

THE VISION

To build sustainable long-term economic prosperity and quality of life for existing and new residents by leveraging the Western Plains' advantages for agriculture, manufacturing agricultural products, mining and tourism in a changing climate.



WESTERN PLAINS

Regional Economic Development

Strategy **2018–2022**

Developed with the support of the NSW Government as part of the Regional Economic Development Strategies program to assist local councils and their communities in regional NSW.



PREFACE

The NSW Government has assisted local councils and their communities to develop 37 Regional Economic Development Strategies across regional NSW. Each strategy is designed around a group of local government areas that form a functional economic region as defined by economic data and community input. While the strategies have been developed using consistent methodology, each is a product of detailed data analysis and local community consultation to ensure ownership through a ‘bottom-up’ process: it sets out a vision for the Region, the strategies, and early stage actions required to achieve the vision.

Regional Economic Development Strategies articulate a framework for identifying actions crucial to achieving the regional vision. Projects listed within this Strategy should therefore be viewed as example projects that have emerged from the initial application of the framework. Adoption of these projects would be subject to further evaluative processes.

The power of the Strategy is its ability to be used on an ongoing basis to identify additional high value projects over time. By complementing existing funding processes, these strategies present new opportunities to strengthen and increase investment in regional development across NSW.

Importantly, the strategy should be viewed as the first stage of a process that will assist those with an interest in the economic development of the Region, particularly councils, communities and local businesses, in planning their future economic activities. It provides a vehicle for engaging the community in a ‘conversation’ about regional needs and priorities, assists in bringing together key stakeholders and mobilising resources. In doing so, it can facilitate faster access to dedicated NSW Government funding, such as the Growing Local Economies Fund, as well as help to capitalise upon other economic opportunities.

This Strategy, prepared by The Balmoral Group Australia, on behalf of the Region, was formed in collaboration with the Bourke, Bogan, Brewarrina, Cobar, Coonamble, Walgett and Warren Councils, key stakeholders and the broader regional community. It benefited from economic-analytical assistance from the NSW Government’s Centre for Economic and Regional Development (CERD).

It is presented in two documents: the Western Plains Regional Economic Development Strategy 2018–2022 (this document) which allows the reader to quickly and easily determine key content; while the accompanying Western Plains Regional Economic Development Strategy 2018–2022: Supporting Analysis details the Strategy methodology, evidence and the Strategy development process.

For further information about the Regional Economic Development Strategies program please contact the CERD on 02 6391 3025 or CERD@dpc.nsw.gov.au.



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INTRODUCTION

The primary objective of the Western Plains Regional Economic Development Strategy (the Strategy) is to provide a set of economic development strategies and linked economically beneficial actions for the Western Plains Functional Economic Region (Western Plains or the Region), comprising Bourke, Bogan, Brewarrina, Cobar, Coonamble, Walgett and Warren Local Government Areas (LGAs). These strategies and actions were developed from a thorough analysis of existing specialisations, current development initiatives, industry clusters, institutional arrangements, endowments and infrastructure. This analysis also considered local economic activity patterns between LGAs and greater economic jurisdictions, as well as patterns at a local and state level. In 2011, the Region's population¹ was 26,781; the major towns are Bourke; Nyngan; Brewarrina; Cobar; Coonamble; Walgett, Lightning Ridge and Collarenebri; and Warren. Most of the Region's workforce is engaged in or supported by mining, cotton, wheat, chickpea, animal husbandry and various livestock operations.

Western Plains represents an area well serviced by the Darling River, as well as the Macquarie and Barwon Rivers, which are key threads of the community's social, political and economic fabric and the Region's most significant natural endowments. A few examples of its diverse communities include: significant specialisation in Mining activity in Cobar Shire; cotton and wheat production in Warren Shire; and Brewarrina Shire's cultural endowments of the National Heritage listed Aboriginal fish traps 'Baiaime's Ngunnhu,'² that have existed for thousands of years.

The Strategy aims to leverage the Region's endowments and specialisations.

These endowments and specialisations were identified through data analysis and subsequently informed and were confirmed through the community consultation process.

The Strategy, which builds on the endowments, specialisations and core competencies, aims to:

- Drive growth in Agriculture and Manufacturing of agricultural products by optimising access to markets and consumers through investment facilitation
- Optimise economic activity across Agriculture, Mining and Tourism industries by enhancing telecommunications and climate infrastructure that increases business certainty and resilience
- Unlock growth in Agriculture, Manufacturing of agricultural products and Mining by improving energy and water infrastructure
- Grow Tourism to enrich and diversify the Region's economy
- Improve the Region's social and demographic fabric to grow Mining, Tourism and Agriculture industries

The Strategy also takes account of regional risks and how they might be addressed.

This Strategy is the culmination of detailed data analysis and collaboration between the Bourke, Bogan, Brewarrina, Cobar, Coonamble, Walgett and Warren Councils, their respective communities and the NSW Government's Centre for Economic and Regional Development (CERD).

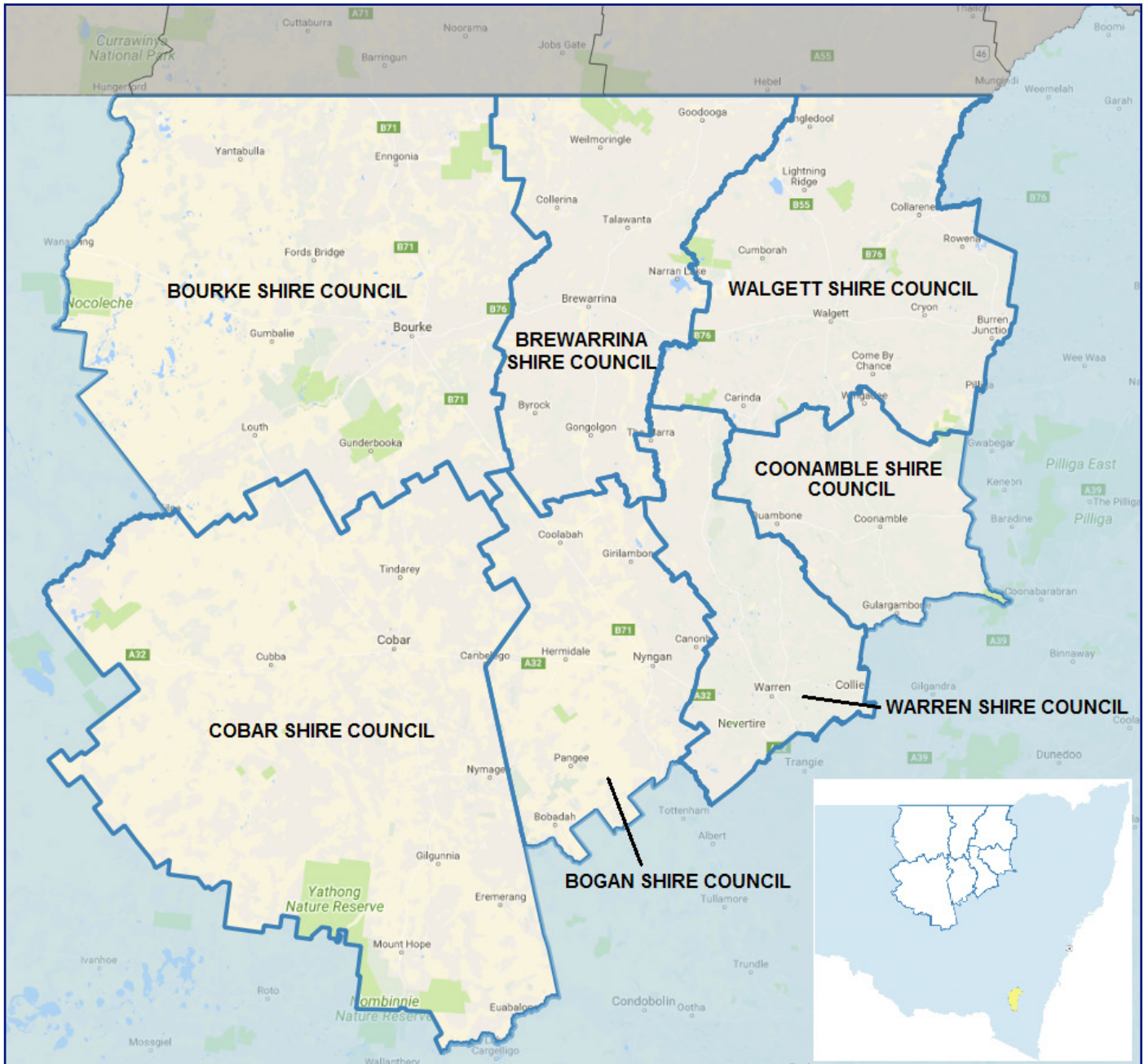
1. Note: There is also a known population 'gap', many Lightning Ridge residents do not list it as their place of residence.
2. National Heritage Listing Place – Department of the Environment and Energy: <http://www.environment.gov.au/heritage/places/national/brewarrina>



