

BUILDING VOLUNTEER FIRE BRIGADE CAPABILITY TOGETHER

— Resilient Communities. Safer Tomorrows. —

A FRAMEWORK FOR STRENGTHENING
VOLUNTEER FIRE AND EMERGENCY SERVICES



PEOPLE



CAPABILITY



RELATIONSHIPS



RECOGNITION



ENABLEMENT

— STRONGER CAPACITY. GREATER RESILIENCE. A SAFER WORLD. —

JOHN S STALKER

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My heartfelt thanks to my wife Jenny who has supported me undertaking
this work over the past several years.

I would also like to dedicate this book to my fellow volunteers at Samford
Rural Fire Brigade, in particular Anne and Alan Wells, Ferg Adrian and
George Cornwell. I have to mention George as he has to put up with me
when were doing incident control or mapping activities.

Contents

1. Introduction	1
2. Supporting the Volunteers Who Serve	13
3. The Capable Volunteer Brigade	21
4. A Brigade Belongs to Its Community	29
5. Trust Is Central to Brigade Capability	35
6. Leadership Builds Capability	42
7. Experience Underpins Capability	50
8. Enabling Capable Brigades	57
9. New Members and Brigade Capability	67
10. Building Capability Through Change	87
11. The Building Capability Framework	105
12. Building Capable Brigades Together	134
13. Reference List	169
About the author	179

Chapter One

Introduction

Building Volunteer Fire Brigade Capability Together

Why do some volunteer brigades remain capable across generations, while others gradually lose people, knowledge, confidence, or community connection?

An estimate based on Centre for Fire Statistics data¹ indicates that approximately 88 per cent (13.8 million) of the world's 15 million-plus firefighters are volunteers. Globally, volunteer firefighters are more commonly organised around structural/community fire protection than exclusively wildfire suppression, although wildland fire-oriented volunteer systems dominate in certain jurisdictions (for example, Australia). Each of these volunteers belongs to a brigade that may either be a fully volunteer or a part-volunteer brigade.

Volunteer fire brigades occupy an unusual yet important place in public life. They provide organised emergency capabilities, but they are also community institutions sustained by people who freely contribute their time, judgement, relationships, and experience. Members respond

to fires, rescue incidents, storms, floods, and other emergencies. They may also undertake prevention, preparedness, education, mitigation, recovery, and other forms of service that help their communities remain safe.

Many people widely recognise the practical importance of these brigades. However, how their organisational capability is built, sustained, and sometimes weakened is less clearly understood. Much of the research examines individual motivation, recruitment, retention, leadership, community resilience, and governance as separate subjects. Brigade capability is defined by the way people, relationships, knowledge, authority, and resources interact over time.²

This book brings these relationships together in an evidence-based capability framework. It uses research to test and strengthen practical propositions but does not assume that published literature has already described every important reality of brigade life. Where practice consistently identifies a relationship that academic research has not yet adequately examined, the absence of literature may represent a research gap rather than proof that the practical observation is incorrect.

The evidence collected has been used in three distinguishable ways:

- Evidence describes what a source reports or demonstrates.
- Framework interpretation draws patterns from several sources and from the lived realities of volunteer brigades.
- A framework proposition states a reasoned, testable explanation that should remain open to further evidence, qualification, and revision.

This distinction is important because confidence should match the quality and directness of the evidence. Several studies support the rela-

tionship between the effects of supportive leadership, belonging, training access, and organisational trust.³

Direct volunteer-fire capacity research exists; however, different studies use 'capacity' to mean different things: budget, personnel, infrastructure, training, knowledge, participation, leadership, or community relationships.⁴

The Building the Volunteer Fire Brigade Capability Framework (the Framework), introduced in this book, treats the volunteer brigade as an organisation, not merely as a collection of individual volunteers or as a local unit on an organisational chart.

The brigade comprises its members, their relationships, community ties, knowledge, leadership and authority, and the resources and systems that support their service. A station, appliance, or membership register may be important, but none is the brigade itself.

Volunteers are not an external stakeholder group attached to a volunteer brigade. They are the brigade. They are also members of the community. The occupations, families, relationships, local knowledge, and community trust that these individuals bring all contribute to the brigade's overall capability.

Emergency responses serve as a crucial method of service delivery, but it is not the sole approach. Depending on local responsibilities and jurisdiction, a brigade may undertake risk reduction, educate residents, prepare for severe weather, maintain community relationships, support recovery, preserve local knowledge, train members, take part in planning, and assist other services.

