

Victorian Regional Homelessness Networks:

Operations Guide



December 2021

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1. Purpose

This Guide outlines the role and responsibilities of the Regional Homelessness Networks and has been developed by the Regional Homelessness Networkers as a resource for Network auspice agencies, governance bodies and new Network Coordinators.

This document brings together historical documents relating to the function of the Homelessness Networks, which may also provide a basis from which the Networks and Department of Families, Fairness and Housing can review the Networks/Networker role in 2021/2022.

2. Background

2.1. Introduction to the Regional Homelessness Networks

The Victorian Regional Homelessness Networks were established in 1996¹, along with the creation of Network Coordinator positions. There are nine Regional Networks operating across Victoria, mirroring the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH) Areas. There is also a statewide Aboriginal Network: the Victorian Indigenous Statewide Homelessness Network (VISHN).

Regional Networks are referenced in Part Five of the Homelessness Guidelines and Conditions of Funding, May 2014:

“DHS [DFFH] provides resources for the maintenance of Regional Homelessness Networks. These networks provide an opportunity for all homelessness services to come together at the regional level to improve responses to homeless people in their local communities. All homelessness services are required to participate in these activities.

Regional Homelessness Networks provide a forum for Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) funded agencies, allied support services and related organisations to come together and resolve issues of homelessness in the region.”

With some regional variations, each Network brings together services with a common interest in supporting people who are experiencing homelessness and/or family violence. Homelessness and family violence agencies in each Network meet together to manage the coordinated homelessness service system in their area.”

The Networks have developed individual identities, and, although processes may vary, all tend to follow similar methods of information dissemination and sector representation via regional meetings, newsletters and web sites.

A Regional Network Coordinator position is funded in each Region to resource the work of the Regional Homelessness Network.

¹ See Addendum 1 for further historic information.

3. Role of the Networkers

The Network Coordinators are the key resource available to assist the Regional Homelessness Networks to achieve their strategic plans and to meet Network deliverables, as defined by the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing.

3.1. Current role description

Funding for the Regional Homelessness Network Coordinator (Networker) position in each region is allocated by DFFH, through the Homeless Services Support (peak bodies networker position) Activity 20084, which states²:

“Objective:

Homeless services support aims to improve consultation, planning, policy development, program and service linkages and coordination to support community service organisations responding to people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness and women and children experiencing family violence.

Description of the service

Community services organisations delivering homeless services support provide services and undertake systemic advocacy for people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, and women and children experiencing family violence.

Homeless services support represents homelessness and family violence organisations, and provide advice to the department and community service organisations on addressing homelessness and family violence through activities such as:

- *training and community education sessions*
- *forums and consultations*
- *discussion papers and newsletters*
- *systemic advocacy.*

Homeless services support also provides key advice and information to people seeking or receiving assistance from any homelessness funded community service organisation and an opportunity to improve the homelessness service system.

‘Homeless services supports’ are delivered by:

- *the Homeless Services Support Network, including the Victorian Indigenous Statewide Homelessness Network, by coming together at a local area and statewide level to improve responses to people who are homeless, and women and children experiencing family violence in their local communities. All community service organisations funded through the homelessness services system are required to participate in these network activities;*
- *a peak body to deliver research and policy advice options on behalf of people who are homeless and those experiencing family violence, to government and the homelessness service sector. It also provides consultation, advocacy and training and the provision of information forums for homelessness and family violence services. ”*

² Volume 3: Human Service Policy and Funding Plan, 2015 – 2019, update 2018-19, Chapter 4: Activity Descriptions

3.2. Targets

The Human Service Policy and Funding Plan identifies, in relation to performance measures for the Regional Networks:

“The Department of Health and Human Services’ Local Engagement Officer will liaise with organisations funded under activity 20084 and set annual targets. Types of services provided will be based on local need, for example, the number of meetings, events, publications and training days.”

Sample regional deliverables

As an example of the regional deliverable identified, in Melbourne’s north and west the Networks are required to meet the following:

Two submission responses each year on specific issues
Fortnightly editions of the Bulletin
Six Steering Group meetings
Four quarterly forums or special events
Progressing two sector concerns per annum.

