A WHITE PAPER FOR WESTERN VICTORIA

The postcode penalty

What Western Victorians told us, what the evidence shows, and a plan to close the gap between the regions and Melbourne.

By Aleta Moriarty

WESTERN VICTORIA · UPPER HOUSE

NOVEMBER 2026

ALETAMORIARTY.COM

Authorised by Aleta Moriarty, W6, 33 Mackey Street, North Geelong VIC 3215

SUMMARY

THE POSTCODE PENALTY AT A GLANCE

Regional Victorians drive an hour and a half for a skin check, wait up to two years for a first paediatric appointment, and watch country roads break up while Melbourne gets the megaprojects.

Behind those statistics are about **1.6 million people**, almost a quarter of Victorians, who live outside Greater Melbourne. They live **2.6 fewer years** than Melburnians, their households earn **27% less**, and published typical bills for water and power are higher. Horsham's typical water bill is about **$400 a year** above Melbourne's average.

Outer regional areas have **fewer than half** the psychiatrists per head of the major cities, and 32% of Victoria's suicides in 2025 happened in rural locations. In our community survey, 75% rated mental health services poor and 61% were very dissatisfied with the State Government's record on mental health.

Children wait longest of all. Barwon Health, which serves Geelong and the south-west, lists an estimated routine wait of **18 to 24 months** for a first paediatric appointment. Half of Victoria's road deaths happen on regional roads. Regional councils, home to about a quarter of Victorians, had only **12% of the 2025–26 capital project value** the Parliamentary Budget Office examined; another 30% was statewide or unallocated.

Rural schools are more than twice as likely as Melbourne's to be in poor condition, and growing towns are filling up with portables. Country firefighters are driving the state's oldest trucks. Western Victoria has lost **two in every five bank branches** since 2017, and some towns have no childcare at all. Family violence is recorded at an **84% higher** rate in the regions, and regional homelessness grew **52%** between the last two Censuses, against 17% in Melbourne.

The gap grows with distance

The further from Melbourne, the greater the need. Ambulances reach 74% of the most urgent cases within 15 minutes in the City of Melbourne, and 29% in Golden Plains.

The money doesn't follow the need

The regions get about half their population share of the capital program, and none of the new schools named in the 2026–27 Budget.

People know

In our survey, 77% agree regional Victoria is treated as an afterthought by policy makers, and 81% rate regional roads and infrastructure poor.

WHAT WE'RE CALLING FOR

Public money should follow the real cost of giving people an equal chance, wherever they live.

1 Regional Equity Act

A Regional Equity Statement with every Budget showing spending by region, checked by the Parliamentary Budget Office, and a floor so the regional share of infrastructure never falls below the regional share of the population.

2 Regional Procurement Guarantee

Enforceable targets for state projects and contracts to use regional businesses, workers and apprentices, with big contracts split into smaller lots and yearly public reporting.

3 Regional Windfall Fund

A legally protected share of revenue from mining, gas, renewables, transmission and rezoned land, returned to the communities that host them.

Health. A 12-month ceiling on first paediatric waits by 2028; ambulances reaching 60% of Code 1 cases in 15 minutes in every council by 2030; crisis and step-down mental health beds in every regional city.

Getting around. Close the road maintenance shortfall over four years, and a Regional Mobility Guarantee with more peak V/Line services and carriages.

Climate, water and farming. A regional disaster mitigation fund, a funded western water strategy with farmers at the table, and a fair deal for transmission hosts and their neighbours.

Schools and childcare. Fix every regional and rural school in poor condition within one parliamentary term, replace long-term portables, open Avoca's new childcare centre on time and fully staffed, and build more in deserts such as Gordon.

Cost of living. No regional water bill more than 10% above Melbourne's; a banking hub or full Bank@Post in every town that's lost its last branch; social housing built where the waiting lists are.

Consent before concrete. A social licence test in law; all information public with real consultation and due diligence; a moratorium on large data centres in the west until a cumulative impact assessment is done; the precautionary principle where risks aren't known.

Plus public jobs that follow people: senior public service roles recruited from the regions and done remotely, and a legal right to work from home two days a week. All 32 recommendations are on pages 38 to 40.

Sources for every figure are footnoted in the chapters that follow.

FOREWORD

I was raised in rural Australia, where my dad was a stock and station agent, and I went to public schools. I've since worked on poverty in more than 20 countries, and the pattern I saw overseas holds here too: the further you live from power, the less of it reaches you.

Regional Victorians know this already. They drive an hour and a half for a skin check, wait up to two years for a first paediatric appointment, and watch country roads break up while Melbourne gets the megaprojects. Then they're told the statewide figures look fine. They do look fine, because three in four Victorians live in Melbourne and the averages are built around them.

This paper sets the averages aside. It puts the official evidence on money, health, housing, schools, roads, banking, safety, climate and energy beside what people across Western Victoria told my campaign in a community survey over the past few months. It finishes with a reform agenda built on one idea: public money should follow the real cost of giving people an equal chance wherever they live.

I'm standing for the Western Victoria upper house as a community independent, with no corporate donations, because both major parties have had decades to fix this and have simply failed to act.

Aleta Moriarty

COMMUNITY INDEPENDENT, WESTERN VICTORIA

CONTENTS

Introduction: the postcode penalty 3
The gap in numbers 4
1 Budgets and priorities 10
2 Health 12
3 Cost of living 16
4 Housing and homelessness 17
5 Education and childcare 19
6 Roads and transport 22
7 Banking 24
8 Work from home 25
9 Women's safety 27
10 Climate, water and farming 29
11 Energy 33
12 Major projects and consent 35
Recommendations 38
About the survey 41

ABOUT THE EVIDENCE

Hard numbers about Victoria come from official and published sources, footnoted on each page and checked in October 2026. Survey results are marked COMMUNITY SURVEY and show the thoughts and beliefs of 53 respondents, mostly in regional Victoria, aged 18 to over 65.

INTRODUCTION

THE POSTCODE PENALTY

Drive west from Melbourne and the neglect is easy to see. Country roads are patched rather than fixed. Trains and buses run rarely, and between regional towns often not at all. Rural schools are more than twice as likely as Melbourne's to be in poor condition, and growing towns are filling up with portables.[1] Western Victoria has lost two in every five bank branches since 2017,[2] and some towns have no childcare at all.[3]

Behind those statistics are about 1.6 million people, almost a quarter of Victorians, who live outside Greater Melbourne.[4] They live 2.6 fewer years than Melburnians,[5] their households earn 27% less,[6] and published typical bills for water and power are higher.[7,8] Regional councils, home to about a quarter of Victorians, had only 12% of the 2025–26 capital project value the Parliamentary Budget Office examined; 30.4% was statewide or unallocated.[9]

This paper calls that pattern the postcode penalty: disadvantages that attach to people because of where they live rather than who they are. Three findings run through every chapter.

The gap grows with distance. Ballarat and Geelong often perform close to Melbourne. The small towns and shires around them don't. In Moyne, ambulances reached a third of the most urgent cases within 15 minutes; in the City of Melbourne they reached three in four.[10] Treating "regional Victoria" as one block hides the places hit hardest, and it hides deep disadvantage inside the regional cities too, in suburbs like Corio, Norlane and Wendouree.[11]

The money doesn't follow the need. Victoria's Budget doesn't report spending by location, so the regional share has to be dug out piece by piece. When it is, the regions get about half their population share of the capital program, and none of the new schools named in the 2026–27 Budget.[12]

People can tell. In our community survey, 77% agreed that regional Victoria is treated as an afterthought by policy makers, and 81% rated regional roads and infrastructure poor.[13] They see decisions made out of sight, shaped by money and marginal seats, with the regions paying the price.

The chapters that follow take each sector in turn and set the official evidence beside what people told us. The paper ends with 32 recommendations, led by three flagship reforms.

> "We need a government of **Victoria, not Melbourne.**"
>
> SURVEY RESPONDENT
> MAN, 55–64, REGIONAL CITY

1. Victorian Auditor-General's Office, Delivering School Upgrade Projects, 17 June 2026 (school condition as at October 2024).
2. Australian Prudential Regulation Authority, ADI points of presence statistics, June 2017 to June 2025; campaign count of branches in the Geelong, Ballarat and Warrnambool & South West statistical regions and the Grampians area.
3. Mitchell Institute, More than 1 million Australians have no access to childcare in their area, 22 March 2022 (Avoca: no childcare places).
4. Centre for Population, 2025 Population Statement: Victoria, January 2026 (2023–24: 5.35 million in Greater Melbourne, 1.63 million in the rest of Victoria, about 23%).
5. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Rural and remote health, updated 20 November 2025 (life expectancy 2021–2023; age-adjusted avoidable deaths).
6. Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021 Census QuickStats: Greater Melbourne and Rest of Vic.
7. Essential Services Commission, Average household water bills in Victoria, 2026–27. Bills are calculated at each area's average household use, which varies across regional Victoria.
8. Essential Services Commission, Regulator reduces Victorian default electricity prices, 25 May 2026 (4,000 kWh a year, flat tariff).
9. Parliamentary Budget Office, Regional and metropolitan investment: 2025–26 Victorian Budget, Nov. 2025: total estimated investment; regional = 48 regional councils.
10. Ambulance Victoria, Ambulance response performance, Quarter 2 2025–26 (October to December 2025), Code 1 first responses by local government area.
11. Australian Bureau of Statistics, Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) 2021, suburbs and localities.
12. Premier of Victoria, Labor invests in our children's future, May 2026; Victorian School Building Authority, Budget invests in the future of Victorian schools and kinder, May 2026.
13. Aleta Moriarty campaign, *Western Victoria Community Survey*, June to October 2026 (n = 53). A self-selected sample reached mostly through campaign networks; it is not a representative poll. See 'About the survey'.

THE GAP IN NUMBERS

METRO · REGIONAL · RURAL

What a Regional Equity Statement would track every year

Health: fewer doctors, shorter lives.

Life expectancy at birth (years)[14]

VICTORIAN DATA

GREATER MELB.	REST OF VIC.
84.1	81.5

GAP — 2.6 years shorter lives

Government health spending per person, 2024–25[15]

NATIONAL AND VICTORIAN

RURAL AUS. GAP	VIC SMALL TOWNS
−$1,218	−$6,503

GAP — $9.23b national shortfall

Specialist doctors per 100,000 people, 2024[16]

NATIONAL DATA

CITIES (MM 1)	REG. CENTRES	SMALL TOWNS
194	154	9

GAP — 21× more in the cities

Psychiatrists per 100,000 people[17]

NATIONAL DATA

MAJOR CITY	INNER REG.	OUTER REG.
18	9	7

GAP — 61% fewer outer regional

Code 1 emergencies reached in 15 minutes[18]

VICTORIAN DATA

CITY OF MELB.	BALLARAT	GOLDEN PLAINS
74%	77%	29%

GAP — 45 pts city to worst shire

Where suicides occurred, Victoria, 2025[19]

VICTORIAN DATA

METRO LOCATIONS	RURAL LOCATIONS
532	250

GAP — 32% in rural locations

Melbourne, major cities or state average · Regional · Rural, remote or worst area

VICTORIAN DATA compares Melbourne with regional Victoria. NATIONAL DATA compares cities with regional and rural areas across Australia.

14. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Rural and remote health, updated 20 November 2025 (life expectancy 2021–2023; age-adjusted avoidable deaths).
15. Nous Group for the National Rural Health Alliance and John T Reid Charitable Trusts, *The Forgotten Health Spend: A report on the expenditure deficit in rural Australia 2026*, October 2026 (2024–25 data, age-standardised).
16. National Rural Health Alliance, *The Forgotten Health Spend 2026*, Figure 6, from the National Health Workforce Dataset (2024): registered full-time-equivalent workers per 100,000 people.
17. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Mental health: workforce (psychiatrists, full-time equivalent per 100,000 people, 2024).
18. Ambulance Victoria, Ambulance response performance, Quarter 2 2025–26 (October to December 2025), Code 1 first responses by local government area.
19. Coroners Court of Victoria, New report shows small increase in Victorian suicides in 2025, March 2026: 532 deaths in metropolitan and 250 in rural locations (32%). Counted by place of death, not residence, so no rate is calculated.

Health services thin out, and children start behind.

Allied health workers per 100,000 people, 2024[20]

NATIONAL DATA

CITIES (MM 1)	SMALL TOWNS
816	329

GAP: 60% fewer in small towns

Emergency department stays of 24 hours or more, Jan–Mar 2026[21]

VICTORIAN DATA

POP. SHARE	SHARE OF STAYS
23%	70%

GAP: 3× over-represented

Children starting school on track, 2024[22]

NATIONAL DATA

MAJOR CITY	REGIONAL
54.0%	50.5%

GAP: 3.5 pts behind from day one

Adults with a bachelor degree, 2021[23]

VICTORIAN DATA

GREATER MELB.	REST OF VIC.
32.8%	18.2%

GAP: 14.6 pts fewer graduates

Students at the proficient standard in reading (PISA 2025)[24]

NATIONAL DATA

MAJOR CITY	REGIONAL	REMOTE
58%	48%	36%

GAP: 1.4 years of learning (approx.), city vs reg al

Students at the proficient standard in maths (PISA 2025)[24]

NATIONAL DATA

MAJOR CITY	REGIONAL	REMOTE
52%	39%	30%

GAP: 1.5 years of learning (approx.), city vs reg al

Melbourne, major cities or state average · Regional · Rural, remote or worst area

VICTORIAN DATA compares Melbourne with regional Victoria. NATIONAL DATA compares cities with regional and rural areas across Australia, used where no Victorian breakdown is published.

20. National Rural Health Alliance, *The Forgotten Health Spend 2026*, Figure 6, from the National Health Workforce Dataset (2024): registered full-time-equivalent workers per 100,000 people.
21. ABC News, Regional emergency departments are overcrowded and risking patient safety, doctors say, 10 August 2026 (reporting Victorian Agency for Health Information data).
22. Australian Early Development Census, 2024 Key Findings (national).
23. Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021 Census QuickStats: Greater Melbourne and Rest of Vic.
24. ACER, PISA 2025: Australian students perform above OECD average, *Teacher*, September 2026 (national results by school location).
25. OECD, PISA 2025 Results (Volume I), chapter 2: about 20 score points is roughly one year of schooling for 15-year-olds (to be used with caution).

Schools: older buildings, more portables.

Government schools in poor condition (VAGO) [26]

VICTORIAN DATA

METRO	REGIONAL	RURAL
8%	14%	19%

GAP 2.4× rural vs metro

School portables per 1,000 students [27]

VICTORIAN DATA

INNER CITY	REG. CITIES	RURAL
4.7	8.1	11.5

GAP 2.4× rural vs inner city

Melbourne, major cities or state average · Regional · Rural, remote or worst area

VICTORIAN DATA compares Melbourne with regional Victoria. NATIONAL DATA compares cities with regional and rural areas across Australia, used where no Victorian breakdown is published.

26. Victorian Auditor-General's Office, Delivering School Upgrade Projects, 17 June 2026 (school condition as at October 2024).
27. Victorian Auditor-General's Office, Delivering School Upgrade Projects, school conditions dataset (condition score out of 5, permanent and relocatable buildings by school), June 2026.

Roads and transport: more deaths, worse roads, later trains.

Road deaths by location, per 100,000 residents, 2025[28]

VICTORIAN DATA

METRO	REGIONAL
2.6	9.0

GAP 3.4× the metro rate

State roads poor or very poor, 2024[29]

VICTORIAN DATA

METRO COUNCILS	REGIONAL COUNCILS
35%	50%

GAP +15 pts worse condition

Trains arriving on time, 2026[30]

VICTORIAN DATA

METRO	GEELONG LINE	BALLARAT LINE
95.1%	88.0%	83.4%

GAP 11.7 pts Metro vs Ballarat, on a looser test

Regional share of 2026–27 capital spending[31]

VICTORIAN DATA

NEW SCHOOLS	TRANSPORT	POPULATION
0%	3.4%	23%

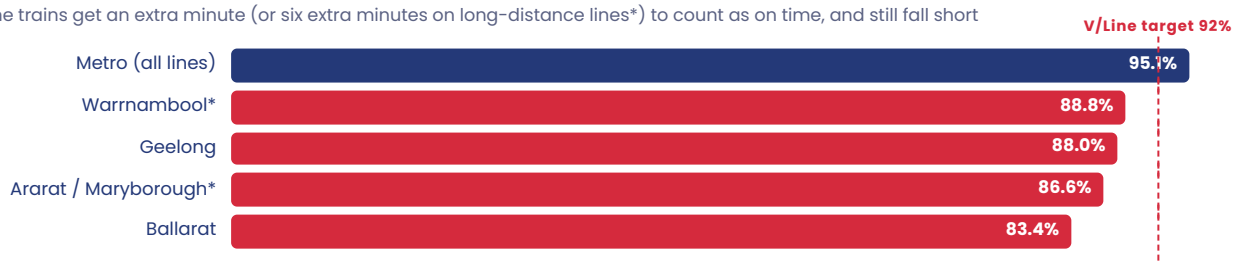
GAP –19.6 pts transport vs population

Melbourne, major cities or state average · Regional · Rural, remote or worst area

VICTORIAN DATA compares Melbourne with regional Victoria. NATIONAL DATA compares cities with regional and rural areas across Australia, used where no Victorian breakdown is published.

