

## **POPULATION, REGIONAL STRATEGIC GOVERNANCE AND THE PANDEMIC: A LIMESTONE COAST PERSPECTIVE**

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**ABSTRACT:** Uncertain post-pandemic population trends raise an interesting dilemma for regional governance authorities. Population stagnation afflicting non-metropolitan regions had been a familiar feature of Australian history. In recognition of its serious social and economic effects, population retention and growth have been familiar elements within the development strategies promulgated by regional governance authorities. Such was the case for South Australia's Limestone Coast region. Unexpectedly, the coronavirus pandemic became associated with more favourable population-movement trends for many regions, including the Limestone Coast. In that region, there is an emerging sense that future strategic challenges may centre on the housing and infrastructure implications of a growing population rather than on the problem of a stagnant population. The strategic response of the region's governance authorities is hampered by the uncertainty about whether the more favourable population trends will turn out to be a temporary or a more enduring phenomenon.

**KEYWORDS:** Regional governance; regional population strategy; COVID-19 pandemic; limestone Coast.

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### **1. INTRODUCTION**

This article explores the impact on South Australia's Limestone Coast regional population strategy of an unexpected improvement in population trends triggered by the coronavirus pandemic. The article does not offer a

definitive appraisal of the population trends as such. Rather, its focus is on their implications for the regional governance authorities responsible for re-examining the region's strategic response.

The genesis of the article was a research project which examined the strategic response within the Limestone Coast region to evident population stagnation. The project, conceived in early 2020 and funded in mid-2020, undertook its investigations across the 2021 calendar year. The project's methodology, involving a regime of within-region interviews, consultations, documentary analysis and observations, is elaborated upon in its published final report (Parkin and Hardcastle, 2022).

At the project's conception, it was not evident that a distant public health issue in China would prove to be a harbinger of a global pandemic. By mid-2020, however, the coronavirus had arrived in Australia. Across 2021, a spasmodic regime of lockdowns and state border closures had become a familiar feature. Unexpectedly, it became evident that the project was monitoring a period of uncertainty around population matters. Pandemic restrictions on population movement were having the effect, at least in the short term, of challenging the basic premise of the strategies under examination: that there was an entrenched tendency for population to drift from peripheral regions towards metropolitan centres.

This article looks at the implications of this apparent change for the way in which the Limestone Coast's governance authorities are beginning to re-examine their strategic response to the region's population outlook. The article begins by contextualising the problem of regional population stagnation nationally and within the Limestone Coast. It describes a strategic response promulgated in 2018. The research project's appraisal of the strategy, undertaken during 2021 and briefly summarised here, coincided with the emerging unexpected evidence about a favourable shift in population trends. The article concludes with reflections on what this might now mean for a strategic rethinking of the region's population priorities.

## **2. STRATEGIC POPULATION ISSUES IN NON-METROPOLITAN AUSTRALIA**

The relative (and at times absolute) decline in the population of many regional and remote localities has been a longstanding feature of Australian history. The social, economic, demographic, technological and political factors driving this long-term trend have been well-studied by population geographers, demographers, policy analysts and others (Connell and McManus, 2011; Smailes *et al.*, 2019; Irving *et al.*, 2021). Those factors

include the attractiveness of metropolitan centres as employment, education and health-service magnets; the aggregation and mechanisation of agricultural industries; and the withdrawal of financial and other services from smaller population centres. The outmigration of school leavers and young adults has been an especially worrying dimension because of the implications for community and workforce sustainability. Younger adults are not only an important workforce resource but also a key to many local institutions such as sporting teams, kindergartens and schools (Hugo *et al.*, 2015; Eversole, 2016; Smailes *et al.*, 2019).

While cause and effect are doubtless intertwined in explaining regional population stagnation, shrinking local job opportunities could be one factor. Counter-intuitively, however, population stagnation can also co-exist alongside a substantial number of unfilled job vacancies. This can occur where there is a mismatch between, on the one hand, the occupations for which there is unfilled local demand and, on the other hand, the qualifications, skills or job-ready qualities of local job-seekers. A high proportion of regional job vacancies are targeted at skilled tradespeople and professionals rather than at relatively unskilled applicants (Houghton, 2019).

