



25 July 2024

Review of Regional Migration Settings

WESTERN DOWNS REGIONAL
COUNCIL SUBMISSION

25 July 2024

Paul Denman
Assistant Secretary
Immigration Planning and Policy Framework
Department of Home Affairs

Sent via email: immiresearch@homeaffairs.gov.au

Dear Mr Denman,

RE: Review of Regional Migration Settings 2024

The Western Downs Region Council (Council) oversees a vibrant local government area spanning 37,937 square kilometres, serving a diverse population of approximately 35,000 residents. Our region thrives on a robust foundation of agriculture, intensive agriculture, energy, and manufacturing industries. These sectors are bolstered by a rich and diverse workforce, including a significant number of migrant employees, who contribute to the social and economic fabric of our community.

We sincerely thank the Department of Home Affairs Committee for seeking submissions regarding the 2024 Review of Regional Migration, which is of strong interest to our Council and our residents.

Enclosed is the Council's comprehensive submission for your consideration, detailing our perspectives and recommendations on regional migration. We believe that the insights provided will offer valuable contributions to the review process and help shape policies that foster growth and inclusivity in regional areas like ours.

For any further information or questions, please contact Prince Lo, Economic Development Program Leader via email prince.lo@wdrc.qld.gov.au or phone (07) 4503 1359.

Yours Sincerely,

Jodie Taylor
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER

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About the Western Downs Regional Council

The Western Downs is located on the Darling Downs, approximately 207 kilometres north-west of Brisbane and 83 kilometres north-west of Toowoomba. The region encompasses the centres of Dalby, Chinchilla, Jandowae, Miles, Tara, and Wandoan, covering nearly 38,000 square kilometres. Combining country lifestyle with modern living, excellent retail offerings and conveniences, the area is home to a population of around 35,000 people and has a large working age population of 60.9% aged 15-64 years.

Built on agriculture and thriving in the intensive agriculture, energy and manufacturing industries, Western Downs Regional Council is focused on making our region a great place to live, work, visit and invest and to ensure our future generation have the opportunity to do what they love whilst enjoying a regional lifestyle and continue the strong economic growth of the region.

Council manage Australia's second largest road network with highways leading into the region including the Bunya, Leichhardt, Warrego & Moonie, an extensive water, gas, and sewage network, and one of Australia's largest cattle saleyards. Located in the heart of the resource rich Surat Basin, the Western Downs has a diversified energy generation: Coal, Gas, Wind and Solar cementing our reputation as the Energy Capital of Queensland. This contributes to the region's strong economic growth, investment, and consistently high employment with a GRP of \$5.91Billion.

Council's five-year [Economic Development Strategy](#) (2023 to 2028) addresses critical issues and clearly articulates a strategic pathway for the Western Downs to diversify and grow its economy, building on the region's competitive advantage and further attracting business and investment in value-adding opportunities and emerging markets. The Economic Development Strategy focuses on five key pillars:

- Jobs & Skills - The Western Downs workforce is growing, optimised and fit for the future.
- Liveability & Infrastructure - The Western Downs is equipped with modern infrastructure and quality essential services across the region to enable liveability and wellbeing, whilst sustaining population growth.
- Population - The Western Downs demonstrates population growth to meet workforce demands.
- Productivity & Innovation - The Western Downs is a recognised leader in agribusiness, energy and manufacturing, and local productivity continues to increase.
- Sustainability & Resilience - The Western Downs is future-proofed for a changing climate and transitioning economies, and circular economy principles are stimulated.

This strategy aligns closely with the Council's [Corporate Plan](#) and supports one of Queensland's most progressive [Planning Schemes](#) which is committed to attracting and enabling development and ensure the Western Downs is a diverse region at the forefront of the changing world.

Executive Summary

Western Downs Regional Council's submission to the Australian Government 2024 Review of Regional Migration Setting focuses on trying to improve migration settings within regional areas. Western Downs Regional Council acknowledges the significant economic and social contributions of migrants to the region through workforce participation and by increasing cultural diversity. Of persons in the Western Downs born overseas, 36.7% of persons arrived in Australia in the past 10 years, with 65.7% of persons living in the region who were born overseas actively participating in the local workforce.

Western Downs Regional Council highlights a multifaceted approach to improving regional migration, focusing on tailored, place-based strategies, comprehensive skills audits, and robust stakeholder consultations.

1. Place-Based Migration Approach

The Council emphasises the need for migration policies tailored to specific regional contexts. This approach ensures that migration strategies align with the unique economic, social, and infrastructural needs of regions like Western Downs, fostering sustainable economic and community development and addressing local skill shortages effectively.

2. Skills Audit and Data-Driven Comprehensive Regional Mapping

Implementing comprehensive skills audits is crucial for understanding the specific workforce needs of regional areas. The Council advocates for data-driven decision-making, utilising accurate movement data and migration numbers to identify skill gaps and prioritise areas requiring external labour. This detailed mapping aids in developing targeted migration and training programs, ensuring that both local and migrant workers can fill these gaps.

