New South Wales Auditor-General's Report
Performance Audit

Management of volunteers

NSW State Emergency Service

The role of the Auditor-General

The roles and responsibilities of the Auditor-General, and hence the Audit Office, are set out in the *Public Finance and Audit Act 1983*.

Our major responsibility is to conduct financial or 'attest' audits of State public sector agencies' financial statements. We also audit the Total State Sector Accounts, a consolidation of all agencies' accounts.

Financial audits are designed to add credibility to financial statements, enhancing their value to end-users. Also, the existence of such audits provides a constant stimulus to agencies to ensure sound financial management.

Following a financial audit the Audit Office issues a variety of reports to agencies and reports periodically to parliament. In combination these reports give opinions on the truth and fairness of financial statements, and comment on agency compliance with certain laws, regulations and government directives. They may comment on financial prudence, probity and waste, and recommend operational improvements.

We also conduct performance audits. These examine whether an agency is carrying out its activities effectively and doing so economically and efficiently and in compliance with relevant laws. Audits may cover all or parts of an agency's operations, or consider particular issues across a number of agencies.

Performance audits are reported separately, with all other audits included in one of the regular volumes of the Auditor-General's Reports to Parliament – Financial Audits.

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In accordance with section 38E of the *Public Finance and Audit Act 1983*, I present a report titled **Management of volunteers: NSW State Emergency Service.**

Grant Hehir
Auditor-General
15 April 2014

Contents

Executive summary

The NSW State Emergency Service (SES) is the lead agency responsible for preparing the community for and responding to storm, flood and tsunami events. Many non-metropolitan SES units respond to other emergencies including road crash, search, rescue, community first responder and bushfire support.

The NSW State Emergency Management Plan recognises that no one agency can address all of the impacts of a particular hazard. The lead agency needs to coordinate the activities of other organisations involved during a disaster.

SES is different from other emergency services in NSW, in that all of its frontline units are made up wholly of volunteers. This presents particular challenges. The episodic nature of storms, floods and tsunamis require a range of management and leadership skills: sustaining volunteer interest in training during quiet times, controlling rapid response to events and all the while providing effective corporate support.

The audit examined whether SES has a sustainable volunteer workforce, with effective strategies to attract, retain and train volunteers. The criteria are:

1. does SES have the workforce it needs to prepare for, and respond to emergencies and disasters?
2. does SES have an efficient and effective framework for managing its volunteer workforce?

The audit's focus is on the management of the volunteer workforce to support SES objectives. The report comments on other aspects of SES management and operations only where it is relevant to that focus.

Conclusion

SES cannot be assured that it has sufficient volunteers to respond to future demands. It does not have strategies to establish what volunteers it needs and how to recruit, retain and train them effectively and efficiently.

SES has been able to respond to over 25,000 incidents per year using its own volunteers and calling upon the assistance of other emergency services. This level of operational response and coordination has been a significant achievement, but may not be sustainable. SES cannot quantify how much it relies on other services when it lacks volunteers. SES also deploys administrative and managerial staff to respond to emergencies to the detriment of business continuity across the organisation.

SES regions recently restarted capability planning to estimate the volunteer workforce needed to manage the threats faced by each locality. Preliminary results show significant gaps between what some regions need and have. SES has yet to determine how these regional plans will be distilled into an SES-wide workforce plan to inform recruitment and training priorities.

The number of active volunteers has fallen in recent years. Twenty-six per cent of SES volunteers leave each year, many soon after joining. The high turnover imposes extra demands on SES and its volunteers for little benefit. This is a major challenge which SES has not addressed effectively and indicates problems with both recruitment and retention.

Leadership, recognition, communication and training are the most important issues that SES needs to address to improve the management of volunteers and reduce turnover.

Supporting findings

Meeting demand: does SES have the volunteer workforce it needs to prepare for, and respond to emergencies and disasters?

SES has been able to respond to over 25,000 incidents per year using its own volunteers and when necessary calling upon the assistance of other emergency services. SES cannot quantify how much it relies on other services when it lacks volunteers. It does not have a clear and consistent picture of how many volunteers it needs to meet future demand and the skills required.

SES Regions recently restarted capability planning to produce this information. Preliminary results for some regions show major gaps between the volunteer workforces they need and have. There are as yet no workforce plans to address these gaps.

SES recognises active volunteers as its primary operational workforce. There were 6,514 such volunteers in mid-2013, a drop of seven per cent since 2009. Overall, SES volunteers are making a bigger contribution than five years ago. On average each volunteer now contributes around 50 hours a year responding to emergencies. They also contribute at least 100 hours each on non-operational tasks including training.

The SES 2011–15 Plan has the potential to change the way it manages volunteers. It has improved safety which has reduced volunteer injury claims by 40 per cent between 2008-09 and 2012–13 through better equipment and work practice. SES has yet to deliver other improvements. At December 2013, no progress had been reported against two thirds of the Plan's indicators. The Plan's initiatives are loosely coordinated, inadequately monitored and SES lacks reliable information for decision making.

The frequent deployment of staff from management and administration to operational roles has delayed implementation of the Plan. Other emergency agencies in Australia assign more of these roles to volunteers.

Managing volunteers: does SES have an efficient and effective framework for managing its volunteer workforce?

The key elements of effective volunteer management are to recruit the right people, train and keep them. SES's high turnover of volunteers indicates weaknesses in recruitment and training as well as retention.

The annual turnover of SES volunteers is about 26 per cent in NSW compared to 20 per cent nationally. Only half of the estimated 1,700 volunteers who join SES each year are active members 12 months later. Many volunteers, although defined as active, do not respond to emergency call outs. This is unproductive, imposes additional demands on volunteer trainers and can cost over $1,000 per volunteer for protective gear that is not used.

There are no state-wide recruitment or retention strategies and no monitoring of volunteer turnover. SES provides limited support to units to address recruitment and retention issues. It is up to local units to attract and keep volunteers and their success varies widely.

The quality of volunteer leadership is an important factor in attracting and keeping volunteers but unit controllers receive little induction or training. Although the performance of controllers should be reviewed regularly, the current reviews of performance add little value. Inadequate leadership and cumbersome grievance procedures contribute to interpersonal tensions and volunteer turnover.

While SES values volunteers in principle, it provides them with limited recognition and support.

There is no state-wide analysis of training needs or evaluation of training delivery. Volunteer training is currently disrupted as updated training materials are being rolled out. Once this is done, recruits should be able to contribute sooner than under the previous training which could take over a year to complete. There is scope for SES to be more innovative and flexible in the way it trains volunteers.

Recommendations

NSW State Emergency Service should establish clear priorities, integrate initiatives and improve monitoring to better manage and support volunteers. To do this, SES should:

1. By December 2014, improve analysis and reporting on management information about volunteers, including:

   - numbers, contribution, skills, profile, availability and turnover
   - reasons for joining and leaving
   - gaps in data completeness and quality

   This should enable SES to demonstrate an improvement in the completeness and accuracy of management information by April 2015 (page 22)

2. By December 2014, develop a volunteer workforce plan to focus resources for recruitment and retention on areas of greatest need. The plan should be based on regional capability plans that assess in a consistent way:

   - how many volunteers they have and need
   - the gaps and risks around volunteer numbers, skills and training (page 22)

3. By April 2015, update its recruitment guidelines and resources, and support units in better targeting recruitment (page 29)

4. By April 2015, develop strategies and resources to improve volunteer retention, including:

   - induction and development of leaders
   - health checks for units to identify and address areas for improvement
   - pathways for volunteers to take on greater responsibility
   - consultation and communication
   - recognition for volunteers and their employers (page 29)

5. By April 2015, develop a training strategy that identifies volunteer training priorities and provides for ongoing review to ensure operational currency, flexibility of delivery and evaluation (page 29)

6. By December 2014, agree a charter with volunteers that clarifies roles and expectations including commitments by:

   - SES to support volunteers to prepare for and respond to emergencies
   - SES to make the best use of volunteers' time by introducing user-friendly systems and reducing the administrative burden on them
   - volunteers to turn-out when called to respond to emergencies (page 29).

Response from the NSW State Emergency Service

10 April 2014

Mr Grant Hehir
Auditor-General
Audit Office of NSW
GPO Box 12
SYDNEY NSW 2001

Dear Mr Hehir

Management Response to Volunteer Management Audit

Please find enclosed with this correspondence, the NSW SES Management Response to the Volunteer Management Program audit report.

On behalf of the NSW State Emergency Service, thank you for your assistance in the progress of this audit and I would also like to pass on my thanks to your team, with special mention to Suzanne Mousallem and Michael Johnston.

