

Growing the Business of Farming



## **BUILDING RURAL COMMUNITIES PROJECT**

Draft Report on the Findings  
and  
Discussion on the Way Forward

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**NSW Farmers' Association Background**

The NSW Farmer's Association (the Association) is Australia's largest State farmer organisation representing the interests of the majority of farmers – ranging from broadacre, meat, wool and grain producers, to more specialised producers in the horticulture, egg, pork, oyster and goat industries. Through its commercial, policy and lobbying activities, it provides a powerful and positive link between farmers and the public.

## Table of Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY .....	4
1. INTRODUCTION .....	7
2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY .....	8
2.1 THE SURVEY .....	8
2.2 COMMUNITY CONSULTATIONS.....	8
3. RESEARCH FINDINGS .....	9
3.1 STATE OF PRODUCTS AND SERVICES .....	9
a) Health .....	9
b) Education .....	10
c) Transport.....	11
d) Police.....	11
e) Childcare .....	12
f) Aged Care .....	12
g) Employment.....	12
3.2 LEVEL OF INNOVATION .....	12
a) Technology .....	13
b) Community Management, Promotion and Consultation Processes.....	14
c) Professional Expertise .....	14
d) Skills Development.....	14
e) Injection of New Ideas.....	14
f) Volunteerism.....	15
g) Attracting and Retaining Rural Youth.....	15
3.3 SUCCESS STORIES .....	16
3.4 GOVERNMENT ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS.....	16
3.5 OTHER ISSUES REPORTED TO BE INHIBITING GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT .....	18
a) OH&S, Public Liability, Trade Certification, Workers' Compensation etc.....	18
b) Shire Amalgamations.....	20
c) Housing/Land Shortages and Hobby Farm Issues .....	20
d) Native Vegetation and Water Reforms.....	20
5. DISCUSSION: THE WAY FORWARD.....	21
5. DISCUSSION: THE WAY FORWARD.....	22
5.1 ROLE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT, LEADERSHIP AND COMMUNITY RESPONSIBILITY .....	22
5.2 IMPACT OF GOVERNMENT REGULATIONS ON THE COMMUNITY ENVIRONMENT .....	25
5.3 HEALTH WORKFORCE SHORTAGES.....	28
5.4 EDUCATION .....	30
5.5 YOUTH AND EMPLOYMENT.....	32
5.6 CHILDCARE .....	34
5.7 TRANSPORT .....	35
5.8 POLICE .....	36
5.9 SHIRE AMALGAMATIONS .....	36
5.10 TELECOMMUNICATIONS.....	37
5. CONCLUSION .....	38
APPENDICES .....	39
1. BUILDING RURAL COMMUNITIES – SURVEY.....	40
2. COMMENTS ON SURVEY QUESTIONS .....	47
3. COMMENTS ON GOVERNMENT ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS FROM ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OFFICERS .....	55
4. LIST OF TOWNS THAT RESPONDED TO THE SURVEY .....	56
5. LIST OF TOWNS REPRESENTED AT THE RURAL MEETINGS .....	57

## **Executive Summary**

NSW Farmers Association firmly believes that the future of rural NSW depends on the strength and resilience of small rural towns. It is perceived by some in rural and remote areas that governments are making decisions based on the premise that a town with a population of less than 5 000 people has no future. Yet towns of this size – and smaller – display optimism and energy, with most demonstrating a very positive outlook.

Anecdotal evidence of declining populations and declining services, with volunteers stretched to the limit, prompted the Association to carry out its own research into the state of NSW country towns. After conducting a detailed survey and face-to-face consultation through town meetings, the following findings emerged:

### **State of Services**

- Health: a major area of concern despite some improvement
- Education: highly variable depending on the region, particularly isolated areas
- Transport: poor and declining
- Banking: poor and declining
- Police: police presence declining, exacerbated by overtime bans
- Child care: not enough places, limiting employment for young mothers
- Aged care: a major area of concern despite some improvement
- Employment: a major area of concern, exacerbated by shortages of professionals and skilled labour shortages

### **Level of Innovation**

- Leadership: clearly evident in innovative towns
- Size and Geography: not significant in terms of influencing innovation
- Technology: improving, but patchy
- Professional Expertise: health, trade and engineering in short supply
- Skills Development: back-up staff costs and travel to courses a major concern
- Management: few small towns have introduced new ideas in management
- Volunteering: burn-out a significant problem, affecting cultural, sporting and recreational activities

### **Government Assistance**

- Successful Programs: *Rural Transaction Centres; Main Streets/Small Towns*
- Awareness: few programs are well known and highly utilised
- Application Process: problems with competitiveness and self-selection
- Participation: strong support for non-confrontational leadership programs to encourage community participation

### **Major Inhibitors to Growth and Development**

- Government regulation: compliance costs (OH&S; workers compensation) and public liability insurance are major problems for all country towns
- Shire amalgamations: concerns about loss of services and representation
- Housing/Land Shortages: an emerging problem in towns experiencing growth
- Hobby Farms: improved cooperation required, particularly for weed control and bush fire hazard reduction
- Natural Resource Management Reforms: native vegetation and water reforms have created considerable uncertainty

### **Lessons from Towns Doing Well – Notable Attributes**

- Local Government: financially competent and entrepreneurial local government
- Volunteer Groups: tenacious and resilient volunteer groups
- Council Staff: positive and effective Economic Development and/or Tourist Officers
- Whole of Government Approach: multidisciplinary boards such as the Riverina Development Board
- Tourism: promotion of tourist attractions

The above findings were analysed by the Association in order to define a positive way forward to address the challenges facing small rural towns. The Association will now be seeking to implement the following 21 recommendations that emerged in *The Way Forward*:

### **Role of Local Government, Leadership and Community Responsibility**

1. That the Association work with the Regional Communities Consultative Council (RCCC) and the regional Universities to effect community solutions to social and capacity building issues.
2. That the Association work with the Local Governments and Shires Association and the Local Government Managers Association to investigate avenues to embrace strong and effective local leadership and local government governance, including the option of mandatory courses for new councillors.
3. That the Association promote small country towns, which may include sponsorship of events which would ensure the NSW Farmers Association is viewed as an organisation directly supporting rural communities.

### **Impact of Government Regulations on the Community Environment**

4. That the Association work with Workcover to obtain on-ground awareness (field days) and training programs to look at ways to reduce compliance costs
5. That the Association produce a simple guide on regulatory compliance for farmers, small businesses and voluntary organisations.
6. That the Association, in conjunction with other key stakeholder bodies, explore with Governments a public insurance system similar to that used in New Zealand

### **Health Worker Shortages**

7. That the Rural Health Taskforce closely monitor and publicly report on the implementation of the Rural Health Plan to ensure initiatives translate into on the ground services / infrastructure and two-way communication about rural and remote needs.
8. That the Association, within the Rural Health Alliance Group, work to implement shortage combative initiatives in conjunction with other key rural health organisations, such as National Rural Health Alliance.
9. That mandatory local community and Allied Health Professional consultation take place prior to Allied Health Professional funding distribution.

### **Education**

10. That the Association work with the Country Children's Services Association of NSW Inc and the Isolated Children's Parents' Association of NSW Inc to lobby government to take urgent action to address the historical and systemic funding inequities for community pre-schools – funding inequities that arguably most severely disadvantage children living in rural and regional NSW.
11. That the Association and ICPA-NSW jointly lobby the Australian and NSW Governments to urgently address the problem issues in education for rural students.

### **Youth and Employment**

12. That the Association lobby the NSW Government and private education providers, for courses to be delivered locally for professional development and for apprentices and trainees
13. That the Association seek the earliest possible implementation of its *FirstFarmer* proposal to provide concessional finance to young people seeking to purchase their first farming property.

### **Child Care**

14. That the Association and Country Children's Services Association jointly lobby the Commonwealth to re-establish a child care planning process to ensure that child care places are provided in regional and rural areas where there are most needed.
15. That the Association lobby for incentive schemes and scholarships to help services attract early childhood teachers to work in rural and remote communities.

### **Transport**

16. That the Association work with the Local Governments and Shires Association to explore all options with the NSW Government to improve transport services (rail and bus) in country areas.
17. That the Association work with the Rail Infrastructure Corporation to secure future infrastructure for rail in country areas.

### **Police**

18. That the Association work with the Local Governments and Shires Association and the Police Association to seek from the Minister for Police, the lifting of the overtime ban for police officers in small country towns.
19. That the Association work with other organisations to investigate how other countries deal with juvenile offenders, particularly in relation to re-education.

### **Shire Amalgamations**

20. That the Association seek a Memorandum of Understanding with the Minister for Rural Affairs to ensure:
  - a. there is no loss of representation in the new larger local government areas. This may include the return to the 'ward' system to give equity in representation;
  - b. there is no loss of (or decrease in access to) service for communities in the new LGA's through centralisation or rationalisation, particularly for communities that have lost their council;
  - c. the loss of population in communities where staff have been transferred or taken redundancy as a result of the amalgamation will be acknowledged; and
  - d. that small communities have a process of appeal if they can demonstrate loss of the above, and a mechanism of review and rectification of or compensation for the loss.

### **Telecommunications**

21. That the Association continue to lobby for improved telecommunications services in rural areas.

## **1. Introduction**

NSW Farmers Association firmly believes that the future of rural NSW depends on the strength and resilience of small rural towns. Economic rationalism and globalisation, coupled with cutbacks and mergers of government departments in rural NSW, have resulted in country people feeling alienated from the democratic process. It is perceived by some in rural and remote areas that governments are making decisions based on the premise that a town with a population of less than 5 000 people has no future. Yet towns of this size – and smaller – display optimism and energy, with most demonstrating a very positive outlook.

Anecdotal evidence of declining populations and declining services, with volunteers stretched to the limit, prompted the NSW Farmers' Association (the Association) to carry out its own research into the state of NSW country towns.

This paper outlines the research methodology and its findings, discussing the underlying themes that have emerged from the analysis of a survey and an associated tour conducted through rural NSW in mid-2004. The paper aims to challenge community, Government and the Association itself, on what can potentially be done to address the concerns that have been raised.

## **2. Research Methodology**

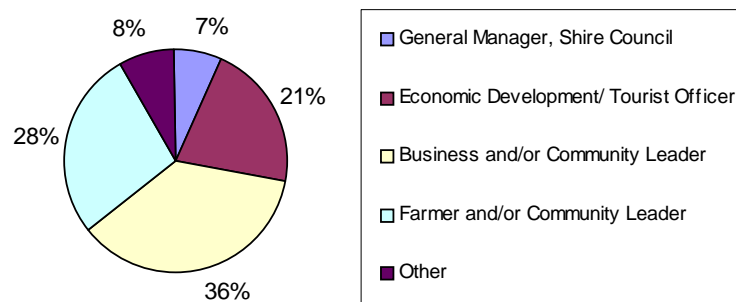
### **2.1 The Survey**

A survey was designed to determine the state of small rural towns in NSW. The survey asked questions relating to the state of essential services and the level of innovation of small country towns, as well as the accessibility and effectiveness of government programs. Questions used to assess the level of innovation within communities were based on survey questions used in a recent Queensland-based research paper<sup>1</sup>.

The survey was sent to 66 towns across NSW, with an even distribution from the north, south, central and far western regions. Towns situated along the coastline were not included, as it was postulated that the factors influencing their wellbeing would generally be different from those influencing inland towns. The survey was emailed to the Economic Development Officer/Tourism officer (if one existed) or General Manager of the shire in each of the 66 towns. Survey recipients were encouraged to forward the survey to local community groups/leaders. Surveys were also made available through the Internet, the Associations' electronic newsletter, and in some instances, by hand.

Fifty eight responses were received, representing 45 of the 66 towns. Respondents consisted of community and business leaders from the town, farmers, Economic Development or Tourist Officers and a small percentage of General Managers of Shire Councils. Respondents were not obliged to record their name and occupation, but always recorded the name of their town.

**Figure 1: Composition of Survey Respondents**



### **2.2 Community Consultations**

In addition to the survey, the Association undertook a tour across rural and remote NSW in June 2004 to hear representations from 39 country towns. Meetings were held with a cross-section of shire council staff/councillors and business and community leaders in nine small towns and one regional centre (Dubbo). Dubbo meeting attendees included Economic Development Officers and community representatives from 10 small towns within 150km radius of Dubbo. The Dubbo meeting was also attended by the Orana Regional Development Board, board members from the Orana Development Employment Council and a representative from the Barwon Darling Alliance (which represents five shires encompassing a further 20 towns and villages in the north-west and far-west of NSW).

