



2025

WHEATBELT FUTURES FORUM

WHITE PAPER

TABLE OF CONTENTS

01

Introduction

14

Session Two Pt 2 Q&A

02

Session One Summary

16

Session Three Summary

06

Session Two Pt 1 Summary

21

Session Three Q&A

09

Session Two Pt 1 Q&A

23

Agriculture Panel

11

Session Two Pt 2 Summary

25

Key Topics

INTRODUCTION

The third annual Wheatbelt Futures Forum, presented by the Northam Chamber of Commerce and the Wheatbelt Business Network built upon the well-established foundation of previous years' efforts to cement the event as a staple of the local events calendar.

Originally developed as an opportunity for businesses and stakeholders to receive information from local industry experts on future opportunities within the region, the event has gone from strength to strength, securing the support of local and state government representatives.

This Wheatbelt Futures Forum White Paper has been produced with the members of the Northam Chamber of Commerce and Wheatbelt Business Network in mind by providing a summary of guest speakers, question and answer sessions and identifying key themes of the day.

The White Paper can be used as a tool for stakeholders to review topics of interest, engage with speakers from the day, and pursue opportunities for their own business.

It has been a pleasure to produce this paper for a third year.

**Eliza Bidstrup
Avon Creative Media**

SESSION ONE

HON. STEPHEN DAWSON MLC

MINISTER FOR REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Stephen Dawson, WA Minister for Regional Development, highlighted the Wheatbelt region's critical role in Western Australia's economic and sustainable development. He emphasised the region's diversity, contributing \$17 billion annually to the state's economy, and underscored its potential to drive future growth through innovation and resilience.

Dawson highlighted the State Government's "Made in WA" initiative, focusing on workforce development and leadership in emerging industries. He referred to the Wheatbelt as a leader in renewable energy, with 900 MW of clean energy generated from solar and wind farms within the region and 36 active projects, 15 supported by WA energy programs. To ensure continued innovation, the government is investing \$70 million over the next five years in a clean energy skills TAFE center.

The region's \$1.1 billion manufacturing sector was described as a magnet for innovation, with hubs like Avon Industrial Park and the proposed Avon West Logistics Hub poised to strengthen national supply chains. Towns like Cunderdin, Williams, and Dalwallinu are transforming into manufacturing hubs, fostering local job creation and economic growth.

Dawson noted significant population growth, driven by Perth's expansion, improved transport links, and the Wheatbelt's appealing lifestyle. This growth brings challenges, particularly in housing and infrastructure. To address these, the \$38.2 million Wheatbelt Regional Housing Initiative will deliver 400 new homes, easing housing pressures and supporting workforce retention. Dawson reiterated that partnerships with local governments are central to identifying land for development.

Investments in digital infrastructure were also highlighted, including \$5 million to support automatic transfer and backup units, enhancing regional connectivity and resilience. Dawson recognised the region's emerging industries, particularly in mining and minerals, and celebrated the 9,500 small businesses in the Wheatbelt as a testament to its entrepreneurial spirit.

He praised the Wheatbelt as a powerhouse of innovation and renewable energy, demonstrating leadership in shaping WA's future. Dawson also welcomed the new Minister for Regions Wheatbelt Sabine Winton, encouraging attendees to work closely with her as a champion for regional WA. Dawson spoke about the region with optimism, confident that the Wheatbelt's talent, ambition, and infrastructure investments will secure a prosperous and sustainable future for the region and Western Australia.

ROB COSSART

WHEATBELT DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION

Rob Cossart, CEO of the Wheatbelt Development Commission (WDC), provided an insightful reflection on the Wheatbelt's present economic status and its trajectory for the future. He emphasised the region's robust economic performance, with a Gross Regional Product (GRP) of \$8.99 billion, 30,706 jobs, and a low unemployment rate of 3.66%. Key industries in the region include agriculture, mining, construction, manufacturing, and retail services, making the Wheatbelt a cornerstone of WA's economy.

Cossart highlighted the Wheatbelt's unique structure, comprising five distinct subregions, each with specialised industries. He stressed the need for flexible, place-based plans to leverage these individual strengths. The region aspires to become the inland gateway to Perth, with a diversified economy, vibrant communities, strong digital connectivity, and efficient freight and logistics systems.

Digital advancements, such as the Telstra intercity dark fibre network offering ultra-fast speeds of up to 83.6 Tbps, position towns like Northam and Merredin as hubs for data-driven industries. Investments exceeding \$387.5 million in freight infrastructure, including the AvonWest project and Bindoon Bypass, aim to enhance supply chain resilience and regional competitiveness.

Population growth at 2.4%, particularly in the Central Coast region of the Wheatbelt, underscores the need for housing, services, and infrastructure. Initiatives like the \$32.8 million Wheatbelt Regional Housing Initiative will deliver 400 new homes, supporting livability and workforce retention. Cossart underscored the importance of livability, emphasising investments in digital connectivity, tourism, and strategies to support ageing populations through the "Living Well in the Wheatbelt" initiative.

Emerging opportunities in the Wheatbelt include agriculture and mining downstream processing, renewable energy, biofuels, and manufacturing hubs. The region's tourism sector attracts 1.1 million visitors annually, with iconic events and destinations driving growth. A dedicated tourism strategy for the Wheatbelt aims to expand this potential further.

Challenges remain, including workforce shortages, infrastructure gaps, and supply chain vulnerabilities. Addressing these requires collaboration across governments, industries, and communities. Cossart highlighted successes like the Wheatbelt Secondary Freight Network as examples of collective action delivering impactful results.