BACKGROUND

Western Plains comprises the Bourke, Bogan, Brewarrina, Cobar, Coonamble, Walgett and Warren LGAs, with 89% of workers in the Region also being residents, pointing to its relative self-containment as a regional economy.

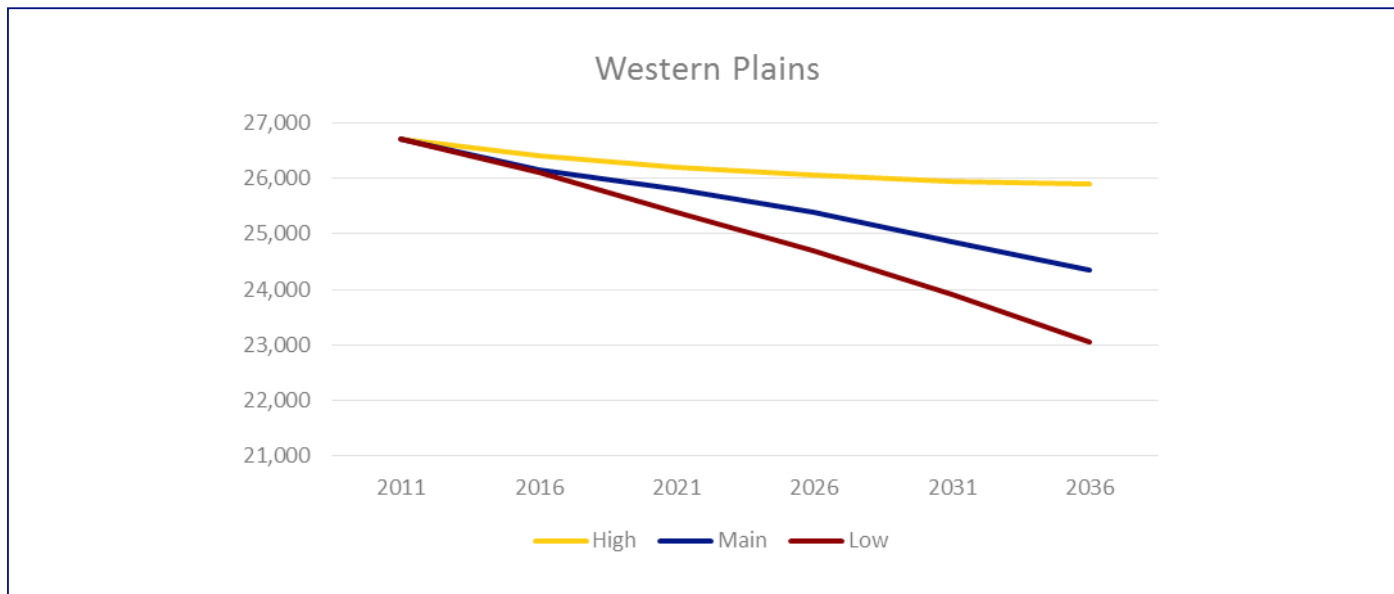
Figure 1: Western Plains Region



The NSW Department of Planning and Environment (DPE) produced population projections to 2036 by LGA. The low, main and high estimates for the Western Plains region are depicted in Figure 2. Between 2016 and 2021 its population is expected to fall by 2.68% (to 25,400) under the low estimate, 1.34% (to 25,800) under the main estimate and 0.76% (to 26,200) under the high growth estimate. However, population trends are not homogenous throughout the Region and some LGAs even expect population growth over the forecast period.

A more in-depth discussion of these trends and how the Strategy addresses them are presented in the Supporting Analysis. These estimates are extrapolated from expected migration, fertility and life expectancy rates and do not take into account the effects of events such as natural disasters or large scale economic development projects or programs. These figures highlight the necessity of active economic management in the context of background demographic changes.

Figure 2: Western Plains Population Projections



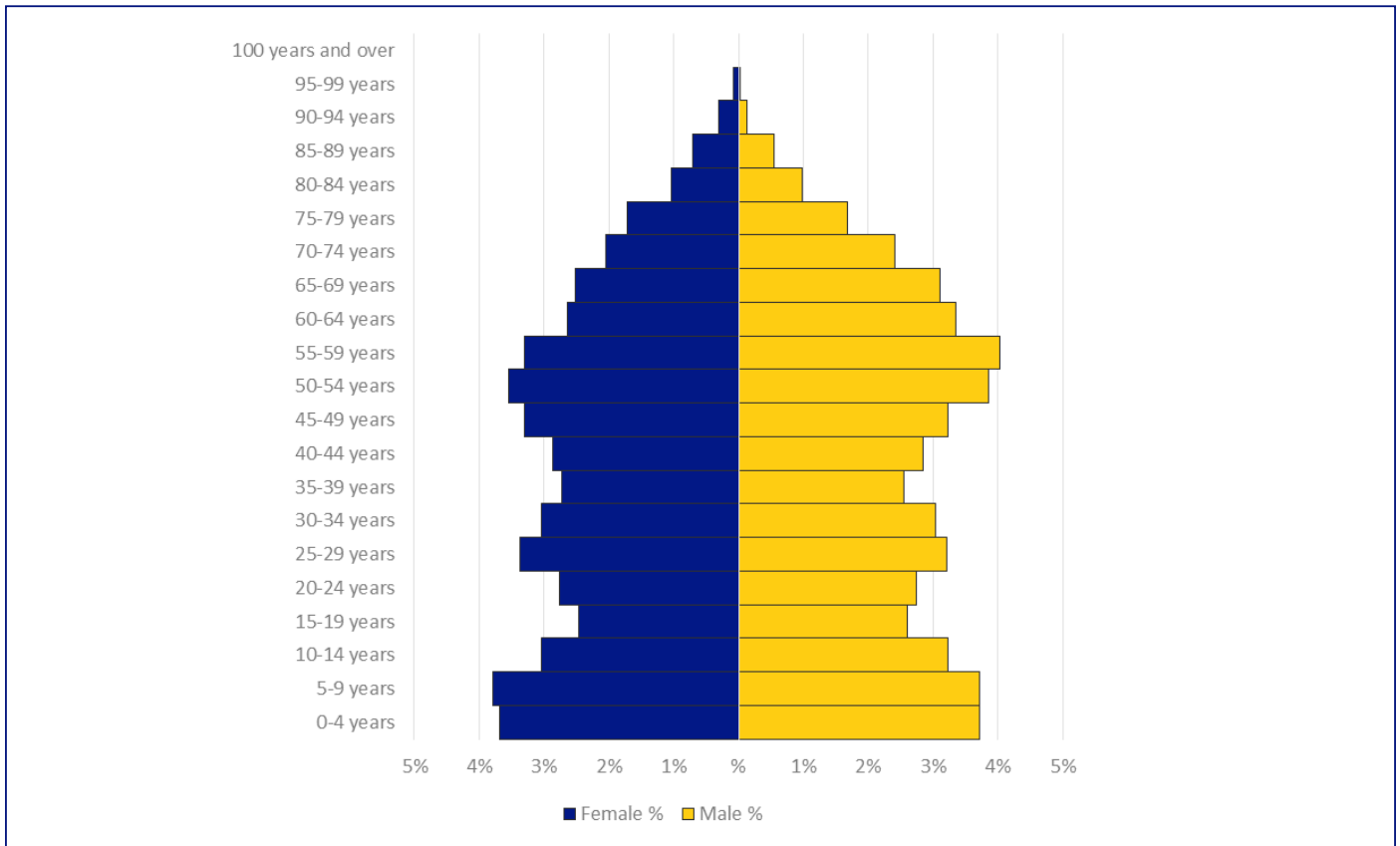
Source: NSW Department of Planning and Environment (DPE)

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2016 Census showed that the median age of the Region is 40, higher than the NSW median of 38. There are also a number of other demographic trends that pose particular challenges to the Region's economy. Overall the male to female ratio of the Region is 1.04, markedly higher than the State average of 0.97.