<sup>1</sup> Plowman I, Ashkanasy N, Gardner J and Letts M (2003) *Innovation in rural Queensland: Why some towns thrive while others languish* (<http://www.dpi.qld.gov.au/business/14778.html>)

### 3. Research Findings

#### 3.1 **State of Products and Services**

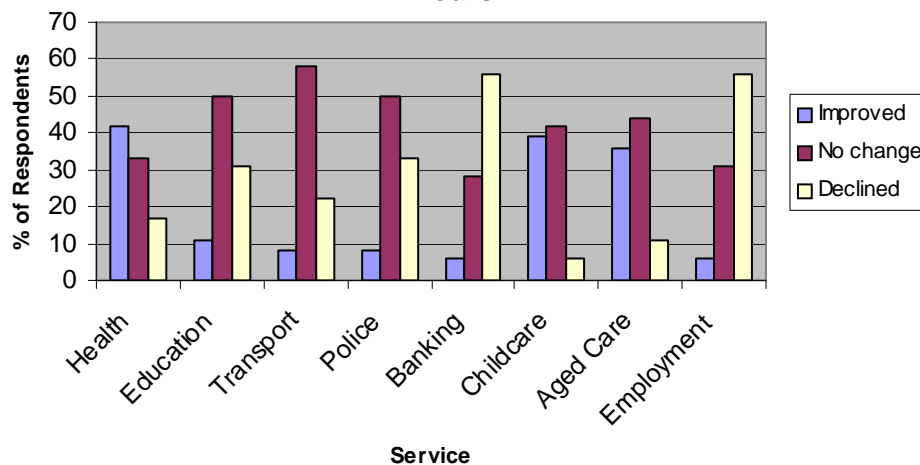
Survey respondents were asked to rate essential services (such as health, education and transport) as either very adequate; OK; poor or non-existent. They were also asked to compare this to the situation five years ago.

Most local services were rated as OK (and in some cases – very adequate), however, written comments from the survey and feedback from the trip still highlight deficiencies with health, police, employment, transport and education in particular.

Only 30% of respondents felt that health, childcare and aged care services have improved, indicating that a high degree of concern remains. This was supported by the written comments and community consultations.

Transport, police, banking and education are considered to have not changed or declined in the last five years.

**Figure 2: Changes to Services Over the Last Five Years**



*(It should be noted that respondents ticked boxes according to their own expectations as to what was 'adequate' in their town, which makes objective comparison between towns difficult. The expectations are likely to reflect past experiences of services; the level of community driven projects to provide better services; or lower expectations generally. It is impossible to know whether individual's expectations were high or low.)*

#### a) **Health**

A common theme from the survey comments and the community consultations was that there are still major problems in health for rural NSW. More than 50% of respondents reported that health services have declined or not changed in the last five years. Access to Allied Health Professionals was raised as a major issue. One town reported “no physiotherapist and 4 hours to regional centre”, reflecting the challenges faced by extremely limited health services. These results closely align with the Association’s wider member survey, where health was identified as the number one concern across the state.

The following health issues were raised as specific areas of concern:

- Problems recruiting doctors, dentists, nurses, physiotherapists and all allied health workers remain unsolved.
- Problems with staffing cutbacks rated highly, as reflected in the following comments from a central western town: “*staff cutbacks with more work, not less –we have 6 new beds, but no new staff*” and a town from the central tablelands: “*we have a new MPS hospital, but it is only running at 70% due to staffing cutbacks*”.
- Poor access to specialists was reported across most of NSW, with the exception of the far north-western and western towns with high indigenous populations. These towns were said to be well serviced by specialists who are flown in from Sydney and Newcastle every six to eight weeks.

## b) Education



Access to good education is vital to any town's survival. More than 30% of respondents reported that education services have declined in the last five years. Some respondents reported the lack of educational opportunities as the main reason that families with school-aged children pack up and leave their small town.

Comments on the standard of the local school ranged from very good to appalling, as reflected by the following comment from a north-western town: “*children in this town are leaving school with a school certificate (year 10), but still can't read or write.....the Minister admits it will take ten years to bring the standard up to acceptable levels*”. Recommendations were made for students in these towns to be allowed to bypass the local school and receive the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) boarding allowance until the standard of the local school reaches the state academic average. The Queensland Government has approved bypassing for a limited number of isolated schools, and the Western Australian Government is trialling this in an attempt to keep more children in the education system and to lift the very poor school retention rates in some areas. Indigenous students are assisted in this way through Abstudy.

The following education issues were raised as specific areas of concern:

- Many comments related to the increases in fees for TAFE courses and cuts to local courses, with no rural skills courses available in many smaller towns. Respondents expressed that this has a direct link to youth and unemployment issues.
- The vast majority of respondents reported limited tertiary opportunities due to isolation, the cost of living away from home, increases in university fees, and difficulty accessing the Youth Allowance.
- Comments also reflected the increasing difficulties encountered by small rural schools as follows:

- Many respondents made reference to the changing nature of the Country Areas Program, which is a Federally funded program administered by the State Government. The program's intent is to assist small rural schools overcome the disadvantage caused by geographic isolation ie face-to-face interaction with peers and teachers and access to sporting and cultural activities to benefit the whole community. Respondents expressed that too often (in NSW) the funds are used for professional development for teachers, which should be the responsibility of the State Department of Education;
- A number of small rural schools in Exceptional Circumstances drought declared areas have lost a teacher as a result of falling student numbers. Residents in these communities suggested that the student/teacher ratio in rural schools should be different from those in metropolitan areas.
- Many respondents referred to the State pre-school funding issue, which was reported to be forcing community-based pre-schools to increase fees, placing pressure on many families. Some communities reported that they are considering converting their pre-school into Federally-funded long day care centres to address this issue.

**c) Transport**

The continued decline in bus and rail services was a major source of complaint by all respondents. The survey results identified the lack of public transport between smaller towns and villages as the most pressing issue, with 25% of respondents reporting this as non-existent. One respondent from the central tablelands reported "*No taxis, no buses, no rail services*".

**d) Police**

The survey results and community consultations reflected an almost unanimous call for greater local police presence. One small town in the central western slopes reported that their local policeman has been taken away because of the low level of crime, which prompted the following comment: "*Why did we have a low level of crime? Because we had a visible police presence.*".

The community consultations identified that overtime bans imposed by the NSW Government are seen as impractical in rural areas. These bans mean that the local police officer is unable to respond to a local incident if off duty. An example given at one of the meetings illustrates this issue. A resident in a very small town rang the police to report an aggravated domestic violence offence in his neighbour's house. Although the local policeman resides one street away in the same town, he was not able to attend (not even to assess the urgency of the situation), because of the overtime ban. A police officer was sent from another town, one and a half hours drive away.

In another example, a car accident occurred 10km from the local police station. Once again, because of the overtime ban, another police officer from 130km away was sent to deal with the situation.

In yet another example of the potentially dangerous implications of police overtime bans on small rural communities, a resident from an Upper Hunter town told of being asked by the police to keep an eye on a suspected offender, because it would be several hours before a police officer would be available from another town.

Those involved in the community consultations were of the opinion that the

community-minded local police officer would be more than willing to attend incidents after hours, but is prohibited by the ban.

Representatives from towns in the west and north-west of the state called for the police to have more power to deal with juvenile crime. The following comments from north-western towns are reflective of the situation experienced in many small rural towns: *“People do not want to live in this town when they are abused in the street and their cars are stolen all the time”* and *“We have cultural problems in our town with petty theft, drinking, drugs, graffiti, loitering on streets, spitting and swearing, care theft, breaking windows and terrorising older citizens”*. Residents are frustrated that the police appear to have no power to deal with those committing some of these offences, who are often juveniles as young as seven and eight, as reflected by the following comment recorded at a community consultation meeting: *“We must have the highest proportion of police per population, but our policemen are only social workers”*.

**e) Childcare**

Although childcare services were deemed to have improved, most towns reported a lack of available places, which is limiting the employment opportunities for young mothers. This was reported as a major issue in all the face-to-face meetings the Association held across the State. Some towns are looking at innovative ways around the problem, such as converting their pre-school into long day care facilities.



**f) Aged Care**

Aged care services were considered to have improved, but remain a major issue for most towns surveyed. Many towns have accessed funds through the Federal Government and used all resources, including huge voluntary contributions from the community, to establish some form of care for their elderly residents. Nevertheless, the common theme reported across the state was: *“aged care is always a problem”*. Whilst acknowledging it is equally a problem in the metropolitan areas, the balance is skewed when distance and separation from relatives and close friends is taken into account.

**g) Employment**

Respondents reported overwhelmingly that employment is a major issue in their towns. Some towns are suffering high levels of unemployment with few jobs available, exacerbated by the drought, while almost all towns face difficulties attracting professionals. Many towns reported a lack of trades people and skilled labour and are calling for more local apprenticeships and traineeships.

**3.2 Level of Innovation**

Previous research has shown that those communities that are thriving have all used strategies to help themselves. As with the Queensland survey, the more successful towns responded positively to questions on the adequacy of:

- access to and use of technology;
- promotion and management of the town – both internally and externally;

- level of professional and technical expertise available;
- professional experts sharing and developing ideas;
- level of participation in community decisions;
- how well the town manages change and leadership; and
- “new blood” and resources.



There were significant differences between towns, and a wide gap between the ‘more successful’ and the ‘less successful’ (where success was defined as very adequate or OK.) Approximately 20% cent of towns reported that they have strong and effective leadership. Geographic position and size were not necessarily factors in how well a town manages its resources, both human and natural, with the population range from 100 to 5 000 in the more successful towns and a geographic spread from north to south.

Approximately 15% cent of respondents rate their town as ‘poor’. These towns are more isolated, but are often situated in productive farming and grazing country. Most, but not all, are dogged by social and cultural problems requiring a whole of government approach. Many of these towns are placed at the bottom end of the scale in the socio-economic index (Australian Bureau of Statistics SEIFA, 2001) and Community Adversity and Resilience (Professor Tony Vinson, 2004), with a high degree of passive welfare dependency.

**a) Technology**

On the question of technology (internet, mobile phone, electronic banking), more than 50% of respondents reported that they have the technologies they expect; and 69% consider that technology has improved over the last five years. However, more than 30% of respondents are not happy with the current levels of technology available (see Table 1). This particularly related to internet service, where there are still areas with very poor basic service. Mobile reception was reported to be patchy, but improving in some areas. Respondents across all towns reported available information technology expertise to be barely adequate, with limitations in many areas of industry and technology, despite big improvements in the last five years.

**Table 1: Results on Level of Expertise, Management and Decision-Making**

	<b>Current</b>	<b>Change Over Last Five Years</b>	<b>Comments</b>
<b>Technology</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• OK: 53%</li> <li>• Poor: 33%</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improved: 69%</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internet unreliable</li> <li>• Poor mobile phone reception</li> </ul>
<b>Promoting Your Town</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• OK: 56%</li> <li>• Poor: 28%</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improved: 33%</li> <li>• No Change: 47%</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dependent on good Council GM, EDOs, volunteers</li> </ul>
<b>Amount of Professional Expertise</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• OK: 42%</li> <li>• Poor: 44%</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No Change: 50%</li> <li>• Declined: 36%</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Major problems in health, engineers and trade</li> </ul>
<b>Involvement in Decision-Making</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• OK/Adequate: 58%</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improved: 28%</li> <li>• No Change: 44%</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hard for small towns in big shires</li> </ul>

**b) Community Management, Promotion and Consultation Processes**

The survey results indicated significant differences between towns on questions relating to the management and promotion of the community, and consultation processes utilized within the community (see Tables 1 and 2).

Some towns demonstrated extraordinary entrepreneurial skills, for example:

- Raising \$1.6 million in community donations so that the town now has a Council-owned, Council-run health complex;
- Council erecting a mobile phone tower and leasing it back to Telstra;
- Attracting new business based on the number of employees, benefit to the community and the type of industry, by marketing the competitive strengths of the town as a location for new or relocating industries; and
- Facilitating the process for new or relocating business by opening doors in government departments and cutting red tape.

The more successful towns appear to have Councils that work closely with the community. Respondents from these towns say their Council provides tours for ratepayers to help determine priorities for expenditure within the next three-year budget and have growth strategies and community plans in place.

**c) Professional Expertise**

The professional expertise available in all small towns surveyed ranged from OK to non-existent, as shown in Table 1. Respondents reported a lack of educated people available to take on leadership roles; lack of medical, nursing and allied health workers; large gaps in the financial sector; and difficulty in finding reliable tradesmen. Respondents also reported that Councils are experiencing difficulties in attracting engineers, with recent Shire amalgamations a further deterrent.



**d) Skills Development**

All towns reported the ongoing difficulty faced by professional experts in upgrading their skills and knowledge. As most relevant courses are only available in regional centres, which could be up to three or four hours away, there is a huge cost in terms of both travel and time lost. This is particularly so for small business owners, who are forced to pay back-up staff. Some towns reported that new measures have been put in place for doctors to upgrade their skills, which is a positive step forward for those towns.