Trains arriving on time: Melbourne vs Western Victoria's V/Line lines, 2026 VICTORIAN DATA

V/Line trains get an extra minute (or six extra minutes on long-distance lines*) to count as on time, and still fall short



28 Campaign calculation: 141 metropolitan and 147 regional road deaths in 2025 (South East Voice, Victoria Police data) ÷ 2023–24 residents (Centre for Population). Compares deaths by road location with residents; not a per-kilometre risk measure.

29. Campaign calculation from the Auditor-General's Maintaining State Roads datasets (remaining useful life, 2024 survey year), grouped into the Municipal Association of Victoria's 31 metropolitan and 48 regional councils.

30. Metro Trains Melbourne, September 2026 results (delivery 98.19%, punctuality 95.06%); V/Line line-by-line reliability and punctuality, 2026, as reported by the Department of Transport and Planning, Public transport network performance. Metro trains count as punctual up to 4 minutes 59 seconds late; V/Line short-distance trains up to 5 minutes 59 seconds and long-distance trains up to 10 minutes 59 seconds.

31. A. Moriarty, Victorian budget figures reveal regional Victoria short-changed on transport and schools, *Geelong Advertiser*, 11 May 2026; campaign analysis of the 2026–27 State Capital Program (Budget Paper No. 4).

Housing and safety: the regions fall further behind.

Growth in homelessness, 2016 to 2021[32]

VICTORIAN DATA

MELBOURNE	REGIONAL
+17%	+52%

GAP: 3× faster growth

Median house price change, 2025[33,34]

VICTORIAN DATA

MELBOURNE	BALLARAT CTRL	HORSHAM
+0.9%	+13.6%	+15.8%

GAP: +14.9 pts Horsham vs Melbourne

House rents, year to October 2026[35]

VICTORIAN DATA

MELBOURNE	COLAC	PORTLAND
+7.0%	+15.6%	+20.5%

GAP: ~3× Portland vs Melbourne

Family violence incidents per 100,000 (2023–24)[36]

VICTORIAN DATA

MELBOURNE	REGIONAL
1,172	2,157

GAP: +84% higher in the regions

Family incidents per 100,000, year to June 2026[37]

VICTORIAN DATA

VICTORIA	NTH GRAMPIANS
1,429	3,004

GAP: 2.1× the state rate

CFA fire trucks 25 years or older, 2025[38]

VICTORIAN DATA

HIGH-RISK URBAN	REMOTE/RURAL
12.5%	44.9%

GAP: 3.6× more old trucks in the country

Melbourne, major cities or state average · Regional · Rural, remote or worst area

VICTORIAN DATA compares Melbourne with regional Victoria. NATIONAL DATA compares cities with regional and rural areas across Australia, used where no Victorian breakdown is published.

32. ABC News, Stark rise in homelessness reflected in regional Victoria statistics, 16 July 2023 (Council to Homeless Persons analysis of ABS Census data).
33. Valuer-General Victoria, Property sales statistics: median house prices by suburb, 2015–2025 (houses-by-suburb-2015-2025.xlsx). Change is calendar 2025 against calendar 2024. Geelong and Ballarat are the Geelong and Ballarat Central suburbs.
34. Valuer-General Victoria, Property sales statistics: Melbourne Metropolitan Area residential price statistics 1995–2026 (year-summary-2025.xlsx). Median house price $857,000 in 2024 and $865,000 in 2025.
35. SQM Research, Weekly Rents Index, week ending 12 October 2026: asking rents for all houses, 12-month change, by postcode (Melton 3337, Warrnambool 3280, Geelong 3220, Ballarat 3350, Torquay 3228, Ocean Grove 3226, Horsham 3400, Bacchus Marsh 3340, Portland 3305, Colac 3250) and for Melbourne.
36. ABC News, Domestic violence rates nearly twice as high in regional Victoria, 4 December 2024 (analysis of Crime Statistics Agency data, 2023–24).
37. Crime Statistics Agency, Family incidents by local government area, year ending June 2026 (data tables); Victorian rate calculated from statewide family incident totals.
38. Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Managing Victoria's Firefighting Fleet*, tabled 14 October 2026.

Investment and cost of living: less money in, more money out.

Population vs capital project value, 2025–26[39]

VICTORIAN DATA

POPULATION	PBO CAPITAL VALUE
25%	12%

GAP 13 pts short; 30.4% unallocated

Average wage, 2023–24[40]

VICTORIAN DATA

GREATER MELB.	REST OF VIC.
$77,688	$65,864

GAP –$11,824 a year (15% less)

Published typical water bill (2026–27)[41]

VICTORIAN DATA

MELBOURNE	REGIONAL	HORSHAM
$1,158	$1,378	$1,550

GAP +$220 a year (Horsham +$392)

Benchmark electricity bill, Victorian Default Offer (2026–27)[42]

VICTORIAN DATA

CITIPOWER	POWERCOR
$1,481	$1,633

GAP +$152 a year in the west

Bank branches in Western Victoria[43]

WESTERN VICTORIA

JUNE 2017	JUNE 2025
206	121

GAP –41% 85 branches gone

Melbourne, major cities or state average · Regional · Rural, remote or worst area

VICTORIAN DATA compares Melbourne with regional Victoria. NATIONAL DATA compares cities with regional and rural areas across Australia, used where no Victorian breakdown is published.

Gaps without a like-for-like Melbourne figure are covered in their chapters: towns that have lost their last bank (page 24), childcare deserts such as Avoca and Gordon (page 21), commuters who could work from home (page 25), and water restrictions on towns and farms (page 29).

39. Parliamentary Budget Office, Regional and metropolitan investment: 2025–26 Victorian Budget, Nov. 2025: total estimated investment; regional = 48 regional councils.
40. Australian Taxation Office, Taxation statistics 2023–24, Individuals Tables 6A and 25, released 17 June 2026. Average salary or wages per wage earner, by postcode. Greater Geelong is postcodes 3212–3224, 3226 and 3227 (roughly the council area); Greater Melbourne is the Melbourne SA4s plus Mornington Peninsula. Weekly is annual divided by 52. Author's calculation.
41. Essential Services Commission, Average household water bills in Victoria, 2026–27. Bills are calculated at each area's average household use, which varies across regional Victoria.
42. Essential Services Commission, Regulator reduces Victorian default electricity prices, 25 May 2026 (4,000 kWh a year, flat tariff).
43. Australian Prudential Regulation Authority, ADI points of presence statistics, June 2017 to June 2025, campaign count of branches in the Geelong, Ballarat and Warrnambool & South West statistical regions and the Grampians area.

BUDGETS AND PRIORITIES

Regional councils are home to a quarter of Victorians, but had just 12% of the capital value the PBO examined.

Budgets show what governments care about, and Victoria's show regional communities as an afterthought: in each of the last two Budgets the regions received roughly half their population share of capital investment, and none of the new schools.

A budget is a statement of priorities. About 23% of Victorians live outside Greater Melbourne,[44] and the money doesn't come close to matching that. Both major parties share the blame. At state and federal level, Labor and the Coalition win government in the cities, where most of the seats are, and investment follows the seats. An Australia Institute analysis of federal discretionary grants found marginal Coalition seats received $184 per person from national programs while safe Labor seats received $39.[45] Spring Street runs on the same arithmetic.

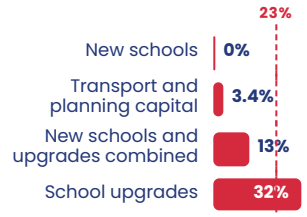
The latest Budget: 2026–27

Schools. The State Government named ten new or expanding school projects, from Wyndham, Casey and Melton to South Melbourne and Preston. None is in regional Victoria.[46] Regional schools got $94.7 million of the $294.8 million upgrade program and none of the $441.2 million for new schools: about 13% of the money for 23% of the population, or roughly $120 per Melburnian against $58 per regional Victorian.[47]

Transport. Of $9.4 billion in transport and planning capital spending, the explicitly regional share was about $320 million, or 3.4%.[47] The government points to roads: it says 70% of its $1.04 billion road maintenance package goes to the regions.[48] That's welcome, and it's still about a third of what the Department of Transport and Planning says the network needs each year.

Regional share of 2026–27 capital spending VICTORIAN DATA

Dashed line: regional share of the population (23%)



Campaign analysis of Budget Paper No. 4 and Government announcements.

$58
per regional Victorian for school building in 2026–27

$120
per Melburnian

"We need people who actually tell us the truth, show us the facts, are transparent and don't waste money."

SURVEY RESPONDENT
WOMAN, 55–64

44. Centre for Population, 2025 Population Statement: Victoria, January 2026 (2023–24: 5.35 million in Greater Melbourne, 1.63 million in the rest of Victoria, about 23%).
45. The Australia Institute, Big winners of $3.9b in government discretionary grants are Coalition marginal seats, November 2021 (federal grants since 2013).
46. Premier of Victoria, Labor invests in our children's future, May 2026; Victorian School Building Authority, Budget invests in the future of Victorian schools and kinder, May 2026.
47. A. Moriarty, Victorian budget figures reveal regional Victoria short-changed on transport and schools, *Geelong Advertiser*, 11 May 2026; campaign analysis of the 2026–27 State Capital Program (Budget Paper No. 4).
48. West Vic Brolga, Western Victoria: State Budget 2026–27, May 2026 (media, reporting the Government's claim that 70% of the $1.04 billion road package goes to regional Victoria).

The year before told the same story.

2025–26: what the Parliamentary Budget Office found

Because the Budget doesn't say where money is spent, a member of Parliament asked the Parliamentary Budget Office to classify the 2025–26 capital program. It sorted 1,414 projects worth $182.7 billion in total estimated investment over their lives, including existing works, so it isn't one year's spending. Metropolitan councils had 57.6%, the 48 regional councils (home to about 25% of Victorians) 12.0%, and 30.4% was statewide, mixed or unplaced. Per person, that came to $19,338 in Melbourne and $12,348 in the regions.[49]

Metropolitan megaprojects drive much of the gap. The Treasurer called the analysis "cherrypicked".[50] Without a regional breakdown in the Budget, nobody outside Treasury can check either side's numbers, and recurrent spending has no published geographic breakdown at all.

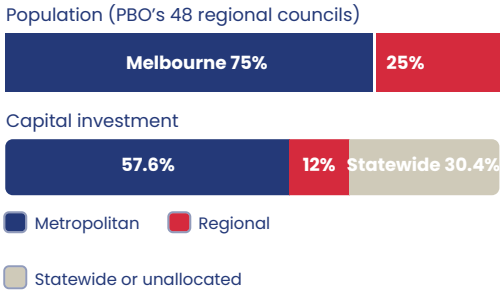
The Opposition now promises that 25% of new infrastructure spending will go to the regions.[51] That would lift the share but still hand out money by headcount. Delivering the same service in a small, spread-out community costs more, and a fair formula has to price that in.

COMMUNITY SURVEY

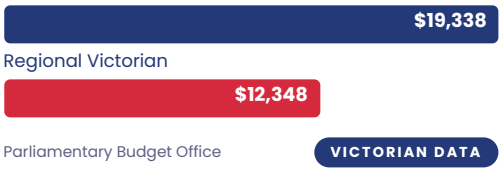
77% agree regional Victoria is treated as an afterthought by policy makers[52]

Share of people vs share of capital investment VICTORIAN DATA

2025–26 Victorian Budget, total estimated investment



Capital investment per person, 2025–26 VICTORIAN DATA



Parliamentary Budget Office VICTORIAN DATA

49. Parliamentary Budget Office, **Regional and metropolitan investment: 2025–26 Victorian Budget**, Nov. 2025: total estimated investment; regional = 48 regional councils.
50. Parliament of Victoria, Legislative Council, Hansard, 13 November 2025 (questions without notice, Treasurer Jaclyn Symes).
51. Liberal and Nationals, Fair share for regional Victorians – guaranteed, 22 May 2026 (party release).
52. Aleta Moriarty campaign, *Western Victoria Community Survey*, June to October 2026 (n = 53). A self-selected sample reached mostly through campaign networks; it is not a representative poll. See 'About the survey'.

HEALTH

Regional Victorians live 2.6 fewer years, and wait longer for almost every kind of care.

Regional and rural Victorians are worse off on health than Melburnians: they die younger, wait longer for ambulances and emergency care, and their children can wait up to two years for a first appointment with a paediatrician.

Life expectancy is 84.1 years in Greater Melbourne and 81.5 in the rest of Victoria.[53] Across Australia, men in outer regional areas die from potentially avoidable causes at 1.5 times the rate of men in the major cities, after allowing for age. Rural Australians miss out on about $1,090 a head in health spending each year compared with city residents.[54]

Emergency care shows how the penalty deepens with distance. Ambulance Victoria's target is to reach 85% of Code 1 emergencies within 15 minutes. Between October and December 2025, Ballarat, Geelong and the City of Melbourne all sat in the seventies. In Moyne it was 33%, in Pyrenees 29% and in Golden Plains 29%, well under half the rate in Ballarat or Geelong.[55]

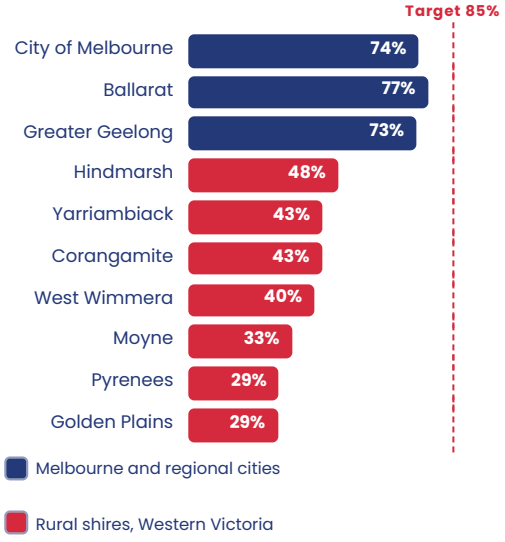
Hospitals take the overflow. Of about 3,300 patients who spent 24 hours or more in a Victorian emergency department in January to March 2026, 2,330 were in regional and rural hospitals. The Department's target is zero.[56]

Children wait longest of all. Barwon Health, which serves Geelong and the south-west, lists an estimated routine waiting time of 18 to 24 months for a first appointment at its paediatric medicine clinics.[57] Victoria doesn't publish specialist waits on a common basis, so nobody can say how many other regional families are in the same queue.

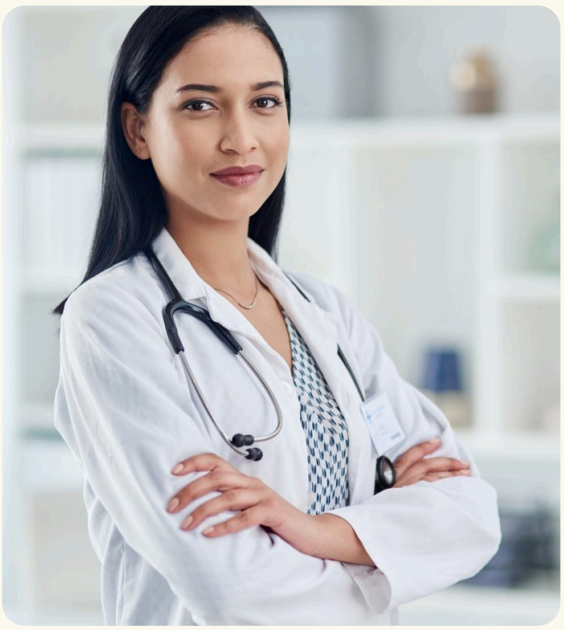
2,330
of 3,300 people who waited 24+ hours in an ED were in regional hospitals

18–24
months: estimated routine wait for a first paediatric appointment, Barwon Health

Code 1 emergencies reached within 15 minutes VICTORIAN DATA
October to December 2025, by local government area



Source: Ambulance Victoria. Statewide result 65.1%.



53. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Rural and remote health, updated 20 November 2025 (life expectancy 2021–2023; age-adjusted avoidable deaths).
54. National Rural Health Alliance, Rural Australians miss out on $8.35 billion in healthcare every year, 25 August 2025 (advocacy).
55. Ambulance Victoria, Ambulance response performance, Quarter 2 2025–26 (October to December 2025), Code 1 first responses by local government area.
56. ABC News, Regional emergency departments are overcrowded and risking patient safety, doctors say, 10 August 2026 (reporting Victorian Agency for Health Information data).
57. Barwon Health, Paediatric Medicine Clinics, page updated 14 January 2026.

Mental health care is thinnest where the need is greatest.

Country people have far less access to mental health care than city people. Across Australia, outer regional areas have fewer than half the psychiatrists per head of the major cities, and suicide rates rise with remoteness.

Across Australia, major cities have 18 full-time-equivalent psychiatrists for every 100,000 people. Inner regional areas have 9 and outer regional areas 7.[58] No Victorian breakdown is published. Of the 782 Victorians who died by suicide in 2025, the Coroners Court recorded 32% as happening in rural locations.[59] Those counts are by where deaths occurred, not where people lived, so they can't give a reliable rate for rural residents.[60] Nationally, rates rise with remoteness: 10.0 per 100,000 in the major cities in 2023, 11.8 in regional areas and 21.0 in very remote areas.[61] Suicide has many causes, and these figures don't show that place is one of them. They do show where services are needed.

What people told us

Health was one of the most-picked priorities in our survey, and views on hospitals were split. People praised frontline staff and blamed understaffing, ramping and distance. Mental health scored far worse: 75% rated mental health services poor and 61% were very dissatisfied with the Government's record.[62]

Respondents described people with acute mental health care needs as "left to their own recognisance", long drives for basic specialist care, and promised hospital funding that keeps slipping. Aged care drew similar anger, with understaffing and profit-driven providers named again and again.

COMMUNITY SURVEY

75% rate mental health services poor

61% very dissatisfied with the Government on mental health

57% very dissatisfied on aged care

"The ramping at Geelong and Warrnambool hospital has only gotten worse. Hospitals unable to fund staff or beds."

SURVEY RESPONDENT
MAN, 55–64, REGIONAL CITY

"Constant travel for medical services: 1.5hr drive for a skin check because local GPs cannot perform."
MAN, 65+, SMALL TOWN OR RURAL AREA

"Rural and regional hospitals used to be really good but increasingly they are under staffed and locals can't rely on them."
WOMAN, 55–64, SMALL TOWN OR RURAL AREA

"The Geelong hospital is under staffed but the care I received by individual workers was amazing."
WOMAN, 65+, REGIONAL CITY

32% of Victoria's 2025 suicides happened in rural locations

782 Victorians died by suicide in 2025

58. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Mental health: workforce (psychiatrists, full-time equivalent per 100,000 people, 2024).
59. Coroners Court of Victoria, New report shows small increase in Victorian suicides in 2025, March 2026.
60. The Coroners Court classifies deaths by where the fatal incident occurred, not residence, so no rural or metropolitan rate is calculated here.
61. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Suicide and self-harm monitoring: regional and remote communities (2023 rates per 100,000).
62. Aleta Moriarty campaign, *Western Victoria Community Survey*, June to October 2026 (n = 53). A self-selected sample reached mostly through campaign networks; it is not a representative poll. See 'About the survey'.

The forgotten health spend: the gap is $1,218 a person, and widening.

New national figures released in October 2026 show the health funding gap between the city and the country grew again in 2024–25, and it is deepest in small rural towns.[63]

$9.23b
less health funding for rural and regional Australians in 2024–25

$1,218
less per person each year than in the cities

+$138
a person: how much the gap grew in a single year, after inflation

$6,605
less per person in small rural towns nationally

The National Rural Health Alliance's 2026 report compares what governments spend on health, aged care and disability services for each person, depending on where they live. Its message is blunt: the gap is widening. Over 2024–25 it grew by $138 a person after inflation, on top of a shortfall that was already $848 a person when the first report was published in 2023.

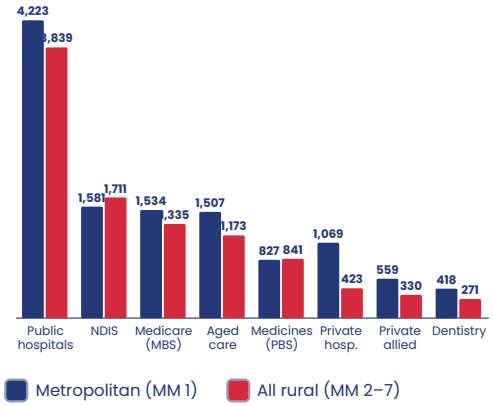
The money goes missing in the services people use most. Rural Australians receive less for public hospitals, private hospitals, aged care, Medicare-funded GP and specialist visits, private allied health and dentistry. Higher spending in remote areas mostly reflects the cost of flying in doctors and running tiny hospitals, not better access.

THE GAP IN VICTORIA

Compared with Melbourne, a person in a small Victorian town of under 5,000 people, such as Stawell or Casterton, receives **about $6,503 less in health spending each year.** In a medium town of 5,000 to 15,000, such as Portland or Hamilton, it's about $725 less, and in a regional centre such as Ballarat or Bendigo, about $429 less. Large rural towns such as Warrnambool and Horsham come out about $3,254 ahead, because they host base hospitals that serve whole districts. Treat these Victorian estimates (Table 35) as indicative; the report sets out coverage caveats.

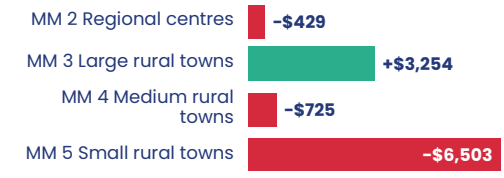
Health spending per person: metro vs rural, 2024–25 NATIONAL DATA

Age-standardised, Australia



Victoria: health spending per person compared with Melbourne VICTORIAN DATA

2024–25, age-standardised



What the "MM" categories mean

MM 1	**Major cities.** Metropolitan urban centres; for example, Geelong, Melton.
MM 2	**Regional centres.** Population over 50,000; for example, Ballarat, Bendigo.
MM 3	**Large rural towns.** 15,000 to 50,000 people; for example, Warrnambool, Horsham.
MM 4	**Medium rural towns.** 5,000 to 15,000 people; for example, Portland, Hamilton.
MM 5	**Small rural towns.** Under 5,000 people; for example, Stawell, Casterton.

63. Nous Group for the National Rural Health Alliance and John T Reid Charitable Trusts, *The Forgotten Health Spend: A report on the expenditure deficit in rural Australia 2026*, October 2026 (2024–25 data, age-standardised).

Fewer doctors, ageing GPs, and nurses holding it together.

Small rural towns have a fraction of the city's specialists and allied health workers, rely on nurses to fill the gap, and get almost half as much aged care spending per person.[64]

Specialists. Specialist doctors are concentrated in the cities and larger towns, where the major hospitals and training places are. Their numbers fall from 194 full-time equivalents per 100,000 people in the cities to just 9 in small rural towns. Nearly 88% of physician fellows and more than 90% of trainees are in the cities.

GPs. As specialists disappear, rural communities lean on GPs and rural generalists, but GP shortages are severe in small towns and more than 40% of GPs are aged 55 or over, so a wave of retirements is coming.

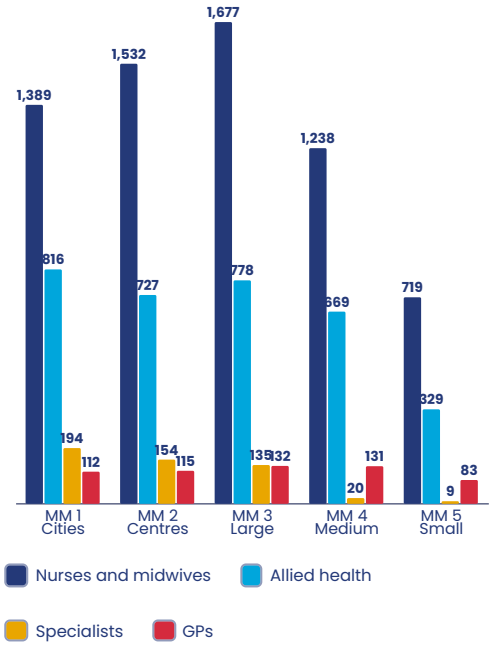
Nurses. In small rural towns there are about nine nurses for every doctor, against just over three in the cities. In many towns, nurses are the only health professionals who live there, covering emergencies, chronic disease, mental health and care coordination.

Allied health. Physiotherapists, psychologists, occupational therapists, pharmacists and other allied health workers fall from 816 per 100,000 people in the cities to 329 in small rural towns. The workforce grew from 2023 to 2024, but faster in the cities, so the gap is widening.

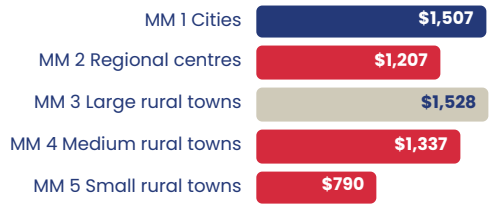
Aged care. Older country people find it harder to get care. Government aged care spending per person in small rural towns is almost half the city level.

Registered health workers per 100,000 people, 2024 NATIONAL DATA

Full-time equivalent, cities to small rural towns



Aged care spending per person, 2024–25 NATIONAL DATA



Small rural towns receive 52 cents for every dollar spent in the cities.

A VICTORIAN RURAL HEALTH STRATEGY

The Rural Health Alliance wants a National Rural Health Strategy that defines the level of care people should be able to get close to home and measures progress against it. Victoria shouldn't wait. We will push for a **Victorian Rural Health Strategy** with clear indicators, such as specialists, GPs and allied health workers per person, travel times, waiting times and spending per person by area, reported publicly every year.

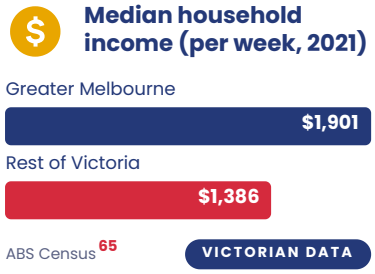
64. National Rural Health Alliance, *The Forgotten Health Spend 2026*, Figure 6, from the National Health Workforce Dataset (2024): registered full-time-equivalent workers per 100,000 people.

COST OF LIVING

Regional households earn 27% less, but pay more for water and power.

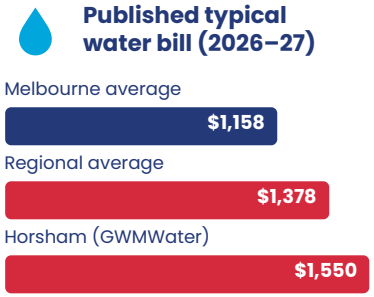
Regional households have less to live on and pay more for essentials: incomes are 27% lower than in Melbourne, while water and electricity bills are higher.

Median household income (per week, 2021)



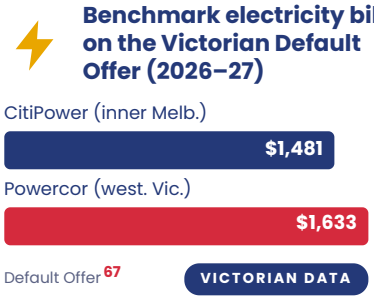
ABS Census[65] VICTORIAN DATA

Published typical water bill (2026–27)



ESC[66] VICTORIAN DATA

Benchmark electricity bill on the Victorian Default Offer (2026–27)



Default Offer[67] VICTORIAN DATA

Part of the income gap reflects an older population with more retirees, so it measures household resources more than pay rates.[65] Wages, which leave retirees out, show a gap too: in 2023–24 the average wage outside Greater Melbourne was $65,864, 15% below Melbourne's $77,688.[68] The costs are real either way. Published typical water bills are calculated at each area's average use, which runs higher in some regional districts, so they aren't what every household pays, but Horsham's typical bill is about $400 a year above Melbourne's.[66] On the benchmark electricity price, the Victorian Default Offer, a typical household on the Powercor network, which covers most of western Victoria, pays $152 a year more than one in inner Melbourne.[67]

In our survey, 81% rated action on price gouging poor and 77% rated the Government's honesty about what's driving the cost-of-living crisis poor. Several older respondents described living fortnight to fortnight, with insurance and food as the pressure points.[69]

$400
higher typical water bill in Horsham than Melbourne's average

81%
of survey respondents rate action on price gouging poor

> **"We seem unable to even get past $500 in savings and we are quite frugal … it is very hard to watch people who are corrupt, or self-interested … wield outsized influence in politics."**
>
> SURVEY RESPONDENT
> MAN, 35–44, REGIONAL CITY

> *"As pensioners, we struggle from fortnight to fortnight with basic living expenses, insurance costs and food security."*
>
> WOMAN, 65+, SMALL TOWN OR RURAL AREA

65. Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021 Census QuickStats: Greater Melbourne and Rest of Vic.
66. Essential Services Commission, Average household water bills in Victoria, 2026–27. Bills are calculated at each area's average household use, which varies across regional Victoria.
67. Essential Services Commission, Regulator reduces Victorian default electricity prices, 25 May 2026 (4,000 kWh a year, flat tariff).
68. Australian Taxation Office, Taxation statistics 2023–24, Individuals Tables 6A and 25, released 17 June 2026. Average salary or wages per wage earner, by postcode. Greater Geelong is postcodes 3212–3224, 3226 and 3227 (roughly the council area); Greater Melbourne is the Melbourne SA4s plus Mornington Peninsula. Weekly is annual divided by 52. Author's calculation.
69. Aleta Moriarty campaign, *Western Victoria Community Survey*, June to October 2026 (n = 53). A self-selected sample reached mostly through campaign networks; it is not a representative poll. See 'About the survey'.

HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS

Regional homelessness grew three times faster than in Melbourne.

Housing pressure has moved to the regions: since 2020, regional home values and rents have risen faster than Melbourne's, homelessness has grown three times as fast, and thousands of families are waiting for social housing.

When Melburnians moved out during the pandemic, regional prices took off. Between March 2020 and February 2024, regional Victorian home values rose 33.9% and rents 26.4%; in Melbourne, values rose 11.0% and rents 23.0%.[70] The gap is still widening. In the year to September 2026, Melbourne values fell 6.2% while regional values rose 3.6%,[71] and in the year to October 2026 advertised house rents rose 20.5% in Portland and 15.6% in Colac, against 7.0% in Melbourne.[72] Regional incomes haven't kept pace (see the town-by-town figures on the next page).

Homelessness rose too. Between the 2016 and 2021 Censuses it rose 52% in regional Victoria and 17% in Melbourne. Greater Geelong's count went from 750 to 1,546, and Horsham's from 43 to 95.[73] In 2024–25, about 105,000 Victorians sought help from homelessness services, and 27% of them lived in regional areas.[74]

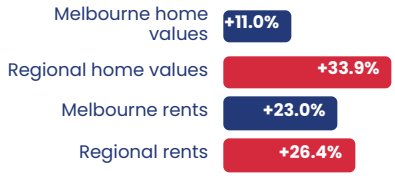
Social housing hasn't kept up. Victoria has the worst social housing provision in the country,[75] and 57,372 applicants were on the Victorian Housing Register in March 2026, including 2,876 in the Ballarat area and 1,077 in Warrnambool.[76]

Housing was the most-picked priority in our survey. 92% rated affordability and supply poor and 88% said the same of public housing and homelessness services. Only one of 52 people was satisfied with the Government on housing.[77]

Home prices and rents since COVID

VICTORIAN DATA

% change, Mar 2020 to Feb 2024 (Cotality)

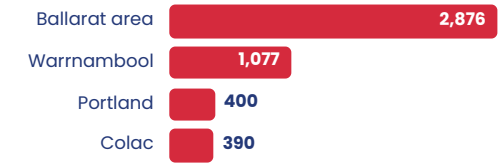


Home values, year to September 2026: Melbourne -6.2%, regional +3.6%.

