RFS

NSW RURAL FIRE SERVICE

Strategic Direction

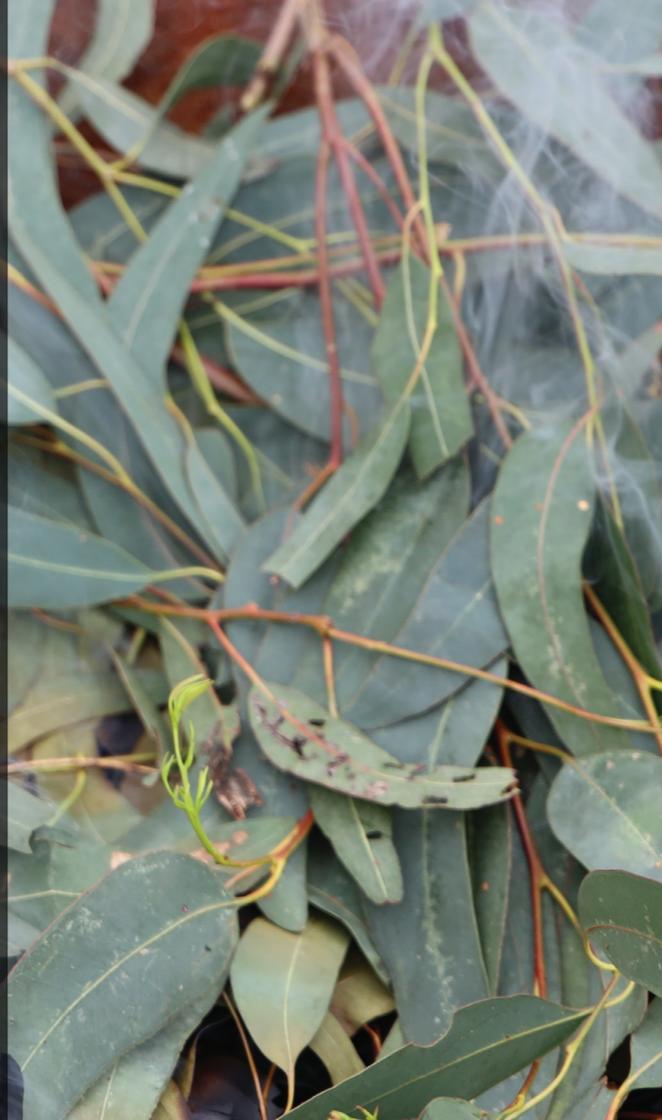2026-2031

NSW GOVERNMENT

Acknowledgement of Country

The RFS acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the lands and waters across NSW and Australia. We are privileged to work across all corners of this state, and we thank them for their expert care, over thousands of generations, of this beautiful Country.

We acknowledge the extreme hardships and exclusion experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples since the colonisation of Australia by European settlers.

We are committed to learning how to engage and connect with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in a respectful, caring and healing manner, and to work together in service to community and protection of lands.

We support young people and the future generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

We pay our respects to all Elders, past and present, and recognise their connection to the Country of their ancestors.

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Commissioner's message

I am pleased to present the Strategic Direction for the NSW Rural Fire Service for 2026 to 2031. This Direction outlines our priorities and commitments for the next five years and provides a clear roadmap to guide the Service in delivering excellence across fire and emergency management, strengthening community resilience and building capability across our membership.

This is more than a planning document. It is a clear statement of intent about how we will continue preparing the RFS for a changing future and evolving communities. It reflects our commitment to remaining a trusted, accountable and responsive emergency services, capable of protecting lives, property and the environment across NSW.

The operating environment in which we serve continues to grow in complexity. Climate variability, longer fire seasons, heightened community expectations, fiscal pressures and workforce sustainability challenges require us to adapt and plan deliberately. The lessons of recent years, including the 2019/20 bush fires, COVID-19 and the Northern and Western NSW floods, reinforce the importance of clarity of purpose, disciplined execution and strong leadership at every level.

At the centre of this Direction are our members. Our volunteers and staff make meaningful contributions every day in communities across NSW. Their dedication, professionalism and local knowledge are the foundation of our success. This Strategic Direction ensures that every member can see how their role connects to our shared purpose and that they are supported with the skills, systems, resources and leadership they need to perform safely and effectively.

