

20 December 2023

The Hon Anthony Albanese MP  
Prime Minister  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

To the Hon Anthony Albanese MP,

**RE: REDRESSING DISADVANTAGE AND LACK OF INVESTMENT IN  
REGIONAL AUSTRALIA – A NATIONAL CONVERSATION**

This letter to you follows a recent three-part documentary program “*Meet the Neighbours*” produced by Blackfella Films and televised nationally by SBS in November 2023, featuring Maryborough within Central Goldfields Shire Victoria.

As Screen Australia has stated the documentary unveils “the challenges faced by regional Australian towns.”

This reflects the key intention of Blackfella Films to “shine a light on what is a divided, two speed and unequal Australia, and what some of the solutions to this disparity might be.”

Council believes this is a matter of real and deep significance and has decided to write to you seeking your commitment to raise this issue within National Cabinet.

This would enable a national conversation to commence about the challenges facing regional Australia, in line with SBS commentary, enabling the development of a comprehensive strategy between the Commonwealth and state governments working in partnership with local governments to create a fairer and more equal Australia.

“*Meet the Neighbours*” followed a Council study which demonstrated that over two-thirds of employers within Central Goldfields Shire had difficulty or serious difficulty in attracting and retaining staff.

Key challenges include a lack of housing, under-investment in crucial services and infrastructure including public transport, telecommunications, and digital connectivity.

Despite some unique regional and local issues which are reflected in the SEIFA index of disadvantage, Council recognises that other towns like Maryborough are facing similar challenges across the nation.

Therefore, rather than simply seek solutions which may assist Maryborough and our Shire, it seemed opportune to share the focus our national program has achieved, with a view to commencing a national solution implemented over time which we would gladly and actively participate in.

The documentary follows eight households from diverse cultural backgrounds as they leave the city to live and work in Maryborough for three months.

This followed the pandemic and was a particularly challenging time to recruit staff given national border closures and major skill-shortages in major cities.

However even with the valuable expertise of the Australian Migrant Employment Service, (AMES) it was clear that visa and state regulatory requirements worked against employment offers in some cases.

There is an important opportunity to provide more targeted support to facilitate regional employment and settling of migrants, migrant communities and their families and enable speedier regulatory management at both the Commonwealth and State level.

The shortage of regional housing is a critical issue and unsurprisingly housing and accommodation was a major challenge in effecting the placement of migrants within the documentary and remains a key barrier to regional employment generally.

A range of housing investments are needed ranging from social and affordable housing to enabling infrastructure to provide key services to encourage private housing investment.

Council would strongly encourage your Government to ensure that sufficient funding is made available to regional Australian towns from the current Commonwealth housing initiative.

This would be an early and positive action within a broader regional redress strategy, which could commence now and have major impact on a key priority need.

Public transport investment is also an important area for regional towns as it can offer workers and residents connectivity and access to major regional and capital cities and the opportunities they offer, and in that way work against perceptions of isolation and distance.

Continuing improvements in telecommunications and mobile reception and digital connectivity are essential both in terms of lifestyle expectations but especially the needs of the New Economy workforce.

Better access to affordable childcare and medical and rural GP services are important needs in regional towns.

More broadly the opportunity to strategically target regional development investment to create a longer term more level playing field for regional Australian towns would be welcome and create an opportunity to partner in lasting improvement and sustainable change, based on the individual needs and opportunities regional towns possess.

Skills training for regional Australia continues to represent a major challenge and there is a need to accelerate investment in areas of identified skills shortages.

Local government is able, working in partnership with its community and business leaders, to drive needed change in regional towns like Maryborough, but needs long term focused investment and partnership with Commonwealth and State governments to enable this, including resourcing the processes to manage that change.

There is no immediate fix for the disparity which has arisen over generations, but the need is critical as *“Meet the Neighbours”* focused on Maryborough, Victoria has shown.

Council has undertaken a comprehensive evaluation of participation in the documentary and plans more targeted advocacy ahead.

Some key results from that evaluation with other local relevant data is shared in the attachment dealing with our specific priorities and needs.

We do feel that, in the first instance, we should share the efforts in which the residents and employers in Maryborough contributed to, in the documentary with you, state Premiers within National Cabinet, on behalf of regional Australia.

Our hope is that the needed national conversation can commence, and we can look forward to a future where the two speed Australia will be a topic for the history books.

Yours sincerely,

Liesbeth Long  
**MAYOR, CENTRAL GOLDFIELDS SHIRE**

Encl.

cc Premier of Victoria, The Hon Jacinta Allan  
Martha Haylett MP, Member for Ripon  
Dr Anne Webster MP, Member for Mallee

## **Attachment – Council Documentary Evaluation and Key Data – Maryborough and Central Goldfields Shire – Challenges and Government Funding Priorities and Partnerships**

The “*Meet the Neighbours*” evaluation report which was endorsed by Council made recommendations to progress the project based on the key learnings.

Recommendations that need Government funding support are:

**Facilitate a coordinated approach to recruiting migrant employees** – Government funding is sought to employ migrant liaison officers located in regional areas to support employers with visa requirements, interpreter services, cultural support, and related needs.

**Seek funding for an ongoing project liaison role to support local collaboration** – Government funding is also needed to employ a project liaison officer to support community co-ordination for short term housing, community mentor program and to build volunteer capacity to support migrants to join volunteer groups.

### **Advocate on housing and childcare needs with all levels of government**

- Central Goldfields Shire Council has a shortage of housing and is currently completing work to support housing development in Maryborough, Carisbrook, and Talbot.

We have completed a business case for Talbot confirming that it can accommodate up to 600 new homes if sewerred.

We are seeking funding through the **Regional Precincts and Partnerships Program** of up to \$30M to support this enabling infrastructure.

- We have recently adopted an Early Years Masterplan identifying the need for an integrated Early Years Centre – while there is a commitment from the State Government to build a low-cost centre in Maryborough, we have a waiting list for 100 children across the Shire right now.

This is impacting all our major employers who cannot fill shifts and ongoing positions due to lack of childcare.

Investment is required from both the Commonwealth and State Governments to provide infrastructure to support the growing demand for childcare for key workers.

### **Building skills and capacity locally – RUSH**

Our employers and community have also identified the need for more place-based education.

While an hour from Bendigo and Ballarat, which provide tertiary facilities, the public transportation to these regional cities from Central Goldfields Shire is poor.

We need place-based solutions, and have run a series of workshops with employers, schools, and community members to address the problem.

One identified solution is to establish a **Regional University Study Hub** in Maryborough, and we will be looking for Federal Government support to do so through the **RUSH** funding program, with an application to be prepared in 2024.

## Tackling disadvantage

### The Facts:

- Persistently high levels of disadvantage and poverty across Central Goldfields.
- One of the lowest SEIFA scores in Victoria.
- **33.3%** of Central Goldfields children are living in poverty.
- Children starting school with levels of vulnerability (in language, cognition, emotion, communication, and physical health) **twice as high** as Victorian average.
- Fragmented early years system that is hard to navigate, many programs and organisations providing services without an anchor or coordination.
- Children with intellectual disability, developmental delay or learning disability in Central Victoria **13%** compared with the Victorian average of **8.2%**.
- Alcohol or drug related problems in the family in Central Goldfields **9.3%** compared to **3.6%** in the rest of Victoria.
- Child witness to violence in Central Goldfields **14%** compared to **3.5%** across the rest of Victoria.