Submission to Inquiry into the Extent and Nature of Disadvantage and Inequity in Rural and Regional Victoria
INTRODUCTION

This submission emanates from discussions held between a range of stakeholder organisations in the North-East concerned about the extent and nature of rural and regional disadvantage in Victoria. The submission represents the composite views of those entities and includes contributions from:

City of Wodonga
La Trobe University (Albury-Wodonga Campus)
North East Local Learning and Education Network Inc (NELLEN)
Border Mail
Catholic College Wodonga
Gateway Health
GHD
Mars Petcare
Rural Housing Network
TAFE Riverina Institute
Uniting Care Wodonga
University of New South Wales
Wodonga Institute of TAFE
Wodonga Salvation Army
Wodonga Senior Secondary College

The core messages raised in this submission are:

- Rural and regional inequality and disadvantage are complex and vexing problems;
- Frequently, disadvantage is multifaceted – e.g. poor housing impacts on health outcomes, educational achievement and so on;
- The nature of disadvantage in non-metropolitan Victoria is far from homogenous – larger regional communities, like Wodonga, often face a different set of challenges to those in smaller communities but both are substantial and require more from the state;
- The ambition to provide public services in rural and regional Victoria that are equivalent to those on offer to metropolitan residents is not being met;
- In addition to the deficiencies in public services, there are a range of state-influenced activities that severely challenge the competitiveness of non-metropolitan firms that generate regional employment;
- There is a need for immediate and longer term responses to the challenge of rural and regional disadvantage.

For convenience, this submission has been arranged around the seven issues described in the terms of reference. Specific cases and data have been included where appropriate. In order to provide a context, the municipalities covered by this submission are initially described.
**Wodonga City**

The City of Wodonga is a progressive and innovative city boasting major manufacturing, distribution and professional service centres. Situated on the Murray River in North East Victoria, Wodonga services a regional population of approximately 170,000. Wodonga is Victoria’s fifth largest provincial city and the largest city in North East Victoria.

Modern and innovative residential developments, a thriving commercial area and an expanding industrial base are the three major focal points to ensure the continued growth of Wodonga. To achieve this, the City of Wodonga is using the principles of new urbanism to create the communities of the future. The removal of the rail line and subsequent redevelopment of Wodonga’s CBD will see the retail and commerce sectors significantly grow over the next 10 years.

Young families have helped fuel Wodonga’s significant growth rate for many years. With more than 52% of the population under 34 years of age, the City will continue to have a strong future for years to come.

Wodonga’s strategic location on the main Melbourne - Sydney transport and communications corridor is within an overnight transport shift of 75% of Australia population, including key cities of Sydney, Melbourne, Canberra and Adelaide. The close proximity Melbourne - Sydney fibre optic line provides as yet untapped opportunities for business expansion/attraction, communication and service provision.

Manufacturing is the primary industry sector in Wodonga and Albury’s $4.3 billion economy. Accounting for over 41% of output in Wodonga, the manufacturing sector continues to expand with the attraction of several major manufacturing operations to new industrial hubs such as Logic, Enterprise Park Wodonga and Baranduda Enterprise Park.

While having access to a labour force of 76,000 Wodonga’s growth has precipitated a shortage of skilled labour at both trade and professional levels and its unemployment rate has dropped to 3.3% with a job growth rate of 10.24% in the last 5 years.

Wodonga is an increasingly diverse community arising from the arrival of new residents from around Australia and an increasing share of international migrants from diverse backgrounds.

Wodonga Community Development programs have been actively working with the community to help migrants to settle within Wodonga. This program has achieved a high level of acceptance with relatively few incidents of overt racism and discrimination apparent. There remain challenges in assisting new international arrivals with employment, language skills and other needs.

Areas within Wodonga that have high concentrations of disadvantage, particularly some public housing areas do suffer from stigma and disadvantages associated with these areas. Redevelopment, reduction in concentration of disadvantage and community support programs will be required to reduce the degree of stigma associated with these areas.

**Localities:** Wodonga, Killara, Baranduda, Bonegilla, and Leneva

**Indigo Shire**

The Indigo Shire covers an area of 2,016 square kilometres and is located in the north-east of Victoria to the south and west of Wodonga. The overall population of the shire in June 2008 was 15,710.

The shire’s economy is based on value-adding to a range of local primary produce, including milk, cereals and grapes, as well as providing services to people, including tourism. Tourism is significant across the region and covers the Rutherglen wine producing area and the historic townships of Beechworth, Chiltern and Yackandandah.

Indigo has attracted a mainly peri-urban population who commute to Albury-Wodonga. As a result, the municipality includes a large proportion of young families and has experienced relatively steady average annual growth rates since the 1980s.

The major population centres are Beechworth and Rutherglen. Beechworth is located 37 kilometres south west of Wodonga and has a population of approximately 3,200 people. Its history as a gold-
mining town has been well-preserved and has enabled the town to build a strong cultural tourism focus. It has developed a reputation as a provider of high-quality boutique food, wine, retail and accommodation services, whilst managing to maintain a strong sense of local community. The town is surrounded by specialist producers of fruit, vegetables, honey, nuts, apples, wine and preserves.

Rutherglen has a population around 2,000 residents and is the centre of Australia’s oldest wine growing region. Established as a gold rush township in the 1850s, it is now a popular tourist destination, and has preserved its old world charm. Home to a thriving viticulture industry, it has also become a major centre for food manufacturing over the past decade. The production of olives and olive oil has added to the other niche agricultural products, the region is becoming renowned for. The wine industry has also ensured the growth of local restaurant and café businesses within the town and its surrounds.

Localities: Allan’s Flat, Baarmutha, Back Creek, Barnawartha, Beechworth, Bells Flat, Brimin, Browns Plains, Bruarong, Carlyle, Charlerto, Chiltern, Chiltern Valley, Christmastown, Cornishtown, Dugays Bridge, Gooramadda, Great Northern, Gundowring, Huon, Hurdle Flat, Indigo, Indigo Upper, Indigo Valley, Kergunyah, Kiewa, Lilliput, Norong, Norong Central, Osbornes Flat, Prentice North, Red Bluff, Reids Creek, Rutherglen, Sandy Creek, Silver Creek, Stanley, Tangambalanga, Wahgunyah, Woolshed, Wooragee and Yackandandah.

Alpine Shire
The Alpine Shire is located 270 kilometres north-east of Melbourne and south of Wodonga. The Shire covers an area of approximately 4797 square kilometres. 92% of the Shire is public land including parts of the Alpine National Park and all of the Mt Buffalo National Park. The shire’s economy is based on tourism, forestry and agriculture. There are significant investments in viticulture and boutique agricultural pursuits, including green tea, chestnuts and walnuts. The estimated population in June 2008 was 12,690.

The Mt Beauty, Tawonga South and Tawonga area is located in the Kiewa Valley at the foot of Victoria's highest mountain, Mt Bogong (1986m). The townships are 366 metres above sea-level and 334 km north-east of Melbourne via the Hume Freeway, Wangaratta and the Great Alpine Road. The population of Mt Beauty, Tawonga South and Tawonga is around 2000 residents. Mt Beauty is a year round tourist base for skiers, bush walkers, bike riders and other extreme sports enthusiasts.

Bright is situated 300 km north-east of Melbourne, and is one of Victoria's most popular and attractive tourist destinations. Bright and district has a population of more than 3000 people, including the picturesque mountain towns of Porepunkah, Wandiligong and Harrietville. The town of Bright has excellent retail, food and accommodation facilities, with a strong reputation as a food and wine centre. The region has a diverse agricultural base including fruit and nuts, berry growing, cattle, cut-flower growers and trout farming.

Myrtleford is 273 km north-east of Melbourne on the Great Alpine Road between Wangaratta and Bright and had a population of 3187 in 2006 (2006 Australian Census). It is positioned at the foot of the Mt Buffalo Range adjacent to the Ovens River, Happy Valley Creek and Barwidgee Creek. The town is also developing a strong identity as a boutique food production, café and restaurant destination.

