ruralcouncilsvictoria

Population Attraction and Retention Toolkit

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About this Toolkit

The publication of this toolkit is an initiative of Rural Councils Victoria (RCV), an organisation representing and working alongside Victoria's rural councils to support and promote sustainable, liveable and prosperous rural communities.

RCV has identified the need for a toolkit to assist councils to embed long-term and ongoing population attraction strategies into their community and council plan. This exercise coincides with upcoming Council elections and changes to the Local Government Act, which require long-term plans to be delivered over the four-year Council term.

As such, this toolkit is designed to support member councils to implement the findings of key research in the area of rural population attraction and retention. The toolkit includes practical steps, tasks, initiatives and potential actions that Councils can undertake to attract and retain residents and ratepayers in a strategic, cost effective manner.

Information Sources

The toolkit draws on the findings of a series of studies commissioned by RCV which explore the factors which influence the opportunity for rural Victoria as a whole and specific rural communities to attract and retain population, with the aim of ensuring that communities and economies are diverse and sustainable for the long term. These programs and reports include:

- *Population Attraction and Retention Strategies for Rural Victorian Communities.*
- *Rural Workforce Development Plan.*
- *Population Growth in Rural Victoria – Opportunities and Actions.*
- *Rural Promotion Program.*

These reports, along with findings of further research into population attraction, provides several key insights and best practice approaches to population attraction and retention that are relevant to the activities of rural councils. These are summarised in this toolkit so that best practice can be applied by member councils.

While this toolkit is primarily designed for Council's facing population challenges (such as a reduction in overall population or difficulty attracting or retaining population), the content can also be used to guide responses to other circumstances.

COVID-19 Pandemic

The research which underpins this toolkit was prepared prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic will present new challenges for metropolitan, regional and rural areas to attract and retain population. The nature of population growth and movement will change and there is expected to be a reduction in net overseas and interstate migration, at least in the short term. New opportunities are also being created for regional and rural areas to attract population from metropolitan areas in particular, particularly due to the increased prevalence of remote work which provides more flexibility in choosing a place of residence, along with the health and lifestyle challenges associated with living in dense urban areas during periods of restricted movement due to the pandemic.

The information in this toolkit remains relevant during and after the initial pandemic impacts and can also be used to assist economic recovery by providing direction for rural communities to respond to all types of population challenges and to capitalise on emerging opportunities associated with the pandemic.

Acknowledgements

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Best Practice

Population Factors

Australian and international research into rural and regional population attraction and retention identifies the various challenges that are faced by rural communities and points to the need for considered, targeted and collaborative action to address the specific issues and opportunities for regions, municipalities and towns.

The research findings into the main influences, drivers, attractors and barriers of population movement in rural areas are summarised on the following page (Figure 1) – these should be considered when planning initiatives.

Best Practice Approach

Rural communities across the world will continue to face challenges posed by urbanisation and centralisation – many residents will move to larger urban areas for employment, education or lifestyle reasons. Rather than seeking to 'stop the tide', research indicates that best practice is to identify and design actions which are targeted, ongoing, easily monitored and collaborative.

Local governments cannot directly influence the movement of residents, so it is important that a range of measures are considered which involve other stakeholders and utilise levers such as policy, land supply, labour force, business and economic development, infrastructure and housing.

The most effective approaches to population attraction and retention consider that:

- **Employment opportunities** are critical to population attraction and retention;
- **Lifestyle** is an important factor, especially the availability of health, education and retail services. Retention and improvement to service provision is key to population retention.
- **Partnerships** are required for effective outcomes. This can include partnerships with migration agencies, state government agencies, individual businesses or groups, volunteer groups, other Councils and so on.
- Actions should be targeted to **specific markets** that are more likely to re-locate, rather than simply 'attract population'. Segments with a greater propensity to move include **former residents** or those with a connection to the area (e.g. family, friends); and **migrant communities.**
- Suitable **housing** remains a barrier to population attraction in many parts of rural Victoria.

