

## **Wheatbelt Area Consultative Committee (ACC) Inc.**

Job Network Review  
Productivity Commission  
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TO whom it may concern

The Wheatbelt of Western Australia is an area twice the size of Tasmania. It comprises 44 shires, 170 communities and a population of 72,431 (June 1999). It covers 154,862 square kilometres, extending southeast from Perth to Wagin. Yilgarn, Kondinin and Lake Grace Shires make up the eastern boundary, and the region incorporates some 200 kilometres of coastline to the north of Perth.

It is divided into four main geographic regions:

- Avon is closest to the metropolitan area, with Northam as its commercial centre;
- Central Coastal and Central Midlands to the north, with Moora as its commercial centre,
- Central East, with Merredin as its commercial centre; and
- Central South, with Narrogin as its commercial centre.

There are no major cities in the Wheatbelt. Northam is the largest town with a population of 9764 people (town and surrounding area) followed by Narrogin with 5665 (town and surrounding area), Merredin with 3787 and Moora with 2592.

Issues in the region differ greatly, especially when comparing regions supported by different industries, -such as agricultural towns in the Wheatbelt compared with cray fishing towns on the coastal strip.

### **Population**

The Ministry of Planning predicts that in the next 10 years the four shires closest to Perth (Toodyay, Chittering, Gingin, Northam and York) will grow by a total of 2400. Other Wheatbelt shires will have zero or negative growth. Merredin Shire has lost 200 people since 1996 and it is anticipated to lose another 100 during the next five years.

### **Age profile**

According to the Ministry for Planning population levels in the 16 to 24 age group remain dangerously low, failing from about 9000 in 2001 to a predicted 6500 in 2021. Over several years the trend has been for many young people in the Wheatbelt to leave their small communities to continue education or find work in larger centres. Others have left for social or lifestyle reasons or to pursue sporting activities.

The Wheatbelt Development Commission in its publication Shaping the Future 1997-2000 points to the following trends:

- people moving from small towns to sub-regional centres, and from sub-regional centres to cities; and
- changing lifestyles leading to a more mobile population base with less loyalty to the local community.

The Ministry for Planning predicts that the strongest population growth in the Wheatbelt in the next 30 years will be in the over 65 age group with an increase from 8000 in 2001 to 20,000 in 2031. The 45-64 age group will also grow, but to a lesser extent (from 18,500 to over 23,500 in 2031).

The 25-44 age group will fall from 22,000 to 20 000 in the next 30 years. The 0-14 age group will decline faster, failing from above 17,000 in 2001 to below 14,000 in 2011, and suggesting that young families will move away and not be replaced by other young people.

## **Aboriginal population**

In 1996 the Wheatbelt's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) population was 2349 or 3.7 per cent of the Wheatbelt's total population (1996 Census). In 1994 the Ministry for Planning predicted that by 2001 the region's ATSI population would be 3225 or 4.4 per cent of the Wheatbelt's total population. It also predicted that by 2001 42.3 per cent of the Wheatbelt's regions ATSI people would be between the ages of 0-14.

## **Central inquiry issues**

The main benefits of the policy framework underlying the Job Network are that providers are financially driven to find jobs for the unemployed. However this has created a catch 22 situation in the Wheatbelt. There are two Job Network Job Matching providers covering 44 Shires. It is in their best interests to work in the most highly populated areas where they have better chances of securing job placements. This has resulted in a lower level of service delivery for the less populated areas. It is not cost effective for Job Network members to travel huge distances to see two to three clients in small Wheatbelt communities, however these clients have the right to a quality service.

The Federal Department of Employment, Workplace Relations and Small Business (DEWRSB) in September 2001 requested Area Consultative Committees to place full page Job Network advertisements in all regional newspapers. One of the options we had was to list the number of jobs that had been placed through Job Network Job Matching. For 11 months, this figure was 450 for the entire Wheatbelt. In some areas the Job Network will not be cost effective, because there simply are not the same number of jobs available as there are in regions with more businesses and less family run or one owner/manager businesses. However the service level to unemployed people should not be affected. Services in the Wheatbelt have been drastically reduced. The former CES had offices in the four regional centres. They now have sub agents working for them in Telecentres, providing a reduced information service, rather than a service that can give immediate answers and is linked to the Centrelink computer system.

There is still limited understanding of the Job Network in the Wheatbelt, despite the best efforts of members and the Wheatbelt ACC to promote the system. The Job Network could be improved by unemployed people having some form of compulsory training in what the Job Network can offer them. When the Wheatbelt ACC held four seminars in the four regional centres with Centrelink clients, at least 75% did not understand the Job Network. Many were not interested in finding work and therefore did not want to understand the Job Network. This figure of 75% lack of understanding is higher for business people in the region. Many business people would prefer to advertise and seek employees that are in current jobs and have skills, rather than register their vacancy with a Job Network member who they perceive work with Centrelink clients, many of whom are long term unemployed. For this situation and local understanding to improve, the Job Network needs to have strategic marketing locally, involving ongoing case studies in local papers and on local radio. The ACC receives \$10,000 per year to market the Job Network. At Job Club meetings with Job Network members we discuss annually the best use of this money. However it is not enough to cover the entire region, and produce results. Monitoring of Job Network members should occur through random sampling of business people and jobseekers of the Job Network, especially in regional areas. This would back up the comments stated above.

Staff in the DEWRSB office in Canberra and at Centrelink need to understand the region they are looking at prior to dealing with people in the region. On many occasions Centrelink staff have told people registering for benefits that they must attend an interview at a Centrelink office, which is up to 4 hours away. Or that they must register in person with a Job Network member who is three hours away. There must be provisions in the running of the Job Network for regional areas with limited services and limited providers.

On the opposing side of this argument is the fact that many jobseekers use living in a region as an excuse not to have to find work. "We are too far away, we cannot get to an office, we do not have transport," are regular excuses given by jobseekers. Centrelink and the Job Network or DEWRSB Job Network members need to have more mobile services to reach these people, and give them no excuse not to try and find work.

The Job Network could be better used to help those who do not need assistance to find work through regular seminars or workshops on the elements of Job Search Training. This would raise the awareness of the Job Network and be welcomed by young people in communities and those wishing to update their skills with regard to writing resumes, CVs, answering selection criteria and attending interviews.

Another area of assistance the Government could investigate purchasing would be to provide funding to businesses to put on unemployed people for work experience for short set amounts of time. This would result in the unemployed getting "match practice" at working including getting up everyday and out of the unemployed rut, gaining skills, public relations confidence and a feel for the type of work they engage in. It may also make some businesses realise that they could do with an extra staff member, if they can afford it, if the jobseeker brings in more work or look at putting on the jobseeker, even on a casual or part time basis during busier times.

1 look forward to reading the results of the Productivity Commission review

Yours sincerely

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