VICTORIA’S REGIONAL MANAGEMENT FORUMS:
A COMPARATIVE REVIEW

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Abstract
Victoria’s Regional Management Forums were established in 2005 to facilitate collaboration between Victorian Government departments and local government in each of Victoria’s eight administrative regions. The Forums are chaired by departmental Secretaries, and comprise the Chief Executive Officers of local government as well as senior representatives from state government departments.

The role of the Forums is to:

- Identify and address critical issues facing the region;
- Encourage cooperation between departments and with councils; and
- Work with statutory authorities, businesses and local communities to deliver key priorities.

This paper considers Victoria’s Regional Management Forums alongside other similar collaborative governance structures, such as Queensland’s Regional Managers’ Coordination Networks, Tasmania’s Partnership Agreements, Western Australia’s Regional Development Commissions and the United Kingdom’s Local Strategic Partnerships.

The paper concludes that the Forums have successfully established a collaborative relationship between state government and local governments, providing a mechanism for constructive, regular dialogue.

Nevertheless, if Regional Management Forums are to be successful in the longer term, they will need to move beyond their existing functions of information sharing, networking and the implementation of selected regional initiatives. A key component of this broadened approach should be the development of integrated approaches to regional development.

Introduction
In recent years, an emergent theme in public administration has been joined-up government as a means of better responding to the complex issues faced by local and regional communities. Largely driven by imperatives within its social policy agenda, the Victorian Government has moved to an enthusiastic embrace of this approach.

In 2005 it established Regional Management Forums, which are the subject of this paper. These forums bring together Local Government and State Government Agencies in a collaborative environment at the regional level. This paper locates Victoria’s Regional Management Forums within a national and international context,
and points to future directions for the Forums, and similar collaborative governance structures.

**Policy context**

Government in the twentieth century was traditionally rules-based, process-oriented and organised hierarchically. This type of organisation was appropriate delivery of ‘one size fits all’ government services.

However autocratic governance is no longer adequate, because responses to complex social problems increasingly demand complex, knowledge-intensive collaboration between government departments, agencies, business and the community. ‘High-trust’ institutional forms of governance are a much better way of coordinating these types of knowledge intensive activities. This form of governance is based on mutual trust, collaboration, devolution of power and de-centralisation of decision-making.

**Regional Management Forums**

The Regional Management Forums were established under *A Fairer Victoria*, the Victorian Government’s social policy action plan released in 2005. In a recognition of the complexity associated with much social policy, *A Fairer Victoria* included the following three initiatives to develop better ways of working together at a regional and local level:

- aligning departmental boundaries;
- establishing Regional Management Forums; and
- establishing cross-government Community Project Teams.

![Figure 1: Victorian Government Departmental Regional Boundaries](image-url)
The new regional boundaries were formally adopted on 1 July 2005 and are based on the eight existing regions of the Department of Human Services. Victoria now has eight administrative regions, with populations ranging from 215,000 (Grampians region) to 1.5 million (North West Metropolitan region). Figure 1 shows the eight regions.

Regional Management Forums

The Regional Management Forums were established in 2005 and bring together the chief executive officers of local government councils and senior representatives from state government departments.

The role of the Forums is to:

- identify and address critical issues facing the region;
- encourage cooperation between departments and with councils; and
- work with statutory authorities, businesses and local communities to set and deliver key priorities.

Each Forum works with regional stakeholders to identify and understand key issues that would benefit from an integrated approach to planning and service delivery. It then identifies and develops proposals to address the issues. To maximise their effectiveness, the Forums have been expected to prioritise activities in the following order:

- initiatives identified under A Fairer Victoria;
- providing additional support for disadvantaged places; and
- taking a broader view of regional issues and priorities (if time permits).

The Forums were required to develop work plans for the first one to two years of operation, including activities that:

- identify opportunities for departments, councils and businesses to work together;
- focus on better service planning and delivery;
- illustrate and test new ways of working with communities;
- create innovative and efficient use of existing resources rather than new funding proposals; and
- have a significant effect on tackling disadvantage.