Yours sincerely

Jim Smith
Acting Commissioner

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Response from the NSW State Emergency Service Performance Audit 2014 – Management of Volunteers

The NSW SES Acting Commissioner and the Director Human Services accept the findings and recommendations of this performance audit and have agreed to implement actions designed to address the recommendations (see Action Plan below). Upon receipt of this report the Agency has given each recommendation a risk rating using the methodology outlined in the NSW SES Risk Management Framework. The NSW SES Risk Matrix, which describes the risk likelihood and consequence combinations giving rise to these risk ratings, is provided for reference.

We welcome this report and the part it will play in further improving and standardising the practices in place with regards to the management of volunteers in the NSW SES.

NSW SES Management of Volunteers Audit 2014 – Action Plan

Audit Report Reference/ Item Number	Action Rating High Moderate Low	Recommendation	Management Response/Action to occur	Date due
1. Improve Analysis and Reporting	HIGH	By December 2014, improve analysis and reporting on management information about volunteers, including: **a)** numbers, contribution, skills, profile, availability and turnover **b)** reasons for joining and leaving **c)** gaps in data completeness and quality This should enable SES to demonstrate an improvement in the completeness and accuracy of management information by April 2015	**a)** The NSW SES will develop standard reports that will be available through the self-service portal for volunteer numbers, skills and turnover. The SAP-HR system has a feature for non-operational activity recording and this will be implemented fully to record the contribution of volunteer members. **b)** The NSW SES has developed a draft Exit policy and procedure, including an exit survey process to capture the reasons that volunteers join and leave the service. A pilot program using these tools was conducted in the Central West Region. At a national level, the NSW SES is engaged in the Bushfire and Natural Hazards Cooperative Research Centre (BNH CRC). The Sustainable Volunteering research cluster will provide insight into issues faced by volunteer based agencies across the sector and nationally consistent strategies to attract and retain volunteers. The NSW SES will analyse exit data to inform annual reviews of the Workforce Management plan and the implementation of strategies to attract and retain volunteer members. The NSW SES will promulgate and implement Exit policy and procedures. **c)** The HR Systems team has an ongoing role to monitor the completeness and quality of volunteer data, where errors are detected the team will liaise with Regions to rectify. The NSW SES will run regular system audit reports to identify anomalies and then advise users how to rectify the data issue that has been identified. The NSW SES will implement identified system enhancements to improve volunteer data including: qualifications for dual members (staff and volunteer), length of service and vaccination records. Targeted program audits will also be identified through the Audit and Risk Committee to ensure the accuracy and quality of volunteer data.	31/12/2014

Audit Report Reference/ Item Number	Action Rating High Moderate Low	Recommendation	Management Response/Action to occur	Date due
2. Volunteer Workforce Plan	HIGH	By December 2014, develop a volunteer workforce plan to focus resources for recruitment and retention on areas of greatest need. The plan should be based on regional capability plans that assess in a consistent way: **a)** how many volunteers they have and need **b)** the gaps and risks around volunteer numbers, skills and training	**a)** The NSW SES will consolidate data from the Region Capability Plans to identify the numbers of volunteers needed at a Unit, Region and State level. Recruitment strategies will be aligned with the composition of the population where SES Units are located to attract women, people with a disability, CALD and Aboriginal community members. Key performance indicators will be established in Region Capability Plans to achieve diversity targets and increases in volunteer numbers, which will also inform the Workforce Management Plan. **b)** The NSW SES will identify gaps and risks from consolidated Capability Plan data and develop recruitment strategies to address these gaps in a Workforce Management Plan. Implemented strategies will include the attraction of members based on factors such as: age, gender, cultural background and skills profile. Additional resources will be required to develop a comprehensive Workforce Management plan that addresses volunteer resource needs out to 2021.	31/12/2014
3. Recruitment Guidelines and Resources	MODERATE	By April 2015, update its recruitment guidelines and resources, and support units in better targeting recruitment	**a)** The NSW SES will update the Recruitment Guide to reflect strategies for the attraction of members based on factors such as: age, gender, people with a disability, cultural background and skills profile. The Looking After People (LAP) Program will provide training to volunteer leaders on how to implement the Recruitment Guide and develop a recruitment plan specific to the needs of their local area. Additional funding will be required to deliver the LAP program to all existing volunteer leaders and new volunteer leaders as they enter the Service. **b)** In conjunction with the Corporate Communications section, AV promotional material for recruitment will be developed that can be used at a local level. **c)** The NSW SES will develop new targeted Community Service Announcements Work (CSAs). Work with Corporate Communications has already commenced to develop the CSAs with a recruitment theme that will screen on the Prime TV network. Research is currently being undertaken to identify who volunteering CSAs should be targeting, and what messages are likely to most appeal to get people to join. Information on our volunteer make up, areas where we are deficient and the skills we need to recruit will also be included.	30/04/2015

Audit Report Reference/ Item Number	Action Rating High Moderate Low	Recommendation	Management Response/Action to occur	Date due
4. Volunteer Retention	MODERATE	By April 2015, develop strategies and resources to improve volunteer retention, including: **a)** induction and development of leaders **b)** health checks for units to identify and address areas for improvement **c)** pathways for volunteers to take on greater responsibility **d)** consultation and communication **e)** recognition for volunteers and their employers	**a)** The NSW SES has released a revised induction product called the 'NSW SES Fundamentals' that is currently being implemented across the State. In addition to this, the NSW SES is part of a multi-disciplinary leadership program aimed at volunteer leaders from our organisation and other agencies. The NSW SES is engaged in the Bushfire and Natural Hazards Cooperative Research Centre and the "Sustainable Volunteering" cluster which amongst other research questions is looking at volunteer leadership development as a retention strategy. The NSW SES will revise the LAP program. The LAP program will be rolled out during the next financial year, targeting volunteer leaders. **b)** A schedule of program audits at a Unit level will be developed to identify and address areas for improvement, the results of which will be reported to and monitored by the Audit and Risk Committee **c)** The NSW SES will develop Incident Management requirements for levels 1 to 3 and will provide development pathways for volunteers to achieve these qualifications. **d)** The NSW SES is currently revising the Volunteer Joint Consultative Committee process at a Region and State level to provide more meaningful consultation and communication with the Volunteers Association. **e)** The NSW SES will continue to deliver honours and awards in recognition of volunteer service. Additional recognition awards will be considered by the Honours and Awards Committee that meets on a quarterly basis, recent awards that have been introduced include recognition of 5 years' service, the Cadet of the Year award and the Andy Roberts Most Improved Cadet of the Year award. The NSW SES will develop an Employer Recognition program to acknowledge the support of employers of volunteers.	30/04/2015
5. Training Strategy	MODERATE	By April 2015, develop a training strategy that identifies volunteer training priorities and provides for ongoing review to ensure operational currency, flexibility of delivery and evaluation	**a)** The NSW SES will complete the Organisation Learning Plan project to articulate learning pathways for volunteers to ensure operational currency in the full range of skill areas. **b)** The NSW SES will complete a Blended Learning Strategy aimed at increasing the flexibility of delivery of training programs. Learning pathways will align with the results of the skills audit conducted with Government Skills Australia (GSA) and the skill gaps identified across the volunteer workforce and will also comply with the current version of the Public Safety Training Package PUA12.	30/04/2015

Audit Report Reference/ Item Number	Action Rating High Moderate Low	Recommendation	Management Response/Action to occur	Date due
6. Volunteer Charter	HIGH	By December 2014, agree a charter with volunteers that clarifies roles and expectations including commitments by: **a)** SES to support volunteers to prepare for and respond to emergencies **b)** SES to make the best use of volunteers' time by introducing user-friendly systems and reducing the administrative burden on them **c)** volunteers to turn-out when called to respond to emergencies.	The NSW SES Volunteers Association has developed a draft volunteer charter in collaboration and has engaged with the Office of the Commissioner, and the Minister's Office to finalise and sign off the agreement. The purpose of this Charter is to provide a documented commitment between the NSW State Government, the NSW SES and the SES VA to enhance the objectives and outcomes of the NSW SES, ensuring the protection of the needs and interests of Volunteers. **a)** The draft Charter outlines the NSW SES commitment to volunteers and the contribution and commitment of volunteers in assisting their communities. The Charter is still under collaborative development and is expected to be completed by the middle of 2014. **b)** The Charter outlines SES Management commitment to consulting on policies that impact on volunteers, providing appropriate resources so that volunteers can do their roles and efficient administrative, operational and infrastructure support services to reduce the burden on volunteer members. **c)** The Charter outlines the volunteer commitment to ensure that the safety needs of the community are met to the best of their collective abilities.	31/12/2014

NSW SES Risk Matrix

Business and Operational Risk Matrix

LIKELIHOOD		SEVERITY Catastrophic 5	Severe 4	Major 3	Moderate 2	Minor 1
Almost certain	5	Extreme	Extreme	High	Medium	Low
Likely	4	Extreme	High	High	Medium	Low
Possible	3	Extreme	High	Medium	Low	Low
Unlikely	2	High	Medium	Low	Low	Low
Rare	1	Medium	Low	Low	Low	Low

• ASSESS   • CONTROL   • MONITOR

Introduction

Emergency Management

The *State Emergency and Rescue Management Act 1989* requires the Government to develop a New South Wales Emergency Management Plan (EMPLAN) to ensure a co-ordinated response to emergencies by agencies. The 2012 EMPLAN provides an all-hazards, all-agencies approach that requires coordination and information sharing for prevention, preparation, response and recovery.