**e) Injection of New Ideas**

The amount of 'new blood' and freshness of ideas in management was reported to be very limited in all towns, as shown in Table 2. One respondent from a southern town commented: *"We seriously suffer from the lack of old blood, before we start looking at new blood. We lack those industries and the growth required to attract new blood"*. This comment is consistent with another town's attitude: *"New ideas are often viewed in a negative fashion"*.

The loss of middle management as a result of government department mergers was reported to be exacerbating the problem. It was reported that these people have generally lived in various areas of the State, giving them a broader

perspective and attitude to new ideas. Only 28% of respondents believe their community leaders have introduced new ideas in management in the last five years, while 50% believe there has been no change at all. Many towns reported a need for more leadership programs to encourage better community participation, particularly from the younger members.

**Table 2: Results on Town Management, Resources and Ideas**

	Current	Change Over Last 5 Years	Comments
<b>How Well Town Managed</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>OK: 39%</li> <li>Poor: 47%</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Improved: 22%</li> <li>No Change: 56%</li> </ul>	Depends on Shire GM
<b>Amount of 'New Blood' and Leadership</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>OK: 44%</li> <li>Poor: 36%</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Improved: 28%</li> <li>No Change: 50%</li> </ul>	Need training programs
<b>Resources in Community (\$ and People)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>OK/Adequate: 36%</li> <li>Poor: 47%</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No Change: 53%</li> </ul>	High burnout of volunteers; resources stretched to limit
<b>Getting New Ideas From Outside</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>OK: 56%</li> <li>Poor: 36%</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Improved: 39%</li> <li>No Change: 50%</li> </ul>	People resisting change
<b>How Well Ideas Are Shared</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>OK: 58%</li> <li>Poor: 28%</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Improved: 28%</li> <li>No Change: 50%</li> </ul>	Need more between locals and Council and youth involvement

**f) Volunteerism**

With a very few exceptions, towns reported that resources are stretched to the limit, with a high degree of volunteer burn-out. Without more encouragement and support for people to take on voluntary positions in small rural communities, respondents say there is an increased danger that many of the services, cultural, sporting and recreational activities will fold. This is already happening in many communities.

**g) Attracting and Retaining Rural Youth**

The challenge of attracting and retaining rural youth in rural and remote NSW was identified as a key area of concern. Respondents put forward several recommendations to attract and retain youth in their community:

- Provision of more cultural and sporting, outdoor and leisure activities;
- Provision of more local traineeships and apprenticeships;
- Addressing the public liability issues with regard to facilities/sport;
- Provision of long term, low interest loans to assist the educated and innovative young people to become established in agriculture; and
- A 'whole of government' approach to addressing the poor opportunities and education standards in the Barwon Darling Alliance shires (bullying, violence, absenteeism, juvenile crime).



### 3.3 Success Stories

Respondents were asked to name any other towns or areas that they believed to be doing well, and the main reasons why this is so. As outlined in Table 3, there was a variety of reasons identified for towns perceived to be doing well; from good leadership and community approach; government or business investment, tourism; location; strong and successful industry base (such as cotton); to the town being the headquarters of the local government area.



The following comment from a town in northern NSW reflects these issues: “The towns that prosper have major industries, the need to attract more industry to the regional areas is imperative. In a time when the government is closing and downsizing departments, loss of middle management positions is a huge concern. Country towns have to rely on tourism more and more and while most are promoting their attractions successfully, towns need a solid foundation to build upon and industry is the building block”.

**Table 3: Towns Identified By Survey Participants as Doing Well, and Why**

Good Plan; Leadership; Community Approach		Government/ Business Investment	Tourism; Welcoming New People	Location	Strong Industry	Shire Towns
Thredbo	Hay	Eden	Canowindra	Goulbourn	Moree	Tumut
Dalgety	Lockhart	June	Mudgee	Bellingen	Narrabri	Tumbarumba
Coonamble	Temora	Quirindi	Lightning	Orange	Hillston	
Bingara	Cootamundra	Parkes	Ridge			
Tamworth	Deniliquin	Dubbo	Howlong			
Gulargambone	Narrandera	Wagga	Nundle			
West Wyalong	Forbes	Wagga	Cowra			
Coolamon	Blayney	Wellington	Oberon			
Narromine	Corowa					
Young	Crookwell					

### 3.4 Government Assistance Programs

Some towns reported a very high success rate in gaining external funding. The initial success with funding for a project was said to act as a catalyst to ignite enthusiasm in the community. The Association believes this encourages more ideas, develops confidence and often leads to the town standing on its own feet. However, some respondents take issue with the underlying philosophy of many programs, which was summarized as a view that the purpose of some programs is “to empower communities and then they’ll be right”. These respondents felt that there is no real understanding about the lack of resources (people and financial) in some communities.

The most utilised Federal program was found to be the *Rural Transaction Centre* (RTC) program, with 67% of respondents reporting that their town has accessed this program. This was followed closely by the *Regional Solutions* program.

The most utilised State program was reported to be the *Main Street/Small Towns* program, with more than 65% of respondents reporting that they have accessed the program. In terms of respondent uptake, there was a significant gap to the next most

successful program, with only 25% of respondents utilising the *Towns and Villages Futures* program.

Many concerns in the written comments reflect the perception that small towns in the shire often miss out on the funding. Others reflect dissatisfaction with the programs being competitive and self-selective, as many towns find difficulty with the application process.

**Table 4: Respondent Uptake of Government Assistance Programs**

Most Used Federal Programs (of the 13 available)		Most Used State Programs (of the 12 available)	
Rural Transaction Centres (RTC)	67%	Main Streets/Small Towns	67%
Regional Solutions	56%	Towns and Villages Futures	25%
Small Grants	39%	Business Retention and Expansion	25%
Regional Tourism	39%	Regional Business Development	22%
Regional Assistance	28%	Regional Business and Investment	14%
Potential Leaders (Rural Community)	28%	Strengthening Local Communities	14%
Can Do Community	22%	Developing Regional Resources	11%
Local Solution to Local Problems	22%	Regional Aboriginal Business Link	8%

*(Apart from RTC and Main Streets/Towns programs, approximately 40% of respondents did not know which programs had been used)*

Although the Federally-funded RTC program has been highly successful, some small towns reported that they have no resources to manage the RTC and have run out of ideas after the big start. A comment on programs from a small southern town reinforces this problem: *“Often these programs send in a consultant who is paid for the work they do. They are sometimes the only winners - the town is left with ideas, but no resources or leaders to implement them”*. This was echoed by a central western town: *“Business and strategic plans are no use when there is no money to implement them”*.

Nevertheless, there is considerable praise for the assistance provided by these programs, from new medical centres to the Department of State and Regional Development's help in developing a comprehensive growth strategy. Recent submission-writing workshops conducted by the Federal Department of Transport and Regional Services (DOTARS) across regional areas were reported to be very well received.

Suggestions for new programs included the need for non-confrontational type leadership programs to encourage community participation. There are also calls for assistance to provide infrastructure for sporting facilities such as tennis courts or swimming pools.

Feedback from Economic Development Officers reflected frustration with the application process, particularly in relation to programs aimed at business and economic development, and tourism and capital works for sport and recreation:

- Guidelines are too broad and ambiguous;
- Requirements are too complex for volunteer groups;
- Very long waiting periods before initial feedback, then requests for additional information;
- Partnership funding is very difficult for towns in decline and suffering drought; and
- Criteria does not take account of the disparities between villages, towns and larger centres located in different parts of the country. For example, a village in a depressed dryland economy has fewer resources to contribute to a project than a village with the same population located on the coastline, adjacent to a

growth centre. Assessment criteria used to compare applications appear to be rigid and not take account of the impact of what might appear to be small outcomes in a depressed community.

A more detailed report on these issues can be found in the Appendix.

### 3.5 **Other Issues Reported to be Inhibiting Growth and Development**

The main issue reported to be inhibiting growth and development of all small country towns is the impact of government regulatory compliance, particularly occupational health and safety (OH&S) and workers compensation; certification requirements for tradesmen, food handling, and disability access; and public liability insurance.

#### a) **OH&S, Public Liability, Trade Certification, Workers' Compensation etc**

##### *Negative Impact on Small Business*

Every town surveyed or visited stated the negative effects of these regulations on rural communities, particularly OH&S. While all agree that a safe workplace is non-negotiable, it must be recognised that there is perceived to be a lack of understanding within many government departments of the difficulties these requirements place on small isolated businesses and contractors:



- Meeting compliance criteria for ongoing certification in many areas places undue cost on small businesses, particularly for private businesses. Finding replacement staff is often extremely difficult and very expensive. This is exacerbated by the distance from where courses for compliance are offered, which may be up to four hours one way and may also result in accommodation costs.
- The costs and time taken for the OH&S courses are prohibitive, for example: \$900 for a five-day confined space course to allow anyone near a silo.
- Tradesmen are forced to travel long distances to earn the necessary points for the Department of Fair Trading certification requirements.
- A perception that innovation is being curtailed. An example of this was quoted at a meeting where a publican's attempt to provide a courtesy bus for his patrons was thwarted by the exorbitant cost of insurance and requirements imposed by the Roads and Traffic Authority. The high cost meant he would have to charge for the service, thus defeating the 'courtesy'.
- For young school leavers, the opportunity to find employment in their home town is diminished as fewer people are prepared to give them a chance. This is demonstrated by comments from a business person in a northern town and a farmer from western NSW. Both stated that it is now too risky to employ someone inexperienced, with the extra costs involved.
- Many employers are now only employing contractors, as the responsibility and costs associated with OH&S training, workers compensation etc. are

borne by the contractor, rather than the employer. This, in turn, is forcing workers to become contractors as their only option for employment, in many cases leading to these families relocating to bigger centres. The flow on effects of such a situation is cause for concern.

#### *Negative Impact on Service Providers*

- Rural Financial Counsellors reported that their hours are being restricted by their Committees, for fear of being in breach of OH&S regulations. Some are required to be in their office at 9am and 4pm to ensure they are not too far out of town at either end of the day. Most Rural Financial Counsellors find their most effective work in helping farmers is carried out on-farm, with easy access to the farmer's computers and financial records. The long distances and the length of time required to prepare applications with cash flow budgets etc. often means the new time restrictions prevent the Rural Counsellor from carrying out his/her work in the most effective manner.
- There is also a social aspect to these restrictions on Rural Financial Counsellors that is impacting on farming families. Rural Counsellors report that they often discover stress-related health concerns within the family, when they are part of the relaxed environment, sitting around the kitchen table. They report that this does not happen in the formal office environment. The importance of early intervention in the emotional wellbeing of farming families cannot be underestimated, particularly for farming men, whose reticence to seek help is well documented. Referring clients to appropriate professionals is an important aspect of the role of Rural Counsellors.

#### *Negative Impact on Voluntary Committees and Local Activities*

Voluntary committees, and the activities and events organised by them, are the lifeblood of small rural towns, both socially and in terms of providing funds for community services. Many fundraising events are now folding under the weight of liability insurance and costly regulations. Examples included:



- The cancellation of the River Rally, which usually takes place every year in an Upper Hunter town.
- A very small town in the central west quoted a cost of \$3 000 (in a population of 90) for certificate training for volunteers to run a rodeo.
- Dramatic effects on school canteens. The cost and inconvenience for each voluntary worker to gain the food handling course certificate is forcing some canteens to close, with the loss of thousands of dollars in fundraising for small schools.
- The impact on young families in rural communities, with the extreme example of property manager's wives and children not being allowed to go out in the paddock, unless they are on the payroll.
- Diminishing quality of life, flowing on to higher stress levels as a result of voluntary events folding in so many areas.

Respondents identified the need for government to assist groups with the increase in costs to implement reforms. Some reported that older volunteers are

choosing to withdraw their services as it is “*all too hard*”. The impact of these regulations may have serious structural adjustment implications for small towns.

**b) Shire Amalgamations**

The threatened loss of services and representation is a major concern for towns involved in shire amalgamations. Towns that will no longer be the shire headquarters in the new local government areas are now losing staff, as many either have to relocate to the new shire town, or take a redundancy. The loss of these educated people and their families is a huge blow for these small communities. In addition, the Economic Development Officers now have a much larger area to cover. Economic Development Officers are cited as a major contributor to the generation and implementation of new ideas in towns. As the Council is one of the town’s biggest employers, there are also fears that the traineeships and apprenticeships will be lost.

**c) Housing/Land Shortages and Hobby Farm Issues**

The drift from the city to small country communities, as people can no longer afford Sydney, Wollongong or the Central Coast, continues in the more favoured areas, closer to the coast or bigger cities. The steady influx of retirees in particular – but also younger people choosing the country lifestyle – has created optimism and opportunities for many small towns.