By focusing on thriving membership, reducing risk and leading preparedness, responding safely and effectively and preparing for the future, we will strengthen our organisation and enhance the support we provide to frontline operations and the communities we serve.

Together, we will ensure the RFS remains ready, capable and resilient in the face of change and continues to protect the people and places of NSW.

Trent Curtin
Commissioner

What we do

Over the next five years, we will align our resources and effort toward three clear outcomes: increased community resilience and reduced risk of harm; empowered and engaged members equipped to meet future challenges; and fires and other emergencies managed safely, decisively and in a coordinated way.

We will strengthen our workforce through improved recruitment, retention, wellbeing and leadership development, ensuring members are supported in safe and healthy environments.

We will modernise bush fire risk planning and hazard management to achieve measurable risk reduction and increase community awareness and action.

We will enhance operational effectiveness by integrating systems, strengthening intelligence and logistics capability and improving interoperability with partner agencies to ensure safe and coordinated responses.

We will prepare for the future by investing in fleet, infrastructure and technology, strengthening cybersecurity and data capability, embracing research and innovation and aligning future risk planning with resource allocation.

Who we are

The RFS is the lead combat agency for bush fires in NSW.

For more than 120 years, the Service has been a significant part of the history and landscape of the state and an integral component of rural and regional communities. Our management and operational responsibilities are mandated under the *Rural Fires Act 1997*.

We work closely with other emergency services, government agencies, industry and community partners to respond to a wide range of incidents including bush and grass fires, structure fires, motor vehicle accidents and storms. Our rural fire districts cover more than 95 per cent of New South Wales.

We are a community-based organisation built on service, professionalism and local knowledge. Our volunteers and staff make meaningful contributions every day, protecting lives, property and the environment while strengthening the resilience of the communities they serve.

Our operating environment

OUR PARTNERS AND STAKEHOLDERS

Members

- Volunteer brigades
- Staff
- NSW RFS Association (RFSA)
- Public Service Association (PSA)

Community

- Local communities
- Landholders, residents
- Research/educational bodies

Stakeholders

Partners

- Fire and Rescue NSW, NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, Forestry Corporation, NSW Police, NSW State Emergency Service, local councils, landholders and industry bodies.

Government

- Minister for Emergency Services
- State Emergency Management Committee
- State Rescue Board
- Bush Fire Co-ordinating Committee

OUR CHALLENGES

The NSW Rural Fire Service operates in an increasingly complex and demanding environment. Climate, community expectations, operational risk and workforce sustainability are all evolving, requiring the organisation to adapt while continuing to deliver safe, effective emergency service to communities across NSW.

A changing operating environment

- Increasing frequency, intensity and unpredictability of bush fires driven by climate change
- More frequent concurrent emergencies, including floods, storms, heatwaves and biosecurity events
- Expanding urban-rural interfaces increasing risk to life, property and critical infrastructure
- Greater reliance on interagency coordination across complex, multi-hazard incidents
- Rising costs of equipment, technology, buildings and logistics placing pressure on funding and sustainability

Community expectations and trust

- Strong community reliance on volunteers to respond quickly and effectively during emergencies
- Increased public expectation for preparedness, prevention and year-round capability, not just response
- Heightened scrutiny of emergency management decisions before, during and after major events
- Growing demand for transparent communication, local engagement and community-led resilience

Volunteer sustainability and capability

- Sustaining a large, skilled and motivated volunteer workforce amid changing social and work patterns
- Increased training, compliance and safety requirements impacting volunteer availability and retention
- The need to create the very best conditions for volunteers to serve safely, confidently and effectively
- Ensuring leadership, support systems and resources keep pace with operational demands

Workforce, systems and capability

- Balancing operational readiness with prevention, mitigation and community education activities
- Ensuring systems, data and technology support decision-making in fast-moving, high-risk environments
- Building leadership and specialist capability across a geographically dispersed organisation
- Managing fatigue, wellbeing and psychological risk for volunteers and staff exposed to traumatic incidents

Organisational alignment and delivery

- Aligning effort across a large, decentralised organisation to a clear, shared strategic direction
- Prioritising limited resources to focus on the initiatives that deliver the greatest benefit to communities
- Ensuring planning, governance and delivery mechanisms enable agility without adding unnecessary burden
- Maintaining a strong safety culture while adapting to new risks, technologies and ways of working
- Balancing local knowledge and innovation with system-wide sustainable investments.

