

MEDIA RELEASE: 19th July 2022

Latest WSM Census Results Highlight New Growth Trajectory

For the first time in at least 40 years the Wimmera Southern Mallee (WSM) has bucked the trend of slow population decline. This occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic; a time in which Victoria's overall population decreased.

Wimmera Development Association (WDA) recently held a Census results webinar, joined by more than 60 participants from around the region. In addition to reporting the region's recent population growth, the forum highlighted age-structure changes, reducing household sizes, an increase in the region's multi-cultural population, and the implications on housing demand.

WDA Chief Executive Officer Chris Sounness said, "The 2021 Census results really demonstrate the importance of delivering the innovative housing solutions within WDA's Housing Blueprint to improve liveability and support the region's continued economic growth".

The shift in the WSM's growth outlook is widely understood by those local leaders and regional development teams who have been at the coalface in dealing with new job creation, skills shortages, and childcare limitations, in addition to the region wide housing crisis.

The WSM region recorded an overall population growth of 2.3% (2016-21), equating to 0.5% per annum. Growth was seen within the Northern Grampians (4.5%), Horsham Rural City (4.0%) and West Wimmera (2.6%) local government areas. Buloke, Hindmarsh and Yarriambiack Shires had small decreases, although they are trending towards population stability.

From an individual WSM town perspective 11 towns achieved population growth, 8 remained relatively stable, and decreases were experienced in 5 of the towns over the five-year period.

Results also indicate the majority of the WSM population is over 45 years of age (53%), compared to the state average of 41%. This older population means the median age of a WSM resident is 9 years greater than the Victorian median of 38 years. With an ageing population and a reducing household size, demand for housing will continue to outstrip population growth for years to come.

"A clear consequence of an older population is that our region's average household size of 2.2 people per house is smaller than both state and national averages, while our housing stock is overwhelmingly made up of houses with 3 or more bedrooms" Mr Sounness commented. "This is creating a significant opportunity for strategically located, smaller, fit for purpose and affordable houses to provide residents with greater housing choices", he said.

While home ownership in the WSM region is comparatively high, housing available for sale is limited, and the rental situation is tight. The 2021 Census results also indicated that many properties had been removed from an already small rental stock over the past five years.

"Across Victoria, 67% of rentals are listed with real estate agents, while here in the WSM only 50% were reported as being listed with agents and 37% were rented through informal arrangements (i.e., rented to friends, family, or employees). This is a problem for new residents seeking suitable accommodation," observed Mr Sounness.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander residents in the region jumped to 1.8%, from 1.3% in 2016, with the Northern Grampians (2.1%), Yarriambiack and Horsham Rural City (each with 1.9%) having the largest proportions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander residents.

WSM is increasing its culturally diverse population from a small base, despite the halt on international immigration during the early years of the COVID pandemic. There was an average annual increase of 7.4% in people born in the top 10 non-English speaking countries, the largest being Philippines, India, Thailand, and Myanmar.

For more information on WSM population growth, housing and the Housing Blueprint please visit: <https://www.wda.org.au/housing>

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Information Sources for all statistics and percentages quoted in this article are the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Censuses of Population and Housing 2016 and 2021, and the ABS Regional Population 2020-21 release (March 2022).