

Crime Prevention/Community Safety Partnerships in Action: Victorian Experience

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Introduction

Partnership forums have become the accepted mode of strategy development and program delivery in the field of crime prevention and community safety internationally (Crawford 1998a; Crawford & Matassa 2000; Hughes 1998, 1996; Walters 1996; Sutton 1994; van Dijk 1991; Wikstrom & Torstensson 1999). The partnership model is underpinned by the key assumption that community safety by its nature is a multi-faceted problem and beyond the capacity of any single agency to address. Partnerships are understood as affording an holistic approach to crime and safety, with responses being problem-focused rather than bureaucratically-premised, allowing for the co-ordination and sharing of effort, expertise and information and the pooling of resources (Crawford 1998a; Gilling 1993, 1994, 1996; Rosenbaum 2002).

An extensive literature already exists on the operation of community safety and crime prevention partnerships, with a number of key elements identified as determining the effectiveness of partnership forums. For example it is important that partnerships have unambiguous objectives and a sense of focus, with participating agencies clear about their inputs and responsibilities and what they are required to contribute to the partnership and resulting strategies. To ensure partnerships are open and transparent, formal processes of conflict management should exist. Dedicated support by a co-ordinator, as well as adequate resourcing is also vital in sustaining partnerships. Given partnerships are supposed to be problem focused they need access to good quality data and protocols for information sharing. Members should ideally be drawn from senior levels, so that partnerships possess authority to influence the strategies and practices of their respective agencies in line with partnership recommendations. Finally, there needs to be commitment and consistent participation by all members (see Crawford 1997, 1998a, 1998b; Crawford & Matassa 2000; Gilling 1997; Heal 1992; Hedderman & Williams 2001; Hough & Tilley 1998a, 1998b; Hughes 1996; Laycock & Webb 2000; Liddle & Gelsthorpe 1994a, 1994b; Phillips et al. 2002; Stokes-White 2000; Roman et al. 2002; Rosenbaum 2002; Tilley 1993).

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The bulk of this work, however, has been limited to UK and US jurisdictions, and there has been a dearth of research on the operation of community safety partnerships in Australia (however see Panton 1998; Presdee & Walters 1997; Walters 1996). Furthermore most of the literature on partnerships in crime prevention and community safety (the few exceptions being the work of Crawford 1997 and Blagg et al. 1988) has provided little insight into the operational dynamics of partnerships, why they are characterised by internal tensions and why they rarely accord to ideal types or models of 'best practice'. There is a high level of discrepancy between how partnership work is theorised and understood and the ways it actually manifests itself in practice. The benefits of partnerships are often assumed, with central government policies and programmes appealing to the advantages of local agencies 'working together' without giving sufficient consideration to the link between central policy and practice and its direct effect on the operation of local partnerships.

This article discusses and analyses the operation of community safety partnerships initiated under the Victorian program *Safer Cities and Shires*. It looks at how they operated and aims to identify factors that impacted on the dynamics of local partnerships. The author argues that broader State government policy and action (or inaction) undermined the effective operation of local partnerships formed under *Safer Cities and Shires*. The lessons from this case study highlight that without commitment to the devolution of resources, authority and decision-making powers, partnerships will struggle to effectively deliver State-wide policies on crime prevention and community safety.

Launched by a Liberal-National Party government in 1997 and abandoned in 2000 by a new Labor administration, *Safer Cities and Shires* was premised upon a range of principles regarded as underpinning best practice in crime prevention and community safety (i.e. local level regional planning and partnership work). However, its development and implementation at the State and local level were far from simple or straightforward, and fell well short of what *Safer Cities and Shires* architects and strategy guidelines intended or stipulated (Cherney 2003; Sutton & Cherney 2002). Partnerships — termed Senior Management Teams (SMTs) — convened and co-ordinated by local government, operated as the main mechanism for the strategy's delivery.

