



Wimmera  
Southern Mallee  
*Everything you need*



# Wimmera Southern Mallee Regional Strategic Plan

2012 Summary



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Southern Mallee**  
*Everything you need*

## Foreword

The *Wimmera Southern Mallee Regional Strategic Plan* outlines the strengths, challenges and a way forward for communities, businesses and the unique environment of the region.

The Wimmera Southern Mallee encompasses the municipalities of Buloke, Hindmarsh, Horsham, Northern Grampians, West Wimmera and Yarriambiack.

It is a productive agricultural region where participating in the life of its small towns and communities has been and continues to be a defining trait of its people.

Furthermore, with its diverse plains, desert, mountains, woodlands, grasslands and forests, the region is rich in unique natural assets.

The *Wimmera Southern Mallee Regional Strategic Plan* was first published in 2010 and has since provided vital strategic direction for our Councils, State Government activities in the region and the work of Regional Development Australia, all of whom come together in the Grampians Regional Management Forum.

This 2012 summary of the Plan re-presents the key challenges and strategic directions of our original plan in a shorter snapshot. It also acknowledges major changes since the Plan was developed, such as a move from drought to floods, and our advanced understanding of what action is needed to achieve our vision.

We look forward to collectively delivering on this plan as we move forward.

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Chair, Wimmera Southern Mallee  
Regional Planning Committee

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Regional Champion, Grampians Regional  
Management Forum  
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# Contents

The region in the future	3	<i>A healthy and resilient environment</i>	13
Why this plan matters	5	> Strategic Direction 10: Sustainable management and use of water	14
Drivers of change	6	> Strategic Direction 11: A healthy catchment	14
Strategic Directions		> Strategic Direction 12: A community living more sustainably	15
<i>A competitive and innovative economy</i>	7	<i>Community well-being</i>	16
> Strategic Direction 1: Strengthen the farming sector's capacity to prosper in a changing climate	7	> Strategic Direction 13: Strengthening local communities	17
> Strategic Direction 2: Build the region's nature-based and outback tourism industry	8	> Strategic Direction 14: Health and community services delivery responds to population change	17
> Strategic Direction 3: Facilitating industry clusters and building on regional strengths	9	<i>Regional settlements and land use planning</i>	18
> Strategic Direction 4: Innovative and sustainable energy solutions	9		
> Strategic Direction 5: Broadband and mobile phone coverage standards enable the whole region to be competitive and liveable	10		
> Strategic Direction 6: Transport infrastructure supports the needs of the region's industries and communities	10		
> Strategic Direction 7: Provide access to a comprehensive and contemporary range of learning programs from K-12, regardless of location	11		
> Strategic Direction 8: Increase locally accessible post secondary education and training opportunities	11		
> Strategic Direction 9: Attract and retrain workers to meet immediate workforce needs	12		

