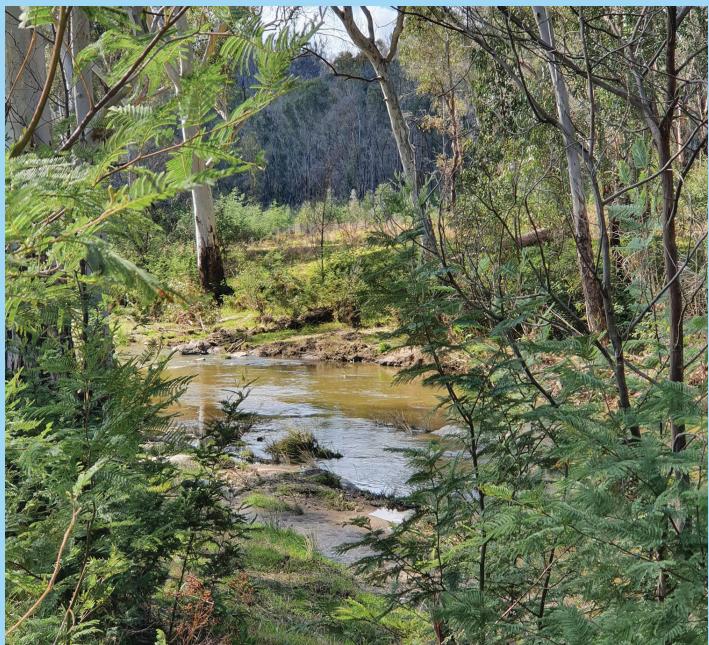




# Riverina Reimagined

REPORT 2020-2021





***“...WE NEED TO TAKE RESPONSIBILITY,  
PLAN FOR OUR OWN FUTURE, THEN VOTE  
FOR ADVOCATES WHO CAN TAKE THOSE  
PLANS AND PROVIDE GOVERNMENT  
SUPPORT IN KIND, TO GET THE RESULTS  
WE HAVE DESIGNED FOR OURSELVES...”***

***-GABRIELLE CHAN, RUSTED OFF***

**[WWW.VOICES4RIVERINA.ORG](http://WWW.VOICES4RIVERINA.ORG)**



REPORT WRITTEN AND DESIGNED BY  
FIONA MCPHERSON AND EMILY CROSS

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Voices 4 Riverina acknowledges the Wiradjuri people, traditional custodians of the land on which we all live and recognise their continuing connection to land, waters and culture. We pay our respects to their Elders past, present and emerging.

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# INTRODUCTION

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The Australian political landscape is dominated by the Australian Labor Party and the Liberal/National Coalition. Memberships to mainstream parties are in steep decline with approximately only 0.5% of the population registered<sup>[1]</sup>. Australians are becoming increasingly disengaged from politicians and distrustful of governmental processes. Surveys following the 2019 federal election found that “56% of Australians believe that the government is run for ‘a few big interests’, while just 12% believe the government is run for ‘all the people’”<sup>[2]</sup>.

A number of issues amongst voters include:

- A two-party system that restricts voting options.
- A growing divide between younger and older voters.
- ‘Safe seats’ and potential for electorates to be taken for granted.
- A lack of opportunity for the public to be genuinely listened to and engaged with, not just at election time.
- Political apathy/a need to increase political literacy.
- Low voter turnout.

The disillusionment and frustration with ‘business as usual’ politics has led to non-partisan ‘Voices’ community groups gaining traction around Australia. At the time of launching this report, 37 active ‘Voices of’ or ‘Voices for’ community groups have been established. Whilst some of these groups are looking to field an independent candidate, almost all are striving for better community engagement and a more meaningful connection between government representatives and their constituents, ensuring local issues and concerns are addressed.

‘Riverina Reimagined’ is intended as a working document, providing a strong foundation as to how we move forward to bridge the gap between people and politics, and ultimately, deliver ‘best in class’ representation for all constituents in the electorate.



## References

- [1] Davies, A. (2020, December 13). *Party hardly: why Australia’s big political parties are struggling to compete with grassroots campaigns*. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/dec/13/party-hardly-why-australias-big-political-parties-are-struggling-to-compete-with-grassroots-campaigns>
- [2] Cameron, S. and I. McAllister (2019). *2019 Australian federal election: results from the Australian Election Study*, Australian Election Study

# WHO ARE WE?

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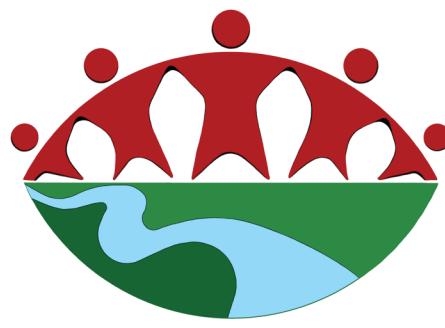
Voices 4 Riverina (V4R) was started by a group of local residents who live, love and work across the federal electorate of Riverina. Our group is passionate about our region and mindful of the next ten generations to follow. How will the Riverina look, feel and be for future generations?