Data reported here are derived from interviews the author undertook with key personnel at both the State and local government level responsible for the design and implementation of the *Safer Cities and Shires* program. A total of 39 face-to-face interviews were conducted. Respondents included State government policy officers, local government Community Safety Officers and Managers, senior government advisors, a private consultant, a Commissioner of police, and State government departmental heads¹. The results form part of a larger research program on crime prevention, its history in Victoria and a case study of the *Safer Cities and Shires* scheme (Cherney 2001, 2002, 2003; Cherney & Sutton 2002; Sutton & Cherney 2002).

1 The bulk of interviewees were drawn from local government, comprising Community Safety Officers and managers. No local police were interviewed due to difficulties in getting access to these informants. Local government Community Safety Officers were best placed to give assessments of the operation of Senior Management Teams, because they were responsible both for their formation and management.

Victoria's Safer Cities and Shires Program

The *Safer Cities and Shires* policy guidebook — known as the 'Blue Book'² — *Safer Cities and Shires: A Guide to Developing Strategic Partnerships*, articulated a 'whole of government' approach based on the premise that responses to crime and community safety must be holistic (Button 2000; Community Safety and Crime Prevention Unit 1997). The program encouraged newly amalgamated local authorities to become 'lead agencies' in crime prevention and community safety and assigned them the responsibility for convening what it termed 'Senior Management Teams' (SMTs).

Strategy guidelines for Safer Cities and Shires stated that SMTs were to comprise:

high level representation from local government, police, the private sector, the community, Commonwealth and State government departments and agencies such as Human Services, Education, Correctional Services and the Department of Education, Employment and Youth Affairs (Community Safety and Crime Prevention Unit 1997:27).

Each SMT was to initiate an analysis of relevant local problems and develop a co-ordinated community safety plan based on this assessment. The program was generous in suggesting broad outcomes — such as safe and secure environments, addressing the needs of particular groups within the community affected by crime and violence (e.g. young people, women and the elderly), linking both community safety and public health issues (e.g. around the area of drugs and alcohol-related crime), and developing local partnerships focused upon outcomes (Community Safety and Crime Prevention Unit 1997). For each key objective area of the strategy, *Safer Cities and Shires* documentation identified a number of specific key result areas. SMTs, when developing their safety plans, could choose from a total of 14 key issues, these encompassing crime, injury prevention and public health (Cherney 2003; Community Safety and Crime Prevention Unit 1997; Sutton & Cherney 2002).

The program had two phases. Under phase one, local government was invited to submit expressions of interest in obtaining funds for the formation of a SMT and the analysis of local crime and safety problems, for undertaking community consultation, and for developing a community safety plan. Of Victoria's 78 local authorities 20 received first round funding under phase one, totalling over one million dollars³. Under phase two, money was made available for implementation of initiatives identified within community safety plans. Amounts of up to \$50,000 were allocated to the initial twenty funded councils, with the expectation this would be matched by council and resources levered in from the private sector and other State government agencies. Phase two also involved some extension to the program, with 12 additional councils selected for funding in 1999/2000 (Community Safety and Crime Prevention Unit 1997; Vicsafe 1998, 1999).

Safer Cities and Shires used a contracted private consultancy firm to provide administrative support to funded councils. The consultant worked under the direction of the Victorian Department of Justice and was required to facilitate the establishment and management of SMTs and the development of community safety plans. The Victorian Department of Justice (specifically the *Vicsafe* unit responsible for crime prevention and

2 The guidebook had a sky blue jacket and was often referred to by State and local personnel as the 'blue book' or 'blue bible'.

3 It is unclear exactly how these determinations for first round funding were made. Interviews the author conducted with State government policy officers responsible for the implementation of *Safer Cities and Shires*, indicated that the final choice of local government areas for funding was determined more by political considerations (e.g. 'meeting the demands of the Minister') than any pre-determined criteria based on local needs and circumstances (Cherney 2003).

community safety policy) also convened the *Community Safety Crime Prevention Board*. This was a high-level partnership forum, chaired by a former Australian Rules football hero (at that time also a prominent media commentator), and also comprised the Chief Commissioner of Police, heads of State departments such as Human Services, Premier and Cabinet, Education and Justice, a community representative, and chief executives from two major local government authorities. One of the Board's central roles in relation to *Safer Cities and Shires* was to complement and support local implementation by facilitating a 'whole of government' approach at the State level (Community Safety Crime Prevention Board 1999).

