

Surveys identify Wheatbelt housing needs

By MEL WILLIAMS

THERE are on average 300 dwellings built in the Wheatbelt each year and demand is vastly outstripping supply, according to a new survey.

About 80 per cent of new dwellings are constructed in just six of the region's 42 shires, mostly on the peri-urban fringe.

Business owners in the shires of Dandaragan, Victoria Plains, Toodyay and Goomalling were recently invited to participate in an online survey seeking to understand workforce and housing needs.

The survey was part of the Dandaragan-AROC Workforce Housing Investigation, which is a collaboration between the four shires and the Wheatbelt Development Commission (WDC).

The economic opportunity cost of not having adequate housing for workers, including farm employees, is estimated to be between \$126,000 and \$265,000 per worker per annum.

Preliminary demand analysis suggests there is current demand to house more than 800 workers needed across the Dandaragan-Avon sub-region.

A 2023 sub-regional housing investigation



□ The economic opportunity cost of not having adequate housing for workers, including farm employees, is estimated to be between \$126,000 and \$265,000 per worker per annum.

found there was unmet demand for housing for more than 130 workers across the six shires of Dumbleyung, Lake Grace, Wagin, Williams, Woodanilling and West Arthur (known as the 4WDL shires).

The 4WDL housing investigation confirmed the housing markets in each of the six shires were in market failure.

The 4WDL Regional Organisation of Councils is now considering the next steps, which may require government intervention with supplementary funding to incentivise investment.

Shire of Dumbleyung



□ Shire of West Arthur chief executive officer Vin Fordham Lamont in Darkan where there could be future housing development.

chief executive officer Gavin Treasure said 4WDL had undertaken extensive investigation and engagement across most industry sectors that had substantiated

the need for new key worker housing. "But turning this demonstrated need into on-ground development will be problematic, as the

cost of building new housing is usually much higher than the resulting market value of the final built product," Mr Treasure said.



□ Shire of Victoria Plains chief executive officer Sean Fletcher at one of the Shire's proposed new housing sites.

"4WDL is in the advanced stages of finalising a project-ready business case which clearly shows significant economic benefits to be derived by investing in new key worker housing across our region.

"Responding to market failure, the sub-regional approaches aim to identify housing solutions – including targeted government intervention actions needed to re-position the development capacity of regional towns."

A key deliverable of the work is the development of innovative and alternative housing models to inform potential project options in each town.

Through the latest survey, 62pc of Dandaragan, Victoria Plains, Toodyay and Goomalling farmers identified a gap in their workforce – presumably at least partly attributable to a lack of suitable housing.

The average number of workers identified as needed per business

was higher for the Shire of Dandaragan at 2.2 additional workers required per business than the other three shires requiring between 0.5 and one additional worker each, bringing the average to 1.5 additional workers per business across the study area.

According to the survey results, most existing farm workers in the four shires live locally in town, with a high equal representation of workers living on a farm and those driving in and driving out.

Housing was provided for farm workers by 62pc of farm businesses and, of this, just under half was onfarm housing.

Business owners indicated that 78pc of their workers were dissatisfied with the conditions and standard of the housing stock provided.

The majority of survey respondents said more rental options were needed, particularly to accommodate seasonal workers.

This aspect dominated the survey responses.

Low maintenance and smaller rental housing units are needed to accommodate a range of workers and support is needed to encourage investment to drive supply of new rental housing.

A mix of housing for families and long-term residents is needed and there was clear feedback around the need to modernise houses.

Barriers to farmers investing in housing onfarm were found to be prohibitive planning, high building costs and lack of capital/finance for investment.

While there was strong interest from farmers to invest in housing in towns, a lack of available properties for purchase and high development costs were a barrier.

Respondents pointed to possible incentives for farmers to invest in housing, identifying things such as government grants or subsidies to assist with purchase or rental of

affordable housing for workers.

Other suggested solutions included cheaper modular/transportable houses, more land availability and lower interest finance options.

Some of the planning actions called for included incentivising density options on blocks of land in towns, greater flexibility around additional dwellings such as granny flats on rural land including farms, and fast tracking approvals.

Shire of Victoria Plains chief executive officer Sean Fletcher said the provision of housing to workers went to the heart of securing economic outcomes for communities.

"Further to this, there are social benefits through providing suitable dwellings," Mr Fletcher said.

"Housing helps to attract and retain workers and thus improve the demographic overall for our communities.

"The solutions we are seeking also assist improve our built environment and will be done in such a way so that the impact on the natural environment is much less.

"Securing worker housing in a timely fashion is the key factor regarding the solutions we are seeking and we are hopeful of finding suitable funding/investment opportunities to help us do this."



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