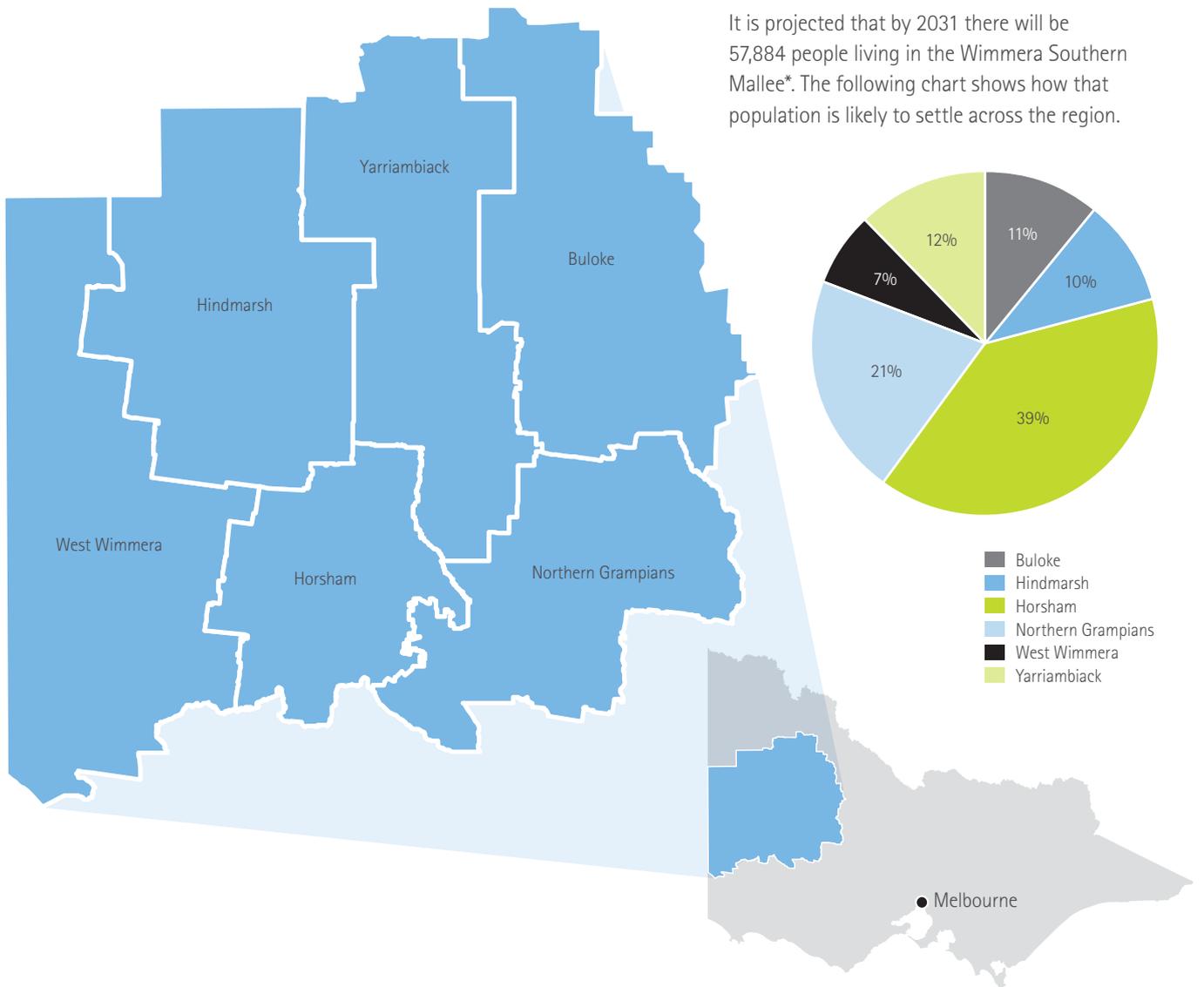


## *The region in the future*

The Wimmera Southern Mallee is a productive agricultural region where participating in the life of its small towns and communities has been and continues to be a defining trait of the community.

This trait was tested during the years of drought and the more recent floods. However, the experience has positioned the region to be much better equipped to adapt to a changing climate and the outlook for our future is very positive:

- By 2031 it is projected that the region will grow to 57,884 people
- The Wimmera Mallee Pipeline will bring enormous benefits for community well-being, health of waterways and business development opportunities
- Economic growth from the region's comparative advantages in grain production, mining, transport and manufacturing will continue
- There is a huge amount of talent in the region and continued development of people of all ages remains of vital importance
- Our industry and communities are shifting to more sustainable practices, as is agriculture in its management of natural resources
- The region is actively pursuing different renewable energy generation options
- The nature-based tourism sector is developing, increasing broader awareness of our superb natural environment
- Local towns and communities are embracing opportunities to plan and drive change for community benefit





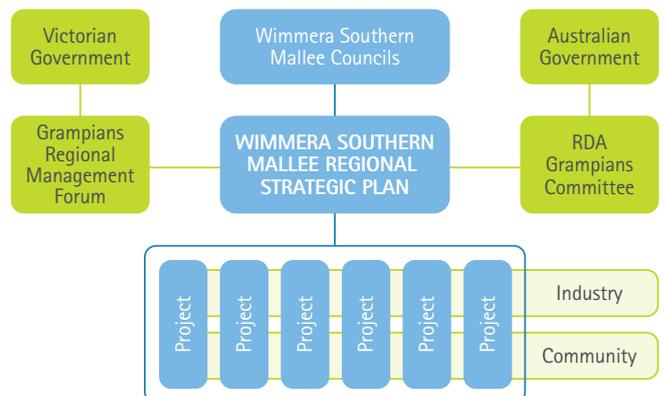
## Why this plan matters

For the first time, the Wimmera Southern Mallee has a clear framework to deliver on the collective aspirations of the communities across our region.

