



**REGIONAL
AUSTRALIA**
INSTITUTE

Optimising regional investment:

Opportunities for reform, innovation and efficiency

Commonwealth Government Commission of Audit 2013

Regional Australia Institute Submission, December 2013

Executive Summary

The whole-of-government mandate of the Australian Commission of Audit provides a unique opportunity to set the Commonwealth on a pathway towards a more effective and efficient role in the economic and social future of regional Australia.

Achieving better outcomes in regional Australia is also critical to the achievement of the goals of the Commission. The result of ineffective and inefficient policy and services in regions is that the nation pays on both sides of the balance sheet with a lower economic contribution and higher costs across social services, health, education and welfare.

While there is a conventional view within the Commonwealth that 'regions are a state responsibility', by any objective measure the Australian Government is a significant investor in regions.

Commonwealth investment and presence in regions spans a range of policies and services across the majority of Commonwealth portfolios. In addition, a series of regionalised policy implementation structures have been established as part of recent inter-governmental reforms in a number of portfolios, the most recent being the development of Health and Hospital Networks and Medicare Locals. As a result, Commonwealth policies play a fundamental and growing role in positioning regions and regional people for success.

Amongst this range of policies, services and programs, the RAI sees that there are many opportunities for policy to be more innovative, more efficient and more effective. However, the current system is poorly positioned to realise these gains. The RAI believes that the Commission has a unique opportunity to begin to change this situation.

In relation to the terms of reference of the Commission of Audit, the RAI offers the following **recommendations**;

1. The Commonwealth should **clarify the extent and costs of policy and service delivery** in different regions across its portfolios.

Stronger evidence about the scope and expenditure by the Commonwealth is needed. With the current information base it is impossible to properly assess the extent of duplication and inefficiency.

More importantly, the effectiveness of different policies and services in targeting the challenges across different regions is mostly unknown at the whole-of-government level.

As part of transitioning the Commonwealth to a sustainable fiscal position and ensuring best use of taxpayer resources, understanding the scope and effectiveness of programs and services in regions should become a business as usual activity.

- Existing regional policy implementation structures created by the Commonwealth should be reviewed to **identify opportunities for better integration and co-ordination of policy development and implementation at the regional level.**

A multiplicity of portfolio based regional structures is likely to be limiting the ability of the Commonwealth to act effectively at the regional level and also provides a foundation for on-going duplication and inefficiency in policy and services.

A cross portfolio, whole-of-government approach to regional policy implementation will result in better targeted initiatives at a lower cost.

- The Commonwealth should establish a system for **locally led innovation initiatives** to harness the potential for communities to lead regional reforms.

These initiatives would offer communities the opportunity to partner with the Commonwealth in searching for ways to better use resources and overcome entrenched local issues.

Given the difficulties of designing effective policy for small and diverse regional communities and the growing calls for regions to be given greater responsibility for their future, it is in the Commonwealth's interest to encourage and enable local innovation in seeking positive change for communities.

While not every community is ready or able to lead local change, there are communities who are frustrated by the current system, can see what could achieve change locally and are seeking greater responsibility and say in their future.

As well as offering an opportunity for real change in many local areas, locally led innovation initiatives will create a source of new ideas and innovative approaches that can be implemented throughout regional Australia.

- The **Commission should consider the likely effectiveness of its broader reform proposals in the regional context.**

Some commonly proposed solutions to efficiency issues (such as contestability-based reforms) are recognised as being less likely to work in regional areas and it cannot be assumed that policy solutions that work in a metropolitan context will directly translate to a regional one.

On the other hand, solutions such as making services more widely accessible using technology can be more effective in regions enhancing the case for reform. The RAI sees enormous untapped potential to exploit technology to make quality services more readily accessible to regional Australians, particularly in the health area.

Considering the likely effectiveness of reform proposals through a regional lens as part of the process for analysis will ensure the Commission builds the strongest possible case for reform.

Introduction

The Commission of Audit presents a unique opportunity for initiating reform of the Commonwealth's engagement with regional Australia.

The Regional Australia Institute (RAI) considers this reform essential given the challenging and quite different context for policy implementation in regions. Despite sustained centralised efforts and initiatives to overcome these issues, there remains persistent disadvantage in services, outcomes and general well-being in many regions.