(NB These deliverables related to the joint North and West Homelessness Network. DFFH has not yet advised whether these are the deliverable or whether the deliverables are halved.)

3.3. Guidelines

The key document guiding the Homelessness Networks is the *Homelessness Guidelines and Conditions of Funding, May 2014*, plus more recent amendments. The Homelessness Guidelines and Specialist Homelessness Services’ Funding and Service Agreements, refer to a range of other statewide documents guiding the work of the homelessness sector, including:

- HEF Guidelines
- Statewide Cross Regional Referral Guidelines
- PRAP Guidelines
- Prison Exits Protocol
- Youth Justice Protocol
- Homelessness and NDIS Guidelines
- MARAM Guidelines.

At the local level, most Networks have established Terms of Reference, and in some cases, a local Practice Manual.

3.4. Operational Framework

The role of the Network was refined with the implementation of the Opening Doors Framework from 2008. The Framework implemented coordinated homelessness service system arrangements and established Local Area Service Networks to oversee the operation of these coordinated arrangements.

The Network Coordinator, as a neutral member of the Network, provides a valuable role in resourcing the coordinated homelessness system.

4. Governance

4.1. Role of the auspice

Funding for each regional Network is allocated to an auspice agency. The auspice agency employs the Network Coordinator and manages the Network funds on behalf of the Network.

The role of the auspice is to:

- be responsible for negotiating and reporting against the Network Funding and Service Agreement (FASA) with the funding Department,
- ensure that the Funding and Service Agreement deliverables for the Network are met and report any barriers to the Network/governance group,
- manage the DFFH funded resources of the Network,
- advise the LASN/governance groups on the parameters of the FASA and budget,
- provide supervision and support to the Network Coordinator,
- monitor achievement of the Network Coordinator workplan and ensure that the workplan is in line with the Network strategic plan,
- provide Network budget updates to the LASN/governance group, and
- ensure that Networker time is equally available to respond to all Network agencies and is not 'captured' by work within the auspice agency.

4.2. Network Accountability

The Networks are accountable to the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing through achievement of deliverables, defined by the Department.

In most regions the activities and directions of each Regional Homelessness Network are guided by a Local Area Service Network (LASN). The LASN establishes a regional strategic plan to direct Network activities. A key role for the Networker is to assist the Network to enact its strategic plan.

Many of the LASNs are guided by a smaller Steering, Management or Reference group [Governance Group], which oversees the operation of the LASN/Network and monitors the implementation of the LASN Strategic Plan. It is usually this group that establishes the workplan for the Networker and this group that the Networker reports back to.

The Governance Group oversees the appropriate operation of the Network against its funded activities, including effectiveness of the Network budget, Strategic plan, Network Coordinator role and auspice arrangements for the Network Coordinator. The Governance Groups operate as an executive for the Network, providing advice on strategies for management of the coordinated system arrangements and will respond to urgent matters arising in the environment.

The auspice agency is a member of this group, providing advice on the Network budget. **The auspice agency is accountable to the Department to evidence the Network's achievement of its deliverables.**

Generally, neither the Departmental representatives nor the Network Coordinator do not have a voting role on the Governance group. **Where the auspice agency is a homelessness funded service, they do have voting rights on a governance group. Where the auspice agency is not a SHS agency, no vote is appropriate.**

Each Network has a Terms of Reference or Memorandum of Understanding, which outlines the roles of the Network/LASN, Governance Group and incorporates dispute resolution processes.

4.3. Link to LASNs

The Local Area Service Networks (LASNs) were established by DFFH in 2008 to facilitate the implementation of the Opening Doors Framework across the Homelessness Service System (HSS). LASNs are formed by the Specialist Homelessness Services (SHSS) in a local catchment area and may include social housing providers and allied services.