The WDC is tracking \$20 billion in renewable energy investments across 23 wind and six solar projects. Efforts to develop Northam as a freight and logistics hub and unlock residential and industrial land signify the region's readiness for future growth. Cossart reaffirmed the WDC's commitment to investing in people, enhancing livability, and fostering collaboration to ensure a prosperous and sustainable future for the Wheatbelt.

AARON MOREY

CHAMBER OF COMMERCE AND INDUSTRY WA

Aaron Morey, Chief Economist at the Chamber of Commerce and Industry WA, discussed global and local economic trends, highlighting challenges and opportunities for the Wheatbelt and the state as a whole.

Morey highlighted ongoing global trade uncertainties, particularly the U.S. President's efforts to reshape trade by incentivising domestic manufacturing to counter China's influence. He critiqued this approach, emphasising its inflationary effects and potential economic harm to the U.S. Meanwhile, Australia's avoidance of such trade conflicts positions the country to experience lower interest rates and economic stability. Rising global anxieties around conflict and geopolitical tensions also loom large.

WA's post-COVID recovery has been exceptionally robust, with economic activity surpassing levels seen during the 2010s mining boom. Mining, which constitutes 45% of the state's economy, alongside construction and healthcare, has been pivotal. However, rising business insolvencies signal emerging pressures as economic supports taper off.

Key challenges facing WA businesses include rising operating costs, labour shortages, regulatory compliance burdens, housing shortages for workers, and supply chain disruptions. In the Wheatbelt, 50% of recent survey respondents reported that housing shortages directly impede their ability to hire and retain staff. Business priorities for the next year include adopting new technologies, improving digital presence, and expanding operations within WA, as indicated by local survey results.

Population growth, driven primarily by overseas migration, has fuelled high demand in the housing sector, leading to tight market conditions. While housing supply is beginning to pick up, the imbalance between supply and demand remains a critical issue. This has contributed to cost-of-living pressures and declining disposable incomes.

Morey anticipates a global slowdown in economic growth, but WA's economy is well-positioned to thrive. A weaker Australian dollar will benefit exports, and increased defence spending offers new opportunities. Investment in renewable energy, alongside diversification in industries like defence, life sciences, and space, aligns well with WA's strengths. The labour market is expected to improve gradually, but housing shortages will persist in the short term.

On a positive note, Morey expressed confidence in WA's economic future. Strategic investments, particularly in renewable energy and diversification, will underpin sustainable growth, while businesses in the Wheatbelt must continue adapting to an evolving economic landscape.

SESSION TWO

Jai Thomas, Deputy Director General – Coordinator of Energy, leading the Energy Policy WA (EPWA) group within the Department of Energy and Mining Infrastructure and Renewable Systems (DEMIRS), addressed the rapid growth in electricity demand within the state and the challenges and opportunities arising from energy transitions.

Thomas highlighted a surge in electricity demand across WA, particularly in regions stretching from Kalbarri to Kalgoorlie. Peak energy usage demands, which last peaked in 2016, reached a new record in January 2024, driven by population growth, increased household usage, and the electrification of vehicles and AI systems. This trend is expected to continue, necessitating urgent planning to ensure consistent energy supply.

Thomas believes the government's 2030 coal phase-out represents both a challenge and an opportunity for Wheatbelt businesses. The decline in coal's economic viability has accelerated the shift to renewable energy. However, the phase-out will lead to a decline in supply from 2026-27, requiring significant investments in new generation capacity and network infrastructure to meet future demand.

Renewables currently account for 38% of WA's energy generation, predominantly from rooftop solar. Operational projects such as the Collgar Wind Farm, Emu Downs Wind Farm, and the Cunderdin Hybrid Solar Battery Facility exemplify the region's progress. Future projects like the Kulin West, Walebing, and Bellwether wind farms will further enhance renewable energy capacity. The Wheatbelt plays a pivotal role in powering the state's future, presenting vast opportunities for regional investment and economic diversification.

Thomas emphasised the need for new and upgraded transmission lines to distribute renewable energy efficiently. While leveraging existing transmission infrastructure is preferred, increased capacity will be required to handle growing activity. Hosting large-scale energy projects introduces challenges for regional areas unfamiliar with such infrastructure, including through environmental impacts, securing social license, and addressing housing shortages.

The energy transition offers significant economic and community benefits, including diversification, emerging industries, and localised growth. Initiatives like PoweringWA, established by the state government, aim to coordinate the delivery of new energy infrastructure, ensuring regional areas benefit from these developments.

Thomas reaffirmed the importance of collaborative planning and investment in renewable energy and infrastructure, positioning WA and the Wheatbelt as leaders in the global energy transition. While challenges remain, the Wheatbelt is uniquely equipped to seize opportunities in this evolving energy landscape.

RACHEL THOMAS

REGIONAL TECH HUB

Rachael Thomas from the Regional Tech Hub, emphasised the critical role of reliable connectivity for regional businesses and communities. She highlighted the tangible costs of poor connectivity on businesses, including lost time, productivity, and revenue, stressing that stability is more crucial than speed for regional businesses. Reliable connections ensure continuity, while redundancy is essential during outages.

Efforts are underway to improve regional connectivity through national and state programs such as the NBN upgrades, the Mobile Black Spot Program, and the Regional Connectivity Program. While these initiatives are making a difference, their impact can be uneven, with many businesses still facing challenges like poor coverage, satellite congestion, and long wait times for new services.

