

## INQUIRY INTO EMERGENCY SERVICES AGENCIES

**Organisation:** NSW Rural Fire Service

**Date Received:** 21 July 2017

---

**Submission  
No 82**

## **INQUIRY INTO EMERGENCY SERVICES AGENCIES**

**Organisation:** NSW Rural Fire Service

**Date received:** 21 July 2017

---

# NSW Rural Fire Service

Legislative Council Inquiry into emergency services agencies

# Table of Contents

Executive Summary	3
A. Prevalence of bullying, harassment and discrimination and effectiveness of policies and procedures to manage and resolve complaints	5
<b>Policies</b>	5
<b>Awareness raising of staff and volunteers</b>	6
<b>Training for managers</b>	6
<b>Agency structures and resourcing</b>	7
<b>Process for managing complaints</b>	8
<b>Previous reviews and forward plans</b>	8
<b>Bullying, harassment and discrimination statistics</b>	9
B-C. Support structures including mental health related support services	10
<b>Structures available</b>	10
<b>External resources</b>	11
<b>Awareness of and access to support structures</b>	11
<b>Statistics</b>	12
<b>Counselling and Support Unit</b>	12
<b>Chaplaincy and Family Support Network Activity</b>	12
D. Appropriateness of uniforms	14
E. NSW RFS Headquarters relocation	15

## Executive Summary

The NSW Rural Fire Service (NSW RFS) is the world's largest volunteer fire service. Its members provide fire and emergency services to some 95% of the land mass of NSW.

Within rural fire districts, NSW RFS volunteers respond to a range of incidents including, bush and grass fires, structure fires and motor vehicle accidents. Volunteers also provide support to other emergency services agencies, responding to storm damage, floods, search and rescue operations. In many parts of the State, it is the only emergency service agency that is close enough to provide an initial response to an emergency.

As at 30 June 2016, the NSW RFS comprised some 73,162 volunteer members supported by 884 staff members. Significantly, approximately 70% of staff employed by the NSW RFS are either current or former volunteers.

The NSW RFS is highly decentralised, with nearly 70% of its salaried members based outside of its headquarters and over 50% being located in regional areas. NSW RFS volunteers form 2,029 rural fire brigades located in rural fire districts aligned with local government areas in NSW. There are 47 district offices and four regional offices located across the State.

Key statistics relating to membership of the RFS as at 30 June 2016 are set out in the *NSW RFS Membership Overview 2016-17 (attachment A)*.

The NSW RFS has its origins in the bush fire brigades that were formed across the State in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The NSW RFS was established on 1 September 1997 in response to recommendations made by the NSW Coroner following the catastrophic bush fires that occurred in January 1994.

This created a properly funded, state wide agency to support the volunteer members of the NSW RFS under a single operational chain of command while the administrative chain of command remained with local government. Importantly, it also enabled the development and delivery of comprehensive support services for volunteers across the entire spectrum of their activities. This included fire fighting vehicles and equipment, Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and Personal Protective Clothing (PPC), training, communications, aerial support and enhanced coordination.

Section 13 of the *Rural Fires Act 1997* also provides for the issue of policy statements, known as Service Standards, and Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) in relation to a range of operational and management issues. An index and copies of current and historical NSW RFS Service Standards and policies relevant to this inquiry are provided at **attachment B**.

Over time, the role and responsibilities of the NSW RFS have been enhanced, often in response to recommendations arising out of inquiries or other reviews in NSW and interstate.

In 2001, more than 300 local government staff involved in bush fire related roles became employees of the NSW RFS and at this time the administrative chain of command moved to the NSW RFS. Service Level Agreements were developed to allow Councils to delegate any or all of its responsibilities, as defined by the *Rural Fires Act*, to the Commissioner of the NSW RFS.

Amendments to the *Rural Fires Act* and Regulations, as appropriate, in 2002, 2009, 2010, 2013 and 2016 saw, among others, the following enhanced responsibilities assigned to the NSW RFS:

- additional regulatory functions in bush fire mitigation, planning and development assessment in bush fire prone areas
- authority to conduct fire investigations
- additional responsibilities for bush fire hazard management in rural fire districts
- responsibility to issue public warnings about bush fires
- additional responsibilities for fire trails which will commence on 1 July 2017.

