

This section on Rural Fire Brigade Groups was not reviewed as part of the development of the new manual. Eventually a separate Rural Fire Brigade Groups Manual will be produced and the information will be reviewed and updated as part of this process.

What I Need to Know

- A Rural Fire Brigade Group (Brigade Group) is a volunteer structure formed to coordinate the activities of rural fire brigades operating in a single Local Government area. A Brigade Group is usually formed only when warranted by the level of brigade activity and where desired by the brigades operating within that area.
- Rural Fire Brigade Groups are able to enhance fire management over an entire Local Government area through cooperative effort by brigades in addressing issues such as hazard mitigation, training and incident management. Additionally, Groups may provide a single focus for dealing with the Local Authority in matters such as the rural fire levy and the Local Government Counter Disaster Plan.
- Rural Fire Brigade Groups were first formed in Queensland in 1994 following submissions to the *Audit Review into Bushfire Strategies in Queensland* commissioned by Cabinet to report on the effectiveness of existing bushfire strategies in Queensland at that time.

The Authority for Rural Fire Brigade Groups

- Rural Fire Brigade Groups are formed under the authority vested in the Assistant Commissioner, Rural Operations of the Queensland Fire and Rescue Service.
- Rural Fire Brigade Groups have been deemed to be Rural Fire Brigades by the Assistant Commissioner, Rural Operations which provides insurance coverage for the members of the Group.
- On formation, Rural Fire Brigade Groups are assigned a registration number in accordance with s79(2) of the Act. A Rural Fire Brigade Group's boundaries must be contained within the Local Government area in which it is formed. A Group's operational role is detailed in the Rural Fire Service Operational Guidelines, provided as a supplement to the Rural Fire Brigade Manual.
- The Assistant Commissioner, Rural Operations may, at any time, disband, disendorse or cancel a Rural Fire Brigade Group. All Rural Fire Brigade Groups are required to adopt the Constitution attached to this Chapter as Annex A. This document regulates the proceedings of the Group and provides for its internal governance.

Functions of a Rural Fire Brigade Group

- The Functions of a Rural Fire Brigade Group are identified in Clause 2 of the Model Group Constitution as:
 - to provide support and assistance to Brigades in discharging their functions under Part 7 Division 3 of the Act;
 - operational coordination between brigades;
 - operational coordination with adjoining groups;
 - to establish and maintain procedures to enhance the ability of Brigades to carry out operations and training effectively and efficiently;
 - to establish and maintain operational coordination of incidents which may arise, where more than one Brigade is involved;
 - to report on matters referred to it by the Rural Fire Service;
 - to provide representation to the local Counter Disaster Committee;
 - maintenance of equipment allocated to the Group;

- advocate on behalf of Brigades with the Area Director in relation to the fire fighting equipment that may be provided within the Group's area;
- coordinating training between Brigades to ensure that Brigades can work together effectively and efficiently;
- overseeing the preparation and maintenance of Group Operations Plans;
- ensuring that an operational coordination centre is identified for the Group.
- providing representation on any committee or organisation in respect of matters that are likely to affect the Group as a whole;
- coordinating hazard reduction programs within the Group;
- coordinating public education programs at Group level;
- conducting an annual operational exercise;
- any other matters which may be referred to it by the Assistant Commissioner, Rural Operations from time to time.

Structure of a Rural Fire Brigade Group

- A Rural Fire Brigade Group is a coalition of Rural Fire Brigades whose individual brigade districts are contained wholly or predominantly within a single Local Government area.

The Group's Relationship with Member Brigades

- The Group exists for the benefit of the Brigades in facilitating rural fire management. The Group is controlled by the member brigades, **each having equal voting power.**
- Rural Fire Brigades remain independent entities with control over their own activities within their brigade district boundaries.
- Specifically:
 - the finances of each Brigade including donations, fundraising and levy shall remain the property of the individual Brigade to be used at the Brigade's discretion;
 - the Group cannot impose a levy on a Brigade;
 - brigades can voluntarily make payments to a Group

The Group's Relationship with the Area Director, Rural Operations

- The Area Director, Rural Operations is a member of a Rural Fire Brigade Group.
- The Area Director, Rural Operations prime role is to provide advice to the Group and to the Local Government on Rural Fire Service policies and procedures.
- The Area Director, Rural Operations acts as the Chairperson for the election of the Group Officer and has a casting vote in the event of a tied vote for this position.

