



Water for a Healthy Country

Rural Towns-Liquid Assets: Social scoping study for the towns of Merredin, Moora, Tambellup and Wagin

Catherine Johnston, Melissa Green and Ewald Helmert

Rural Towns-Liquid Assets:
Social scoping study
for the towns of
Merredin, Moora,
Tambellup and Wagin

Catherine Johnston, Melissa Green and Ewald Helmert

ISBN: 0 643 09249 8

Water for a Healthy Country is one of six National Research Flagships established by CSIRO in 2003 as part of the National Research Flagship Initiative. Flagships are partnerships of leading Australian scientists, research institutions, commercial companies and selected international partners. Their scale, long time-frames and clear focus on delivery and adoption of research outputs are designed to maximise their impact in key areas of economic and community need. Flagships address six major national challenges; health, energy, light metals, oceans, food and water.

The Water for a Healthy Country Flagship is a research partnership between CSIRO, state and Australian governments, private and public industry and other research providers. The Flagship aims to achieve a tenfold increase in the economic, social and environmental benefits from water by 2025.

The work contained in this report is collaboration between CSIRO partners (list divisions/s) and collaborators list.

CSIRO Land and Water

Department of Agriculture, Western Australia

Local Government Shires Merredin, Moora, Tambellup and Wagin

University of Western Australia (School of Agricultural and Resource Economics)

© CSIRO Australia and Chief Executive Officer of the Department of Agriculture, Western Australia, 2005. All rights reserved.

This work is copyright. Apart from any use as permitted under the Copyright Act 1968, no part may be reproduced by any process without prior written permission of CSIRO and the Chief Executive Officer of the Department of Agriculture Western Australia.

Citation: Johnston, C., Green, M. and Helmert, E. (2005). *Rural Towns-Liquid Assets: Social scoping study for the towns of Merredin, Moora, Tambellup and Wagin*. Water for a Healthy Country National Research Flagship. CSIRO Land and Water: Perth.

DISCLAIMER

You accept all risks and responsibility for losses, damages, costs and other consequences resulting directly or indirectly from using this publication and any information or material available from it.

To the maximum permitted by law, CSIRO and the Chief Executive Officer of the Department of Agriculture Western Australia excludes all liability to any person arising directly or indirectly from using this site and any information or material available from it.

For more information about Water for a Healthy Country Flagship or the National Research Flagship Initiative go to www.csiro.au.

Table of Contents

1.0	INTRODUCTION	1
2.0	METHODOLOGY	3
3.0	MERREDIN	6
3.1	Perceptions of Merredin	7
3.2	Merredin in the future	10
3.3	The ideal future town	10
3.4	Major challenges for Merredin	11
3.5	Salinity in Merredin	13
3.6	Merredin’s water situation	14
3.7	Innovative water management	15
3.8	Achieving aspirations for Merredin	16
4.0	MOORA	19
4.1	Perceptions of Moora	20
4.2	Moora in the future	23
4.3	The ideal future town	24
4.4	Major challenges for Moora	25
4.5	Salinity in Moora	27
4.6	Moora’s water situation	28
4.7	Innovative water management	30
4.8	Achieving aspirations for Moora	31
5.0	TAMBELLUP	34
5.1	Perceptions of Tambellup	34
5.2	Tambellup in the future	37
5.3	The ideal future town	37
5.4	Major challenges for Tambellup	38
5.5	Salinity in Tambellup	40
5.6	Tambellup’s water situation	41
5.7	Innovative water management	42
5.8	Achieving aspirations for Tambellup	43
6.0	WAGIN	45
6.1	Perceptions of Wagin	45
6.2	Wagin in the future	49
6.3	The ideal future town	49

6.4	Major challenges for Wagin.....	50
6.5	Salinity in Wagin.....	52
6.6	Wagin’s water situation.....	54
6.7	Innovative water management	55
6.8	Achieving aspirations for the town.....	56
7.0	CONCLUDING CONSIDERATIONS	59
8.0	REFERENCES	63
	Appendix A	65
	Merredin Demographic Data	65
	Appendix B	69
	Moora Demographic Data	69
	Appendix C	73
	Tambellup Demographic Data	73
	Appendix D	77
	Wagin Demographic Data	77
	Appendix E.....	81
	Country Water Rates	81
	Appendix F.....	85

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The Rural Towns - Liquid Assets project aims to optimise the management of water resources in Western Australian Wheatbelt towns. Many of these towns face challenges related to waterlogging and salinity, as well as water use restrictions for domestic supply. These issues, combined with increasing social and economic challenges, can impact significantly upon rural communities and quality of life.

The Rural Towns - Liquid Assets project comprises a multi-disciplinary approach to devise an integrated management solution that can address the issue of salinity in a manner that produces multiple benefits for a town. A principal research outcome for the project is the development of water management plans that explore new local water schemes and technologies, as well as the most beneficial scenarios for treatment, reuse and disposal of drainage water, and combine the measures aiming to control urban salinity. Specific objectives include:

- protection of townsite infrastructure from salinity;
- a model for integrated town water management;
- development of alternative new supplies plus recycled water schemes;
- reduced reliance on scheme water in towns;
- promotion of high value industries using new water supplies; and,
- fostering of local ownership of water resources management issues.

Project funding is through the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality, regional catchment councils in WA (Avon Catchment Council; Northern Agricultural Catchments Council; South Coast Regional Initiative Planning Team; South West Catchment Council), local government Shires involved in the project, the Department of Agriculture WA, and the CSIRO Water for a Healthy Country Flagship.

The project team comprises specialists from the Chemistry Centre (WA); CSIRO; CRC for Landscape, Environments and Mineral Exploration (LEME); Department of Agriculture WA; the University of Western Australia (School of Agricultural and Resource Economics), and; Wheatbelt Enterprise Technologies (WET).

Sixteen priority towns have been selected as study sites for the project. An important part of the Rural Towns Liquid Assets project is to ensure that water management options are tailored to the specific social, economic and environmental conditions of these towns. For this reason a social research component formed an integral part of the study. Key aims were to: incorporate social considerations as part of a systems approach for developing integrated water management schemes in rural WA; inform technical, economic and policy considerations, and; ensure that technical outcomes are relevant for and endorsed by local communities.

This report is concerned with scoping research conducted by The Australian Research Centre for Water in Society (ARCWIS), within CSIRO Land and Water, during March and April of 2005. The purpose of this research was to provide an understanding of the social context as a basis for the ongoing concept development and project implementation for four pilot towns in the WA Wheatbelt region - Merredin, Moora, Tambellup and Wagin. This included:

- providing an understanding of community aspirations and concerns for the future of their town;
- involving local communities in options and preferences for water and salinity management in their town; and,
- helping to establish a link between the community and the technological science being developed.

The main aim of this research was to record the range of views of the regional residents on issues of importance to the project. It should not be considered as a representative survey of the towns, but as providing a basic understanding of the different ways people think about their towns, and what they want from the future. The information gained from the scoping research could be utilised and built upon during the course of the Rural Towns – Liquid Assets research for each town. A detailed methodology for the scoping research was provided for use by other researchers for the other priority towns involved in the project.

Key findings of the scoping research for Merredin, Moora, Tambellup and Wagin are discussed in detail in the report. A summary review of concluding considerations are presented following this discussion. Demographic data and water pricing information are found in the Appendices.

2.0 METHODOLOGY

The scoping research took place in two stages. The first phase was the compilation of relevant data that could provide important background information for each of the four towns. Information was obtained through such means as:

- identifying Australian Bureau of Statistics data for each town and region;
- compiling relevant historical, geographical, cultural and hydrological information;
- perusing local government Shire websites and community directories;
- reviewing past and current local newspapers and other media resources;
- visiting associated agency or government department websites (for example, Development Commissions and Department of Agriculture WA); and,
- identifying relevant local government plans, regional strategies and catchment management plans.

The second stage of research entailed field trips to each of the four towns to conduct personal interviews with local community representatives. This ensured that first-hand experience of the towns and communities was gained. In addition, it was important for establishing positive relations with the involved communities and local governments. Using telephone and local community directories, as well as local government resources, a stakeholder database was created for each town. Further potential interviewees were supplied by known contacts in each town.

Specific stakeholder groups were identified as essential for the research. These incorporated: aged; community groups (including progress associations, Lions and Apex clubs, culture and arts, and the WA Country Women's Association); education; environment; health; indigenous; agricultural landholders; local businesses; local government; state government (including a variety government agencies, water authorities, regional development bodies and police representatives); town residents, and; youth.

Potential participants were selected so as to ensure a wide range of interests and perspectives in each town. At least one representative for each stakeholder group was targeted. In most instances more than one representative of each group took part in the study. However, indigenous participation was not able to be obtained for the town of Wagin. The CEO of the local government Shire was interviewed for each town.

For youth, group interviews were held with both primary and secondary students of local schools. In Tambellup, however, the field trip coincided with school holidays. Interviews at the local school were therefore not possible. As a result, participants' children, whose ages ranged from primary to secondary school years, were interviewed to include the perspective of youth. In Moora, an interview was also able

to be obtained with the local youth group, comprised predominantly of young Aboriginal children.

Before making contact with potential interviewees, the local government Shire was advised of the intended field trip dates and of the research process to be conducted in the town. Following agreement from the Chief Executive Officer of each local government Shire, interviewees were telephoned in advance to request their participation in the study and to arrange a convenient interview time.

A total of 95 interviews were conducted during the course of the field trips. A breakdown of interviews is shown in the table below. An even number of participants were targeted for each town. However, final numbers of interviewees depended upon willingness or availability for participation in the study. Interviews generally were between 30 minutes to an hour in length. Some, however, were in excess of an hour and a half.

Table 1.

TOWN	NO. OF INTERVIEWS
Merredin	26
Moora	28
Tambellup	21
Wagin	20

Interviews followed a semi-structured format and incorporated the following topics:

- ♦ **Demographics** - all interviews commenced with a question to determine length of residency and, for those who had not been born locally, reasons for coming to the town. This was to gain background information but also acted as an 'ice-breaker' to begin the interview;
- ♦ **Perceptions of the town** – interviewees were asked to describe the town as they saw it. This provided a broad understanding of the town from the local viewpoint;
- ♦ **Future vision of the town, both realistic and ideal** – as it was important to distinguish between hopes for the town and a realistic assessment of its future. Thoughts about the town's perceived likely future were contrasted by a question designed to elicit opinions about an *ideal* vision for the future;
- ♦ **Challenges facing the town** - in order to gauge priority issues facing the town, interviewees were asked to comment upon perceived major challenges facing the town;
- ♦ **Salinity as a possible issue for the town** – although salinity may not have been mentioned as an issue unprompted, it may still be considered a

problem. For this reason interviewees were specifically asked if they perceived salinity to be an issue for the town;

- ♦ **The overall water situation** – this question helped determine local attitudes towards water in general in the town¹;
- ♦ **Innovative water management** – as mentioned previously, a key objective for the project was to determine local options and preferences for water and salinity management in their town. Hence, opinions were sought on ideas for local water management²;
- ♦ **Meeting community aspirations for the future of the town** – this question encouraged consideration of possible means of overcoming challenges and helped identify what was needed for achieving aspirations for the future from a local perspective.

Before the interviews commenced, the RTLA project and the purpose of the social component were explained. Assurance was given of confidentiality and anonymity. Recommendations for other possible interviews were sought at the completion of the interview. This helped ensure that all key people were included in the study.

¹ Interviewees sometimes spoke of a perceived rising groundwater table in response to this question. This often indicated that this issue was not necessarily directly associated with salinity. As a result, opinions about a rising water table that were offered as part of the local water situation have been recorded within this question in the discussion of results.

² One interviewee, a professional in water management, had comprehensive ideas for integrated water management in Moora. As these were described in detail they have been outlined in full in Appendix F of the report.

3.0 MERREDIN

Merredin is the largest regional centre in the Central Eastern Wheatbelt. It is located 260km east of Perth and the Merredin Shire covers an area of 3,372 square kilometres. In 2002 the population of Merredin was 3,715, representing a minor declining trend over the past decade (3,741, 2000; 3,859, 1995 - see Appendix A). Indigenous peoples comprise 4.6% of the total population.

Total employment for the Shire of Merredin was 2,068 in 2003, demonstrating an increase of 2.3% from the previous year. The unemployment rate in the Shire has fluctuated slightly over time, from 2.5% in December 1999 to 4.7% in March 2002. The unemployment rate in June 2003 was 3.1%, compared to 5.9% for the state. Agricultural and retail industries have the highest number of workers per industry in Merredin.

Like most WA Wheatbelt towns, Merredin is an agricultural-based district. However, it is considered that its central position in the Wheatbelt offers good potential for the development of new industries. Existing businesses in town service most needs with a variety of retail trades. Many government agencies are located in Merredin, including the Water Corporation, Wheatbelt Development Commission, Department of Agriculture WA, Ministry of Justice, Department of Aboriginal Affairs, Disability Services, the Police Department.

Merredin has a range of educational services, including a kindergarten, two pre-primary schools and primary schools respectively, and a senior high school and residential college. It also hosts a campus for C.Y. O'Connor College of TAFE. Health facilities for the town cover a range of services, including a District Hospital offering a variety of community and mental health services. A range of specialist health care services are available, including those aimed at particular demographic groups such as children, men, women, seniors and indigenous peoples. Several doctors and dentists operate in Merredin.

A variety of leisure and recreational opportunities are available for district residents. Sports groups in town incorporate football, cricket, hockey, tennis, badminton, golf, bowling, squash and softball. The town has a swimming pool, gymnasium and a library. There is also a community aero club. Many community groups operate in Merredin, including Country Women's Association, RSL, Red Cross, Lions Club, and a Fine Arts Society. Additionally, there are environmental groups such as Landcare and a Water Action Group.

The district's water supply is provided via the C. Y. O'Connor Perth to Kalgoorlie pipeline which delivers water from the Mundaring Dam in Perth. Merredin residents and commercial businesses pay Class 2 rates for this scheme water (see Appendix E). The Shire also has an open drainage network where water run-off can feed into Council dams. This water is combined with treated waste water from the Water

Corporation dam and is then used to water Council parks and gardens, school green areas and lawns belonging to various community groups around the town. This water is distributed through a reticulation system.

3.1 Perceptions of Merredin

Many of those interviewed in Merredin had lived there for most of their lives, either being born there or having come to the town with their parents as a young child. Some longer term residents had come through employment opportunities and had stayed. Others, usually government employees, had been there for a short time and intended to move on when the opportunity arose. The Aboriginal representative who was interviewed reported he was seventh generation in the area, and that this was not uncommon for other Aboriginal people in Merredin.

Merredin was typically described as a town that had changed in recent decades. Most interviewees related how in the past it had many more government bodies, including railway, electricity, telecommunications and water management organisations. Many spoke of the times when Merredin accommodated these organisations with nostalgia. The relocation of these services to other towns such as Northam and Kalgoorlie was seen as a loss to the town and as having affected town identity. However, it was not viewed as having threatened Merredin's future.

There were varied opinions about changes in Merredin's population size since the withdrawal of the abovementioned government bodies in the 1980s. Most agreed that there had been a decline in the population since this time. However, it was said to have now stabilised, even though the population was more transient than in the past. Alternately, it was believed that the number of people living in Merredin was either gradually increasing or decreasing. The larger population size of Merredin was often compared to that of smaller neighbouring towns. Merredin was commonly described as "too big to be small and too small to be big." This was seen to have its challenges for the community, but was also welcomed for the privacy and anonymity offered.

Merredin was typically described as the service centre for the region. Its location was seen to play a large role in this status, the town being situated between Perth and Kalgoorlie on the well-frequented Great Eastern Highway. It was considered to be well-serviced to meet essential needs, including a public train to Perth. The recent opening of a bakery in town was welcomed by local residents. Local businesses were said to be doing well given they serviced the regional population, and particularly as many businesses in smaller towns in the region were closing. Some businesses, for example the local, very large hardware store specifically aimed to service the entire regional community. There was reported to be only one major supermarket in town, which was considered rather expensive. However, there was also a small grocery store that offered the convenience of Sunday trading. Shopping in other centres such as Northam or Perth was not uncommon.

As a regional centre, Merredin was said to have a range of health care facilities. There was a local hospital, a variety of visiting medical specialists, and several doctors who had been contracted through a migrant citizenship scheme. There were also numerous specialist health professionals in the town, for example, a physiotherapist. It was generally thought, however, that more could be done to improve health services in Merredin. The hospital was believed to be understaffed and not equipped to handle the mental health problems it was dealing with. The doctors were noted to be committed and making an effort to be involved in the community, however some reported a few concerns relating to health services.

Merredin was described as having numerous educational facilities, including several primary schools and a high school that went to Year 12. It also had a residential college to accommodate boarding students from the region. This was seen as a special asset of the town and evidence of its service centre status. Residents also had access to a local TAFE campus that was located in town. Educational facilities were typically held in good esteem by the local community. However, issues of turn-over of teachers and diminishing high school curriculum were noted.

In terms of lifestyle, Merredin was often said to be “typical of any Wheatbelt town.” This referred to rural attributes that set country towns aside from urban areas - for example, peace and quiet, freedom, and an overall feeling of personal safety. It was stated that most locals still knew each other despite the presence of more transient residents in the town. This gave a sense of belonging, but was sometimes seen as a drawback in terms of “everyone knowing everything about you.” Merredin was believed to be an excellent place for families and for children. For some people, however, the “laidback” nature of the lifestyle could be challenging in terms of lacking things to do. This view was countered by the assertion that community involvement was simply a matter of personal commitment, wherever one lived.

Sporting activities were a central part of the local lifestyle. Indeed, sport was seen as the best means of being part of the local community, although some residents found this restrictive. There were many sports on offer, and “if there isn’t one you can create it and people will come along.” There were said to be several groups for popular recreational activities such as tennis and bowling. A new recreation centre was being planned for the town to integrate sporting clubs and facilities and this was a frequent topic among those interviewed. There was strong support for the plan and it was reported to have wide community support. However, there was opposition from a minority group of residents.

The local community was described as being diverse. It comprised farmers and town residents, indigenous and non-indigenous peoples, and long term residents and transient professionals. A flying school for young Chinese trainee pilots was located just outside the town, although the students were housed in special accommodation in the local community. There was reported to be a broad socio-economic spectrum of people in Merredin. It was commented that residents typically fell into “under twenty and over sixty” age categories.

The indigenous community comprised about two hundred residents in Merredin. Good cross-cultural relations were reported and there were initiatives to incorporate Aboriginal culture into the town. Some schools and the Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM) were working with a local Aboriginal elder to incorporate traditional knowledge, such as language and 'bush medicine and tucker', into the area. This elder was also a mentor for both indigenous and non-indigenous students at a local primary school. For Aboriginal youth, there was an initiative to encourage longer term education and processes were in place for camps to pass on cultural knowledge such as tracking and bush survival skills. For tourism, there were plans for a cultural centre at the nearby Aboriginal reserve and to include visits to Aboriginal sites as part of a local tour of Merredin.

For some, the local community was characteristic of the qualities associated with country communities. It was described as friendly, supportive and caring, especially towards seniors. It was said to have a good sense of community spirit and commitment to the town. However, most of those interviewed commonly perceived this to extend to only a relatively small, core group of people in Merredin. It was reported that there was a sense of complacency or apathy among many residents in the town. It was often said that there was a tendency for the local community to be critical and negative, yet unwilling to take remedial action because it was either "too hard" or "someone else's problem." There was a perception of general resistance to change, even positive change, among many residents.

When mentioned, the local government Shire generally attracted favourable comment. It was reported to be supportive of the town and to be "doing a good job." The local government Shire was considered to have prime responsibility for organising local community events and was believed to perform this role well. However, it was suggested that community ownership of local initiatives would be better for the town. Concern was expressed about a possible focus on 'RRR' (roads, rates and rubbish) to the detriment of social and environmental issues. One interviewee was opposed to certain local government aspirations and plans for the town - for example, the introduction of the previously described recreation centre.

Both the primary and secondary school students interviewed typically perceived Merredin in terms of its rural attributes. This principally referred to lifestyle aspects such as the small community, peace and quiet and a sense of safety and belonging. Sport was a principal activity for all ages and there was also access to a skate park and BMX track. Services and shops were seen as adequate, although many reported they went to Perth and Northam to shop with their parents. There was an overall feeling of contentment with the town and it was generally agreed that "I like Perth as a contrast, but I don't know if I'd like to live there." However, all students interviewed indicated that they planned to leave Merredin for either educational or employment opportunities.

3.2 Merredin in the future

When thinking about Merredin in the future, some thought it may decline and that its future existence was uncertain. However, it was predominantly believed that it would survive into the future as a regional service centre. There was perceived to be great potential for Merredin to grow and that with good planning the town could double its population. Nevertheless, this was generally thought unlikely because of “the poor community attitude” and associated lack of the motivation and leadership needed for change. Hence, most foresaw little change for the town in the future, with the possible exception of refinement of existing businesses and services. It was believed its status as a regional service centre would be consolidated over time as smaller outlying towns declined or even eventually “died.”

While overall the town itself was not predicted to be much different in the future, it was believed that there could be changes within the local community. Many predicted an increasingly older population and fewer young people in town. It was suggested that family households may decrease given a seeming trend for young women to marry and have children later in life. A larger group of transient residents was foreseen, primarily consisting of professionals who had employment placements in town. Indeed, it was suggested that in the future the population size would be more dependent upon the presence of government employees in Merredin. It was also believed that the local government CEO position could be fulfilled on a transient, ‘commuter’ basis.

3.3 The ideal future town

In light of scepticism about Merredin’s capability for change, interviewees were not confident in discussing its “ideal future.” For most, the ideal was for Merredin to develop its potential and “make the most of itself.” Alternately, it was simply hoped that the town would be self-sufficient and sustainable in the long term. More industries outside of the agricultural resource base were desired so that the town’s welfare was less dependent upon this industry. A common aspiration was for the freight trains that daily passed through the town to stop in Merredin, as they did in the past. With this, it was thought ideal that freight would be delivered from the West to the East, and not just in the reverse direction as in the present.

Many personal hopes focused on local improvements in the town. For the local community, a more positive and helpful attitude was hoped for. More community pride in upkeep and beautification of the town was also desired. This included ensuring that the district was kept clean and tidy. It was believed that town appearance could be further improved through the creation of more green areas. Special hopes were held for local services and facilities. A common aspiration was improved health care and educational services. A greater variety of shops was desired, as was better local accommodation. More entertainment and cultural

activities were hoped for, by both adults and youth. For youth, more shops, fast food outlets, a cinema and a recreational centre were seen as ideal.

3.4 Major challenges for Merredin

Merredin was perceived to face many challenges. A key topic of concern was the issue of “rural decline”. It was stated that as the state government saw WA Wheatbelt as the least “sexy” of all areas it was difficult to get funding. This was despite a perception that it was most in need because it was most impacted by decentralisation trends. In addition, it was reported that due to funding cuts government agencies had to pool resources and knowledge to operate effectively. It was noted that this cooperation had its benefits, but decline in quality of service was nevertheless a concern. In addition, scarce funding created fierce competition between rural towns in a culture of “survival of the fittest.” Many believed there was political bias towards coastal areas or places that were reportedly more valuable for election votes. It was perceived that there was little local political assistance because Merredin was “a safe seat.”

While the future of Merredin was generally considered secure, concern was expressed about lack of growth. It was said new businesses in town were rare, and the bakery had therefore been an exciting and welcome addition to the town. Moreover, it was extremely difficult to sell local businesses and some had been on the market for several years. Dwindling numbers of farmers in the region was causing unease. Farm sizes were increasing and it was said that many younger farmers were either no longer interested in the lifestyle or could not meet women who were. It was estimated that the farming population could decrease by up to fifteen percent during the course of the year. This was said to have significant psychological repercussions for the community given the town’s strong dependence on agriculture for its welfare.

As mentioned previously, inadequate health services were widely seen as a challenge for Merredin. The loss of specialist health services at the district hospital was particularly begrudged. The difficulty of attracting and keeping local doctors was a source of concern. It was reported that the local government Shire and Australian Medical Association had to secure current doctors through a migrant citizenship scheme. It was suggested that more doctors, including a female practitioner, were needed.

The housing situation in Merredin was widely perceived to be a major problem for the town. It was reported that good quality or new houses were rare. The standard of housing was said to benefit lower income residents as it was more affordable, but was not satisfactory for those seeking a better standard living. In addition, the housing problem was seen to be a major barrier to attracting investment and new residents to town. It was reported that while the property market in Merredin was healthy, most houses were bought and sold within the town itself.

Loss of youth was widely held to be a major issue for Merredin. It was reported that as subject availability declined at the local high school, some parents sent their children to Perth for their schooling. This trend was impacting the local residential college which was said to be only half full. For those who completed their schooling in Merredin, there was then the issue of lack of further education or professional employment opportunities. The local TAFE was said to be limited in course variety and trades positions were seen to hold little appeal for contemporary youth. The lack of opportunities for youth in Merredin was described as confronting for those who wished to stay in town. It was reported that some families left town when the children were older simply because of lack of future opportunities for them. Young students who were interviewed echoed these views. However, they were more preoccupied with the lack of local entertainment and shops in Merredin.

All stakeholder representatives cited poor community attitude as a particular challenge for the town. Frustration was expressed about perceived community apathy. It was reported that unlike the surrounding smaller towns, the local community was not particularly proactive or cohesive. As mentioned previously, there was said to be a generally negative attitude in the community, with a focus on criticism without action. Moreover, change of any kind was typically resisted. This was said to leave Merredin more often than not “doing without.” It was suggested that there had been no cohesive social development in the town for decades. Those with energy and vision in the local community were reported to give up or move on in the face of the general negative attitude of many residents.

