

**SUBMISSION TO THE
JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON
MIGRATION**

INQUIRY INTO MIGRATION IN REGIONAL AUSTRALIA

October 2019



**REGIONAL
AUSTRALIA
INSTITUTE**

KNOWLEDGE POLICY PRACTICE

ABOUT THE REGIONAL AUSTRALIA INSTITUTE

Independent and informed by both research and ongoing dialogue with the community, the Regional Australia Institute (RAI) develops policy and advocates for change to build a stronger economy and better quality of life in regional Australia – for the benefit of all Australians. The RAI was established with support from the Australian Government.

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REFERENCE

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LIST OF RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATION 1: Regional areas should be encouraged and supported to include consideration of migration and population into long-term growth planning.

RECOMMENDATION 2: The Australian Government should develop a consultation mechanism whereby LGAs can convey their needs and opportunities for migration into national planning.

RECOMMENDATION 3: The Australian Government should recognise the importance of the local community in making regional migration successful and sustainable and consider ways to support the local community to develop and maintain locally-led migration initiatives.

RECOMMENDATION 4: For migration to regional Australia to be properly supported, there is a need to provide evidence as to the contribution of migration to counter myths and misperceptions. Information about the economic contribution of migration to Australia as well on regional case studies should be made available in “information packs” to support the development of locally-led migration strategies.

RECOMMENDATION 5: Information about the cultural and national background of migrants as well as information for migrants on life in Australia, on employment and on rights and responsibilities, which will assist in their settlement should be available in templates which can be adapted for use at a local level.

RECOMMENDATION 6: There should be recognition that all new arrivals, regardless of visa type, need some level of assistance or orientation in order to be able to settle well into a regional community. The Australian Government should provide resources for the provision of such assistance, however it should be planned and coordinated locally and available within the community, to ensure that there are no gaps in delivery.

RECOMMENDATION 7: Information, training and support should be provided to regional employers on being an “employer of choice” for migrant workers, ensuring their ongoing competitiveness. This includes information tools on visas and contractual provisions.

RECOMMENDATION 8: Longer term investment and planning must go in to ensuring that there are employment and study pathways for young people in regional areas.

RECOMMENDATION 9: There needs to be consideration on the promotion and incentivisation of secondary migration, including support for employers and making linkages between employers and migrants in capital cities.

RECOMMENDATION 10: There should be ongoing monitoring of the new regional visas to ensure that they are assisting regional employers to fill their labour needs and properly aligned with demand so that migrants are successful in finding work appropriate to their skill level.

RECOMMENDATION 11: Consideration should be given to housing needs in regional Australia and how to ensure that new residential development is economically viable, in order to allow towns and businesses to attract migrants to regional Australia.

RECOMMENDATION 12: Policy-making on migration to regional Australia must be accompanied by a commitment to dedicate resources to the provision of infrastructure and services in regional Australia.

RECOMMENDATION 13: An independent advisory panel should be appointed to provide cross-portfolio advice and information on migration to regional Australia, providing a conduit for information from agencies and from regional areas to be brought to the national level as well as undertaking research, surveys and studies to provide an evidence-base for policy-making.

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1. INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

The Regional Australia Institute (RAI) appreciates the opportunity to make this submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Migration’s “Inquiry into Migration into Regional Australia”.

Since 2011, RAI has been researching topics relevant to the prosperity and success of regional Australia, which is defined by RAI as all areas of Australia outside the capital cities. Regional Australia is home to over 9 million people and contributes one-third of total national economic output. Its prosperity is critical to the future of the nation.

RAI has analysed the data from the 2016 Census which shows the impact of international migration on regional population levels. By examining changes in the number of people living in regions that are born in Australia or overseas, the contribution of migration on different regions in Australia can be seen. While the Census data does not identify the year of arrival of migrants, it does show that people who are born overseas and move to Australia are **vital for the sustainability** of regional Australia.

Census figures show that, for many small towns, international migrants have been their only source of population growth. Table 1 shows the balance of Australian and overseas born residents in the 2016 Census. Figure 1 shows population change across the country.