Another counter-intuitive feature of regional population stagnation is that it can also co-exist with a shortage of housing. The underlying structural causes of regional housing shortages have been much debated. Plausible explanations include developers and investors being attracted by higher capital appreciation in metropolitan markets, the reluctance of banks to provide housing finance in lower-turnover regional markets, and the conversion of properties from longer-term rental to higher-yielding short-term holiday accommodation (Regional Australia Institute (RAI), 2021a).

Most analysts of regional population trends have emphasised the longstanding and apparently inexorable nature of the underlying dynamics. As a 2015 study advised, '[p]olicy measures attempting to increase the share of growth in regional areas will struggle against natural demographic forces operating in the opposite direction' (Wilson, 2015, p. 91).

### **3. THE LIMESTONE COAST AND ITS GOVERNANCE**

The Limestone Coast is one of the seven non-metropolitan South Australian regions recognised within the Regional Development Australia network. Around 21,000 sq. km. in area and located midway between Adelaide and Melbourne, the Limestone Coast region stretches between South Australia's south-eastern shoreline and the Victorian border as mapped in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** The Limestone Coast Region, South Australia. Reproduced with permission of Regional Development Australia Limestone Coast. Source: Limestone Coast Local Government Association (LCLGA) (2021a).

The Limestone Coast's population is around 67,000 people. The urban and peri-urban districts in and around the City of Mount Gambier in the south account for almost half of that number. The remainder are located in a range of coastal towns (including Kingston, Robe, Beachport and Port MacDonnell), inland towns (including Millicent, Naracoorte, Bordertown, Keith and Penola) and interspersed rural localities. The region's economy and employment are based mostly on agricultural industries (with

specialisations in wine grapes, wool, potatoes, sheep, cattle and dairy), fisheries and forestry. This traditional base is being slowly modified by a discernible trend towards job creation in the service and tourism industries (Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics and Sciences (ABARES), 2022; Regional Development Australia Limestone Coast (RDALC), 2019).

The Limestone Coast has not been a strong magnet for international immigrants. The 2021 census records 11 per cent of its population as overseas-born, well below the national figure (29 per cent) and slightly below the average across regional South Australia as a whole (11.6 per cent) (RDALC, 2023a; Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2022). While these figures suggest a limited degree of cultural diversity, such a characterisation is less applicable to several towns (such as Mount Gambier, Bordertown and Naracoorte) and several industries (notably meat processing) which have attracted a diverse range of immigrants (Australian Migrant Resource Centre (AMRC) and Hugo Centre for Population and Housing (HCPH), 2019; House of Assembly Economic and Finance Committee, 2019; Feist *et al.*, 2015).

Seven local Councils constitute the region's most visible governance level. These local government jurisdictions comprise the City of Mount Gambier, the District Council of Grant, the Kingston District Council, the Naracoorte Lucindale Council, the District Council of Robe, the Tatiara District Council and the Wattle Range Council. They range in population from Mount Gambier's 27,500 down to Robe's 1,500 (though Robe's substantial summer holiday influx attracted by its coastal scenery and upmarket ambience, plus its high proportion of absentee second-home owners, can make its figure a little misleading).

The Limestone Coast Local Government Association (LCLGA) is the regional umbrella body formed by the seven local Councils. It is an entity with a history traceable to a predecessor founded as far back as 1885. Another important regional actor is Regional Development Australia Limestone Coast (RDALC), a body focused primarily on economic development. Part of the national RDA network, RDALC is overseen by a regional board and is supported by funding from local, State and Federal governments.

Both the LCLGA and the RDALC as regional umbrella bodies are essentially reliant on the cooperation and collaboration of their constitutive elements (for the LCLGA, its seven constituent Councils and, for RDALC, the same Councils plus other stakeholders across industry, commerce and government). Nonetheless, it has been through the LCLGA and RDALC

that the Limestone Coast's region-level strategic development has been principally contemplated.

National and State-level policies and services naturally provide some of the context for this. Various Limestone Coast projects have been supported via the application-based funding favoured by recent national Coalition governments. State-level investment and policy decisions about public schools, public hospitals, vocational education, agricultural support and other services have a substantial regional influence. A State-instigated *Limestone Coast Region Plan* prepared in 2011 envisaged a population target of an additional 21,750 people in the region over the following thirty years without being particularly forthcoming on how this might be achieved (Government of South Australia, 2011).