*Best practice is to identify and design actions which are **targeted, ongoing, easily monitored** and **collaborative.***

F1 Population Factors

Research into population movement in rural and regional areas is summarised in the following matrix.

	Lifestyle	Economic	Environment	Connections
Drivers	• Regional service centres • Diverse range of services	• Regional centre employment • Diverse range of jobs	• Coastal amenity	• Inclusive communities
Attractors	• Education • Pace of life • Health services • Shopping	• Lower cost of living/housing jobs	• Natural beauty	• Family and friends • Return migration
Barriers	• Lack of health and other services	• Lack of relevant employment • Lower pay • Cost of relocation • Internet speed and availability	• Distance many towns and areas are too far to commute to a regional centre	• No social networks • Loss of professional networks • Responsibility to care for elderly relatives in current location
Influences & Trends	• Ageing agricultural workforce • Ageing population - need for health services	• Reducing agricultural labour intensity • Strong population growth in Metropolitan Melbourne, decreasing affordability	• Tree change • Sea change movements	• Social and professional/ business networks

Source: Population Growth in Rural Victoria – Opportunities and Actions, Rural Councils Victoria, Urban Enterprise, July 2018

Recommended Approach

Based on the findings of the various reports and research, a four step approach has been developed to assist Councils in planning for population attraction and retention.

Each step is explained in further detail on the following pages.

1

Diagnose

Research indicates that targeted actions are considerably more effective than general incentives. Therefore, it is important that each council considers its specific circumstances when designing and implementing initiatives.

2

Identify Strengths and Weaknesses

The findings of the diagnosis and analysis of strengths and weaknesses will assist Councils to establish specific objectives relating to population attraction and retention.

3

Develop Targeted Objectives

Effective population attraction projects and initiatives should respond to local strengths and weaknesses – either to leverage competitive advantages, address key issues or avoid areas of weakness.

4

Design

Effective population attraction and retention initiatives should consider the key learnings and identified success factors from the research. Success factors are shown on page 7.

Examples of potential actions are shown on page 10.

Step 1

Diagnosis

Councils experience different issues affecting the ability to attract and retain residents, including opportunities and challenges with respect to demographic, economic, liveability and housing issues.

Research indicates that targeted actions are considerably more effective than general incentives. It is important that local circumstances are understood prior to designing and implementing population attraction and retention initiatives.

Understanding local circumstances is a critical first step to provide context for actions. The following questions can be considered when diagnosing local challenges.

Responses to these and any other relevant questions should be supported by evidence and consultation findings (where available) and can be consolidated into an Issues Paper.

Demographic Issues

- Is the area experiencing population growth or decline?
- What demographic trends are evident?
- Is the working age population declining or changing?
- What are the leading indicators of future population growth or opportunity?
- What migration patterns are known (including sources and destinations)?

Lifestyle Issues

- What types of services are frequently access in regional centres and metropolitan areas outside the municipality?
- Are key services lacking in any particular parts of the municipality (especially where employment opportunities are)?
- Are there any key services at risk of being lost?
- Are there any towns that currently (or are expected to) have a population level that is insufficient to maintain a viable ongoing mix of key services?

Economic Issues

- How is employment changing, including structural changes by industry or labour type?
- Are there any trends in business number, types or investment levels evident?
- What do businesses say about the availability of labour? Are there known workforce shortages, skills gaps or issues with workforce availability?
- What broader economic trends are driving current and potential future labour needs?
- Is Council at risk of not meeting expected levels of service?

Housing Issues

- What housing issues are known, such as the suitability or availability of housing for new residents?
- Is sufficient and suitable land available to facilitate viable development of new housing?
- Are there any specific housing issues that need to be addressed before population can be attracted, such as to do with affordability, tenure, quality, location, availability (tourism use of private dwellings), etc.

