UNDERSTANDING REGIONAL LIVEABILITY

DISCUSSION PAPER

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FOCUSSING ON LIVEABILITY

Attracting and retaining populations should be a key concern for towns and cities across regional Australia. Sustaining and building resident populations helps towns and cities thrive and plan for their future. However, outside of Australia's metropolitan areas, planning for and managing regional populations can be challenging. Population growth is distributed unevenly across towns and cities in regional Australia, and some regions struggle to provide meaningful employment options to residents while many others are experiencing continual shortages of professionals and highly skilled tradespeople.

Since early in the twentieth century, the distribution of regional Australia's population has changed: not only are populations drifting towards the coast, but there are significantly fewer smaller towns in regional areas. In 1911, there were 2,400 regional towns with under 8,000 residents but by 2006, this had fallen to 1,577.[i]

This slow, historical trend compounds the population challenges that some regional communities face. As access to remote working improves and physical infrastructure better connects towns with regional centres and metropolitan areas, people can afford to be choosier about where they settle. This is especially so as demand for skilled and professional workers increases across much of regional Australia. Regional areas can find themselves in competition with one another as they seek to improve their liveability and be more attractive to prospective residents.

However, improving the liveability of a regional community is not necessarily straightforward. 'Liveability' means slightly different things to different people and the way that we assess liveability is subjective and highly personalised. People make different assessments based on their needs, their aspirations, and their stages of life. What makes a place liveable for one person might not exactly match what makes it liveable for another.

Defining liveability is an ongoing concern of scholars and researchers: it is a concept that is continually refined and redefined. A lot of this effort is directed towards understanding liveability in large cities. While this is important, it does not necessarily help regional communities in their current attempts to attract and sustain populations. One reason for this is that concepts that are used to measure liveability in metropolitan areas - such as the quality of international infrastructure links, the level of national security threat in a community, or the level of censorship are not necessarily appropriate measures for regional Australia.[ii] To understand regional liveability, we needed another approach: we needed to understand what matters to different kinds of people who are moving to, from or staying in towns in regional Australia.

To do this we have built definition of liveability based on *what people in regions have themselves said matters to them.* We have teased apart the broader discussion of population attraction in regional Australia so that we can focus on understanding the concept of liveability and what it means to different people who live in regional Australia.

This Discussion Paper steps through a definition of liveability and helps to understand the way that people think about liveability when they make decisions to move to, from, or to stay in regional communities. It steps through key indicators that people tend to use when assessing the liveability of a town or community and examines they key ways that these vary across several demographic groups. It is part of the research into Mid-Sized Towns that forms part of the 2019 RAI Shared Inquiry program.

VOTING WITH OUR FEET: ABOUT POPULATION MOBILITY IN AUSTRALIA

Australians appear to have a distinct tendency to move residences. We change addresses more often than about 80 per cent of the populations of other developed nations. In 2015, around 15 per cent of Australians changed their address, which was almost double the comparable world average of 7.9 per cent. Globally, around 21 per cent of people move every five years, but in Australia, this rate is 39 per cent. [iii]

Despite the relative ease with which Australians appear to 'vote with their feet', there is strong evidence that they nevertheless remain attracted to the idea of living in regional areas. Census data shows that between 2011 and 2016, over 65,204 more Australians moved from a city to a regional place, than moved from a regional place to a city.

In addition to this, just over 690,000 people moved between regional communities in the five years between 2011 and 2016. Survey data indicates that of those already living in regional Australia who were considering moving, around 80 per cent intended to remain in the regions. [iv] Although Australians move residences more often than those in most other developed countries the idea of the 'rural life' and the 'liveability' of regional Australia remains highly attractive to people across a variety of age groups.

MOVE OR STAY? HOW DO PEOPLE MAKE LOCATION DECISIONS IN REGIONAL AUSTRALIA?