Membership

Membership of each Regional Management Forum ranges between 20 and 35 members, including:

- the departmental Secretary for the region (the ‘regional champion’);
- representatives from state government departments (generally regional directors or senior officers); and
- the chief executive officers of local government councils in the region.
The majority of the Forums also include a representative of the CFA. Some Forums have invited representatives from other local organisations, such as water catchment management authorities, universities or local consultation committees, to become members.

To provide a whole of government perspective at senior level, departmental Secretaries have been assigned to a specific region as a regional champion. In this role, the Secretary is expected to:

- champion improved services, by brokering solutions between stakeholders, resolving blockages and cutting through red tape;
- oversee the effective functioning of the Forums, including endorsement of the work plan and reporting to the State Coordination and Management Council; and
- identify lead agencies for priority projects and authorise the creation of Community Project Teams.

**Resourcing**

The Department of Planning and Community Development supports the operation of the Forums including the funding of a Regional Executive Support Officer for each Forum. These Officers are employed in DPCD’s Community Development Group and undertake a range of tasks to support the Forum, including:

- provision of executive support to the regional champion/Secretary;
- administrative and operational support to the Forum (organise meetings, agendas, papers);
- monitoring and reporting on the Forum work plan;
- supporting the regional champion/Secretary in resolution of issues critical to priority projects;
- working with the DPCD regional team; and
- liaising with Forum members.

Forums have the authority to initiate joint projects in the region, within existing budgets and policy frameworks. If additional funds or policy changes are required, the Secretary championing the region can recommend joint action through the State Coordination and Management Committee.

**Reporting and monitoring**

Each Forum has developed a two year work plan that identifies priority projects, deliverables, timelines, responsible agencies and resources. Each Forum meets either quarterly or bi-monthly, with meeting schedules established for the year. Project teams are established for priority projects and these teams report progress to the Forum. The Forums report periodically to State Coordination and Management Committee on progress against the work plan.
Activity

Regional management forums are able to ‘un-block’ difficult issues to facilitate the operation of place-based partnerships at the local level. Additionally, they are able to tackle complex issues at the regional level.

Since their establishment in 2005, several distinctive themes have emerged in the work of the Regional Management Forums. These can be summarised as follows:

- **Place based projects** combining hard and soft infrastructure elements (e.g., affordable Housing) in disadvantaged neighbourhoods or precincts and growth areas.

- **Strategic or integrated planning** emphasizing collaborative or region-wide approaches to the region and/or particular issues. For example, through the Hume Regional Management Forum, the Hume Sustainable Communities strategy has adopted a whole-of-government approach to economic, environmental and community planning. The strategy supports a regional and sub-regional approach to planning for future economic and social opportunities.

- **Population groups** with particular needs, many focusing on disadvantage or families and young people.

- **Economic and environmental issues**, particularly in rural regions.

- **Collaborative efforts between State and Local Government** to build capacity, strengthen networks and contribute to joint outcomes.

- **Community building** projects or programs.

- **Innovative use of community facilities and public land** is an issue in both metropolitan and regionally-based Regional Management Forums.

- **Transport** provision or improved transport access – including community transport – features more so in rural Regional Management Forums.

- **Local data and information management** is an emerging theme, particularly access and use of common data.

The Regional Management Forums have established project teams or working groups to implement priority projects and they are generally nominating a project lead. Project teams are a good mix of State and Local Government representation, including from across State agencies. In some instances, members are drawn from community organisations and business. Some Regional Management Forums have established standing sub-groups which meet regularly.

As the Regional Management Forums continue evolving it means that significant work is likely to be done outside of scheduled meetings by working groups and project teams to implement agreed priorities.

Strengths

Overall the Forums have established a collaborative relationship between state government and local governments, providing a mechanism for constructive, regular dialogue.
Consultations with local government have indicated that they see key advantages of the Forums including:

- direct access to regional champions;
- better understanding of and opportunity to contribute to policy directions and processes of the Victorian Government;
- information sharing;
- networking; and
- implementation of select initiatives across Victoria.

Other jurisdictions

A range of other jurisdictions have also developed collaborative governance arrangements designed to facilitate integrated responses to complex issues. Following is a summary of the approach in three Australian states plus the United Kingdom. Table 1 presents the approaches in summary form.