Section 8 of the *State Emergency Services Act 1989* makes the NSW State Emergency Service (SES) responsible for dealing with floods, storms and tsunamis. The EMPLAN gives SES lead responsibility for preparing the community for, and responding to, these events.

Many non-metropolitan SES units respond to other emergencies including road crash, search, rescue, community first responder and bushfire support.

Successive governments recognised the importance of this service and increased the SES budget from $34 million in 2004–05 to $95 million in 2013–14. This has enabled SES to:
- upgrade and standardise unit equipment, facilities and fleet which had previously being provided by local councils
- establish an around the clock state call centre and the state operations centre which is activated during major emergency events
- implement new administrative systems and processes, including finance and human resources (SAP), planning, management information and communication.

Over the last decade the number of SES staff increased from 125 in 2003–04 to 342 in 2012–13 of which 204 are at state headquarters and 138 in regional offices. Over the same period there has been a slight reduction in the number of active volunteers. SES refers to staff and volunteers collectively as members.

Exhibit 1 shows the structure and functions of SES.

SES is the lead agency for flood, storm and tsunami

Exhibit 1: The structure of SES

State Headquaters **204 staff**	• located in Wollongong • has directorates: finance and logistics, human services, ICT, community safety, Office of the Commissioner and operations • sets policy and develops training material • provides coordination, operates the statewide call centre, and manages the SES operations centre during major emergencies
17 Regional Offices **138 staff**	• boundaries are based on major river systems • led by a regional controller • provide operational and administrative support and coordinates unit planning and training • should each have a regional controller, deputy, learning and development officer and two administrative staff. Some regions have additional community engagement, volunteer support and learning officers
229 Local Units **6,514 volunteers**	• based on local council areas and are led by a unit controller • controllers are responsible for recruiting, training members, organising emergency response, community engagement, finance and administration • in addition to storm and flood, units provide a range of responses depending on the needs of their community: e.g. road crash, alpine resue and community first response • vary in size from less than 8 to over 110 members • most have 1-2 deputy controller(s), trainers and assessors. Some units also have community engagment officer.

Source: NSW State Emergency Service 2012–13 Annual Report and website.

Volunteers contributed 30,000 hours engaging the community to prepare for, and 309,000 hours responding to, emergencies in 2012–13. In addition to these hours volunteers recorded over 500,000 hours to other activities including, maintenance, training and administration. We estimate that the contribution to other activities is understated by at least 50 per cent.

In recent years, two thirds of response hours have been for storm, while flood effort varies from year to year. Other emergency response has remained constant at around ten per cent of hours but is the main task undertaken by some rural units.

Volunteer Management

The use of volunteers in emergency service raises particular challenges requiring a range of management and leadership skills to respond to the episodic nature of weather events. It needs to train and maintain the interest of volunteers during the quiet times, control rapid response to events and all the while provide effective corporate support. While volunteers can provide a cost-effective surge response, longer term commitments are hard for volunteers and their employers to sustain.

SES cannot manage volunteers in the same way as paid staff. A volunteer's availability and the goodwill of their employer determines their ability to attend training and respond to emergencies. SES relies on volunteer leaders to organise the local response to emergencies and to recruit, train and engage with their local communities.

Organisations that rely on volunteers face growing competition for unpaid helpers, and declining rates of volunteer participation as people age and their capacity and preferences change.

Exhibit 2 shows the organisational challenges facing SES as a volunteer emergency service organisation, under three main heads: planning, service delivery, managing people. We have used this structure for our report: Chapter 1 covers planning and service delivery; Chapter 2 managing volunteers.

Exhibit 2: Organisational elements of a volunteer emergency service

Basic organisational element	Emergency service agency dimension	Volunteer agency dimension
Planning Organisation has clear: priorities, planning processes, roles, management information and controls.	Emergency planning requires flexibility and interoperability in roles, resources and systems.	Agency needs to give volunteers a stake and a way to influence proceedings. The respective roles of agency and volunteers need to be clear. There should be a culture of support from the agency and commitment to respond from the volunteer. Volunteer time is limited and they are generally not interested in administration.
Service delivery Organisation delivers expected service. It understands service demands, available resources and is able to respond.	The all agency approach requires agencies to work in partnership. Agencies need to address prevention and preparation as well as response and recovery. Unpredictable demand requires a surge capability. Resource availability needs to be stated in capabilities. If there are shortages contingency plans are required.	Volunteers are not paid employees who can be directed. Agencies need a sufficient number of volunteers so as to provide a sustained effort.
Managing volunteers Organisation attracts, retains and trains the right mix of skills.	Attracting additional resources can be a challenge in some rural areas. Emergency response is dangerous. Agencies need to protect their people with training, safe practice and support.	Understand why volunteers join, stay or leave. Focus on engagement, communication, recognition and support for volunteers. Develop volunteer leadership and management. Make the best use of volunteers' limited time. Volunteers can resist changes to health and safety practices. Additional paperwork is viewed as timewasting and adding little value to reducing safety risk.

Source: Audit Office of New South Wales.

We undertook this audit because previous financial audits have repeatedly found that SES lacked adequate volunteer workforce plans. In addition, volunteering is an important component of the NSW 2021 State Plan and volunteer management presents some unique challenges in the area of natural disasters which provide lessons to other organisations.

Appendix 1 contains further information about the audit scope.

Exhibit 3: Evacuation of nursing home

Source: State Emergency Service 2007.

Key findings

1.   Does SES have the volunteer workforce it needs?

Finding: SES has been able to respond to over 25,000 incidents per year using its own volunteers and when necessary calling upon the assistance of other emergency services. SES cannot quantify how much it relies on other services when it lacks volunteers. It does not have a clear and consistent picture of how many volunteers it needs to meet future demand and the skills required.

SES Regions recently restarted capability planning to produce this information. Preliminary results for some regions show major gaps between the volunteer workforces they need and have. There are as yet no workforce plans to address these gaps.

SES recognises active volunteers as its primary operational workforce. There were 6,514 such volunteers in mid-2013, a drop of seven per cent since 2009. Overall, SES volunteers are making a bigger contribution than five years ago. On average each volunteer now contributes around 50 hours a year responding to emergencies. They also contribute at least 100 hours each on non-operational tasks including training.

The SES 2011–15 Plan has the potential to change the way it manages volunteers. It has improved safety which has reduced volunteer injury claims by 40 per cent between 2008–09 and 2012–13 through better equipment and work practice. SES has yet to deliver other improvements. At December 2013, no progress had been reported against two thirds of the Plan's indicators. The Plan's initiatives are loosely coordinated, inadequately monitored and SES lacks reliable information for decision making.

The frequent deployment of staff from management and administration to operational roles has delayed implementation of the Plan. Other emergency agencies assign more of these roles to volunteers.

1.1   Planning for the volunteer workforce it needs

SES Plans and priorities

SES's organisational structure in Exhibit 1 provides a framework for managing operational response and control of resources. Its 2011–15 Plan aims to develop service delivery, governance and people. Exhibit 4 lists the Plan's goals for managing and supporting volunteers.

Exhibit 4: Goals relevant to volunteers in the SES 2011–15 Plan

- **Active Membership –** Attract, train, support and retain members to the organisation
- **Culture of Improvement –** Every member may actively contribute to a culture of improvement
- **Safe Environment –** Safety, health and wellbeing of all members achieved
- **Skilled Organisation –** Ongoing learning and development where members acquire the skills to fulfil their roles
- **Supportive Technology –** All members have access to technology that adds value to their roles
- **Volunteer Impact** The impact on volunteers is reviewed before introducing new services, assets or practices
- **User Friendly Systems –** Business processes are easy to follow, consistent and enabling
- **Resilient Community –** Increase access to prevention and preparedness services
- **Effective State-wide –** capability based on research and need
- **Learning Organisation –** Learn lessons from corporate and operational activities that result in obvious improvement.

Source: NSW State Emergency Service 2011–15 Plan.

SES initiatives have improved volunteer safety. Between 2008–09 and 2012–13, volunteer injury claims fell by 40 per cent to 70 and the average cost of these claims fell by 58 per cent to $3,547. SES attributes this reduction to a process of continuous improvement to equipment and work practice.