While images of sea and tree changers may fill our television screens, the liveability of a regional town or city is not in itself enough to attract most people to be residents. Research shows that there is a distinction between the 'drivers of mobility' and the aspects of a community that people like or enjoy. [v] This means that the decision to move to or to stay in a community in regional Australia is more nuanced than popularly depicted.

One way to understand the role that liveability plays in a location decision is to understand this decision as a two-step process:

- First: people make a decision to **move to regional Australia.** This means that they will consider whether they can be employed and pursue a career in regional areas. Having a job, whether moving to an area for one or finding one whilst already living in an area is important. To pursue employment and career opportunities in a regional area, a specific standard of infrastructure services must be already present, including access to water, good roads, and digital connectivity. Generally, the presence of these things in a regional area acts as a 'hard gate' in peoples' decision making, and is sufficient for most people to seriously entertain the idea to move to or their capacity to remain in regional Australia.

- Second: once the decision to move *per se* is made, people move onto the next stage of their decision making. Having identified broad areas that are suitable for relocation, people decide **where in regional Australia they'd like to live.** They decide where, specifically, they want to live,

which regional town or city they will call home. This is a much more personal and nuanced decision that is subject to a 'liveability assessment'.

Each stage of decision making is differently influenced by policy. For the 'hard gate' of the first stage to be successfully navigated, people tend to need a regional area to have good access to employment options, and to have hard and digital infrastructure that both ensures the provision of essential services and that connects the community with other communities and with areas of employment.[vi]

Conversely, the second decision involves a more personal assessment of what a place is like to live in. Once people identify a region (or several) as suitable so as to seriously entertain moving there, they will look more closely at the locations available and make a 'liveability assessment' in which they consider and compare the liveability of one or more alternative places.

WHAT IS LIVEABILITY?

There is much discussion about the definition of 'liveability'. Academics, policy makers, and practitioners have various ways to conceptualise liveability and its relationship to other ideas such as quality of life, wellbeing and community wellbeing. These concepts are related but distinct and, somewhat unhelpfully, they can also be used differently by these various groups.

In order to sidestep the debate about how to define liveability and in order to retain its essentially subjective nature, we have looked to people living in regional areas and tried to understand what they mean when they talk about liveability.

This means that 'liveability' is subjective. The concept can mean slightly different things to different people. We make different assessments based on our needs, our aspirations, and our stage of life. What makes a place liveable for one person might not exactly match what makes it liveable for another. For example, while access to good early childhood or primary education may make a place liveable for a young family, schooling will not necessarily feature in the liveability assessments of retirees.

In this project, we have analysed survey and qualitative work that has been conducted across several jurisdictions. This has involved looking at the work undertaken as part of the University of Canberra's *Regional Wellbeing* Survey, as well as the publications of several State Governments and Commonwealth Departments.[vii] We have also conducted our own research and asked people living in regional communities about liveability and what it means to them. We asked people what made them stay in or move from regional communities.

We have teased apart the broader discussion of population attraction in regional Australia so that we can focus on understanding the concept of liveability and what it means to different groups of people who live in regional communities. This information has been extrapolated to develop a broad Regional Liveability Framework, based on working assumptions, which has been discussed in several community, policy, academic and practitioner forums. It is not conclusive but can be used as a general guide when considering the importance of liveability factors..[viii]

SIX INDICATORS OF LIVEABILITY

We found that while concepts of liveability vary from person to person, there are key indicators of liveability that are common to most people.

These indicators are:

- Health services
- Education services
- Cost of living
- Amenity
- Connections to community, friends and place
- Lifestyle and opportunity

From our research, we have developed working assumptions of the importance that different demographic groups attach to these factors.

HEALTH SERVICES

Health care services and the quality of those services is a key component in all liveability assessments, although it is slightly more important for older age groups. This does not necessarily mean that people expect that each town will offer exhaustive health services, but it does mean that most people expect that an array of services can be accessed easily, even if they are located in a nearby town or city. This includes access to female GPs and dentists, especially for women and children.