The founding committee of V4R were inspired by the 'Voices for Indi' movement which led to increased democratic engagement across their electorate. With the success in Indi, V4R came together with the common goal of doing politics differently within the electorate by engaging and taking time to listen to the community and the issues that matter to them. We want our representatives to be deeply in touch with the communities they represent and the decisions they make, ensuring our electorate can reach its full potential. This led to the creation of a collective voice, V4R, striving for meaningful and participatory connection between the community and political representation at all levels of government.

The federal electoral division of Riverina is located in South-West rural New South Wales, generally following the Murrumbidgee River valley. The Riverina represents one of Australia's most diverse electorates and spans an area larger than Switzerland. It is home to over 155,793 people (2016 Census) and includes 14 local government areas. This rural seat includes the city of Wagga Wagga and the major town of Parkes as well as the towns of Bland, Coolamon, Cootamundra, Cowra, Forbes, Gundagai, Harden, Junee, Lockhart, Temora, Weddin and Young. The region is also home to the Wiradjuri people, the first inhabitants and traditional custodians who have lived in this area for tens of thousands of years.

Voices 4 Riverina prides itself on being a grassroots community group who have no affiliation with any organisation, political party or independent candidate. V4R was incorporated as an association in NSW in November 2020. Our organisation is volunteer run with minimal overheads funded by small private donations from our members.

**Voices for Riverina has gained over 1000 followers on our social media pages. Our supporters are locals, who are passionate about the issues that face our electorate.**



# OUR VALUES

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The guiding values of V4R that drive our actions and decisions centre around integrity, respect and inclusion.

We encourage and welcome participation from all people of the Riverina, irrespective of political allegiance, age, gender, culture or background. All of our interactions and conversations provide a safe and supportive environment to ensure that everyone feels listened to and respected; this ensures a diversity of views and opinions.

- **COURAGE** - SUPPORTS PEOPLE TO STAND UP FOR WHAT THEY BELIEVE
- **DIVERSITY** - WELCOMES PEOPLE FROM ALL WALKS OF LIFE
- **INCLUSION** - NON-PARTISAN AND ENCOURAGES PARTICIPATION BY ALL
- **INTEGRITY** - ETHICAL, HONEST, TRANSPARENT AND EVIDENCE-BASED
- **RESPECT** - VALUES ALL VIEWS, GIVES DUE REGARD AND LISTENS TO EVERYONE



# OUR VISION

- 1.** To encourage and empower participatory democracy across the Riverina electorate.
- 2.** To strive for a unified 'Riverina Family' and a sense of pride for our community. This fosters a sense of genuine connection.
- 3.** To serve as a catalyst for action and improve standards for modern, effective and innovative representation within the Riverina electorate.



# KITCHEN TABLE CONVERSATIONS

## KITCHEN TABLE CONVERSATIONS (KTCS)

Kitchen Table Conversations (KTCs) are more than just talk. They are conversations connecting locals about things that matter to them in a safe and comfortable environment. They are conducted in a simple yet powerful format, developed by the Victorian Women's Trust and other 'Voices' style groups.

The KTCs were designed to provide an insight into a wide range of opinions within the community. Each conversation included 3 to 8 residents who met for approximately 1.5 hours. Each conversation was hosted by a Riverina resident wherein a facilitator asked a series of predetermined questions whilst a scribe took notes. There were a few ground rules, centred around ensuring respectful conversations. There were no right or wrong answers and all views were heard equally.

## WHO PARTICIPATED?

During the course of 2020-2021 a total of 32 KTCs sessions were held across the Riverina federal electorate with hundreds of responses to our core questions generated by our participants. Our conversations reached over 170 people, from Wagga Wagga to Forbes, Cootamundra to Coolamon, Cowra, Temora, Junee, Gundagai and Young. Participants comprised a broad range of ages, from 17 to 75, from all walks of life and political backgrounds.

The V4R committee systematically analysed each of the KTC transcripts to compare and contrast responses. This qualitative method allowed exploration of the key issues and concerns highlighted by community members. Once all the responses were collated, they were grouped into overall themes to ensure the readability of this report. Participants were passionate to have their voices heard and this report includes a selection of quotes that supports themes highlighted here.

*KTCs are an ongoing process and we recognize the information gathered is not necessarily a complete representation of the electorate, rather a reflection of those who willingly attended these meetings. Ultimately, we would like to continue speaking with more people in the electorate and invite any interested persons to get in touch.*



# REASONS FOR ATTENDING KTCS

There is an increasing trend of politically disillusioned and concerned citizens in our communities looking to have a voice. The growing number of grassroots organisations across Australia are serving as a conduit to this, galvanising people power. As a non-partisan community group, it was heartening that V4R was seen as a new and trusted community forum for residents' voices.

We noted four core reasons for participation in KTCs:



## AN AWAKENING TO PEOPLE POWER & GRASSROOTS COMMUNITY GROUPS

*"It's difficult for the everyday person to voice what they think, grassroots groups like V4R will help with progress"*



## DISSATISFACTION WITH CURRENT POLITICAL SYSTEM

*"I dislike the way voting works and the short election terms, there's no long-term vision"*



## SPECIFIC ISSUES OF CONCERN WERE NOT BEING ADDRESSED

*"During COVID we've followed science but in terms of climate change – still no action"*



## DESIRE TO SEE POLITICAL REPRESENTATION IMPROVED

*"Politicians have lost touch with the people that put them there. They're out of touch – now it's a numbers game"*



# KTC QUESTIONS

The following questions were used to focus the conversations during KTCs. All responses were recorded anonymously.

