

# Surge Project Evaluation

PREPARED FOR FIRE AND EMERGENCY NEW ZEALAND

PREPARED BY VERSUS RESEARCH



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## Acknowledgments

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## Executive Summary

### Introduction

Fire and Emergency New Zealand (Fire and Emergency) relies heavily on a volunteer workforce, with around 80 – 85% of its personnel being volunteers. However, there was a noted decline in volunteer numbers across Aotearoa, New Zealand, increasing pressure on the existing volunteers. To address this issue, Fire and Emergency utilised a targeted campaign, the Surge Project (Surge), in 2022, to assist with volunteer attraction (VA) at a localised level. The project was to support the brigades identified as being most in need and provided additional resource to focus on face-to-face interactions with these brigades. An evaluation, conducted for Te Ao Mārama, Fire and Emergency's Research, Evaluation, and Library service in August 2023, aimed to understand the effectiveness of the Surge initiative compared to the traditional attraction approaches.

### Evaluation Approach

Surge focussed on supporting and developing localised volunteer attraction initiatives based on data insights and community connections. A team, including local advisors from different regions, managed the project. This evaluation's focus was to measure Surge's effectiveness and focussed on four Key Evaluation Questions (KEQs) addressing:

- **KEQ 1:** How well has Surge been implemented?
- **KEQ 2:** To what extent has local delivery of attraction initiatives led to better outcomes than traditional attraction processes?
- **KEQ 3:** What difference has Surge made to the brigades it has been implemented at?
- **KEQ 4:** To what extent should Surge be retained for future use?

Analytical frameworks, including a logic model and evaluation criteria, were used to guide the evaluation, which was qualitative in nature. Surge staff and brigade representatives participated in the evaluation.

### Evaluation Findings

#### Engagement

Engagement varied across the brigades involved with Surge: approximately nine brigades showed low engagement, seven exhibited medium engagement, and four demonstrated high engagement. The low engagement brigades cited various reasons, from needing practical support to timing issues. However, the primary underlying theme was that Surge lacked relevance, with brigades believing they already employed all viable VA strategies, and that community composition limited their recruitment opportunities.

Interestingly, community size was not a definitive factor for low engagement, suggesting that the brigade's relationship with its community played a crucial role. While, medium to high engagement brigades typically hailed from larger townships, these brigades often had a motivated individual overseeing VA, and found value in Surge's tools. The assessment of the project's effectiveness primarily considered feedback from engaged brigades, but the broader evaluation, and recommendations, factored in insights from all engagement levels.

#### KEQ 1: How well has Surge been implemented?

KEQ 1 aimed to measure the implementation of Surge across the brigades and evaluated this as having achieved **moderate overall success**. Positive feedback highlighted the benefits of using local

advisors for direct brigade engagement and the value of personalised resources that resonated with individual communities, notably when paired with locally focussed open days. However, challenges emerged around implementation timing, with summer and adverse weather conditions affecting brigade involvement. Additionally, some brigades reported delayed resource delivery due to internal capacity issues at Fire and Emergency and brigades' delays in providing the requested content.

**KEQ 2: To what extent has local delivery of attraction initiatives led to better outcomes than traditional attraction processes?**

KEQ 2 aimed to determine how well brigades were bolstered by Surge compared to traditional VA approaches. Overall, Surge was deemed **somewhat to moderately better** than traditional approaches. Positive feedback highlighted the significance of local advisors, personalised resources, and localised community engagement events that resonated with individual brigades. Notably, the dedicated VA support bridged a perceived gap between brigades and the broader Fire and Emergency organisation, leading to a sense of appreciation and acknowledgment among volunteers. Inter-brigade support during events like open days also fostered camaraderie. Challenges emerged around timing, extra volunteer workload, and the perceived mismatch between the offered Surge resources and the brigades' actual needs. There was also evidence that, despite the positive support Surge provided brigades, a targeted approach was less effective than the previous traditional approach for generating volunteer applications.

**KEQ 3: What difference has Surge made to the brigades it has been implemented at?**

KEQ 3 aimed to discern the impact of Surge on the brigades it was implemented in, especially concerning their community ties. Overall, Surge made **little difference** in this area. Surge's resources enabled brigades to initiate new conversations with the community about the broader roles within the brigade. However, the main challenge was that many brigades already had strong community involvement and relationships, leaving minimal room for Surge to enhance these ties. While brigades felt valued in their communities, there were still pockets of the community they did not connect with. Some brigades hoped Surge would introduce new initiatives to communicate with these groups. However, the pilot nature of Surge, its short duration, and the sometimes limited involvement from local support roles in Fire and Emergency potentially reduced the impact of Surge in this space.

**KEQ 4: To what extent should Surge be retained for future use?**

KEQ 4 assesses the potential future retention of Surge. While the exact current format of Surge might not continue, **certain aspects were identified as valuable for future VA strategies**. These include dedicated VA resources, localised support, and resource creation and delivery assistance. Brigades recognised the value of roles solely focussed on VA, the benefits of localised engagement over a national approach, and the importance of having accessible and personalised VA resources. Feedback also highlighted the need for consistent brigade and VA support connections, exploration of new VA avenues, and a nationwide advertising campaign to bolster localised efforts. Overall, brigades are looking for a sustained volunteer force through a balance of support and autonomy, fostering deeper community connections and tailoring to specific community needs.

#### **Additional considerations**

The evaluation also gathered feedback which may be beneficial for Fire and Emergency's future VA strategies more generally. Respondents expressed concerns about declining volunteer rates, especially among younger populations and in rural communities. The volume of training for new Fire and Emergency recruits can be considered daunting by some, causing potential volunteers to lose

interest before completion. Some also found the on-boarding process slow when compared to other volunteer organisations, while others noted the criteria for volunteer eligibility, particularly regarding individuals with criminal records, restrictive. Given changing community dynamics, there was a call to re-evaluate the volunteer brigade structure. Operational feedback also touched upon the rising workload expectations for volunteers, leadership issues within brigades, and the need for clear progression pathways, highlighting areas for potential refinement in future VA strategies.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

The primary conclusions from this evaluation highlight that:

- The concept of Surge was well received; however, engagement could have been higher amongst some brigades.
- Surge was generally well implemented, and those who engaged with the project found the engagement a positive experience.
- Being involved in Surge re-focussed brigades on VA. While there was limited change in the outcomes brigades achieved compared to their traditional VA approaches, Surge brought significant support benefits over the traditional attraction processes. However, Surge did not appear to drive the volume of applications that previous approaches have delivered, although this was likely to be affected by a number of factors, not simply the change in VA approach.
- Surge helped brigades to start VA conversations but had limited impact on enhancing current community connections or generating new connections in the community.

Based on the evaluation findings it is recommended that Fire and Emergency:

- Continue to support brigades' VA requirements at a local level through establishing a dedicated localised VA support system, building local relationships, and expanding VA methods.
- Continue to expand VA resources by broadening brigades' access to locally tailored resources, developing key VA positions at brigades, leveraging and promoting current resources further, and providing practical assistance to brigades.
- Continue to work to remove barriers to volunteering through streamlining training processes and considering new options for volunteer brigade composition.
- Support and develop brigade culture via further developing leadership training, progression pathways for volunteers, managing workload expectations, and creating more structured feedback loops.

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## 1 Introduction

Fire and Emergency New Zealand (Fire and Emergency) is the combined urban and rural fire service provider for Aotearoa, New Zealand. The primary functions of the organisation are to promote fire safety, deliver fire prevention services, search and rescue, and respond to fire, motor vehicle, and civil emergency incidents.

Approximately 80 – 85% of Fire and Emergency’s personnel are volunteers however, the proportion of new volunteers joining Fire and Emergency has slowed over the past decade. A declining volunteer force is well documented throughout Aotearoa, New Zealand, with current volunteers working longer hours and few new volunteers emerging to fill labour gaps<sup>1</sup>. However, given Fire and Emergency’s role in securing the safety and resilience of all communities, a shrinking volunteer workforce presents a significant risk for Aotearoa, New Zealand.