3. Strong Consultation with Local Government Authorities (LGAs) and Regional Stakeholders

Council stresses the importance of continuous engagement with LGAs, regional stakeholders, and employers. This collaboration is essential for developing regional skills plans that reflect immediate and future needs. Regular consultations ensure that migration policies are aligned with local economic conditions and community priorities, promoting effective integration and retention of migrants.

4. Providing Regional Concessions

Council suggests implementing regional concessions to attract migrants to areas with specific skill shortages. These concessions could include incentives for employers adhering to best practices and tailored benefits for migrants. Such measures aim to balance the attraction of migrants with the existing local workforce, ensuring complementary growth and development.

5. Alignment of Visa and Occupational List

Simplifying and consolidating visa categories and occupational list is critical for making the migration system more accessible and efficient. Council recommends a unified list for skilled

visas, reducing complexity and ensuring that visa arrangements are clear and manageable for both migrants and employers.

6. Addressing Regional Priorities – Infrastructure and Housing

Addressing infrastructure and housing needs is vital for supporting regional migration. Council advocates for coordinated investments in physical and social infrastructure, including affordable housing, healthcare, and education facilities. These improvements are essential for accommodating a growing population and enhancing the quality of life for both migrants and locals.

7. Cultural Exchange and Community Support Initiatives

Enhancing community support is crucial for migrant retention. Council advocates for the Federal Government to support initiatives such as cultural exchange programs, community events, and support programs to help migrants integrate and feel welcomed. These efforts are aimed at fostering a sense of belonging and engagement within regional communities, which is key to long-term retention.

In summary, the Western Downs Regional Council underscores the importance of a strategic, place-based approach to regional migration. By focusing on comprehensive data analysis, strong stakeholder engagement, regional concessions, streamlined visa processes, infrastructure development, and community support, this aims to create sustainable, thriving regional communities that attract and retain skilled migrants.

Recommendations

Western Downs Regional Council recommends the Committee:

1. Align Migration Policies with Regional Needs

- 1.1. Region-Specific Skills Plans:** Develop region-specific skills plans and occupational list based on skills audit data and to address both immediate and long-term regional needs. Implementing place-based migration solutions to support employers in the region in filling vacancies and addressing skill shortages.
- 1.2. Approach based on Local Government Area:** Implement an approach based on local government area to identify and address specific regional skill shortages across all visa types.
- 1.3. Alignment with State and Territory upskilling:** Ensure that migration policies align with state and territory upskilling programs, avoiding displacement of the potential local labour force by migrant workers.

2. Undertake Robust Stakeholder Engagement

- 2.1. Regional Stakeholder Engagement:** Consult with local governments, regional stakeholders, and employers on visa and migration changes to ensure policies support regional development.
- 2.2. Data Provision:** Provide accurate migration data to local authorities and support services to design effective cultural exchange and community support programs and anticipate upcoming needs.
- 2.3. Feedback Mechanisms:** Establish mechanisms for gathering input from migrant workers and employers to tailor visa products better and address real needs.

3. Enhance Post-Arrival Support and Community Engagement

- 3.1. Increase Funding for Support Services:** Increase resources for organisations like the Pacific Islands Council of Queensland to provide comprehensive legal and social support for migrants. Extend the support services to migrants in all other visa categories.
- 3.2. Community and Cultural Engagement Initiatives:** Federal government to support local cultural exchange and community support initiatives and programs to help migrants integrate into regional communities, fostering a sense of belonging retention, and community cohesion.
- 3.3. Destination Marketing:** Collaborate with local councils to promote the benefits of regional living, highlighting positive lifestyle aspects.

4. Support Regional Development

4.1. Increase Housing Supply: Coordinate efforts across all government levels to develop affordable and diverse housing options, addressing critical barriers to regional population growth.

4.2. Investment in Infrastructure: Ensure infrastructure development keeps pace with population increases, particularly in childcare, healthcare, and education, to support a growing migrant population.

5. Supports Attraction and Retention initiatives through the region

5.1. Regional Concession: Implement regional concessions to attract migrants to areas with specific skill shortages, including tailored visa arrangements and incentives for ethical employment practices.

5.2. Engage with Pacific Nations: Establish cooperative programs supporting economic development in Pacific nations while addressing labour shortages in Australia, including tailored migration pathways with specific concessions for Pacific migrants.

6. Harmonise Systems and Visa Reform

6.1. Consistent Visa Requirements: Council advocate for uniform provisional visa arrangements across regional visas to provide clarity for employers and migrants.

6.2. Definition of Regions: Aligned with the needs of each local government area.

6.3. Simplified Legislative Instruments: Unify legislative instruments for visas.

6.4. Tailored Approaches: Grant states and territories more flexibility to address unique regional challenges and opportunities in migration planning.