Partnership structures

Safer Cities and Shires documentation was not prescriptive about the organisational structure of SMTs. In fact a variety of partnerships structures were established by funded councils. While some local government areas opted for a single SMT, most adopted more complex structures, comprising a senior level task force (typically referred to as the Senior Management Team), subcommittees, work groups or project teams focused on specific tasks and community forums, and local action groups.

For example, the Melbourne municipality of Maroondah adopted a three-tiered arrangement comprising senior representatives from community, government, non government and private sector agencies (tier one), officers of various council departments (tier two) and local organisations and community groups involved in the provision of community safety and crime prevention initiatives within the municipality (tier three). Tier one (i.e. the SMT) was concerned with co-ordinating, directing and assessing the development and implementation of a safety plan. Tier two provided a forum for council units to collaborate on community safety and crime prevention initiatives. Tier three assisted in the identification of community safety issues in the municipality and in the implementation of initiatives (Childs 1999). Hume City Council on the outskirts of Melbourne established a senior level task force supported by an advisory forum, with multi-agency teams formed to develop and implement strategies on specific issues e.g. problem gambling, organisational and cultural change, young people, alcohol and drugs. Indigenous people, violence prevention, positive ageing, marketing, urban planning and design and property crime (Button 2000; Hume City Council 2000).

The reasons why these various partnership models were adopted related mainly to 'operational imperatives'. It was reported by local government Community Safety Officers and managers that in an effort to simplify the task of overseeing the development and planning of a community safety plan and its actual implementation, senior level tiers (i.e. what were often referred to as SMTs) were involved in planning and development, while mid to lower level tiers concentrated on implementation and provided feedback on key community safety issues in need of consideration. Having these structural arrangements was based on the recognition that senior level representatives, whether drawn from State government departments or non-government organisations, would not necessarily have the time to dedicate to implementation duties given their executive positions in their own organisations and the demands this placed upon their availability and commitment to the partnership. Rather they were better placed to have input into planning processes and direct resources to lower level partnership groups or tiers to aid the implementation of strategies. Likewise, having work groups, teams or advisory committees focused on specific issues facilitating an in-depth problem-solving approach that was beyond the time and capacity of a senior level SMT to conduct. Working through specialist subcommittees also helped simplify decision-making processes.

Achieving ideal partnership types

The choice of who to have on SMTs was a significant issue in their formation. This in particular related to the seniority of agency representatives. The dilemma for local authorities convening SMTs was ensuring they had a focus on local issues, while also possessing the capacity to influence strategies and resource allocations of a wide range of relevant agencies. The private consultant who worked with funded councils described the problem in the following way:

The formation of SMTs came down to a choice between having a regional manager — a State government department rep — who can make decisions, or somebody local who cannot. So you have the dilemma of do you go so high and gather people who have the resources and the big picture stuff but they don't have the local focus, they don't know the area, they don't know the issues. Or someone who knows the area but doesn't command any authority.

This was partly solved by councils who adopted tiered management structures, one respondent drawn from a rural shire stating:

It was a real problem in having a SMT and nothing else. In an area like ours where the senior regional people are further a-field it was unrealistic to expect them to be coming down to meetings and participating as well as to actually getting in and doing things. And there was also an issue about their level of understanding of local issues. So what we ran with was a steering group, which was made of local representatives — local being shire based or some of them are regionally based but with a stronger local commitment. Like our SES⁴ rep on the steering group is still a regional officer, but he has been a person that has had a lot to do with this municipality. Their role is very much about community input and sending messages up to the SMT who then send instructions for things to happen and resources down through their departments and to the steering group. Well that is what was supposed to happen in theory (local government manager of community safety).

