

# Wimmera Southern Mallee Development Limited

## 2023 Annual Report

Paul Geyer  
Chair of the Board

Chris Sounness  
Chief Executive Officer

## Introduction

The Chair and Chief Executive Officer of Wimmera Southern Mallee Development (WSM Development) are pleased to present their report for the year ending July 2023.

In this report, we will provide a comprehensive overview of WSM Development's achievements.

## Our Place in The Wimmera Southern Mallee Region

WSM Development brings together the six councils in the west of Victoria: Horsham Rural City, Buloke (Joining August 2023), Hindmarsh, Northern Grampians, West Wimmera and Yarriambiack.

Together, these councils have a land area of 33,900 sq km, a population of approximately 54,500 people, 2 major centres (Horsham and Stawell), and 22 further towns.

The estimated economic output is \$7,126 billion, led by agriculture but with growing contributions from mineral sands and renewable energy industries.

In our region, WSM Development's purpose is to lead and advocate for responsible economic growth, ensuring future liveability and prosperity.

## Highlights

During the year, WSM Development has:

- launched its strategic plan
- established the company Wimmera Housing Innovations PTY (WHIP), which is supporting several housing initiatives to address the shortage of accommodation in the region
- continued work to develop tourism and tourist facilities in the region
- supported By Five's work to increase early childhood education and care in the region, and their child health and welfare activities
- supported training, employment, settlement and migration initiatives in the region
- been an advocate for responsible renewable energy generation and transmission line developments.
- supported our local communities through leadership development, business awards and grants

WSM Development is proud to be a major contributor to the growth and success of our region.

## Strategic Plan

In May 2023, following extensive consultation, WSM Development published its Strategic Plan.

The plan articulates our purpose and our vision. By 2032, we intend that WSM Development's programs will have facilitated population growth of 7,000 people in the WSM region, assisted our region's communities and businesses in lowering their carbon emissions to reach legislated targets. Our organisation's values, Innovative, Supportive and Brave, define our people and our culture, and guide how we collaborate, lead, advocate and deliver value for our region.

## Housing

During the year, we have pursued a number of initiatives which follow up on our [Housing Blueprint](#) and are aimed at improving the supply of housing in our region. These include:

- Short-term housing solutions for newcomers to the region.
- Formation of Wimmera Housing Innovations Pty Ltd to continue project work.
- Support for tourism accommodation grants to alleviate housing issues outside peak tourist seasons.
- Documentation of a landbank, including crown land, Education Department, and Church-owned properties, with efforts to make them available for use.

## Housing Development Guidebook and Development Flowchart

In our region, nearly 80% of residents live in detached houses. As the population ages, and as we try to bring in new, younger residents to fill unmet demand for employees, WSM Developments has identified a need for more medium density dwellings.

The Housing Development Guidebook, developed in partnership with our member councils, has been prepared as a tool to help inform developers and community members about issues relating to development. It includes information about the subdivision process, rules around dwelling siting and servicing, sustainability, building styles and building extensions.

## Wimmera Housing Innovation Pty Ltd (WHIP)

In June 2022, WSM Development formed Wimmera Housing Innovation Pty Ltd (WHIP) as a wholly owned subsidiary company.

WHIP's role is to support communities in the region to undertake property development. It does this by providing seed money to allow community groups to undertake pre-feasibility studies for housing development opportunities in their communities.

During the year, WHIP commenced or agreed to commence pre-feasibility work with five community groups and three other organisations in the region. In the 2024 financial year, four community projects are expected to raise funds from the community to build between 12 and 16 homes, and one organisation will be creating 30 rooms of worker accommodation from an existing, older structure which currently houses only 10 workers.

The funding used to undertake the pre-feasibility work will be returned to WHIP as part of the proceeds of any property development.

## WSM Land Supply and Capacity Study

Working with member Council's planning teams and external consultants, WSM Development has documented land supply and capacity across the region.

Several Councils are using this work to, together with the Housing Development Guidebook, promote new developments and to unlock potential serviced blocks within their areas.

## Tourism

WSM Development are managing a range of projects across the Wimmera Mallee Tourism region.

### Cabins Across the Wimmera

The primary objective of the project is to provide consistent, quality, centrally booked, self-contained cabin accommodation in Wimmera Mallee locations which are closely accessible to the region's nature, arts and culture attractions. New cabins are being delivered in a range of locations across the West Wimmera, Hindmarsh and Yarriambiack LGAs. A formalised booking and promotion package will follow.

## Eclectic Accommodation Feasibility Study

The project is intended to fill identified gaps in Wimmera Mallee's visitor accommodation offer by creating more mid-market/up-market facilities using existing significant buildings such as hotels, railway stations, churches and other historic buildings. WSM Development is leading the project.