The Black Saturday fires impacted significantly on the Alpine shire in early 2009. The fire destroyed over 30,000 hectares of land, countless buildings and claimed the lives of 2 Mudgegonga residents. While the fire started within 3km of Beechworth, the prevailing weather conditions drove the fire to within 8km of Myrtleford and directly threatened several communities in both Indigo and Alpine shires before being controlled.

Localities: Abbeyard, Barwidgee, Bogong, Bright, Brookside, Buckland, Buffalo Creek, Buffalo River, Cobungra, Coral Bank, Dandongadale, Dargo, Dederang, Dinner Plain, Eurobin, Falls Creek, Freeburgh, Gapsted, Germantown, Glen Creek, Harrietville, Havilah, Hotham Heights, Kanconoa, Merriang, Mongans Bridge, Mount Beauty, Mount Buffalo, Mount Hotham, Mudgegonga, Myrtleford, Nug-Nug, Ovens, Porepunkah, Rosewhite, Running Creek, Smoko, Tawonga, Tawonga South, Upper Gundowring, Wandiligong and Wongungra.
Towong Shire
Towong Shire, in the far north east of Victoria, covers an area of around 6,673 square kilometres but has a relatively low population density. The Towong Shire was formed in 1994 from the merger of the Shires of Tallangatta and Upper Murray. The estimated population according to ABS data, in June 2008 was 6,273 residents.

Towong has experienced negative average annual population growth rates since 1991. The 1980s saw minimal population growth in the shire. Towong’s declining population results, at least in part, from the fact that it has an older population and an economic base largely dependent on agriculture. In 2006 the number of deaths in the shire outweighed the number of births. (Spatial Analysis & Research Branch DPCD 2008)

Towong Shire is a popular tourist destination with a number of rivers, reserves and the major water storages of Dartmouth Dam and Lake Hume. Primary production, particularly agriculture and forestry, is a major source of income and employment for Towong’s population and provides around 26.4% of the employment in the shire. There are also a number of boutique production activities including horse and bison breeding, peppermint oil production and organic dairy farming.

Corryong is a traditional rural service town of around 1,500 people. It is 437 kilometres north-east of Melbourne via the Hume Freeway and Murray Valley Highway and 116 kilometres east of Wodonga. Principal industries include cattle and dairying along with major tourist attractions such as mountain-biking, canoeing, bushwalking, horse riding, trout fishing, hang-gliding and white-water rafting. Access from NSW is via Thredbo Village and Khancoban.

Tallangatta is 40 kilometres east of Wodonga, and 338 kilometres north-east of Melbourne with a population of approximately 1,100 people. Residents access employment both in the township and in nearby Albury Wodonga. The health and education sectors are the largest employers within the town.


How the region works
The Hume Region has produced a draft settlement strategy that indicates in essence that a framework for settlement exists and needs to be acknowledged.

The settlement framework identifies settlements in four categories: Regional Centres, District Towns, Towns and Villages. These categories are defined below:

Regional Centres
Regional centres are centres with an important role in providing regionally based, higher order services, shopping, education, recreation and employment. These centres usually have a wide range of housing types and opportunities. These centres are generally located within a major transport corridor and often at a junction of two or more major roads. These centres generally offer more than one mode of public transport and act as a hub for transport to large centres, other regions and other states. Regional centres are suited to accommodate the majority of regional population growth and employment opportunities and to deliver state and regional services to the entire region or specific subregions.

District Towns
District Towns are generally larger towns providing local and district services and facilities. They may have a general range of weekly and some higher order goods and business services and generally have established town centres. District towns are generally located in the major road network with access to rail transport. These centres usually provide public transport connections to Regional Centres and major transport corridors. These settlements have a high capability to accommodate population growth and employment opportunities.
Towns
Towns are generally larger settlements with limited service catchments. Small to medium scale concentration of retail, health and other services with generally lower density housing. These settlements are also usually reliant on regional centres, and district towns for higher order services, retailing and employment. Towns are generally located in the major road network providing some access to District Towns, Regional Centres and linkages with the major transport corridors. These settlements have a moderate capacity to accommodate population growth and employment opportunities.

Villages
Villages are generally small settlements with local retail and (in some instances) specialty tourism retail. Villages usually have limited local services. In general Villages have limited access to public transport. Basic public transport may be available to larger settlements in close proximity. These settlements have a low capability to accommodate population growth and employment opportunities.

In an attempt to clearly convey the settlement framework which has been proposed for the Hume Region, the concept underpinning this framework is first described in a theoretical context and then applied specifically to the Hume Region.

Figure 1 below diagrammatically illustrates a network of settlements in each of the categories defined above located with a spatial context (a region). This network of interrelated settlements provides services and facilities to all communities in the region (and outside). Higher order services and facilities are generally available within Regional Centres and other settlements (such as District Towns, Towns and Villages) are connected to these Regional Centres, thereby providing services to all relevant communities within and outside the region.

Some communities within the region may access services in large centres outside of the region and similarly some communities outside of the region may access services within the identified centres of our theoretical region.

Settlements in the region are linked to each other by transport infrastructure and services. This linkage varies from very strong linkages (shown in Figure 1 as thicker lines) to weaker linkages (shown in Figure 1 as thinner lines). These linkages are affected by the proximity of the settlement to each other and the availability of transport infrastructure/services. Factors such as topography and the demand for services in other settlements will in turn affect the availability of transport facilities/services and the level of service.

**FIGURE 1: DIAGRAM OF CONCEPTUAL SETTLEMENT FRAMEWORK**
The focus for growth and servicing large populations should be on identified “Regional Centres” supported by other settlements in the region. This model will provide services and facilities in an efficient manner to communities in the region, providing access to most higher order services and facilities within the region and subregions. Such a model for future development should make best use of existing assets while providing services to the wider regional community in a more efficient and sustainable manner.

The key to this model is transport linkages between settlements in the region and transport linkages with centres outside of the region.

Important existing linkages include the Hume transport corridor. This has a north-south alignment, whilst east-west transport connections are not developed to the same standard. The further development of east-west transport linkages across the region will become increasingly important to ensure regional communities have access to services and facilities in larger centres. These main linkages (east-west and north-south) form the basis of functional relationships between settlements.

The ‘Regional Centres’ are supported by a network of ‘District Towns’, ‘Towns’ and ‘Villages’ each with varying degrees of capability to accommodate future growth.

Regional Centres form the focus within this network and each lower ranking settlement is linked to the higher ranking settlements via transport infrastructure and services. Services and facilities are concentrated in Regional Centres where larger populations are located. These centres generally have higher order transport services and infrastructure and have excellent transport linkages with District Towns, which in turn provide services and facilities (including transport to Regional Centres) to lower ranking settlements such as Towns and Villages. Communities in Villages and other lower ranking settlements will access services in the Villages, Towns, District Towns and Regional Centres.

This is a “hub and spoke” model where higher ranking settlements are the hubs which are linked to lower ranking settlements and larger centres outside of the region.

There are advantages and disadvantages of this type of philosophy. In essence it should be easier for governments to provide strategic context in this setting. However, people choose to live in locations for many factors. These include lifestyle, education, employment opportunities, climate etc. In many instances though, this choice does not include consideration of the services that are available, also the availability of other services that may be required sometime into the future such as health care and other services that are generally expected to be delivered by government.

**Current evidence of disadvantage in rural and regional Victoria with a view to identifying the social groups most affected by disadvantage**

It is important to recognise that one of the biggest indicators of disadvantage for small rural communities is rural isolation. The disadvantages of living in a large regional centre, as experienced by Wodonga, are likely to be magnified for more remote and rural communities that are located around an hour or more from the main regional centre. Those communities that are closer to the regional centre may benefit from that proximity but it is still possible that the regional centre will benefit to a greater extent.