In general, families, millennials and professionals tend to be satisfied with a general practitioner and a chemist in their communities so long as other services could be accessed nearby. Of course some families may still require access to specialist health services and to hospitals however on the whole GP and chemists are seen as essential for most families.

It can reasonably be assumed that those over 65 years of age are more likely to require the availability of specialist health services and for some to require access to these services through community or government provided transport.

EDUCATION SERVICES

Education options are especially important for families with young children, and for those continuing education through University or TAFE. Studies show that families will seriously consider moving so that their children can have access to better schooling, particularly secondary schooling. This reflects the strong desire to have children attend local schools and minimise travel time or boarding school arrangements. Having at least two schooling options in a place is important to those with primary and secondary school aged children. Secondary schools that offer a range of extra-curricular activities are valued by families in the community. The availability of accredited early childhood education is also a key consideration for families and professionals with infants.

Access to ongoing training, retraining and options for life-long learning feature in peoples' liveability assessments. This means that access to face-to-face retraining options and to local learning centres is

becoming increasingly important, as is reliable digital connectivity that can facilitate long distance tertiary studies.

COST OF LIVING

The cost of living in a town is a common feature in liveability assessments. Even where residents have well paid employment, there is an important balance that needs to be struck between income and the cost of everyday goods and services. A town will be assessed as liveable if there is a good balance between employment remuneration, affordable housing options and 'living expenses' such as food, travel costs, and services. Our research indicates that it is the *balance that* is crucial for liveability assessments. For example, a town may be experiencing economic growth that is accompanied by well-paying jobs, but if the cost of living there outweighs the benefits of this remuneration, people tend to move to another town and travel to work instead of choosing to live locally.

An emerging component of this cost of living assessment is the availability of rental properties in regional Australia, where there are a growing number of people who rent their homes or who are looking for rental properties. This is in line with national trends that have seen a steady decline in the rates of home ownership. Traditionally, the provision of rental properties has been associated with socio-economic disadvantage, but recently there has been a demand for rental properties across a variety of groups. This includes an increase in demand for private rentals for professionals, as single occupants, partnered tenants or with families. This demand also extends to families where there are two professional wage earners. The availability of affordable private rentals is expected to increasingly feature in the liveability assessments of highly skilled tradespeople and professional workers who are looking to move to or stay in regional Australia and may want to experience living in a regional community before committing to purchase a local property.

Access to appropriate accommodation and to high quality rental properties emerges as an issue in communities with high amenity and a large tourism trade. Property owners in some towns are increasingly withdrawing their properties from local rental markets and opting to maximise earnings through holiday letting.[ix] In turn, this decreases the supply of 'high-end' rental accommodation and can create intense competition for homes that remain available, even where these properties are less desirable. Difficulties accessing rental properties featured negatively in liveability assessments, as did having little option but to take up short term accommodation (usually a holiday let) before an application for a rental property was successful.

An emerging consideration in people's cost of living concerns was the cost of a range of fresh fruits and vegetables.

AMENITY

Like the concept of liveability itself, 'amenity' is multi-faceted. Sometimes the term is used interchangeably with liveability so that it includes access to health and education services. However, we have defined 'amenity' to be the natural, physical and cultural attributes of a place. This includes the landscape, character of a town, its cultural vibrancy as well as its social character. Separating out or 'unpacking' health and education from the definition of amenity allows us to understand each aspect in their own right.

Perceptions of amenity include consideration of neighbourhood attractiveness and locational attributes such as climate and natural beauty. All groups tend to value the natural amenity of a place. Town

amenity can also include the architecture of the town, the way that buildings and public spaces are maintained and its walkability. In general, families tend to value large block sizes so that children have access to back yards. A 'walkable' town centre also helps to create a feeling of physical safety in a community.

