

Review of the DEECD-MAV Partnership Agreement

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1. Introduction

Background of the Partnership Agreement

The Victorian Government has a strong, productive partnership with the Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV) and local government.

The relationship between MAV and Office for Children in particular has existed formally since 2002 (DHS Partnership Protocol). Since 2008, the relationship between all State Government agencies and local government has been underpinned by the Victorian State Local Government Agreement (VSLGA). On 6 August 2009, the Chief Executive Officer of the MAV and the former Secretary of the Department signed an agreement that builds on mutual support and collaboration in order to improve outcomes for children, young people and their families.

The Partnership Agreement provides a formal set of high-level principles to guide the partnership between the Department and the MAV in its representation of local councils.

The aims of the Partnership Agreement are achieved through annual action plans agreed to by the Department and MAV. Achievements to date include:

- DEECD-MAV Joint Youth Forum 13 May 2011 - Working together to support young Victorians
- DEECD-MAV Survey of Victorian Local Government Support for Children, Young People and Their Families
- MAV / Office for Children and Portfolio Coordination (OCPC) Working Group
- Agreed communications protocols on emergency management
- DEECD participation at MAV Human Services Advisory Group meetings
- Protocols for establishing Neighbourhood Safer Places in government schools
- The establishment of a DEECD, MAV and Local Government Executive Roundtable in November 2011.

Rationale for review

The Partnership Agreement commits the parties to monitoring the implementation of the Agreement and evaluating its effectiveness on an annual basis. The first annual review was conducted in October 2010, at a meeting between the CEO, MAV and the then Secretary of the Department. At this meeting, the achievements to date, future opportunities and a future action plan were discussed. The 2011-12 Action Plan lists this current review as a key action to be completed.

It is also timely to review the effectiveness of the Partnership Agreement and refresh the document, particularly following the machinery of government changes which returned Skills Victoria and Adult, Community and Further Education to the Department.

Review methodology

The review comprises several components, including:

- Surveys of local government and the Department
- Targeted interviews of key Department executives
- A map of the key relationships between local government and the Department

Surveys

Two online surveys were developed, one targeting local government staff and the other Departmental staff. The surveys also contained questions that were designed to map the relationships between the Department, the MAV and local government. The surveys asked a range of questions that canvassed:

- their views on the impact of the Partnership Agreement on the relationship between local government, the MAV and the Department
- areas for future improvement
- possible alterations to include in the refresh of the Partnership Agreement
- suggestions for future Action Plans.

There were 49 respondents from local government and 14 from the Department.

Interviews

Interviews were held with key Departmental executives to gain their perspective on the Partnership Agreement. They were also asked for possible amendments to include in a refreshed Partnership Agreement as well as suggestions for future Action Plans.

2. Key findings

Mapping exercise

The questions in this section of the survey were designed to map the relationships between the Department, the MAV and local government. The questions included:

- If local government generally interacted more with regional office or central office, or generally interacted equally with both
- If the Department generally interacted more with local government or the MAV or generally interacted equally with both
- Which policy and program areas the partners worked together on
- How the partners categorised the relationships – either as joint policy and planning, networking, coordinating and cooperating, or collaborating.
- How the partners rated the overall quality of the relationship with each other.

All survey respondents answered these questions (49 from local government and 14 from the Department).

