



An Australian Government Initiative



Regional
Development
Australia

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT AUSTRALIA WHEATBELT

Annual Report 2022-23

September 2023



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1. Introduction

Regional Development Australia (RDA) Wheatbelt is a not-for-profit, incorporated organisation, governed by a committee and funded by the Australian Government Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communities and the Arts. RDA is a national initiative of 53 committees representing metropolitan, rural and remote regions across the country.

The Australian Government's vision for regional Australia is one of strong, connected regions that shape economic growth and wellbeing; are resilient and responsive to economic and environmental shocks; are inclusive, vibrant and diverse.

RDAs are critical to the delivery of this vision, including supporting the successful implementation of the Australian Government's Regional Investment Framework, which will guide a more coordinated approach to regional development, underpinned by local engagement.

RDAs play a role in helping to drive economic growth, innovation and entrepreneurship in regions through facilitating investment in community, industry and the environment. RDAs assist to bridge the regional development gaps in regions by working with a broad range of stakeholders across sectors and supporting the delivery of identified Australian Government strategic priorities.

The Wheatbelt region is the third largest in WA in terms of population and is characterised by being widely dispersed with approximately 75,000 people across 42 Local Governments and over 200 communities, in a region that covers 156,000 square kilometres. The 42 Local Governments equate to a third of all the Western Australian Local Governments.

To effectively manage resources and achieve positive outcomes, RDA Wheatbelt places a strong emphasis on collaborative projects, partnerships, connecting like-minded projects and referrals. Direct engagement, both face to face and via telecommunications with Local Government, State Government, business, industry, community organisations and other stakeholders is valuable in maintaining the flow of information across the region.

RDA Wheatbelt focus areas for 2022-23 were:

- To develop the new Lumen Wheatbelt Regional University Centre to provide access to facilities and student support with the aim to promote greater participation and completion rates for external University courses.
- To continue support for transport and economic sustainability through the Wheatbelt Secondary Freight Network.
- To support the Wheatbelt Business Network.
- To investigate opportunities within the manufacturing sector, defence and space industries.

2. RDA Wheatbelt Vision, Mission and Purpose



- ❖ The vision for our organisation is to actively shape the future of the Wheatbelt Region.
- ❖ To realise this vision, we commit to our mission of collaborating across communities, advocating with key decision makers and harnessing innovation to create local opportunity, growth and impact.
- ❖ And we do this because our purpose is to be the Wheatbelt's local voice to Federal Government to facilitate social and economic development.

3. Regional Development Australia Charter

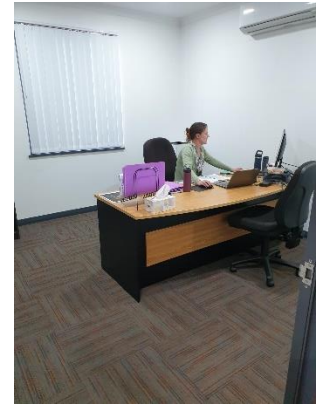
The Charter was updated in 2023

As representatives of their local communities, RDAs will:

- ✓ focus their activities and strategy on delivery of the Regional Investment Framework (RIF) in their region, including investment in people, places, services, and industries and local economies
- ✓ support regional stakeholders, including local government and the not-for-profit-sector, to seek grant opportunities that advance strategic regional priorities
- ✓ support decarbonisation efforts and the transformation to a net zero economy and enable regional linkages between sectors to achieve these aims
- ✓ build the evidence for economic development, including innovation and diversification strategies
- ✓ facilitate meaningful engagement across the three levels of government to ensure investments deliver better outcomes for regions, and
- ✓ contribute relevant data and local intelligence to support the evidence base to inform regional development strategies, program design and policy responses.

RDAs use their local, cross-sector expertise and regional voice to:

- collaborate with integrity, transparency, respect and accountability
- engage with diverse communities, especially First Nations people
- support the Government's ambition of 'no one held back and no one left behind', and
- support gender equality opportunities in their regions.



Lumen Wheatbelt Regional University Centre - Wongan Hills Study Hub

4. Reports

4.1 Chairman's Report

This AGM seems to have come around really quickly. Which again means we have had a busy year with a lot happening at RDA Wheatbelt over the past twelve months.