However, other parts of the Plan have been less successful. The Plan has more than 1,200 initiatives, which have not been sufficiently prioritised or resourced to make progress. Synergies between the initiatives have not been identified to minimise duplication and maximise impact.

In 2011 SES introduced the Corporate Performance Management system to monitor progress against the key performance indicators (KPIs) for the Plan. SES stopped reporting between Dec 2012 and Aug 2013. At December 2013, it had reported no progress against two thirds of these KPIs.

SES has only reported progress against one third of KPIs in its five year Plan

Exhibit 5: Disruption to the Plan

In October 2013, a review commissioned by SES found that emergencies can interrupt the implementation of the Plan when paid staff:

- are deployed in incident control management roles
- volunteer to work in the State Operations Centre (SOC), which entitles them to overtime and allowances
- volunteer to work in a local unit to which they belong.

SES policy requires that volunteering by staff does not adversely affect normal business. The 2013 review found this was not happening. On 160 days during 2011–12 some headquarter staff ceased their corporate work to respond to emergencies. At some stage, senior managers, all of ICT, two thirds of the Human Services and half of the Learning and Development staff were deployed operationally. This placed significant pressure on the ability of SES to maintain regular corporate service activities, support volunteers and deliver key projects on time and budget. Our fieldwork confirmed this disruption.

Operational impact on corporate projects could be reduced by adopting the practice of the Victorian SES and the NSW Rural Fire Service. These agencies train and use volunteers in the SOC and as Incident Control Managers during an event. Since 2008, SES has made commitments to train volunteers in Incident Control Management. To date, SES has accredited no volunteers as incident controllers and does not use them in the SOC.

Source: NSW State Emergency Service documentation 2013 and Audit Office of New South Wales analysis 2014.

Workforce and capability planning

SES does not know how many volunteers it needs in each locality and the skill sets required to meet future demand. SES began workforce planning five years ago but has made little progress in respect of volunteers. Until recently, it had no process for identifying the number of volunteers required by each community and developing plans for the recruitment, retention and training of volunteers to meet those needs.

SES does not know how many volunteers it needs

The corporate focus has been on other aspects of organisational capability, such as buildings, equipment, operational management and staff competencies. Only $4 million of the five year $95 million enhancement in the 2013–14 budget directly funded volunteer projects. Nevertheless, SES advise that modern facilities and equipment increases volunteer satisfaction and reduces turnover.

SES has renewed its attention on capability planning recently. In 2013, Southern Highlands was the first region to develop a capability plan to determine a preferred establishment of volunteers for each of its 15 local units.

Exhibit 6 contains a summary of its analysis of the volunteer workforce needed to address the risks faced by one of the units, Queanbeyan.

Exhibit 6: Extract of Southern Highlands Region draft capability plan

Local government area and population	Risk	Risk rating	Comment
Queanbeyan 37,991(2011 census) 47,239 (2016 ABS estimate) 52,095 (2021 ABS estimate)	Flood riverine	Extreme	Queanbeyan River flows through the City and its CBD. Googong Dam is located 10 km upstream
	Flood flash	Moderate	
	Storm	High	

To meet these risks and other rescue events, the Region estimates that the Queanbeyan local unit needs to be able to deploy:

- five teams of five to respond to 180–200 requests for storm damage assistance within a 72 hour period
- two flood boat teams of two to respond to the 300 properties at risk
- a team of two vertical rescue operators available 24/7
- an alpine rescue team
- an operations management team.

Capability plans have to factor in the likelihood that volunteers will turn-out when needed. This can vary greatly depending on the community, with some small rural units able to rely on most of their volunteers turning out when required. Turn-out also depends on the time of day – units made up of commuters find it hard to mobilise teams until late afternoon. Volunteers are more likely to turn-out and be supported by their employers when the event is news-worthy. Most of the controllers we spoke to, only expect one in three volunteers to turn-out when first called. On that basis Queanbeyan requires 100 active volunteers with an appropriate mix of competencies.

The aggregated Southern Highlands Capability Plan also commits the Region to support larger ongoing operations in other regions with storm and flood teams for five days. This is likely to require a larger number of teams to be rotated through to maintain the operational capability. These teams will be drawn from across the region, not just the Queanbeyan unit.

Southern Highlands has 376 active volunteers, 108 more than the capability plan requires.

Source: Southern Highlands Region Capability Plan 2013–18.

SES management has asked the other 16 regions to prepare capability plans based on the Southern Highland template by February 2014 to identify local and regional recruitment and training needs. We note:

- some regions have made preliminary assessments that indicate significant shortfalls in volunteer numbers. Sydney Southern has 880 active volunteers, 300 short of the estimated need and Hunter has 512 volunteers, 100 short
- the State Emergency Management Plan requires SES to prepare communities for natural disasters. This requires different skill sets to those needed for flood and storm response. The preliminary plans give insufficient attention to the volunteers and skills required for community engagement.

There are significant gaps between the workforce some regions need and have

The initial results suggest the need for targeted efforts at recruitment and retention in some regions. It will be important to ensure a consistent approach to capability planning across the state. It is unclear how SES will calibrate and aggregate the regional plans to produce a state capability and workforce plan. Until they do, SES cannot be assured that it will continue to have a sufficient volunteer workforce, especially in locations that find it hard to recruit volunteers, or have particularly high turnover.

The quality of information used for planning

SES lacks adequate information to analyse and address issues around the recruitment, training and turnover of volunteers. This is despite its investment in SAP and other systems. SES has yet to integrate many HR, finance and IT processes.

There is a lack of consistency in process, record management and reporting lines. SES uses a variety of stand-alone systems, data re-entry, and manual recording. For example:

- HR systems do not provide useful information on a volunteer's profile, skills, current competency, length of service and availability. This restricts SES's ability to plan for operations, make the best use of volunteers and recognise their contributions
- HR cannot monitor or report volunteer attrition trends
- there is no consistent practice for recording volunteers' time on non-operational activities or for maintaining financial, fleet and asset maintenance records. Units use a variety of systems or none at all.

The SES Plan recognises the need to upgrade and integrate operational and administrative systems and to train volunteers in their use. Progress has been limited. Systems remain poorly integrated and are not easy for volunteers to use. There is opportunity for SES to improve its implementation of SAP by learning from other emergency agencies that use it.

SES headquarter directorates tend to work in isolation with different priorities. There are inconsistent messages and the premature release, withdrawal and rerelease of policies, procedures and training materials to volunteers. In 2013, this occurred frequently, in respect of storm, traffic control and fitness procedures.

1.2 Emergency response

Available volunteer workforce

Volunteers respond to over 25,000 incidents each year

SES has been able to respond to over 25,000 incidents a year with the assistance of other emergency services. In turn it has assisted other emergency service in New South Wales and other states. This is in accordance with New South Wales all-agency approach to emergency management.

Exhibit 7: An all-agency approach to storm and flood

In June 2007, gale force winds, heavy rain and major flooding struck the Hunter and Central Coast. Eight people drowned.

SES led an all-agency response during the 18 days of severe weather.

Hundreds of people were rescued from flood waters, over 4,000 evacuated and over 7,400 requests for storm assistance answered. SES advise that this response was not limited by the number of volunteers who turned out across the state. This was because SES was supported by hundreds of personnel from other emergency services, defence, councils and interstate.

Source: NSW State Emergency Service documentation 2007.

SES cannot quantify how much it relies on other services when it lacks volunteers. Its systems do not capture how many calls for assistance are allocated to other agencies or what resources those agencies deploy. SES also pays contractors $1.5 to $3.7 million a year to assist with housing repair and clean up.

**Exhibit 8: Number of incidents attended**
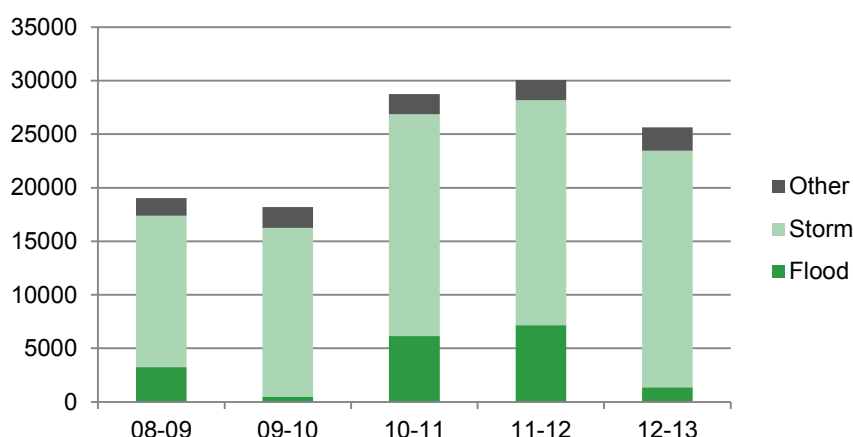
Source: NSW State Emergency Service data.