Interaction between the partners

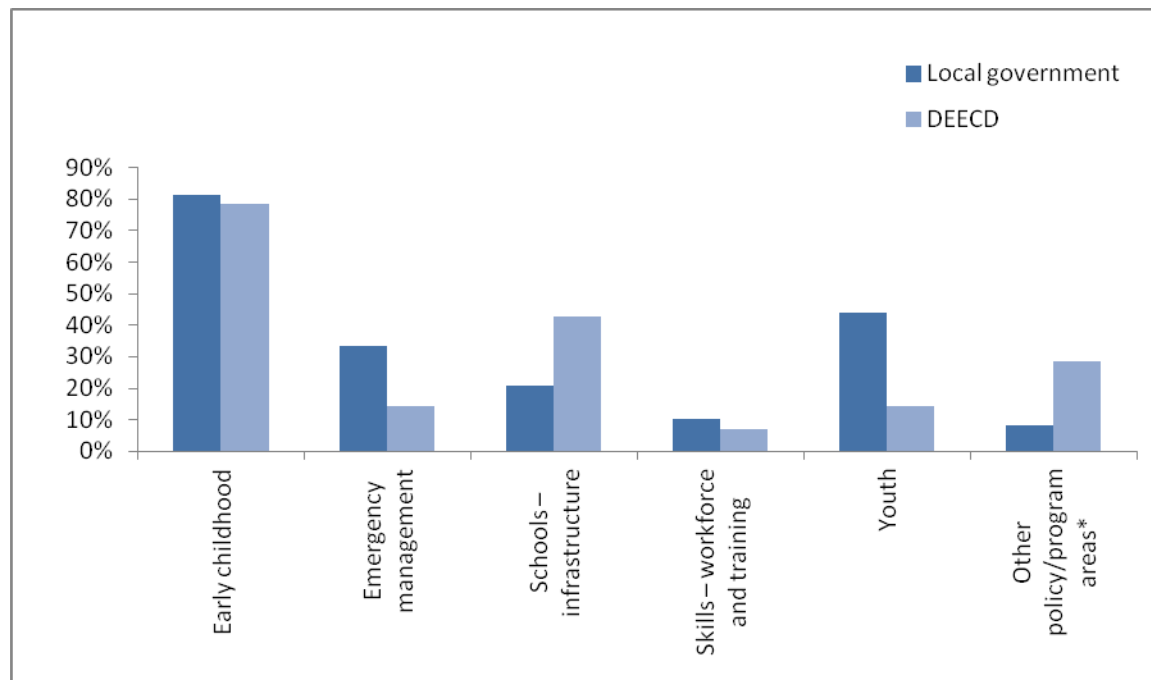
Almost 90 per cent of local government survey respondents answered that they generally interacted more with Regional Office staff, with 6.3 per cent indicating that they generally interacted more with Central Office. The remainder (4.2 per cent) answered that they generally interacted equally with both Central and Regional Office staff.

Responses from the Department were more widely distributed. Fifty per cent indicated that they generally interacted more with local government, with just over 35 per cent answering that they generally interacted more with the MAV. The remainder answered that they generally interacted equally with both the MAV and local government.

What the partners work together on

By far the most commonly nominated policy/program area that the partners work together on was early childhood. Others included emergency management, youth, schools infrastructure and skills workforce and training (see Table 1).

Table 1: Policy/program areas that the partners work together on



* Other areas include transitions issues and coordination; road safety issues and sustainability programs and frameworks

How the partners work together

In this section, survey respondents were asked to categorise how they worked together in the areas that they identified in the previous section. The categories were:

- Joint planning and policy development

- Networking – meeting regularly to exchange information for mutual benefit
- Coordinating and cooperating – exchanging information, altering activities and sharing resources
- Collaborating – exchanging information, altering activities, sharing resources and partners enhancing the capacity of each other for mutual benefit and common purpose

The results for this section are displayed in Table 2 (local government) and Table 3 (Department). As Table 2 shows, there is a wide range of responses from local government, likely due to the higher number of respondents.

Comparing the results, it is interesting to note that:

- In early childhood, the Department largely categorised that relationship as a collaborative one, while local government saw the relationship as based on networking and coordination and cooperation
- With respect to infrastructure, the majority of both sets of respondents categorised the relationship as one of coordinating and cooperating.
- The majority of Departmental respondents categorised the relationship with the MAV as collaborative.