## 1. LIVING IN THE RIVERINA

- What makes for a strong community?
- What are the best things about living where you live?

## 2. POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT AND REPRESENTATION

- What do you think makes for a really good political representative?
- Do you feel you have an adequate voice to date in the way you are represented? If not why not?
- What would make for a stronger relationship between people and elected representatives?

## 3. KEY ISSUES AND CONCERNs

- What are the most important issues to you within and beyond the Riverina electorate that you think deserves more focus?

## 4. LOOKING FORWARD, FUTURE IMPROVEMENTS

- What practical things can we do to improve community engagement/interest in democracy and politics?
- What improvements to where you live would you like to have occurred over the coming decade?



**"A sense of connection, a sense of connection makes you feel looked after"**

**"If you see something wrong, get a group of people together and fix it"**

**"Communication, interaction, networks, building community"**

**"There's a sense of communities within the local groups - football groups are fabulous"**

**"Small towns have suffered, small communities are no longer getting together for social events, there's rural drain"**

**"Community is what you put in"**

**"Find out what the community wants and then full steam ahead"**

**"A welcoming place, community is warm and willing to introduce newcomers to networks"**

**"Sense of identity, if you can identify with a community you'll be stronger as a community"**

**"Smaller communities like Coolamon and Temora know how to work together"**

**"A cohesive society is one that is full of people who are supported and feel that they belong to the community"**

# 1. LIVING IN THE RIVERINA

## WHAT MAKES FOR A STRONG COMMUNITY?

The question revealed the recognition that communities are constantly changing and stronger communities are more prevalent in smaller rural regions. In this sense, Wagga's overall community was not necessarily seen as strong or cohesive, and this was mainly attributed to its size. However, it is recognised that there exists communities within community.

Whilst there was a diverse range of responses, there were fundamentally four drivers behind what makes a strong community according to our participants:

### 1. CONNECTION

The community is welcoming and fosters a sense of inclusiveness, belonging and acceptance. There is a sense of unity and that everyone is of equal importance. A diversity of interests, opinions, ideas are embraced. People are neighbourly, look out for and help each other to feel safe and secure. Support is across all ages, from infants to the elderly, and vulnerable and minority groups are looked after.

### 3. OPPORTUNITIES TO CONTRIBUTE/ SHARE EXPERIENCES

Communities are strong if people feel encouraged and empowered to get involved. Events and shared experiences enable connection and unity between people. There exist community groups, who offer help and support for a common purpose.

### 2. ACTIVE INVOLVEMENT

There was an acknowledgement that everyone has a role in helping create a strong community and that to a certain extent, one needs to build one's own community. There was a sense that a strong community is reliant on the personal values of the community member.

### 4. INSPIRING LEADERSHIP

Recognition that leaders and councils have a role to play in helping to develop and foster community connection. Availability and investment in essential and local infrastructure enables balanced growth in rural and urban areas within the Riverina.



**COMMUNITY CONCERN:**  
Mention was made of the demise of rural communities, the rural drain, and the suffering of small towns in our region.

A chance to **slow** down and **escape**, space to be by yourself, belief in the town. Nice city to live in, **diversity**, many cultural activities, **entertainment**, everything is here. Big enough to get lost in, small enough to be nice. **Amazing** place to bring up children. **Ease** of the Riverina, could have a really nice house and still afford to travel around. Coffee in Gundagai, liquorice in Junee, **camping**, family destinations within close radius. **Everything** on doorstep. A country **vibe** in the city. Orchards of Young, through to wheatfields, wineries, lots of great **produce**. The Riverina is our food bowl, especially through irrigation. Love the fact it is almost **halfway point** between Sydney and Melbourne. All the services, 5 minutes to anywhere. Kids can play with such **freedom**. Following easy carefree life. Cycling culture is good, more space to ride freely. Coolamon is a great **community**, sport, bingo and stuff for older people, it caters for everyone. Fantastic spot, close to Canberra and Wagga or Cootamundra. **Regional feel** but with the **opportunities** of the city. People have the time of day to chat. Ease of the Riverina, could have a really nice house though still **affordable** to travel around. I moved here for the **University**. Community **connections** are strong. Small enough to engage in community. Growing awareness of Indigenous community, strengthened by a local university. **Genuine people**. Well grounded people. **Appreciative** community. Community support helping migrants. You can find patches of community within it, whatever you are into, there is a patch of people in Wagga. The Coota community, **everyone knows each other**, low crime rates. Easier to build a community relationship in a smallish city. People are **friendlier** than in cities and have time to talk, a real feeling of this being a 'bush mentality' and that city people don't get it. Gundagai is **home**, great sense of community. Vast migrant story throughout the LGAs, Aboriginal history, how both came together, **richness** and vibe, traditions from **all walks of life**, difference in ways of thinking. Tend to know your local government councillors and don't put them on pedestals, they are on an even keel with us humans. It's **the people**, if the people feel visible you are in the next tier of engagement. I love being connected to **nature**. Love being in the **country**. Being close to nature, being near the **river**. I like Wagga as it is a city surrounded by nature. The **lake** can be used to engage the community better if it is taken care of. I can see the **stars** at night.