These recommendations aim to create a consistent, responsive, effective regional migration supportive framework, ensuring alignment with our local economic growth, addresses skill shortages, enhances community cohesion and fostering sustainable regional development.

Submission

Question 1. How can the various temporary and permanent visas available to the regions work together to better meet skills needs? For example, Designated Area Migration Agreements (DAMAs) and regional employer sponsored visas.

Western Downs Region Council supports the existing migration system, which includes various settings aimed at supporting regional migration, such as the four pathway groups mentioned on Page 7 of the discussion paper with concession and specific pathways for regional migration. These pathways provide employers with additional options when compared to the standard migration options to bring temporary and permanent workers from overseas, addressing skill shortages and regional needs.

Council has consulted with the Region's Chamber of Commerce and has been advised that employers in the Western Downs region face challenges in navigating the complex system of temporary and permanent visas. The cost of visa application and sponsorship is high. They often require support from specialised migration agents, recruitment, and labour hire companies to understand which visa suits their needs and support them in bringing migrants to the country and support to fill shortages. Constant changes to the system and visa types further lower business confidence in sponsoring migrant workers, adding costs and time burdens that reduce productivity.

Council appreciates the establishment of Jobs and Skills Australia to identify national skill shortages. However, a 'one-size-fits-all' approach cannot address the diverse needs of different regions. Each region, including Western Downs, experiences unique skill shortages that require place-based solutions tailored to specific regional needs.

The existing Designated Area Migration Agreements (DAMA) is essential for addressing unique regional workforce challenges and providing access to more overseas workers. However, the process of securing a DAMA is complex and costly, making it difficult for regions like Western Downs to utilise them effectively. The additional fees and federal endorsement requirements for each occupation add to the complexity, hindering regions from filling specific skill gaps efficiently.

As such, Council would like to propose the following solutions for temporary and permanent visas available to the regions to work together to better meet skills needs in the region:

1. Comprehensive Skills Audit and Workforce Planning:

- 1.1. Skills Audit by State and Territories and Identify Shortage by each Local Government Area:** Council proposed State and Territory authorities conduct skills audits based on comprehensive regional data to identify current and future labour market needs in each local government area. For example, the State of Queensland could identify shortages of feedlot labourers in the Western Downs region, Isaac region, Livingstone Shire region, Noosa region, etc.
- 1.2. Construct Occupational List Based on Skills Audit:** Council recommends constructing occupational list based on these audits, indicating both national

shortages identified by Jobs and Skills Australia and regional shortages identified by state and territory authorities.

2. Alignment of Occupation List Across Visa Types:

- 2.1. **Local Government Area Specific Occupational List:** Council believes in the alignment of local government area with specific occupations based on regional skill shortages. This would enable the federal government to easily identify, and address skill needs in specific regions. Developing local government area specific occupational list allows for more targeted visa allocations and ensures that migrants are moving to areas where their skills are most needed.
- 2.2. **Integration with Visa Conditions:** Council also believes in the alignment of specific conditions of temporary and permanent visas with the local government area specific occupational list. This includes concessions given for visas categories. The creation of an integrated visa system that aligns temporary and permanent visa pathways with regional skill shortages can ensure a seamless transition for migrants and provide long-term stability for regional employers throughout regional Australia, including Western Downs, is better met.
- 2.3. **Responsive to local needs:** Council proposes closer collaboration between the federal government and state and territory authorities to ensure that migration policies are responsive to local needs. This includes regular updates to occupational list based on comprehensive regional data, assist regions to develop regional skills plan that addresses both immediate and long-term needs, ensuring that migration policies align with identified skill shortages.

In summary, Council advocates for a simplified, place-based approach to regional migration that recognises the unique needs of each region. By conducting comprehensive skills audits, creating evidence-based local government area specific occupational list, and aligning list with visa conditions, the various temporary and permanent visas can work together more effectively to meet the skills needs of the Western Downs region.

Question 2.1. Should there be a regional occupational list?

Council believes that any occupational list should be constructed based on comprehensive regional data and skills audits. Occupational list must clearly identify the workforce needs specific to each region, including the types of visa products and relevant concessions to support employers in addressing skill shortages through migration and to ensure that migration policies are accurately aligned with regional economic priorities. A single list for all of regional Australia cannot cater to the unique skill needs of individual regions.

State and Territory authorities should collaborate with Local Governments to determine specific skill shortages within each region. This approach will help to cater to the unique needs of different areas and provide a more tailored solution.

For example, by conducting detailed skills audits, the workforce needs in sectors such as agriculture in the Western Downs can be accurately identified and addressed. This would also support other regions with distinct industries, such as mining in Western Australia or tourism

in Far North Queensland, ensuring that the migration system can be responsive to diverse local demands.