Table 1 Comparative summary of collaborative governance structures

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Queensland

Queensland has adopted a consultative approach establishing Regional Managers’ Coordination Networks. The Cabinet-endorsed mandate for the networks is to assist agencies to achieve improved outcomes through better regional engagement and coordination. The networks have two key objectives:

- to achieve economic, social and environmental benefits through the coordination of priority, cross-agency initiatives at the regional level; and
• to ensure that services align with government priorities and community needs by supporting collaboration across state government agencies as well as with local government, business and communities

The Department of Communities supports the networks by providing executive coordination and support for networks and by facilitating communication, resource and information sharing and capacity building across all 15 networks.

The Department has also developed operating guidelines and a performance management framework to articulate the planning, implementation and reporting of the networks. The performance management framework is used to:

• assist with goal setting;
• Identify activities and outputs to achieve objectives; and
• monitor and report on progress.

Membership must comprise the most senior public servants in each region (e.g. regional managers) and meetings must be held at least every two months.

There is some flexibility as to how the network is implemented in each region. Each network can appoint a chair and determine associate membership, the yearly work program and associated timeframes.

Agreed priority projects are then jointly signed off by relevant CEOs and the Director-General of the Department of Communities.

There are no formal funding channels for initiatives. The Department of Communities provides executive and coordination support. Individual support arrangements are agreed for each network, and further funding for executive support or projects needs to be sourced by the network.

Tasmania

The Tasmanian Government has utilised Partnership Agreements to work with local governments on issues of local importance.

A Partnership Agreement sets out actions and timeframes for important social, environmental and economic issues through improved working relationships between state and local government.

The objectives of Partnership Agreements are to:

• identify opportunities to work in partnership to achieve social, economic and environmental goals; and
• ensure effective service delivery arrangements to meet the needs of residents including improved coordination of joint service delivery arrangements.

Initially introduced to improve working between state and local government, Partnership Agreements are now used to cover:

• bilateral agreements (State and local government);
• regional agreements (based on state regions, addressing issues that cut across local boundaries);
• statewide agreements (based on issues rather than geography and cover the whole state); and
• tripartite agreements (between local, State and Commonwealth governments).

Partnership Agreements are developed through consultation between local and State governments. This development and the operation of the agreement is based on a set of protocol arrangements developed by the Department of Premier and Cabinet. The protocol arrangements set out the:

• issues for negotiation;
• principles that underpin the Partnership Agreement;
• proposed exchange of information;
• stakeholder and community liaison and the establishment of a peak group; and
• monitoring, reporting and evaluation arrangements.

The Partnership Agreement is then developed specifying agreed actions and timeframes to address issues.

Partnership Agreements are entered into for three years, at the end of which a review and re-development process begins if the parties are interested.

Agreed actions are funded through existing budgets; specific funding is not allocated to the Partnership Agreement.

**Western Australia**

Western Australia has established Regional Development Commissions (statutory bodies) to focus on regional development and to facilitate coordination between agencies and levels of government at the local level. The Regional Development Commissions are the primary mechanism for collaboration between State and local government at the regional level.

The RDCs have a role in regional development and in coordination between agencies, and levels of government. This role incorporates:

• project management and program delivery;
• coordination of community dialogue;
• strategic planning;
• promotion of investment opportunities; and
• partnerships with local government.

The Regional Development Commissions were established as statutory authorities under the Regional Development Commissions Act 1993 (WA). The Act outlines the objectives and functions of the Commissions.

The Act stipulates that each of the nine Commissions be governed by a board. The board comprises local government and community representatives and Ministerial appointments. The Board sets the strategic direction and goals for the Commission.
Each Commission is responsible to a state government Minister.

The chairpersons of the Regional Development Commissions, along with two local government representatives and an independent chairperson, form the Regional Development Council. This is the peak advisory body to the state government on all regional development issues.

Regional Development Commissions are funded by a parliamentary appropriation. These funds are held in trust by Treasury.