In summary:

- 175 regional LGAs increased their population, while 246 did not;
- 151 increased their overseas-born and decreased their Australian-born population. In other words, for 151 LGAs, their population increase was solely due to international migration;
- 20 increased Australian-born and decreased their overseas-born population;
- 128 increased both Australian-born and overseas-born population; and
- 116 decreased both Australian-born and overseas-born population.

Population Change 2011-2016	Number of Metropolitan LGAs	Number of Regional LGAs
Overall population decrease	2	246
Overall population increase	116	175
Increase in both Australian-born and overseas born population	101	128
Decrease in both Australian-born and overseas-born population	2	116
Increase in Australian-born and decrease in overseas- born	3	20
Decrease in Australian born and increase in overseas- born	3	151

Table 1: Number of Local Government Areas (LGAs) and population change 2011-2016

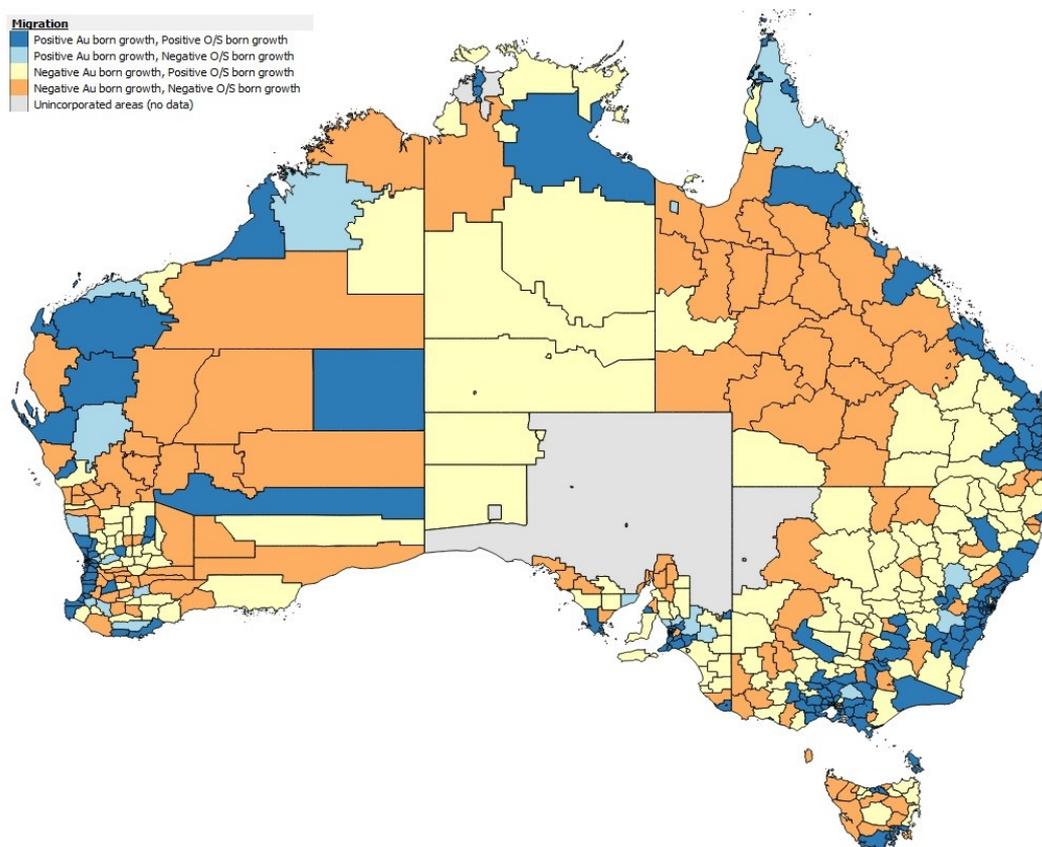


Figure 1 – Growth of Australian-born and overseas-born population 2011-16: 2016 Census data

Despite the importance of international migration to Australia’s population, overall only around **15 per cent** of the international migrants that arrived in Australia between 2006 and 2011 settled in a regional area. Regional Australia is not getting its share of international migration and is therefore not fully benefitting from the value that migration can bring.