Homelessness VICTORIAN DATA

% rise in people counted as homeless, 2016 to 2021

Waiting for social housing, March 2026



Victorian Housing Register — VICTORIAN DATA

> "Housing is a basic right. It should not be promoted as a means to get wealthy."
>
> **SURVEY RESPONDENT**
> WOMAN, 65+, SMALL TOWN OR RURAL AREA

70. CoreLogic, Four years since COVID, March 2024 (change March 2020 to February 2024).
71. Cotality, Home Value Index, October 2026 (values to 30 September 2026).
72. SQM Research, Weekly Rents Index, week ending 12 October 2026: asking rents for all houses, 12-month change, by postcode (Melton 3337, Warrnambool 3280, Geelong 3220, Ballarat 3350, Torquay 3228, Ocean Grove 3226, Horsham 3400, Bacchus Marsh 3340, Portland 3305, Colac 3250) and for Melbourne.
73. ABC News, Stark rise in homelessness reflected in regional Victoria statistics, 16 July 2023 (Council to Homeless Persons analysis of ABS Census data).
74. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Specialist homelessness services 2024–25: Victoria (clients by remoteness: inner regional 22%, outer regional 5.3%).
75. Council to Homeless Persons, Record number of Victorians seek homelessness help as state ranks last on social housing, 4 December 2025 (advocacy).
76. West Vic Brolga, 57,000 Victorians waiting for a home, 20 August 2026 (media, reporting Victorian Housing Register figures for March 2026).
77. Aleta Moriarty campaign, *Western Victoria Community Survey*, June to October 2026 (n = 53). A self-selected sample reached mostly through campaign networks; it is not a representative poll. See 'About the survey'.

Some of the steepest rises are hitting towns on the lowest incomes.

House prices and rents across most of Western Victoria's towns rose faster than Melbourne's over the past year, and several of the towns with the biggest rises have wages well below Melbourne's.

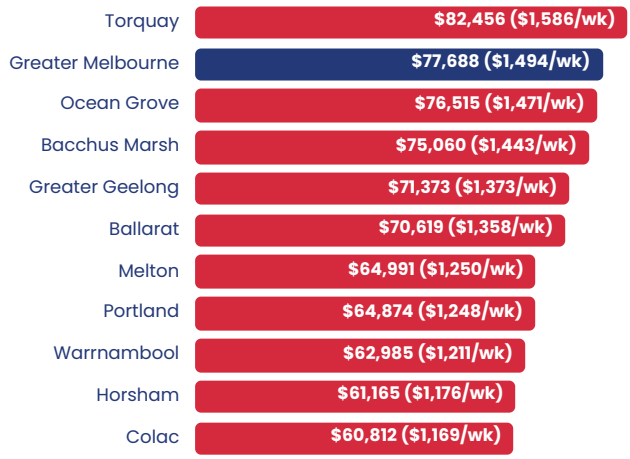
In 2025 the median house price rose 15.8% in Horsham, 13.6% in central Ballarat and 11.7% in Melton, according to the Valuer-General's sales figures.[78] Across metropolitan Melbourne it rose 0.9%, from $857,000 to $865,000.[79]

The rent figures are more recent, and harsher. In the year to 12 October 2026, advertised house rents rose 20.5% in Portland, 15.6% in Colac and 10.1% in Horsham, against 7.0% across Melbourne.[80] A typical house in Colac is now advertised at about $600 a week.

Those rises are out of proportion to what people earn, because these towns don't have Melbourne's wage base. In 2023–24 the average wage in Colac was $60,812, about $1,169 a week, and in Horsham $61,165, against $77,688 in Greater Melbourne, a gap of almost $17,000 a year.[81] So a 15.6% rent rise in Colac, on an asking rent of about $600 a week, lands on workers paid around $325 a week less than the average Melbourne wage. On the coast, in Torquay and Ocean Grove, prices and rents were flat or falling.

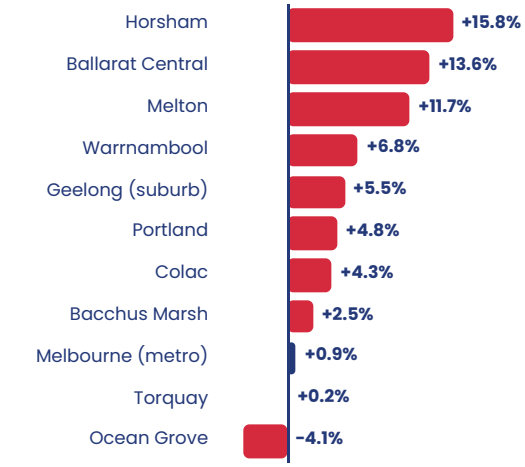
Average annual wage, 2023–24 VICTORIAN DATA

ATO data, weekly in brackets. Geelong is the whole council area.



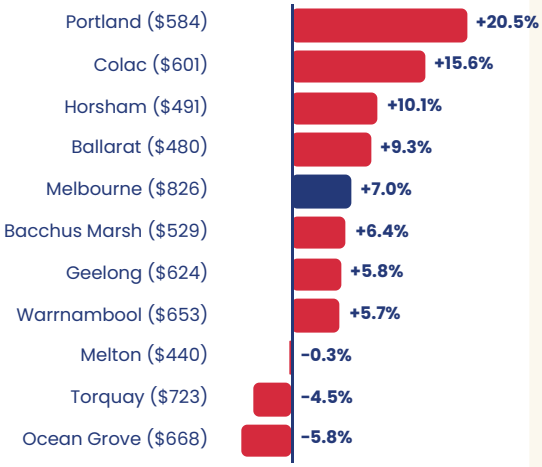
Median house price change, 2025 vs 2024 VICTORIAN DATA

Highest to lowest. Navy: metropolitan Melbourne.



House rent change, year to 12 Oct 2026 VICTORIAN DATA

Advertised rent for all houses, by postcode. Weekly rent in brackets.



Reading these figures. Prices are suburb medians; Geelong and Ballarat Central are the central suburbs only, and small towns have few sales, so medians swing. Rents are asking rents by postcode. The Government's Rental Report stops at September 2025.[82]

78. Valuer-General Victoria, Property sales statistics: median house prices by suburb, 2015–2025 (houses-by-suburb-2015-2025.xlsx). Change is calendar 2025 against calendar 2024. Geelong and Ballarat are the Geelong and Ballarat Central suburbs.
79. Valuer-General Victoria, Property sales statistics: Melbourne Metropolitan Area residential price statistics 1995–2026 (year-summary-2025.xlsx). Median house price $857,000 in 2024 and $865,000 in 2025.
80. SQM Research, Weekly Rents Index, week ending 12 October 2026: asking rents for all houses, 12-month change, by postcode (Melton 3337, Warrnambool 3280, Geelong 3220, Ballarat 3350, Torquay 3228, Ocean Grove 3226, Horsham 3400, Bacchus Marsh 3340, Portland 3305, Colac 3250) and for Melbourne.
81. Australian Taxation Office, Taxation statistics 2023–24, Individuals Tables 6A and 25, released 17 June 2026. Average salary or wages per wage earner, by postcode. Greater Geelong is postcodes 3212–3224, 3226 and 3227 (roughly the council area); Greater Melbourne is the Melbourne SA4s plus Mornington Peninsula. Weekly is annual divided by 52. Author's calculation.
82. Homes Victoria, Rental Report, September quarter 2025 (annual change in rent index, new lettings).

EDUCATION AND CHILDCARE

Regional children start school behind, and the gap widens on the way through.

The learning gap between city and country students opens before school and keeps growing: by 15, regional students are more than a year of learning behind students in the major cities.

Across Australia in 2024, 54.0% of children in major cities were developmentally on track on all five measures when they started school, against 50.5% in regional areas.[83] By age 15 it's much wider. In the PISA 2025 tests, which report by school location nationally, 52% of major-city students met the national proficient standard in maths, against 39% of regional students and 30% of remote students, and the pattern held for reading and science.[84] The regional gaps are 30 points in maths, 27 in reading and 24 in science. The OECD suggests about 20 points is roughly a year of schooling, so as an illustration, not a precise measure, regional 15-year-olds are about a year and a half behind in maths (see box).[85] By adulthood, 32.8% of Melburnians hold a bachelor degree, against 18.2% of other Victorians.[86]

The causes are familiar to anyone who teaches in the country: harder-to-fill positions, longer travel, fewer subject choices in small secondary schools, and buildings that have been left to run down.

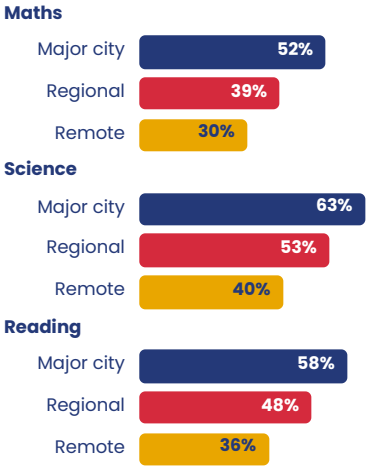
In our survey, 81% rated equity in education poor. Several people singled out public funding for private schools and students with additional needs left behind in mainstream classrooms. TAFE and skills was the best-rated service in the whole survey, with 46% satisfied.[87]

> "Intergenerational poverty leads to poor education, poor health outcomes, more crime and social division. It costs more to not deal with these issues than it does to deal with them."
>
> **SURVEY RESPONDENT**
> MAN, 65+, REGIONAL CITY

Students meeting the national proficient standard

NATIONAL DATA

PISA 2025, Australian students by school location



Source: ACER, PISA 2025.

50.5%
of regional children start school on track on all five measures (cities 54.0%)

81%
of survey respondents rate equity in education poor

ROUGHLY HOW FAR BEHIND, IN YEARS OF SCHOOLING

1.5	1.4	1.2
Maths, 30 points	Reading, 27 points	Science, 24 points

Regional vs major-city 15-year-olds, PISA 2025. Illustrative: about 20 points ≈ one year (OECD).

83. Australian Early Development Census, 2024 Key Findings (national).
84. ACER, PISA 2025: Australian students perform above OECD average, *Teacher*, September 2026 (national results by school location).
85. OECD, PISA 2025 Results (Volume I), chapter 2: about 20 score points is roughly one year of schooling for 15-year-olds (to be used with caution).
86. Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021 Census QuickStats: Greater Melbourne and Rest of Vic.
87. Aleta Moriarty campaign, *Western Victoria Community Survey*, June to October 2026 (n = 53). A self-selected sample reached mostly through campaign networks; it is not a representative poll. See 'About the survey'.

Crumbling classrooms and a state built on portables.

Regional and rural schools are far more likely to be in poor condition, and per student, rural schools rely on portables more than twice as heavily as inner-city Melbourne's.

The Auditor-General found 19% of rural and 14% of regional government schools were in poor condition, against 8% in Melbourne.[88] The lowest building condition ratings are at small country schools. Natimuk Primary near Horsham scores 2.86 out of 5, Great Western Primary 2.91 and Amphitheatre Primary in the Pyrenees 2.93. In West Wimmera, three of the shire's four government schools are rated in poor condition.[89]

Portables instead of classrooms

Relocatable buildings make up 43% of Victoria's 15,727 government school buildings, double the number a decade ago.[90] We grouped the Auditor-General's school-by-school data by type of area.[89] Melbourne's fast-growing outer suburbs rely on portables most, with 12.5 for every 1,000 students. Rural shires come next at 11.5, more than twice the inner-city rate of 4.7. Small country schools can't share buildings across a big campus, so a single portable often makes up a large part of the school.

In Western Victoria, 575 of 1,924 school buildings are relocatables (30%), and 82 of 261 schools have none at all.[89] The Budget's new schools all went to Melbourne (page 10).

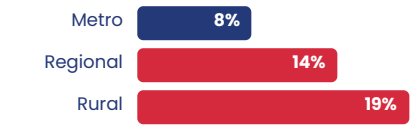
LOWEST BUILDING CONDITION RATINGS IN THE WEST

School	Shire	Building score /5
Natimuk Primary	Horsham	2.86
Macarthur Street Primary	Ballarat	2.90
Great Western Primary	Northern Grampians	2.91
Amphitheatre Primary	Pyrenees	2.93
Maroona Primary	Ararat	2.93
Goroke P–12 College	West Wimmera	2.96

Government schools in poor condition

VICTORIAN DATA

Victoria, 2024

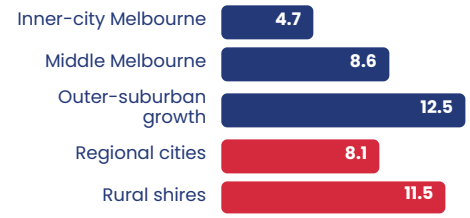


Source: Auditor-General.

Relocatable buildings per 1,000 students

VICTORIAN DATA

Government schools by type of area



Share of all school buildings that are relocatable: inner city 38%, middle Melbourne 42%, outer suburbs 55%, regional cities 34%, rural shires 30%. Campaign analysis of Auditor-General data. Outer suburbs are Melbourne's nine metropolitan interface councils; regional cities are the ten Regional Cities Victoria councils.

2.4×
portables per student, rural vs inner city

3 of 4
West Wimmera schools rated poor

88. Victorian Auditor-General's Office, Delivering School Upgrade Projects, 17 June 2026 (school condition as at October 2024).
89. Victorian Auditor-General's Office, Delivering School Upgrade Projects, school conditions dataset (condition score out of 5, permanent and relocatable buildings by school), June 2026.
90. J. Graham, "The Melbourne schools with the most portable buildings and the impact on students", *The Age*, 7 October 2026 (analysis of Auditor-General data; buildings include some storerooms and sheds).

Portables in Western Victorian schools

The schools that lean hardest on portables are a mix of tiny rural schools and fast-growing coastal and commuter towns. Surfside Primary in Ocean Grove, with 9 portables out of 12 buildings, is one of the few to get upgrade money in the 2026–27 Budget.[91,92]

HIGHEST SHARE OF PORTABLES

School	Council	Portables / all buildings
Beaufort Primary	Pyrenees	**4 of 5**
Bullarto Primary	Hepburn	**4 of 5**
Cape Clear Primary	Golden Plains	**4 of 5**
Surfside Primary	Greater Geelong	**9 of 12**
Bundarra Primary	Glenelg	**6 of 8**
Pomonal Primary	Ararat	**3 of 4**
St Leonards Primary	Greater Geelong	**5 of 7**
Mirripoa Primary	Greater Geelong	**9 of 13**
Darley Primary	Moorabool	**12 of 18**
Torquay Coast Primary	Surf Coast	**6 of 9**

Schools with four or more buildings. Excludes the interim Geelong English Language School.

LARGEST SCHOOLS WITH NO PORTABLES

School	Council	Students
Western Heights Secondary	Greater Geelong	**1,075**
North Geelong Secondary	Greater Geelong	**976**
Bannockburn P–12	Golden Plains	**805**
Matthew Flinders Girls Secondary	Greater Geelong	**604**
Timboon P–12	Corangamite	**500**
Colac Secondary	Colac Otway	**486**
Daylesford Secondary	Hepburn	**425**
Ararat Secondary	Ararat	**349**
Stawell Secondary	Northern Grampians	**346**
Pleasant Street Primary	Ballarat	**344**

82 of Western Victoria's 261 government schools have no relocatable buildings.

Childcare deserts

> It isn't only schools that are missing. There are whole towns in Western Victoria with no childcare at all, and many more where families wait months for a place.

When the Mitchell Institute mapped childcare in 2022, Avoca in the Pyrenees had no childcare places at all.[93] That's now changing: Early Learning Victoria's centre at Avoca Primary School is due to open in early 2027 with 57 places. The test is whether it opens on time, is fully staffed and meets demand. Where there are more than three children for every place, the Institute calls it a childcare desert; in Gordon, in Moorabool Shire, there's about one place for every 14 children.[94] Warrnambool had as many as 400 children on childcare waitlists in the past year, and new centres open below capacity because they can't find staff.[95]

0
childcare places in Avoca in 2022; a centre is due in 2027

1:14
places per child in Gordon

400
children on childcare waitlists in Warrnambool in the past year

91. Victorian Auditor-General's Office, Delivering School Upgrade Projects, school conditions dataset (condition score out of 5, permanent and relocatable buildings by school), June 2026.
92. Premier of Victoria, Labor invests in our children's future, May 2026; Victorian School Building Authority, Budget invests in the future of Victorian schools and kinder, May 2026.
93. Mitchell Institute, More than 1 million Australians have no access to childcare in their area, 22 March 2022 (Avoca: no childcare places).
94. Mitchell Institute, Victoria University, Mapping the childcare deserts, August 2024; Gordon figure reported in *The Standard*, Regional Victoria's childcare 'deserts' and 'oases' revealed, August 2024.
95. ABC News, New childcare centres might ease waitlists in regional Victoria, but worker shortages endure, 20 October 2025.