The NSW RFS is committed to providing a respectful and inclusive workplace that is free from bullying, harassment and discrimination. To support this, the NSW RFS has implemented a robust framework of proactive measures which has its foundations in the NSW RFS's organisational values. The framework has been developed and improved over many years taking in account contemporary learnings. It comprises a Code of Conduct and Ethics, policies, procedures, training and support services.

The health, wellbeing and safety of NSW RFS members is of paramount importance to the NSW RFS. The NSW RFS has in place a strong suite of support services to assist its volunteers, staff and, in some circumstances, their families with health issues. Support services provided to members are based on current research and industry practice and have evolved and improved over time. Workers compensation schemes are in place that cover both volunteers and staff who are injured while at work. Counselling and support programs are available to members and their families and the NSW RFS also has a Chaplaincy and Family Support Network available to members and their families in the local community.

The NSW RFS is widely recognised as a leader in PPE and PPC design which has resulted in continuous improvements to equipment and clothing issued to members. Recently, the NSW RFS completed a comprehensive review and redesign of the Bush Fire or Wildland Protective Clothing issued to volunteers and staff, including the development of a female sizing range. Members are issued with a range of uniforms appropriate to their role including field uniforms, protective clothing and business uniforms.

The new NSW RFS Headquarters location at Sydney Olympic Park was chosen through a transparent process which complied with NSW government policy and took into account the NSW RFS's operational and organisational requirements. The technological requirements of the NSW RFS are complex and a location in the Sydney basin provides the technological availability, capacity, redundancies and performance that the NSW RFS requires. The location also provides easy access for members and to key government and non-government stakeholders during fire emergencies, such as Ministers, other emergency services organisations and the media. The new premises will provide the NSW RFS with a state-of-the art facility that is critical to the State's coordinated firefighting arrangements used to manage fire emergencies and will be the hub of a highly decentralised organisation.

## A. Prevalence of bullying, harrassment and discrimination and effectiveness of policies and procedures to manage and resolve complaints

### *Policies*

The NSW RFS's organisational values are the reference point for decision-making at all levels and underpin all NSW RFS Corporate Plans, Service Standards and Policies. The NSW RFS values are:

- mutual respect
- integrity and trust
- one team, many players, one purpose
- support, friendship and camaraderie
- adaptability and resourcefulness
- community and environment
- knowledge and learning.

The NSW RFS's commitment to providing and maintaining a respectful and inclusive workplace is reflected in the implementation of a range of proactive measures which has occurred over many years.

Service Standard 1.1.7 *Code of Conduct and Ethics* (**attachment C**) was first implemented in 2007 and was reviewed and updated most recently in 2016. As with all policy documents, the NSW RFS consulted widely, both within the NSW RFS and with relevant external stakeholders in developing these documents. An outline of the various consultation arrangements within NSW RFS is provided at **attachment D**)

Service Standard 1.1.3 *Grievances* (**attachment E**) has recently been reviewed. The revised draft Service Standard was released for consultation, in the usual manner, to all NSW RFS stakeholders including the Rural Fire Service Advisory Council (RFSAC), the Rural Fire Service Association (RFSA), the Public Service Association (PSA), and all members of the Service. The revised Service Standard is intended to be more adaptable to meet the requirements of both staff and volunteers.

Service Standard 1.1.42 *Respectful and Inclusive Workplace* (**attachment F**) was implemented in 2015 and superseded previous policies on bullying and harassment and extended its scope to volunteers as well as staff. This Service Standard:

- defines bullying, discrimination, vilification and sexual harassment
- outlines what is not classified as bullying, discrimination, vilification and sexual harassment
- describes the effect of bullying, discrimination, vilification and sexual harassment on individuals and the work environment
- details the responsibilities of members at all levels
- details the support services available to all members
- outlines the procedures for raising and responding to matters related to bully, discrimination, vilification and/or sexual harassment.

