



## MOORA INDUSTRY ACTIVITY REPORT

FAPSTC travelled to Moora to understand the current workings of local government and gain insights into the challenges facing community and businesses in the area. We listened to views of representatives from local businesses, peak bodies, government and the education sectors. Discussions explored the changes impacting industry, the influences on workforce development, and the skilling and training of staff and broader community. This report is a synthesis of discussions and provides an overview of industry activity in the Shire of Moora.

### Shire of Moora Overview <sup>1,2</sup>

The Shire of Moora comprises the main towns of Moora, Milling and Watheroo with a combined population of close to 2,800 residents, spanning an area of 3,763 km<sup>2</sup>. Moora is the largest inland service centre between Perth and Geraldton, located in the Wheatbelt region, 172 km north of Perth. While it is not without challenges, the town is able to support business diversification and buoyancy, including the provision of services and employment opportunities in the region. Its reach extends to neighbouring towns to a population catchment of 6,000 residents within a 100 km radius.

The chief source of income across the Shire comes from agriculture, primarily broad acre farming, horticulture and livestock production (cattle and sheep). Many of the local businesses are aligned to these and other peripheral agricultural activities such as heavy machinery, transport and logistics. Other industries include tourism and hospitality, manufacturing, retail, education, health, mining (granite and silica) and timber. Services include a range of banks, commerce and retail sectors, as well as a senior high school, TAFE and community cultural and recreational facilities. Health services comprise a district hospital, medical and dental practices, and a pharmacy.

The largest employers are the hospital, the Shire, the education sector, CBH Group, BGC, McIntosh and AFGRI. Andrew Forrest's plan to build a \$51.9 million feedlot at Koojan Downs<sup>3</sup>, is set to be the biggest cattle feedlot in WA with plans to employ 100 workers across the business which would make it the largest employer in the region.

### Local Government Administration

A key focus for the Shire of Moora is diversifying and strengthening economic activity, which in turn broadens local employment opportunities, supports the ability to service the needs of the residential population and contributes to the longevity and vibrancy of communities, making them more attractive places to live. It means addressing local issues and advocating for solutions to support an ageing local demographic. There is a growing need for aged care and health care facilities and staff. Currently the GP, Retirement village and Hospital are located close to one another and staff transition as all-rounders between all three systems to service the needs of residents.

The Shire's 10-year Strategic Community Plan<sup>4</sup> outlines intended goals and outcomes across five broad areas of scope:

- Access to services and facilities that support health, education, safety and wellbeing of the community.

<sup>1</sup> Shire of Moora, [website](#).

<sup>2</sup> Shire of Moora, [Strategic Community Plan 2018-2028](#).

<sup>3</sup> Farmonline National, [Andrew Forrest to build WA's biggest cattle feedlot](#), 17 February 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Shire of Moora, [Strategic Community Plan 2018-2028](#).



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- Management of the Shire's natural resources and minimisation of the impact of waste on the environment.
- Planning for infrastructure development to meet current and future community and commercial needs.
- Planning, promotion and advocacy for local industries, business and employment opportunities (includes advocacy for innovative education and training opportunities and apprenticeship programs to retain, attract and employ local youth).
- Development and maintenance of quality partnerships through effective local leadership that advocate strongly for the community customer services (includes provision of appropriate support for all staff to work effectively and develop professionally).

Pending large scale infrastructure projects include the development of an early childhood development centre. The new facility is being designed around meeting the needs of local people and will provide local access to medical and allied health professionals specialising in a range of early development and education services. The Shire is also undertaking the redevelopment of the aerodrome, which will include sealing the runway to open it up for more extensive private and agricultural use. There are also plans in place to redevelop the swimming pool. Where possible, the aim is to employ locals who can be trained and upskilled to support the contractors awarded each project and retain a higher level of skill within the region at the conclusion of the project.