If feasible, the project will enable WSM Development and Wimmera Mallee Tourism to work with building owners, Councils, Government agencies and investors to establish a number of eclectic accommodation facilities. These will bring new visitor segments to the region, and could become bases for short-term professional workers, artists in residence, and special interest groups.

## Silo Art Projects - AR/VR Project

Through the Wimmera Mallee Tourism Digital Realities Strategy Plan, WSM Development is looking to develop a sustainable application for digital realities that create beneficial impacts for tourism across the Wimmera Mallee. These impacts could include utilising digital reality experiences as an attractor, or to create more memorable and engaging experiences for people who visit the region.

West Wimmera Shire Council have now taken carriage of the role out of AR/VR implementation.

## Signage Audit, Design and Implementation

WSM Development is seeking to develop better tourism signage across the region that includes Indigenous perspectives, encourages visitors to go off the main roads and spend more time in the region and increases the income and viability of small businesses.

The project will:

- help promote the Silo Art Trail
- increase the prominence of wayfinding signage at sites where visitors may need additional reassurance or may miss the turnoff/entry points
- upgrade of existing interpretation and visitor information signage and add information about nearby attractions
- provide new interpretation and visitor information signage at visitor hubs

## Enhanced Marketing

WSM Development's Enhanced Marketing Project focuses on promotion of tourism assets within the Shires of West Wimmera, Hindmarsh, Yarriambiack, Buloke and Horsham.

The work is being delivered across the Visit Wimmera Mallee and Silo Art Trail platforms, using social media, blogs and electronic direct mail.

The Autumn campaign showcasing the Wimmera Mallee region as 'Adventures In A Different Light' was shortlisted for the Best Use of Content category in the prestigious 2023 Mumbrella Travel Marketing Awards.

Arthur St created a series of webinars for businesses to [develop their digital marketing knowledge and skills](#).

The campaign has been hugely successful, reaching over 1.8 million people using highly targeted advertising across Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and Google.

The project will run until the end of 2023.

## Early Childhood - By Five

The most recent Australian Early Development Census highlights that the development of children in our region have fallen further behind their State and National peers. Up to 55% of children in some of our communities are

arriving at school developmentally vulnerable compared to an average of 20% across the State. Improving the outcomes for children has never been important for our communities.

WSM Development has developed and nurtured the By Five team to address this issue. Investing in accessible, quality services and creating community conditions that deliver the best for children is the By Five team's focus.

## Maternal Health

The By Five team has been working with the Rural Northwest Health, East Wimmera Health Service, West Wimmera Health Service and Harrow Bush Nursing Service to build their capability to provide antenatal care to local women under the Victorian Maternity Framework. Capacity building will also be supported as a part of the new Maternity Care Project under the Grampians Region Health Services Partnership.

## Early Childhood Education and Care

In partnership with the North Central LLEN and on behalf of the Mallee, Loddon Campaspe and Wimmera Southern Mallee Partnerships, the By Five team has been identifying factors which will support access to early childhood education and care.

Its rural and regional perspective is a core part of its advocacy activities, which include engagement with Commonwealth Ministers, support for national campaigns Thrive by Five and The Parenthood, and submission of a paper to the National Productivity Commission Inquiry into Early Childhood Education and Care. The By Five team has also engaged with the Victorian Department of Education.

## Child Health and Wellbeing

The By Five team has supported Rainbow P-12 school access allied health initiative through a partnership with Royal Far West. Primary school aged children have been able to access speech, occupational therapy and psychology services through a supported telecare model. In its early stages, this 12-month trial has delivered results for students and staff, and has increased parents' confidence in the school. The trial will continue until mid-2024.

A two-year Paediatric Trial, which gave children, their families and local professionals timely access to a behaviour and development paediatrician, was completed in March 2023. The project was delivered in partnership with the Royal Children's Hospital (RCH) and was supported by the Centre for Community and Child Health. The trial was a resounding success for the Wimmera. The local health professions (including maternal and child health nurses, GPs, and allied health practitioners) who accompanied the child and family via videoconference showed a marked increase in their confidence in being able to support other children. Families stated they felt much more confident with their local health professionals and reduced stress knowing their child's needs were being addressed. This service will continue until 2025.

## Training and Employment

Building skills, ensuring that there are career opportunities in the region and equally people to fill available roles is a key part of WSM Development's work. WSM Development has supported and collaborated with the Victoria Skills Authority to develop a skills development plan for the region, supporting workforce development.

### Job Advocate Program

WSM Development participated as an Advocate in the State government's Jobs Victoria Advocate program. The program, which started in May 2021 and concluded in June 2023, responded to the impact of COVID-19 by supporting jobseekers in local communities to find the information, advice and additional support they needed to help gain employment.

WSM Development was a host employer, providing Advocacy support for nearly 3,000 people. It partnered with numerous organisations including Grampians Community Health, the Salvation Army, Headspace Partnership,

Wimmera Careers Expo, Wimmera Women Connect, Neighbourhood Houses across the region and Federation University.