The NSW RFS received feedback from the then WorkCover and the Public Service Association on this Service Standard. All comments were considered and taken on board where appropriate in the final version.

### ***Awareness raising of staff and volunteers***

The organisational values and expected behaviours are embedded in the NSW RFS's learning and development framework. Online induction programs, for both staff and volunteers, outline what Service Standards are and the importance of the Code of Conduct and Ethics. Training courses such as Bush Firefighter, Crew Leader, Group Leader and Crew Safety Welfare, all contain content in relation to discipline, conflict resolution, managing team issues, ethical decision making, leadership responsibilities and interpersonal communication, which are key factors in ensuring the organisational values are upheld.

All staff members are required to attend Code of Conduct and Ethics training and are required to annually acknowledge and electronically sign Service Standard 1.1.7 Code of Conduct and Ethics. Code of Conduct and Ethics training has also commenced for senior volunteers.

An online training program, which reinforces the principles of the Service Standard 1.1.42 Respectful and Inclusive Workplace, has been developed and will be available to all staff and volunteers in the near future.

### ***Training for managers***

The NSW RFS develops the capability of its leaders in a range of ways. This includes, for example, sponsoring volunteer and staff members to attend Australasian Fire and Emergency Services Authorities Council leadership programs, the Australian Institute of Police Management programs, the provision of Advanced Diplomas, Diplomas, Certificate IV level programs, in conjunction with TAFE NSW. Leadership and people management skills are also developed through volunteer Group Leader, Crew Leader and Incident Management programs.

The Multi-Agency Leadership Program is a good example of a leadership program which focuses on personal attributes, relationships, results and people management is available to NSW RFS staff and volunteers. This program was developed jointly by NSW Ambulance, NSW RFS, NSW State Emergency Service and Fire and Rescue NSW.

In support of the many leadership programs available to NSW RFS members, the NSW RFS Commissioner is on record discussing expectations about behaviour at a number of staff and volunteer forums.

The annual NSW RFS District Manager forums provide support to District Managers in respect of enhancing their capacity to manage workplace conflict, grievances and misconduct. The following sessions are listed by way of example:

- Volunteer Discipline – Service Standard and Case Studies (2017)
- Complaints Management (2016)
- Grievance v Misconduct (2016)
- Performance Management (2015)
- Difficult conversations (2015).

Similarly, the biennial Leadership Forum focuses on building leadership capacity of NSW RFS Managers and Senior Volunteers. Common themes across the 2011, 2013 and 2015 forums were



managing people, key attributes of a leader and leading with influence. This theme continues for the 2017 forum.

In addition to the Code of Conduct and Ethics material, there are numerous resources for members that reference the importance of appropriate behaviour and leadership. For example, the Recruitment and Retention Kit contains a 'health check' which provides an insight into a brigade's working environment and culture. A brigade is rated against a series of statements to identify strengths and areas that need work. Depending on the results of the 'health check' brigades will be directed to information within the resource that will assist them.

## ***Agency structures and resourcing***

The Professional Standards Unit (PSU) plays a significant role in analysing, reporting and acting upon serious complaints, as well as providing education and training relating to professional standards for staff and volunteer members.

In respect of issues management, the PSU is responsible for investigating serious allegations against staff and/or volunteers including serious misconduct or breaches of discipline, corruption, Public Interest Disclosures, potential criminal and high-risk matters.

Less serious conduct issues along with the resolution of workplace conflicts and/or misunderstandings are managed by line managers as part of their core people management responsibilities. Support from Membership Services and/or PSU is readily available and provided to managers, where required. The PSU also responds to queries and/or accepts reports from volunteers and staff.

While the PSU and Membership Services provide advisory services across the organisation, both teams work particularly closely with the Regional Services Directorate, who has line management responsibility for more than 460 Regional and District staff as well as over 73,000 volunteers.

