



AUSTRALIAN
LOCAL GOVERNMENT
ASSOCIATION

Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Migration

In response to the Inquiry on Migration in Regional Australia

19 September 2019

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Committee Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on Migration
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Sir/Madam,

Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Migration - Inquiry on Migration in Regional Australia

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Committee's Inquiry which will investigate and report on the breadth of migrant settlement strategies and migration settings, including for skilled and humanitarian migrants, in regional Australia.

The Australian Local Government Association (ALGA) is the national voice of local government in Australia, representing 537 councils across the country. 75% of these councils are located in rural, remote or regional areas of Australia.

In structure, ALGA is a federation of State and Territory Local Government Associations. This submission should be read in conjunction with any separate submissions received from State and Territory Associations as well as individual councils.

Local Governments ensure that local communities function effectively on a daily basis and are provided with the basic services and facilities that Australian communities expect to find in suburbs, towns and rural areas. Councils play a critical role in building local identity, community wellbeing and social cohesion and contributing to national productivity. Local governments are fundamental to achieving liveability in our regional and rural communities.

Depending on local circumstances, many regional and rural local governments are keen to attract workers and residents to their communities. Skilled migrants may create opportunities to further develop regional economies by increasing the skills base, demand for services, and through improving access to international networks. Compared with metropolitan areas, regional communities often have a greater capacity to accommodate migrants, as they are less affected by issues such as congestion and housing affordability.

At the 2019 National General Assembly of Local Government, a resolution was adopted that called upon the Federal Government to develop a long-term plan for investment in regional cities as a key to maintaining the liveability of the regions they support, attract business investment and to provide high quality health, education, recreation and cultural facilities.

International migrants provide stability to communities in regional Australia by offsetting population decline and the departure of young adults, as well as being essential to meeting work force shortages. Some regional areas are already experiencing population growth and overseas-born residents are a significant, and in some cases, the only contributor to that growth. Regional migration can be a win-win scenario for new arrivals and host communities in the regions. In many regional and remote places, population stability or growth has been based on international migration. An analysis of 2016 Census data shows that:

- 151 Local Government Areas increased their overseas-born while decreasing their Australian-born population;
- 128 increased both their Australian-born and overseas-born population;
- 116 decreased both Australian-born and overseas-born population; and
- 20 increased Australian-born and decreased their overseas-born population.

There are some excellent examples of initiatives led by local governments that have been very successful in attracting and more importantly retaining new workers and residents. These are outlined in the attachment that responds to the Terms of Reference.

We note that the Committee will give particular consideration to how communities and settlement services can best assist migrants to gain successful employment outcomes in regional Australia, including local work experience opportunities, skills certification and training, knowledge of Australian workforce regulations, accommodation and travel to and from the workplace. In this regard Australian local governments collectively employ approximately 189,000 people and in regional areas, local governments are a significant employer in their communities.

Earlier this year, ALGA released a [Local Government Workforce and Future Skills Report](#) which may be of interest to the Committee. The report found that the local government workforce:

- Is considerably older than the Australian All-industry workforce;
- Has a declining participation level of workers under 30 years of age;
- Does not have enough apprentices to meet future needs;
- Is facing major skills shortages in key professional and technical occupations; and
- Is not well positioned in regard to new and emerging soft skills.

Further findings including recommendations can be found in the full Report.

ALGA has been advocating to the Federal Government for additional funding to give local governments greater capacity to meet communities needs in terms of services and infrastructure (refer to [2019-20 Pre-Budget submission](#)). In particular our funding proposals below will support services and infrastructure for a growing population in regional Australia:

- Restoring the financial assistance grants to 1% to help ensure equivalent level of services are provided across rural, regional and remote areas;
- Investing \$200 million per annum in a Local Government Higher Productivity Investment Plan to realise the potential of Australia's freight routes and improve heavy vehicle access on local roads;
- Increase the Roads to Recovery Program funding to \$800 million to sustainably manage the Local Government component of the national road network;
- Making the Bridge Renewal Program permanent to more sustainably manage council bridges;
- Establishing a Digital Local Government and Rural/Regional Telecommunications Program of \$100 million per annum to increase the benefits to rural and regional communities of improved technology, connectedness and innovation; and
- Investing in a Local Government Community Infrastructure Program of \$300 million per annum over four years to restore and rejuvenate ageing community infrastructure and improve the liveability of communities.