While the larger population size of Merredin was seen to offer many benefits, it was believed to create fragmentation within the local community. There were reported to be over one hundred community and sporting groups in Merredin, often servicing the same need. This was not necessarily a problem in the past but was an increasing challenge given they were now typically struggling for numbers and resources. This was said to create competitiveness and conflict within the community and parochialism was strong. As previously mentioned, there was strong support for plans for a new recreational centre that could consolidate many of these groups. However, a core group of dissenters were delaying action, which was reported to be a common theme in Merredin.

Although the lifestyle in Merredin was seen as one of its important assets, it was noted to have some social problems. Problems with crime, vandalism and drugs were reported. There was also concern about some residents’ lack of respect for or pride in Merredin and the local community. This was said to have a negative influence in the town. Moreover, it was believed to affect the town’s appearance. This was described as variable, with some houses being of great pride to their residents and others being somewhat run-down and unkempt. It was believed that indigenous residents faced particular social problems.

The local government Shire was said to have new management who wanted to introduce improvements in the town. A strategic plan for Merredin was currently being developed with local input. However, it was said that few people were willing

to pay higher rates to improve the town. The perceived devolution of more State Government responsibilities to the local level was believed to create further difficulties for local government in meeting its aspirations for the town.

3.5 Salinity in Merredin

Salinity was rarely mentioned unprompted as a major issue for the town. When asked directly, a small number of interviewees said that salinity and the associated rising water table was a problem for Merredin. It was said by this group of people that salinity was impacting infrastructure in the town and agriculture in the district. It was perceived to have worsened in recent decades and was considered a threat to the future of the town. However, for some it was important to view the issue in perspective. It was pointed out that salinity was a statewide problem, not just one for Merredin. One interviewee asserted that while salinity was a problem, it was “a joke compared with other issues rural towns are facing.”

Overall, the general public did not perceive salinity as an issue for the town. Most considered themselves to be “vaguely aware” about it. It was said that it was not typically thought or talked about in the town. This was partly attributed to scientists and government agencies typically not informing the local community of what they were doing or of their research outcomes. It was also believed that local residents would not take note until they began to actually see major effects in the town and/or were directly impacted. However, a local action group were reported to be taking action and working to raise community awareness.

The Groundwater and Desalination Pilot Project³, funded by the State Salinity Council in conjunction with the Shire of Merredin, the Water Corporation and the Department of Agriculture's Rural Towns Program, was reported to have helped raise awareness about salinity in Merredin. The project was said to have general support from the local community, who had been kept informed by regular updates from both the local government Shire and the Department of Agriculture. However, it was believed that the general public had little real understanding about what the project was about and that it was only a pilot venture. Many of those interviewed indicated that they thought the project had ended because it was “a failure” and the learning difficulties experienced during the course of the trial were held up as evidence of this. Most therefore considered the pilot project to have been “yet another case of typical bureaucratic inefficiency.” For this reason, it was said that there was high community scepticism about similar future projects.

Farms in the district were said to be impacted by salinity, but to varying degrees depending upon the position of the property. For example, one farmer whose property was located at the bottom of a catchment described his farm as almost entirely salt-affected. Salinity was taken seriously by local farmers and many were

³ Nott, R., Pridham, M., Roe, J., Ibbott, J., Leeson, A. (2004). Resource Management Technical Report 266. *Merredin townsite groundwater pumping and desalination project.*

part of a landcare group. However, it was suggested that there was a degree of paranoia about the issue in Australia, created by the strong government funding focus on salinity. Management practices for the problem typically involved tree planting and drainage, although the latter was seen to just shift the problem to the neighbouring farm. Contour banks were implemented by some farmers.

When asked, only the teenage group of students had some awareness of salinity. This was primarily because they had been taught about it at school. Salinity was therefore viewed in more of a theoretical sense than as an issue for Merredin. However, there was some awareness about the rising water table in the town because of a newsletter previously sent to all households by the local government Shire showing residents if they could expect their house to be impacted by the rising water table in the future.

3.6 Merredin's water situation

For the general community, water was predominantly conceived of in terms of supply and it was simply stated that water was piped from the Mundaring Weir along the Perth to Kalgoorlie pipeline. Supply was described as "not a problem" and evidently little more was thought about the matter. The community was believed to be generally waterwise, although this was disputed by some who had strong feelings about water conservation. From this perspective, the community was complacent about water use and would remain so until impacted by difficulties in the future. One local business had invested in rainwater tanks in the belief that future water prices would increase considerably as water became a more rare and precious asset.

District farmers around Merredin were also considered to be generally complacent about water usage. It was reported that farmers for up to a 100km radius of Merredin were connected to the Perth to Kalgoorlie water supply. It was claimed that this water was commonly used for stock as well as for domestic uses. This was verified by one local farmer who said it was because they were rainfall dependent and property dams were very low. Nevertheless, there was general concern among some interviewees that farmers were not putting more effort into water conservation or the development of self-sufficient water management systems on their properties.

Merredin was described as "a natural trapping for water" because of its position in a low-lying area and nearby creek system. In terms of surface water, flooding was said to have been an issue in the past. However, it was reported that this was now managed by contour banks that slowed water coming into the town. Concern was expressed about possible recharge into the groundwater system through this system. It was reported that stormwater, with treated sewerage water, was utilised to water parks and ovals in the town.

The rising groundwater table was considered to be an issue for Merredin. Stories were related of how the water table quickly rose again as soon as pumping ceased. The rising table was often associated with water logging and recharge in the area.

Local watering was seen to exacerbate the problem. One interviewee found it ironic that local residents were, in effect, importing and paying for water from Perth to add to Merredin's rising groundwater problems. There was divided opinion as to whether groundwater was fresh or saline.

For youth, water was typically conceived of in terms of local supply. From an adolescent perspective, supply came from the pipeline and was therefore "a Mundaring issue." However, there was some concern among the younger children for local residents to use rainwater rather than rely upon scheme supply. Nevertheless, it was noted that Merredin was experiencing a dry rainfall period. The primary school students demonstrated waterwise awareness as they had been involved in water conservation projects at school – for example, creating a waterwise garden.

3.7 Innovative water management

For those with some knowledge and experience of water, the water situation in Merredin needed to be determined before any decisions about water management could be made. It was considered that the water and soil system was highly complex and subtle and comprehensive research was required before action could be taken. It was suggested that management actions, such as revegetation, that impacted the water system also needed to be taken into account. Moreover, the potential impacts of any options - for example, pumping - needed to be understood before any on-ground initiatives were implemented.

There was some uncertainty as to possible innovative water management options for the town. It was commonly stated that "anything that utilises the water" was favoured. Economic viability was a common consideration for the type of on-ground measures that could be adopted. One interviewee stipulated that any management option implemented should be to the benefit of Merredin rather than elsewhere. An ideal outcome was to become a national model for positive use of salinity and water. This was believed to be an important means of attracting recognition and subsequent economic and social benefits for the town.

Desalination was a common suggestion, but there was strong reservation about whether it was viable. Moreover, there was the question of "what to do with the by-products?" It was suggested that bottled water and salt harvesting could be investigated. Aquaculture was thought to be a more realistic option. However, it was noted to require high maintenance and was typically considered an enormous risk venture. Use of water to develop industry or agriculture was thought feasible. For some, the establishment of a self-sufficient town supply was a priority. It was also suggested that supply to other areas could be a consideration in light of the perceived vast amounts of water to be utilised.

Lifestyle options were seen as important for possible use of water. Town beautification was a popular option. This included landscaping the town, creating

water features and picnic areas, and greening the local golf course, parks and ovals. Pumping the water to a natural salt lake to create a recreational lake or water park was thought to be good for both personal use and tourism. Unsurprisingly, this option was particularly popular with youth. One interviewee envisaged Merredin as “the Venice of the Wheatbelt.”

3.8 Achieving aspirations for Merredin

External support for the town was considered vital for Merredin’s future. It was thought that state government needed to give the town “a fair go” and help the development of its potential. Financial support was essential, although it was also believed the town needed to improve its funding submission skills. Future water management schemes were believed to be highly dependent upon political support. This was conceived less in terms of financial assistance than for clear governance arrangements. Nevertheless, funding assistance was noted to be required. It was further thought healthy incentives and subsidies were needed to encourage water use and other natural resource efficiency.

For water research, it was thought that Merredin would benefit from having researchers based in town. It was suggested that the establishment of a water research centre in Merredin would be helpful. This centre could be utilised to draw on overseas experience and knowledge, as well as local expertise. Researchers needed to keep the local community informed of their studies. In addition, information needed to be easily accessible, accurate and affordable for the local community. In terms of the Rural Towns - Liquid Assets project, the town needed clear and accurate information and action that was tailored for local requirements and aspirations.

It was believed the town itself had an important role to play in water management. At a local government level, decisive action was needed to address problems before they reached crisis point. It was vital that water and salinity management were incorporated into the Strategic Plan within a holistic water framework. Good planning was essential, as was community input and awareness about water management. It was suggested that an interactive website was an efficient and user-friendly way of keeping the community engaged and informed. The local community had its own important role in “getting smart about using water.” This referred to understanding that water was a precious asset, being water use efficient, and helping to develop an integrated system for water self-sufficiency in Merredin.

Growth and development of the town were important to achieving aspirations for the future. Making Merredin attractive to visitors and new investors and residents was considered vital. It was said that Merredin needed to build on its strengths to improve the town and outside perceptions of it. Improving the quality of life in Merredin was important for enhancing its appeal. This included better provision of services and activities, particularly for families and professionals, and improved dining out facilities, as well as fast food outlets. Town beautification, improvement of

the town centre, integration with nature, and community pride in homes and gardens, was needed.

Proactive promotion of the town was essential to attracting people to Merredin. Tourism was important and it was thought that Merredin could benefit by promoting its natural assets to tourists, in terms of features that were taken for granted by locals but were novel and appealing to international travellers. This referred to such aspects as wide open spaces and blue country skies, as well as to lifestyle aspects such as local agriculture, farm stays and country hospitality. As mentioned previously, it was thought that Merredin could attract visitors as a national example of innovative, holistic and whole-of-community water management. Improved accommodation and cafes and restaurants were seen to be required if tourism aspirations were to be achieved.

More industry was an integral part of new investment in the town. Some believed new business would have to be agriculturally-based, but overall there was strong feeling to expand Merredin's industry base. This was to ensure that it was less dependent on and vulnerable to agricultural outcomes. Industry that could use water, either fresh or saline, should be established in the town. However, it was asserted that there needed to be discernment in the type of industry accepted in Merredin, "not just let anything come in because land is cheap."

For the local community, improvement in health, social and educational services was important. It was stated that Merredin required "a medical situation that befits a regional centre." The local hospital needed to be upgraded, particularly as it would have to cater for residents in surrounding towns in the future. Although Merredin was said to have a good aged care village, more aged facilities were needed. For education, better promotion of the regional high school and residential college was required. It was noted that the above described changes were also important for attracting new business and people to town.

Keeping youth in town was widely held to be a priority for Merredin's future. More well-paid and professional roles were essential, but it was also thought that it was important to overcome perceived bias about trades work being hard, dirty and poorly paid. Recreational and entertainment opportunities were considered equally important in helping to retain youth. This was seen to help balance the appeal of perceptions about living in the city. Building the planned recreational centre was a strong theme in providing organised recreational activities for youth in particular. It was important within this that decisions were firstly based on what was needed and *then* determining what could be provided within budget constraints.

It was strongly believed that improved community attitude was paramount for achieving aspirations for the future of Merredin. A positive and open attitude was a vital starting point. Respect for and pride in Merredin and its community were essential for creating and maintaining community spirit. The town had to be progressive, proactive and highly organised in maintaining and furthering itself, particularly in an environment of decentralisation and subsequent rural competition.

Hence, it was important that the community work together rather than indulge in parochialism and local competition for people and resources. It was suggested that community patronage of local business would help proprietors to improve quality of service at more competitive business prices.

Responsibility for Merredin's welfare needed to be taken up by the *entire* community, including youth, rather than left with local government. However, it was thought that local government should have a key role in provision of leadership. It was suggested that the local government Shire could help develop a collective vision for Merredin. This would require being genuinely open to community input and ideas. It was believed, however, that local government might need to frame aspirations as "issues" or even "threats" to incite community interest and engagement. Nevertheless, it was important not to create undue alarm in the local community.

4.0 MOORA

Known as the “Heart of the Midlands”, Moora is the largest town between Perth and Geraldton. It is located 172 kilometres north of Perth and 90 kilometres inland from the coast and is situated on the Moore River. The Shire of Moora covers an area of 3,788 square kilometres. In 2002, the Shire of Moora had a population of 2,683, which was a decrease of 0.4% from 2001 (see Appendix B). Overall, Moora has experienced a minor population decline since 1993. Indigenous peoples comprise 11.1% of the total population.

The Shire of Moora in 2003 had 1,531 people employed, increasing by 3.4% from the previous year, which was above the 1.9% growth rate for the state. Accordingly, the unemployment rate for Moora in 2003 was 3.1% compared to 5.9% for the state, having dropped since reaching a peak in 2001 (see Appendix B). Most people were employed in agriculture, with retail having the second highest number of workers per industry.

As the regional centre for the Northern WA Wheatbelt, Moora offers a range of service and recreational facilities to support surrounding areas as well as the immediate town. The town is well equipped with government agencies including Department of Agriculture WA, Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM), Wheatbelt Development Commission, Family and Children's Services, Australia Post, Telstra, Community Health Services, the Crown Law Department, Police Department, Homeswest, Western Power and Water Corporation. There are a variety of local businesses, particularly agricultural services, in Moora to service most needs.

The educational services for Moora include two pre-primary schools, two primary schools and a high school. Medical and health facilities cater for a variety of needs with a 26-bed hospital, supported by three doctors. Visiting or full time specialists include a dentist, gynaecologist, general surgeon, speech therapist, psychologist and a dietician. Other available services include physiotherapy, podiatry, optical, chiropractic care, naturopathy, and aged care.

Moora supports numerous recreational facilities. These include hockey fields, a cricket and football oval with an adjacent recreation centre, a golf course, a swimming pool, netball and tennis courts, indoor cricket, an equestrian park, a pony club, bowling greens, and rifle and pistol shooting areas. Many community organisations such as an Apex Club, Rotary Club, Lions Club and Country Women's Association are also active within Moora. Cultural and leisure groups in the town include the Historical Society, an Arts & Craft Society, Repertory Club, Dance Group and the Fine Arts Society. There is also a library and a new performing arts centre.

The water supply for Moora is mainly from a western borefield that taps into the Leederville aquifer. There is also an eastern borefield on the shallow, unconfined

Noondine chert which is only used to meet peak requirements during summer. Residents pay Class 1 rates for water (see Appendix E). The local government Shire has also developed an effluent treatment, recycling and reticulation system meaning that town green areas and the sports oval can be regularly watered and maintained. The storm and sewerage wastewaters are treated in effluent ponds located to the south-west of town. Many residents also use rainwater tanks for their water supply.

4.1 Perceptions of Moora

Most interviewees had either grown up in the Moora region or had been living there long term after moving there from other towns in the Northern Agricultural region. All of the indigenous residents interviewed had been born in the area, and had family connections going back many generations. It was commented that they had a strong cultural sense of place and were unlikely to move. A number of people had come to Moora through employment opportunities or placements, but had been, or intended to be, in Moora long term. One person, a government official, stayed in Moora during the week and commuted home to Perth, where the family resided, on weekends.

When asked to describe Moora, most residents perceived it to be a town that had undergone quite significant change in recent decades. It was reported to be an old grazing families' town historically, and had also been characterised by the presence of many government institutions, particularly railway personnel. Locals and railway personnel were described as two distinct groups in the community during this time. It was said that in the past the town "just ticked over". In contrast, Moora in the present was said to be "on the move". A central focus was on improving the lifestyle and attracting new residents and industry to the area. Progress was being made in beautifying and revitalising the town. Much of this was attributed to a proactive local government Shire.

Moora was widely perceived as being in an advantaged position for a Western Australian rural town. It was reported to be an excellent and secure farming district due to its good rainfall. Many commented that the town had never been drought-declared. For this reason many local farmers were considered to be relatively "well off", which placed Moora in a favourable position. Indeed, overall, Moora was seen to be in an excellent situation for a country town, being comparatively vibrant, a stable or positive growth town, and with huge potential for the future.

Following this, descriptions of Moora typically incorporated a recital of the range and number of services in the town. These included five banks, a hospital, several doctors, a dentist, health specialists, and a variety of educational facilities, including a TAFE campus, many government services, and retail businesses to cater to most needs. It was believed the local community had nearly all the services it needed available in the town. However, there was some concern that the population size did not warrant the extent and diversity of these services and hence there was strong intent to increase the population of town.

Moora's location was commonly thought to place it in good standing for future growth. It was described as having easy access to both Perth and the coast and with good roads to main highways in both cases. Many were of the opinion that growth in other areas would eventually reach Moora and people would commute to Perth or coastal areas. It was believed that the town was in a prime position to offer people the benefits of a rural lifestyle without isolation. However, there was some concern that commuters would also shop in Perth at the expense of local business.

Moora's rural lifestyle was thought to be a valuable asset. Many considered it a wonderful place to live, even "idyllic", and most people had no plans to leave. Environmental features such as open space, blue skies and stars at night, wildlife, and the local iconic salmon gums were important. The peace and quiet, sense of safety and country community were also valued. The lifestyle was typically contrasted to urban living, and was viewed as especially good for families and retirees. The idea of an urban retirement village held little appeal for most, although it was reported to be particularly unattractive to men who needed "to stay close to the land."

Moora was said to offer a range of activities in which to be involved. As with many rural towns, sport was a pivotal feature of the lifestyle. A range of community groups also existed in the town. Cultural activities were said to be limited, although it was reported that a fine arts group was being established. Some residents reported to suffer from the perceived limited social and cultural life on offer in Moora. However, an alternate view was that in any place or situation it was always "up to the individual to get out there and be involved." For those originally from smaller towns, Moora offered the perfect balance between community involvement and privacy.

The local community in Moora was described as mixed and somewhat fragmented, being "a little bit bigger than a community and more a case of groups within a community." Perceived divisions included: long and short term residents (some residents came from families that had been in the district for generations whilst others were transitional, coming and going as part of their work); farmers and town residents; socio-economic status; ethnicity (typically indigenous and non-indigenous); and, geographic location according to placement east or west of the railway line.

The larger population size of Moora in comparison to many other WA Wheatbelt towns was commonly said to impact the sense of community and community spirit. It was said that in many ways the local community was that of "a typical country town." That is, open, friendly, caring and always there to help those in need. There were residents who were committed to the town and were active volunteers, often contributing in a number of areas. However, it was widely believed that the town lacked the strong and cohesive community spirit that typically existed in smaller towns. It was commonly said that the perceived good standing of the town made the

general community somewhat complacent and apathetic. Community spirit, for the most part, was considered to be variable or lacking altogether.

The floods that impacted Moora in March of 1999 were reported to have been hugely significant for community spirit. The floods affected many homes and most businesses, led to the evacuation of around 1,000 people and total damage was almost \$3.5 million⁴. It was reported that it had taken many years for the town to recover and many were anxious about possible future flooding. However, it was widely agreed that the disaster and subsequent clean-up brought the community together and strengthened the sense of solidarity for some time. The Shire President of the time was also thought to have played a major role in enhancing sense of community. Moreover, the floods resulted in revitalisation of the town and led to the highly successful annual "Easter Country Camp Out", a joint initiative between local government and the community. Nevertheless, it was generally agreed that community spirit had gradually waned again over time.

The Moora local government Shire was a key topic of discussion among interviewees. It was typically described as proactive and progressive, and a key driver for change in the town. It was said that it was very supportive of the local community, had done much for the town, and was committed to securing its future. This was ascribed to key individuals being very confident and unafraid to take a stand. Many held the local government Shire in great respect and admiration and it was commented that its actions were worth an increase in rates. Alternately, it was thought that it was "almost too ambitious". It was believed that there needed to be a balance in its plans and activities for the future.

Local government was aware of public opinion and saw strong leadership as part of its role, despite doubts and opposition from some in the community, and indeed within local government itself. It was said to be "spreading the news that this is a can-do town", including persistent and successful lobbying of state government to retain and upkeep the local hospital. An Enterprise Development Manager had been appointed to broaden the economic base of the town. This was reported to be the first position of its kind in local government in Western Australia. In addition, unlike the required three-year template, a fifteen-year strategic plan had been developed for Moora.

It was strongly believed that new industry and residents were a key part of Moora's future. Improving the town through revitalisation and beautification was an important part of Shire planning. There was particular focus on attracting new industry to town. It was strongly believed that there were many opportunities for Moora to strengthen and diversify its resources, particularly given water, power and rail facilities. It was reported that new agricultural industry such as citrus growers, piggeries, beef feedlots and machinery businesses were to be established in the district. The local government Shire was also proactively seeking to bring other industry to Moora, including less conventional and publicly unpopular ventures

⁴ Emergency Management Australia Disasters Database, <http://www.ema.gov.au/emadisasters.nsf>

such as a biosolids storage facility. Its aims for new industry were widely shared by the local community, however it was asserted that there needed to be discernment about the type of industry accepted.

Perceptions of youth were an important aspect of the research and interviews were held with primary (Year 7) and high school (Year 11 and 12) students, as well as indigenous youth at the local youth centre. Most had been born in the town and the younger students conceived of remaining there as adults, even if they had to leave for a time to pursue further education. The older students, however, intended to leave Moora and go elsewhere (typically Perth) once they had completed their studies. This was said to be because Perth offered “more opportunity for life.” At least half of the graduating class of 2004 were reported to have had left Moora to pursue other opportunities.

The younger children interviewed were generally positive and very enthusiastic about the town. They expressed great attachment to the rural attributes of the town, particularly the peace and quiet, close, friendly and supportive community, and the freedom afforded them. This was as opposed to the crowded, noisy, uncaring and unsafe city. They also thought there was much to do, from just “hanging out with friends” to playing sport or visiting the local swimming pool or skate-park. In contrast, the teenagers, both indigenous and non-indigenous, saw Moora as “boring” and having “nothing to do.” Some local recreational aspects were enjoyed, however for the most part the town was seen as having little to offer.

4.2 Moora in the future

Thoughts about Moora in the future were typically an extension of the way the town was perceived in the present. The consistent and strong theme was that the town would be a regional centre, although thoughts about the estimated size of the town varied. As mentioned previously, it was thought that with population saturation and escalating property prices in other areas, particularly in Southern and coastal regions, people would seek areas to live where they could still commute to their work. It was thought that Moora would be an attractive alternative given its location, infrastructure and services, and affordability of housing and rural lifestyle. In addition, it was popularly believed that it would hold great appeal for retirees, particularly as they could benefit from a better quality of life and have more savings left over to enjoy their retirement years.

With an increased population, it was believed that there would be more resources, employment and services. However, it was also foreseen that the population structure of Moora would comprise more seniors and fewer people who both lived and worked locally. Many thought that there would be more industry in town, particularly given access to large amounts of water, “the main economic resource of the future.” This was ascribed in part to local government aims in this area, however it was also believed to be a natural follow-on from the current trend. It was commonly considered that there would be more horticultural and intensive

industries. Some people believed there would be an increase in industries that tackled the salinity problem, such as farm forestry.

Youth in Moora did not foresee any real change for Moora in the future. The younger children predominantly saw it continuing to offer all the features they currently valued. Adolescents also predicted that it would change little. However, from their perspective, the town would continue to be uninteresting and have little to offer them.

4.3 The ideal future town

People's thoughts about Moora's realistic future were closely similar to their ideal vision for town, with a degree of elaboration and qualification. An ideal future for Moora incorporated it being the main regional service centre, rather than Jurien Bay on the coast. It was hoped that the benefits offered by lifestyle and location would increase population and growth of the town. There would be more diversity of industry, reducing its reliance on agriculture. Tourists, too, would be attracted to the town, which could offer people "an authentic country experience." Ideally, big business and government would help support the establishment of new ventures in Moora.

It was hoped that with the above changes, quality of life would improve. More employment was desired, especially for youth. Beautification of the town and increased community pride were widely hoped for. For some, having a greater range of services and cultural and social activities was important, for both local residents and for the benefit of visitors. Increased property prices were considered a positive part of Moora's future. It was stressed that growth and development would not compromise the town and the local community. Ideally, there would be a balance between revitalisation of Moora and retaining its special rural qualities and unique identity.

From an indigenous perspective, more opportunity for youth was an integral feature of an ideal future. This referred to employment opportunities, but also included recreational outlets that could offer indigenous youth appealing activities. Their vision included a recreational and entertainment centre that was big and open and offered all the things that were needed to productively entertain adolescents. Greater youth access to cultural ties and education, for example, elder mentoring and bush camps, was equally important. Overall, it was hoped that Moora would be a thriving and prosperous town.

Youth offered a distinct perspective on their ideal image of Moora in the future. Their version of a more vibrant town referred to more shops and facilities, including an arcade and a mall, "cool" clothing stores, new restaurants, and take-away outlets such as Hungry Jacks. Entertainment features such as cinemas, night clubs, music concerts and a water park were hoped for. Inclusion of professional graffiti art, as the mark of youth in Moora, was desired.

Interestingly, younger children, while hoping for more social and entertainment outlets, also focused on social and environmental aspects. It was hoped that there would be less vandalism and littering in town. Recycling as an integral part of town life was desired, as well as a pollution-free environment. There was some concern to see more responsible behaviour on the part of older youth. Improved welfare for local Aboriginal children was a special hope.

4.4 Major challenges for Moora

In order to gauge priority issues facing the town, interviewees were asked to comment upon perceived major challenges facing the town. Many responses centred on themes of coastal bias, centralisation and lack of support for rural areas. These were typically seen as national issues and not unique to Moora. There was some fear that Jurien Bay, and not Moora, would become the regional centre of the district. Other key concerns for the town included potential closure of businesses or withdrawal of services, decreasing numbers of farmers due to increasing farm sizes, and dwindling numbers in sporting and community groups. Change in lifestyles and liability and occupational health and safety regulations were said to play a role in the struggles of these groups. A common concern among those interviewed was having a single supermarket in town, in terms of monopoly of the market.