It has also created a shortage of available houses and land suitable for housing developments. Community members in one Upper Hunter town visited believed that their lack of available land for housing is inhibiting their town’s growth. The neglect of community infrastructure over the years has emerged as another problem with water, electricity and sewerage issues requiring attention if this growth continues.

The increase in the number of hobby farmers in areas closer to the major cities is changing the nature of these communities and is creating land use/subdivision issues. There are also concerns that the new hobby farms created by subdivision may not be viable, with reports that the new residents often have a limited understanding of legal requirements and other responsibilities. Respondents identified the need for cooperation to ensure effective weed control and fire hazard reduction as an issue to be addressed.

**d) Native Vegetation and Water Reforms**

Native vegetation legislation and water reforms also rated highly as concerns for many areas. Respondents from the affected areas reported that they face an uncertain future as reflected in the following comment from a central western town: “*For a shire that relies heavily on agriculture, the native vegetation legislation is the worst thing ever imposed*”. Towns in irrigation areas also stated they are fearful of the future with less water available from the water sharing plans.

#### 4. Observations: Lessons From Towns Doing Well

Comments from survey respondents and in community consultation meetings indicate clearly the importance of local government in a town's 'success' or otherwise:

- It appears local governments that encourage businesses; offer traineeships; have ratepayers' wish lists; strategic plans etc, tend to have councillors who are open to change and therefore attract greater community support and volunteer participation;
- The introduction of Economic Development and/or Tourist Officers is having a positive effect on many towns;
- Towns in the south of the State praised the Riverina Regional Development Board for its 'whole of government' approach;
- Many towns stated that they favour a policy of encouraging the businesses already in the town first, before attempting to attract new ones;
- Most of the more successful towns make mention of their efforts to encourage art and cultural activities; and
- A southern town talked of a philanthropic idea of 'Give where you Live' to encourage people to leave money to their community.



## **5. Discussion: The Way Forward**

In preparing this discussion paper, the Association considered the higher-level themes that emerged through the survey data and community consultation. A key objective of the discussion paper is to identify why (excluding geographical and natural resource issues) some communities appear to be doing better than others. The analysis also sought to identify where there are major gaps in services and where the Association and other key stakeholders can make a difference.

### **5.1 Role of Local Government, Leadership and Community Responsibility**

Why are some local government areas doing better than others? Why are some communities receiving more government assistance? The research clearly shows that whilst geography and resources – both natural and otherwise – are very important, it is dynamism, leadership and the tenacity of people within the community to grasp issues and circumstances, that leads to one community performing better than another one.

The above attitudes of the community are often reflected in local government, both in terms of elected and non-elected officials and staff. While it may be considered that talented people can often be seen in those areas where there are significant natural resources and opportunity, it is often the environment that is fostered within local government and community that attracts these people to becoming involved. Why is this important?

One of the local government areas visited had managed to attract within its local government staff, people with entrepreneurial attitudes that in turn led to empowerment of those associated with the local government. As a result, this Council and community developed a program that resulted in the establishment of a local health complex to overcome their concerns about the lack of health services. The attitudes fostered by this win led to the community addressing their telecommunication problems with the investment by the local community in a mobile phone tower, which it now leases back to Telstra.

Taking a negative view, there are a few examples where communities seem powerless to address their problems. Of course, those towns not doing so well argue that they have other contributing factors. Shire towns are consistently accused of ignoring the smaller towns within the shire. Isolation by distance or terrain and high levels of passive welfare dependency is said to stifle many an enthusiastic entrepreneurial aspiration. In some communities it can seem to be just ‘too hard.’

Leadership, or the lack of it at a local level, often leads to those communities missing out on government help, either State or Federal. More importantly, where State and Federal programs are put into communities without enough local enthusiastic support, those programs seem to have trouble being sustainable in the long term. “*No money and no people to implement the program*” is often stated.

One example where this is *not* the case, and where the leadership of small communities has led to a degree of equality between large and small centres, is in the southwest of the state. This community used a broad consultative process to



determine how to improve their little town. They then explored all avenues of fundraising and set about rejuvenating their town. Without relying totally on the major centre, this community realised that it was local responsibility and leadership that could make a difference.

The depth of involvement is also important, with the need for not only the involvement of talented and motivated leaders or individuals, but also a need to have the community involved in what these leaders are trying to achieve. Some excellent ideas have been enacted only to fail because of the lack of community enthusiasm. Apathy is often the killer for small communities, but there are ways in which leaders within communities can influence the involvement of others. Too often the community leaves a large percentage of community activity to the same workers.

Lack of information is constantly mentioned as a growth prohibiting factor. Many in small communities have ideas on how to support their town, but have no idea how to access information about funding opportunities. One reason may be that most members in the community groups are older residents and internet use is limited.

### **What Can Be Done**

It is clear that often the salvation of a community occurs from within. Yet it is also clear that there are now very few programs from government that build leadership within local rural communities. It is disappointing that the Federal Government has not continued the leaders and volunteers programs. Often the term 'leadership' makes involvement difficult with high expectations being perceived by potential participants. 'Get involved locally' may be a better term for such programs.

It is a view of this analysis that there is a real need for State and Local Government, and perhaps non-government organisations, to become more involved in fostering the leadership and involvement capacity of rural communities. Where this is the case, local government benefits in the longer term as talent is cultivated and communities become more engaged. In a recent report by the Regional Communities Consultative Council (RCCC) the suggestion of a **volunteer training program** for small towns was put forward:

*"The volunteers need to know how to run meetings, finances etc. Information on topics such as OH&S, grant seeking, food handling, insurance and the use of the Community Builders Resource Kit. The trainer needs to be a community worker who has an understanding of the dynamics of communities and volunteers. A TAFE teacher or a professional training consultant is more likely to antagonise the volunteers. Each community would have different needs and training needs to link into the practical community development projects they want to undertake. The involvement of young people is essential to bring forth the next generation of volunteers."*

Another suggested way forward was:

*"A facilitator with a strong understanding of social capital formation and volunteering, rather than economic development would be helpful....a person who can work quietly and nurture their aspirations and link them to resources. Even a fortnightly visit for three months would achieve a range of outcomes for communities.... The program needs to be recurrent, not another one-off pilot that tests the model, but does not put anything permanently in place, or throws it back to the community to self sustain. Once the initial work (three months) is completed the visits can be scaled back to six or twelve monthly planning days. The outsider would be the catalyst to stimulate and affirm that the community has made progress."*

Similar needs to these have been recognised and addressed in many Western countries, in a variety of ways. For example, in Missouri and in many other states in America, community development specialists are employed for every five to six



counties to meet the needs identified above. They work together with government and non government agencies to provide a holistic approach to regional, social and economic development. This holistic approach to regional development, (the triple bottom line, combining economic, social and environmental outcomes) must be the goal for all stakeholders in rural communities.

Based on the success of these initiatives and the apparent needs of New South Wales rural communities, the former University of Sydney (Faculty of Rural Management) and now Charles Sturt University, is currently developing a number of courses that will be offered in rural communities aimed at building communities from the grass roots and empowering them to move forward. Any courses would be undertaken at the request of the community and shaped to meet their specific needs. The University is also exploring the possibility of developing the EXCEL framework (Experience in

Community Enterprise and Leadership) that has been used successfully in the United States, for use in Australian communities. The program is characterised by a high degree of flexibility, local control and inclusiveness.

It is likely that other regional universities would also have skills in facilitating community social and economic development. The Association could liaise with the RCCC and the regional Universities to explore further these and other options to assist small communities to help themselves.

In view of the positive comments about the work of Economic Development Officers it is apparent there is a need for more Economic Development Officers. A possible solution may be to establish a 1800 number, with a centrally based coordinator, who could walk individuals or groups through the process of discovering what funding is available; how to access it and how to manage the project once it is up and running.

The Association believes successful involvement in community development must be community driven.

**Enabling councillors at a local government level** to be provided with the skills and abilities to understand their complex roles and then to be able to operate more effectively to ensure that their communities are appropriately represented, is another issue that needs exploring.

The Association understands there are many courses for present and incoming local government representatives, which are not only delivered in Sydney, but are available in regional centres, or can be organised 'in house'. It is disappointing therefore to note some comments from survey respondents about their local council. Comments such as "*Council is not proactive nor proficient to manage*" were not as common as comments relating to consultative processes, such as "*Council has a record of seeking community consultations and doing whatever they want, irrespective of the public opinion*", and "*The participation is not a problem, it is how the end decision is made that fails*". Of course, in defence of councillors, community apathy is often a contributing factor in the failure of consultative processes.

The high costs of some of the courses and conferences may discourage local government executives and councillors from some shires attending. The cost for a two day seminar/conference can be up to \$3 000. Frustratingly, those shires that cannot

afford to send representatives are often the most in need of these seminars and conferences.

Perhaps attending a course should be mandatory for all elected councillors. The Association could take a lead in facilitating self help for communities by liaising with the State and Federal Departments and the Local Governments and Shires Association. Forums/workshops or meetings could be organised for local government executives, Economic Development Officers and community leaders to share ideas and help kick start, enthuse and support their counterparts in more difficult local government areas. Visits to other areas could be encouraged to exchange ideas.

Many respondents reported the difficulties local governments are having providing increased services with little financial compensation from government. Councils are faced with increasing demand for human services, which now come at the expense of funding for traditional, property-based services, such as the provision and maintenance of roads and other infrastructure.

A report from the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Economics, Finance and Public Administration (The Hawker Report) outlines major reforms to place Australia's councils on a more secure and financial footing. It also suggested that duplication and coordination costs of all levels of government in Australia could amount to more than \$20 billion a year. Key features of the recent Australian Government's response to the Hawker Report are the development of an intergovernmental agreement to help stop cost shifting to local government, a Productivity Commission study on barriers to local government revenue raising and recognition of local government by Federal Parliament.

The Australian Local Government Association (ALGA) welcomed this response, but has committed to continue pushing for the replacement of the assistance grants with a model that gives local government access to a growing source of revenue to meet the needs of communities.

**Recommendations:**

- 1. That the Association work with the Regional Communities Consultative Council (RCCC) and the regional Universities to effect community solutions to social and capacity building issues.**
- 2. That the Association work with the Local Governments and Shires Association and the Local Government Managers Association to investigate avenues to embrace strong and effective local leadership and local government governance, including the option of mandatory courses for new councillors.**
- 3. That the Association promote small country towns, which may include sponsorship of events which would ensure the NSW Farmers Association is viewed as an organisation directly supporting rural communities.**

## **5.2 Impact of Government Regulations on the Community Environment**

One of the major concerns that has come through this analysis and the associated tour of country towns is the impact that excessive government regulation has on a) small business and b) the abilities of rural communities to be sustainable in the simple services and community events that allow communities to function.

The impact of these government regulations, particularly OH&S, on small communities was discussed in the report findings section of this paper. There appears to be little recognition by government or support given to assist voluntary groups to cope with

changes being imposed by these new regulations, particularly with the increase in costs to implement reforms.

Subsequent research indicates that much of the angst for employers is caused by the fear of being in breach of the Act, rather the OH&S legislation itself, which does not necessarily require all of the courses demanded by some employers. It is reported that even the most diligent employer may still be prosecuted, even if there is deliberate negligence on the part of an employee.

In October, 2004, the State Government released the draft Workplace Fatalities Bill that proposed huge fines of up to \$.65 million and jail terms for employers and managers if a death occurred on their farm. After enormous pressure by the Association and other employer groups, the Government has made changes to the draft Bill will see a fairer system put in place. The Association has provided a submission on the new draft bill and is continuing to hold rallies around the state. Farmers are hoping for a sensible and workable approach to OH&S legislation with the ACT to be reviewed in late 2005.

The cost of **workers compensation** to farmers and small business in country towns must not be underestimated in this mix. The State government sets the rate for



workers' compensation and all insurance companies must offer the same premium. It is reported that in NSW, the cost of workers' compensation for shearers, for example, is three to four times more than in Queensland and Victoria. It is possible to have a tariff of 3% in Victoria, when it is approximately 12% in NSW.

Why is it so much more expensive in NSW? The Government has stated it will not reduce tariffs until

revenue equals expenditure and the deficit is down to zero. Actuarial research conducted by the Government in 2003 reported it will take eight to ten years to achieve this.

### ***What Can Be Done – OH&S***

It is expected by the general community that Government has the responsibility to put in place laws, policy and programs that allow communities to flourish. This is accepted and expected by NSW Farmers' Association. It is clear to this analysis that many policies of government and their implementation led to a situation where these policies work against the above principle. In the time since the research was conducted, the Department of Fair Trading has announced significant and practical changes to the certification requirements for tradesmen in country areas. This Department is to be congratulated for its positive response to the many complaints received.