# WHAT ARE THE BEST THINGS ABOUT LIVING IN THE RIVERINA?

A sense of regional pride can be seen amongst Riverina residents. Three major themes were expressed within KTCs:

## 1. LIFESTYLE

Living in a regional city or smaller town, of 'optimum size' is seen to have many benefits. Major examples of this included ease of travel, cost of living, family friendliness, benefits of city living/ proximity to cities (Sydney, Melbourne, Canberra) or larger towns (Orange, Wagga), diverse range of activities with 'something for everyone', proximity to natural environment, diversity of backgrounds and cultures.



## 2. COMMUNITY SPIRIT

Not surprisingly, a strong theme across all the KTCs was an acknowledgement of the sense of a community in the countryside. Welcoming, supportive and genuine community members contribute to what people value about living in our region.

## 3. CLOSE TO NATURE

Proximity to nature was highly valuable to lifestyle and the 'feel' of where people live. Having the opportunity to relax in nature has never been more appealing. Particular mentions included the Lachlan River, Murrumbidgee River, native wildlife/birdlife, trees, smell of eucalyptus, Wiradjuri Reserve, walking and hiking outdoors, stars at night, Lake Albert, community parks, fresh air. Having a sense of space was greatly aligned with ease of access to the natural environment.



## COMMUNITY CONCERN:

Some people in the north of the electorate do not relate to their location as being 'Riverina'; they feel distanced from Wagga. Further exploration is needed to improve how the Riverina federal electorate can be unified and given an identity. A united electorate is key in engaging residents to allow a 'together we can' philosophy and optimise member representation.

*"I think Riverina is a bit of a misnomer, we've always been known as the Lachlan region and Wagga is a long way from here"*



“

**“There are some people who think differently but don’t feel comfortable to speak up, I don’t know if it’s that they are afraid or don’t feel they know enough or what”**

**“I don’t really have a voice, I don’t know what you are voting for at all levels. I don’t know who they are or what their policies are”**

**“We’ve been shunted into different electorates for decades and sometimes don’t know who the new member is”**

**“It’s hard to know who to go to or how to access them, it becomes too hard to know how to go about seeking help from elected people”**

**“I don’t feel there is any point of saying anything because I feel like I won’t be listened to”**

**“There isn’t real or effective engagement so I don’t feel as though it is worth the effort, you just get a stock standard answer from staff”**

**“I feel connected and have a voice because of my employment as I have to deal with council on a regular basis”**

”

## 2. POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT AND REPRESENTATION

### DO YOU HAVE AN ADEQUATE VOICE IN THE WAY YOU ARE REPRESENTED?

Overall, participants felt they did not have a voice. There was a sense that it takes more than one person to have influence and there is uncertainty about how to seek help or be heard by elected members. The infrequency of elections contributes to the lack of community knowledge towards representatives and their policies.

A lack of voice was strongest towards local and federal levels of government. More positive feelings were felt at a State level.

Recognition that for our young people to participate in politics and democracy there needs to be more education, encouragement and opportunities available to them.

#### FIVE LEVELS OF ENGAGEMENT



# WHAT DO YOU THINK MAKES FOR A REALLY GOOD POLITICAL REPRESENTATIVE?

We asked participants what they considered to be the most important and desired attributes of a political representative. Their responses included:

## 1. PERSONAL QUALITIES

Political accountability, integrity, transparency

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## 2. GENUINE REPRESENTATION

A representative who genuinely represents the community rather than a party

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## 3. LISTENS

An ability to listen and connect with constituents

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## 4. EVIDENCE BASED

Representatives who display evidence based and not opinion-based leadership

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## 5. HAS VISION

With long term, big picture visions for the electorate

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## 6. GOOD COMMUNICATOR

Effective and visible communication

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# WHAT WOULD MAKE FOR A STRONGER RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PEOPLE AND ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES?

Overwhelmingly the initial reaction to this question was that getting the 'right person to start with' as the representative is vital. This person should be able to proactively communicate with the electorate in an open and transparent manner. Attendees want to meet with the representatives in the community and have one to one conversations with them that are more informal and which form a dialogue not just a monologue.

***"Courageous, brave, normal, makes mistakes, realness, vulnerable to make a stand for what is right, the long term vision game, and to see their role as a privilege to serve their people"***

***"The elected representative is accountable to the people and not the party"***

***"Change societal behaviour, people aren't wanting to talk to politicians"***

***"There are thousands of people in the electorate, we need a different way to get information to them"***



Regular meetings within each of the LGAs. Zoom meetings, recordings, transcripts, live streaming available.



More informal meetings so there is dialogue not just monologue. Ability to meet representatives in the community and have one-to-one conversations with them.



More community discussion and letting people have a voice, increasing the scale of V4R.



