

**COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND JUSTICE
STANDING COMMITTEE**

INQUIRY INTO FIRE AND EMERGENCY SERVICES LEGISLATION

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE TAKEN
AT PERTH
WEDNESDAY, 12 APRIL 2006**

SESSION TWO

Members

**Mr A.P. O’Gorman (Chairman)
Mr M.J. Cowper (Deputy Chairman)
Mr S.R. Hill
Ms K. Hodson-Thomas
Mrs J. Hughes**

Hearing commenced at 10.58 am**SHADBOLT, MR KEITH,****President, Volunteer Marine Rescue Association of Western Australia, examined:**

The CHAIRMAN: Welcome. The committee hearing is a proceeding of Parliament and warrants the same respect that proceedings in the house itself demand. Even though you are not required to give evidence on oath, any deliberate misleading of the committee may be regarded as a contempt of Parliament. Have you completed the "Details of Witness" form?

Mr Shadbolt: Yes, I have.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you understand the notes attached to it?

Mr Shadbolt: Yes, I do.

The CHAIRMAN: Did you receive and read the information for witnesses briefing sheet regarding giving evidence before parliamentary committees?

Mr Shadbolt: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: Before we start, do you have anything you want to say to the committee first up?

Mr Shadbolt: No. I thank you for the opportunity to express the association's views on legislative change and where we fit within the fire and emergency services structure. There are a couple of current issues that we are starting to address in fire and emergency services, but they are in their infancy stage, so I might highlight those issues as we go through, if that is possible.

The CHAIRMAN: I will start off with the first question, and then we will go to the other members. Prior to the establishment of the Fire and Emergency Services Authority, the volunteer marine rescue service was part of the water police. Has there been a significant change in the operations of the VMRS since administrative support was transferred from the police to FESA?

Mr Shadbolt: Yes, there definitely has been a significant change. I have been a part of that change since its instigation and was involved with sea rescue prior to that. It meant secure financial support for the association and its member groups. That was committed through the state government at the time by the minister. It has meant that the association and its groups have formalised themselves in some respects in relation to accountability and their operating procedures under the structure of FESA. That accountability was just spin-off from greater financial support and funding for the groups as a whole. I believe there has been significant change. The association has changed itself internally in its current structure and how it manages its groups at association level and has obviously been involved in consultation through the VMRS side of FESA to achieve the common goals of both FESA and the association.

The CHAIRMAN: Following on from that, currently Western Australia Police and FESA share responsibility for VMRS groups. FESA provides the administrative support and the police provide operational support. Is that arrangement working for the VMRS groups, and how does it appear to work at the local level?

Mr Shadbolt: It is working reasonably well. The principle of FESA administering the government's funds down through the association to its groups has worked quite well, and the coordination of the operations of the groups through the water police is a service that has been there for quite some time anyway. From the point of view of the association and the groups, the

combined management between the two agencies seems to operate quite well. There does not seem to be any conflict or crossover between the two. Operationally, the groups appreciate the support they get from the water police. Quite often in country towns, it is a matter of the water police getting the services of the sea rescue group to manage particular incidents from start to finish because of their expertise. An understanding has been set up with some of the country police in relation to the sea rescue groups, and they quite often leave the sea rescue groups to get on and do the job without much interference other than to issue a job number. That works quite well, but in more metropolitan areas the crossover between the operating groups, the water police and FESA also seems to work quite well.

Mr S.R. HILL: The committee is aware from discussions with a number of VMRS groups in the south of the state that funding is accessed through a variety of sources including the operational grants from FESA, fundraising and membership. Could you elaborate on your view as to what the principal source of funding for the groups in Western Australia should be? You mentioned earlier that the minister had indicated that there was some funding.

Mr Shadbolt: The current funding structure is such that, as you are probably aware, a certain amount is pledged from the government and that is administered through FESA's VMRS unit. It is dispersed in consultation with the association and representatives from its groups. That works quite well. The total funding is in three major areas - the costs involved in operating the VMRS unit within FESA, the capital replacement costs for the groups' equipment and resources, and the operational costs for the groups. It is not 100 per cent funding, and I do not envisage that it ever will be or should be.

Mr S.R. HILL: Do you think you should ever come under the emergency services levy funding?

Mr Shadbolt: From the association's perspective, there are some positives and negatives about the ESL. We are very fortunate that all our groups are autonomous, independent and self-constituted, and they hold that status very close to their hearts. With the current funding regime, that structure works well. One of the issues we are dealing with now is that some changes have been mooted in the FESA management structure, and, possibly within that, regionalisation and combining the emergency management groups into an emergency management unit. You would not necessarily have an SES, a fire brigade and a volunteer marine rescue group; there would be a combination of those three services. If that is the case, it flags a number of complications for us, firstly from a financial perspective, because we are outside the ESL arrangements, and also from a capital perspective. Currently if a group wants to replace or purchase capital equipment, it makes a capital application to FESA, and the funds are then supported dollar for dollar through the administration of the FESA grant. That capital purchase becomes the property of the group, whereas within the other emergency service groups like SES and the bushfire brigades, the capital items are owned by FESA, not by the groups. They are operated by the groups. That creates another issue for us.

