

STATEMENT FOR HANDOVER OF REPORT TO PREMIER ON QFES REVIEW

A short time ago, the Premier requested that I undertake an independent review of the handling of an incident involving employees of Queensland Fire and Emergency Services. This incident concerned sexual harassment and workplace bullying of women firefighters, and my role was to review the adequacy of the organisational responses dealing with the incident, including support provided to the women concerned.

I was also asked to consider whether there were any underlying cultural issues that fostered gender discrimination in the Fire Service, and the need for any changes to policies and practices necessary to address bullying and harassment.

I have today delivered my report to the Premier.

I have found in my review that the response by QFES to the complaint of sexual harassment in the particular incident involving Queensland firefighters failed:

- It failed to recognise the seriousness of the issue
- It failed to properly investigate the incident and sanction the unacceptable conduct, and
- It failed the women firefighters who have endured many months of stress without the support and assistance of the organisation to which they have chosen to dedicate themselves.

I have also found that there are systemic problems in the QFES organisation that limits its ability to respond appropriately and effectively to these matters generally.

In making my findings, I note that the Queensland situation is not unique. The issues identified in this review have also been identified in recent times in other Australian jurisdictions and in countries such as the US, UK and Canada. Similar issues have been found in other uniform organisations with a traditional command and control culture, such as the Australian Defence Force and its Academy, both of which were

comprehensively reviewed by the Sex Discrimination Commissioner in 2011 and 2012.

Women only commenced serving as firefighters in the urban fire service in Queensland in 1995. The organisation has been unprepared for their inclusion, and at worst, overtly hostile to them.

The findings and recommendations I make in this report are not about requiring special treatment for women or creating differential standards.

Women firefighters take great pride in knowing they have met the exacting standards required for entry to the organisation.

They want only to be able to get on and do the job they were trained to do, in an environment of trust and respect.

The directions I propose in the report reflect the need to establish a workplace that meets contemporary expectations of acceptable workplace behaviour, and ensures a safe environment that is free from harassment and bullying for all employees.

The Terms of Reference for the review required it to be conducted within a short timeframe in order to ensure that the ongoing impact on the complainants was minimised to the greatest extent possible.

As a result, the report identifies a range of issues about organisational culture for QFES that remain for more detailed analysis, and that will require the engagement of a larger range of people than was possible during this process.

I will not detail the recommendations in this statement – they are set out clearly in the report.

I will say however that the recommendations do not merely require a clarification of a few organisational rules and requirements. What is required is a serious review of the organisation's HR policies and practices, and a strong commitment to cultural

change to ensure QFES provides a safe working environment for all staff, free from discriminatory practices.

I have also recommended that a further time-limited review be commissioned to consider and respond to a number of complaints made to this review about human resource management in the rural and auxiliary fire services, that were outside the scope and time frame of this review.

Quite rightly, firefighting is a highly regarded career in our community – firefighters undertake some of the most dangerous and difficult work we could ever ask people to do. They have a long and proud history of service, but some of the traditions of the past must be let go to embrace future opportunities, and to ensure the fire service is staffed with the best and most capable men and women.

There is an enormous opportunity to transform the fire service into a modern agency with a broader mission that is not only about fire management, but recognises its critical role in the management of disasters. They also have a central role in the engagement and development of the more than 40,000 volunteers skilled in rural fire management and emergency response upon whom our communities depend.

I am optimistic about the capacity of the fire service to embrace further change that will position them as an organisation known as much for its commitment to equity as it is for contributing to community safety.