



Briefing: Lessons in partnerships from the Northern Councils Alliance

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Summary

The Northern Councils Alliance (NCA) is a collaboration that was formed in 2019 by local governments across northern metropolitan Melbourne – Banyule, Darebin, Hume, Merri-bek, Mitchell, Nillumbik, and Whittlesea.

Recognising that working collaboratively would lead to more effective, efficient, and sustainable solutions to regional issues, ultimately benefiting the entire community, the seven local government CEOs agreed to establish the NCA and provide ongoing support. They decided that the role of the NCA would be to advocate for projects and objectives that have regional impact, are designated regional priorities and align with Council goals.

Melbourne's northern region spans the inner city and middle ring suburbs through to peri-urban and rural interface areas. Home to approximately one million people (20% of Melbourne's population), the region's population is expected to grow by 44% in 2036 to almost 1.5 million residents. This growth presents opportunities but also

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significant challenges that need to be addressed.

Key issues faced by the region are:

- Transport connectivity and access – congestion; lack of connectivity between places, people and jobs; and lack of sustainable transport options.
- Jobs and skills – a need for jobs growth to match population growth; lack of jobs near home; barriers to workforce participation; mismatch of skills and employer requirements; and tapping into the opportunities of increased demand for renewables and circular economy.
- Community health and wellbeing – the need for further action to prevent family violence; increase in mental health issues; limited access to health and wellbeing services; and negative impacts of climate change.

Successful actions taken by the NCA include:

- strong commitment by CEOs and Councillors to the establishment and operations of the NCA
- appointment of a full-time Executive Officer for the organisation
- implementation of an agreed NCA governance structure and protocols
- development of a five-year Strategic Plan that outlines key priorities and actions
- annual selection of projects that align with NCA and Council priorities.

This briefing will be of interest to councillors, CEOs and senior executives, and those interested in collaboration and partnership opportunities between peer governments.

Briefing in full

What does good governance look like?

Key to the NCA's success is strong governance and a shared understanding of NCA goals.

The NCA is governed by a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the seven member councils. Signed by all CEOs and Mayors, the MOU outlines the purpose, governance, authority, responsibilities, membership, and operations of the NCA. It is reviewed regularly.

A series of protocols demonstrate how the NCA works now and how member councils intend to work together into the future to benefit their communities:

- The NCA Forum is represented by the Mayor and CEO from each member

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council, with the position of chair rotated between members annually. The Forum meets quarterly and decides on regional advocacy priorities and delivery of projects that support the NCA Strategic Plan.

- The NCA Host Council role is rotated every 12 months by agreement. The Mayor of the Host Council acts as the NCA Forum chair. NCA management and budget oversight are also rotated between councils on an annual basis.
- The NCA CEO Group comprises the CEO from each member council. This group meets monthly and oversees the delivery of agreed projects that align with the NCA Strategic Plan and NCA priorities.
- The NCA employs a full-time Executive Officer who oversees projects, budget, compliance and auspice arrangements, coordination of events and meetings, advocacy, and development and implementation of the NCA Strategic Plan.



Source: Northern Councils Alliance

The importance of shared goals and clear priorities

The NCA's Strategic Plan 2022-2026, a blueprint for regional advocacy, focuses on developing and advocating for four key regional priorities that align with the themes and objectives of the seven member councils. These are, transport connectivity and access, jobs and skills growth, community health and wellbeing, and regional collaboration.

While each member council has its own priorities and plans, the NCA Strategic Plan priorities are informed by issues of common concern, with a focus on the issues

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members have identified as being of regional importance and that cannot be addressed without government support. Critically, the NCA is not just seeking the necessary government funding for projects, it is also asking for ongoing collaboration and coordination.

“We focus on areas of regional importance and agreed priorities,” said Cr Tom Melican, Mayor of Banyule and Chair of the NCA Forum. “We know that we can’t do everything. So, we assess where our collaborative actions can have real value, and take it from there.”

“These are targeted projects that require government assistance so that they can be delivered to benefit our community. The projects provide evidence that supports our regional advocacy efforts. They have been chosen because they are based on previous work, such as barriers to employment, on comprehensive research, such as transport, or in response to emerging needs, such as electric vehicles. Importantly, they are projects that will have a regional impact and benefit all seven municipalities.”

Case study: transport

Transport connectivity and access is a major issue for Melbourne’s north, with population growth and urban sprawl key contributors to road congestion. The conflict between modes, which involves issues such as train and bus timetables not aligning, is severe when compared to other regions of Melbourne. This also increases pressure on public transport systems.

Most residents in the region drive to work, with only 10.9% of households using public transport daily. Distance to employment and poor public transport connectivity means that residents face longer than average commute times, and those without cars have limited access to employment across the region. Protracted time spent travelling to the CBD has social and health implications, and limited ability to travel between suburbs also results in long commutes. In addition to gaps in public transport infrastructure, electrification of trucks and cars over the next decade requires programs and infrastructure to be in place for the region to successfully navigate this transition.

In response to these challenges, the NCA commissioned a suite of strategic reports:

The [***Northern Region Transport Strategy***](#) was designed to align government and stakeholders in improving the transport network. It identifies key actions, such as the

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development of a rail network, the need for improved east-west connections, the development of strategic cycling corridors, and the finalisation of the regional trail network.

The [**Bus Networks Study**](#) is the result of a key recommendation from the Northern Region Transport Strategy, which emphasised the need for short-term investment in bus networks to meet regional needs. Alongside expanding Melbourne's bus network and helping people reach critical employment centres, a Suburban Rail Loop Bus (mirroring the planned Suburban Rail Loop route) would open up easterly and westerly travel, easing the strain on the north's transport network and reducing road congestion thereby. Services to growth areas and improvements to the SmartBus routes would increase access across the region.

The [**Community Electric Vehicle Transition Plan**](#) includes a set of recommendations that will bring about wider improvements in the sustainability of the region's transport system and support the transition to electric vehicles. This plan will be explored in more detail in a follow-up briefing.



Source: Northern Councils Alliance

Comment

Melbourne's north is vital to Victoria's economy, but it needs significant and strategic investment if it is to reach its full potential.

Many challenges span multiple LGAs. Regional collaboration allows local governments to address issues they would not be able to solve on their own, and

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gain benefits by facilitating activities, communication and advocacy through various networks and projects. Presenting a unified regional voice to state and federal governments maximises opportunities for the entire region.

Collaboration on strategic priorities, as outlined in the NCA's *Strategic Plan 2022-2026* and advocacy priorities, is essential for transport connectivity, precinct development, business and employment growth, access to education and health services, and future-proofing the economic and social development of Melbourne's north.

The NCA provides a good example of local governments working together to provide a blueprint for the future of their region. Central to its success is the involvement of all CEOs and Mayors. Attendance at the NCA Forum and NCA CEO Group is high, and adherence to strict protocols means that decisions are made in a timely manner and projects are advanced without delay.

"Working together gives us an opportunity to maximise our advocacy for increased investment," explained Allison Beckwith, CEO of Banyule City Council and Chair of the NCA CEO Group. "But it's not just about money. Increased collaboration and cooperation between the three levels of government, and between Councils, means greater efficiencies and better results for our communities."

"These are just the first steps in progressing our regional efforts. We understand that they don't cover every issue and that we have more work to do. But we're proud of our progress so far and look forward to working collaboratively to benefit our region into the future."