Thomas stressed the importance of awareness and understanding of connectivity options. Many regional users are unaware of their service providers or available plans, leaving them without optimal solutions. The Regional Tech Hub offers free, independent advice to address these gaps. It helps with troubleshooting, equipment guidance, and finding the best connectivity options for specific locations.

She encouraged people to check their hardware, optimise their router placement, and report issues to service providers. Advocacy and awareness are key to ensuring regional communities fully benefit from available technology advancements.

NAOMI EVANS

NBN LOCAL

Naomi Evans from nbn Local underscored the importance of fast and reliable digital infrastructure in fostering regional growth. She noted that 80% of Australia's data traffic relies on the NBN, with 99% of premises able to connect and 8.5 million already accessing the network. Modern data usage in WA averages 461GB per month per premises, driven by the needs of regional businesses, education, healthcare, and emergency services.

Evans highlighted the role of connectivity in economic growth and job creation, with 78% of remote workers affirming that the NBN positively impacted their productivity. Evans said as much of daily work and data storage has moved to the cloud, access to higher speeds and reliable connections has become essential.

She detailed ongoing network upgrades, including fibre expansions enabling gigabit speeds for 9.4 million premises and plans to provide upgrade paths for all fibre-to-the-node premises by 2030, which will benefit 622,000 homes and businesses.

Evans mentioned the Sky Muster satellite program, which now offers uncapped data, and plans to explore low Earth orbit satellite solutions to ensure continuity as Sky Muster nears end of life. These advancements aim to enhance connectivity and support regional resilience.

SESSION TWO PART ONE

QUESTION AND ANSWER PANEL

Jai Thomas - DEMIRS

Q: There are a lot of renewable energy projects in development in WA. The Government is also investing in the Energy Skills National Centre of Excellence. What specific skills are needed to keep up with these developments?

A: We need to continue to scale up our traditional trades and offer them with new technologies to work with machinists, operators and construction workforce. The TAFE network rollout will help ensure that those skills are contemporary and that people will have access to learning about wind turbines and batteries. There will be new industries and jobs created as a result of renewable energy projects but we also need to uplift the volume of people in traditional trade roles.

Q: There is a critical need for resilient power. Is mandating minimum backup power infrastructure and power restoration times the solution to ensuring better connectivity? What is department doing to address backup power to critical infrastructure?

A: Mandating through law isn't the way to make it happen as we have the issue of who is responsible and who pays. There has been strong Government investment into the reliability of communications infrastructure and subsidies for batteries may come after the Federal Election. There is also a wealth of funding available for backup power supply and the role of the State Government is to make sure that those opportunities are well known. The main focus at the moment is ensuring that the existing power supply is reliable and planning to identify where further upgrades are needed.

Rachel Thomas - Regional Tech Hub

Q: What training and development is in place to help businesses with the transition in connectivity and technology?

A: We need to develop a strong digital literacy. We need to employ and attract people into our businesses who are curious, adapt well to change, have a strong willingness to learn and who know how to use the tools because we are moving so fast that we need to find people who aren't afraid of change.

Q: Digital literacy is extremely low in the regions. There is a gap between the regions and metropolitan area. What are the key investment priorities that are needed to bridge the gap.

A: We need to concentrate on connectivity literacy and ask ourselves whether we are trained to put too much responsibility on the consumer to understand new technology. In the regions we have more technologies and want our connectivity to plug in and work the first time. It would be great to get it to the point where it was that simple and where we don't have to exist and support people. We need to invest in simplifying technology systems so that consumers have a turn key experience.

SESSION TWO PART ONE

QUESTION AND ANSWER PANEL

Naomi Evans - nbn Local

Q: How does the NBN help businesses be attractive?

A: We have tried to understand how being online works in a regional world. People in the regions want to have a strong online connection to keep in touch with family and friends, to access education online and access telehealth services. From a business perspective, in order to be competitive you need to have connectivity to complete grant applications and reach customers.

Michael Heydon - Telstra

Q: When power goes down, our communication goes down. What investment is being made into power reliability on telecommunications infrastructure?

A: We work with all levels of Government on this. It is not as simple as identifying a site and putting a big battery there. We need to ensure that all pieces of the chain are working to ensure stable connectivity. It is all well and good to have mains power but if another site has lost transmission, the main tower still may not be working. We need to focus on where those key transmission points are.

Q: With the development of the Telstra dark fibre network along the Great Eastern Highway, what type of businesses are you seeing that we could target with the fibre network.

A: We currently have a number of fibres in the network that are more than 40 years old and they are running out of capacity. The establishment of the new network will have hundreds of times the capacity. The reason for building it is to give high quality transmission for data centres for super speed connectivity. Along those routes like the Great Eastern Highway you have opportunities for businesses to get on that network. It is not the sort of thing for the average consumer but more for data centres as it is an expensive exercise.

Q: The regions have taken up the Starlink service at rapid pace, does it leave regional WA vulnerable relying on international services?

A. I don't believe it leaves us vulnerable. Telstra sell on for Starlink. We wouldn't enter into a deal with a business we didn't think was reliable. We work with international partners all the time whether it be for making modems or relying on the international supply chain.

Q: With the de-commissioning of the 3G network how is Telstra working to address coverage gaps?

A: We have always had gaps in coverage and have never claimed that we have had coverage everywhere. We always wish it was better. 3G was very old technology. It was great when it started but in 2025 it was not up to scratch. We have 4G where we used to have 3G and there have been some cases of little niggles but we have been working to iron those out. If you have any specific location gaps get in touch and we can look into our coverage maps.