While this submission considers the overarching role and mandate of the Commission as an agent of fundamental reform in the Commonwealth, the terms of reference to which this submission relate are;

"The Commission is asked to report on efficiencies and savings to improve the effectiveness of, and value-for-money from, all Commonwealth expenditure across the forward estimates and in the medium term, including:

- *options for greater efficiencies in the Australian Government, such as:*
 - *increasing contestability of services;*
 - *adoption of new technologies in service delivery and within government;*
 - *consolidation of agencies and boards;*
 - *rationalising the service delivery footprint to ensure better, more productive and efficient services for stakeholders;*
 - *flattening organisational structures and streamlining lines of responsibility and accountability;*
 - *consolidating government support functions into a single agency; and*
 - *privatisation of Commonwealth assets.*
- *potential improvements to productivity, service quality, and value for money across the public sector, including better delivery of services to the regions;"*

Commission of Audit 2013, Terms of Reference

This submission is structured in two parts. The first examines the role and structure of the Australian Government in regional Australia.

The second part reflects on the strengths and challenges of this situation to offer a series of recommendations for reform. These recommendations include what the RAI considers to be essential reforms that will benefit all Australians and help to ensure the Commission achieves its challenging objectives.

The RAI welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Commission of Audit and looks forward to further discussion with the Commission on this important issue.

Regional Australia

Regional Australia refers to the non-metropolitan areas of the nation that lie beyond Australia's major capital cities and their immediate surrounding suburbs.

Australia's regions are diverse and vast; they comprise 99 percent of Australia's land mass and are home to seven million people - a third of Australia's population. They are fundamentally important both socially and economically to Australia's future.

Our regions also experience challenges and opportunities which are fundamentally different to major metropolitan areas. Their diverse histories, sources of wealth, cultures and communities are simultaneously a source of strength for the nation and a challenge for centralised policy making.

About the Regional Australia Institute

Independent and informed by both research and ongoing dialogue with the community, the RAI develops evidence-based policy and advocates for change to build a stronger economy and better quality of life in regional Australia – for the benefit of all Australians.

The RAI was specifically formed to help bridge the gap between knowledge, debate and decision-making for the potential and future pathways of regional Australia. It exists to ensure local, state and federal policy makers, researchers, business and members of the community have access to the information they need to make informed choices about the future of regional Australia.

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Part 1 - The Australian Government and Regional Australia

The role of the Australian Government

- Outcomes in regional Australia are affected by all portfolios of government, not just those dedicated to regional Australia.
- There is limited information about Commonwealth investment across portfolios at the regional and local level. This limits the ability of the Commonwealth to make informed decisions about improving outcomes in regions.
- While there is a diversity of services, programs and initiatives to combat regional issues there is limited opportunity for towns and communities themselves to lead local change.

In examining the efficiency and effectiveness of services to the regions, it is essential to look beyond the lens of what is typically considered regional policy; that is, beyond the policies and programs administered by the Department of Infrastructure and Regional Development.

Across many portfolios, the Australian Government is a significant investor in regional services. The scale of government investment outside of the Department that is specifically tasked with regional development is likely to be much higher than that coming directly from the regional sector of Commonwealth administration itself. Figure 1 provides a simple overview of the role of the Commonwealth, State and Local Governments in regions.