Due to the dangerous nature of SES work, volunteers need to be appropriately trained. SES requires a volunteer to train once a month to maintain active membership. A unit can retain volunteers who do not meet this requirement as reserve members, but should not deploy them in the field until it reassesses their competency. This policy is not applied consistently across units.

The number of registered active volunteers who can be deployed in the field has fallen to 6,514 at 30 June 2013, a drop of seven per cent since 2009.

Exhibit 9: Active and reserve SES volunteers
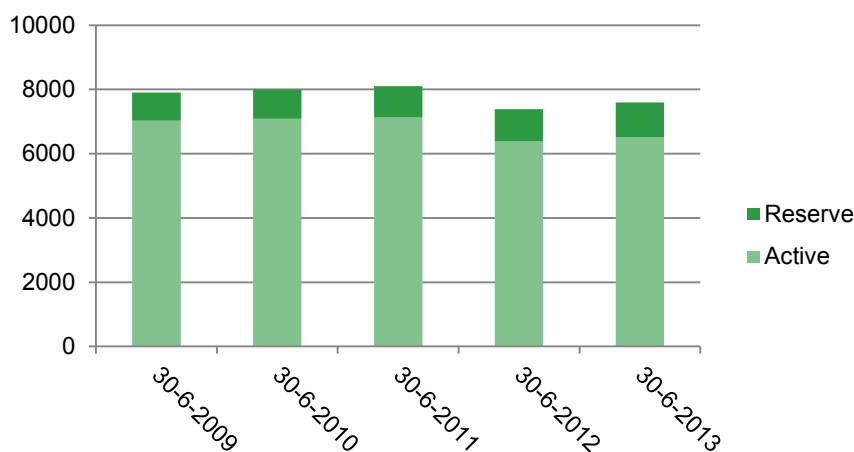
Source: NSW State Emergency Service data.

SES advises that there were 6,867 active volunteers at February 2014 and while these are the primary workforce, others can contribute in an emergency. There were 909 recruits and 1,068 reservists to give a total strength of 8,844 volunteer members.

Volunteer contribution

Operational hours fluctuate with the occurrence of severe weather events. These cannot be predicted.

Volunteers are making a bigger contribution than five years ago. On average each volunteer contributed three hours to community engagement and 49 hours in emergency response in 2012–13, compared with one and 37 hours respectively in 2008–09. The exhibit does not capture all operational time as some units do not record their effort.

**Exhibit 10: Volunteer operational hours by activity 2008–13**
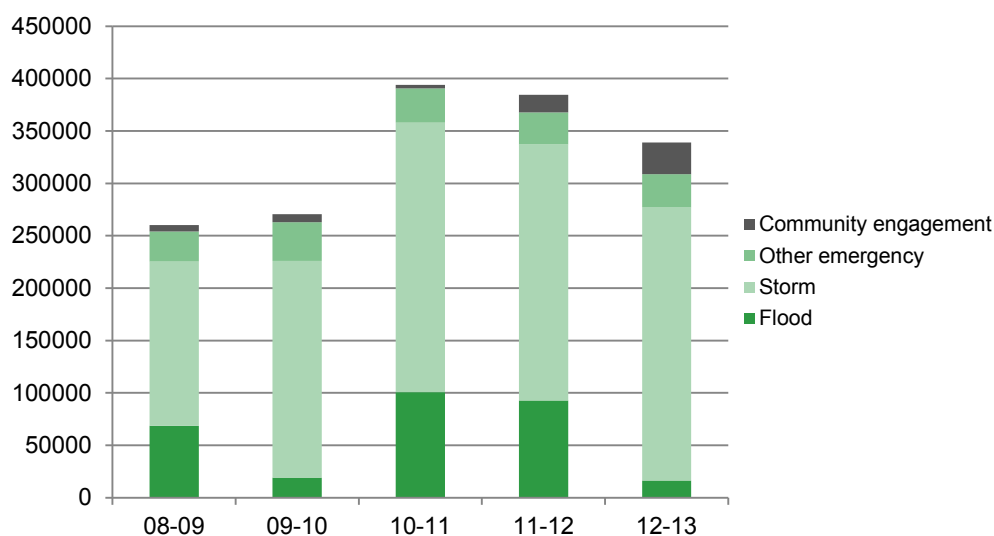
Source: NSW State Emergency Service data

Note: Other emergency includes road crash, search, rescue, community first responder and bushfire support.

It is unclear whether the time spent on engagement is sufficient or effective to prepare communities for emergencies. SES advise it is working to improve its reporting to better capture and target volunteer effort. While some units engage well with their community, others saw it as a distraction from field work. SES has employed a staff member to coordinate community engagement in nine of the 17 regions.

When rural regions are hit by severe and long-lasting floods, the operational commitments can increase dramatically to over 120 hours per volunteer as shown in Exhibit 11. For example the Macquarie region in the central west was inundated by two major floods in 2010–11.

Exhibit 11: Operational hours per active volunteer by region
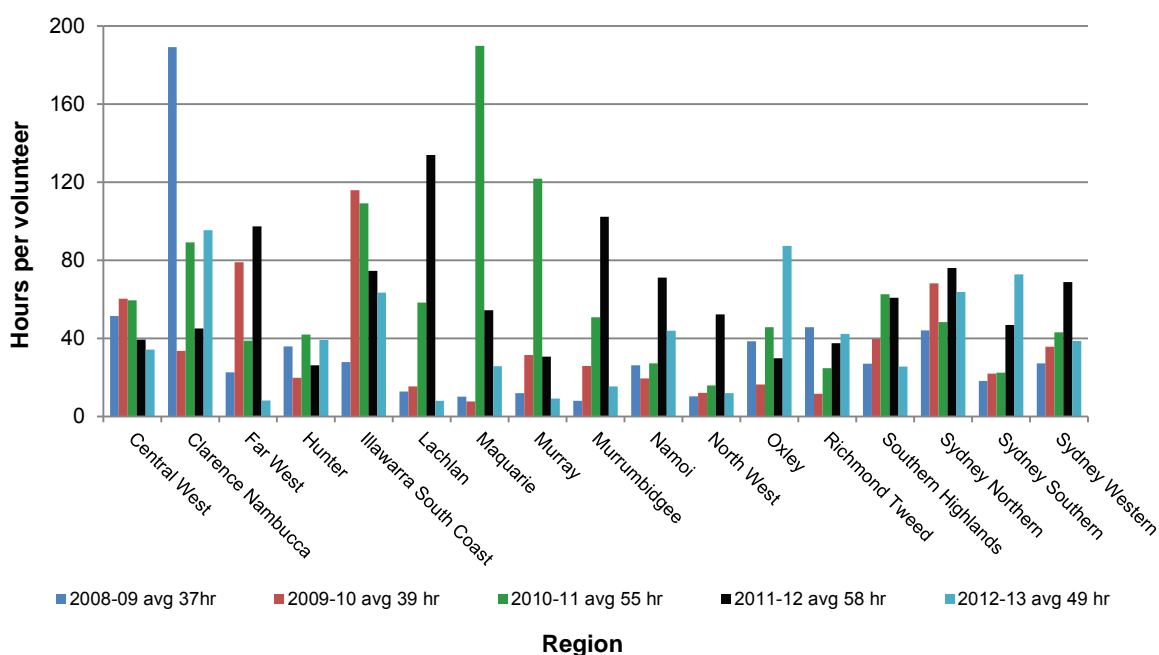
Source: NSW State Emergency Service data .

Recommendations: NSW State Emergency Service should establish clear priorities, integrate initiatives and improve monitoring to better manage and support volunteers. To do this, SES should:

- By December 2014, improve analysis and reporting on management information about volunteers, including:
    - numbers, contribution, skills, profile, availability and turnover
    - reasons for joining and leaving
    - gaps in data completeness and quality

This should enable SES to demonstrate an improvement in the completeness and accuracy of management information by April 2015

- By December 2014, develop a volunteer workforce plan to focus resources for recruitment and retention on areas of greatest need. The plan should be based on regional capability plans that assess in a consistent way:
    - how many volunteers they have and need
    - the gaps and risks around volunteer numbers, skills and training.

Exhibit 12: Response to storm

Source: State Emergency Service 2007.

2. Does SES have an efficient and effective framework for managing its volunteer workforce?

Finding: The key elements of effective volunteer management are to recruit the right people, train and keep them. SES's high turnover of volunteers indicates weaknesses in recruitment and training as well as retention.

The annual turnover of SES volunteers is about 26 per cent in NSW compared to 20 per cent nationally. Only half of the estimated 1,700 volunteers who join SES each year are active members 12 months later. Many volunteers, although defined as active, do not respond to emergency call outs. This is unproductive, imposes additional demands on volunteer trainers and can cost over $1,000 per volunteer for protective gear that is not used.