The loss of youth was a key concern for residents and was described as “the cancer of the country community.” It was reported that although the town had a local high school, many parents preferred their children to board at private schools in Perth due to a perceived higher quality of education. Even those who graduated from high school left the town for further education or improved employment or career prospects. There was general pride in having a local TAFE facility, but it was thought to be limited in curriculum and short-sighted in terms of student numbers for class viability.

Employment was a major issue in Moora with respect to lack of variety of occupations, particularly for youth. Professional roles were said to be scarce, especially for females. Further, professionals who came to town rarely stayed long term and commuted to Perth on weekends. This affected town viability in terms of use of services and participation in community activities. Conversely, it was reported that while apprenticeships and trades positions were available, it was extremely difficult to attract people into these positions. This was attributed to a greater appeal for employment in the city or coastal areas. Moreover, mining ventures were seen as more appealing because of the high income that could be earned.

Paradoxically, as mentioned previously Moora was seen to be in a good position compared to the rural decline experienced by many other rural towns. This was seen to have a negative impact on community commitment and involvement in the town. Indeed, community apathy was held by some to be the town’s biggest challenge for its future. It was said that as overall quality of life was good in Moora most people

did not see a need to make an effort for the town. There was reported to be a general lack of vision and negativity and resistance towards change. Community leaders were thought to be in short supply and it was perceived that residents typically allowed the local government Shire to take responsibility for securing the town's future. Some expressed concern that ultimately growth and innovation would have to come from external investors, who would not put their profits back into the town.

There was a general perception that local farmers, being in a secure agricultural position, were equally complacent. It was reported there was little interest in trying sustainable farm management, simply because in their good fortune there was no need. Further, it was generally considered that the local farming community had little commitment to the town. Farmers were said to typically keep to themselves and did not get involved in local community activities. Frustration was expressed that many farmers invested both their money and their spare time outside the town (typically in the city or coastal areas) when Moora was in most need of their support. It is of note that the local landholders interviewed did not note any perceived division between farming and town communities.

Pragmatic constraints to new growth and development were also reported to be an issue for Moora. The key aim to attract new people and business was said to present a catch-22 situation for the town. It was stated that there was a lack of land available for potential investors. In addition, land that was available was overly, even ridiculously, expensive and lacked connection to power and water. As a result, investment was detracted, in turn constraining the capital growth necessary to help gain interest. Private landholders were reported to be particularly impacted, lacking the funds to connect power and water without prior investment in the land. The potential impact of floods and expensive flood control measures, as well as possible impact on infrastructure from the rising water table, were also perceived to dampen investor interest.

Growth in the town was said to be further constrained by its housing situation. It was reported there were few rental properties available. Those that were on offer had extremely high rental prices, particularly given the standard of housing. Hence, there was limited opportunity for "trying the town" before investing. The traditional single home on large block was also a problem, being unattractive or unsuitable for some demographic groups. The elderly were reported to experience difficulty maintaining large home and block sizes and new aged units being built were not sufficient to meet the demand. Homeswest properties were widely held to be a problem for the town, being old and located in a single part of town. This created a "ghetto" environment which was disliked by both indigenous and non-indigenous people alike.

Town attractiveness was considered a further detractor to potential growth and development. It was thought that much more could be done to beautify the town for the benefit of both local residents and visitors. Shopping facilities, although adequate for local residents, lacked general appeal for outsiders. This was said to be compounded by a lack of dining outlets and cultural activities in the town. It was

suggested that a combination of the services of Moora and the cultural, social and aesthetic features of Toodyay was needed.

For indigenous peoples, lack of state government support was a key challenge. Relocation of many government agencies to Northam was viewed poorly given there could be little understanding of local context. State government housing was a particular problem for the indigenous community, with houses being said to be scarce and of poor standard. It was reported that a uniform paint colour was used inside houses accommodating indigenous residents, and this was considered extremely derogatory. The housing placement process was regarded as unfair and unreasonable, reportedly having no consultation measures for incorporation of appropriate cultural considerations. To compound this, the indigenous community subsequently gained a poor reputation for fighting between some local families.

Racism was acknowledged as a problem by some of the non-indigenous people interviewed in the study, although it was generally perceived to be unconscious. There was general awareness that the actions of a few Aboriginals branded the entire indigenous community. It was reported there was a perceived problem of crime and threat to personal safety from some local indigenous residents. Some were of the belief that indigenous people failed to take opportunities given them, particularly for employment. This perspective was shared by some of the indigenous residents interviewed. However, it was also pointed out that employment was a major issue for many Aboriginal people who may not have a car, a driving licence or a birth certificate, or even know when they were born.

For youth, primary school children saw vandalism, graffiti and “teenage mischief making” as major problems. They were also concerned about dwindling numbers in their football teams and classes. Non-indigenous teenagers primarily saw problems associated with the local indigenous community as a key challenge. For Aboriginal youth, having “nothing to do” and lack of “good or well paid jobs” in Moora were the principal issues.

4.5 Salinity in Moora

Issues of salinity typically did not receive mention as a challenge for the town. When prompted, opinion was divided as to whether salinity was a problem for the town. Some thought it was more an issue for nearby towns. This was attributed to Moora having an undulating landscape, naturally better surface water run-off and underground drainage, and more timber coverage than other areas. It was said the town oval was the only site in town experiencing problems with water logging, and this was believed to be caused by over-watering. Others believed that salinity was a problem for the town, but was principally a preventative issue. Only several residents perceived salinity to be a serious issue for the town. There was concern among this group that the problem was worsening and would create major difficulties in the future.

Community awareness, or lack thereof, about salinity and the rising water table was viewed as a problem by this group. There was concern that people would not take note until they were personally impacted and/or the town began to suffer major impacts. Some frustration was expressed that salinity and the rising water table were generally viewed in isolation, and were not linked with other issues such as watering of gardens. It was thought that more needed to be done to raise awareness in the general community in a way that created concern without undue alarm.

Those that saw salinity as an issue for Moora commonly reported its impacts to be variable in the town and surrounding district. It was said to be more a problem in surrounding areas than within the town itself. The eastern district was considered to suffer more because it was characterised by clay soils, whereas in the west there was sandy soil and hence better drainage. However, it was believed that areas to the west were now beginning to be impacted also. All areas were seen to be affected by climatic variations. The current situation was perceived to be favourable in that several dry seasons had caused a drop in levels of groundwater.

Most landholders reported some impact of salinity on their property. Farms in the district were divided geographically in terms of location either east or west of the town, but all farmers told a similar story. There was very little impact from salinity on their farms, it was not growing rapidly and was usually remedied by fencing off the affected area and planting trees or saltbush. However, there was some doubt about the long-term effectiveness of these techniques. Formal landcare practices were often considered more trouble than they were worth in terms of bureaucratic regulations. Furthermore, other issues such as inadequate power supply and perceived lack of interest in upgrading old and deteriorated infrastructure were seen as equally or more pressing.

Youth were also asked whether they thought salinity was an issue for Moora. The primary school children and Aboriginal youth did not know what salinity was. Those interviewed at the high school said that they had learnt about it at school, but did not consider it to be a problem for Moora.

4.6 Moora's water situation

All people interviewed were asked to give their thoughts about Moora's water situation in general. Town residents had some difficulty in answering this question, primarily because water was not something they generally gave much thought to. Most responses referred to domestic supply aspects such as water quality. From this perspective, water quality was good, particularly in comparison to Jurien Bay where it was brackish and unpleasant. Local rainfall also received mention, it being said that the district had good rainfall despite a few dry years. It was reported that there were no water restrictions in place outside of sprinkler use.

Moora was generally considered to have an unlimited supply of good quality, fresh water. This water was reportedly pumped from a large aquifer in the western region.

There was said to be a reserve of current town supply, and strong confidence was expressed in capacity for catering for increased demand in the future. The good water supply was considered a key asset for Moora's future. However, there was unease from some about potential complacency about future supply and a lack of vision about potential water scarcity in the future.

There was divided opinion about the quantity and quality of local groundwater. Many believed that the water table was rising and was increasingly saline. It was reported that town supplies now came from the western district as the original source in the local vicinity had become too salty for domestic use. However, it was stressed that the underground water situation was not really known. It was asserted that there had been no long term, strategic monitoring through bores and a number of things could be happening underground of which there was no awareness. Some frustration was expressed about the lack of information given to the community about the situation with water and salinity, and of water monitoring results.

Surface water was considered a challenge for Moora in terms of its position at the confluence of a river system and historical flooding. The 1999 floods had left their psychological mark in the community and it was reported many were still suffering or recovering economically. There was high concern that flood control measures were inadequate to cope with another crisis situation. Of further concern was a perceived growing complacency about flood threat because of the current dry period.

The water situation on local farms was said to be variable. Farmers further to the east of Moora were often self-sufficient in their water supply, although they suffered from scarcity and poor quality of underground water. One farmer described how the water from his bores began to kill his roses in the garden due to increasing salt levels. Groundwater was said to be found by "keeping your eyes open" and water divining was reported to be more reliable, and considerably less expensive, than drilling. Many landholders were reliant upon surface water, which was said to be scarce due to the dry period. Water run-off was described as poor because of the poor drainage of clay soils and compaction of soil through movement of stock.

Farms to the west of town were said to be in a more favourable position for water. These properties tended to be connected to supply, and it was commented that there was "never any shortage of water as we get it before the town does!" Moreover, landholders in this part of the district were described as having an excellent supply of quality underground water at their disposal. However, this water was considered to be increasingly salt affected. Recharge levels were reported to be high in western areas due to the sandy soil. As a result, soaks were more commonly used in place of wells.

Problems with water management were commonly perceived for the district. The Department of Environment's system for water allocation was generally considered to be poor. It was believed that past mistakes had not been learnt from, for example, over-allocation in the south of the Shire. It was asserted that there was lack of

discernment about suitability of ventures when allocating water. It was often commented how vast amounts of water had been allocated to an unviable industry nearby. Moreover, the science used to assess allocation was believed to be flawed, being based on the amount of water available without consideration of recharge and the size of the land under consideration.

Local government attracted some criticism about water management, particularly with respect to watering of the town oval. Many disapproved of watering during daylight hours and considered the oval to be considerably over-watered. Some suggested this directly contributed to the rising levels of the water table. However, it was claimed that research had proved this assumption to be untrue. It was suggested that local government was short-sighted about water in its future plans for the town. There was particular concern that it was not adequately accounting for limitations of future water supply. This referred to such things as “just giving it [water] away to industry” and failing to promote use of rainwater tanks in town.

Farmers also attracted some criticism about water management on their properties. It was believed that they did not sufficiently recognise or address the linkages between natural resource management and water management. It was thought that some farmers were complacent about water, carting water in dry seasons rather than ensuring sufficient water through their management actions. This was seen to be less prevalent in the east of Moora where farmers were more water deficient and hence careful with usage. However, it was noted that many landholders throughout the district were economically constrained in being able to adopt efficient water management practices.

The reflections of youth about the water situation in Moora reflected many of those of their adult counterparts, including good rainfall and quality of scheme water. In addition, concern was expressed about the state of the Moore River. This was described as “dirty” and lacking in water. There was also greater focus on the 1999 floods, and concern to see that flooding did not reoccur in the future.

4.7 Innovative water management

For many of those interviewed it was essential that the water situation in Moora be scientifically established before deciding upon possible management options. It was said that although there were ideas about what could be done, there was no sound basis for decision making until the water situation had been properly determined. Moreover, it was reiterated that it needed to be known whether potential ideas were economically viable.

A number of alternatives were suggested as possible management options. However, it was stressed that a *variety* of measures were required⁵. Pumping groundwater from

⁵ One interviewee, a professional in water management, offered a comprehensive outline for integrated water management in Moora. This can be found in Appendix F of the report.

under the town was a popular option, *if* it had been scientifically established as necessary. Many were keen to pump groundwater into the Moore River. It was thought this could keep the river flowing all year round, would bring wildlife, and a lovely picnic area could be created next to the river in town. However, concern was expressed about possible recharge and downstream impact. A similarly popular, and complementary option, was to use the river as a “holding pond”. It was suggested that water could then be pumped out to the natural salt lakes system west of the townsite.

The idea of using these lakes for recreational purposes held great appeal among the general community. This was particularly favoured by youth, along with a water park. Other lifestyle options for utilisation of excess groundwater included “greening the town” and creating local water features. It was suggested that plans for town beautification could incorporate landscaping and a central water feature. It was asserted that “serenity value, not just economic value” was important. Greening the golf course was considered an attractive option. It was thought that these initiatives could also be important in helping attract visitors and new residents to Moora.

Desalination was commonly mentioned as a possible option. However, given economic and practical constraints it was generally not considered realistic. Some believed that a solar powered plant may be more feasible in view of local climatic conditions. Desalination was also believed to offer potential benefits through the development of evaporative and mineral extraction industries. Aquaculture was typically viewed as a more viable option than desalination. However, there was concern about the capital investment risk, market demand, and the time needed before a profit return could be generated. Horticultural industries were a possibility, dependent upon quality of water.

4.8 Achieving aspirations for Moora

Most residents of Moora interviewed for the study considered that the future of Moora primarily rested with the town itself. It was stressed that the community, including farmers, young people, and indigenous residents needed to work together for the benefit of the town. From an Aboriginal perspective, this required cross-cultural awareness and respect. A change of attitude within the community was thought essential to securing Moora’s future. It was believed the general community needed to be proactive and open to new ideas that might benefit the town and there should be more support for the local government Shire’s vision and plans for the town. More local loyalty was needed and residents would have to consider “can I afford *not* to invest in Moora?” It was asserted that “a committed community is a town’s biggest resource.” Some, however, maintained that it was not realistic to orchestrate a change in community attitude. From this perspective it was important to simply introduce change and then allow the community to adjust over time.

Whilst the role of the community was thought paramount to Moora’s future, support from outside the town, and from government in particular, was also seen as vital. It

was thought that ultimately government policy was more powerful than the most strong and committed of communities. It was strongly felt that the state government needed to help community aspirations for the town. Examples included: maintaining services; supportive policies for development from organisations such as Western Power, the Water Corporation, and the WA Planning Commission; and, recognition of local context, knowledge and capability. For indigenous people, it was important that there be more understanding of cultural needs, especially in areas of education, training, and employment for youth.

It was widely agreed that attracting new people to the town was vital to a positive future, and would help offset the threat of rural decline. This was expressed as “populate or perish.” Ways to achieve this included: improving and diversifying services and ensuring more competitive prices; addressing the housing situation, including Homeswest properties; beautifying the town; improving lifestyle through availability of social and cultural activities; and, catering to specific needs such as an ageing population. Devising means to allow local youth to stay, or to attract them back – for example, through employment opportunities - was also paramount. New industry, in particular, was seen as a key to the future. This required the maintenance and improvement of infrastructure and roads, and an open mind to all possibilities. There was some scepticism, however, about the realism of “artificially” developing new business.

Local government was considered to have a central role in helping Moora to achieve its aspirations for the future. Good leadership was believed to be essential to provide direction and to overcome self-interest. This included being progressive and prepared to take risks, and a willingness “to make hard decisions.” However, it was essential that a balance be achieved between investment, development and economic returns and impacts on the community. It was thought that the local government Shire could be more proactive in promoting the town’s unique assets. Some believed that amalgamation with other local governments to strengthen Moora’s position, particularly against coastal bias, should be considered.

While local government leadership was paramount, genuine consideration needed to be given to community aspirations and opinions. Community input was viewed as essential and it was suggested open discussion and debate was required to develop a collective vision for the town. This would help garner support and confidence in the plans for the town. Moreover, it was thought that local government could gain community confidence and trust by “starting with small successes” and demonstrate the benefits of change and new development.

Specific thoughts were held about meeting aspirations for water management. As mentioned previously, determining the overall water situation in Moora was a vital starting point. This needed to be a rigorous, exact and strategic research process that led to the development of a simple, viable and effective water management plan. It was thought that the inclusion of overseas expertise from those with “success stories” could be helpful. However, this was insufficient without inclusion of local expertise. It was also essential that the general community be regularly kept

informed about what was happening. Management plans needed to incorporate local water use efficiency. This referred to local government as well as to the wider community. Farmers, too, were expected to “do their bit” in best practice water management. Raising awareness about water use efficiency was therefore an essential component of any future management planning.

5.0 TAMBELLUP

Tambellup is a small township located 328km south-east of Perth and 126km north of Albany. The Shire of Tambellup covers an area of 1,437 square kilometres which is predominately occupied by agricultural activities such as sheep, wool, grain and pigs. The agricultural industry has the largest number of workers. In 2002 the Shire had a population of 722. This declined by 1.4% from the previous year, in keeping with the declining trend of the last ten years (see Appendix C). Indigenous peoples comprise 20.9% of the total population.

In June 2003 there were 400 people employed in Tambellup. The employment rate in Tambellup has shown a significant decrease in recent years. In June 2002 the employment rate decreased by 19.7%. This is compared to a 1.9% positive growth for the state. Only 9 people were unemployed in June 2003, producing a rate of 2.2%. This is in contrast with a 5.9% employment rate for the state in the same year.

Tambellup services include a library, telecentre, community bank, business incubator and a several small retail outlets. There is also a government police department. A number of community groups operate in Tambellup, including St John Ambulance, Country Women's Association, and youth and seniors groups. There is also an environmental Land Care District Committee. The town accommodates a variety of sporting clubs. These include bowls, cricket, darts, golf, hockey, football, netball, tennis and the Tambellup Community Sporting Association.

Tambellup has one primary school providing education from kindergarten to Year 7. Katanning, a near-by regional service centre, provides schooling to Year 12. School buses operate daily to take students to and from Tambellup to Katanning. For health services, the town has a health centre with a full time nurse and various visiting specialists. An environmental health officer also visits Tambellup once a week.

Water in the Tambellup Shire is primarily from the Harris Dam as part of the Great Southern Towns Water Supply Scheme. Residents pay Class 4 water rates for the scheme water (see Appendix E). However, scheme water is not used for the town ovals. Instead, the water supply for the oval comes from an old railway dam located 7km out of town, which used to be a reserve. Rainwater tanks are also a common source of water for town residents.

5.1 Perceptions of Tambellup

Nearly all of those interviewed in Tambellup reported they had lived there all their lives, or had been settled there for a long period. The few people who had been in the town for only a short while were there on work placements. Of those who had adult children, many had left the town to pursue life opportunities elsewhere. However,

several children from farming families had remained in the district, either married to a farmer or working on the family farm.

Tambellup was typically described as “a great place to live.” It was well placed, with regional centres to the north (Katanning) and south (Albany) within easy access and enjoyed a good climate. Tambellup had all of the valued rural attributes such as peace and quiet, and was said to be a small, friendly and safe town. It was widely considered an excellent place to raise a family. The community was described as very friendly, helpful, caring and committed. It was said that the community was “just like a big family” and was very welcoming to others. Community spirit was commonly considered to be high, however was also reported to ebb and flow.

As with many rural towns, sport was central to social life in Tambellup. However, it was said to assume even more importance given the small size of the town. Indeed, it was suggested that sport was the principal social outlet for residents, being as much about friendships as it was about recreation. This was welcomed for reasons of community cohesion, but was also somewhat constraining for residents who were not particularly sporting inclined. It was reported that because of lack of facilities and team numbers for certain sports, some residents travelled to larger regional centres to participate in their desired game.

Tambellup was reported to have the largest indigenous population in the Great Southern Region. It was said that the local Nyoongar community had always been separate to non-indigenous residents in the town. This extended to sporting activities, the local adult football team being reported to be an almost exclusively indigenous group. Some considered there to be a degree of racism in Tambellup, which was attributed to social problems associated with some of the local indigenous residents. From an indigenous perspective, the local community was friendly and high satisfaction was expressed with the town.

Tambellup’s community was described as “progressive in attitude, although limited in size.” A key achievement for the town was the establishment of a local community bank. This was initiated in partnership with the neighbouring town of Cranbrook after both towns had been without a bank for several years. The bank was reported to be the first one nationwide to have been established in a town without an existing bank. Two local residents were said to be key drivers in the process, canvassing community support and investment in the scheme to make the aspiration a reality. Despite being reportedly the smallest community bank in Australia, it was stated that it was now making a “decent profit” for the local community.

The local government Shire was well regarded and was reported to have a good relationship with the local community. It was said that it was committed to supporting and improving the town but was constrained by withdrawal of resources, along with increasingly devolved responsibility of state government responsibilities. Local government was described as having a partnership relationship with the community in achieving shared aspirations for the town. This partnership was based on local government support of ideas and initiatives, but with

community ownership to better ensure local endorsement and ultimate success. This included a locally organised tourism plan to encourage visitors to the Great Southern Region to come and see less frequented towns such as Tambellup.

The community Telecentre was seen as a further example of local commitment and community partnership to improve the town. Originally the Station Master's building and retained by local government, the Telecentre had been the community-run resource centre for the last decade. It was described as an important social hub of the community and gained valued financial support through local fundraising initiatives such as cake stalls and aluminium can recycling. The annual Agricultural Show was commonly cited as a further important joint initiative for Tambellup. It was a source of pride that it was still being held and its survival was put down to local pride and dedication. Moreover, the successful evolution of the event into a street show due to problems with the local oval was considered evidence of community creativity and adaptability.

Tambellup was described as having a number of services for the local population. In terms of health care, most of those interviewed felt fortunate that they had a nursing post in town with a full time nurse and visiting doctor once weekly. Other specialists, such as physiotherapists, were also reported to visit the town. Having a hospital and other services nearby in Katanning was evidently appreciated. A similar attitude was held towards educational facilities, with facilities for primary education and children then going to larger regional centres or to Perth for secondary education. Tambellup was seen to provide well for its seniors, with several aged units, home care services and organised seniors' activities.

Other services in Tambellup were said to be limited. It was reported that many shops had closed in recent years, including a butcher and a general store. The local hotel had also been closed for several years, although had recently reopened under new management. The local delicatessen had recently sold, but was to be taken over by new residents. Tambellup had a local co-operative store, although it was widely noted to be more expensive and limited in variety than larger supermarkets in neighbouring regional centres. Most residents expressed conflict between supporting local business and protecting their budget and quality of life. The compromise for many was to "use the co-op for what it can be used for and go to Katanning too."

The views of local youth in Tambellup followed that of their adult counterparts. High satisfaction was expressed for the town, which was described as friendly, safe, fun and healthy. Sport was the main activity for local children and most participated in a number of sporting groups. The annual Agricultural Show was an anticipated event and it was said that the entire community, including the local primary school, took part. It was reported that most local youth of secondary school age went to either Katanning or Albany for their education. The young high school student interviewed for the study boarded in Albany, and this was considered a normal way of things. It was thought that they would remain in Tambellup in the future, and live and work on the family farm.

5.2 Tambellup in the future

Concern was commonly expressed about Tambellup's prospects for the future. It was considered that despite the proactive and close community, in the current rural climate the survival of smaller towns was a battle. Tambellup was generally seen to be at a crossroads, likely to decline over time unless something was discovered to sustain the town. It was pointed out that it had already lost many businesses and services and people were already in the habit of utilising nearby regional centres for their needs. Many believed that this trend would continue into the future unless there was a dramatic change of fortune for the town.

Alternately, it was believed that Tambellup would survive into the future with little change. The town was viewed as having enough resources and local commitment to continue on as it was currently for some time to come. The rural lifestyle and reasonable cost of living were thought to be valuable assets for keeping and attracting residents. It was reported that many farmers had or intended to retire in the town. A new flux of babies in the community was also an important consideration for a positive future. Little change was foreseen for the local community, comprised overall of the same demographic population and enjoying a similar lifestyle.

5.3 The ideal future town

When considering an ideal future for Tambellup, some simply hoped that it would survive and that existing businesses could be maintained. It was thought that the town was entirely satisfactory just as it was and very little change was desired. Others hoped that the town would be prosperous and thriving in the future. A key hope associated with this was the establishment of new industry in Tambellup. This could diversify the resource base, provide employment for local residents, particularly youth, and help increase the population size of the town.

Tourism was also perceived to be central to future prosperity. The Great Southern Region attracts many visitors, yet smaller inland towns such as Tambellup are not on the major tourist routes. For this reason, most visitors to the region typically bypass the town. It was hoped that something could be devised that could attract tourists to the town and help it to become more vibrant and prosperous. While growth and development were a part of some residents' ideal vision for the town, it was hoped it would not adversely impact Tambellup's valued rural assets and lifestyle.

Ideally, Tambellup would have improved prospects for local youth. The town would have opportunities for young people so that they did not have to leave to further their life opportunities. More social activities and good employment prospects were central to this vision. For farmers, more support with issues of salinity and in sustainable land management was desired. It was also hoped that salinity and water problems in the townsite would have been addressed. Local youth aspired to more green areas in the town, including the primary school oval, and more shops.

5.4 Major challenges for Tambellup

A key perceived challenge for Tambellup was decline of the town. The population was said to have dwindled over the years, and the small size was a source of concern to many. Although it was stated that the town was attracting retiree residents, it was commonly considered to be “struggling for people.” Decreasing farm sizes and loss of youth were key factors in this trend. Moreover, inadequate facilities for aged care had serious repercussions in terms of capacity for keeping the older residents in town.

Community groups were noted to be particularly impacted by decreasing population size. While still active and highly important to the town, they were reportedly experiencing a decline in membership, and were typically run by the same core group of people who were now tiring. Loss of youth and change in lifestyle values were said to play a part in lack of membership. Nevertheless, it was reported that over ten younger women responded to a CWA local “crisis notice”, determined not to see the group die. Sporting groups, however, were not faring as well and it was reported that many adult teams were struggling to carry on.