The establishment and successful bedding down of our Lumen Wheatbelt Regional University Centre Program has no doubt been a great achievement. To think we now have our four Study Hubs in Merredin, Wongan Hills, Narrogin and York with 36 students studying a variety of courses is a fantastic outcome for our region. Yes, we have had some challenges along the way, but I think we all knew that would be the case. However, due to the great work and persistence of the Director Elise Woods, with the great support of the Director Regional Development Mandy Walker, Reference Group Chair Wendy Newman, the Reference Group and our Staff, we have overcome, and are continuing to overcome those challenges. As the Chair of RDA Wheatbelt, I am really excited about this programme and the progress we have made. I am confident that Lumen will continue to grow and provide huge benefits to our region. So well done to Elise and all involved, I am so proud of what we have achieved already and confident of a bright future for Lumen.

Mandy's continued great work with defence industries is also very exciting, with more and varied opportunities for our local businesses becoming real possibilities. Mandy has really opened some doors here and we must continue to pursue the opportunities over the next twelve months.

The Wheatbelt Secondary Freight Network (WSFN) welcomed John Nuttall as their CEO this year and RDA Wheatbelt are still strong supporters of this initiative. Mandy and I recently attended a meeting in Merredin with John and President Wayne Gibson to meet with Federal and State Liberal Politicians to update them on the WSFN current position and to look to future funding opportunities.

Congratulations to Mandy, Research Evaluation Project Support Officer Chris Evans and Admin/Finance Officer Pippa Harris on putting forward an excellent submission to the recent Banking Inquiry, it was very professional and made very strong and accurate points regarding the impact of the loss of banking services to our rural communities. It was terrific for Mandy and I to have the opportunity to appear before the Inquiry Committee at a public hearing in Beverley recently and to be able to stress and expand on our points, and bring home the reality of what these loss of services really means to people in our local rural communities. Let's hope there are some real positive outcomes that come from this.



Photo: A Touch of Life Photography

Mandy and Deputy Chair Karen Strange attended the SEGRA Conference in Toowoomba in July and I then joined them for the RDA Forum. Once again it is always of great value to attend these events and in particular to hear what others are doing and sharing ideas.

I also recently attended a camp for schools involved with Karen's Wheatbelt and Beyond Youth Mentoring programme. It was a great success and it is really inspiring to see the great benefits this programme is providing to the students, their mentors, the student

parents and the schools involved. It is a terrific programme that we here at RDA Wheatbelt have been involved with and supported for a number of years. Congratulations Karen to you and your team and keep up the great work.

I will end this report by sincerely thanking all on our Committee for their involvement, great input, work and support of myself, Mandy and our team. Together we have achieved, and are achieving, many benefits that have real and positive affects for the people in our region. We don't win them all, but we are having some great wins and will continue, I am sure, to have many more.

A huge thanks again to Mandy, Elise, Pippa and Chris for their dedication, commitment and for the great work they do, I know it is greatly appreciated and highly valued by us all.

Thank you again and let's have another exciting and successful twelve months.

Terry (Tuck) Waldron
Chairman



4.2 Director Regional Development Report

Lumen Wheatbelt Regional University Centre activities have certainly been the highlight for 2022/23. The opportunities this initiative creates for our regional communities, businesses and local governments is significant. I am so pleased that we have been able to recruit Elise Wooda as Director and that she is well into the implementation of the operational plan for Lumen.

In addition to the roll out of Lumen this year we've been active in the Defence Industry sector fostering relationships and opportunities for collaboration with defence contractors and our Wheatbelt manufacturing businesses. I am confident that we are making progress raising awareness and facilitating real economic outcomes for the region. We will move forward in the upcoming year by working with the Wheatbelt Business Network to demystify working with defence contractors and lobbying for policy change within defence procurement.



We have a real opportunity in the upcoming year to create meaningful partnerships with the space, autonomous technology and robotics sectors. I am excited to see connections being made and potential to positively influence the mining and agricultural sectors in the region through these partnerships. Diversity in our economy is essential to ensure sustainability of and vibrancy in our Wheatbelt communities.

Our relationship with Local Government continues to strengthen and I am pleased that activities like the online "one off the wood" discussions provide the chance for genuine and insightful dialogue between RDA Wheatbelt and our 42 Local Government CEOs. There have been some great ideas generated through this process which we have been able to share with policy and program setters.

Our impact as an RDA has been noticed by our colleagues across the country and I always receive compliments from the RDA program and network about the work we do and the way we go about it. This is a credit to our team, Committee members and the passion that everyone brings to their role in the organisation.