Traditionally, Fire and Emergency’s volunteer recruitment has been completed through national advertising campaigns and a support function at National Headquarters. However, in 2022, Fire and Emergency elected to take an alternative approach to volunteer recruitment, re-purposing funds to a targeted campaign to support those brigades with the greatest volunteer deficit. This work was known as the Surge Project (Surge).

As part of this project, Fire and Emergency has commissioned an evaluation of the work to determine the merit and worth of this approach compared to the traditional process. Thus, in August 2023, Te Ao Mārama (Fire and Emergency’s Research, Evaluation, and Library service) commissioned a formative evaluation of Surge. This document details the findings from the evaluation.

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<sup>1</sup> Non-profit institutions satellite account: 2018 report.



## 2 The Evaluand

The evaluand for this project is Surge Project (Surge). Surge was developed in 2022 as a volunteer attraction (VA) initiative to support brigades experiencing a decline in the number of new volunteers. This work was funded by re-purposing national advertising funding. It marked a shift from delivering VA initiatives at a national level to utilising local knowledge and community connections.

The selection of the brigades for inclusion in Surge was based on data-driven insights and local intelligence (district level). Regional Leadership Teams selected the final brigades included in the initiative. A total of n=53 brigades were included in the project.

The Surge team consisted of a Senior Advisor (national level), three local advisors in Whangarei, Tauranga, and Ōtautahi/Christchurch (each responsible for approximately n=16 brigades), and a Project Co-Ordinator working at Fire and Emergency National Headquarters. Surge advisors were responsible for engaging with local brigades and determining the type of support a brigade required. The engagement with brigades was supported by district-level staff who helped to facilitate meetings and introductions for the advisors.

The project ran from August/September 2022 to December 2022, although some resource development and brigade support continued into mid-2023.

## 3 About the Evaluation

### 3.1 Evaluation Focus

The focus of this formative evaluation was to understand how effective Surge has been for the brigades it was delivered to. A formative evaluation is conducted during the early stages of an initiative. The benefit of completing a formative evaluation is that it can provide context for further evaluations and provide guidance around change for future programmes.

#### 3.1.1 Key Evaluation Questions

Initial discussions led to the formation of the following key evaluation questions (KEQs), which focus on addressing how effective Surge has been:

- **KEQ 1:** How well has Surge been implemented?
- **KEQ 2:** To what extent has local delivery of attraction initiatives led to better outcomes than traditional attraction processes?
- **KEQ 3:** What difference has Surge made to the brigades it has been implemented at?
- **KEQ 4:** To what extent should Surge be retained for future use?

The initial three questions look at Surge as a whole in terms of implementation and the outcomes that it achieved. The final assessment examines these three questions to conclude the elements of Surge that most benefit future volunteer attraction (VA) strategies.

It is important to note that the aim is to assess the effectiveness of the Surge approach (tailored support for under-pressure brigades), not the effectiveness of Fire and Emergency or the brigades themselves.

#### 3.1.2 Analytical Frame

To understand if Surge was effective in achieving its intended outcomes, a set of criteria and measures were needed to evaluate what successful implementation and outcome achievement looks like. Given that this is a new approach for Fire and Emergency, and there is no standard set of evaluative measures for such an approach, the evaluation used the initial logic model alongside a simple rubric as the analytic frame for this work.

Each of these elements are described further in the appendix.

### 3.2 Method

This evaluation utilised a qualitative approach to data collection. Two groups were involved in this work: Surge staff responsible for engaging with brigades and supporting brigade needs, and brigades involved in Surge. It is important to note that this evaluation focuses solely on volunteer brigades and does not include brigades with paid positions.

A qualitative approach was selected over a quantitative approach due to the relatively small sample size (the small number of brigades who had participated in Surge and the small number of people involved internally) and the need to understand the experiences the brigades and staff had in detail. Further details of the audiences involved in the evaluation are provided in the appendix.

### 3.3 Limitations of the Evaluation

- The evaluation is focussed on the effectiveness of Surge as a VA tool. However, the volunteer journey is a broad subject, and Fire and Emergency has many levers it can utilise to support the attraction, on-boarding, and retention of volunteers. Participants provided many additional comments about the role of volunteers within Fire and Emergency generally. This content was out of scope for the evaluation but has been included briefly within the report to provide context to Fire and Emergency in other operational reviews (Section 5, page 25).
- Economic evaluation (e.g., cost-benefit analysis) was out of scope. Therefore, effectiveness is judged based on the outcomes achieved without comparing this to a value-for-money metric. It does not assess whether the total monetary value to deliver Surge exceeds its costs.

### 3.4 Document Notes

- The document is shaped around the four KEQs. Each section starts with an overall rating for the KEQ criteria and then explores the successes and challenges of Surge within the context of the criteria.
- KEQ 1 – 3 utilise specific evaluation criteria, while KEQ 4 considered the findings across all prior KEQs and reflects on these for future implementation.
- Evidential quotes are included to show/demonstrate particular points. These have been de-identified to allow for a respondent's anonymity.

## 4 Evaluation Findings

### 4.1 Brigade Engagement

A key part of the evaluation's findings is the level of engagement that brigades had with the Surge project. Among the brigade interviews (individual brigades, not the interviews with the district managers) nine brigades had a low level of engagement with Surge, seven had a medium level of engagement, and four had a high level of engagement. This is shown in the table below.

Table 1: Brigade engagement

Level of engagement	Number of brigades	Engagement with Surge
Low	9	Conversation and emails
Medium	7	Conversation and emails Supply of resources
High	4	Conversation and emails Supply of resources Campaign

It should be noted that the above spread of engagement was, to a certain extent, expected given the assessed levels of support the brigades needed prior to commencing the evaluation (refer appendix). The points below have been included to explore the barriers to greater engagement and resource uptake, as it was generally agreed by respondents that an approach like Surge would benefit any brigade regardless of their establishment figures.

#### 4.1.1 Low Engagement

Across the interviews, there was no single reason for lower engagement with Surge amongst the brigades, and all brigades noted that they required more volunteers (although there was a strong focus on operational firefighters, not necessarily support staff). Reasons brigades provided for lower engagement related to:

- **Practical support:** Some brigades needed practical support to implement some of the required resources, for example, support with photography or help with writing and posting on social media.
- **Brigade inaction and busyness:** Some brigades did not follow up with the support that Surge offered; for example, brigades were meant to provide pictures or write blurbs to the Surge advisors but ran out of time or became too busy to act on this.
- **Timing:** For some brigades, Surge's timing coincided with a busy holiday period, which they felt was less conducive to running a VA campaign as the shape of their community changed. This was compounded by the significant weather events during the summer of 2022/23.

However, despite the above reasons, there was a clear underlying theme that low engagement brigades felt the approach Surge took lacked clear and sufficient value for their brigade. When this is explored, there were three drivers of this perception:

- **Sufficient VA activity currently:** Brigades felt that they were already doing all they could, and Surge brought no new VA tools they had not already tried or were not already using.

- **Limited new VA approaches:** Brigades were looking for new ways to engage with the community rather than using traditional attraction tools and felt that Surge only utilised VA tools that were already available.
- **Community:** Brigades reported they did not pursue further engagement with Surge as they felt the recruitment opportunities in the community were limited. Essentially, this group felt the issue was with the composition or size of the community rather than with the VA tools per se.

Interestingly, when the composition of these brigades was compared, it was not the size of the community that pre-determines lower engagement. While Surge worked well in larger communities, there were also examples of success in smaller communities. Furthermore, there are reports of a known poor culture and "stale leadership" at some of the low engagement brigades which some respondents suggested had a large effect on the uptake of Surge resources and the brigade.

Despite the lower engagement, all these brigades recognised they needed to increase their volunteer numbers and did appreciate the connection and effort that Fire and Emergency had made to initiate Surge. As such, the challenge to engage was not necessarily the lack of need but rather the lack of perceived efficacy of the VA tools on offer and brigade culture.

#### 4.1.2 Medium and High Engagement

Some commonalities were observed amongst brigades that have more significant levels of engagement. These included:

- Brigades that were from areas with larger townships (population of more than 5,000 residents).
- There was one motivated person in the brigade who took charge of VA or had an interest in VA. This was not always the CFO or DCFO; this responsibility was often divulged to other brigade volunteers.
- There were direct connections and support from the brigade GM or VSO in the area, who helped coordinate campaigns and encouraged the brigade to become engaged with the Surge team.