The role of each LASN is to:

- develop, implement and maintain Opening Doors arrangements in their particular geographic catchments,
- build on consistency and quality of service delivery practice amongst member agencies,
- coordinate referrals with allied services and services in other areas,
- undertake data monitoring and client satisfaction review for the purposes of identifying gaps and trends in service provision, and
- make evidence-based recommendations to the DFFH about responses to service gaps (changes in agency catchments/targets/allocation of funds/utilisation of funding).

LASNs operate within the context of each member agency's own governance processes and contractual arrangements with DFFH. Each LASN has well established Terms of Reference, including Governance arrangements and articulating the relationship with local DFFH.

In all Areas the LASNs have been key to enhancement in service co-ordination and have contributed to the development of mutually agreed and locally appropriate systematic approaches to quantifying and addressing homelessness.

LASN Terms of Reference generally require that member agencies abide by LASN decisions, where they are not in conflict with individual Funding and Service Agreements (FASA) with the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH).

In many regions the Network and Homelessness Local Area Service Network (LASN) are synonymous. Whilst the key functions of regional networks (above) have remained unchanged since 1995, many Networks have now incorporated the responsibilities of the LASNs into the Network.

4.4. Link to the VHN

Each Regional Homelessness Network is a member of the Victorian Homelessness Network. Generally, the Network chair, auspice agency and Networker will attend VHN meetings, to present the Network's view at VHN meetings.

The VHN provides a mechanism for strategically progressing issues of common concern across all Regional Homelessness Networks, with a focus on operational issues relating to management of a statewide homelessness service system. This work includes:

- Identifying and responding to shared statewide strategic themes and priorities for action across the Regional Homelessness Networks.
- Identifying and responding to statewide issues arising in relation to the operation of a coordinated Statewide Homelessness Service System; including identifying the stakeholders and mechanisms relevant to progressing resolution of statewide issues.
- Identifying strategies for the further development of the Homelessness Service System's capacity to respond to those who are homeless, at risk of homelessness and/or experiencing family violence.

- Assisting Regional Homelessness Networks to align their business planning cycles and other key functions in order to increase the effective functioning of the homelessness service system.
- Provision of expert advice to key stakeholders, including the key peak bodies (Council to Homeless Persons, Domestic Violence Victoria and the Community Housing Industry Association of Victoria) and the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing.
- Coordinate the progression of shared strategic priorities with the key Peak bodies.

Objectives of the VHN

- The VHN Terms of Reference³ identify that the VHN will:
 - Facilitate information sharing across the Regional Homelessness Networks and with key stakeholders.
 - Progress shared statewide strategic themes and priorities for action across the Regional Homelessness Networks.
 - Propose solutions to statewide issues arising in relation to the operation of a coordinated Statewide Homelessness Service System.
 - Identify strategies for the further development of the Homelessness Service System's capacity to respond to those who are homeless, at risk of homelessness and/or experiencing family violence.
 - Intersect strategically with DFFH, CHP, CHFV, DV Vic and other Stakeholders.
 - Consider the consumer experience of the operation of the coordinated Statewide Homelessness Service System.
 - Design and implement the annual survey of Network members across the State to measure the Networks' effectiveness in achieving the objectives outlined in the Statewide Governance Framework and to determine key strategic priorities for Network activities in the following year.
 - Undertake activities that support the objectives of the Regional Homelessness Networks:
 - To promote and support innovation, knowledge sharing and expertise in the best interests of consumers who are experiencing homelessness.
 - To foster relationships and collaboration between service providers to ensure timely, coordinated and effective responses.
 - To act as a conduit between the Department of Health and Human Services and the regional service sector on homelessness related data, issues, and trends to inform policy.

Authorisation

The Victorian Homelessness Network is authorised by its member Networks to:

- Draw out key statewide themes and strategic priorities from across the Regional Network strategic plans and circulate these priorities and themes across Regional Networks and to key stakeholders (such as the key peak bodies and DFFH).
- Represent the shared concerns of the Regional Networks in discussions with key stakeholders.
- Make recommendations back to LASNs/Networks about mechanisms to improve the Homelessness Service System.

³ Victorian Homelessness Network, Terms of Reference, Ratified in 2015 and updated in 2018.