This is my final contribution to the RDA Wheatbelt Annual Report as I leave RDA Wheatbelt to focus on my own Wheatbelt business. It has been an absolute pleasure to work in the role of Director Regional Development. It is the people in the region that make this role exciting, I firmly believe we are a smart, capable and inventive region ready to make ourselves known to the rest of the State and nation for more than just wheat. We are on the cusp of demystifying the tremendous diversity in our economy and communities which I know will be a real driver in changing perceptions about living, working and raising a family in the Wheatbelt.



Thank you to all the people who have given me their time to work on initiatives, discuss ideas and implement creative solutions to some of the challenges we face in the region. There are too many to list individually across our 42 Local Governments, project partners, businesses, state agencies, community groups, non for profits, the list is quite extensive, and I have learnt a great deal from you all.

Mandy Walker
Director Regional Development

5. Operational

5.1 Committee Member Profiles

Name	Position	Qualifications & Experience
Mr Terry Waldron Narrogin	Chair	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Chair, Central Eastern Accommodation Care Alliance Chair, Rural Health West Chair, WA sports star of the year award Former Chair, WA Cricket Association Former Member of State Parliament for 16 years 6.5 years Minister for Sport & Recreation, Racing, Gaming & Liquor Former General Manager WA Country Football League Former Secretary Australian Country Football Council Former Real Estate Business Owner/Director Gt Southern & Wheatbelt South
Mrs Karen Strange Bruce Rock	Deputy Chair	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Grain and Livestock Producer in Bruce Rock Wheatbelt & Beyond Youth Mentoring Cofounder and Co Program Director Wheatbelt Youth Council committee member Deputy Chair, Lumen Wheatbelt Regional University Centre Reference Group 2011 - current Community Liaison- Bruce Rock DHS Former Board Member of WA Women’s Advisory Council
Mr Michael Aspinall Seabird	Committee Member	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Chair Keep Australia Beautiful Council Former Board member Keep Australia Beautiful National Body President Wanneroo Agricultural Society Inc Former Shire of Gingin, President and Councillor (13 years) Former member of WALGA’s Municipal Waste Advisory Council (13 years) Former member of the Control of Vehicles (off-road Areas) Act Advisory Committee 28 years in a variety of roles, for an engine and fuel injection research and development company

Name	Position	Qualifications & Experience
Mrs Lynette Baker Corrigin	Committee Member	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Partner and part time worker in farming enterprise Past Shire President 10 years, Councillor 16 years, Honorary Freeman, Shire of Corrigin Past Board Director Rural Health West, 6 years. Graduate, Australian Institute of Company Directors Past member, working group Wheatbelt Secondary Freight Network Special interest in rural health
Mr Stephen Gollan Beverley	Committee Member	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Chief Executive Officer Shire of Beverley 41 years experience in local Government. Beverley, Wickepin and Gnowangerup Deputy Chair WA Country Cricket Board Committee Member WA Veteran's Over 50s Treasurer Beverley Golf Club
Mrs Kim Hewson Jurien Bay	Committee Member	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Principal, Economic Transitions Eleven+ years assisting regional communities diversify their tourism product and seeking community sustainability Company Secretary of the Australian Prospectors & Miners' Hall of Fame Board member of Australia's Golden Outback Member, Australian Institute of Company Directors (Graduate) Member, Governance Institute of Australia
Mrs Lisa Judson Bolgart	Committee Member	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Partner, Small Business (11 years) Agrifinance Manager, Avon Valley and Wheatbelt (16 years) Chair Bolgart School Council Member Mortlock Agri Focus Group
Ms Wendy Newman Dowerin	Committee Member	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Chair, Lumen Wheatbelt Regional University Centre Reference Group Deputy Chair, WA Country Health Service Deputy Chair, Regional Early Education Development Inc (REED) Deputy Chair, Directions Workforce Solutions (Inc) Principal Consultant, Quintessence Consulting Member, Dowerin Events Management Member, Women on Boards Graduate, Australian Institute of Company Directors Member, Australian Council Health Service Managers Member, RRR Network Member, Wheatbelt Business Network



SEGRA 2023

Karen Strange, Deputy Chair and Mandy Walker, Director Regional Development.



Lumen Wheatbelt Regional University Centre - York Study Hub

5.2 Staff

The staff are funded through the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communities and the Arts. Staff are contracted to 30 June 2025, in line with the Operational Contract.

- ◆ Mandy Walker - Director Regional Development - mandy.walker@rdawheatbelt.com.au
- ◆ Chris Evans - Research, Evaluation, Project Support - chris.evans@rdawheatbelt.com.au
- ◆ Pippa Harris - Admin / Finance Officer - admin@rdawheatbelt.com.au

The Lumen Wheatbelt Regional University Centre staff are funded through the Australian Government Department of Education. Some are directly employed by RDA Wheatbelt and others employed through the Study Hubs.