A decreasing population was also of major concern with respect to local business. As reported previously, there had been a decline in local businesses in recent years. The local co-operative was widely perceived to be in a “borderline” situation in terms of its survival. Its predicament was said to be “catch-22” in that it needed more local support to continue business. Yet, as services and facilities in Tambellup had dwindled, local residents typically frequented nearby regional centres for their needs and shopped in the large supermarket while there. This was not the preferred situation for residents, however was considered a pragmatic reality.

A key perceived challenge for the town was the potential closure of fuel outlets. Fuel in Tambellup was traditionally supplied through bowsers situated on the footpath outside the premises of two local businesses. It was reported that new regulatory requirements deemed this unacceptable due to potential risk of accident. The fuel bowsers would therefore have to be moved to meet regulatory standards, at an expense not affordable by the affected businesses, or be removed. Apart from the potential significant and costly inconvenience to the community, there was strong frustration and indignation at the seeming senselessness of the directive. There was reportedly no track record of accidents on which to base the decision making. It was strongly felt that this type of regulation represented “modern madness” and was “out of hand”. Feelings about the situation ran particularly high given it was viewed as representative of the irrational and demoralising obstacles that hampered local community efforts to sustain or improve the town.

Issues of decline in the town were primarily attributed to lack of government support for smaller rural towns. It was reported that there had been significant withdrawal of state government services and funding since the 1980s, which had a flow-on effect on population size. However, it was claimed government did not

recognise this link, paradoxically justifying further withdrawal of support “by the same old story that our population is too small!” The common sentiment was that small country towns were unimportant to government as they were not politically important and “cost more to keep alive than to let them die.” It was believed that decision makers had no feeling for impacted communities, viewing them in cold political or economic terms. There was strong concern and disillusionment of the repercussions of the “one vote, one value” policy⁶ in further eroding the power of country communities.

Small population size was said to have had a significant impact on the power of local government in Tambellup. It was reported that as a result amalgamation with other small local governments in neighbouring areas was being considered. The possibility of this amalgamation created some concern among the local community. It was feared that the town could be neglected in an amalgamated local government. There was also apprehension that the valued autonomous identity of the town could be compromised. It was thought that while there may be short term economic benefits in pooling resources, in the longer term it would be more costly and inefficient.

Attracting industry to Tambellup was commonly considered a key means of helping to combat the impacts of rural decline. However, there was general scepticism about this as a viable solution for the town. There was wide regard for the Business Enterprise Centre that had been set up in town to “incubate new business”. Yet, despite all efforts it was not well utilised as the obstacles to setting up new business were too constraining. Infrastructure was said to be limited and the cost of freight was perceived to be a key deterrent. Power and communications services in the area were reported to be extremely problematic because of old and deteriorating infrastructure, which was a hugely frustrating issue for the local community. Moreover, there was the important issue of lack of people to patronise any business in town.

Attracting new residents and visitors to the town was considered equally fraught. While the town was deeply valued by the local community, it was recognised that lack of services and facilities was hugely detracting for outsiders. Further, the town was said to give a depressing impression with its empty shops and deteriorating buildings. For families, there was no secondary school in town and no childcare facilities were available for younger children. Many believed that the town would face a huge struggle to develop something that could attract visitors. Hence, while plans for tourism were popularly supported, doubt was expressed about whether they were realistically achievable.

The local housing situation was strongly held to be a key impediment to the future of the town. There was reportedly no housing for people to either buy or rent and houses that did come up were said to be of poor standard. Furthermore, the little land that could be available for new housing was said to be in low-lying, water-

⁶ Legislation to create an electoral system where each Lower House seat has approximately the same population. Hence, seats would be removed from regional areas and added to urban areas.

logged areas which were expensive to develop. New houses being built in the area belonged to Homeswest and were principally for Aboriginal residents in town. Hence, there was little capacity for accommodating new residents, including local farmers who wanted to retire in Tambellup.

Issues for local youth were considered a key issue for Tambellup. Loss of youth was widely considered as inevitable. The town was seen to offer little for those between the ages of sixteen and twenty-five. This referred to employment and social opportunities. Adolescents had to leave town to attend high school, and it was reported that most boarded either in nearby regional centres or in private schools in Perth. Hence, in a sense they were already being prompted to leave the town and explore further life opportunities. A small percentage of young males were said to come back to the family farm. However, many adult residents felt ambivalent about this because of the perceived difficult agricultural lifestyle and scarcity of young females as potential partners.

The indigenous population was said to have specific challenges. While it was said that more indigenous youth remained in Tambellup, unemployment was high. In addition, it was reported that there were problems with drugs and alcohol. There was a locally owned and run farm to the west of town for Nyoongar residents, however it was not typically seen as very productive. Issues facing the group were said to be exacerbated by a lack of indigenous elders and leadership, resulting in disparate and sometimes rivalling groups. This was a source of strong concern and frustration given that a strong and cohesive indigenous community was particularly important in helping overcome social and cultural struggles.

5.5 Salinity in Tambellup

Salinity was reported, both prompted and unprompted, as a local challenge by both town residents and local farmers. However, it was typically viewed as “a farming issue” rather than as a major concern for the town. It was said that the impacts of salinity in the agricultural district varied from minimal to “as bad as it gets.” Most people believed that the problem had worsened over time. Properties that were said to have had few salinity problems had once fresh dam water turning saline. Properties with a history of salinity reported that it had intensified over the years.

All farmers interviewed practised some form of salinity management. Tree planting, fencing and drainage were common. Innovative practices such as perennial and lucerne crops were being tried and satisfaction was expressed with results to date. More experimental techniques, such as Vetiver grass, were said to be tried by other farmers but had not been applied locally. It was said that “time and money to lose” were needed to pursue more speculative ventures. Some farmers reported to be experimenting with small-scale, non-profit aquaculture ventures, although a farmer in a nearby town had used saline water to start a successful commercial barramundi venture on his property.

5.6 Tambellup's water situation

For the townsite, Tambellup was typically considered to have “more of a *water* problem than a salt problem.” The town was seen as having an abundance of groundwater, whether fresh or saline, due to its low lying position. A rising groundwater table was also generally considered to be an issue for the town. Indeed, it was claimed that the green lawn in front of the local post office was never watered. It was joked that residents would know when the rising water table problem had been fixed when the owner had to begin to water his lawn. It was generally thought that the underground water could not be too salty or this lawn would have died.

It was stated that the rising groundwater table had been a problem for Tambellup for some time. Town infrastructure was reported to be impacted. The local hotel was said to have water problems in its cellar because of the rising water table. Rising damp was considered a major problem for many buildings. Significant amounts of money were claimed to have been spent on fixing the town hall over the years because of groundwater impacts. It was reported that a bore located in the backyard of the town hall continually pumped water from the groundwater table into nearby storm drains.

While there was general community awareness about impacts of the rising water table on infrastructure, a major issue for residents was its effect on the septic system. This was causing increasing concern because of health risks and unpleasant odours. Residents expressed frustration and a sense of betrayal that several years ago the promised state funding to provide a sewerage system had been withdrawn. It was said that the state government gave annual assurances that the money would be forthcoming, but was never delivered. There was little belief the town would actually receive state government assistance to fix the problem. It was generally thought that the assurances were merely a way of placating local residents. Indeed, some were of the opinion that the state government was trying to mollify the local community while the town was left to die.

From an indigenous perspective, the rising water table was a major concern because of its impact on Nyoongar graves in the local cemetery. The cemetery was used for all local residents and it was reported that all gravesites could be impacted. However, there was particular alarm about the effects of the rising table on indigenous gravesites which were said to be in low-lying ground and the first to be affected. Impacts on the graves were also a cultural issue for the local Nyoongar people. There was frustration that state government agency regulation prevented action from being taken to redress the problem. It was of great importance that some means of resolving the issue be found.

Town water supply in Tambellup was claimed to be an issue because of old and leaking infrastructure. This was thought to cause a significant loss of water, but it was maintained that the Water Corporation was not interested in fixing the problem. This caused general resentment given strict restrictions in times of water shortage,

and particularly as they had been imposed just when new grass had been planted at the town oval at considerable expense. Local government therefore had to outlay further funds to pipe water from an old dam in the area. Old infrastructure was reported to present further problems in times of water carting because of the significant time taken to fill the water trucks. This was not only hugely expensive for farmers, but was extremely inconvenient for town residents whose domestic supply was impacted at these times.

Local farmers in the area reported to be self-sufficient in water supply except in times of extreme shortage. Rainwater tanks and dams were used, although it was stated that there was little or no harvesting of surface water run-off. Water quality on properties was said to be variable and even unpredictable. One landowner whose property was severely impacted by salinity reported that the family house was built on top of a freshwater supply. Water logging was an issue for some farmers, although others said their problem was that surface water could not be retained as it quickly leached underground through natural fissures in the land.

Talk of the water situation in Tambellup was often dominated by the heavy rains it had recently received. It was reported that there had been several dry years and it had been reaching critical point for farmers. Some had been forced to start carting water for their properties. In the town, the reserve dam used to water the oval was said to have been pumped dry. Hence, the recent rains, which had refilled the dams, and indeed caused minor flooding in the area, were a relief for the community. It was noted that the welfare of the town was strongly interlinked with that of the agricultural district.

The Gordon River was also a frequent water-related topic among local residents. This river, which flows through the town, was historically important for the town and had traditionally been a site of local recreation. However, it was said to have badly deteriorated over time. This had been partially remedied through a local restoration project to build a weir at a local bridge crossing. Many believed there had been a significant improvement in the river since this time. It was reported there was more water in the weir side of the river, wildlife were returning, and it had considerably more aesthetic appeal. Some, however, were less enthusiastic. It was pointed out that it was not known whether the actual quality of water in the river had improved. Moreover, the river downstream of the weir was said to often be stagnant and was a breeding ground for mosquitoes.

5.7 Innovative water management

There was wide support for innovative water management to address water-related problems in Tambellup. Indeed, it was a source of pride that the town was being proactive in this area, particularly as it was perceived that many nearby towns were ignoring similar problems. However, some of those interviewed were reluctant to comment upon possible management options. It was considered that they did not have sufficient knowledge or expertise to forward an opinion. Others believed that it

was the province of the local government to make decisions for the local community. For many, it was simply important that the water was utilised productively, and for economic benefit of the town if possible.

After making these qualifications most people then felt more comfortable in venturing an opinion. Pumping of the groundwater was favoured, although it was suggested that prevention of groundwater recharge through harvesting and storage was an equal priority. It was thought that if the water was of adequate quality it could be pumped into the river, either to flow downstream or to be used to create a pleasant recreational area as in the past. Using the water to beautify and green the town, particularly the town oval, was also favoured. A local swimming pool was a preference for youth. Creating a self-sufficient town water supply and potentially even supplying water to other areas was thought to warrant serious investigation.

Desalinisation was considered an “obvious” option and was said to be favoured by the local Council. However, there was some contention over whether the quality of the groundwater warranted this alternative. New industry was commonly supported, particularly as it would not be so reliant upon pristine water quality. Aquaculture ventures were a very popular consideration. Horticulture was perceived to be a distinct possibility for the town. Innovation for holistic water management was thought important. A farmer in a nearby town who had received international recognition for innovative use of water on his property to grow and sell a variety of irrigated crops and to adopt other sustainable agricultural practices was held up as an inspirational example.

5.8 Achieving aspirations for Tambellup

It was generally perceived that the local community was doing a great deal already to help achieve aspirations for the future of the town. However, it was believed the town could benefit from more community support of local business. Innovation, creativity and community spirit were considered essential to the future of the town and it was thought more could be done in these areas. Further, widespread involvement and cooperation in helping to achieve aims for the town was believed to be essential. More indigenous involvement in town initiatives was desired.

Maintaining the current population and lifestyle was a key aspiration. Keeping sporting groups going was a priority, not only for recreational purposes but because they operated as the principal social hub of the town. In addition, they represented the continued existence of Tambellup as a separate identity. Increasing the population of Tambellup was seen by many people as essential to securing the town’s future. More people were needed to be able to maintain and possibly improve town groups, services and facilities. Initiatives were therefore needed to attract people to Tambellup. For some, tourism was crucial and the town needed to be revitalised and proactively marketed to attract visitors. Others, however, did not see this as a realistic option for the town and asserted that new industry was needed.

Alternately, it was argued that growth of the town could not be orchestrated and had to evolve naturally.

Resolving the housing situation was considered essential to bringing new people to Tambellup. However, there were few ideas for how this could be achieved. Similarly, while it was recognised that employment opportunities were critical, particularly for youth, there was uncertainty about how these could be created. It was suggested that youth themselves could be encouraged to “think big” and create new industry and jobs in town. It was proposed that youth could leave Tambellup to acquire the skills and qualifications needed in the town and then set up these businesses to service the local community.

Water management was considered vital to the future of Tambellup. Indeed, it was suggested that water was “the key to the town.” Water was believed to have an important role in developing new business and attracting visitors to the town. Groundwater management was equally important and much hope was invested in the Rural Towns - Liquid Assets project for helping to overcome problems in this area and provide economically beneficial solutions for the town. It was thought that the local community could play a part in water management. More waterwise awareness in the community could help in current supply problems. Moreover, it was believed that more could be done to create an independent town water supply through efficient water harvesting and storage.

While it was widely noted that the local community was largely responsible for securing its own future, the need for external support was stressed. Financial investment was considered vital, it being commented that “aspirations are always greater than income.” Funding processes that helped rather hindered the community were an equal priority. Overall, however, it was strongly believed that the future of Tambellup essentially laid in a change of attitude and policy at both Federal and State Government levels. It was believed that within the current climate for small rural towns, even the most concerted of community efforts for town prosperity would be futile. There was little faith, however, in any political change. Rather, hopes were pinned on the Rural Towns - Liquid Assets project for providing Tambellup with the means to survive and prosper in the future.

6.0 WAGIN

The town of Wagin is located 227 kilometres south east of Perth. The Shire of Wagin covers an area of 1,950 square kilometres. In June 2002 Wagin had a population of 1,848, having decreased by 1.2% from the previous year. This population decline has been steady for the last ten years (see Appendix D). Indigenous peoples comprised 5.6% of the total population. In June 2003 Wagin had 992 people employed, which was a 15.4% decrease compared to June 2002. The unemployment rate in June 2003 was 5.3%, compared to 5.9% for the rest of the state.

Wagin is an agricultural based district and is an important centre for sheep and wheat industries. This is evident from the grain silos and bulk loading facilities near the railway line. Additionally the town produces agricultural supplies such as superphosphate and stock feed. Wagin has a variety of retail trades available for local residents. Agriculture and retail were the two highest industries employing workers in Wagin.

For health care facilities, Wagin has a district hospital and a doctor. A variety of aged care services are available. These include accommodation facilities, a Home and Community Care program, and a community bus. Educational facilities in Wagin provide schooling up to Year 10. School buses are available for students completing their secondary education in Narrogin.

Wagin supports numerous recreational and community groups. For sport, groups include badminton, basketball, bowling, cricket, football, tennis and golf. Groups for the Red Cross, Rotary, Apex and Lions clubs, and Rural, Remote and Regional Women's Network exist in the town. Wagin also has a Wagin Agricultural Society. The town has a swimming pool, showground and park and gardens. Wagin hosts a renowned Historical Village which attracts over 30,000 visitors a year.

Puntapin Rock, located four kilometres south-east of Wagin, is a large rock formation spanning an area of 60 acres which traditionally provided the town with its water supply. Current town scheme water supply is piped from the Harris Dam near Collie. There are two dams located near town. A dam to the south, owned by the Water Corporation, holds 80ML and a northern dam which holds 25ML. The Shire and school oval is watered from water from the northern dam. All other local requirements, including watering of parks and parts of the showgrounds, are met through scheme supply. Residents and commercial water rates for Wagin are Class 2 (see Appendix E).

6.1 Perceptions of Wagin

Many of those interviewed in Wagin were born there, the majority coming from families that had been in the area since the early 1900s. Some interviewees had

moved to Wagin to marry long term residents, and had lived and raised children there. Many of these children had left the town to pursue other opportunities, however several families had sons who had taken over the family farm. Two people had come to Wagin through a work placement, and had been there for up to five years. One interviewee had moved to Wagin over a decade ago as good standard housing was affordable in the area.

Descriptions of Wagin were characterised by attachment to and pride in the town, it being widely seen as “a fantastic place to live.” It was said that, like most other country towns, Wagin was suffering from centralisation policies and associated issues of rural decline. However, this was said to have increased community self-sufficiency and solidarity. Most began their descriptions of Wagin as “a typical country town”, and then progressed to relate all its highly valued features.

There was great attachment to the lifestyle offered, which was described as having “all the things that make life tick.” This included rural lifestyle aspects such as peace and quiet and lack of stress. Many expressed appreciation in feeling safe, in terms of an increasingly rare commodity in modern life. Like most rural towns sport was central, and a new recreation centre had just been built to incorporate many sports. However, there were many other community activities and groups to be involved in, including recently formed groups for Sunday morning bike riding and a book club.

Residents took pride in Wagin as a happy and friendly town. It was said that people invariably smiled and said hello on the street, and “going shopping was a social event.” This friendliness extended to newcomers and visitors. Wagin was described as a place where all were welcomed and anyone could feel at home. Stories were related of how visitors had been so struck by the friendliness and positiveness of the town that they had chosen to move there. An annual celebration was held in Wagin to welcome new residents, who were appreciated for the new skills and fresh perspective they offered. It was strongly felt that new residents must be a positive and valued part of the community.

There was striking feeling for and pride in the local community, which was typically described as having “brilliant community spirit and solidarity.” It was reported, that unlike some other smaller country towns, it was not petty or “cliquey”, but was extremely co-operative, helpful and selfless. Like many smaller rural towns, this “country care” occurred through organised community or sporting groups and events. The Wagin Woolorama was often cited as an example of how the community worked together to achieve remarkable outcomes. However, Wagin was seen to be distinctive in that sense of community was not confined to these realms but was integral in daily life. Many examples were offered of people helping each other in the town, and it was said that this culture was one of the first things people had to learn about the town when they moved there.

There was equally strong pride in the proactive nature of the community, which was said to be “vibrant and positive.” The community was seen as independent, spirited and collectively prepared to fight for wellbeing of the town. It was frequently

reported that “you know that if you want something done, it just gets done.” This extended from more mundane tasks to creating and maintaining iconic features of the town, such as the annual Woolorama event, the Historical Village and the Giant Ram. Fund raising was central for helping to improve the town, but it was stated that the community also donated time, materials and even personal possessions in their endeavours. Moreover, effort was not confined to a core group of residents. The entire community was described as volunteer-based.

It was reported that the community and local government worked together to deliver its aims. Local government was held in high esteem, and the Shire President was viewed as a positive leader for the community. Many examples were given of joint efforts between the local government Shire and the general community to improve the wellbeing of the town. One such example included the placement of an advertisement in the West Australian newspaper encouraging people to come and live in Wagin, “simply because it was a great place to live!” The considerable costs of this exercise were shared by community groups. It was reported that the community and local government were always willing to take up an idea, and if it turned out to be less successful than envisaged, “then everyone just moves onto something else.”

For all of the reasons described above, Wagin was considered very innovative. Indeed, it was described as “one of the most progressive places in Australia.” It was said that the community was not scared to try new things or to expand its horizons, although there was less confidence about this among some in the farming community. Recent new ventures included emu farming, perennial and jojoba crops, aquaculture and viticulture. Most initiatives were practiced on a small-scale, trial basis as part of agricultural diversification. Owners of the emu farm had attracted international interest and were contracted to share their expertise with a group of Chinese delegates. The local hotel had won the award for ‘Best Regional Hotel in WA 2004-5’ and sported a well-frequented modern, artistic wine bar.

There was high satisfaction among local residents with the services offered in Wagin. It was frequently stressed that the community had all it needed in the town. There were strong feelings about shopping locally for loyalty and support. This was heightened by a sense of rivalry and threat with the nearby larger service towns, Narrogin and Katanning. However, it was considered reasonable to occasionally shop in these towns whilst visiting for other reasons. It was suggested that people in Wagin were advantaged by being able to use larger service towns to their convenience, but not having endure all the perceived negative aspects of larger service towns.

Wagin’s services for the elderly gained common comment as being particularly good. This primarily referred to the local “Care and Share” which was described as “the best model for aged care in Australia.” It was reported over the last decade there had been a collective effort to rebuild the old, dilapidated Catholic convent classrooms that had been donated for the cause. This was now a central facility for the older citizens of the town and was said to “cater brilliantly to the needs of seniors”. However, it was stressed that a key aim of the initiative was “to give back

to the community” and the facility incorporated an ‘opportunity shop’ and a crafts store that sold both traditional country crafts and timber furniture made by female seniors in the group. In addition, a free lunch was offered every Sunday. Other aged services in Wagin included thirty two aged units, an aged hostel, and a range of activities offered by the new recreation centre.

The aged services in Wagin were considered vital to catering to the future needs of the community. A distinctive trend in the town in recent years was the number of retirees coming to the town. Indeed, it was reported that “the biggest growth industry in Wagin is the older people.” Wagin was seen as a popular place to retire given that a good home could be bought at a very reasonable price, thereby leaving people with more savings to enjoy a better quality of life. In addition, they could enjoy a temperate climate, all the benefits of a rural lifestyle and local community, and have availability of all key services. A further benefit was central access to Perth and the western and southern coasts.

New retirees in town included local farmers. Women were described as particularly keen to move into town once the children had been raised, wanting to enjoy the lifestyle of town residency. It was reported that many local farmers’ children took over the family farm. Increasing farm sizes were therefore due to “the big farmers buying out the little guys.” Farmers were highly respected in Wagin, being described as “the lifeblood of the town”. Their wide range of skills and experience was particularly appreciated and they were considered to “be good at getting things done around town.”

Younger members of the community had a distinctive view point about Wagin. About half of the students interviewed, of both primary and high school ages, were born in Wagin. Others had come to town because of their parents’ work or for a change of family lifestyle. All youth interviewed planned to leave Wagin in the future to pursue educational and career opportunities.

Wagin was principally described by its youth for its rural attributes. It was said to be peaceful, quiet, not too crowded and clean (it won ‘Tidy Town of the Year’ two years ago). It was also valued as being safe, “even at night.” There was little traffic and everything was close by, “so you can just go over to a friend’s place.” The community was considered kind and friendly and there was a sense of belonging and place. The community was comprised of “mostly old people here, not many babies but lots of kids.” The rural lifestyle was also appreciated for its wide variety of wildlife and opportunities for experiences such as sheep farming.

Wagin’s youth were satisfied overall with services and activities in town. It was thought to have a good variety of shops, although it was lacking in clothing stores and fast food outlets. Local activities and facilities included bike riding, (“not too hilly”), a skate-park, pool, recreational centre, and a variety of sporting groups. However, many also went to Narrogin to play sports or to use the recreational facilities offered. Proximity to regional service centres was considered a special feature of the town, along with the Wagin Woolorama, the Historical Village and

Puntapin Rock. Students were proactive in helping with the Woolorama and also raised their own funds to finance their annual school camp.

6.2 Wagin in the future

Uncertainty was expressed about Wagin's future in terms of the impact of rural decline. Although it was recognised that there was strong community attachment to and pride in Wagin, and that residents were fiercely committed to its wellbeing, political attitude towards smaller rural towns was seen as a key threat. It was feared that the strongest of community attitudes and efforts may not be sufficient in the face of a decentralisation trend. It was simply hoped that Wagin "would not be in a hole", or "would still be here."

Many were of the attitude that Wagin would "survive" despite perceived threats to its future. It was believed that the appeal of the town would continue to attract new residents, which would be important in helping to secure the town's future. Wagin's ageing population was considered a particular asset for its future. It was thought that the high number of seniors and retirees would be important for maintaining Wagin's future population size. In addition, it was asserted that they would require service support, which would bring younger professionals to the town. Hence, the town was likely to secure its services and facilities into the future.

It was thought that there could be an increase in lower income people in Wagin in the future because of its affordability and lifestyle. This was not necessarily viewed as a positive trend as it was believed this demographic group would not be inclined to participate in or contribute to the community and town. Significant or radical change that could improve Wagin's prospects was considered unlikely. It was suggested that "for anything to change something really out of the ordinary would have to happen."

6.3 The ideal future town

Following views expressed in the preceding question, for many people the simple survival of the town in the current political climate was an ideal future. It was hoped that the town would continue to attract new residents and retirees, particularly professionals who were seen to have a positive contribution to offer the town. Some desired to bring new people to the town through a key tourist feature. However, it was believed this would have to be based on "making some amazing discovery here" and, while a nice idea was generally unrealistic.

It was commonly hoped that Wagin would undergo little change as it was considered special as it was. In addition, it was thought that "bigger isn't necessarily better" and could potentially introduce new problems such as crime to the town. Nevertheless, there were some aspirations for growth of the town, with the clear provision that it was balanced to ensure that Wagin's valued features were not

compromised. New industry was welcomed, particularly for the employment prospects it would bring for youth. Smaller industries, however, were favoured over larger corporations. Aquaculture and fish industries were thought suitable, and possibly a feedlot.

Provision of good health services was a strong hope for the town. Having a fully functioning hospital and all necessary health facilities was seen as ideal. However, it was principally hoped that the town retained its existing services and personnel, particularly the local doctor and pharmacist. Educational facilities also received mention. It was hoped that there would be provision of high school right through to Year 12 to allow youth to stay in Wagin longer.

For youth, Wagin was satisfactory principally as it was at the time. More entertainment, however, was welcomed. Ideally, a larger skate-park and a BMX park would be positive additions to the town. Teenagers wanted more dances and community-hall activities for social outings and their own special place to “hang out.” The younger students hoped for an all-year cinema and a fun park. It was thought that the town could benefit from more shops, although as per the adult residents, they didn’t want “Wagin to change all that much or get spoiled.” It was also hoped that there would be more young people in the community in the future.

6.4 Major challenges for Wagin

While one interviewee was of the opinion that there were no major challenges for the town, feelings ran high about issues of rural decentralisation. It was thought “that just living in the country these days was a major challenge.” Downsizing of some local businesses was reported and this, particularly with potential loss of employment positions, created concern about the impact on the town. It was said that Wagin simply could not afford any further decline and survive in the future.