MELANIE BROWN

NEWROC

Melanie Brown, President of NEWROC (North Eastern Wheatbelt Region of Councils), emphasised the region's commitment to sustaining the present while building a prosperous future. She highlighted NEWROC's collaborative approach, values of regional commitment, community focus, accountability, innovation, and collaboration, and its ability to address both opportunities and challenges.

Representing a population of 3,200 and over 570 businesses generating \$460 million in agricultural production, NEWROC communities generate a substantial portion of the regions economic output. NEWROC's past initiatives, such as the Wheatbelt Way Self-Drive Route, demonstrate the group's innovative spirit. This project, developed 15 years ago, showcases 24 unique sites and integrates new attractions like stargazing and wildflowers, enhancing tourism and community engagement.

Connectivity improvements have also been a priority for NEWROC and the communities it represents, with \$1.2 million in funding secured for enhanced telecommunications networks via Crisp Wireless. This investment enabled 13 towers across the NEWROC region to be installed, providing fast, reliable internet, which proved crucial during recent severe weather events.

Brown also addressed the economic and social challenges posed by the phase-out of live sheep exports. The region's 400,000 sheep support 180 businesses and contribute \$18.7 million annually to the economy. A NEWROC commissioned study revealed a 20-year policy impact of \$128 million in economic losses and \$34.6 million in reduced household income. These findings were presented to both state and federal governments last year, in an effort to highlight the ripple effects on government services, school numbers, and mental health in regional communities.

Brown highlighted the region's resilience being tested during the January 2024 storms, which caused prolonged power outages, some lasting up to nine days, resulting in economic losses of up to \$11.1 million. Submissions have been made to state and federal governments advocating for improved infrastructure on behalf of NEWROC's residents.

Local governments in the NEWROC region face ongoing challenges, including small population growth, housing shortages, essential infrastructure needs, and access to medical services. However, Brown underscored the region's unwavering belief in its future, its determination to advocate for opportunities, and its commitment to improving the quality of life for its communities.

ALEXANDRA MACKENZIE

ARCHITECT

Architect Alexandra Mackenzie presented a case study on housing infill in Wheatbelt towns, highlighting innovative approaches to address housing shortages and under-utilised spaces. The research project, conducted post-COVID and centered in Northam, explored opportunities to develop residential and short-term accommodations within town centers, focusing on empty lots, under-developed areas, and two-storey buildings.

Mackenzie engaged property owners, uncovering key case studies that exemplify the potential for intervention. Wheatbelt towns largely consist of single-house residential dwellings, yet the workforce increasingly demands diverse housing options, such as “lock-and-leave” accommodation.

A key focus of Mackenzie’s presentation was a two-storey building on Grey and Fitzgerald Streets in Northam, a former hardware store with an upper-level residence. Through a design process rooted in the building’s history and commercial zoning, Mackenzie developed three levels of intervention to explore its residential potential. An early concept design envisioned a 100-square-meter upper-level dwelling suitable for a small family. However, costs associated with isolating the floors and ensuring compliance rendered this option financially unfeasible.

Instead, a townhouse design emerged as a more viable solution. This concept matched the housing needs expressed by many businesses in the Wheatbelt region, many of which expressed readiness to house employees in such accommodations. Mackenzie noted that private sector delivery of these projects is unlikely, emphasising the need for government-led initiatives.

The proposed residential product, upper-floor lofts and similar infill developments, addresses critical housing diversity issues in Wheatbelt towns. It repurposes empty spaces during a housing crisis and offers workforce accommodations for businesses, government employees, and locum workers.

Mackenzie advocated for government leadership in piloting these infill projects, suggesting that government-backed case studies could navigate complexities and create a pathway for implementation. She also proposed public-private partnerships to incentivise property owners to repurpose under-utilised commercial spaces.

Her speech highlighted how innovative, government-supported housing infill can provide much-needed solutions to the housing and workforce accommodation challenges facing Wheatbelt towns, fostering vibrant and sustainable communities.

LINDA VERNON

NEWTRAVEL

Linda Vernon, Tourism Officer for the North Eastern Wheatbelt Travel Association (NEWTRAVEL) highlighted the evolving nature of tourism in the Wheatbelt and the strategic efforts to foster growth in the sector. She emphasised that while Wheatbelt tourism remains an emerging industry, significant strides have been made to build on the legacy of the Wheatbelt Way Self-Drive trail program.

Tourism in the Wheatbelt is shifting from traditional caravanning and camping to experiences centered on connection and creativity. Modern visitors seek local, memorable, and authentic encounters. In 2024, the region welcomed 15,380 visitors, its highest on record, reflecting successful marketing efforts and expanded tourism seasons. Historically reliant on the July-October peak season, NEWTRAVEL extended its focus to March-June, resulting in notable visitor increases and the ability to promote tourism for eight months annually. This effort generated an estimated \$6 million in visitor spending.

Vernon identified the "experience economy" as a key opportunity, emphasising that visitors now prioritise personal interactions, local creativity, and unique activities. Public art, place-making, and meaningful events encourage repeat visits and word-of-mouth marketing.

Events are essential, not as fleeting attractions but as lasting legacies that connect people to places and culture. NEWTRAVEL supports a four-tier event strategy encompassing flagship, annual, monthly, and market events. Examples of a flagship event included the Dowerin Machinery Field Days, which drew 17,000 visitors in 2024, and the Wylkatchem Rodeo, which transformed a drive-through town into an overnight destination. Unique attractions like the Koorda Drive-In add nostalgic charm, hosting 120 visitors monthly for ten months of the year.