This pattern is particularly stark in the population over 50 (1.12); and in LGAs where mining is a significant employment sector, such as Cobar Shire (1.05). The population pyramid in Figure 3 illustrates the demographic patterns of the Region.



Figure 3: Population Pyramid by age and sex (2016)



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2016Census

The age structure of the Region is driven primarily by economic opportunity and lifestyle. Community consultations revealed that people migrate to and through the Region following good work and lifestyle prospects. This pattern was particularly noticeable for young people with the means to move independently and with fewer lifestyle needs (i.e. those in the 25-29 age bracket). The spike in their numbers suggests that there are economic “pull” factors drawing in workers of this age. Older people with families tend to require a host of services such as medical access, childhood education and family recreation as well as long-term job security that is not always available in the Region. Similarly, younger people between the ages of 10-24 tend

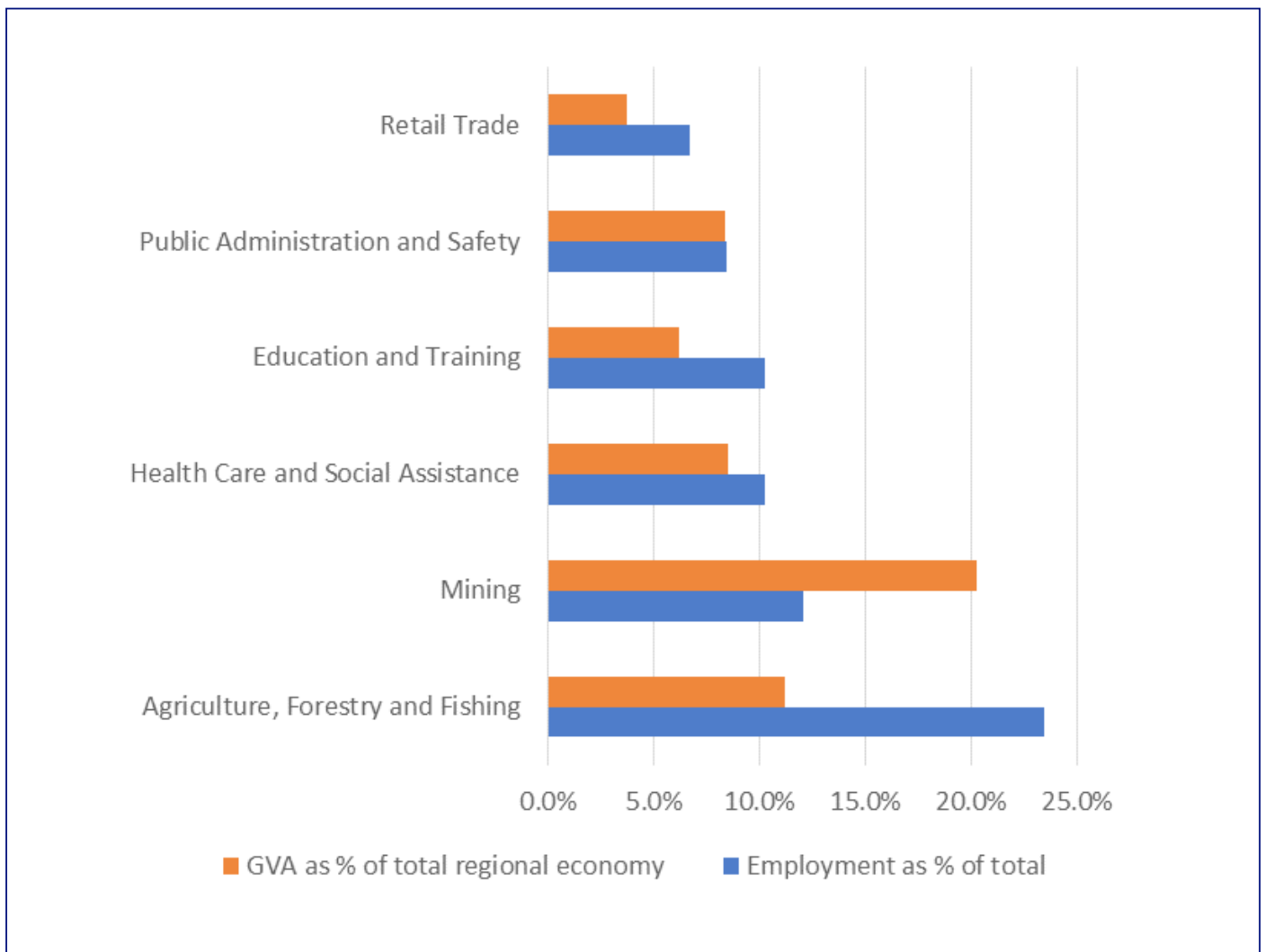
to seek education and work opportunities outside the Region, only returning later if employment prospects are good. Retirees also tend to seek options outside the Region, which is especially true of older single or widowed women. Stakeholder consultations suggested that the decline in the older female population relative to the older male population is due to “push” factors, such as the unavailability of women’s health, recreation and social services causing older women to seek retirement and lifestyle options outside the Region;. Together, these factors all have implications for the ability of the Region to access skilled workers, as well as retain older consumers necessary for a vibrant economy.

BACKGROUND CONTINUED

Figure 4 below provides a snapshot of the Region's main industries of employment as well as the contributions of those industries to Gross Regional Product (GRP). It is important to keep in mind however that the LGAs in the Region are not homogenous and employment patterns vary between them. For example, Mining activity is almost exclusively carried out in Cobar and Bogan Shires, with some black opal mining in Lightning Ridge in Walgett Shire.

Agriculture is also not a homogenous industry. Cotton farming and ginning features heavily in Warren Shire, whereas Grains and Cattle Farming features more heavily in LGAs such as Bogan, Brewarrina, Coonamble and Walgett Shires. It is also important to keep in mind that drought and seasonality on the sector significantly affect production, as well as the fact that in most LGAs it accounts for nearly all export volume and value.

Figure 4: Proportion of employment and GRP by sector



Source: ABS and CERD, Balmoral Group work product

ENDOWMENTS

Endowments are strengths that a regional economy possesses and can capitalise on. Economic principles suggest that endowments play a key role in the economic development of regions. The CERD in its Regional Economic Growth Enablers Report (2017) found that:

“the future of individual regional economies is inexorably linked to their natural endowments and attempts to retain or establish industries without an underpinning endowment are unlikely to succeed.”³

A region seeking to encourage economic development should concentrate on factors that enable the growth of endowment-based industries. It must also build local leadership, institutional capacity and capabilities to facilitate businesses, public agencies and services to capitalise on the opportunities that a region’s endowments present. Endowments can lead to opportunities from which commercial and industrial interests may leverage and develop specialisations.

Endowments of the Region identified through analysis and community consultation

Access to water, land and markets

The Darling River Basin, Macquarie River and Barwon River systems support Agriculture. These arterial tributaries of the Murray-Darling River Basin flow throughout the Region to support a wide variety of dryland and irrigated agriculture operations. These include Beef and Sheep Farming, as well as Wheat, Other Grains, Legume and Cotton Growing operations. The Great Artesian Basin also supplies water to half of the Region.

