

# STRATEGIC PLAN

2021 - 2023



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## Minister's Foreword

Victoria is home to vibrant and diverse border communities.

Around 120,000 Victorians live in border towns and districts along the State's borders with New South Wales and South Australia, while overall population on both sides of the borders reaches more than 300,000 people.

These close-knit border communities benefit from access to health, education, employment, retail, recreation and other services on both sides of the border. But they also face unique challenges that come with differences in the way neighbouring states conduct their business.

In 2018 Victoria's Government listened to our border communities who told us about the need for a Cross Border Commissioner. The initiative was particularly championed by the Mallee Regional Partnership.

Victoria's Cross Border Commissioner advocates for those living and working along Victoria's state borders and continues to tackle matters affecting the everyday lives of border residents, resolving issues, negotiating agreements, and advocating on their behalf.

Since the beginning of COVID-19, the challenges that our border communities face have been brought to the fore through the introduction of border restrictions and other COVID-related measures. They have also highlighted the importance of the Cross Border Commissioner's advocacy role in times of emergency.

Assisting our border communities to navigate COVID-related border restrictions, the Cross Border Commissioner has responded to thousands of public enquiries and advocated into New South Wales and South Australia on border bubbles, opening bridges, allowing emergency access, approving compassionate cases and simplifying border area movement.

The Victorian government is proud to champion the needs of people living on our state's borders. I endorse this Strategic Plan for 2021-2023 as an important blueprint to help our border communities and unlock the opportunities abundant along the borders.



The Hon Mary-Anne Thomas MP  
Minister for Regional Development

## Introduction

People living along Victoria's borders have business and social networks that extend into New South Wales and South Australia. But service delivery and regulatory differences between the states can discourage people from taking up work and study opportunities across the border and add to the cost of doing business in border areas.

In a COVID environment these differences are made more stark by the range of border restrictions along state borders. Those, combined with different state COVID settings and support packages, further complicate life for border communities and businesses.

Victoria's Cross Border Commissioner's principal role is to work with border communities and businesses to identify and advocate for change along Victoria's borders. This involves working with Victoria's departments and agencies, as well as interstate counterparts and other jurisdictions.

Helping border communities and businesses navigate these differences, especially with advice on COVID-related border restrictions, has also emerged as a necessary role for the Cross Border Commissioner.

Making it easier to do business across our borders has economic benefit, while addressing practice and regulatory barriers to people accessing various services improves health and social outcomes in border communities – making our border areas better places to live.

## The Office of Victoria's Cross Border Commissioner

Following representations by the Mallee Regional Partnership, which shares borders with NSW and SA, the State Government of Victoria appointed its first Cross Border Commissioner, commencing in October 2018.

The Office of Victoria's Cross Border Commissioner is located within the Department of Jobs, Precinct and Regions. The Cross Border Commissioner is based in Albury-Wodonga and travels regularly along Victoria's border areas to meet with fellow border residents and border businesses.

## Victoria's Border Communities

The State of Victoria has three borders. Two are land borders – with South Australia to our west and New South Wales to our north. The third is Tasmania, with our border in Bass Strait.

More than 300,000 people live in our border towns and districts on both sides of each of our land borders.

Victoria's border communities are diverse, ranging from major urban centres like Albury-Wodonga, Mildura and Echuca Moama to smaller and even remote communities like Bendoc and Bonang in the northern reaches of far east Gippsland, Lindsay Point in Victoria's far north west and Nelson in Victoria's south west corner.

These communities are interconnected through cultural and economic ties between both sides of the border. Sporting competitions and festivals, schools and hospitals, business and employment include residents from both sides of the border and provide opportunities to interact and support each other.

## Border Anomalies and Opportunities

Victoria's border communities have deep connections with their cross border counterparts, and many of these communities aspire to operate as one.

This can be seen in the way they define their communities such as in Echuca-Moama, Barham-Koondrook and Albury-Wodonga, the many cross border sporting teams and competitions, and the sharing of resources and facilities.

Despite the best efforts of border communities to work together, legislative, regulatory and practice differences between states can discourage people from taking up work and study opportunities across the borders, and can also prevent, or raise issues, for business.

