

COUNTRY CHANGE



SPRING 2026:
THE RELOCATION ISSUE

Where life has room to grow

Discover opportunity, connection
and a new way of living across
the **Riverina and Murray.**



MEET THE LOCALS

*Building meaningful
lives across the region*



WORK, STUDY, GROW

*Where opportunity
meets affordability*



YOUR REGIONAL GUIDE

*Communities, services
and places to explore*

ON THE COVER: Temora Shire Council Canola Trail – Anne Cooper Photography

The Riverina & Murray

Acknowledgement of Country



Take a moment to pause and feel the earth beneath our feet. To recall our place in this timeless, bountiful country.

We acknowledge, with deep respect, the traditional custodians of this land whose stewardship continues to grace this country as it has done for more than 65,000 years.

We pay our respect to Aboriginal Elders from the past, in the present, and those who are striving today to bring their very special relationship with country to our social identity.

We endeavour to honour the full depth of history this country knows, with gratitude and care.

NEW SOUTH WALES

The Riverina & Murray are vibrant regions in south-western New South Wales, covering an area of 163,044 km².





MESSAGE FROM THE *Chair*

Welcome to the 2026 edition of Country Change Magazine. Each year, this publication showcases the people, places and opportunities that make our region such a rewarding place to live, work and invest. Through the stories shared in these pages, you'll discover communities that are thriving, businesses that are growing, and individuals and families who have embraced a new way of life in regional Australia.

The Riverina continues to attract people seeking more than just a change of address. They are looking for connection, opportunity, balance and a genuine sense of belonging. Our region offers all of these qualities, supported by strong industries, quality education and healthcare services, vibrant communities, and an enviable lifestyle that combines career opportunities with affordable living and access to the outdoors.

At Regional Development Australia Riverina, we are proud to support initiatives that help showcase the many advantages of our region. Country Change plays an important role in connecting prospective residents with the information and inspiration they need to make informed decisions about relocating, while also celebrating the stories of those who have already made the move and are contributing to the ongoing success of our communities.

As you explore this edition, I encourage you to look beyond the headlines and discover the real experiences of people who have chosen the Riverina as their home. Their stories reflect the resilience, optimism and community spirit that define our region and continue to make it an attractive destination for people from across Australia and beyond.

On behalf of the Board and team at Regional Development Australia Riverina, thank you for your interest in our region. We look forward to welcoming you and helping you discover why so many people are choosing to make a country change.

Brett Stonestreet

Brett Stonestreet
Chair, RDA - Riverina



MESSAGE FROM THE *CEO*

As you explore the stories, opportunities and communities featured throughout this edition of Country Change Magazine, I encourage you to imagine what your own future in the Riverina could look like.

The people you'll meet in these pages arrived here by many different paths. Some travelled from the other side of the world — like Geena and Jude, who swapped West Sussex for a health career and a family-focused life in Wentworth Shire, and April, whose journey from Cebu to Coolamon reunited her family and gave her children a brighter future. Others came home after decades away, like artist Tanya returning to Wagga Wagga with fresh eyes, and Ted and Sue, who came full circle to the scenic community life of Gundagai.

Whether you're considering a move, investing in your future, or simply discovering what our region has to offer, I hope these pages inspire you to take the next step and experience the possibilities that await in the Riverina.

Rachel Whiting

Rachel Whiting
CEO, RDA - Riverina



Date Days in the Park - Greater Hume ©Matt Beaver

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Finding Home at *The Point*

HOW AMANDA'S COUNTRY CHANGE BROUGHT HER
CLOSER TO FAMILY, COMMUNITY AND CALM



When Amanda Elvy packed up her life in Griffith and moved to Darlington Point in the Murrumbidgee Council area, she thought she was simply helping her sister through a tough time. What she found was a new home, a new business, and a community that welcomed her with open arms.

"I was born in Sydney and relocated with my parents in 1995 to a little town called Rankins Springs," Amanda shared. "I've always been in a rural setting now for as long as I can remember. My sister bought a house here, and at the time, my mum was passing with pancreatic cancer. As a single parent, my sister asked me to go with her for support as she had a new baby — and I thought it was a great idea, so I went too."