Structurally, Membership Services and the PSU are within the same Directorate (Membership and Strategic Services). Both teams work collaboratively to provide advice and support across the NSW RFS in regard to their functional area. In this regard, the Membership Services function provides advice and support on matters relating to grievance management, performance management and industrial issues, whereas the PSU provides advisory services with respect to the management of allegations against staff and/or volunteers, undertaking investigations, complaint management and assisting in remedial action.

It is worth noting senior volunteers, such as Brigade Captains, hold people management responsibilities within a brigade structure. In this regard, senior volunteers play a critical role in the resolution of people matters at the local level.

In November 2016, the PSU introduced a dedicated case management system, Resolve. This program was implemented to allow for improved management, monitoring and reporting of matters. The Resolve system is used by the PSU, the Regional Services Directorate and each of the four Regions (East, North, South and West).

Education, training and mentoring is an important focus of the PSU. Since 2012, the PSU have trained more than 870 staff in Code of Conduct and Ethics training. This training is mandatory for all NSW RFS staff.

In 2016/2017, the PSU commenced piloting Code of Conduct and Ethics training for senior volunteers. Whilst the training for volunteers is not mandatory to date 105 volunteers have participated in Code of Conduct and Ethics workshops. The PSU has put plans in place to expand the delivery of this training over the coming years.

The PSU comprises six staff, being:

- Director, Professional Standards
- Senior Investigator x 2
- Project Officer (Education)
- Project Officer
- Assistant Project Officer.

### ***Process for managing complaints***

Allegations of bullying, discrimination, vilification and sexual harassment are assessed in accordance with the information contained in the Service Standard 1.1.42 *Respectful and Inclusive Workplace*.

If the matter is assessed as being bullying, harassment and/or discrimination, the process outlined in the Service Standard will be followed to investigate and resolve the matter. This may involve dealing with the matter:

- under Service Standard 1.1.3 Grievances, if the matter does not relate to a clear breach of discipline (volunteer) or misconduct (staff) or
- if the matter relates to an allegation of a clear breach of discipline or misconduct, the matter will be investigated under Service Standard 1.1.2 Discipline (if the member is a volunteer) (**attachment G**), or the misconduct provisions in the *Government Sector Employment Act 2013*, Regulation and Rules (if it relates to a staff member).

Matters that are not deemed to be bullying, harassment and/or discrimination are dealt with in accordance with the relevant NSW RFS policy and are dealt with in accordance with local management principles.

### ***Previous reviews and forward plans***

The NSW RFS has a suite of plans that sit under the NSW RFS's corporate plan (NSW RFS Plan 2014-2021) and are relevant to eliminating bullying, harassment and discrimination in the Service.

The Next Generation Workforce Plan 2016-2021 is a sub plan to the corporate plan. It identifies the outcomes that are important to the NSW RFS's capacity to meet the workforce challenges, both volunteer and staff, of coming decades, with a specific focus on the next five years. One of the strategies in the plan is to continue to support a respectful and inclusive workplace where all members are treated with dignity, courtesy and respect.

Other relevant plans include:

- NSW RFS Multicultural Plan 2014-2017
- NSW RFS Aboriginal Services Plan 2016-2018
- NSW RFS Disability Plan 2016-2018
- NSW RFS Child-Safe, Child Friendly Plan 2014-2017.

In 2014, the NSW RFS appointed a dedicated temporary Principal Project Officer for the purpose of developing Service Standard 1.1.42 *Respectful and Inclusive Workplace*. As outlined earlier, this Service Standard superseded previous policy documents that did not extend to volunteer members.

This issue was highlighted in the Public Sector Commission's People Matter survey which was first conducted across the NSW public sector in 2012. The Service's agency report showed that 48% of respondents said they have witnessed workplace bullying within the last 12 months and 19% had personally experienced bullying. Additionally, obligations under new work, health and safety legislation had changed and an increased focus was being placed on psychological injuries (like bullying).

### ***Bullying, harassment and discrimination statistics***

Statistics in relation to bullying, harassment and discrimination from 2013/14 to 2016/17 (as at 30 May 2017) are outlined at **attachment H**.