**United Kingdom**

The United Kingdom uses the model of Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) which have been established to provide a single overarching local co-ordination framework within which other partnerships can operate.

Local Strategic Partnerships have been formed in each local government authority area and bring together a range of partners from the public, private, business, community and volunteer sectors.

The partnerships are designed to facilitate coordination and cooperation between local partners, to improve the effectiveness of service delivery and achieve sustainable economic, social and physical regeneration.

Each partnership has a number of core tasks:

- prepare and implement a community strategy;
- bring together local plans, partnerships and initiatives;
- work with local authorities that are developing local public service agreements to devise and meet targets; and
- develop and deliver a local neighbourhood renewal strategy.

The Local Strategic Partnerships are non-statutory, non-executive organisations.

Membership of each partnership has been determined locally and usually involves local government, public sector and community organisations, businesses and voluntary organisations that serve the local area. Local authorities are the lead partner in the partnership and are the only body accountable to central government.

Local authorities, on behalf of the partnership, negotiate a local area agreement (LAA) with the regional Government Office. The LAA is a three-year agreement that describes how local priorities will be met through local solutions and contributes to the national priorities set out by the government.

The LAA specifies agreed outcomes, targets and indicators across four themes:

- children and young people;
- safer and stronger communities;
- healthier communities and older people; and
- economic development and enterprise

Funding is allocated to the Local Strategic Partnership under Local Area Agreements. These agreements provide funds pooled into the four theme areas. From 2008,
Review of Regional Management Forums

Last year, at the request of the Minister for Community Development, the Victorian State Services Authority conducted a review of the Regional Management Forums. The review drew on expert advice from Professor Mark Considine, now Dean of Arts at the University of Melbourne.

Interviews or consultations were conducted with 146 members of the Forums. Additionally, an online survey was conducted, with responses generated from 116 forum members.

Although the report has not yet been publicly released, the review is expected to result in a number of changes.

Firstly, the main function of the Forums is currently information sharing and networking. While this is valuable, the Regional Management Forums will need to move beyond this role towards an integrated approach to regional development.

There is an emergent consensus in Government that the agenda of the RMFs needs to be expanded to incorporate economic, environmental and social objectives.

Achieving integration between state and local government planning for the social, economic and environmental wellbeing of communities is well recognised as a major challenge for governments. It will be important that Departments ensure regional managers have an appropriate delegate to effectively participate in such an expanded agenda.

Outstanding questions

Collaborative governance involving local government and state government agencies is vital. Responses to complex issues would however, be strengthened with the participation of the Commonwealth Government. With the Commonwealth Government’s current focus on social inclusion and collaborative federalism, there is likely to be scope to explore the involvement of the Commonwealth Government in regional governance structures such as Regional Management Forums.

If policy responses are to be effective, it is important that the scale of the governance structure is appropriate to the policy challenges being addressed. Regional Management Forums are able to oversee region-wide systemic issues, but local issues are better tackled via small-scale projects. The existence of collaborative governance structures at the regional level does not obviate the need for collaborative governance at other scales.

Collaborative governance structures are difficult to implement in the Westminster system of vertical accountability. This is not made easier by New Public Management with its focus on outputs and outcomes assigned to particular departments. How the tension between New Public Management and collaborative governance will be resolved is not yet clear.

Conclusion
Joined up government is central to many agendas, across social, economic and environmental policy areas.

Collaborative governance structures such as Regional Management Forums provide a mechanism for constructive dialogue between state and local government which could inform the development of whole of government priorities for the state and enable the achievement of those priorities at the regional and local levels.

Beyond the immediate and existing priorities of such structures, they have a longer-term potential to act as a universal vehicle for a broad range of collaborative agendas. These can include regional development, learning regions, and responses to climate change. In particular, the Forums offer an opportunity to more effectively link state and local planning.

There is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ model of collaborative governance, although there a number of learnings common to models across Australia. Joined-up government is clearly easier at the local level than it is centrally. And the learning from Victoria is that strong leadership is important to give shape, form and direction to activity.

Collaborative governance is critical to many policy issues. However, approaches to collaborative governance are in their infancy, and there remains much to learn.
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