Agency representation on, and commitment to SMTs was reported as being varied and inconsistent. While SMTs were assessed by local practitioners as affording a range of benefits (e.g. improving linkages with various agencies) there were some points of tension in their operation, with levels of agency input determined by a range of factors. For instance, one interviewee from local government stated:

What happened in theory didn't necessarily happen in practice. Obviously the SMT was set up through Safer Cities and Shires — the blue book indicating that representatives needed to be able to go back to their own organisations and make changes. But what was proposed on paper didn't quite happen in reality in that not many of the SMT felt that they should bring all these approaches back to their own organisations ... Yes, this affected their level of participation on the SMT ... The fact was that a lot of them didn't see — the Department of Education for instance — didn't see themselves as saying OK this is great we'll take this on board — what was coming out of the SMT — we will turn up and take some of these things back into our own work plan or our own corporate plan as such — like things arising out of the community safety plan. One problem that became evident was that the Department of Education actually didn't quite have a clear understanding of the purpose of the program, or their involvement in the program and were grappling with the idea of why were the Department of Education involved in Safer Cities and Shires. So we had a representative who wasn't there as often perhaps as she could have been. So you got individuals faced with attending a committee which they didn't have very much understanding of (local government manager of community safety).

4 State Emergency Services.

The problem voiced here was a common complaint. Despite attempts by policy officers in both the Department of Justice and the Department of Education to identify how the latter could actively contribute to the implementation of *Safer Cities and Shires*, the roles State government departments were to play under the strategy remained ill-defined (Cherney 2003).

A large number of respondents from local government (20 of 25 interviewees from local government) recalled that the effectiveness of SMTs (i.e. their operation leading to an increased sharing of information and co-operation) was in particular determined by the personalities of members and their individual attitude toward partnership work. One key participant observed that:

I saw the benefits of SMTs mostly relied in the main on the quality of the person who was nominated from agencies. Their attitude towards multi-agency forums and how comfortable and trusting they felt in them.

The data highlight problems that can arise when participating agencies are unclear about their respective roles and responsibilities within partnership forums. However such problems with SMTs were not that simple. In fact they were a direct consequence of a lack of political commitment at higher levels organisationally within Victorian State government to devolve decision-making powers, authority and resources to appropriate levels (i.e. to local government and State government representatives) that would actually provide SMTs with the capacity to achieve effective inter-agency work. Such devolution would have resulted in SMTs being able to impact on the internal working arrangements and policies of external agencies that underpins the notion of a 'whole of government' (or what is also referred to as 'joined up') approach to policy development (Crawford 1998a, 1998c, 2001). Achieving this at the local level in a context where there is an absence of central government action and co-ordination in facilitating the conditions necessary for inter-agency partnerships is impossible.

This was highlighted by the operation of the State level *Community Safety Crime Prevention Board* whose role was to develop and facilitate the policy necessary for 'whole of government' administration. Interviews with members of the *Board* as well as *Vicsafe* policy officers within the Victorian Department of Justice, — who established and managed the *Community Safety Crime Prevention Board* — indicate it was less than successful in fulfilling its mandate and struggled to understand what was meant by 'whole of government', let alone translate such ideas into actual working policies and practices. Respondent assessments of the *Board* (5 of the *Board's* 9 members, 5 *Vicsafe* personnel and 1 senior government advisor) commented on its lack of cohesion, insufficient guidance, ill-defined mandate, ambiguous functions and confusion among members about its role (see Cherney 2003 for more detail). Minutes of Board meetings indicate that several key members began to question its very purpose, with meetings becoming less and less frequent (Community Safety Crime Prevention Board 1998a, 1998b, 1998c). At the request of a number of its senior members a review was undertaken into the *Board's* operation, with an eye to restructuring both membership and management (Community Safety Crime Prevention Board 1999). However, no outcome eventuated from this review, and the Board ceased to meet.

It is no surprise that given the dysfunction of partnerships at the State level, local level partnerships like SMTs struggled. Many of the participants on SMTs were representing State government departments (e.g. the Department of Education). If their Chief Executive Officers at the State level were unable to establish effective partnership arrangements, it would be unreasonable to expect local representatives to do better. As one interviewee stated:

Without the Community Safety Crime Prevention Board operating as it should have and without the imprimatur that the Board could give and the leadership role that the Board could give — and wasn't — interagency functions at a local level through Safer Cities and Shires were disenfranchised, because the interagency work at the State level wasn't evident.