Despite these successes, Vernon acknowledged challenges such as changing volunteer workforces, skilled labor shortages, rising costs associated with hosting events and an ageing population. These factors contribute to burnout and difficulty in attracting and retaining talent both in the form of event hosts and tourists. Collaboration and coordinated efforts remain central to overcoming these hurdles. NEWTRAVEL introduced an online event management hub to support communities in planning and executing complex but impactful events, which can often seem overwhelming and full of red tape for those without experience.

Vernon concluded by envisioning a Wheatbelt renowned for its robust regional events calendar and immersive, hands-on experiences. This vision seeks to strengthen local jobs, foster community pride, and position the region as a vibrant destination. Through collaboration, creativity, and innovation, Wheatbelt tourism can evolve into a thriving industry that benefits both visitors and local communities.

SESSION TWO PART TWO

QUESTION AND ANSWER PANEL

Melanie Brown - NEWROC

Q: The live sheep export has seen the arbitrary cancelling of a region without community consultation. If the Federal Government does go through with it there isn't enough transition time. My concern is what industry is next. Has anything been put in place as to how communities transition to the end of this industry?

A: At this point in time there has been financial assistance announced. There has been the rolling out funding to abattoirs and processors and transport drivers. There has been some money announced to be rolled out to shearers and farmers but no dollar figures have been given yet. Money on the ground sounds fabulous but it has to be targeted to the right areas. It is our whole economies and our whole towns. The Government need to look at the whole picture and not just the industry we are losing. They are missing the mark. The sheep trade sounds like the first of it. What about the cattle industry?

Q. What is the likelihood of this ban going ahead and how can we stop the negative impacts?

A: I wish I had the answer. If there is money being offered it needs to be into the communities to offset taking away the sheep. We need to be putting another business into those communities.

Q. With 42 shires in the Wheatbelt, do you see a time where local government reform will occur and reduce the number of LGAs.

A: I think perhaps yes. Our communities are getting smaller. No one wants to see their local government be the first to go down that path. If we look around our area our ROCs are very strong so I can see a world where we may group together local governments. If we mimicked the ROC way of doing things it could be a way of making it work. It would be a bit like a super local government to share your ideas and have like minded people to work with. We have already proven that we can collaborate well. We are all there to make our communities better spaces. I don't think the way we navigate local governments is sustainable to stay the way it is.

Alexandra Mackenzie - Architect

Q: When we talk about housing crisis, what new construction methods can we be using in the Wheatbelt that make us build quicker?

A: There's no fancy material that will fix all our problems. In order to solve this issue we need to look at spending more resources on the design aspect of building homes. If we can augment processes early and deliver them on a wider scale with some intelligent design we can make use of the material and trades we have. We need to use those basic principles and use them on mass and intelligently.

Q: Is there anything in the pipeline for construction for smaller Wheatbelt towns?

A: Sadly not really. I was on a panel last year where we heard of businesses losing employees due to lack of housing. It's a common problem and we are not putting as much energy into it as we can. We are not seeing a whole lot of action.

SESSION TWO PART TWO

QUESTION AND ANSWER PANEL

Linda Vernon - NEWTRAVEL

Q: What sort of gaps do we currently have in the events space? Are there events you think we should be doing that aren't currently taking place?

A: I think instead of looking at what events we aren't currently doing, I see a need for supporting the ones that we currently have. We need to make them more sustainable. Community infrastructure is needed for us to have venues and places to hold these events, but also need to use the infrastructure we currently have to bring events to life. We are in a unique location within the state and could offer more events out here. One of the biggest barriers to events in the region is a lack of accommodation options to house people coming to towns for events.

Q: Are volunteer shortages an issue in the Wheatbelt? And if so what do we do about it?

A: All of our events in the Wheatbelt are run by volunteers and it is not sustainable. People's capacity is not how it used to be. My opinion is what if we can support paid employment in the events space to create a stable workforce to host reliable events. We need to look at how we can make that happen.

SESSION THREE

DEAN CRACKNELL

TOWN TEAM MOVEMENT

Dean Cracknell, Co-founder of the Town Team Movement, spoke passionately about transforming communities from merely “liveable” to truly “loveable.” While liveable communities meet basic needs like infrastructure, housing, health services, and education, loveable communities foster a deeper sense of connection, belonging, and pride that inspires people to stay and contribute actively.

Cracknell emphasised the need for regional towns to create environments that residents and newcomers can deeply connect with and cherish. He referenced insights from the Regional Australia Institute, noting a growing trend of people moving to places they want to live and love, rather than purely for work or necessity. For towns to thrive, they must engage newcomers and inspire active participation. Younger generations, in particular, connect differently and require new avenues to integrate into community life.

The Town Team Movement, founded over seven years ago, aims to empower communities to take ownership of their towns. It encourages collaboration between governments and citizens to enable grassroots action and promotes the concept of active citizenship over passive consumption. The movement launched in 2018 and has grown to 174 town teams across Australia, New Zealand, Poland, the UK, and the US. Its success demonstrates that ideas born in Western Australia resonate globally.

Beyond town teams, the movement has expanded to include other programs that rethink traditional volunteerism. Cracknell highlighted the importance of adapting to modern expectations, as not everyone identifies as a “volunteer” in the traditional sense. Instead, people are eager to contribute when opportunities are engaging, rewarding, and enjoyable. Cracknell said by changing our view on what a traditional volunteer should be, we have better chance of getting people involved in projects and events.

Cracknell showcased the transformative potential of active citizenship. When people love their communities, they invest in their future, ensuring their towns not only survive but thrive. This sense of connection can inspire townspeople to go above and beyond for their communities, fostering sustainability, vibrancy, and resilience in regional towns. By empowering individuals to take part in creating places they truly care about, the Town Team Movement envisions a society enriched by collaboration, creativity, and community spirit.