- ◆ Elise Woods - Director – director@lumenwruc.edu.au
- ◆ Rebecca Atkinson – Student Support Officer york@lumenwruc.edu.au
- ◆ Tanya Johns – Student Support Officer wongan@lumenwruc.edu.au

5.3 Administration Office

Where of mutual benefit, RDA Wheatbelt employs staff (including the Director Regional Development) under a work-from-home arrangement with an administrative office in Gingin. This allows for greater coverage of the expansive geographical area that the region encompasses and reduces operational costs associated with office leases and travel.

Administration Office:

3 Constable Street, Gingin WA 6503
Tel: (08) 9575 1888
Email: admin@rdawheatbelt.com.au

Web: www.rdawheatbelt.com.au

5.4 Partnership and Collaborations

RDA Wheatbelt is committed to working with key stakeholders to maximise opportunities for our region. Our primary stakeholders include:

- The 42 Local Government Authorities that make up the Wheatbelt region

- The Wheatbelt Development Commission (WDC) – a statutory authority charged with the role of implementing the State’s Regional Development Policy.
 - Local community members and community groups
 - The 41 WA Community Resource Network Centres and Network
 - WA Local Government Association – Three zones Great Eastern Country, Avon-Midland Country and Central Country.
 - The Wheatbelt Business Network (WBN)
 - Local industry groups
 - State and Federal government agencies and departments
 - Office of Defence Industry Support
- RDA Great Southern and Geraldton RUCs. Working closely with these organisations to develop the Lumen Wheatbelt Regional University Centre (Lumen WRUC)
 - Shires of Merredin, Narrogin, Wongan Hills and York. Working to set up Lumen WRUC study hubs in these locations.
 - Wheatbelt Business Network. RDA Wheatbelt continues to distribute grant information and share in business activities where applicable.
 - Wheatbelt Secondary Freight Route Group. Financial, in-kind and Steering Committee Member.
 - Wheatbelt Development Commission. A collaborative approach to aligning RDA Wheatbelt with the WDC Strategic Regional Plan and to avoid duplication of activities.
 - RDA Midwest Gascoyne. A collaborative GrantGuru funding portal.

6. RDA Wheatbelt Reporting Outcomes

RDA Wheatbelt reports on three outcomes to the Dept of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communities and the Arts.

1. Facilitate regional economic development outcomes, investment, local procurement and jobs.
2. Promote greater regional awareness of and engagement with Australian Government policies, grant programs and research.
3. Improve Commonwealth regional policy making by providing intelligence and evidence-based advice to the Australian Government on regional development issues.

7. Summary of Key Achievements 2022-23

7.1 Lumen Wheatbelt Regional University Centre

RDA Wheatbelt was successful in securing funding through the 2022 Regional University Centre (RUC) funding round to develop the ‘Lumen Wheatbelt Regional University Centre’, in response to an identified need for access to higher education facilities within the region.

This funding is an important step in showcasing the Wheatbelt as a modern, smart region where you can pursue a workforce ready career pathway. The Wheatbelt is home to some of the most innovative businesses, farming systems, industry, and service sectors in the State who are willing to partner with us. Our model for a regional university enables those people already in the workforce to access additional study options and for our school students both regional and returning from boarding school, an opportunity to connect with a future focused career path.



Regional communities will benefit by having a means to attract and retain residents within their towns. We know that around 60% of people who study in the regions stay in the regions to work, this will be a great outcome for our hospitals and schools, as well as our key industry sectors of agriculture and mining.

The regional university centre provides access to high-speed internet, computers, printers, video conferencing and more importantly, a student support/services person who assists students with navigating university life, all at no cost to the student.



Lumen Wheatbelt Regional University Centre - Narrogin Study Hub & official opening

There are four study hubs in this unique delivery model, designed to provide better access to a greater number of Wheatbelt students. Located in Merredin, Narrogin, Wongan Hills and York, the study hubs are located to meet a geographic need and industry opportunities.