All Wimmera Southern Mallee Councils share common goals: to develop a competitive and innovative economy; to support a healthy and resilient environment; and to promote community well-being. We are achieving much more for our communities by working together to realise these goals.

As local representatives, the Wimmera Southern Mallee Councils are primarily responsible for the Plan. However, the Victorian and Australian Governments also recognise the strength of collaborative action, and support the strategic directions of the Plan:

- The Victorian Government hosts the **Grampians Regional Management Forum** (Grampians RMF), a forum for local, state and federal government to address regional issues as outlined by the Plan.
- The Australian Government has established the **Regional Development Australia Grampians Committee** (RDA Grampians), to represent the views of local government, industry and the community on regional priorities. The Committee has adopted the Plan as its own strategic plan.





## Drivers of change

The Plan identifies challenges that will be best managed on a regional scale. These challenges are driven by change being experienced in the region.

### Increased agricultural productivity

Increased agricultural productivity and farms size has resulted in fewer farms and less demand for workers, leading to population loss. In the grain producing areas of the Wimmera Southern Mallee, this issue has been particularly pronounced. Between 1971 and 2001, the number of farms fell from over 5000 to 3000.

### A changing climate

Water availability is a major driver of economic growth, environmental health and liveability of the Wimmera Southern Mallee. Over the next 20 to 50 years, climate change is predicted to result in higher than average temperatures, lower than average rainfall, more extreme rainfall events, and potentially an increase in the frequency of droughts.

### Global food demand

The expected increase in global food demand will provide opportunities for food producing regions that can successfully adapt to climate change and other factors affecting agriculture, such as energy costs.

### Liveability

Various factors influence people's choices on where to live, including availability of employment, choice and affordability of housing, education, health, cultural and lifestyle features. The region's recent growth in population is partly attributable to the region's attractiveness as a place to live compared to Melbourne, and this is expected to continue in the future.



## *A competitive & innovative economy*

### Challenges to address:

The Wimmera Southern Mallee is a strong agricultural region, with an agricultural industry that generates in excess of \$1.6 billion and directly supports over 5,800 jobs plus further employment indirectly in associated manufacturing and transport.

Compared with the Victorian average, the region is highly dependent on agriculture. In some areas such as the northern part of Yarriambiack Shire, agricultural employment can be as high as 45%. Other major employers include health care and social assistance, retail trade and manufacturing. This relatively undiversified economy means that the Wimmera Southern Mallee has been identified as the most exposed Victorian region to climate change .

To counter the risks of this exposure, it is imperative that the region's agricultural sector is well positioned to withstand a changing climate and that the region more broadly is positioned to diversify its economy. Expansion of other sectors such as manufacturing, primarily associated with food processing and agricultural equipment, transport, mining and tourism is expected.

Additionally, there is strong regional interest in the development of a renewable energy industry. The Wimmera Southern Mallee has been identified as having the greatest potential for producing electricity from crop biomass in Victoria and the region is also highly suited to wind and solar energy generation.

### Regional goal:

Economic growth in the Wimmera Southern Mallee will be driven by:

- Building on its comparative advantages in sustainable primary production and related value adding and service industries
- Leveraging new industry development from the Wimmera Mallee pipeline
- Implementation and operation of the Wimmera Intermodal Freight Terminal
- Innovative renewable energy solutions for future energy generation
- Fostering growth in industry networks and clusters
- Development of nature-based and outback experience tourism
- Providing essential infrastructure (including telecommunications) to support new and existing businesses
- Improving education and training outcomes



## STRATEGIC DIRECTION 1

### *Strengthen the farming sector's capacity to prosper in a changing climate*

Agriculture, and particularly grain production, is facing significant challenges from the changes in climate over the past decade. Developments in plant varieties, technology and farming systems to more effectively adapt to climate change are vital to maintain the Wimmera Southern Mallee's prosperity.

The region is well placed to deliver research and the development of new plant varieties and farming systems to equip the agricultural sector to adapt to the climate as it changes while enhancing production capacity.