The Group's Relationship with the Rural Fire Service

- The Brigade Group structure does not introduce an additional administrative tier for the management of Rural Fire Brigades in Queensland. The normal administrative chain between individual Brigades and the Rural Fire Service functions through the Area Office, and this remains unchanged. Dealings between the Group and the Rural Fire Service are limited to matters that relate to the Group as a whole.

The Group's Relationship with other Agencies

- The Group is able to provide a forum for addressing fire management issues that extend beyond the boundaries of individual Brigades. In so doing, other agencies with the responsibility of managing fire on land under their control may become involved in the Group's broader fire planning and hazard mitigation activities where it is appropriate to do so.
- Group involvement in fire management activities with other agencies is encouraged however the responsibility for the management of incidents on land under the control of other agencies remains the same for Groups as it is for Rural Fire Brigades.

The Group's Relationship with the Local Government

- Rural Fire Brigade Groups are formed from brigades whose boundaries are wholly or predominantly within a Local Government's area.
- Ideally only one Group will be formed in each Local Government area, however it is acknowledged that geographic or other special factors may require two Groups in some Local Government areas. This will occur only after consultation with the Local Government and on the advice of the Area Director, Rural Operations.
- The boundaries of a Rural Fire Brigade Group must be contained within a single Local Government area.
- A role of the Rural Fire Brigade Group is to provide advice within its expertise to the Local Government's Counter Disaster Committee.
- The Local Government has the power to nominate a representative to audit the financial records of the Group where no other auditor has been appointed under Section 13 of the Group Constitution.

The Rural Fire Levy

- The Local Government, under s128A of the Fire and Rescue Service Act may make and levy rates and charges under the Local Government Act and contribute amounts raised to rural fire brigades operating in its Local Government area.
- The direct line of accountability for Rural Fire Brigades in receipt of a rural fire levy is set out in detail in Chapter 5 of the Rural Fire Manual. Brigades that are members of a Rural Fire Brigade Group have an additional requirement, as part of the levy process, to present their Activity Plans, Annual Operations Plans and Budgets to the Group for discussion.
- The method of distribution of levy funds to Brigades is a matter for each Local Government. Groups involved in this process are to ensure that funds are distributed in accordance with the requirements of the Local Government and in the most expedient manner.
- A Brigade Group is expressly forbidden from retaining any monies belonging to the member Brigades by way of a levy, but Brigades may make a voluntary contribution to the Group.

Forming a Rural Fire Brigade Group

- The decision to form a Brigade Group should be based on the identified benefits to be gained from such a structure by individual brigades and the communities serviced by those brigades. The prime indicators of the appropriateness of forming a Group would be:- a history of a high level of response activity combined with identified resource and manpower deficiencies; the need for a whole-of-Local Government area approach to fire planning and hazard mitigation; and the requirement for high levels of training and community awareness.
- Where the preconditions for the forming of a Brigade Group are perceived to exist within a Local Government area, the Area Director, Rural Operations will call a meeting to determine the attitude of Brigades to the forming of such a structure. This meeting should address all features and characteristics of the Group, both positive and negative. The Group structure may not be suitable to all Brigades in a Local Government Area and those that do not wish to form or join a Group should not be coerced into doing so.
- Where agreement is reached to form a Group, an election of Interim Office Bearers is conducted to administer the process of obtaining the Assistant Commissioner, Rural Operations' approval for the Group.
- An application to form the Group should be made in writing to the Area Director, Rural Operations who will make appropriate recommendations and refer the matter through the normal administrative channels for approval by the Assistant Commissioner, Rural Operations.
- Upon receipt of the approval of the Assistant Commissioner, Rural Operations to form a Group, a meeting is convened to confirm the interim Office Bearers in their positions, to adopt the Model Group Constitution and to elect an Auditor. Arrangements for opening a bank account should also be made at this meeting.

