POPULATION POLICY

Population Policy

Regional Capitals Australia members are seeking a greater share of Australia's population, accelerated through immigration policy.

Regional capitals are not only critical regional hubs, providing services and infrastructure to local residents and those in surrounding towns and rural areas; they are increasingly an affordable alternative for people and businesses seeking to escape capital city costs and congestion.

RCA supports the development of a national population policy aimed at ensuring there is a greater share of population growth that will attract a larger workforce and increased business investment in our member cities.

RCA believes regional population growth must be underpinned by both skilled and non-skilled migration, along with continued investment in enabling infrastructure and services to maintain the local character and amenity that makes regional cities a destination.

Fast Facts

1. In 2020/21 regional areas grew at a faster rate than capital cities for the first time since 1993/94 (*2022 Population Statement*).

2. In 2022/23 less than 17% of net overseas migration will flow to regional Australia (*2022 Population Statement*), despite the fact that there were 94,000 job vacancies in regional Australia in November 2022 (*Regional Australia Institute*).

3. Between 1996 to 2016 migrants contributed 26 percent of the population growth in regional Australia.

4. Skilled migrants account for nearly 70 percent of Australia's permanent migration program, up from 30-40 percent twenty years ago.

5. Skilled migrants and their families offset Australia's ageing population, improve labour force participation and productivity, and help businesses source skills that are difficult to develop at short notice.

Accelerating Regionalisation

The 2021 Australian Infrastructure Plan highlighted that there has been a 200 percent increase in net growth to regional centres and regional areas during the COVID-19 pandemic. Much of this growth was driven by the shift to a 'work from anywhere' capability.

The report further highlighted that Australia's Smaller Cities and Regional Centres have unrealised growth potential and that the increase in net population growth in regional Australia presents an opportunity to lock in accelerating regionalisation.

With improved access to employment, education, services, housing and community facilities, many regional capital cities could accommodate further sustainable population and economic growth. This would support a future population settlement pattern that is more widely distributed across the country, benefiting all Australians.

The Need

In a post-pandemic world international immigration should be a key factor in Australia's overall population growth and as such, should be a significant factor in ongoing regional growth.

Skilled migrants comprise 70 per cent of Australia's migrant intake. These new arrivals and their families offset Australia's ageing population, improve labour force participation and productivity, and help businesses source skills that are difficult to develop at short notice.

The government has the policy levers to encourage skilled migrants to settle outside of Australia's capital cities and RCA believes visas for skilled migration and business investment should be expanded or amended to ensure this occurs.

RCA recognises the Australian Government's stated commitment to increase Australia's permanent migration program to 195,000, and seeks assurances that regional Australia will benefit from this increase.

Recommendations

- Develop a population policy to encourage businesses and families to move to the regions, and that RCA be consulted during the development of this policy;

- Continue support for current 491 and 187 regional visa streams cater for skilled, non-skilled and education migration to regional capital cities; and

- Expansion of business visas to establish a new range of regional visas that are based on the 188, 888 and 132 and 858 but require investment or business activity in regional economies.