Strategic Direction

Our Strategic Direction 2026-31 provides clarity and focus by defining where the organisation is heading, aligning resources and effort toward shared goals and enabling decision-making by serving as a reference point for choices. It also drives accountability and measurement by setting clear objectives and outcomes, while giving us the flexibility to adapt to change and respond to external challenges as we stay true to our core priorities.

OUR VISION

Safer communities, better prepared for a challenging future.

OUR PURPOSE

To protect the community and our environment by minimising the impact of fire and other emergencies.

OUR VALUES

Our values guide how we serve our communities, support our people and uphold the standards expected of us every day.

– One Team, Many Players, One Purpose
– Integrity and Trust
– Support, Friendship and Camaraderie
– Mutual Respect
– Adaptability and Resourcefulness
– Community and Our Environment
– Knowledge and Learning

How we will deliver the strategy

We will deliver this Strategic Direction through clear governance, strong planning and shared accountability across the organisation. Dedicated governance arrangements will oversee implementation and ensure progress remains aligned to our strategic priorities. An annual Agency Plan will translate the strategy into practical actions, supported by Divisional business plans and individual performance and development plans so that responsibility for delivery is clear at every level.

Progress against the Strategic Direction will be reviewed and reported annually, enabling us to adjust priorities, resources and investment to ensure we continue to deliver outcomes that matter for our members and the communities we serve.

While this Strategic Direction sets a five-year vision, activities and reporting will be staged each year. The cycle of planning, implementation and reporting ensures the Strategic Direction is delivered consistently across the five-year period. The following table describes the phases aligned to the timeframe (when) and activities (what) for each year.

Phase	Timeframe	Activities
Planning	Feb – May each year	– Set priorities – Develop initiatives and annual plans aligned with the Strategic Direction – Develop Agency, Directorate and Business Unit plans – Identify key projects – Allocate budgets and resources
Implementation	Jul – Jun each year	– Deliver strategic initiatives for the year – Adjust delivery plans in response to emerging issues or changing context – Engage and communicate with stakeholders throughout implementation
Monitoring and Reporting	Nov each year	– Quarterly monitoring of progress to stay on track – Outcomes reported against the Agency Plan and in the Annual Report

Strategic Direction

OUR STRATEGIC INTENT

Our Strategic Intent is shaped by four Pillars that define our key areas of focus and describe where we are heading.

Reduce risk and lead preparedness

We will strengthen community readiness and reduce risk through targeted planning, engagement and hazard reduction.

Thriving membership

We will develop, empower and support our members, ensuring they are prepared, recognised and able to work together in a safe and inclusive environment.

Respond safely and effectively

We will enhance our ability to respond safely and effectively with our partners, to reduce harm to the community and the environment.

Preparing for the future

We will strengthen organisational capabilities to adapt and meet the future challenges.

Community

Thriving membership

Reduce risk and lead preparedness

Preparing for the future

Respond safely and effectively

STRATEGIC OUTCOMES

Increased community resilience and reduced risk of harm

Empowered, engaged members equipped to meet future challenges

Fire and other emergencies are managed safely, in a decisive and coordinated way

The sections that follows explain each Pillar in detail.

Strategic Direction

PILLAR

Thriving membership

HOW WE'LL MEASURE IMPACT

– Improved member engagement and satisfaction

– Improved member wellbeing

– Improved attraction, retention and development of membership

STRATEGIC INTENT

We will develop, empower and support our members, ensuring they are prepared, recognised and able to work together in a safe and inclusive environment.

