

Outback Futures: Stage 1 Consultation - What we heard

The state of the Outback...

While some people believe the outback is generally on the right track, the prevalent view is that the outback is in decline.

While there are less people living here permanently, there are increasing numbers of people working in the outback, most notably in the mining sector on a 'fly in fly out' basis, and steady increases in the number of people travelling through the outback. Investment in infrastructure and services for both local communities and tourists hasn't kept up.

Attracting the next generation to live in the outback is a tall order. Many communities do not have the services (health and education most notably) to make them attractive propositions for young families. Housing availability is scarce and buying a home in the outback is beyond the reach of many because of the banking sector's requirement to provide at least a 50% deposit.

The centralisation of government Agencies and mining sector employment practices have meant a reduction of locally available employment.

For some communities, the impact of decisions by the mining sector, including the prevailing 'fly in / fly out' nature of its workforce is seen as having a very detrimental effect on local communities, and one that requires some sort of recompense.

While rain has brought some relief to the western communities of the outback, drought continues to have a big impact elsewhere, with ripple effects felt throughout those regions.

We love our Outback

People love where they live and have great pride in the outback – its unique communities, the beauty of the natural environment, the resilience of its people, its history and heritage, including that of the Aboriginal people who were the outback's first nations.

Many people feel that the unique nature of the outback, its communities, and the skills, qualities and adaptability of the people who live in them are not well understood or appreciated by decision makers outside the region. 'One size won't fit all' was a phrase we heard frequently. Also not well understood are the much higher costs of service delivery in the outback and the costs for individuals and families who choose to make the outback their home.

Preserving the uniqueness, protecting and restoring the natural environment, and embracing outback hospitality are all highly valued.

Community well-being

Communities are stretched. A universal theme was the imposition placed on Progress Associations, pastoralists and businesses from the increasing need to meet legislative and regulatory requirements.

It is clear that COVID-19 has had a negative impact on community cohesion and social well-being due to lack of community events and opportunities to interact, as well as to fundraise.

The current volunteer model of managing services in communities is seen as unsustainable. There are multiple and inter-related reasons for this. An aging population, lack of population renewal, the increasing burden of administration and 'red tape' and often the need to fundraise for community development activities, and the fact that volunteers are often involved in multiple committees within communities, all conspire to reduce the capacity of the volunteer model.

While many communities are proud of how much their voluntary efforts have achieved, most groups are wanting increased support to relieve them of administration, paid roles to assist in community development and event coordination, and in some cases, assistance with managing the functioning of their Progress Associations. Several communities identified a paid administration and/or community development role as a potential / partial solution to volunteer burn out. Access to training and skills development for volunteers is also an issue, and assistance with grant applications was frequently mentioned.

Volunteering is seen as an essential and valuable part of life in the outback. It builds community solidarity and connection. Volunteers would rather their energy was spent on these types of activities and events that fulfil that function rather than in the provision of community services.

An associated issue is the cost and administration associated with public liability insurance for events. This often outweighs the viability and profitability of events and this in turn acts as a deterrent to volunteer involvement.

The BIG issues

Roads, roads, roads!!

One of the most consistently identified issues was the state of outback roads. Poorly maintained roads are of concern for a few reasons, including safe mobility, costs for individuals, families and businesses because of rapid vehicle deterioration and reduced productivity for businesses because of slower travel times.

Tourism is impacted by poor road conditions, and tourists often drive inappropriately on unsealed roads, contributing further to their deterioration and maintenance requirements.

Some specific road issues that are seen as priorities include sealing of the Strzelecki Track, a 'loop road' from Andamooka to Borefield Road and the road in to Fowlers Bay. People want more 'all weather' roads.

Concerns were raised about the quality of road maintenance; specific examples being grading practices that result in environmental degradation, and inappropriate surfacing materials being used.

There was also a strong view that amenities associated with roads, such as toilets, identified camping areas and rubbish management should be provided and managed. The lack of provision of such amenity is resulting in degradation of the natural environment, incursions of the travelling public on to private land and an increased burden on communities for waste management.

Technology

Mobile phone and internet services are seen as inadequate. Mobile phone coverage needs to be ubiquitous. Internet speeds are slow, particularly for people relying on satellite coverage - and expensive. This puts limits on business and tourism and opportunities for innovation.

There was a view that improved connectivity could assist with increased collaboration and cooperation between communities and regions, and remove the need for some travel – which incurs both financial and time costs.

Utilities

Needing to have a reliable supply of good quality water was raised in many communities.

Likewise, despite improvements for many communities, reliable power is an issue, with some experiencing frequent and prolonged outages. There is a frustration that the outback climate is well-suited to solar and wind energy production, but people are not able to get the financial incentives available to people in cities because they are not connected to the National Grid. Green energy production is seen as more in keeping with an outback 'brand'.

Health and Aged Care

There is great appreciation of the services provided by the Royal Flying Doctor Service. However in many communities access to health services is limited and often means travelling significant distances. Aged care, including 'in home' aged care services are non-existent. It can be distressing for communities when a person needs to be relocated to receive basic aged care.

Transport

The inadequacy of public transport, and the high cost of services that are available are seen as a disadvantaging factor in living in the outback. This is particularly true for older people, the transport disadvantaged and those needing to access services in large regional centres (e.g. Port Augusta) or Adelaide.