Whilst not exhaustive, the list of groups affected by disadvantage includes:

- Those without access to affordable housing
- Individuals suffering mental health disorders
- Those with drug/alcohol related problems
- The unemployed
- Groups/industries reliant on public infrastructure including:
  - Transport
  - Broadband
  - Health facilities
  - Cultural facilities
  - Gas and electricity
- Firms seeking to attract and retain skilled workers.
To provide some indication of the pressing needs faced by some of these groups the following data and cases are provided.

**Income levels**

The Spatial Analysis and Research Branch DPCD 2008 reports that both Wodonga and Indigo have a relatively low proportion of low income households, and more households with high incomes than many other parts of regional Victoria. The Shires of Towong and Alpine have a relatively high proportion of low income earners. The 2006 Census reported Median Equivalised (adjusted total income of the household according to the number of persons and household type) Gross Weekly household income for Wodonga as $577.00, Indigo $558, Alpine $477.00 and Towong $472.00 compared to the Victorian state average of $600.00. It is important to note that all local government areas in the north east are under the state average but that Alpine ($123 per week under) and Towong ($128 per week) are markedly behind the other two areas.

In the North East region outlined, those communities which are further from Melbourne have the lowest levels of income. There are a number of reasons for this. The lower capacity of employers to pay higher salaries, lower farm incomes, rural businesses struggling through drought and natural disasters which are unable to pay higher levels of salaries or choose to employ staff part time as conditions worsen and the more significant impact upon the local community when a small business fails or closes down. In contrast these communities are also likely to have the highest cost for food and services because of the extra cost of transporting goods into the towns or travelling to access services provided only in a larger regional centre.

**Education and training**

The City of Wodonga is fortunate in that its residents have access to a range of education and training providers. Within the city are the regional campus of La Trobe University, the Wodonga Institute of TAFE, the Albury Wodonga Community College, as well as a range of government primary and secondary schools, Catholic primary and secondary schools and a number of independent primary and secondary schools. As well as Victorian providers there are a number of large providers in Albury.

The 2009 inquiry into geographical differences in the rate in which Victoria students participate in higher education offers some useful insights into rural and regional disadvantage generally. The financial constraints faced by students and how these interact with aspirations were touched upon in the report but few substantive responses from government are evident to date. At a local level, the lack of student accommodation in Wodonga is telling. Presently the campus offers 41 beds for on-campus accommodation at a relatively affordable rate of $105 per week. The necessity to set asides some beds for management purposes means that on average there are about 30 beds on offer for commencing students. This compares with an average student population of 1150 over the past five years.

The upshot is that there is excess demand for affordable student accommodation that spills over to the private rental market. This is in contrast to the findings of the recent inquiry by the Victoria Parliament that found that most students relocating from home would opt for on-campus accommodation if it were available.

Not surprisingly then the participation rates of regional students in higher education is much lower than metropolitan areas, in part because of the difficulty of securing accommodation. Importantly, there is a spill-over cost to others who are also in search of affordable accommodation. This has significant ramifications for the wider community and compounds existing disadvantage.

The surrounding shires have various levels of educational provision including primary and secondary schools and some adult and community providers and neighbourhood houses. The Australian Institute of Flexible Learning is based at Corryong but provides limited training in the area of community and health. None of the outlying local government areas have significant access to tertiary education and training other than at Albury Wodonga or Wangaratta to the south west of the region. Moreover, the absence of affordable student accommodation in the region centre makes participation more problematic than is desirable.
Health and community services

The provision of health and community services varies across the region. Both Towong and Alpine Shires note that one of the biggest future issues will be the provision of aged and hospital care for their aging communities. As with all rural and regional areas there is a shortage of general practitioners and specialists even in larger regional centres. In a listing provided early in 2010 a number of clinics are identified as unable to take on new clients. Small communities and hospitals have difficulties in replacing general practitioners as they retire and the work load can be extensive in small rural communities.

The region has no facilities for the treatment of drug and alcohol abuse and organisations who respond to critical need situations indicate that there is a shortage of places for high need emergency accommodation. Community organisations which work across the health and community services area indicate that lack of services in the region can lead to between a four to six week delay for high need response services for families in crisis.

Who delivers the on the ground services is also an issue. Funds are often provided to larger organisations to administer programs and they enlist the support of smaller agencies which receive minimal funds from the administering agency and have staff who are paid to deliver a program but put in extensive volunteer hours to ensure it is administered correctly. Agencies and organisations will often not take on projects unless there is up to a 25% administration fee that is extracted from the funding. Government compliance and reporting is extensive and requires significant funds that in turn mean that the services to be delivered are limited by compliance and reporting issues. This becomes a significant issue for small programs to be delivered in rural communities where the expertise and capacity of staff may be limited.

Community demographics

The City of Wodonga is very proud of the fact that it is a town where the average demographic age of the community is declining notwithstanding that this also brings challenges. Unfortunately, this is not the case for the surrounding shires. An example of this is the projected decline in the number of young people within the rural shires.

Table 1 below shows the trend for the four LGAs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LGA</th>
<th>2006 Actual</th>
<th>2016 Projected</th>
<th>2026 Projected</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alpine</td>
<td>12,574</td>
<td>13,406</td>
<td>14,152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indigo</td>
<td>15,367</td>
<td>16,758</td>
<td>17,853</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Towong</td>
<td>6,247</td>
<td>6,190</td>
<td>6,020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wodonga</td>
<td>34,504</td>
<td>39,736</td>
<td>44,337</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>68,692</td>
<td>76,090</td>
<td>82,362</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1.1: Projected and actual population by LGA

Source: DPCD Victoria in Future 2008. Populations and Household Projections—Hume Region
It is important to note that the projected population figures for Alpine, Indigo and Wodonga indicate an increase over the 20 year period from 2006 to 2026. It must also be noted that there will be a marked decline in the number of young people 0-17 in Indigo and Towong Shires as well as a decline in the 18-34 year olds in Indigo and Towong. In both cases Alpine only has a marginal increase whilst Wodonga will continue its significant growth across these age groups. Wodonga’s independent research and projections indicate that the above figures are conservative. Apparent in all these numbers is the percentage decline of the three rural local government areas from just under 50% of the total population of the region to 46% of the total population within 20 years. At the same time the rural shires of Towong and Alpine already have over one third of their population over 55 years of age; a figure that creates future issues in providing appropriate aged and health care and impacts through a reduced rates base as many gain benefits from pensioner incomes.

**Indigenous and Cultural communities**

**Table 1: Projected Age Group Numbers by LGA. 2006—2026**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>2016</th>
<th>2026</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alpine</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-17</td>
<td>2,764</td>
<td>2,525</td>
<td>2,528</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-34</td>
<td>1,886</td>
<td>2,067</td>
<td>2,099</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indigo</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-17</td>
<td>3,916</td>
<td>3,740</td>
<td>3,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-34</td>
<td>2,284</td>
<td>2,111</td>
<td>1,871</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Towong</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-17</td>
<td>1,448</td>
<td>1,226</td>
<td>1,099</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-34</td>
<td>772</td>
<td>776</td>
<td>622</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wodonga</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-17</td>
<td>9,156</td>
<td>9,530</td>
<td>10,247</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-34</td>
<td>8,766</td>
<td>10,096</td>
<td>10,361</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2006 ABS data for the 4 LGA’s of Alpine, Indigo, Towong and the City of Wodonga indicate a broad cultural cross section living in the region. The diverse background of the communities is detailed in Table 2 listed below.