#### **4. A POPULATION STRATEGY FOR THE LIMESTONE COAST**

The LCLGA and RDALC regional governance authorities oversaw the launch in June 2018 of the *Limestone Coast Regional Growth Strategy*. The *Strategy* documents were prepared, in 'partnership' with the LCLGA and with 'support' from RDALC and the seven local Councils, by the Regional Australia Institute (RAI 2018a; 2018b, 2018c).

A fundamental basis for the 2018 *Strategy* was the proposition that the Limestone Coast region was 'at a crucial turning point' due to a population trend characterised by stagnation and potential decline. There was a significant out-migration of younger adults, a net in-migration of retirees and a resultant ageing profile overall. This all co-existed with a substantial number of unfilled job vacancies and with a housing shortage which deterred potential in-migrating applicants for these positions. The resulting problem was summarised within the *Strategy* as a scenario in which 'the region will increasingly have a smaller labour pool with the necessary skills from which to draw on to support business and industry growth' (RAI, 2018a; RAI, 2018b).

The 2018 *Strategy* aimed to attract and retain at least 2,000 additional people into the region by 2026. There was to be a 'targeted migration strategy' for achieving this, including a sustained effort to recruit more international as well as domestic in-migrants. As an immediate practical measure, the *Strategy* recommended a better system for matching job vacancies with potential job-seekers. On a longer-term basis, the *Strategy* envisaged the region enhancing its social infrastructure to improve its 'liveability' and help retain more of its young people, as well as measures to encourage older workers to remain workforce-active (RAI, 2018a; RAI, 2018b).

Having instigated the development of this plan, the LCLGA and RDALC were nominated to take on the key oversight and operational roles for its implementation. The *Strategy* identified the LCLGA as ‘ideally positioned’ to lead the overall collaborative effort required across the region. RDALC was allocated specific responsibility for workforce-related development, and in turn encompassed the strategy within its own *Prospectus of Priorities* for the next fifteen years (RAI, 2018a; RAI, 2018c; RDALC, 2019).

## 5. AN APPRAISAL OF THE 2018 STRATEGY

Reviewing population trends across the Limestone Coast and monitoring the implementation of the 2018 *Strategy* up to that point was the broad remit of a research project undertaken across the 2021 calendar year. The project’s report essentially confirmed the principal symptoms diagnosed within the 2018 *Strategy* documents. As a background to what the evolving situation then produced for the *Strategy*’s governance sponsors, the LCLGA and RDALC, the following paragraphs outline some of the findings elaborated upon in the project report (Parkin and Hardcastle, 2022).

The report confirmed that an out-migration trend involving school-leavers and young adults, a key concern behind the population elements of the 2018 *Strategy*, was a familiar pattern for Limestone Coast residents. There was a sense expressed among community and professional informants of an inevitable ‘rite of passage’ as many young adults ventured out to Australia’s metropolitan centres and perhaps beyond. There was an appreciation of the social dilemma arising from this understandable pattern not necessarily being in the best interests of the region.

The project confirmed a mismatch between a plentiful supply of job vacancies across the region and a shortage of qualified skilled job seekers. The Tatiara District Council’s specific diagnosis of occupational shortfalls within its own territory is instructive: ‘All trades but particularly diesel mechanics, automotive technicians, electrical, refrigeration mechanics, maintenance fitter[s], welders, as well as health, early years, hospitality, construction, engineers, administration, customer service, machine/plant operators, transport/ truck drivers, skilled meat workers, agriculture/livestock’ (Tatiara District Council, 2021b, p. 101).

A positive consequence of plentiful job vacancies during the period of the 2021 research project was a notably low unemployment rate: for example, just 1.7 per cent for the month of October 2021. This was, however, a somewhat fluctuating indicator. The unemployment rate had

been as high as 5.1 per cent in January 2020, just before the onset of the pandemic, and had hit an 8.4 per cent figure in October 2020. This followed some months of pandemic lockdowns exacerbated by the effect of China's export impediments on several regional industries (ABS, 2023b).