Specifically, brigades with greater involvement saw value in the VA tools and additional support that Surge offered. They felt they could benefit from the other resources or revisit their current VA approach. For some, the tools and advice that the Surge team provided were new and added considerable value to the brigade's VA efforts which strengthened their involvement in Surge.

#### 4.1.3 Data for KEQ Assessment

Given the split in engagement across the brigades, the KEQ 1 – 3 assessment is based on the feedback from those brigades who did engage with Surge. This was considered appropriate as the barriers to engagement with Surge are not necessarily due to implementation. Instead, they were a combination of reasons that could not be foreseen before Surge commenced. However, the assessment regarding retaining Surge (KEQ 4) and subsequent recommendations consider the feedback from all brigades including those with lower engagement.

## 4.2 KEQ 1: How Well Has Surge Been Implemented?

### 4.2.1 Overview

KEQ 1 looks at how well the VA campaigns developed under Surge reflected local communities and how well Surge resources were adopted.

Overall, it was determined that Surges was implemented **moderately well**. A breakdown of the results based on the indicators has been shown below.

Table 2: KEQ 1 indicator summary

Criteria	Achievement indicators	Rating
VA campaign appropriateness for the community	Campaigns reflect the brigade's community	Excellent (4)
	Resources are perceived as locally appropriate by the brigades	Moderately well (3)
	Resources showcase local communities and start conversations	Somewhat well (2)
Resource adoption	Brigades have a better understanding about where to access the resources	Moderately well (3)
	Brigades have a better understanding of how to use the resources	Moderately well (3)
	Brigades have greater confidence using the resources	Moderately well (3)

### 4.2.2 What Has Worked Well?

When looking at Surge's implementation, there are some areas where the execution was undertaken well. The first area was the use of local advisors to visit and engage with the brigades. Several brigades commented that there was a benefit in having someone focus on VA solely. While there are other support systems for volunteers, VA was usually a lesser focus, and having this elevated re-engaged brigade's thinking about VA while putting it in a localised context. Having locally engaged support significantly helped create resources and VA solutions appropriate for a brigade's community and grew their confidence for future VA initiatives.

In keeping with the above point, the implementation of the personalised resources was also well received by brigades. These resources reflected the community in a way generic resources cannot convey. For some, this was particularly important if there had been a cultural change at the brigade over time or they were looking to attract a more diverse range of volunteers. As one participant explained:

**“***It's cool to see yourself reflected back, my girls wear moko kauae and to see that, it would say something, 'hey we belong here too...open up the doors and show them'.***”**

Interestingly, while the option to have personalised resources was valued, not all brigades took this up, despite being offered. Respondents offered a couple of reasons for electing not to use this resource, principally because their brigade did not want the "spotlight" on them and that volunteering was simply something they did for their community, not for public recognition. Despite not using the personalised resources, other brigades felt that being able to use images that reflected their community was necessary, even if it did not include people specifically from the community.

The final area of implementation that worked well was the open days. While several brigades had utilised these in the past, the involvement and support of advisors and often other brigades meant that these days had a greater emphasis on them, were more vibrant and reached a wider audience. This was particularly noted when the brigades initiated and led the open days rather than being driven by advisors or other support roles. These were critical in starting conversations within the community and were effective when combined with personalised resources.

“We had like a when we had our big open day, they, so they contacted us and said can you get together and take a whole heap of photos as a brigade. So we did that, and they used those photos and put them on some little flyers and some big posters, and they were awesome; they were probably the biggest hit, not only for our guys but also because we put them up in like shops, all the local shops and stuff like that and you know you'd hear people talking to one of the members and they'd be saying 'oh my gosh, I saw you, like you're on that, that's so cool' like because normally FENZ will use not localised, so if we do a push for something around here it's probably someone from down south or someone no one even knows, so just the buzz that it created that you guys are actually representing your local community in your local community so that whole side of things was a really, really big hit and it really gave, it boosted the members' confidence, their energy to help with the project in the open day because they were handing out things that had their face on them. So, it was a proud moment for them.”

#### 4.2.3 Challenges

Despite the positive implementation elements, Surge's delivery also had some challenges.

A key challenge to Surge was the timing of the project. While this started in early August 2022, it took time to resource, gather data about brigades, and then engage with them. Given this, most brigades were engaged with coming into the summer period. While this was not an issue for all brigades, some found it particularly challenging as:

- small beachside communities often experience a population increase;
- local people, who may be the target of recruitment, often leave the area for holidays, or;
- volunteers were busy with the holiday period (personally and in volunteer roles).

2022 and 2023 also saw additional pressure on some areas over the summer with challenging weather conditions experienced by much of Aotearoa, New Zealand. This placed extra pressure on brigades in these areas and meant that planned VA initiatives could not be carried out as required.

In line with the above issues, some brigades reported slow delivery of the VA resources promised by the Surge team. While this was not an issue for all brigades, it did mean that some brigades proceeded without the resources they needed to fully implement the initiatives. When this was explored further, it seems that there were several reasons for the delay in delivery:

- **Brigade capacity:** Delays in the delivery of images from brigades mostly related to brigades unable to capture photos of a sufficient standard to create the resources.
- **Fire and Emergency capacity:** There have been some internal challenges at Fire and Emergency with the internal capacity to create the resources. This component relied heavily on the NHQ-based team, who often had other commitments that needed prioritising, causing an eventual delay in the delivery of the resources.
- **Time to create resources:** In line with the above point, the time required to create the resources has been underestimated. In part, this is due to the number of people involved in

the creation of the resources, with all these aspects needing to be in alignment for a smooth process to occur, i.e., brigades need to have the volunteers available, the images then need to be sent to Fire and Emergency, this needs to be booked in around other communications and creative work which then needs to be produced, checked, and delivered back to the brigade.

The final implementation issue related to accessing the resource portal. While brigades acknowledge the portal was a positive resource, there was little engagement with this as a VA tool despite having reasonable engagement for other portal-based resources, e.g., Fire Wise. Some brigades noted that the resources are not top of mind in the VA space and that the core issue was actually finding and connecting with new volunteers, rather than accessing resources to support this, as one respondent explained:

**“** *We do use this stuff but if we even get there. The real need is to get people interested. To get them to come along to training and then see if they are still keen.”*



### 4.3 KEQ 2: To What Extent Has Local Delivery of Attraction Initiatives Led to Better Outcomes than Traditional Attraction Processes?

#### 4.3.1 Overview

KEQ 2 focuses on determining how well Surge strengthens brigades in terms of their VA focus, connection to Fire and Emergency, and volunteer numbers.

Overall, it was determined that Surge was **somewhat to moderately better** than traditional approaches. However, when application numbers are considered, Surge was determined to be **no better** than traditional attraction approaches.

A breakdown of the results based on the indicators has been shown below; please note that the achievement indicator relating to volunteer inquiries is considered separately as the data for this measure was sourced from internal application numbers, rather than from feedback sourced from brigade interviews.

*Table 3: KEQ 2 indicator summary*

Criteria	Achievement indicators	Rating
Brigades are strengthened through Surge support.	Brigades become more engaged with VA and understand the importance of ongoing VA.	Somewhat better (2)
	Brigades take greater ownership of VA for their brigade	Somewhat better (2)
	Brigades feel more energised/rejuvenated	Moderately better (3)
	Brigades feel more valued by Fire and Emergency (heard/seen/listened to)	Significantly better (4)
	Volunteer inquiries increase	No better (0)

### 4.3.2 Traditional VA Approaches

When considering this KEQ, it is important to determine the traditional VA approaches brigades undertake. While Fire and Emergency co-ordinates attraction at a national level, brigades supplement this support with localised tactics focusing on community engagement and specific recruitment. A description of the localised initiatives has been provided in the table below.

