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Sustaining the effort: integrated social policy frameworks in Victoria

Alison McClelland
Department of Planning and
Community Development

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About the author

Alison McClelland is the Executive Director of Strategic Policy, Research and Forecasting at the Department of Planning and Community Development. She is responsible for the Department's central policy and research unit; for conducting research, developing policy and understanding projects to improve livability, sustainability, social inclusion and the way government operates in Victoria.

Alison has previously held positions as Associate Professor and Head of School, Social Work and Social Policy, La Trobe University and Director of the Brotherhood of St Laurence, responsible for Social Action and Research. She is currently on the advisory committee for the Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research.

For governments to tackle complex and ongoing social problems, they often need to bring together different portfolios in integrated and sustained action. These are social policy frameworks that illustrate the move toward 'strategic government'. They are deliberative and coordinated plans of action across departments and portfolios over an extended period of time to achieve defined goals in order to 'solve specific problems and deal with the diversity and complexity of modern society' (Gallop 2007).

However, whilst often important and necessary, developing and maintaining these frameworks can be challenging. Two recent Victorian examples of social policy frameworks are A Fairer Victoria and the Victorian Family Violence Reform. This paper covers the development, continuation, benefits and challenges associated with these frameworks.

The need for purposeful, integrated and sustained government action

The use of such frameworks reflects a more purposeful role for government than 'New Public Administration', which dominated public administration in the 1990s. These frameworks require governments to regain 'their capacity to anticipate and lead' (Bourgon 2008) with a 'renewed belief in social change as the desired government action' (Gallop 2007). This can include acting in areas previously regarded as private responsibility (such as family violence), responding to longstanding problems (such as poverty and inequality) and committing to human rights frameworks. An heightened awareness of risk and uncertainty also places greater emphasis on the enabling role of government, and the need to develop individual capability and community resilience (Bourgon 2008).

Governments are also more aware that longstanding issues such as violence, addiction, homelessness and social exclusion are multidimensional and interrelated. They require a range of organisational responses, and often call for horizontal integration of action across departments and between different levels of government. Further, governments need to work with external organisations to better understand these complex issues, and to engage as partners in effective responses. Because these issues are longstanding, governments are more aware that responses need to be sustained to achieve significant outcomes. How to sustain coordinated effort with a reforming focus is a particular challenge.

A Fairer Victoria (AFV)

AFV is a policy framework for addressing disadvantage and creating opportunities. Each year a statement is released containing initiatives from different portfolios in the context of longer-term whole of government objectives and medium-term priorities.

AFV was introduced during the Brack's Government's second term, and followed a first-term social policy focus on improving basic services such as health and education. After the Government's re-election in 2002, there was a strong sense from both within government and the community that the Government needed to give higher priority to social policy. Consultations indicated that action should focus on disadvantage, range across a number of areas, and involve significant collaboration within and outside of government.

The process for developing AFV commenced in 2004. Four Ministerial Taskforces, chaired by senior ministers, were established to stimulate new policy thinking. Community organisations, researchers and academics were invited to contribute, complementing internal departmental research and analysis. In March 2005, the Government released a discussion paper setting out the case for action and the problems related to disadvantage that needed to be addressed (Department of Premier and Cabinet 2005a). The Government subsequently launched AFV as part of the budget in April 2005, and supported it with $788.2 million in new investments targeted to 14 strategy areas (Department of Premier and Cabinet 2005b).

Since then, four annual AFV statements have been released with each budget, and over $5 billion allocated to AFV initiatives (see Department of Planning and Community Development

2009 for the latest statement). In 2008, the original 14 strategies were converted into a deeper focus on four priority areas to meet the original five goals. This has not only given AFV continuity and consistency, but also the flexibility to address current issues.

The Department of Planning and Community Development (DPCD) is the lead department for the AFV. DPCD works closely with other departments, including the central agencies of the Department of Premier and Cabinet and the Department of Finance and Treasury to develop priorities and identify relevant initiatives for each annual statement. Collaboration occurs through regular meetings of departmental representatives and individual consultations over portfolio specific issues. Community organisations also participate in regular meetings at both departmental and ministerial levels. The Minister responsible for AFV presents to the relevant cabinet committee which authorises AFV priorities and the relevance of individual departmental initiatives to those priorities. The Minister then presents the proposed AFV package of initiatives to the Expenditure Review Committee.