OUTCOME		WHAT WE'LL DO		WHY WE'RE DOING IT
1.1	**Sustainable volunteering and staff membership** A sustainable, diverse workforce where the right people are in the right places at the right time to serve the needs of the community.	1	Collaborate to develop and implement a Volunteer Workforce Strategy	To ensure we are recruiting, retaining and building the skills of our volunteer membership base, to sustainably match the needs of our local communities.
		2	Collaborate to develop and implement a Staff Workforce Strategy	To ensure our workforce is structured, skilled and supported to deliver the highest level of service to brigades and strengthen our partnerships with the communities we serve.
		3	Negotiate and embed a new RFS Industrial Award	To ensure our industrial framework is modern, equitable and supports an engaged workforce, positioning RFS as an employer of choice.
1.2	**Safety, health and wellbeing** All members operate in a safe, healthy and supportive environment with systems that protect their wellbeing and enable recovery and resilience.	1	Implement and enhance the Health, Safety and Wellbeing Framework	To proactively improve safety, reduce harm and prevent incidents by embedding a culture of continuous improvement, innovation and accountability in everything we do.
		2	Implement the Mental Health Strategy (MHS) and embed it into everyday practice	By integrating the MHS into our everyday, we want to reduce psychological harm, increase resilience and protect wellbeing in all our members.
		3	Develop and implement a program to provide enhanced care and support for members following incidents	To be able to provide acute care to members following prolonged or major incidents, which might have different needs compared to 'business-as-usual' incidents.
		4	Research, develop and implement the 'Clean Firefighter' Program	To reduce contamination risks and improve health outcomes for members through updated facilities, equipment and decontamination practices.

OUTCOME		WHAT WE'LL DO		WHY WE'RE DOING IT
1.3	**Learning and development** For members to continuously grow, learn and build capability, evolving together.	1	Create trusted, high-quality and accessible learning and development to enhance organisational capability	So members can access high-quality training and development, leading us to a well equipped, competent and prepared agency delivering sustained positive community outcomes.
		2	Build an integrated training management system	To streamline access to courses, simplify administration and enable members to seamlessly progress through training pathways.
		3	Build leadership capability by establishing structured development pathways	To strengthen member leadership capability to cultivate growth, enable succession and empower both today's leaders and those of tomorrow.
1.4	**Communication and engagement** For all members to be informed and connected, recognising their place in the one team that is RFS.	1	Develop and embed an internal Communication and Engagement Framework	To help members feel connected and aligned as one team by providing ways to stay better informed, give feedback and turn feedback into action.
		2	Enhance our systems and channels for coordinated communication	To leverage the combination of technology that supports the Communication and Engagement Framework, making it easier to share the right information to the right members quickly and effectively.
		3	Develop and implement a Recognition and Excellence Framework	To shift culture across the organisation so that all members' efforts are acknowledged, celebrated and equally valued.
		4	Establish and continuously improve a structured change management framework	To enhance member experience and ensure changes are known, understood and more effectively adopted.

Strategic Direction

STRATEGIC INTENT	We will strengthen community readiness and reduce risk through targeted planning, engagement and hazard reduction.

	OUTCOME		WHAT WE'LL DO	WHY WE'RE DOING IT
2.1	**Bush Fire Risk Planning** Increased understanding and utility of Bush Fire Risk Management Plans by modernising and consolidating planning processes.	1	Enhance our Risk Modelling Platform	To assess bush fire risk with updated data and modelling methodologies, transitioning reporting to be based on risk reduction and activity.
		2	Develop localised risk modelling to support community decision making	To provide more specific community information about risks and guide targeted planning and response efforts.
		3	Review the bush fire management zones	To create a shared understanding of the optimal management strategies in a changing climate, we will work with our partner agencies to deliver a comprehensive bush fire management zoning system for NSW.
		4	Review Bush Fire Management Committees (BFMC) planning and policy processes to identify efficiencies	To streamline the processes undertaken by BFMC, increasing the opportunity for implementing planned actions.
2.2	**Community engagement** Strengthen communities' preparedness for bush fires by fostering direct engagement and support.	1	Support communities to develop personalised plans informed by local risk	We want our communities to be informed, prepared and able to act when it matters most.
		2	Design targeted behavioural based programs and activities that reflect the diverse needs of our communities and brigades	So brigades and districts can best support communities to plan, prepare for, respond to and recover from bush/grass fire and other emergencies.
		3	Develop tailored programs for rural and remote communities	To deliver practical engagement programs that are relevant to these communities and meet their priorities.