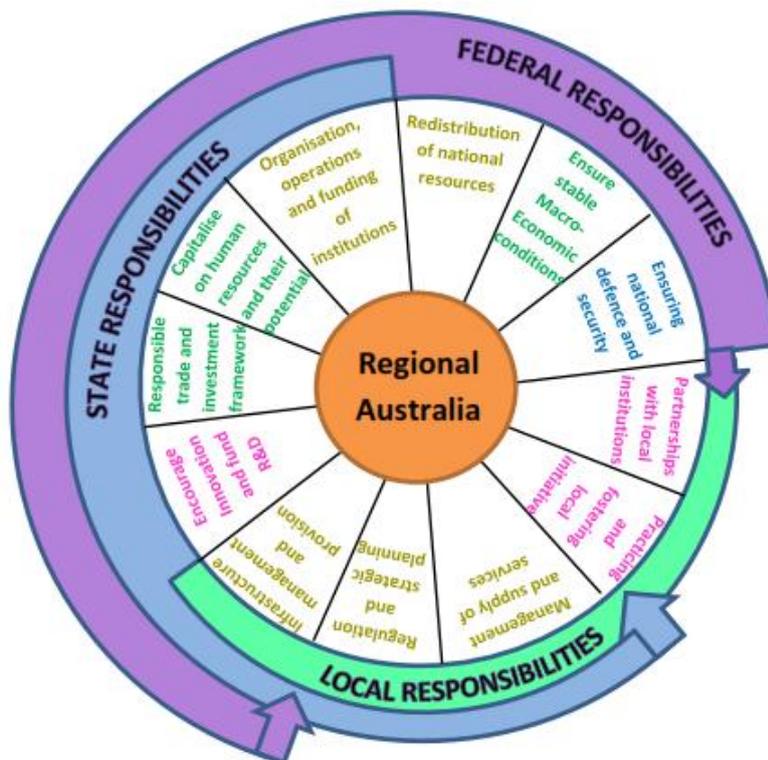


Figure 1: Role of Australian governments and regions (Source: RAI, 2013)

While each role of government is important to the regions, as with the nation as a whole, the most significant expenditure in regions emerges from the re-distribution of national resources (tax and welfare) and the investments in people (health, education, employment, social services, human services)ⁱ. It is within these roles that the Government has the largest influence over outcomes in regional Australia.

This regional breakdown of government services and spending (Figure 2) is not something that has been extensively examined by the Commonwealth to dateⁱⁱ. It is understood by the RAI that while attempts have been made in the past to examine spending at a regional level, these have not progressed. A combination of complex systems and the unavailability of information pertaining to government spending at the regional level are understood to have confounded attempts to understand regional level investment across the Commonwealth.

As a result, the ability to make informed decisions about the efficiency and effectiveness of services across regional Australia is severely impeded. In fact, it is likely that within the Commonwealth and the regions, there is no detailed understanding of the breadth of policies and programs that are active in different regions, how much they are costing and, importantly, how effective the mixture of Commonwealth investments is in different regions.



Figure 2 Overview of Commonwealth portfolios and regional investment (Source: RAI, 2013)

This lack of cross portfolio understanding means that solutions are developed in silos and operate independently, or in competition within regions. For example, Ceduna in South Australia is reported to have 20 separate welfare agencies delivering services in a town of 3000 peopleⁱⁱⁱ.

In engaging with regions, the RAI has encountered a commonly held view that the myriad of services and programs that do exist, across multiple providers and levels of government, are often costly, confusing and largely ineffective.

These views are reflected in recent comments by residents of Bourke in Western NSW in discussing the severe socio-economic challenges facing this regional community:

"One of the difficulties we have is that well-meaning people who aren't us control our community..."

...People are allocating a certain amount of money to us, but the people who control that money don't live here, have never been here, and to some extent at least their jobs depend on our problems never being solved...

...There's an industry around the suffering and the anguish in our community.... All we see is fat cats who come to our community to tick a box, to have a barbecue, to give a nod, and the waste is phenomenal. I'm a big supporter of 'take it away'. We will start again, but let's do this a bit smarter. Let's cut out the middle man.' iv

While these are emotive comments, they are reflective of the frustration felt by many in regions.

The RAI has sought to understand these issues in an objective and meaningful way. However, our conclusion at this point is that although most of the resources within regions are likely to come from the Commonwealth, it is not possible to understand what resources are available, whether they are being well managed and whether they are targeting the most pressing issues in any particular region.

Service Delivery Outcomes in regional Australia

An examination of the relative social outcomes in regional Australia emphasises the extent to which the current approaches to service delivery are failing in many areas.

For example, overall, early childhood performance in regional areas is poorer with one quarter of children considered developmentally vulnerable while in capital cities it is just one fifth of all children.

Similarly, with regard to access to secondary schooling, all capital city LGA's ranked in the top 20%. Regional LGA's ranked from the top 10% right down to the bottom 10% of LGA's.

Meanwhile, the social outcomes of regional Australia including health risk factors, educational attainment and chronic disease all show a direct relationship between increasing levels of geographical remoteness (and therefore access to services) and poorer performance on these social measures. For example, the proportion of persons receiving youth unemployment, disability or single parenting support services were 7% in regions yet only 4% in capital cities.