## B-C. Support structures including mental health related support services

### ***Structures available***

The NSW RFS has robust support services for assisting its volunteers and staff with health issues, including mental health issues:

- volunteer workers compensation - a NSW RFS volunteer who sustains an injury (including psychological injury) during authorised NSW RFS duties may be entitled to benefits under the Workers Compensation (Bush Fire, Emergency and Rescue Services) Act 1987. The Health, Safety & Welfare Unit has a dedicated Volunteer Workers Compensation Liaison Officer who provides support, guidance and assistance to injured volunteers and/or their District Manager in conjunction with the insurer Claims Officer/Manager.
- workers compensation for staff – NSW RFS staff who sustain an injury (including psychological injury) during authorised NSW RFS duties may be entitled to benefits under the Workers Compensation Act 1987 and Workplace Injury Management and Workers Compensation Act 1998.
- the NSW RFS Health, Safety & Welfare section oversees support for volunteers and staff members who have sustained injuries or illnesses during authorised NSW RFS duties, including liaison with Employers Mutual and iCare (insurers for staff and volunteers respectively), treating doctors and rehabilitation providers.
- the Counselling & Support Unit (CSU) leads and manages three programs. The manager holds a Master of Counselling degree and the NSW RFS also engages a clinical psychologist and other mental health professionals to support its program:
  - Critical Incident Support Services (CISS) is a network of at least 42 peer support officers trained to provide critical incident support services and other mental health support to members and their families of rural fire brigades. The CISS team responds to, on average, 260 requests each year. CISS also provides services to Marine Rescue NSW
  - Member Assistance Program (MAP) is a free and confidential program for volunteers and their families, which provides information and advice about mental health related issues, including referrals to external services that provide support and assistance
  - Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is a free and confidential program for NSW RFS staff and their families, by an external mental health provider.

NSW RFS Chaplaincy and Family Support Network comprises one Senior Chaplain and one Senior Family Support Chaplain. They are engaged through the Salvation Army to lead and manage a dedicated team of 36 comprising Associate Chaplains (24) and Associate Family Support Chaplains (12) who support members (both volunteers and staff and their families) in their local communities. The Senior Chaplain and Senior Family Support Chaplain travel around the State on average 53 400 km annually while the other Chaplains travel on average 17 400 km annually<sup>1</sup>.

The NSW RFS works closely with industry stakeholders to ensure the support services provided to its members are based on current research and industry practice.

---

<sup>1</sup> NSW RFS Annual Report 2015/2016

In 2014, the Audit Office of NSW conducted a performance audit on the Fitness of Firefighters. The audit assessed whether Fire and Rescue NSW and NSW RFS knew whether firefighters were fit for duty. The audit considered whether there is a fitness standard for firefighters, whether firefighters are assessed against the fitness standard and whether current arrangements are effective in ensuring that firefighters are fit for duty. For the purpose of the audit, “fitness” was physical and psychological fitness.

In response to the audit, the NSW RFS developed the NSW RFS Health and Fitness Initiatives Plan 2016-2021. It is a sub plan to the corporate plan and promotes the overall health and fitness of members to enhance their own wellbeing and the capability of the NSW RFS to provide emergency services to the community. The NSW RFS has included key actions associated with the Plan in ongoing Corporate Planning processes for the NSW RFS Plan 2014 - 2021 (2016-17 Update).

### ***External resources***

The NSW RFS worked with the NSW Mental Health Commission and other emergency services agencies to develop the Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy for First Responder Organisations in NSW for First Responders, which is an overarching mental health strategy and was launched in October 2016.

Resources available through beyondblue’s Heads-Up initiative are publicised to NSW RFS volunteers and staff to increase awareness of, and reduce the stigma associated with mental health issues.

The NSW RFS is also participating in a collaborative research study by the University of Sydney Brain and Mind Centre, the Black Dog Institute and University of New South Wales to test the predictive performance of a risk algorithm designed to predict rates of depression and anxiety.

Finally, throughout October 2016, the NSW RFS promoted Mental Health Month. This included additional mental health information and the creation of a direct electronic link from the MyRFS network (member internet portal) to organisations such as beyondblue, Black Dog Institute, Lifeline, Sane Australia, and Headspace.

