

25 August 2022

CMA Skills Forum and Meeting

At a recent meeting of the Country Mayors Association, the number one priority issue identified was 'Skills and Training'. This outcome resulted in a Skills Forum being hosted by the CMA.

Chair of the Country Mayors Association, Cr Ken Keith OAM, the Mayor of Parkes Shire, opened the forum, outlining the dire situation in trying to attract skilled staff to Councils and communities generally. He said "Covid has highlighted Australia's dependence on skilled migration and the need to refocus on training and education. We have seen a decline, particularly in regional towns, in the delivery of courses, particularly face-to-face, by TAFE and private providers."

"Course enrolments have decreased significantly by 12.7% from 2016-2021 and more importantly only 29% of people enrolled completed their courses in 2021. One of the main issues is the lack of apprenticeships and traineeships in rural towns," added Mayor Keith. The forum was addressed by the National Commissioner for Rural Education, the Hon Fiona Nash, who provides advice to Government on solutions to challenges in workforce shortage. She indicated the disparity between city and country, with country students less likely to complete their higher education.

The Minister for Skills and Training, the Hon Alister Henskens, indicated that \$3.1billion is provided in the budget for skills and training. However, a labour shortage is causing many issues. If you don't have people to train, then you have a problem.

Mr Henskens praised the efforts of TAFE NSW, who train 45% of students in Australia, but did not explain the disparity in service to NSW regional towns.

Other speakers on the day included Director of policy for the McKell Institute, Edward Cavanagh, who spoke on the research being done by the McKell Institute into this issue, CEO of Parkes CUC, Cr Jacob Cass, who outlined the growing network of Country University Centres, Cr Rick Firman, OAM and CEO of Riverina Joint Organisation, Julie Briggs, who outlined the Riverina's skills shortage project.

A round table discussion seeking suggestions for positive change ensued. Ideas included:

- Specifically, isolating data from Metro areas to compare to Regional, Rural and Remote LGAs. That this data should be presented in a TAFE NSW detailed annual report.
- Within TAFE's community service obligation, allow flexibility for reduced class sizes and course offerings and more support and incentives for businesses to train Trainees.
- To encourage the State Government to train their own trainees and apprentices rather than taking from Local Government and the private sector.
- Advocate for the aged workforce to return to the workforce and provide training and mentoring.
- That the CMA membership support the McKell Institute and its endeavours to increase skills and retain skills in country NSW.
- Engage with Minister Henskens and his advisors to discuss problems facing Regional and Rural NSW.

The CMA met the following day for a meeting at Parliament House where members were addressed by Head of NBN Local NSW, Tom O'Dea, who outlined the significant investment and planned upgrades of the NBN network. The Minister for Planning and Minister for Homes, the Hon Anthony Roberts, spoke on the Governments initiatives and investment into housing, particularly social and affordable housing and acknowledged the leaders in flood affected communities. Acting Directors and staff from the Biodiversity Offsets Scheme addressed the meeting and bravely answered questions on this controversial issue and its impact on development in regional NSW.

Parliamentary Secretary for Health, Mr Justin Clancy MP, updated members on planning in the Health Sector and Shadow Minister for Local Government, Mr Greg Warren MP, presented the oppositions perspectives.

"The Country Mayors Association continues to provide a valuable source of information and voice for regional Mayors," concluded Mayor Keith.

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