**Table 2: Country of Birth of Person (excluding overseas visitors)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Australia</th>
<th>USA</th>
<th>Malta</th>
<th>Malaysia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom (England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>Morocco</td>
<td>Philippines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td></td>
<td>Burma</td>
<td>Romania</td>
<td>Poland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td></td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>Zimbabwe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td></td>
<td>China</td>
<td>Cyprus</td>
<td>Ukraine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Zealand</td>
<td></td>
<td>Fiji</td>
<td>Sri Lanka</td>
<td>Chile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td></td>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>Czech Republic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovenia</td>
<td></td>
<td>South Africa</td>
<td>Israel</td>
<td>France</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Switzerland</td>
<td></td>
<td>Serbia</td>
<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>India</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iran</td>
<td></td>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>Hungary</td>
<td>Lithuania</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Wodonga has a growing Indigenous community with the number of Indigenous school enrolments increasing by 25% over the past five years. There is a wide range of Indigenous support programs fostered through partnerships across a range of community organisations including Gateway Community Health Services and Wodonga Institute of TAFE, supported by the Local Indigenous Network, Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group and the local Indigenous cooperative in Wodonga. The Indigenous population is significantly in the City of Wodonga.

Communications

In this region there are still areas, or blind spots, where telecommunications services are limited. Mobile phone services in particular are non functional in more remote and isolated areas of the Upper Murray, Mitta Valley, and Alpine communities. Internet services are also generally restricted to broadband rather than wireless services. Smaller communities are supported by their local governments to foster initiatives in this area but significant support is required to improve these services.

Identify the key factors of disadvantage and inequity in rural and regional Victoria

As noted in the introductory remarks, it would be unwise to treat the factors impacting on disadvantage and inequity as simple, linear or summative. Put differently, what appears as the cause of disadvantage is often correlated with other underlying factors.

There is often a perception that land is relatively more abundant in rural and regional communities and this should result in more affordable housing. Local data shows that this is not always the case with homelessness common and emergency housing in strong demand.

Findings of the Housing Needs Analysis

Wodonga has undertaken an Affordable Housing strategy and the following is an extract from that draft strategy

Wodonga has a younger population in comparison to Victoria and the nation. From 2006 to 2026, numerical growth is projected to occur about equally in the 25 to 69 age group and in the over 70 age group, with those over 70 nearly doubling in number. Despite the influx of young singles to the area, Wodonga is also characterised by larger households than much of the state. However, the size of households is declining and the proportion of 1-2 person households is increasing in line with the national trend – these households now account for 59% of all households in Wodonga.

While jobs in Wodonga have attracted many young people from Victoria and NSW, housing has not kept up with the influx of young workers to the area. In addition to demand from these workers, Wodonga has campuses for both La Trobe University and Wodonga TAFE, with Charles Sturt University in Albury, which has given rise to a large, low-income student population that also drives up rental housing demand (see above).

Wodonga falls midway on the “Index of Economic Resources” for local government areas (LGAs) state-wide but fares better on this index than most regional LGAs. Its socio-economic strengths include:

- higher indicators of industry and jobs,
- a relatively young population,
- high levels of workforce participation.

Indicators of socio-economic weaknesses include:

- lower education levels,
- high levels of family violence (in line with regional Victoria),
- high need for residential care relative to the state and regional Victoria,
- a slightly higher proportion of single-parent families than the state.
Most of Wodonga’s economic indicators are stronger than most regional areas, particularly inland ones. This economic and income strength tends to increase housing costs.

Housing prices are expensive relative to inland regional Victoria and relative to regional household incomes. Overall, since land prices tripled in 2004, Wodonga ranked low on new dwelling approvals state wide, particularly given its rate of population growth. This has changed in 2009 with improved land supply, price parity with Albury and an increase in diversity of lot sizes. Nearly 425 housing building approvals were issued in 2009.

Wodonga has a high proportion of rental tenure households relative to the state. This is at least in part due to the presence of the Latchford Bandiana Army Base as Military bases tend to generate more rental tenure, as well as an influx of shorter term workers associated with freeway and railway projects. The impact of students in this market has been noted earlier. Higher demand and competition for rental housing tends to drive up rents.

**Summary of housing stress in Wodonga**

**Rental housing stress**

Affordability in Wodonga has varied over the period from 2001 to 2009. Calculations by the Victorian State Rental Report showing proportion of affordable housing lettings on a quarterly basis for Wodonga show the trend in the proportion of dwellings that would be affordable by lower income households, defined as those receiving Centrelink incomes paying no more than 30% on rent, by bedroom size, over time. This is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1 shows the proportion of affordable rentals in Wodonga increased for all housing types up to about 2002. Affordability from 2002 to about 2006 then declined for most types of rental stock. Since 2006 the proportion of new lettings that are affordable has declined for one bedroom stock (albeit it has been quite volatile) with most other classes of rental accommodation having a slight increase in the proportion of offerings affordable to those on Centrelink incomes to the second quarter of 2009.

**Figure 1  Proportion of affordable lettings**

![Figure 1](image)

Source: Rental Report

To put the trend shown in Figure 1 into perspective, one should also note that the total number of lettings changed over time, as shown in Figure 2.
Other Centrelink data shows that, overall, about 30% of RA recipients in Wodonga are still in rental stress after receiving RA. The highest proportion is for single person households. Strong growth is expected in need for seniors as the population continues to age, as well as some growth in need for families, particularly lower income workers relocating to Wodonga where the private market generally offers relatively limited lower cost rental options for this group.

The Housing Stress and Affordable Housing Potential in the Wodonga LGA estimated the level of need among low income households – that is, households with less than 80% of equivalised median income – in housing rental stress as shown in Table 1 below. The total of 445 dwellings represents about 3.7% of Wodonga households. However, the estimate is based primarily on Centrelink Rent Assistance (RA) data, and while the estimate allows for additional households, it may not be sufficient allowance for renting households not receiving RA so there may be some additional households in rental stress. Figure 4 puts these numbers into perspective graphically.

### Table 1  Low income households in rental stress, Wodonga, 2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>In stress</th>
<th>% in stress</th>
<th>All</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Families w/dependents</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>621</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singles</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>368</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single seniors</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>275</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couple seniors</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couples under 55</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>445</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>1400</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Housing Stress and Affordable Housing Potential in the Wodonga LGA*

*Note: these figures do not include households currently served by public housing.*
These estimates do not include any explicit allowance for homeless or those in insecure housing (couch surfing or sharing in overcrowded conditions). They also make no allowance for future growth in need. These estimates are also likely to understate overall stress when considering the total cost of abode. There will be some households not in rental stress but subject to financial stress as a result of:

- Paying high transport costs to reach employment or services from outlying areas;
- In poor standard housing with high bills for utilities;
- Living in stigmatised housing that limits access and equal treatment in the community.

Equally, some of those paying above 30% of income on rent may be in very well located, low cost to heat and cool dwellings that make paying above 30% less stressful. In particular, when looking at provision of affordable housing, it is the total cost of abode that should be used as a guide.

The majority of low-income households that rent and are in housing stress are single parent families followed by lone person under 55. The intensity of rental stress is generally highest for one person households, as highlighted in Foundation Paper #2 Affordable Housing in Context.

Over 20% of those in housing stress are senior households. With an aging population this figure will increase. The over 65-years population may grow by about 2,000-3,000 to 2026. Up to 5% of these households are expected to be in housing stress, which suggests need for additional 6-10 affordable appropriate dwellings a year from 2010 to 2026 for this group alone.

In addition to general housing stress caused by high housing costs relative to income, four high-need household groups have been identified, that is households likely to have multiple challenges to securing housing and at higher risk of homelessness:

1) people aged 15-25 years, not students, living alone or with other young people,
2) older people living alone in rental housing,
3) people with a disability, and
4) people from linguistically diverse backgrounds.

The majority of the higher-need households earning below 50% of median household income are accommodated in public housing, particularly for family households. This means that the main focus should be on affordable housing for households with between 50% and 80% of median income.
However, because public housing stock is not expected to remain proportional with population increases and some higher need households groups are expected to increase, housing stress for high needs households is likely to grow.

This increase in demand is most likely to occur in smaller and lone person households in particular. A need for transitional and crisis housing in Wodonga was also identified.