That decision, made from love and family connection, has transformed into something much bigger. Today, Amanda runs Recover DP Coffee Shop — a cosy, welcoming café in the heart of Darlington Point — and has become one of the town's most loved locals.

Life on the banks of the Murrumbidgee

Nestled along the banks of the Murrumbidgee River, Darlington Point (affectionately known as The Point) offers all the natural beauty and calm of country living — but with a surprising vibrancy.

"It's a relaxed, family-orientated town," Amanda said. "Everyone is looking out for each other's children. I'm the eldest of nine myself and have always been close to my family, so it's almost like being at home. There is a real sense of community and belonging. I love Darlington Point."

Her kids still attend school in Griffith, commuting daily by bus. "They didn't want to change schools, but they've made so many friends with the local kids," she smiled. "It's the best of both worlds."

Brewing connection at recover DP

At Recover DP Coffee Shop, Amanda's passion for people and her love of community shine. The café has quickly become a local hub — a place where people gather for a chat, a caffeine fix, and a sense of connection.

"Being involved in the community has helped me meet new people, network and create friendships," Amanda said. "I enjoy my small business and having a space where people can meet, relax and enjoy the atmosphere."

Amanda is also a familiar face on the sidelines of the local footy field. "I used to coach many years ago when my eldest son first started playing back in 2012," she shared. "It was great to get back to what I know and love, coaching with the DP Roosters."

Balancing business, family and community

Regional life brings a different rhythm — one Amanda has learned to embrace.

"I actually own two local businesses," she explained. "One located in Griffith and another here in Darlington Point. I'm very lucky to have a village. My staff in Griffith are wonderful and really hold the reins in, so I can focus on my little café here. My sister helps with my younger children at home in the mornings, and evenings are spent at the gym, swimming lessons and footy."

That "village" extends beyond family. Amanda has found a supportive network of locals who step up when needed.

"Travelling for after-school sports was tricky when I first moved," she admitted, "but it's become easier having family, friends and other parents to help along the way."

She's also helping nurture a new local book club — a quiet nod to her belief that connection comes in many forms.

Learning to slow down

Moving from the busier pace of Griffith to the serenity of Darlington Point has taught Amanda to pause and appreciate the moment.

"When I first moved, I was really too busy to stop and take in my space," she reflected. "I didn't expect to create the friendships that I have, because I was always so busy. Living here and having a business here has really taught me to slow down — and I'm extremely grateful for that."

“

Darlington Point is a great little town and very welcoming... creating a business here has been very welcomed too.”



That gratitude runs deep. For Amanda, the past year has been more than a relocation — it's been a renewal.

"Darlington Point is a great little town and very welcoming," she said. "Creating a business here has been very welcomed too. I plan on staying here. I've found a sense of home in my local community. As to what comes next, I'm unsure — but I have big plans. Come what may."

Why Murrumbidgee?

Life really is better in the Murrumbidgee. Whether you choose Coleambally, Jerilderie or Darlington Point, you'll find a region full of heart, hospitality and opportunity. Here, there's time to breathe, space to grow and a community that makes you feel instantly at home.

For Amanda, that's exactly what she's found — a place to belong, to build, and to dream.

"I think it was fate that brought us here," she smiled. "And I wouldn't change a thing."

Whether you're casting a line, paddling a kayak, or just watching the sunset from the riverbank, life here invites you to slow down — something Amanda has learned to embrace wholeheartedly.

When asked what advice she'd give to other families considering a Country Change, Amanda's answer was heartfelt and grounded in her own journey.

"Moving to the country or anywhere for that matter is always going to have challenges," she said. "Small communities are always so welcoming with open arms. It takes a village to raise a family — and that village is found in the country. There are so many great opportunities for our children, and better work and lifestyle opportunities too." ●

From West Sussex to Wentworth Shire

A HEALTH-CAREER TREE CHANGE THAT
DELIVERED A BRIGHTER FUTURE

© Wentworth Shire Council

When people talk about a “country change”, they often start with the lifestyle: more space, warmer weather, less time commuting and more time together. For Geena and Jude Varghese, that was absolutely part of the picture, but their move from West Sussex, England, to Australia was first sparked by something else: career progression in the health sector.