If you would like to discuss any issues in this submission please contact Liz de Chastel, Senior Policy Adviser on telephone

Yours sincerely

Adrian Beresford-Wylie
Chief Executive

Response to Terms of Reference

1. National and international best practice strategies to encourage people to settle and stay in regional areas.

While regions are experiencing population growth it is the ideal opportunity to build on the work in a growing number of regional communities that have already been successful in attracting international migrants through the development of place-based strategies. Regional cities such as Bendigo in Victoria, Mount Gambier in South Australia, Orange in New South Wales, and Toowoomba in Queensland have increased their populations by attracting overseas-born and Australia-born residents. In many locations, local governments lead the process and advocate on behalf of their communities for additional residents.

The perception of quality of life, community and family connections, and liveability feature strongly in individuals and families decisions about whether to stay in a community or their willingness to move to another area. There are often tangible and intangible factors that make a place attractive to live and work in.

Drivers of liveability can include: having sufficient income (by implication, education and employment), accessibility (transport – including public transport and lack of congestion), personal relationships and connections (social capital – networks, trust), individuals feeling good about themselves (self-esteem, confidence), and having control over personal environments (such as capabilities to make choices and problem-solve).

Local governments, through their provision of community infrastructure and services including land use planning, play a significant role in ensuring the liveability, sustainability and wellbeing of our communities. Liveability, particularly in regional areas is influenced by a range of different factors including:

- Feeling of safety, opportunities for participation and social cohesion;
- Access and availability of community services such as arts, culture and creative industries, entertainment, sport and recreation;
- Access and availability of community gathering places particularly focussed around a vibrant restaurant and café scene;
- Public open space including parks, playgrounds and reserves within walking distance;
- Good accessibility within the community including walkability, cycling and public transport and lack of congestion as well as accessibility to larger centres including air travel and non car based transport;
- Sufficient income (by implication, education and employment) and cost of living commensurate with income;
- Proximity to quality higher order services such as health care and secondary and tertiary education; and
- Affordable and appropriate housing including being designed for climatic conditions.

Local Government provides many of these services or facilitates and advocates for other services. It has an important role in the development and support of communities as well as fostering social cohesion. Councils provide the conduit by which local and regional communities express their identity, enhance their well-being and relate to other levels of Government. It is the level of government that most people come in contact with for information and support and it is the level of government that is consistently sought out for commentary on local social issues.

Regional centres can provide both a high standard and range of physical infrastructure to support economic and lifestyle benefits, such as libraries, pools, sporting facilities, retail hubs, parks, aged care and child care services and are able to attract and retain populations. However, population or financial pressures in some locations have meant that these services can be over capacity or not available. In some communities, local governments step into the provision of some of the services (eg child care) where there are thin markets.

Some regional centres and rural and remote areas can leverage their existing advantages in terms of liveability, for example clean environment, quality lifestyle, lack of congestion and affordable housing, to actively promote their regions as great places to live and work. These strategies can also target skilled and experienced workers from overseas, interstate and elsewhere in the state, and often emphasise tree change and sea change lifestyle-based migration opportunities. A current example of this approach is the [Copper Coast Council](#) in South Australia which is developing a marketing campaign to promote the region to a broader audience, including businesses, tourists and potential future residents.

Many regional populations are growing based on their existing services, accessibility and infrastructure, yet in order for regions to continue to grow and attract new residents, there needs to be a more equitable investment in their infrastructure and services to further build appealing, adaptable and viable communities that people want to live in and contribute to in the long term.

Underpinning how successfully a community manages population change has a lot to do with the strength and cohesion of the community as well as local leadership (typically led by the council). Whilst communities are undergoing change, Local Governments understand the importance of the strength of the social fabric of their communities as much as the necessity for physical infrastructure, especially to foster liveable and inclusive communities.