**Potential for affordable homeownership**

Family households (3.5-person households) earning the median income (for household size) should be able to find appropriately sized dwellings at median prices for purchase provided they have a 20% deposit. If they have only a smaller deposit then a median price dwelling would not be affordable without stress, restricting their choice to lower value ‘entry level’ housing at the 25 percentile price level. Single person households would not find median priced flats affordable even with a 20% deposit and would have severely limited choice, but those with median to 120% of median income could afford a 25 percentile priced flat.

There is a portion of low-income family households that have a mortgage and anecdotal reports of some of these having to shift back to rental tenure. This suggests that mortgage stress is prevalent and may be more evident in future with projected interest rate rises.

In addition, where housing is more affordable in some rural and regional locations it is often not matched with wider service provision. For instance, housing may be more affordable in some of the rural locations surrounding regional centres like Wodonga, but the services to support the needy in those locations are sadly lacking. This is compounded by the absence of public transport and/or the cost of transport to the large centres where services are on offer.

As previously identified housing in Wodonga is a significant issue.

**In the smaller regional communities**, especially those that are declining in population the issue is not as critical as families move out of the more isolated communities to access employment and other services.

According to the Spatial Analysis & Research Branch DPCD 2008 report, housing development in Alpine has increased strongly in recent years with Indigo closely in line with the regional Victorian average. Towong has remained much lower than the regional average, reflecting it’s more isolated and dispersed settlement pattern. The relatively strong housing development in Indigo demonstrates the popularity of small towns which are close enough to Albury Wodonga for commuting purposes.

The median price of houses in the region as at November 2008, Indigo $206,000, Towong $200,000 and Alpine $208,000. The percentage of households spending 30% or more of their gross household income on rent or mortgage payments in 2006 (Census) were Indigo 13.3%, Alpine 13.3% and Towong 10.3% in comparison to the Victorian state average of 17.7%.

**Homelessness**

It must be noted that the 2006 Census identifies 1% of the population of Wodonga as homeless. Local agencies such as Uniting Care and the Salvation Army indicate that this number has increased, especially amongst young people. The fact that many homeless people may not be recorded at Census time creates a problem of accurate identification. Current data indicates that the region has the highest homeless population outside of the major metropolitan areas of Victoria.

**Lack of Cultural Facilities**

National and international research has demonstrated the contribution that arts and culture provides to the economic and social fabric of a community. The establishment of the cultural services makes a clear statement that will add social capital to any provincial region and stimulates economic growth.

Cultural activity forms a significant component in the decision by metropolitan based people to move to provincial areas. In addition these facilities serve a vital role for the existing community.
Enhanced cultural facilities such as Performing Arts Centre or Arts Space will:

- Offer a point of difference from other venues where flat floor, break out and workshop spaces are limited.
- Be a multipurpose venue that accommodates large audience numbers
- Provide service to the community through accommodating the development and presentation of diverse cultural product and activities
- Have a strong focus on development of emerging and community arts initiatives
- Operate on a multipurpose level, enabling the community to conduct:
  - Performances
  - Concerts
  - Recitals
  - Community celebrations
  - Emerging arts activities (workshops, student concerts, schools arts festivals)
  - Community and professional workshops
  - Conferences, forums and seminars
  - Balls, dance competitions
  - Exhibitions
  - Educational activities (including exams)
- Compliment existing resources in the region and strengthen a provincial areas position as an attractive place for external presenters to present and host product
- Lure activity to the region, as present venues are often at capacity or unable to accommodate due to size restrictions or technical requirements.
- Deliver a performing arts program through a range of genres that aim to provide the populace with exposure to diverse, challenging and new art and cultural experiences
- Better service existing audiences of the venue and strengthen the region as a whole
- Then secondly look at the introduction of new audiences within the region and attraction of audiences to the region

Social Return

Cultural facilities will:

- Provide a social hub for the community
- Build the communities capacity in developing and delivering their own events, performances, activities
- Inject visitation and time spent in the city or town
- Offer a unique venue within the region for diverse community needs
- Foster creative community processes and product development in a safe and nurturing environment

Wodonga has attempted to attract many industries and businesses to establish in Wodonga. While the business case and due diligence work has been reluctant to move families to Wodonga due to the lack of and range of cultural activities and educational and health operations available.

Communications

Wodonga sits alongside the main fibre optic line from Melbourne to Sydney. An opportunity exists to access this network potentially providing residents and business with fast speed internet. Currently Wodonga’s maximum service capability is Business Grade 2, ADSL2+. Many areas of the city are unable to access even this level of service. The existence of fibre optic network (and therefore greater speed and capacity capabilities) throughout a city’s CBD would assist in the attraction of large industry and business providing significant economic returns through job creation and investment. Education and health would also derive significant benefits through greater service delivery potential.

In the region there are still areas, or blind spots, where telecommunications services are limited. Mobile phone services in particular are non functional in more remote and isolated areas of the Upper Murray, Mitta Valley, and Alpine communities. Internet services are also generally restricted to broadband rather than wireless services. Smaller communities are supported by their local governments to foster initiatives in this area but significant support is required to improve these services.
Transport and Access

Wodonga has been significantly covered in the earlier analysis but for the rest of the region transport and access to services is always going to be a key factor in defining disadvantage and inequity. One of the simplest examples is in providing a wide scope of education and training opportunities for young people. Another is the need for those without their own transport; the elderly, ill, unlicensed, to have available to them appropriate transport options to access the services and treatment that is not available in their local community.

On Track data for this region indicates that there is a significant disadvantage in living in rural and regional communities for the uptake of university places. The further a young person lives from Melbourne the more likely it is that they will not aspire to entering a university course. The Victorian On Track research commenced in 2002 and provides us with specific information on the destinations of Year 12 completers within the region. In 2002 32% of the region’s Year 12 completers took up a university placement, by 2008 this has dropped to just 18% in a state where the average has been consistently between 40 -50% uptake of offers. Of interest is also the increasing level of deferral of university offers. From 9% in 2003 to 31% in 2008. Many reasons are cited for deferral and significant among them are financial issues, wanting to establish independent status and readiness to leave home.

North East Victoria - the declining uptake of university placements 2002-2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Acceptance of University offers</th>
<th>Deferral of University Offer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>29.6%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>17.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>23.5%</td>
<td>21.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>27.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

During the 1980’s government policy and funding provided assistance for the purchase of small community buses to improve access for health and community activities. In small regional centres it was often the health service providers and some adult education providers who purchased buses to assist their community. The current situation is that these buses are now aged and replacement funding is not available. The Ovens and King Health Service reports that their buses may soon have to be decommissioned. The Community Access program that runs out of Wodonga has provided support to the Mt Beauty program but has limited capacity and volunteers to continue this service. In the Upper Murray the Corryong community access the Snowy Mountains Scheme bus from across the border. These are all interim and unsustainable programs. Once removed they will leave a gap in services that the communities currently are unable to replace.

The Towong Shire has recognised the need to improve access into the community of Corryong and is seeking to upgrade the airport at Corryong. This will be a long term program but may provide improved transport options for that more isolated community.

The North East Transport Connections Project pilot which commenced in 2008 has clearly identified the need for community access to transport that is flexible and well delivered. The project will now be funded to continue until 2020.

1. Employment

It is imperative that this region has access to a range of employment options to remain healthy economically and socially. The Goulburn-Ovens-Murray region covers a vast cross section of industry. The economic impact of drought and the global financial crisis has delivered an unwanted increase in unemployment.
The September quarter figures for 2009 indicate the Goulburn-Ovens-Murray region has an unemployment rate of 6.7% (not seasonally adjusted) which is slightly higher than the Victorian figure of 5.7%. The data indicates that the Goulburn-Ovens –Murray region shows an annual increase for 2009 of 1.9%. (DEEWR—Australian Regional Labour Market Information September quarter 2009).