The Region supports a wide variety of soil types suited to a range of agriculture, including shallow and sandy soils suited to livestock and deep loamy soils suited to cropping.

Agricultural land also supports a significant endowment in the form of natural biomass that can be used as a renewable resource for energy generation and carbon abatement.

The Inland Rail project will increase options for the Region’s agricultural production to be transported, processed and exported both North and South.

Landscapes, heritage and culture

Many communities (such as Lightning Ridge) have resident artists drawing inspiration from the wide open spaces, mirages and wildlife. These landscapes include the Macquarie Marshes between Walgett and Nyngan, along with other National Parks.

Similarly, the night sky gleams: the Kamilaroi people are one of only two groups globally to make ‘constellations’ out of the dark sections of the night sky.

The ancient Brewarrina Fish Traps and scar trees show Indigenous presence over thousands of years. The Region continues to be an important backdrop for contemporary indigenous life in New South Wales. Historic events such as the 1965 “Freedom Riders” protests in Walgett facilitated changes to the Australian Constitution. Proportionally, Walgett also has one of the highest Indigenous populations throughout the State.

The Region is also endowed with Outback cultural heritage linked to Banjo Paterson and Henry Lawson’s literature.

3. Regional Economic Growth Enablers Report (2017), Centre for Economic and Regional Development.



ENDOWMENTS CONTINUED

Nonferrous ore and precious stones deposits

Copper, zinc and lead have been mined in Bogan Shire since the late 19th century. Similar deposits were discovered at Cobar in 1869 where there are currently three operating mines. Communities dominated by mining activity often experience swings in development and population that can place pressure on towns during both booms and troughs.

In the southwestern part of the Region, there are major mining belts that are believed to contain the largest concentration of base metals in New South Wales and one of the largest in Australia.

The opal deposits of Walgett Shire are also a unique feature of the Region. The Lightning Ridge opal deposits contain rare black opals that attract fossickers and grey nomads, as well as growing international tourist markets such as the Chinese demographic.

The Inland Rail project will increase options for the Region's ore production to be transported, processed and exported both North and South.

Sunshine

The Region has a hot semi-arid climate, experiencing hot summers with warm to cool winters, and some to little precipitation.

These conditions are favourable for solar energy generation. However, much of the Region currently lacks the transmission network capacity to host large-scale solar power plants apart from the 102MW solar farm at Nyngan, which leverages access to the grid to provide enough power to service approximately 40,000 homes a year.

Institutional endowments

The Region includes seven councils that have collaborated to develop previous regional plans all together, or in smaller groupings.

State Government institutions like Health and Education have limited presence in the region, meaning that it is a challenge for these institutions to address negative perceptions the community has of them. Strategy elements discuss how these institutions can make themselves more relevant / available to the community.

There are also strong business community organisations throughout the Region. These include:

- Bourke Business Group
- Nyngan Ag Expo
- Brewarrina Chamber of Commerce
- Cobar Business Association
- Coonamble Chamber of Commerce
- Walgett 2020 Group
- Lightning Ridge Chamber of Commerce and Industry
- Warren Chamber of Commerce
- Orana Joint Organisation
- Far North West Joint Organisation

Other business groups organise particular events which act as networking and catalysts for growth, such as Nyngan Ag Expo, the Walgett Agricultural Show and the Warren District Agricultural Society Show.

There are also numerous social / community groups providing services, assistance and recreation activities. However the need for more and wider groups was emphasised during community consultations.

Recently there have been improved relationships between government institutions and Aboriginal organisations, as shown by the Justice Reinvestment program in Bourke.

SPECIALISATIONS

Western Plains' large geographical area makes it difficult to identify specific specialisations that will apply generally to all or even most of the Region. It is therefore important to identify in what parts of the Region specialisations occur, which then has implications for how strategies are adopted. While strategies that raise the overall competitiveness of the Region may apply generally, strategies that target specific industry clusters are more likely to be 'place based'. Therefore, the Strategy examines both specialisations that emerge generally across the whole Region, as well as ones emerging specifically in each LGA.

Location Quotients, Shift-Share and Input-Output Analysis

Various methods can be used to obtain an understanding of those sectors within a regional economy that offer competitive advantages⁴ and further growth opportunities. One form of analysis is the Location Quotient (LQ) which measures the employment concentration in industry sectors within a region, compared with the same sectors across NSW. The higher the LQ, the higher the likelihood that a region is specialised in that industry (relative to NSW).

For the purpose of this analysis, specialisations as defined by LQs, are therefore used as an indicator of those sectors and industries that represent a region's true competitive advantages; as literature suggests, a LQ of 1.25 defines those sectors that can be considered a regional specialisation.

Importantly, while LQs are used in this document for that purpose, they are only a partial measure of competitive advantage. Hence, they have been considered alongside additional data and analyses such as Input-Output analysis to arrive at the findings for the Western Plains Strategy.

Shift-share analysis attributes the proportion of employment growth due to state, industry and regional effects, identifying whether growth or decline can be attributed to internal or external factors. Input-Output analysis computes the internal value-adding, final consumption, imports and exports for individual sectors of the economy.

A number of the Region's specialisations are illustrated in Figure 5. The figure plots selected industries in terms of the employment LQ and employment growth relative to the NSW industry average (which is a proxy for the anticipated growth in LQ in the future).

A bubble's size represents the number of people employed in the industry. In this analysis, the key industries inside the Region fall into one of the three categories below. The categories are:

Industries which are currently specialisations, and likely to be specialisations in the future

These industries are the bubbles in **blue**. They possess a LQ greater than or equal to 1.25, and hence are likely to be the Region's specialisations. Employment in these sectors 'grew faster' than the equivalent sector across the whole of NSW⁵, showing regional strength. If these trends in employment continue, their LQs are likely to stay above 1.25 in the future.

Industries which are currently specialisations, but may lose its status as a specialisation in the future

These industries are the bubbles in **red**. They possess a LQ greater than or equal to 1.25, and hence are likely to be the Region's specialisations. However, employment in these sectors did not grow as fast as the equivalent sector across the whole of NSW. Hence, if these trends in employment continue, their LQs may drop below 1.25 in the future.

Industries which are currently not specialisations, but likely to be specialisations in the future