### **Recruitment and Training**

Local government spans a wide spectrum of sector specific job roles and functions. Many of these require a working understanding of governance and compliance within a local government context. Shires located in the regions often lack access to suitably skilled and experienced locals to fill key positions (particularly at management and executive levels) and find it challenging to attract the right candidates into the area. Location, people demographics, availability of services/facilities and lack of suitable accommodation play a part. An inability to match salaries to those of competing industries is another. The smaller and more remote the Shire, the greater the challenges.

Lack of staff resourcing affects their capacity to champion work and the extent to which corporate and strategic plans are executed. Changes resulting from federal and state government withdrawal from or reduced involvement in certain services, such as home care and aged care service, and the consequential increase in workloads and compliance are also affecting resource allocation to maintain services/facilities and servicing the community. It is common practice for local governments to rely on consultants for specialist expertise and/or compliance requirements. If not available locally, depending on location, these are sourced from Perth and attract a cost premium. Contractors are also used for major works and roadwork, including truck drivers, grader and plant operators.

This is no different for the Shire of Moora. Wherever possible, they employ locals and only look beyond the region for highly skilled professionals in harder to fill roles. In many instances, this means rather than hiring for skill, they look for the right fit with a view to train and upskill new entrants. They are highly reliant on people's ability to multi-skill and look for cost effective solutions and on-the-job training to train and develop staff. WALGA and Local Government Professionals WA are engaged for much of the local government specific training through development programs, workshops, seminars, professional networking opportunities and fee-for-service specialist support. Exposure to and type of training is dependent on factors such as specific job role needs, knowledge/skills gaps, risk and compliance.



### **Accounting Services**

One of the accounting businesses in Moora operates during parts of the week and provides a wide range of services. It also has an office in Perth. Another accounting firm is part of a global network with 30 offices across Australia and a strong WA presence. Both businesses provide professional accounting and advisory services to a geographically large client base. Specialising in the agricultural sector and related industries, services include tax and compliance, business advisory services, cloud accounting, self-managed superannuation funds, and succession/estate and retirement planning. Other services include native title trusts, private ancillary funds, financial planning, finance broking and bookkeeping.

Firms with an international or national presence have the advantage of scale and reach. By design, larger firms can deliver a greater range of specialist services that attract larger corporate clients. Their access to things such as resources, technology and systems, streamlined business processes, online presence, administrative support and internal training solutions bolster their capabilities, efficiency and cost advantages due to economies of scale. They can fast track their response to new needs, develop centralised training modules and deploy bite-sized skill development. Locals employed in clerical and administrative support roles within small firms have a breadth of capability. Typically, their skill acquisition usually develops through on-the-job learning, coaching and informal training. Small regional businesses rely on existing staff to carry additional workload.

### **Banking Services**

Moora has three different banks located in the town as well as a Post Office which provides access to limited banking transactions. A small number of staff are employed to operate each branch due to contactless transactions and cost reductions. This means staff require all-rounder capabilities to maintain all client services. Clerical roles are typically filled by locals and the turnover is low. Qualifications are usually dependant on the type of position, but high managerial roles require a minimum of tertiary qualifications. It is not uncommon for banks to include benefits such as accommodation packages to attract good staff from Perth to fill these roles if these cannot be sourced locally (although there is a shortage of suitable accommodation creating a barrier in attracting people to relocate). Corporate head offices develop and roll out industry specific training. Training is done in-house via e-learning and on-the-job training.

### **Disability Employment Services (Essential Personnel)**

COVID-19 limited their ability to provide carer work to NDIS clients because of contactless requirements. Lack of job placements due to the pandemic also impacted employment services as they work on a commission basis. Essential Personnel moved to job sharing due to the downturn in work, reducing work hours to 10 hours per week.

### **Insurance Brokers**

The impact of COVID-19 has not affected insurance agents and brokers based in Moora. The businesses we spoke with consisted of two staff, all of whom had worked in the sector for a long time. There are not many opportunities for business growth which keeps employment numbers constant. Working in a regional country town, requires strong involvement in the community and broad product knowledge to ensure clients are provided with tailored insurance solutions to meet their changing needs. The majority of clients are broadacre farmers.