Like many families, Geena and Jude were also reassessing what day-to-day life had become. England felt busy and compressed: long working hours, short winter days, and not enough quality time as a family.

But Geena, a Credentialed Diabetes Educator, wasn't looking for a sideways step. She wanted to expand her scope, work in a different system, and make a meaningful contribution in a community setting. That desire for balance didn't mean stepping away from ambition, it meant finding a place where professional growth and family life could actually coexist. And Wentworth Shire offered exactly that.

“Professionally, I was looking to expand my role and work within a different healthcare system. When the opportunity arose at Buronga HealthOne, it aligned closely with my experience in community diabetes care.”



Why regional, not a capital city?

For the Varghese family, permanent residency was a major factor in choosing to settle regionally. It transformed the move from “trial” to “long-term plan”.

“We wanted stability for our children and the opportunity to integrate fully into the community. Regional Australia offered professional opportunities while also providing a family-focused lifestyle, which made it an attractive choice over a capital city.”

That stability lens matters for many skilled migrants: it's not just about the first job, it's about where you can build roots, relationships and a future.

Geena arrived first, where she was welcomed by Kym Chapman, Local Connector for Wentworth Shire, who delivers The Welcome Experience on behalf of Regional Development Australia Far West NSW.

The Welcome Experience is a free service supporting essential workers and their families who are considering applying for, or have accepted, a job

in regional NSW. Local Connectors assist with all aspects of settling in — from practical matters such as finding housing and choosing childcare, to exploring employment opportunities for partners and even making introductions within the local community.

Geena commenced her role at Buronga Health One ahead of her family, with Jude and the children joining her a few months later.

“Arriving ahead of my family allowed me to focus on understanding the local health system and the specific needs of the community,” she says. “I was able to establish professional relationships, understand referral pathways, and become familiar with how services are delivered across the region.”

“It made the transition much smoother when my family joined me,” Geena adds.

For Jude, arriving later with two children brought its own challenges but the welcoming community and relaxed pace of life helped ease the transition.

"The relocation itself was significant, particularly managing the move with two children," Jude says. "Adjusting to a new country and system takes time. However, the welcoming nature of the community made a positive difference. The slower pace of life compared to England helped us settle more comfortably."

Impact, variety and autonomy

From Geena's perspective, one of the most compelling reasons for health professionals to consider regional Australia is the ability to work in an integrated, community-focused system, and to see the impact of your work more directly.

"In diabetes care, there is a significant opportunity to support prevention, education, and chronic disease management," she says. "Working in a regional setting allows for meaningful patient relationships and continuity of care."

For skilled workers and health professionals looking for career progression, she says regional roles can offer far more than people assume.

"Regional areas offer real professional impact," Geena says. "Skills are valued, and there is opportunity to contribute directly to service delivery and development. For health professionals in particular, the work is varied, autonomous, and community-centred."

"The genuine sense of community and collaboration," they say. "Both professionally and socially, people are approachable and supportive. There is a strong sense that people look out for one another."

That "people look out for one another" feeling isn't just a nice idea, it's what turns a relocation into belonging.

Settling through school, sport and wellbeing

With two young children, Lennox and Leandra, the move came with clear priorities.

"Our priorities were stability, academic support, and a nurturing environment," Geena and Jude share. "Moving countries is a significant adjustment for children, so ensuring they felt supported was essential."

"We have found the schools approachable and supportive... communication has been clear, and there is a strong focus on student wellbeing alongside academic achievement."

And like many families, sport became the shortcut to friendships and connection.

"Our son has joined a local cricket club and plays badminton, and our daughter participates in swimming," they explain. "Sport has helped them build friendships and feel part of the community more quickly."

Why Wentworth?

Set at the junction of the mighty Murray and Darling Rivers, Wentworth Shire is a place where history, nature and community life intersect. Home to around 7,800 people, the region offers an easy-going rhythm with plenty to explore on weekends. From river walks and fishing spots to heritage streetscapes, galleries and local events, plus day trips to nearby river towns and the broader Sunraysia produce and wine region. It's also surprisingly well connected for a remote-feeling tree change: around a 6 hour 20 minute drive to Melbourne and about 5 hours to Adelaide. And for families looking to put down roots, the housing proposition is compelling!