Table 2: Local government’s categorisation of relationship with the Department

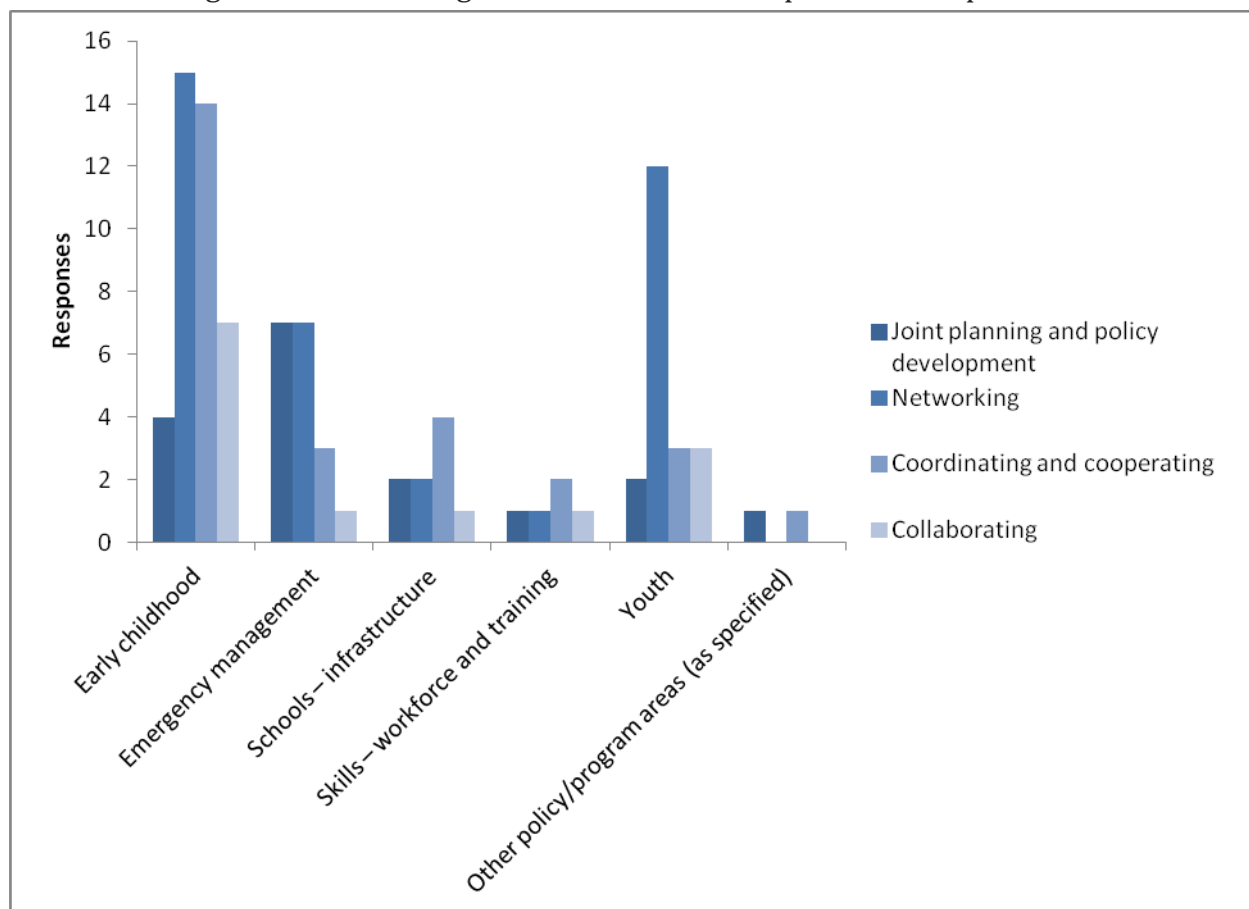
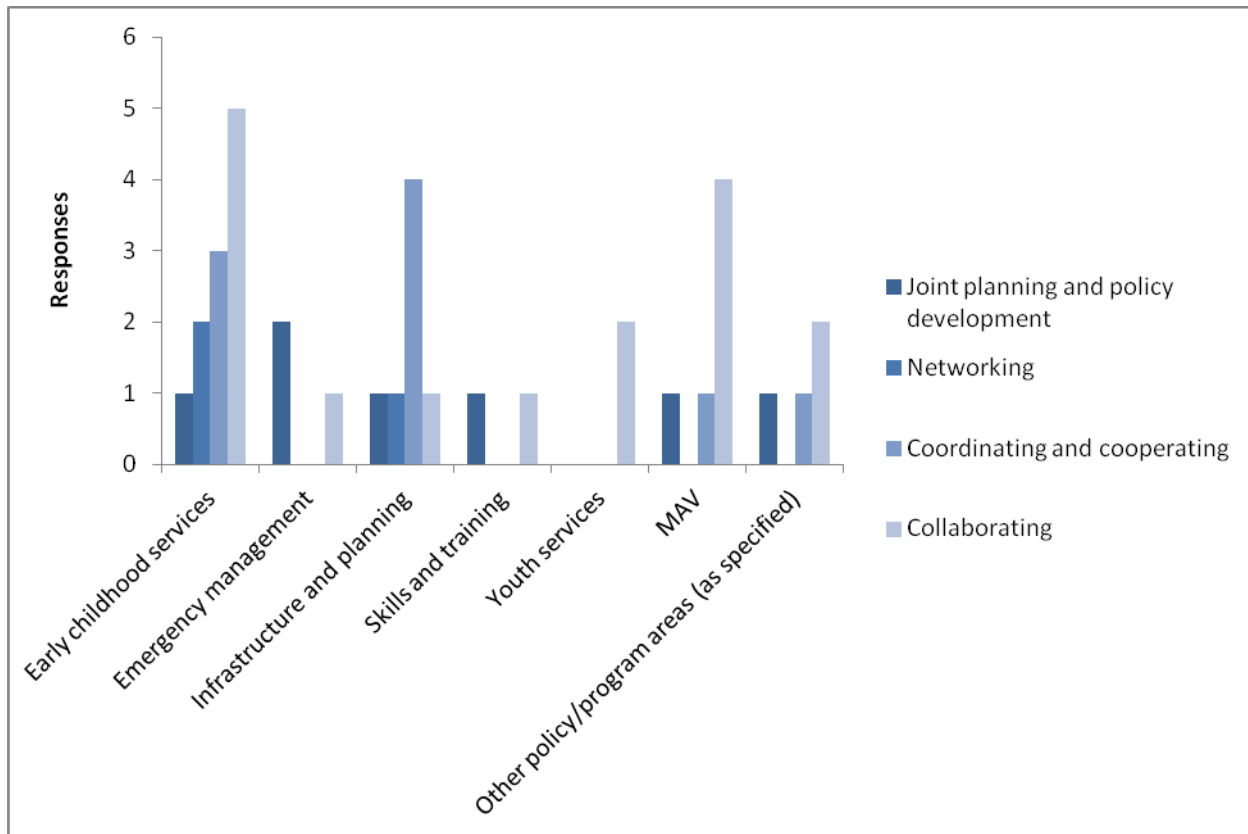