Most of the insurance work is straightforward and can be done seamlessly from databases and online. Occasionally, tailor-made insurance packages require brokers to liaise between insurance companies and clients. Training takes place on the job. Similarly, employees are



## FINANCIAL ADMINISTRATIVE & PROFESSIONAL SERVICES TRAINING COUNCIL INCORPORATED

required to complete various training modules in order to attain PD points which can be done via zoom, webinars and online. Insurance companies provide the training and support brokers, including product knowledge and system training.

Technology has impacted work in a positive way. Businesses have transitioned to database search and online applications and claims. Advances to systems and platforms have streamlined processes and fast track lodgement times. These have enabled users to find information quickly and maintain accuracy.

### Real Estate Services

A number of real estate businesses in the area are part of or affiliated with agribusiness brands (Elders and Nutrien Ag Solutions) which offer a suite of products and services to meet diverse agricultural business needs. These can range from grain/livestock/wool sales and water trading, through to farm supplies, technical and financial services, as well as real estate and clearing sales. This provides an effective way of capitalising on long-standing relationships and reaching a wide range of existing customers or establishing new markets. Shared resources create cost advantages and increase organisational efficiency and effectiveness. Businesses with a national footprint are backed by technology, systems and networks which provide a leading edge across all areas of operation.

Real estate operators such as Elders Real Estate, Nutrien Harcourts and Ruralco Property all benefit from such arrangements/joint ventures. They are well placed nationally and internationally in terms of audience reach and application of emerging real estate technology to maximise marketing and sales opportunities. Services range from large-scale acreage and land sales to hobby farms and residential homes in town. Micro-sized agents rely on long-standing relationships for business turnover. Majority of the work comes from farming sales. One sole operator points to a strong and well performing market with a continued trend towards a consolidation of farms as people retire or move away from the area.

New entrants find it hard to get a foothold and compete with established, locally known agents. A significant number of sales need to be made before a profit is made which is difficult for many to achieve when starting out. While business owners undertake their required PD points for their real estate license to remain valid each year, the cost of training for new entrants can be a barrier to entry, particularly in regional areas where established businesses have a stronghold in the market.

COVID-19 restrictions meant a temporary cease of travel which affected small business turnover during that period. Despite the interruption caused by the pandemic, demand has continued from overseas and interstate buyers for purchases of local farms. Legislation which limits acquisition of real estate by overseas investors has not prevented overseas buyers from purchasing large farms, finding loopholes to exceed purchase restrictions.

### Fire, Rescue and Emergency Services

#### Voluntary Roles

The fire and emergency services are reliant on local volunteers. It is getting harder to recruit people into the voluntary service roles when numbers drop due to a continued decline in the number of people living locally, an ageing/retiring population, the confronting and hazardous nature of the services being administered and the increasing administrative burden required to run rural and remote services. It is vital that recruits are vetted, and only suitable candidates are brought on board to replace retiring volunteers. At different times, St John have been able to enlist younger recruits studying paramedics at tertiary institutions who come to volunteer in



## FINANCIAL ADMINISTRATIVE & PROFESSIONAL SERVICES TRAINING COUNCIL INCORPORATED

Moora to gain experience, otherwise difficult to attain in Perth. Some have stayed up to three years before transitioning back to the city.

Community connectedness, Facebook and locally run events play an important part in the recruitment process. The townspeople are aware of the critical need for local participation if fire/rescue and ambulance services are to be adequately resourced and responsive in emergency situations. The motivation to volunteer is the ability to come to people's aid in times of crisis, supporting families, neighbours and people passing through with the best care possible, which would not be possible without volunteers.

### **Training**

New fire and rescue recruits commence under a probationary status and are required to carry out a series of training courses ranging from basic fire skills to road emergency. Volunteers can choose whether they train to work with fires, motor vehicle rescue or both. Due to the confronting nature of motor vehicle rescue, some recruits choose only to work in fire rescue, even though majority of calls received are for motor vehicle rescue. All training is done by the Department of Fire and Emergency Services (DFES). Specific training courses are usually delivered locally on a quarterly basis and volunteers have unlimited access to a range of on-line modules.