Table 4: Summary of traditional approaches to VA

Group	Community engagement	Recruitment
Purpose	Raise brigade profile in the community. Respond to community requests (e.g., presence at events) Increase fire safety awareness	Increase volunteer numbers at the brigade
Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Community events (particularly with schools or ECE)</li> <li>Smoke alarm drives/home checks</li> <li>Community papers or newsletters (columns)</li> <li>Facebook (community and brigade pages)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Shoulder tapping/referrals</li> <li>Pressuring friends and family</li> <li>Open nights</li> <li>Real estate agent referrals for new people in the community</li> </ul>

It should be noted that all brigades included in the evaluation undertook some form of either community engagement or recruitment, with the most common being participation in community events (for profile raising) and shoulder tapping (for recruitment). The current tactics present two key challenges as identified by the brigades:

- **For raising the profile:** While all brigades were highly engaged in the community and the events that the community runs, these events do not always have an explicit attraction intention and did not always start VA conversations.
- **For recruitment:** Many brigades felt that they had exhausted their current shoulder tapping avenues and that there were no new people to reach through a shoulder-tapping approach to recruitment. In part, brigades acknowledge that they could only shoulder-tap those in the community they connect with, so by default, there will be parts of the community with whom they cannot reach. Thus, despite their best intentions or desires to expand the brigade, they felt there is a natural limitation on the diversity or breadth of people they could recruit.

“Diversity is good and highly valued...the Oamaru community had a strong Tongan population, once there was a Tongan volunteer involved, suddenly there is a whole heap of engagement with the community and allowed them to build home fire safety visits, but that wasn't going to happen without that connection.”

These localised approaches to attraction were supported by Fire and Emergency NHQ. In this role, Fire and Emergency traditionally had two staff members (FTE) who delivered brigade requests such as collateral creation, posters, leaflets for open days, or on-boarding information. To access VA support, brigades contacted NHQ, and the request was handled as needed. There was also an additional budget allocated by Fire and Emergency each year to undertake national advertising campaigns, with some brigades aligning their recruitment activities with such campaigns.

The Surge project took the budget for the national advertising campaign and provided additional resources (three advisors) to help support the most at-risk brigades. The selection of the brigades

involved the analysis of brigade numbers and compared this to the ideal number for a given brigade. The identified brigades were then taken to Regional Leadership Teams to assess their suitability for inclusion in Surge. This approach ensured that eligibility for Surge support was ultimately determined by local knowledge.

This is a change in the attraction approach for Fire and Emergency as it means the attraction support became targeted to specific brigades to elevate and support those in the most vulnerable positions. As outlined earlier, not all brigades utilised the additional support (Brigade Engagement, page 10). However, this was primarily due to factors relating to their broader community and brigade culture, not a lack of need. This suggests that identifying brigades through localised knowledge was sound and ensured the resources were channelled to the suitable space.

#### 4.3.3 What Has Worked Well?

The primary area that assisted Surge in delivering better outcomes than traditional VA processes was the ability for brigades to re-engage with VA initiatives. The resources and support supplied through Surge helped to re-focus brigades on VA. While most were very aware of the importance of VA, the focussed support re-engaged brigades in this space with some reporting they needed to reflect on their efforts further. It is important to note that many brigades in this evaluation were already engaging in VA activities. As such, Surge enhanced the work brigades were currently doing and put a re-focus on VA rather than vastly improving their VA approaches.

Furthermore, brigades valued the attention the Surge advisors offered the brigades. Simply having a person to listen and understand the VA challenges they faced helped the brigades to feel heard, with the advisors acknowledging the challenges that brigades faced in the VA space. For some, this supported them to take ownership of the VA and look for solutions, while for others, it provided a boost, and they started to feel positive and supported in their VA efforts. It should be noted here that many brigades felt well supported locally by their GM or VSO but can feel distanced from the broader Fire and Emergency organisation. The dedicated VA resources made this connection directly to Fire and Emergency feel more robust.

**“** *“I think they definitely felt like they were seen a little bit more. It’s very easy for people to get lost within that umbrella because it’s not all the time that we do things that are localized or that there can be quite a disconnect between what they see as this FENZ and then just the little volunteer brigade sort of thing but because we were receiving this help, because we got these personalized items and stuff I know that people kind of felt like ‘oh we are on the radar like we do feel a little bit appreciated, we do feel supported when we need it and stuff like that.”*

There were also reports of inter-brigade support during open days, with brigades bringing additional appliances or helping out. While most brigades have a sense of connection to other brigades at an operational level, such support and camaraderie helped to energise brigades. While this was not a core part of Surge, such inter-brigade support appears important for rallying morale amongst volunteers, as sharing stories helps brigades validate their work with others in similar roles.

One further area that contributed to improving brigades' outcomes was the personal recognition volunteers experienced through their involvement in the Surge initiatives. Many respondents acknowledged that people do not volunteer to be glorified for their role but noted that the quiet recognition from engaging with their community at events, seeing themselves in communications, or engaging with other volunteers engendered pride and reinforced why people volunteered in the first place.

“People don't want to be glorified. They want it from their community, their peers and GM, their DM, and then maybe nationally, but the most important is the community, as the support for their community is the reason they joined. Some also don't want any recognition, they simply want to be involved.”

#### 4.3.4 Challenges

While the brigades that engaged with Surge realised some positive outcomes, respondents noted some practical barriers to achieving these outcomes. Many of these barriers related to the practical resourcing of Surge initiatives. Respondents reported the additional work required of volunteers to initiate the VA activities, for example, delivering flyers, organising open days, learning and leading social media initiatives, organising images, or writing content. While most brigades could draw on current volunteers to support these initiatives, it was noted that these tasks added pressure to already time-pressed volunteers. As such, the tasks lagged slightly or may have yet to be completed to the desired level.

The second area respondents reported as challenging was the feeling that the Surge resources would not necessarily add value for the additional effort required. While brigades were willing to try these approaches, the Surge initiatives sometimes failed to gain traction with the community and deliver against the brigades' expectations of these resources.

“They had one [open night, at the brigade] down the road and got three people. They had our Group Manager there, and a business support person so that there was independence, yeah important in small communities, it was really successful option and was used around the region. But we had one and not one person turned up... [Why?]. Well, I had my doubts if it would work. I am keen to come down any night of the week and show people through the station. I am keen but it just didn't work, it wasn't right for this place.”

For some brigades, Surge resources were often tools they had not used previously, so the brigade was willing to try and utilise what was on offer. However, in such instances, there seemed to be a mismatch between the VA tool and the appropriateness for the community of interest; in short, it did not solve the traditional VA issues that the brigades were looking to solve, namely reaching new community members, and increasing expressions of interest. It should be noted that this was not due to poor resource quality, rather it was a mismatch between the resources and the brigade's community.

“We started the process; we got a local person and took pictures, and they were going to put a billboard on the shed with local crew on it. So, the photo is great, and the idea is great, but if the purpose is for VA, will it actually do anything? In the end, we decided not to pursue it. We really questioned what the purpose of doing this was, we would be advertising to the same bunch of people, and everybody knows everyone so what's the point?”

#### 4.3.5 Increase in Volunteer Numbers

When comparing Surge to the traditional attraction processes the indicators relating to engagement, ownership, and perceived value, all deliver significantly better results. However, as Surge was designed to be an attraction tool, it is important to consider the effects of Surge's efforts on brigade numbers.

To better understand the impact Surge has on attraction, analysis of the applications brigades received over the Surge period were compared to an equivalent earlier period. Although this data does not link an application directly to a Surge initiative, it does indicate the general outcomes Surge achieved for brigades relative to a traditional attraction approach.

The table below shows the applications for each brigade for August 2019 – August 2020 (pre-COVID) and then August 2022 – August 2023; this data is for the medium and high engagement brigades only.

*Table 5: Comparison of applications for high/medium engaged brigades (August 2019 – August 2020 and August 2022 – August 2023)*

Brigade #	Applications between August 2019 - August 2020	Applications between August 2022 - August 2023	Difference
6 <sup>2</sup>	34	2	-32
7	11	4	-7
8	0	1	1
9	10	5	-5
10	12	4	-8
12	11	3	-8
13	0	5	5
14	6	6	0
17	17	8	-9
18	0	0	0
20	7	5	-2
<b>Total</b>	<b>108</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>-65</b>
<b>Average</b>	<b>9.8</b>	<b>3.9</b>	<b>-5.9</b>

From this data, we can see that the traditional approach resulted in 108 applications over the 12 months, while the Surge approach resulted in 43 applications over the 12-month period, which was 60% fewer. The average number of applications was lower for the Surge period by around six per brigade than for the previous measurement.

