

Chapter 1

Introduction

Conduct of inquiry

1.1 On 11 February 2015, the Senate referred the following matter to the Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee for inquiry and report by 1 December 2015:

The future role and contribution of regional capitals to Australia, including:

- a. an assessment of current demographic trends and the changing role of regional capitals;
- b. an analysis of current funding provided to regional capitals;
- c. an analysis of the benefit of additional funding regional capitals could receive based on population, demand for services and their strategic importance for the region, state or country;
- d. investment challenges and opportunities to maintain or grow regional capitals, including infrastructure, community and human services, communications and natural resources;
- e. incentives and policy measures that would support sustainable growth in regional capitals;
- f. the impact the changing environment will have on regional capitals; and
- g. any other related matters.¹

1.2 On 12 November 2015, the Senate granted an extension of time for reporting until 12 May 2016.

1.3 The committee advertised the inquiry on its webpage and on Twitter. The committee also invited submissions from interested organisations and individuals. The committee received 85 submissions. A list of individuals and organisations that made submissions together with other information authorised for publication is at Appendix 1.

1.4 The committee held public hearings in:

- Geelong, Victoria;
- Launceston, Tasmania;
- Geraldton, Western Australia;
- Townsville, Queensland; and
- Canberra, Australian Capital Territory.

1 *Journals of the Senate*, 2015, pp 2141–2142.

1.5 A list of witnesses who appeared at the hearings is at Appendix 2. Submissions and Hansard transcripts of evidence may be accessed through the committee's website.²

1.6 At the inquiry's outset, the committee received numerous queries from Australian towns asking whether they were excluded from participating in the inquiry. Such inquiries were prompted by the absence of a definition of 'regional capital' in the terms of reference and by newspaper articles stating that the inquiry would not consider the needs of certain regional areas. There was a strong perception that the committee was only seeking the views of towns within Regional Capitals Australia's definition of 'regional capital'.³ To address these concerns, the committee added the following statement to its website:

Note: the terms of reference do not define 'regional capitals'. The committee is interested in receiving submissions not just from representatives of regional capitals, but also from other towns and cities who have relevant views to express about the current and future role of regional capitals. Any person, organisation, town or city may contribute to the inquiry through making a submission by 30 April 2015.

1.7 The committee was pleased to receive a range of submissions from smaller cities, towns and councils.⁴

Acknowledgement

1.8 The committee thanks the large number of individuals and organisations who made submissions to this inquiry, and to witnesses who offered their time to give evidence at public hearings and provided additional information. A number of witnesses travelled significant distances to appear before the committee.

Note on references

1.9 References to Hansard are to proof Hansard. Page numbers may vary between the proof and official (final) Hansard.

The need for an interim report

1.10 Regional capitals across Australia perform a critical role in their communities and each faces a unique set of challenges and opportunities. The terms of reference for this inquiry were crafted to enable the committee to, among other things, investigate how Australian government policy could better address the needs of these regional cities.

1.11 Strong interest in the role of regional capitals in Australia has been reflected in the high number of quality submissions to this inquiry from local councils, state and

2 www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Rural_and_Regional_Affairs_and_Transport/Regional_capitals

3 Regional Capitals Australia, *Submission 48*.

4 For example: National Growth Areas Alliance, *Submission 7*; Horsham Rural City Council, *Submission 9*; Temora Shire Council, *Submission 58*; ACT Government, *Submission 67*.

territory governments, academics, research institutes and federal government agencies. This interest has been reinforced by the substantial evidence provided to the committee during its public hearings in five locations across Australia.

1.12 When referring the inquiry to the committee, the Senate initially set 1 December 2015 as the reporting date, and later extended this to 12 May 2016. Given the significant evidence provided to the committee thus far, the committee has decided to present an interim report prior to the anticipated double dissolution of Parliament. The weight of evidence provided to the committee and the important issues that have been raised require more time to adequately address.

1.13 Given this, chapter 2 of this interim report provides a snapshot of the key issues identified thus far, but does not delve any deeper into the different views put by submitters, or reach any conclusions. The committee notes the possibility that the Senate may re-refer this inquiry in the 45th Parliament, following a recommendation to that effect from this committee once it is reconstituted. Such a course of action would ensure that the issues raised by submitters could be properly and comprehensively examined and reported on.