This distinction keeps the framework focused on purpose. A brigade does not build capability simply to become a larger or more impressive organisation. It builds capability so that it can provide reliable and sustainable service to the community.

How Key Terms Are Used

'Volunteer brigade' means an organised local fire or emergency-service body whose continuing capability depends substantially upon people who serve voluntarily. The exact legal form differs between jurisdictions.

'Volunteer' and 'member' are used to describe the people who make up the brigade. The terms do not intend to suggest less professionalism or competence.

The senior brigade officer is generically termed 'Captain' since the term differs across countries. Local titles may include Captain, Chief, First Officer, Commander, or similar designations.

A 'Fire Agency' means any organisation that oversees, coordinates, regulates, or supports the operation of volunteer brigades. It may be a government department, statutory authority, municipal body, association, federation, or another form of organisation.

Community includes the people, places, organisations, networks, and relationships the brigade exists to serve. It is not limited to a geographic boundary.

Capability means the brigade's continuing ability to organise its people, knowledge, leadership, community relationships, and resources so it can serve today while remaining able to serve in the future.

International Scope, Local Application

Volunteer brigades operate under very different legal, financial, and cultural arrangements. A municipal volunteer department in North America, a rural fire brigade in Australia or New Zealand, a civil-protection association in Portugal, and a municipal volunteer fire service in Germany

may share important characteristics while differing substantially in authority, funding, operational scope, and relationship with government.

The framework, therefore, does not prescribe one ideal structure. It identifies organisational relationships that can be examined within different organisational and governance structures.

The same discipline applies to terminology. The book uses generic language where possible and explains jurisdiction-specific examples rather than treating them as the norm.

Politics and Organisational Reality

Fire Agencies do not operate outside politics. Governments establish legislation, allocate resources, determine public policy, and appoint or oversee senior leaders. Political choices can enable investment and overdue reform. They can also create instability, short planning horizons, or organisational change that affects brigade capability.

Ignoring politics would produce an incomplete account of reality. The book therefore discusses political and institutional influences without becoming partisan. We can critically examine decisions, systems, and consequences. The purpose is not to attack individuals or political parties. It is to keep community safety and sustainable volunteer brigade capability visible.

Structure of the Book

1. Chapter 1 describes why brigade capability matters and why building it before the alert sounds is essential.

2. Chapter 2 focuses on the brigade volunteers and the shared responsibilities that sustain volunteer service.

3. Chapter 3 defines the capable brigade and introduces its historical roots as organised community capability.

4. Chapter 4 examines the relationship between the brigade and the community.

5. Chapter 5 explains how trust is developed, revealed, and repaired.

6. Chapter 6 examines leadership within and beyond the brigade.

7. Chapter 7 considers how experience and local knowledge become organisational capability.

8. Chapter 8 examines the responsibility of Fire Agencies to create enabling conditions.

9. Chapters 9 and 10 address renewal and change.

10. Chapters 11 and 12 bring the framework together and translate it into practical action.

Why Volunteer Fire Brigade Capability Matters

What does a community need its volunteer brigade to be capable of—today, during peak demand, and in the years ahead?

Volunteer brigades exist to serve their communities. Though that statement seems simple, it sets the standard for judging capability. The purpose is not organisational survival for its own sake. It is not an accumulation of equipment, membership, or authority. Those things matter only if they support reliable community service.

Service may involve response to fire and other emergencies. It may also involve prevention, preparedness, education, mitigation, recovery, local planning, mutual aid, and community support. The precise responsibilities differ, but the organising purpose remains public service.

Research on volunteer brigades repeatedly connects continued com-

mitment with community contribution, public-service values, local identity, and meaningful work.⁵ Operational readiness is essential, but brigade capability is broader.

A brigade may be well-prepared for a routine incident but poorly equipped for prolonged operations, leadership succession, membership changes, or losing experienced personnel. The brigade may have a well trained and experienced team of volunteers but lack the relationships and systems required to manage unexpected events. The organisation may perform effectively under one Captain, but it lacks leadership depth if that individual is unavailable.