Mrs J. HUGHES: So you then become responsible for maintenance and replacement of loss, and you do the insurance on those items. Can you elaborate on that?

Mr Shadbolt: Within the overall budgeted money that comes down from the government, the VMRS unit structures an insurance package with risk cover. That covers all of our groups and our association. We pay individual insurance at association level, which is like a corporate insurance. However, capital replacement and issues for the operation of the groups is covered under a blanket risk cover package, which is individualised for VMRS and its volunteers. Does that explain it?

Mrs J. HUGHES: Do liability issues for risks and responsibility for what happens on a particular rescue fall to the VMRS, or does it go to the police?

The CHAIRMAN: Under the legislation as it stands, liability comes back to FESA.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Is it not the police?

The CHAIRMAN: No. The police are only operational. FESA is the administrator.

[11.10 am]

Mr Shadbolt: It is an interesting structure, because there is a dual role of considering who is the hazard management authority in marine rescue. It is a combination, because when an emergency is declared, the water police issue a job number to the particular group that will conduct the response. That basically indicates a clearance that their insurance is covered and that they have the authority to act on behalf of the water police. It also encompasses the fact that they are acting on behalf of FESA. It has not presented itself as an issue as such; however, there is an overlay about who is the HMA. The way that the association and groups have always operated is that if it is an emergency response, there is a requirement for notification from the police and that is basically insured by a job number. However, the insurance for anything outside the emergency response itself - our operations and training - is covered by our blanket insurance, which is RiskCover insurance.

Mr M.J. COWPER: Traditionally when volunteer rescue groups emerged in various coastal towns, they tapped into the local knowledge of people who lived in an area and who knew an area well. With the advent of people requiring certain competencies in today's society, is there a growing requirement for members to have recognised competencies; namely, skippers' tickets? Is that impacting on the smaller and provincial groups, in particular?

Mr Shadbolt: I believe it is to some degree. Prior to FESA's administration, when volunteers were loosely banded, few official requirements were placed on volunteers. Coming under the FESA structure and becoming approved FESA volunteers and groups meant, firstly, a security of funding. Secondly, it meant that a lot of accountability had to be put in place. For example, people had to achieve competencies for certain procedures within a group's operations. Some of the larger and more strongly supported groups did not have an issue with that. However, we have had to nurture some of the smaller groups to try to assist them to achieve the standard requirements set by FESA. It has been a limiting factor to some degree; however, I believe we have addressed it quite well. It may be a deterrent to people in some small country towns volunteering their time.

Mr S.R. HILL: That is because a lot of those groups are retirees, are they not?

Mr Shadbolt: Yes, they are. There can be a fallout. A classic example is the person who has been driving a boat all his life without having a licence and who is now required to achieve competencies to be a skipper of a sea rescue vessel. Although prior learning is recognised, in some areas there is the feeling that it is all too hard.

Mr M.J. COWPER: Is there a reluctance to go back to school?

Mr Shadbolt: Yes. I would not say it is a huge problem, but the issue exists. As I said, we try to nurture those groups that are struggling through our FESA coordinators and the association's representatives.

Mr M.J. COWPER: You said that a lot of these groups are autonomous in their structure and that they would like to remain so. Is it safe to say that there are different administration and management styles within certain organisations and that some groups perform well and are more well drilled compared with others?

Mr Shadbolt: If you look at our 33 groups, a number of groups are very well organised and well structured and do not have any accountability problems with the service they provide and the funds that they receive; alternatively, others battle with the whole thing. There is a diversity with groups across the state.

Mr M.J. COWPER: Is there a culture of reluctance by some to the proposal of being placed under a bigger umbrella?

Mr Shadbolt: Initially there was, because it was thought that with the FESA guys running the show, we would lose our autonomy and independence. That was the fairly strong feeling in the early days of FESA's establishment. There was a difference in the association's structure at that

point - there still is - but a number of things have happened. The association's 33 groups are now seeing the positive aspect of where we have gone. I would not hesitate to say that 90 per cent, even 99 per cent, of our groups are satisfied that they have moved ahead because they can see the benefits.

The CHAIRMAN: FESA is proposing that it be re-established as the department of emergency services. That will mean the removal of "fire" from the corporate name. FESA's argument is that the removal of "fire" from the organisation's name is appropriate because a fire is just one of the many emergencies that volunteers attend. There has been objection to this on the basis of a claim of a loss of identity. Do have a comment about that?

Mr Shadbolt: In relation to a loss of identity with the removal of the word "fire" from the corporate name, it is not something that is reflected in sea rescue. There has never been a marine rescue part of FESA. I do not think it is an issue within our group. Whether it is called the department of emergency services or FESA, we would be very reluctant to lose a VMRS unit at the state level. Whether the overall structure is emergency management authority or an emergency management department, we would not have any further issue provided that it contained a VMRS unit.

The CHAIRMAN: There has been comment by some VMRS groups to the effect that younger and fitter people are required to operate the newer equipment, mainly because the membership principally comprises retirees. Are the association and membership groups trying to attract younger people?