Migration therefore contributes to **population growth** and can **revitalise the local community**. Migration is also vital for **filling jobs** in regional Australia. RAI tracks monthly job vacancies in regional Australia, in August 2019 there were 46,000 job vacancies in Australia. These are only the jobs which are nationally advertised, it can be assumed that many more exist which have not been advertised or are only known locally. These figures indicate that job needs in regional Australia are not being adequately met and that more needs to be done to encourage migrants and refugees to settle outside of capital cities.

Migration has also been shown to contribute to the **creation of jobs**, with many studies quantifying the impact of migrants on entrepreneurship and job creation in a specific town/region as well as across Australia.¹

¹ See, for example, Chen, L.; Sinnewe, E.; and Kortt, M. (2018). *Evidence of Migrant Business Ownership and Entrepreneurship in Regions*. Canberra: Regional Australia Institute and Deloitte Access Economics and AMES Small Towns, *Big Returns: Economic and social impact of the Karen resettlement in Nhill, Ames*, March 2015.

International migrants make a number of vital contributions to the regional communities they settle in



Help to fill
workforce
shortages



Create
new jobs



Important
source of
population
growth



Revitalise
the local
community

For migration to regional Australia to be successful, it must be sustainable and beneficial for both the local community and for the migrants themselves. Ensuring that migrants enjoy a quality of life that encourages them to stay in regional areas should be an important policy goal. Employment is a critical aspect for the sustainability of migration to regional Australia, but it cannot be viewed in isolation and should not be the sole focus of regional migration policy; it is **only one of the several interconnected factors which need to be in place.**

Based on our experience with regional migration issues, there are a range of factors which need to be considered and in place for migration to small and mid-sized communities to be successful. These factors increase the likelihood that migrants can successfully establish lives in regional communities which is ultimately beneficial for the local community, for employers and for the individuals involved. They necessitate consideration of, and investment in, both infrastructure and services.

RAI considers that, for government policy aimed at channelling migrants to regional Australia to be successful², each of the following key points needs to be considered:

- regional councils should include migration needs within their broader growth plan and regional needs should feed into national planning
- the local community should be involved in planning migration and developing a locally-led migration strategy that is relevant and appropriate for their community
- there must be two-way information and promotion of the positive aspects of regional migration
- there needs to be an appropriate level of settlement services for all new arrivals
- employment must be available and the related visa schemes should work to assist in filling labour shortages
- housing must be available as well as other infrastructure and services such as transport
- there needs to be cohesive governance of regional migration.

² “Successful” broadly means regional migration that is sustainable, i.e. beneficial to migrants as well as the local community. It includes seeing migrants choosing to stay in regional Australia and prosper.

2. INCORPORATING REGIONAL MIGRATION NEEDS INTO NATIONAL PLANNING

As described above, migration is necessary for the continued viability of regional towns and businesses. Migration should be a part of every regional or local government area growth and planning strategy, ideally looking ahead to the next 10 and 20 years. By developing a long-term plan, communities can consider what they want their town or regional to look like in the future and develop a roadmap to achieve that vision which would include consideration of the population, demography and skills needed. Including migration into a broader economic and social plan at a local level will ensure that there is thinking about how many people a particular region needs and is able to support given existing and planned facilities and services.

In turn, the specific needs of different regions should be elicited in order to properly inform national policy making on regional migration. The forward-looking needs of regional areas should feed into national discussions on population and on immigration levels to ensure that national policy is designed to meet the needs of regional areas. Currently, there are discussions between the national and state level governments on migration needs, which contribute to the determination of yearly immigration ceilings. However, there is no consistent mechanism for obtaining information from regions as to their needs and their labour and population goals. RAI recommends a mechanism is developed so that the needs of regional areas for migration are able to be systematically feed into State and Federal planning on migration.

RECOMMENDATION 1: Regional areas should be encouraged and supported to include consideration of migration and population into long-term growth planning.

RECOMMENDATION 2: The Australian Government should develop a consultation mechanism whereby LGAs can convey their needs and opportunities for migration into national planning.