Family Violence Reform (FVR)

FVR is unique in Australia, having been developed and implemented over a sustained period of time (from 2005 to the present). FVR is an integrated policy package involving a cross-section of individuals and organisations from across and outside of government.

Alongside broader reforms and significant investment in the issues of sexual assault and Indigenous family violence, FVR has positioned Victoria as a national leader in responding to violence against women, and holding perpetrators accountable.

FVR aimed to improve the safety of women and children, and to ensure that men who use violence are held accountable for their actions. It was the result of extensive research and policy development over three years, involving different sectors and organisations. The growing body of evidence suggested that a whole of government response was essential. Specifically, the evidence indicated that intimate partner violence was the highest contributor to the disease burden of Victorian women aged 15 – 44 years (Victorian Health Promotion Foundation 2004), was associated with over half the child protection cases, and was a significant economic cost (Access Economics 2004).

Two preceding strategies were critical. The first was the 2002 *Women's Safety Strategy*, which recommended establishing the Family Violence Statewide Advisory Committee with representation from government departments, the police, courts, legal services, family violence services and statewide and peak services. The committee's work was important in building a consensus around FVR. The second strategy was the *Violence Against Women Strategy* introduced by the Police Commissioner in 2004. This set in place a range of reforms including a new *Police Code of Practice for the Investigation of Family Violence*. It also identified ten Police Family Violence Advisor positions across the state. The police reforms were a key driver in Victoria towards developing an integrated system, and were established with no new funding.

Initial work concentrated on building a shared understanding on the nature of family violence, developing a standardised response to assess and manage risk, and having the police, courts and specialist services operating together in an effective and integrated manner. The central reform design was supported by widespread agreement that family violence could not be effectively addressed by one sector or service alone, or by fragmented and inconsistent services.

With a lead Minister, FVR was announced as a discrete strategy of AFV in 2005. A new investment of $35.1 million was allocated to a range of services and programs across government and the community sector. These included the development of a common risk assessment framework; expanded housing and crisis support options for women and

children; crisis accommodation and voluntary behaviour change programs for men; specialist family violence services at Magistrates' Courts; significant workforce development; and Indigenous Healing and Time Out services. These reforms built on the new police reforms initiated in 2004.

Further reforms and funding were announced as part of the 2007 and 2008 AFV statements to implement the risk assessment framework; continue the Family Violence Court Division; develop a network of specialist family violence lawyers; provide increased and targeted case management support for women and children; increase accountability through improved system responses to men who use violence; and strengthen regional governance.

The new *Family Violence Protection Act 2008* came into effect in December 2008. The legislation is aimed at better protecting victims of family violence through an enhanced intervention order system. Changes include the capacity for police to issue Family Violence Safety Notices—a key part of system reforms to enable women and children to remain in their homes, critically underpinning the reform process.

FVR is ongoing with new policies, tools, protocols and practice standards being developed to support the integrated service system. Examples include development of formal protocols between the Department of Human Services and Victoria Police around referral pathways, and the continuing development and implementation of the common risk assessment framework for the service system as a whole. Victoria is the first state to establish a mechanism to systemically review family violence deaths in Victoria, to be undertaken by the State Coroner's Office. The aim is to identify factors that led to these deaths, improve system responses, and address system gaps.

An inter-departmental committee (IDC) monitors the FVR, and includes a lead executive (a Deputy Secretary in DPCD) and a Ministerial Working Group of the five relevant Ministers. The Family Violence Coordination Reform Unit in the Office of Women's Policy in DPCD supports these committees. Family Violence Regional Partnerships have multi-sector representation, and oversee progress of regional work plans. The Family Violence Statewide Advisory Committee continues to meet and provide advice to government.

The next stage of Victorian reform focuses on the primary prevention of violence against women, with the comprehensive State Plan to Prevent Violence against Women announced as part of the 2008 – 2009 State Budget.

Progress and opportunities

The development and implementation of the two frameworks were intertwined, occurring over a similar period and reflecting government's preparedness to exercise leadership in developing a sustainable policy response to critical social policy issues. The implementation of both frameworks represents significant progress and achievements in social policy.

Some of the benefits of AFV include a broader understanding of the nature of disadvantage in Victoria, and an acceptance of government's key responsibility to reduce that disadvantage. In addition, a new understanding now exists of the complementary relationship between economic and social policy, and of social policy's broader contribution. The focus of social policy has broadened beyond restoring basic yet important services, to reforming across a wide range of areas including mental health, disability, youth, seniors, Indigenous Victorians, and disadvantaged places. This more coherent and consistent approach to reform is based on early intervention, and is client-focussed and place-based. There is also a stronger relationship between government and the community sector, and greater collaboration within and outside of government.