ROADS AND TRANSPORT

Half of Victoria's road deaths happen on regional roads, and the network is wearing out.

Regional roads are in worse condition and more dangerous than Melbourne's: half of all road deaths happen on them, and half the regional network is near the end of its structural life.

About 82% of Victoria's state road network is regional. In September 2026 the Auditor-General reported that 48% of state roads were in poor or very poor condition, up from 39% in 2021. The Department of Transport and Planning estimates it needs more than $3 billion a year just to hold the network at its current condition.[96] The 2026–27 Budget put $1.04 billion into road maintenance.[97]

The burden falls on the regions. On the Auditor-General's measure of remaining useful life, half of all state road in regional council areas was poor or very poor in 2024, against about a third in metropolitan council areas.[98] In 2025, 147 of Victoria's 288 road deaths happened on regional roads,[99] though fewer than a quarter of Victorians live in the regions. Visitors drive those roads too, so this compares deaths by location, not risk per kilometre driven.

For people who can't drive, distance is the whole problem. Outside Geelong, Ballarat and the main rail lines, many towns rely on a few coaches a day. Older people, teenagers and people with disability depend on lifts and volunteer drivers, and every closure of a bank branch, GP clinic or specialist service costs them more than anyone. Almost 800 regional bank branches closed across Australia between 2017 and 2023, more than a third of the total.[100]

Our respondents praised cheaper regional fares but complained about cross-regional services, connections, single-line sections, the reliability of trains, and roads that get patched rather than fixed.[101]

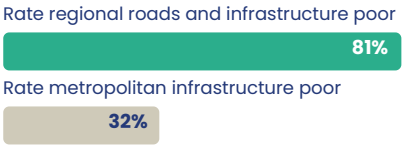
State roads in poor or very poor condition

VICTORIAN DATA

Remaining useful life measure

Sources: Auditor-General; campaign calculation from its datasets.

COMMUNITY SURVEY



> "The state of the roads in rural areas is atrocious."
>
> SURVEY RESPONDENT
> WOMAN, 45–54, SMALL TOWN OR RURAL AREA

96. Victorian Auditor-General's Office, Maintaining State Roads, 9 September 2026.
97. West Vic Brolga, Western Victoria: State Budget 2026–27, May 2026 (media, reporting the Government's claim that 70% of the $1.04 billion road package goes to regional Victoria).
98. Campaign calculation from the Auditor-General's Maintaining State Roads datasets (remaining useful life, 2024 survey year), grouped into the Municipal Association of Victoria's 31 metropolitan and 48 regional councils.
99. Victoria Police, 288 lives lost on Victorian roads in 2025; regional and metropolitan split as reported by South East Voice, January 2026.
100. ABC News, Federal inquiry's final report calls on regional communities to be shielded from further bank closures, 24 May 2024.
101. Aleta Moriarty campaign, *Western Victoria Community Survey*, June to October 2026 (n = 53). A self-selected sample reached mostly through campaign networks; it is not a representative poll. See 'About the survey'.

Fewer trains, more crowding, and more of them late.

Regional train passengers get fewer services, more crowding and less punctual trains than Melbourne commuters, even though V/Line is given more time to count a train as on time.[102]

In September 2026, Metro Trains ran 98.2% of its scheduled services and 95.1% arrived on time. No V/Line line came close. On the Geelong line 88.0% of trains were on time, on the Ballarat line 83.4%, and on the Warrnambool and Ararat–Maryborough lines 88.8% and 86.6%. Only one line in the state, Shepparton, met V/Line's own 92% target.

The comparison isn't quite like for like, and that makes the regional result worse. A Metro train is late if it arrives five minutes or more behind schedule. A short-distance V/Line train, such as Geelong or Ballarat, gets six minutes, and a long-distance train, such as Warrnambool or Ararat, gets eleven. Held to Metro's test, more V/Line trains would count as late.

Short-distance lines also cancel more trains: Geelong ran 96.4% of services and Ballarat 96.8%, against Metro's 98.2%. Long-distance services ran more reliably, at 98.6% to 99.7%, but there are only a handful of them each day.

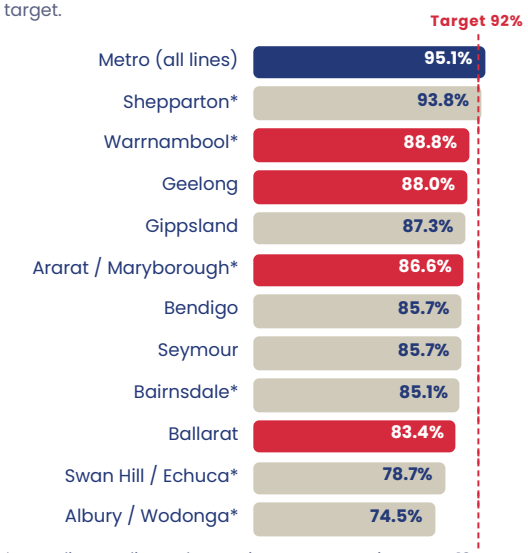
Packed in the corridors

Regional lines run far fewer trains than Melbourne's suburban network, often on single tracks where one late train holds up the next. When a service is cancelled or replaced by a coach, the next one fills up. Commuters on peak Geelong and Ballarat trains regularly stand in the aisles and vestibules for most of the trip, and our survey respondents raised crowding and the lack of connections between regional towns.[103] The answer is more services, more carriages and track upgrades that let trains pass each other, so regional passengers get a seat and arrive when the timetable says.

Trains arriving on time, by line, 2026

VICTORIAN DATA

Red: Western Victoria lines. Dashed line: V/Line's 92% target.



*Long-distance lines, where trains count as on time up to 10 min 59 sec late. Short-distance: 5 min 59 sec. Metro: 4 min 59 sec.

95.1%
of Metro trains on time, with a stricter test

1 of 11
V/Line lines met the 92% punctuality target

102. Metro Trains Melbourne, September 2026 results (delivery 98.19%, punctuality 95.06%); V/Line line-by-line reliability and punctuality, 2026, as reported by the Department of Transport and Planning, Public transport network performance. Metro trains count as punctual up to 4 minutes 59 seconds late; V/Line short-distance trains up to 5 minutes 59 seconds and long-distance trains up to 10 minutes 59 seconds.

103. Aleta Moriarty campaign, *Western Victoria Community Survey*, June to October 2026 (n = 53). A self-selected sample reached mostly through campaign networks; it is not a representative poll. See 'About the survey'.

BANKING

Western Victoria has lost two in every five bank branches since 2017.

Bank branches are disappearing from Western Victoria: the region had 206 in June 2017 and 121 by June 2025, a dozen towns have lost their last branch, and dozens more are down to one.

Banks have been closing branches everywhere, Melbourne included. The difference is what's left behind. When a suburban branch shuts, there's usually another a few minutes away by car, tram or bus. When a country town loses its branch, the nearest one can be an hour's round trip, with no public transport to get there.

APRA's records show Western Victoria fell from 206 bank branches in June 2017 to 121 in June 2025, a 41% drop. Eleven towns that had a branch in 2017 had none in 2025, from Casterton and Kaniva to Mortlake, Koroit and Skipton. Another 34 towns and suburbs were down to a single branch, including Stawell, Port Fairy, Terang, Timboon, Cobden, Heywood and Apollo Bay.[104]

The closures haven't stopped. Bendigo Bank shut its Bannockburn branch on 25 September 2025, leaving one of Victoria's fastest-growing towns without a bank and removing its ATM. Customers were sent to Geelong West and Corio, and Bannockburn has no public transport.[105] Bendigo also closed branches in central Ballarat and on Malop Street in Geelong,[106] and ANZ left Camperdown in 2023.[107]

The fallback is Bank@Post, which runs through more than 3,300 post offices but caps deposits at $10,000 a day.[108] Going online isn't a full answer either: digital ability and affordability gaps are largest outside the capital cities, and 12.4% of people there rely on mobile-only internet.[109] The big four banks have paused regional closures until at least mid-2027, CBA and Westpac until the end of the decade, and the banking industry wants to trial up to ten shared "banking hubs" in towns without a branch.[110]

Bank branches in Western Victoria

WESTERN VICTORIA

June 2017 vs June 2025

Geelong, Ballarat and Warrnambool & South West statistical regions plus the Grampians area. Source: APRA.

LOST THEIR LAST BRANCH, 2017–2025

BALMORAL · BEULAH · CASTERTON · GOROKE · HARROW · JEPARIT · KANIVA · KOROIT · MORTLAKE · QUEENSCLIFF · SKIPTON · + BANNOCKBURN, SEPT 2025

−41%
branches in Western Victoria, 2017 to 2025

34
towns and suburbs down to one branch

104. Australian Prudential Regulation Authority, ADI points of presence statistics, June 2017 to June 2025; campaign count of branches in the Geelong, Ballarat and Warrnambool & South West statistical regions and the Grampians area.
105. Golden Plains Times, Outrage as bank reveals plan to close Bannockburn branch, 2025 (media).
106. ABC News, Bendigo Bank to close 10 branches, leaving some regional towns without financial services, 8 July 2025.
107. The Standard, ANZ to close Camperdown branch in April 2023, November 2022 (media).
108. ABC News, Bendigo Bank closes several country branches leaving older Australians struggling to manage, 19 August 2025.
109. Australian Digital Inclusion Index, The 2025 findings.
110. SmartCompany, Major banks unveil plan to bring banking back to regions left without branches, 8 October 2026; Yahoo Finance, Westpac extends regional branch moratorium to 2030, 17 November 2025.

WORK FROM HOME

Working from home brings city wages home to regional main streets.

Working from home could be one of the cheapest regional development policies available: it lets thousands of Geelong and Ballarat workers earn Melbourne wages without the commute, keeps their spending in local towns, and opens jobs to women and people with disability who can't manage a daily three-hour round trip.

In 2021, 14% of Geelong's workers and 6% of Ballarat's had jobs in Greater Melbourne.[111] For Greater Geelong, that's about 18,000 people; for Ballarat, about 3,200.[112] About 36% of employed Australians now usually work from home some of the time,[113] and about 429,400 Victorian employees do so one to two days a week.[114]

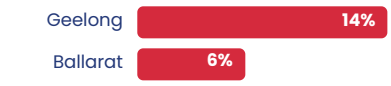
More people in work. Flexible work is drawing in people the daily commute shut out. Between 2019 and 2022, workforce participation in jobs suited to working from home rose 8.5% for women with young children and 6% for people with disability.[114] That matters: in 2022, 60.5% of working-age Australians with disability were in the labour force, against 84.9% of those without.[115] In regional areas, where the nearest suitable job may be an hour away, home-based work can be the difference between a job and no job.

A law stuck in the upper house. The Government's bill to make two days a week a legal right passed the Legislative Assembly in July 2026, then stalled in the Legislative Council, which sent it to a select committee.[116] The new Premier has since pushed the start date back to July 2027 and signalled he may soften it after meeting business leaders.[117] Business groups argue about productivity and CBD vibrancy,[114] but inner-city foot traffic and commercial rents shouldn't decide where regional families earn and spend their wages.

Not every job can be done from home, and nobody is asking a nurse, a shearer or a teacher to try. But with poor regional transport and so many high-paying jobs in Melbourne, two days at home could help the regions for relatively little direct public spending, subject to costing.

Workers whose job is in Greater Melbourne VICTORIAN DATA

Share of employed residents, 2021 Census



Source: Charting Transport analysis of ABS Census data.

~18,000
Geelong workers with jobs in Melbourne

61% vs 85%
labour force participation, with and without disability, 2022

WORK FROM HOME AND WOMEN'S WORK

+9 pts Australia: participation in jobs that can be done from home, women with young children, 2019 to 2023

+4.4 pts the same for people with a disability or health condition

−2.8 pts United States: mothers of children under five, January to June 2025, the sharpest fall for that period in over 40 years, amid return-to-office mandates

In the US, each one-point rise in working from home lifted full-time employment among people with a physical disability by about 1%.[118] Time saved: about $110 a week.[119]

Sources: CEDA, More than a third of Australians still work from home as office mandates loom, Dec 2024; L. Prewitt and M. Heggeness, Labor force participation tracker: parents with children under 5, University of Kansas, 28 Aug 2025.

111. Charting Transport, How do commuting distances vary across Melbourne and Victoria?, September 2023 (analysis of 2021 Census place-of-work data).
112. Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021 Census QuickStats: Greater Geelong (129,590 employed) and Ballarat (53,104 employed); commuter numbers are campaign calculations.
113. Australian Bureau of Statistics, Working arrangements, August 2025.
114. Parliament of Victoria, Debating the future of working from home, Parliamentary Library research paper, 13 May 2026 (citing HILDA Survey data).
115. Australian Bureau of Statistics, Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia: Summary of Findings, 2022 (ages 15–64).
116. Victorian Legislation, Equal Opportunity Amendment (Work from Home) Bill 2026 (passed the Assembly 30 July 2026; referred to a Legislative Council select committee 10 September 2026).
117. Dynamic Business, Victoria's new premier is already softening the WFH bill, 4 August 2026; HRD, Victoria pushes work-from-home law start back to July 2027, Aug. 2026.
118. N. Bloom, G. Dahl and D.-O. Rooth, Work from home and disability employment, NBER Working Paper 32943, 2024, revised 2025.
119. Premier of Victoria, Work from home protected in law from 1 September, 4 March 2026 (Government estimate).

Two days at home: an illustrative value of work done from regional homes.

On cautious assumptions, two days a week at home for Geelong and Ballarat's Melbourne commuters would see about $450 million a year of Melbourne-paid work done from regional homes, about 4,270 full-time jobs' worth. That's existing work relocated, not new jobs.

Our estimate: what working from home is worth

CAMPAIGN ESTIMATE

Two days a week at home for commuters in jobs that allow it

Result	Geelong	Ballarat	Total
Full-time jobs' worth of work done locally	3,630	640	4,270
Value of work done from regional homes, a year	$380 m	$67 m	$447 m
Local spending kept in town, a year	$25 m	$4 m	$29 m
Commuting hours saved, a year	2.1 m	0.4 m	2.5 m

Campaign estimate.[120] Figures rounded.

Time lost commuting to Melbourne CAMPAIGN ESTIMATE

Door to door, per commuter, a year. Deliberately conservative.

From	Hrs a day	Hrs a year	2 days home saves	5 days home saves
Geelong	2.5	575	230 h (5.8 wks)	**575 h (14.4 wks)**
Ballarat	3	690	276 h (6.9 wks)	**690 h (17.3 wks)**
Melton	2	460	184 h (4.6 wks)	**460 h (11.5 wks)**

Working fully from home gives back **14 to 17 working weeks a year** to Geelong and Ballarat commuters. The 21,062 people from these three areas working in the City of Melbourne spend about **10.8 million hours** a year commuting.

46 working weeks of 40 hours. Low–high hours a year: Geelong 460–690, Ballarat 575–805, Melton 269–575. Trains: Geelong 59 min, Ballarat 65–95 min each way (Daniel Bowen; The Courier); Melbourne average commute 70 min a day (Real Insurance). Workers: City of Melbourne.

Assumptions

Change any of these and the estimate moves in proportion

Input	Geelong	Ballarat	Basis
Employed residents (2021 Census)	129,590	53,104	ABS QuickStats
Share whose job is in Greater Melbourne	14%	6%	Charting Transport
Commuters to Melbourne	~18,140	~3,190	Calculated
Share in jobs that can be done from home	50%	50%	Assumption
Days at home each week	2 of 5	2 of 5	Proposed legal right
Average full-time earnings a year	$104,700	$104,700	ABS AWOTE, Vic, Nov 2025
Local spending kept per home day	$30	$30	Assumption
Working weeks a year	46	46	Assumption
Round-trip commute avoided per home day	2.5 hours	3 hours	Assumption

$447m
illustrative value of work done from homes in Geelong and Ballarat

4,270
full-time jobs' worth of work done in the region

$29m
a year spent in local shops and cafes instead of the CBD

2.5m
hours a year not spent commuting

How to read the estimate

This is the value of work done from regional homes, not new money or new jobs. It counts both home days, but many commuters already work from home some of the time: if they average one day a week now, the extra change is about half, roughly $224 million and 2,135 jobs' worth. CEDA values the commuting time saved at about $110 a week, or about $5,000 to $5,300 over a working year: the value of time, not cash in hand. Treat these as orders of magnitude, and as benefits that need relatively limited direct public spending, subject to costing.