A full time Director and four part-time Student Support Officers (1 in each of the 4 locations) jobs were created through this program, with 1 position currently vacant. <https://lumenwruc.edu.au/>

7.2 Defence supply chain opportunities

After compiling a comprehensive list of Wheatbelt manufacturers and engineering businesses, RDA Wheatbelt has engaged directly with targeted businesses on the list with the view to introducing them to the potential of participating in the defence supply chain. The Department of Defence are putting real investment behind getting more regional Australian businesses into their supply chain and RDA Wheatbelt sees the opportunity for the regions businesses to potentially subcontract to the Primes (companies with Defence contracts) due to the number of innovative and highly skilled businesses and their proximity to Perth.

Two defence industry introduction regional tours have been held this period in October 2022 and April 2023. RDA Wheatbelt organises the tours and facilitates the introduction of Office of Defence Industry Support (ODIS) staff to meet Wheatbelt businesses involved in engineering and manufacturing. The first tour focused on the central and eastern areas of the Wheatbelt with the second tour through the north eastern areas.

The second tour included a roundtable in Dalwallinu where RDA Wheatbelt invited businesses to come and meet ODIS as well as Defence West and Prime contractors from the Henderson precinct. The opportunities that exist to participate in the defence supply chain are explained and attendees are provided with a first start reference list on how to go about doing that. Whilst only one of the Primes were able to attend, conversations have commenced, and referrals are now through RDA Wheatbelt as Primes begin to recognise the potential.

ODIS have expressed that they have been very impressed (and surprised!) by the high standard of facilities and custom manufacturing capability, further tours and roundtables are planned.

Our goal was to demystify what the defence industry supply chain means, and what it looks like. We were successful in this aim as well as at the same time showcasing to Babcock and Defence West in Dalwallinu the type of capabilities that exist in the Wheatbelt. RDA Wheatbelt will continue to engage with ODIS, AusIndustry, Henderson Alliance, Australian Industry and Defence Network, Babcock and others.



There are actual real examples now of how our relationship building is assisting both Wheatbelt based and metropolitan based businesses. Between ODIS and RDA Wheatbelt, we have been able to introduce businesses to discuss work packages and negotiate commercial terms. This is a great outcome for our region.

7.3 Wheatbelt Secondary Freight Network

The leadership role is managed by the Wheatbelt Secondary Freight Network (WSFN) Steering Committee, of which RDA Wheatbelt is a member. RDA Wheatbelt contributions, both financially and in-kind have greatly assisted and enabled the progression of this initiative.

The project has identified the secondary freight routes in the Wheatbelt, completed a high-level analysis of the current condition of each road and what is needed to bring these roads to fit for purpose. Of the 80 secondary freight routes comprising 4400 kms, the program's proposed works have identified 2850 kms (65%) that are prioritised for upgrades, at a cost in excess of \$500 million, of which \$167.5 million has already been sourced. A business case including the cost benefit analysis has previously been completed.

To date, 42 projects have been constructed and \$52.9 million expended on the completed projects, with numerous other projects currently under construction.

7.4 Submission, Bank Closures in Regional Australia Inquiry

RDA Wheatbelt conducted a survey across the region to inform a submission to the Inquiry into Regional Bank Closures. RDA Wheatbelt were then called as a witness to a public hearing held in August 2023 a copy of the Hansard transcript can be downloaded [here](#)

- There have been 11 closures of banks or bank agencies in the Wheatbelt WA over the past 10 years which represents 22%, or over 1/5th of the overall banking services in the region.
- As branches are withdrawn services fall to Australia Post and in one case a Community Resource Centre. At least one Local Government has no on ground services at all.
- There has been little to no consultation with communities about the reasons why branches are closed, communities are just given a closure date.

- Digital connectivity and mobile phone coverage is problematic across some parts of the region, compounding this is unreliable power supply in some areas. No power, no bank, no cash.
- 2021 Census indicated 23% of the Wheatbelt population is over 65 years old with a high proportion of this cohort having limited digital skills for online banking, as well as a preference not to use online banking.



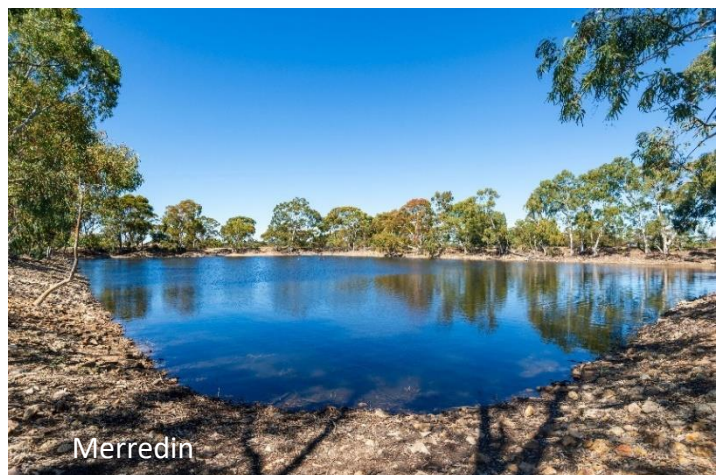
- Respondents were asked how far they would need to travel if their bank in town closed. 26% of respondents indicated that they would have to travel less than 50 kms, 48% would have to travel between 51 and 100 kms, while 23% would have to travel between 101 and 200 kms with 3% having to travel more than 200 kms.