The job-vacancy mismatch issue spurred the first specific post-*Strategy* implementation initiative from the regional governance bodies. Supported by funds channelled through Regional Development South Australia, RDALC instigated an enhanced program for identifying and publicising available positions. This turned out to be a more challenging task than anticipated; a number of employers had evidently given up the search and many genuine vacancies turned out to be unadvertised. The end-result, nonetheless, was the Job Board, a web-based resource providing a searchable list of vacancies (RDSA, 2021a; RDALC, 2021).

The research project confirmed the region's significant housing supply constraints. As the CEO of RDALC succinctly explained, 'We have more jobs than we have people but we've got to start finding solutions to the housing stock' (Spence, 2021). The Tatiara District Council advised of 'insufficient housing stock being available to accommodate workers and professionals' and 'a critical housing shortage that is providing a significant barrier to the recruitment of staff and serious risk to our economic prosperity' (Tatiara District Council, 2021a).

Housing supply constraints fed into decreasing levels of housing affordability. Housing values across the region were increasing in mid-2021 at a higher annual rate than in metropolitan Adelaide which was itself experiencing significant house price inflation (Brown, 2021). Over the course of 2021, Millicent recorded a 34.2 per cent increase in the median house sale price, the biggest increase in regional South Australia. The increase was around 15 per cent for both Mount Gambier and Naracoorte. Rent levels in Mount Gambier for both houses and flats were likewise rising significantly (Gandolfi, 2022; Ganesan, 2022a).

As with the job-mismatch problem, the housing issue triggered promising initiatives from key governance bodies and specifically from several local Councils. The Tatiara District Council secured external funding for constructing rental cabins and workers' accommodation at a local caravan park, co-invested with a not-for-profit community housing provider, and purchased vacant blocks in Bordertown suitable for residential development (Earl, 2021; Harvey, 2021). Lobbying for State-level action in relation to housing was a sensible option, with Mount Gambier City Council particularly active (City of Mount Gambier, 2021). A range of State-level advances duly began to emerge: a Regional Housing Policy Toolkit sponsored by the SA Regional Organisation of Councils



(South Australian Regional Organisation of Councils (SAROC), 2021a) and a Local Affordable Housing Toolkit put together by the SA Housing Authority (SAROC, 2021b). This momentum continued into 2022 with a newly-elected State Labor government establishing an Office of Regional Housing to address regional housing shortages, an initiative aimed especially at skilled workers and, more specifically, at State employees such as police, teachers and healthcare workers (Government of South Australia, 2023). It was accompanied by a commitment to build more public housing, with Mount Gambier as one of the foreshadowed test sites (Ganesan, 2022b).

The 2018 *Strategy* had envisaged enhanced international immigration pathways. A Regional Australia Institute report of March 2020, a follow-up to the RAI's own work on the 2018 *Strategy*, proposed a 'migration attraction and retention strategy' for three specific Limestone Coast towns: Naracoorte, Bordertown and Keith (RAI, 2020). Among the further initiatives was a systematic effort through RDALC to extol the region's virtues at monthly welcoming events in Adelaide for newly-arrived skilled immigrants. Recruiting international immigrant arrivals is difficult enough; retaining them in a non-metropolitan region is a further challenge. Recognition of this led to the introduction or enhancement of a range of welcoming events and multicultural service initiatives (RAI, 2020). However, even before the pandemic's immigration pause interrupted these post-arrival initiatives, it was becoming evident that a significant increase in international arrivals was an unlikely prospect.

Through such observations, the project report was able to reflect on and offer a general confirmation and reinforcement of key strategic directions proposed by the 2018 *Strategy*, and to note some promising initial implementation initiatives.

## 6. UNEXPECTED POPULATION TRENDS

At the same time, the pandemic period produced a substantial challenge to the 2018 *Strategy*'s fundamental rationale: that the Limestone Coast region was faced with an inexorable problem of population stagnation. This has created an unanticipated conundrum for the regional governance bodies charged with implementing the strategy.

It was not long into the pandemic period before there were claims pointing to an apparent new trend for an enhanced net population movement towards, rather than away from, non-metropolitan regions. These claims were publicised in a number of speculative mainstream media articles (Barrett, 2021; Cockburn, 2021; Salt, 2021). The Regional

Australia Institute (RAI)'s periodic Regional Movers Index then began to provide data broadly corroborating the claimed new trend.