Housing value, space and the chance to buy

With a median house price around \$380,000, there's genuine opportunity to secure space and lifestyle without the capital-city price tag. While the family is currently living in Mildura, their goal is to buy a home in Wentworth Shire. For them, it's about establishing long-term roots in the place that best matches the lifestyle they came for.

"We see Wentworth Shire as a place where we can establish long-term roots," they say. "It offers the lifestyle we were seeking while still being close to employment and essential services."

In practical terms, the housing equation looks very different to West Sussex.

"Compared to West Sussex, housing here offers significantly more space and value," they say. "The overall lifestyle feels less pressured and more balanced."

Advice for other skilled professionals and international families

Their advice is simple.

"Research thoroughly, particularly around qualification recognition and employment pathways," Be open to adapting and engaging with the community. Regional Australia offers genuine opportunity for both professional growth and family life." ●

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Work, Opportunity & a Life that Fits

WHAT MOVING TO GRIFFITH REALLY LOOKS LIKE

When people talk about moving to regional Australia, the conversation often leans heavily on lifestyle. But for Lorraine Saidon and Obert, their move to Griffith in the Northern Riverina, has been shaped just as much by professional opportunity as by what happens outside of work hours.

Both arrived in Australia with strong agricultural backgrounds, so they were a perfect fit to both become Assistant Farm Managers at ProTen, one of Australia's largest poultry producers. What they've found here is a place where skills are valued, industries are evolving, and family life doesn't need to be put on hold to build a career.

Meaningful regional work — without stalling your career

Obert describes his role simply, but with pride. He speaks about enjoying being part of something bigger, contributing to Australia's food system and doing work that feels purposeful. Yet what matters most to him isn't scale or output – it's values. One of the quieter strengths of Griffith's major employers is the diversity of people they attract. Obert speaks openly about how welcoming the workforce at ProTen has been.



© Matt Beaver

"What I really appreciate is how welcoming the workplace is," he says. "People from different backgrounds, cultures and walks of life are respected. That makes a huge difference when you're settling somewhere new."

That inclusiveness has helped make the transition easier, particularly for families relocating from elsewhere. It's also reflective of Griffith itself: a town shaped by migration, agriculture and generations of people building new lives in the region.

Obert describes Griffith as a practical choice. Coming from an agricultural background, he saw the region as a place where he could continue to grow professionally while staying connected to the industry he knew.

"The sector is strong here, and there's room to contribute, learn and move forward."

Lorraine echoes that sentiment. Having grown up around poultry, stepping into a professional role in the industry felt like a natural progression, but what surprised her was how advanced and forward-looking the work is.

"There's a lot of innovation happening," she explains. "Technology, systems, best-practice animal care – it's not what people imagine when they think of regional work. It's exciting to be part of an industry that's constantly improving."

For both, Griffith represents something important: regional employment that is skilled, stable and future-focused.



© Matt Beaver

“

Griffith gives you room to work, to raise a family, and to breathe. If you're thinking about a country change, it's worth looking at what's really possible here.”

”

Griffith, where life outside work actually exists!

While career opportunities brought Lorraine and Obert to Griffith, lifestyle is what's made them stay.

“Griffith isn't just about work,” Lorraine says. “There's a lot here for families.”

They talk about spending time together after work, without having to travel long distances or battle traffic, but heading somewhere close and familiar. Places like Lake Wyangan have become part of their regular routine, offering space to unwind and reconnect.

“After long hours, it's nice to know you can finish the day somewhere peaceful without needing to plan much,” Lorraine says. “Everything is nearby.”

For her family, the move has brought unexpected benefits. Lorraine speaks about how quickly their children settled into life in Griffith.

“There are so many opportunities for kids. Swimming, sport, outdoor activities,” she says. “They're involved, active and enjoying it.”

Beyond facilities, there's a sense of ease that comes with regional living. Shorter commutes, familiar faces and time together have reshaped how their family spends its week.

