



Rural Councils Victoria

Strategic Plan 2020 – 2024

Supporting Document

Prepared by:



Susan Benedyka | The Regional Development Company Pty Ltd

PO Box 25, Wangaratta VIC 3676

Phone: 03 5722 2207

Email: rdc.office@regionaldevelopment.com.au

Web: www.regionaldevelopment.com.au

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Introduction

Rural Councils Victoria (RCV) represents Victoria's rural councils, supporting and promoting sustainable, liveable, prosperous rural communities.

We believe that liveable, sustainable and prosperous rural communities are fundamental to the ongoing success of Victoria. Our rural areas and communities are critical to the liveability of Victoria. They are also key to a thriving state economy.

1 in 9 Victorians live in rural communities and are served by rural Councils. In Victoria, 38 of the 79 councils are classified as 'rural'. Victoria's rural councils are responsible for 79 per cent of Victoria's land area and have a combined population of approximately 745,000 people (Census 2016).

Purpose of our Strategic Plan

Our Strategic Plan provides clear directions for the next four years (2020-2024), so that we can deliver our Mission, and achieve our Vision.

Our mission: To play a leadership role in delivering a sustainable, liveable, and prosperous rural Victoria

Our organisational vision: RCV is recognised as the voice for rural Victoria, to achieve sustainable rural communities and sustainable rural councils

The Strategic Plan provides high level strategic directions to meet this vision and mission, and describes our desired outcomes and our overall priorities. It is our driving document for governance and accountability to our member councils and to our funding partners.

This supporting document provides details of lead-up discussions, context for the strategic directions, desired outcomes and high-level RCV actions.

An Annual Work Plan will be developed by the Committee and outline priority actions, timeframes, responsibilities, and key performance measures to achieve the strategic directions and the Committee's agreed priorities. The RCV Committee will review this Strategic Plan annually and reframe the priorities for the coming year.

In addition, an Advocacy Plan will be developed and negotiated with member councils.

Background

Rural Councils Victoria

RCV was established in 2005 to coordinate the network of 38 rural councils across Victoria in their efforts to better understand, articulate and address the issues affecting them.

We work hard to heighten awareness of the issues impacting rural communities.

Our core work includes expert research on the challenges and opportunities for rural Victoria, development of practical policy frameworks, modelling and testing of best practice examples, and delivery of programs to support local solutions.

We also deliver events, training and implementation materials to ensure our member councils across rural Victoria have the capacity to respond to the findings of our core work in a meaningful way.

We are a valued avenue of communication between our member councils and State and Federal governments, and regularly collaborate with agencies and private sector organisations to ensure our work is used to secure better outcomes for rural Victoria, and for the state as a whole.

We are an independent organisation supported by fee contributions from our member councils, and a funding agreement with the Victorian State Government.

Our Committee of 12 is comprised of councillors and local government CEOs from across Victoria who meet monthly to oversee our program of work. In June 2020, 37 councils are members of RCV.

Context

At the time of developing this strategic plan (June 2020), there were significant disruptions and uncertainties affecting individuals, communities, and rural councils across Victoria – specifically post-drought impacts, significant bushfire impacts, and the ongoing impacts of COVID-19 pandemic.

It is acknowledged that these uncertainties and the volatility of the current situation creates even greater pressures for rural communities and their councils. These uncertainties and volatility also impact the state and federal governments and may drive very different policy agendas for future recovery.

Now, more than ever, rural councils and rural communities need strong advocacy to deliver a clear, compelling vision of a sustainable, liveable, and prosperous rural Victoria.

Many of the issues RCV has explored since its establishment are centred on the issue of equity for rural Victoria.

Geopolitical shifts and global forces, policy and funding decisions, and community attitudes over a long period of time have resulted in major gaps in equity between Australia's major cities and the rest of the country, which have major impacts for rural Victoria.

These are most pronounced in the following areas:

Environment

Environmental pressures on our rural communities are coalescing in critical ways. Changes in climate conditions are seeing drought conditions, bushfires and natural disasters placing new pressure on rural industries and economies. Never before has the need for proactive policy and funding decisions to support these communities to weather the worst been more necessary.