Intergovernmental relationships and regional Australia

- State and Commonwealth Governments have established regional policy implementation structures as part of recent reforms in a number of areas of policy.
- While resolving conflicts in the roles and responsibilities between States and the Commonwealth is important, for regions it is the subsequent effectiveness of policy implementation that matters.
- Simply shifting responsibilities between States and the Commonwealth may have little practical impact at the regional level.

The Commission's Terms of Reference require that the division of responsibilities between States and the Commonwealth be considered. The RAI notes that the 1996 Commission of Audit was of the view that:

“As far as possible governments should operate at their 'natural' level: national issues should be handled by the Commonwealth Government; regional and local issues should be handled by State and local governments.”

– 1996 Commission of Audit Executive Summary

While this principle of operating at the 'natural' level is much quoted, how relevant it is to regional policy in 2014 is questionable. The practical realisation of this 'natural' level approach to intergovernmental roles for regional Australia has been sporadic at best. Since 1996, there has been a trend towards further centralisation of powers from States towards the Commonwealth under both Coalition and Labor administrations as the Commonwealth has sought to leverage its fiscal dominance into broader policy influence.

In this environment it is important that the Commission examines practical examples of Commonwealth-State reforms rather than reverting to a restatement of principle.

Across recent COAG reforms, the co-operative development of joint regional level implementation structures has emerged as a preferred method for implementing change⁹. Key examples of this now established preference include:

- Health and Hospital Networks and Medicare Locals.
- Natural Resource Management Organisations.
- Regional Development Australia Committees.
- Indigenous Coordination Centres and Regional Operations Centres.
- Enterprise Connect.
- Job Service Providers.

This trend reflects the fact that although regions are not a formalised level of government in Australia, they are a spatial scale that makes sense for policy implementation.

This agreement also reflects the shared limitations for Commonwealth and State Governments, with their metropolitan-based and centralised bureaucracies, in delivering services effectively for different regions and local areas.

In this environment, simply adhering to the 1996 principle of acting at the 'natural' level and devolving Commonwealth activity back to States or vice versa will not necessarily be effective or efficient in achieving better outcomes in regional Australia.

Diverging experiences, service demands and outcomes in regional Australia

- Regions exhibit an increased demand for services combined with a higher and potentially increasing cost of service provision.
- Regional and metropolitan service provision settings are inherently different.

Because of historically poorer service provision, an older population structure, large pockets of entrenched disadvantage and poorer overall health outcomes, many regional populations demand a higher than average level of service.

The RAI has observed that it is incredibly difficult for the standard structures and policy approaches adopted by centralised government to be effective in any region, particularly those outside the metropolitan areas, and especially remote locations.

In densely populated metropolitan areas, engaging with social or economic issues and implementing targeted investments to seek change within narrow specialist areas (such as a network of services for forms of substance abuse, specific types of disability or mental health conditions) makes sense.

Cities will usually include a relatively large population of people experiencing a particular issue and a potential for a diversity of service providers. People can be channelled into a multi-dimensional system including a variety of support services to deal with other issues an individual may be experiencing, such as unemployment or chronic health conditions. While not always effective, the conditions exist for this approach to work.

In regions however, low population density and distance between centres means providing an effective web of interrelated services that meet individual and community needs is either much more expensive on a per capita basis or simply not feasible.

Nevertheless, the need for diverse combinations of services to meet individual needs is similar, irrespective of location. Distance and small populations mean that governments face a challenge in balancing the needs of individuals against the economics of service delivery.

If we continue to work in ways which do not reflect the unique challenges and experiences of regions, a further decline in outcomes for regional populations can be expected, as well as a continued rise in the demand for Government investment to accommodate this.

However, if we focus our attention on regional service challenges and are prepared to alter the models we use to invest in regional Australia, we can create opportunities to facilitate better outcomes at lower costs.

To date, the pathway to improved and specific outcomes for regions has remained elusive and unclear.

The broad mandate of the Commission, however, offers a unique opportunity to begin a pathway of reform and lead to more effective, efficient outcomes for regional Australia, the Commonwealth Government and Australia as a whole.

Part 2 - Reform Pathways

- The Commonwealth needs to clarify the scope and expenditure of its investments in regional services.
- Regional level co-ordination or integration of existing policy implementation structures should be considered.
- Locally led innovation initiatives should be established to co-opt local leadership and innovation from capable communities as part of the reform process.
- All significant reform proposals should be tested in terms of their likely efficacy and impact in regional Australia.