“It's a calmer way of living. You're not constantly rushing!”

Growth without the pressure

Obert describes Griffith as a town that's evolving at a steady pace. Developing infrastructure and industries, while still remaining accessible.

“It's growing, but it hasn't lost its balance. There's space for people to come in, find work and build a future.”

That balance between employment, affordability and lifestyle is what makes Griffith appealing to people considering a move. It's not about escaping city life entirely, but about reshaping it into something more sustainable.

Lorraine puts it simply.

“Griffith gives you room to work, to raise a family, and to breathe. If you're thinking about a country change, it's worth looking at what's really possible here.” ●

Back to the Country

INVESTING IN THE FUTURE OF
BAROOGA AND TOCUMWAL

After more than 30 years in Sydney, Steve Ratcliffe knew he wanted to return to country life. The hotelier had grown up in regional New South Wales and always hoped he would one day find his way back. When an opportunity arose during the COVID period, he began looking at hotels in regional communities.

That search eventually brought him to Barooga.

"I came down here and fell in love with the place... this area here is a beautiful area to live," says Steve.

Today, Steve is involved with two important hospitality venues in Berrigan Shire: the Barooga Hotel and the Tocumwal Hotel Motel, known as The Palms.

His experience shows what can happen when people recognise the potential of regional towns and invest not only in local businesses, but also in the communities around them.

Finding opportunity in Barooga

Berrigan Shire includes the towns of Barooga, Tocumwal, Finley and Berrigan, each offering its own character and lifestyle.

For Steve, Barooga provided the combination he had been looking for: a welcoming community, a river-town lifestyle and a business with the potential to become something more. And he saw that potential in the Barooga Hotel, which required a substantial renovation when he took it on.

"It needed a major renovation – a brand-new kitchen, brand-new bars, toilets, bottle shop, accommodation, everything's new. Basically, the only thing left is the shell."

The hotel was redesigned to make it more practical and appealing, with a new liquor barn, upgraded hospitality areas and deluxe accommodation cabins.

More than a place to have a drink

Steve believes a country hotel should play a much broader role than simply serving food and drinks.

"When I grew up in the country, the pubs were the hub," he says. "That's where all the tradesmen met. That's where the sports teams met."

That philosophy has guided the redevelopment of the Barooga Hotel. Steve wanted to create a place where people could gather, support community causes and feel connected to the town.

"It becomes the meeting point, the focal point of the town," he says. "It's where they raise money for charities. We've raised a lot of money for charities, and we get involved in everything."

The renewed hotel has been warmly received by the community, giving Steve confidence to continue investing in the region.

Breathing new life into Tocumwal

Steve and a syndicate also became involved with the Tocumwal Hotel Motel.

The property had fallen into poor condition, but Steve could see both the potential of the venue and the strength of the town around it.

"Tocumwal is a beautiful town, right on the river, and it's a beautiful community," he says. "It was just going to rack and ruin, and I don't like that happening to country towns."

The team introduced upgraded accommodation, a restaurant, improved food service and a renewed bar, with further work continuing.

The project has been well received locally and demonstrates the opportunities available to people prepared to invest in regional businesses, tourism and hospitality.



Jobs and business opportunities across the shire

Berrigan Shire has a diverse economy supported by agriculture, manufacturing, retail, tourism, hospitality and essential services.

Its fertile land underpins strong farming and food-production industries, creating employment across cropping, livestock, processing, transport, machinery, trades and agricultural services.

The Murray River and the region's golf courses, events and natural attractions also support accommodation, hospitality and visitor-based businesses.

Steve believes employment opportunities in regional communities are stronger than many people realise.

"As the world's changing, there's the opportunity for people who work from home," Steve says. "If they lived here, they'd have a hell of a better life."

A more achievable place to call home

Housing affordability is another reason people are considering a move to Berrigan Shire.

The median house price across the shire is approximately \$410,000, with median weekly rent of around \$350. Individual prices and availability vary, but the figures highlight the possibility of securing more space at a lower cost than in many larger cities.