3. SUPPORTING LOCALLY-LED MIGRATION STRATEGIES

There is a great diversity among regional communities in Australia – reflecting unique geography, resources and history. This also means that there can be no ‘one-size fits all approach’ to regional migration policy. But while every community is unique, migration has an important role to play in their ongoing viability. Communities should be supported to conduct a workforce and population needs assessment and then to design and implement a migration attraction strategy that is relevant and appropriate to the particular region. This means that realistic and achievable goals can be set at a local level, increasingly the likelihood of success of migration to that region.

Support for locally-led migration strategies that are flexible, fit for place, and designed to meet local labour and community needs should be a priority in future immigration, settlement and regional development policies. There are many examples of communities in regional Australia that have been motivated to attract new residents to meet a particular labour or population-related need and that have done so successfully.³ With little or no outside support, they have put in place the services and welcome that are needed to make the migration successful, both for the local community and the migrants involved. Learning from the experience of these communities, RAI developed a toolkit “*Steps to Settlement Success*”⁴ which distils the common factors needed to make locally-led migration sustainable and beneficial.

The RAI toolkit underlines that support and involvement of the **local Council** is critical to the success of regional migration. Local government can be an important stakeholder for program delivery but for also “setting the tone” of welcome and acceptance among a community. Equipping local government to understand its role and the potential needs of new migrants can contribute to success of strategies to attract and retain migrants in regional areas.

Further, the toolkit underlines the important role of the **local community**. The receiving community has a key role to play in driving a local strategy and also in successfully incorporating migrants into their area. The welcome extended by a local community can be critical to the sense of belonging felt by a new arrival. In turn, this can influence their willingness to stay and put down roots as well as impact the overall cohesiveness of a community. Involving the local community in conversations about migration to their areas is important and RAI is doing some work in this area with the support of the Building Better Regions Fund and the Scanlon Foundation.

Local community groups including sporting and cultural groups also have an important role to play in the acceptance and involvement of new migrants and should be supported and encouraged in this respect. Having the community plan for the welcome of new arrivals, such as hosting an event and/or setting up systems such as a “buddy system” for migrants are ways to ensure that they can quickly feel part of the community.

Other stakeholders which are important to the community, such as police, emergency services, health providers, schools and professional service providers also have role to play and their leadership on inclusiveness is also important. They should also be part of community planning and be equipped with the **knowledge and capacity** that they need to welcome migrants.

RAI has seen admirable efforts of local communities to develop their own projects to attract and retain migrants, including coordinating services, filling service gaps and developing committees of welcome. Much of the work is done on a volunteer basis or individuals spend time seeking ad hoc grants. There are many inspiring examples of success, as referenced above. However local initiatives, and the energy involved to successfully implement them, are difficult to sustain in the long term without some form of

³ See the case studies in Piper, Margaret (2017), *Refugee Settlement in Regional Areas: Evidence-based good practice*, Department of Premier and Cabinet, Australia.

⁴ Regional Australia Institute (2019) *Steps to Settlement Success A Toolkit for Rural and Regional Communities*, Canberra, the Regional Australia Institute, produced in partnership with Scanlon Foundation.

support. RAI considers that locally-led initiatives should receive **support and recognition** of the central role that they should play in achieving the goal of increased migration to regional Australia.

One example of a way to support local initiatives is the support provided by the Canadian Government to “Local Immigration Partnerships” (LIPs) throughout Canada. The Government recognises the importance of local actors in encouraging and sustaining migration to their areas and it provides a modest funding amount to each Local Immigration Partnership for a staff member and an office, in order to systemise local engagement in settlement and build on existing local initiatives. LIPs are a mechanism through which the Canadian Immigration department supports the development of community-based partnerships and planning around the needs of newcomers. The Handbook on LIPs notes that:

LIPs not only complement existing activities, but also help to more fully integrate and optimize these activities. In addition, LIPs build on current successes in the community, and work with what is already in place, rather than supplanting other efforts or working in parallel. As LIPs mature, new practices, new partnerships and new ways of working will emerge. LIPs systematize initiatives while supporting bridging between settlement service provider organizations (SPOs) and mainstream institutions. Further, the presence of LIPs provides structure and staff to ensure coherence and maintain momentum within a community.⁵

This model allows migration initiatives to remain place-based and locally-led, while being provided some support from the Federal level, ensuring their continued momentum.