Step 2

Identify Strengths and Weaknesses

Competitive Advantages and Disadvantages

Effective population attraction and retention initiatives have regard to local strengths, weaknesses and opportunities.

People have a wide range of choices of where to live and in many instances, Councils are competing with one another for population. Population attraction measures often cite cheap land or housing as an advantage, however, affordability alone is not a key driver of population attraction.

Competitive advantages exist for some areas to attract a particular type of resident – such as health and environment strengths attracting retirees. Councils should identify competitive strengths and weaknesses help narrow the areas of focus for action. For example, does the area offer unique lifestyle benefits, including natural amenity, food offerings, access to outdoor recreation, cultural amenity, etc?

In some cases, a current weakness or disadvantage may exist that is directly limiting the ability to capitalise on an economic opportunity identified in step 1 (such as a lack of access to education for younger families which may be suited to the employment opportunities available but not filled).

Considerations

The following questions provide a guide to better understand existing strengths and weaknesses in the context of population attraction and retention – these are based on the Population Factors graphic shown on page 5 which should be considered when responding to the questions.

Budget permitting, this step could be informed by consultation with existing and/or newly arrived residents.

Lifestyle
(e.g. liveability factors, access to key services, etc):

- ✓ What are the local strengths and weaknesses?
- ✓ Are any attractors or barriers present and influential?

Economic
(e.g. employment, cost of living, housing, etc.):

- ✓ What are the local strengths and weaknesses?
- ✓ Are any attractors or barriers present and influential?

Environment
(e.g. natural amenity, location, etc):

- ✓ What are the local strengths and weaknesses?
- ✓ Are any attractors or barriers present and influential?

Connections
(e.g. physical distance, infrastructure, access to family and friends, etc.)

- ✓ What are the local strengths and weaknesses?
- ✓ Are any attractors or barriers present and influential?

> **!** Review the 'Population Factors' graphic (Figure 1) on page 5 as part of this step.

Step 3

Develop Targeted Objectives

Each Council should establish a short list of targeted objectives which respond to the findings of Steps 1 and 2 and the associated target audience for each.

The resulting objectives will be more nuanced that an objective to simply attract more residents and will often relate to a specific demographic, economic, lifestyle or housing issue which, if successfully addressed, will lead to greater population attraction and/or retention as a result.

The following provides examples of broad population attraction and retention objectives that could be pursued by councils in response to its specific circumstances or areas of strength.

Objectives with Demographic Outcomes

- Increase the 'return rate' of former residents
- Increase the working age population to offset ageing workforce
- Attract young families
- Increase the number of non-residents who are 'familiar' with the area

Objectives with Lifestyle Outcomes

- Improve the provision of a particular service
- Maintain a certain population level in a town at risk of losing key services
- Provide a new service through alternative means (eg. partnership, remote, etc.)
- Promote/capitalise on a unique lifestyle offering of your area
- Identify and address a known perception of negative lifestyle conditions
- Capitalise on existing outdoor recreation strengths by investing and promoting benefits to families or known target market (e.g. former residents).

Objectives with Economic Outcomes

- Address a particular workforce or skills shortage
- Facilitate growth in a particular industry with potential to increase the number of jobs available
- Support existing businesses to grow their employment
- Attract investment in catalyst businesses or developments
- Improve the access and quality of digital infrastructure (e.g. internet) to support new job creation and/or increase remote working base

Objectives with Housing Outcomes

- Improve the availability of housing of a certain type (e.g. quality housing for professionals)
- Remove barriers to housing development
- Improve the affordability of housing of a certain type (e.g. quality housing for professionals or creation of new rural/low density living options).

To achieve efficiencies and support existing Council priorities, the following actions should be considered when drafting and identifying objectives:

- **Stakeholder scan:** When objectives are drafted, scan neighbouring councils, existing government policies, funding streams and other institutional/business initiatives for common ground and opportunities to partner.
- **Existing Council policy scan:** Review current Council policies and priorities and identify complementary and contradictory objectives for discussion and balancing within Council.