The Town Team Movement is already active in the Wheatbelt with teams in towns including Northam, York, Narembeen, Kellerberrin and Koorda.

LISA LEGENA

SMALL BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION

Lisa Legena, Director of Business Skills Development at the Small Business Development Corporation (SBDC), highlighted the strategic opportunities for small businesses in WA over the next decade, emphasising the Wheatbelt's role in leveraging these prospects.

The SBDC, a state government authority established 40 years ago, aims to unleash the enterprising spirit of WA by supporting and developing small businesses. To aid forward planning, the SBDC partnered with The Demographics Group to analyse the outlook for small businesses from 2024 to 2034, with Legena focusing on the Wheatbelt.

WA's unique geographical position, neighbouring the growing urban middle class in Asia and within the same time zone, offers significant advantages for small businesses to cater to this market. Additionally, WA is globally recognised as one of the most productive and diversified regions for minerals and petroleum, while its cereal exports are predicted to grow substantially over the next 30 years, further supporting small business opportunities in agriculture and related industries.

Population growth is a key driver for business development in WA, with the state expected to add 40,000 people annually over the next decade. However, Legena emphasised the need to prepare for an ageing population, which will bring a major shift in values and consumer demands. As the baby boomer generation continues to age, opportunities will be created for businesses to offer retirement-friendly products and services, such as gardening, cleaning, and support services.

The emergence of millennials as WA's largest generational cohort will also shape business trends. This tech-savvy generation values fast technology, quality experiences, and innovative solutions. Small businesses that can cater to these evolving preferences will thrive in the years ahead.

Legena underscored WA's advantages in adapting to these shifts, noting that the state is better positioned than others to meet future demands, given its resources, infrastructure, and strategic location. By aligning business strategies with demographic changes, the Wheatbelt can attract investment, support entrepreneurial growth, and address future challenges.

Legena emphasised the need for businesses to stay informed, adaptable, and innovative to capitalize on the opportunities presented by demographic and economic transformations in WA. This approach will ensure long-term success for both businesses and communities across the state.

NICOLE HUGHES

MEGT

Nicole Hughes from MEGT highlighted the organisation's contributions to workforce development in WA and nationally. MEGT has assisted over 100,000 people in WA to secure apprenticeships and supported 250,000 businesses across Australia in building skilled workforces through tailored training solutions.

Apprenticeships typically take 3–4 years to complete, while traineeships require 1–2 years, offering flexibility and opportunities to meet diverse industry needs. Hughes emphasised the mutual benefits of apprenticeships and traineeships for both employers and employees. For businesses, they provide a skilled workforce, improved staff retention, and the opportunity to tailor training to specific requirements. Additionally, they help future-proof the workforce, with 91% of employers agreeing that apprenticeships address skills shortages effectively.

For apprentices, the programs offer the chance to earn while learning, access to mentoring, and government incentives, opening up numerous career opportunities. Financial incentives for businesses, particularly in WA, were also highlighted. Employers can access state-specific incentives, with payments of up to \$8,500 available for non-construction industries.

Hughes promoted MEGT's fast, flexible, and face-to-face support, emphasising its role in strengthening regional and national workforces while addressing current and future skills gaps.

DANIELLE BAKER

APPRENTICESHIP SUPPORT AUSTRALIA

Danielle Baker from Apprenticeship Support Australia discussed the organisation's comprehensive role in supporting apprenticeships across the state. As the only provider contracted by the Australian Government offering generalist and specialist apprenticeship support, the organisation prides itself on focusing on growing the workforce of women in trades, First Nations apprentices, and clean energy apprenticeships.

Baker highlighted the organisation's services for employers, such as industry-specific support and assistance in navigating government financial payments. A particular focus was placed on increasing women's participation in trades within the Wheatbelt, noting popular courses for females including Certificate III Electrotechnology Electrician, Certificate III Engineering Mechanical Trade, and Certificate III Process Plant Operations. Challenges faced by women in trades, such as sexual harassment, assault, and managing parenting alongside training, were addressed. Apprenticeship Support Australia provides progress appointments and mentoring programs in an effort to support apprentices face these barriers.

Baker said early exposure to trades through "Try a Trade" programs and work experience help attract more women to these roles. She called for collective efforts to ensure supportive systems and opportunities for women in trades, paving the way for local Wheatbelt women to thrive in these careers.

LEONIE KNIPE

AVON VALLEY MOTOR GROUP

Leonie Knipe, Dealer Principal of Avon Valley Motor Group (AVMG), shared her experiences as a woman in the male-dominated automotive industry and her dedication to overcoming challenges faced by regional businesses. A fourth-generation grain and sheep producer, Knipe recently closed her Merredin Toyota and Isuzu dealerships due to reduced sales, housing and skills shortages, and lack of corporate understanding of regional landscapes. She highlighted how large corporations often disregard smaller towns, in her case like Merredin, as significant markets, contributing to business closures that ripple through communities, impacting schools, sports clubs, and employment.

Knipe emphasised the importance of strong businesses when it comes to building resilient communities. To address workforce shortages, she has invested heavily in training and education, shifting the narrative around apprenticeships from being seen as an expense to being a valuable asset. At AVMG, apprentices are considered beneficial from day one, fostering loyalty and reducing turnover.

In the past four years, the business has doubled its apprentice count, with plans to introduce auto electrician apprenticeships in a bid to add a unique dual trade to the local market. A state government grant will support AVMG's expansion to accommodate more apprentices and bolster its in-house service capacity, reducing reliance on Perth-based businesses.

