

## Creating Benalla's Future Together

### Submission to Federal Inquiry into Regional Development and Decentralisation

13 September 2017

Secretariat  
PO Box 6021  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600

#### Inquiry for Regional Development and Decentralisation

Dear Contact Officer

The Benalla Rural City Community Plan Implementation Steering Committee lodges the attached submission to the Inquiry for Regional Development and Decentralisation based on feedback from the community in the development of the Benalla Rural City Community Plan 2016-2036.

If you would like any further information please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely,

Ms Barbara Alexander AO  
Chair



## **Submission of the Benalla Community Plan Implementation Committee to the Federal Inquiry into Regional Development and Decentralisation.**

### **a) Best practice approaches to regional development, considering Australian and International examples that support:**

Benalla has a strong history of supporting decentralisation and has the capacity to support future population growth and economic development. However, improved access to reliable telecommunication and public transport, especially an efficient rail service to Melbourne is required. This would also ensure sustainability, growth and connectivity to regional communities building skills and capacity, improving employment opportunities and fostering economic growth and tourism development.

#### **i) Growing and sustaining the rural and regional population base;**

The Benalla Rural City Community Plan 2016-2036 advocates that Benalla develop a strong advocacy position to encourage Government to implement a population dispersal strategy. It also highlights the need to ensure the population plan includes relevant support services and facilitates sustainable growth, maintaining the welcoming feel and values of Benalla Rural City.

#### **iii) Developing the capabilities of regional Australians**

Regional community's capacity to foster innovation and creativity has underpinned the sustainability of rural communities for generations. It is important to acknowledge the work, knowledge and skills that already exist in regional communities; as well as identifying opportunities to further invest and develop key capabilities for future economies to prosper and grow.

There is also a need to foster ongoing partnerships with tertiary education providers (such as GOTAFE and Charles Sturt University) to upskill the local workforce and to take advantage of future opportunities such as the roll out of NDIS.

### **VI) Vibrant, more cohesive and engaged regional communities;**

Strong, vibrant and connected communities are essential to maintaining, attracting and retaining people in rural communities. The Benalla Rural City 2016 - 2036 Community Plan outlines how over the next 20 years the community, the Council and other organisations and groups will work in partnership to build economic prosperity as well as vibrant, cohesive rural communities with a focus on maximising health and wellbeing outcomes. A whole of community approach working in partnership with local, state and federal government, community groups, businesses and sporting clubs will help to build strong communities that will drive economic development and community connectedness.

The development of the Benalla Rural City 2016 - 2036 Plan enabled the Community to come together to formulate a shared vision and prioritise actions. The Plan was created through significant community consultation which included focus groups, community meetings, kitchen table conversations, on line consultation and community feedback post cards. More than 700 people contributed their feedback to what sort of community they want Benalla Rural City to be. This process enabled the community to build skills, participate in the planning process and to identify the strengths, opportunities and challenges for the municipality.

The Benalla Rural City Council Community Plan was overseen by a community-based steering committee with 11 independent community representatives from across the Benalla

Rural City. The Plan was developed and launched in 2016 and outlines broad objectives and strategic directions for strengthening liveability, sustainability, inclusivity and resilience.

In 2017 a Community Implementation Committee has been developed and three working groups established Community Connectedness, Progressive Economy and Sustainable Environment to begin to bring the plan to life. Community representatives are now working on creating the future Benalla desires, collecting local examples of economic productivity, community connectedness and environmental sustainability. These examples help to demonstrate the great work that has been undertaken to date by the community and the opportunities that exist to work together on future opportunities and challenges such as limited population growth, attracting young people back to Benalla, an ageing population, climate change, significant levels of disadvantage and the global economy.

**Some examples of successful projects that underpin the values identified in the Community Plan include:**

**PEEP (Parents Early Education Partnership)**

Benalla is fortunate to be one of just a few communities in Australia to enjoy the benefits of the PEEP program. PEEP is delivered by Benalla's Tomorrow Today Foundation with active support from Benalla Health and Benalla Rural City Council and many community partners.

The program focuses on supporting parents of babies and children aged 0 to 5 as their child's first, and most important, educator. Weekly sessions incorporate a song/circle time, stories, rhymes, games and supported early learning activities for the children. Through established program routines the children learn positive group behaviours such as cooperative play, listening, turn taking, following instructions, packing up, healthy food habits and much more – all within a fun and supportive environment. A highlight of the program is a facilitated 'talk time' where parents explore a range of topics around child development and parenting, with the support of many local professionals.

PEEP began in September 2012 with 11 mothers and their newborns and now reaches over 150 families per week in Benalla, with 12 sessions running. Parents and carers who have attended the PEEP program over time have reported great benefits to both themselves and their children. Through anecdotal feedback and professional evaluations, the program has consistently been shown to be greatly valued by families as a significant learning resource for themselves and their children and as an opportunity to meet and socialise with other local parents and children.