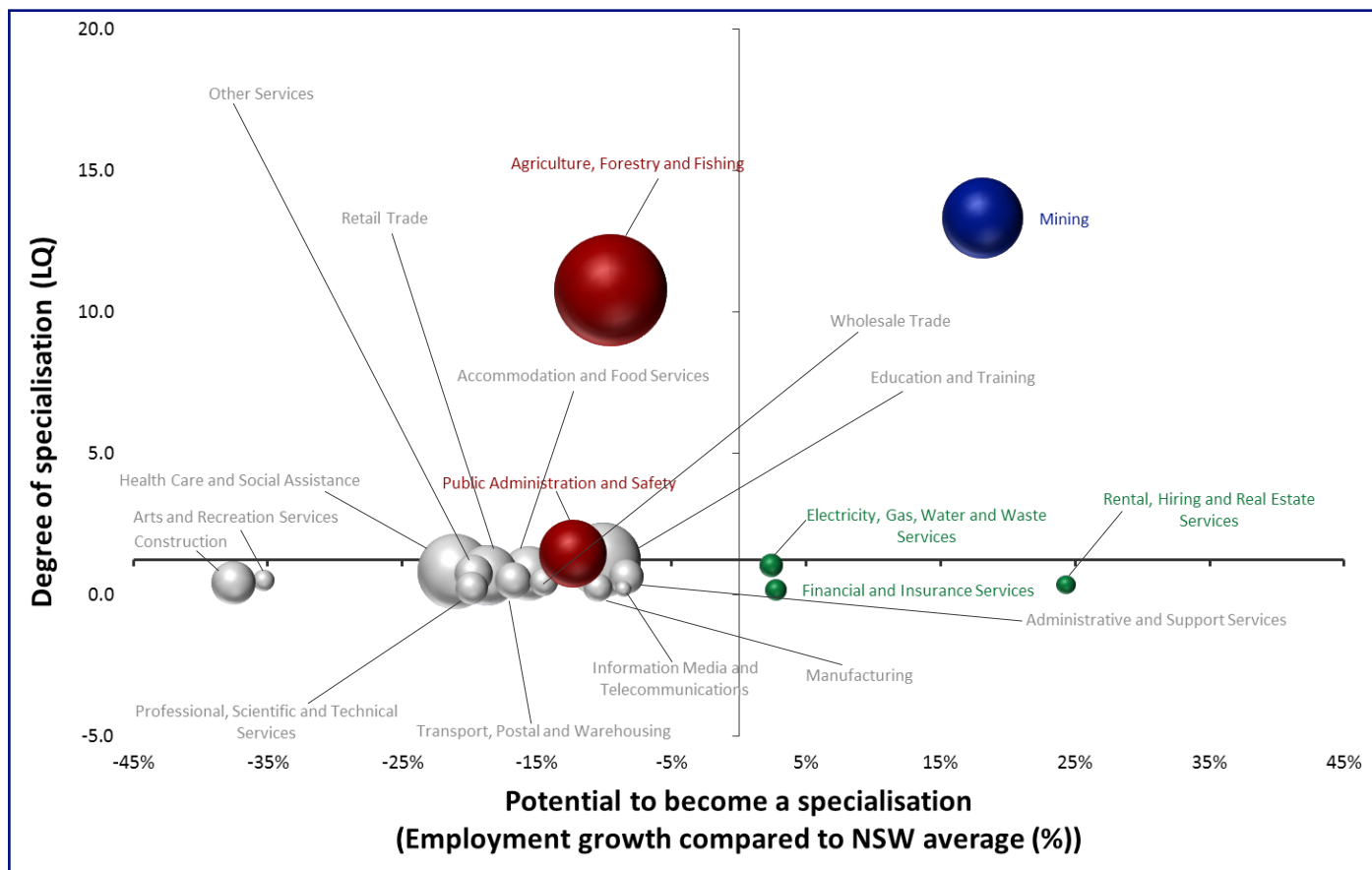
These industries are the bubbles in **green**. They possess a LQ less than 1.25, and hence are unlikely to be the Region's specialisations. However, employment in these sectors grew faster than the equivalent sector across the whole of NSW, showing regional strength. If these trends in employment continue, their LQs are likely to reach 1.25 in the future.

Based on the LQ analysis, the Region has a number of specialisations including *Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing and Mining*.

4. A region's competitive advantage for an industry includes its ability to produce goods and services at a lower cost or differentiate its products from other regions, along with access to external factors which enhance business and operations / minimise risk (Stimson, Stough and Roberts, 2006).
5. It should be noted that there could be three cases in which employment 'grew faster' in the region compared to the same industry across the whole of NSW. These are the case where:
 1. The industry experienced an increase in employment in the Region and in NSW as a whole, and the % increase for the Region was more than that of NSW,
 2. The industry experienced an increase in employment in the Region but declined in NSW as a whole, and
 3. The industry declined in employment in both the Region and in NSW as a whole, but as a % the Region lost less of its employment in the industry than NSW as a whole.

A similar case also applies to the cases in which employment in the Region's sectors 'did not grow as fast' as the equivalent sectors across the whole of NSW.

Figure 5: Location Quotients and Employment Growth for Industries in the Western Plains



Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing

Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing employed 2,275 people in 2016, the largest workforce in the Region, accounting for 23.5% of employment with a location quotient of 10.78 overall. At the LGA-level it is also the largest sector of employment for Bogan (21.0%, LQ: 9.66), Brewarrina (29.9%, LQ: 13.74), Coonamble (31.8%, LQ: 14.60), Walgett (26.8%, LQ: 12.31) and Warren (42.2%, LQ: 19.38). From 2015-16 it contributed \$139.8 million worth (11.2% of total) of Gross Value Add (GVA) to the regional economy. It is also one of the Region's net exporting industries, contributing \$8.3 million worth of Net Exports in the same year. However these GVA and Net Export figures are likely to be much below average due to the prolonged effects of drought that currently affect the Region.

The Meat and Meat Product Manufacturing sector had a Gross Value Added of \$19.56 million, representing a significant benefit to the Region. On a smaller, but still locally significant scale, the Textile Manufacturing and Textile Product Manufacturing sectors that are representative of the cotton ginning and related industries prominent in

Warren had a total Gross Value Add of \$4.1 million. In total, they accounted for 64 FTE jobs in the Region. However these GVA, Employment and Net Export figures are likely to be much below average due to the prolonged effects of drought that currently affect the Region.

Despite the relative importance of the sector to the economy, as a whole it has experienced consistent declines in employment, falling 33.8% between 2001-06, 12.3% between 2006-11 and 3.4% between 2011-16. This pattern of decline was mirrored in most LGAs, the notable exceptions being Brewarrina and Cobar Shires which have remained relatively stable. Shift-share analysis suggests that overall these declines in employment are in excess of State and Industry effects, pointing to local factors as the driving force behind this trend. Locals identified drought as a major factor in the employment trends in Agriculture, with people leaving the sector and the Region during periods of low rainfall and returning when more favourable weather patterns resume.

SPECIALISATIONS CONTINUED

At the ANZSIC level 4 subsector, Sheep Farming (Specialised) was the largest employer in Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing in 2016, representing 516 jobs or 22.7% of total industry employment; Beef Farming (Specialised) was also a significant employer, representing 377 jobs (16.57%). Both subsectors experienced increased employment over the period of analysis. In contrast, mixed Grains-Cattle Farming experienced sharp declines. This points to a trend towards increased specialisation in the Agriculture sector, driven by farmers adapting to changing market and business conditions. Although a significant export, Cotton Growing (present mostly in the Warren LGA) has also experienced consistent declines in employment, falling from 222 in 2006 to 101 in 2016. This trend is likely due to advances in technology, as evidenced by increased investment and output from the sector in recent years.

Mining

In contrast to declines in employment in the Agriculture sector, the Mining sector has experienced consistent increases in employment since 2001. From 2001-16 it increased 55.1%, from 2006-11 it increased 10.8%, and from 2011-16 it increased 20.4% resulting in a workforce of 1,173 representing 12.1% of employment with a location quotient of 13.33. However, economic activity is almost exclusively concentrated in Cobar, employing 72.9% of the industry workforce (LQ: 41.48). Bogan Shire's workforce accounts for another 22.7% (LQ: 22.57). It is also important to highlight that there have been job losses at individual mines throughout this period. There is also a 'hole' in this data as Lightning Ridge has many resident opal miners, but many do not list it as their profession, nor Walgett Shire as their place of residence. The Lightning Ridge Miners' Association lists approximately 860 financial members; however, only 45 people in Walgett (2.2% of the workforce) listed their industry of employment as in the Mining sector. This may partly be explained by the fact that many miners are semi-permanent, leaving the area during the hot summer months.

Shift-share analysis suggests that recent gains in employment are driven by local factors over and above State and Industrial effects, likely due to the Region's significant mineral endowments as discussed above.

Input-Output Analysis of the Mining industry as a whole from 2015-16 shows that the sector accounts for 20.2% of total Gross Value Added. It also spent \$30 million on Exploration and Mining Support Services, indicating that there is interest in future expansion and that employment growth in the industry could remain strong.