Local governments' role in fostering social cohesion with their communities, is varied but can include:

- Consulting and engaging with community leaders;
- Mapping and understanding community profile and needs;
- Planning and delivering relevant local infrastructure and services;
- Advocacy on behalf of communities for support services;
- Providing opportunities for celebration and promotion of cultural diversity; and
- Hosting citizenship ceremonies to welcome new citizens.

2. Strategies to develop regional skilled migration.

Australia's current immigration, employment and settlement services are relatively siloed and across different levels of government leading to potential barriers to rural settlement. There is no systematic way for migrant workers to link up with rural employers, nor is there a systematic policy or integrated support mechanism to facilitate secondary migration away from metropolitan cities. With greater facilitation of relocation to rural areas and active community welcoming, more international migrants will come to call a rural community their home.

Strong coordination between the three levels of government is needed to match migration strategies and decisions with local needs, particularly to support economic growth. For example, if a town needs agricultural workers and this need is not being met by Australian workers, then visas may be required to enable migration by overseas workers with relevant backgrounds and/or relocating humanitarian visa holders with agricultural skills.

Underpinned by a locally-led settlement strategy, rural communities can welcome and host new migrants, play a key role in securing employment and housing, take into account culture, customs and the environment, and foster community support and cohesion. In areas of high migrant population, settlement services, literacy and education support, and employment pathways are essential – not only for the economic development of the community, but for creating a welcoming and caring environment. This is paramount to integration, resilience and economic success.

3. Strategies to develop regional humanitarian migration.

Local Governments play a significant role in ensuring that all refugees and new migrants feel welcomed and included, understand their rights and responsibilities, participate in the local community and are supported with appropriate services.

Examples of local government practice in supporting cohesion and integration include:

- [Victorian Local Government Multicultural Issues Network](#) and Local Government Multicultural Network NSW - networks for council staff interested in multicultural services and policy development;
- [Refugee Welcome Zones](#) - Local Governments which have made a commitment to welcoming refugees into the community, upholding the human rights of refugees, demonstrating compassion for refugees and enhancing cultural and religious diversity in the community; and
- [Welcoming Cities](#) – A network which supports local governments to advance communities where everyone can belong and participate in social, cultural, economic and civic life.

4. Key local, state and federal initiatives for successful regional settlement outcomes.

Providing financial incentives to encourage people living elsewhere in Australia to relocate to regional areas is a proactive and interventionist approach for increasing population and meeting skilled workforce needs. Incentives to relocate could include:

- Coordination and incentives to relocate people away from high growth areas, recognising the opportunity for education-based incentives such as for international students and ones that may address existing and future skills gap;
- Incentives to address barriers that may stymie relocation due to social, economic and environmental factors including (but not limited to) social cohesion, links to family and friends including transport and telecommunications accessibility, work, education and career pathways, safety and feelings of security, liveability and comfort commensurate with local climatic conditions, appropriate and affordable housing options and other cost of living considerations, community, healthcare and government service accessibility, and improved water security;
- Removing barriers to secondary migration of international migrants wanting to relocate to regional areas with funding to support community initiatives to contact and assist settlement of these people;
- Incentives to encourage suitable new international arrivals to settle in places other than the capital cities; and
- Incentives for relocating that appropriately considers changing environmental characteristics including climate change and flow on costs of living.

As an example of a local government incentive, the [Strathbogie Shire Council](#) in northern Victoria provides a “rates holiday” for 2 years for existing residents and potential new residents to the region (based on eligibility for the state’s First Home Buyers Grant).

The [Northern Tasmanian Development Corporation](#) (NTDC) which is funded by seven northern councils aims to improve the prosperity of northern Tasmania. The NTDC has been appointed as the lead agency to develop the Regional Economic Plan as outlined in the Launceston City Deal. Part of this is a Population Taskforce which *“has been established to address the issues around our declining working age population over the next few years. There are specialist skills within our region that our employers are already having difficulty recruiting to including: health professionals, construction trades, accountants, ICT professionals etc. The Population Taskforce will consider how to best promote our fabulous family-friendly lifestyle to a targeted audience considering a move away from over-congested city centres.”*

5. Local volunteers, employers and community organisations and their role in facilitating regional settlement.

Local governments work closely with business and community groups and acknowledge that strong partnerships and good communication are essential to making regional settlement a success in local communities.

