

Questions and Answers

27 May 2015

1. Will volunteers and their employers get more support under each option?

Yes. Volunteers make up the majority of the fire services workforce and New Zealand needs them to remain committed to joining and remaining part of fire services in our communities.

Each option addresses the level of support to be provided to rural and urban volunteers. The options are not set in stone, and feedback through consultation could improve the ideas. The review wants to hear from volunteers about what would make it easier to recruit volunteers and how to keep volunteers engaged.

Option 1 focuses on NZFS volunteers, as the structure of fire services gives the NZ Fire Service Commission (the Commission) little influence on rural fire volunteers. The Commission can work with Rural Fire Authorities (RFAs) to promote the changes under this option.

There is little difference in the “what” is provided in Options 2 and 3, but the “how” changes. More support to a wider number of volunteers is intended under both Options 2 and 3. In Option 2, the new fire service is in a relationship with independent brigades and the Rural Fire Authorities. In Option 3 there is a direct relationship between the one national fire service and all volunteers.

2. What are the areas this review focuses on?

This review focused on: support for personnel and better workforce engagement; governance and funding of both urban and rural fire services; the mandate (range of activities) of fire services; coordination with other emergency services, and how to modernise the legislation.

3. How is Option 1 different from the status quo?

Option 1 enhances the current position. It does not change the structures or delivery of fire services. Rural fire continues to be delivered by Rural Fire Authorities, which can continue to amalgamate voluntarily. Urban fire is delivered by New Zealand Fire Service (NZFS) career firefighters and by volunteers through independent volunteer brigades. The National Rural Fire Authority continues to have the limited role of coordinating and promoting rural fire control matters. Local funding of rural fire would continue to be provided through various sources (see Appendix E of the Discussion Document for more information).

The changes in Option 1 focus on providing support to NZFS volunteers, clarifying the Commission’s mandate for non-fire incidents, and modernising some parts of the Commission’s governance structure.

4. What are the main differences between the three options?

Option 1, enhanced status quo, focuses on the Government's response to the 2012 report of the independent Fire Service Panel (the Swain Report). Option 1 includes the Swain Report recommendations agreed by Cabinet in September 2013, and those accepted by the NZ Fire Service Commission (the Commission). It does not include the additional matters covered in Options 2 and 3. As noted above, this option focuses on providing support to NZFS volunteers, clarifying mandate and modernising governance.

Option 2, coordinated service delivery, would give better support to all volunteer firefighters and greater leadership and governance to the new fire service. New fire districts would be established and new Rural Fire Authorities would be established to deliver fire services in those districts. This would continue the local delivery and funding of rural fire.

Option 3, one national fire service, would create a single new organisation made up of all fire services. All volunteer firefighters would be in a direct relationship with the new national fire service. The new national fire service would set standards and ensure consistent services across New Zealand. There are several ways the one national fire service could be structured and we want to hear the public's views on the best way forward.

5. How will this affect rural communities?

Rural communities are currently served in two ways:

- by New Zealand Fire Service (NZFS) brigades, usually volunteers; and
- by Rural Fire Authorities (RFAs).

The proposed changes intend to ensure these services are delivered more effectively to rural communities – whether by NZFS brigades, independent RFAs or through one national organisation.

To ensure the effectiveness of services, the fire services will consider the needs and risks of the local community. There will be consultation to decide the services that best meet those needs and risk. There is no intention for this review to downgrade rural services. Those communities that are currently under-resourced should receive more support than in the past.

6. Will something be done to address the situation of people in rural areas paying more but receiving less service?

Some landowners consider that they pay more for the rural fire service that they receive because some pay a targeted rate for fire services to their territorial authority, and pay the fire service levy to the Fire Service Commission (Commission) through their insurance. This varies across the country, because each territorial authority has a different approach.

The Swain Report has a useful discussion about this issue (from page 80). It provides some information on the level of service provided to rural communities, and notes that the Commission provides good fire prevention advice. The Commission also contributes to the rural fire sector, so those in rural areas paying a fire service levy are not “wasting their money”. The Commission pays for the National Rural Fire Authority, pays grants to Rural Fire Authorities and contributes to the Rural Fire Fighting Fund. NZFS brigades also attend the first hour at vegetation fires free of charge.

The review will carefully consider how local funding of rural fire should occur under Options 2 and 3. The review encourages you to make your views known through the submission process.

7. Is this a plan to change how the wider emergency services operate?

No. The fire services currently work effectively with police and ambulance to provide emergency services across New Zealand. That cooperation will continue. The fire services will also continue their close operational links to civil defence.

The fire services legislation will set out a clear mandate for the fire services to attend non-fire incidents. The fire services will work carefully with police, ambulance, search and rescue and other emergency agencies to reduce any gaps or overlaps in service.

8. What has happened since the previous review? Why was this one needed?

The 2012 independent Fire Review Panel had limited terms of reference. The Government decided to look at additional matters (e.g. rural fire) to ensure wider community needs were met.

A number of recommendations in the Swain Report have already been acted on, including improved support for volunteers. Details of the Swain Report recommendations and responses are in the Background paper: Swain Report, on the website www.dia.govt.nz/fireservicesreview.

9. How much will the changes cost?

The funding needed for the Commission to make changes and meet ongoing costs depends on which option is chosen and how it is implemented. Option 1 has the smallest change, so is likely to cost the least. Option 2 is a ‘medium change’ option and keeps local funding for rural fire, so is likely to cost more than Option 1, but less than Option 3.

After the consultation period, the Government will consider the submissions and decide the preferred option for change. At that time, more precise costings will be possible.

10. Will the funding options mean I end up paying more for the fire services?

The review is not designed to make people pay more, but to make the funding system work better. For example, the fire service levy can be confusing to calculate and difficult to forecast.

The review has found some gaps in services, which may mean some people have to pay more. Any increases will be kept as small as possible because of expected efficiencies.

Following the analysis of feedback, the Government will consider if it has a preferred funding option. At that time, a clearer picture will emerge of funding implications.

11. Will this review result in redundancies or fire station closures?

Decisions about firefighter numbers and location of fire stations are made by the NZ Fire Service Commission and Rural Fire Authorities. This review does not consider these issues. It is focused on better supporting staff, meeting the needs of the community, and improving governance and management structures. Cutting staff or facilities is not an aim of this review.

12. What is the process after consultation?

The submissions will be considered and analysed and further advice will be provided to the Minister of Internal Affairs.

If the Government then decides to make changes, new legislation will be drafted and introduced. New legislation would be sent to a Parliamentary Select Committee and another round of public submissions would take place.