There are no state-wide recruitment or retention strategies and no monitoring of volunteer turnover. SES provides limited support to units to address recruitment and retention issues. It is up to local units to attract and keep volunteers and their success varies widely.

The quality of volunteer leadership is an important factor in attracting and keeping volunteers but unit controllers receive little induction or training. Although the performance of controllers should be reviewed regularly, the current reviews of performance add little value. Inadequate leadership and cumbersome grievance procedures contribute to interpersonal tensions and volunteer turnover.

While SES values volunteers in principle, it provides them with limited recognition and support.

There is no state-wide analysis of training needs or evaluation of training delivery. Volunteer training is currently disrupted as updated training materials are being rolled out. Once this is done, recruits should be able to contribute sooner than under the previous training which could take over a year to complete. There is scope for SES to be more innovative and flexible in the way it trains volunteers.

2.1   Recruitment

Workforce planning is necessary to ensure that SES has the right resources, in the right place at the right time. As described above SES is developing capability plans at a regional level. At this stage it has limited organisational awareness of its volunteer workforce requirement.
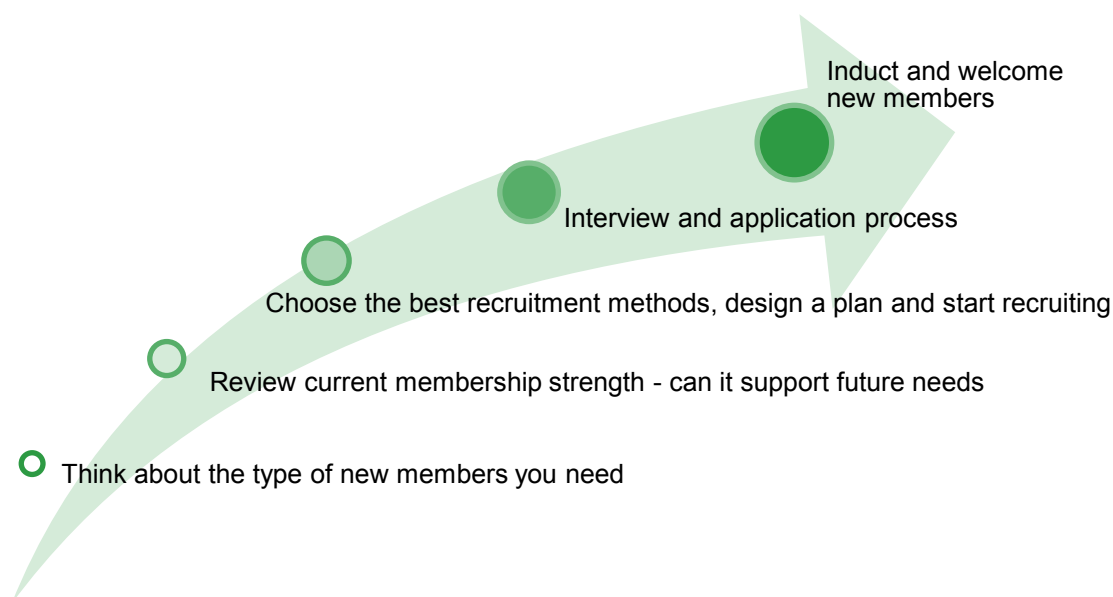
It is the responsibility of units to attract new volunteers. They receive limited support and guidance from SES to do so. What support there is, is not targeted and takes three forms:

- the controller's manual contains a recruitment guide, which SES has not reviewed since 2008. It has templates for recruiting but these cannot be electronically adapted by units. In contrast, the NSW Rural Fire Service supports its brigades with clear guidance on how to recruit and adaptable tools
- each year SES runs StormSafe and FloodSafe, which are state-wide campaigns to prepare the community. Together with Wear Orange Wednesday, these help promote the work of SES volunteers. State headquarters give units promotional material to distribute during these campaigns to attract new volunteers
- since 2009, SES has run a cadet program which 1,669 secondary students have completed. In 2012–13, 26 schools and 449 students participated. While the program provides challenging training and understanding of community service, less than 10 per cent of cadets go on to join SES. Other emergency services attract more of their cadets into active membership. Nevertheless, SES advises that the number of active volunteers under 25 years has doubled since it began the cadet program.

SES does not do enough to attract the right volunteers

The SES membership application form does not capture the reasons recruits join or how they learnt about SES. Such data could inform recruitment efforts and workforce planning. Research indicates that volunteers join SES to help others, learn new skills and enjoy the camaraderie. Several of the volunteers we spoke to joined after SES had helped them during a disaster.

We observed units that recruited effectively followed the steps in Exhibit 13. They identified the roles needed, used targeted recruiting methods, held information sessions and interviewed applicants to ensure that they and the unit were a good fit. These units attract a large pool of suitable recruits which allow them to introduce an annual intake making induction and training more efficient. Some units have relaxed their attendance requirements to recruit volunteers for non-field roles such as communication and community engagement.

Exhibit 13: Steps to consider when planning recruitment

Induct and welcome
new members

Interview and application process

Choose the best recruitment methods, design a plan and start recruiting

Review current membership strength - can it support future needs

Think about the type of new members you need

Source: NSW Rural Fire Services recruitment and retention kit 2013.

Other units struggle to recruit volunteers because they have limited management skills or a smaller pool of potential volunteers due to population size, age, gender, ethnicity and competing demands. Such units need more support from SES to better target recruitment. This is particularly true of some rural units.

Emergency agencies in other states are doing more to achieve flexible membership. For example, the Queensland emergency sector has made it easier for volunteers to work across agencies by introducing an inter-agency passport. It has also established a register of skilled people who are prepared to assist with recovery after a disaster.

2.2   Retention

Only 50 per cent of recruits remain active after 12 months

Volunteer turnover is a challenge to SES across Australia. A 2009 report found average national turnover was 20 per cent. We estimate that the current annual NSW turnover is higher at around 26 per cent.

While half of the active volunteers at any moment have been with SES for more than four years, the rest turn over quickly. We estimate that only half of the 1,700 new volunteers who join SES each year are active volunteers 12 months later.

SES defines active volunteers by their training attendance rather than their willingness to turnout when called. Several units told us that many volunteers do not turn out and that they rely on a handful of dedicated volunteers to respond to emergencies. SES does not have good information on turnout rates at state or local level.

We visited two units that made their expectation about turnout clear to new recruits, provided mentors and actively engaged them. These units performance manage volunteers who consistently do not respond to emergency call outs and as a last resort ask them to leave.

The high turnover and low turnout is wasteful because SES gets little return on the recruitment, fit out and training of those recruits who leave too soon. It can cost SES over $1,000 to provide each of these people with protective gear alone. The cost in terms of wasted time for volunteer trainers, assessors, supervisors, and staff is also significant.

Despite the high turnover, SES has no retention strategy, does not monitor turnover and does not support units in keeping volunteers. In contrast, the NSW Rural Fire Service provides a retention tool kit to its volunteer units. It encourages them to undertake regular 'health checks' to identify and address factors creating discord.

SES has not addressed its high turn over

Understanding why people leave is critical to reducing turnover. It is uncommon and often impractical for units to conduct exit interviews of volunteers who have already drifted away. However, SES needs to monitor attrition trends and reasons for separation. The electronic link to the only tool it currently has, an exit survey on its intranet, does not work.

SES is participating in University of Wollongong research into the profile and motivations of its volunteers but it is not clear how SES will translate this into its workforce plan. On a positive note, one third of NSW SES volunteers surveyed by Government Skills Australia in 2011 reported no negative features about being in SES. Only one in five controllers reported the same.

Some turnover is beyond the control of SES but some is not. The Government Skills Australia survey and other research by SES suggested that volunteer management can be more challenging for rural units. Many face a diminishing and ageing population, a lack of leadership to attract and keep volunteers, long travel times and poor communication. Rural units reported a greater need for assistance and training in communications, technology and people management.

Key areas that directly influence retention are leadership, recognition, communication and training.

Leadership

Controllers are required to manage their unit's volunteers and activities in line with legislative, public sector and SES requirements. Ideally SES appoints controllers who have leadership and management expertise, but such people are not always available. Exhibit 14 shows the breadth of challenges faced by a controller.

Exhibit 14: Challenges facing a local unit controller

A small rural unit had closed down because of inter-personal conflict. The region asked a young volunteer from a neighbouring town to take on the role of controller and rebuild the unit. He did not receive any leadership training and was given inconsistent advice on handling grievances when conflict re-emerged.

Apart from organising the emergency response in the town, he is also responsible for:

- recruiting and training volunteers
- ensuring their safety
- managing the unit's assets and finances
- engaging the community
- planning and reporting to local council
- accounting to SES regional and state headquarters.