Management of a Rural Fire Brigade Group

- All of the affairs of a Rural Fire Brigade Group are managed by the member Brigades. This is accomplished:
 - **without an identified Management Committee**; such as exists to manage a Rural Fire Brigade :and
 - **without a separate Standing Finance Sub-committee** to manage the financial affairs of the Group
- All decisions in relation to the Group are made by the member Brigades, each of which has equal voting powers exercised **by a single nominated representative of each Brigade**.
- The Office Bearers of the Group are elected from the member Brigades at an Annual General Meeting. The following persons are the Office Bearers:-
 - the Group Officer
 - the Deputy Group Officer
 - the Group Administrative Officer
 - the Group Training Officer
- Ideally, the Office Bearers are drawn from different Brigades. Where these positions are otherwise unable to be filled, the following rules provide for when more than one office bearer is supplied by a Brigade without that Brigade gaining a voting advantage:-
 - Each Brigade has a single representative to vote on its behalf at meetings of the Group.
 - Office Bearers elected from within these Brigade representatives retain the right to vote on behalf of their Brigade. Under these circumstances the Group Officer has a deliberative vote and a second or casting vote in the case of a tied decision.
 - Office Bearers elected from outside of the nominated Brigade representatives do not have a vote, except in the case of the Group Officer, who exercises a casting vote, and then only in the case of a tied decision.
- The Office Bearers shall hold office for two years and are eligible for re-election.
- No person may hold more than one office simultaneously. Where an Office Bearer position is unfilled at an election, the Group may make representation to the District Inspector to have the vacant positions filled by a person who currently holds another office.
- Any person may resign from a position at any time. The Group Officer shall not be an Office Bearer of a Brigade except with the prior approval of the Assistant Commissioner, Rural Operations.
- The Group Officer has discretionary power to appoint any person to any one of the following positions for any period of time to assist in the performance of the Group Officer's duties:
 - Group Logistics Officer
 - Group Planning Officer
 - Group Communications Officer
 - Group Equipment Officer
 - Group Specialist Officer
 - Any other position (with the prior concurrence of the Area Director, Rural Operations)
- The persons appointed at the discretion of the Group Officer do not have a vote at meetings of the Group except where they are the persons nominated by a Brigade under Clause 4.3 of the Constitution to represent the Brigade at Group meetings.
- The elected Group Training Officer may appoint such number of assistants as is required to effectively perform training functions. Such assistants are not considered to be holders of office within the Group and do not have a vote at meetings of the Group except where they are the person nominated under Clause 4.3 of the Constitution to represent a Brigade at Group meetings.

Duties of the Office Bearers

- **The Group Officer's** prime role is to ensure coordination of activities in support of Rural Fire Brigades in the Group. The duties of the **Group Officer** are to:-
 - preside at meetings of the Group;
 - represent the Group on the Local Government Counter Disaster Plan;
 - liaise with other agencies involved in rural fire management in the Group's area;
 - act as the Rural Fire Brigades' operational coordinator in accordance with the Rural Fire Service State Operational Guidelines;
 - oversee the activities of the Group;
 - act as a signatory to the Group's Bank Account.
- The **Deputy Group Officer** assumes the duties of the Group Officer in the Group Officer's absence. The Deputy Group Officer may also be a signatory to the Group's Bank Account.
- The duties of the **Group Administrative Officer** are to:-
 - receive and initiate Group correspondence;
 - give proper notice of all meetings of the Group in accordance with the Constitution;
 - call for nominations for Office Bearer positions in accordance with the Constitution;
 - take accurate minutes of the proceedings at meetings of the Group;
 - receive and deposit the funds of the Group;
 - maintain the books of account properly to show the financial activities of the Group;
 - pay accounts when authorised by the Group to do so;
 - administer the disbursement of the Rural Fire Levy to member Brigades expeditiously;
 - act as a signatory to the Group's Bank Account;
 - prepare the financial records of the Group for audit in accordance with Clause 12(k) of the Group Constitution;
 - manage the Group's petty cash account on the imprest system;
 - provide for the security of the Group's documents;
 - sign Orders for equipment and account for the Group's Assets in an Asset Register;
 - undertake all other administrative duties as required by the Group.
- The duties of the **Group Training Officer** are to:-
 - coordinate the Group's Training Program as directed by the Group;
 - liaise with the Regional Training Officer in relation to training matters;
 - deliver training as required;
 - appoint assistant Training Officers where appropriate;
 - plan and conduct an annual Group Training Exercise;
 - act as a signatory to the Groups Bank Account where required;
 - perform other training functions as directed by the Group.

Meeting Procedure - General

- The Group shall meet at least once per year in addition to the Annual General Meeting and shall meet at other times and places as is fixed by resolution of the Group.
- The following persons are entitled to attend meetings of the Group:
 - (i) any other person admitted by the members present at the meeting; and
 - (ii) any member of a Rural Fire Brigade within that Group may be admitted as an observer