Health and Education

The gap in health and education outcomes between rural Victorians and their metro counterparts continues to grow. But public and private investment in these sectors could unlock new opportunities for population growth and workforce attraction and ultimately bring huge gains in the liveability of our rural and regional communities. With this comes growth in rural (and regional) economies, support for our ageing populations and opportunities to significantly shift disadvantage outcomes across the state.

Infrastructure

Underpinning the growth of Victoria is the critical need for investment in built and digital infrastructure to unlock opportunities for economic growth, improve connectivity, and attract new populations to liveable rural areas. With local governments increasingly responsible for this infrastructure, funding support is needed to ensure our rural areas are not left behind.

Reflection

We have reflected on the past three years of RCV to understand what has served us well, what we have achieved, and what lessons we have learned. This reflection allows us to build on our strengths, develop insights into our best ways of achieving impactful results, and highlights the areas we need to work on over the coming four years.

At our very best

RCV, when operating at its very best, is:

- relevant, go-to source of evidence-based information about rural councils and communities
- proactive, positive advocacy and lobbying group on behalf of rural councils
- visible to our members, state and federal government, and local communities
- effective – achieving results for our member councils
- respectful of the diversity of our members
- a genuine partner
- providing meaningful, practical, useful research for our members and government

We are enabled to do our very best by:

- Strong and mutually respectful relationships with organisations such as MAV and Regional Cities, and other levels of government
- Committed and active members
- Effective communication and connection with our members
- Clearly understood and defined role
- Focus on issues which are of concern to the majority of our members
- Resources to enable us to deliver advocacy and research
- Being nimble, responsive and decisive

Achievements

We have done well over the past three years in the following areas:

- Advocacy on behalf of our rural communities, and acknowledging the difference between councils
- Comprehensive, practical research that underpins effective lobbying – eg workforce, investment attraction, economic impact of jobs
- Developed a high-quality investment plan for the State government election
- Great support material developed for member councils
- Provided opportunities for skills development for councillors and council staff
- Developed critical partnerships to further our work
- Represented 38 councils

Specifically, we have delivered:

- Research that has provided an evidence base for advocacy, and provided data and insight into key issues faced by rural councils
- Resource centre for councils
- Summits and forums for rural councillors and rural council staff that disseminated information, provided connections, built skills
- Being a sounding board and key provider of input to federal and state government for future thinking on matters affecting rural communities, and rural councils

For the future

Our reflection and analysis have led to a clear understanding of what we need to continue to do, and strengthen:

- Set clear agreed priorities for future action
- Be the voice of rural councils
- Engage more broadly with member councils
- Communicate with members about successes, issues, emerging opportunities
- Share best practice resources between councils

We also understand that the current uncertainty may mean that state funding resources for the work of RCV may be either constrained, or enhanced, and that both eventualities need to feature in our future thinking.

If we are successful in obtaining continued state funding, we will:

- Use existing research for action, support, and advocacy
- Continue commissioning relevant and good quality research to provide an evidence base for policy proposals and submissions, and good quality accessible material for member councils
- Continue to represent our 38 councils to support our communities
- Strategically pick up on emerging opportunities for rural Victoria
- Continue to build skills and capacity in rural councils – through forums, workshops, seminars, shared resources
- Become an effective networking body

If external funding resources are constrained, we will:

- Continue to represent our 38 councils to support our communities
- Narrow the focus of RCV to advocacy, utilising our existing research
- Partner with other peak bodies and ensure rural councils voices are heard
- Become an effective networking body
- Explore other avenues of funding for research and capacity development activities

Considerable opportunities are emerging:

- Federal focus on regional Australia
- Post COVID population shift (reality and opportunity) to rural and regional areas
- Opportunity to promote and market lifestyle and benefits of rural communities
- Shared resources and best practice between councils

- Building deeper relationships and awareness within member councils
- Recovery, resilience and preparedness of communities and councils for disasters
- Trusted sounding board for Ministers

As a result, we have determined three pillars for our work over the next four years:

1. Sustainable, liveable and prosperous rural Victorian communities
2. Safe rural Victorian communities
3. Engaged, supported and capable rural Victorian councils

Our Mission

To play a leadership role in delivering a sustainable, liveable, and prosperous rural Victoria

RCV Organisational Vision

RCV is recognised as the voice for rural Victoria, to achieve sustainable rural communities and sustainable rural councils.

