

Blue Water Working Group Q&A held in Townsville 25/05/19

Working Group and associated members present:

Cher Barron - AVCGA State Council

Steve Bellamy - AVCGA Mooloolaba

Jason Boon - AVCGA Redland Bay

Cam Darby - advisor to Working Group

Troy Davies - QFES Acting Executive Director, Emergency Management and Community Capability

Warren Francis - VMRAQ Burdekin

David Hartley - QAS Director of Operations

Jim Huggett - MSQ Executive Director of Operations

Charles Linsley - VMRAQ Mackay

Doug Smith - QFES Deputy Commissioner and Chief Strategy Officer

Ian Threllfall - QRBC Secretary

Adrian Westerman - VMRAQ State Treasurer

Jim Whitehead - QPS State SAR Coordinator

Task of the Blue Water Water Group provided by Troy Davies:

- Determining what a future Marine Rescue service would look like and what capabilities Marine Rescue organisations will need. It is a step-by-step process, however the Working Group is working under a fast timeline — a broad picture of what the sector would look like is expected by the end of June.

Q & A Session

What is the reason for the review and for change?

The work being done at the squadron and flotilla unit level is outstanding. However, there are many squadrons and flotillas around the state that are struggling to raise funds and retain volunteers at a sustainable level. In addition, the review observed there was issues with governance, funding, insurance cost, fuel costs, etc. Under the current system there is also a lack of commonality, efficiency and integration. There is a need to provide an overarching strategic plan to better support our volunteers and our boating public. For the sector to have a sustainable future, change has to happen at a statewide level.

What was the catalyst for the review? It felt sudden and out of nowhere for some.

MP Craig Crawford had been speaking to many squadrons and flotillas at a unit level and there was an overwhelming response that there needed to be a review into the sector.

Where will funding come from for a combined Marine Rescue services? Will it be an involuntary payment from citizens like fire and ambulance services are?

Funding models are still being discussed and an answer can't be provided until a model is decided upon. However, it should be noted with SES and Rural Fire that there is still community involvement and support through fundraising. Government grants should also continue to be a source of funding. The Working Group will recommend a funding model for the Marine Services in the future. However, there is a balance between autonomy and oversight that needs to be considered.

What incentive is there for units to possibly lose some of their autonomy in a new system?

The Working Group is looking at the two current models of Marine Rescue services in NSW and WA which have varying levels of autonomy. WA has similar issues to QLD -- a large and diverse area with highly autonomous units in parts -- while NSW has a smaller area with more people. These two models are helping to guide the Working Group and the group urges both squadrons and flotillas to look at these models and provide feedback to the Working Group in regards to the autonomy vs the dependency level appropriate for services in QLD.

There is a uniqueness to localities in QLD, eg. some areas have all-tide access while others do not, and these different constraints require different operational practices and costs. Additionally, is current QLD Marine Rescue autonomy and volunteerism under threat from this process?

QFES has recently refocused under regional reporting lines. This allows more localised work and attention to be conducted in the local community, and the Working Group is using this as a guiding principle. There is understanding that flexibility is needed as no community is the same. Additionally, the capabilities developed in that community need to reflect the risk profile for that community. Therefore, operations will differ between communities.

In regards to current assets, money and future fundraising, can the Working Group confirm that these things will stay with the current squadrons and flotillas?

No matter the outcome of the process, the guiding principle of the Working Group is that local community assets stay within the local community.

Is there a timeframe for the implementation of the current recommendations the Working Group has already made?

The recommendations — the single service, and that it should be new service with a new brand and approach — have not been decided on at QFES or the government level. The focus now for the Working Group is to gain understanding of the capabilities that would be required for a single service.

Areas like Cardwell have very specific issues that make it difficult to maintain a sustainable future, eg. tidal access, community funding, and volunteer retention. Will the model decided on by the Working Group be able to be adapted to the smaller areas?

The Working Group is aware of the unique needs for the diverse areas around QLD. The guiding principle for the new model is that it provides maximum support to volunteers at the community level. The Working Group has models like the WA model to guide them which had similar issues in regards to diverse and unique needs in different areas.

There is a feeling of distrust in the government taking control of Coast Guard and, if that happens, there may be volunteers who walk away.

There has been no decision made to where the Marine Services in QLD will sit in a government structure. There will always be a level of bureaucracy involved, but the Working Group is focusing on promoting and empowering volunteers to continue to do their work in their local communities while ensuring a sustainable future.

One of the funding models the Marine Rescue services use is membership subscription, and a change in funding to be more government-based may decrease the ties to the community and lower the ability to fundraise. Is the Working Group aware of the extra cost the government may have to continue the high level of service Marine Rescue services currently provide?