RECOMMENDATION 3: The Australian Government should recognise the importance of the local community in making regional migration successful and sustainable and consider ways to support the local and community to develop and maintain locally-led migration initiatives.

⁵ Citizenship and Immigration Canada, *Local Immigration Partnerships Handbook*, August 2013.

4. PROVIDING INFORMATION TO SUPPORT MIGRATION TO REGIONAL AUSTRALIA

Information is key to understanding. There are various levels of information which needs to be provided in order for regional communities and migrants to be able to make migration successful and sustainable.

- Providing neutral, factual **information on the economic, cultural and social benefits of migration** will assist regional towns to properly consider the contribution of migration. For regional communities to understand the benefits that migration can bring, it is necessary to provide them access to the facts. Myths and misperceptions in relation to migration are rife across the country, in the media and in populist politics. Unambiguous evidence is available to counter myths such as “migrants take the jobs of Australians” or “refugees are a drain on welfare”. In order to develop a local development plan or a locally-led migration attraction strategy, communities should have access to evidence of the contribution of migration to Australia’s economic position as well as information on “success stories” and the economic impact that migration has had on specific towns, regions and businesses in Australia. As the OECD notes:

Migration can be a contentious issue, with public debate sometimes informed by perceptions that do not stand up to analysis. This is especially true in discussions of the fiscal and economic impacts of migration – complex issues with many strands. These include immigrants’ employment rates, the extent to which they pay taxes and receive benefits and their contribution to an economy’s capacity for innovation. ... Developing an accurate understanding of the fiscal and economic impacts of migration is essential to informing public debate. It is also vital if governments are to design effective policies that maximise the contribution of immigrants to their new homes.⁶

- There are also significant **misperceptions in relation to humanitarian entrants**, with a lack of awareness that refugees can be highly skilled and very motivated to work or start a business. Such misperceptions can be easily countered with the provision of facts and data, as well as through positive stories about individuals and their contribution to Australia, of which there are many.
- Providing **information about migrants and their backgrounds** can be very useful for receiving communities, service providers and employers. This can assist locals in welcoming new arrivals and help avoid cultural misunderstandings. Migrant communities around Australia should be supported to provide information about their background and cultures in a way that can be accessed by regional communities which are welcoming new arrivals.
- Providing **information to migrants about the region**, about life in Australia and its customs and culture and, if relevant, the routine and culture in the place of employment can also help in clarifying expectations and greatly assist in the process of settlement. There is also a need to ensure that migrants are aware of their rights and responsibilities, and how to contact relevant services that are available in case of need. Some information resources and templates could be

⁶ Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, Policy Brief, May 2014.

made available to communities around Australia, for them to use and adapt to ensure that they are locally relevant.

RECOMMENDATION 4: For migration to regional Australia to be properly supported, there is a need to provide evidence as to the contribution of migration to counter myths and misperceptions. Information about the economic contribution of migration to Australia as well on regional case studies should be made available in “information packs” to support the development of locally-led migration strategies.

RECOMMENDATION 5: Information about the cultural and national background of migrants as well as information for migrants on life in Australia, on employment and on rights and responsibilities, which will assist in their settlement should be available in templates which can be adapted for use at a local level.

5. SETTLEMENT SERVICES

The provision of settlement services in Australia is well-established for humanitarian entrants and there have been several reviews and studies done on it. There are many other actors that are better placed to make submissions on the adequacy and design of settlement services for humanitarian entrants in regional areas.

In general terms however, and looking at the services available for any new arrival, some key points are apparent from RAI’s work around the country:

- There is significant variation across regional Australia in the services available for new arrivals and, generally, they are not as accessible or sufficient as those in metro Australia;
- There are few services specifically designed to assist non-humanitarian entrants and their families settle into life in Australia, and specifically, life in regional Australia;
- **English** language support can continue to be strengthened in regional Australia; not having adequate access to English language tuition significantly detracts from successful settlement;
- As well as language, new arrivals often need assistance with form filling, tax information, driver’s licence and other documentation and regulatory requirements. Such services are available at a primary settlement location for humanitarian entrants but their availability is mixed in other locations and for other types of visa holders. Volunteers and employers may fill some gaps. **Coordination** of the provision of such support will mean that there are reduced gaps and more consistency. Such coordination can be led by community steering groups and be part of a locally-led migration initiative, as mentioned in the section above.
- **Employers** also have a role to play when welcoming migrants into their workplace and local community. However, in RAI’s experience, employers often lack the expertise and capacity to fulfil this role meaning that migrants can have very diverse settlement experiences depending on the employer and may be provided insufficient support. An interesting model is in Canada where,

as part of the sponsorship process, the employer must work with a settlement service provider and commit to preparing their workplace to welcome newcomers.⁷