There is significant opportunity for reform in the way the Commonwealth provides services to regional Australia. This reform can make an important contribution to the broad objectives of the Commission as well as delivering better outcomes for regions over time.

The RAI proposes a series of actions for consideration by the Commission to initiate this substantial process of reform.

Building a stronger information base

The RAI recommends that the first priority for improving regional services be the development of a robust body of evidence identifying the scope and expenditure on policy, programs service delivery in different regions.

In the first instance, a focus on a representative sample of different regions identifying the mix of programs and services across portfolios, the scope and cost of services actually delivered and the mode of delivery will help to build the understanding of Commonwealth engagement in regional Australia that is currently missing.

This information can then be contrasted with the mixture of issues experienced by these communities and changes in socio-economic outcomes over time. The findings of this work would be used to identify:

- Priority areas for reform across and within portfolios, to increase effectiveness and efficiency of regional services; and
- Approaches to maintaining a stronger and more systematic knowledge of regional services expenditure by the Australian Government, so that on-going monitoring is possible.

Because of the need to combine information across portfolios, this task would need to be led

by central agencies.

The process itself should be suitably distant from the bureaucracy but possess the power to secure appropriate information from agencies on expenditure, while also engaging meaningfully with communities involved.

The RAI considers the Productivity Commission, a dedicated independent Commission and/or regionally-engaged organisations may be most appropriate for initiating this important reform.

Coordination of Commonwealth activities at the regional level

The proliferation of regional implementation structures in Commonwealth policy is an issue that needs to be better recognised across the Commonwealth Government. It is also timely to consider the benefits of better cross portfolio co-ordination (or integration) of these structures at the regional level to ensure promised outcomes can be delivered in different regions.

Siloed approaches, whereby there is an artificial separation of programs and services at the regional level reflecting centralised structures can lead to inefficiency and institutional bottlenecks. This results in multiple players each holding a portion of responsibility for regional issues and approaches driven by competing institutional self-interest.

The OECD identifies institutional bottlenecks as a “key explanatory factor for poor economic performance” in regions.^{vi} The practical effects of bottlenecks can include poor mobilisation of stakeholders, a lack of continuity and coherence on policy, institutional instability, a lack of common strategic vision. This results in limited capacity and gaps in governance that work against productivity and growth.^{vii}

The antidote to bottlenecks is coordination, integration or alignment of regional activity. The RAI recommends that a regionally led co-ordination and leadership mechanism for these multiplying regional entities be explored. This can provide a more coherent and integrated framework for channelling Federal and State funds to regions, as well as, and including, local government.

This joint co-ordination effort should not only seek better integration and efficiency in the provision of regional programs, but also a higher profile and accountability of regional initiatives for the communities they serve. If properly designed and armed with the insights from the information base proposed above, this reform can likely be implemented using existing resources.

Locally led innovation initiatives

While better understanding of regional needs and fine tuning of Commonwealth strategy is likely to reveal opportunities for significant gains, activating local innovation and leadership is essential to achieving better outcomes in regions.^{viii}

Confronting the combination of likely severe but unknown inefficiency and duplication in regional services, combined with the need to overcome well-established poor social and economic outcomes in regional Australia is a challenge that requires new and innovative policy thinking.

Regional issues are a classic case of the Centre and the Periphery (see Box^{ix}). This creates a set of strategic imperatives and challenges that are well recognised in the corporate world as well as in government. The feature of this assessment is the long-understood capacity for innovation from businesses, people and organisations that exist on the periphery.

Given this well proven finding, it is important for any reform process to consider the incentives that the current siloed and accidental regional policy creates for local leaders and communities to realise the potential for innovation that lies at the periphery.

The comments noted earlier, from people in Bourke NSW, emphasise that the current system provides little incentive or pathway for local innovation.

The RAI recommends that a reform program of regional services includes a shift towards creating deliberate incentives and opportunity for genuine local engagement and leadership.

Calls for change of this type are growing and coming from communities and leaders in some of the most challenged regions. Of particular note is the “Empowered Communities” initiative from a group of remote and regional Indigenous communities^x as well as the work of Desert Knowledge Australia.

The Centre and the Periphery

Regional issues for governments are a classic case of the centre and the periphery. Regions occupy the periphery of socio-economic policy, governments the centre.