**Hands on Trades Career Expo**

The Hands on Trades Career Expo held at Winton Raceway in May 2017, was initiated by a Benalla Business person suggesting that more young people should have access to a hands on event that promotes employment in the trades sectors. The impressive event coordinated by NE TRACKS LLEN hosted 24 exhibitors across all apprenticeships from automotive to hairdressing ; 704 students from 18 local schools across the Region attended and feedback from students , teachers , employers and parents suggested that this was an outstanding event and "better than most traditional career events ". Almost 2000 students have signalled their interest for the 2018 event.

**Rural Outreach Worker**

Currently Benalla Rural City Council employs a Rural Outreach Worker to provide the link between rural residents and appropriate services that can assist and support people to self-manage their health and wellbeing.

The Outreach Model is based on the worker visiting clients in their own environment and providing a non-threatening space for people to discuss their issues and concerns by chatting about possible actions or referrals to help their situation. This is an extremely valuable service that is highly regarded by rural farming families. Funding to continue to support this project is required to ensure a consistent, reliable and sustainable approach. A strong partnership of functional infrastructure, community connectedness, access to health services and social capital is required to maintain and grow rural communities. Benalla has the vision for a strong future underpinned by strong, resilient and cohesive community.

### **Live4Life Benalla**

The Benalla community is leading a whole of community approach to preventing youth suicide by raising awareness and providing information and training to young people, secondary teachers, parents and members of the broader community.

In 2017 in partnership with Youth Live4Life Inc., a Live4Life partnership group has been established including representatives from Benalla Rural City Council, NE Tracks LLEN, Tomorrow Today Foundation, Vic Police, Benalla Health and Hume Central Hume Primary Care Partnership, NESAY, NECAHMS and community members.

Ongoing funding is required to ensure that this model is ongoing and continues to build capacity and understanding across the community in relation to youth mental health awareness and how to get help.

### **North East Artisans (NEA)**

North East Artisans is a not for profit organisation supported by approximately 50 volunteers who work together building a sustainable and resilient community by creating a thriving local arts culture in Benalla.

NEA was founded in 2014. The group have transformed two previously unused commercial premises into thriving and useful spaces benefiting artisans, the community and business. NEA encourages tourists, passing trade, and locals to 'stop and shop' in Benalla, promoting local art and community. NEA also provides art workshops, mentoring, and studio space and conducts a range of local events including local writing workshops.

### **Swanpool Cinema**

The Swanpool Cinema has been operating as a Community Enterprise since 2011 after taking over the business from Kevin Smith and Shirley Swallow who had been operating it for over 20 years.

Volunteers now run the cinema screening film classics, organising double film sessions over the weekends in addition to promoting and catering for groups, fundraisers and matinee screenings.

### **Benalla Sustainable Futures Group**

The Benalla Sustainable Futures Group has conducted four sustainable housing forums over the last three years. These forums look at both sustainable, energy efficient design for new housing and retrofitting existing houses to make them more energy efficient. These forums are growing in popularity and the Benalla community is on board to build a sustainable future together. The group also supports a Bulk Food Buying Cooperative which operates three times per month and offers over 90 products to its members. This cooperative encourages

the responsible use of resources by enabling members to buy mainly Australian produced non-perishable food without packaging.

### **In Summary**

Currently Benalla Rural City Council has 42% of the population aged 55+. In some areas an older population can be seen as a challenge, however it can also be a competitive advantage. Rural communities with access to accessible health services, environmental amenity and housing affordability with an active, connected older population can prosper. Advantages include increased employment for local health services and infrastructure provision; diversity and improved recreation activities, development of diverse housing stock, improved accessibility and mobility and volunteering and mentoring opportunities.

Employment opportunities in the Aged Care and Community Services areas, will be a key area of focus for future employment and education opportunities and growth.

Rural communities need to be well supported and connected through well maintained infrastructure, functional and reliable technology (internet and mobile phone), reliable public transport, affordable housing, access to health services and local education opportunities are important.

The Benalla community has developed a strategic vision for the growth of the municipality and has commenced pursuing and creating the future they seek. Ongoing support and investment from State and Federal Government is critical in bringing the vision to reality; achieving prosperity and growth for Benalla into the future.

### **Recommendations**

- Improved public transport is required ensuring rural and regional communities have access to reliable, accessible public transport services within and between rural and metropolitan communities.
- Regional development requires good planning and resourcing support to ensure that new policies and programs are able to be implemented in a timely, functional and sustainable way.
- Digital connectivity is a priority to support rural development, allowing innovation, community connectedness and economic development to prosper and grow. Rural communities require access to reliable internet and telephone to support sustainable employment, participate in education, access and navigate the health system and to maximise opportunities to interact with the global economy.
- Financial investment is required by State and Federal Government to continue to support rural communities to prosper and grow. Whilst decentralisation will support population growth, increased economic activity and job opportunities it is also important to consider the strong social fabric that underpins rural communities. Supporting community programs, building partnerships and creating innovative opportunities are important. Building capacity is also a key driver for regional development which can be developed by attracting young professionals to rural towns and regional cities; as well as upskilling and building capacity in the existing population.

- Expansion of further educational opportunities offered in Benalla through already existing providers such as GOTAFE and local universities that have a presence in the area.
- A whole of community approach to be embedded across rural communities taking on board the social, financial and economic implications; ensuring that rural communities are included in discussions and planning for their future.