By structuring the occupational list based on local government area specific data, the Federal Government can develop a clear understanding of skill shortages across the nation. This method would allow regions to identify occupations in high demand locally, even if they are not in demand nationwide, ensuring that regional migration policies are effective in supporting local economies and addressing specific skill gaps.

While Council is not supportive of a single regional occupational list for all of regional Australia, Council would like to emphasise the importance of using comprehensive regional data and skills audits to create a migration system that supports the specific workforce needs of each region. This approach ensures that migration policies can be more accurately aligned with regional economic priorities and effectively support the unique skill shortages in regional Australia.

Question 2.2. How should regional occupation lists work alongside the Core Skills Occupation List?

Council believes that the Core Skills Occupation List (CSOL) should cover occupations in demand across Australia, while a complementary list, based on local government area, should focus on occupations particularly needed in specific regions. This approach highlights the distinct differences between national and regional skill shortages and helps address both effectively.

It's natural to have an overlap between the CSOL and the complementary list based on local government area, as some occupations may be in shortage both nationally and regionally. However, having a list based on local government area specific data ensures that local skill needs are accurately reflected and addressed.

For instance, in the Western Downs region, there is a significant demand for skilled workers in the manufacturing sector, particularly for roles such as industrial machinery mechanics and production managers. While these occupations may not be in high demand nationally, they are critical for supporting local manufacturing industries and economic growth. By including these specific occupations in a regional list, local employers have access to the skilled workers they need to maintain and expand their operations.

By identifying key occupations in demand both nationally and regionally, mobility and certainty for skilled workers can be facilitated, ensuring that migration policies are aligned with regional economic priorities and effectively supporting the unique skill shortages in regional Australia.

Question 2.3. What should be considered in compiling the regional occupation list?

Western Downs Regional Council strongly suggests that the Federal Government adopt an occupation list based on local government area specific data, as previously outlined. Compiling this list requires a comprehensive approach that involves consulting with State and Territory governments, local government authorities, regional businesses, and stakeholders to identify region-specific skills gaps and support sustainable population growth through migration.

Key considerations for compiling occupation list include:

1. Local Consultation, Regular Review and Feedback:

- 1.1. **Local Government Involvement:** State and Territory Government consultation should engage with local government authorities to ensure the list reflects the unique needs of each region. Utilise insights from local government strategies and reports, such as the Western Downs Regional Council's Economic Development Strategy (2023 to 2028) and the Deloitte Access Economy Western Downs Skills Gap Analysis Report (2021), which highlight key industries and workforce gaps.
- 1.2. **Business and Stakeholder Feedback:** Include input from regional businesses and industry bodies to identify critical skills shortages and occupation priorities. Establish a mechanism for regular review and feedback from local stakeholders to keep the list responsive to changing regional priorities and economic conditions.
- 1.3. **Dynamic Updates:** Update the list regularly based on new data and insights to ensure it remains relevant and effective in addressing regional skill shortages.

2. Comprehensive Skills Audit:

- 2.1. **State and Territory Skills Audit:** State and Territory to conduct a detailed skills audit to identify current and future labour market needs by local government area, providing a clear understanding of specific skill shortages in each region.
- 2.2. **Local Government Area Specific Data:** Compile the list based on precise data, indicating which occupations are in shortage in specific areas, ensuring that migration policies are accurately aligned with regional economic priorities.

3. Support Regional Development Goals:

- 3.1. **Local Economic and Industry Needs:** Assess current and projected economic growth sectors, including occupations that are critical for upcoming infrastructure projects to ensure the workforce is prepared for regional development initiatives. Ensure the occupation list supports sustainable regional growth, enhances local productivity, and addresses long-term development goals.
- 3.2. **Demographic Trends:** Consider population growth patterns and workforce demographics to align the occupation list with regional economic development goals.

By considering these factors, the occupation list can be tailored to support the specific needs of the Western Downs and other regional areas, ensuring that migration policies effectively address local skill shortages and contribute to regional development.

Question 3. Could the definitions of regional be aligned across the various regional visas? How can definitions be structured to better account for the unique circumstances of regions?

Western Downs Regional Council supports aligning the definitions of regional areas across various regional visas to simplify and enhance the effectiveness of migration policies. Currently, the broad definition of "regional" as areas outside of Sydney, Melbourne, and Brisbane does not sufficiently address the unique circumstances and needs of different regions. The discussion paper also mentioned that the current definition of regional adds complexity to the migration system. As the definition of regions could have a flow-on effect on the type of visa products and concessions provided to employers and migrants, being able to define specific regions of regional Australia is integral for identifying region-specific gaps and increases the efficiency of the migration system.

1. Unified Regional Definition Framework:

1.1. Consistency Across Visas: Council believes the definition of regional areas should be based on their unique characteristics and needs. For example, differentiating between remote areas, rural areas, and regional cities can help target specific migration incentives and support. Establishing a consistent definition of "regional" for all regional visas as this unified framework would reduce complexity for employers and migrants, making it easier to navigate the visa system.