Hence, given these deficits at the State level, the functioning of SMTs became determined by personalities, because this became the only way to get things done. This also affected both what the SMTs did and how they operated, with conflict management becoming important in such contexts.

Conflict management

When questioned about issues that generated disagreement and lengthy discussion between SMT members, local government Community Safety Officers recalled a number of matters as causing debate. Disagreement occurred among SMT members in relation to defining 'community safety' within local safety plans, and over the provision of data for their development. More important to respondents within local government, however, was not so much the nature or source of disagreements among SMT members — this was seen as an unavoidable feature of partnership work — but the ways in which these disagreements were resolved and managed. Quick resolution often was seen as essential for enabling SMTs to 'move on' and not get 'bogged down in unnecessary conflict'.

Both formal and informal methods of resolving conflict were drawn upon by local government practitioners. For instance issues would be 'thrashed out' until a consensus was reached among SMT members. When agreement could not be reached within the SMT forum, in certain instances the chair of the SMT and council's Community Safety Officer would meet individually with disputing parties or individuals outside the SMT to discuss how a solution could be reached. Often the consultant employed by the Department of Justice to oversee implementation of *Safer Cities and Shires*, would assist in facilitating these informal meetings. This consultant recalled a number of ways in which conflict was managed:

One other strategy was to get other people that were part of your inner sanctum to help — other SMT members. There was also a coaching process — asking people to be the one to ask the question that could lead the SMT into another issue and away from a sticking point ... No it's not conflict avoidance, it's conflict management. There is a range of ways of dealing with conflict and it is not always about seeing eye to eye. Some people cannot be managed, so you have to manage the environment. But that is a judgement that has got to be made on an individual basis according to the dynamics of a SMT.

The importance of managing both potential and occurring conflict within SMTs and its distinction from 'conflict avoidance' was also highlighted by the following interviewee drawn from local government:

Ultimately the process of how you manage those people and bring them along is more important. There was a person on the SMT from council who at the first meeting wanted to go in and attack the police. It was his stated intention, and he had been looking at police statistics that had been provided in good faith, so that we could circulate for the first SMT meeting information on crime. He was saying 'I'm going to go in there and tackle them about the quality of those statistics'. In terms of our briefing we said 'no', 'while we agree with you the police have got a long way to go to improve their statistics and so on, this is what the process is about'. They have shown goodwill by giving the information, they didn't have to do it, they could have just as easily said 'well we won't provide statistics'. So we did some damage control. That's why the induction process with members before meetings is so important. It's almost 'yes minister' in a sense, in that you want the meeting to go as you plan it ... It's not being manipulative. It's more about the possible dynamics

between people and making sure everyone before the meeting understands issues and getting the ground rules established ... I wouldn't call it conflict avoidance, its conflict management. There is bit of a distinction there. This was more about being constructive around the issues — managing conflict, moving things forward (local government manager of community safety).

It is clear that local government Community Safety Officers had to manage SMT conflict in creative ways, given that SMT partnerships were characterised by ongoing internal tensions. The responses above, however, indicate that there clearly is a fine line between the functional 'management' of SMTs (i.e. ensuring their smooth operation), and the avoidance of all conflict. Sometimes the latter (i.e. simple conflict avoidance) can gloss over significant differences of interests and perspectives, which might be better exposed and resolved (Crawford 1997, 1998a, 1998c). Conflict avoidance was particularly problematic when it occurred outside formal structures and processes, adopted to avoid controversial topics and maintain an 'image of unity' among the SMT forum. This hid a range of decision-making processes from formal view (also see Crawford 1997). This leads to what Crawford (1997, 1998c) has termed the smorgasbord effect — i.e. SMTs opt for discrete non-controversial projects rather than striving to achieve organisational change in policies and practices of key agencies (a fundamental but rarely recognised goal of partnerships, see Cherney 2002; Townsley, Johnson & Pease 2003). To maintain unity, the main focus becomes, by default, one of ensuring everyone is kept 'on side' with increasing communication between participating agencies becoming the essential goal. Hence the main benefit of SMTs cited by local government respondents was improved communication (i.e. increasing sharing of information, facilitation of networks and contacts between agency representatives). However, achieving such outcomes was consistently reported by local government Community Safety Officers and Managers as dependent on the personalities of individuals on the SMT and their understanding of its underlying principles.