Table 3: The Department’s categorisation of relationship with local government



How the partners rated the quality of the relationship

Over 87 per cent of local government survey respondents rated the quality of their relationship with the Department as very good or good, while 10 per cent as neither poor nor good and 2 per cent rated it as poor. Similarly, just over 85 per cent of the Department’s survey respondents rated the relationship as very good or good, while the remainder were equally split between neither poor nor good and poor (7.1 per cent).

Awareness of the Partnership Agreement

Survey respondents and interviewees were asked if they were aware of the Partnership Agreement and if they understood the rationale behind the agreement.

Of the 31 local government survey respondents who answered, 23 were aware of the Partnership Agreement and 8 were not. Twenty-two understood the rationale behind the Partnership Agreement, while nine did not. Of the nine Departmental survey respondents who answered, all were aware of the Partnership Agreement and eight understood the rationale behind the Partnership Agreement.

Some interviewees suggested that there was a lack of awareness of the Partnership Agreement across the Department, with some indicating that they did not know that it existed.

Relationship

In the Departmental survey, nine survey respondents rated their level of agreement with the following statement:

Do you think that the Partnership Agreement has enhanced the relationship between local government, the MAV and the Department?

No survey respondents disagreed with this statement. Four were neutral, and the following explanations were given:

“It has when it is followed. Not everyone is familiar with it.”

“The [Partnership Agreement] is at too high a level and lacks accountabilities”

Five agreed or strongly agreed, stating that:

“It has enhanced cooperation between parties and fostered a common understanding of issues.”

"[The Partnership Agreement] formally recognises the third level of government in Australia and formalises our pre-existing relationship with MAV and local government."

Two interviewees also suggested that the relationships between local government and Departmental staff were a key strength.

In the local government survey, the question intending to measure the relationship between local government, the MAV and the Department differed to that in the Departmental survey. Therefore the two cannot be compared.

Due to the ambiguity of the question in the local government survey¹, it can only be determined that respondents agreed or disagreed that the relationship has changed in some way, but not if it has improved or worsened. Given this, the overwhelming majority of local government survey respondents strongly agreed or agreed that the relationship had changed (96.8 per cent). Note that 18 survey respondents skipped this section

Strengths of the relationship

The strength most commonly nominated by both local government and Departmental survey respondents and by interviewees was early childhood. Specific strengths in the early childhood area included the provision of children's services, particularly Maternal and Child Health (MCH) services, strategic policy and planning in early childhood, preschool issues and universal access and the relationship between local government and the Department's Children's Services Advisers. Both local government and the Department also nominated emergency management arrangements as a key strength in the relationship.