For FVR, the benefits include an acknowledgment of the seriousness of family violence and its implications. Responding is now considered to be a core business of government—family violence is no longer tolerated. A consensus has developed on how to respond, including the need for shared assessment, referral, support and integrated responses. State level strategic policy coordination has been complemented by coordination of regional implementation. As a result, partnerships between sectors and agencies have been maintained and collaboration between key organisations continues. System reforms have strengthened police and justice response since 2004, with an increase of 168 per cent in the number of Intervention Orders applied for by police, and an increase of 153 per cent in charges laid. Workforce development is occurring along with the development of evidence for ongoing reform of service practice.

While it cannot be said that these frameworks alone were responsible for the benefits outlined above, they arguably have had a significant influence. An important reason for this influence is their longevity—both have been ongoing for a number of years. It is now accepted in Victoria that government, with other sectors, has a responsibility for acting on the issues of disadvantage and family violence. Both issues have elevated the role of social policy, and have involved collaboration and a reform agenda. Both were developed on the basis of evidence, and have presented the government with coherent and accessible narratives around complex issues. Importantly, this longevity has allowed the key organisations and individuals, including Ministers, public servants and relevant people outside government to develop a deeper understanding of the issues and the responses that work. It has also enabled Victoria to use these understandings to play a national leadership role, contributing to the development of both the Commonwealth Government's approach to social inclusion, and a National Plan to Prevent Violence Against Women and Children.

Both frameworks face the challenge of continuing to develop an integrated government response. Government structures and processes are mainly based on vertical lines and according to portfolio accountabilities. The question of how to achieve horizontal and vertical integration, and balance 'joined up approaches with portfolio based, functional accountabilities' (State Services Authority 2004) is relevant not only to these frameworks, but also to a range of whole of government policy activities. This is particularly important in sustaining integrated action over a long period of time. How to maintain impetus and interest is a particular challenge, as is developing structures and processes to enable action that is efficient and appropriate.

Critical areas for building and sustaining the frameworks

The final section of this paper discusses four areas that are critical to the ongoing effectiveness of social policy frameworks, particularly in relation to ongoing policy development for cross-cutting policy issues. In doing so, it draws on the findings of two reports: *Connecting Government* (Management Advisory Committee 2004) and *Victorian approaches to joined up government* (State Service Authority 2007). The Commonwealth Government's Connecting Government report identifies a number of areas for attention for integrated government action that are also highlighted in the State Services Authority's report. These crucial areas have particular relevance for AFV and FVR.

The first is **structures and processes**. These frameworks need coordinating structures that set direction, oversee progress and account for outcomes, in addition to strong leadership at ministerial and executive level.

Both AFV and FVR developed structures that coordinate action across government. For AFV, the relevant cabinet social policy committee has played an important coordinating and authorising role. This is appropriate for a broad framework where all social policy Ministers have an interest at some time, and where annual requirements demand regular discussion

and decision-making. However, for FVR, a specific Family Violence Ministers Group with representation from the five portfolio's Ministers and a lead minister is more appropriate. With meetings held quarterly to monitor and review progress, this Ministers Group has provided strong leadership and political drive for the reform process.

Given the strong role for outside organisations in the FVR framework, the role of the Statewide Advisory Committee in bringing together different (and initially opposing) perspectives inside and outside of government has been pivotal. DPCD convenes departmental meetings for AFV, and has direct one on one consultations with departments. There is a reliance on strong relationships, open communication and familiarity over time with process. The link to the budget is an impetus for coordination.

Both frameworks have been served by strong leadership at ministerial and executive level, and by using the lead agency model to develop the various packages that have contributed to the frameworks over time. Interestingly, the same lead agency for both is a line department (DPCD), although AFV was originally developed in the Department of Premier and Cabinet, which was important in establishing authority. The Office of Women's Policy in DPCD, which is responsible for advising on whole of government policy and program development, is a relevant location for the ongoing development of FVR.

Culture and capability are the second areas critical to the frameworks. High level departmental support for cooperative approaches is vital. Public sector capabilities around relationship building, negotiation and conflict resolution, and departmental systems that support local and lower level decision-making are also important.

Building strong relationships across and outside of government has been instrumental to the longevity of both frameworks. The authority to collaborate and share information across departments and services is central to both, but is not always easy.