For this particular indicator, it is also interesting to consider the brigades that had low engagement with Surge. This data is shown in the table overleaf.

<sup>2</sup> Brigade 6 is an outlier within the initial measurement period and was likely part of a district-wide campaign in August 2019 – August 2020, contributing significantly to a rise in applications. If Brigade 6 is removed, then the application analysis shows Surge resulted in 45% fewer applications.

Table 6: Comparison of applications for lower engaged brigades (August 2019 – August 2020 and August 2022 – August 2023)

Brigade #	August 2019 - August 2020	August 2022 - August 2023	Difference
1	13	3	-10
2	2	0	-2
3	4	0	-4
4	0	6	6
5	0	5	5
11	8	0	-8
15	5	5	0
16	14	5	-9
19	10	1	-9
<b>Total</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>-31</b>
<b>Average</b>	<b>6.2</b>	<b>2.8</b>	<b>-3.4</b>

These results show that the traditional approach resulted in 56 applications over the 12 months, with only 25 applications received over the same 12-month period, which is 55% fewer applications, again suggesting that a targeted approach was less likely to work as an attraction tool than the traditional processes. However, it is also worth noting that the low-engagement brigades generally achieved fewer applications in both measurement periods, suggesting that the role of an 'attraction champion' within the brigades was likely to be a driving factor in the success of any type of attraction initiative.

When these points were looked at collectively, the traditional processes for VA resulted in more significant application numbers, suggesting that a national-based approach was a better attraction vehicle than a more targeted approach to recruitment. Potentially, the momentum created by district or nationwide campaigns may have had a more significant effect at a population level than a smaller community-based approach, as such approaches can attract greater coverage and leverage district resources to support local initiatives.

Furthermore, Surge took a localised and tailored approach to community engagement by encouraging brigades to develop their attraction initiatives while identifying gaps and possible solutions within the attraction space. This approach will require time to build, and the short evaluation period will likely not capture the longer-term impact on applications at a brigade level.

On face value, these numbers show a poorer result for the Surge approach as an attraction tool when compared to the traditional approach. However, while the two measures are comparable periods, considerable social change occurred between these two collection periods with the introduction of COVID and its ongoing effect in communities. COVID transformed the capacity of the volunteer workforce in Aotearoa, New Zealand. While not captured as part of this evaluation, this effect will likely be somewhat reflected in the above numbers.

## 4.4 KEQ 3: What Difference Has Surge Made to the Brigades it Has Been Implemented At?

### 4.4.1 Overview

KEQ 3 focuses on the differences that Surge has made to the brigades' relationships with their community.

Overall, Surge is determined to make a **little difference** to the brigades in which it has been implemented. A breakdown of the results based on the indicators is shown below.

Table 7: KEQ 3 indicator summary

Criteria	Achievement indicators	Rating
There is a stronger connection between the brigade and their local community.	The community has greater awareness of the brigade and its roles	Some difference (2)
	Brigades build stronger relationships with their community	Little difference (1)
	Brigades feel more valued by the community	Little difference (1)
	Brigades feel more positive about their role in the community	Little difference (1)

### 4.4.2 What Has Worked Well?

The key area that worked well was the role Surge played in initiating VA conversations between the community and the brigade. Outside of their emergency response role, all respondents reported their brigades were heavily involved in their community with local activities and community events. However, as seen in the analysis for KEQ 2, only some of these events had a dedicated attraction focus, and thus, such events resulted in limited VA conversations.

Introducing Surge resources provided brigades with new avenues for starting conversations locally. Rather than initiating these conversations and feeling like they were "selling themselves", the personalised flyers and banners allowed a more subtle change in the exchanges. They were considered far more effective starters for discussing the brigade's broader roles. As one respondent explained:

“No, that was the thing that actually worked amazing, like we got one of the first, like it would have probably been like one and a half metres wide, like a metre wide, like a big core flute sign saying like ‘volunteer with us’ and it had us on it...Previously we had nothing to even start that conversation, like that’s not a conversation where someone just walks up to you, a) you’ve gotta get them to walk up to you for starters and then b) you can’t just go “do you know we are volunteers” and “did you know that anyone can join within reason”? So having that there for people to read and then go “Oh actually now I have a question” like that sparked a flame sort of thing, was really, really good.”

### 4.4.3 Challenges

The primary challenge of this area was that Surge had minimal impact on brigades' relationships with the community. Most brigades in the evaluation were already very involved in their local communities, evidenced by their current community outreach; all brigades felt valued and respected within their community and felt positive about their role.

For the most part, the community engagement that brigades undertook had delivered strong relationships and a clear standing in the community. This left very little room for Surge to grow such relationships. However, discussions with DMs note that while brigades generally have strong connections to the community, there are always opportunities to connect to those pockets of the community who do not engage with the brigade.

This point was also raised by some respondents within the evaluation, some of whom were looking to Surge for solutions to reach new groups within the community. Such respondents felt as though they had exhausted most of their avenues with their current VA approaches and were hoping for new initiatives to reach different or broader audiences, many of which required an introduction to new or other demographics within the community, with specific mentions around the business community, iwi, or government agencies such as the Department of Conservation or Landcorp. While broader community connections may have eventuated over time, the short duration of Surge made such relationships difficult to create due to:

- **Resourcing:** There needed to be more internal resourcing to dedicate significant time to a given brigade to support and build such relationships at a local level.
- **Short timeframe:** Surge's duration was only three months, making building new relationships within each community difficult.
- **Localised engagement:** There was potentially an underutilisation of local GM and VSO, meaning that the work was undertaken directly with brigades rather than using the local interface, with some suggestion that localised support could have assisted in continuing to build these relationships after Surge was completed.
  - It should be noted that Surge had always intended to engage those in GM or VSO roles however, such engagement was only sometimes practical and hence not realised to its full potential.

“We need to leverage the positive VSO and GM relationships. These are the eyes and ears of people on the ground; they know the issues, and they have trusted relationships. Surge Project can work, but it takes time to have the established relationship and to prove the value of the program over the long term. I think the pilot was probably too short to show this, but it's promising for the future.”



## 4.5 KEQ 4: To What Extent Should Surge be Retained for Future Use?

### 4.5.1 Overview

KEQ 4 considers the findings from KEQ 1 to KEQ 3 and focuses on identifying the key benefits of Surge that should be retained for future use while also considering the elements that may require greater finessing. This KEQ was not assessed in terms of a rubric set of measurements.

While it is unlikely that Surge will be continued in its exact and current format, **some promising elements should be retained to support VA in the future**; these are:

- Dedicated VA resource.
- Localised support.
- Support for resource creation.

In addition to the above elements, brigades also raised the following considerations for future VA initiatives:

- Consistent connecting with brigades to keep VA top of mind.
- New VA avenues.
- Nationwide support.

These points are discussed further below.

### 4.5.2 Key Components

Across the evaluation, there were three key areas that Surge delivered, which brigades identified as beneficial to retain for the future. How these concepts are provided in future VA strategies may vary; however, the underlying benefits from these concepts were evidenced in nearly all brigades and should be considered for future VA initiatives.

- **Dedicated VA resource:** Despite the limited engagement with Surge amongst some brigades, there was a clear recognition of the value that dedicated VA roles can bring to brigades and Fire and Emergency. While there are positions which address volunteer support, a role solely focussed on VA is likely to help build a greater VA focus amongst brigades, which can lead to a more sustainable volunteer force in the long term. Interestingly, respondents noted that this does not need to be solely for brigades that are under stress or low in numbers; such support could be proactively offered for all brigades to connect with.
- **Localised support:** All brigades noted that the local level support assisted with VA motivation, it provided a balance between guidance and autonomy and was a more effective engagement tool than a national level initiative. While it is understood that having a dedicated resource for every brigade is not practical or warranted, having a VA specialist who can take the time to understand the community and meet locally was considered important as it allowed the opportunity for greater tailoring of VA initiatives to a community.
- **Support for resource creation and delivery:** Although the portal is underutilised, having a suite of easy-to-use VA resources to access was viewed positively. Some resources introduced were new for brigades, and having new ways to engage was appreciated. Personalising the resources was also essential, and templates were considered helpful. Further practical support for resource creation and development, such as sourcing images, writing content, or writing team profiles will assist brigades significantly. Additionally, the idea of having extra support for the delivery of localised VA initiatives was also considered helpful, as the practicality of resourcing a VA campaign can present a barrier for some

brigades. This was partly evidenced by the efficiency of the cluster campaigns, where the work was completed in a single effort rather than duplicating the actions of individual brigades.