The results above are not entirely surprising. As already noted, there existed no overall commitment centrally to the devolution of decision-making powers, authority and resources across government, let alone to the level of SMTs. Hence SMTs were relatively blunt mechanisms, many operating in quite a passive fashion, leaving most of the work to local councils and their Community Safety Officers.

Temporal dimension of partnerships and deference of responsibilities

A report produced by the private consultant who oversaw and assisted in the formation and management of SMTs, observed that during phase one of *Safer Cities and Shires* — that involved the formulation of community safety plans — many SMTs tried to push this responsibility for safety plan development onto councils and their safety officers (McMillian & Moriarty 1999). This was confirmed by the majority (11 out of 18) of interviewees, who had been working for local authorities during the phase one stage. In their view most of the leadership came from council, with council and project officers being key drivers of the planning process. This was contrary to what was espoused under *Safer Cities and Shires*, with SMTs expected to provide leadership and strategic direction during the planning and implementation of the program at the local level. Compounding this problem was the need to supervise SMTs and keep them focused on relevant issues. This was consistently raised as a key challenge by local government practitioners. It was often stated by respondents that senior level SMTs could get side-tracked, especially becoming engrossed in the implementation of specific projects that could distract them from their long-term planning role.

Once the research and consultation processes surrounding the development of community safety plans (i.e. phase one of *Safer Cities and Shires*) was completed, local government respondents (20 of 25) recalled that SMTs often went through a transition period between the completion of phase one of *Safer Cities and Shires* and moving into phase-two (safety plan implementation). SMT members were recalled as questioning their role beyond phase one, with a key challenge for safety officers being to ensure that the functioning (i.e. momentum) of the SMT was maintained during transition between phase one and into phase two of the strategy. This often required the reconfiguration of a SMT, with new members drawn into the partnership who were more experienced in program delivery. However it was important that SMTs continued to have input into ongoing planning issues around community safety, given the obvious need for them to review the progress of safety plans, and if need be, adjust priorities and formulate new strategy outcomes. Here again the value of tiered SMT models was emphasised by local government respondents, with smaller work groups outside of a SMT adopted as a way of progressing implementation, while still allowing senior level tiers to focus on planning priorities.

It is clear from interviews that on the whole local government representatives (i.e. safety officers and managers) did take a lead role under phase one of *Safer Cities and Shires*, involving the formation of community safety plans, with some SMTs being passive observers of council driving the planning process⁵. However, this was not symptomatic of a 'conspiratorial model' of multi-agency work (see Sampson et al. 1988:479) whereby local government determined the agenda and objectives of SMTs. Rather it is illustrative of the fact that the strategic role of partnerships like SMTs do not develop automatically, requiring dedicated personnel (i.e. Community Safety Officers) to encourage and shape partnership input into the development and delivery of strategies (see Cherney forthcoming). The danger, however, is that deference to a dedicated co-ordinator or worker can affect the capacity of partnerships to form as collective entities (Cherney 2003; Crawford & Matassa 2000; Tilley 1992, 1993).

Authority and accountability of Senior Management Teams

As highlighted by the work of Crawford (1997, 2001) the authority and accountability of crime prevention and community safety partnerships is a vexed issue, given they blur the boundaries between the roles and functions of agencies sitting on partnership forums (also see Rhodes 1997). Hence, given SMTs were to play a key role in shaping crime prevention and community safety practice at the local level in Victoria, what authority did they have to do so, and to whom were they accountable for making such decisions?