Similarly, St John deliver all required training several times each year. A paramedic comes from Perth to conduct training in Moora. Volunteer trainees first become assistant paramedics. Further training enables them to work as emergency medical technicians. It can take up to 3 years to gain the required knowledge and skills to work as a medical technician (the highest level a person can attain as a volunteer). Other practical training is conducted onsite fortnightly to maintain skills. The local GP is an invaluable community resource. He helps with debriefing sessions and counselling after traumatic events/rescues.

As older volunteers retire and younger volunteers join, acquisition of training and upskilling will be more readily gained through e-learning platforms. Younger recruits embrace technology which makes it easier to roll out training of theoretical modules.

COVID-19 restrictions put training on hold for six months across fire, rescue and emergency services. While volunteers have caught up on required training, lack of continuous training over that time (particularly the essential hands-on practical training) placed enormous strain on volunteers who rely on on-going essential training to be effective in their roles.

### **Employment Challenges**

#### **Recruitment**

Despite a list of job vacancies across farming, retail and services, many businesses are having difficulty in attracting staff. At times it is due to a mismatch between the jobs needing to be filled and available candidates. However, local employment services point to a lack of interest from applicants and a marked drop in applications from job seekers. They cite lack of motivation and a reluctance to work due to the COVID-19 JobSeeker payment. There is a sense that the scheme is discouraging some people from applying. Increasingly, applicants have not shown for job interviews and fail to show evidence of job seeking activity.

#### **Driver's Licence**

One of the key challenges for young people living in the area which prevents them from being able to secure work is their inability to attain a driver's licence and poor access to a car. In the region, a driver's licence is critical for anyone wanting to work but many young people in the area don't have a driver's licence. This also affects their ability to apply for work in surrounding



## FINANCIAL ADMINISTRATIVE & PROFESSIONAL SERVICES TRAINING COUNCIL INCORPORATED

towns as they are unable to get to and from work. Many of the long-term unemployed face this challenge, which limits their chance of getting jobs. Although driving instruction is available monthly by a private company, the service is extremely expensive and out of reach for the locals who (as a family) may not even possess a motor vehicle. Completion of 50 supervised driving hours by learner drivers is unattainable for many at the private rate being charged.

### **Boarder Closures**

Businesses which rely on backpackers or international workers have been adversely affected by the boarder closures, travel restrictions and quarantine requirements. Prior to COVID-19, the town had many more overseas workers in Moora which helped the local economy. As they left the area, many jobs remained unfilled which is still challenging local businesses to service client needs (examples include bakery, cafes and car detailing). Local and neighbouring crop growers, fruit orchards and sheep farmers who rely on an influx of seasonal workers to harvest grain, pick fruit and shear sheep are also experiencing a critical shortage of staff.

### **Accommodation**

Reportedly, there is a shortage of short-term accommodation for seasonal workers and no foreseeable investment in the housing sector. What is available tends to be full and cannot cater to large influxes of workers. This is a hindrance to some short-term employment opportunities. A cattle feedlot in Dandaragan required 350 workers but lack of accommodation restricted uptake of this short-term employment opportunity for anyone wanting to temporarily move into the area. Similarly, a nearby carrot farm needed to fill 250 jobs but was faced with the same accommodation dilemma.

### **Drugs and Alcohol**

Drugs and alcohol pose some serious problems in the region and affects both youth and adults. The nearest drug and alcohol rehabilitation centre is in Northam and thus too far to service the population of Moora. The divide between the families and children affected by drugs and alcohol and other working families and businesses is significant. The courthouse in Moora focuses on integration, remission, and community support instead of harsh judgment and punishment. Being a small town, those with drug and alcohol issues have no way of being anonymous which affects job seeking and can lead to people becoming discouraged and disengaged.

### **Education and Training**

The Central Midlands Senior High School is located in Moora and caters for students to year 12. It is affiliated with St James Residential College which provides high quality accommodation and care for close to 50 students. A limited range of lower-level vocational education and training qualifications are undertaken by year 11 and 12 students to keep them engaged and to consider what they might like to do after leaving school. Uptake of qualifications tend not to be from the Training Packages which fall under our Training Council's remit. This is a similar case when considering the delivery of courses by the local TAFE. Reportedly, only eight students are currently undertaking online courses in business services, majority of whom are from other regional areas.