These duties impose significant work load on the controller and can only be undertaken with the support of their employer. In most of the large units we visited, the controllers could only manage the work load because they were retired.

Source: Audit Office of New South Wales fieldwork.

Regions do not consistently follow SES policy to induct new unit controllers. Only one region we visited provided induction training for new controllers, a one day course.

Volunteer controllers do a lot with limited support from SES

The SES Act provides that volunteer controllers are appointed for two years and their performance be reviewed annually. In practice these reviews are done every two years before re-appointment. The reviews can be superficial and fail to differentiate between small and large units. The opportunity to develop leadership skills and plan for controller succession is often missed. The Southern Highlands region is improving their controller reviews by linking them to expectations in the capability plan.

In the past SES provided controllers with leadership training, but this stopped in 2012. SES advises that this was because of financial constraints. Six volunteers attended a multi-agency leadership program in 2013 and SES is considering ways to provide more leadership training to its volunteers.

Staff and volunteers told us that there was a strong link between good leadership and retention. Conversely inadequate leadership leads to interpersonal tension and higher turnover.

SES policy aims to resolve grievances promptly, impartially and if possible locally. However, its procedures are interim and not easily accessible to volunteers. It allows complainants to raise grievances with multiple levels of management and does not set timeframes for action. SES has not always proactively addressed interpersonal and leadership issues in a unit when a cluster of complaints arise.

Recognition and communication

While the SES states that volunteers are its most important asset it gives limited recognition to their role and does not effectively consult them.

SES needs to recognise, consult and communicate better with its volunteers

The Act established the Volunteer Joint Consultative Council to advise the Commissioner on matters relevant to SES volunteers. The Volunteers Association represents volunteers on this council. This council and its regional counter-parts have provided volunteers with opportunity to raise issues. However, council minutes indicate that long-standing matters including the replacement of height equipment remain unresolved.

SES has committed to use Volunteer Impact Statements (VIS) to consider the effect of policy changes on volunteers before they are introduced. It allows the Volunteers Association seven days to comment, which is too short a time frame for effective consultation with units that meet weekly. SES has not used VIS for major decisions involving storm and flood practice. The VIS we reviewed, either failed to recognise or understated the impact of change on volunteers.

Exhibit 15 describes several occasions where changes to improve safety were communicated poorly. Inconsistent directives from different parts of headquarters, lack of consultation and poorly documented policies contribute to this miscommunication.

Exhibit 15: Communicating change

Example 1: In December 2011, SES suddenly withdrew all height equipment where there was uncertainty as to its age or integrity. Units complain that their capacity has diminished because of the loss of resources. Staff say that replacements are available if requested.

Example 2: In November 2013, SES issued an interim policy for tree operations. It suspended the use of a chainsaw from a ladder and the felling of storm damaged trees. Night work was to be avoided where possible.

Example 3: In 2013, SES required flood rescue crews to undertake a swim test to ensure they are fit for tasks. Some volunteers are concerned that while this is appropriate in fast water situations it will unnecessarily exclude existing volunteers on the western plains.

In the first two examples the change was unexpected and not communicated well. SES did not consult volunteers because it viewed the safety issues to be paramount.

In all three cases volunteers felt that their role was being reduced by staff who did not understand what volunteers do.

Source: NSW State Emergency Service documentation and meetings with volunteers.

Communication is a major challenge for SES as many volunteers do not access email or the intranet and rely on face to face contact through their unit. On the other hand, unit controllers advised that they suffer information overload with 30 or more emails a day from SES.

Exhibit 16 shows that other agencies such as the Victorian Country Fire Association define roles and have more robust ways to recognise, communicate consult and support volunteers.

Exhibit 16: Country Fire Association (CFA) – Volunteer charter and consultation

A Charter can clarify the responsibilities of an agency and its volunteers

In 2011 the Victorian premier, minister for police and heads of CFA and its volunteer association signed a charter that recognises the fundamental role of volunteers in emergency management. Under the charter:

- CFA recognises its primary responsibility to support volunteers, develop their competencies and use their time to maximum advantage
- Volunteers commit to providing their services for the protection of the community.
- CFA commits to ensuring that there is meaningful consultation allowing enough time for real involvement of volunteers on all matters which may affect them.

The approach to consultation was demonstrated by the 2013–18 Training Strategy. CFA and volunteer representatives developed a discussion draft which was communicated to volunteers by:

- an introductory DVD sent to every unit
- an electronic version on their intranet
- information sessions held throughout the regions.

CFA gave volunteers six months to provide feedback on their priorities for future training before finalising the strategy.

CFA has also established a volunteer division in its structure that reports to the CEO and delivers their volunteer support program. CFA is centralising some administrative functions such as finance and HR, in order to free up regional staff to support volunteers more effectively.

Source: Victorian Country Fire Association 2013.

Recent research indicates that appropriately framed mutual commitment can encourage desired behaviour. A charter that requires volunteers to make a written and public commitment about their availability to turn out could improve the effectiveness of units, capability plans and emergency response. It should also reduce the number of unsuitable recruits and allow SES to focus training, resources and support on volunteers who are committed to helping their communities.

SES recognises volunteer contributions through emergency service medals, Director-General awards, long service medals and nominations for national honours and awards. Some other states do more. Victoria has established Memberlink, a reward program that provides volunteers with discounts in retail, entertainment, travel and dining from private businesses that support and recognise the value of emergency volunteers.

SES advised that employers are increasingly unwilling to release volunteers during working hours. It is regularly contacted by volunteers seeking advice about employer action against them, despite national and state legislative protections for emergency volunteers. This is particularly the case when out of area operations require volunteers for five days.

Some jurisdictions complement legislative protections with incentives. For example, Western Australia Fire & Emergency Service Authority provides formal recognition and awards to employers who support their staff volunteering. Some NSW units and regions recognise local employers but a state-wide approach is yet to be implemented.

2.3   Training

Training is essential for volunteers given the dangerous nature of their work but SES is not currently meeting the training needs of all its volunteers.

Volunteer training is currently disrupted

Volunteer training is disrupted at present because SES suspended 14 of its 16 training packages (TRK) in August 2013, because they were no longer compliant with national public safety training standards. While this was partly due to recent work health and safety changes, poor planning and a failure to keep the TRKs up to date over the last decade contributed to the extent of the problem.

The disruption to training is affecting local unit capability. Only one of the 18 units we spoke to had completed the basic training of its 2013 recruits before the TRKs were withdrawn.

Headquarters has developed new TRKs which it is rolling out to volunteer trainers and assessors. An internal review has found that the scale and pace of the change is affecting the quality and consistency of training.

On the positive side, the new TRKs break down training into shorter modules. This should allow recruits to participate in emergency response sooner and help to make them feel part of the unit. In contrast the previous training could take well over a year to complete.

SES headquarters does not oversee training

SES has no overarching training strategy to identify key drivers, challenges or learning pathways for volunteers. State headquarters does not coordinate volunteer training, assess unit training needs or evaluate the delivery of training. The regional offices are responsible for these functions and their performance is variable.

Most training occurs within the unit and is delivered by other volunteers who teach and assess using the TRKs. Some smaller units struggle and rely on neighbouring units and regional staff to provide training.

Units induct and train recruits in first aid, the use of communication equipment and storm operations. Volunteers can then train in other skills including flood, vertical, road crash and alpine rescue, land search, chainsaw and community education.

We estimate that active volunteers and probationers, who meet weekly, should train for over 100 hours a year. SES lacks good information on the amount of training completed with recorded training hours ranging from zero to over 160 per volunteer per annum.

Some units enforce the training attendance requirement while others are more flexible, sometimes for good reason. Volunteers in non-field roles such as communication do not need weekly training for and others such as farmers are unavailable during peak seasons. There is scope for SES to be more innovative and flexible in the way it trains volunteers.

Recommendations: NSW State Emergency Service should establish clear priorities, integrate initiatives and improve monitoring to better manage and support volunteers. To do this, SES should:

- By April 2015, update its recruitment guidelines and resources, and support units in better targeting recruitment

- By April 2015, develop strategies and resources to improve volunteer retention, including:

    - induction and development of leaders
    - health checks for units to identify and address areas for improvement
    - pathways for volunteers to take on greater responsibility
    - consultation and communication
    - recognition for volunteers and their employers

- By April 2015, develop a training strategy that identifies volunteer training priorities and provides for ongoing review to ensure operational currency, flexibility of delivery and evaluation

- By December 2014, agree a charter with volunteers that clarifies roles and expectations including commitments by:

    - SES to support volunteers to prepare for and respond to emergencies
    - SES to make the best use of volunteers' time by introducing user-friendly systems and reducing the administrative burden on them
    - volunteers to turn-out when called to respond to emergencies.

Appendix

About the audit

Audit objective

The audit examines whether SES has a sustainable volunteer workforce, with effective strategies to attract, retain and train volunteers.