Another strength nominated by Departmental survey respondents was infrastructure, including infrastructure developments. One Departmental survey respondent also suggested that:

"The relationship between MAV and the Department is strongest in a dedication to improving outcomes for children and local communities, including the provision of early childhood services. It is not so strong at individual local government level."

Local government nominated a number of other strengths, including consultation and the sharing and dissemination of information, joint policy and planning, disengaged youth and advocacy, which included both advocacy from the MAV on the local government perspective and advocacy to the Federal Government. One respondent suggested that:

"The department and the MAV have shown consistency in providing regular updates through a variety of mechanisms on issues that impact local government. Similarly I believe local government reciprocate this by also keep[ing] MAV and the department in the loop on critical issues."

Opportunities for improvement

In this section, survey respondents were asked to nominate the areas in which the relationship between local government, the MAV and the Department could be improved. A wide range of areas were listed.

Data and information sharing were nominated by both local government and Departmental survey respondents, including more consultations and forums; quicker access to new information and improved feedback times; reporting on key strategic projects and outcomes; and more sharing of data. Both partners also nominated joint policy and planning as an opportunity for improvement.

The most common area listed by local government survey respondents was collaboration, including collaborating on major projects that impact on service delivery within LGAs; engaging early in ongoing discussion on matters relating to local government and local communities; more consultation from the Department regarding role of local government in service planning and delivery; and cooperation and collaboration on planning, joint usage and agreements.

Local government survey respondents also suggested that the role of the MAV could be strengthened within the partnership, and that there were opportunities for improvement in emergency management, infrastructure, youth matters, early childhood (specifically planning and funding facilities such as Integrated Hubs) and skills, training and workforce development.

¹ Do you think that the relationship between local government, the MAV and the Department has improved or worsened since the signing of the Partnership Agreement in 2009?

Strongly agree

Agree

Neutral

Disagree

Strongly disagree

"I think the Partnership Agreement has all of the best intentions however there needs to be more guidance and accountability to regional offices to ensure that it works as a true partnership rather than requirements of the Department."

The areas listed by the Department in survey responses included coordinating support to young people after school, or students disaffected from school and improved links to support early childhood and student learning outcomes. An interviewee also suggested that infrastructure, particularly co-location of facilities, was an opportunity for improvement.

Suggestions for key priorities

In this section survey respondents were asked what the partners' key priorities should be in the short term (the current financial year), the medium term (the next one to two financial years) and the long term (beyond the next two financial years).

Short term

Early childhood was the most commonly listed priority. Particular suggestions included providing support to implement the National Quality Framework and universal access, as well as Maternal and Child Health unit pricing. Both sets of survey respondents also nominated work to enhance and promote the partnership, such as establishing community partnerships, education about the Partnership Agreement, and a focus on routine information sharing.

Additional suggestions from local government survey respondents related to improving collaboration and transparency, emergency management, funding issues and infrastructure planning.

Medium term

Similar to the short term priorities, the most common suggestions for medium term priorities related to early childhood, with a specific focus on providing support to implement the National Quality Framework and universal access, links with schools, infrastructure and service planning, solution modelling for temporary infrastructure solutions for increased demand for children's services and recurrent funding for local government staff resources to support kindergartens. Joint policy and planning and information sharing and data were also mentioned by both parties as medium term priorities.

Local government survey respondents also suggested youth as an area of priority, specifically alternative settings and consolidation of funding for youth and streamlining of support, for example links with Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENs) and other youth development programs. Other suggestions included funding issues and more support for families with special needs.

Long term

Again, the most common suggestions from both sets of survey respondents related to early childhood. The long term suggestions in this area included developing a more integrated system, identifying projects and resources that will strengthen the role that Victorian councils can play in the early years and joint contribution to increasing quality of early childhood services. Joint policy and planning was also mentioned by both local government and Departmental survey respondents, including mapping of local government areas for individual assessment of needs, work on birth to 18 years planning without silos, complementary funding decisions and infrastructure and provision planning, particularly the provision of quality infrastructure to support growing communities.

Additional suggestions from local government survey respondents related to collaboration, information sharing and analysis, including sharing success stories and improving analysis of data to provide improved access to lead indicators, infrastructure, youth, and a commitment to refresh and renew the relationship.