### ***Awareness of and access to support structures***

All new staff members and volunteers are required to complete online induction programs which explain the support services available and how to access them.

At critical points staff and volunteers are informed of the services available. For example:

- where a member passes away while engaged in NSW RFS duties, the CISS team contacts other members who may have been present or affected by the event
- the Professional Standards Unit provides information to members who are the subject of disciplinary proceedings about support services available
- NSW RFS, CISS and NSW RFS Chaplaincy and Family Support Network regularly attend RFS family days to advise of the services available.

## Statistics

### Counselling and Support Unit<sup>2</sup>

	Critical Incident Support Services (CISS)			Member Assistance Program (MAP)	Employee Assistance Program (EAP)	
	# of requests	# of personnel assisted	Hours	# of new requests	Internal	External
2016	259	808	10,401	363	77	21
2015	273	786	8,522	347	92	26
2014	259	617	8,203	308	89	22

Note - These figures do not account for pre-incident information / education sessions provided throughout the year.

### Chaplaincy and Family Support Network Activity<sup>3</sup>

Chaplaincy Activity		Totals - Senior Chaplain and Senior Family Support Chaplain			Totals - Volunteer Fire District Chaplains and Family Support Volunteers		
		2016	2015	2014	2016	2015	2014
1	Visits to RFS Headquarters	148	155	160	0	0	2
2	Visits to Fire Control Centers	41	19	38	410	435	455
3	Visits with Fire Control Officers	35	17	31	204	215	225
4	Visits to Rural Fire Brigades	32	38	45	152	148	140
5	Regional Conferences	3	0	0	1	0	0
6	State Management Conferences	0	0	0	0	0	0
7	Brigade Captains Meetings	0	0	0	42	36	38
8	Seminars & Conferences	3	4	3	0	23	0
9	Station Openings & Dedications	3	4	3	6	8	5
10	Fire Fleet Blessings & Services	8	11	9	28	48	54

<sup>2</sup> NSW RFS Annual Report 2015/2016

<sup>3</sup> NSW RFS Annual Report 2015/2016

11	Personal & Family Counseling	87	78	84	352	364	372
12	Telephone Support & Counseling	242	210	255	290	320	295
13	Home Visits-Members & Family	73	35	27	168	175	182
14	Hospital Visitation-Members	51	40	62	125	169	165
15	Funeral Services Conducted	10	7	11	5	9	8
16	Infant Christenings/ Dedications	1	0	1	0	4	6
17	Service Weddings	4	5	4	2	6	4
18	Rural Fire Service Callouts	4	9	8	77	136	130
19	NSW Fire Brigades Callouts	1	0	0	0	0	0
20	NSW Parks and Wildlife Callouts	0	0	0	0	0	0
21	Respond to Suicides/ Postvention	0	0	0	12	0	1
22	Championship & Field Days	3	5	6	2	2	2
23	Critical Incident Support	18	30	35	15	19	28
24	Work Cover and other RFS Meetings	115	51	49	0	0	0
25	Total Kms Travelled	56,412	53,021	50764	10,936	18,660	22,515

## D. Appropriateness of uniforms

The NSW RFS issues a range of uniforms to members where appropriate, including field uniforms, protective clothing and business uniforms.

The NSW RFS works closely with the Australasian Fire and Emergency Service Authorities Council and protective clothing manufacturers to ensure protective clothing worn by NSW RFS volunteers meets the latest Australian and organisational safety standards.

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and Personal Protective Clothing (PPC) includes jackets, trousers, boots, goggles, gloves and helmets, specifically designed for NSW RFS activities including, bush fire and structural firefighting.

The NSW RFS is widely recognised as a leader in PPC and PPE design over recent decades which has resulted in continuous improvements to apparel issued to members.

The NSW RFS has again recently completed a comprehensive review and redesign of the Bush Fire or Wildland Personal Protective Clothing (PPC) issued to volunteers and staff. A working group including NSW RFS volunteers, product specialists, technical designers and a specialist in female PPC design assisted the review.