This means that:

- We are a key body influencing government policy and projects for rural Victoria
- We provide a rural lens on the development and implementation of policy
- We increase the understanding, recognition, and funding outcomes for rural councils across Victoria
- We increase the capacity of rural councils to deliver positive outcomes for their communities
- We are a strong advocate on issues affecting rural councils and communities

Strategic Pillars

1. Sustainable, liveable and prosperous rural Victorian communities

Strategic intent:

- A thriving Rural Victoria is seen as critical to the state's success

Desired outcomes:

- Rural Victoria's population is at a sustainable level
- Rural Victoria has the workforce in place to support a sustainable economy
- Rural Victoria's existing and growing industries are supported to thrive, and new industries are actively supported
- Essential public services are sustainably funded to ensure viability of rural communities for the long term
- Built infrastructure funding ensures an equitable liveability standard across Victoria
- Improved access to services for people living in rural communities (health, education, transport, telecommunications) so that Rural Victorians have access to services for all stages of life at a comparable standard to their regional and metro counterparts
- The social indicators gaps between rural residents and their metro counterparts closes
- Victoria's natural environment is preserved and improved
- Rural Victorians are valued as important champions for their local communities

High level RCV actions:

- Media campaign about positive aspects of rural living
- Promote results of previous research to member councils, governments, and broader Victorian community
- Research to underpin a strong advocacy plan to achieve sustainable, liveable and prosperous rural Victorian communities
- Annual Advocacy Plan developed – based on evidence and engagement with all rural councils

2. Safe rural Victorian communities

Strategic intent:

- assist rural councils by undertaking research that will support rural council's emergency management and advocacy.

Desired outcomes:

- Rural communities can lead and influence recovery in their communities, with support (not control) from State and Federal agencies
- Local councils are recognised as key stakeholders in disaster preparation, response and recovery, and valued for their important local knowledge and information
- Funding is available for disaster preparation and recovery
- Rural councils are provided with state funding to be better prepared for natural disasters
- Rural communities are able to capitalise on recovery – population attraction, capital expenditure, and targeted government investment
- Long term economic impacts of disasters (particularly Covid-19) are recognised and planned for in rural areas
- Economic impacts of disasters on rural communities are recognised and supported at a council by council level
- The unique impacts of health disasters on rural communities and rural councils is identified, with advocacy for relevant responses

High level RCV actions:

- Understand and measure the impacts of natural and health disasters on rural communities and rural councils
- Investigate opportunities for resource and staff sharing to assist rural councils impacted by natural disasters
- RCV membership/participation on State Emergency Management bodies
- Training for rural council officers in emergency and disaster recovery

Advocacy:

- Dedicated funding for rural communities to respond to and recover from disasters
- Funding to assist rural councils prepare for disasters

3. High performing rural Victorian councils

Strategic intent:

- Engaged, supported and capable rural councils

Desired outcomes:

- Financially sustainable rural councils
- All rural councils have a clear long-term vision
- United, connected and networked rural councils
- Resourced rural councils
- Capable rural councils
- Well utilised collective resources
- Diverse pools of candidates for elections
- The RCV value proposition is well articulated, recognised and appreciated

High level RCV actions:

- Engage, consult and advocate on key issues affecting rural local government
- Continued investment in skills development for rural councils
- Design and deliver targeted forums, networking opportunities, and conferences
- Develop ways to encourage resource sharing, working together and shared delivery
- Continued focus on building capacity of rural councils
- Clearly articulate the value proposition of RCV
- Communicate the value, benefits, opportunities provided by RCV to councils (deep within the organisations, and to Councillors)
- Long term planning for rural councils – for a future with less state and federal funding available
- Develop suite of resources to assist councils to develop long term plans, and implement strategies and actions
- Up to date, accessible and communicated resources
- Communications structure that is ready, able and accessible to tackle 'hot' issues quickly