Design

Policy Levers

There are multiple direct and indirect 'levers' that Councils can use when developing initiatives, policies and actions, such as:

- **Invest:** direct Council funding for capital works or operating costs;
- **Incentivise:** providing financial or other incentives to prospective residents or businesses;
- **Promote**: advertising a particular investment opportunity, initiative or lifestyle;
- **Partner:** collaborating with other stakeholders to deliver a specific action;
- **Advocate:** working with other governments/ institutions for a particular policy outcome aligned to an objective.

Council's role will naturally depend on available budget, risk appetite, the type of challenge and objectives, and the extent to which the population issues are critical to sustainability.

Actions should be selected and designed to achieve the objectives identified in the previous step, taking into account the following success factors which are derived from the research.

Success factors

These success factors can be used as a checklist when designing and implementing policies and actions.

Targeted Growth

- Is your initiative targeted to attract or benefit a specific market?
- Is your initiative targeted to facilitate growth in a key industry sector (or overcome labour shortages in a specific sector)?

Long Term Integration

- Does your initiative include measures that foster the integration of new residents into the community?
- Does your initiative consider the integration needs of intrastate and international migrants?

Identify & Pursue Partnerships

- Are there any opportunities to collaborate with other Councils?
- Are there any opportunities collaborate with other organisations, including community groups, private enterprise and/or other government bodies (e.g. State Government)?

Promote Benefits & Opportunities

- Is the initiative promoted to target markets using the right communication/marketing channels?
- Have you promoted the benefits/opportunities of the initiative to target markets?

A list of potential actions identified from the research are shown in the following pages which could respond to some of the key issues and challenges outlined in this toolkit. These are examples only and should by no means limit the initiatives of Councils – the most successful initiatives are generally those which relate specifically to a particular issue. Councils are encouraged to design their own initiatives using the content of this toolkit as a guide.

Given that there are numerous factors which influence population attraction and retention, Councils should also prioritise objectives and apply targeted and sustained actions to pursue them.

Step 4 Design

Examples of Potential Actions and Outcomes

	Demographic Outcome	Economic Outcome	Lifestyle Outcome	Housing Outcome
Delivery of open town/ homecoming events Providing targeted community events can be a good promotional tool for the town and also targets former residents with existing connections to the area.			🧘	
Targeted financial incentives to prospective residents Targeted financial incentives for new residents, coupled with an existing government incentive (e.g. Regional First Home Owners Grant).	👤	$		🏠
Promotion program Identify a target audience and prepare a promotion program. This could include either residents, businesses or investors. An example is preparing a database of key catalyst development opportunities and promoting to potential investors.			🧘	
Collaborate with education & training providers Partner with relevant providers regarding placements and career pathways for students and trainees matched to known local job opportunities and labour force gaps.	👤	$		
Foster the relocation and settlement of a particular migrant community Engage with local businesses and migration agencies to match skills gaps with labour force.	👤	$		
Facilitate investment attraction Promote the opportunity for private enterprise and former residents to invest in rural towns, including (for example): · Promoting businesses/properties for sale; · Providing rental subsidies or grants (i.e. matched funding); and · Streamline approvals/permits.		$	🧘	

Step 4 Design
Examples of Potential Actions and Outcomes

	Demographic Outcome	Economic Outcome	Lifestyle Outcome	Housing Outcome
Facilitate housing development Potential actions include direct delivery of a housing development, engaging with developers to address 'bottle-necks' such as catalyst infrastructure, partner with state and federal government to facilitate new housing to match an identified need such as housing for temporary workers, aged care, etc.				🏠
Leverage Council assets/land Identify opportunities to use council assets and land to support objectives (e.g. provision of a key service or delivery of new housing). This could include offering low rent premises to a catalyst service provider or community co-op.			🧘	
Identify and promote areas of workforce and skills shortages Engage with industry groups and local chambers of commerce to identify areas of labour and skill shortages		$		
Provide transport options to access services Maintain service provision and 'lifestyle' expectations by ensuring transport is available to all key services for residents of small and more remote areas.			🧘	
Leverage the unique lifestyle offerings through promotion and development Undertake a targeted investment program and then promotion plan to capitalise on an existing strength, which may comprise one or more of the following: • Natural amenity (e.g. national/state parks); • Access to outdoor recreation activities (passive and active); • Unique food offerings (e.g. farm gate, paddock to plate initiatives); and • Cultural amenity (e.g. streetscaping, public arts, etc.).			🧘	