6. Destination NSW, Travel to Outback NSW Tourism Region Year ended March 2018 <https://www.destinationnsw.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/outback-nsw-time-series-march-2018.pdf>

Tourism

Although not formally defined by the ABS in its own right, the effects of Tourism expenditure impact almost every single sector in the Western Plains economy. Input-Output analysis for 2015-16 computes that the sector contributed \$111.2 million to Gross Value Added (9.5% of total) and 10.4% of Full Time Equivalent (FTE). Input-Output analysis identifies the Employment and Travel Agency Services sector as an important and potentially powerful industries, which can be leveraged by better managing the flow of tourists throughout the Region. A healthy tourism industry can also help diversify the Region's economy, putting less reliance on the Region's traditionally export orientated economy. It was made clear during consultation with the Food and Beverage Services industry that they depend upon the reliability of consumption from local residents and businesses to support them and provide the cash flow necessary to invest in products that attract tourists, such as regional foods and high quality accommodation.

Three sectors in particular both drive and benefit from Tourism and the flow-on effects it has throughout the economy. In 2015-16 Tourism expenditure accounted for 88.8% of FTE jobs in Accommodation and Food Services (LQ: 0.76), 32.1% in Retail Trade (LQ: 0.69), and 21.2% in the Arts and Recreation Services (LQ: 0.52) sectors. Together, these sectors accounted for 1,424 employed individuals in 2016. However, there has been a slight decline since 2001 when the workforce totalled 1,787. This is in contrast to an overall (but highly variable) increase in visitor numbers and expenditure in Outback NSW over that period.⁶

Further employment gains are possible to fully capitalise on the Region's significant drawcards and endowments, such as the Macquarie Marshes, Opal Fields and other natural attractions, as well as significant Aboriginal cultural heritage. The existence of a healthy Leisure and Recreation sector will also have positive flow on effects for the rest of the economy, improving the Region's standard of living and making it a more attractive place to live, work, and do business.

In summary, the core competencies for the Region depend on individual LGAs. The core competency throughout the Region is in agriculture: both livestock grazing and broad acre farming for grains and crops. In some parts of the Region there is a value chain for manufacturing of agricultural products. Increasing the synergies between these industries is a key focus of the Strategy. Mining is a key industry in some parts of the Region, and there are diverse tourism attractions throughout the Region that can be better connected. The Strategy builds on these economic strengths and is presented on the next page.

STRATEGY

The five Strategy elements for the Western Plains region link directly to the opportunities presented by the Region's endowments, specialisations and core competencies and also aim to address some key regional risks.

The Strategy elements were derived from an analysis of the endowments that underpin the Region's strengths, followed by examination of current and emerging industry specialisations, identified in consultation with the community and councils.

Each element is accompanied by a set of early actions, which should be interpreted simply as example actions derived from the preliminary application of the Strategy framework. It is therefore expected that there will be other actions capable of contributing to achieving the Region's vision that are yet to be identified. Consequently, an action's alignment with the Strategy is the primary strategic consideration, rather than it being listed in this document, and all proposed actions will be subject to further qualitative and quantitative evaluative processes.

The Five Elements of the Strategy

- 1 Drive growth in Agriculture and manufacturing of agricultural products by optimising access to markets and consumers through investment facilitation.
- 2 Optimise economic activity across Agriculture, Mining and Tourism industries by enhancing telecommunications and climate infrastructure that increases business certainty and resilience.
- 3 Unlock growth in Agriculture, Manufacturing of agricultural products and Mining by improving energy and water infrastructure.
- 4 Grow Tourism to enrich and diversify the Regional economy.
- 5 Improve the Region's social and demographic fabric to grow Mining, Tourism and Agriculture industries.



1 | Drive growth in Agriculture and Manufacturing of agricultural products by optimising access to markets and consumers through investment facilitation

The two most significant bottlenecks constraining future economic development in the Region is the lack of adequate transport options. Resolving this will not only allow agricultural producers to better access export and processing markets, but also have effects in other industries such as mining and tourism throughout the Region. Through analysis of transport networks and stakeholder consultation, it became clear that the Region needs an integrated transport plan that includes investment in a full range of road, rail and air infrastructure. Road infrastructure is particularly important as the primary form of transport to intermodals and it is key to the Region being able to fully capitalise on the development of the Inland Rail. Air transport is important but also as a way of encouraging skilled workers into all sectors of the economy, as the Region's distance from other metropolitan and regional centres can be a disincentive for seeking work in the Western Plains.

Infrastructure Priorities

Upgrade and maintain regionally significant road corridors: Funding and resourcing for road maintenance and upgrades should continue to be made available, with particular attention paid to enhancing pathways to markets. The local councils of the Region are responsible for maintaining a vast network of sealed and unsealed roads, placing significant pressure on councils' limited resources. This Strategy has been identified as a priority for all LGAs in the Region, but will be particularly important for areas that are currently serviced by rail such as Cobar, Warren, Nyngan (Bogan Shire), Coonamble and Walgett. Many road corridors in the Region also link directly to rail sidings, further emphasising the need for a holistic view of effective transport infrastructure.

Upgrade rail line and invest in loading and containerising facilities: Infrastructure upgrades on rail lines, as well as in loading and containerising facilities in the towns serviced by rail, will enhance further opportunities for market access and value adding along the agricultural supply chain. Rail is considered by many stakeholders as a vital piece of enabling infrastructure. For example, the upgrade of the Coonamble-Dubbo rail line allowed a grain receival site to be opened in 2012, which has since become one of the largest receival sites in the State. Current rail lines operate from Cobar-Narromine, Coonamble-Dubbo and Walgett-Narrabri, which positions the Region well with respect to the intermodals of the Inland Rail. Therefore this Strategy has been identified as an opportunity for LGAs serviced by rail, including Bogan, Cobar, Coonamble, Walgett and Warren.

Upgrade airports in major towns: A need has been identified to provide a regional air service between the Region's major towns and Dubbo as travel distances can be prohibitive for skilled workers and service providers considering opportunities in the Region. This will require the refurbishment of airports in some towns. The Strategy has been identified as a priority for LGAs that currently have airports servicing major towns.

Organisational Priorities

Consider the regional impact of infrastructure upgrades: Many of the infrastructure priorities listed in this Strategy are priorities for most of the LGAs in the Region. In order to pursue the best case for funding, each infrastructure upgrade project should be considered in a regional context. This involves coordination between local councils to identify road network corridors of regional economic significance, which integrate into the greater transport network through rail and air linkages.

Strategy Outcome

Agribusinesses and Manufacturing enterprises have enhanced access to export and consumer markets which promotes economic growth in the Region.

Intermediate Outcome

- Agribusinesses and manufacturers develop value adding along enhanced supply chains.
- Industry supported by skilled workers and service providers throughout the Region.

Outputs

- Agribusinesses have enhanced access to export markets.
- Skilled workers and service providers can more easily access opportunities in the Region with more ease.

Activities

- Upgrade and maintain regionally significant road corridors.
- Upgrade and invest in rail lines, loading and containerising facilities.
- Upgrade airports in major towns to enable a regional air service.

Inputs

- Resource funding for the upgrade and maintenance of regionally significant road corridors.
- Resource funding for and encourage the development of upgrades of the rail transport network.
- Resource funding for the upgrades of major airports to enable a regional air service.

2 | Optimise economic activity across Agriculture, Mining and Tourism by enhancing telecommunications and climate infrastructure that increases business certainty and resilience

Access to Information Communications Technology (ICT) is considered by many stakeholders to be a key piece of enabling infrastructure across core sectors of the economy. This includes providing stable and equitable access to the National Broadband Network (NBN) and mobile phone connectivity. However, while access to the internet is important, the quality of the information that businesses can access is severely limited with regards to meteorological forecasting. A 2013 report commissioned by the Orana Regional Organisation of Councils summarised the broad economic benefits that could accrue should a dedicated weather radar station be established in the Region.⁷ Through this investment into the relevant technologies and infrastructure, businesses can achieve operational efficiency during its implementation, and potentially achieve business certainty upon its completion.

