



Cannabilised workforce threatens housing targets

Opinion: Victoria's regions warn of dire shortages in critical local roles

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Like much of Australia, regional Victoria has a shortage of houses. It's making it harder for young people to buy a first home and stay in our regions, and harder to attract new people for jobs.

Our story is not unique. That's why there's a national push to build more houses and units – to make homes cheaper and rentals easier to find and afford.

But long before anyone puts the key in a door and unlocks the great Australian dream, we need things like pipes, poles and paths in the ground – and the experts to put them there.

In the regions, our local government workforce has been cannibalised by things like Victoria's Big Build – these projects pay above and beyond most councils' capacity to compete.

But we need planners and building surveyors to make sure new homes are safe and insurable – as well as engineers to design our new communities.

Further, new housing projects can't happen without water pipes, larger sewerage plants, new roundabouts or traffic lights, and wider local roads – the “trunk infrastructure”.

With an imminent federal election, those in Canberra who want a laser focus on housing need to make significant funding available for essentials like water, power, sewerage, footpaths and roads to support new housing developments.

The Labor Government has been rolling out its relatively new \$1.5 billion Housing Support Program, funding just these sorts of projects. But it must be extended if Anthony Albanese is re-elected – so we can give developers confidence in long-term local investment.

Peter Dutton has committed that a Coalition Government would make \$5 billion available for enabling infrastructure through a Housing Infrastructure Program.

Victorian independent Helen Haines has called for a dedicated \$2 billion Regional Housing Infrastructure Fund.



As the peak body representing Victoria's 10 largest regional cities, we have long advocated for this dedicated investment in "trunk infrastructure" to bring forward construction and make many housing developments in regional areas viable.

It's the only way we are going to be able to meet national targets to build more than a million homes in the next four years.

RCV's member cities are keen to play their role in unlocking land supply – but we must also address the critical gaps in the current delivery model that threatens to disrupt this momentum.

I recently led a delegation to Canberra to raise these concerns ahead of the election, because Australia's housing crisis will only get worse unless we do something about the shortage of critical workers.

The number of students studying town planning has collapsed – despite housing being one of the top policy issues of our time. There is nowhere near enough graduates to meet demand. State and local governments continue to cannibalise each other as we try to recruit.

We need a new approach. A pipeline of future workers. That's why we asked those in Canberra to consider waiving HECS-HELP debts for new planners, building surveyors and civil engineers who agree to live in regional Australia and work in local government. Or introducing scholarships.

We asked them to consider extending the 'Commonwealth Prac Payment' to students undertaking mandatory placements while studying an accredited town planning course.

But we also need these critical professionals, now. That's why we called on our political leaders to pilot an international campaign to attract people to Australia to help us unlock more housing and fast-track migration of these skilled workers if they come and live in regional Australia.

The councils that make up Regional Cities Victoria have already tried many things: fostering internal career changes, formalising remote working arrangements, reimbursing relocation costs, piloting internships, and using private sector consultants. But it's not enough – and it's only adding to the cost of living of our ratepayers.

Local governments understand the housing urgency – but our efforts to address the crippling workforce shortages must be complemented and amplified by other tiers of government – or nothing will go in, on or get off the ground.

Cr Shane Sali
Chair of Regional Cities Victoria
Mayor of Greater Shepparton