Recognising housing shortages as a critical barrier to workforce growth, Knipe has ventured into worker housing solutions. AVMG has purchased one property and is building two more, while exploring modular housing options to address this challenge. Knipe noted that many business owners are compelled to engage in housing development to sustain operations.

Knipe also underscored the importance of regional procurement policies to strengthen local economies. She proposed expanding local government procurement policies to prioritise businesses within the Wheatbelt before turning to Perth suppliers. A regional procurement approach would foster collaboration between neighbouring towns, enhancing their collective survival and sustainability. She urged state government entities, such as the Water Corporation, to lead by example by sourcing goods and services from the regions in which they operate.

Knipe called for a paradigm shift in supporting regional businesses, emphasising investment in training, housing, and regional procurement. By adopting these strategies, businesses and governments can bolster the resilience of regional towns, create sustainable economies, and ensure communities thrive despite ongoing challenges.

SESSION THREE

QUESTION AND ANSWER PANEL

Dean Cracknell - The Town Team Movement

Q: Clubs are struggling with finding volunteers and community organisations are folding. Can one funded organisation fill the role of overseeing community volunteers?

A: We see big difficulties when it comes to local clubs and organisations trying to fill a committee come AGM time. There is a perception that people don't want to be secretary or treasurer because of the level of commitment. It's rethinking whether you need incorporated groups and looking at having umbrella organisations to oversee informal volunteering, or even committees looking at employing people into roles to ensure they are sustainable.

Q- How do we retain people in the regions?

A: It's about population retention and making the right people stay. We need to create connection and help people fill the need of wanting to belong. It is all good for people to come and visit but we need them to stay and get involved. We want our locals to love where they live but also make newcomers fall in love with our towns as well.

Lisa Legena - SBDC

Q: There are rising costs associated with running a business. What type of help is available for them so that they can either pivot or close down their business before they lose everything.

A: We are very aware of rising costs of running a business and are advocating for government support. We are seeing a reluctance from some businesses to pass on some costs to their customers. People are not wanting to raise their costs as they are scared customers will not respond well but most of the time people want to support their local businesses. For some people they are not running a profitable business or just breaking even, so we can work with business owners to look at the inefficiencies of their business.

Nicole Hughes - MEGT

Q: What are some of the most popular TAFE courses delivered in the Wheatbelt?

A: Childcare is the most popular course at the moment in terms of enrollment as it can be delivered on site at the centre. There are a lot of heavy fabrication and diesel related trades that are unable to be done in the Wheatbelt because there isn't a training provider. We are trying to work with advocating with TAFEs of what is needed in the area as there are a lack of trainers able to deliver the courses in some areas. If someone is having to travel to complete these courses that aren't able to be delivered locally we are trying to educate people on the travel allowances and incentives that are available to them if they have to leave the region to train as many people are not claiming them.

Q: Are large blocks of training at TAFE down in Perth a deterrent for people doing a trade? How can we look at doing things differently?

A: TAFEs have been asked to adapt to the regions. I have seen the training of regional and metropolitan students done at the same time via online portals for a dental course. If they can do it for dental it can be done for other trades. Block release is now 4 blocks of 2 weeks and there are some private trainers that will do 3 days at a time. It's not all like it used to be. TAFE is change as to the demands of students and workplaces.

SESSION THREE

QUESTION AND ANSWER PANEL

Danielle Baker- Apprenticeship Support Australia

Q: Are large blocks of training at TAFE down in Perth a deterrent for people doing a trade? How can we look at doing things differently?

A: If blocks don't work for your apprentices there are opportunities to look at private training providers. We are seeing more options being thrown at businesses and apprentices when it comes to studying. Employers, employees and training providers need to have open discussions. The more people that are vocal for more program delivery in the region, the more backing you'll have for the changes being implemented.

Leonie Knipe - Avon Valley Motor Group

Q: What is the secret to retaining employees and apprentices?

A: For us it is about doing things differently. We really prioritise a family first culture and recognise that you're work a lot of the time so we need to keep family in mind, but also incorporate a bit of fun, health and fitness into our days. I like to try and buck the norm a bit.

Q: We are hearing that there are still opportunities for new business in establish themselves in the Wheatbelt. How do we encourage people to open a bricks and mortar business?

A: There is still a big demand in regional towns for our storefronts to be full and thriving. When we are looking to attract people to move to our towns there is a minimim expection for their to be a good hospital and good schools. What we begin to look at after that is the loveable that Dean was speaking of earlier. People want a coffee shop, they want quirky. Towns need that loveable piece. You need bricks and mortar businesses to provide those bits that people make loveable.

AGRICULTURAL PANEL

QUESTION AND ANSWER PANEL

Paul Berghella - McIntosh & Son

Q: Agriculture is an exciting sector. What are some trends and opportunities you have seen that will shape the future of the Wheatbelt economy?

A: You can see that there are some dynamic changes on foot. Career paths are opening up all the time, and with the development of technology these new career paths are becoming more appealing. We do need to attract more people to the regions. At McIntosh & Son and our training academy the TAFE system down in Perth can't deliver what we can deliver from an industry point of view. The facilities that we are building are very special. I see some exciting times and opportunity for young men and women for people going through school to have an exciting career in the regions.

Q: How do we keep the pipeline of tradespeople full?