Infrastructure Priorities

Invest in internet connectivity: Investing in telecommunications infrastructure is a critical step towards ensuring that businesses can continue to grow, for example:

- Broad acre Agriculture: the adoption of precision sowing, fertilisation, irrigation and spraying
- Livestock Agriculture: the adoption of virtual fence and pasture management
- Mining: the adoption of mine automation and real-time environmental quality monitoring
- Tourism: enhancing the safety of visitors to the Region, and the development of a virtually connected network of assets (as discussed in Strategy element 4)
- Health and Social Assistance: the development of online health care, especially in the areas of aged, women's and mental health to enhance regional liveability (as discussed in Strategy 5)

A wide range of technology options should be considered, including fixed wireless and 5G networks. This action has been identified as a priority for all LGAs within the Region.

Invest in mobile phone connectivity: Mobile phone connectivity is a requirement for modern business operation. Many stakeholders also highlighted the personal safety and wellbeing benefits of mobile phone connectivity, especially during natural disasters such as floods or fires. This action is also a priority for all LGAs within the Region.

Organisational Priorities

Develop a weather station servicing the Western Plains: A detailed feasibility and business case is required to resource the funding required for the construction of a weather radar station for the Western Plains. A number of economic, social and environmental benefits have been identified and indicatively quantified as part of studies into its potential benefits. It may require coordination with interested proponents or key beneficiaries in order to secure funding, such as through Commonwealth programs or through a partnership with the Mining and/or Agriculture sector/s. Because benefits are dispersed throughout the Region and across industries and interest groups, this action has been identified as a priority for all LGAs within the Region.

Strategy Outcome

Businesses are not constrained by the availability of tele-communications services or climate uncertainty and can grow, expand and travel freely.

Intermediate Outcome

- Agribusinesses adapt, specialise, and integrate new technology into their businesses.
- Tourists can make forward plans with less uncertainty.
- Telecommunications infrastructure and mobile phone coverage allows businesses to develop new products and grow.

Outputs

- Agriculture and Mining businesses as well as visitors have access to mobile and internet services.
- Businesses across all sectors and visitors have access to accurate and up to date weather forecasting services.

Activities

- Invest in critical telecommunications infrastructure, including mobile phone and internet connectivity throughout the Region.
- Pursue the development of a weather radar station servicing the Western Plains.

Inputs

- Co-ordinate with NBN Co. and mobile service providers.
- Co-ordinate with Bureau of Meteorology.

7. GHD (2013), Report for the Orana Regional Organisation of Councils – Weather Radar Project

3 | Unlock growth in Agriculture, Manufacturing of agricultural products and Mining by improving energy and water infrastructure

Stakeholders engaged in the Strategy across the Mining and Agriculture industries, the two largest employers in the Region, frequently cited the lack of water and energy security and reliability as key barriers to growth and challenges to current production. Manufacturing businesses, which are essential in adding value to Mining and Agriculture, also stated the above points as key barriers. This Strategy addresses these barriers by recommending increased investment both in regional-scale infrastructure, as well as small-scale efficiency and generation technologies that will enhance the resilience and productivity of these industries in the long-term and secure future regional economic growth.

Infrastructure Priorities

Invest in regional and small-scale water infrastructure projects:

Regional-scale water security infrastructure to increase the reliability of supply and reduce the risk that any part of the Region has shortages. At the same time, investment in small-scale water efficiency projects that reduce losses in the system will reduce costs and uncertainty. Stakeholders engaged in consultations identify the effects of prolonged periods of drought, as well as water policies of successive governments, as reasons for declines in population and activity in Agriculture. This action has been identified as a priority for all LGAs within the Region.

Invest in renewable and alternative energy: The dispersed nature of the entire Region and its Agriculture, including value adding Manufacturing industries means that investments in local renewable energy generation from solar, wind, biomass and thermal assets are needed. The cost and intermittency of supply directly interferes with businesses' ability to meet market needs or source inputs. For example, value-adding industries relevant to the Region such as Meat Manufacturing and Cotton Ginning have significant energy requirements. This action has been identified as a priority for all LGAs within the Region. Renewable energy is also an important factor for Mining production, which uses a lot of energy within the Region.

Invest in energy transmission infrastructure: Investing in energy transmission infrastructure is required to address a critical bottleneck in the economy. Currently energy transmission lines are not adequate to meet current demand for power during peak residential demand. Some Mining operations cease during these periods, lowering the overall viability of future expansion in this sector. This action has been identified as a priority for Cobar and Bogan Shires, which represent the major Mining areas of the Region.

Organisational Priorities

Fund feasibility studies for energy and water projects: Funding joint applications for investigation into the economic viability of large-scale infrastructure projects that address identified needs is the first step to securing investment. There is currently a lack of research and data quantifying the economic costs of poor energy and water infrastructure in the Region. This action has been identified as a priority for all LGAs within the Region.

Strategy Outcome

Agriculture, Manufacturing and Mining Businesses will be less constrained by availability of water and energy supply and can grow and expand more freely.

Intermediate Outcome

- Agribusinesses and manufacturers remain viable and can invest in growth without uncertainty of water and energy security.
- Mining activity expands, develops and employs more people.

Outputs

- Agribusinesses, manufacturers and mining industries have enhanced water and energy security, making them more viable and productive in the long-term.
- Energy supply is adequate to service the demands of communities and Mining operations, making operations more viable and productive.

Activities

- Invest in regional and small-scale water infrastructure projects.
- Invest in renewable and alternative energy generation and storage infrastructure projects.
- Invest in energy transmission infrastructure.
- Investigate feasibility studies and business cases for energy and water infrastructure projects.

Inputs

- Co-ordinate with NSW Water
- Co-ordinate with Infrastructure NSW
- Co-ordinate with TransGrid

4 | Grow Tourism to enrich and diversify the regional economy

Sub-industries comprising the tourism industry within the Region does not boast a location quotient high enough to be considered a current specialisation. However, the significant natural and cultural endowments, particularly from Aboriginal communities, suggest that more can be done to stimulate this sector to diversify the economy. There exists an opportunity to stimulate the development of assets belonging to Aboriginal communities as a method of addressing social and economic disadvantage, as well as contributing to the NSW State Priority to increase attendance at cultural venues and events by 15% by 2019.

Infrastructure Priorities

Develop natural and built assets to attract visitors: Participants in the Strategy development process identified several under-resourced potential tourist destinations throughout the Region. These include, but are not limited to the Ramsar⁸ listed Macquarie Marshes, the Pilliga National Park, the Toorale and Gundabooka National Parks, Narran Lake Nature Reserve, the National Heritage listed Brewarrina Fish Traps, Mt Grenfell, Culgoa National Park and several artesian bore baths. Improving access to, and facilities servicing, these places is a significant step forward to opening them up as eco-tourism destinations. There are also opportunities to leverage the unique cultural characteristics of individual towns to provide cultural centres, museums and artistic installations to enhance their attractiveness. While investment in the development of these assets represents unique 'place-based' strategies for these areas, the identification and cross-promotion with other areas should be a priority for all LGAs within the Region. This action links to Strategy element 5: Develop town beautification, as well as Strategy element 1: resolving problems in transport options.

Develop air infrastructure: A regional air service can only be developed based on improved airport infrastructure. Doing so would significantly improve access to the Region's multiple, but disparate, attractions; the attractions can then thrive based on enhanced consumer flows. This action links to Strategy element 1: air infrastructure, as well as road infrastructure.

Enhance the number and quality of accommodation options: The Region should also strive to make itself attractive to a range of international markets such as Chinese tourists interested in opals, as well as the domestic business and family markets. A key barrier to taking advantage of the number of tourists that visit the Region is the limited range of quality accommodation options available across the spectrum from camping and caravan parks to hotels and motels. Grey nomads traveling through the Region are a significant market, although primarily stay in self-contained RVs. This strategy has been identified as a priority for all LGAs within the Region.

Organisational Priorities

Establish a forum for tourism operators to network: An energised business network amongst tourism operators should be established to assist businesses in networking, advertisement and co-promotion. The distances between towns and subsequently businesses servicing visitors mean that these operators are often beyond each other's immediate networks. This strategy has been identified as a priority for all LGAs within the Region.