Issues raised by border communities are usually one of three types:

- different rules and regulations – eg. road rules, load limits, trade and business licensing.
- different policies and practices – both practices might be reasonable, but living in the middle of the two can get messy.
- joint opportunities for working together. For example: "Wouldn't it be better if we could market our tourism offerings together rather than separately?"

Making it easier to do business in other states has economic benefits, while addressing practice and regulatory barriers to people accessing education, justice, health and human services can improve health and social outcomes in border communities.

Capitalising on opportunities for joint action and investment is not always easy to navigate and coordinate when two State Government budget processes are involved, though the most efficient investment can involve a single build, a single event, or a single program/action based in one state to service residents in both.

## Victoria – NSW Memorandum Of Understanding

The Premiers of Victoria and NSW signed have signed the *New South Wales and Victoria Memorandum of Understanding for Cross-Border Collaboration 2019-2021*, now extended to 2023.

The MoU is an acknowledgement by both governments of the importance and interdependence of both jurisdictions in the border region, and the ongoing requirement to work closely and collaboratively to improve social and economic outcomes.

The MoU identifies key focus areas that cover:

- Improved service delivery;
- Simplifying regulation for communities, businesses and organisations;
- Joint regional development opportunities.

A joint Annual Work List is developed under the MOU, with actions addressing the key focus areas. The Annual Work List guides the work of each Cross Border Commissioner along this border.

## Statement of Intent

The Cross Border Commissioner advocates for change for border communities and businesses.

### Strategies

The Cross Border Commissioner advocates for change for border communities and businesses by:

- Providing an effective avenue for border communities and businesses to air cross border anomalies and opportunities
- Bringing together the people and agencies best able to act on those issues and opportunities
- Designing, testing and sharing solutions for lasting change.

### Success

Externally, success is indicated by border communities:

- Having their issues truly heard and acknowledged
- Seeing people and agencies acting on those issues, with genuine intent
- Seeing and experiencing lasting change.

### Functions

The Cross Border Commissioner's primary function is advocacy. With particular focus on the Strategic Action Areas identified further below, the Cross Border Commissioner will:

#### **1 Advocate for increased collaboration between governments to address cross border issues**

- Consult with and inform border communities, businesses and other stakeholders
- Work with other jurisdictions to solve issues
- Work with other cross border commissioners or equivalent
- Provide input into commonwealth and state government reviews and inquiries
- Provide advice to government about prioritised cross border issues
- Advocate for the needs of cross border communities and businesses to be considered in the drafting of policy, procedures, regulation and legislation
- Represent border communities and businesses at relevant forums.

#### **2 Advocate for increased investment and jobs growth in border communities through greater access to new markets, improved productivity and increased labour mobility**

- Identify key barriers for economic development
- Advocate for a simplified regulatory environment for business growth and labour mobility
- Advocate for mutual recognition of licences and qualifications to facilitate labour mobility.

### **3 Advocate for better access to services for border communities**

- Work with other jurisdictions to improve planning for and access to a range of education, justice, health and community services for border communities.

### **4 Provide supporting advice to help border communities navigate border restrictions and anomalies**

- Work with border communities as required to make sense of border restrictions and other border anomalies
- Advocate back into agencies to improve the quality and consistency of advice.

## Key tools

As an advocate, the Cross Border Commissioner:

- Works to the Minister for Regional Development, and through the Minister reports to Cabinet on every issue and opportunity raised, and on progress against them
- Updates and informs border communities and businesses on issues and progress
- Works with the NSW Cross-Border Commissioner and SA agencies, including under cross border Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs)
- Connects with Ministers, departments and agencies relevant to an issue or opportunity
- Shares information and experiences across border communities, departments and agencies to build capacity for communities to resolve future issues
- Convenes forums to design, test and share solutions
- Researches issues and opportunities to support solution development
- Measures and evaluates progress.

