

The Hornsby and Ku-ring-gai LGA's have a combined BFMC with a combined area spanning 58,390 hectares (ha). The urban bushland interface has been identified as being at high to extreme risk of bush fire events with 73.5% bushland and 7.8% grassland. A bush or grass fire can occur at any time of the year, noting the risk is higher during the warmer months when bush, grass or scrub is drier.

Hornsby Shire Council has some concerns with the current arrangements for funding of the Rural Fire Service and the ownership and maintenance of RFS assets and premises.

We provide the following comments and recommendations on the Terms of Reference: That the Public Accounts Committee inquire into and report on:

1. The mechanisms for:

- a. Funding Rural Fire Service assets and premises;**
- b. Maintaining Rural Fire Service assets and premises;**
- c. Accounting for the ownership of Rural Fire Service assets and premises;**
- d. Operational management, including the control of assets and premises, risks, and impacts to local government, and the ability to effect a response to emergencies;**

Hornsby Shire Council currently recognises RFS assets in its assets register, including RFS buildings, fire trucks, support vehicles, personnel carriers and other small plant equipment with a combined replacement value of \$25.9M.

It has been identified in Council's operational budget that a net cost of approximately \$1M (excluding the Emergency Service Levy), is provided to meet Rural Fire Service activities. Unfortunately, Council's budget does not have the capacity to increase levels of funding during high-risk periods, potentially impacting an appropriate response to an emergency due to this constraint.

In terms of Hornsby's Bushland area and our 15 brigades, suggestion is put forward to consider funding allocations to Council's on a risk basis. As the likelihood of bushfire incidents increases and the time between incidents is reduced, the ability for a high-risk Council to sustain operations under existing funding allocations for the purposes of emergency response becomes unsustainable and ultimately impacts on Council's own source revenue.

Recommendation 1: The inquiry must evaluate the necessity for a specific allocation of funds by the NSW Government to supplement Local Government expenditure to ensure the RFS has the requisite financial support for comprehensive maintenance, asset management, and execution of on-ground operations.

2. Whether the following arrangements between Councils and the Rural Fire Service are fit for purpose:

- a. Service agreements;
- b. The division of responsibilities for bushfire management and hazard reduction;
- c. Upkeep of assets;
- d. The provision of insurance;
- e. Provision of land and construction management for RFS premises;
- f. Bushfire Management Committees

The Service Agreements between the RFS and Councils are out of date by several years and do not currently reflect the requirements of both parties. The Service Agreement is fundamental to the cooperation and collaboration between the RFS and local Councils by clarifying responsibilities and an appropriate level of service is achieved to provide an effective emergency service for the community.

Recommendation 2: We recommend prioritising an update to the Service Agreement that involves the collaboration of Local Government in its drafting and development. The Service Agreement needs to clearly delineate appropriate responsibilities between Council and the RFS, not be ambiguous and be mutually agreeable by the parties to the agreement.

Note the division of bush fire management and hazard reduction is appropriate and is effective within Hornsby Shire Council area. Clear responsibilities exist between fire authorities, land managers and the community. However, for Hornsby LGA, the division of responsibilities for bush fire management and hazard reduction is resource heavy for Council as we are responsible for ongoing bush fire mitigation works in high to extreme risk areas on the urban interface. As a land manager this work includes the planning and preparation of asset protection zone works and hazard reduction burns. It is considered that the current service agreements and funding arrangements with RFS do not reflect this appropriately.

Recommendation 3: It is recommended that hazard reduction grant funding processes be reviewed and streamlined to facilitate ongoing mitigation treatment works. The Inquiry must acknowledge the critical need for targeted funding by the NSW Government to ensure comprehensive support for both strategic initiatives, as outlined in the Bush Fire Risk Management Plan, and reactive measures in accordance with the Hazard Compliant Process, to effectively carry out mitigation treatments.

Responsibility for the upkeep of assets falls largely on local Councils. It is only on rare occasions RFS engages fleet mechanics or conducts small plant equipment repairs without the assistance of Council. Annual maintenance and repair budgets that are given to Council to manage RFS buildings and assets, is generally not received until December or January for the current financial year which makes it difficult to properly manage and report on this requirement.

Note for year ended 30 June 2023, the annual maintenance and upkeep of RFS stations and fleet costs for Hornsby Shire Council was in excess of \$244K.

Recommendation 4: It is recommended that budget allocations be clearly identified and allocated to Council in a timely manner to enable appropriate actions to be taken.

The RFS are not title property owners within the Hornsby LGA. It falls upon Council to find and allocate appropriate parcels of land on which to locate RFS stations and Fire Control Centres. These locations may not necessarily be the best location from a planning perspective.

The legacy of building RFS stations or 'sheds' in the past has seen the construction buildings on limited budgets, often funded from community donations and the donated time of builders. Those original buildings may not have been fit for purpose or future proofed to house new fire tanker design builds. In recent decades Hornsby Shire Council has worked with the RFS to upgrade RFS fire station facilities, to be fit for purpose and compliant with modern building codes.

Recommendation 5: Consideration needs to be given to State level planning and budgeting for forecasted upgrades of RFS buildings and the appropriate acquisition of lands for such buildings that is not limited to Council owned or managed lands.

The Hornsby Ku-ring-gai Bush Fire Management Committee (BFMC) is fit for purpose and effective in the development of the Bush Fire Risk Management Plan, associated treatments and works programs to

mitigate the threat of bush fires. However, we believe consideration needs to be given to improving the efficiency of bush fire mitigation funding.

Recommendation 6: It is recommended that hazard reduction grant funding processes for land managers be streamlined. The current approach of assessing hazard reduction grant funding for land managers, such as Councils, on an event-by-event basis is inefficient and is recommended to be restructured into a comprehensive works program budget. This budget should include a contingency fund to address mitigation responses arising from processes like the hazard compliance processes. Such a restructuring would enhance the efficiency of completing required strategic and reactive mitigation-related tasks.

3. The appropriate role for local authorities in the provision of emergency services;

Hornsby Shire Council recognises its responsibility through the State Emergency Management Act 1989 (SERM Act) as a support agency for the combat emergency services.

It is appropriate for Councils to maintain their role as a support agency in times of emergencies and natural disasters and have a coordinated approach through the Local Emergency Management Committee (LEMC) and Council's representative; the Local Emergency Management Officer (LEMO).

However, ambiguity exists with regards to the ownership of RFS assets and buildings and who is ultimately responsible for the control of those assets. Council is not a combat emergency service agency, as per the SERM Act, yet technically owns buildings and fire-fighting appliances, on behalf of the combat agency.

4. The sustainability of local government contributions to emergency service provision;

Council's budget does not have the capacity to increase levels of funding during seasonal high-risk periods, potentially impacting an appropriate response to an emergency due to this constraint.

It is recognised that into the future, natural disasters are likely to increase in severity and frequency. This places substantial pressure on Local Government in its roles of mitigation, preparation, response and recovery across all natural disasters.

Hornsby Shire Council is committed to an ongoing supportive relationship with the RFS and seeks to support improvements to the assets, premises and funding arrangements to ensure this is sustainable.

Note: Councillors of Hornsby Shire Council will be briefed on this submission on Wednesday 15 May 2024 until such time this submission is considered 'draft' in order to meet the submission deadline of 10 May 2024.

Yours sincerely



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General Manager

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