- Make recommendations to DFFH and other key stakeholders about mechanisms to improve the Homelessness Service System.
- Develop and respond to the annual Network survey of the effectiveness of the Networks in achieving their objectives.
- Develop a complimentary business planning cycle and process for all Regional Networks.
- Initiate joint projects and partnerships and establish Statewide Working Groups.

Individual VHN members are authorised to represent the endorsed positions of their Regional Network, not of their agencies, and to participate in decision making on behalf of their Regional Network.

4.5. Strategic planning

Each of the Regional Homelessness Networks participates in a coordinated, shared annual strategic planning process:

- Each Network utilises a shared survey to surveys its LASN members annually about their strategic priorities against the following objectives:
 - Working together to end homelessness.
 - To act as a conduit between DFFH and the Regional service sector on issues and inform policy.
 - Foster relationships and collaboration between service providers to ensure timely, coordinated and effective responses.
 - To promote and support innovation, knowledge and expertise in the best interest of consumers.
- The Network develops its annual Strategic Plan from the priorities identified through the survey.
- Each of the Networks' strategic priorities are compared to identify issues of shared statewide priority.
- The VHN determines how to progress these shared priorities at the statewide level and develops a workplan for the VHN.
- VHN priorities are incorporated into Regional Strategic Plans.
- The VHN leads discussions with each of the peak bodies to identify synergies between strategic plans and to identify actions that will support each other's strategic plans.

4.6. Reporting

There are no formal reporting requirements for the Networker positions. However, most Networkers report monthly to their governance group and/or auspice agency.

The auspice agency reports to the Department on the Network's achievement of its deliverables, as required.

5. Funding/budget

5.1. Budget

Funding for the Networker position is provided against Activity 20084 in each auspice agency's Funding and Service Agreement with the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing. The funding for the Network is approximately \$149,694⁴⁵.

This funding belongs to the Network as a whole. The LASN/Governance Group will set an annual budget for the Network. The auspice will monitor progress and should report quarterly to the LASN/Governance Group on the state of the budget.

5.2. Auspice costs

The auspice agency can draw a component of the Network budget for overheads such as supervision, photocopying, finance support. The level of these overheads is negotiated with the LASN/governance group. In some cases, the overhead will have been negotiated by the auspice agency, with DFFH through an auspice tender submission or post tender negotiations. In these cases, the auspice agencies should make the overhead transparent to the Governance Group.

5.3. Networker salary and conditions

Salaries and conditions vary amongst the Network Coordinators. Most Networks have identified that the Networker role equates to a SCHADS Level 7. The Network funds are not sufficient to employ a Network Coordinator full time at this level, so most Networkers are employed for four days a week.

Most Network Coordinators have an option of a salary packaged car, in recognition of the large amount of travelling required to resource a whole region.

5.4. Operations budget

The Network funds initially included \$10,000 in project funding to assist the Network to achieve its deliverables i.e. cover meeting venue hire, printing costs, training costs. Current Funding and Service Agreements do not break down the allocated funds to this level of detail.

DFFH in one region has identified that these brokerage/operations funds should have increased as funding allocations have increased, with CPI.

⁴ The Barwon Region has been allocated block funding by DFFH, which is significantly less than the standard funding identified above.

⁵ When the Network funds were allocated, the positions were tendered out. Every position was funded the same way and there was no variation. Every auspice organisation was funded with brokerage/operation costs.

6. Networker activities

Networker activities are extremely varied and are determined by local strategic priorities. However, there is a range of activities that are undertaken by most Networkers in order to meet the requirements of the funded activity:

“Homeless services support represents homelessness and family violence organisations, and provide advice to the department and community service organisations on addressing homelessness and family violence through activities such as:

- *training and community education sessions*
- *forums and consultations*
- *discussion papers and newsletters*
- *systemic advocacy.*

Homeless services support also provides key advice and information to people seeking or receiving assistance from any homelessness funded community service organisation and an opportunity to improve the homelessness service system.⁶”

6.1. Training and community education sessions

Activities that Networkers may undertake in this area include:

- Orientation sessions to new homelessness and allied workers
- Homelessness sector information sessions for local community organisations i.e with Child Protection, Mental Health Services, Local Councils, Departmental staff
- Previously undertook an annual training needs analysis for the LASN/Network (until 2020 Networks had access to one training day per semester)
- Sourcing training options for the Network
- Organising and promoting community awareness activities in Homelessness Week, World Homelessness Day and Youth Homelessness Matters Day (see advocacy below).