The analysis believes that structural change is occurring as the result of Government policy and regulations concerning OH&S. This is said to be happening because employees in many industries are being forced into starting up their own small business as contractors. It is feared by many respondents that these contractors, with their families, will in time relocate to bigger centres as they search for more work to compensate for the added business costs they now encounter. This structural change is not within the intended industry but rather on a wider front.

**Recommendations:**

- 4. That the Association work with Workcover to obtain on-ground awareness (field days) and training programs to look at ways to reduce compliance costs**
- 5. That the Association produce a simple guide on regulatory compliance for farmers, small businesses and voluntary organisations.**

The impact of public liability insurance on rural communities came through the analysis as a major theme. The events that are often iconic in the Australian culture, such as the country show, the rodeo or the local sport events are becoming more and more out of reach for small communities. There are many examples where public liability insurance has left the community with little choice but to limit its activities.

The huge hikes in public liability insurance premiums were a result of two large and unusual events: i) the liquidation of the HIH Group of companies in March 2001 (HIH was a price leader); and ii) the terrorist attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001. In addition, the general insurance industry as a whole performed extremely poorly in the 2001-02 financial year and experienced the highest underwriting losses ever recorded in Australia.

Throughout 2002 and 2003, Federal, State and Territory governments pursued a framework of reform in response to the perceived crisis of rising premiums and reduced availability of public liability insurance. As part of the framework, the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) was required to monitor particular aspects of the reform.

The reforms agreed to by governments related to changes to how tort law applied. They focussed mainly on minimising personal injury claims costs by implementing caps and thresholds on court awarded settlements, provisions for structured settlements, changes to negligence laws and minimising legal costs.

**Despite these reforms, voluntary organisations (not for profit) found it almost impossible to gain public liability cover at any price.** In 2003, three companies applied for authorisation of a joint venture arrangement for the collective supply of public liability insurance through a 'co-insurance pool' to eligible not for profit organisations. The ACCC was not totally convinced the public benefit (improved availability of cover) outweighed the public detriment (lack of competition). Accordingly the ACCC only granted authorisation until December 2006.

The 'co-insurance pool' has enabled most non profit organisations to gain public liability cover, but at an exorbitant price, considering the low risk history and status of most voluntary organisations.

***What Can Be Done – Public Liability Insurance***

In the latest monitoring report, the ACCC found that although claims were down relative to the number of policies written, the average size of the claims has increased. The expected outcome in the short term is a premium increase of 4%. There is little joy in these findings, considering most voluntary organisations say they are having difficulty meeting present premiums.

New Zealand has a completely different system. The Accident Compensation Corporation (ACC) administers New Zealand's accident compensation scheme. It is a Government-Owned Corporation set up by an act of parliament and run by a board of directors who are responsible to the Minister for the Accident Compensation Corporation. ACC provides no fault, 24 hour cover to all New Zealanders wherever

they are in New Zealand, with cover for all injuries whether home, sport or work related (no separate workers compensation). It is funded by a levy paid by all New Zealanders – employers, wage earners and motor vehicle owners. The levy is based on income

1. The levy from non-earners is paid by the government
2. Premiums are set to pay for the current and future costs of all claims made in that year
3. There is no private insurance for accidents
4. There is no precedent for spurious and exorbitant claims
5. As a result of improved scheme performance, premiums have begun to fall in the last two years, dropping by 25%

The Association does not have sufficient information at this stage to form an opinion on whether this scheme or similar would be suitable for NSW or Australia. As NSW already has a levy on petrol and has precedents for vexatious claims, low premiums through this scheme may test governments.

**Recommendations:**

6. ***That the Association, in conjunction with other key stakeholder bodies, explore with Governments a public insurance system similar to that used in New Zealand.***

### 5.3 Health Workforce Shortages

There is an international shortage of doctors and nurses, particularly in rural and remote areas. Australia is no exception. It is well documented, for example, that there are more nurses working outside the industry, than within.

Over the past number of years, both the Federal and State Governments have implemented a number of initiatives to combat the attrition. A number of these look promising, but there is much more progress to be made and key bodies, such as the National Rural Health Alliance, continue to lobby for changes.

Whilst the Association has also actively lobbied for specific corrective measures, more recent policy and priorities have recognised the need for **Allied Health Professionals (AHP)** to also be included within any health workforce shortage management strategy. The results of the recent surveys (community and members) support this action. The surveys revealed that poor access to AHP (including mental health workers), dentists and medical specialists is of major concern to our rural communities, particularly those in isolated areas. A broken leg in Bourke for example, results in the patient travelling four hours one way by car for each physiotherapy treatment.

Australian Government programs that provide allied health professionals service funding are conceptually good, but vary considerably in their on-the-ground provision. These programs are administered by the Divisions of General Practice, each of which differ in how they determine AHP requirements. Case studies have shown that greater community and existing AHP consultation helps to fulfil specific demands, as well as achieving a medical 'team', a sense of community ownership, and limited duplication of services.



Many respondents mention **poor access to mental health workers** in their area. Subsequent research shows there are mental health workers attached to NSW Health in many areas of the state, not just the regional centres. There appears to be a lack of information out there which NSW Health could possibly alleviate by conducting a media awareness program.

**Poor access to specialists** is a consistent theme, except in the north-west towns with high indigenous populations. These towns are well serviced by specialists, who are flown in every six to eight weeks. Perhaps other small towns could be serviced in the same fashion – depending on whether the funding comes from the Health or Aboriginal Affairs Department.

### **What Can Be Done**

Given that the problems contributing to the Allied Health Professionals workforce shortage – unrealistic workloads, increased responsibilities, little or no support for example – are shared by the other members of the medical teams (doctors, nurses etc) it stands to reason that some of the combative initiatives may also apply to the AHP. The federally funded HECS reimbursement scheme is one such measure worth considering to enhance AHP student numbers. Certainly many of the lessons learnt from handling the nursing and doctor shortage crises may apply to those of AHP.

Ensuring that adequate community / local consultation is sought before funding is distributed through the Rural Primary Health Program for example, seems another simple yet very effective step in supplying the required health services in areas of greatest need.

NSW Health has a number of initiatives underway in response to the AHP shortage, through its Rural Health Plan. These include a strategic plan for allied health students (with graduate recommendations), which is currently being developed and a workforce planning group whose aim is to ascertain shortages and needs. The Rural Health Plan recognises the importance of grassroots input and has hence held a number of AHP forums (and subsequently translated input into direct funding for computers as a result). The Rural Health Plan also seeks input through its Rural Health Taskforce, which includes NSW Farmers Association representation. Both parties are keen for this liaison to be highly interactive, and therefore a very valuable voice for our farmers, rural communities and policy makers alike.

### **Recommendations:**

- 7. That the Rural Health Taskforce closely monitor and publicly report on the implementation of the Rural Health Plan to ensure initiatives translate into on the ground services / infrastructure and two-way communication about rural and remote needs.**
- 8. That the Association, within the Rural Health Alliance Group, work to implement shortage combative initiatives in conjunction with other key rural health organisations, such as National Rural Health Alliance.**
- 9. That mandatory local community and Allied Health Professional consultation take place prior to Allied Health Professional funding distribution.**

## 5.4 Education

The many concerns registered from the survey comments and the consultations on the regional tour indicate there are a number of systemic **education issues** to be addressed from pre-school through to tertiary education.

Many respondents referred to the “*State funding of pre-schools issue*” and others are “*Looking into converting*



*our pre-school into a long day care service*”. Subsequent research reveals there is indeed a funding crisis in community-based pre-schools in NSW. In all other States except NSW and Victoria, State Governments have accepted that the funding of high quality **pre-school services** is a state responsibility and have policy implemented to ensure a minimum level of universal and affordable access to pre-school in the year before starting school.

In NSW there is no real commitment to affordability or universality. This state has two separate pre-school systems operating – a small number of inexpensive pre-schools attached to the education system, fully funded for staffing and building costs, and a community based system (800) funded much more frugally through the Department of Community Services (DoCS). Since 1989/90, when base levels of funding were frozen, it is argued the State Government has not made any significant attempt to address the systemic and chronic under funding of community based pre-schools. Although this is a state wide issue, the problems are exacerbated for pre-school services located in rural areas for many reasons including:

- An inability to gain financial benefit from economies of scale
- Difficulty in attracting and retaining qualified staff – lower rate of pay for early childhood teachers compared to teachers with the same qualifications in the school system
- High costs in relation to training and professional development – travel and accommodation
- Lack of appropriate transport – pre-school children do not qualify for free school bus travel, making it difficult for those out of town, possibly having to travel 30-50 km or more each way.
- State funded mobile services also experience the same problems of under funding
- Small pre-schools licensed for under 29 places, have found that they have not had sufficient funds to sustain an early childhood teacher/director. This means the children are potentially disadvantaged by not having programs delivered by early childhood teachers.
- Increasing fees due to funding shortfalls, comes at the worst time as the state wide drought impacts on families and communities.

Non-profit community based pre-schools play a vital role in building the social capacity of rural communities. There is much discussion about the importance of “community”, social cohesion and the problems which arise from ‘social exclusion’. Losing a pre-

school in a small town not only represents a loss of the very important early childhood service, but the loss of an important part of the local economy. They allow parents to pursue employment and training opportunities as well as providing employment and support to local businesses, therefore helping small rural communities remain viable.

The option of converting pre-schools into Federally-funded long day care services is discussed in the child-care section below.

#### ***What Can Be Done – Preschools***

##### ***Recommendations:***

- 10. That the Association work with the Country Children’s Services Association of NSW Inc and the Isolated Children’s Parents’ Association of NSW Inc to lobby government to take urgent action to address the historical and systemic funding inequities for community pre-schools – funding inequities that arguably most severely disadvantage children living in rural and regional NSW.***

The State Government’s inability to make inroads into the **very poor education outcomes of schools** in the Barwon Darling Alliance shires requires urgent attention. The Association understands this issue has been the major thrust of lobbying by ICPA for ten years, with the ICPA calling for students who wish to learn, to be able to bypass the local school and receive the Federal Assistance for Isolated Children’s Scheme Boarding Allowance to attend another high school in a bigger town. As already mentioned in this report, Queensland has approved bypassing for a limited number of isolated schools in an attempt to keep students in the education system and Western Australia is trialling bypassing. A ‘whole of government’ approach is required to effect change in the long term, which would include the Federal and State Governments combining the very considerable resources from all departments (DOCS, Police, Justice, Education, Health, Aboriginal Affairs) in a coordinated manner. This is not happening at the moment and residents see little, if any, improvement, despite the millions of dollars being spent.

Survey respondents report **TAFE** is restricting the course opportunities for children in some central schools, while other towns are worried that school children are not taking the vocational educational training (VET) courses which would lead them into local employment.

The Association already has existing policy on problems encountered with **tertiary access**, including the **Youth Allowance**. Both the Association and the ICPA are calling for a tertiary access allowance for country students to assist with the increasing HECS fees and the cost of **living away from home**.

#### ***What Can Be Done – Education for Rural Students***

##### ***Recommendations:***

- 11. That the Association and ICPA-NSW jointly lobby the Australian and NSW Governments to urgently address the problem issues in education for rural students.***

## 5.5 Youth and Employment

The provision of good education, or the lack of it, is vitally linked to employment opportunities and the retention of youth in small towns. After leaving school many local youth move away to find employment in a larger centre, as they don't have the appropriate skills for the few jobs in their area. Many would like access to courses that match the types of jobs available locally.

The **lack of jobs** on the one hand contradicts the often mentioned **shortage of skilled labour** in most small towns. This highlights the need for all young people to partake in some form of job skilling to become employable. Gone are the days when the local kid could walk out of school and go straight into a job. Many consider the introduction of **more locally based apprenticeships or traineeships** would alleviate the skilled labour shortage in time.

There is a New Apprenticeships scheme which can assist businesses to take on apprentices or trainees. The Australian Government provides the financial incentives for the employers and the NSW Government's commitment represents the cost of training, either public or private; a travel allowance for the apprentice for block training in the regional centre (some are required to travel to Sydney) and a provision for payroll tax concessions if applicable.

The positives of the apprenticeships scheme are:

- Employers are given an incentive of: \$4 400, with a possible further \$1 100 for a skill shortage incentive; or an innovation incentive of \$1 200 for an electrical/IT trade, and an incentive if the area is in drought;
- The employer only pays apprenticeship wages;
- There is a living away from home allowance for those who move to bigger towns;
- Apprentices are eligible from 15 years of age up with no upper limit;
- The apprenticeship can start in years 11 and 12;
- Local councils are eligible for the apprenticeship scheme;
- There is extra money for an aboriginal strategy – mentoring;
- Traineeships apply to farming as well – rural traineeship program;
- In a skill shortage industry – \$5 500 incentive;
- Can employ son or daughter; and
- Training can be delivered in the workplace if employer is willing to take the responsibility – no block release.