Given they were convened by local government, SMTs reported directly to local authorities, but only did so in an advisory capacity, making recommendations to councils, who then had to endorse these before they could be officially responded to by the SMT and incorporated into a community safety plan. In light of this, when questioned about the accountability of SMTs, over 80% of local government respondents saw them as accountable through council. Local governments, however, had no external authority over SMT members, and were restricted in their ability to hold agencies (particularly State

5 Despite these results, not all respondents believed that local authorities completely controlled the initial planning process surrounding the development of a community safety plan. A number of local government safety officers (6 out of 25 interviewees) felt that SMTs had participated keenly. One interviewee stated that the SMT (in this instance the local *Police Consultative Committee*) had been very active in steering her research for a safety plan, at times refocusing her work that was deviating from the agreed target areas. Such a result, however, was largely again determined by the strength of personalities on SMTs.

government departments) accountable for outcomes identified in a safety plan. Local authorities could not formally compel members to commit resources to the SMT and on occasions representatives refused to do so (Cherney 2003; McMillian & Moriarty 1999). As collective entities SMTs did not directly report to any State government department, reliant upon the willingness of members to provide feedback to their respective managers.

This was an issue that individual funded councils all had to grapple with, and that was largely left unresolved, with many relying mainly upon the 'good will' of agency representatives to agree to some level of accountability.

If crime prevention and community safety partnerships are aimed at changing how agencies address safety and crime, it only makes sense that bodies responsible for convening and co-ordinating partnership forums and leading the development of strategies, have influence over a broad range of relevant agencies. In the context of the experience reported above, local government in Victoria was (and continues to be) relatively powerless, through SMTs, to achieve any significant shift in policies and practices of relevant external agencies, let alone those of State government departments. Hence the partnership model adopted under *Safer Cities and Shires*, with its emphasis upon increased downward accountability for policy development and implementation through SMTs, was partly incongruent with the level of authority and influence possessed by local authorities over agencies sitting on these partnerships, whose action or inaction affected the outcomes of a community safety plan. This model (which is not particular to Victoria) was incompatible with the broader bureaucratic and political context in which it was being implemented.

Conclusion – partnerships at the local level

No formal evaluation of *Safer Cities and Shires* has been completed. When the Bracks Labor government won office in 1999, a key reason for the abandonment of the *Safer Cities and Shires* strategy was due to a lack of demonstrable success (i.e. evidence of its impact on crime and safety). The strategy was criticised by government insiders as suffering from program drift with its broad community safety focus described as part of a 'confetti approach' to policy development (see Cherney 2003; Sutton & Cherney 2002). The author's own research indicates that many local government Community Safety Officers and Managers did see formal components of the strategy as being successful. For example, SMTs were seen by local practitioners as providing the basis for the establishment and facilitation of working relationships between council and external agencies that had not existed previously.

It would be premature to simply dismiss the *Safer Cities and Shires* strategy due to a lack of evaluation of its crime prevention outcomes. Problems encountered during the development and implementation of the strategy are of particular significance because they provide important policy lessons (see Cherney 2003; Cherney & Sutton 2002), especially with respect to the operation of Senior Management Teams.

The problems evident in the operation of SMTs were the result of key structural flaws in the ways partnerships under *Safer Cities and Shires* were set up in the first place. Issues related to the seniority of membership and having the right 'personalities' on SMTs, would have been largely irrelevant if there had been a broader commitment to principles of devolution across State government during the implementation of *Safer Cities and Shires*. The reality was that SMT representatives possessed limited power or authority to make independent decisions that could have assisted in the implementation of local safety plans.

Safer Cities and Shires-funded councils had limited capacity to influence other agencies on SMTs and to negotiate changes in policies and practices. Hence the overt dependence on 'personalities' and the 'management of conflict': ensuring that 'every one gets along' remained the only way of moving processes forward. Local government, as convenors of SMTs, cannot be blamed for such a result.

Participation on partnership forums and input into strategy development only makes sense if they are seen as ongoing processes. In the absence of such sustainability, agencies will be reluctant to commit to partnership work and are more likely to be just 'supportive passengers' — sitting on forums, but contributing very little. The problem with SMTs is that they were formed on the basis of developing a community safety plan, the expected mutual benefits of which were supposed to be self-evident, with SMTs expected to be self-sustaining. However, there was no expectation or signal from central government — especially through the actions of the *Community Safety Crime Prevention Board* — that they would commit to facilitating and sustaining partnership processes across government. Given this absence of central commitment, the functioning of SMTs was always going to be precarious. Hence, local government Community Safety Officers and managers had to work hard to ensure that SMTs remained focused and that momentum was maintained on all fronts. In actual fact the operation of *Safer Cities and Shires*' SMTs became even more precarious, when in 2001 Victoria police began establishing Local Safety Committees under its Local Priority Policing reform, that paralleled both the membership and roles of SMTs (Cherney 2003; Palmer & Cherney 2001).