Advocacy:

- Clear differentiation of needs of rural councils (as compared to metropolitan councils) so that this is understood and engrained in policy and decision making
- Continued advocacy on funding equity – with a solutions focused aim
- Clear advocacy pitch/ask

Advocacy Intentions

RCV is one of many organisations and individuals whose work contributes to a sustainable, liveable, and prosperous rural Victoria. This Strategic Plan intentionally focuses on high level activities and actions within the ambit, influence and control of RCV. However, our work and the work of others contributes to a much bigger picture.

Annually, we will develop an Advocacy Plan with these goals in mind, as well as the specific issues of importance to rural councils.

We will be able to define our collective success when the following goals have been achieved.

Pillar 1 – Sustainable, liveable and prosperous rural Victorian communities

Goals (social, economic and environmental):

- 1.1. Rural Victoria's population is at a sustainable level
- 1.2. Rural Victoria has the workforce in place to support a sustainable economy
- 1.3. Rural Victoria's existing and growing industries are supported to thrive, and new industries are actively supported
- 1.4. Essential public services are sustainably funded to ensure viability of rural communities for the long term
- 1.5. Built infrastructure funding ensures an equitable liveability standard across Victoria
- 1.6. Rural Victorians have access to services for all stages of life at a comparable standard to their regional and metro counterparts
- 1.7. The social indicators gaps between rural residents and their metro counterparts closes
- 1.8. Victoria's natural environment is prioritised to ensure the rural lifestyle is preserved
- 1.9. A thriving Rural Victoria is seen as critical to the state's success
- 1.10. Rural Victorians are valued as important champions for their local communities

Pillar 2 - Safe rural Victorian communities

Goals:

- 2.1 Services are available to rural Victorians that enable communities to be safe
- 2.2 Investment in natural disaster mitigation is made to ensure rural communities are safe for the long term
- 2.3 Rural councils have the capacity to respond to crises
- 2.4 Rural councils are valued as important sounding boards for community safety and wellbeing, and are an active partner in the development of disaster planning and responses

Pillar 3 – High performing rural Victorian councils

Objectives:

- 3.1 Rural councils are sustainable
- 3.2 Strong and capable rural councils
- 3.3 Local Government is prioritised as the tier of government closest to rural communities

Priority Setting

This Strategic Plan is deliberately at a high level.

An Annual Work Plan will be developed by the Committee and outline priority actions, timeframes, responsibilities, and key performance measures to achieve the strategic directions and the Committee's agreed priorities. The RCV Committee will review this Strategic Plan annually and reframe the priorities for the coming year.

The Committee will take a principles-based approach to establishing annual priorities:

- Addressing issues that affect the majority of councils
- Addressing issues that affect some councils but have a significant impact
- Responsiveness to emerging opportunities, issues and demands
- Actions that are within our control
- Advocacy for outcomes or resources that are outside of our direct control
- Partnerships and alliances that achieve the desired advocacy intentions and strategic outcomes

Review and Monitoring Process

The RCV Committee is responsible for the governance of the organisation. Our Strategic Plan has a life of four years and will be renewed in June-July 2024.

It has been deliberately developed at the start of the financial year that fits the cycle of Victorian Council elections which occur in October every four years.

From this Plan, an Annual Work Plan and priorities will be developed. Our Annual Work Plan will take into account the local government cycle (ie new councillors elected in Year 1, Council Plans developed in Year 1).

Following the development and adoption of Council Plans (March-June Year 1), RCV will work with Councils to develop the RCV Annual Advocacy Plan considering issues affecting most councils.

The Strategic Plan, and Annual Advocacy Plan can also be used as the of basis high-quality investment plan for the State and Federal government elections.

Every four years	Strategic Plan renewal
Annually	Strategic Plan review Annual Work Plan reviewed New Annual Work Plan developed, with refreshed priorities Annual Advocacy Plan developed with member Councils
Bi-annually	Advocacy Plan monitored for progress
Monthly	Annual Work Plan reported on, and monitored for progress

