

Improving regional welcoming strategies

Contents

Introduction	2
An assessment of the community's willingness to seek and actively integrate newcomers into their community	2
A thorough understanding of the newcomer's expectations and a realistic assessment of the community's capacity to meet them	3
A well designed program to demonstrate to newcomers that their expectations can be fulfilled	4
Sources of government information	5
Community initiatives	5
Local government importance in welcoming strategies	6
Concluding comments	6

Introduction

Many regional communities are actively trying to woo new long-term residents as a means of addressing the drift of young people to the cities and the constant lack of resident professional and trades people. Apart from the associated economic stimulus, newcomers can improve the quality of life in regions. Their different backgrounds and life experiences often extend the diversity and complexity of the community in which they reside.

The Australian Government and many state governments are actively promoting the settlement of overseas business and professional people in regional locations. Government initiatives are generally aimed at meeting skill shortages in regional communities although relatively little attention has been directed at the wider issues associated with retaining newcomers.

Many people move to regional areas and settle harmoniously in their new communities but that does not understate attracting and retaining newcomers to work and live in regional Australia can be a significant challenge, and can be crucial for community sustainability.

In Warrnambool, the council believes there is considerable scope for communities to do more in this area and to learn from the efforts of those communities that have made a positive choice to welcome newcomers.

The need for communities to develop more effective regional welcoming strategies was identified in the Regional Business Development Analysis (RBDA) report, *Regional Business: A Plan for Action*.

This paper provides the council's views about what communities need to consider in creating a more welcoming climate for newcomers to regional communities.

There are three broad elements that should be considered in developing any welcoming strategy. The specific initiatives within each element need to be determined within the community and there is no 'one size fits all' scenario that can be implemented or documented. The elements communities should consider are:

- An assessment of the community's willingness to seek and actively integrate newcomers into their community;
- A thorough understanding of the newcomers' expectations and a realistic assessment of the community's capacity to meet them; and
- A program to demonstrate to newcomers that their expectations can be fulfilled.

An assessment of the community's willingness to seek and actively integrate newcomers into their community

It is vital for communities to critically ascertain if they wish to seek and actively integrate newcomers into their community.

The catalyst for undertaking any conscious consideration of attracting newcomers is usually by a need to fill a employment gaps in the town, especially amongst skilled professional people, but it can be a general economic expansion of the community. Civic leaders, employers and members of key local organisation should also be mindful of the total impact of bringing in newcomers into the community and assess the implications of going outside the region.

The decision to recruit for a key vacancy is usually an imperative for the employer, and in the case where the position has a high community profile, needs considerable thought about long-term

consequences. The result can, in some instances, have a dramatic impact on the community, especially if people in the community are not prepared to accept newcomers from overseas or alternate lifestyles, etc. There will always be some in a community who may have a variety of entrenched, negative attitudes to such people.

Difficulty can also be experienced by Australians who are newcomers, particularly where there is a sense of cliquishness among the established 'oldtimers' in the community, when it takes 30 years to be accepted as part of the community. This would be exacerbated by ignorance about cultural differences between Australians from the city moving to regions, and lack of access to social and community events where newcomers could be integrated.

Unfortunately, newcomers who are 'different' can end up being ostracised or harassed by locals. This is perhaps the most difficult environment in which to promote a welcoming strategy, including the value of cultural diversity and the worth of new workers, as it conflicts with entrenched attitudes.

A broad and ongoing cultural awareness program may need to be considered in this case. Careful consideration would need to be given to an implementation strategy, and if possible would need the services of a professional (eg psychologist) to conduct any program. Positive media and marketing can assist if timing is orchestrated, as can case studies.

It may be the case that some communities are not interested in expanding or seeking any newcomers, and are not interested in developing any welcoming strategy. These communities should be acknowledged for their position and not be dismissed by 'outsiders' wanting to impose change upon them. There is a prevailing outsider view that communities such as these would surely want to expand – sometimes misrepresented as 'wanting progress without change'.

A thorough understanding of the newcomers' expectations and a realistic assessment of the community's capacity to meet them

In preparation for any strategy to attract newcomers, communities should make themselves thoroughly aware of the needs and likely expectations of the newcomer, particularly what services the community offers. This needs to be, as much as possible, undertaken from a newcomer or 'customer' perspective, rather than from a local residents view, and requires it to be realistic in its assessment.

Clearly, the newcomers' expectations will depend upon their profile, such as whether they are people moving to take up work, spouses, retirees, refugee groups, or tertiary students. People's backgrounds need to be catered for when welcoming strategies are being developed. The core concern for most people is access to services.

Appropriate access to services and facilities are paramount for most newcomers, especially professional services (doctors, dentist, accountant, lawyers), transport connections, education facilities and pre-schools, banks, postal services, service and sports clubs, and reasonable access to retail shopping facilities. There is usually an expectation by newcomers that local people will be friendly and open with helpful suggestions about how and where services can be accessed.

In addition, many migrants expect to be employed in professions aligning with their skills and qualifications, although there is a recognition this can not always occur. Appropriate employer sponsored work experience and training would assist in overcoming any skill or language deficiencies that are identified.

Anecdotally, it is considered that migrants have little idea of what to expect in Australia. The climate and differences in lifestyle in rural Australia will surprise even those from coastal regions of

Australia. The move can have a mildly traumatising effect on people who are experiencing so many simultaneous losses – loss of homeland, culture, family and friends, familiar community, loss of control over one’s environment, and some loss of confidence.