The RAI index does not have the authoritative cachet associated with Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data. The RAI also appropriately notes that its disaggregated local-area figures should be interpreted with caution because of the possible statistical volatility associated with change-over-time measures applied to relatively small subpopulations (RAI, 2021b). Nonetheless, in drawing upon a very substantial dataset (Commonwealth Bank data tracking relocations among its 10 million customers) on a quarterly basis, the RAI index provides a plausible first insight into population movements. Due to the RAI's connections with regional governance bodies (not least in the Limestone Coast), its information flow has been influential in shaping local perceptions.

According to the RAI indices across 2020 and 2021, the peak years for pandemic travel restrictions and lockdowns, 'capital city people moved to regions in record numbers, some 15.4 per cent more than in two years pre-COVID'. Limestone Coast localities echoed these trends. The RAI index for the 2021 September quarter identified the Wattle Range Council area as having recorded, at 83 per cent growth year-to-year, Australia's strongest annual increase in migration from capitals to a regional local government area. For the City of Mount Gambier, the figure was 32 per cent. For the calendar year 2021, Mount Gambier's 44 per cent year-on-year increase in migration from capital cities was the nation's fourth highest. Mount Gambier continued to grow thereafter: in the September 2022 quarter, its growth in capital-to-region migration was Australia's largest (RAI, 2021b, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c).

Analysts awaiting more authoritative ABS data were soon able to draw upon the Australian Government's Centre for Population's ABS-derived periodic analyses of regional population change. In essence, these corroborated the story of an unexpected shift in the direction of net population movements. The Centre for Population observed that, according to the ABS data, regional areas grew at a faster rate than capital cities across 2020–21, the first time that this had happened since 1993–94. The underlying dynamics included both 'a sharp drop in the number of people, especially young people, moving from regional areas to capital cities' and a 'smaller but significant increase in the number of people moving from capital cities to regional areas' (Centre for Population, 2021, pp. 5, 26). A year later, Centre for Population analysis for 2021–22 showed some population recovery for capital cities (driven by the return of international migration arrivals), but this was occurring alongside

continued population growth in the regions arising from ‘continued high levels of internal migration’ (Centre for Population, 2023).

The most direct explanation for these trends involves the actions employed over 2020-2021 by Australian governments to manage the pandemic, prominent among which were those directed at limiting travel. This included restricting movement across regional boundaries, such as from non-metropolitan to metropolitan destinations, as well as across interstate borders. International immigration effectively went into a long pause. ‘Working from home’ became on occasions either mandatory or advisable for occupations where it was possible (and, in due course, seems to have been embedded as a preferred mode for many employees). For those undertaking home-based work, broadband connectivity meant that it mattered less whether the home was in metropolitan suburbia or in a more distant non-metropolitan region. Added to this were the particular challenges of enduring lockdowns in densely populated metropolitan settings. There might also have been a perception of a reduced risk of viral contagion elsewhere. The result was a plausible enhancement of the attractiveness of staying in or, if possible, moving to a non-metropolitan location.

It is possible that the data, whether measured by the RAI index or by the ABS statistics, may have been affected by residents needing to rapidly correct their Medicare-registered residential addresses in order to participate in vaccination rollouts (Denny *et al.*, 2023; Centre for Population, 2023). Any effect from this influence would presumably be on measured rates of locational change over short time periods with less impact on the overall direction of change measured over a longer time.

## **7. REGIONAL GOVERNANCE RESPONSE DURING THE PANDEMIC PERIOD**

The advent of the pandemic, with all of its associated economic and social disruptions, produced a major disturbance within the Limestone Coast region it did across Australia as a whole. Initial worries about the potential public health implications were soon accompanied by ongoing concerns about economic and social dislocations caused by lockdowns and travel restrictions. Within the Limestone Coast, there was an additional factor: the periodic closure of the Victorian State border to the east. This inhibited, and periodically stopped, the flow of the employees, customers and students domiciled in western Victoria who were accustomed to crossing into SA for work, education, shopping, professional services and

other activities. Limestone Coast residents whose routine pathways went in the other direction were likewise hampered.