- Notice of all meetings shall be given by the Group Administrative Officer to all member Brigades and the Area Director, Rural Operations at least 7 days before the commencement of the meeting. Such notices shall be in writing and given personally or by post.
- Notice of a meeting shall set out the date, time and place of the meeting and shall also set out an agenda for the meeting.
- A special meeting of the Group shall be held within twenty one (21) days of the Group Administrative Officer receiving a written request signed by at least one third of the member Brigades. Such request shall state the reason(s) why the meeting is to be convened.
- Each member Brigade is entitled to nominate one person from within its membership who has the authority to act on behalf of the Brigade, to represent the Brigade in the conduct of the affairs of the Group.
- No business shall be transacted at any meeting unless a quorum of member brigade representatives is present at the time the meeting proceeds to business. If a quorum is not present within half an hour of the appointed time of the meeting:
 - (i) the Group Officer is to adjourn the meeting to such time and place as he/she determines, or
 - (ii) if the Group Officer is not present, the meeting is to be adjourned to such time and place as the majority of brigade representatives present so determine. If at this adjourned meeting the number required for a quorum is not present, then those brigade representatives who are present shall be deemed to be a quorum.
- A question for decision at a meeting will be decided by a majority of the votes of the brigade representatives present at the meeting. Proxies are not permitted. If any representative abstains from voting, that representative's vote is to be recorded in the negative. The Chairperson has, in the event of an equality of votes, a casting vote.
- Voting shall be by show of hands, unless any two brigade representatives request a secret ballot.

The Annual General Meeting

- The Financial Year for each Rural Fire Brigade Group closes on the 30th June each year. The Annual General Meeting of the Group is to be held within 3 months of that date.
- The First Annual General Meeting after the forming of a Group is to be held within 18 months of the day of the approval of the Group's formation.
- The following persons are entitled to attend the annual General Meeting of a Rural Fire Brigade Group:-
 - (i) persons admitted by the members present;
 - (ii) any member of a brigade within that Group (as an observer only)
 - (iii) other interested members of the community, whether a member of a Brigade or not.
- The business to be transacted at each Annual General Meeting shall include:-
 - (i) The receiving of the statement of income and expenditure, assets and liabilities and charges affecting the property of the Group for the last financial year;
 - (ii) The receiving of the auditor's report on the financial affairs of the Group for the last financial year;
 - (iii) The presenting of the audited statement to the meeting for adoption;
 - (iv) The biennial election of office bearers;
 - (v) The appointment or election of an a Auditor;
 - (vi) The confirmation of the minutes of the previous Annual General Meeting.

Election of Office Bearers

- The Election of Office Bearers shall proceed as follows:
 - (a) The Group Administrative Officer must, at least 28 days before the day on which Group elections are due to be held, give or post to the secretary of each Brigade, a written

notice setting out the day on which the elections are due to be held and inviting nominations of candidates for election.

- (b) Nominations for the offices to be filled are to be in writing and lodged with the Group Administrative Officer before the commencement of the meeting at which the election is to be held.
 - (c) If no written nominations are received for an office, then nominations shall be accepted from the floor.
 - (d) The local Area Director, Rural Operations shall assume the chair for the election of the position of Group Officer.
 - (e) Voting for each office shall take place separately, in the following order: Group Officer, Group Administrative Officer, Deputy Group Officer, and Group Training Officer.
 - (f) Where there is only one candidate for an office, that candidate is to be declared elected. Where there is more than one candidate, the *exhaustive ballot* system is to be used.
 - (g) In an election for Group Officer, the outgoing Group Officer does not vote. In an election for other positions, the incoming Group Officer has a vote in accordance with the rules set out in 3.4 paragraph 4 (b) and (c). Voting is to be by show of hands unless any two Brigade Representatives present request a secret ballot. Proxies are not permitted.
 - (h) The Chairperson, when a nominated Brigade Representative, has a deliberative vote and in the case of a tied vote, a casting vote. In an election for Group Officer this power of a casting vote is passed to the local Area Director, Rural Operations.
- Except in the case where an outgoing Group Officer has re-nominated for this position, a candidate for an office is entitled to vote in the election for that office providing the candidate is a Brigade Representative nominated under the provisions of Clause 4.3 of the Constitution.
 - The Exhaustive Ballot method shall proceed as follows:
 - (a) Where the vote is to be by show of hands, brigade representatives shall raise their hands for their preferred candidate.
 - (b) If any candidate achieves a clear majority (at least 51% of the votes cast), then that candidate shall be declared elected. If no candidate has a clear majority then the candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated and balloting proceeds again for those candidates remaining. The cycle continues until a clear winner can be declared.
 - (c) Where voting is to be by secret ballot, the Chairperson shall appoint two of the Brigade Representatives to collect and count the votes. These two do not lose their right to vote.
 - (d) The Brigade representatives shall write the name of their preferred candidate on a sheet of paper which is then collected and counted. Each candidate is entitled to appoint one scrutineer.
 - (e) If no candidate has a clear majority, the balloting cycle continues as in sub para (b) above until a clear winner can be declared.
 - (f) An election has no effect unless approved by the Assistant Commissioner, Rural Operations. Within two weeks of the election of an Office Bearer, the Group must notify the Assistant Commissioner, Rural Operations of the result of the election through the Area Director, Rural Operations.

