

HOUSING & SHORT TERM ACCOMODATION NEEDS IN THE NEW ENGLAND RENEWABLE ENERGY ZONE

FIELD NOTE - DECEMBER 2023

Acknowledgement of Country: We acknowledge Aboriginal people as the First Peoples and Nations of the lands and waters we live and work upon and we pay our respects to their Elders past, present and emerging. We acknowledge and respect the deep spiritual connection and the relationship that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have to Country. We also acknowledge housing is a critical issue and vulnerability for First Nations people and value the input and conversation to be had as part of this dialogue process.

ABOUT THIS FIELD NOTE:

Orange Compass and the Community Power Agency (CPA) co-hosted a 'Housing & Accommodation Roundtable' on 4 December 2023 in Armidale, NSW. Supported by Lumea, the theme of the Roundtable was 'Collaborating to build a cumulative picture for New England Renewable Energy Zone'. Over 25 participants joined from academia, civil society, community, industry and State and Local Governments.

This field note captures key insights from the discussion. It is part of our commitment to give back to those we have learnt from so that pathways and actions can be navigated. We have organised our insights below in the categories of:

- Key takeaways
- Cumulative impacts
- Data and information
- Local government planning and capability
- Valuing and recognising local solutions

We are grateful for the insights of everyone who took part. We hope the recommendations below reflect your intent.

About the convenors:

[Orange Compass](#) is a niche consultancy that works to support change makers transform systems and build better futures. Our approach is underpinned by a commitment to participatory processes and we work with and alongside communities and their priorities. We are committed to seeing the ways that communities are engaged with and benefit from the energy transition improved. We have also written a public [White Paper](#) and engaged with governments in NSW and Victoria to communicate different possibilities for community empowerment and lasting benefits.

[Community Power Agency](#) was established in 2011 to enable and advocate for community energy projects. A not-for-profit co-operative, we have evolved to support communities across Australia to engage in and benefit from the transition to renewable energy. Our vision is for Australian communities to be active participants in a renewable energy system that is fair and accessible to all. We work toward achieving this vision by collaborating with and building capacity in communities, government and industry.

Acknowledgement of funding: Community Power Agency is funded by an independent philanthropic grant designed to enable local participation and better outcomes in the New England REZ. Lumea supplied lunch, and funded the participation of Orange Compass as part of their social responsibility/community engagement for the New England REZ.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

The bottom line from the Roundtable is that industry and government still have a long way to go to achieve: much **better and fairer engagement for host communities; a clearer understanding of cumulative impacts; and community participation in decision making** around housing and short-term accommodation.

The traditional method of delivering temporary accommodation through worker camps that are packed up and packed down for each project leave no legacy benefits to communities and disrupt local economies for the entire period of construction.

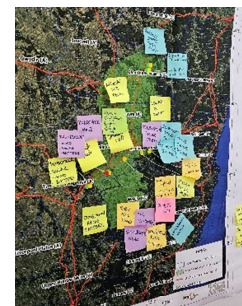
There is a role for a community involved cross sector approach to tackle this problem and to recognise the forthcoming challenges and opportunities. This means understanding and gaining more knowledge on the ecosystem that temporary housing and accommodation sits within and local priorities and solutions.

Given the forthcoming development boom, community voices need to be prioritised in developing solutions that generate legacy benefits not short-term fixes.

CUMULATIVE IMPACTS

Armidale and surrounding regions are predicted to receive an influx of temporary workers for the construction of large-scale renewable energy generation projects and transmission infrastructure for the New England Renewable Energy Zone (REZ). This will have varying impacts depending on the phasing of projects, their construction, and whether these coincide with other major construction projects in the region over the next 5-10 years. One of the most evident impacts is the need for temporary housing and accommodation during the construction phase of these projects. This problem, if unaddressed, can have unintended consequences as seen in other sectors such as mining. It is a complex problem that lacks the mandated authority of a single entity.

The Roundtable heard of widespread concern from all stakeholders about the impacts of additional housing pressures on New England residents. Roundtable participants conducted a rapid mapping exercise that showed the likely demand to be generated by the known project pipeline. This doesn't include the many other projects yet to be approved and yet foreshadows a development boom. This is leading to an increased sense of urgency around the likely pressures on housing. It was acknowledged that such pressures will be further complicated by competing priorities, interests, and needs. Workforce numbers, travel flow and transport options will all directly impact the existing local Housing and Accommodation sector. And yes, the fear is that nobody appears to be leading planning for this in any holistic



way. Each project under development appears to be considered in isolation rather than in terms of the cumulative effect on housing and accommodation for the region.