For families, that can mean a larger backyard, greater financial flexibility and more room to plan for the future. It may also mean spending less time commuting and more time together.

"After living in Sydney for 30 years, it's certainly an easier life," Steve says. "It doesn't take you long to get to work."

“

It becomes the meeting point, the focal point of the town. It's where they raise money for charities.”

”

Connected without the city pressure

Berrigan Shire offers a country lifestyle while remaining connected to larger regional centres and major cities. Residents can access local hospitals, medical centres, schools, childcare services, shops and community facilities across the shire.

Melbourne is around three hours away by car, while Shepparton and Albury-Wodonga are also within reach. This gives residents access to larger services, airports and employment markets without having to live among metropolitan congestion.

Life on and around the Murray River

The Murray River is central to life in Barooga and Tocumwal.

Residents can enjoy fishing, boating, swimming, water skiing, riverside walks, camping and time on the region's river beaches.

The shire is also known for golf, local sport and community events. Barooga and Tocumwal have established sporting clubs and recreation facilities, while Finley and Berrigan offer strong agricultural communities and everyday services.

For Steve, the greatest attraction is the chance to become involved in local life.

"It's being involved with people and being involved in the community," he says.

A move the whole family embraced

While Steve was certain about returning to the country, his wife initially needed more convincing.

"When I told my wife I was moving back to the country, she said, 'You'll be going on your own... now I can't get rid of her. She absolutely loves the place, and we should have done it years ago.'"

What ultimately made the move feel right was the welcome they received.

"The people. Without a doubt, the people," Steve says. "The same thing at Tocumwal — beautiful people."

His advice to anyone considering moving, investing or starting a business in Berrigan Shire is simple.

"Do it sooner rather than later, while there are plenty of opportunities." ●

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From Cebu to Coolamon

A COUNTRY CHANGE THAT BROUGHT TOGETHER
A FAMILY AND A COMMUNITY

For April Laguros, the decision to move to regional Australia was never just about a job. It was also about building a bright future for her family.

Originally from Cebu in the Philippines, April had imagined a different kind of life for her family. When she came across an opportunity to train and work in aged care in Australia, with a scholarship too, it felt like it was something worth pursuing.

"Australia has always been my dream country – a place where I hoped to build a better future for my family," April says. "When I saw an advertisement on Facebook about training, sponsorship and caregiver opportunities in Australia, I took a chance and applied."

Her courage paid off, because she was awarded the scholarship and her dream life was on its way!

Building a future from a distance

Of course, like all dreams worth having, it did bring with it some challenges. Initially, April arrived in Coolamon on her own, leaving her husband and children back in the Philippines.

"Being alone at the beginning was not easy. I experienced deep homesickness, and there were many challenging moments."

Those early months required resilience, strength and even courage. April held onto the goal that she'd had from the beginning. A bright future for her family. And when things got hard, "I held on to my dream of reuniting my family, and that kept me going."

Finding a place that feels like home

Coolamon, however, was certainly the right place for April.

She says, "From the very first day, Coolamon felt like home. The community welcomed us with such warmth and kindness."

But once her family all joined her, things got even better. She says the community "made us feel like we truly belong. We feel safe, valued and at home."

When the family was finally all back together in Coolamon, it was like it was meant to be. "It felt like all the sacrifices were worth it."

"Not only did I reunite with my husband and children, but I was also able to bring my mother, who lovingly helps care for the kids."

Life in Coolamon

Set in the Riverina region of south-west New South Wales, Coolamon is a small town known for its heritage streetscapes, wide verandahs and strong sense of community. Located around 40 kilometres north-west of Wagga Wagga, it sits within Coolamon Shire – an area that also includes the towns of Ganmain and Ardlethan, along with villages such as Marrar, Matong and Beckom.



April and her family, building a future in Coolamon



“

I would encourage families to consider moving to a regional area like Coolamon. Life here is peaceful, slower and more family-oriented.

”

Home to around 2,200 people, Coolamon is surrounded by wheat fields and is part of the region's well-known Canola Trail.

The area blends working farmland with a relaxed, small-town lifestyle, where historic buildings, local businesses and community groups remain at the heart of daily life.