In the case of AFV, the competitive nature of the budget process, and the need for strict confidentiality of budget decisions can inhibit sharing and accessing relevant budget information. This has been resolved by developing trust between key departments, and using special processes to share and access information. For example, when developing the annual statement, DPCD officials are located in the Department of Premier and Cabinet, and all material remains there. Also important has been DPCD's high level of delegation to the business unit responsible for AFV. This has allowed the unit to respond to whole of government issues, and not to the specific interests of DPCD.

Similarly, FVR has benefited from strong executive leadership. Victorian Police's leadership has been critical in relation to resource commitment, training and cultural change. A Deputy Secretary from DPCD chairs the Family Violence IDC, which meets bi-annually with regional partnerships to address issues that arise from the reform implementation.

Information management and infrastructure are the third important, but often neglected, areas. They include the capacity to develop and exchange information with inter-operability between information systems, and to establish whole of government indicators. These are also relevant to issues of resource allocation and accountability.

For FVR, data collection and information sharing has been a key focus given the complexity of multiple data systems with a lack of capacity to track across systems. New effort and investment was required to facilitate service integration, and to collect details about relevant risk factors and information on perpetrators. FVR continues to be monitored through departmental and regional annual workplans, and data is collected in statewide databases. A Family Violence Database, managed by the Department of Justice, provides trend data on family violence incidents in Victoria. In addition to the database, the Family Violence Benchmark Data Project (led by DPCD) has been collecting two-week snapshot data from

the police, courts and family violence services on key indicators every six months over a two-year period.

Ongoing work includes establishing a common family violence risk assessment framework and protocols for information sharing. Outcome measures and indicator development are also an ongoing focus of research. The family violence reforms in Victoria, including a focus on the integration of intervention responses, are also being analysed with an academic team from Melbourne University.

AFV operates as a policy framework for developing portfolio specific and, in some cases, cross-portfolio initiatives. Accountability for these lies with the relevant Ministers. A new reporting system to the relevant cabinet committee has been developed, which places more emphasis on assessing progress in areas relevant to AFV priorities and less on monitoring the implementation of individual initiatives. This was cumbersome and unnecessarily duplicated departmental monitoring systems. However, developing relevant measures and whole of government data systems remains a critical area for further work for AFV and social policy generally. Investigations into systems with the capacity to bring together data around relevant social policy issues, groups and place are continuing.

Connections in and outside of government is the final area, and is important for identifying a wide range of views, communicating and consulting with the public, and having relevant on the ground information and implementation capacity. AFV has used both formal and informal consultation processes primarily with community organisations, but also with some academics. These consultations have helped to develop a credible framework, and to obtain political support. FVR's ongoing advisory committee, with representation from key organisations outside of government, has been central to obtaining informed views of those outside of government and developing deeper shared understandings and integration of different perspectives, including of those responsible for service delivery. For both frameworks, public reporting on resources, actions and achievements is important for media and public attention, and for maintaining political and ministerial support.

Challenges for the future

While the areas discussed above have been critical to the development and longevity of the two frameworks, some need further work. Both AFV and FVR have structures that develop and authorise activity with strong leadership at ministerial and departmental level. However, both require the activity through formal structures to be complemented by engagement and communication with individual departments and services. There is a need for continuing the strong commitment to collaboration at all levels, and for building communication and the capacity to negotiate.

Perhaps the least understood and developed areas are those of information management and infrastructure, and the related matters of resource allocation and accountability. Both AFV and FVR rely on resource allocation through departments and, therefore, depend on the decisions of individual departments where the accountability also resides. Mechanisms for highlighting the collective resources across government allocated to these frameworks such as AFV's annual statement have been critical to their continued support. Also of importance has been building common understandings and processes, such as the risk assessment framework and protocols for information sharing in the case of FVR. However, more work is needed to identify common outcomes, understand how the actions of different departments contribute to these outcomes, and introduce common systems and processes for information sharing and integration across departments to monitor these outcomes.

Building integrated frameworks is a work in progress with theoretical and practical implications for public policy and administration. While certainly not all government action needs to be integrated in this way, the examples of AFV and FVR illustrate that it is possible

to have a cross-portfolio approach within a structure where accountability and resource allocation still reside within individual portfolios. Importantly, these frameworks illustrate the benefits and the difficulties of sustained action, which allows for ongoing learning and development about the issues and about how best to respond to them.

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