Capability therefore includes the ability to prepare, mobilise, coordinate, learn, and renew. It connects today's response with tomorrow's capacity to respond. When an emergency begins, there is usually little time to create trust, establish roles, repair relationships, develop leadership, or understand the community. The alert reveals what has already been built: whether people know one another, whether competence is current, whether officers can exercise judgement, whether communication works, whether equipment is ready, and whether members trust the wider organisation.

This does not mean that learning stops during an emergency. Incidents can generate important innovation and new experience. Effective adaptation under pressure usually depends on foundations built earlier. Wildland-fire research similarly shows that effective performance under uncertainty depends upon contextual engagement, anomaly recognition and proactive sensemaking rather than procedure alone.⁶

Capability maintenance and development is an investment in the future. It is also a duty to those who are currently serving. Members who respond to dangerous and distressing situations require competent leadership, safe equipment, reliable training, trusted colleagues, clear

authority, and organisational support. These are not abstract features of a future organisation. They affect whether people can serve safely and sustainably today.

Recent emergencies continue to show that firefighters may lose their lives or be injured while protecting communities. At such times, brigades need more than just praise. They need the practical, relational, and institutional support that capability provides. Viewed over time, the same organisational responsibility involves supporting those who serve today and strengthening the brigade for tomorrow.

While individual competence matters, it is not sufficient by itself. A brigade becomes capable when individual skills can be coordinated through shared purpose, trust, leadership, knowledge, authority, and resources. Therefore, headcount, qualifications, and appliances cannot provide a complete measure. A large membership register may conceal low availability. A qualified workforce may be unable to access the training required to remain current. Adequate equipment may exist within a brigade that is weakened by conflict or leadership dependency.

The evidence across brigade, emergency volunteering, and organisational studies supports a relational and cumulative understanding: capability emerges from interactions rather than from one asset acting alone. Organisational learning and resilience research likewise treats capability as a process, which converts individual insight, relationships, and resources into coordinated adaptation, rather than a static inventory.

Capability grows through thousands of ordinary decisions. A member is mentored. An officer explains a decision. A lesson is shared. A family is thanked. A training opportunity is made accessible. A new member is given meaningful work. An unnecessary administrative step is removed. Capability can also deplete gradually. Repeated delays, avoidable meetings, unresolved conflict, leadership churn, inaccessible training,

poor consultation, and administrative burden may each appear manageable. Together, they can weaken trust, availability, and the willingness to continue.

The most serious capability loss is often visible only after it has accumulated. A brigade may continue functioning because a few committed people compensate for failing systems. Their extraordinary effort can conceal organisational fragility until fatigue, retirement, or a major incident exposes it.

Governments change, senior Fire Agency staff change, legislation, funding, and organisational structures change. Communities remain, risks continue, and the alert still sounds. One purpose of brigade capability is to provide continuity through those changes. It preserves knowledge, relationships, local presence, and service while allowing practices and structures to adapt.

Continuity does not mean preserving every tradition. It means protecting the organisational foundations that enable service: purpose, trust, competence, community connection, leadership depth, shared knowledge, and sustainable participation.

Appliances can be purchased. Fire stations can be built. Technology can be replaced. Experienced judgement, community trust, leadership depth, and effective relationships, however, may take years to develop. These are strategic assets because the community relies on them for safety and cannot quickly restore them after weakening. A capable Fire Agency therefore treats volunteer brigade capability with the same strategic seriousness it applies to finance, infrastructure, technology, and workforce planning. It considers not only the current services but also the capability that will persist over the next five to ten years.

No brigade will be equally capable in every area. No amount of organisational development can remove the inherent dangers and uncertain-

ties of fire and emergency services. Capability does not claim it controls every incident or that it corrects every decision. It is the continuing ability to prepare, act, learn, support people, and responsibly renew the organisation. This understanding makes improvement possible without creating unrealistic expectations. A capable brigade is not a flawless brigade. It is a brigade that can recognise weakness, use its strengths, learn, and continue serving.

What the evidence tells us

The evidence does not identify one organisational design that guarantees capability. It shows that a combination of public purpose, meaningful participation, capable leadership, trust, community connection, accessible development, and organisational support sustains volunteer service. The complete interaction of these factors is the basis of the capability framework proposed in this book.

Looking Ahead

People build capability. Chapter 2 examines what volunteer service asks of those people and what the brigade and Fire Agency owe them in return.

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Chapter Two

Supporting the Volunteers Who Serve

How can a brigade support the volunteers who serve without lowering legitimate standards or assuming that commitment is unlimited?