Develop Aboriginal cultural attractions with communities: Government should co-ordinate with local Aboriginal land councils and community groups to identify suitable opportunities for investment in and development of their local economies. This applies broadly to all industries, but particularly in the tourism sector. These may include Aboriginal culture trails, museums and other cultural attractions. This strategy has been identified as a priority for all LGAs within the Region.

Strategy Outcome

The development of a diverse Tourism industry that capitalises on significant natural and cultural endowments.

Intermediate Outcome

- Local economies diversify their base of economic activity, creating resilient and vibrant communities.

Outputs

- Visitation numbers to the Region are increased.
- Local and Aboriginal communities benefit from increased economic activity.

Activities

- Develop natural and town assets to open them up to visitation.
- Regional air service developed.
- Enhance the number / quality of accommodation options.
- Establish a forum for tourism operators to network, advertise and cross-promote.
- Develop cultural attractions identified by Aboriginal communities as suitable priorities.

Inputs

- Resource access and facilities to service natural assets.
- Co-ordinate dispersed tourism operators through the Destination NSW Network Country and Outback.
- Co-ordinate with Aboriginal communities.

8. The Convention on Wetlands of International Importance (treaty) is for the conservation and sustainable use of wetlands.

5 | Improve the Region's social and demographic fabric to grow Mining, Tourism and Agriculture industries

A major impediment to the economic development of the Region identified by the stakeholders who took part in the Strategy process was the difficulty faced by businesses retaining long-term staff. One reason for this included the low level of training and professional development opportunities within the Region, as well as the low participation rate in the general workforce. Observers noted that during the Millennium Drought many people lost their jobs and have since faced difficulties re-entering the workforce as the businesses in which they were employed have not returned.

Infrastructure Priorities

Develop town beautification strategies: Actions such as cleaning and maintaining public parks and squares, utilising empty shopfronts as displays for unique local produce and helping local businesses repaint and brand their stores are all examples of things that towns can do to 'lift up' their communities. Maintaining the appearance of local towns can also encourage passing visitors to stop, synergising with Strategy 4. A sense of civic pride associated with living in a place that looks and feels like a healthy and vibrant community can instil a culture of community in residents that encourages them to stay and work in the Region. This strategy has been identified as a priority for all LGAs in the Region.

Develop and renovate residential property: The Region should simultaneously encourage investment in new residential property, as well as the refurbishment and renovation of existing properties as appropriate. The lack of adequate residential property has been cited by various stakeholders as an impediment to attracting labour into the towns of the Region, even when there is work available. Potential reform in existing guidelines may also encourage investment into this area.

Organisational Priorities

Invest in the provision of essential services and recreation: various essential and recreational services must be available in the community, including:

- Healthcare facilities, particularly women's and mental health
- Education
- Child care
- A mature Food and Beverage Service industry
- Vibrant community groups

In some cases the local workforce is insufficient to meet the needs of industry, such as the specialised skills required by the Mining sector. In order to attract skilled labour, a 'family-centric' approach to recruitment must be taken. When advertising jobs, businesses must be able to advertise the lifestyle available to workers' families. This strategy has been identified as a priority for Cobar Shire, which is heavily reliant on accessing the external labour market for Mining.

Improving council delivery and synergies for state service deliveries in isolated communities will make it easier for people to live and work in the Region, contributing to positive economic and demographic outcomes.

Strategy Outcome

A thriving and engaged community that provides the foundation for a vibrant and skilled labour force that allows industry growth.

Intermediate Outcome

- Businesses are able to attract and retain skilled workers from within the Region, and from outside the Region when necessary.

Outputs

- The social amenity of towns are improved.
- Education outcomes for young people and people re-entering the workforce are improved.

Activities

- Develop and action town beautification strategies.
- Encourage the development and renovation of residential property.
- Invest in the provision of essential services such as health care, education and child care.
- Encourage the development of a vibrant Food and Beverage industry.
- Encourage the development of vibrant community groups.
- Invest in TAFE Connected Learning Centres.

Inputs

- Resource funding for town beautification actions.
- Resource funding for essential services.
- Co-ordinate with community groups.
- Co-ordinate with the Food and Beverage sector community.
- Co-ordinate with TAFE and the Department of Education

5 | Improve the Region's social and demographic fabric to grow Mining, Tourism and Agriculture industries

Organisational Priorities (Continued)

Evidence from local businesses and community members points to the lack of educational opportunities within the Region for youth and those seeking to re-train. The reliance on remote delivery for TAFE courses is limited by the poor quality of internet services, detailed in Strategy 2. This strategy has been identified as a priority for all Councils in the Region, some of which experience poor educational outcomes for their youth.

Invest in TAFE Connected Learning Centres: Government should coordinate with TAFE NSW to expedite the delivery of Connected Learning Centres throughout the Region. These modern facilities can help bridge the communication divide, as well as act as informal campuses where students can support each other and develop the social support networks crucial for successful learning outcomes. Evidence from local businesses and community members points to the lack of educational opportunities within the Region for youth and those seeking to re-train. The reliance on remote delivery for TAFE courses is limited by the poor access to internet services, detailed in Strategy 2. This Strategy has been identified as a priority for all Councils in the Region, which are some of the LGAs that experience the poorest educational outcomes for youth.



Summary of Strategies and Actions

Enablers	Drive growth in Agriculture and Manufacturing of agricultural products by optimising access to markets and consumers through investment facilitation	Optimise economic activity across Agriculture, Mining and Tourism industries by enhancing telecommunications and climate infrastructure that increases business certainty and resilience	Unlock growth in Agriculture, Manufacturing of agricultural products and Mining by improving energy and water infrastructure	Grow Tourism to enrich and diversify the Region's economy	Improve the Region's social and demographic fabric to grow Mining, Tourism and Agriculture industries
People and skills				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Establish a forum for tourism operators to network, advertise and cross-promote. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Invest in TAFE Connected Learning Centres ➤ Encourage the development of vibrant community groups.
Government, regulation and information			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Investigate feasibility studies and business cases for energy and water infrastructure projects. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Encourage the development of a vibrant food and recreation industry.
Infrastructure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Upgrade and maintain regionally significant road corridors. ➤ Upgrade and invest in rail lines, loading and containerising facilities. ➤ Upgrade airports in major towns to enable a regional air service. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Invest in critical telecommunications infrastructure, including mobile phone and internet connectivity throughout the Region. ➤ Pursue the development of a weather radar station servicing the Western Plains Region. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Develop natural and town assets to open them up to visitation. ➤ Enhance the number and quality of accommodation options available. ➤ Develop cultural attractions identified by Aboriginal communities as suitable priorities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Develop and action town beautification strategies. ➤ Encourage the development and renovation of residential property. ➤ Invest in the provision of essential services such as health, education and child care.
Utilities			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Invest in regional and small-scale water infrastructure projects. ➤ Invest in renewable and alternative energy generation infrastructure projects. ➤ Invest in energy transmission infrastructure. 		

IMPLEMENTATION

The effective implementation of the Strategy will involve the key stakeholders and regional community that contributed to its development, including all seven councils as well as state government agencies and local entities.

The completion of this document is intended to be the first stage of an ongoing process where new specific actions to further progress the Vision are identified through application of the framework.

It is therefore recommended that an Advisory Committee made up of representatives from each council and other groups such as business chambers be established to progress the implementation of actions listed in this Strategy, apply the Strategy's framework to identify new actions to be added to the Action Plan, develop key performance indicators and evaluate outcomes. The Advisory Committee would meet every quarter and would report progress on actions to each council.

The seven councils would also meet six monthly with the Regional Director – Western, NSW Department of Premier and Cabinet. These meetings could also be used to check the Strategy's progress and review against current grant opportunities.

After two years, the Advisory Committee will initiate the conduct of a formal review of the Action Plan and associated governance processes, producing a brief report card to be published as an addendum to the Economic Development Strategy. This will also provide an opportunity to update the Action Plan for new or modified actions in view of key economic, social, environmental and policy changes.

After four years, the Advisory Committee will also begin the process of updating or refreshing the Strategy.



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