	OUTCOME		WHAT WE'LL DO	WHY WE'RE DOING IT
2.3	**Hazard management** Hazard reduction activities are scaled and targeted to reduce risk to communities and the environment.	1	Streamline the planning process for hazard reduction burning	To enable more hazard reduction work to be undertaken.
		2	Enhance community awareness and engagement in bush fire risk mitigation initiatives	To engage community in advance about hazard reduction burns, so they are prepared and aware of the benefit it brings in reducing risk, understanding their responsibility and active role in preparing for bush fire events.
		3	Develop innovative ways to undertake and enable bush fire hazard reduction.	Increase the level of work completed so communities are afforded the highest level of protection possible through planned activities.
2.4	**Regulatory Frameworks** Legislative and regulatory frameworks are complied with and operationalised to achieve strategic outcomes.	1	Strengthen our internal training, processes, policies and governance	So all members understand and can consistently comply with their legislative and regulatory obligations from an operational and corporate perspective.
		2	Enhance community awareness in relation to legislative obligations	To ensure community members are aware of and are complying with their legislative obligations to prevent bush fires and reduce fire hazards.
		3	Further work with external stakeholders to ensure legislative and regulatory obligations are met	To fully exercise our statutory functions to protect life, property and the environment.
		4	Update Planning for Bush Fire Protection (PBP)	To provide a contemporary approach for development within bush fire prone land.
2.5	**Cultural burning activities** Strong, inclusive partnerships with Indigenous communities to support cultural burning activities.	1	Collaborate with Indigenous communities to develop a code to streamline approval requirements for cultural burning	To support and facilitate the cultural burning practices of traditional custodians in NSW.

Strategic Direction

STRATEGIC INTENT	We will enhance our ability to respond safely and effectively with our partners, to reduce harm to the community and the environment.

	OUTCOME	WHAT WE'LL DO	WHY WE'RE DOING IT
3.1	**Response resource deployment** Integrated systems to support resource activation and tracking for more effective command, control and communication.	1 Improve response efficiency through better integration of our operational systems	To better manage complex, multi-agency incidents by integrating systems, internally and externally, to provide consistent, reliable and accessible operational data.
		2 Integrate multi-agency and third-party Automatic Vehicle Location (AVL) data	To improve safety and situational awareness through our ability to track non-RFS resources during bush fire operations and other incidents.
		3 Enhance our aerial intelligence capability and better integrate into our operational system	To use Remotely Piloted Aircraft System (RPAS) and other aerial technology to expand and integrate data collation and aerial insights, to help us make informed decisions during incident response.
		4 Improve operational vehicle connectivity through the rollout of Mobile Data Terminals (MDTs) and Vehicle as a node (VaaN)	To improve member safety by increasing the ability to maintain access to critical incident and operational information during incidents.
3.2	**Incident information and community liaison** Communities receive timely, accurate and relevant information to help them take appropriate action and stay safe.	1 Enhance our public information-sharing platforms	To improve our ability to deliver appropriate information in a timely manner that is readily accessible by community when most needed.
		2 Revitalise the role of Community Field Liaison (including Rural and Indigenous Liaison)	To better support our communities with on-the-ground guidance during emergencies.
		3 Work with partner agencies to expand warning systems in line with national standards	So our communities and the public receive timely, coordinated and consistent warnings with improved information.

	OUTCOME	WHAT WE'LL DO	WHY WE'RE DOING IT
3.3	**Interoperability** Stronger partnerships with the fire and emergency management sector, government, industry and community stakeholders.	1 Embed a strategic intelligence function within the State Operations Centre	To promote an intelligence framework using nationally consistent processes to supply timely, informed analysis to guide key decisions that protect communities and the environment.
		2 Deliver a multi-agency warehouse and logistics capability	To enable more efficient and coordinated logistical responses across government resources during emergencies and large-scale operations.
		3 Work with partners to further evolve aviation safety in response to natural disasters	To uplift aviation safety and operational consistency through stronger partnerships, ensuring a safer and more coordinated aviation capability that improves outcomes for communities during natural disasters.
		4 Support whole-of-government aviation capability, including night capability, through owned aircraft and the State Air Desk	To reduce duplication, strengthen coordination and ensure government agencies operate as part of a unified system during emergencies.
		5 Provide post-major incident support to other agencies and community	Through our close ties with communities, we can assist in community restoration after major incidents, even when recovery is led by other agencies.
		6 Strengthen interoperability between agencies	To provide the community with the highest level of service in preparing for or during emergencies.
3.4	**Learn and Evolve** Embed a culture of continuous learning and knowledge-sharing that informs key decision-making and drives nationally consistent operational practices, strengthened through key events, exercises and activities.	1 Evolve and mature the Lessons Management Framework	So lessons are accessible, timely and consistently embedded into operational practice, improving organisational learning and operational performance.
		2 Develop and implement a Real-time Monitoring framework	To provide timely insights that support proactive decision-making and enhance the management of risks and incidents.
		3 Enhance and Embed our Operational Assurance Capability	To strengthen confidence in our ability to deliver critical operations safely, reliably and effectively in complex emergency environments.