The Woolcott Research Report about Perceptions in Regional Australia found that metropolitan residents viewed regional Australia as “friendly,” “having a strong sense of community” and being “peaceful and quiet.” However the negative aspects resulting from this biased media exposure included “lack of work/career opportunities”, “shortage of young people”, “low standards of health care”, and not being a “happening place”.

The research revealed that despite the fact that many participants had described “country” people as being friendlier than those from the city, however, there was also a strong perception that there was a general narrow-mindedness amongst regional communities. Some went as far as to describe some part of these communities as “redneck” and believed that there was a higher incidence of racism in these areas. There was also a feeling that there was no room for individuality in rural and regional Australia, and that if you dressed differently or didn’t play footy you would not be accepted.

The findings also clearly show that these perceptions were inhibiting the likelihood of metropolitan residents considering rural and regional Australia as a place for anything other than a relaxed/stress free alternative to city life.¹

A well designed program to demonstrate to newcomers that their expectations can be fulfilled

The final element involves demonstrating to newcomers that the community/region can meet their needs.

Whatever means are used to promote the region to newcomers, whether it be advertising or marketing, it is important that it should not be misleading nor misrepresented.

Some communities are particularly aware of the impact and image the first few weeks have on newcomers to a community. It makes sense for community residents to develop some initial plans to make the potential newcomers’ move and settling period over the first few weeks as pleasant as possible. Some smaller communities have a committee that personally welcomes newcomers and provides an information package. It is advantageous to know someone in the new location before moving, if that can be arranged.

The Regional Business Development Analysis report concluded that:

Regions need to provide a welcoming ‘people climate’, as well as a welcoming ‘business climate’ to ensure new people feel included as part of the community and want to put down roots. This includes making sure there are childcare facilities and employment for spouses. It also includes ensuring there are accessible, adequate recreation facilities.

One of the biggest advantages of regional towns is the sense of community enjoyed by residents. It is important that this feeling of belonging is portrayed and shared with new arrivals.

Even if people don’t stay forever, positive word of mouth testimonials are the best marketing a region can get—communities that create a welcoming and friendly environment will

rightfully gain a good reputation. They will create a new perception in the minds of the families and friends of those that pass through—‘I thought regional Australia was a terrible place to live but [town] sounds great’.²

The RBDA provide some examples of how some regional towns across Australia are seizing the initiative and taking the responsibility of reversing their population decline.

For example, one town in regional New South Wales has run ‘open days’ in the belief that if city people can see and experience the benefits of the local community, they will make the move.

By reimbursing petrol costs to visit for the weekend, the town showcased itself to visitors who discovered a town with:

- affordable four bedroom houses
- good schools and hospitals
- great social and sporting amenities, including golf, tennis and bowls
- friendly locals with a sense of community
- a low crime rate.

To sweeten the deal, the local council undertook to reimburse newcomers’ first year’s rates and to help them find jobs. Since the first open day, 28 houses and eight blocks of land have been sold...regions helping themselves...³

Under most circumstances, skilled newcomers to regional communities will have little practical idea about the local area, unless of course, they are a minority of people who are returning to a known location.

Sources of government information

- The Department of Immigration and Citizenship has a comprehensive welcoming and information website for immigrants. This link is aimed at those coming to Western Australia: <http://www.immi.gov.au/living-in-australia/settle-in-australia/beginning-life/pdf/wa/eng.pdf>
- The WA State Government has useful information at <http://wa.gov.au/governmentservices/aboutwa/>
- Individual council websites are also worth checking.

Community initiatives

A mentoring system that can be initially identified and/or conducted through the local real estate agent, local council or school would be helpful. This would assist people to know what is occurring, and to invite participation at community events. Small acts of kindness go a long way to assisting newcomers settle.

If a level high of migrant newcomers are anticipated, it may be appropriate to develop a central register of newcomers and language register for the community. It provides local assistance for the newcomer, and the language register provides reassurance for those who are able to speak their native language. It also allows potential mentoring arrangements to be introduced.

Newcomers who are quickly welcomed upon arrival and who are invited to participate in the community’s business and or social activities are more likely to settle happily, and become

² *Regional Business, A Plan for Action* - Regional Business Development Analysis Panel June 2003

³ *Regional Business, A Plan for Action* - Regional Business Development Analysis Panel June 2003

productive residents. It is also acknowledged that properly structured citizenship ceremonies have a profound influence on people's feeling of inclusiveness.

Local government important in welcoming strategies

The basic element of any 'welcoming strategy' is based around welcoming and information sessions. Local councils should have a welcoming strategy in place, and arrange for an invitation for newcomers to attend a welcoming and community information session. This should occur on a regular basis.

For those businesses that are moving to new areas, there are rural communities that have local development organisations emphasising the positive aspects of the community and the potential for business opportunities. Local councils play a large role in supporting these endeavours.

It is suggested that that real estate agents or council electoral roll officers, should be encouraged to contact a local council register for newcomers. This will allow either the local council or a designated organisation to forward a welcome package, ideally prepared by the local council. This could be followed up with a personal visit or an invitation to attend a welcome and information session. Privacy issues would need to be considered in any activity of this type.

Additionally, it would assist if websites were available where potential newcomers can check out what the community can offer, although it is recognised it is still the local people who can provide the detailed advice.

Concluding comments

Developing a 'welcoming strategy' should not be viewed as difficult, or indeed deter people from sourcing newcomers from outside the region. It does require realistic consideration and assessment about what the community can offer in the way of resources and the potential for the community residents to accept newcomers, particularly if the person/s are from overseas.

New people to communities bring with them new skills and experiences which can enrich a community and enhance economic development.

The three elements of the welcoming strategy identified here provide a basis for community leaders to consider their own circumstances and incorporate into any plan to attract newcomers to their community.