2. Factors in Regional Classification:

2.1. Local Government Area Based Classification: Define regional areas using local government area-based classification. This method ensures that specific local needs and conditions are accurately represented.

2.2. Economic and Social Indicators: Incorporate economic indicators (e.g., local industry needs, employment rates) and social indicators (e.g., population density, infrastructure availability) to create a nuanced classification of regional areas. Council also supports the definition to allow for periodic review and adjustment of regional definitions to adapt to changing economic conditions and development priorities.

2.3. Local Government Input: Engage with local governments, such as the Western Downs Regional Council, to identify and classify regions based on firsthand knowledge of local conditions and development goals.

3. Alignment with Regional Development Plans:

3.1. Integration with Local Strategies: Align regional definitions with local and state development strategies, such as the Western Downs Regional Council's Economic Development Strategy (2023 to 2028), which highlights the region's focus on intensive agriculture, manufacturing, and energy sectors.

3.2. Infrastructure and Project Considerations: Consider ongoing and planned infrastructure projects, such as the \$7.5 billion of projects in development identified in the Toowoomba and Surat Basin Enterprise (TSBE) Western Downs Development Status Report 2024, to ensure migration policies support these initiatives.

By aligning regional definitions across various visas and structuring them to reflect the unique circumstances of each region, the migration system can be more effectively tailored to support regional development and address specific skill shortages. This approach will help regions like the Western Downs attract and retain the workforce needed to drive local economic growth and prosperity.

Question 4. How can we reform Working Holiday Maker program visa settings to limit exploitation, while still ensuring regional Australia can access the workers it needs? For example, are there innovative strategies to incentivise Working Holiday Makers to choose regional Australia as their preferred destination, without tying the incentives to specified work visa requirements?

Western Downs Regional Council acknowledges the challenges associated with the Working Holiday Maker (WHM) program and supports reforms that limit exploitation while ensuring regional areas can attract the necessary workforce. While the Council recognises that specific innovative incentives are best identified by the State and Territory Government as the State and Territory Government's capacity to provide comprehensive feedback due to their broader data access, we can suggest several strategies for consideration.

1. Freedom to Change Employers within the Same Industry:

1.1. Addressing Exploitation: To mitigate exploitation, WHM visa holders should be permitted and have the flexibility to change employers within the same industry if they face exploitative conditions. This flexibility can empower workers to leave adverse situations without the fear of losing their visas and jeopardising their visa status.

1.2. Industry Consistency: Ensuring to maintain employment within the same sector (e.g., agriculture) ensures that regional industries continue to have access to necessary labour without disruption.

2. Enhanced Awareness and Support:

2.1. Educational Campaigns: Implement educational campaigns to inform WHM visa holders about their rights and available support systems. This can reduce fear of reporting exploitation and encourage a more supportive work environment.

2.2. Support Services: Establish dedicated support services for WHM visa holders in regional areas to aid and advice on employment-related issues.

3. Ensure Alignment of Incentives with Goals:

3.1. Non-Exploitative Incentives: Any incentives designed to attract WHM visa holders to regional areas must align with the goal of preventing exploitation. They should not create conditions that make workers vulnerable to abuse or mistreatment.

3.2. Equitable Distribution: Incentives should be structured to ensure they do not disproportionately affect the labour supply in other regions. This balance is crucial to avoid creating labour shortages in non-regional areas.

3.3. Supporting Regional Needs: Incentives should be tailored to meet the specific workforce needs of regional areas, ensuring they support local industries and economic development without leading to unintended negative consequences.

4. Leveraging Local Economic and Development Strategies:

4.1. Alignment with Regional Plans: Align WHM visa incentives with regional economic and development strategies. For example, Western Downs Regional Council's Economic Development Strategy (2023 - 2028) highlights key industries such as intensive agriculture, manufacturing, and energy. Tailored incentives can be developed to attract workers to these sectors.

4.2. Project Integration: Integrate incentives with ongoing and planned infrastructure projects, such as the \$7.5 billion worth of developments identified in the TSBE Western Downs Development Status Report 2024. This can create attractive employment opportunities for WHM visa holders.

5. Regular Review and Adjustment:

5.1. Responsive Policy Framework: Establish a mechanism for regular review and adjustment of WHM visa settings to ensure they remain responsive to changing economic conditions and labour market needs.

5.2. Stakeholder Engagement: Engage with local businesses, industry bodies, and community groups to gather feedback and ensure policies are effectively addressing regional workforce requirements.

By implementing these strategies, Western Downs Regional Council believes that the WHM program can be reformed to limit exploitation while ensuring regional areas, including Western Downs, can attract and retain the workforce needed to support local industries and economic growth.

