

To the Committee,

My name is Ben McLean and I have been a professional MFB firefighter for 10 years. I hold the rank of Station Officer, and I am currently based in MFB Eastern Zone, which covers the eastern suburbs and adjoins the CFA areas of Knox, Wantirna, Scoresby and Boronia, amongst others. I write to express my support for the proposed fire services reform.

As an MFB Officer in Charge, I rely on capable, trained and qualified crew to safely carry out firefighting tasks to reduce the risk to themselves and the community. It isn't enough that only four firefighters are available to respond to an urban area house fire for those first vital minutes – it's the additional backup from swiftly responding and skilled crews that we rely on when managing an incident. Seconds count and lives are at risk in these conditions.

As an Officer in Charge, it is my responsibility to keep people and property safe. The safety of my crew and the public is paramount. A vital part of preparing and implementing a plan is having an assurance that further assistance is on the way. Within the MFB area I can rely on sufficient firefighters with guaranteed skills and qualifications to arrive on scene and mitigate the emergency. I know the skills and qualifications of the crew before having to talk to them on arrival, and that knowledge forms part of my planning. I can enact a plan as soon as I arrive on scene knowing that skilled and qualified backup is there or almost there. It's difficult and can be dangerous to commit to a plan of action without that assurance.

Firefighting relies on teamwork to keep people safe, and that teamwork must be promptly deployed and on the scene as soon as possible. Fires burn more rapidly and fiercely now than they ever have, due to construction of buildings, the fuel load in the buildings and the composition of those fuels. Fires spread rapidly and need sufficient crew at the incident. A minimum of seven firefighters on scene with appropriate skills, qualifications and experience in breathing apparatus (BA) and structural firefighting is just that - the minimum for managing the emergency and keeping fire crews and civilians safe.

Victoria's fire services boundaries have not changed significantly in 60 years. In my experience there is a problem in heavily populated areas of Melbourne where the system is failing in being unable to guarantee a trained and qualified firefighter response. We don't rely on a volunteer police force, or a volunteer ambulance service into these areas. They have a professional full-time response because that's what is best for the community. To say that a system of fire protection which was established fifty or sixty years ago is appropriate in this modern day is incorrect.

I can't see how having greater fire coverage across urbanised areas of Melbourne and regional centres is a bad thing. How can having a greater response to emergencies be a negative for the community? Additionally, as I understand it, the volunteers at these 35 proposed stations are encouraged to continue to volunteer their time as firefighters. As I see it, their role and their place won't change.

When there is an emergency, the public wants help from capable crews who get to the emergency swiftly. This proposed model delivers that to the community. To ensure the safety of all Victorians - including me as a firefighter - I ask you to please seriously consider your support for the proposed fire services reform.

Thank you for reading my submission.

Ben McLean  
Station Officer, Metropolitan Fire Brigade