6.2. Forums and consultation

- Activities that Networkers may undertake in this area include:
- Convening LASN meetings
- Convening/supporting working groups established to improve the homelessness service system
- Surveying LASN members about responses to key issues
Networkers generally use survey monkey as a useful tool for gathering a LASN perspective on an issue.
- Drafting of discussion papers on contemporary issues for consideration by LASN and Working Groups
- Convening forums on issues of concern to the Sector i.e. linkages with the NDIS, responding to the needs of children
- Representing the Network at forums with allied providers.

⁶ Volume 3: Human Service Policy and Funding Plan, 2015 – 2019, update 2018-19, Chapter 4: Activity Descriptions

- Collation of data (Quarterly Departmental data, Census data) and presentation of data findings to the LASN
- Cross sector collaboration – projects to improve linkages with allied sectors or to coordinate responses to shared clients
- Consultation with consumers about the effective of the coordinated homelessness system arrangements.

6.3. Discussion papers and newsletters

Activities that Networkers may undertake in this area include:

- Bulletins to a mailing list of interested homelessness and allied practitioners
Most Networkers hold a mailing list of homelessness and allied practitioners who are members of the 'Network', beyond the LASN membership. Networkers circulate bulletins, which incorporate information on: news, new resources, training opportunities, campaigns, employment. Networkers use a variety of mediums for this such as mailchimp.
- Circulation of information to LASN/Network members
- Share environmental scans/update on reform and systems changes
- Draft discussion papers on improvements to the coordinated homelessness system arrangements and draft submissions to Sector reviews/reforms/consultation, for discussion at the LASN.

6.4. Systemic advocacy

Activities that Networkers may undertake to address this include:

- Meetings with Members of Parliament
- Providing advice to DFFH and relevant Ministers on regional issues, trends and needs
- Coordinating advocacy campaigns
- Assisting the Network to prepare local events for Homelessness Week (1st week of August), World Homelessness Day (10th October) and Youth Homelessness Matters Day (early April).
- Coordination of the Homelessness Enumeration for each Census
(held in August every five years from 2021).
Traditionally the Networks have played a key role in the enumeration. The Networker is sometimes employed by the Australian Bureau of Statistics for a number of months around the Census to promote the Census, recruit staff for the enumeration and to coordinate enumeration activities for the local area.

Network agencies provide staff to support the enumeration and practitioners have a central role in promoting the Census amongst consumers and allied agencies.

6.5. Network Coordination

Key roles for each Homelessness Network are to:

- Undertake an annual strategic plan survey
- Enact activities in the annual strategic plan
- Oversee the effective operation and development of the local coordinated homelessness service system
- Engage with regional DFFH staff

- Maintaining and reviewing coordinated system documents i.e. Network Partnership and Practice Manuals
- Convene Network working groups as needed.

The Network Coordinator and the Network budget are the key resources held by each Network to assist the Network to achieve these responsibilities.

6.6. Regular Networker meetings

There are a number of regular meetings that support the work of the Networks:

Regional meetings

Each Network holds regular LASN meetings, and most will convene governance and working group meetings that the Networker attends.

Victorian Homelessness Network meetings

VHN meetings are held twice a year. VHN members may also participate in VHN working groups. (See also the VHN Terms of Reference.)

DFFH/Networker meetings

From time to time the Department arranges meetings with the Networkers to share information, test ideas, discuss trends and reforms. (See DFFH/Networker Meeting Terms of Reference.)

CHP/Networker meetings

The Networkers meet with the Council to Homeless Persons quarterly to provide updates, share information and discuss issues of sector concern. (See also CHP/Networker Meeting Terms of Reference.)