## Reporting

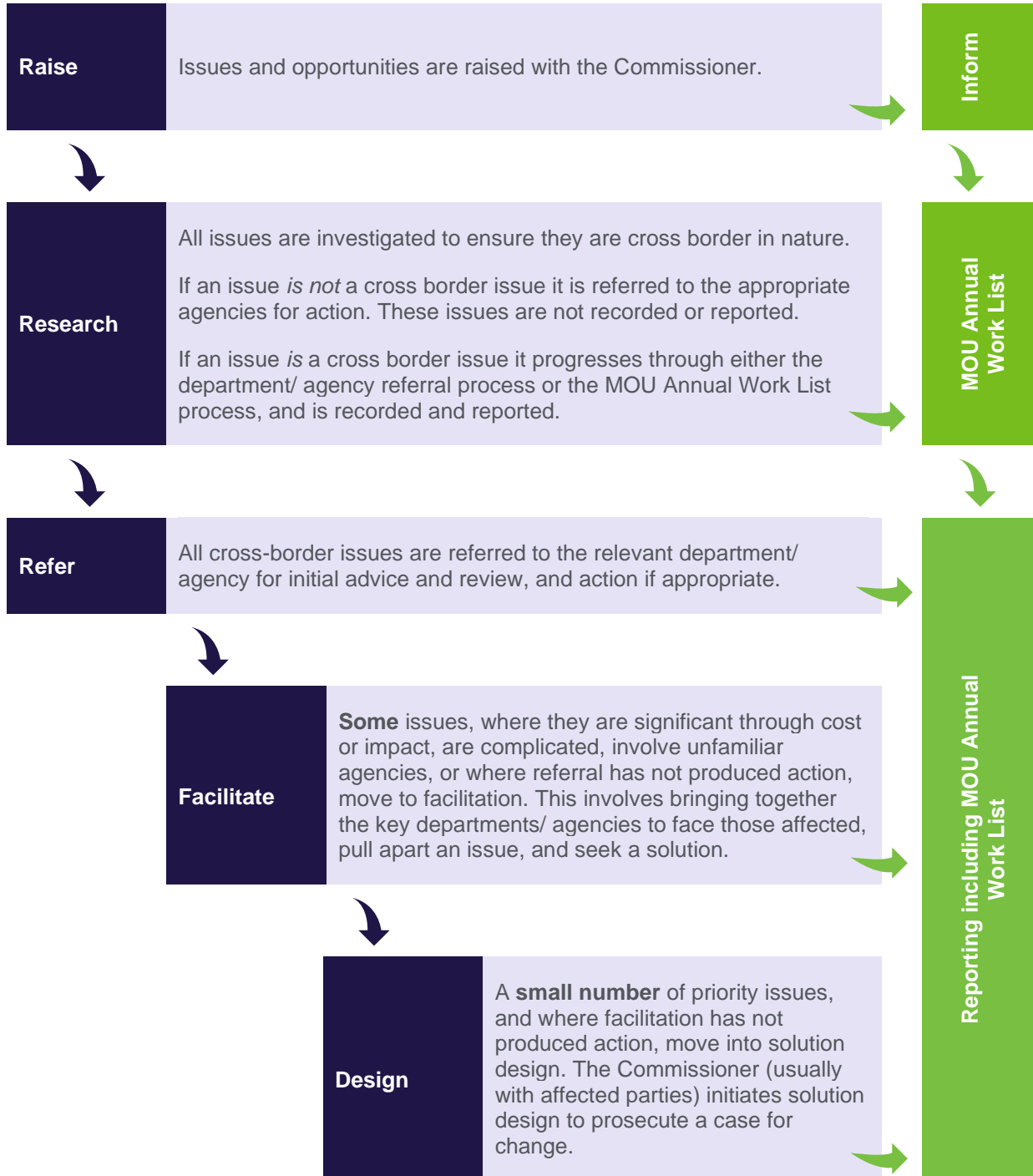
The Cross Border Commissioner reports to the Minister for Regional Development on a quarterly basis. The Minister brings to Cabinet reports on cross border issues, trends and systemic observations provided by the Commissioner.

The Cross Border Commissioner engages with government departments on an ongoing basis and reports to departmental secretaries on a six-monthly basis on issues and observations.

The Commissioner's Annual Report is included into the annual report published by Regional Development Victoria, an agency within Victorian Department of Jobs, Precinct and Regions.

The process utilised by the Cross Border Commissioner is captured in the graphic below.