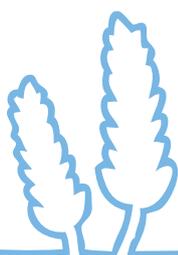
## STRATEGIC DIRECTION 2

### *Build the region's nature-based & outback tourism industry*

Tourism in the Wimmera Southern Mallee is focused largely on the nature-based experiences of the region's natural and state parks, which are popular for a range of outdoor activities such as bushwalking, cultural heritage, birdwatching, rock climbing, mountain biking, four wheel driving and camping.

Further growth of tourism in the northern and western parts of the region can be partly driven by leveraging from the strong visitor numbers to the Grampians.

This strategy will strengthen the regional economy by growing an industry sector that has competitive advantages in nature-based tourism and enabling the development of new tourism activity in the region.





### STRATEGIC DIRECTION 3

## *Facilitating industry clusters & building on regional strengths*

Expansion of industry sectors such as manufacturing, primarily associated with food processing and agricultural equipment, transport and mining is sought.

There is scope for industry cluster development to build on the specialisation and comparative advantage of the region in order to attract new investment, encourage local expansion and stimulate new company start-ups. Business development from the Wimmera Mallee Pipeline will build on the availability of a secure water supply.

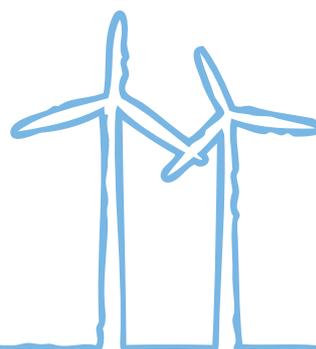
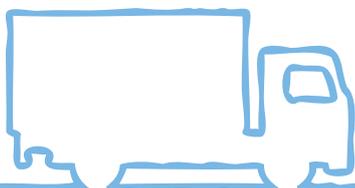
Capitalising on the region's strengths is a sound economic development approach that will provide secure and on-going employment.

### STRATEGIC DIRECTION 4

## *Innovative & sustainable energy solutions*

Local manufacturing businesses and food processors use significant amounts of energy in the form of heat from electricity and heat and flame from gas. While businesses in Horsham and Stawell have access to natural gas, others in Nhill, Warracknabeal and St Arnaud for example rely on bottled gas, which can cost up to twice that of natural gas. Meanwhile, there is anecdotal evidence that the current electricity system is approaching its capacity.

Greater use of distributed energy generation and improved energy efficiency would increase the reliability of energy, while reducing its costs and potentially freeing up existing supply capacity. This is critical for the further development of the manufacturing and alternative industries that can help diversify the region's economy.





## STRATEGIC DIRECTION 5

*Broadband & mobile phone coverage standards enable the whole region to be competitive & liveable*

Telecommunications, especially mobile and broadband services, are critical to improving the productivity of business and the future competitiveness of region. Access to modern communication networks can reduce the disadvantage of remoteness faced by businesses and communities in rural areas of the Wimmera Southern Mallee.

Given its dispersed and ageing population, the region is particularly dependent upon information and communication technology to improve services, emergency response and liveability.

This Strategic Direction seeks to overcome the current disadvantage faced by industries and communities from sub-standard broadband and mobile phone coverage.

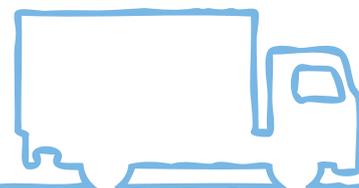


## STRATEGIC DIRECTION 6

*Transport infrastructure supports the needs of the region's industries & communities*

Improving the transport infrastructure and services within the Wimmera Southern Mallee would see better connection of people within the region to health and education services, recreation opportunities and with Melbourne.

It would also address safety issues associated with freight carriage within the region and the growth in traffic along the Melbourne to Adelaide transport corridor that transects the region.





## STRATEGIC DIRECTION 7

*Provide access to a comprehensive & contemporary range of learning programs from K-12, regardless of location*

The number of small schools (primary and secondary) and the number of schools with declining enrolments in the region is high. Many schools are finding it difficult to attract appropriately qualified teachers to deliver a comprehensive range of learning programs.

There are increasing barriers to the provision of and access to a comprehensive range of learning opportunities at all levels of the education system. This issue must be addressed if the Wimmera Southern Mallee is to meet its needs for increased skills in the future.