The immediate economic impact on the region was negative. An October 2021 report advised that the region had suffered a 4.7 per cent decrease in its Gross Regional Product and a 2.4 per cent decrease in employment levels due to the pandemic (RDSA, 2021b). The sectors most immediately affected were tourism and hospitality where businesses were accustomed to drawing on a much wider extra-regional catchment.

For the LCLGA and for RDALC, the regional governance bodies, immediate operational adjustments rather than strategic rethinking necessarily came to the fore. Several short-term support measures were put in place, with the tourism sector identified as an immediate priority (LCLGA, 2020). RDALC accelerated its attention to job-vacancy matching and workforce development initiatives. Both the LCLGA and RDALC prioritised facilitating connections to various business-support and employee-subsidy programs being offered by national and State governments.

The LCLGA reflected in its 2020-2021 Annual Report that the pandemic had demanded ‘flexibility in everything we did and innovation and agility in our program delivery’ in the context of ‘how rapidly our operating environment was changing’ (LCLGA, 2021d, p. 2). It commented elsewhere on the ‘rapid and significant disruption to our operating environment due to the COVID-19 pandemic ... impacting every aspect of our lives from trade, workforce, supply chains, diversity and equity, housing, political environment, regional employment, tourism, work/life balance, to name a few’ (LCLGA, 2021b, p. 4).

Even when matters began to return to some sort of new normality a year later, with the regional economy recovering, the residue of the extraordinary couple of years of pandemic management continued to affect organisational outlooks. The CEO of Wattle Range Council noted in the Council’s 2021-2022 Annual Report that ‘two years of COVID restrictions ... have tested our entire community [and] it is vitally important that we reconnect with each other in tangible and meaningful ways’ (Wattle Range Council, 2022, p. 3).

## **8. RETHINKING THE POPULATION STRATEGY**

The implications of this experience for the longer-term Limestone Coast regional strategy and, in particular, for the population dimensions of the 2018 *Strategy* have taken longer to percolate through the agenda for the regional governance authorities.

The unexpected reversal of the accustomed out-of-region net population flow is a challenge to a fundamental basis of the 2018 *Strategy*. There continues to be strong support among the key regional governance leaders for attracting new residents. Indeed, RDALC has produced two new information kits, one for potential domestic relocators and the other for potential international immigrants (RDALC, 2023b; RDALC, 2023c). However, what has also emerged among these actors is an implicit though uncertain acceptance that the pessimistic population assumptions underpinning the 2018 *Strategy* probably need to be reconsidered. As a corollary, there would need to be greater attention to accommodating an increased population adequately and affordably, and to providing sufficient infrastructure for the larger-than-expected population.

The LCLGA's 2023-2024 Business Plan provides an insight into some of the new thinking. It observed that the 'trend for migration to regional centres is continuing'. This represents a marked change in outlook from that embodied within the 2018 *Strategy*. This new trend is 'creating an opportunity and a challenge'. The region is 'seeking population growth to lower the working age of our populations and invigorate our community, but we are also facing a housing shortage'. Indeed, 'many people ... would like to live and move to the Limestone Coast', another notable revision of the 2018 outlook, 'but are not able to due to the lack of housing'. The housing problem was recognised as having both an economic dimension (because the lack of accommodation deters potential job seekers) and a social dimension (because it is 'creating hardship for the most vulnerable in our community'). The Business Plan commits the LCLGA to developing a new economic growth strategy superseding the 2018 version (LCLGA, 2023).

The Boards of the LCLGA and RDALC have begun collaborative work on this revised Regional Growth Strategy. Its likely components are not yet clear. On the one hand, there is a sense that the 'Regional Growth Strategy doesn't need a significant rewrite' (LCLGA, 2022, p. 32), and an agreement that what was envisaged was a 'revision to [the] 2018 plan rather than wholesale change' (RDALC and LCLGA, 2022). On the other hand, there is an acknowledgement that a revised Strategy would need to incorporate 'an analysis of the opportunity cost from growth limiting "pinch points"' such as housing (LCLGA, 2022b).