A: We need to be reaching out to schools and colleges to get people aware from a younger age of the sorts of jobs that are out there. It is vital to be reaching out and attending events so we are informing people of the opportunities for training in agriculture. When you speak to people they don't often know what is available. I believe we need to talk to governments about bringing back trade school in high school during school hours to have early intervention with school aged kids looking into agriculture with skills and interest.

John Trunfio - Hutton and Northey Sales

Q: Agriculture is an exciting sector. What are some trends and opportunities you have seen that will shape the future of the Wheatbelt economy?

If we were still farming how we were 40 years ago we wouldn't have any success. We keep having record harvests which is a good sign of how the industry is going. The new technology is exciting in the sector with major advancements on measuring and mapping. Our farmers with new technology can work out if their land is productive or not and choose to do something else with the land that isn't making them money. Precision ag technology is really changing the way we do things.

Q: From an agricultural perspective, what role does environmental sustainability have in responding to climate change?

A: We are seeing that our farmers are doing more with less compared to how we did things in the past. We are burning less therefore having less of a negative impact on our environment. We have also seen the growth of participation in carbonisation. There are new ways of doing things and a greater awareness of how we do things.

AGRICULTURAL PANEL

QUESTION AND ANSWER PANEL

Ley Webster - 2 Workin Oz

Q: Agriculture is an exciting sector. What are some trends and opportunities you have seen that will shape the future of the Wheatbelt economy?

There needs to be more training for people working in the sector. With the rapid advancement of technology means workers need more skills and experience than they had before. This past season we have seen a high turnover of staff where employers are saying people aren't able to pick up the technology quick enough. There will be more requirements for training moving forward so that farmers are able to maximise the technology. There is a large cost to farmers who aren't using new technology.

Q: Can you tell us a bit about your passion for farms skills and training.

We have seen a big gap in knowledge and skills from kids leaving school and going to work straight on the farm. There is currently an agricultural apprenticeship being developed at a Federal level which will bridge some of that gap so people can have some formalised training before they work on the farm. This won't take away from agricultural colleges but instead establish a three to four year apprenticeship which will help farmers in the employment of staff as they will be able to verify skillsets. Many of our farm kids come out of school and there is no formalised qualification for them. If we keep them in the industry it is a good thing. We hear that they want to stay but we have nothing for them.

Danielle Green - Dowerin Machinery Field Days

Q: Agriculture is an exciting sector. What are some trends and opportunities you have seen that will shape the future of the Wheatbelt economy?

As an event our main mandate is to bring everyone together. The fact that the sector is so vibrant and progressive gives us a reason to have an event.

Q: When people think of the Wheatbelt people think of broad-acre farming. As part of the field days what are you seeing businesses doing to adapt to technology innovation?

A: We unite the ag supply chain and bring together all of the stakeholders in the sector. As an annual event we are able to look back at the advancements in technology over the decades and see the development of the sector. Our farmers adapt because they have to and now more than ever the need for data is huge. For farmers to be able to get data and make informed decisions about their business.

Q: How does the field days showcase us to our city counterparts?

A: Each year we have a breakdown of who attends, and the majority of those are the decision makers on the farms as well as sales representatives for ag companies. More than 50% of our attendees are coming from the Perth metro area to Dowerin which shows the appeal of the event. We have an incredible opportunity to showcase the Wheatbelt so that these people have a country experience and appreciation for all that we do. Our state conversation is about mining. Agriculture gets lost and the Wheatbelt doesn't get considered so it is great to leverage the event in Perth.

KEY TOPICS



Economic Diversification & Industry Development

The Wheatbelt Futures Forum emphasised the importance of diversifying the Wheatbelt economy beyond traditional agriculture to include renewable energy, manufacturing, mining, tourism, and digital industries.

- The region contributes \$17 billion to the economy annually and has a vision for a diversified economy serving as an inland gateway to Perth with strong freight, logistics, and digital connectivity
- Renewable energy projects are significant, with 38 projects including wind and solar farms in the pipeline, and a \$70 million investment in a clean energy skills center to build workforce capacity
- Manufacturing hubs are emerging in towns like Cunderdin, Williams, and Dalwallinu, creating local jobs and strengthening supply chains
- Tourism is growing, with 1.1 million visitors annually and efforts to develop a dedicated tourism strategy and events calendar to enhance the visitor economy



Challenges & Opportunities in Infrastructure and Communications Sectors Within the Regions

The Forum highlighted the critical need for improved infrastructure, including housing, digital connectivity, energy supply, and transport networks, to support growth and livability.

- Housing shortages are a pressing issue, with initiatives like the Wheatbelt Regional Housing Initiative aiming to create 400 new homes to retain workers and ease pressures
- Digital infrastructure improvements are underway, including upgrades to the NBN, mobile blackspot programs, and the Telstra dark fibre network, which positions towns for growth in data-driven industries
- Reliable power supply and backup systems are essential, especially with the coal phase-out and increasing electricity demand driven by electrification and population growth
- Freight and logistics investments, such as the AvonWest project and Bindoon Bypass, are strengthening national transport links

KEY TOPICS



Workforce Development & Community

Sustainability Essential to Growth

Addressing workforce shortages, skills development, and community engagement were key themes to ensure the region's future prosperity and livability.

- Workforce shortages affect key sectors like agribusiness, energy, manufacturing, childcare, and health, with a focus on apprenticeships, training, and attracting women to trades
- Programs supporting digital literacy and connectivity skills are critical to help businesses and communities adapt to technological change
- Community sustainability involves creating "loveable" towns where people feel connected and want to stay, supported by active citizenship and volunteerism
- The impact of industry changes, such as the live sheep export ban, on local economies and mental health was discussed, emphasising the need for targeted support and economic diversification