More political discussion in schools

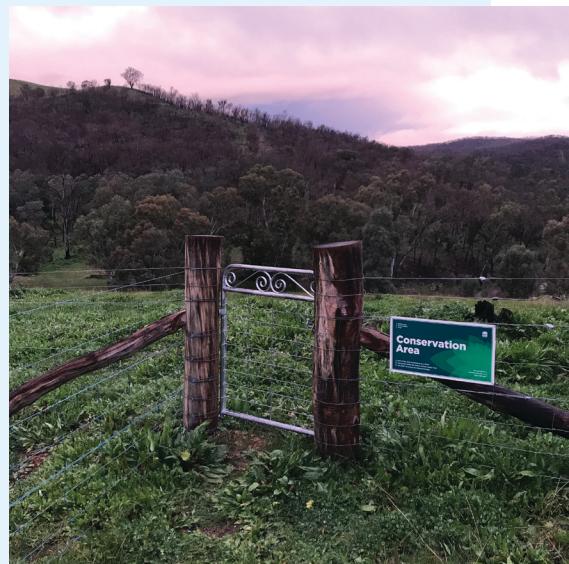


# 3. THE TOP CONCERNS OF PARTICIPANTS

This was a critical question in terms of determining community wants and needs from our political representatives.

## TOP 20 ISSUES AND CONCERNS

- 1. Environment protection and sustainability**
- 2. Future focused planning & small town sustainability**
- 3. Climate change strategy, action and policy**
- 4. Radical change needed in political system**
- 5. Indigenous inequality**
- 6. Women's rights & gender equality**
- 7. Investment in education**
- 8. Refugee & migrant support**
- 9. Improve political literacy and education in young people**
- 10. Improve mental health accessibility and support**
- 11. Regional employment**
- 12. Availability and credibility of media**
- 13. Council matters**
- 14. NDIS and disability care**
- 15. Crime rates**
- 16. Aged care & valuing the older community**
- 17. Housing affordability/social housing**
- 18. Foreign ownership/manufacturing**
- 19. CSU University (Wagga Wagga campus)**
- 20. Homelessness**



*"The expansion at all costs regardless of environmental consequences ... not recognising the value of natural areas, the iconic species Australia is known for, our vast landscape"*

## 1. PROTECT OUR NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

Proximity to nature was a key reason for enjoying the Riverina lifestyle. This, alongside the region's reliance on agricultural production, made conserving the environment a top issue amongst concerned participants. Many are witnessing the first-hand impacts from the failings of natural resource management leading to long-term environmental damage.

A diverse range of concerns and issues were raised:

- Lack of an agricultural vision
- Relationship between energy securement and the environment for example mining underground gas, polluted water from fracking, subsidisation of fossil fuel industries
- Management of river systems/waterways eg Murrumbidgee, Lachlan, Lake Cowral and Gum Swamp near Forbes
- A need to revisit the Murray Darling Basin vision/plan
- Water availability, security and ownership
- Foreign investment and ownership of farms /land/utilities
- Regenerative agriculture



## 2. FUTURE FOCUSED PLANNING

Whilst the 14 local government area councils each have long term strategic plans in place with individual vision statements, there appears to be no single common vision for the Riverina federal electorate region.

Three specific concerns:

### A. Long-term infrastructure

Wagga Wagga is looking to reach a population growth target of 100,000 by 2038. Concerns include: road infrastructure, protection of green spaces/trees, water use and management, housing, medical services, cycle tracks, foot paths, public transport and the balance between the environment versus growth.

### B. Small town sustainability.

Growing divide between rural and metropolitan Australia, rural drain and fatigue amongst few community leaders. Shortage of opportunities for tertiary education and young people having to move away to find jobs. Inadequate and under resourced regional health care facilities with particular concerns for the retention of doctors in country areas. People want to see strong leadership, representation and servicing for smaller communities with clear strategies to build rural economies. There is recognition that communities need to be open to new ideas and think differently.

### C. Telecommunications

NBN expansion and access to telecommunications infrastructure for both urban and rural communities. In rural communities internet reliability, quality of service and inconsistent coverage was negatively impacting local businesses and families.



*"Great emphasis by all parties on development, still living on a planet with finite resources"*

***"Climate change needs to be addressed seriously, or nothing else is going to matter, 2050 target is too late"***

### **3. STRONGER ACTION ON CLIMATE CHANGE**

Concerns for climate change were explicitly mentioned in two thirds of KTCs. People want to see meaningful action with strong leadership and a sophisticated roadmap with clear regular deadlines.

The community wants cohesiveness and evidence based policy in the principles behind the policies. Importantly, the younger generation currently lack a voice on climate change and it is their generation that will be the most impacted in future years.

***"A government with climate change deniers - it should be a bipartisan issue"***

### **4.CHANGE POLITICAL SYSTEM**

Political transparency, integrity and accountability were top issues, participants also strongly called for significant changes to the current political system including:

- More emphasis on long term vision, planning and decision making.
- Concerns that a 'two party system' does not give equal representation.
- More transparency in political donations/funding/alliances and calls for an actionable Integrity Commission.
- More diversity across gender and ethnicity in our political systems.
- Greater local involvement and representation of constituents from across the electorate.
- Decentralise government to the regions

***"I live in an electorate in which I don't feel I have representation"***

### **5. INDIGENOUS INEQUALITY**

Government to seriously address First Nations justice and socio-economic inequality in areas such as health, education and employment. Calls were made to raise the age of incarceration, prevent deaths in custody, increase Indigenous representation and respect Indigenous knowledge of land management.