There was strong resentment against perceived lack of state government support for smaller rural towns. An example was the closure of the Magistrate’s Court in town, which meant loss of local police presence due to time spent in court in Narrogin. It was said these types of policies were exacerbated by a perceived simultaneous withdrawal of funds and “cost shifting to local government.” Grave concern was expressed about the ‘one vote, one value’ legislation. This policy was perceived as a sign of doom for smaller country towns in the belief that there would be even less political support. It was considered that policies were made by people in the city who did not know the town, nor cared about its future.

Residents expressed a particular sense of betrayal about loss of certain services at the local hospital in the belief it had been an “underhand process.” In addition, the local hospital board had been dismantled, which was perceived to further disempower the local community’s control of its health care. Further health challenges were experienced in difficulty in retaining health professionals. It was reported that the local government had to take responsibility for the medical situation in town. The

town had one doctor, brought in through the migrant citizenship scheme, although his position was in jeopardy due to perceived bureaucratic inefficiency. The sole dentist in the town was no longer practicing and had not been replaced. This meant that residents had to travel to nearby regional service towns for their dental needs, which was less of a concern in terms of inconvenience than for using services in another town to the detriment of local business owners.

Centralisation policies had served to create an environment of rural competition, with a resultant rivalry with the nearby service towns of Katanning and Narrogin. There was a concern that Wagin would eventually lose its services and facilities to these towns, particularly as there was a perceived political bias in their favour. Hence, there was strong determination to use the town's own services and facilities in lieu of those in the regional centres. In addition, it was said that the smaller Shires of Wagin, Woodanilling and Dumbleyung were working together for mutual support to help contend with the more powerful larger towns. Interestingly, it was reported there was conflict between the smaller and larger towns because communities in the smaller towns utilised regional services and facilities to their convenience, yet paid no rates for this use.

A key challenge for Wagin in its perceived fight for survival was dwindling numbers in community groups. Loss of youth and farming populations were said to leave many groups struggling for members. Volunteers were becoming scarcer and it was stated that the Historical Village was recently forced to start paying people for some of its upkeep. Changes in lifestyle were also thought to play a role in declining community groups, for example, women now working even when raising children. Sporting groups, too, were said to be struggling and were merging with nearby smaller towns to survive. The new recreation centre was said to be welcomed by the local community as there was now a paid professional to organise and co-ordinate sporting activities.

The situation for youth in Wagin was considered a key challenge. Education in the town ended at Year 10 and students were therefore forced to attend schools in regional centres or the city to continue their education. This not only ensured loss of this demographic from the population, but discouraged some students from continuing into upper high school. Facilities and employment for youth were also said to be lacking. It was reported, however, that in recent times more farming children were returning to town to take over the family property. Other employment challenges included loss of tradespeople and difficulty of attracting and retaining staff.

Housing was considered a significant problem for Wagin. Rental properties were scarce and the standard of housing available was poor or inappropriate for what was needed. Securing a builder for a new home was also a problem due to high demand. It was reported that local government was willing to develop new sites but was being hampered by state government planning regulations. These issues had significant ramifications for housing work personnel and attracting new residents to town. Housing facilities for seniors were also said to be limited and there was no

provision for invalid aged care. Wagin residents were under the impression that there was an enforced placement of Homeswest people in town, which was seen to create social problems in the community and was considered disrespectful and insensitive towards the local community.

The farming community in the district faced its own challenges. Landcare management was said to be a major problem for landholders, and hugely frustrating and disillusioning. The government system for funding was perceived to be highly ineffective, inefficient and inequitable and participation was considered a matter of desperate necessity rather than choice. Passing on the family farm also presented difficulties. While it was reported that many sons wanted to take over the farms, the difficulties entailed in farming now meant that some parents were reluctant to see this eventuate. It was joked that "handing over your farm to your children these days is child abuse." There was also concern that young farmers may not be able to meet a partner given scarcity of young females in rural communities and changing values of women, who may not wish to take on a farming lifestyle.

Younger residents in Wagin perceived several challenges for the town. A strong theme for both primary and high school age children was lack of opportunities for young people in the town. Lack of entertainment was seen as a particular problem. It was said there were not enough fun things to do and that some things that had been available in the past, such as a local cinema, rarely operated anymore. Work experiences and employment opportunities were said to be very limited, in terms of variety and professional or well-paid work.

As with many adult members of the community, dwindling numbers in some sporting clubs was also a concern for youth. However, the recent revitalisation of the recreation centre was thought to be increasing the numbers of people in other sporting groups. Youth too shared frustration about reduced services in the local hospital. It was said to be "more like a nursing home now." Further, it was thought silly that they had to use the hospital in Narrogin as they had a perfectly good facility in town that could be utilised.

There were also perceived issues with the local community. Although the high number of retirees in the town was welcomed for maintaining population size by adult residents, from the perspective of youth there were too many retirees and not enough young people in the community. It was also reported that "a fair few whackos have moved here" and were having a negative impact in the local community. It was said that children from these families were causing a disturbance at the local school.

6.5 Salinity in Wagin

Unprompted, salinity was rarely seen as one of Wagin's main challenges but was said to be a problem when directly questioned. However, it was mostly perceived in terms of salt and not of associated water issues. For this reason it was often viewed

as more of a problem for farming properties rather than for the town itself. It was said that although the community was generally aware of piezometers in town, they were not clear about why they were there or of monitoring results. Measures were being taken to raise understanding about salinity in the town, its causes and remediation measures.

It was reported that most farms were salt-affected and that the problem had been getting worse over time. Stories were related of fresh water turning saline. It was considered that farms to the east of town, closer to the district's salt lakes, were more impacted than those to the west. However, impacts were variable on properties. Low-lying areas were said to be the worst affected. Salinity was also described as worse in land that was more recently cleared than in areas where it had been cleared long ago.

A number of management options were being practiced by landholders, it being said that "farmers *not* doing anything is no longer an option." Most practiced a variety of salinity management options on a trial and error basis, it being asserted there was no solution and minimal government support. Tree planting was common and was reported to be helpful, but inadequate. Salt tolerant plant species were being used, with the help of university researchers. Perennial pastures were being trialled as a solution to both water logging and stock feed. Drainage had been practiced but was not popular, it being reported to be expensive, labour intensive, ultimately ineffective, as well as frowned upon by authorities.

Cost effectiveness was said to be a said huge barrier to management practices. The adage "it's hard to be green when you're in the red!", as quipped by one interviewee, was seen to capture the dilemma for farmers. However, a number of farmers were branching into innovative farm practices. A jojoba plantation had been introduced as an experimental way to diversify tree species on the property. This was said to look promising but had not been operating long enough to determine results. Yabbies and marron had also been introduced on a small, private basis. Farmers expressed reluctance to work with government agencies in alternative farm management due to bureaucratic constraints, however sandalwood was being trialled in conjunction with CALM. Salt water irrigation was also being investigated.

There was high awareness about salinity among Wagin's younger residents. Students reported that the subject was part of the school curriculum and they therefore had sound theoretical knowledge. In addition, they were being taught about how it was an issue for Wagin itself. It was stated that landcare representatives visited their school to tell them about salinity, and showed them monitoring of their school-grounds bore. Moreover, they said they could see salinity impacts in the area, especially around the salt lakes. Some students who lived on farms described their family properties as salt-affected. The situation of rising water in the cellar of a local hotel was well known. There was also awareness about possible management options, for example, contour banks and tree planting.

6.6 Wagin's water situation

When asked to describe Wagin's water situation, it was commonly replied, "Well, it's very different from a few weeks ago!" This referred to some extremely heavy rainfall in the district that had been received. This was particularly providential for local farmers, whose dams were said to now be full and overflowing just at the point when water scarcity had become dire. Although the recent rainfall less directly impacted town residents, it was said that the relief of farmers extended to the entire district, and particularly the town itself, given its heavy agricultural dependence.

For town residents, the water situation in Wagin was satisfactory. They were connected to supply and had sufficient water of good quality for their needs, although many were unaware of where their supply came from. Ovals were said to be watered by waste water that was pumped into an existing dam on a nearby hill. However, it was reported that scheme water was used to water other parks and green areas in the town, including the town's Showgrounds. A key water problem for the town was overflow from the Water Corporation's sewerage ponds. Discussions were taking place to possibly resolve the problem to mutual benefit by pumping the water into a disused Water Corporation dam out of town, treating it, then "shandyng it" with stormwater from the dam on the hill and using the resultant water for town parks and gardens.

It was believed that most community residents were waterwise, particularly retired farmers who were used to water conservation and used rainwater tanks and greywater for their gardens. Local government was also keen to utilise greywater recycling and was negotiating with the Water Corporation towards this end. One town resident had created an entirely waterwise garden that required no watering. This resident came from a water-rich country and considered waterwise gardens essential in the Australian climate, and expressed great surprise and concern that they were not an integral part of the Australian culture.

Surface water was not seen as a real issue for the town. It was reported that as the town was in a low-lying area it suffered from poor drainage, however concrete drains had been used to help address excess surface water in the town. Rather, the low-lying nature of the town was more commonly seen as a problem in terms of groundwater. It was reported that the rising groundwater table was impacting infrastructure and it was often quoted that a local hotel had to pump water from its cellar. Rising damp was widely considered a significant problem for those in the lower areas of town. This was said to be expensive to fix and beyond the budget of many homeowners. Further, it was not certain if the warranty given in such situations covered salinity impacts. As a result, most people were said to just paint or plaster over affected areas.

Wagin was seen to be in an excellent position for harvesting water, "the problem being water logging and not lack of water!" It was believed that surface water needed to be captured and positively utilised before it reached low-lying areas of

town. The local government's initiative in pumping stormwater to the dam on the hill for further use was commended. It was hoped that private residents would demonstrate equal initiative in water efficiency in their home, although high costs of water efficiency technology was noted to be a constraint.

Local farmers were reported to be self sufficient in their water supply. Rainwater tanks were used for domestic consumption and water from dams supplied gardens and stock. However, rainfall was said to have decreased in recent years which was causing problems with respect to scarcity. Furthermore, water in dams was described as being increasingly saline. Harvesting water from surface run-off was noted to be an option. However, compacted soils and practices such as minimal-til were reported to significantly reduce the amount of water available in this form and hence it was questioned as to whether it was a viable option to pursue.

One landholder, through personal experience, strongly believed that there was more than sufficient water for farmers, even in times of low rainfall. It was considered that water logging was an opportunity for "smart water management" to ensure supply. Reportedly, most farmers typically aimed to remove water from their property, usually by pumping it away. This created the issue of where to put the water, particularly as pumping it to nearby salt lakes, a practice favoured for some time, was no longer allowed. Instead, it was asserted, a whole-of-water management system could capture and positively utilise excess water. This approach was noted by other landholders, but was said to be too expensive to apply. Indeed, it was reported that in a poor agricultural season cost-reducing meant that sustainable management could not be practiced at all.

When asked about the water situation in Wagin, most young people interviewed at the local schools described the recent heavy rainfall event in town, particularly as many of their homes had been impacted. One child said that there was less rainfall now because "the seasons are now out of whack." Many had rainwater tanks at home, and one child who lived on a farming property reported they used bore water for domestic use, topped up with scheme water when it was needed.

6.7 Innovative water management

When considering innovative water management, professional expertise was believed essential. It was thought that whilst the community could come up with ideas it was not necessarily a useful process as they did not really have the technical expertise needed for decision making. Moreover, they needed 'outside' ideas from those who could "see Wagin with fresh eyes." Local youth were also thought to be able to contribute fresh insight. From a local government point of view, it was expected that experts in the Rural Towns - Liquid Assets project would provide options for innovative water management as part of the agreed research outcomes.

Comprehensive understanding of the local water system, including impacts from agriculture and recharge, was essential before deciding upon management options.

A comprehensive audit of the entire water situation and resources in the area was seen as the only real way to devise effective management solutions that would be relevant and workable for Wagin. However, this was not seen as realistic given the expense and time involved. Cost was acknowledged to have a central role in determining possible water management outcomes. The best solution was maintained to be one that “gave something for nothing” in utilising a problem to an economic advantage.

It was believed that no single solution would be sufficient, given that “the environment is multi-faceted.” Pumping of the groundwater was favoured by most, but “just to pump it away is a waste.” Pumping water into evaporation ponds was noted to be an option, but the most popular idea among all ages and groups was to pump the water into the nearby Norring Lake. This lake had been a favourite water recreation and picnic area in the past, but over time had become dry and unpleasant. It was reported that revitalising Norring Lake had been a popular idea in Wagin for many years and was on the community’s official “ideal wish list”, devised at the local government’s request. Restoration of the lake was not only seen as beneficial for recreational purposes for the local community, but also for tourism and could bring economic “flow-on” effects for the town. There was some concern, however, about the viability of this option in terms of viability within government guidelines and attitude of affected landholders.

Aquaculture industries were also favoured as a possible innovative management option. Fish farming, yabbies and marron were considered to have potential, and it was suggested that the award-winning solar powered dam aerator, invented by a local farmer, could be utilised. For the townsite, desalination was seen as a theoretical possibility but the economic viability of this option was questioned. Depending on groundwater quality, watering of local parks and ovals was favoured, as was the development of a self-sufficient water supply. Indeed, some, including youth, believed that “putting water *back into* the scheme supply” and benefiting economically was a viable option with right management and bold vision.

6.8 Achieving aspirations for the town

Continuing community solidarity and spirit was considered essential to achieving its aspirations for Wagin in the future. It was thought that people *were* able to make a difference when working together and were focused and committed to their cause. The community, including local government, youth and indigenous people, needed to believe in the town and fight for their aspirations to overcome challenges facing smaller rural towns. It was stated that “you have to have a horse in the race if you want to win.” The community also needed to be adaptable, open minded and ingenious in coming up with innovative initiatives, particularly in an environment of rural competition. One less popular suggestion was to cooperate with the larger towns to share facilities to mutual advantage.

Innovation in agricultural management was thought to be equally vital. It was believed that Wagin needed to extend its resource base to make it more robust in the future. Farmers, too, saw advantage in diversifying their agricultural production as there was too much risk in investment in a single venture. Moreover, successful land management was important for increasing property value. It was stated that farmers needed to broaden their vision and be opportunistic to new ideas. For example, it was reported that one property had “pristine” groundwater that was being pumped out and just “going to waste”. It was asserted that an economic benefit could be found for this water. Cooperation and support between farmers was seen as essential for providing inspiration and means to explore innovative farm management options.

External support was thought essential to “helping the community to help itself.” Although the community prided itself in its autonomy, it was noted that it was limited by economic constraints in what it could achieve. Assistance from researchers, in terms of information, ideas and on-ground work, was also important. However, this was to be complemented by local knowledge and experience. Government support, mostly in terms of supportive governance and policies, was particularly vital to help the community in its endeavours. The government was viewed as indifferent, or even obstructive, towards smaller rural communities. This was particularly frustrating and demoralising given the effort the community put into “building its social capital.”

Retaining and expanding Wagin’s current assets was a commonly shared aspiration. It was strongly felt that the community needed to retain its existing population, services and facilities to secure its future. Keeping the hospital, doctor and pharmacist was a particularly strong theme. Indeed, it was typically believed that the survival of the town lay in this, to lose them being “the biggest disaster.” Having health services on-hand was important for local residents, particularly in light of the high aged population, and for attracting new residents. However, the symbolism of retaining health facilities was considered equally important.

Retaining Wagin’s young people was a shared priority. It was widely agreed that it was vital that “something was done to stop youth from leaving town.” Provision of jobs was essential. Social, recreational and entertainment activities was also important. It was believed that youth also needed guidance and mentoring to ensure that they did not just “drop out of school” when completing Year 10 in town. These types of options gained most mention, however it was strongly felt that *anything* that could improve local prospects for youth must be considered.

As previously mentioned, Wagin’s future was seen to be heavily dependent upon its ageing population. Nevertheless, attracting other demographics to town was a key aspiration. It was pointed out that whilst it was wonderful to have seniors make up population numbers, they required high maintenance services, spent little money in town, and payed low rates. For this reason attracting younger residents was also considered essential. Bringing families to the town was particularly desired for community involvement and maintaining student numbers at school. However, it

was noted that education and population were interdependent, population being a prerequisite for good standard educational facilities that would attract new families. It was widely noted that availability of quality housing, both rental and privately owned, was essential for helping to attract new residents.

Promotion of Wagin's assets had an important role to play in attracting people to the town. It was believed that Wagin had many existing features that could be promoted, including its location, rural lifestyle and community, the Historical Village, and the Giant Ram. However, it also was thought that new tourist ventures were needed "to put Wagin on the map." The nearby, impressive Puntapin Rock was popularly mentioned as a potential tourist asset, having both aesthetic and Aboriginal cultural appeal. It was noted that Wagin would need suitable tourist accommodation if it were to achieve its aspirations in this area.

Water management had a key place in helping to secure Wagin's future. Waterwise options were viewed as important and it was suggested that more rainwater tanks and water restrictions were essential. "Smart water harvesting" was also desired. It was thought that the entire community could capture wasted water to use on their gardens. Harvesting surface water was a further option. Being waterwise, it was stated, not only saved money in terms of reduced use of scheme water, but ensured water could be available for possible commercial ventures.

While the community assumed collective responsibility for meeting its aspirations, local government was seen to have a key leadership role. It was suggested it needed to be proactive and "act *now* to fix the problems." Preventative measures were considered essential for protecting Wagin's future. It was thought that professional facilitation was needed to develop a collective community strategy for the future, particularly given time constraints of its Councillors. This strategy needed to include a whole-of-water management action plan. Finally, local government needed to be "strong", make and commit to difficult decisions, and provide skilful leadership and clear direction for the community.

Younger children interviewed indicated that they were satisfied with Wagin as it was and did not want it "to be spoiled." Nevertheless, like the adult population, it was noted that more employment opportunities were needed for young people in the town. Retaining local services was also seen as vital for the future of the town. Improved prospects for farmers and more landcare initiatives were thought to be important. Unsurprisingly, there was strong focus on provision of more social and entertainment opportunities for young people in Wagin. It was suggested that empty shops could be utilised to create a special place for youth to "hang out."

7.0 CONCLUDING CONSIDERATIONS

The social research component of the Rural Towns – Liquid Assets project revealed a number of issues that require consideration. Discussions with local representatives yielded a wealth of information about the towns of Merredin, Moora, Tambellup and Wagin to inform the technical, economic and policy components of the research project. This produced a “picture in time” of each of the towns. A comprehensive understanding of local perceptions of each town, hopes and concerns for the future, and expectations and preferences for water and salinity management was gained. This is essential to ensuring that outcomes of the project are relevant to and endorsed by the local communities.

Clearly, each town had a distinctive identity and unique situation. Local communities were diverse and comprised a range of views and outlooks. Yet, a number of similar themes emerged in line with issues that are well documented as common to many rural communities in Australia. A central matter that came out of discussions was the impacts of decentralisation policies, which were mostly perceived in terms of loss of political support for rural towns, and for small rural towns in particular. This was associated with such impacts as withdrawal of key government services, population decline and closure of local business.

The exodus of youth from rural communities was of similar importance. Strong concern about lack of professional employment opportunities and social and cultural entertainment for young people was widespread. Adolescents themselves stated their intentions to leave town in the future to explore further educational, employment and overall ‘life opportunities’. This demographic gap was felt even more keenly in a context of struggling community groups and volunteer organisations.

These types of social and economic influences had a significant effect on perceptions of salinity in a town. Community awareness about salinity in the district and townsite itself was variable. When salinity was noted as a problem it was often viewed in relation to other issues impacting the town. Hence, salinity was frequently considered as equally or less pressing than other challenges. Some saw salinity as a priority issue requiring immediate attention and intervention. Yet, the view was also expressed that contemporary funding and subsequent scientific focus on salinity distorted the issue, creating a sense of false alarm and even paranoia in the nation. Therefore, whilst there was concern to address salinity issues in a town there was also a perceived need to keep a sense of perspective about the seriousness of the problem and its priority standing for the local community.

Poor awareness about salinity amongst local communities was particularly evident in a common distinction between a ‘salt problem’ or a ‘water problem’. Salinity was often thought of in terms of salt impacts on rural properties. However, a rising groundwater table was often reported to be a challenge for the townsite in response

to a question about the local water situation. This problem was often reported with respect to the low-lying nature of the town and nearby water courses. It would therefore appear that, for many in the general community, a rising water table was not associated with salinity.

Raising community awareness about salinity in a townsite was often considered a priority by those with some knowledge and experience of the issue. It was noted that scientific researchers had a role to play in this through communication of their work and through provision of readily accessible, affordable and easily understandable data. This included widespread dissemination of monitoring results from townsite piezometers. Local government Shires were also seen to have a leadership role in raising community awareness about salinity and water management. Strategic management of the issues and good communication strategies were desired. A partnership between researchers and local government was seen as the most effective approach to communications.

It is important to note that a town's welfare was consistently seen as a *collective* responsibility. This included dealing with salinity and water management. Hence, while researchers and local government organisations were important for providing information, leadership and for mobilising communities, ultimately local ownership was essential. Local input to planning and strategies was imperative. Gaining community involvement in water management, for example through waterwise behaviours, was also an important part of local action. These considerations are in line with the key Rural Towns – Liquid Assets objective for local ownership of water resources management. However, from a local perspective mobilising the community was not only important for water management but for the overall future of the town.

The Rural Towns – Liquid Assets project can be seen to have strong links with the communities' aspirations for the future. In an immediate, pragmatic sense the project was noted as being important for simply tackling existing or perceived impending impacts of salinity. This was primarily conceived in terms of addressing the issue of a rising groundwater table in a townsite. Within this, of particular importance for local communities is helping to prevent impacts of a rising water table on local infrastructure. Redressing salinity impacts in this way could help save considerable expense to local government and residents. Other issues that have particular meaning for local communities, for example issues of deep septic problems and impacts on local gravesites in Tambellup, can also be addressed.

On a broader level the project could be, and indeed in many instances was perceived to be, a potential means to maintaining a town and/or helping local growth and development. Strong connections are evident with aspirations for the development of new industry, including that which can help with salinity management as well as provide an economic benefit and employment for the local community. This follows a key objective of the Rural Towns – Liquid Assets project. Additionally, however, the project was seen to have an important role in opportunity for town beautification and creation of local recreational outlets. Links with housing problems are evident

with respect to fixing and preventing impacts of a rising water table and allowing for development of land. These types of outcomes are not only important for local communities, and potentially for youth too, but might also have a major role to play in helping to bring new investment and residents to a town.

It is of note that the project gained particular prominence and significance in light of the perceived lack of state government support and funding for rural communities. For many, the project was symbolic of an opportunity to help enable local communities 'to help themselves' in achieving aspirations for the future. For some towns this was particularly important given competition with coastal towns or regional centres. Indeed, in some cases the Rural Towns – Liquid Assets project was considered a key to a town's future survival. Of particular significance was local governments' concern for the project to meet its stated objectives given the high level of financial investment by local governments, especially in a time of scarce resources.

Nevertheless, in all instances a degree of mistrust and scepticism was expressed for the realism of the project meeting its stated objectives. This was predominantly based on a poor perception of 'bureaucracy'. There was strong concern for the project to deliver effective, cost efficient and clear guidelines and outcomes for a town. The project needed to be 'grounded' and to take into account all considerations. This included policy context and pragmatic impediments to implementing objectives. For the Rural Towns – Liquid Assets project, this would include consideration of such factors as local capacity for connecting to power and water for the development of new industry. Moreover, the project needed to find a balance between growth and development and potential compromise to the town and local community.

Following these considerations, it was believed that it was essential for project objectives for water management to be grounded in comprehensive and accurate understanding of the overall water situation for a town. This incorporated surface and ground water considerations, as well as factors that impact the water situation – for example, local revegetation initiatives. In addition, while it was generally perceived that a rising groundwater table was a problem for a town, it needed to be definitively established if this was indeed the case. If so, clear details of present and future implications needed to be determined and made known. Rigorous understanding of potential impacts for water management measures that were planned for implementation was also required.

For many, decision-making about potential water management options was not possible unless this information was available. It was often considered that decision making about water management should be the responsibility of scientists and local government, as they had the capacity for informed decisions. For many in the general community, the priority was simply to pump and dispose of water. However, there was support for positive utilisation of the water if it was feasible. Potential benefits from this process were welcomed, although again on the basis of viability. Expense and investment risk were integral aspects of consideration about possible water management options.

Within these qualifications, a number of preferences for possible water management options emerged. It was noted that a number of management practices would need to be implemented. Unsurprisingly, options that could bring an economic benefit to a town were important. The development of new industry had widespread support, provided that it was appropriate and would not compromise the local community. Aquaculture was a popular suggestion, but was widely believed to have feasibility considerations. Desalination in particular, although widely noted to have potential benefits for a town, was generally not considered a realistic option. For some, the development of a self-sufficient town water supply was important. This was generally considered to be both feasible and a priority, reflecting the Rural Towns – Liquid Assets aim to develop new water supplies and reduce reliance on scheme water in towns.

Lifestyle options also formed an important part of considerations for management of water in a town. Where appropriate and practicable, the creation of water recreational areas at local salt lakes had strong support. These types of recreational options were particularly favoured for and by youth. Town greening and beautification gained popular mention as well. Value was given to leisure activities, aesthetic appreciation and intrinsic appeal. Sporting was also important, and keeping town ovals in good order gained popular mention. These types of quality of life aspects were considered to have benefit for a local community as well as potential to attract visitors and new residents to a town.

Although not generally conceived by town residents, the development of an integrated and holistic water management system was considered imperative by those with water management awareness. Reflecting an underlying philosophy of the Rural Towns – Liquid Assets project, it was strongly believed that potential options could not be divorced from the entire water context for a town. Water harvesting and storage, of both surface and groundwater was important. Recycling of water was also believed necessary. The need for local participation in water management was stressed. This included local government and community residents. For example, pumping of groundwater would be less effective if there was over-watering of green areas and gardens in a town.