Question 5. How can we ensure a more consistent approach to lower paid migration across various visa products, as well as reflect our commitment to maintain the primacy of our relationships with the Pacific?

Western Downs Regional Council recognises the importance of a consistent approach to lower-paid migration across various visa products, ensuring alignment with Australia's commitment to maintaining strong relationships with Pacific nations. Council specifically considers the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme in its response.

1. Comprehensive Post-Arrival Support and Improved Resource Allocation:

Council strongly advocates for increased funding and resources for post-arrival support for migrants under the PALM Scheme. Organisations like the Pacific Islands Council of Queensland (PICQ), which delivers the Community Connections initiatives, are currently under-resourced. Enhanced funding would enable these organisations to hire additional qualified support staff, expand service coverage, and provide comprehensive legal and social support. Ensuring migrants understand their rights and obligations is crucial to addressing

challenges such as legal support and social integration, ultimately fostering better relationships between migrant workers and their local communities.

2. Support Cultural Exchange and Community Support Initiatives:

Council strongly advocates for the Federal government to support local government or support services to deliver cultural exchange and community support initiatives to facilitate better understanding and integration of Pacific migrants into host communities in the region. These programs can include community events, educational workshops, and cultural festivals that celebrate the heritage of Pacific migrants while fostering mutual respect and understanding. By encouraging cultural exchange, migrants can feel more welcomed and supported, which aids in their social integration and enhances community cohesion.

3. Employer Incentives for Ethical Practices:

Offering incentives to employers who adhere to best practices in hiring and managing lower-paid migrant workers is essential. Ensuring employers provide fair wages, safe working conditions, and opportunities for skill development helps protect migrant workers from exploitation and ensures that regional employers can access a reliable and productive workforce.

4. Stakeholder Engagement and Feedback Mechanisms:

Council advocates for robust stakeholder engagement and the establishment of feedback mechanisms, particularly seeking input from migrant workers and PALM participants already in Australia. Conducting studies across regional areas to understand the needs and experiences of these workers and their employers can help tailor visa products to better suit their circumstances. Using this feedback to structure visa products ensures they reflect the real needs of migrants, enhancing the benefits for both migrants and the Australian economy.

5. Bilateral and Multilateral Collaboration:

Council encourages the Australian Government to continue engaging in bilateral and multilateral agreements with Pacific nations to create tailored migration pathways that benefit both sending and receiving countries. Establishing cooperative programs that support the economic development of Pacific nations while addressing labour shortages in Australia is crucial. Such agreements should include specific concessions for Pacific migrants, similar to those in place for countries like India, ensuring a streamlined and supportive migration process.

By implementing these strategies, Western Downs Regional Council believes that Australia can ensure a more consistent and ethical approach to lower-paid migration, while also maintaining and strengthening its relationships with Pacific nations.

Question 6. Noting the limitations of visa settings, what factors encourage more migrants to choose to settle in the regions and improve retention?

Western Downs Regional Council recognises the necessity for coordinated, long-term planning to address the needs of regional areas and improve migrant retention. Council urges the Department of Home Affairs to engage with stakeholders in housing, infrastructure,

education, employment, and local government authorities to develop a place-based, collaborative approach to future needs. Consulting stakeholders who foster community connectivity for migrants is also crucial for retention across regional Australia. This region-specific consultation with key stakeholders will assist in identifying exacerbating pre-existing pressures in regional communities and align migration settings with population, connectivity, infrastructure, housing, and services investment across all levels of government.

1. Housing Supply:

A primary challenge and barrier to population growth in the Western Downs is the availability of housing. Council strongly advocates for a coordinated approach between the Federal Government, State and Territory Governments, and Local Government to increase the housing supply in the region, specifically in the Western Downs. Investing in the development of affordable and diverse housing options is crucial. This includes constructing new homes, refurbishing existing properties, and ensuring a mix of rental and ownership opportunities. With sufficient housing supply, this could have a positive flow-on effect, attracting workers in other areas of skill shortages, such as education and healthcare, and enhancing overall community stability.

2. Strong Investment in Social and Physical Infrastructure:

Western Downs Regional Council strongly recommends that consideration should be given to how an increase in population can be complemented by an increase in both social and physical infrastructure, ensuring that growing demand on social and physical infrastructure does not exceed and place undue pressure on regional community capacity. Coordinating with federal, state, and local governments is essential to ensure that infrastructure development matches population increases. Long-term planning of investments in transportation, healthcare, and education is critical to supporting a growing population and enhancing the quality of life for migrants. For example, the Western Downs faces high demand for childcare services, particularly for children aged 6 weeks to 3 years. Long waitlists (up to 24 months) can force families to leave the region to secure childcare. Addressing this shortage is crucial to retaining migrant families and supporting their participation in the workforce. Many migrant parents prioritise the availability of services and amenities for their children. Adequate schooling, recreational facilities, and healthcare services make regions more attractive for families. Regions with limited access to these services may struggle to retain migrant families, who might move to metropolitan areas for better opportunities for their children.