Access to green spaces and parks is important across all demographic groups. This access is valued not only for the amenity or beauty it brought to a town but also because it broadens the kinds of leisure activities available to residents.

A town's 'cultural vitality' increasingly featured in assessments about amenity. While cultural vitality is also an important way that residents connected to their community (below), this vibrancy usually improves the amenity of built spaces through public and community art.

While for some families and professionals, access to retail opportunities is important. This access is valued if it extended beyond a supermarket and to a range of department and even specialist stores.

CONNECTIONS TO COMMUNITY, FRIENDS AND PLACE

The prospect of being connected to a community is an important part of liveability assessments. People want to be socially included and connected to other people in a town, and a friendly, welcoming community is a key priority. This conception of community is part of the 'rural idyll' where community members are on first name terms and people gather in support of the town and of one another. It is valued across all demographic groups.

However, this connection tends to be shaped differently for different people. Families and those aged over 65 value both a strong connection to a small group of friends or family and also a connection to the wider community itself. There is a particular emphasis on the importance of these relationships as people age in place.

Close friendships and family connections are also important for professionals and millennials, however these key groups of people are more likely to be located outside the immediate community. This means that the ability to connect with them through telecommunications or digital platforms was valued, as was the ability to easily visit them in person, whether by road, rail or air transport.

While some people value having close friends located in the community more than others, all demographic groups valued a connection to the community itself. These connections were particularly important to new arrivals in a town; however, they may be difficult to forge in places with high population turnover. This is because the high churn rates reduces the appetite of long-term residents to bond with newcomers.

Families tend to forge connections through school and sporting activity and are thus associated with high levels of volunteering in these areas. While the over 65 year old group is the most likely to volunteer in the community than other demographic groups, they also were the community members that reported the strongest sense of belonging. Conversely, millennials feel the least connected to friends and community and sometimes report difficulty in finding ways to make connections. Unsurprisingly this group is less likely to volunteer in the community than other groups.

Access to sporting opportunities is especially important for families but also for professionals and for millennials. These groups tend to build and maintain social connections through these activities. Where

families were from culturally diverse backgrounds, it is important that links to diverse communities and faith groups can be established.

A connection to the 'place' was considered important by families and those over 65years old and in particular to returners in these groups. This connection is considered to be a subjective combination of the connection to the community, its way of life, and to the local natural environment. This means that opportunities to 'connect' to nature and the environment were valued alongside community and friendship.

LIFESTYLE AND OPPORUNITY

The 'regional lifestyle' is valued across all demographic groups. Commonly, the components of this lifestyle include a slower pace of life than in metropolitan areas, increased leisure time and the ability to reassess personal values so as to focus on "the important things" that help bring about a better quality of life. This reassessment allows people to also recognise opportunities that come with living and working in a regional community.

For families, the regional lifestyle offers a more relaxed environment for children and a greater chance for them to experience play and outdoor activities than their metropolitan based counterparts. Parents value greater flexibility to be involved in their children's school and extra-curricular activities. Families connect to each other through school and sporting activities, although opportunities to be involved in cultural and artistic activities are also valued. Through volunteering, especially through school and sporting activities, some parents value being able to take a leadership role in the community and 'build something' for residents and children. This is an opportunity that is perceived to exist especially in regional communities, where there is a greater work-life balance that allows parents to make meaningful contributions to their community.

The regional lifestyle provides opportunities to engage in a range of cultural, artistic and sporting leisure activities. Lower commuting times and a better work-life balance are also valued as is a perceived reduction in pressure to keep up with marketing and social trends.[x] Importantly, professionals valued the career opportunities that working in regional communities often affords. Professionals report undertaking work that is often broader and deeper in scope than their metropolitan peers, so that they are likely to assume leadership positions earlier in their careers.[xi] In turn, this is sometimes seen as creating an opportunity to 'make a difference' through a person's professional work in the community.

For millennials, the regional lifestyle entails participation in cultural and arts activities and access to sporting and leisure activities. Lower commuting times are valued, as are opportunities to 'make a difference' through professional or community activities.