A final consideration was a need to keep perspective about the potential for the Rural Towns – Liquid Assets project to deliver some of its stated objectives. A distinction was made between aspirations or potential for a town and the likelihood of achieving these. It was suggested that growth and development could not be artificially contrived, but developed as part of a natural evolution of a town if conditions were favourable. A similar view was held for changing community attitudes and behaviours in a town. Moreover, it was thought that achievement of project objectives may not necessarily make a town attractive to visitors and investors. From this perspective, management of local expectations could be an important consideration for the Rural Towns – Liquid Assets project.

8.0 REFERENCES

Australian Bureau of Statistics 2003a, *Time Series Profile Merredin (S) (LGA 55460) Community Profile Series 2001 Census*, Sheet T05 Indigenous Status by Sex excluding overseas visitors.

Australian Bureau of Statistics 2003b, *Time Series Profile Moora (S) (LGA 55600) Community Profile Series 2001 Census*, Sheet T05 Indigenous Status by Sex excluding overseas visitors.

Australian Bureau of Statistics 2003c, *Time Series Profile Tambellup (S) (LGA 58120) Community Profile Series 2001 Census*, Sheet T05 Indigenous Status by Sex excluding overseas visitors.

Australian Bureau of Statistics 2003d, *Time Series Profile Wagin (S) (LGA 58610), Community Profile Series 2001 Census*, Sheet T05 Indigenous Status by Sex excluding overseas visitors.

Australian Bureau of Statistics 2002a, *Basic Community Profile Merredin (S) (SLA 525155460), Community Profile Series 2001 Census*, Sheet B26B Industry Employed Persons excluding overseas visitors.

Australian Bureau of Statistics 2002b, *Basic Community Profile Moora (S) (LGA 55600), Community Profile Series 2001 Census*, Sheet B26B Industry Employed Persons excluding overseas visitors.

Australian Bureau of Statistics 2002c, *Basic Community Profile Tambellup (S) (SLA 515058120), Community Profile Series 2001 Census*, Sheet B26B Industry Employed Persons excluding overseas visitors.

Australian Bureau of Statistics 2002d, *Basic Community Profile Wagin (S) (LGA 58610), Community Profile Series 2001 Census*, Sheet B26B Industry Employed Persons excluding overseas visitors.

Department of Local Government and Regional Development 2003a, *Regional Trends and Indicators - Shire of Merredin*, General Socio-Economic Indicators, pp.1-2.

Department of Local Government and Regional Development 2003b, *Regional Trends and Indicators - Shire of Moora*, General Socio-Economic Indicators, pp.1-2.

Department of Local Government and Regional Development 2003c, *Regional Trends and Indicators - Shire of Tambellup*, General Socio-Economic Indicators, pp.1-2.

Department of Local Government and Regional Development 2003d. *Regional Trends and Indicators - Shire of Wagin*, General Socio-Economic Indicators, pp.1-2.

Appendix A

Merredin Demographic Data

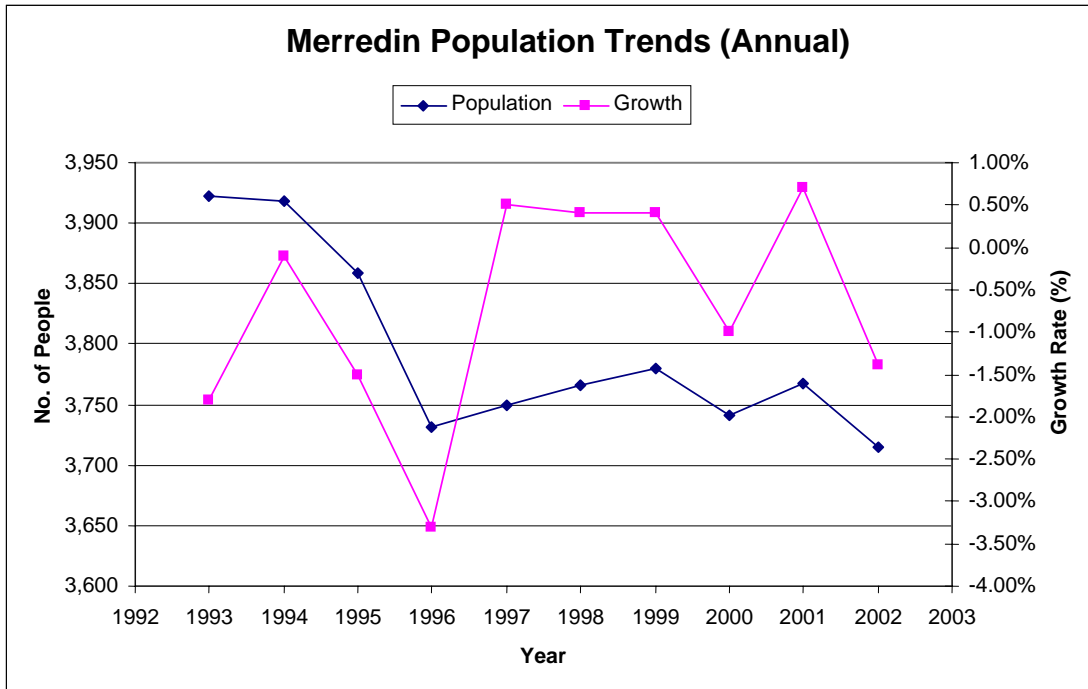


Figure 1 – Population Trends for the Shire of Merredin 1993 – 2002
(Department of Local Government and Regional Development 2003a)

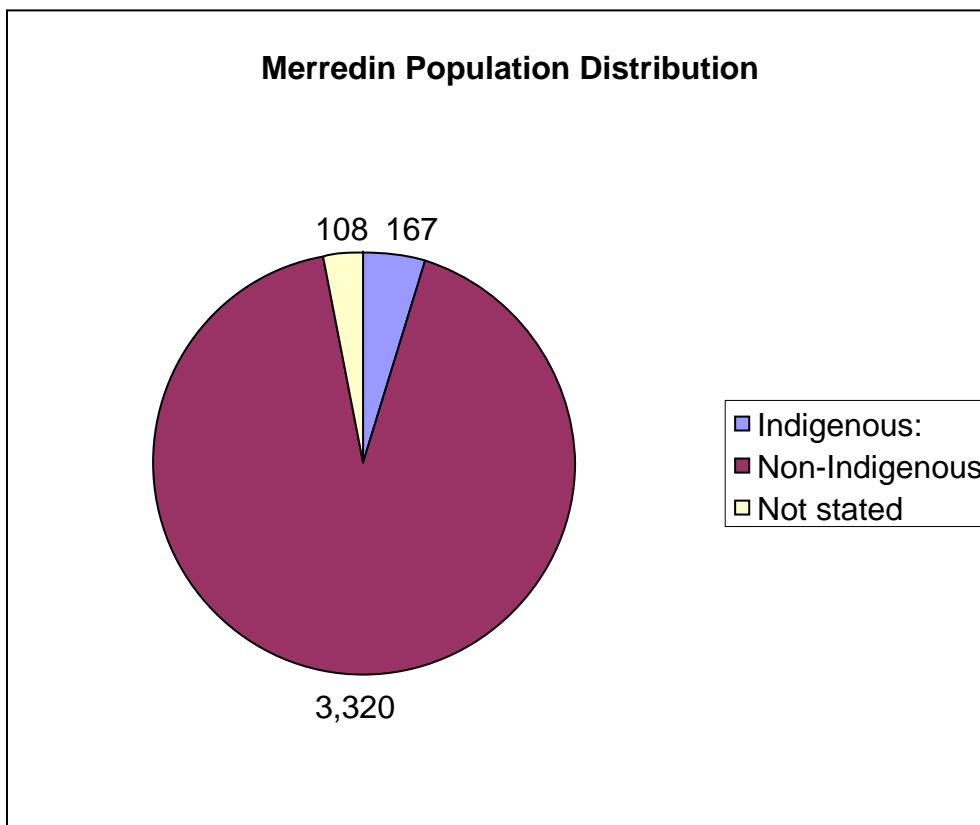


Figure 2 – Population Distribution for the Shire of Merredin 2001 (ABS 2003a)

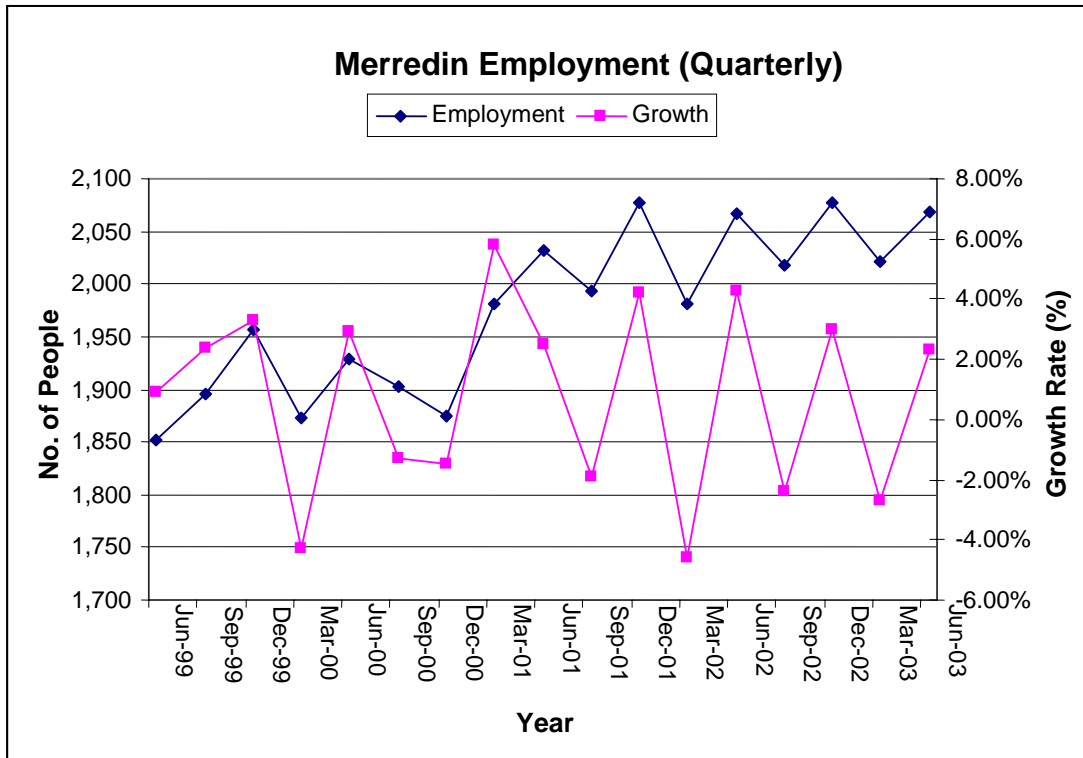


Figure 3 – Employment in the Shire of Merredin
(Department of Local Government and Regional Development 2003a)

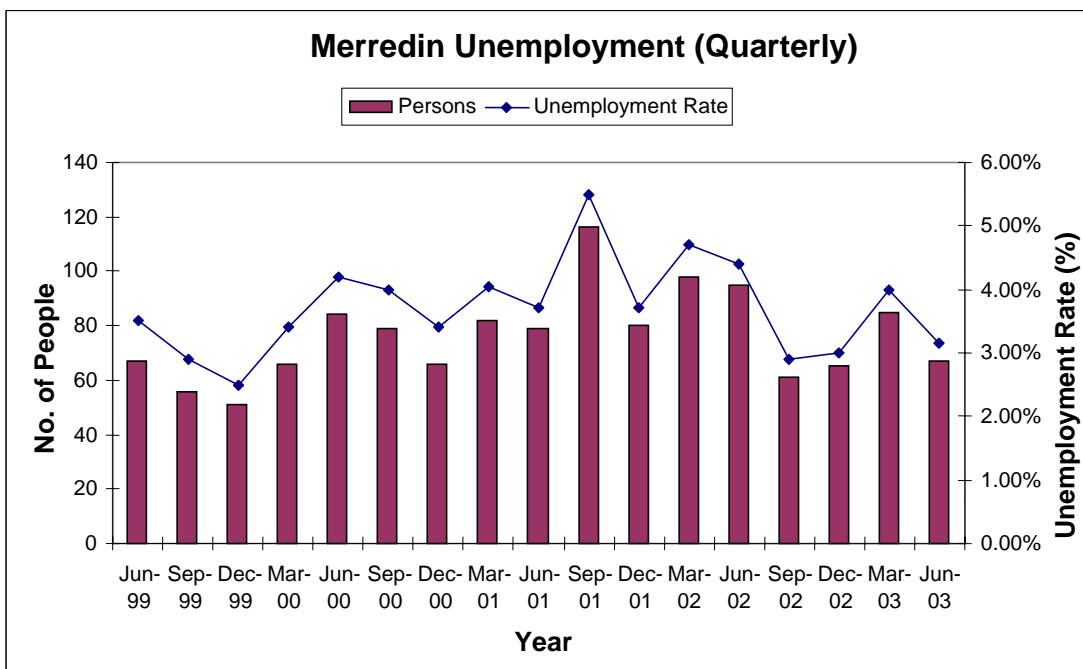


Figure 4 – Unemployment in the Shire of Merredin
(Department of Local Government and Regional Development 2003a)

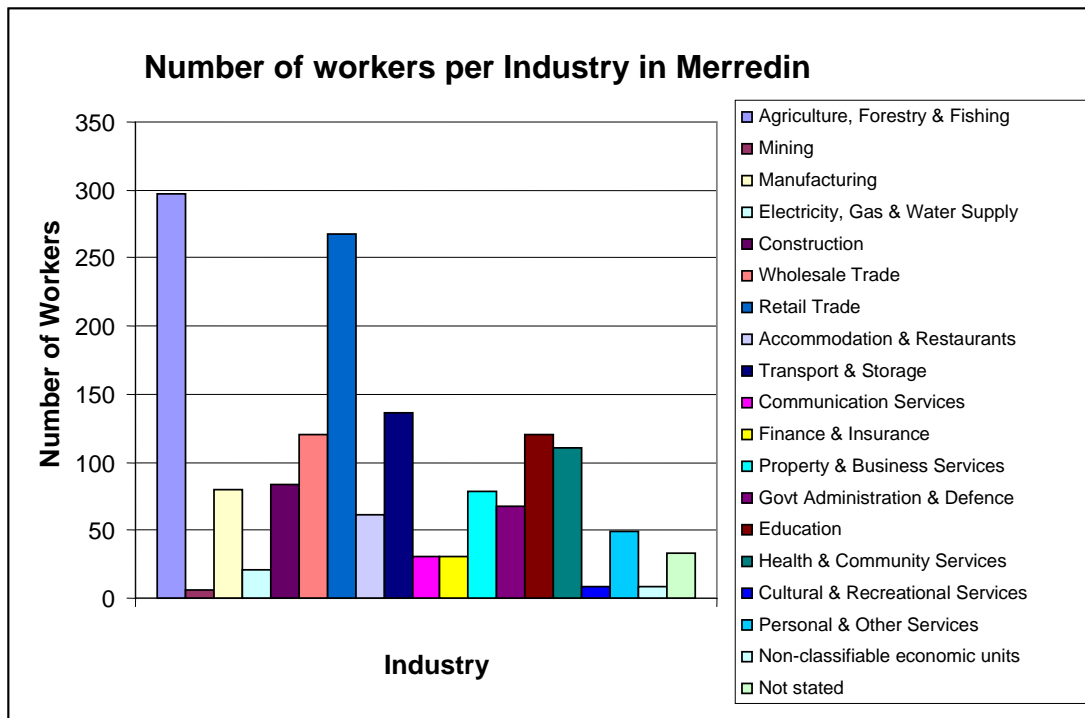


Figure 5 – Number of Workers per Industry in the Shire of Merredin
(ABS 2002a)

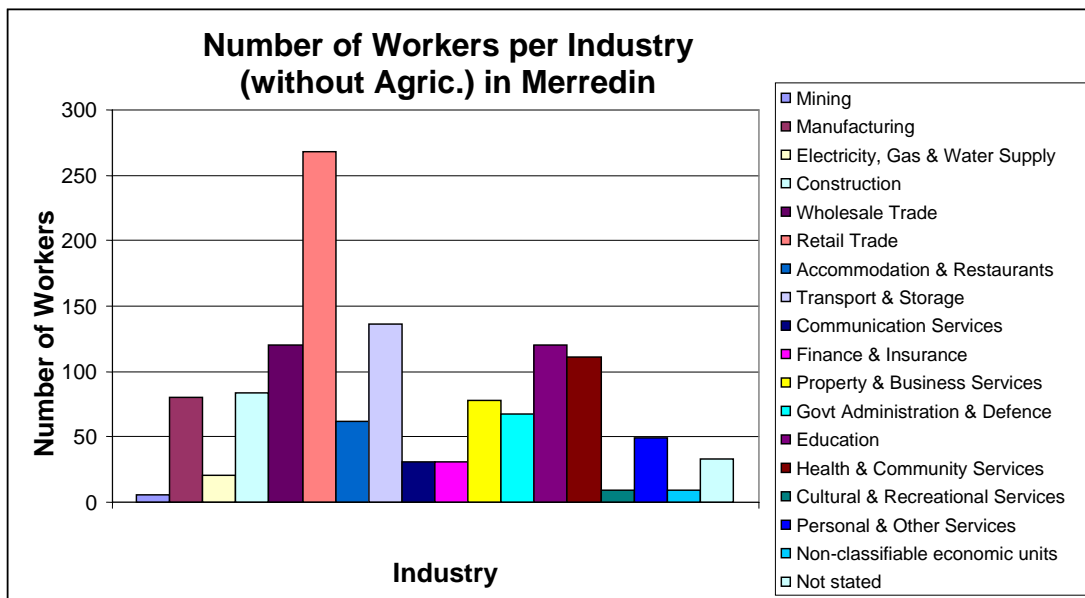


Figure 6 – Number of Workers per Industry Excluding Agriculture in the Shire of Merredin
(ABS 2002a)

Appendix B Moora Demographic Data

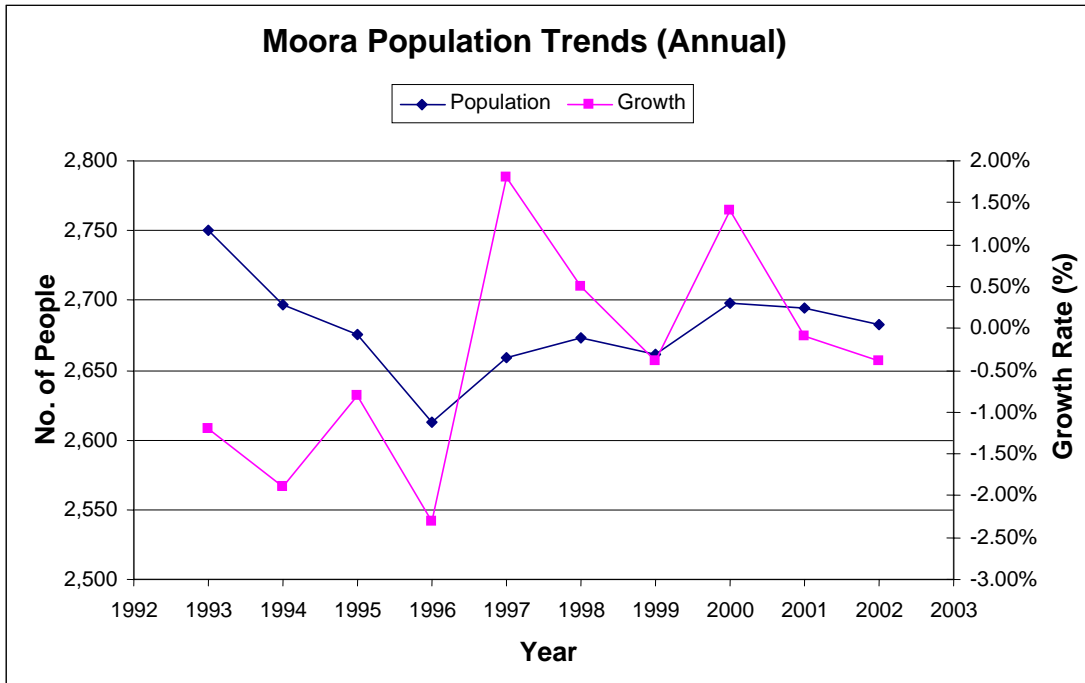


Figure 7 - Population Trends for the Shire of Moora 1993 – 2002
(Department of Local Government and Regional Development 2003b)

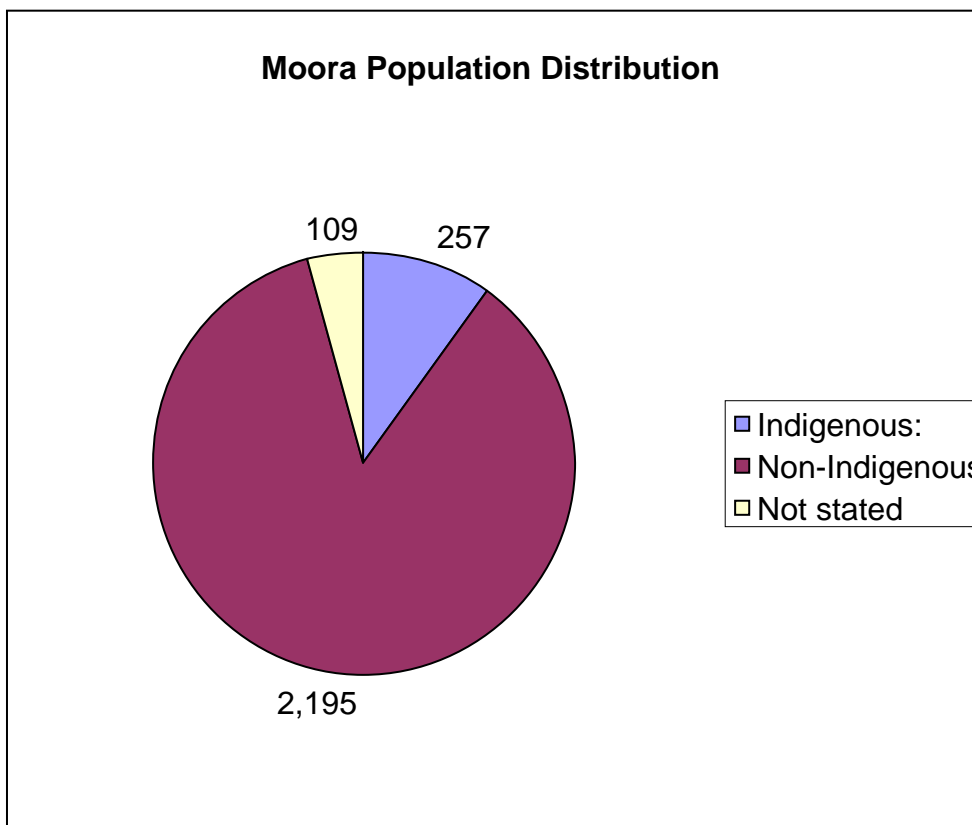


Figure 8 – Population Distribution for the Shire of Moora 2001 (ABS 2003b)

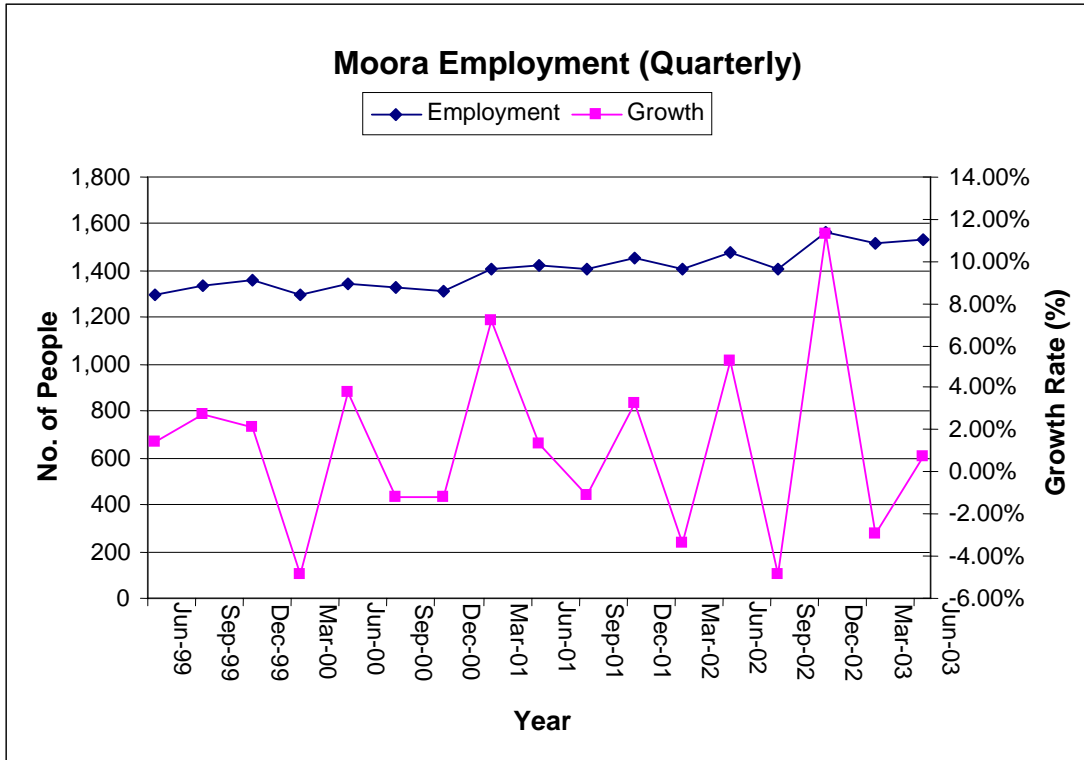


Figure 9 - Employment in the Shire of Moora
(Department of Local Government and Regional Development 2003b)