In the context of the current rural issues (drought, bushfires and recovery from the economic downturn) and the implications of operating in a global market place there is a challenging reality for local industry. Manufacturing is a key employer in the region with Albury Wodonga being the main location of these activities. The recovering global financial situation will create a range of local employment issues and opportunities that will impact upon the employment across the region. Agriculture is also an important part of the economies of the district and numbers involved in agriculture in some shires have declined slightly over the ten years from 1996 to 2006.

Wodonga’s employment base is underpinned by several strong diversified industries giving it a stable base. Wodonga’s strategic location has encouraged the establishment of major manufacturing companies backed by ongoing development of educational facilities and service sectors, resulting in sustained growth. It is expected that Wodonga will continue to be the strong, economic centre of the region and that less impact will be experienced in contrast to its rural surrounds.

The Indigo Shire provides employment in areas such as the manufacturing industry, health care and social assistance as well as agriculture, viticulture, forestry and fishing. The Shire has a workforce of 7,499 with an unemployment rate of 3.4% (March 2009 Small Area Labour Markets Data).

The Indigo Shire has more than 700 separate businesses with the economy based on farming, processing of primary produce and provision of services including tourism. Major employers are Murray Goulburn Co-op Ltd, Nestlé (Uncle Toby’s), The Beechworth Bakery, IGA, La Trobe University, Indigo Shire Council along with numerous viticultural and wine making enterprises, including the Brown Brothers label.

The Towong Shire includes the major towns of Corryong and Tallangatta and is mainly involved in primary production, particularly agriculture and forestry. Agriculture accounts for over a quarter of the labour force in the Shire of Towong and around 6% for the region as a whole. The Shire has a workforce of 2,922 with an unemployment rate of 3.1% (March 2009 Small Area Labour Markets Data). The major employers are agriculture, forestry and fishing, health care/social assistance and the retail trade.

The region is experiencing a decrease in population along with lost production in traditional industry areas such as dairy farming. There has been an increase in health and aged services due to the ageing population. Major employers include Upper Murray Health and Community Services, Tallangatta Hospital, Towong Shire Council and the primary and secondary schools. Major enterprises include Corryong Abattoirs, Corryong Essential Oils, Corryong Timbers, Snowy Mountains Meats, Tallangatta Meat Processors, Upper Murray Seeds, Upper Murray Farming Systems Group, Walker Sawmills and Whitley's Transport.

Alpine Shire industry is based on tourism, forestry and agriculture and includes the major towns of Mt Beauty, Bright and Myrtleford. Alpine shire’s workforce is employed in accommodation, food services and retail, reflecting the importance of the tourism industry to the shire which includes the Falls Creek, Mount Hotham and Mount Buffalo ski resorts. The March 2009 Small Area Labour Markets Data notes that the Alpine Shire has a workforce of 6,035 and an unemployment rate of 4.1%.

Health and social services is a major employment sector in the region contributed to by the ageing populations. Education is also a large employment sector due to the number of primary and secondary schools in the region. Major employers in the district are Foodworks, Alpine Shire Council, Carter Holt Harvey, Australian Alpine enterprises (owner and operator of Victoria Ski Fields including Falls Creek and Mt Hotham), Alpine Health, AGL Hydro, Victorian Alps Wine Company and Greenfreight.

Major industries in Myrtleford include mining, wholesale trade, education and training, electricity/gas/water/waste services and retail trade. Accommodation and food continues to be an important focus for the towns in this region. Bright is an established wine and food hub and Myrtleford is developing a strong boutique food production profile, as well as a dining out appeal. While
accommodation is regarded by many as a strong economic contributor in these towns, the employment provided by the accommodation and food industry overall has shown a slight flattening out in numbers from the most recent census (2006).

One of the biggest issues for the region is how to sustain employment in those towns that have a declining population and thus less capacity to economically sustain employment options and businesses. From this overview it can be seen that some communities are very resilient and capable of rebuilding their employment base through diversification and the dedication of the business owners with support from their LGA. Of concern is the long term impacts of cessation (closure) of some industries such as tobacco farming in the Ovens Valley centred on Myrtleford. The town and Shire has had to overcome the lack of employment within the community and is currently the only town outside of Wodonga which records an area of lowest SEIFA classification.

Another point that is important is that not-for-profit organisations who provide support to the needy in the community have noted that in 2009 there was a notable change in the people seeking support. These are families where both parents are working but their incomes are not sufficient to cover all their living costs. Considering the focus on employment as being a means to social and economic connection this is a worrying trend.

IDENTIFY THE LOCATIONS IN RURAL AND REGIONAL VICTORIA WHERE DISADVANTAGE IS MOST SEVERE WITH A VIEW TO PRIORITISING THESE AREAS FOR FUTURE ACTION BY GOVERNMENT.

The following pages show 2006 ABS Socio-economic Index For Area (SEIFA) data, which codes the relative disadvantage across the four LGA’s. There are several areas in Wodonga and Myrtleford which are in the lowest decile for disadvantage. The other regional centres are also rated towards the lower end of the disadvantage scale.
INVESTIGATE THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC TRENDS ON THE FUTURE OF RURAL AND REGIONAL VICTORIA IN THE CONTEXT OF DISADVANTAGE

The concept and evidence of tree-change is well established along the Hume corridor. This is usually perceived in a positive light insomuch as it adds to the regional and rural population and potentially acts as a source of demand that stimulates private provision.

What is often overlooked, however, is that the tree-change phenomenon does not guarantee that public services will automatically follow. Public services can be overstretched by the relocation of metropolitan residents to provincial Victoria, especially if these groups originate from disadvantaged circumstances in the first instance. This can compound the existing heavy demands on public services offered in regional centres, which are often stretched by the influx of demand from smaller communities in the hinterland.

The Alpine Shire identifies a number of items as their most significant challenges and these are supported by data and information from other rural shires. These are:

- The creation of employment opportunities within the shires to maintain the population and sustain economic development.
- The capacity of rural Shires to support sustainable healthy and economically viable communities
- The capacity to overcome the impact of natural disasters, e.g. drought and the impact of bushfires.
- Transport which is identified by all LGAs as a major issue whether it is transport to capital cities or for rural access to regional centres.
- Rateability and economic strengthening of each LGA given the different contexts for each area and the significant issues for large rural shires such as Towong with a very low population and rates base.

The attraction of refugees to regional and rural Victoria offers much promise on many fronts. Refugees can resolve some skill shortages and significantly and positively impact on the cultural vibrancy of communities. However, refugees are often disadvantaged in the first instance and the state has a role to play in supporting their transition into regional and rural communities.

The relative success of Wodonga Council’s skilled migration programs has highlighted the need for greater levels of settlement support. The experience of the Council demonstrates that gaps are mostly in equity and access to mainstream services such as affordable housing, education, health and basic orientation into the local community. Without this there is a propensity for all the hard work of attracting a migrant to be wasted when a migrant cannot be retained in the region.

Negative experiences of new migrants directly impact on their capability to reach their full potential in the community.

The City of Wodonga is particularly disadvantaged by the fact that it does not have sufficient, dedicated resources to ensure long term settlement of new arrivals.

There is no funded multi cultural resource centre in Wodonga, some assistance is contributed by volunteer groups but it is impossible to provide the level of necessary service.

In addition the City is not receiving the referral of Humanitarian migrants it expected from the Integrated Humanitarian Settlement Strategy (IHSS) which is based in Wagga Wagga mainly because we lack the settlement support services as outlined.

Wodonga City Council has recently undertaken the development of a youth strategy. The following provides a snapshot of what was important to them. The items have not been placed in any priority order. They do however provide an important picture of what is important to them and what they see as lacking in Wodonga and a disadvantage to them as individuals within our population.
There is a lack of non-sporting recreational activities in Wodonga for young people

Young males prefer to be entertained through live music (52.8%), movies (44.3%) and major sporting events (38.7%). Young women on the other hand wanted live music (63.8%), movies (55.7%) and events and festivals (46.2%).