In parallel with this, the South Australian government (through its Department of Planning and Land Use Services) intends to promulgate a new Statewide set of Regional Plans with a 30-year time horizon and with an emphasis on a whole-of-government coordination which includes the key infrastructure agencies and utilities (State Planning Commission,

2022). Within the Limestone Coast region, this State-level initiative has been mostly left with the State Department for progression, the LCLGA being reluctant to participate in a joint (i.e. State and regional) oversight board for the exercise (LCLGA, 2021c). Nonetheless, there is sensible recognition that ‘any review of the Regional Growth Strategy’, as has been initiated within the Limestone Coast, ‘should consider how we can feed into the [State-initiated] Regional Plan and avoid duplication’ (LCLGA, 2022a, pp. 31,32).

## **9. FUTURE IMPLICATIONS**

The reversal during the coronavirus pandemic of the negative population trends afflicting the Limestone Coast has been welcome but unexpected. As this article has documented, among its effects has been to call into question what had been one of the foundational pillars of the region’s development strategy. The Limestone Coast regional governance bodies are in the process of considering what strategic adjustments might now need to be made. Their initial response seems to accept that, at least in the short term, population trends have changed in a positive direction, and that the region’s most immediate strategic problem in relation to population pertains to the infrastructure and housing implications of likely growth.

There must be, however, some uncertainty about whether the recent population-trend changes in relation to non-metropolitan regions will persist. Is there really a new and long-lasting shift? Or has this been just a temporary pandemic-induced aberration which will inevitably revert to the established historical pattern?

Evidence continues to accumulate that the more favourable population trends for many Australian non-metropolitan regions are proving persistent. Supporting factors include surging national population growth triggered by a rebound in international immigration (ABS, 2023a) and continuing high levels of working from home (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), 2023). In its analysis of the March 2023 quarter, the RAI observed that the ‘thirst for a tree or a sea change hasn’t waned as city dwellers continue to move to the regions’; its Regional Movers Index was at its ‘third highest level since 2018’ (RAI, 2023a). Six months later, the RAI’s September 2023 quarter analysis measured capital-to-region relocations as having stabilised at around the same levels as the previous year. While this was ‘below the levels reached at the height of the pandemic, capital to regional migration still shows no signs of retreating to pre-COVID levels’ (RAI, 2023b). On such evidence, there may be grounds

for optimism about the persistence of positive population trends for many non-metropolitan regions.

On the other hand, the professional demographer community seems more inclined to anticipate the return of the historical pattern of relative capital-city growth and regional stagnation. Davies (2021) had warned during the pandemic that ‘it is unlikely that COVID-19 is driving a shift away from capital cities or city lifestyles’ (Davies, 2021). Nygaard and Parkinson (2021, p. 879) cautioned that the ‘existing social, economic and technological “slow-burn” drivers of urban dynamics’ are likely to support the continued growth of metropolitan centres. Beer (2021) has been similarly inclined, arguing that most of the apparent net population growth in the regions during the pandemic years was ‘caused by young people living in regional areas postponing their relocation to a capital, rather than metropolitan residents fleeing to the country to experience “the good life”’. He advised that ‘[m]ost experts predict we will see a return to the long-term trend of big-city growth once the economy opens up’ (Beer 2021).

This also seems to be the tenor of the advice being received at the national governmental level. The Australian Treasury’s 2022 Population Statement advised bluntly that ‘[n]ormalising patterns of overseas and internal migration are expected to result in future population growth returning to pre-pandemic patterns, with growth in capital cities outpacing growth in regional areas’ (Centre for Population, 2022 p. 26).

Recent Ministerial statements have projected a more neutral stance. In August 2023, for example, the Australian Minister for Resources and Northern Australia issued a familiar lament that ‘[m]ost of Australia’s jobs and economic opportunities have gravitated to the suburbs and inner cities’ which has ‘not only depleted the bush of its young people but set many small towns on a slow path to decline’. However, she also proclaimed that ‘[f]ortunately we’re now seeing a reset in favour of the regions. People are continuing to flock to the bush’ (King, 2023).

This uncertainty suggests that, as the Limestone Coast regional governance bodies ponder what to do about a population strategy promulgated in 2018, but out of kilter with the unexpected population improvement post-2020, they would be unwise to completely jettison the 2018 strategic outlook. Yet the population shifts characterising the years since 2020 are making a more optimistic approach tempting.

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