Why then, are there not more businesses taking on apprenticeships in country towns? Some of the reasons may be:

- Many consider the incentive is not sufficient: apprenticeships are four years – the incentive is a one off payment, not \$4 400 for each year. The payment is split with one at the beginning of year 1 and one at the end of year 4.
- Lack of business confidence - economic environment where town is not growing
- Age of many tradesmen in country towns – many in their 50s and 60s
- Difficulty in the engineering trades to find apprentices
- Fear that they may be training up a competitor, particularly in the building

trades. Not enough business in small towns for too many electricians for example.

- Some apprentices are head-hunted in the third and fourth year – welders for example – there is nothing to stop them walking off
- The block training is in the regional centres and for some trades, in Sydney.
- Block training can be 1 day a week or 3 days every 3 weeks (block release) for automotive trades for example – difficult from more isolated areas
- The living away from home allowance can act as a disincentive for young people to stay in their local town
- There is more incentive for an employer to take on a trainee for one year rather than an apprentice for four years, as there is no more money for the extra years
- Many small businesses may not be aware of the scheme – requires better marketing to convince employers

It is clear there may be structural issues for small country towns emerging from this scheme. The necessity for the apprentice/trainee to travel long distances to undertake training in a regional centre means many would decide to move to the centre for the duration of the apprenticeship. The living away from home allowance is an added incentive for young people to move to bigger centres. Although unintentional, this scheme could be said to be making it more difficult for small country towns to retain their youth.

An initiative, which is working well in other states, and has recently been implemented in NSW, could have positive outcomes for retaining youth in the country. This **School to Industry** project is part of a national initiative funded by the Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) and managed by Rural Skills Australia (RSA). RSA is a not-for-profit organisation formed by the National Farmers' Federation (NFF). Its role is to help increase the skills base of rural industries, particularly in the areas of agriculture, horticulture and veterinary nursing. **The School to Industry Project** aims to:

- Increase the capacity of industry to promote and support school to industry partnerships;
- Increase the participation rate of students undertaking Structured Workplace Learning (SWL) and school based New Apprenticeships (SBNA) in agriculture and horticulture;
- Promote the diversity of career opportunities in the rural industries to career advisers, VET teacher, parents, students and the employment and training sectors; and
- Develop a rural focussed enterprise education model.

The ongoing challenge for the project is to identify industry participants who are willing to host a student in the workplace. To ensure that our local communities remain viable, young people need to see that there are opportunities at a local level that can lead to a rewarding career. The benefits that flow on to the community once employers take on young people are many.

In some parts of the north-west and west of the state, action is urgently needed to turn around long term problems such as high welfare dependency and youth unemployment, high indigenous unemployment, a lack of skills in the working age population and low levels of post school qualifications.

**The Barwon Darling Alliance** is a unique collaboration between the local governments of Coonamble, Walgett, Brewarrina, Bourke and Central Darling and the Murdi Paaki ATSIC Regional Council. The Alliance has a plan to bring together local, state and federal government and private organisations and individuals under a five year trial of a custom designed socio-economic zone. This plan centres on job stimulation and set of on-the-ground actions to build up the overall capacity of local

people and their communities. Residents see little if any improvement in employment opportunities in these areas, despite the millions of dollars being spent in other Federal and State programs.

The Association has current policy to lobby government and financial institutions to develop a program of financial assistance, including low interest rate loans and farm succession planning advice for young people wishing to make agriculture their career. Both Queensland and Victoria have schemes in place to assist young people purchase land or enter a sharefarming or leasing arrangement. With the average age of farmers well above fifty, this scheme would be an investment for the future of farming, as well as in the future of rural communities that rely on agriculture for income and employment. Young 'would be' farmers are well educated, innovative and enthusiastic and it is a tragedy to see so many of them head to the major cities because they cannot access finance to get started in their own business on the land.

### ***What Can Be Done – Youth and Employment***

#### ***Recommendations:***

- 12. That the Association lobby the NSW Government and private education providers, for courses to be delivered locally for professional development and for apprentices and trainees***
- 13. That the Association seek the earliest possible implementation of its FirstFarmer proposal to provide concessional finance to young people seeking to purchase their first farming property***

## **5.6 Childcare**

Although childcare services were deemed to have improved, most towns report a lack of places which is limiting the employment opportunities, particularly for young mothers. There was much discussion on this topic in our face to face meetings, looking at innovative ways to address the issue. Some towns are looking at converting their under funded, struggling community based pre-schools into long day care centres. Parents facing fee increases in pre-schools are attracted to this option, as the Federally funded long day care services are able to offer better fee subsidies for families on low incomes.

However, the management must crunch the numbers well to ensure this is a viable option, as there may be traps for small communities with this option:

- Increase in running cost because of the requirement for long day care to operate for at least 8 hours per day and when operating over 8 hours the service must pay for shiftwork and/or overtime
- Access to Child Care Benefit (CCB) is higher if the day care centre is open for 12 hours, but small communities cannot sustain 12 hours as there may not be sufficient community need for 12 hours of care per day, and it may not be financially viable to sustain the increased staffing costs of shift worker/overtime for one or two children.



- Difficulty in finding staff as need two shifts with at least two staff for each
- Inconsistency with numbers – in school holidays families with school age children may not seek child care for their younger children and would rather take time off work

Many country people may not be aware of the federally funded 'in home care' which is delivered through Family and Community Services (FACS). Under this service the carer goes to the family's home. Unfortunately, in-home care places are capped which means there is limited availability of this type of service. Under the Commonwealth's recently announced 'the New Child Care Support Program', there is recognition of the need for additional support for child care services in rural and remote communities. This includes "Sustainability Assistance" for small services, however, it is too early to know whether it will be sufficient to address the issues for child care provision in small rural communities

### **What Can Be Done**

#### **Recommendations:**

- 14. That the Association and Country Children's Services Association jointly lobby the Commonwealth to re-establish a child care planning process to ensure that child care places are provided in regional and rural areas where there are most needed.**
- 15. That the Association lobby for incentive schemes and scholarships to help services attract early childhood teachers to work in rural and remote communities.**

## **5.7 Transport**



Transport is considered by respondents to have declined by more than 20% in the last five years. There is particular mention of non-existent transport between smaller towns.

A very recent initiative by the Department of Transport is hoping to alleviate some of these transport problems. Regional Coordinators have been appointed to look at the spare capacity of local buses, including community buses, and taxis, to use more efficiently in country towns. Disadvantaged groups have been targeted: the frail and elderly, who often have no access to private transport, the disabled and indigenous people.

The coordinators are initially looking at individual towns to assess their particular needs. These may be health related transport requirements, with people needing to visit regional centres for appointments, or transport requirements between smaller towns.

Another option for small towns may be to explore the feasibility/viability of private bus services. In more closely settled areas, maybe school buses could be utilised in out-of-school hours. Does this happen anywhere? The government could cross subsidise which would be a cheaper option than providing public transport.

### **What Can Be Done**

#### **Recommendations:**

- 16. That the Association work with the Local Governments and Shires Association to explore all options with the NSW Government to improve transport services (rail and bus) in country areas.**
- 17. That the Association work with the Rail Infrastructure Corporation to secure future infrastructure for rail in country areas.**

### **5.8 Police**

Overtime bans imposed by the NSW Government on police in small towns is quite impractical and raises safety issues, as the examples given in the report section of this paper illustrate. The Association has long standing policy on opposing the reduction of operating hours of police stations and the closure of police stations.

The Association also has existing policy on addressing the issue of juvenile crime ...*that where juveniles are convicted of vandalism to public utilities, the cost of repair to those utilities be borne by the parents or guardians of the offender.*

The problem currently stems from the attitude of the magistrates, who undoubtedly through the best intentions, consistently let repeat offenders off. This causes utter frustration for the local police and the residents.

### **What Can Be Done**

#### **Recommendations:**

- 18. That the Association work with the Local Governments and Shires Association and the Police Association to seek from the Minister for Police, the lifting of the overtime ban for police officers in small country towns.**
- 19. That the Association work with other organisations to investigate how other countries deal with juvenile offenders, particularly in relation to re-education.**

### **5.9 Shire Amalgamations**

Research evaluation indicates there are real and perceived concerns from residents in all local government areas affected by these forced amalgamations. What can be done when faced with a *fait accompli*?

The Association will be seeking a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) from the Minister to ensure no loss of services and representation following a motion carried at the 2004 Conference.

The Local Government Employment Protection Amendment to the Local Government Act provides job security for non-executive staff for three years. All other concerns



relating to representation and threatened loss of services are required to be negotiated by the new council.

The following is an extract from the Minister's speech in the Legislative Council in relation to rural centres:

*“The Government is well aware that in many small rural communities the council is the major employer. That is why the Government is **committed to maintaining core numbers of staff in rural towns that have been affected by structural reform.** Under this bill councils must ensure that the number of regular staff of the council employed in a rural centre is maintained at not less than the previous number of regular staff, as far as is reasonably practicable. These provisions will apply in towns where there are 5,000 residents or fewer.”*

#### **What Can Be Done**

##### **Recommendations:**

- 20. That the Association seek a Memorandum of Understanding with the Minister for Rural Affairs to ensure:**
- a) there is no loss of representation in the new larger local government areas. This may include the return to the ‘ward’ system to give equity in representation;**
  - b) there is no loss of (or decrease in access to) service for communities in the new LGA's through centralisation or rationalisation, particularly for communities that have lost their council;**
  - c) the loss of population in communities where staff have been transferred or taken redundancy as a result of the amalgamation will be acknowledged; and**
  - d) that small communities have a process of appeal if they can demonstrate loss of the above, and a mechanism of review and rectification of or compensation for the loss.**

#### **5.10 Telecommunications**

Although telecommunications in some rural areas are improving, comments from many survey respondents indicate there are many gaps in the service, particularly with internet access. This was identified as a significant area of concern requiring urgent attention.

Respondents from the southern areas of the state praise the Riverina Regional Development Board for its award winning initiative *Riverina First*. This project involves nineteen councils and is designed to improve telecommunications services for regional and remote areas.

#### **What Can Be Done**

##### **Recommendations:**

- 21. That the Association continue to lobby for improved telecommunications services in rural areas.**

## **5. Conclusion**

The information provided from the survey and the meetings has given the Association a snapshot view of what is happening within small rural communities. Despite much commentary to the contrary, the analysis shows there are many strong and resilient small towns in rural NSW with a positive outlook. However, there many are other towns struggling to generate enthusiasm due to a lack of resources, both financial and human. The analysis also highlights gaps in service provision in small rural communities and issues which country people consider are working against them.

There are significant areas of opportunity for the Association to form alliances with others to assist small country towns remain viable. These include fostering the leadership and involvement capacity of communities; seeking better outcomes from the impacts of excessive government regulations and seeking solutions to the deficiencies in the provision of essential services such as health and education and transport.

Much will be achieved if the Advisory Committees of NSW Farmers' Association work closely with government departments, other appropriate organisations and the regional universities to develop a coherent, holistic approach to sustainable rural development.

The challenge now to the Association, government and others, is to take the action required to make a difference.



## **Appendices**

- 1. *The Survey***
- 2. *Comments on Survey Questions***
- 3. *Comments on Government Assistances Programs from Economic Development Officers***
- 4. *List of Towns that Responded to the Survey***
- 5. *List of Towns Represented at the Rural Meetings***

**1. Building Rural Communities – Survey**

The Association is looking at ways to assist rural communities to grow and prosper. By participating in this survey, you will help us understand the strengths and weaknesses of small towns, so that we can really make a difference on the ground. The survey should take approximately 10 minutes.

Name of town..... Population.....

For all questions please tick ✓ the appropriate box. Please feel free to attach extra sheets.