Mr Shadbolt: Recruitment is a big issue for sea rescue as it is for lot of volunteer organisations. Historically, marine rescue volunteers have usually been elderly people and retirees, because they have time on their hands and can donate that time to sea rescue. There is a drive to generate interest in younger people so that they will become involved. We have had some success with that. However, the association and its groups realise that they need to keep up with technology and that they must provide a professional service and minimise the response time. Having said that, our drive is to supply the equipment that will assist us to reach those goals. Some of that equipment lends itself to being used by younger and fitter people. By the same token, it is not limited to that. It depends on how an operator uses the equipment. Older people can use the equipment as effectively as younger people.

[11.19 am]

The CHAIRMAN: There is a perception among the public that volunteer sea rescue sits on call all the time waiting to pick up people when they get into trouble. How much focus does the volunteer sea rescue place in educating the public on safety matters and on informing the public that the volunteer sea rescue groups are a volunteer service rather than a paid service?

Mr Shadbolt: I agree that there is a perception in the community that recreational boat users can go to sea and that someone will rescue them no matter what happens to them. We do not like to promote that perception. Most of our groups have a training aspect to them and the association is strongly recommending that the new initiative of the DPI, the recreational skippers' ticket, be implemented. We have been very heavily involved in support of that. The minister requested that I give a talk at the launch of that initiative. There must be more of a push to educate the public that our services are to be used in the event of an emergency; we are not there to respond willy-nilly to every call. The public could be better educated on that matter.

Mr S.R. HILL: That also depends on the people in the community with whom they are involved. The association in Geraldton has a high profile. The membership of the rescue group impacts on how it is dealt with in the community.

Mr Shadbolt: That is right.

The CHAIRMAN: Recreational boats seem to be getting bigger and bigger. How is the association coping with that? Is the association going to spread its resources across VRMS groups to cover those types of contingencies?

Mr Shadbolt: We have tried to keep in line with that by encouraging our groups to either purchase or replace their old vessels with certain types of vessels. We are looking at a vessel replacement program to consider what vessels will be required in the future and also at the possibility of implementing a 10-year replacement program for capital, such as vessels. That is required mainly because there is a greater demand to rescue larger vessels. The vessels that we recommend to our groups are capable of managing large recreational vessels up to 25 or 30 metres, which is the length of some recreational vessels. Many more recreational vessels are being encouraged into particular areas. We are trying to address that matter by not only the types but also the number of vessels we have available for service. We are continually dealing with that matter.

Mrs J. HUGHES: How well established is planning for search and rescue activities at the local level, and how heavily are the police involved in the formulation of those plans, particularly regarding the more serious incidents?

Mr Shadbolt: At the local level, it is broad based, depending on the area. Some areas that have a LEMAC activity have good planning structures in place for sea rescue services. Generally, LEMAC groups are involved in the planning of search and rescue activities to some degree. However, other areas are left to do whatever they can. That is how extreme the situation has become. In some areas in the far north and even in the south west, the local policeman, who is the HMA, may be some distance away. He might telephone somebody to say that he has received a request for a response, and that will be it; the volunteer sea rescue service will be involved with the planning. The planning structure is fairly broad. At some points LEMAC is involved, and in other cases it is left up to the volunteer sea rescue group to do the job.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Would you like to see a better coordinated approach taken across the state, or are the volunteer sea rescue groups quite happy?

Mr Shadbolt: They are happy to do that. It serves a purpose because people with the experience and background knowledge do the job. We want to ensure that the groups are well trained.

Mrs J. HUGHES: Do police contribute to the cost of training?

Mr Shadbolt: They have done. We have called on their expertise to run the SARCO courses and even short search and rescue courses to bring our volunteers up to speed with the latest ideas in search and rescue operations.

Mr M.J. COWPER: How many rescue operations are conducted around Rottnest Island?

Mr Shadbolt: That is an interesting question. The Fremantle Volunteer Sea Rescue Group is not part of our association. Generally, it services Rottnest Island. The Rottnest Rangers, who are part of that team, also participate in sea rescue operations. If the rescues on the island were referred to as specific emergency response rescues -

Mr M.J. COWPER: Is that one that could put it with you with just a bit of WAMSAR?

Mr Shadbolt: Yes. The staff on the island probably conduct 20 or 30 rescues each summer, but Fremantle sea rescue would conduct many more than that. The definition of what is and what is not a sea rescue is a fair question. I do not have the figures for Fremantle sea rescue. I viewed this hearing as an opportunity to broach a couple of the changes to the structure of FESA, but perhaps I will have to put them in a separate submission.

The CHAIRMAN: Thank you for attending the hearing and providing the committee with that information. A transcript of the hearing will be forwarded to you for correction of typographical errors or errors of transcription or fact. New material cannot be introduced and the sense of the evidence cannot be altered. Should you wish to provide additional information or elaborate on

particular points, you should submit a supplementary submission for the committee's consideration. If the transcript is not returned within 10 days of receipt, it will be deemed to be correct.

Hearing concluded at 11.28 am.