The school's new VET coordinator is actively seeking to establish strong partnerships with local businesses to enhance employment opportunities for young people finishing school. Part of this strategy is an introduction of a career expo at the school which also extends to education and training providers to help inform students of education, training and career choices.



## Training Needs

### Missed Opportunity Despite Skill Demand

One of the concerns is the proportion of young people leaving the area. Many tend to move away to pursue study or work opportunities and don't return to the town. Others who are highly skilled get poached into mining roles. Those who stay try to fill local all-rounder jobs when they come up, without a specific career path.

Access to local training and opportunities for meaningful employment are critical if young people are to stay living in the region. While such employment opportunities are possible, relevant and cost-effective training needs to be made available and tailored to meet the needs of local businesses. Discussions with employers point to a diminished confidence in the breadth and quality of training available locally with some preferring to send their apprentices to Perth for training despite the cost, seeing this as a better return on investment than the completion of the same course locally.

A number of Moora's key stakeholders have voiced a need for mechanical and automotive skills in the region. Agricultural machinery handling and licensing to operate heavy machinery were also cited. Some people are of the opinion that TAFE should broaden private fee-for-service arrangements (such as those with John Deere) and offer similar targeted, short course training through mainstream course delivery to locals. There is also a strong interest from businesses in developing local automotive skills with viable employment opportunities. The infrastructure already exists but needs a training partner to deliver the training.

The school has a purpose-built trade training centre for hospitality, engineering and automotive trades which is currently underutilised and discussions with the local TAFE have not been able to secure delivery of any automotive qualifications. If TAFE is unable to support such delivery, consideration should be given to extending funding arrangements to private RTOs able to undertake quality training in the regions. This would open career and employment opportunities locally and incentivise people to remain in the area.

### Digital Skills for Small Business

State-wide travel restrictions contained much of consumer spending to locally purchased products. Regional business owners saw a significant increase in demand for locally sourced mainstream goods. While it was hoped this trend would continue, once restrictions lifted people reverted to pre-COVID habits of travelling to larger towns and/or Perth for bulk purchases.

The local Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Shire of Moora held a business forum at the end of July to gain insights into how businesses were faring during the pandemic. It was attended by close to 50 members of the business community. A number of considerations were identified for action in light of changing business and community contexts. Microbusinesses wanted more networking opportunities and business support. Businesses struggling to fill roles sought a collaborated effort to promote local employment opportunities. There was also a big push for marketing and promotion of local businesses to encourage locals to buy local and to drive broader communities into the town to boost the local economy. This aligns to our discussions with local businesses which point to an appetite for digital skills, particularly from small businesses looking to enhance capability and reach.

The recently released [Digital Skills for Small Business Skill Set](#) could meet the digital business needs of small businesses in Moora. The skill set focuses on four main areas of skill development: using social media to engage customers, providing of online customer service, securely managing personally identifiable/workplace information, and building simple web pages. An opportunity exists for affordable training delivery of these units to business owners



## FINANCIAL ADMINISTRATIVE & PROFESSIONAL SERVICES TRAINING COUNCIL INCORPORATED

and staff. This would require adequate support to ensure people who have completed the training can continue to use, maintain and troubleshoot implemented systems on an ongoing basis.

Anecdotally, the provision of such services is scarce across the region. Even when available, the cost is prohibitive and lacks adequate ongoing support mechanisms post implementation. Given its location, TAFE is well placed to design appropriate material and deliver a targeted programme to local businesses. However, based on conversations with a wide range of local stakeholders, there appears to be a disconnect between the people living in the region and the TAFE. A collaborative approach is needed to respond effectively to the specific local business needs. This would require TAFE to actively reconnect with local employers, peak bodies, service providers and community. Brokering strong partnerships with local businesses also need to include a more flexible and adaptable approach to training delivery in regional and sub-regional areas to meet skill demands.