***"Reconciliation, Indigenous treaty, a genuine Uluru Statement, bridging the gap with Indigenous education"***



### **6. WOMEN'S RIGHTS / GENDER EQUALITY**

Attendees want to see more women represented in all aspects of our lives, with parliament better reflecting gender balance within the population and more women on boards. There was concern surrounding the lack of access to reproductive/abortion healthcare services in the Riverina. Concerns for domestic violence were also raised, including increased action to prevent cyclical ramifications as well as poverty amongst older women.

***"Women are having to travel for health services"***

### **7. INVESTMENT IN EDUCATION**

People want to see better funding and higher standards for education, specifically in regional areas where there are fewer opportunities for tertiary education and a shortage of quality teachers. Better incentives to keep teachers in the regions rather than cities is required and recognition that educational needs are specific in these regions. For many smaller communities distance education due to Covid-19 has presented huge challenges for students without computers or internet service at home.

***"Higher standards of education, increase pay for teachers to encourage excellence"***

### **8. REFUGEE / MIGRANT SUPPORT**

Concerns were raised over National policies for mandatory detention and mental health of asylum seekers. Participants want to see better treatment and attitude towards refugees and migrants.

## **9. IMPROVE POLITICAL LITERACY**

A lack of political literacy and education amongst our youth was seen as a growing area of concern. Suggestions made include a non-political roadshow to take to schools, educate children that they have a voice and how it relates to them. Civics and citizenship in schools should be longer than a term. Conversations at home. Not just a once every 3 years conversation.

*"With meet the candidates night, I'm 50 and the youngest one there. How do we encourage more younger people to participate in politics?"*

## **10. MENTAL HEALTH**

Mental health was mentioned many times in our KTCs with improvements needed in the Riverina in terms of accessibility. Concerns included long wait times to services, suicide prevention and ongoing mental health support before a crisis. This was mentioned in a general sense, and also for returned defence force, the older community, and rural areas where youth seeking help had no counsellors in schools.

*"In addition to mental health which focuses on when people fail, we need to help people with mental health skills by improving their mental fitness, similar to physical fitness"*

## **11. REGIONAL EMPLOYMENT**

Participants expressed concern for regional towns with limited job opportunities or apprenticeships, particularly limiting access for young people who are trying to move out of home. In smaller towns, there are fewer opportunities for tertiary education and frequently, those who move away are then faced with a lack of jobs on their return.



*"For places like Coota there is no appeal for younger people living in a regional town as there are no opportunities outside of owning a local shop"*

## **12. MEDIA**

Two broad issues surrounded media:

1. Access: There has been an erosion of local media/newspapers in rural locations. This has produced knock on effects in communities trying to stay connected and keep up to date on local events and topics.
2. Quality: There is real concern around how conglomerates are buying local newspapers, leading to less publications, centralised stories and influence by Murdoch press. Unregulated social media allowing fake news and misinformation.

## **13. COUNCIL MATTERS**

Whilst 'you can't please all of the people all of the time' has never rung so true when talking about local council, there was certainly a mixed view, especially regarding Wagga City Council. Whilst on the one hand some participants were 'inspired by the dynamic future direction of Wagga's expansion' there were many more participants who voiced concerns. The key concerns or perceptions were:

- Council lacks vision and planning
- Nothing in place for climate change
- More diversity and creative people are needed on council
- Developers running council
- A lack of transparency and accountability
- Councillors should not be aligned to political parties
- The demerger in Cootamundra was a particular concern
- Cowra Shire Council was mentioned as working well with the community and having "an authentic consultation process" and "amenable to ideas from the public"
- Junee's council is seen as apolitical and non-aligned

*"Regional areas are patriarchal and women are underrepresented. A more diverse representation is required, not just women but disabled, refugees, Indigenous backgrounds, minority groups - to achieve a holistic view"*

## **14. CONCERN ABOUT NDIS AVAILABILITY, COSTS AND REGULATION**

Alongside NDIS problems, concerns were also expressed about the employment opportunities for people living with disabilities.

*"There is no NDIS therapist in Temora"*

## **15. CRIME RATES**

Car theft and house break-ins are an issue in Wagga. There was also concern regarding drugs in regional towns.

## **16. AGED CARE/VALUING OLDER COMMUNITY**

KTC participants wanted increased respect for older residents. There is a problem with social isolation and loneliness amongst the elderly in our communities. A perception that privatisation of aged care has been detrimental for these communities.

*"Adequate pay for people in aged care, we will not get good care for the elderly without improving their benefits"*



## **17. HOUSING AFFORDABILITY/ SOCIAL HOUSING**

There have been hikes in house and land prices in regional locations making home ownership increasingly difficult. Our KTC participants reported that renters were now paying 60-70% of their wages in rent in some regions. Availability of social housing across the region is an issue.