Strategic Direction

STRATEGIC INTENT	We will strengthen organisational capabilities to adapt and meet the future challenges.

	OUTCOME		WHAT WE'LL DO	WHY WE'RE DOING IT
4.1	**Whole-of-life asset management** Having the right resources, in optimal condition, at the right time, at the right place, to support our members in safe operations, preparedness, learning and community engagement.	1	Allocate and equip fleet according to risk, asset management and response needs	To base fleet and equipment distribution on local response needs and community risk.
		2	Invest in the next generation of fleet	So fleet innovations keep us operationally ready for future challenges, providing safer, faster, more effective emergency response.
		3	Improve and standardise station fit out and maintenance	To ensure the infrastructure and facilities within stations are of standard quality and fit-for-purpose for our members, brigades and communities.
		4	Mature and enhance the Strategic Asset Management Framework	To provide assets aligned with our purpose, vision and future needs, and managed over the asset life-cycle, to enable reliable and efficient operations.
4.2	**Strategic Information and Communication Technology (ICT) management** Our ability to serve community is enabled and strengthened by modern, resilient and scalable ICT infrastructure.	1	Deliver against the Cybersecurity Strategy	To keep pace with emerging cyber threats, protecting sensitive information and preventing disruption to our service.
		2	Enhance ICT systems connectivity and consolidate digital systems and tools to create a contemporary, streamlined, integrated technology environment	For reduced duplication, minimise friction and improve member user experience by enabling seamless access to the right tools and information, to boost collaboration and service delivery.
		3	Establish a unified Data Management Framework	To improve data handling and quality to enable informed decision-making and more effective service delivery.
		4	Establish a robust governance framework to facilitate the development, deployment and oversight of AI technologies	To ethically harness the potential of emerging AI technologies in driving operational efficiency, enabling innovation and supporting data-driven decision-making.

	OUTCOME		WHAT WE'LL DO	WHY WE'RE DOING IT
4.3	**Future Risk Planning** Resources are planned and allocated based on current and emerging risks.	1	Prepare and implement the RFS Climate Risk Assessment and Climate Adaptation Plan	To better prepare us to deliver effective preparedness and response capability in a changing climate, as bush fire seasons are expected to last longer and include increased occurrence of extreme fire behaviour.
		2	Plan, model and adjust resource allocation in response to changing risk profiles and environmental conditions	To align resources with current and future risks for safe and effective response.
4.4	**Embrace Research, Innovation and best practice** Innovation, technology, lessons, data and research drive continuous organisational evolution.	1	Develop and embed a Strategic Research and Innovation Framework	To embed evidence-based innovation across the RFS so we can close capability gaps, solve problems thoughtfully and continuously improve in a changing environment.
		2	Expand the Lesson Management Framework to incorporate business improvement	So business improvement insights are captured, shared and applied to inform better decision-making and advance organisational maturity.
		3	Explore and implement new fire detection, monitoring and intelligence systems	To leverage technology, including AI, to detect, monitor and control fires quickly, reducing their impact on communities.
		4	Invest in sourcing fit-for-purpose personal protective clothing and equipment (PPC and PPE)	So members are provided with contemporary, fit-for-purpose and safe PPC, PPE and equipment.
4.5	**Elevate governance** A highly accountable, transparent and well-governed organisation that demonstrates strong ethical practices and effective decision-making through robust compliance frameworks.	1	Proactively monitor and identify emerging policy, legal and economic issues	To understand current trends and explore future risks and opportunities, to support development of robust, adaptive and future-focused proposals.
		2	Explore cost drivers of delivery programs to find sustainable alternate approaches.	To improve our long-term financial sustainability as we adapt to technology changes, climate risk and cost volatility pressures on service delivery outcomes
		4	Review and enhance our existing governance arrangements	To generate a governance culture that promotes innovation, manages risk proactively and positions the organisation for long-term success.

RFS

Scan to read more about
the Strategic Direction
on the RFS website