A volunteer brigade is not simply an organisation that contains volunteers; it exists because those volunteers choose to serve. Without members, there is no operational response, no training, no mentoring, no community engagement, no local governance, and no organisational memory. Policies and equipment may support the brigade, but people convert them into service.

Therefore, language matters. Describing volunteers only as people who assist a formal organisation can obscure the practical reality that, in many communities, they provide the core or overwhelming share of local fire and emergency capability. Research and public reviews consistently

describe volunteers as central to community protection, surge capacity, and the continuing operation of volunteer fire systems.¹

Members do not arrive at the station without other responsibilities. They have families, employment, businesses, study commitments, caring responsibilities, health needs, community roles, and a need for rest and recovery. Officers may carry substantial leadership responsibilities while also managing these demands.

Designing volunteer systems around an imaginary volunteer with unlimited time and no competing obligations makes these systems unsustainable. The inability to meet all volunteer time commitments may first appear as missed training or reduced availability. Over time, this can lead to fatigue, family tension, financial loss, reluctance to accept leadership, and departure.

Research on volunteer retention repeatedly identifies work and family pressures. Flexible arrangements and thoughtful organisational design are therefore capability measures, not concessions. A systematic review² and meta-analysis of 117 studies involving 55,335 volunteers found that satisfaction, commitment, engagement, communication, organisational support, and leader-member relationships were among the strongest predictors of turnover, while demands, time pressure, and burnout increased the risk of withdrawal.

A volunteer fire fighter accepts substantial responsibilities when choosing to serve. Those responsibilities may include saving life and property, placing oneself at risk, training, safe practice, reliable conduct, respect for lawful authority, care for equipment, and support for other members.

The Fire Agency and brigade must also accept responsibility for the work of volunteers. Required leadership support should be provided, volunteers' time should be used responsibly, maintain fair administrative

and operational processes, make any necessary resources available, and create an environment in which service can remain sustainable.

Reciprocity does not make every expectation negotiable. Safety and competence requirements remain necessary. Authority should demand from volunteers only what the organisation will support with time, resources, clarity, and respect.

Volunteers are more likely to remain engaged when they can see that their contribution matters. Meaningful contribution may involve an operational response, but it may also involve logistics, communications, training, equipment support, administration, finance, community education, welfare, planning, or mentoring. The mix depends on the brigade's responsibilities.

Roles should not be invented solely to maintain numbers. Assigned activities should contribute to brigade service delivery and maintenance. Research links satisfaction and continued commitment with purposeful work, development, recognition, camaraderie, and the opportunity to contribute beyond minimum requirements. Volunteer management research also shows that task design, autonomy, competence, relatedness, and perceived organisational support shape satisfaction, effort, and willingness to continue.³

A person can join but still feel disconnected from the brigade. New volunteers develop a sense of belonging when they feel welcomed, included in discussions and learning, treated equitably, and permitted to contribute without pressure to conform to a limited vision of a typical member. Camaraderie is a strength when it widens mutual support. It becomes a capability risk when it is used to exclude people based on age, gender, cultural background, family history, operational role, political belief, or other characteristics unrelated to safe and effective service.

Research and organisational reviews show that bullying, discrimina-

tion, nepotism, and unequal development opportunities weaken engagement and retention. Inclusion therefore belongs within capability, not outside it as a separate social aim. Direct wildland fire and rural brigade studies show that gendered norms, informal status, and family-like identities can provide social support while also making belonging uneven for people who do not fit established expectations.⁴

Recognition of the work of volunteers is important as it communicates what the organisation values. However, volunteer recognition will not compensate for inaccessible training, poor equipment, ignored concerns, or decisions that repeatedly consume volunteer time.

Credible recognition is visible in ordinary organisational behaviour: responding to enquiries, providing equipment, explaining decisions, honouring commitments, supporting progression, and treating volunteers as capable contributors. Longitudinal New Zealand research found that recognition by brigades and the wider organisation contributed to engagement, while established volunteers wanted stronger recognition of the families and employers who support their service.⁵

A volunteer brigade considers time one of its most valuable resources because no one can replace it. Every unnecessary process competes with training, mentoring, maintenance, community engagement, family life, employment, and recovery. Even a minor change at headquarters can have a significant impact on thousands of volunteers. Respecting time does not mean removing necessary accountability. It means designing systems proportionately, simplifying duplication, scheduling activities when volunteers can attend, and asking what existing requirement can be removed when a new one is introduced.