Resignation, Removal and Vacation of Office

- An office becomes vacant if the office bearer:
 - (a) dies or resigns;
 - (b) is absent from three consecutive general meetings of the Group without giving prior notice either verbally or in writing;
 - (c) is dismissed by the Assistant Commissioner, Rural Operations under the provisions of s81(5) of the Act;
 - (d) if the office is declared vacant.

- Any Office Bearer may resign from the office by giving notice verbally or in writing to the Group Administrative Officer. Such notice shall take effect at the time such notice is received by the Administrative Officer unless a later date is specified in the notice when it shall take effect on that later date.
- An Office Bearer may be removed from office by a motion to declare the office vacant. The motion may be moved at any meeting of the Group where that office bearer shall be given the opportunity to fully present his/her case. There is no right of appeal against an office bearer's removal from office under this section.

Filling a Casual Vacancy

- Should an office become vacant within six months of a forthcoming scheduled election, then the vacancy will be declared casual and may be filled by appointment by the Group. Vacancies occurring longer than six months before the next scheduled election must be filled by an election. The person so appointed or elected shall hold office only for the unexpired term of the vacating Office Bearer.

Funds and Accounts

- Rural Fire Brigade Groups have the same responsibilities for their adequate financial and administrative management as do Rural Fire Brigades. The applicable sections of Chapter 6 of the Rural Fire Brigade Manual in relation to Brigades therefore apply equally to Brigade Groups.
- A Rural Fire Brigade Group may be in the receipt of income from a number of sources including the Rural Fire Service which provides funds for initial establishment as well as an annual operating grant.
- A Rural Fire Brigade Group is expressly forbidden by Clause 16(f) of the Constitution from imposing a Levy on member Brigades, however under Clause 16 (g) a Brigade may voluntarily make payments to a Group.
- The requirements for accounting for the Group's financial assets are set out fully in Clause 12 of the Group Constitution.

The Auditor

- The Group shall appoint an auditor who shall be either:-
 - (a) a Certified Practising Accountant; or
 - (b) a nominated representative of the Local Government; or
 - (c) a nominated representative of the Assistant Commissioner.
 - (d) a nominated representative of the Local Government may be a person identified by the Group who is acceptable to the council for the purpose of the audit.
- A nominated representative of the Chief Commissioner may be a person identified by the Group who is acceptable to the Area Director, Rural Operations for the purpose of the audit.

Group Equipment

- Equipment purchased by the Group shall be available for use by all member Brigades.
- A Rural Fire Brigade Group may acquire equipment in the same manner as a Rural Fire Brigade, and is responsible for its proper accounting and care.
- The relevant sections of Chapter 16 of the Rural Fire Brigade Manual dealing with Brigade Equipment apply equally to Brigade Groups.

Group Training

- The prime roles of the Group in relation to training are to:-
 - (a) provide assistance to Brigade Training Officers of member Brigades in the delivery of training
 - (b) provide centralised training to members of Brigades
 - (c) plan and implement an annual Group Exercise.
- The relevant sections of Chapter 25 of the Rural Fire Brigade Manual in relation to Brigade Training apply equally to Rural Fire Brigade Groups.

- The training functions of the Group are the responsibility of the elected Group Training Officer, who implements the training policies made by the member Brigades.

Group Operational Management

- Rural Fire Brigade Groups have a responsibility under Clause 2 (k) of the Constitution to oversee the preparation and maintenance of Group Operations Plans. Additionally, the Objectives of the Group include a requirement for operational coordination between Brigades and adjoining Groups, for incidents where more than one Brigade is involved.
- The Group's role in operations is in accordance with Incident Control Systems management and is governed by the Rural Fire Service State Operational Guidelines.
- The Group's role in operations is governed by the Rural Fire Service Operations Guidelines to incidents that warrant the attendance of a number of Brigades. (Level 2 responses) the Group's role is to be one of coordination and the Group Officer may make various appointments under Clause 10 of the Constitution to assist in this process.
- At all times the Brigades' First Officers retain their authority under the provisions of s 83 of the *Fire and Rescue Authority Act* and are responsible for the activities of their Brigade.