

Inquiry into Skills Shortages in Rural and Regional NSW

Submission by Broken Hill City Council

A. Attracting and Retaining Professional / Skilled Labour

There has been significant publicity in the national media in recent months highlighting the extent of shortages of professional and skilled labour across the board. We believe the problem is magnified further in remote areas such as Broken Hill. It is not believed to be an easy issue to resolve in the short term.

Key issues/barriers to attracting and retaining professional/skilled labour include:

1. Career Considerations

Career advancement can be stalled by moving to rural and regional NSW.

2. Salary

Salary levels tend to be lower whereas in actual fact they should be higher in order to attract individuals.

3. Lifestyle

This should be a positive element in selling rural and regional NSW but this will depend on recreational facilities, social events, culture, history, sense of community, shopping and generally “fitting in”.

4. Needs of Partner/Family

All family members need to feel comfortable with any relocation.

5. Professional Development/Training/Networks

It is certainly more difficult to keep abreast.

6. Medical and Health Services

Professional and other skilled people are unlikely to live and work in communities where there is no easy local access to health care. Recent restructuring of health services in the region have not assisted in this regard.

7. Housing

Issues arise in relation to availability and quality. Generally costs are comparative. There are certainly lower capital gains in rural and regional NSW.

8. Capital Commitment

If a person makes the decision to move to a rural or regional area and purchase a house, moving back to the metropolitan market becomes difficult.

9. Educational Facilities

The standard of facilities is important.

10. Infrastructure

Reliable, accessible and affordable transport and telecommunications infrastructure and services are essential to maintaining family, social and professional links. They reduce perceptions of isolation and remoteness and can have a significant impact on individual and family decisions to live and work in rural and regional NSW.

11. Perception

Metropolitan dwellers often unfairly perceive that rural and regional NSW is “second rate” in relation to services, lifestyle and financial wellbeing.

These barriers are real.

It is believed there are multiple factors influencing decisions to locate in rural and regional areas. These range from lifestyle, services, salary and family.

The changing nature of career structure is another driver. Professional and skilled labour no longer look to secure a “job-for-life”, instead choosing to stay for a shorter period in a region and then move on.

Career and life cycles are recognisable including:

- Locals who leave for study reasons and return later
- Young people who head out to work to gain experience and breadth of knowledge that will provide them with career advancement opportunities which may see them leaving

The aging population in Broken Hill presents an opportunity for upskilling and the use of skills in aging communities.

Possible solutions would include:

Short Term

- Identifying priority areas
- Developing an “attraction package”
- Focus on existing workforce/residents
- Marketing
- Looking at alternative solutions

Medium Term

- Address Inhibitors
- Networking and mentoring
- Marketing
- Relationships
- Migration

Long Term

- Perception change

B. Skills Shortages in Broken Hill City Council

There are current and projected skills shortages in key professional and skilled labour areas of employment. There is also an issue pertaining to retention of professional and skilled labour.

Broken Hill City Council is addressing this in a number of ways namely:

- Emphasis on retraining and upskilling
- Instigating training and development programs

It is difficult to attract and retain staff across a broad spectrum including Environmental Services, Infrastructure, Administration, Tourism, Corporate and Human Services.

Council invests considerable monies in training and development however a lack of funds is a constraint. The nature of training is varied and includes on site, conferences and seminars, structured training off-site, structured on-the-job training, TAFE courses and undergraduate or postgraduate university courses.

Broken Hill City Council certainly has flexible work practices for employees as an incentive.

Initiatives to overcome skills shortages include:

- Traineeships
- Upskilling existing employees through training and development initiatives re university or TAFE course

C. People

It is believed many of the problems in terms of skills shortages are community based and include:

- The short term nature of many private and government funded employment contracts which creates a transient population unwilling to make a commitment to Broken Hill

- The increasing requirement on the part of employers to find employment for the spouse of the new recruit
- The inadequacy of social amenities such as child care and recreation facilities and
- Perceptions of inadequate health and education services

To attract skilled people to Broken Hill proposals that could be considered include:

- Pursue a marketing strategy that focuses on both attracting skilled people and creating the right business climate at the same time identifying specific skill shortages
- At the same time persuade the State and Federal Government to improve the marketing of business negotiation initiatives

Skilled business negotiation is felt to be an untapped resource in Broken Hill. There also needs to be incentives offered to attract skilled people to Broken Hill. We do not believe this area has been significantly explored. An emphasis on improving skills development and training is also essential. Assistance with a home owners scheme may assist.

Leadership in Broken Hill also needs to be fostered to ensure it is effective. Stronger emphasis on networking may assist.

D. Overview

Attracting and retaining professional and skilled people to live and work within rural and regional NSW is one of the major challenges in building sustainable regions. A community that can offer the services supported by professional and skilled workers supports the people who are living in regional communities and the businesses operating there. This provides the foundation stone for attracting new residents and businesses.

The issue is critical to sustaining regional communities as viable entities into the future communities that are self-sufficient in terms of professionals and tradespeople are more likely to retain their residents and attract new ones.

Broken Hill believes that it is best placed to generate creative, yet practical, solutions. Nevertheless we require support and guidance in implementation. This can be sourced from different levels of government or a combination. A coordinated approach however is essential.

Issues:

- Broken Hill seems to suffer from an image problem. A large percentage of people enquiring about jobs have no idea at all what is out here, they generally imagine a small remote mining town
- People are very surprised to learn of the number of schools and sporting facilities that are located in Broken Hill
- A marketing campaign to promote Broken Hill as an exciting and progressive City with many opportunities for singles and families is needed
- Encouraging job opportunities for partners
- The locality allowance needs to be increased and better tax breaks for people in “remote” locations, and making Broken Hill more accessible to relatives and friends by negotiating better airfare prices

- Promote family friendly rosters that will allow more community interaction (sports, social functions)
- Support new industry in Broken Hill and the region

There are various reasons why skills shortages can occur. In Broken Hill's case the following apply:

- Growth of new industries with few ready-skilled tradespeople available
- Lack of interest in particular industries among potential job seekers
- Technology changes within an industry, resulting in new methods and skills needs

In terms of Apprentices a barrier would be seen to be the loss of the Apprentice by the employers owing to a number of consecutive weeks of training. The down time experienced by the employer does not take into account the workload needs or patterns of the workplace.

A change in the way off-site training occurs can provide the employer a higher level of flexibility is more attractive. Increased flexibility of off-site delivery would allow the employer to have a choice when they released the apprentice for training. This would allow better alignment between workload and training requirements. For larger organisations in Broken Hill it would allow flexibility relating to the number of apprentices away for training at any one time.