- 94% of respondents in the survey indicated that in travelling to a (bigger) town with a bank they would take the opportunity to do shopping. The impact of this redirection of revenue out of towns

without a bank is demonstrated in the responses to the question ‘...while in another town for banking, on average how much would you spend?’ Over a third (36%) of respondents indicated that they would spend between \$101 and \$200 per week with 33% nominating between \$201 and \$300 per week along with 12% who thought they would spend over \$500 per week. These levels of spending out of town would or does seriously challenge the economic sustainability of some small and medium businesses in these towns without a bank.

- The potential for this to impact on local businesses was shown in responses to the question ‘Has the lack of bank services impacted your business cash flow?’ Of the businesses owners or managers that responded to the survey, 29% agreed that a lack of banking services in their town had a negative effect on their businesses’ cash flow. This 29% represented most of the respondents from towns without a bank.
- A resident who is the treasurer of the local football club and whose bank had withdrawn from the town, said that for a home game the club needed a cash float of \$5,000. They said that there was no way the local post office or the ATM could provide such a sum. As a result, they had to take time off from work on a Friday to undertake a round trip of almost 140 kms to pick up the float.
- Similarly, employees of businesses and shires without access to a bank in their local town are having to make trips to other towns with a bank to deposit large sums cash which their local post office is unable to accept due to lower security levels.

The Regional Banking Taskforce Final Report (Commonwealth of Australia 2022) made six recommendations based on their findings. RDA Wheatbelt view the implementation of these recommendations as a first step towards addressing the issues associated with bank closures in the Wheatbelt Region. We strongly encourage the Australian Government to place a greater degree of accountability on the banking sector to invest in reliable internet connectivity when considering the closure of banks across regional and remote Australia so that online banking facilities can be readily accessed by their customers.



7.5 Collaborative Grant Funding Portal

RDAs Wheatbelt and Midwest Gascoyne collaborated to provide a GrantGuru portal across the two RDAs regions. The project is providing a funding support online platform available to all Wheatbelt WA and Midwest Gascoyne stakeholders.

The Wheatbelt region of WA comprises 42 Shires over an area twice the size of Tasmania. The region covers from coast to broadacre farming in the West. A low population density, under 75,000, and having no major city makes it difficult for most the small, underfunded, Shires to attract staff with the high level of skills for developing a strong funding proposal application. RDA Wheatbelt, whilst able to give strong support to some projects, are not in a position to actively support/write every application.

There are two components to this project, the free portal for communities, Local Government's (LGs) and businesses, where they can sign up to receive free alerts to opportunities based on preference selections, and the second is the subscription based LG only portal where all funding opportunities eligible for LGs are available and alerts can be set up based on funding needs. Subscription has been renegotiated at approximately 50% of regular subscriptions.

The initial subscription period attracted 22 LGs who committed to a three year proposal. All 42 LGs were offered a new two year proposal in May 2023 and 24 have accepted the offer, indicating that this service is of value. The subscribing LGs have greater time to develop proposals through early targeted notification of suitable funding options and not risk missing suitable grants. The online grant writing tools within the portal also offer access to information and tips to assist applicants. The free funding portal now has 545 active registrations from community, businesses and LGs.

7.6 Supporting Funding Applications

RDA Wheatbelt continues to assist with grant applications across a range of projects and funding streams that vary greatly in size and scope. The support ranges from research support, feedback on applications, matching projects to funding, identifying partners and providing letters of support.

- RDA Wheatbelt provided 5 letters of support, for Regional Economic Development fund applicants.
- 7 letters of support were provided to Regional Connectivity Program applicants.
- 3 other letters of support were provided.

The Growing Regions Program only opened for EOIs in July 2023



8. External Funding

The Australian Government Department of Education.