*"Housing is a fundamental right"*

*"Cowra used to have wool-topping works, cordial factory, Edgell's cannery, petrol refining and other manufacturing enterprises which no longer exist"*

## **18. FOREIGN OWNERSHIP/ MANUFACTURING**

Concerns were raised about Australia's reliance overseas and the selling of local assets to foreign investors. Local businesses have also been unable to compete with large overseas competition and cheaper labour costs.

*"More emphasis on manufacturing within Australia, value adding to raw products"*



## **19. CSU UNIVERSITY (WAGGA WAGGA CAMPUS)**

Concern that CSU University Council is not being represented by regional members as well as a focus on distance learning which fails to bring students to the region.

*"I'm mad at University managers who don't have a commitment to the region, poor university management and who don't live in the Riverina"*

## **20. HOMELESSNESS**

Access to services and initiatives for people experiencing homelessness, especially those with mental health issues

*"I'm worried about homeless people with mental health difficulties"*

# 4. LOOKING FORWARD & FUTURE IMPROVEMENTS

## WHAT PRACTICAL THINGS CAN WE DO TO IMPROVE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND INTEREST IN DEMOCRACY AND POLITICS?

Due to feelings of a substantial lack of a voice in the community, asking for practical ideas and suggestions to improve this was a critical follow up question.

The number one suggestion to improve community engagement and interest in democracy was accessible politics. Participants described accessibility in terms of both the physical presence of elected members in their communities and also strategies to make politics more engaging, relatable and interesting.



### 1. PHYSICAL PRESENCE

***"It shouldn't be optional to engage with the community; it is their job"***

Practical suggestions included:

- Regular meetings within each of the LGAs with key political figures at all level of government.
- Zoom meetings, recordings, transcripts, live streaming available.
- Panel discussions, Q&A type town hall conversations/debates, shopping centre question time, increasing the scale of Voices 4 Riverina.

***"MPs could do 5 min daily zoom updates or social media, choose a question and the politician answers it as best they can"***

### 2. ENGAGING & RELATABLE

Political literacy needs to be promoted in the broader community, not just amongst young people. Help people understand how politics affects them, increase education about how politics fits into their community and their life. Understand the issues that will motivate people to act and get involved, encourage awareness of the importance of having a voice.

More diversity in editorial and opinion pieces in local newspapers.

People would engage more if the result of their engagement was shown, that the community was listened to and feedback given so that people felt heard. A public track record of 'this is what I said I would do and this is what I did do' was mentioned by some participants.

***"What if we made the politicians put out a little promo video of every policy they are acting on, this way we are more informed"***

# WHAT IMPROVEMENTS TO WHERE YOU LIVE WOULD YOU LIKE TO HAVE OCCURRED OVER THE COMING DECADE?

This question generated a list to serve as a call to action, providing our elected representatives with insights into the priorities discussed by attendees at Riverina KTCs.

A broad array of responses as to what participants would like to see was collected:

1.

## ENVIRONMENTAL GUARDIANSHIP

- A decrease in deforestation
- Water security
- Increase in renewable energy and solar panels on community buildings, rental properties and businesses
- Riverina as leaders in recycling.
- Independent power with communities generating their own energy
- Better farming methods with incentives for organic/regenerative farming
- Smarter environmentally aligned homes with solar orientation and mandatory waste water recycling and rainwater tanks
- An increase in green energy jobs
- Biodiversity cared for

“

*Our Australian resources are our own to look after, I want to see better management of resources, such as our water supply, water usage regulations and water ecosystems. There should be a Royal Commission into our water usage.*

”



2.

## LOOKING AFTER OUR YOUTH

Looking after youth in smaller towns. People are wanting more incentives and job opportunities for young people to stay in rural/regional towns or be attracted to move from cities to the country. They want to see greater opportunities for young people to be engaged and involved in the community, from youth focused music festivals to council youth officers visiting schools on a regular basis. Greater access to health services, particularly mental health is important.

“

*“More opportunities for young people to stay in the country rather than be beguiled by city lights”*

”



# 3.

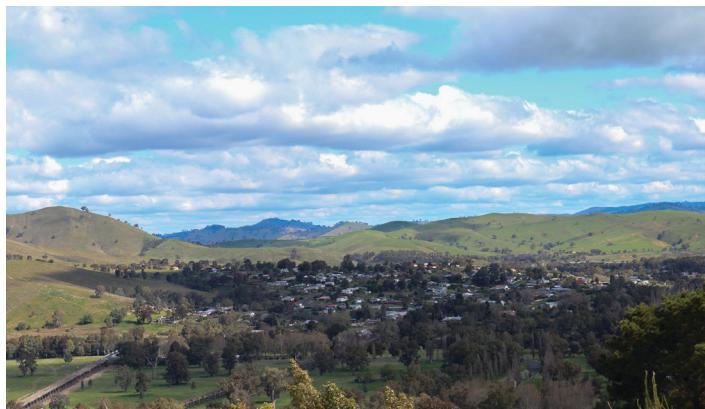
## REGIONAL / RURAL VISION

Participants cited that a “brave leadership and a strategic view” is needed for regional/rural areas to support higher populations or for small Riverina towns to retain and build upon their existing populations. Riverina people want to see a reduction in the disparity between cities and rural areas and a levelling of access to equity, opportunities, technology and transport. Riverina continues to attract people here to visit and work. There needs to be community markets with greater emphasis on local product/producers, cultural attractions, a multipurpose entertainment facility (similar to Tamworth), transport and infrastructure to encourage people to visit.