## STRATEGIC DIRECTION 8

*Increase locally accessible post secondary education & training opportunities*

Compared with the State average, young people in the Wimmera Southern Mallee have significantly lower participation in post secondary education and training, and significantly higher rates of deferral from such training. There are concerns within the regional community that this situation may be exacerbated by the recent trend of reduced participation in pathway programs within schools.

This Strategic Direction will seek to increase the proportion of young people undertaking post secondary education and training within the Wimmera Southern Mallee.





## STRATEGIC DIRECTION 9

# *Attract & retrain workers to meet immediate workforce needs*

The Wimmera Southern Mallee requires a regionally specific approach to increase skills and workforce participation because of its relatively narrow economic base, high vulnerability to the negative impacts of climate change and its small, declining and ageing population.

The skills shortage can be addressed by several broad strategies, including: retraining workers from industries with declining employment; and attracting skilled workers from outside of the region.

The intended outcome of this is for growing industries within the Wimmera Southern Mallee to have greater access to skilled employees to meet their needs.



## A healthy & resilient environment

### Challenges to address:

The Wimmera Southern Mallee is diverse with plains, desert and mountains, woodlands, grasslands, moist foothill forest and box ironbark forest, Mallee heath and Mallee woodlands. Average annual rainfall varies from up to 1,000mm in the Grampians National Park to as low as 300mm in the northern plains. Features of the region include the many wetlands and lakes, the heritage listed Wimmera River, groundwater resources, indigenous and European heritage and over 600 parks and reserves.

The condition of our natural environment varies considerably. The major rivers and tributary creeks are all in very poor to moderate condition. The only waterways in good or excellent condition are located in the forested areas in the Grampians National Park. Recently, there has been some positive impact from environmental flows in the Wimmera River and some of its tributaries, such as Yarriambiack Creek, resulting from savings from the Wimmera Mallee pipeline.

Given most of the region has been cleared for agriculture, the region has 15% of its native vegetation remaining, most of which is parks and State Forests. There are approximately 320 plant species and about 80 animal species that are rare or threatened. There are also several bioregions of note, including the Little Desert and the northern part of the Greater Grampians

### Regional goal:

Achieving a healthy and resilient environment in the face of a changing climate will be driven by:

- The sustainable management and use of water resources
- Effective natural resource management and sustainable agricultural practices
- Improved knowledge of, and adaptation to, climate change and its impacts
- Well-informed communities



## STRATEGIC DIRECTION 10

### *Sustainable management & use of water*

Recent droughts and climate change are key drivers of change in the Wimmera Southern Mallee. Whilst the construction of the Wimmera Mallee Pipeline will deliver significant water savings and a better quality secure water supply, the CSIRO project that water availability will decrease by as much as 62% under a high climate change scenario by 2055. This level of reduction in inflows to storages may reduce the amount of water savings that can be achieved, thus creating further challenges for water allocation and sustainable use.

A huge community investment (local, State and Commonwealth governments) has been made to construct the pipeline. Now the priority for the region is to determine how best to utilise this resource for the future productivity, sustainability and liveability of the region. Water for river health and for recreation are just two examples of the many critical roles that water has in people's lives. A significant challenge is determining how to manage the balance between water availability (allocation) and security.

This Strategic Direction will work to develop local ownership of the actions required to ensure sustainable water use in the Wimmera Southern Mallee and that the available water resource is utilised to maximise the future productivity, sustainability and liveability of the Wimmera Southern Mallee.

## STRATEGIC DIRECTION 11

### *A healthy catchment*

Improving the health of the catchment requires action in:

- Strategically protecting and returning native vegetation to the landscape
- Working to improve the condition of waterways
- Supporting farmers in farming sustainably
- Controlling the impacts of introduced pests and weeds
- Providing information to the community about local environmental systems

The Landcare communities of the Wimmera Southern Mallee have been very active in protecting and enhancing the natural environment. Continued support of Landcare is critical if the achievements of the past are to be maintained and built upon further.





## STRATEGIC DIRECTION 12

### *A community living more sustainably*

All Councils of the Wimmera Southern Mallee are concerned about, and taking action on, a range of environmental issues. The most common are measures designed to mitigate and adapt to climate change, including the reduction of energy use and consideration of alternative energy sources.