Contract to deliver the Regional Universities Centres funded, 'Lumen Wheatbelt Regional Universities Centre' (Lumen WRUC) program commenced in July 2022 and will conclude in June 2025. \$575,995 was received for this period.

9. Regional Priorities

- There are around 9,000 small and medium enterprises registered in the Wheatbelt region. Supporting SMEs within the Wheatbelt region to harness innovation in their sector, deliver products and services in a profitable and sustainable manner as well as being a source of local job creation is critical to ensuring the economic vibrancy of the region is maintained.
- A gap still exists in outcomes for Aboriginal people within the Wheatbelt across the spectrum in health, education, workforce participation, employment, life expectancy, home ownership and many other measures. A concerted effort is required across all agencies in collaboration with the Noongar people to reverse this trend. RDA Wheatbelt has contributed to this by fostering economic participation at a micro business scale.
- Agriculture is fundamental to the region's economy. The prospects for this industry are bright and we've seen innovative farm products, practices and business models implemented across the sector to mitigate the risks associated with climate change. The resources sector however is rapidly gaining parity in economic importance with agriculture thus changing the economic profile of the region.
- Limited mobile phone reception in many parts of the region impacts on emergency services, liveability of communities and business performance/development. Sub-standard internet connections are a further social and economic handbrake in the region, which will only be partially addressed by the NBN roll-out. Digital connectivity is essential to provide opportunities for business growth and innovation in the region.
- The natural attributes of the region make it particularly suitable for renewable energy projects including large scale wind and solar farms. State Government regulation, connection costs, storage technology and capacity restraints in the distribution network are inhibiting the development of energy generation and limiting the regions ability to contribute to the renewable generation market.



- The natural and cultural attributes of the region make it extremely versatile in tourism service and product offerings. Support for local government, business and communities is required to capitalise on the opportunities presented by the regional, state, national and international tourist sectors.

- There is a lack of diverse and suitable housing stock across the Wheatbelt which poses a major constraint to workforce attraction and retention. Multi-purpose housing developments to accommodate the needs of different sectors of the community are required across the region.

- An extensive national, state and local road and rail network serves the Wheatbelt region. Investing in this infrastructure is imperative to ensure safe and efficient access to ports and strategic hubs for connection with domestic and international markets.
- The Wheatbelt has lower Year 12 attainment rates when compared with those of Western Australia. There are also limited opportunities to participate in post-compulsory education in the region. Innovation in the delivery of education to this region is required to improve the employability of school leavers within the Wheatbelt. The Lumen Wheatbelt Regional University Centre will be an affordable and attractive option for those students who don't want to, or can't afford to, relocate to the city for further education opportunities.
- Wheatbelt residents require health care services of a suitable standard. It is important to support health care facilities as well as the care workforce to take advantage of modern technologies that can help us maintain high quality services and increase the ability of people to remain in their homes.

Lumen Wheatbelt Regional
University Centre
Merredin Study Hub



10. Challenges and Issues

The March 2022 data indicates that the Wheatbelt unemployment rate is under 3.8%, but with 26% of people over the age of 74 currently working at some level, this raises concerns that this resource will diminish too. Critical workforce shortages are reported in all sectors. RDA Wheatbelt has also been affected with two advertising campaigns and the use of personal contacts, failing to secure the last Student Service Officer for the Lumen WRUC program.

Accommodation options for regional workforces across all sectors is an issue that RDA Wheatbelt will be continuing to look at. Applications to funding streams for workforce accommodation have been strongly supported. Large projects in the region have seen the opportunity for economic and community growth however there is a lack of suitable accommodation for workforce needs in construction, industry and services.

A number of LGs have contacted RDA Wheatbelt regarding inaccurate data resulting from distribution and collection issues for the 2021 Census for their locality and the affect this will potentially have in securing funding that has a high priority on population and looks unfavourably on locations that are perceived to be in decline. A number of areas did not have the hard copy census delivered and/or collected due to lack of staff. Poor internet connections, lack of facilities and low digital literacy contributed to many that did not receive a hard copy not completing an online form. An example of the ongoing effect this is having is the Shire of York that

had a state government report, compiled from census data, declaring the Shire had experienced a substantial reduction in population and based on this proposed a 20% decline in population over the next 10 years. This highlighted the Shire as having a reduced potential for investment. Further RDA Wheatbelt research indicated a discrepancy in the number of people in the labour force listed in the census data compared to the number recorded in the ABS Unemployment and Labour Force smoothed data files (2022). The revised Shire of York population in 2021 would be 3,549 people which represents just a 1.6% decrease on the 2016 Census count of 3,606.