“

***“Making our region a technology hub”***

”



# 4.

## REAL ACTION ON CLIMATE CHANGE

In the next decade people want to see climate change addressed.



“

***“A federal Initiative for Climate Action Transparency (ICAT) with teeth, with a road map to address climate change and a 2030 target that has been achieved, with a 2050 target also”***

”

# 5.

## POLITICAL ACCOUNTABILITY

Political accountability for every tier of government was a strong theme. Politicians like any other public servant need to be under stricter KPI’s (key performance indicators). It was felt that the press corps could do more to hold politicians to account. Accountability to the ‘people and not the party’ was a sentiment repeated throughout the Kitchen Table Conversations as something voters are looking for. Going forward a lack of accountability from the top down and a lack of political literacy from the ground up is potentially a recipe for ineffectiveness, disillusionment and apathy.

“

***“I want to see the transition of politics towards Independents”***

”

# WHAT'S NEXT?

Voices 4 Riverina is committed to increasing momentum for positive, long-term political change in the Riverina, to ensure political leaders are truly representative and accountable to the people. Ultimately, our goals are to:

**1. Deliver accessible politics to encourage community engagement and increase political literacy.**

**2. Encourage youth voices and activities in the electorate and Voices 4 Riverina.**

**3. Engage the community through public activities that enable assessment and evaluation of candidates in the lead up to the 2022 federal election, including how candidates and representatives align with the values and concerns raised in this report.**

The findings in this report will form the basis for ongoing discussions between the community and our elected representatives at all levels of government, including potential electoral candidates.

## HOW YOU CAN GET INVOLVED?

- Keep in touch and up to date with V4R events and updates through our website and social media.
- Become a member of V4R and consider making a donation to our not-for-profit organisation.
- Keep the Kitchen Table Conversations going and get your friends and family together. Conversation kits are available on the V4R website.
- Explore other websites and organisations that promote community democracy.
- Get in contact with your representatives at all levels of government about the issues that matter most to you, including the concerns raised in this report.
- Start the conversation - share this report with your friends and family!
- Retain the view that 'It's my democracy, and as a citizen, it's my responsibility to participate in it'.

# MEET THE V4R TEAM

**Fiona McPherson**

I immigrated to Australia from the UK in 2008. I have a background in market research and understanding consumer behaviour. I have always been motivated by 'making a difference' in the communities in which I live and it is exciting to be involved in the growing 'voices movement' across Australia. I am especially interested in making politics more accessible and developing leadership with vision that truly represents the people of the Riverina.

**Bob Montgomery**

I worked for many years as a staff member of Wagga City Library. I am dedicated to improving political representation for all citizens of the Riverina, encouraging participation in our democratic processes and giving all Riverina residents a voice in what happens in our electorate.

**Rod Studdert**

I live in Gundagai and have taught in schools within the Riverina electorate for 27 years. I have been involved in a number of local activities through both my teaching career and in the community generally.

**Caitlin Langley**

I have a background in agricultural sciences and work as a business development officer in the ag-tech industry. I am passionate about improving the viability of food production systems and evidence-based policy. I hope to see more transparency in our elected officials and better community engagement in the democratic process.

**Emily Cross**

I have lived in the Riverina for 6 years, now completing a PhD in molecular biology at Charles Sturt University. I feel very lucky to live in this beautiful region and proud to advocate for a healthy democracy in our community.

**Peter Lonsdale**

I have lived in Wagga all my life. I currently run a small business with my lover Karolina, called the red Pomegranate for the past 15 years. I am involved with a number of community groups and I am passionate about developing a better democracy in our electorate.

**Trudi Beck**

My family and I have called the Riverina home since 2016. I work in the medical profession with a passion for women's health and environmental health. I love that "ordinary" people can influence politics and I wanted to be involved in V4R to help more people find their voice.

**Emilie Nuck**

I am a mother of 2, a clinical pharmacist and have studied and lived in the region for a number of years. I am passionate about the environment and sustainability wanting to create a safe and wonderful community for my children to live in.

**Andrew Redgment**

My background is formed by the good fortune to grow up in Africa which gave me an appreciation for the bush and an unspoilt environment. I feel blessed now to live in the Riverina and have welcomed the opportunity to be part of a young, vibrant and talented group who are committed to democracy, better representation and greater transparency.

**Dominic Fleming**

I have lived in multiple locations across the Riverina including Young, Cootamundra and Harden. I moved from Harden to complete my undergraduate degree in Chemistry and proudly consider myself a Wagga Local. I have a keen interest in increasing political literacy across all demographics.



V4R acknowledge The Victorian Women's Trust and Voices for Indi in creating and refining the Kitchen Table Conversation model and in particular, Denis Ginnivan for his continued advisory role and support. V4R also thanks Declan Young for his continual support and Louise Freckleton for use of her photos in this report. We thank past and present committee and all KTC participants and hosts for their enthusiasm and support, making this report possible.



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