3. Sense of Community:

A significant factor for migrants choosing to reside in regional areas is the sense of community connection and engagement. Many migrants come from cultures where community bonds are strong, and finding a similar sense of belonging in their new environment is vital. Accessible support services, cultural exchange and community support initiatives, community events, and networks that help migrants integrate and connect with locals can make the transition smoother and more appealing.

4. Stability of Employment:

Job availability and security are critical in encouraging migrants to settle in regional areas. Metropolitan areas often appear more attractive due to lower unemployment rates and higher job security. Ensuring regional areas offer stable, secure employment opportunities can help counter this trend and make regional living more appealing.

5. Upskilling Locals within the Region:

The need for locals to move away for skill development is a significant barrier. This risks the potential of newly acquired skills to not return to the region as they must travel large distances to be able to acquire these skills. Providing local upskilling opportunities ensures that both new migrants and existing residents can develop their skills without leaving the region. This not only helps retain talent but also contributes to the economic growth of regional Australia through increased local expertise.

6. Enhance Destination Marketing:

Council recommends that the Federal Government collaborate more with local councils on destination marketing to promote the benefits of regional living. Highlighting the positive aspects of regional lifestyles, such as a slower pace, cleaner environment, strong community ties, and diverse employment opportunities, can attract more migrants. Council has already invested in promotional materials and seeks Federal Government support to strengthen these efforts to attract skilled migrants to the region.

By implementing these strategies, Western Downs Regional Council believes that Australia can encourage more migrants to settle in regional areas, improving retention and contributing to the sustainable growth of these communities.

Question 7.1. Do provisional visas successfully encourage large scale retention of migrants in the regions?

Western Downs Regional Council believes that provisional visas are crucial for regional industries to fill worker shortages and provide migrants the opportunity to experience regional Australia. The provisional visa requirement does encourage retention and residence in regional areas for those applying for permanent residency. As evidenced by the 65.7% of overseas-born residents actively participating in the local workforce, Council believes that the visa itself is not the issue. Rather, it is the factors that entice migrants to stay in the region after obtaining permanent residency. Addressing the needs for housing, childcare, upskilling, and infrastructure is critical. Migrants often leave regional areas due to a lack of social and community engagement, which metropolitan cities offer. By meeting the needs of the local community, the region can become more attractive and successfully retain migrant workers after their provisional visas expire.

The council recommends the following:

1. Community Support Initiatives:

Council advocates for developing community support systems that help migrants integrate into the regional community, regardless of visa category. Building roots and networks with locals will encourage migrants on provisional visas to stay in the region after gaining permanent residency. A strong sense of community engagement and belonging is a major determinant of migrant retention in regional Australia. Council suggests the federal government supports cultural exchange and community support initiatives through local government and support services. This will provide migrants with a sense of belonging, encouraging them to stay in the region.

2. Infrastructure and Housing Supply:

Investing in physical and social infrastructure is essential to accommodate both locals and migrants. A coordinated approach between federal, state, and local governments to increase housing supply in the Western Downs is necessary. Providing affordable and diverse housing options, including new constructions and refurbishments, will attract and retain migrants.

3. Upskilling Opportunity in Regions:

The lack of local upskilling opportunities is a significant barrier. Ensuring that both new and existing residents can develop their skills locally will retain talent and contribute to regional economic growth. Attracting migrants through available upskilling opportunities supports both local skill requirements and migrant worker retention.

By addressing these factors and fostering a supportive environment, the Western Downs Regional Council believes that provisional visas can successfully encourage large-scale retention of migrants in regional areas.

Question 7.2. Is the length of a provisional visa the right length? Should both the regional employer sponsored visa and the regional nominated visa have the same provisional visa arrangements?

Western Downs Regional Council believes that the length of provisional visas plays a crucial role in allowing regional employers to fill skill gaps that cannot be addressed locally. The length should be sufficient to address immediate regional skill shortages and foster a sense of community among migrants. The focus should be on ensuring that the duration allows migrants to settle, familiarise themselves with the region, build community connections, and form relationships.

1. Consistency in Visa Arrangements:

Council supports having the same provisional visa arrangements for all regional visas. Consistent visa requirements provide clarity for both employers and migrants, facilitating smoother processes and better understanding. A uniform approach ensures that employers know what to expect and migrants can make informed decisions about their stay and integration into the community.

2. Focus on Community Integration:

Beyond the visa length, Council suggests that migrants should be required to settle in a regional area for a specific number of years that the duration is deemed sufficient for migrants to settle, familiarise themselves with the region, and build strong community connections and relationships. These steps are vital for fostering a sense of belonging, which naturally enhances retention rates in regional areas. A duration stay in the region on a provisional visa allows migrants enough time to integrate into the community, making it more likely they will remain in the region after fulfilling their visa requirements. Successful community integration is key to retaining migrants, as it helps them establish roots and feel a part of the local community.