The Wimmera Mallee Sustainability Alliance represents six councils, the Wimmera Catchment Management Authority and other local institutions and is making a contribution to tackling local and regional environmental issues. The group has highlighted climate change adaptation and mitigation among the key issues for the region.





## Community well-being

### Challenges to address:

The Wimmera Southern Mallee has a number of characteristics that are highly valued by the community:

- There is a strong feeling of community connectedness, with higher than average satisfaction with feeling part of the community, social network support, volunteering, and parental participation in schools compared to other areas of regional Victoria
- Personal and community safety is strong around perceptions of safety, crime and family violence
- Financial stress is lower in Wimmera local government areas (LGAs), compared to regional Victoria
- Housing affordability is considerably higher in the six Wimmera LGAs
- There is a higher proportion of citizenship engagement than the regional Victorian average, with contribution to important issues and membership of decision-making boards or committees

There are however other indicators of community well-being where the region performs less well. These are mainly health related, however the region's youth are over-represented in incidence of road trauma, property damage and assaults.

Addressing the disadvantage experienced by many Indigenous people in the region continues to be a focus for government and the community on issues as diverse as maternity and early childhood development, heritage and Native Title, health, welfare, education, training, housing, justice, family violence and employment.

### Regional goal:

The Wimmera Southern Mallee is a wonderful place to live and will become even more attractive for existing and new residents with:

- Innovative models of community service delivery
- Valued and supported volunteers
- Provision of a broad range of housing choice, affordability and availability
- Engaged and connected young people
- Improved health outcomes
- Thriving sports and recreation clubs and facilities



## STRATEGIC DIRECTION 13

### *Strengthening local communities*

Maintaining community cohesiveness will be an important challenge to a number of communities.

There is growing demand for improved community service delivery which is being partly addressed through community planning initiatives. However, the level of community dissatisfaction with service delivery indicates that much more is needed to be done.

Climate change impacts will pose various risks for members of the community, such as elderly people and those with heat-related problems. Ensuring that people from all socio-economic backgrounds are not disadvantaged or 'left behind' as the region seeks to adapt to climate change will be important.

Volunteering is a vital part of community well-being particularly in smaller and geographically-isolated areas. However, greater support is required for volunteers to avoid burn out, especially as community expectations for service provision expands and the volunteer sector is called upon to deliver more.

Building leadership capability in the region has been successful through the Wimmera Leadership program. Its continuation and the contribution of arts and cultural activities to community well-being will continue to be important.

## STRATEGIC DIRECTION 14

### *Health & community services delivery responds to population change*

Like many parts of rural Victoria, health outcomes in the Wimmera Southern Mallee are below those of metropolitan Melbourne and Victoria as a whole. Fewer health services and more difficulty accessing them, increased stress, distance and social isolation and lower access to a healthy diet, healthy environments and exercise programs are all likely to contribute to this.

Without a shift in infrastructure and service delivery, it seems unlikely that most rural and remote communities with declining populations will be able to address poor health and meet the needs of their ageing populations. Innovation and collaboration in service delivery is needed to meet the critical challenge of maintaining services and facilities where there are diminishing economies of scale.

Finding ways to meet the service needs of small and/or declining communities could have a range of immediate benefits such as improving people's health and wellbeing, and longer term benefits of attracting and retaining people within the small towns of the region.





## Regional settlements & land use planning

Horsham is the main regional centre in the Wimmera Southern Mallee, servicing the broader rural hinterland. It is the only town in the region predicted to experience growth over the next 20 years. Outside the Wimmera Southern Mallee, Ballarat and Bendigo are the nearest centres.

The roles and functions of towns requires an understanding of the relationships of travel for work, sport, health services, education facilities and amenity.

This Regional Strategic Plan sets out the following principles to support strategic settlement and land use planning:

**Principle 1** – Support a network of integrated and prosperous regional settlements

**Principle 2** – Maintain and provide for the enhancement of environmental health and productivity within rural and hinterland landscapes

**Principle 3** – Maintain and enhance regional Victoria's competitive advantages

**Principle 4** – Respond to the impacts of climate change and natural hazards and promote community safety

**Principle 5** – Support the growth and development of distinct and diverse regional settlements

**Principle 6** – Promote liveable regional settlements and health communities

**Principle 7** – Encourage regional integration and implementation of policy and regional strategies