Networker planning meetings

The Networkers meet regularly, as a group, to share ideas, information and resources. Traditionally these meetings occurred bi-monthly. Since the COVID pandemic, the Networkers have met for an hour each week, via zoom.

The Networkers also hold a 2.5 day planning meeting each year, generally in a rural area, in recognition of the fact that rural Networkers frequently travel into Melbourne for meetings.

SHIP Champions meetings

Quarterly meetings, convened by Council to Homeless Persons, to promote use of the SHIP data system and analysis of data within the Homelessness Sector.

6.7. Linkages

Department of Families, Fairness and Housing

Some Regional DFFH offices convene regular meetings with representatives of the Network.

A key role for Networks is provision of information about key issues and trends in the homelessness sector and amongst those experiencing homelessness, to the Department.

Peak Bodies

The Networks have links with four key Victorian peak bodies:

- Council to Homeless Persons (CHP)
- Community Housing Industry Association Victoria (CHIA Vic)
- Domestic Violence Victoria (DV Vic)
- Victorian Council of Social Services (VCOSS)
- and, at the National level, with Homelessness Australia.

Children's Resource **Coordination Program and Family Violence Principal Strategic Advisors**

The Children's Resource Coordinators are funded as Specialist Homelessness Services, resourcing the Networks on provision of support to children.

The Family Violence Principal Strategic Advisors are funded by Family Safety Victoria and resource the local Integrated Family Violence Committees (which include homelessness services and SHS funded family violence services).

Network Coordinators coordinate with the CRCs and FV PSAs to vary degrees and may engage in joint Network projects.

Local Councils

Some Regional Networks have established productive links with the Local Councils in their area and having participated in the development of Council housing and homelessness plans.

Allied networks/providers

Establishing links with allied Sectors is a role for the Networks

The Networker is a contact point for cross sector projects, forums and discussions aimed at improving cross sector responses to shared clients.

Examples include:

- Forums on responding to women and children experiencing family violence
- Building linkages with NDIS Local Area Coordinators
- Shared projects with the AOD and mental health sectors
- Forums on improving intersections with Child Protection.

Addendum 1: History of the Regional Homelessness Networks

The Victorian Government funded the network program in response to a Commonwealth requirement, under the bilateral Commonwealth and States Supported Accommodation and Assistance Program (SAAP) II Agreement, for the development of enhanced linkages between homelessness services.

At this time homelessness services were funded through the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP).

The Health and Community Services, SAAP Regional Service Networks: Interim Guidelines (1995) detailed a broad framework for the Networks, which included the following role overview:

“Each network will negotiate work priorities with regional officers of Health and Community Services, to accord with the particular requirements of each region. It is agreed that some activities (e.g. Planning and Needs Identification, Consultation and Coordination/Linkages) will not be negotiable”.

The Interim Guidelines 1995 further detailed the “outputs” expected from the development of regional networks to include;

- *An effective consultation mechanism between the Department and SAAP service providers.*
- *An effective consultative mechanism between the Department and SAAP service users.*
- *Effective SAAP service provider participation in the development of regional plans, and in relation to specific policy matters.*
- *An annual report detailing the establishment of consultative mechanisms, processes and procedures.*
- *Regional Needs assessments, drawing upon both primary and secondary data sources, to be input to regional planning.*
- *Input on needs through community representatives on the Ministerial Advisory Committee and during regional Strategy Plan consultations as appropriate.*
- *Protocol and other arrangements governing access to relevant services have been developed.*
- *Services in receipt of latest information on innovative practices and government policy developments.*
- *Fully developed and supported service (re) development proposals submitted to government.*

Member agencies of the Regional Homelessness Networks met together regularly. However, in 2010 the Department of Health and Human Services established the Local Area Service Networks (LASNs) in each region. These LASNs were initially managed by the Department to implement the new Opening Doors Framework locally. Following implementation of the Opening Doors Framework, the Department ceased chairing the LASNs in most cases. The LASNs have become the vehicle through which each Network agency is represented and by which Network decisions can be made.