120. Campaign estimate. Commuters = employed residents (ABS 2021) × share working in Greater Melbourne (Charting Transport). Full-time-equivalent work = commuters × 50% in home-suitable jobs × 2 of 5 days. Wages = that × $104,712 (ABS full-time adult average weekly ordinary time earnings, Victoria, November 2025, × 52). Local spending = home-suitable commuters × 2 days × 46 weeks × $30. Hours = same days × 2.5 hours (Geelong) or 3 hours (Ballarat).

WOMEN'S SAFETY

Police record family violence at nearly twice the rate in regional Victoria.

Family violence is recorded at nearly twice the rate in regional Victoria as in Melbourne, and parts of Western Victoria are among the worst in the state: Northern Grampians, Horsham, Ararat and Glenelg all run at about double the Victorian rate.

In 2023–24, police recorded 2,157 family incidents per 100,000 people in regional Victoria and 1,172 in Melbourne. Thirty of the 31 local government areas with the highest rates were regional.[121]

The latest figures, for the year to June 2026, show where the pressure is in the west. Northern Grampians recorded 3,004 family incidents per 100,000 people, the sixth-highest rate of any council in Victoria and more than double the state rate of 1,429. Horsham (2,861), Ararat (2,724) and Glenelg (2,723) aren't far behind. Greater Geelong's rate is lower, but with 5,485 incidents it has more than any other council in the region.[122]

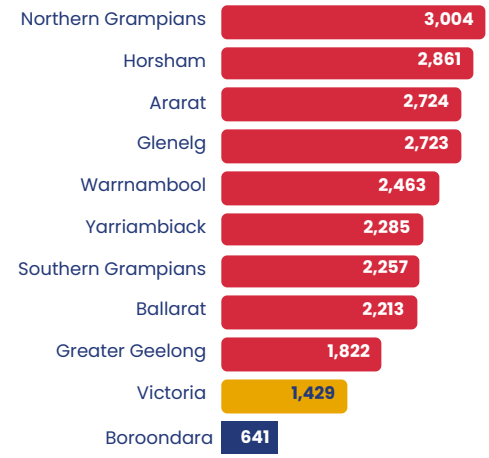
Services haven't kept pace. Support workers, police and courts are stretched across long distances, and a woman leaving a violent home in a small town has fewer places to go and fewer people who don't know her business.

Need support? 1800RESPECT: 1800 737 732 · Safe Steps (Victoria, 24/7): 1800 015 188 · In an emergency call 000.

Family incidents per 100,000 people

VICTORIAN DATA

Year to June 2026, police-recorded incidents, Western Victorian councils vs the state



Source: Crime Statistics Agency. Recorded incidents, not prevalence.

2.1×
the state rate in Northern Grampians

30 of 31
highest-rate councils are regional (2023–24)

121. ABC News, Domestic violence rates nearly twice as high in regional Victoria, 4 December 2024 (analysis of Crime Statistics Agency data, 2023–24).
122. Crime Statistics Agency, Family incidents by local government area, year ending June 2026 (data tables); Victorian rate calculated from statewide family incident totals.

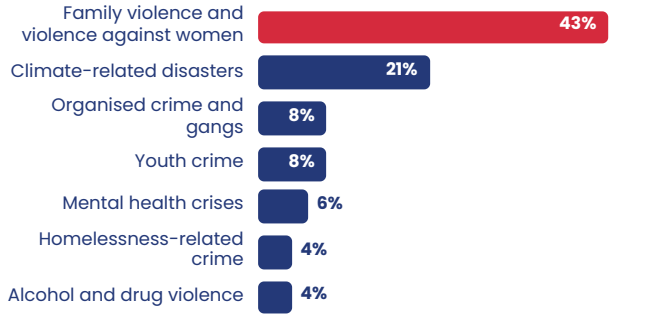
Victim-survivors told us the system failed them.

Violence against women was the clearest safety concern in our survey. Asked to name the single biggest safety risk facing Victoria, 43% chose family violence and violence against women, well ahead of any form of crime. 91% rated action on eliminating it poor, and 81% rated justice for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence poor.[123]

Some of the most powerful answers came from victim-survivors. They described police who didn't believe them, intervention orders that took years, and repeated court appearances used by perpetrators to drain them financially. Respondents were also critical of how the justice system treats First Nations people (86% poor) and young people (77% poor), while rating police conduct and community relations noticeably better.

The single biggest safety risk facing Victoria OUR SURVEY

Community survey, one answer per respondent



Write-ins grouped; 8% gave other or several answers.

> **"I have written to many politicians and other authorities in the last 10 years … I am writing this in the hope of change."**
>
> SURVEY RESPONDENT
> WOMAN, 65+, REGIONAL CITY

> *"Victoria Police overall are a complete failure to victims of Family Violence and at present there is genuinely no accountability mechanism that works."*
>
> WOMAN, 35–44, REGIONAL CITY

> *"System abuse is prolific in the justice system … women like me have no chance at all."*
>
> WOMAN, 55–64, REGIONAL CITY

> *"I work in Family Violence and see the systemic inequalities every day."*
>
> WOMAN, 65+

91%
rate action on violence against women poor

43%
name it the biggest safety risk in Victoria

123. Aleta Moriarty campaign, *Western Victoria Community Survey*, June to October 2026 (n = 53). A self-selected sample reached mostly through campaign networks; it is not a representative poll. See 'About the survey'.

CLIMATE, WATER AND DISASTERS

The highest climate risks fall on the communities least able to pay.

Western Victoria is living with drought, water restrictions and repeated bushfires, and those risks fall on communities with lower incomes, fewer services and less capacity to pay for recovery or rising insurance.

Water. The south-west had 15 months of record low or below-average rainfall to mid-2025. Farmers were hand-feeding stock and selling breeding ewes because they had no water, and the Government's drought support reached $144 million, including rate relief across 12 western council areas from Ararat and Moyne to Golden Plains and Glenelg. The Victorian Farmers Federation said the help came too late.[124] Towns felt it too: Apollo Bay, Marengo and Skenes Creek went to Stage 3 restrictions and Daylesford and Hepburn to Stage 2 in 2025,[125] and Geelong's storages entered March 2025 at 46%.[126]

Fire. The Grampians fires of February 2024 destroyed 46 homes, mostly around Pomonal, and the park burned again from December 2024.[127] In January 2026, fires burned about 400,000 hectares across Victoria, destroyed around 330 homes and killed more than 23,000 sheep and cattle. In the west, homes were lost at Natimuk, Streatham and Mount Mercer, and the Otways burned for weeks.[128] Insured losses reached $810 million.[129]

Cost. Natural disasters already cost Australia about $38 billion a year, rising to $73 billion by 2060 even on a low-emissions path.[130] An influential 2014 Productivity Commission inquiry found 97% of disaster funding went to recovery and only 3% to prevention.[131] Later inquiries say the balance has improved, but spending on prevention still isn't reported transparently. Regional households earn 27% less than Melburnians,[132] so every uninsured shed, lost season and premium rise takes a bigger bite. In our survey, 87% agreed low-income Victorians are least equipped to cope, and 77% that regional people carry a heavier burden from disasters.[133]

RECENT DISASTERS IN WESTERN VICTORIA

Feb 2024 Grampians fires: 46 homes destroyed, mostly at Pomonal.

Dec 2024 Fires return to the Grampians National Park.

2024–25 South-west drought: 15 months of record low or below-average rain; stock sold for lack of water.

2025 Water restrictions at Apollo Bay, Marengo, Skenes Creek, Daylesford and Hepburn.

Jan 2026 Statewide fires: about 400,000 ha burned and 330 homes lost, including at Natimuk, Streatham and Mount Mercer; $810 m in insured losses.

97%
of disaster funding went to recovery, 3% to prevention (2014 inquiry)

$144m
drought support after 15 dry months in the south-west

> "It took roughly 6 months for there to be funding from the government for these communities; as always, the rural community itself raised money to support themselves."
>
> SURVEY RESPONDENT
> WOMAN, 18–24, SMALL TOWN OR RURAL AREA

124. ABC News, Rate relief, food payments and water funding in new $75m Victorian drought package, 4 July 2025.
125. ABC News, Winter water restrictions turned on for three Victorian regions amid drought, 24 June 2025.
126. Barwon Water, Water restrictions to soon come into effect, 2025.
127. Victorian Government, February 2024 Western Victorian bushfires.
128. Risk Frontiers, The early January 2026 Victorian grassfires and bushfires, January 2026.
129. Insurance Business, Victoria bushfire losses now estimated at $810 million, April 2026 (PERILS estimate).
130. Deloitte Access Economics for the Australian Business Roundtable for Disaster Resilience & Safer Communities, Update to the economic costs of natural disasters in Australia, 2021.
131. Productivity Commission, Natural Disaster Funding Arrangements inquiry, 2014, as cited by the Insurance Council of Australia: Increase budget mitigation funding to protect communities from natural disasters, February 2017.
132. Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021 Census QuickStats: Greater Melbourne and Rest of Vic.
133. Aleta Moriarty campaign, *Western Victoria Community Survey*, June to October 2026 (n = 53). A self-selected sample reached mostly through campaign networks; it is not a representative poll. See 'About the survey'.

People want the state to prepare before disasters hit.

Climate and the environment was the top priority theme in our survey: 47% put it in their top three and 83% called climate change very or extremely serious.[134] People were far harsher on preparation than on recovery. 83% said the Government is doing poorly at protecting vulnerable communities from bushfire and 81% from floods, while recovery after disasters rated better. 81% said the insurance affordability crisis in high-risk areas is being handled poorly.

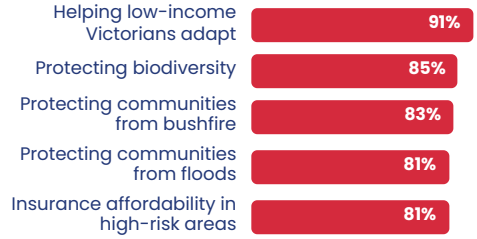
They also want the environment protected while the state adapts. 85% said biodiversity protection is going poorly, and native forest cleared for wind farms, culling permits and an unreleased koala report all came up unprompted. Data centres' demands on water drew particular anger in a region already on restrictions (page 35).

What would help

Prevention and recovery both matter. Communities hit by fire, flood or drought need recovery support that arrives quickly and lasts. But prevention has to be given priority, not left to whatever is left over: fuel management, fire-ready community buildings, water security for towns and farms, and drought support that starts when the dry starts rather than 15 months in. Farmers' groups have asked for the same: the Victorian Farmers Federation's complaint about the 2025 drought package was timing, not intent.[135]

Share saying the Government is doing poorly at... OUR SURVEY

Community survey



Percentages of all respondents.

83%
say climate change is very or extremely serious

87%
agree low-income Victorians are least equipped to cope

> *"It is better to invest than to insure."*
> MAN, 55–64, REGIONAL CITY

> *"I am all for renewables and to do it quickly BUT it must not be done at the expense of biodiversity and harm to wildlife."*
> WOMAN, 45–54, REGIONAL CITY

134. Aleta Moriarty campaign, *Western Victoria Community Survey*, June to October 2026 (n = 53). A self-selected sample reached mostly through campaign networks; it is not a representative poll. See 'About the survey'.

135. ABC News, Rate relief, food payments and water funding in new $75m Victorian drought package, 4 July 2025.

Farming feeds the state. Policy hasn't kept pace.

Victorian farmers work 3% of Australia's agricultural land but produce more than a quarter of the nation's farm output by value, and the water they depend on in the west is under more pressure than ever.[136]

3%
of Australia's agricultural land is in Victoria

26%
of the nation's farm production by value ($22.2b, 2023–24)

$22.1b
record food and fibre exports in 2024–25, the most of any state

150,700
people work in agriculture and food and fibre processing

Victoria is Australia's largest exporter of food and fibre, with 28% of the national total, and exports reached a record $22.1 billion in 2024–25. Much of it is grown, milked and shorn in the west: dairy in the south-west, grain and sheep in the Wimmera and Mallee, beef and wool across the Western District.

Government policy hasn't kept up. Farmers tell us they're carrying new taxes, compliance rules written without reference to the farm gate, and freight routes that no longer work. Meanwhile the same land is being asked to host transmission lines, wind farms and data centres (pages 33 to 37).

What farmers asked us for

- A government that helps **secure the inputs farms run on**: water, fertiliser, fuel and labour.
- **Fair markets**, and **viable transport** to move food, fuel and grain.
- Serious **control of feral animal numbers**.
- Practical support and information based on **evidence and proven practice**.
- A chance to **learn from Indigenous rangers about fire**. Traditional Owner groups in the west, including Gunditj Mirring, Barengi Gadjin, Eastern Maar and Wadawurrung, already lead cultural burns with the fire agencies.[137]

Water for the west

In July 2025, in response to the drought, the Premier announced a new Western Region Sustainable Water Strategy, a long-term plan required under the *Water Act 1989*.[138] It will replace a strategy written in 2011. Consultation closed in August 2026, a draft is due in mid-2027 and the final strategy in late 2027, with work starting from 2028.[139] Water underpins the region's farms, towns, rivers and cultural values.

WATER SECURITY: REVIEW, THEN DELIVER

Western Victoria is still working under a **2011** water strategy, and the new one won't take effect until **2028**.[139] We'll push for an independent review of what the 2011 strategy delivered and what it didn't, and for the new strategy to be funded and implemented with farmers and communities at the table, not left on the shelf when the drought breaks.

BIOSECURITY AT THE FARM GATE

Transmission companies and government officers are seeking entry to farms for surveys and construction. In February 2026 VicGrid threatened court orders to get onto **27 farms** on the VNI West route that hadn't agreed to access. Every vehicle, boot and machine that crosses a paddock can carry weeds, pests and disease.

No company should enter a farm without an **agreed access arrangement and biosecurity plan**, and breaches of the land access code should carry real penalties.

136. Agriculture Victoria, Victoria's agriculture and food industries (land 2021–22; production 2023–24; exports 2024–25; employment 2022–23).
137. Forest Fire Management Victoria, Traditional Owner-led burning gains momentum, 30 May 2023.
138. Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action, Western Region Sustainable Water Strategy; announced by the Premier in July 2025 under the *Water Act 1989*.
139. Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action, Introduction to the Western Region Sustainable Water Strategy (fact sheet; indicative timeline); Engage Victoria consultation closed 23 August 2026.
140. North Central News, Court order threat on access, 25 February 2026 (VicGrid access notices for 27 farms on the VNI West route).
141. Victorian Government, Transmission infrastructure and biosecurity fact sheet (Essential Services Commission Land Access Code of Practice; Agriculture Victoria "Come Clean, Go Clean").

Country brigades are fighting fires with the oldest trucks in the state.

The Auditor-General found in October 2026 that Victoria's fire trucks are ageing, not maintained on time and badly underfunded, and the oldest trucks are concentrated in rural brigades, where fire risk to towns, farms and bushland is high.[142]

57%
of CFA fire trucks are at least 15 years old (median age 16.4 years)

$1.5b
needed to replace and upgrade fire trucks over ten years

26.7%
of that funding has been found

54.4%
of the state's forest fire fleet was grounded with cracking before the 2025–26 season

The CFA runs 2,208 of Victoria's 3,068 fire trucks through 1,209 mostly volunteer brigades. It sends its newest trucks to busy urban stations and its oldest to the country: in remote and rural areas the average CFA truck is 21 years old, and almost half are 25 years or older. Some still make firefighters ride on the back, exposed to smoke and injury, with no anti-lock brakes or stability control. In 2025–26 the CFA reached 73% of structure fires on time against a 90% target.

The forest fire fleet run by the environment department is newer, but it was built badly. G-Wagen trucks were driven while overweight and Unimog trucks with cracked frames were kept in service. When the department accepted that any crack made a truck unroadworthy, it grounded more than half its fleet weeks before the fire season and had to scramble to repair them.