**1. Does your town have those products and services that people might expect?**

*Towns often have a range of products and services, provided by both government and private sector. How well is your town serviced:*

	Current			Non-existent	Last 5 years		
	Very adequate	OK	Poor		Improved	No change	Declined
Health							
Education							
Transport							
Police							
Banking							
Child-care							
Aged-care							
Employment							
Other							

**Comments**

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**2. Do you have the technologies you expect?**

*Products and services which we enjoy can be delivered using a variety of different means. It is possible for a town to enjoy the same range of products and services over the last five years, delivered using new technologies. eg Mobile phones for communication and the internet for banking.*

	Very Adequate	OK	Poor	Non-existent
Current				
	Improved		No change	
Last 5 years				Declined

**Comments**

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**5. Do your professional experts have colleagues in the same area with whom they can share and develop ideas?**

*Specialists who work together with other professionals in the same discipline have a greater chance of successfully introducing change. Specialists who largely work alone have less opportunity to swap ideas.*

	Very Adequate	OK	Poor	Non-existent
Current				
	Improved		No Change	Declined
Last 5 years				

**Comments**

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**6. Are the professional experts constantly upgrading their knowledge and skills?**

*Increased depth of professionalism increases a community's capacity to look beyond the boundaries. This question explores whether the experts that are available to your community are continually upgrading their knowledge and skills.*

**The depth of professionalism:**

	Very Adequate	OK	Poor	Non-existent
Current				
	Improved		No change	Declined
Last 5 years				

**Comments**

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**7. Do people in your town have enough technical expertise?**

*The greater the technical knowledge resources available within and used by a community, the easier it is for people to take on even more new technical ideas. These resources might include internet, mobile phones, emails, electronic banking etc.*

	Very Adequate	OK	Poor	Non-existent
Current				
	Improved		No change	Declined
Last 5 years				

**Comments**

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**8. Are the big decisions in your town made by the Council (centralised), or are there a broad variety of decision groups (decentralised)?**

*The decision processes of a town can be driven by one or two people or bodies (centralised), or they can be spread over a great many people or bodies (decentralised)*

**The extent of decentralisation in decision making:**

	Very Adequate	OK	Poor	Non-existent
Current				
	Improved		No change	
Last 5 years				

**Comments**

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**9. Can anybody easily participate in decision-making in your town if they wish to?**

*In some communities, the members are passive. They are not interested in trying to influence their community and are happy to leave involvement and decisions to others. In other communities, anyone who wants to has a chance to get involved in decision-making.*

**The level of participation in community decisions:**

	Very Adequate	OK	Poor	Non-existent
Current				
	Improved		No change	
Last 5 years				

**Comments**

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**10. How well does your town manage change?**

*Managers and administrators who have a favourable attitude towards change encourage and support others. Managerial support for innovation is especially important in the early stages, when co-ordination and conflict resolution among individuals and units are essential.*

	Very Adequate	OK	Poor	Non-existent
Current				
	Improved		No change	
Last 5 years				

**Comments**

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**11. Does your town have enough 'new blood' and new ideas in its leadership?**

*New community leaders, executives and managers, who come in from outside/or from the younger generation with different perspectives, new ideas and fewer loyalties to the current system can offer, suggest and even implement changes.*

	Very Adequate	OK	Poor	Non-existent
Current				
	Improved	No change	Declined	
Last 5 years				

**Comments**

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**12. What issues need to be considered with respect to retaining and attracting younger people into your community?**

Comment:.....  
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**13. Are the resources in your community stretched to the limit, or does the community have spare capacity to try things out?**

*When a community has spare resources/capacity it can allow the community to afford to purchase innovations, to try things out, to sometimes fail and to just have a go.*

	Very Adequate	OK	Poor	Non-existent
Current				
	Improved	No change	Declined	
Last 5 years				

**Comments**

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**14. Does your town have enough fresh ideas coming in from outside? Does your town talk enough with the outside world and get ideas from them?**

*Looking outside of the community and mixing with others from outside can bring in fresh ideas. Innovative communities exchange information with outsiders.*

**The level of external communication is:**

	Very Adequate	OK	Poor	Non-existent
Current				
	Improved	No change	Declined	
Last 5 years				

**Comments**

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The Sustainable Regions Program			
<b>▪ Stronger Families and Communities</b>			
Potential Leaders in Local Communities			
Local Solutions to Local Problems			
National Skills Development for Volunteers			
Can Do Community			
<b>▪ Foundation for Rural and Regional Renewal (DOTARS &amp; Sidney Myer Fund)</b>			
Small Grants Program			
Community Foundations Kit for Australian Communities			
<b>▪ Department of Immigration</b>			
State specific migration			
<b>▪ Department of Industry, Tourism &amp; Resources</b>			
Regional Headquarters Program			
Regional Tourism Program			
Austrade – in particular Tradestart			
<b>▪ State – Premier’s Department – Strategic Projects Division</b>			
Strengthening Local Communities Strategy			
<b>▪ Department of State and Regional Development</b>			
Hunter Advantage Fund			
Regional Business Development Scheme			
Illawarra Advantage Fund			
Regional Economic Transition Scheme			
Regional Aboriginal Business Link Program			
Salinity Business Development Program			
New Market Expansion Program for Regional Enterprises			
Regional Business and Investment Tours and Business Relocation Seminars			
Agribusiness Alternatives Program			
Developing Regional Resources			
Business Retention and Expansion Survey			
Main Street/Small Towns Program			
Towns and Villages Futures Program			
Country Lifestyles Program			
Country Embassy			
The NSW Meat Industry Restructuring Program			

**18. What are the main ways the assistance has benefited your community? Could any of these programs be better coordinated/targeted? What other ideas do you have for other programs?**

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- 19. What other issues do you believe inhibit the growth and development of your community?**
- Shire amalgamations
  - OH&S requirements
  - Water reform
  - Native Vegetation
  - Public liability insurance
  - Other.....

## 2. Comments on Survey Questions

Q2 Do you have the technologies you expect?

### Comments from survey and trip:

- *Internet still very slow and unreliable*
- *Mobile reception improving, but poor in some areas*
- *Need ADSL at low cost*
- *Public access via libraries and CTCs is improving*
- *Need affordable internet access*

Q3 How well is your town managed and promoted - both to yourselves and to the outside world?

### Comments from survey and trip:

- *Smaller towns in shire are neglected*
- *Local government very under resourced*
- *Community very active with huge number of volunteer hours*
- *Public liability a nightmare for volunteer organisations – many folding*
- *Non-government organisations often compete with each other for meagre funds – should behave cooperatively for betterment of community*
- *Negative image from law and order issues not being remedied*
- *Pre schools struggling, dissatisfaction with school, some left and doing correspondence, others leaving the town because of poor education*
- *Good EDOs and tourist officers have had positive impact*
- *Pro-active councils have promotional campaigns*
- *Not all tourist officers are focused*
- *Juvenile crime and social problems turn tourists off – many have a bad experience*
- *Decline in number of people wanting to take responsible roles*
- *Excellent tourism promotion, but need a better web presence*
- *Business is being promoted more now we have an Economic Development Officer, tourism is desperate*
- *We have great leaders and sporting groups*
- *Our streetscape and gardens are not very appealing and council continues to brush this under the mat*
- *No support for tourism and economic planning due to lack of understanding by council and the community*

Q4 Does your town have all the professional expertise it needs?

### Comments from survey and trip:

- *Lack of educated people to become leaders, prepare submissions etc*
- *Lack of medical, nursing and allied health workers*
- *Financial sector and reliable tradesmen almost non-existent*
- *Hospital has excellent operating theatre but closed due to cutbacks -now long distances for minor day surgery*
- *Builders in the Barwon Darling Alliance towns are unobtainable – almost permanently employed building aboriginal housing*
- *Difficult to find engineers – amalgamations a further deterrent*
- *Doctors come for a 2 or 6 week stint only*

**Q5 Do your professional experts have colleagues in the same area with whom they can share and develop ideas**

**Comments from survey and trip:**

- *Often won't share ideas for fear of competition*
- *Innovative farmers who are willing to listen and learn*
- *Riverina GP group is active and gives good support*
- *Always work in a cocoon – “don't tell them anything” mentality*

**Q6 Are the professional experts constantly upgrading their knowledge and skills?**

**Comments from survey and trip:**

- *Most services require increase in training budgets*
- *Huge costs due to isolation*
- *Very difficult for small business owner – most courses in regional centres up to 3 hours away – current trade upgrades are totally out of perspective for country people*
- *Professionals will only increase their skill level when driven by demand. People in country towns put up with the level of professionalism dished out because they don't know any different*
- *New measure have been put in place for doctors to upgrade their knowledge and skills*

**Q7. Do people in your town have enough technical expertise?**

**Comments from survey and trip:**

- *IT expertise patchy – difficult for older generation.*
- *CTC provides instruction and gives community access to the internet and video conferencing*
- *Limitations in many areas of industry and technology.*

**Q8. Are the big decisions in your town made by the Council (centralised), or are there a broad variety of decision groups?**

**Comments from survey and trip:**

- *Amalgamations will reduce local level participation*
- *Decisions are all made by council with very little consultation – particularly for smaller towns in the shire*
- *Depends generally on the issue at hand and the relevant stakeholders*
- *Community groups do have some influence if active enough*
- *Council has a record of seeking community consultation and doing whatever they want, irrespective of the public opinion*

**Q9. Can anybody easily participate in decision making in your town if they wish to? Level of participation in community decisions.**

**Comments from survey and trip:**

- *Newcomers to community groups often discouraged by negativity*
- *Many trying to achieve more community involvement*
- *Too many older people with limited scope to address the big picture*
- *In the past two years six more advisory groups have been formed.*
- *Smaller towns in the shire miss out*
- *Certain amount of apathy*

Q10. How well does your town manage change?

**Comments from survey and trip:**

- *Many community members are left behind in times of change*
- *Depends on the General Manager of the Shire*
- *There is a lot of pecuniary interest and parochialism and perhaps selfishness that is having a big affect on the community working together to manage change.*
- *The current council embraces change when necessary*
- *The same figures head each community group. Volunteers are requested but must conform to old/traditional attitudes*
- *The current council embraces change when necessary and encourages and supports innovation from all sections of the community*

Q11. Does your town have enough 'new blood' and new ideas in its leadership?

**Comments from survey and trip:**

- *Room for more development eg leadership programs*
- *New ideas often viewed in a negative fashion*
- *Have six new, younger councillors which should stimulate new ideas*
- *Losing middle management with government closures/mergers*
- *More retirees moving in – newcomers are not keen, or heaven forbid, not welcome to make waves*
- *Definitely need new blood*



Question 12 (attracting youth) is covered after question 15.

Q13. Are the resources in your community stretched to the limit, or does the community have spare capacity to try things out?

**Comments from survey and trip:**

- *Resources are stretched to the limit*
- *Plenty of resources – not used efficiently*
- *The high achievers are wearing out*
- *Very few young people civic minded enough to replace the older ones*
- *Level of poverty is a determining factor*
- *Plenty of enthusiasm, but only a small band of workers with limited fund and time*

Q14. Does your town have enough fresh ideas coming in from outside? Does your town talk enough with the outside world and get ideas from them?

**Comments from survey and trip:**

- *Difficult convincing the older generation to take on new ideas*
- *Some towns developing well, most resisting change*
- *New opportunities with government programs*
- *Council employ inexperienced staff which hinders the performance as a progressive unit*

Q15. Does your community share and support ideas with each other?

**Comments from survey and trip:**

- *More interaction is required between council and local groups so that ideas can be shared and supported*
- *Happens in the sporting organisations which are led by the younger generation*
- *Community strategic plans are effective*
- *Cultural problems prevent cohesive approach*
- *Too many groups trying to reinvent the wheel*

**5.4 Attracting Youth**

**Q12. What issues need to be considered with respect to retaining and attracting younger people in the community?**

**Comments from survey and trip:**

- *Employment, education, cultural and sporting, outdoor and leisure activities.*
- *More apprenticeships – government should make it easier*
- *Easier access to tertiary education*
- *Facilities and programs need to be provided for youth*
- *Ever increasing pressure on councils to supply facilities and programs*
- *Poor education standard and opportunities, bullying, juvenile crime needs to be addressed*
- *Public liability a huge issue with regard to facilities/sport*
- *Long term low interest loans to assist young farmers become established*

**5.5 Towns nominated as doing well**

**Q16 Can you name any other towns/areas that you believe are doing well? What do you think are the main reasons for this?**

**General comments –**

- 1) *The towns that prosper have major industries, the need to attract more industry to the regional areas is imperative. In a time when the government is closing and downsizing departments, loss of middle management positions is a huge concern. Country towns have to rely on tourism more and more and while most are promoting their attractions successfully, towns need a solid foundation to build upon and industry is the building block.*
- 2) *Towns with crime problems need police with the power to police – not social workers and revenue raisers for the RTA/ government*
- 3) *Good general managers, economic development officers and/or tourism officers can turn towns around*

**5.6 Government Assistance Programs**

**Q17. Has your community applied for/or used any of the following government services or assistance programs?**

**Federal:**

Rural Transaction Centres	67% of towns surveyed
Regional solutions	56%
Small grants program	39%
Regional tourism program	39%
Regional assistance program	36%

Potential leaders in rural communities	28%
Can Do community	28%
Local solutions to local problems	22%
Communities foundation kit	11%
The sustainable regions program	8%
National skills development for volunteers	8%
Dairy regional assistance program	6%
Regional headquarters program	6%

**State:**

Main street/small towns program	67%
Towns and villages futures program	25%
Business retention and expansion program	25%
Agribusiness alternatives program	25%
Regional business development scheme	22%
Regional business and investment tours	14%
Strengthening local communities strategy	14%
Developing regional resources	11%
Regional aboriginal business link	8%
New market expansion program	6%
Country lifestyles	6%
Country embassy	6%
Regional economic transition scheme	3%