Contemporary volunteering research and parliamentary evidence identify administrative burden, training inflexibility, financial cost, and work-family pressure as significant sustainability risks. Longitudinal

firefighter research links organisational support with engagement and identifies work-family conflict as a pathway through which operational demands can reduce the intention to remain.⁶

Service can expose members to physical danger, trauma, fatigue, grief, and prolonged stress. Volunteer wellbeing should not depend on personal resilience or access to counselling after harm occurs. Workload, leadership, conflict, role clarity, equipment, training, fairness, family support, and the confidence that the organisation will respond appropriately when a member is injured or distressed can all affect wellbeing.

Peer support and professional services are important, as are organisational conditions that reduce preventable harm and allow members to recover after demanding incidents. The people who serve now must remain physically, mentally, and socially able to continue. Personal sustainability is therefore part of brigade capability.

A family may rearrange responsibilities when the alert sounds. An employer may release a member during working hours. A self-employed volunteer may lose income. These contributions support the public service but are often absent from organisational accounts. Families and employers should not serve as unlimited private subsidies for the fire service system. Acknowledging their support, considering practical effects, and reducing unnecessary disruption are important. Research shows that employer recognition can improve willingness to release volunteers and that family inclusion can reduce uncertainty and strengthen engagement.⁷

A member's ability to serve is not constant. Employment changes, children are born, health conditions fluctuate, caring responsibilities grow, and people move away only to return later. A capable brigade makes room for participation to increase, decrease, pause, or change form without treating every transition as a failure. Research on returning

volunteers in Finland shows that people who step away may later become valuable contributors again. Flexible pathways preserve a relationship that the organisation would otherwise lose.

Supporting volunteers does not mean treating them as passive recipients of organisational care.

Volunteers bring expertise, judgement and responsibility. Support should enable that capability rather than replace it. The most effective relationship combines clear standards, appropriate authority, reciprocal accountability, and genuine opportunities to influence decisions that affect service. This is the difference between managing volunteers as a category and working with the people who make up the brigade.

What the evidence tells us

The evidence consistently shows that leadership, belonging, training, recognition, meaningful roles, manageable demands, and the relationship between service, family, and employment shape volunteer engagement and retention. These are not separate welfare concerns; they determine whether people can continue making up the brigade.

Looking Ahead

People become capable collectively through the brigade. Chapter 3 examines the brigade as an organisation and explains why capability is more than the sum of individual members.

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Chapter Three

The Capable Volunteer Brigade

What makes a volunteer brigade capable rather than merely active, well equipped or numerically large?

A brigade is more than the people present at a particular meeting or incident. It possesses continuity, identity, relationships, knowledge, practices, authority, and responsibilities that extend beyond individual tenure. Members join an organisation shaped by those who served before and contribute to what later members will inherit.

Treating the brigade as an organisation makes different questions visible. Who holds what knowledge? How is leadership renewed? What binds members together? How does community trust enter the brigade? Which decisions can be made locally? What is lost when experienced members leave?

Direct brigade research describes volunteer fire brigades as community-integrated organisations whose autonomy, solidarity, leadership, and social relationships influence survival and performance. Public admin-

istration research also cautions that volunteer contribution is not a one-for-one substitute for paid labour: its organisational value depends upon coordination, role design, authority and the wider system's capacity to use it.¹

Literature uses capacity and capability in overlapping but distinguishable ways. Not-for-profit capacity research commonly identifies the resources, practices, and systems required to pursue a social mission. Dynamic capability research asks how organisations sense change, make choices, learn, and reconfigure resources. However, we should not reduce either to a list of assets.²

Volunteer fire research now provides explicit capacity precedents. Valero linked organisational capacity, measured principally through annual budget, to volunteer utilisation across 213 United States volunteer fire departments. Zhang and colleagues mapped volunteer personnel capacity across rural California and showed how spatially uneven staffing decline can threaten availability, response reliability, station continuity, and geographic coverage.³

Other capability literature examined addressed other parts of the organisational system: community integration, autonomy, internal structure and survival; leadership, training, participation efficacy and group identification; tacit knowledge and buddy learning; rural recruitment and retention; and the interaction of local knowledge, authority, partnership, equipment, funding and trust in wildfire response.⁴