For April and her family, life in Coolamon has been like a dream. The children adjusted very quickly and settled straight into Coolamon Central School. They made friends easily, and they can walk to and from school.

April loves her work with the residents at Allawah Lodge, an aged care facility.

"What I enjoy most is spending time with the residents, especially during meals or morning tea. I love listening to their stories and life experiences, and in return, we share our own joys and challenges. There is a genuine connection – we treat them like family, and they feel that."

She also noticed a clear difference from her previous experience working overseas.

"Here in Australia, communication is easier, and the people are warm, open and welcoming. The environment feels lighter and that makes a big difference in both work and daily life."

In fact, the work-life balance is great. April describes this as the "biggest difference" between life in the Philippines and in Coolamon.

"Here, life feels more relaxed. There is no rush, no heavy traffic and the pace is calmer. I have more quality time with my family, which is very important to me. It's also a safe place for children to play and grow. Compared to life in the Philippines, where everything is fast-paced and often requires juggling multiple responsibilities, life here feels more balanced and peaceful."

The family loves spending time outdoors, going to the park, having picnics and enjoying the beautiful weather. And there's so much of the great outdoors in Coolamon. Fantastic walking and cycling along the Kindra Forest Trail, incredible canola fields and Lions Park gives residents and visitors so many options for getting close to nature.

It's no wonder the family loves their time together in Coolamon.

Knowing it was the right move

There have been many moments that have confirmed for April that the move was the right one. But the most important has been to see how happy her family, in particular her children, are.

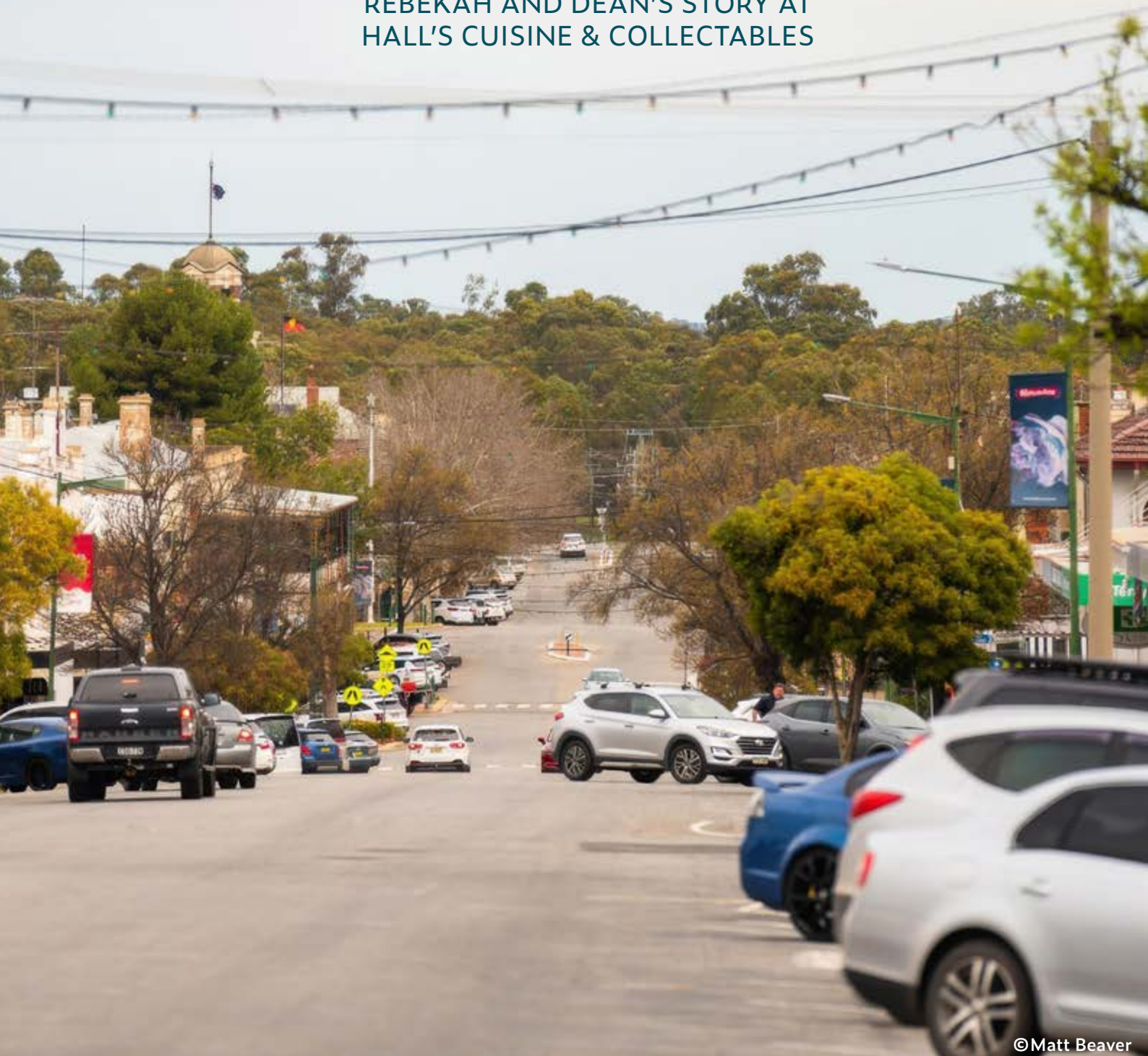
"As a mother, every decision I make is for my children. Seeing them enrolled in school here and having access to a good quality education reassures me that we made the right choice."