An analysis by the University of Adelaide of what worked within the [Murray Bridge](#) community of South Australia found that, *"in order to create positive outcomes for new migrants and communities in rural and regional Australia stakeholders need to work together to create a good settlement experience. Bringing key community leaders together with employers, community groups and organisations, local government, and other key stakeholders such as schools and health services enables a holistic and coordinated 'whole of community' approach to settlement."*

6. Relevant migration policy, including administration and state specific migration mechanisms.

Generally local governments support more transparency and information about migration mechanisms and stand to work alongside State and Federal Governments in this regard. Input by local governments into migration mechanisms will support the success of the migration program.

7. Related infrastructure matters.

With the desirability of a capital city lifestyle being challenged by pressures on infrastructure and high housing costs, improvements in regional infrastructure that further enhance liveability will support the flow of people out of congested cities without the need for individual relocation incentives.

While population growth in major metropolitan local government areas (10.5% for 2012-2016) was higher than regional areas, population growth in regional cities was not far behind. Regional places in close proximity to the major metropolitans (connected lifestyle regions) grew by 9.3% across the same period and other regional cities grew at a rate of 7.8%. Mid-sized towns that act as industry and service hubs grew by 3.3%, and even across the more isolated heartland regions populations did *not* decline but in fact grew by 1.6%.

In order for regions to continue to grow and attract new residents, there needs to be a more equitable investment in their infrastructure and services to further build appealing, adaptable and viable communities that people want to live in and contribute to in the long term.

Infrastructure spending is strongly weighted to solving problems in capital cities (particularly the CBDs) rather than enhancing liveability of regional towns. To achieve this, regardless of location, there is a suite of essential elements which foster liveability (including but not limited to):

- access to a range of community services and infrastructure that supports health, education, water, recreation and social interaction and well-being;
- a range of housing options, which is affordable and in adequate supply;
- transport accessibility, both within the community (including effective and adequate public transport options), and connected to other centres via strategically linked freight routes;
- pleasant environments, including parks, gardens, footpaths and bikeways as well as built infrastructure that is appropriate for the climatic conditions; and
- a range of education and employment pathways to cater to different age groups and skill groups, that considers also culturally-diverse and non-English speaking populations.

At the finer grain, the critical things that need to occur to achieve a liveable community are:

Regional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • increasing populations, linked to a mix of migration, birth rates, working aged residents to assemble a critical mass • overt and strategic investment in essential community and social infrastructure • access to higher education and diverse employment opportunities, especially careers for young people • natural environment accessibility and protection/capitalisation of local area heritage • lifestyle opportunities • affordable housing with adequate supply and tenure options • uncongested traffic routes • digital connectivity • quality health services • good transport access and accessibility (public transport and freight) • financial incentives (e.g. zoned tax benefits) • diverse economic base, with entrepreneurship facilitation • quality of life benefits
Rural	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • increasing populations via migration and birth rates • access to higher education and diverse employment opportunities, particularly for young people • overt and strategically planned investment in essential community and social infrastructure, including digital infrastructure and telecommunications and secure water supplies • affordable housing with adequate supply and tenure options • public transport • lifestyle opportunities • access to major centres for services • affordable and renewable energy options • access to state and federal data • economic opportunities including eco-tourism and agritourism • natural environment accessibility and protection/capitalisation of local area heritage

Remote	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• increasing populations via migration and birth rates• employment opportunities and job retention• overt and strategically planned investment in essential community and social infrastructure, including digital infrastructure and telecommunications and secure water supplies• access to education• economic opportunities including eco-tourism and agritourism• lifestyle opportunities and community well-being programs, including sport and recreational activities• proximity to a regional centre• transport accessibility (road and air)• subsidised, affordable housing• induction programs for new residents
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8. Any other related matter.

ALGA would like to see the work of this Committee reference and link to the work of other related policy areas of Governments including the Treasurer's Forum on Population and the Department of Home Affairs Senior Officials Settlement Group.