Boston Consulting Group asserts that the periphery is the realm of opportunities not yet discovered. A greenfield in which modest and prudent investments can produce huge payoffs for the centre.

RAI’s assessment is that Australian policy is not providing a platform for the centre and the periphery to use their respective advantages to innovate.

Regions (the periphery) are constrained in deploying their own resources in response to local needs and opportunity. The centre is caught trying desperately to solve problems of which it has little practical knowledge and connection to meet regional expectations and national aspirations.

The Commonwealth Government has already made a commitment to help progress the Empowered Communities vision. This submission makes the case that this initiative is reflective of wider regional frustration with the current system and a desire amongst local leaders to take responsibility for achieving change.

The RAI recommends that local leadership, where communities are ready and capable of leading change, be embedded in the system through Locally Led Innovation Initiatives.

Locally Led Innovation initiatives would be proposed and implemented by local coalitions of motivated people and organisations. Their activities would be based firstly on local identification of the combination of solutions that are most likely to achieve significant change in entrenched regional issues.

The role of Government would primarily be in support and oversight of the projects.

These initiatives should operate independent of line portfolios and enable social services (such as health and education) and economic development (such as job creation) to be integrated into fit-for-purpose local solutions to local issues.

It is likely that initiatives would also draw in community resources and philanthropic contributions, further leveraging Commonwealth investment.

Initiatives would only occur in local areas where the genuine initiative and ability to come together to design and implement innovative solutions to local issues exists.

As well as the growing calls for change from regional Australia, the seeds and precedence for this type of reform have already been laid within recent thinking about policy and regional issues in the UK^{xi} and in an innovative new initiative within the Australian health portfolio (see Box^{xii}).

By harnessing local energy Locally Led Innovation Initiatives can act as a catalyst for significant change in the system.

Partners in Recovery – seeds of significant reform

Partners In Recovery aims to support people with severe, persistent and complex mental illness and their carers and families, by getting multiple sectors, services and supports they may come into contact with (and could benefit from) to work in a more collaborative, co-ordinated and integrated way.

Through system collaboration, the Australian Government program seeks to promote collective ownership and encourage innovative solutions to ensure effective and timely access to the services and supports required by people with severe and persistent mental illness with complex needs to sustain optimal health and wellbeing.

While this initiative is contained within the Health portfolio, its analysis of the challenges facing complex service environments and solutions proposed is similar to the situation for regions.

Although it is a new initiative, it reinforces the challenges faced in delivering complex services and shows the way for wider reform as an initiative which is creating partnerships in Medicare Local regions across Australia.

The RAI sees opportunity for this type of approach, combined with ideas from recent UK reforms and a strong analysis of regional issues could be combined into a system which enables local areas to lead the way in tackling their own issues.

Testing reform proposals

The final recommendation relates to the wider process for the Commissions deliberations.

Given the context described above it is also important to ensure that the Commission does not unintentionally exacerbate the issues described above.

To avoid this risk, the RAI recommends that the efficacy of reform proposals be tested against the practical delivery environment in regional and remote communities.

For example, innovations such as voucher systems and competitive tendering between service providers are sensible ways in which government can seek a more efficient approach in service delivery. However, depending on the policy issue and delivery environment, these reforms may only be effective in a metropolitan context where a diversity of potential service providers exist.

This limitation was acknowledged but not substantially resolved in the recent Productivity Commission inquiry into the Disability Care model with a conclusion that because self-directed funding was not mandatory, regional people would not be worse off^{xiii}. This implies that for many people with disability in regional areas, particularly those requiring specialist care, this reform may have limited or no impact.

There are also examples where reform proposals may be more effective in regions. The use of technology in service delivery is one area of great potential for reforms to be more important and effective in regions. For example, the removal of structural and administrative barriers to technology integration in Commonwealth service delivery.

There are likely to be a range of opportunities in this area including substantive systemic reform such as securing adequate and acceptable methods of e-health records or by enabling the negotiation of partnerships with non-government organisation (not-for-profit or for-profit) to establish physical or virtual public service centres for government transactions, for example post offices, may significantly increase the accessibility of services to regions and regional people as well as achieving efficiency outcomes.

In any case there is significant value in the Commission considering how well a system wide reform is likely to work in regional areas and accounting for this in its recommendations to provide the strongest possible case for reform.

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