The first item on the agenda for the next Working Group meeting is to discuss funding expectations. There is a guiding principle that volunteers should not have to pay for membership, uniforms or training costs. Unfortunately, it is difficult to provide a good answer without a funding model decided on, but there is a need for a balance between government funding and the ability for volunteers to have a role within their community, eg. fundraising. Hopefully the new model can help reduce the amount of time volunteers have to spend fundraising. There also needs to be a consistency with subscription fees and coverage area to better serve the boating community.

Currently SES, Disaster Management, etc., have representatives that liaise with QFES, if a single Marine Rescue service is implemented within QLD, will there be regional representatives or only one person to liaise with QFES?

The Working Group has not reached the point to discuss this issue as of yet. It will be dependant on whether the single service will be inside or outside of government, but regional reporting is important to QFES and the Working Group.

Our services have a good working relationship with QPS and coordinate on Police SARs, however there is only reimbursement for cost of fuel, not operations. Is there a realistic way for operational costs to be covered in the future?

In a perfect world the state government should fund anything SAR related. Saving a life should be completely funded by government and it will be a topic of conversation for the Working Group. It is not sustainable for the Water Police to keep spending their budget on reimbursing the Marine Services, but there is no answer on what the future will be.

It is understood that the Service Agreement is under negotiation and there will be a CPI increase, but there are units that require funding now. Is there an interim pool of money to fund these units while all of this change is happening?

There is an intention for a submission to government around funding and insurance, but it is uncertain whether it will happen. The Service Agreement will be extended through to the end of the year along with the CPI. The government and Working Group are aware of the stresses for specific units, such as Mornington Island, and hope to work to provide aid for them. For units that need funding urgently, it is important that these units put together a business case in the next 2-3 months and these could be funded by emergency funds from QFES.

In terms of hierarchy within the new structure, we need to hear the Working Group say that members of the new hierarchy will have maritime experience.

From a QFES perspective, QFES will not take over day-to-day operations of the new service on a governance basis. The business of search and rescue will stay with the Marine Rescue services. QFES works on a culture of respect and the people in the local communities who have the capabilities, training and experience to be in charge of an operation, should be the ones in charge. But QFES acknowledges that in practice that does not always occur. Additionally, on an operational basis, marine legislation and internal policies ensure the hierarchy of a vessel, eg. if you are on board as the skipper, you are responsible for and control that boat, and Appendix B of the Search and Rescue manual states that QPS are the SAR authorities. Therefore, no other authority can interfere in an operation.

Some units have issues raising funds compared to others. Is the Working Group aware of these issues and, if so, how do they propose to deal with them?

The Working Group is aware of the different funding scenarios for different units. Any future model will consider the level of marine rescues required in an area to the capability needed and the funding required to meet them. The NSW model has had flexibility working on the needs of different areas over the long term.

The level of government funding is inadequate for cost of vessels. Will that be reflected in the new model?

The Working Group is endeavouring to ensure the new model will incorporate the needs of units and the costs associated with them.

Volunteer confidence would be gained if there will be custom tailored expertise at a high level making decisions for resourcing and equipping marine rescue arrangements moving forward, eg. a bureaucrat with no knowledge of regional needs for vessels making the decision on the type of vessel needed.

The Working Group appreciates and acknowledges the point made.

Will there actually be any change with this whole process?

Change will definitely happen. The only thing uncertain is the scope and exact nature of a model going forward.

Will there be funding for operational training exercises on vessels?

Training capabilities that are required for the new Marine Rescue service will be discussed by the Working Group. An appropriate training model will be decided upon. On-the-water training can be utilised, but virtual reality training may also be possibility.

What model are you going to look at for capability of each organisation for each community?

The Working Group is taking a place-based approach for each community. This will include looking at tides, training required, vessel needs, etc. Decisions must be made using a risk vs. capability analysis.

Will individual units have to bear the costs of the rebranding to a single service?

There is no decision made yet, but the guiding principle is that the massive cost of rebranding could be government funded.

Has there been a discussion of how the hierarchy of the new single service will be elected or appointed, and where those people should come from?

There has only been preliminary discussions of structure at this point. The focus for discussion at the moment is capability.

How do you make decisions on capability without knowing the structure?

There has been basic conversations on structure, but first there is a need to understand the capabilities that the structure would then need to address.

This change is happening whether Coast Guard or VMR like it. There is a loyalty to the service that we are already a member of, not a new service.

The new service will continue to allow the Marine Rescue services to do their jobs. The communicates the Working Group sends out after every meeting allows units to be aware of what has been discussed and feedback is highly encouraged to direct changes going forward.

What is the name of the new service?

No single service has been approved. But if it is approved, a consultation phase of the volunteers involved is likely to happen.