Suggestions for future Action Plans

As part of the Partnership Agreement, Action Plans are developed annually to advance and strengthen the partnership. A number of actions have been achieved to date through Action Plans. This section asked survey respondents to suggest actions to include in future plans.

Following the trend in other sections of the survey, actions relating to early childhood were most commonly suggested by both sets of survey respondents, such as the funding formula for MCH and the development of a MCH database, providing clarity on early years infrastructure capital funding, workshops on developing Municipal Early Years Plan and finalising/approving the kindergarten priority of access policy.

Reflecting the previous suggestions around information sharing and collaboration, both sets of survey respondents nominated actions such as joint forums, increased rates of communication on new information and government announcements, joint activity between the Victorian Council of Social Service, the MAV and the Department on areas of mutual interest, more open dialogue and provision planning sessions.

Both local government and Departmental survey respondents also suggested actions relating to youth, such as development of alternative education options for under 16 year olds and committing all councils to support the Fit to Drive and Keys Please programs.

Local government survey respondents also suggested:

- A repeat of the Victorian Local Government Support for Children, Young People and Their Families survey (undertaken in September 2010 as part of the Partnership Agreement)
- Review current network groups and carefully consider the scope and purpose of groups and what can be achieved. Ensure that the roles played by all parties to the partnership agreement are complementary and seen on an equilibrium
- Alternative rural education pathways and transport options.

Departmental interviewees suggested:

- A formal agreement on emergency management arrangements could be included in a future action plan, following the roll-out of the Emergency Management Framework.
- The development of a communications plan to promote the Partnership Agreement and associated activities
- Working directly with local government on data needs.

Suggestions for a refresh of the Partnership Agreement

Following the review, the Partnership Agreement will undergo an update and refresh to reflect the change of government and the machinery-of-government changes that resulted in Skills Victoria and Adult, Community and Further Education returning to the Department. Survey respondents were asked for suggestions for things that should be included or altered in a refreshed Partnership Agreement.

Both Departmental and local government survey respondents suggested that a refreshed Partnership Agreement could contain a formal agreement to consult and share data in a timely manner.

Additionally, local government survey respondents suggested that the roles and responsibilities of the partners could be more clearly defined in the Partnership Agreement and that further acknowledgement of the significance of the role of local government in this space could be included. It was also suggested that a formal commitment to engaging and collaborating early on issues of mutual interest could form part of a refreshed Partnership Agreement. It was also suggested that it should be recognised that the partners may not share the same perspective at all times, with one respondent stating that:

“There needs to be clarity that the MAV will need to at times disagree and actively lobby against [Departmental] policy positions in the best interest of local government.”

Survey respondents from the Department also suggested that a refreshed Partnership Agreement could contain a more extensive dispute settling section and a link to the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young People.

3. Conclusion

The Partnership Agreement has fostered a generally positive working relationship. It is overwhelmingly clear that the relationship is strongest in the early childhood area. This result reflects the origin of the partnership between the MAV and the Office for Children. Given the range of initiatives underway in early childhood, it is important that the momentum and relationship in this area is maintained.

Given this, early childhood could dominate the relationships between local government, the MAV and the Department. However, respondents and interviewees also noted a number of other areas that they work on together. The partners should continue to focus on these areas.

The return of Skills Victoria to the Department also presents an opportunity for the partners to work more closely together in the higher education and skills sector under the Partnership Agreement. This includes both pathways for LGA residents as well as addressing councils' own skills and workforce needs.

It is also clear from the responses that knowledge of the Partnership Agreement is not as well known as it could be. Promotion of the Partnership Agreement should be undertaken to facilitate increased awareness.

Recommendations

1. There is a need to for more promotion of the Partnership Agreement across the Department and local government. A communications plan should be developed to complement the refreshed Partnership Agreement.
2. The refreshed Partnership Agreement could more clearly define the roles and responsibilities of the partners, contain a formal commitment to engaging and collaborating early on issues of mutual interest, further acknowledge the significance of the role of local government, acknowledge that at times the partners may disagree and even actively lobby against each other's policy positions and contain a more extensive dispute settling section.
3. Future action plans and other priority planning should make reference to the ideas suggested in this review by respondents.
4. That the partners work together to maintain and further enhance the relationship in the early childhood area
5. That the partners work together to further build the relationship in other policy and program areas, namely infrastructure, youth and emergency management.
6. That the partners work together to explore new opportunities in the higher education and skills area.