“Those who liked it really liked it – they were upbeat, never had that sort of encouragement before, really enjoyed it and found their input valuable and insightful. It was also good to have someone totally focussed on recruiting. A VSO carries out a multitude of tasks, so it was good to have someone solely looking at recruitment.”

#### 4.5.3 Future VA Initiatives

As part of the evaluation, respondents were asked to outline any areas they felt would help with VA in the future. The primary themes from these responses have been outlined below.

- **Consistent connections between brigades and VA support:** While Surge made a positive step towards connecting brigades with communities, the short duration of the project limited the presence the Surge advisors had and the relationships they could build. A consistent presence with a brigade goes a significant way to building a trusted relationship and genuinely understanding the changing needs and relevant VA approaches for each community. Interestingly, several respondents noted that initiatives from NHQ seem to come and go, so having a stable VA support system with regular links to brigades will be critical for future VA development.
- **New VA avenues:** Some brigades within Surge were hoping for new avenues for recruitment. While Surge advisors supported this the best they could, these brigades required greater ongoing support to facilitate new connections to different parts of their community, e.g., businesses or local marae. These new relationships take time and require flexibility and tailoring to fit within the Fire and Emergency volunteering model. Such negotiating and planning are likely to be challenging to implement at a local level but is needed to access a broader range of volunteers.
- **A nationwide advertising to complement localised efforts:** Some respondents felt that VA work needs continued nationwide advertising to support brigade’s localised efforts. Some believed that having a national campaign in place sparked interest and kept volunteering top of mind, meaning people would be more open to localised drives. One key area mentioned was advertising on appliances, with several noting this was a lost opportunity for placing a call to action.

## 5 Additional Considerations

Across the evaluation, there was additional content provided by respondents which, while outside of the scope of this evaluation, may support Fire and Emergency's future decisions for VA strategy and volunteer support generally. The feedback has been included below and is categorised under attraction and volunteering support. Where relevant, references have also been included where the feedback aligns with other work Fire and Emergency has undertaken within the volunteer space.

This feedback does not present solutions to the issues identified, with most respondents noting that these issues affect individual communities differently, and it is likely that different brigades will create different workarounds for such matters. Furthermore, brigades were cognizant of the need for health and safety requirements when considering recruitment and volunteering challenges and identify that this requires greater consideration.

### 5.1 For Attraction

The points below summarise respondents' feedback relating explicitly to VA and the challenges that brigades face in this space.

- **Shrinking volunteer rates and declining community populations:** Some respondents identified declining volunteer rates generally in society as a significant barrier; few people are offering to volunteer, and those who do are volunteering more; this decline was perceived to be more common amongst younger people and those with young families. This challenge was confounded by perceptions of shrinking rural communities, limiting the pool from which volunteers can be sourced. Similar findings were also evident within the recent diversity research<sup>3</sup>.
- **Off-putting training volume for recruits:** The training required for new Fire and Emergency recruits was consistent feedback from respondents. In particular, respondents noted that the volume of training can cause recruits to lose interest before completing the training. For some, the location and timing of the training can also be off-putting, with some unable to take the time away from family or work to undertake the off-site seven-day training block.
- **Slow on-boarding:** The above points support perceptions of Fire and Emergency having a relatively slow on-boarding process which can be challenging to maintain potential recruits, particularly when compared to other voluntary organisations where volunteers were engaged in their role much sooner. With this, a few respondents also mentioned the challenge of being able to access doctors for medical testing, particularly the time and expense this may incur (this was particularly noted by very rural communities) and expressed frustrations at not being able to cross-reference similar training qualifications, such as BA use or HT licenses.

“They've had three months in brigade, but they're still not registered as we have so much to do beforehand. It is hard to keep people's interest and input when you tell them that it will be 12 to 18 months before they will actually be able to get on the truck and do the “fun stuff” – this is a huge barrier to fully committing.”

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<sup>3</sup> Barriers and Enablers of Recruitment and Retention Diversity, Martin Jenkins, 12 September 2023.

- **Suitability of volunteers:** For some respondents, particularly those from smaller communities, the limits of who can participate were frustrating. It was perceived that community members with past criminal records were notably excluded from volunteering despite being a significant part of the community. However, this point also speaks to the challenges faced by all small communities with limited people to whom they can reach out to. For some, this challenge extends to understanding how the Fire and Emergency model can better accommodate and adapt to the expectations around volunteering for people from different cultures. These points are explored within the recently commissioned diversity research<sup>4</sup>.
- **Options for volunteer brigade composition:** The final area that challenges brigades when attracting volunteers was the relatively set business structure that a brigade needs to conform to regarding the roles and responsibilities of those involved. Some respondents questioned how feasible it was to continue with these structures when communities change, and the pool from which brigades can recruit is challenged.

“...our roles are almost too broad; we have to be able to do all the things. When we first started, we just did fires, but now we do fires, cats up trees, drownings, boats tipping over, you just have to know so much about everything. Could these be changed or broken up so that we can access more people – do we all have to be fully qualified to do everything? Do we all have to be a firefighter? We wear too many hats.”

## 5.2 For Volunteering

The points below summarise the feedback from respondents relating to the challenges brigades faced once they have volunteers in place. This feedback was largely operational; however, some respondents considered this to influence volunteer retention in the long term. The recently published Volunteer Journey research explores much of this content more fully<sup>5</sup>.

- **Increased demands and expectations of volunteers:** The primary challenge respondents noted about volunteering was the increased amount of work that volunteers need to do. Much of this was seen as procedural work and training. However, the expectation that such work will be completed seemed at odds for many with the rhetoric of valuing volunteers, i.e., if volunteers were truly appreciated, then task volume and management would be easier.
- **Poor leadership at the brigade level:** Some respondents noted that there could be challenges with poor leadership at some brigades and that this directly affects the ability of the brigade to retain volunteers. While there was recognition that there are processes to eliminate negative brigade cultures, some respondents noted that more could be done to support those in volunteer leadership roles to ensure that such challenges do not escalate unchecked and grow over time.
- **Progression pathways:** In keeping with the VA challenges associated with training volume and timing, some respondents also noted that there needs to be a greater focus on volunteer progression and clear training pathways for those who wish to develop their volunteer skills further. This concern was more of a regional-based challenge and dovetails into considerations about how to capitalise on future VA recruitment programmes, as one respondent explained:

<sup>4</sup> Barriers and Enablers of Recruitment and Retention Diversity, Martin Jenkins, 12 September 2023.

<sup>5</sup> Lin, Dr En-Yi, McManus, Verne, Adams, Dr Jeffery (2021). Understanding the Volunteer Journey, Report to Fire and Emergency New Zealand. SHORE & Whāriki Research Centre, College of Health, Massey University, New Zealand; Fire and Emergency New Zealand.

**“***We need a level of support with the progression up to Senior Firefighters and make this an easier progression, so if we have 100 volunteers come on board then in two years, we have 100 firefighters that are going to be available for senior positions. These people need to be trained up so it's obvious we will need to have that in place and ready to go. We just seem to react to this rather than anticipating it.”*

## 6 Conclusions and Recommendations

### 6.1 Conclusions

**The concept of Surge was well received; however, engagement could have been higher amongst some brigades.**

Engagement with Surge varied across the brigades. However, successful engagement was seen in both large and small communities. Brigades with lower engagement with Surge often cited busyness and timing, while some needed more assistance in photography or social media management. Ultimately, low-engagement brigades felt Surge tools were not new and were looking for non-traditional community engagement tools, which they felt Surge lacked.

Brigades with medium or high engagement with Surge were typically from slightly larger townships, although there was usually a motivated individual in the brigade focussed on VA. Brigades with higher engagement perceived value in Surge's tools and support, often finding them beneficial and innovative.