## Approach





## Strategic Action Areas

Through extensive and ongoing engagement and consultation with border communities and businesses, Victoria's Cross Border Commissioner has identified six strategic areas for action and reform that aim to contribute towards improving economic, social and environmental outcomes for communities living along Victorian borders. Framing around these action areas will allow for the normalisation of the Cross Border Commissioner's COVID related work.

### 1. A Cross Border Approach to Health Outcomes

State borders should not be an impediment to healthcare, and a sustainable borderless approach to service delivery is essential to meet the current and future needs of our border communities, who seek accessible and culturally appropriate health services regardless of geography or jurisdiction.

The Cross Border Commissioner advocates for state health planning to recognise cross border catchments in the development of health infrastructure and the health workforce, as well as the delivery of health services. To achieve this, the Cross Border Commissioner will work with health agencies to build and enhance interagency collaboration. This includes the ongoing advocacy and information effort in relation to COVID-related border restrictions.

### 2. A Cross Border Approach to Infrastructure, Transport and Digital Connectivity

Efficient infrastructure is an enabler of better social, economic and environmental outcomes. Often framed as both anomalies and opportunities, investment, regulation and service design in these areas demonstrate significant opportunity for joint or coordinated action, as well as for the development of joint information to help border communities identify and navigate differences. Recent experience has already shown the payoffs available from the Cross Border Commissioner facilitating engagement between state agencies, including helping to build agency connections and relationships that are typically weaker outside of border regions.

### 3. A Cross Border Approach to Safe and Resilient Communities

The 2019-20 bushfires and the COVID-19 pandemic have drawn national attention to state borders and their implications for emergency management and community resilience. The Cross Border Commissioner was found to be in high demand very quickly upon the onset of the relief and recovery effort around the fires, and even more so with the advent of COVID-related border restrictions applying to Victoria's border communities in March 2020.

This experience built on the representations already made to the Cross Border Commissioner around border issues with community safety involving areas such as justice, policing and child protection.

The Cross Border Commissioner will continue a measured role in support of emergency management, staying within the advocacy role to support connections between emergency management agencies, continuing as a resource for border communities seeking to navigate border restrictions as necessary, and continuing advocacy on supportive data sharing.

### 4. A Cross Border Approach to the Simplification of Regulation

Border regions represent a unique regulatory and investment environment for governments as cross border communities access their services and operate their businesses in multiple jurisdictions, but within communities that operate as one. Government can take stronger account of this status when delivering government programs and investments, and developing policies, regulation and legislation.

The Cross Border Commissioner will continue to advocate for regulatory and policy development to incorporate cross border assessment, to avoid the uninformed creation of new anomalies and help to

reduce the impact of existing anomalies. As well as pursuing specific regulatory reform areas, such as liquor regulation, mutual recognition, commercial passenger vehicles and business licensing, the Cross Border Commissioner will also engage in capacity building across key parts of government to help agencies deal with border questions more efficiently.

#### **5. A Cross Border Approach to Education and Training**

Provision of quality and consistent education for cross border communities encompasses all levels of education – from pre-school through to transitioning into the workforce. Opportunities to improve access and pathways to education in cross-border communities is one of the most common issues raised along Victoria's borders, especially around school access, vocational and educational training subsidies and their portability and data sharing.

#### **6. A Cross Border Approach to Economic Development**

Recognising the above, it becomes obvious that economic development opportunities in border regions can only be maximised through applying a cross border lens to the opportunities. This is because customers, employees, resources and supply chains will inevitably cross borders, rendering delusional the notion that opportunity can be maximised by working to one side of a border only.

The Cross Border Commissioner has supported the development of Victoria's Regional Economic Development Strategies (REDS), which will recognise these opportunities. Accordingly, the Cross Border Commissioner will support further harmonisation efforts that arise from these strategies through Victoria's Regional Partnerships, or through other mechanisms such as Regional Deals where they apply to border areas (eg. the prospective Albury Wodonga Regional Deal).

The Commissioner will also work with grant program designers to allow border communities a fair opportunity to benefit from state programs, and where possible to identify joint or coordinated funding opportunities with neighbouring states.