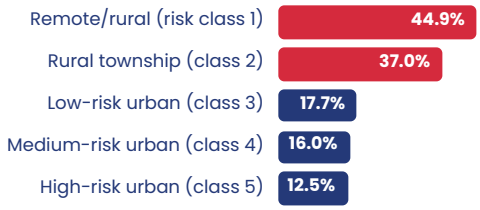
The fire services need about $1.5 billion to replace and upgrade their trucks over the decade to 2033–34. After the Treasurer told agencies to trim their bids, they have just over a quarter of it. Rural communities facing longer, hotter fire seasons shouldn't be relying on trucks older than the volunteers driving them.

21 yrs
average age of CFA trucks at remote and rural stations

73%
of structure fires reached on time by the CFA, against a 90% target

CFA trucks aged 25 years or more, by station risk class VICTORIAN DATA

Share of each class's fleet, 2025



Rural stations face fewer call-outs than city ones, but the fires they fight are often grass and bushfires threatening towns and farms.

Fire truck funding: needed vs found, 2024–25 to 2033–34 VICTORIAN DATA

MAINTENANCE FALLING BEHIND

Since 2021, only 58.2% of scheduled fire truck maintenance has been done on time. The forest fire fleet missed 14.4% of its annual pre-season services.

142. Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Managing Victoria's Firefighting Fleet*, tabled 14 October 2026.

ENERGY

People want renewables, built with the communities that host them.

Our survey showed strong support for renewables and a faster transition, but Western Victoria is hosting the wind farms and power lines while paying some of the state's highest power bills, and farmers say they're being overridden rather than consulted.

Renewables supplied 42.4% of Victoria's electricity in 2024–25, and the state's targets are 65% by 2030 and 95% by 2035.[143] Much of that will be built in the west. The Western Renewable Energy Zone takes in parts of Northern Grampians, Yarriambiack, Hindmarsh and Buloke,[144] and the VNI West transmission line will cross farmland near Stawell and Donald.[145]

Our respondents back the shift. 72% want faster action on renewables even if it costs more in the short term, and expanding renewables was the best-rated climate response, with 36% saying it's going well. One wrote that the battery rebate "helped quite a lot".[146] That support is conditional. People want it done fairly, with consultation, local benefit and protection for wildlife and farmland.

That's where it's going wrong. In March 2026 Parliament passed laws letting transmission companies compulsorily acquire land before environmental assessments are finished; the Victorian Farmers Federation said farmers were "gutted".[147] VicGrid has warned 27 landholders on the VNI West route that officers could enter their land if they keep refusing access.[145] Hosts are offered $8,000 per kilometre a year for 25 years,[148] but the VFF says payments should reflect year-on-year production losses, include neighbours, and fund benefits in the communities actually affected.[149]

Household bills. A typical household on the Powercor network, which covers most of western Victoria, pays $1,633 a year on the Victorian Default Offer, the regulator's maximum price for a standard plan, $152 more than in inner Melbourne.[150] Hosting the generation hasn't brought cheaper power to the towns next to it.

Standard electricity bill on the Victorian Default Offer, 2026–27 VICTORIAN DATA

Typical household, 4,000 kWh a year

Source: Essential Services Commission.

WHERE WE STAND WITH FARMERS

The **National Farmers' Federation** supports net zero by 2050, provided there are viable pathways and no sector-specific targets on agriculture.[151]

The **Victorian Farmers Federation** supports a smooth transition to renewables, but wants commercial consent, fair annual payments, a binding land access code, undergrounding of lines where possible, developers covering added costs, and consultation with affected communities.[152] Our recommendations line up with those principles.

72%
want faster renewables even if it costs more short-term

+$152
a year on power in the west vs inner Melbourne

143. Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action, Victorian renewable energy and storage targets.
144. VicGrid, Western Renewable Energy Zone.
145. ABC News, Deadline looms for farmers refusing transmission line work on properties, 28 February 2026.
146. Aleta Moriarty campaign, *Western Victoria Community Survey*, June to October 2026 (n = 53). A self-selected sample reached mostly through campaign networks; it is not a representative poll. See 'About the survey'.
147. ABC News, Farmers 'gutted' after compulsory land acquisition amendments pass Victorian parliament, 5 March 2026.
148. Premier of Victoria, Landholder payments for a fairer renewables transition, 23 February 2023.
149. Victorian Farmers Federation, Landholders have say on transmission, renewable energy and community benefits.
150. Essential Services Commission, Regulator reduces Victorian default electricity prices, 25 May 2026 (4,000 kWh a year, flat tariff).
151. National Farmers' Federation, Climate change (policy position).
152. Victorian Farmers Federation, Renewable energy and energy efficiency policy, February 2024.

Every oil shock is a reason to make our own power.

The 2026 fuel crisis showed how exposed regional Victoria is to a war on the other side of the world. Power generated here, and the batteries, vehicles and farm machinery that run on it, are the cheapest way to cut that exposure.

The fuel shock. On 28 February 2026 President Trump launched US strikes on Iran alongside Israel.[153] Iran shut the Strait of Hormuz, which carries about a fifth of the world's oil trade, and within three weeks unleaded hit a record national average of $2.38 a litre, 27% more than before the war. Diesel passed $3 a litre in nearly every capital, and at one point 45 Victorian service stations had no diesel and 75 had no unleaded.[154] Australia imports about 90% of its liquid fuel,[155] and Canberra has since committed $10 billion to fuel and fertiliser security, including a government-owned reserve.[156]

Country people felt it first. Farmers, truck drivers, tradies and anyone without a train or bus to fall back on can't just drive less, and diesel runs the harvest, the dairy and the freight that stocks country supermarkets. A stockpile buys a few weeks. It doesn't stop a war in the Gulf from setting the price of getting to work in Horsham.

What the numbers say. Electricity tells the same story. The average wholesale cost of generation on the east coast peaked at $189 a megawatt hour in 2022, when global gas prices spiked, and was about $104 in 2025; futures markets point to $80 to $90 by 2030. CSIRO and AEMO again found that renewables backed by storage are the lowest-cost new generation, and the report's lead author named the Iran war as one of the two biggest sources of uncertainty.[157]

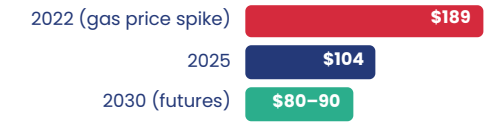
The build isn't cheap. AEMO puts the capital needed to 2050 at about $106 billion in today's dollars, but estimates that $6 billion of new transmission will save consumers $30 billion in avoided capital, operating and fuel costs.[158] At home the payback comes sooner. Households with solar and a battery can cut power bills by up to 90%, electric vehicle owners spend about $1,400 a year less on fuel and maintenance, and in March alone Australians driving EVs and hybrids avoided about $50 million in extra fuel costs.[159]

The costs that don't show up in those sums fall on the communities hosting the build (previous page). That's why the benefits have to land there too: solar and batteries on farms, schools and halls, community batteries in towns, fast chargers along regional highways, and a share of project revenue kept local through a Regional Windfall Fund.

Average wholesale generation price, east coast

EAST COAST MARKET

$ per megawatt hour



Source: CSIRO and AEMO, GenCost 2025–26.

Renewables: costs and benefits

NATIONAL DATA

BENEFITS

- Lowest-cost new generation[157]
- $30b saved from $6b of transmission[158]
- Up to 90% off power bills with solar and a battery[159]
- About $1,400 a year saved per EV
- Less exposure to oil and gas shocks

COSTS AND RISKS

- About $106b of capital to 2050
- Transmission costs doubled on some projects[160]
- Farmland, landscape and wildlife impacts on host communities
- Gas still needed as backup

~90%
of Australia's liquid fuel is imported

$2.38
record national average for a litre of unleaded, March 2026

153. NPR, Trump launches "Operation Epic Fury" on Iran, 28 February 2026.
154. ABC News, Here's what a month of fuel hikes looks like across Australia, 29 March 2026.
155. K. Morrison, IEEFA, Does the Iran ceasefire mean the fuel crisis is over? Not even close, 8 April 2026.
156. Bloomberg via Energy Connects, Australia unveils $7.2 billion fuel security plan push after Iran war supply shock (A$10 billion), 6 May 2026.
157. CSIRO and AEMO, GenCost 2025–26 Final Report, 15 July 2026.
158. AEMO, AEMO publishes least-cost pathway for the National Electricity Market (2026 Integrated System Plan), 25 June 2026.
159. Climate Council, Pedal to the Metal: A Budget to Break Free from Fuel Chaos, April 2026.
160. RenewEconomy, ISP warns of missed targets and added costs from delays, 10 December 2025 (on the Draft 2026 ISP).

MAJOR PROJECTS AND CONSENT

The benefits flow to cities and investors, while the risks stay in the regions.

Western Victoria is being lined up to host some of the largest data centres in the country, and they're being approved through fast-track pathways that sideline councils and communities before the risks to water, power, land and fire safety are known.

Data centres store and process the computing that runs cloud services and artificial intelligence. They need huge, constant supplies of electricity, cooling and land close to high-voltage lines, which is why developers are buying farmland next to the Moorabool Terminal Station and the Victorian Big Battery. The computing serves customers in Melbourne and around the world. The power lines, water demand, noise and fire risk stay here.

The approvals have been fast. NEXTDC's Corio data centre went through the state's Development Facilitation Program and had its permit 63 days after lodgement.[161] Our campaign then used freedom of information to ask for the environmental and social assessments behind that approval. We paid the fee, and the 30-day statutory deadline passed without a single document being released.

HyperDC lodged its application for a campus of up to 480 megawatts on Farming Zone land at Moorabool on 22 September 2026,[162] the same day the Government announced its new data centre rules.[163] Big projects like these can go straight to the Planning Minister under clause 53.22, which takes away neighbours' right to appeal to VCAT.[164] In our survey, data centres came up unprompted as a threat to water, wildlife and the supply of tradespeople.[165]

Data centres proposed or approved in and around the Western Victoria Region WESTERN VICTORIA

As at October 2026[166,167,168]

Project	Location	Size	Status	Who decides
NEXTDC GE1	148–158 O'Briens Rd, Corio (Geelong)	About 4 MW IT	Permit granted 24 Oct 2025, 63 days after lodgement	Development Facilitation Program, Planning Minister
HyperDC MBL1	715 Ballan Rd, Moorabool (near Geelong)	400–480 MW; $6.1 bn; 39.8 ha of Farming Zone	Lodged 22 Sept 2026, the day the new plan was announced; at referral	Planning Minister, clause 53.22
NEXTDC Lovely Banks	Lovely Banks (Geelong)	169 ha bought for $165 m; size not disclosed	No application yet	Not yet known
X2M / Resi Ventures	Miners Rest (Ballarat)	Data centre and renewable energy precinct; size not disclosed	No application as at July 2026	Council or Planning Minister
Syncline 'Victorian AI Hub'	Plumpton (City of Melton)	Two data centres on 350 ha	Proposed; petition tabled in Parliament	Not yet known

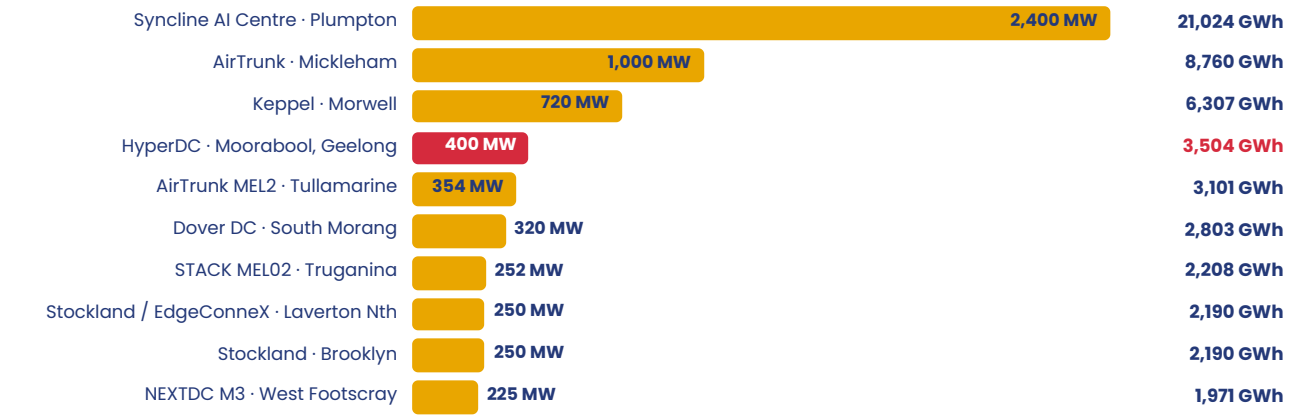
161. Department of Transport and Planning, Ministerial permits register, PA2503895, 148–158 O'Briens Road, Corio (lodged 22 August 2025, permit granted 24 October 2025); NEXTDC, GE1 Geelong.
162. Ministerial permits register, PA2604671, 715 Ballan Road, Moorabool (lodged 22 September 2026); The Urban Developer, HyperDC proposes $6.1bn data centre on Geelong farmland, 9 October 2026.
163. ABC News, New restrictions on data centre water use, proximity to schools under Victorian strategy, 22 September 2026.
164. Victoria Planning Provisions, Clause 53.22 Significant Economic Development (copy published by Mansfield Shire Council, August 2026): data centres qualify from $10 million outside Melbourne; applications are exempt from the decision requirements of s. 64(1)–(3) and the review rights of s. 82(1) of the *Planning and Environment Act 1987*.
165. Aleta Moriarty campaign, *Western Victoria Community Survey*, June to October 2026 (n = 53). A self-selected sample reached mostly through campaign networks; it is not a representative poll. See 'About the survey'.
166. DatacenterDynamics, Australian data center firm NextDC buys 169 hectares outside Melbourne, 25 June 2026.
167. City of Ballarat, Statement regarding Miners Rest data centre proposal, 15 July 2026.
168. Star Weekly, Data centre petition, 22 June 2026.

One data centre at Moorabool could use about twice Geelong's electricity, on a provisional estimate.

Almost 80 data centres are operating or planned in Victoria. In a hypothetical scenario where the ten biggest were built and ran flat out, they could use more electricity in a year than the whole state uses now.[169]

Victoria's ten biggest proposed or operating data centres VICTORIAN DATA

Capacity in megawatts, and potential electricity use in a year at full load (GWh)



Highlighted: the HyperDC campus proposed on Farming Zone land at Moorabool, near Geelong.

6,171 MW
announced capacity of the top ten: up to 54,000 GWh a year as an upper bound

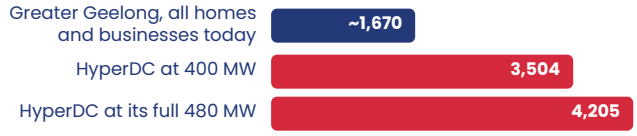
120%
of Victoria's current yearly electricity use, in a hypothetical flat-out scenario

2×
Greater Geelong's yearly electricity use (provisional), for Moorabool at 400 MW; about 2.5× at 480 MW

These are hypothetical upper bounds: announced capacities may be IT load or total facility demand, may be staged, and several projects may never be built. But the grid has to be planned for what's approved, not what's eventually used. Before Moorabool is approved, the community should know where the power will come from, who pays for grid upgrades, and what it means for local prices and reliability.

Moorabool vs Greater Geelong (provisional) VICTORIAN DATA

Electricity use in a year, GWh



WHAT WE HEARD

In our community survey, data centres came up unprompted as a threat to **water, wildlife and the supply of tradespeople**, in a region already living with water restrictions and stretched building trades.[170]

169. Campaign analysis of announced capacities from RenewMap, Certified Strategic, the Victorian planning register and media reports, October 2026. Annual use assumes each site runs at its stated capacity around the clock once fully built (MW × 8,760 hours). Victoria: about 45,000 GWh a year (AEMO operational demand, Q3 2025 to Q2 2026). Greater Geelong: about 1,670 GWh a year, estimated from 2023–24 electricity emissions (Snapshot) at the Victorian National Greenhouse Accounts factor.

170. Aleta Moriarty campaign, *Western Victoria Community Survey*, June to October 2026 (n = 53). A self-selected sample reached mostly through campaign networks; it is not a representative poll. See 'About the survey'.