**Surge was generally well implemented, and those who engaged with the project found the engagement a positive experience.**

Positive aspects of Surge's implementation related to the successful engagement with brigades using local advisors who emphasised the importance of VA. Brigades appreciated the personalised resources as these resonated with the local community, with some brigades holding successful open days supported by advisors. Challenges to Surge's implementation related to the timing of the project, appropriate internal resourcing, and the time taken to create resources and engage with the brigades.

**Being involved in Surge re-focussed brigades on VA, however there was limited change in the outcomes brigades achieved compared to traditional VA approaches.**

Surge provided an added focus on VA and the project's strengths lie in its resource and support provision, making brigade members feel valued and recognised by the broader organisation. Inter-brigade support and personal recognition for volunteers were also noted as particularly effective.

Despite positive outcomes, some brigades felt the added responsibilities from participating in Surge initiatives were burdensome for already busy volunteers. Moreover, some brigades questioned the value of some Surge attraction options, as some brigades felt Surge's tools needed a greater focus on addressing their primary VA challenges. Specifically, these brigades sought tools or assistance to reach new people within the community or to have greater flexibility around the brigade roles and composition. These brigades mainly considered Surge to deliver the same suite of VA tools as they had traditionally accessed.

Furthermore, despite the positive views of the support Surge provided to brigades, the Surge approach was not able to deliver the equivalent applications that previous traditional approaches have been able to, although there are likely a number of reasons for this. Moving forward there is potential for an approach that utilises a combination of dedicated brigade support working alongside a broader national focus.

## **Surge helped brigades to start VA conversations but did little to enhance community connections.**

Although brigades were already heavily involved in their communities through local events, not all these engagements led to VA discussions. Surge's personalised materials, acted as conversation starters, making it easier for the community to approach brigade members. However, challenges arose from the already strong community relationships brigades had established, leaving little room for Surge's impact. Many brigades felt they had exhausted current VA approaches and sought new strategies to connect with unengaged community segments, such as businesses, iwi, or government agencies. The pilot nature of Surge posed difficulties in establishing these connections due to its short duration, limited resources, and sometimes limited engagement from local intermediaries (GM or VSO roles).

## **6.2 Recommendations**

Surge explored a different approach to VA by increasing the efficacy of the resources at hand by channelling support to the most at-risk brigades. The evaluation shows that the identification and selection of brigades who needed this support was robust, with all brigades in the pilot recognising they had lower-than-optimal brigade numbers. Furthermore, the brigade-level support Surge provided positively influenced the morale and VA engagement of the brigades who adopted it.

While Surge has made some moves forward, it has challenges. In particular, this approach did not deliver the attraction numbers that previous approaches have achieved. However, the reasons for this are slightly more nuanced than can be captured in this evaluation and are likely to be influenced by broader societal issues such as declining volunteer numbers, shrinking rural and remote communities, and general declines in community cohesion.

Across this work, it is evident that a new approach to VA is warranted. It will require more careful consideration of brigade composition, the different roles and functions, and how relationships between brigades and the various pockets of communities are formed and sustained. The positive elements of Surge do start to address these issues, certainly more so than the traditional processes have previously. With this in mind, it would be beneficial for Fire and Emergency to consider the following points when developing VA strategies.

### **6.2.1 Continue to Support Brigades' VA Requirements at a Local Level**

Developing a dedicated local support structure for VA ensures a streamlined and efficient outreach for garnering potential volunteers. Incorporating the points below supports the brigade's efforts in attracting volunteers and also grows the overall community outreach, ensuring sustained growth and impact.

- **Establish localised VA support:** Establish a dedicated regional support network focusing solely on VA to assist brigades in ongoing development and initiatives. Continue to analyse and monitor brigade numbers and establish regular, perhaps annual, check-ins for brigades to ensure an ongoing VA focus based on real-time feedback and requirements.
- **Build local relationships:** Use the VA support network to help brigades to broaden their community connections. Develop mutually supportive relationships with major industries, local businesses, government agencies, NGOs, and iwi or hapu organisations. Theoretically a 'ground-up' approach to VA should help brigades to establish a more sustainable pipeline of volunteers through new and stronger connections with their community, with such relationships assisting with the flow of new volunteers into the brigade.

- **Continue national VA campaigns:** Consider continuing the nationwide campaign to complement localised efforts and aid volunteering awareness nationally. While Surge is a positive support for brigades at a local level, there is a need for nationwide momentum to support and reinforce attraction efforts.

### 6.2.2 Continue to Expand VA Resources

The development and effective distribution of VA resources is a critical component of an ongoing VA strategy. The continual development and efficient utilisation of these resources will assist in VA efforts and help brigades feel more empowered through their efforts.

- **Develop key attraction contacts at brigades:** The brigades that achieved the greatest success with Surge were the ones that had a dedicated brigade member focussing on VA. The enhancement of the brigade support role can be one way to facilitate community connections while also supporting the brigade's engagement with members' families, other volunteer organisations, Fire and Emergency NHQ, and regional support roles.
- **Enhance access to tailored resources:** Continue developing and distributing the localised resources that have proven effective in initiating community conversations. Streamline the process of resource delivery, possibly by enhancing the internal capacity at Fire and Emergency and setting firmer timelines for brigades to deliver against.
- **Leverage current resources further:** Promote the resource portal as a valuable tool for VA and consider workshops or training sessions to familiarise brigades with these tools, ensuring they can leverage them effectively for recruitment.
- **Offer practical assistance:** Beyond providing resources, it is essential to ensure that brigades are practically equipped to handle VA requirements. Consider capacity building via short courses or ongoing training and support.

### 6.2.3 Continue to Work to Remove Barriers to Volunteering

Ensuring continual growth in the volunteer base is critical for both brigades and their communities. One of the primary ways to achieve this is by actively working to remove barriers that hinder individuals from volunteering.

- **Streamline training processes:** Address concerns regarding the volume and duration of training for recruits. Consider modular training approaches, online courses, or other methods to make the training process more accessible and less daunting. Explore options for cross-referencing training and certifications gained from other entities.
- **Explore new options for brigade composition and eligibility:** Consider adapting the current brigade model to accommodate the long-term trends seen throughout Aotearoa, New Zealand communities. Consider the roles and responsibilities of volunteers and how these could be re-structured to suit the resources in a community. Re-evaluate the criteria for volunteer eligibility, especially concerning individuals with past criminal records or health conditions.

### 6.2.4 Support and Develop Volunteer Brigade Culture

A positive brigade culture enhances individual members' performance and ensures the brigade's collective efficacy and sustainability. Supporting brigades' internal development is critical as it directly affects volunteer attraction and retention. The points below are based on the key elements



that respondents identified throughout the conversations however, all are covered in much greater detail in other research pieces Fire and Emergency has completed<sup>67</sup>.

- **Leadership training:** Continue to develop and support brigade leadership. Offer additional training or resources for brigade leaders to ensure a positive and supportive volunteer environment. Engage with other volunteer organisations to share best practices in leadership.
- **Emphasise clear progression pathways:** Ensure volunteers understand their potential growth and progression within the brigade.
- **Address workload expectations:** Evaluate the current workload and expectations placed on volunteers.
- **Feedback loop:** Implement a structured feedback mechanism for brigades to share their challenges and success stories, fostering a culture of continuous improvement.

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<sup>6</sup> Barriers and Enablers of Recruitment and Retention Diversity, Martin Jenkins, 12 September 2023.

<sup>7</sup> Lin, Dr En-Yi, McManus, Verne, Adams, Dr Jeffery (2021). Understanding the Volunteer Journey, Report to Fire and Emergency New Zealand. SHORE & Whāriki Research Centre, College of Health, Massey University, New Zealand; Fire and Emergency New Zealand.

## 7 Appendix

### 7.1 Analytical Frame

The development of an analytical frame consisted of:

- A logic model for the SPR product
- Evaluative criteria for implementation (KEQ1) and outcome achievement (KEQ2 and KEQ3)
- Levels of performance

#### 7.1.1.1 Surge Logic Model

A logic model is a visual tool used to describe how Fire and Emergency resources deliver the outcomes and ultimate purpose Surge aims to achieve. In an evaluation, a logic model is helpful to highlight the areas an evaluation should focus on for implementation (described as inputs, activities, and outputs) and describes the changes that successful implementation should deliver (outcomes).