By sustainable we mean a workforce that is reliable, replenishable, responsive and sufficient to meet expected demand.

Scope

The audit focused on relevant SES initiatives, policies and procedures and the implementation of these by a selection of units across the state. We compared NSW SES practices with those in other jurisdictions and volunteer organisations.

Audit exclusions

The audit did not examine:

- NSW Volunteering as it does not have a direct role in volunteer management within the SES
- coordination of SES and other emergency services operations
- financial and asset controls
- the salaried workforce, except in regard to its supervision of volunteers.

Audit approach

Audit evidence was acquired through examining:

- research and review reports on managing emergency service volunteers and SES volunteers
- policies, legislation, strategies, guidelines in relation to volunteers
- relevant data from SES
- information on emergency service volunteers in other jurisdictions or from key stakeholders

We interviewed staff at state and five regional headquarters and volunteers from 18 units across metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas.

We interviewed staff from the Ministry of Police and Emergency Service, NSW Rural Fire Service, Volunteering NSW and the Centre for Volunteering. We visited Victoria and met with their SES and Country Fire Authority.

Audit selection

We use a strategic approach to selecting performance audits which balances our performance audit program to reflect issues of interest to Parliament and the community. Details of our approach to selecting topics and our forward program are available on our website.

We undertook this audit because previous financial audits by the NSW Audit Office have repeatedly found that SES lacked adequate volunteer workforce plans (2011 and 2012). In addition, volunteering is an important component of the NSW 2021 Plan and volunteer management presents some unique challenges in the area of natural disasters which may provide lessons to other organisations.

Audit methodology

Our performance audit methodology is designed to satisfy Australian Audit Standards ASAE 3500 on performance auditing, and to reflect current thinking on performance auditing practices. Our processes have also been designed to comply with the auditing requirements specified in the *Public Finance and Audit Act 1983*.

Acknowledgements

We gratefully acknowledge the co-operation and assistance provided by NSW SES. In particular we wish to thank our liaison officers and members who participated in interviews and provided material relevant to the audit.

Audit team

Michael Johnston and Suzanne Mousallem conducted the performance audit. Rob Mathie provided direction and Sean Crumlin provided quality assurance.

Audit cost

Including staff costs, printing costs and overheads, the estimated cost of the audit is $289,000.

Performance auditing

What are performance audits?

Performance audits determine whether an agency is carrying out its activities effectively, and doing so economically and efficiently and in compliance with all relevant laws.

The activities examined by a performance audit may include a government program, all or part of a government agency or consider particular issues which affect the whole public sector. They cannot question the merits of government policy objectives.

The Auditor-General's mandate to undertake performance audits is set out in the *Public Finance and Audit Act 1983*.

Why do we conduct performance audits?

Performance audits provide independent assurance to parliament and the public.

Through their recommendations, performance audits seek to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of government agencies so that the community receives value for money from government services.

Performance audits also focus on assisting accountability processes by holding managers to account for agency performance.

Performance audits are selected at the discretion of the Auditor-General who seeks input from parliamentarians, the public, agencies and Audit Office research.

What happens during the phases of a performance audit?

Performance audits have three key phases: planning, fieldwork and report writing. They can take up to nine months to complete, depending on the audit's scope.

During the planning phase the audit team develops an understanding of agency activities and defines the objective and scope of the audit.

The planning phase also identifies the audit criteria. These are standards of performance against which the agency or program activities are assessed. Criteria may be based on best practice, government targets, benchmarks or published guidelines.

At the completion of fieldwork the audit team meets with agency management to discuss all significant matters arising out of the audit. Following this, a draft performance audit report is prepared.

The audit team then meets with agency management to check that facts presented in the draft report are accurate and that recommendations are practical and appropriate.

A final report is then provided to the CEO for comment. The relevant minister and the Treasurer are also provided with a copy of the final report. The report tabled in Parliament includes a response from the CEO on the report's conclusion and recommendations. In multiple agency performance audits there may be responses from more than one agency or from a nominated coordinating agency.

Do we check to see if recommendations have been implemented?

Following the tabling of the report in parliament, agencies are requested to advise the Audit Office on action taken, or proposed, against each of the report's recommendations. It is usual for agency audit committees to monitor progress with the implementation of recommendations.

In addition, it is the practice of Parliament's Public Accounts Committee (PAC) to conduct reviews or hold inquiries into matters raised in performance audit reports. The reviews and inquiries are usually held 12 months after the report is tabled. These reports are available on the parliamentary website.

Who audits the auditors?

Our performance audits are subject to internal and external quality reviews against relevant Australian and international standards.

Internal quality control review of each audit ensures compliance with Australian assurance standards. Periodic review by other Audit Offices tests our activities against best practice.

The PAC is also responsible for overseeing the performance of the Audit Office and conducts a review of our operations every four years. The review's report is tabled in parliament and available on its website.

Who pays for performance audits?

No fee is charged for performance audits. Our performance audit services are funded by the NSW Parliament.

Further information and copies of reports

For further information, including copies of performance audit reports and a list of audits currently in-progress, please see our website www.audit.nsw.gov.au or contact us on 9275 7100.

Performance audit reports

No	Agency or Issues Examined	Title of performance Audit Report or Publication	Date Tabled in Parliament or Published
240	NSW State Emergency Service	*Management of volunteers*	15 April 2014
239	Fire and Rescue NSW NSW Rural Fire Service	*Fitness of firefighters*	1 April 2014
238	Transport for NSW Department of Attorney General and Justice Department of Finance and Service Roads and Maritime Services NSW Police Force Department of Education and Communities	*Improving legal and safe driving among Aboriginal people*	19 December 2013
237	Department of Education and Communities	*Management of casual teachers*	3 October 2013
236	Department of Premier and Cabinet Ministry of Health – Cancer Institute NSW Transport for NSW – Rail Corporation NSW	*Government Advertising 2012–13*	23 September 2013
235	NSW Treasury NSW Police Force NSW Ministry of Health Department of Premier and Cabinet Department of Attorney General and Justice	*Cost of alcohol abuse to the NSW Government*	6 August 2013
234	Housing NSW NSW Land and Housing Corporation	*Making the best use of public housing*	30 July 2013
233	Ambulance Service of NSW NSW Ministry of Health	*Reducing ambulance turnaround time at hospitals*	24 July 2013
232	NSW Health	*Managing operating theatre efficiency for elective surgery*	17 July 2013
231	Ministry of Health NSW Treasury NSW Office of Environment and Heritage	*Building energy use in NSW public hospitals*	4 June 2013
230	Office of Environment and Heritage – National Parks and Wildlife Service	*Management of historic heritage in national parks and reserves*	29 May 2013
229	Department of Trade and Investment, Regional Infrastructure and Services – Office of Liquor, Gaming and Racing Independent Liquor and Gaming Authority	*Management of the ClubGRANTS scheme*	2 May 2013
228	Department of Planning and Infrastructure Environment Protection Authority Transport for NSW WorkCover Authority	*Managing gifts and benefits*	27 March 2013
227	NSW Police Force	*Managing drug exhibits and other high profile goods*	28 February 2013
226	Department of Education and Communities	*Impact of the raised school leaving age*	1 November 2012
225	Department of Premier and Cabinet Division of Local Government	*Monitoring Local Government*	26 September 2012
224	Department of Education and Communities	*Improving the literacy of Aboriginal students in NSW public schools*	8 August 2012
223	Rail Corporation NSW	*Managing overtime*	20 June 2012

No	Agency or Issues Examined	Title of performance Audit Report or Publication	Date Tabled in Parliament or Published
	Roads and Maritime Services		
222	Department of Education and Communities	*Physical activity in government primary schools*	13 June 2012
221	Community Relations Commission For a multicultural NSW Department of Premier and Cabinet	*Settling humanitarian entrants in NSW: services to permanent residents who come to NSW through the humanitarian migration stream*	23 May 2012
220	Department of Finance and Services NSW Ministry of Health NSW Police Force	*Managing IT Services Contracts*	1 February 2012
219	NSW Health	*Visiting Medical Officers and Staff Specialists*	14 December 2011
218	Department of Family and Community Services Department of Attorney General and Justice Ministry of Health NSW Police Force	*Responding to Domestic and Family Violence*	8 November 2011
217	Roads and Traffic Authority	*Improving Road Safety: Young Drivers*	19 October 2011
216	Department of Premier and Cabinet Department of Finance and Services	*Prequalification Scheme: Performance and Management Services*	25 September 2011
215	Roads and Traffic Authority	*Improving Road Safety: Speed Cameras*	27 July 2011

Performance audits on our website

A list of performance audits tabled or published since March 1997, as well as those currently in progress, can be found on our website www.audit.nsw.gov.au.

audit office
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