Families need two vehicles for day to day mobility. The removal of the 'out of areas' concession on car registration and generally higher fuel prices, along with vehicle maintenance costs because of the previously mentioned poor state of the roads all adds up to significant expense. This is exacerbated by many people needing to travel long distances multiple times a week to access medical services and food.

Planning, Regulation and Compliance

There are currently not enough resources to regulate development in outback communities, resulting in structures being erected that are not in keeping with the character of townships and with building standards.

Similarly there is no oversight to approve / regulate business activities that may conflict with residential areas.

Blocks in some towns are being littered with hard rubbish and scrap metal, which detracts from the amenity of communities and their appeal to tourists. The OCA having the power to order clearing of rubbish from these blocks was seen as a potential solution.

Tourists behaving badly

Many communities identified disrespectful behaviour as a major issue, particularly the poor behaviour of the 'self-contained' travelling public.

Tourists encroach on private land and private property and degrade the natural environment by driving 4WD vehicles off track, leaving exposed faecal matter and toilet paper in creek beds and at rest stops, and by collecting fuel for campfires.

Suggestions for dealing with this include an 'outback code of behaviour', information campaigns, and the Western Australian model of only being able to camp in designated areas.

Town Maintenance and Amenity

There is a concern that some communities are in poor physical state, with dilapidated buildings, abandoned blocks and no basic amenities such as footpaths. People want to have pride in their communities and for them to be well maintained and attractive places for residents and to better appeal to tourists.

The Opportunities

Tourism

Some communities believe that tourism is the 'silver bullet' to their survival. Information and education for tourists/visitors about how to behave well in the outback; better infrastructure for tourists, particularly roads and well-managed rest stops with toilets and bins; improved public information and signage; better marketing and promotion; capitalising on the uniqueness of the outback; creating new tourism products and related endeavours are all seen as very important.

There are big tourism opportunities emerging (for example, fossil tourism) and planning is needed to create the necessary infrastructure to support this.

Infrastructure to support and encourage air travel to within walking distance of more outback destinations is an opportunity to generate increased tourism.

Working Together in a Coordinated Way

There needs to be a line of sight between a vision for the outback, the regions within it, and communities. This could be achieved through strategic planning processes that first identify the preferred 'big picture' future.

Increased collaboration between communities, particularly on a 'regional' basis is seen as very important. This includes better joined up strategic planning with each other and the OCA, as well as basic information and resource sharing and accessing services from adjacent local governments.

Timing community events to capture people travelling to larger events, for example the 'Big Red Bash', is seen as an opportunity.

Vertical integration of government services and partnerships between governments, communities, industry are seen as vitally important.

Recognition of the role that the outback plays in South Australia's economic well-being is currently undervalued – there is room for more investment – along the lines of social impact investment. Business cases and feasibility studies are required to identify the level of investment required, and also the benefits to be realised across a number of State and Federal Government portfolios.

Aspirations

Articulating a succinct vision for the Outback's future requires further consideration and consultation. Have a seat at the table to create a vision was frequently mentioned.

Some of the emerging themes include:

- A great place to live, work and play – attractive to the next generation, well serviced and well maintained
- Sustainable, liveable, profitable, resilient and equitable
- Having the assets and infrastructure to support world class tourism with unique destinations – and the potential and impact of world heritage listing acknowledged
- All sectors of the community engaged – Aboriginal communities, townships and pastoralists.

The Question of Money

Funding is a vexed question. Most communities acknowledge that at least some 'user pays' contribution should be made for services received. The level of contribution is not resolved.

The combination of a state appropriation, some sort of levy or rating system along with funding from the Grants Commission (Federal funding) is the prevalent view and this was accompanied by a strong opinion that funding should take account of the total populations living in and using the outback, not just permanent residents.

Revenue raising through a range of sources including a tourism levy, a share of mining royalties and fuel taxes was also suggested.

More joint efforts between industry and communities with Government funding conditional on these types of partnerships was another suggestion.

Governance, Representation and Advocacy

While a few communities are satisfied with the way things are now, the overall flavour of feedback about governance is that change is required. Being able to attract more funding to the outback, greater accountability back to communities, a more democratically formed governance structure, and one outback with one voice that can communicate more directly with Governments and decision makers were key themes.

The idea of a local government or 'shire' model was raised several times. People are interested in this model because of the perception that local governments generally provide a broader range of services than is currently available, their ability to attract

funding, and their ability to regulate aspects of life in the outback that cause angst to local communities. Some examples include planning and development, regulation of (inappropriate) business activities and inappropriate behaviours, such as rubbish accumulation of townships blocks. Some communities questions why outback people are under a different governance model that the rest of the state.

Another model supported by several communities was the notion of the outback divided into four regions with elected representation on the Board.

A structure that enabled greater immediate influence on government without bureaucratic interference was also seen as preferable by some communities.

No matter what model or structure is eventually decided, many people identified the need for more paid positions to administer service delivery, coordinate events and undertake community development and capacity building at the local level.

There was general consensus that the majority of people in a governance structure for the outback should be people who live in, and understand, the outback. There was also a majority view that such representation needed to be balanced with skills, experience and understandings of those subject matters most needed to grow the outback.