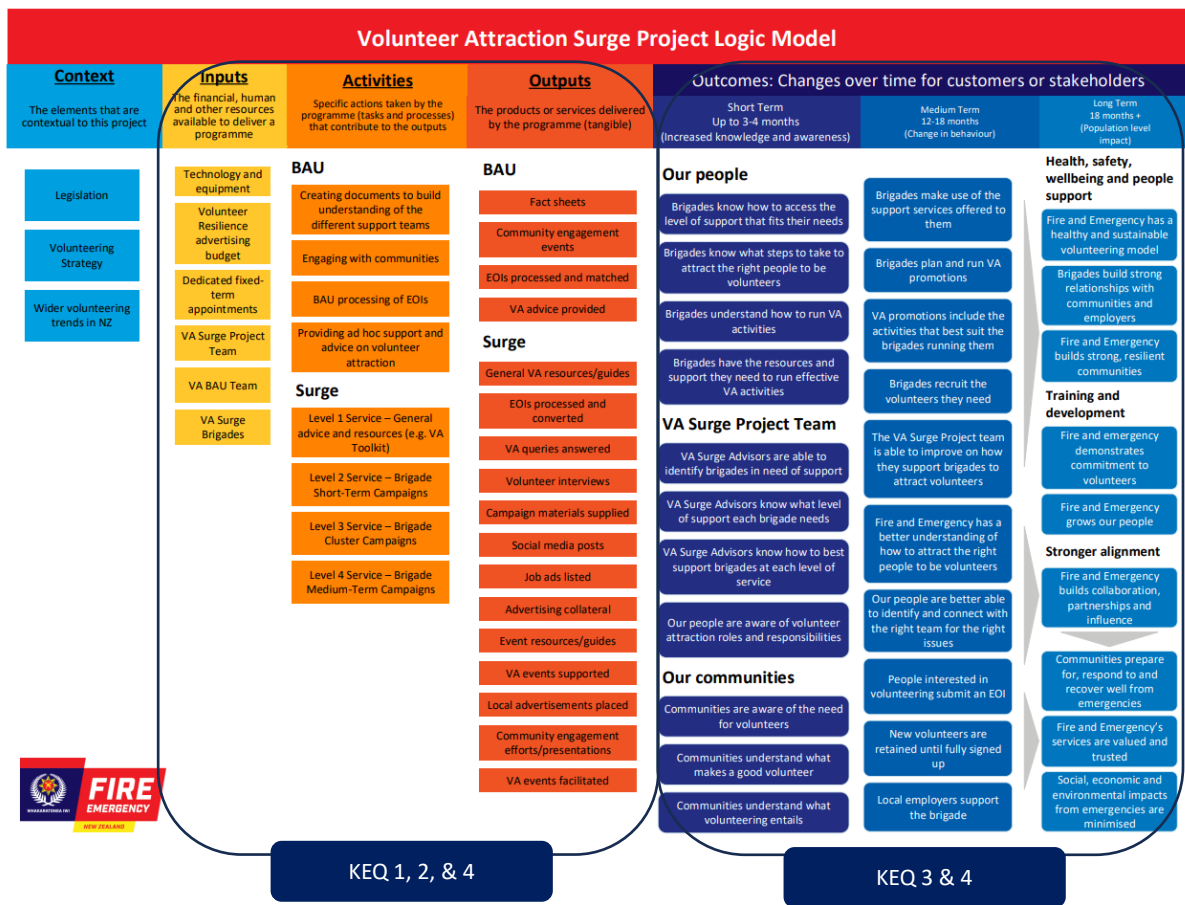
In the context of this evaluation, the logic model displays the intended causal pathway for enabling brigades to increase volunteer numbers through localised attraction strategies.

The Te Ao Mārama evaluation team developed the logic model for this project in conjunction with the wider Surge team. It identifies Surge's inputs and activities: stratification and localised and tailored support for brigades experiencing critical volunteer numbers. Outcomes identified include that brigades understand how to access support and VA resources, the steps required to attract volunteers, and how to run campaigns. Notably, the Surge team will benefit by better understanding how best to support each brigade. At the same time, communities will become aware of the need for volunteers and the different roles a volunteer can take on. As a result of Surge, it is expected that brigades will use the support and services offered by Surge, undertake VA activities, and ultimately recruit volunteers. Internally, it is anticipated that Fire and Emergency will be better able to identify and connect the right team to the brigades.

Ultimately, this will lead to an improved and sustainable volunteering model, more robust relationships between the brigades and Fire and Emergency, and a stronger, more resilient community.

The entire visual logic model is shown in the image overleaf, alongside the relationship with the relevant KEQs.

Image 1: Surge Logic Model



### 7.1.1.2 Evaluative Criteria

Table 8 contains the critical criteria for assessing Surge's effectiveness. Criteria are essential to consider when evaluating whether or not, and in what ways, Surge has been effective. The evaluation team developed these criteria before completing the evaluation to reflect: the logic model, early discussions with Fire and Emergency and the Surge advisor team, and the project background provided through Te Ao Mārama. Each criterion is expanded upon by the inclusion of achievement indicators, which are the changes in behaviours or actions we would expect to see if the criteria was successfully realised. These points shown in the table below alongside the KEQ that each criterion is linked to.

*Table 8: Evaluation criteria*

Criteria	Description	Achievement indicators	KEQ
VA campaign appropriateness for the community	VA campaigns reflect local communities and use relevant channels	Campaigns reflect the brigade's community Resources are perceived as locally appropriate by the brigades Resources showcase local communities and start conversations	1 & 4
Resource Adoption	Brigades use resources to support volunteer attraction strategies	Brigades have a better understanding about where to access the resources Brigades have a better understanding of how to use the resources Brigades have greater confidence using the resources	1 & 4
Brigades strengthened	Brigades are strengthened through Surge support	Brigades become more engaged with VA and understand the importance of ongoing VA. Brigades take greater ownership of VA for their brigade Brigades feel more energised/rejuvenated Brigades feel more valued by Fire and Emergency (heard/seen/listened to) Volunteer inquiries increase	2 & 4
Connection built with the community	There is a stronger connection between the brigade and their local community.	The community has greater awareness of the brigade and its roles Brigades build stronger relationships with their community Brigades feel more valued by the community Brigades feel more positive about their role in the community	3 & 4

### 7.1.1.3 Levels of Performance

The rating for the criteria uses a simple five-level scale which denote different levels of achievement. A generic description for each rating level is included in the table below alongside a simplified version of the rating scale for each KEQ as the intent and wording of the scale change slightly with the relative criteria.

*Table 9: Rating scale*

Rating	Generic level	KEQ 1: How well has Surge been implemented?	KEQ 2: To what extent has local delivery of attraction initiatives led to better outcomes than traditional attraction processes?	KEQ 3: What difference has Surge made to the brigades it has been implemented at?
0	Not present at all	Not at all	No better	None
1	Emerging, could be present soon	Slightly well	A little better	Little difference
2	Somewhat present, not fully embedded	Somewhat well	Somewhat better	Some difference
3	Moderate presence, good but could develop a little	Moderately well	Moderately better	Moderate difference
4	Fully present, fully embedded	Excellent	Significantly better	A significant difference

## 7.2 Sample

A profile of the audiences involved is provided below.

### 7.2.1 Surge Team

The internal Surge staff involved in the evaluation included the three advisors and the project coordinator. These people were interviewed in early August 2023.

### 7.2.2 Brigades

Twenty volunteer brigades were included in the evaluation alongside three district managers. The person responsible for VA at the brigade was interviewed; this was often the CFO but also included the DCFO or another nominated volunteer. Brigades were selected to ensure geographic coverage and that different levels of support were included. A summary of the brigades included is shown in the tables below.

*Table 10: Brigades included by level of support*

Level of Support	N=
Level 1	6
Level 2	13
Level 3	2
Level 4	2

*Table 11: Brigades included by region*

Region	N=
Nga Tai ki te Puku	4
Te Hiku	5
Te Ihu	4
Te Kei	5
Te Upoko	5