The natural and cultural attributes of the region make it extremely versatile in tourism service and product offerings. Support for local government, business and communities is required to capitalise on the opportunities presented by the regional, state, national and international tourism sectors. A collaborative model across 42 shires underpinned by Regional Tourism Organisation support is required to progress this sector.

The Wheatbelt has an export oriented economy as the States leading agricultural producing region. Growth limited by negative perceptions of the region, workforce availability, critical housing shortages, poor education and training attainment. Current visa policies are inhibiting both seasonal and ongoing workers to the region.

Workforce issues are compounded by an ageing population and out-migration of 15-45 year olds. Quality diverse housing stock is required to facilitate workforce attraction and underpin the growth of the region's aged services industry.

Inadequate digital connections are restraining economic growth in the region. Innovation in the delivery of digitally based business, education and health services is impeded. COVID-19 distancing regulations highlighted the sub-standard internet capacity with many organisations and families unable to connect with videoconferencing due to limited bandwidth and allocations. School children were unable to complete any or only limited online classes across the region.

Connection costs, storage technology and capacity restraints in the distribution network are inhibiting the development of energy generation and limiting the regions ability to contribute to the renewable generation market.

Service design of many government programs that does not account for highly dispersed population settings results in market failure and therefore and unwillingness of private enterprise and not for profit sector to provide services to the region due to lack of sustainable funding.

Distribution of information. Governments 'roadshows' aimed at information sharing, engagement or collaboration often miss our region and focus on coastal areas. Transport to attend in other areas is a challenge and costly.

Transport, housing and telecommunications are critical for Wheatbelt residents to access economic opportunities and key services such as health, education.



Photo: Bruce Rock Engineering – Transport

Staying in Place – This initiative addresses a concerning issue across the whole Wheatbelt. RDA Wheatbelt continues to work with the Pingelly Somerset Alliance see the model expand regionally. A grant of \$377,000 over three years from the Dept of Social Services Seniors Connected Program was received in 21-22 to pilot the virtual aged village and supports the employment of staff to be able to support other towns to set up the program. There have been numerous positive lessons learned from this initiative which are now being shared with other regions.

Banking - Closures of branches have made running a business, sports club and community group extremely difficult. Postcode discrimination in regard to business lending to non-agricultural enterprises is a real handbrake to regional economic development and diversity. Community based models need to be considered.

11. Financial Statement

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT AUSTRALIA WHEATBELT INC

STATEMENT OF RECEIPTS AND PAYMENTS

FOR THE YEAR ENDING 30 JUNE 2023

	Operating	Projects	University	Income	Investments	TOTAL
Opening reconciled cash at 1 July 2022	52,705	10,109	-	66,929	318,025	447,768
INCOME FOR THE YEAR						
Grant Income - DITRDCA/DESE	363,482		879,656			1,243,138
Governance funds - DITRDCA	5,000					5,000
Branding funds - DITRDCA	5,600					5,600
Interest Income	23	1	125	7	2,141	2,296
GrantGuru Subscriptions	12,918					12,918
General insurance audit refund	405					405
Lumen WR University Centre	42,647					42,647
Vehicle contribution reimburse	2,600			5,798		8,398
Vehicle RAV4 repayments				6,861		6,861
Transfers				38,900	254,300	293,200
Other Income		2,182	5,000			7,182
TOTAL INCOME	432,675	2,183	884,781	51,566	256,441	1,627,646
TOTAL FUNDS AVAILABLE 2023	485,380	12,292	884,781	118,495	574,466	2,075,414
EXPENDITURE FOR THE YEAR						
Asset Acquisitions	1,505		27,439			28,944
Committee & Board Costs	15,753		1,765			17,518
Financial & Professional	3,707		5,355			9,061
Activities, Marketing, Events	23,668		5,703	5,137		34,509
Office Lease & Outgoings	12,132		-			12,132
Operational Costs	8,798		30,758			39,556
Staff Salaries	251,597		137,109			388,706
Other Staff Expenses	48,407		36,909			85,316
Motor Vehicle Costs	26,195		13,549	5,051		44,796
Governance review - DITRDCA	5,000		-			5,000
Transfers			250,000		30,000	280,000
Other		10,711	5,000	36,627		52,338
TOTAL EXPENDITURE	396,761	10,711	513,588	46,815	30,000	997,875
CASH AT BANK 30 JUNE 2023	88,619	1,581	371,193	71,681	544,466	1,077,539

12. Contacts

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