Young people identified in the consultation that there is a need for more youth friendly places and spaces for them to gather together and integrate into the community. Not having access to transport makes it difficult for young people to get involved in community activities. 12% of young women expressed they would like to see more art exhibitions and 8.8% wanted more cultural activities.

Wodonga's young people are highly connected to sporting activities within the community

Young people reported their level and commitment to participating in informal physical activity and sport (organised/club) was higher than any other community activity.

48.8% of males participate regularly in informal physical activity and 53.7% participate regularly in organised/club sport, compared to 32.6% of females participating in informal physical activity and 42.2% participating in organised/club sport. A small proportion of young people felt empowered to influence change in their community through their sporting club. Minority groups feel connected to the community through sport but find it hard to engage because of high fee costs.

Young people want to have a stronger involvement in the community

Young people reported they would like to participate more in volunteering, environmental activities, Student Representative Councils and community interest groups.

Time was identified as the greatest barrier for young people being involved in community activities. This was followed by other commitments (sport, work, school), transport, living out of town, parental permission, family responsibilities, age restrictions, not knowing about the opportunities and not being motivated. Young people felt there was a lack of recognition for volunteering within the community. Environmental activities are examples of where some young people feel empowered to change things within their community. 13.3% of males and 23.4% of females who completed the survey stated that would like to get involved in environmental activities.

There needs to be a shift in social attitudes so that young people feel valued in Wodonga

Young people feel that they are perceived negatively in the community. They attributed a lot of this to the media coverage young people receive.

61.8% of males and 67.1% of females surveyed had never thought about having the power to change things within their community. While 25.1% of males and 16.8% of females felt they did not have the power to change things within their community. Young people felt there was a lack of understanding of them in general in the community. This is intensified for young people with complex needs.

Young people would like a more diverse range of shops and entertainment in Wodonga

Young people identified the shopping in Wodonga as lacking variety and quantity. They wanted to be able to access shops such as Big W, DFO, K Mart and other brand stores in Wodonga.

Some young people felt the shops within Wodonga could be more youth friendly. The majority of young people surveyed are spending more of their money outside of Wodonga. 42.7% of them spend their money in Albury. The current shops in High St do not interest young people in Wodonga. Young people wanted spaces and places where they could relax and socialise.

Better access to transport would make it easier for young people to access employment, social events, services and activities

Young people identified the lack of available transport outside of standard business hours as a barrier to getting and retaining employment e.g. apprentices needing to start work before 7am.
Young people find the cost and access to supervised driver training is a barrier to getting their P’s with the new licensing system in Victoria (young people now require 120 hours of supervised training before they can go for this P’s). Accessing community activities is difficult for young people without transport.

**Young people have a positive attitude to education and link it to better opportunities**

Education is the most important issue for young people aged 12-19.

22.4% of males and 21.1% of females surveyed had not yet decided what they would do once they have finished school. Young people identified more careers counselling and work place visits as something that would help them examine their options. Females (73.2%) remain positive about getting being offered a TAFE/university course compared to 58.3% of males. The majority of young people are neutral or more willing to move away to study if they had to. Time away from friends, family, being in a big city and the cost of living away from home concern young people when they are considering moving outside of Wodonga to study.

Lack of individual literacy and numeracy support within mainstream schools creates a barrier for young people’s effective engagement in education. Lack of available child care either prevents young parents from returning to study or limits their study choices.

**Young people want to participate in the labour market**

Of the young people surveyed 30.5% of 16-19 years olds are in casual employment while 28.3% are looking for work. More females (25.8%) find it difficult to find work in Wodonga than males (19.6%).

Young people identified transport as a barrier to securing employment. More males (19.3%) plan to get an apprenticeship/traineeship once they leave school than females (5.8%). Young people would like clearer communication with employers about job availability, receiving feedback if they are unsuccessful and the benefit/opportunities young people could have in their businesses.

**Young people want to be able to live healthy, affordable and safe lives in Wodonga**

Some young people identified ‘anti social’ behaviour such as violence, binge drinking, bullying and drugs with having nothing to do.

Despite safety concerns, many young people leave Wodonga to access recreational and social activities. Males are more likely to go to their parents for support and advice. Females on the other hand are more likely to go to their friends for support/advice than their parents. Embarrassment is the major barrier as to why young people do not seek support or advice, followed by fear of consequences. Young people felt real estate agents lacked an understanding of their ability to generate a rental history. Affordable housing is often at a distance from other services and amenities. This further complicates access given limited transport options. Of the young people surveyed the older they got the more concerned they were about their health. Transport is an issue for some young people in accessing medical care.

**Examine the Government responses to rural and regional disadvantage**

The federal system of government necessitates that responses to disadvantage and inequality in rural and regional communities be shared between Commonwealth, State and local governments.

There is at least some evidence that these responses are not always well coordinated, resulting in sub-optimal outcomes for the most needy.

**North East Transport Connections Project** is a state government funded pilot that seeks to find solutions to transport issues identify by communities across the North East of Victoria. It has had some success but has also demonstrated how difficult it is to implement services that can provide a flexible and ongoing transport options with often only a small number of passengers. It is important that this program continue to explore options for improving transport outcomes, especially for the more isolated rural communities.
**Primary Care Partnerships** bring together organisations which work across the health area to facilitate improved and consistent approaches to health provision across the region. This is a complex area to work in and relies significantly on the time given by the partners. It is difficult to ensure that all partners are able to commit time and effort to the partnership when within their own organisations there is more demand for their immediate services within their organisations.

Albury Wodonga is in a unique situation of sharing a cross border health service. This type of innovative approach clearly needs to have governments who are able to respond appropriately, overcome the red tap quickly and ensure that the local context and community identified needs are effected efficiently, (which has clearly not been the case in the protracted negotiations for this service). It is also important that small rural health and hospital provision does not fit under the models that apply to large providers. Again local context and community identified needs should be addressed at the local level and not with state wide policy and implementation. It is important that there is flexibility in the approaches used by government.

One of the evolving issues around community health provision is that there is a growing duplication of services and significantly more funds being put in to the administration, compliance and reporting of outcomes and funding application. It is important that responses to need are analysed on the basis of who is best placed to implement community health programs, especially where smaller communities require service that understands the local context and need.

**Drought and bushfire relief** has been of value in supporting communities impacted by drought and as a response to bushfire incidents. It is also important that any response to these disasters are facilitated through a flexible and adaptable approach as each region will have different issues to address and have different levels of capacity to respond to such events. Drought relief formulas that apply state-wide do not take into account the different environments or the capacity to respond quickly or effectively due to the extended process of application. It is also an issue when support can be withdrawn quite rapidly without the long term consideration of ongoing support needs.

Currently there has been an influx of promised funds for the ‘Education Revolution’ across Australia and this region has been fortunate to have a range of programs approved for funding. In the context of what has been noted above much of this funding has been competitive (eg Trade Training Centres) and significantly impacted by the capacity of the government to respond to the real local need of communities. Funding that was approved in early 2009 has still not been evidenced in the commencement of some building programs, especially where the state government was part of the consultation process. Having a regional university and TAFE should be a significant benefit to this region but until funding for student housing and youth allowance is resolved many of the young people of the region will continue to choose further education and training as an option.

**Regional Development Victoria** provides opportunities for small communities to implement regional development opportunities through its Small Towns Program. It has supported the Corryong Business Incubator and is currently engaged in facilitating an industrial land development at Rutherglen.

There is also evidence that the investigation of problems is more common (and often duplicated) than is the development and implementation of solutions.

**Insights from higher education**

The Victorian government instigated an inquiry into geographic differences in the rate in which Victorian students participate in higher education. In simple terms, the inquiry found that low participation rates in higher education by rural and regional students was the norm and that this could be attributed to a complex mix of interrelated geographical, socioeconomic and cultural factors.