The experience of partnership forums under *Safer Cities and Shires* can really only be fully understood in the context of the broader political and economic environment that existed at the time. During the *Safer Cities and Shires* period the serving Liberal/National party, led by Premier Geoff Kennett, had undertaken a number of political and economic reforms clearly informed by a mix of economic rationalism, neo-liberalism, new public management and 'reinventing government' philosophies⁶. Both State government departments and local authorities were being told to do more with less (i.e. with less recurrent funding and personnel), with the serving government's amalgamation of State government departments only intensifying hierarchy as the essential organising principle of government (Alford et al. 1994). The government's agenda of placing departmental heads on tight fixed contracts and performance bonuses — that made little mention of partnership work — inevitably had the effect of making departments fixate on their narrow functional responsibilities (Alford et al. 1994; Crawford 2001; Perri 1997). Rather than increasing horizontal and vertical co-ordination between government departments — which is an aim of partnership work (see Crawford 1997; Crawford & Matassa 2000; Stokes-White 2000) — these reforms created conditions which were intrinsically hostile to 'partnerships for the public good'.

This political environment may have provided a period of respite wherein middle ranking bureaucrats could develop *Safer Cities and Shires* as a comprehensive crime prevention and community safety program (see Cherney 2003; Sutton & Cherney 2002). In

6 This included the reduction of State debt and minimising the size of the public sector, privatising traditional government services such as electricity, public transport and prisons, merging twenty-two existing government departments into thirteen mega-departments, placing departmental heads on fix-term contracts and introducing compulsory competitive tendering within local government service provision. No area of policy whether education, health, industrial relations or criminal justice, remained untouched (see Alford et al. 1994; Costar & Economou 1999).

the long term, however, this same environment made effective operation of partnership forums like the *Community Safety Crime Prevention Board* and SMTs impossible. Thus, the problems with partnerships under *Safer Cities and Shires* were in part structural. Economic and political reforms promoted by the serving Liberal/National party (facilitated by a fiscal crisis of inherited State government debt from the previous Labor administration) often tended to render the very organisations expected to play critical roles in SMTs and the implementation of *Safer Cities and Shires'* local safety plans (e.g. local authorities, key government agencies, schools) unable to participate effectively. Attempting to achieve contradictory aims — institutional reforms and economies based on 'business models' of efficiency, a focus on key outputs of departments, and economies of scale (which involved the amalgamation of local authorities and school mergers) while simultaneously engaging in partnerships — made it almost impossible for partnerships to operate effectively.

SMTs did have their problems, but there is no doubt they afforded a range of benefits for both local government and agency representatives. Officers and managers within local government, while finding the management of SMTs difficult, did not see them as completely dysfunctional and found the process rewarding. Experience with partnerships under the Victorian *Safer Cities and Shires* program, however, highlights that their operation, and ultimately the sustainability of crime prevention and community safety, is conditional on broad government commitments⁷. If central governments are serious about sustaining crime prevention policy and achieving strategic objectives, they have to create political and organisational environments that are conducive to partnership work. It must involve developing mechanisms and establishing direct incentives so that relevant agencies will collaborate in new and sustained ways, while also broadening accountability and responsibility for crime prevention. This commitment must be matched by a meaningful devolution of resources, authority and decision-making powers so that inter-agency partnership work can actually occur at the local level. Appealing to the self-evident benefits of partnership work is not enough. Ignoring the 'enabling' conditions that determine 'best practice', will mean that theories of how crime prevention partnerships are supposed to operate will fall well short of how they function in reality.

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7 First and foremost this involves central government commitment to crime prevention as a viable political alternative to law and order (see Cherney 2002; Cherney & Sutton 2002; Sutton 2000).

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