These studies substantially strengthen the component evidence for Brigade Capability. They do not yet validate a unified model of how people, knowledge, authority, relationships, and material resources are mobilised, developed, coordinated, and renewed. Building Volunteer Fire Brigade Capability Together addresses that integrative gap and remains a testable synthesis rather than a settled universal law.⁵

Capability is not stored in one place. Capability depends on members, relationships, equipment, procedures, community networks, leadership arrangements, experience, and external support. It emerges when these can be mobilised coherently for service. This explains why apparently capable brigades can fail under pressure and why modestly resourced brigades can sometimes perform exceptionally. The decisive factor is frequently not the assets themselves, but the effectiveness with which they can be combined.

A capable brigade requires several forms of organisational capacity working together:

- People with availability, competence, and commitment.
- Leadership capable of aligning purpose, standards, and relationships.
- Trust that permits cooperation, discussion, delegation, and shared risk.
- Shared local and operational knowledge.
- Strong community relationships.
- Authority that is accountable and exercised with discretion.
- Equipment, facilities, technology, and financial support.
- Systems for learning, recruitment, succession and adaptation.
- Connections to a wider fire service system capable of coordination and reinforcement.

No single component substitutes for another. Exceptional commitment may compensate temporarily for poor systems, but sustained ca-

pability requires the elements to reinforce one another. Capability-based resilience research describes this as an organisational process of anticipation, coping, and adaptation, while organisational-learning theory explains how individual insight becomes shared and institutionalised practice.⁶

A capable brigade in one community may look different from a capable brigade elsewhere. Hazards, geography, population, distance from reinforcement, incident frequency, seasonal risk, legal responsibilities, community expectations, and resources all shape what the brigade must be able to do. Therefore, the Framework does not prescribe an ideal brigade size, structure, or role mix. It asks whether the brigade's organisation is sufficient and sustainable for the service expected of it.

Routine workload provides only part of the capability requirement. Volunteer brigades may be required to respond to low frequency, high consequence events, prolonged wildfire campaigns, concurrent incidents, or mutual aid deployments beyond their immediate area. A brigade that appears over-resourced during ordinary periods may be essential when demand expands.

Planning should therefore consider availability, depth, fatigue, specialist skills and leadership across both ordinary and peak conditions. The capacity to scale is one of the distinctive contributions of organised volunteers to emergency systems. Rural volunteer firefighter research also shows that demographic change, distance, and the distribution of paid work can affect usable availability independently of nominal membership.⁷

Compliance with safety, training, and accountability requirements is essential. However, compliance does not automatically establish capability. A brigade may complete required administrative procedures, while continuing to lose experienced members. Training objectives can

be achieved but this doesn't guarantee that there will be sufficient crew to turnout during business hours. Capable governance therefore measures both compliance and organisational effect. It asks whether organisational requirements improve service delivery or whether they create unintended capability loss.

Some capability is fragile because it depends upon one volunteer, the arrangement may work for years and become invisible. When that person retires, moves or becomes unavailable, the brigade discovers that a critical function was never institutionalised. A capable brigade identifies these dependencies and develops depth without devaluing the people who currently perform them. Mentoring, documentation, delegation, and succession convert personal capability into brigade capability.

Capability focuses attention on fitness for purpose, sustainability, learning, and the ability to continue serving. It includes strength where strength is required, but it also includes judgement, relationships, adaptability, and care for the people who make service possible.

Capability is never adequate, skills lapse, equipment changes, communities develop, people retire, and experience leaves. Trust can weaken. Additional hazards and technologies appear. A brigade that was capable ten years ago cannot assume that the same arrangements remain sufficient. Renewal occurs through recruitment, retention, learning, succession, community connection, and adaptation. It is the continuing work of the organisation rather than a project completed once.

What the evidence tells us

The evidence strongly supports viewing the volunteer brigade as a community-embedded organisation whose capability depends upon relationships, identity, leadership, knowledge, authority and resources. The

precise integrated definition of Brigade Capability is a framework synthesis and requires further comparative and longitudinal testing.

The capacity research also changes the novelty claim. Direct organisational and personnel capacity studies exist, but their measures are narrower than the Framework. The contribution of this book is therefore integrating these resources: relational, governance, learning, and renewal dimensions at the brigade level.⁸

Looking Ahead

A brigade grows from and remains connected to its community. Chapter 4 examines that relationship and the capability it creates.

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