DATA AND INFORMATION

The lack of consideration of cumulative effects is being fuelled by very real data and information gaps in regional communities. To date there has been little public information released about the likely cumulative effect on communities, particularly the impact on housing and accommodation markets. Meanwhile, any data that is being used in planning decisions has shortcomings. For example, the data on average vacancy rates (0-2.8%) being used in planning decisions across LGAs for multiple renewable energy projects is perceived as misleading and highly variable depending on season. Likewise, there are concerns that inaccurate and years-out-of-date census data (e.g. on population trends, student accommodation needs etc) is forming the basis of planning decisions for renewable energy projects.

The lack of accountability and the competitive nature of infrastructure and generator projects further limits the availability and transparency of information about energy project impacts and timelines.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT PLANNING AND CAPABILITY

Energy projects are being developed and applied for through the State planning process so Local Councils have no decision-making power or involvement in the decision-making process before projects are approved.

In addition, Local Councils are accountable for the increase in cumulative demand on services (rates, roads, rubbish, sewage) arising from workforce influxes - but are only compensated project by project through the Voluntary Planning Agreement (VPA) process. This is incredibly hard for councils to navigate. They have limited resources and inadequate funding to address housing impacts in a systemic way. Some funding has been sourced by several councils to develop individual Housing Strategies, but this funding is either yet to be confirmed or only just commencing. And this funding doesn't include all Councils in the REZ nor any shared regional planning.

VALUING AND RECOGNISING LOCAL SOLUTIONS

Regional communities are made up of people that are used to filling limited services gaps or creating their own solutions to access reliable support. The local NFP, business and industry sectors are the backbone of rural and regional communities. This means that people are deeply connected and care about issues affecting their local people and place. A government-driven approach is only one way of tackling the issue of housing. There are more sustainable and impactful options available with regional communities willing and able to be involved in the design of a sustainable housing future. Regional stakeholders are asking to be more involved in decisions around energy infrastructure projects right from the start so that locally based solutions can be pursued. Consultation after major planning decisions have already been made in this space will lead to unintended consequences and short-term outcomes.

Community intelligence and active involvement should not be viewed through a lens of risk or social licence - but rather valued as part of an effective implementation framework. The existing housing crisis and incoming pressures are something regional communities are grappling with and have many ideas on. Roundtable Participants developed an initial list of ideas and solutions for further exploration. These ideas are included below.

Ideas on cumulative impacts, data and information:

- Engage energy companies in discussions to help shape the planning of housing and temporary accommodation in the NE REZ and influence best practice;
- Create data sharing agreements between governments, stakeholders and community so that cumulative impacts can be understood in a more transparent and accessible way;
- Develop community data sharing platforms to hold regional data sets that are necessary for informed community-led decision making;
- Release data on the phasing of approved projects, their workforce numbers and geographical areas so it is possible to adequately map the scale and size of the problem

Ideas on local government planning and capability:

- Allocate resources to Local Councils to enable them to engage, consult and respond to the REZ policy in a holistic way (including responding to requests for submissions, participating in planning discussions, developing cross-sectoral responses, partnerships and shared understanding);
- Fund the development of Housing Strategies each LGA and support this with a consistent framework at the State and Commonwealth levels;
- Develop Housing and Accommodation Legacy Benefits Guidelines in collaboration with the local stakeholders and communities.
- Host a process for regional communities to reimagine local housing futures and feed into regional housing strategies so that legacy benefits can be realised;
- Create an overall Housing and Accommodation strategy for the entire REZ, not just for isolated Councils.

Ideas on generating legacy benefits through better housing supply:

- Consider social values in planning and early works phases;
- Map community assets for repurposing (e.g. those that need upgrading, are no longer utilised, old heritage buildings, student accommodation or decommissioned sites);
- Work with local building and construction companies to scale production with the development pipeline, drawing on local workers and keeping the benefits in local economies;
- Partner with 'for purpose' landowners to discover solutions
- Boost visitor accommodation capacity by incentivising Local Councils to host workers and accommodation (e.g. through tax incentives to standardise the approach for remuneration)
- Provide financial incentives for the development of better short-term housing options

- Partner with Community Housing Providers and local NGOs to identify needs and opportunities to develop customised solutions that can be left/gifted post construction
- Enable Local Councils to act as a residential developer and/or landlord
- Tackle the issue of land banking
- Work with Local Aboriginal Land Councils to develop and activate their land
- Ensure emergency or crisis housing needs are still being met