As a result of its participation in the program, WSM Development gained access to data on the region's workforce, including unemployment, underemployment and latent workforce demand. This has opened up a number of opportunities for further workforce development projects. WSM Development was also able to strengthen and widen its collaborative networks.

### Accessing Latent Care Industry Workforce

WSM Development is planning pilot programs to provide care-based training for potential workers in care industries located in smaller communities, where significant workforce gaps exist. The goal is to improve the sustainability of care industry staffing in these areas.

The pilot program will test whether smaller workforce gaps (1-10 people) in smaller communities can be filled by training local workers who would otherwise not been able to engage in study.

Training will be place-based in LGAs which have care workforce challenges (smaller townships with low unemployment and ageing populations).

### Migration

On Thursday 29 and Friday 30 June, WSM Development hosted information sessions to discuss opportunities for the Wimmera Mallee region to attract migrants to assist businesses to attract additional workforce. These provided information on the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) Scheme and proposed changes to the Skilled Regional Migration pathways, and explored ways for businesses to attract and support new workers to the region.

Following on from the migration round table, WSM Developments is working through a pilot project with West Wimmera Health and Rural North West Health Services. The project will look to tap into the Filipino workforce, attracting a greater Filipino community to the region via the Aged Care visa.

## Infrastructure

### Power Transmission

WSM Development has been actively advocating for increased transmission and improved distribution networks to support regional growth and decarbonization.

Transition to net zero emissions is likely to involved \$20bn of construction work in our region over the next 10 years. As an organisation we are advocating to ensure our farming communities, towns and infrastructure are supported through this significant change, including just compensation where land is acquired and process transparency.

### WSM Rec-socio Economic Value of Recreational Water

This project is the seventh assessment of the economic and social contribution made by the local weirs, lakes and rivers to the regional economy. It involves an assessment of 25 waterbodies at lakes, creeks and rivers around the region and trend and inferred estimates for a further five waterbodies. The project is a joint initiative between WSM Development, GWMWater, the Wimmera Catchment Management Authority, and Local Councils.

The total regional economic contribution from the 30 selected recreational water facilities in the Wimmera Southern Mallee in 2022-23 is estimated to be \$30.50 million, which represents a 22.5% increase from the previous year.

# Community Support and Engagement

## Leadership Wimmera

In November 2022, 15 community members graduated from our flagship Change Makers program. All participants undertook a community leadership project and are well positioned to step as key leaders in our region.

The 2023 Leadership Wimmera Program has commenced with 19 participants from a diverse range of backgrounds. This year's community program, Engaging and Strengthening the Horsham Filipino Community, will work to address and support regional workforce attraction and retention through improved liveability. The local Filipino community is seen as a key connector for new residents to the region.

A two-day leadership program was offered to the local Filipino community to develop their leadership skills and act as a catalyst to attract new residents and workers to the Wimmera Mallee region.

## 2022 ACE Radio Wimmera Business Awards

The 2022 ACE Radio Wimmera Business Awards gala presentation, attended by 300 people including Paul Geyer, was held on Friday October 21<sup>st</sup> at the Horsham Town Hall.

The awards provide recognition of the efforts, ingenuity and talents of our regional businesses from the Northern Grampians Shire, Horsham Rural City, Hindmarsh Shire, Yarriambiack Shire and West Wimmera Shire Councils.

This year, WSM Development introduced a new Regional Woman in Business Excellence Award, to highlight the significant contribution women make to business in our region. The winner was Tanya Stanley of Beetanicals.

## Murra Warra Wind Farm Sustainable Community Grants Fund

The Murra Warra Wind Farm Sustainable Community Grants Fund provides small grants of up to \$5000 and large grants of up to \$20,000 to support social and environmental sustainability initiatives for the benefit of communities within the Horsham Rural City, Hindmarsh and Yarriambiack Shire Councils. Wimmera Southern Mallee Development manages the Fund.

With the recent completion of Murra Warra stage 2, comprising 38 turbines, this year's available funding increased significantly to \$96,000.

This year, the Fund received applications for over 40 projects. All available funding was allocated.

# Administration

In April 2022, shortly before the start of the 2023 financial year, WSM Development was transformed from an association into a company limited by guarantee.

During the year, as we navigated the changes to our corporate status, we have maintained our professionalism and capabilities, and ensured minimal disruption to our member councils and other stakeholders.

To date, we have been grateful for the support of Horsham Rural City Council, which has provided us with HR, finance, IT, and other services. We are now exploring alternative options to bring these services back under WSM Development's control in a cost-effective way.

## Staff Changes

During the year, Rhiannon Plush, Kate Adams, Jodie Matthews, Kristy Witmitz, Sally Marcroft and Sokan Sat finished up as the projects they were working on came to end. We would like to acknowledge the contributions made by each for them.