**Note: Apart from the RTC program (Federal) and the main street/small towns program (State) approximately 40% of respondents were not always sure which programs had been used**

**Comments:**

- *The Rural Transaction Centre (RTC) program is very successful and is also of social benefit to the volunteers*
- *We have no resources to manage the RTC and ran out of ideas after the big start*
- *The Department of State and Regional Development assistance to develop a comprehensive growth strategy was excellent*
- *The Main Streets program employed an Economic Development Officer and led to the formation of better community committee structure and response. Most programs do not.*
- *We gained an excellent new medical centre*
- *Often these programs send in a consultant who is paid for the work they do. They are sometimes the only winners. The town is left with ideas, but no resources or leaders to implement them.*
- *Country people have a 'get the job done' attitude which is good until they come up against a hundred restrictive regulations which have stifled many a project aspiration.*
- *Business and strategic plans are no use when there is no money to implement them*
- *Smaller towns in the shire often miss out on the funding*
- *We need an incentive program for young people to relocate to regional areas or start businesses*
- *We need non-confrontational leadership programs to encourage community participation.*
- *We need assistance to provide infrastructure for sporting facilities*

**Q18. What are the main ways the assistance has benefited your community? Could any of these programs be better coordinated/targeted? What other ideas do you have for other programs?**

- *Should be more effort towards greater awareness of these programs*
- *Often these programs send in a consultant who is paid for the work they do. They are sometimes the only winners. The town is left with ideas but no resources or leaders to implement the ideas in the town.*

- *RTC – are successful and some social benefit to the volunteers. Other towns have no resources to manage the RTC and run out of ideas after the big start*
- *DSRD assistance to develop a comprehensive growth strategy – excellent*
- *Need money for infrastructure programs to improve facilities eg pool, sporting.*
- *Business and strategic plans are no use when no money to implement*
- *Smaller towns in the shire often miss out as the funding goes to the shire town*
- *Main street program employed an EDO and led to the formation of better community committee structure and response. Most programs do not.*
- *Gained an excellent new medical centre*
- *Need incentive program for young people to relocate to regional areas or start businesses*
- *Need low interest loans for young farmers to get established*
- *Country people have a “get the job done” attitude which is good until they come up against a hundred restrictive regulations which have stifled many a project aspiration*
- *DSRD and Tourism NSW tend to send degree holders with no hands on experience to regional areas for two to three days and expect them to be able to make accurate assessments and develop solid business relationships. It takes a special professional to manage the cultural problems in some towns and to analyse solutions and plan strategies*

## 5.7 Other issues

Q19. What other issues do you believe inhibit growth and development of your community?

<b>Public Liability</b>	<b>69%</b>
<b>Amalgamations</b>	<b>47%</b>
<b>Native Vegetation</b>	<b>47%</b>
<b>OH&amp;S</b>	<b>44%</b>
<b>Water reform</b>	<b>36%</b>

**Other:**

- Drought
- Removing local Business Enterprise Centres
- Appalling education outcomes
- Unfair dismissal laws
- Not dealing with juvenile crime, unemployment, education, isolation
- Government funding directed to Sydney, Newcastle and Wollongong
- Too many government handouts and no incentive to work

**From the trip:**

- OH&S
- Public Liability insurance
- amalgamations
- Regulatory compliance cost to small business and tradesmen
- Skilled and educated labour shortage
- Affordable internet
- RTA problems
- Council ignoring small towns in the shire
- DSRD cutbacks
- Social problems in Barwon Darling Alliance Shires
- Assistance in application process for government programs
- Assistance to drive programs

**OH&S, Public liability and Department of Fair Trading Compliance**

- **Negative impact on small business:**

**Examples:**

- 1) Office of Fair Trading requiring electrician to gain 100 points – been a contractor for 35 years – now has to go to Dubbo (2 hrs drive) to earn 2 points at a time
- 2) Small business – too many regulations eg hay contractors – own 6 tractors – each one requires first aid kit etc plus driver needs certificates in forklift etc – costs \$500 per employer. On costs for small business: 10 years ago was 5%, now 25%-30% to employ someone
- 3) Silos - confined space course costs \$900 for a 5 day course, 2 days for lollipop course, chemical course etc. etc.
- 4) OH&S – 2 families leaving because manager's wife and kids are not allowed out in the paddock – must be on the payroll
- 5) Employers only employ contractors to save the cost of training up staff to meet regulatory requirements. – impact on communities – may not live locally
- 6) Publican can't have courtesy bus - \$1800 public liability insurance and must have special licence
- 7) If governments have these regulations they should help with ongoing costs. Maybe mobile training units from Tocal or similar

▪ **Negative impact on committees and local activities:**

**Examples:**

- 1) Fundraising extremely difficult with all the regulations for volunteers – \$95 for Responsible service of alcohol course, food handling etc. School canteens costing more for each person to do the courses - some closing, losing \$10,000 in fundraising for the school
- 2) Barriers to voluntary events – rodeo – insurance cost. Each person \$15 for horse sports. \$3000 cost for certificate training out of a population of 90
- 3) Regulations killing everything – local show must have security guards at bar
- 4) Only one at the school canteen should be required to do the food handling course for example

**Amalgamations:**

- Council won't spend money on the small towns because they don't generate enough in rates
- Government putting more and more onto LG – will be less services
- Communities and LGs should make more noise – form alliances at rural level – governments are reactive
- One EDO has bigger area which is impossible – 2 EDO positions lost
- LG staff have to move or take redundancy – town loses educated middle management – flow on effects
- Houses were increasing in value, now declining with shire amalgamation
- By-laws from a large shire town may impact on small towns eg. no plants or signs out in front of businesses; little league – if oval charges are the same as the larger town it will be unfair.

**6. Observations and recommendations**

**6.1 Lessons from towns doing well**

- *Council offers training packages and apprenticeships*
- *Sinclair Committee came to our town – 400 people turned out so we were put on the MPS program for 06/07*
- *Procurement feasibility program*
- *Philanthropic idea – “Give where you Live” – encourage people to leave money to their community*
- *Excellent health facilities- \$1.6m in donations from community – now council owned, council run health complex*
- *Didn't have a mobile phone tower – council erected one and lease out to Telstra*
- *Riverina Regional Development Board is excellent*
- *Encourage the businesses already here*
- *Have a 3 year budget – tour for ratepayers to create a wish list*
- *DA turnaround in 1 to 2 days*
- *Growth strategy – reviewing Community Plan*

- *Pro-active council*
- *Council runs child-care*
- *Council offers scholarships for young people*
- *Message for region – stop competing and work together*
- *Rural Initiative grant – funding from DOCs State and Federal for Activity Centre to 6pm. Plus funding from the shire (disadvantaged). For 5-12 years, now expanded to 12-14 years. Take kids on excursions*
- *Farmers in area use In-home Care for child minding on farm. Many not aware – perhaps should be included in OH&S material*
- *Small towns growth strategy (only 2 towns in NSW get it) – 6 projects. Road tour for developers*
- *Drought has accentuated lack of support for small business – gradually being recognised*
- *Communities advised to make good use of “Good” people in politics*
- *Rural leaders are not only farmers*
- *MOU – whole of government approach in Riverina – Orana region to follow lead*
- *Suggestion to change NSWFA name to reflect community rather than just farming*
- *EDO doing a skills audit*
- *Youth issue “Finding a Place in the Community” – program to educate and come back – been effective and going for 18 months – want to establish a youth shop as a business incubator. Need to put component into funding to employ someone to drive the program*

## **6.2 Community difficulties**

- *Focus should be on value adding – need more help*
- *Lack of expertise to fill in forms*
- *Difficulties with RTA –*
- *Leadership in the small towns is male dominated, ageing and not changing often enough*
- *More isolated small towns – numbers down, energy down – worn out*
- *Bush has bad marketing – needs more positive branding*
- *DSRD cutbacks bad for bush*
- *Farmers and small business must unite and be more pro-active*
- *Barwon Darling Alliance towns most disadvantaged in NSW – not just requiring economic help – social impact*
- *Funded telecentre few years ago – next thing 4 computers were placed in the library next door and are free – nobody now uses the ones in the telecentre Government departments need to liaise better.*
- *Govt. programs not always effective – too many hoops for small amount of money and short term.*
- *Need someone to run the programs*
- *Orchardists are reluctant to get involved in the whole community – NSWFA could encourage members*
- *May lose out of hours school care – only guaranteed to end of 2004*

### **3. Comments on Government Assistance Programs from Economic Development Officers**

1. The guidelines are ambiguous - it is generally not possible to deduce what outcomes the funding body is seeking. Government websites do not provide clear, plain English explanation of what is required.
2. Application forms are unnecessarily complex, jargonistic and repetitive - they are a strong deterrent to most organisations who may wish to apply. The state sport & recreation capital assistance program revised its form for this year (one section which previously contained 4 questions now contains between 30 and 40).
3. Partnership funding is highly problematic - for towns in decline who are also suffering extended drought it is not possible for businesses to continue to commit substantial funds to a wide range of projects that are seen as necessary. The variance between state and federal policies and the timing of their programs makes the demonstrating by applicants of shared funding a very hit and miss affair. For example: you may receive a federal grant but the appropriate state grant may not be available for another 12 months, by which time you are required to have acquitted the federal grant.
4. The time taken to process applications is unacceptable - we recently had a state funding program which took over 12 months to advise a result; we have had several federal applications take 9+ months. This is partially as a result of point 1. where they have come back to applicants asking for a substantial amount of additional information that was not included in guidelines or not specifically part of the application form.
5. Funding provided should be realistic to support the project and ensure that it succeeds - despite highly detailed and tightly costed budgets provided by applicants, the amount of funding allocated often ensures that projects will either not proceed or not deliver to their potential, both of which are demoralising for the applicants who have contributed substantial time, effort, finance and mental stress to their projects.
6. Reporting requirements - are often very stringent and time consuming even for very small amounts of funding. Accountability requirements should reflect the level of investment by the funding body. There are also examples of funding programs that seek certain clear outcomes (eg. employment, business start-ups etc) but fund projects that have no real hope of delivering these outcomes over the timeframe involved and with the level of funding allocated for individual projects. Yet they continue to ask communities to promise "sky-high" outcomes in order to receive tiny grants. The reporting then becomes a demoralising process for volunteers who are asked to prove jobs created, etc. a matter of months after completing a project
7. There seems to be a general lack of understanding among funding bodies of the duress that many communities are under in terms of available capital and accessible skills. This impacts on both capacity to successfully complete very complex and ambiguous forms and the amount of local partnership funding that can be contributed. Criteria does not take account of the disparities between villages, towns and larger centres located in different parts of the country. eg. a village in a depressed dryland economy has fewer resources to contribute to a project than a village with the same population located on the eastern seaboard adjacent to a growth centre. Assessment criteria used to compare applications appear to be rigid and not take account of the impact of what might appear to be small outcomes in a depressed community.

These comments come at a time when we've been working with a wide range of local groups on around a dozen different project applications under various funding programs. We wonder how volunteer committee members (who have other jobs and many of whom haven't completed a secondary education) are expected to negotiate the maze that is government funding. These people can deliver great projects and consistently do so, but the unnecessary complexity associated with getting a little bit of assistance is mind-boggling.

#### **4. List of Towns That Responded to the Survey**

Batlow  
Bega Valley shire – includes Cobargo, Quaama, Wyndham, Candello, South Pambula,  
Bemboka  
Binnaway  
Bombala  
Boorowa  
Borenore  
Bourke  
Brewarrina  
Canowindra  
Cargo  
Collarenebri  
Coolah  
Coonabarabran  
Coonamble  
Cootamundra Shire includes Wallendbeen and Stockinbingal  
Crookwell  
Cudal  
Cumnock  
Deniliquin Shire  
Denman  
Dorrigo  
Geurie  
Gilgandra  
Gunnedah Shire includes Mullaley, Curlewis, Carol and Tambar Springs  
Hay  
Inverell Shire includes Yetman, Delungra, Ashford and Wallangra  
Ivanhoe  
Kandos  
Kyogle  
Lightning Ridge  
Lockhart  
Molong  
Narrandera Shire  
Quambone  
Quirindi  
Rankin's Springs  
Rylstone  
Springdale  
Talimba  
Temora shire  
The Rock  
Trangie  
Walgett  
Wanaaring  
West Wyalong  
Yeoval  
Yerong Creek  
Young Shire

**5. *List of Towns Represented at the Rural Meetings***

Coolamon  
Adelong  
Ardlethan  
Ariah Park  
Barmedman  
Batlow  
Cabramurra  
Dubbo  
Ganmain  
Gilgandra  
Gulargambone  
Mirrool  
Nyngan  
Talbingo  
Tallimba  
Trangie  
Tumut  
Ungarie  
Wellington  
West Wyalong  
Weethalle