- Support for community neighbourhood houses or a similar **central community service** which provides such services to the community (not necessarily only new arrivals) could be considered in many places. These would potentially ensure more **consistent services** around the country and even within a community. Local councils should be resourced and supported to provide such a service so that assistance for new arrivals does not fall solely on volunteers or individual employers.
- Support for **other family members** is also important as if families are not well settled, migrants will not stay in regional areas. Isolation is particularly a risk for mothers who are not working, and lack of English can exacerbate isolation. Focus should also be placed on teenage children of new entrants who will be the next generation of Australian regional community members, but may find adapting to a new language and new environment more challenging than smaller children.

RECOMMENDATION 6 There should be recognition that all new arrivals, regardless of visa type, need some level of assistance or orientation in order to be able to settle well into a regional community. The Australian Government should provide resources for the provision of such assistance, however it should be planned and coordinated locally and available within the community, to ensure that there are no gaps in delivery.⁸

6. EMPLOYMENT

Employment is a key motivator of regional migration and a necessary component for retention of migrants. Employers have a critical role to play in the success of regional migration, yet there is little support or capacity building to ensure that they are properly equipped to play this role well. In RAI's experience, there is a need for **additional information and support for employers** in terms of:

- Navigating the visa system, particularly sponsorship
- Successfully managing a multicultural workforce
- Understanding and ensuring compliance with both labour laws and visa conditions

Such information is critical if regional employers are to remain competitive and are able to attract the workforce needed for their ongoing viability. The number of vacancies in regional Australia, which remains relatively steady month-to-month, shows that employers will need to compete for migrants to fill their labour needs, and should be equipped with the tools needed to be **successful employers of a culturally diverse workforce** and therefore “an employer of choice”. RAI is looking to start research on the needs of regional employers and what tools they require to successfully attract and retain migrants

⁷ Factsheet *Atlantic Immigration Guide Pilot A step-by-step guide*, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada.

⁸ This recommendation is not meant to detract from the provision of settlement services needed for humanitarian entrants.

into their workforce (noting that while there is already some work in this area it primarily is geared toward employment of refugees,⁹ not skilled workers or other non-humanitarian visa types).

There should also be some attention paid to the knowledge and capacity of **labour hire contractors**, in relation to the needs of migrants for successful settlement. Such contractors have a significant role in the welcome of new migrants and their conditions of stay and work, however there seems to be little consistent attention as to standards, knowledge and training of the industry.

At the same time, there is scope for dedicated tools which ready new arrivals for employment in Australia, including **knowledge of labour rights and responsibilities**. These should be tailored to particular regions and/or industries. Standard or template work contracts containing conditions for different type of work visas could also have a role to play assisting both employers and employees.

Employment is more than simply a job. Consideration of employment also needs to factor in employment pathways and skills acquisition for migrants and their families in order for them to stay in regional areas. The **lack of pathways for young people** is a factor that contributes to young people, both local and migrant, leaving smaller towns and communities. Longer term planning and review of technical education, apprenticeships, distance learning and other pathways need to be included in a holistic approach to encouraging regional migration.

RECOMMENDATION 7: Information, training and support should be provided to regional employers on being an “employer of choice” for migrant workers, ensuring their ongoing competitiveness. This includes information tools on visas and contractual provisions.

RECOMMENDATION 8: Longer term investment and planning must go in to ensuring that there are employment and study pathways for young people in regional areas.