The next generation PPC will maintain the highest level of protection against fire injury and safety to members. The new garments will also be one third lighter, stronger, more durable, flexible and breathable. The fabric is inherently fire retardant (negating the need for fireproofing), and meets Australian Standards. It comprises a jacket and the option of two different styles of pants being an over trouser pant and a cargo pant.

Prototypes of the new design were field tested by one hundred members, comprising 30% female and 70% male (which is representative of the membership profile) and included a cross section of areas of operation. In response to member feedback, the next generation PPC will include a specific female sizing range.

The manufacturing of the next generation PPC has commenced with 15,000 ensembles currently manufactured. The distribution of the next generation Wildland PPC to members will commence from 1 July 2017 and be issued to members over a 3 - 4 year period, with allocation prioritised to female members and members requiring replacement PPC.



## E. NSW RFS Headquarters relocation

The new NSW RFS Headquarters will be located at 4 Murray Rose Avenue, Sydney Olympic Park. Construction of the new NSW RFS Headquarters commenced in April 2017.

The Sydney Olympic Park site was chosen based on organisational and operational requirements of the NSW RFS. The location also provides easy access for members. The NSW RFS headquarters is the hub of a highly decentralised organisation, which includes control centres, customer service centres, mitigation services and other infrastructure in regional areas. Nearly 70% of its salaried members are based outside of its headquarters. Headquarters' staff support four regional offices and 47 district offices across the State. Over 80% of the NSW RFS's spend on infrastructure (appliances or buildings) since 2011 has been outside of the Sydney metropolitan area.

NSW has been well served for many decades by the NSW emergency management arrangements which encapsulate the principles of co-ordinated fire-fighting and ensure co-operation and co-ordination between all of the relevant agencies. NSW RFS is the lead agency for co-ordinated interactions with other government agencies and organisations which is also a key consideration in the location of the NSW RFS headquarters.

The State Operations Centre (housed in the NSW RFS Headquarters) provides readiness, command and control, coordination, liaison and support services across the State during periods of major bush fire activity. It is staffed according to daily operational readiness levels which ensure the NSW RFS is at the highest level of preparedness necessary to deal with any emergency.

A key statutory function of the NSW RFS is providing warnings and other information to members of the public. It is essential to have an inbuilt capability to enable local, state, national and international media to easily transition to NSW RFS headquarters and conduct live broadcasts.

It is essential that the NSW RFS Headquarters be located in close proximity to the other emergency service organisations and government agencies with which the NSW RFS interacts. This is particularly so during periods of high fire danger or other operational periods. These agencies include but are not limited to:

- Fire & Rescue New South Wales
- NSW Parks & Wildlife Service
- Forestry Corporation
- Bureau of Meteorology
- NSW Police Service
- NSW Ambulance Service
- NSW State Emergency Service
- Department of Community Services
- NSW Public Works
- Department of Transport
- NSW Health
- Welfare Services
- Department of Defence
- Telco Authority
- Department of Primary Industries.

The above organisations work closely with the NSW RFS in terms of planning, training and operational activities. Personnel from each of the agencies work closely with NSW RFS in the State Operations Centre.

A location in the Sydney basin provides technological availability, capacity, redundancies and performance which cannot be achieved in a regional area. Redundancy in terms of power supplies, communications systems (including dual independent optic fibres), mains water supply and access to direct optic and satellite media feeds is of critical importance. These facilities are available at Sydney Olympic Park as a consequence of the site's development for the 2000 Olympics. As such, it is a unique location as it offers:

- dual mains ring power feed from two separate substations
- dual communications and optic fibre
- multi directional mains water supply
- direct optic and satellite media feeds for all major media outlets/networks
- dedicated mobile communications towers
- easy access on main roads in all directions including to the CBD.

During periods of operational activity extensive interaction with government ministers and the media is also essential. The Premier and Ministers together with senior officers of other agencies (based in Sydney) attend briefings and meetings at the State Operations Centre. Additionally, NSW RFS recognises the critical relationship with the media to deliver information during emergencies.