New rules arrived after the biggest projects were lodged.

The Government's new data centre plan fixes some problems, but it doesn't apply to projects already lodged, and it still lets the biggest ones bypass councils and appeal rights.

Electricity

At full load, a 480 MW campus would use about **4.2 TWh a year**, roughly what a million Victorian homes use.[171] Victorian data centre energy use is projected to quadruple by 2030.[172]

RISK

Water

HyperDC plans to connect to **drinking water**; a Barwon Water recycled-water main isn't expected until about **2035**.[173] Data centres already use under 1% of Victoria's drinking water for cooling.[172]

RISK

Fire

The Moorabool site sits beside the Victorian Big Battery, where a battery caught fire in July 2021 and toxic smoke warnings went out for **Batesford, Bell Post Hill, Lovely Banks and Moorabool**.[174]

RISK

Land

HyperDC's application includes **vegetation removal** on Farming Zone land.[173] NEXTDC's 169 ha at Lovely Banks was earmarked for **housing** before it was bought.[175]

RISK

What the new plan does, and doesn't do

The Sustainable Data Centre Action Plan, announced in September 2026, is mostly policy so far. A Ministerial Statement of Expectations guides assessment of applications lodged on or after 23 September 2026. Firmer controls, like a 150-metre buffer from homes, limits in rural zones and fire, water and grid authorities as referral agencies, need planning scheme amendments with no timetable. Using non-drinking water for cooling, bringing their own renewable energy and paying for grid upgrades are announced, not yet law.[176]

The gaps are just as real. HyperDC's Moorabool application was lodged on 22 September, the day before the Statement applies,[173] and nothing changes for approved projects. Rural land next to transmission lines and substations, exactly where Moorabool and Lovely Banks sit, is still allowed. Proponents need only "actively engage" with communities and councils, with no detail on what that means.[176]

Regional Victoria has seen this before. The Commonwealth Games were promised to five regional centres, then cancelled in 2023 at a cost of more than $589 million, with a business case prepared without consulting the councils that controlled most venues.[177] People raised the Games again and again in our survey.[178] Every major project should face the same test: risks, benefits and a plan to manage them, shown to the community before the decision.

WHAT WE'LL PUSH FOR

A social licence test in law. Under a Regional Equity Act, no major project is approved until its risks, benefits, mitigation plan and consultation record are published and the host community has had a real say.

Assess every data centre together. A cumulative impact assessment of all data centres, proposed and approved, with no new large approvals in the west until it's published.

Open books and real consultation. All information public on lodgement, enhanced consultation and independent due diligence.

The precautionary principle. Where the risks aren't known, the project waits until they are.

No exemptions, and appeal rights restored. Full list: recommendations 27 to 32.

> "It is evident to me that the concerns of constituents are not making their way to our elected representatives."
>
> SURVEY RESPONDENT
> WOMAN, 45–54, SMALL TOWN OR RURAL AREA

171. Campaign calculation: 480 MW × 8,760 hours = 4.2 terawatt-hours a year at full load, divided by the 4,000 kWh a year the Essential Services Commission uses for a typical household. Actual use depends on how fully the campus is used and its cooling efficiency.
172. ABC News, New restrictions on data centre water use, proximity to schools under Victorian strategy, 22 September 2026.
173. Ministerial permits register, PA2604671, 715 Ballan Road, Moorabool (lodged 22 September 2026); The Urban Developer, HyperDC proposes $6.1bn data centre on Geelong farmland, 9 October 2026.
174. TechCrunch, A Tesla Megapack caught fire at the Victorian Big Battery facility in Australia, 30 July 2021.
175. DatacenterDynamics, Australian data center firm NextDC buys 169 hectares outside Melbourne, 25 June 2026.
176. Hall & Wilcox, Sustainable Data Centre Action Plan: new energy, water and planning requirements, 23 September 2026.
177. Victorian Auditor-General's Office, Withdrawal from the 2026 Commonwealth Games, 20 March 2024.
178. Aleta Moriarty campaign, *Western Victoria Community Survey*, June to October 2026 (n = 53). A self-selected sample reached mostly through campaign networks; it is not a representative poll. See 'About the survey'.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Regional Victoria hosts the infrastructure that powers Victoria's economy. Regional communities should share in the wealth it creates.

Three flagship reforms

1
Regional Equity Act

FAIR FUNDING AND ACCOUNTABILITY

A Regional Equity Statement with every Budget, showing capital and recurrent spending by region, measuring service gaps and explaining how major decisions affect regional communities. A population-share floor for regional infrastructure, with extra funding for disadvantage, distance, infrastructure condition, growth and service need.

2
Regional Procurement Guarantee

KEEP PUBLIC MONEY CIRCULATING LOCALLY

Enforceable targets for state-funded projects and contracts to use regional businesses, local workers, apprentices and local goods and services wherever practical. Large contracts broken into smaller lots, lower barriers for small firms, and annual reporting on how much government buying reaches regional Victoria.

3
Regional Windfall Fund

A FAIR SHARE OF THE WEALTH CREATED HERE

A legally protected fund that directs a share of revenue from major developments, renewable energy and transmission, and extractive industries such as mining, quarrying and gas into the communities hosting them, for housing, health and education facilities, local roads, transport, water security, environmental repair and training.

These three bring the paper's other recommendations together into one economic plan, with clear funding, measurable targets and public accountability. School funding already carries loadings for location and disadvantage; the Regional Equity Act applies the same logic across government.

1. Legislate for equity

You can't close a gap the Budget refuses to show.

1. **A Regional Equity Act** requiring a Regional Equity Statement with every Budget, checked by the Parliamentary Budget Office. It reports capital and recurrent spending by region over a rolling four-year period, publishes annual expenditure separately from total project values, and explains how statewide projects are attributed.
2. **Regional impact statements** for major budget measures, laws and service closures or centralisations.
3. **A public regional dashboard** reporting every gap on pages 4 to 9 each year, plus specialist waits by health service, ambulance response by council and NAPLAN by region.

2. Fund according to need

A per-head share still short-changes small, distant towns.

4. **Build a Regional Equity Loading** into capital and recurrent funding formulas, weighted for service need, remoteness, growth and the condition of existing infrastructure.
5. **A floor, not a ceiling.** Measured over a rolling four years, the regional share of state-funded infrastructure should never fall below the regional share of the population; need decides how far above it goes.
6. **Fix what's falling apart.** Act immediately on safety hazards in regional and rural schools, publish condition assessments within 12 months, and fund a schedule to repair every school in poor condition within one parliamentary term. Replace relocatables according to condition, suitability and sustained enrolment demand, and close the road maintenance shortfall over four years.

3. Health and safety close to home

Distance shouldn't decide who gets care in time.

7. **A 12-month ceiling on routine waits** for a first public paediatric appointment by 2028. The clock starts when the referral is received and stops at a substantive appointment with a paediatrician. If the standard is breached, the case is escalated and families are offered another provider and travel support. Urgent cases keep their shorter clinical timeframes, and regional families get a guaranteed share of new appointments.
8. **A regional ambulance standard:** at least 60% of Code 1 cases reached within 15 minutes in every council area by 2030, backed by staffing, station coverage and hospital handover targets, and reported as rolling results with safeguards for small numbers in sparsely populated councils.
9. **Grow our own health workforce** with scholarships tied to regional service, and more regional psychiatry, psychology and paediatric training places.
10. **Make mental health care a regional priority.** Crisis and step-down beds in every regional city, guaranteed follow-up for everyone leaving acute care, local Mental Health and Wellbeing services in smaller towns, telehealth backed by face-to-face clinicians, and suicide prevention funded to rural need, until regional access to psychiatrists matches the major-city rate.
11. **A Victorian Rural Health Strategy** with public indicators reported every year, including specialists, GPs and allied health workers per person, travel and waiting times, and health spending per person by area, aligned with a National Rural Health Strategy.
12. **Fund family violence services to need,** using recorded incidents alongside unmet demand, distance, service capacity and barriers to reporting, so places where women find it harder to report aren't short-changed. Start with Northern Grampians, Horsham, Ararat and Glenelg.

4. Make regional life viable

People stay where they can find a home, childcare, a bank and a way to get around.

13. **A Regional Housing Infrastructure Fund** for the sewerage, water, roads and council planning staff that hold back new homes, with key-worker housing built in.
14. **Build social housing where the need is.** Allocate new social housing using Victorian Housing Register demand together with homelessness, overcrowding, housing condition and local service capacity, published by town.
15. **Childcare in the deserts.** Make sure Avoca's new early learning centre opens on time in 2027, is fully staffed and meets demand, and build public or not-for-profit childcare in other deserts, starting with Gordon, Portarlington, Golden Plains and the Horsham district.
16. **A Regional Mobility Guarantee:** a minimum level of public or community transport for every town, including links between regional towns, and more peak V/Line services and carriages so commuters get a seat.
17. **A last-branch guarantee.** The state should work with banks, Australia Post and community banks to put a shared banking hub or full-service Bank@Post in every town that has lost its last branch.
18. **Fair water bills.** No regional household should pay more than 10% above the Melbourne average, comparing bills at the same consumption and with comparable charges.

5. Climate, water and energy

Build the transition with regional communities, and prepare for the disasters already here.

19. **A fair deal for hosts and neighbours.** Payments that reflect ongoing production losses, payments for neighbours, a binding land access code, no farm entry without an agreed access and biosecurity plan, penalties for breaches, undergrounding assessed on every new line, and no compulsory acquisition before environmental assessment.
20. **Prioritise prevention, and keep recovery strong.** A dedicated regional disaster mitigation fund for fuel management, fire-ready community buildings and flood works, on top of recovery support, not instead of it, with prevention and recovery spending reported every year. An influential 2014 Productivity Commission inquiry found 97 cents in every disaster dollar was spent after the event.
21. **Water security for towns and farms.** Review how the 2011 Western Region Sustainable Water Strategy was implemented, then fund and deliver the new one with farmers at the table. Finish rural pipelines like East Grampians, secure town supplies before restrictions bite, and trigger drought support when the dry starts, not a year in.

6. Share the wealth and the work

Keep the money made in the regions working in the regions.

22 **Back the people who feed us.** Help farmers secure water, fertiliser, fuel and labour, especially in a supply shock; keep markets fair and freight routes for food, fuel and grain viable; fund serious feral animal control; provide practical advice grounded in evidence; and partner with Traditional Owner rangers to share cultural fire knowledge.

23 **A Regional Procurement Guarantee.** Enforceable regional targets on state contracts, building on Local Jobs First, which already applies to regional projects from $1 million [179] and requires apprentices and trainees for 10% of labour hours on construction projects over $20 million. Break big contracts into smaller lots and report each year on how much state buying reaches regional businesses.

24 **A Regional Windfall Fund.** A legally protected fund that returns a fixed share of state revenue from mining, quarrying, gas and other extractive industries, major renewable and transmission projects, and windfall gains on rezoned land to the regions that host them. The law would separate existing revenue from any new levies, set rates, expected receipts, governance and allocation rules, and keep landholder compensation separate from broader community benefits. Western Australia's Royalties for Regions returns up to 25% of mining and onshore petroleum royalties to regional areas. [180]

25 **A Regional Energy Dividend.** Within the Windfall Fund, renewable energy and transmission projects pay into pooled, locally governed funds big enough for housing, health facilities and training. Western Victoria goes first.

26 **A work-from-home guarantee for regional workers.** Pass the right to work from home two days a week, without carve-outs that weaken it. Make the Victorian Public Service a model employer: earmark a set proportion of senior roles, as an affirmative measure, as eligible to be done remotely or from regional hubs in Geelong, Ballarat and other centres by suitably qualified regional and rural workers, so taxpayer dollars work harder for regional communities. Not every role in the public service or industry can be done from home.

7. Consent before concrete

Regional communities shouldn't carry the risks of projects that mostly benefit others without a say.

27 **A social licence test in the Regional Equity Act.** No major project is approved without published disclosure of its risks, benefits, mitigation strategies and consultation, and evidence of broad-based community support, assessed by the decision-maker (the Planning Minister or council) against published criteria. Traditional Owner rights are recognised in their own right, not folded into general consultation.

28 **Publish everything on lodgement.** Environmental, social, water, energy, fire and traffic reports, and the due diligence behind them, go online when an application is lodged. Nobody should need FOI to see them.

29 **Close the data centre loophole.** Apply the Statement of Expectations and the coming planning controls to every application not yet decided, including those lodged before 23 September 2026, with enhanced consultation and independent due diligence.

30 **A moratorium until the work is done.** No new large data centre approvals in Western Victoria until adequate due diligence, risk mitigation strategies and consultation are in place, applying the precautionary principle. The pause lifts on a set timetable once a cumulative impact assessment of all data centres, starting with Corio, Moorabool, Lovely Banks and Miners Rest, shows measurable conditions are met for water, electricity, emergency response and cumulative impacts.

31 **Apply the precautionary principle, and restore appeal rights.** Where the risks to water, power, health, fire or land aren't known, the project waits until they are. Neighbours and councils get notice and VCAT review on fast-tracked projects, including those under clause 53.22.

32 **Benefits that stay.** Binding community benefit agreements, locally governed funds and reported local jobs for every major project.

PUBLIC JOBS AND PUBLIC MONEY THAT FOLLOW PEOPLE

Regional Victorians earn less and get less back for the tax they pay. Most state procurement is spent in Melbourne, and the senior, best-paid public service jobs sit in the city. Housing costs have pushed families out to the regions, but the premium jobs haven't followed. **We want public money to benefit regional and rural communities, including senior public service roles earmarked for regional and rural workers** (recommendations 23 and 26).

INTEGRITY REFORMS

Our survey's strongest message was about honesty in government. Reforms to donations, lobbying, IBAC and freedom of information are set out in the companion white paper, **Restoring Trust**, at aletamoriarty.com.

179. Local Jobs First, About Local Jobs First.
180. Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development (WA), Royalties for Regions.

ABOUT THE SURVEY

METHOD AND LIMITS

June to October 2026 · 53 respondents

The Western Victoria Community Survey ran online from June to October 2026. After removing one blank test entry and one duplicate, 53 responses remained. People rated 65 issues across eight policy areas and answered open questions about what's working, what isn't and what would make Victoria feel fair.

Read it for what it is

- It's a self-selected sample: everyone who answered chose to take part.
- With 53 people (fewer on some questions), one answer moves a result by about two percentage points, so small differences don't mean much.
- Agree/disagree questions merged "Neither" and "Disagree" in the export, so only agreement is reported for them. Two respondents live in Melbourne.
- Quotes are anonymised and attributed by gender, age band and type of place. Some are trimmed; spelling is lightly corrected.

Who answered OUR SURVEY

Group	People	Share
Aged 65 or older	24	45%
Aged 55–64	11	21%
Aged under 55	18	34%
Women	29	55%
Men	20	38%
Non-binary, other or not stated	4	8%
Regional city or large town	31	58%
Smaller town, rural or remote	20	38%
Melbourne	2	4%
Bachelor's or postgraduate degree	35	66%
2022 vote: independent	14	26%
2022 vote: Labor	13	25%
2022 vote: Greens	12	23%
2022 vote: Liberal or Nationals	3	6%
2022 vote: other, none or not stated	11	21%

WHAT PEOPLE SAID IS WORKING

A fair number said "nothing". The rest named **TAFE** (the best-rated service, 46% satisfied), **public transport and V/Line**, the **renewables build-out** and battery rebates, **Treaty**, **local community groups** and **frontline workers** in hospitals and police.

"Our lives are mostly much better and more affluent than the negativity spread by unscrupulous politicians and a biased press."

SURVEY RESPONDENT
WOMAN, 65+, SMALL TOWN OR RURAL AREA

31 of 53

respondents offered to help the campaign, from hosting a corflute to running community meetings.

HONESTY. INTEGRITY. FAIRNESS.

You can't fix a broken system with the people who broke it.

On 28 November 2026, Western Victoria can send a community independent to the upper house: someone with no party machine to answer to and no corporate donors to repay.

Volunteer

Hand out how-to-votes on election day, or help in the weeks before.

Donate

A grassroots campaign with no corporate donations runs on small gifts.

Share

Pass this paper on, host a corflute, or bring a friend to a community meeting.

@VOTE1ALETA | ALETAMORIARTY.COM

Authorised by Aleta Moriarty, W6, 33 Mackey Street, North Geelong VIC 3215

ALETA MORIARTY
COMMUNITY INDEPENDENT