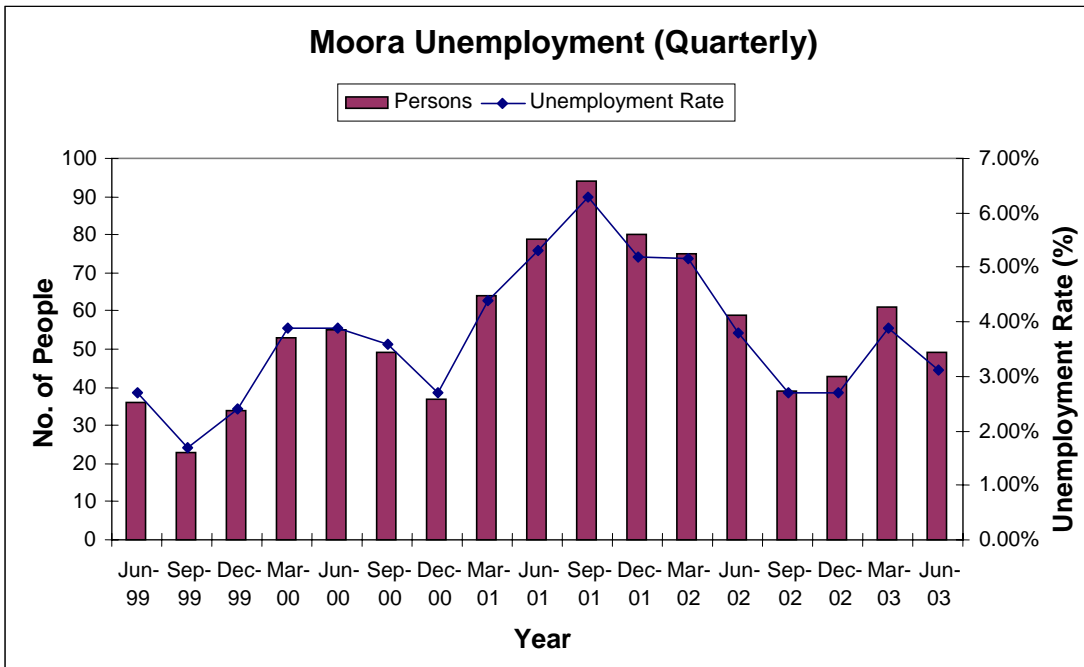


Figure 10 - Unemployment in the Shire of Moora
(Department of Local Government and Regional Development 2003b)

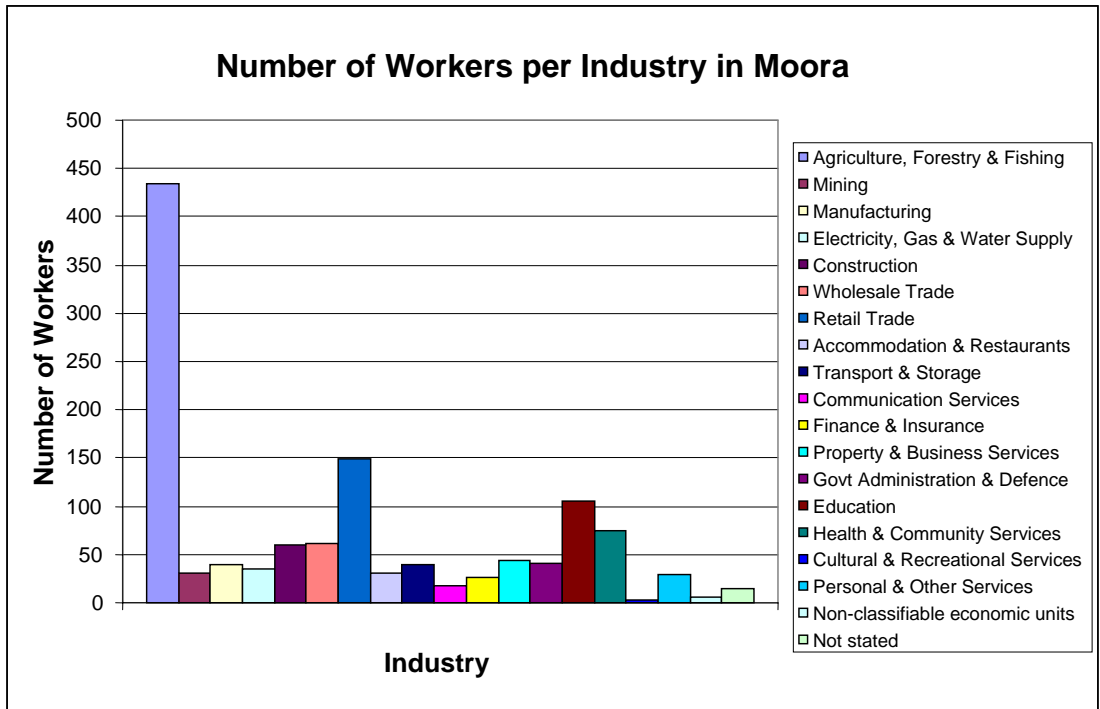


Figure 11 - Number of Workers per Industry in the Shire of Moora (ABS 2002b)

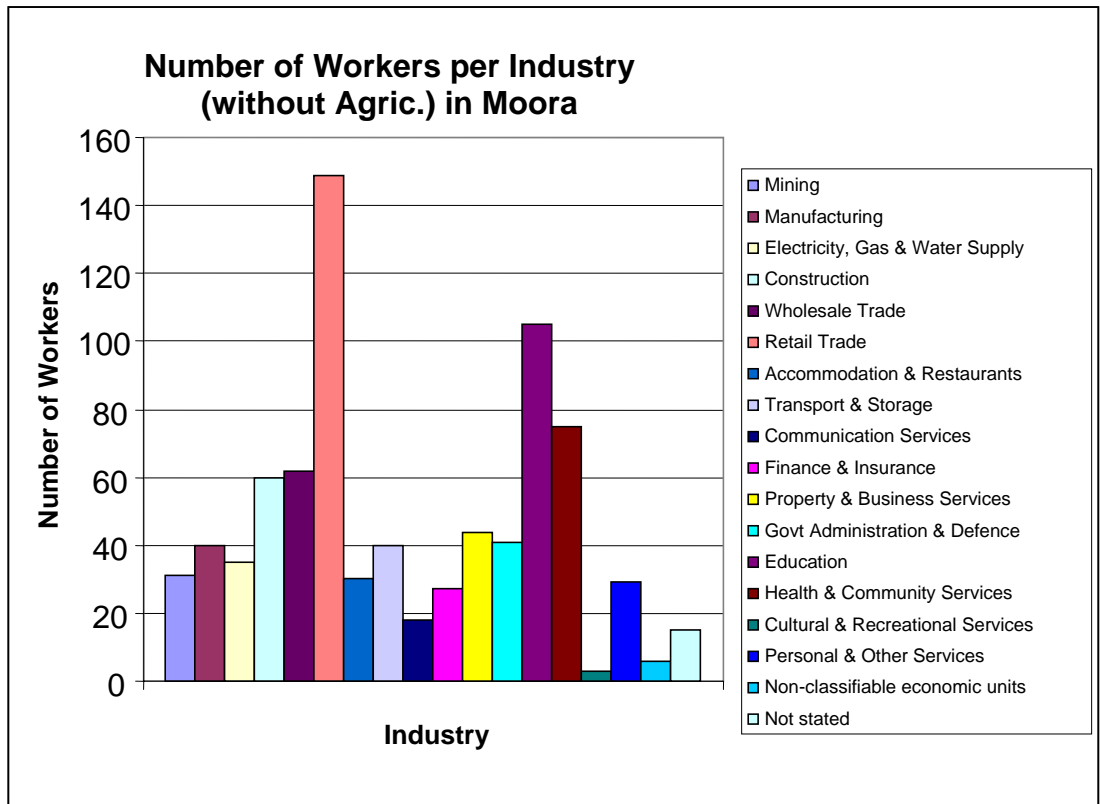


Figure 12 - Number of Workers per Industry Excluding Agriculture in the Shire of Moora (ABS 2002b)

Appendix C Tambellup Demographic Data

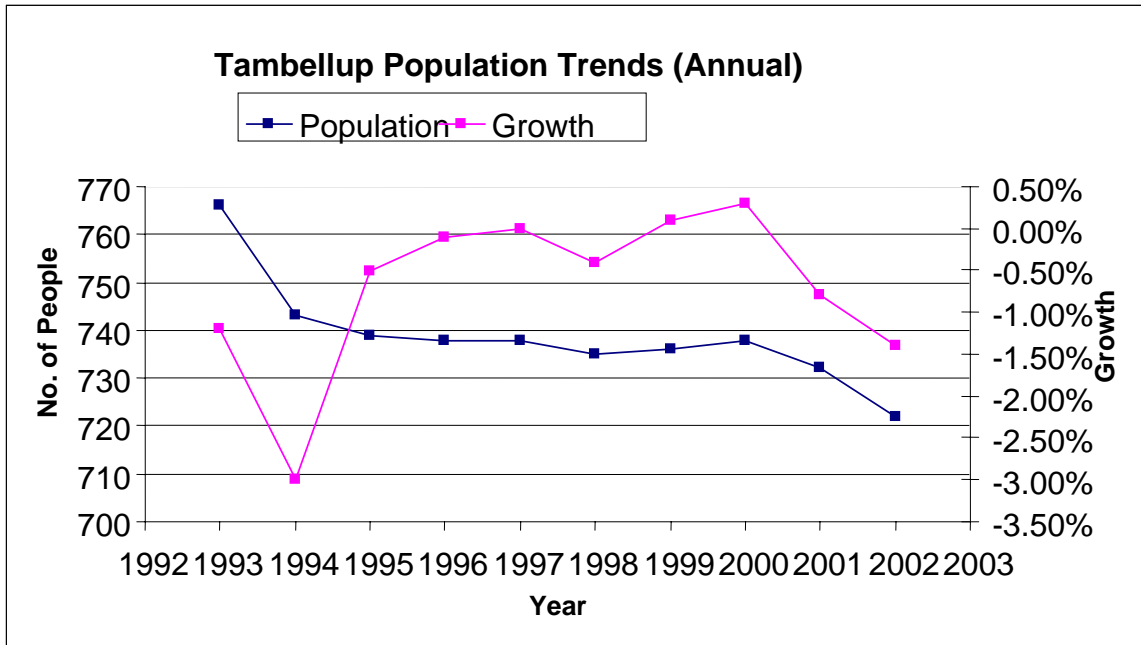


Figure 13 – Population Trends for the Shire of Tambellup 1993 – 2002
(Department of Local Government and Regional Development 2003c)

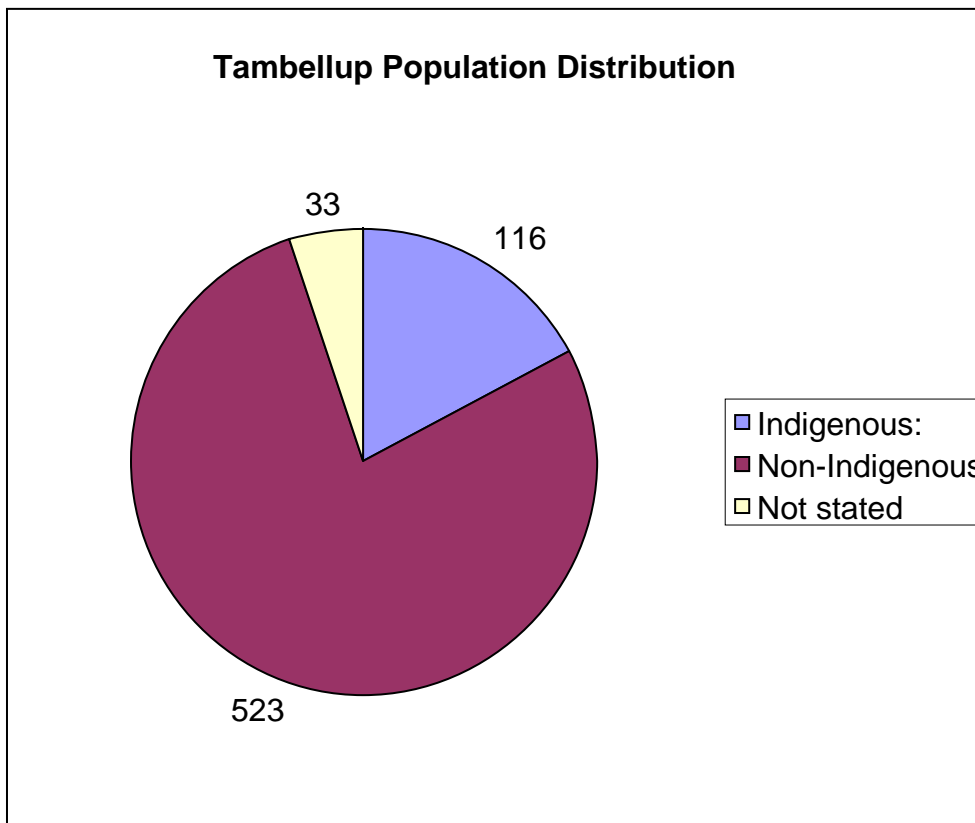


Figure 14 – Population Distribution for the Shire of Tambellup 2001 (ABS 2003c)

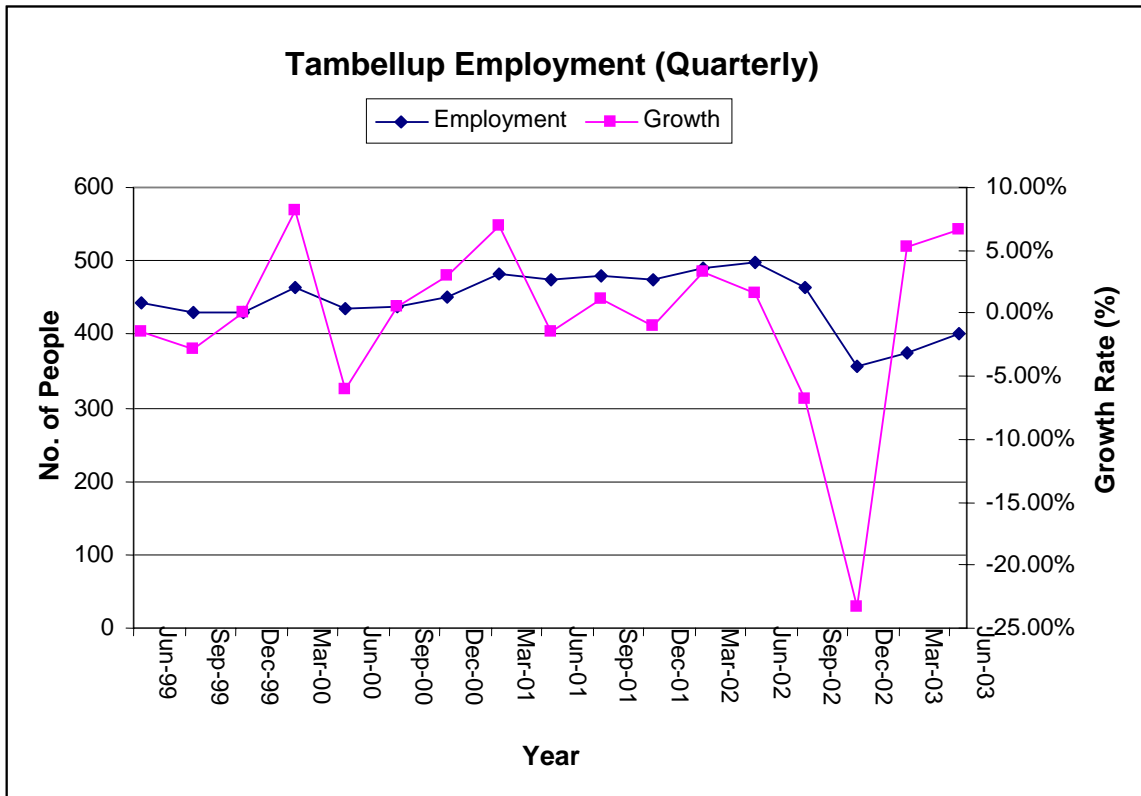


Figure 16 - Employment in the Shire of Tambellup
(Department of Local Government and Regional Development 2003c)

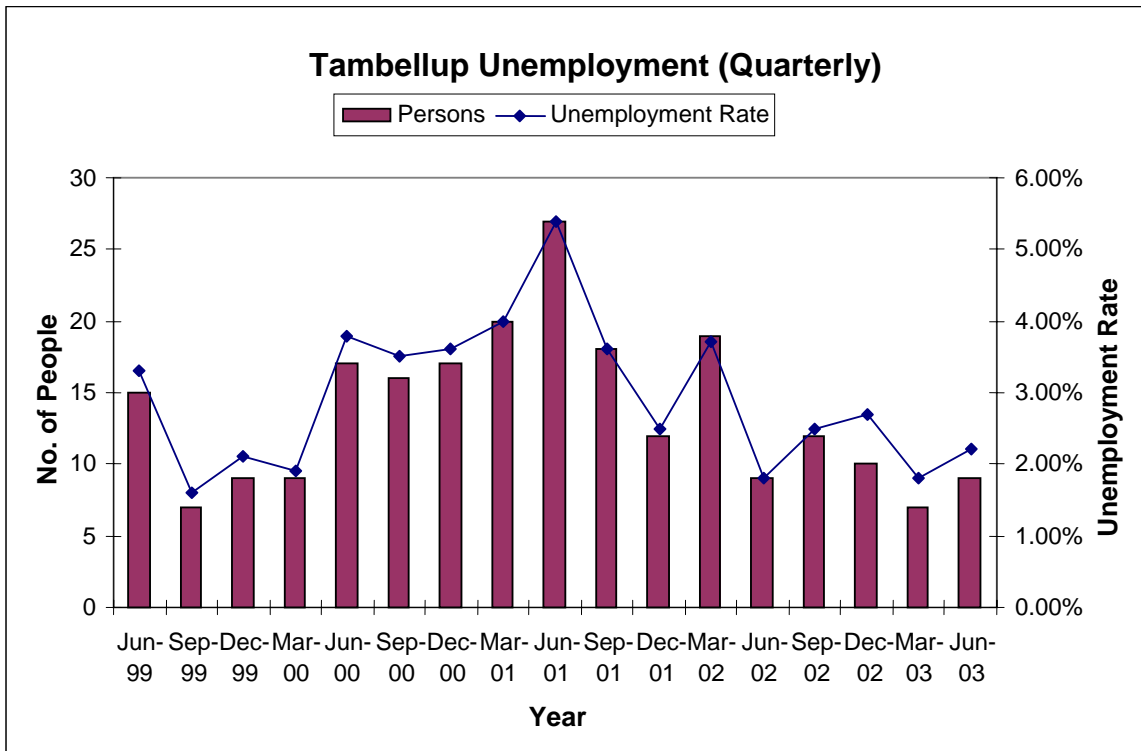


Figure 17 - Unemployment in the Shire of Tambellup
(Department of Local Government and Regional Development 2003c)

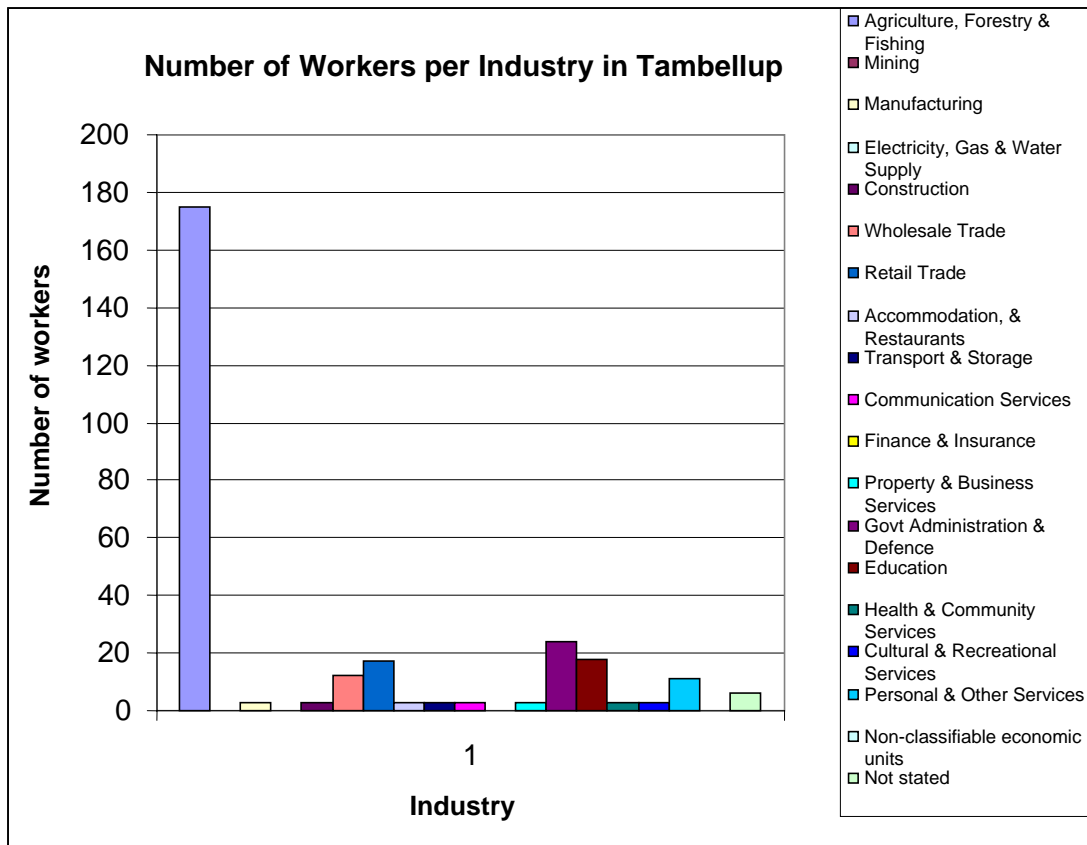


Figure 17 - Number of Workers per Industry in the Shire of Tambellup (ABS 2002c)

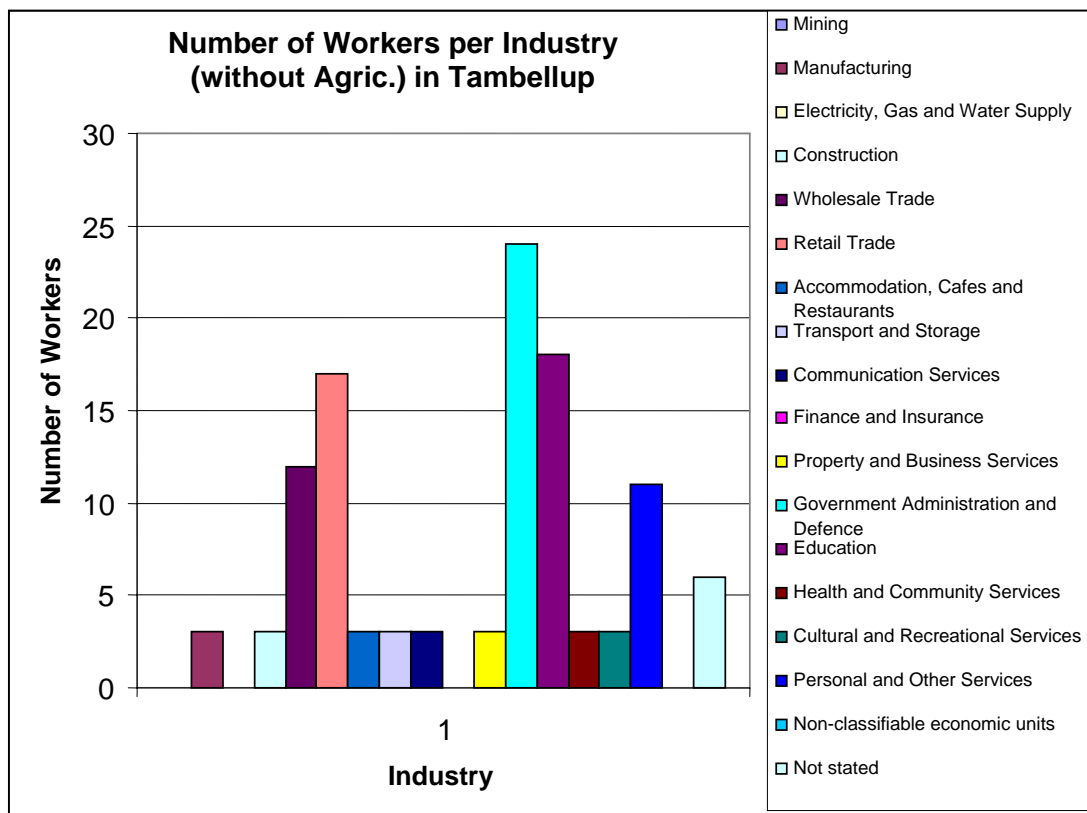


Figure 18 - Number of Workers per Industry Excluding Agriculture in the Shire of Tambellup (ABS 2002c)