Case Studies

The following shows a selection of case studies which involve policy actions and initiatives delivered or supported by local councils to facilitate population attraction and retention.

Nhill 'Luv-A-Duck'

Luv-A-Duk

The town of Nhill successfully attracted Karen migrants (from Myanmar) through employment opportunities at the Luv-A-Duck poultry producer. The initiative was launched by the general manger of Luv-A-Duck and attracted 160 migrants to the town.

As a result of the program, $40 million has been added to the local economy and 70 jobs have been created. Population decline in the town has been halted and the Nhill Neighbourhood House Learning Centre received funding to build capacity and participation in the local community.

Although council did not play an active role, the success of this case study highlights the importance of Councils identifying/supporting similar opportunities in brokering employment connections.

Rupanyup Community Retail Hub

Yarriambiack Shire Council, Bendigo Bank, Residents

Construction of a new retail precinct to include a range of key retail, health and community services, designed to generate employment opportunities and activate the town. Enterprise Rupanyup, with the help of Council, developed a business case to support the project. Following the completion of the business case, Council provided direct funding for construction, in partnership with funding from other sources including the community, Bendigo Bank and State Government.

Renew Newcastle

Renew Newcastle & City of Newcastle

Renew Newcastle is a not-for-profit organisation established to respond to vacant shopfronts. The organisation connects people with vacant spaces, supporting a community of creative entrepreneurs who activate empty spaces with temporary exhibitions, pop-ups, etc. The spaces are temporarily activated on a rolling 30-day basis until a long-term commercial offer is made to the landlord.
Renew Newcastle has activated over 80 shopfronts with a range of creative and cultural installations and had over 260 participants. These programs are supported by a range of stakeholders, including the City of Newcastle and property developers/landlords

Tasmania's Population Growth Strategy

State Government of Tasmania

Although not led by local councils, this strategy includes a range of actions that could be considered by Victoria councils, including the following (among others):
- Increasing engagement with the Tasmanian diaspora and encourage them to return home;
- Increasing the share of humanitarian entrants
- Encouraging intergenerational knowledge transfer and succession planning

Beaufort Housing Initiative

Pyrenees Shire Council

To address a lack of housing in Beaufort, the local council invested in the Correa Park housing estate to facilitate housing in the town in order to attract new residents. Over the past six years Council has completed three stages of residential subdivision and 57 new lots.

Delivery Framework

The following delivery framework can be used by Councils to apply the toolkit. The design and delivery of population attraction and retention strategies should be considered as part of long-term planning.

1

Issues Paper
Prepare an Issues Paper (Steps 1-3) to provide the evidence base to inform targeted objectives.

2

Design Policies and Initiatives
Prepare Step 4 based on the approach outlined in the toolkit.

3

Identify Steps Required for Implementation
Identify steps to implement which could include:
- Creating a project control group to oversee progress
- Identifying Council support available (funding and policy) and allocating resources.
- Identifying key stakeholders and opportunities for partnership/collaboration with other Councils
- Setting KPIs and targets over the short, medium and long term

4

Alignment of Policy and Innitiatives
Update relevant Council policies as needed, including resolving any existing policy conflicts.
Align policy with any regional or state policy on population attraction and retention.

5

Ongoing Monitoring and Review
Periodically review progress and initiatives for performance and adjust as needed.

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