It is important to ensure that **the visa regime** is appropriate for labour needs in regional Australia. The RAI welcomes to introduction of new regional visas and suggests ongoing monitoring to ensure that they achieve their aims of encouraging and facilitating regional migration. RAI notes the following issues:

- The 2018 Government changes to **working holiday visas** mean that they are an increasingly important source of labour for regional areas and the agricultural sector. However, despite the seasonal nature of many agricultural jobs, in RAI’s experience, many regional employers would prefer to invest in long-term migrants. There are no skilled visa categories that correspond to farm labour, so such employers would need to attract **secondary migrants** and should be supported to do so.

⁹ See, for example, *Tent Australian Employers’ Guide to Hiring Refugees*, Friendly Nation Initiative and Migration Council of Australia.

David is a fifth-generation farmer in Western Queensland. He pays over \$2 million per year to backpackers and Pacific Islanders to harvest his crops and pack his produce for shipping all over Australia. He would prefer to have permanent migrants work for him, who will settle in his local community and contribute to it. Not only would he be more efficient, not having to train new workers every few months, permanent migrants would be spending wages to the benefit of the local town and Australian economy.

- RAI suggests that **quantifying the reliance of temporary workers** in particular occupations and regions may be a useful exercise in order to determine whether the current system of skilled occupation lists is effectively meeting local labour needs.
- The **costs involved in sponsorship** of skilled workers can be prohibitive for small and medium sized businesses. This can include the level of the Temporary Skilled Migration Income Threshold as well as the cost involved for migration agents, payment of the Skilling Australia levy at the point of application and other associated costs. These costs effectively put the possibility of sponsoring skilled workers to regional Australia beyond the reach of many small regional businesses.
- RAI suggests that there should be ongoing review of the **new regional visas** to gauge whether they succeed in their intent of encouraging regional migration. Information should be collected from regional employers, migrants and service providers as to their efficacy and to monitor any unintended consequences (see section on Governance below). RAI notes, for example, that the requirement for all family members to stay within the regional area may make it difficult for migrants with children who are finishing school and want to go to university in a capital city. There is also evidence that skilled migrants who have been State or Territory nominated are not able to find work in their area of skills once they arrive in Australia.¹⁰
- The existence of the new regional visas is insufficient in itself to adequately channel migrants to regional areas and more consideration is needed on the promotion and incentivisation of **secondary migration**. Secondary migration is a 'win-win' for regional communities looking to grow their population and labour force, and for migrants looking to establish a life for themselves outside of metropolitan centres. RAI notes that there is no systematic way for migrant workers to link with regional employers, although several NGOs are now working in this space, nor is there a systematic policy or integrated support mechanism to facilitate secondary migration away from cities and to meet local labour needs in rural areas.

¹⁰ Deloitte Access Economics *Seizing the opportunity: making the most of the skills and experience of migrants and refugees*. A research report for Multicultural Affairs Queensland November 2018.

RECOMMENDATION 9: There needs to be consideration on the promotion and incentivisation of secondary migration, including support for employers and making linkages between employers and migrants in capital cities.

RECOMMENDATION 10: There should be ongoing monitoring of the new regional visas to ensure that they are assisting regional employers to fill their labour needs and properly aligned with demand so that migrants are successful in finding work appropriate to their skill level.

7. HOUSING AND TRANSPORT

The **lack of housing in regional Australia** has been frequently cited as an impediment to regional migration and an impediment to businesses expanding.

A town in western Victoria of approximately 6000 people considers that it has 1000 or more jobs coming up in the next 3-5 years, on a variety of major infrastructure and other projects, and is wanting to attract both medium and long term migrants. The lack of housing is an impediment to migrants moving to the area, which poses a risk to the viability of the planned projects. The elderly owners of large 3 or 4 bedroom houses would like to downsize, potentially meaning those houses would be available to migrant families, however there is no smaller or aged care housing available.

Even where there is land available, there is **no economic incentive for development**. The RAI suggests consideration be given as to possible incentives or concessions for residential development in regional Australia. The lack of housing can also mean that nearby businesses are unable to attract the migrants that they need to keep their businesses thriving.

A meat works in South Australia which is in a position to expand and increase production would like to be able to put on more workers and extra shifts but is unable to, due to the lack of housing for migrant workers in the area. The lack of housing directly impacts the ongoing competitiveness of the business.