Appendix D Wagin Demographic Data

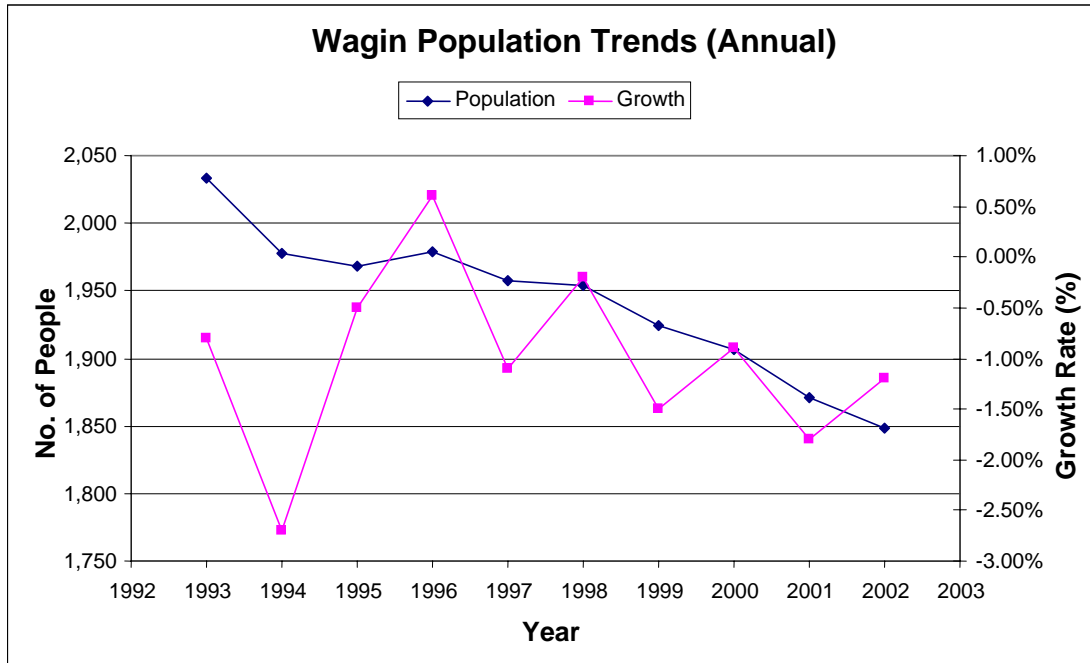


Figure 19 - Population Trends for the Shire of Wagin 1993 – 2002
(Department of Local Government and Regional Development 2003d)

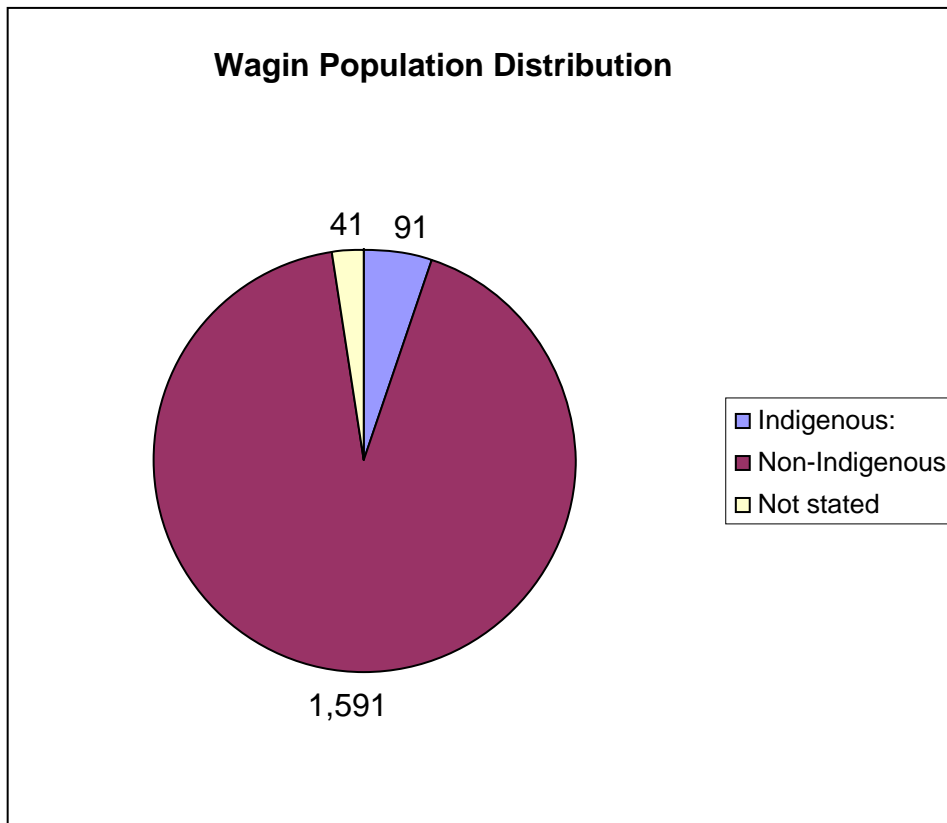


Figure 20 – Population Distribution for the Shire of Wagin 2001 (ABS 2003d)

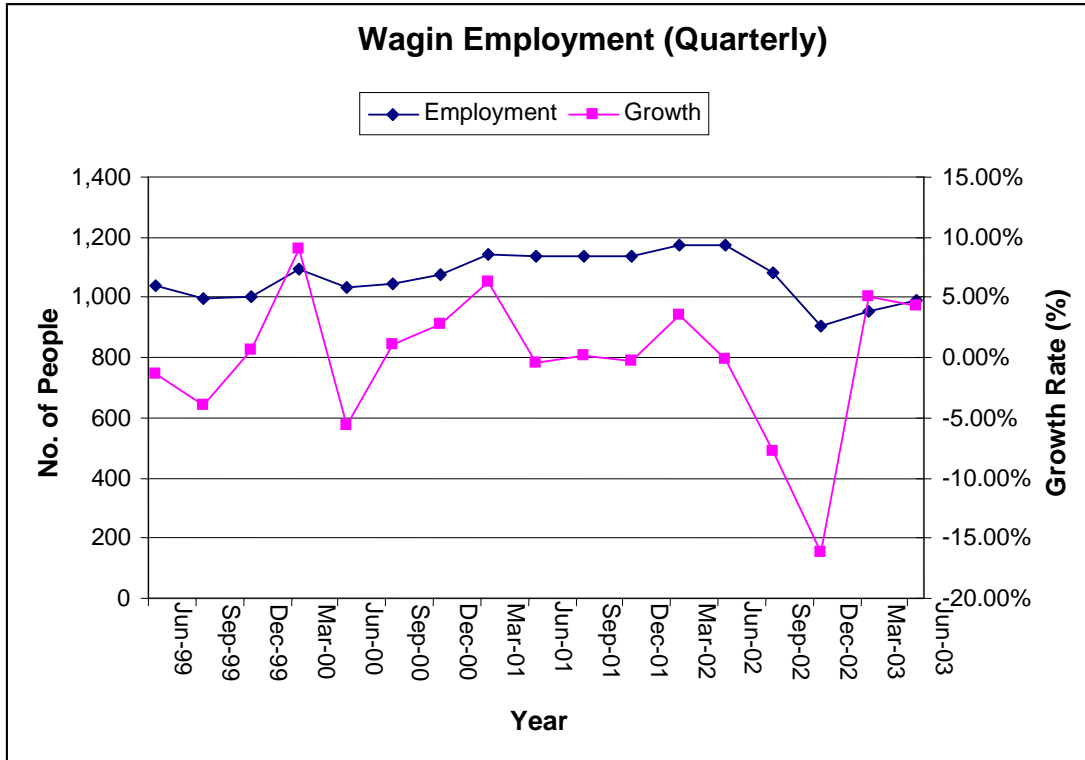


Figure 21 – Employment in the Shire of Wagin
(Department of Local Government and Regional Development 2003d)

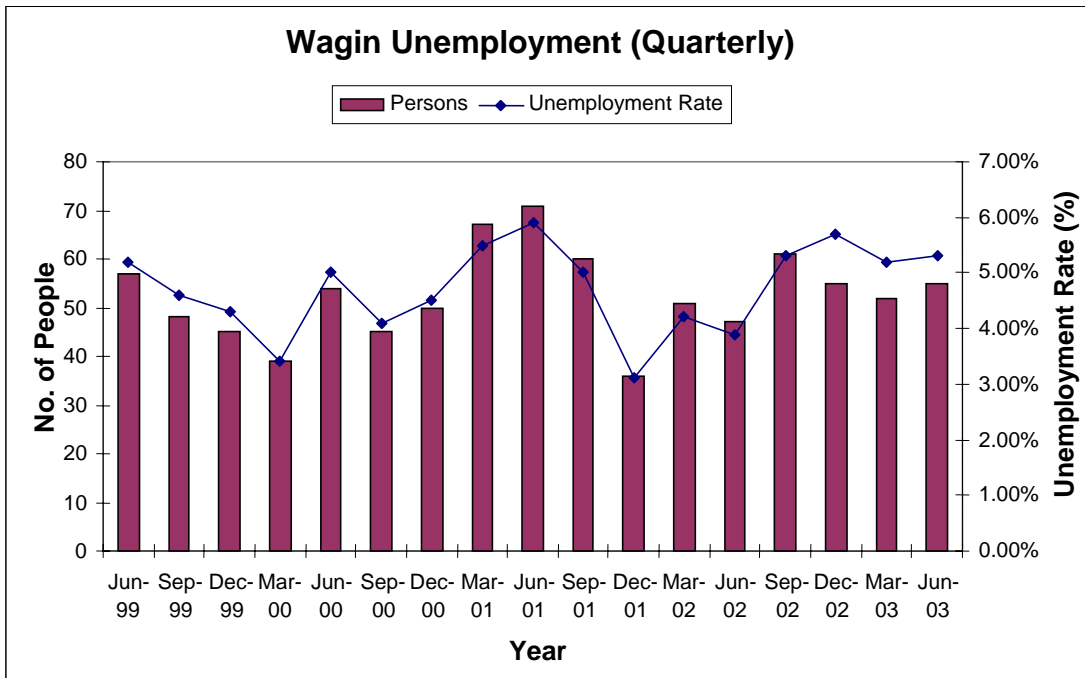


Figure 22 - Unemployment in the Shire of Wagin
(Department of Local Government and Regional Development 2003d)

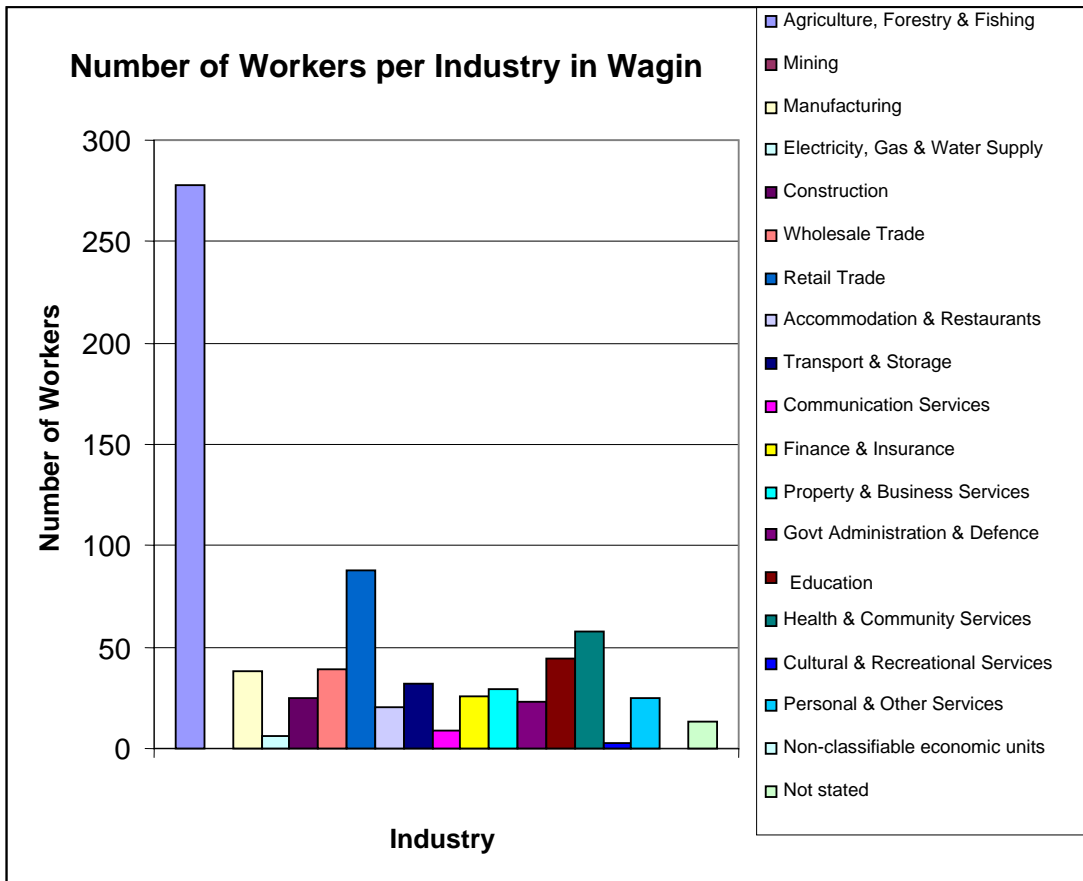


Figure 23 - Number of Workers per Industry in the Shire of Wagin (ABS 2002d)

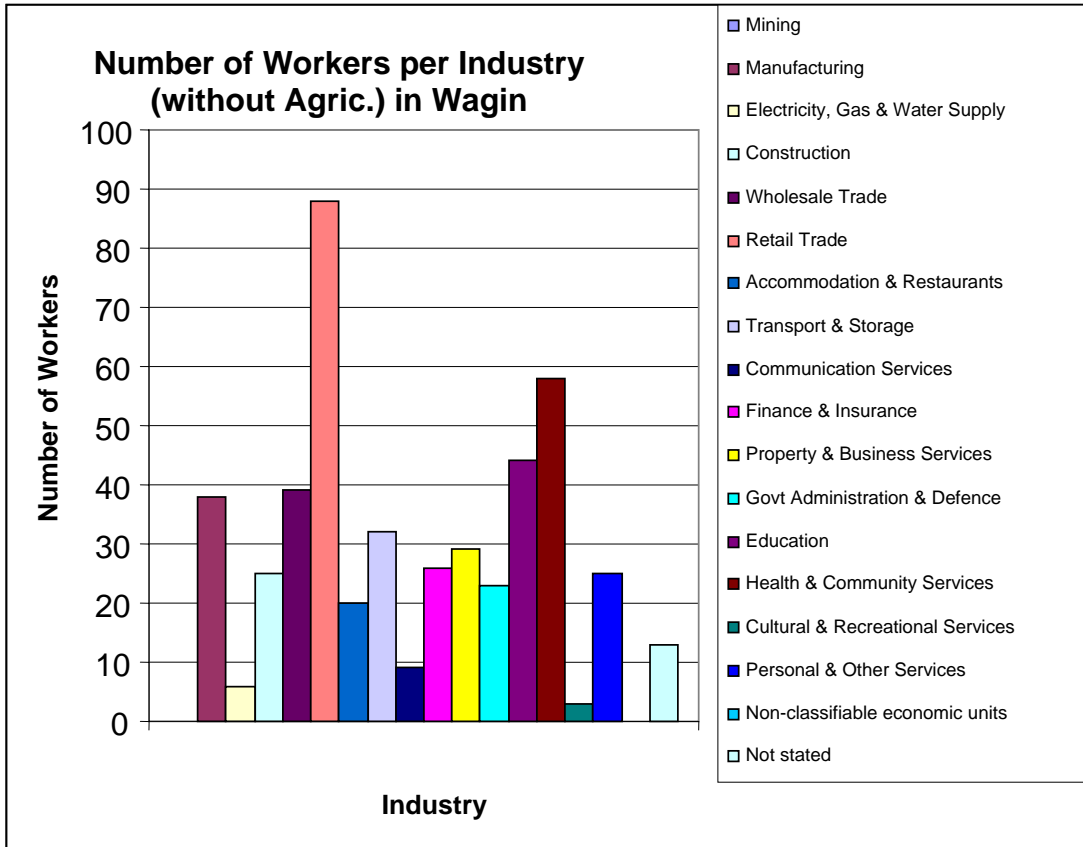


Figure 24 – Number of Workers per Industry Excluding Agriculture in the Shire of Wagin (ABS 2002d)

Appendix E

Country Water Rates

Commercial Rates for 2004/5

Merredin

		Merredin			
Usage (kl)	Class 1 c/kl	Class 2 c/kl	Class 3 c/kl	Class 4 c/kl	Class 5 c/kl
0 - 300 KI	82.9	110.1	120.9	132.2	135.8
over 300 KI	144.8	196.3	218.8	249.1	279.2

Moora

	Moora				
Usage (kl)	Class 1 c/kl	Class 2 c/kl	Class 3 c/kl	Class 4 c/kl	Class 5 c/kl
0 - 300 KI	82.9	110.1	120.9	132.2	135.8
over 300 KI	144.8	196.3	218.8	249.1	279.2

Tambellup

				Tambellup	
Usage (kl)	Class 1 c/kl	Class 2 c/kl	Class 3 c/kl	Class 4 c/kl	Class 5 c/kl
0 - 300 KI	82.9	110.1	120.9	132.2	135.8
over 300 KI	144.8	196.3	218.8	249.1	279.2

Wagin

		Wagin			
Usage (kl)	Class 1 c/kl	Class 2 c/kl	Class 3 c/kl	Class 4 c/kl	Class 5 c/kl
0 - 300 KI	82.9	110.1	120.9	132.2	135.8
over 300 KI	144.8	196.3	218.8	249.1	279.2

Country Residential Rates

Merredin

	Merredin				
Usage (kl) per year	Class 1 c/kl	Class 2 c/kl	Class 3 c/kl	Class 4 c/kl	Class 5 c/kl
First 150 kl	41.6	41.6	41.6	41.6	41.6
next 200kl (350)	67.4	67.4	67.4	67.4	67.4
next 100kl (450)	83.3	85.7	85.7	85.7	85.7
next 100kl (550)	83.3	110.7	121.6	132.8	136.5
next 200kl (750)	120.0	125.2	144.2	159.5	174.6
next 400kl (1150)	152.6	206.8	230.6	262.4	294.2
next 400kl (1550)	219.3	302.2	349.7	477.1	588.2
next 400kl (1950)	252.7	373.7	461.2	572.5	683.8
over 1950 kl	293.7	477.1	556.6	667.7	763.2

Moora

	Moora				
Usage (kl) per year	Class 1 c/kl	Class 2 c/kl	Class 3 c/kl	Class 4 c/kl	Class 5 c/kl
First 150 kl	41.6	41.6	41.6	41.6	41.6
next 200kl (350)	67.4	67.4	67.4	67.4	67.4
next 100kl (450)	83.3	85.7	85.7	85.7	85.7
next 100kl (550)	83.3	110.7	121.6	132.8	136.5
next 200kl (750)	120.0	125.2	144.2	159.5	174.6
next 400kl (1150)	152.6	206.8	230.6	262.4	294.2
next 400kl (1550)	219.3	302.2	349.7	477.1	588.2
next 400kl (1950)	252.7	373.7	461.2	572.5	683.8
over 1950 kl	293.7	477.1	556.6	667.7	763.2

Country Residential cont.

Tambellup

				Tambellup	
Usage (kl) per year	Class 1 c/kl	Class 2 c/kl	Class 3 c/kl	Class 4 c/kl	Class 5 c/kl
First 150 kl	41.6	41.6	41.6	41.6	41.6
next 200kl (350)	67.4	67.4	67.4	67.4	67.4
next 100kl (450)	83.3	85.7	85.7	85.7	85.7
next 100kl (550)	83.3	110.7	121.6	132.8	136.5
next 200kl (750)	120.0	125.2	144.2	159.5	174.6
next 400kl (1150)	152.6	206.8	230.6	262.4	294.2
next 400kl (1550)	219.3	302.2	349.7	477.1	588.2
next 400kl (1950)	252.7	373.7	461.2	572.5	683.8
over 1950 kl	293.7	477.1	556.6	667.7	763.2

Wagin

		Wagin			
Usage (kl) per year	Class 1 c/kl	Class 2 c/kl	Class 3 c/kl	Class 4 c/kl	Class 5 c/kl
First 150 kl	41.6	41.6	41.6	41.6	41.6
next 200kl (350)	67.4	67.4	67.4	67.4	67.4
next 100kl (450)	83.3	85.7	85.7	85.7	85.7
next 100kl (550)	83.3	110.7	121.6	132.8	136.5
next 200kl (750)	120.0	125.2	144.2	159.5	174.6
next 400kl (1150)	152.6	206.8	230.6	262.4	294.2
next 400kl (1550)	219.3	302.2	349.7	477.1	588.2
next 400kl (1950)	252.7	373.7	461.2	572.5	683.8
over 1950 kl	293.7	477.1	556.6	667.7	763.2

Appendix F

An Outline for Integrated Water Management in Moora

Idea 1 – Using water from the waste water treatment ponds

- The shire currently loses approximately 48 000 kilolitres/yr of water to evaporation from the waste water ponds. This could be used to water six hectares of grass a year.
- Duckweed is a natural weed that floats on top of water and could be used to prevent evaporative water loss. It is cheap to buy and grows rapidly to cover whole water surface areas.
- As well as stopping evaporation, it also lowers waste-water odour, controls mosquitoes and absorbs nutrients in the water (controls algae). Duckweed may be utilised for cattle feed (as it is 50% protein) if pathogens are destroyed through a process such as sunlight exposure.
- An idea would be for the shire to go into joint venture with a cattle feed company, who would harvest duckweed for their own use. There would be no capital costs for the shire to begin using it on the waste water treatment ponds. This would mean, with Department of Environment regulation, more efficient water use through lower treatment costs and reduction in evaporation losses.

Idea 2 – 900,000 kilolitres of water available from an aquifer east of town

- The Department of Environment has a 900,000 kilolitre water source east of town. The water corporation currently takes out 100,000 kilolitres for nearby farms.
- That leaves 800,000 kilolitres that could be pumped and used for light industrial areas around the town. As water is higher RL than the town and close (within 3km), it should be viewed as an alternative source for good non-potable water requirements in town, for some processing, watering, mixing etc.
- Possible salinity intrusion can be controlled through careful pump rate design and monitoring.

Idea 3 – Shire requires the saline water table to be lowered under the town

- Action needs to be taken now to address the rising groundwater as the salt affected trees can be seen just out of town and it takes several years from investigation to implementation even if it was started today!
- The underground water could be pumped out to the salt lakes near the golf course to create a recreational lake.
- The bottom of the lake would need to be lowered to the height of the winter water table and a control gate put into one of the banks. The shape and size of the existing lakes is already perfect.

- General indicative costings have been worked on, and it appears a water park resource given some federal salinity funding could be viable.
- Windmills could pump water to keep the lake topped up from evaporation if low cost pumping was required in summer.
- 2/7 of the community usually go to the coast on the weekends. A recreational lake would keep them here and create additional benefits. It would be of great importance to the perception of the youth in town as a place to live, rather than to leave etc.

Idea 4 – Energy control

- Oil energy companies are spending big dollars on finding the best ways forward in terms of recycling. They do not mind losing a bit now if it means having the best gains for the future. This attitude would be beneficial to gradual expansion alignment with renewable energy requirements.
- These experimental ideas need to happen here.
- Desalination could work but for many of the towns there is limited power to do it.
- Currently some farmers are planting mallee on their farms to lower the salt water table. The by-products do not produce high gains (mallee oil etc).
- Instead the mallee biomass could be digested utilising new technology to produce power and run a desalination plant or industry.
- Federal government would pay the capital for the plants provided the operations and maintenance is there.
- The water corporation would then buy back the water at approximately 90c a kilolitre. If the water is more expensive then the shire or a business could subsidise the extra costs.
- The power station produced from burning mallee could be a five million watt supply dependent on the expansion of the timber plantation industry on the excellent plantation soils south of Moora through to Mogumber and Gin Gin.
- This is currently on trial in Narrogin with a one million watt power station.

Idea 5 – Environmental packages with pine plantations

- The Gngangara Mound is covered in pine trees and Forest Products Commission is allowed to extend the 25 year license. Currently 21 000 hectares are covered in pine, with 30 000 hectares required to replace the Gngangara Mound Plantations once harvested. This could well be south of Moora.
- There are pine needles and forest waste from plantation management that is the resource for renewable power generation.
- Pine needles and other bio waste could be used to fuel a power plant and the Forest Products Commission would happily give the carbon credits as it would be cleaning up the forest floor.
- Therefore Moora could use Mallee biomass and pine biomass to fuel a power plant. A federal subsidy would be needed to begin with but these packages would quickly become self sustainable.

- Western Power is happy for the grids to have more power as they contributed \$10 million to the research and development plant in Narrogin and it is mandatory to have 6% of their total energy produced from renewable resources by 2012.

Idea 6 – Moora’s water supply and the Department of Environment

- There are groundwater allocation sub areas in the Gin Gin and Jurien groundwater areas that are simply cadastral lines of convenience on maps. There could be a good case for more sub areas to be instituted similarly to the Kwinana general area. This will allow more abstraction if the bore rest levels are not dropping or are increasing. This means more business development for the areas.
- Department of Environment could perhaps (if not done already) develop a map showing the exact location of the bores and their outputs, water rest levels, tds and flows. This makes it much easier for other businesses to assess utilising a bore, purchasing a bore or/and land, and other pertinent business decision information.
- The above information capture will also show where bores are too close together (rest levels drop), which is not always a sign of over abstraction, but could be simply too many bores operating too close together, causing interference.
- Strong committee presence by the Shire will assist better economic decision making for water allocation if many of these issues are understood.

Idea 7 – Dam the Moore River and combining ideas

- Fresh water could be pumped from the hill reserve into the river where it is dammed in town. This would make a nice picnic area, dam or used for watering.
- The waste water treatment ponds would have duckweed on top which would produce more water for green areas for town, through reduction of evaporation losses.
- There would be pumps in town placed in strategic areas that moves water from under the town to the salt lakes to make an all year recreational lake and it can be topped up with water from the fresh hill supply if needed.
- This plan means that a desalination plant would not be needed as the water could be pumped into the salt lakes. A feasibility study would show whether a desalination plant/bio-energy plant is more feasible than say a permanent recreation salt lake.
- There may be an option whereby the Water Corporation can purchase water from a desalination plant at up to the capitalised cost of water from its current plant, with a subsidy covering any additional cost per kilolitre, by either government or business.