Those over 65 years value the opportunity to participate in community activity. As with other groups they value the opportunity to focus on the 'important things' in life. These important things include enjoying the natural amenity of a place, enjoying friendships and family connections and being active within the community.

CONCLUSION

Understanding the role that liveability plays in directing people's decisions to move to, stay in or move from a regional town can help communities more keenly target policy and program efforts to attract and retain residents. Understanding the way that liveability is understood in regions, how it differs from metropolitan concepts, and how different demographic groups value different aspects of liveability also helps to sharpen the focus of these efforts.

By viewing location decisions as a two staged process with 'hard gates' and a liveability assessment we can better sequence infrastructure investments, job creation efforts, and population attraction programs.

Table 1: Working Assumptions of Liveability Considerations across Four Demographic Groups

	Families	Under 35 years old (Millennials)	Professionals	Over 65 years old (Boomers)
Health services	- More likely to be satisfied by GP and chemist than older demographics - Access to female GPs and dentists - Access to bulk billing and Medicare rebates	- Increasing importance of access to mental health services across a variety of delivery mechanisms - More likely to be satisfied by GP and chemist than older demographics		Access to specialist health services is more important than in other groups. These services may be located elsewhere however residents desire access to transport (including public) and good roads to travel to specialist services.
Education services	- Access to accredited early childhood education services, noting that accreditation is important for the rebate purposes - Access to childcare - Access to primary school options - at least two schools, even if only one is public. - Access to a local secondary school with breadth of curriculum and depth of teaching (limited out of field teaching). - A variety of extra-curricular opportunities for children (clubs, arts, etc.) are also important.	Access to tertiary education options, especially through distance/correspondence	- Access to professional development is very important. This includes opportunities for face-to-face learning as well as though digital platforms - Vocational education, life-long learning options. - Access to tertiary education options, especially through distance/correspondence	
Cost of living	- Availability of suitable rental properties - Some access to social rentals (government provided) - More likely to find fresh fruit and produce expensive than older group	- Availability of suitable rental properties - Some access to social rentals (government provided) - More likely to find fresh fruit and produce expensive than older group	- Availability of suitable rental properties, including 'high end' or 'executive' level rentals - More likely to find fresh fruit and produce expensive than older group	Some access to social rentals (government provided)

Amenity	• Access to parks and green spaces and access to back yards for keeping pets. • Walkable town centre/neighbourhood • Perceptions of safety are important • Retail opportunities	• Access to parks and green spaces and access to back yards for keeping pets. • Culturally vibrant town centre • Walkable town centre	• Culturally vibrant town centre • Retail opportunities	• Importance of built and natural amenity increases with age • Perceptions of safety are important • Climate and walkable town centre
Connections to community, friends and place	• More likely to volunteer to connect to community through school or sporting activity • Important to offer children an opportunity to be part of a friendly community • Connection to place – natural environment and community	• Less likely to feel connected to the wider community or to find opportunities to connect • Group least likely to volunteer and to report a strong sense of belonging • May maintain strong friendship connections with others outside the community • Community generally friendly, especially when compared to metropolitan areas	• Seeks opportunities to connect with colleagues and other professionals • May maintain strong friendship connections with others outside the community • Community generally friendly, especially when compared to metropolitan areas	• More likely to volunteer than other demographics, especially in arts and cultural activity. Also the most likely group to report a strong sense of belonging. • Emphasis on creating long-lasting friendships with people located within the community so that people can age in place • Community generally friendly, especially when compared to metropolitan areas • Connection to place – natural environment and community
Lifestyle and opportunity	• Access to a range of leisure activities and although sporting opportunities are generally more popular than arts or cultural opportunities, there is a desire for the availability of both • Space for children to play and experience a non-metropolitan upbringing, with green spaces, physical activity and the room for play • Families are less exposed to marketing • Parents value greater opportunity to be involved with the day-to-day lives of their children (school performances, sporting teams etc.) • Opportunities for parents to 'build something' within the	• Community and cultural vitality is important, especially to educated millennials • Access to sporting activities is more important than for older demographics • Better working commute times • Opportunities to 'make a difference' in the community and to pursue passions.	• Community and cultural vitality is important, but so too are sporting opportunities • Range of leisure options are desired • Career opportunities and opportunities to 'make a difference' • Better working commute times • Less pressure to keep up with marketing and social trends	• Community and cultural vitality is important – group most likely to participate in arts and cultural activity • Less pressure to keep up with marketing and social trends