Western Downs Regional Council emphasises that while the length of provisional visas is important, the critical factors are the opportunities for migrants to integrate to attract and retain them. By ensuring consistency in visa arrangements and opportunity in community integration, the region can effectively fill skill gaps and build a cohesive, vibrant community.

Question 8. How can we improve planning for regional migration, especially given the return of migrants to regional Australia post-pandemic? Should there be more flexibility provided to states and territories in planning for regional migration?

Western Downs Regional Council emphasises the importance of strategic and coordinated planning to effectively manage regional migration post-pandemic. Given the changing dynamics, it is crucial to align migration policies with the region's specific needs and priorities. Western Downs Regional Council believes that improved coordination across the Federal, State, and Local Government levels is essential for effective regional migration planning. Ensuring all levels of government are aligned on migration policies will enhance strategic planning and implementation. This coordinated approach will allow for better feedback mechanisms, enabling continuous improvement in migration systems.

1. Consultation with Local Government Authorities (LGAs) and Stakeholders:

The Council advocates for comprehensive consultation with local government authorities, regional stakeholders, and employers during skills audits or any changes to regional migration policies. This collaborative effort will help develop the occupational list and regional skills plan that addresses both immediate and long-term needs, ensuring that migration policies align with identified skill shortages. The skills plan would indicate which skills and occupations can be filled by improving local training opportunities and which skills required external migrants to fill shortages. Council also advocates for a fair policy that ensures migration complements State and Territory investment into upskilling and connecting current youth, disadvantaged and/or unemployed individuals to fill skill shortages. A coordinated approach between migration policy attracting workers and State and Territory government training and upskilling programs should be adopted to ensure that the potential local labour force is not crowded out by the migrant workforce. The skills planning could allow Council and relevant stakeholders to provide input on how to shape the place-based region-specific occupational list for the Federal Government for migration purpose and on what skilling and training program the State and Territory should support for the region specifically.

2. Movement Data and migration numbers to provide to LGAs:

Providing local government authorities (LGAs) with accurate movement data and migration numbers is crucial. This information will enable LGAs and local support services to design

cultural exchange and community support programs with the support of the Federal Government, anticipate upcoming needs, and coordinate services effectively to support migrants in the region.

3. Incentives for Regional Migration:

It was made known to Council that due to Covid-19 concessions were put in place to encourage migrants to work in Australia throughout the pandemic. The council believes that throughout the planning of regional migration for regional settings, certain regional concessions should be in place to encourage migrants to work in regional areas. Given that the Federal Government provides States and Territories greater access to regional migration planning along with co-ordination between Federal Government, State and Territory Governments, and local government authorities, regional concessions would then reflect certain skill shortages throughout regional Australia of each state, leading to the attraction of workers in regional Australia.

4. Flexibility to States and Territories:

Council supports greater flexibility for states and territories in planning for regional migration. Considering that each state and territory understands the condition of its own economic situation and areas of skill shortages, giving more flexibility would allow for tailored approaches that address unique regional challenges and opportunities. Additionally, enhanced coordination across all government levels will empower local governments and regional authorities, to contribute to visa product planning that can be more responsive and effective in meeting the specific needs of different areas, fostering future regional development.

5. Streamlining Legislative Instruments:

Council recommends simplifying the legislative instruments for skilled visa types. With 10 subclasses of skilled visas and 8 different legislative instruments specifying various occupations in demand, the current system is complex. Consolidating these instruments into a single list for all skilled visa types would reduce complexity and make the migration system more accessible.

To improve planning for regional migration post-pandemic, Western Downs Regional Council advocates for better coordination across government levels, comprehensive stakeholder consultation, accurate data provision, regional migration incentives, flexibility for states and territories, and streamlined legislative instruments. These measures will enhance strategic planning and implementation, attract, and retain migrants, and ensure the sustainable development of regional areas.

Stakeholder Consultation

Western Downs Regional Council has consulted the following stakeholders to provide input for this submission:

- Pacific Islands Council of QLD
- Darling Downs African Communities Council
- Chinchilla Community Commerce & Industry
- Wandoan Community Commerce and Industry
- Miles & District Chamber of Commerce
- Regional Australia Institute

Conclusion

Western Downs Regional Council extends its appreciation for the opportunity to respond to the 2024 Review of Regional Migration Setting.

We hope that this submission provides an opportunity to the Federal Government to better understand how migration setting in Australia can address skill shortages within the workforce and continue to support the economic growth throughout regional Australia.

Contact Details

Please do not hesitate to contact Prince Lo, Economic Development Program Leader via email prince.lo@wdrc.qld.gov.au or phone (07) 4503 1359 should you wish to discuss any aspect of this submission.

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