Where housing is available it can sometimes be difficult for migrants to access it. Newly arrived migrants may not have rental histories and **real estate agents** may therefore be reluctant to provide rental accommodation (this may be particularly the case with humanitarian entrants). Information and orientation on **rental rights and responsibilities** needs to be provided.

Migrant workers may need **short term housing** when they initially arrive and many towns are not equipped to be able to provide it. Where there is short-term group housing, for example for Pacific Islander temporary workers, isolation can be an issue without **regular transportation** other than to and from work.

Transport is also often cited as a difficulty for migrants who do not have a car or who, frequently, do not feel comfortable to drive long distances on country roads.

The “push” for regional migration is bound to fail, and the viability of regional towns will be imperilled, unless there is serious and committed **longer-term planning on infrastructure** for regional Australia including on transport.

RECOMMENDATION 11: Consideration should be given to housing needs in regional Australia and how to ensure that new residential development is economically viable, in order to allow towns and businesses to attract migrants to regional Australia.

RECOMMENDATION 12: Policy-making on migration to regional Australia must be accompanied by a commitment to dedicate resources to the provision of infrastructure and services in regional Australia.

8. GOVERNANCE ON REGIONAL MIGRATION

RAI supports the concept of a “**whole of government approach**” to regional migration, noting that regional migration is a multi-faceted and multi-sectoral issue which needs to be addressed holistically. Currently, Australia’s immigration, employment, settlement and regional development systems are relatively siloed, meaning that policy to support regional migration is not as efficient and coherent as it could be. In RAI’s view, all levels and all sectors of Government could enhance their recognition of the importance of migration to every aspect of Australian life, economic, social and cultural. This means that in setting policy priorities and developing growth plans, migration and its impacts are mainstreamed and properly considered and included.

Underpinning a whole-of-government approach, RAI also considers that there is a need for a **national advisory panel on regional migration** which could provide ongoing review and advice, drawing from lived experiences in regional Australia as well as from best practices around the world.

Recognising the range of agencies and service providers involved in regional migration, RAI is initiating an interagency group to discuss and coordinate the work of various non-governmental agencies involved in regional migration. This interagency group could also feed into the work of an advisory panel and it may provide a useful source of information for the Committee during its review period.

Further, there should be a mechanism to ensure that local-level stakeholders are also able to regularly feed information to the advisory panel which can then provide advice to Government on relevant issues and challenges being faced, as well as to provide best practice examples.

RAI suggests that part of the work of such a panel would be to undertake **monitoring of the new regional visa scheme**, including cataloguing some of its successes and any challenges arising. The advisory panel

would be tasked with **developing an evidence-base on regional migration** to be used by policy-makers, as well as **providing expertise and advice**.

RECOMMENDATION 13: An independent advisory panel be appointed to provide cross-portfolio advice and information on migration to regional Australia, providing a conduit for information from agencies and from regional areas to be brought to the national level as well as undertaking research, surveys and studies to provide an evidence-base for policy-making.

9. CONCLUSION

The RAI commends the Minister for Immigration, Citizenship, Migrant Services and Multicultural Affairs, the Hon David Coleman MP for referring this important inquiry to the Joint Standing Committee on Migration. The issue presents a significant and exciting opportunity for this Government to shape the nation, to ensure that regional Australia thrives economically and that regional communities not just remain viable but prosper well into the future.

By mainstreaming the issue of regional migration within different portfolios and embedding it in broader discussions on Australia's future, regional migration will become increasingly sustainable. A strong emphasis on locally-led migration initiatives, particularly those involving secondary migration, is needed in national policy, recognising that the most successful and sustainable migration strategies will be place-based, relevant for local community and take into account local needs. This means that providing the tools and the capacity to local communities and regional employers will be an important part of any successful policy on regional migration.

More can be done to develop an evidence-base for policy makers on issues relevant to regional migration, looking at best practices from regional Australia and overseas. Monitoring of the roll-out of the new regional visas and how they are functioning to support regional businesses and employers is equally important, as well as ensuring that the daily lived experience regional Australia, its industries and its communities feeds into national level discussions, ensuring that policy making is evidence-based and targeted to meet the needs of regional Australia. The RAI remains available to support this exciting and necessary work.