	community by taking pivotal leadership roles			

[i] Bureau of Infrastructure, Transport and Regional Economics (BITRE) (2014). *The evolution of Australian towns*, Report 136. Canberra, ACT

[ii] We looked at a range of well-known liveability indices and found that most well-known liveability indices – and therefore research and analysis – focuses on the relative liveability of large urban centres or cities across the world. Often these are used for investment purposes or even for the relocation of staff in multi-national corporations and most include at least some measures that don't easily apply to regional areas such as the level of terrorism threat. Whilst there are undoubtedly characteristics of liveability that are objectively measurable and common across metropolitan and regional places, there are also a number of more subtle variations or different interpretations and contexts to which these may apply in a regional setting. For instance, a lack of road congestion while welcome in regions, doesn't appear to be as important as good roads to connect regional communities with major centres. Some regional communities don't factor in things like public transport to liveability assessments at all, and 'affordable decent housing' can mean something different between regions and cities and even between sections of regional communities themselves. Basically, regional liveability can't be viewed through the same lens as liveability in cities and where it does regions tend to always come off as less liveable as the indices are skewed towards larger metropolitan settings.

[iii] Charles-Edwards, E., Bell, M., Cooper, J., Bernard, A. (2018) *Population shift: understanding internal migration in Australia*. Australian Bureau of Statistics. Available at: https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/2071.0~2016~Main%20Features~Population%20Shift:%20Understanding%20Internal%20Migration%20in%20Australia~69

[iv] Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development (2013) *Living in the Regions 2013*. Government of Western Australia. Available at: http://www.drd.wa.gov.au/Regions2016/Living-in-the-Regions/Pages/default.aspx

[v] McKenzie, F. (2016) *A Regional Career: Migration histories of professionals working in Bendigo, Victoria. Summary of Findings*. The State of Victoria Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning.

[vi] McLaren, N. (2019) 'Commuters sick of waiting for high-speed rail options', ABC News. Available at: https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-10-14/australia-talks-commuters-sick-of-waiting-for-high-speed-rail/11594272

[vii] These resources have included but are not limited to the State of the Regions reports conducted by the State Government of Western Australia, *The evolution of Australian towns*, (2014). We also used the work of McKenzie (above) and the Regional Cities Victoria Liveability Index

[viii] The RAI has presented and discussed the Regional Liveability Framework at several academic, policy and practitioner forums over 2019. We have also conducted qualitative work in regional Australia and refined the Framework as a result of this.

[ix] Guttentag, D. (2018) 'What Airbnb really does to a neighbourhood', *BBC News*. Available at: https://www.bbc.com/news/business-45083954

[x] An exposure to advertising material has been linked in some studies to decreased levels of mental health in urban areas. See Williams, S. (2019) 'Better urban design could improve mental health: experts', *Allhomes*. Available at: https://www.allhomes.com.au/news/better-urban-design-could-improve-mental-health-experts-903556/?utm_campaign=strap-masthead&utm_source=canberra-times&utm_medium=link&utm_content=pos4

[xi] UNSW Media. (2019) *Rural practice linked to junior doctors being more satisfied*. Available at: https://newsroom.unsw.edu.au/news/health/rural-practice-linked-junior-doctors-being-more-satisfied