Operating simultaneously with this inquiry was the Commonwealth’s review of higher education. The so-called Bradley review recommends, amongst others, an increase in participation rates in higher education, especially for those from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

More recently, the Department of Employment Education and Workplace Relations has instigated an inquiry into the regional loading scheme that purports to compensate regional universities for the operation of regional campuses.
There would appear to be merit in better coordinating the responses to any findings from this work. Whilst the prospects of additional government action at Commonwealth and State levels would be welcome, as it stands, little additional support to directly address rural and regional disadvantage has emerged\(^1\).

There is also evidence that greater attention to the on-going requirements of those who relocate to rural and regional Victoria has not always been adequately contemplated. This applies at the individual and firm level.

As noted earlier, defining disadvantage with precision is no simple task. Historically, working families with multiple incomes have not been regarded as disadvantaged. There is mounting evidence that this may no longer be the case with a trend towards working families seeking additional support.

**Examine measures taken at a local level to combat problems of hardship and disadvantage**

In the absence of adequate state support, rural and regional disadvantage is often managed at a local level via community action.

**The La Trobe Regional Community Scholarship scheme**

Recognising that many regional students would struggle to complete their course because of financial stress, the Albury-Wodonga Regional Advisory Board of La Trobe University instigated the Community Scholarship scheme. The scheme provides funding to regional students who, without support, would likely struggle to reach their full potential. The selection criteria are weighted towards those facing greatest disadvantage and who have demonstrable talent (which is broadly defined).

Funding for the scheme emanates from corporate and individual donations along with regular fundraising events. The scheme has been running for three years and has directly assisted more than 50 students, many of whom have remained as professionals in the region. On average 67% of regional students take up a position in a regional or rural area. Data show that this is substantially higher for scholarship recipients (approximately 90%).

Wodonga City Council has supported the **Border Medical Recruitment Taskforce (BMRT)** which is a partnership between local government, local business, local agencies, community groups, together with college physicians (RACP), college general practice (RACGP), General Practice Registrars Australia (GPRA) and medical student groups.

The aim of the group has been to both identify the potential shortages of medical professions and to provide strategies to attract these medical professionals and to also understand and address the social, partner and infrastructure requirements that need to be addressed.

The BMRT has both identified the immediate requirements for the range of medical professionals and also identified the future requirements for Albury Wodonga based on the age profiles of existing professionals.

A website has been established [www.bordermedicalrecruitment.com.au](http://www.bordermedicalrecruitment.com.au) which is averaging three hits per day of professionals interested in Albury Wodonga as a business opportunity. As a result Albury Wodonga is one of the few regional areas with a growing medical population. However, there is still a shortage as the population of both cities are growing.

The issues that have been identified and that are being worked on by the BMRT are:

\(^1\) It needs to be acknowledged that reforms on this front have been delayed due to the difficulties encountered in passing the legislation through the Senate.
• Recruitment – Australia graduates; and
• Accommodation.

b) Socialisation:
• New doctors with the existing cohort;
• Young doctors with other young professionals and common interest groups; and
• Social functions.

c) Infrastructure and social needs:
• Accommodation;
• Education; and
• Dietary needs.

d) Availability of partner employment

**Indigo Shire** is undertaking the development of industrial land at Rutherglen costing $505,000 as part of the Regional Development Victoria Small Towns Program. Rutherglen is also discussing the feasibility of a heavy vehicle bypass to remove excess traffic from the town’s historic main street.

**Towong Shire** has facilitated the development of a business incubator in the centre of Corryong to assist people to develop business ideas in the town and to attract outside investment. The Corryong Innovation Space features a series of small factories or industrial units and an office complex. The facility has been purpose built by Towong Shire Council and is a major project in the economic development portfolio. A solar technology distributor has plans to open an office in Corryong, however details of this development have not yet been finalised. The Shire has worked extensively to attract prospective residents to boost the local business and economic market with some level of success. Utilisation of the ‘pure’ clean green image has contributed to the significant development of the agri-tourism industry.

**Alpine Shire** has consulted widely with its community in developing its municipal health plan and part of that focus is to further develop and improve the cycling and walking infrastructure to maximise the Shire’s lifestyle opportunities and improved health and social connections. Considering the size of the Shire, it’s rural or rurally isolated communities, the downturn in some industries including the loss of the tobacco industry, the decrease in population and the increase in ageing residents, the Shire has proactively adapted to the shifting economic and climatic changes whilst meeting the needs and expectations of the community and is expected to continue in this way for the foreseeable future.

The **Indigo Health Services** have worked to rebuild a strong innovative approach to health provision in the shire within a limited budget.

In all cases these local communities find innovative approaches within funding models and in line with the needs of their local communities. It is imperative though that governments understand that there is a need and responsibility to support these communities, consult widely with them and ensure that the best outcomes are negotiated at a regional and local level and not always at a state or national level.

**IDENTIFY PRIORITIES FOR ACTION BY GOVERNMENT TO TACKLE KEY RURAL AND REGIONAL DISADVANTAGE ISSUES**

Enhanced coordination between governments and a clear commitment that rural and regional communities should be able to enjoy the same level of public service provision as metropolitan communities should be a major priority.

One of the most important foci of any government is to understand the context of the local communities, whether large metropolitan cities and regions, regional centres, rural townships and shires or isolated and dislocated communities. The message should be that one size does not fit all. What will work as a solution for Melbourne transport options will not work for Wodonga and even less so for small rural communities that have poor and inadequate transport options. Even within one shire each community will have many different issues to be addressed.
Local government areas respond effectively to the needs of their communities. All these LGAs are often the first point of contact to their community member and they take on the role and responsibility of effective governance of their regions, sometimes in difficult circumstances. The LGA role is important in ensuring the effective economic and social growth within these communities. Other government funded organisations work to provide support throughout the health, education and community programs that might be implemented locally.

It is imperative that there is strong information gathering but more so, that the government decision makers actually visit (not for just a day) and learn of the issues and disadvantages of living in rural and regional centres. It is important that decisions are made based on community identified need and not for reasons of political advantage.

There are a number of priorities that are key to removing some of the inequity and disadvantage across the region. It is recognised that not all solutions can be provided by the Victorian Government but it has a role to advocate nationally to alleviate inequity and disadvantage. These priorities are:

1. Improved transport and access options
2. Incentives to ensure that health provision across the region is equitable and accessible as well as ensuring crisis response facilities are provided and are accessible locally.
3. Equity in provision of educational opportunities including training provision for industry and business
4. Student accommodation and welfare housing in Wodonga
5. Ongoing engagement with business and industry across the region to look at the projects already being developed locally and supporting locally developed initiatives that explore rural and regional options.
6. Support for small business
7. Support in attraction of business to the local region
8. Funding to employ a dedicated Settlement Officer as a single point of contact to help both new arrivals and to give support to existing migrants.
9. The establishment of a multicultural/ethnic communities centre where migrants can help each other and gain advice on specialist problems. (Similar to Geelong, Warrnambool and Whittlesea).

Across the region, an ongoing number of barriers for participation by community members are prevalent and need to be considered when addressing issues of inequity and disadvantage. They include difficulties associated with living in a rural or remote region (transportation, distance from general education, higher education access, employment providers, general isolation, identity and disadvantage). On the reverse, key enablers in smaller communities have been identified as supportive community based environments, support from family/friends, sporting connections and the ability to be involved in decision making that affects their futures and general community participation.

Whilst not an exhaustive list, the table below summaries some of the potential enablers for the participation of people within their community.

- Social inclusion
- Family connection and support
- Safe and secure housing
- Access to information and resources
- Access to affordable education and training
- Active participation and involvement in decision making
- Team connections (e.g. sporting and community based groups)
- Identification and addressing of barriers on an individual basis
- Community projects and civic engagement
- Volunteering
- Positive social change towards disadvantaged groups and individuals

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