For April, the decision was always about what the future could hold for her family.

She says, "I truly believe this place will help give them a brighter and better future." ●

A Taste of Home in Narrandera

REBEKAH AND DEAN'S STORY AT
HALL'S CUISINE & COLLECTABLES



©Matt Beaver

For Rebekah Rogers and Dean King, their journey to Narrandera began with a building that had captured their hearts.

"We came to visit this beautiful old soul of a building, affectionately known to the locals as 'HALLS,' back in 2015, and fell in love," Rebekah recalls. The couple bought the heritage building the following year, discovering its rich history as a 1940s hotel once run by Ted Hall.

From that point, Hall's Cuisine & Collectables became a passion project — part café, part antique store, and all heart.

A café that connects people

The building's vintage charm and welcoming warmth have made it a favourite spot for locals and visitors alike, a true reflection of Narrandera's community spirit. Locals drop in for coffee, visitors stop to browse the antiques, and conversations flow easily.

"Through our business, we've made so many beautiful connections that have grown into lifelong friendships," Rebekah says. "There's something special about small towns — you get to know people deeply, and they get to know you back."

Both Rebekah and Dean are active community members, volunteering with Lions Club, Meals on Wheels, Landcare, and the Narrandera Garden Club. They're also proud supporters of Can Assist and other local organisations. "Giving back is important to us," Rebekah adds. "We know funding can be limited in smaller communities, so we help wherever we can."

“
My passion for food, combined with my Wiradjuri heritage, leads me to showcase what our region has to offer. The land here is full of flavours bursting to tell a story.
”

Finding home on country

Set along the banks of the Murrumbidgee River, Narrandera is known for its leafy streets, heritage architecture, and strong community ties. The town sits within the Narrandera Shire, which also includes the villages of Barellan, Binya, Grong Grong, Kamarah, and Sandigo — a region of about 5,800 people spread across 4,118 square kilometres.

The name Narrandera comes from the Wiradjuri word Narrungdera, meaning "place of the lizard or goanna." For Rebekah, who is of Wiradjuri descent, the move back to Country was deeply meaningful.

"We were looking for something with soul and character," she explains. "For me, being of Wiradjuri descent, I wanted to be back on Country. From that first visit, it felt like home. The people here are so friendly, and many have become family to us."

With Dean's career in the Australian Defence Force taking him across New South Wales and Victoria, the couple needed a home base. "We needed somewhere Dean could come home to on weekends," Rebekah says. "I transferred my job to Leeton, then later returned to my trade as a chef and reopened the café upstairs."

Bush tucker with heart

Rebekah's creative spirit shines in her cooking — especially through her use of native ingredients that celebrate her heritage and the land around her.

"My passion for food, combined with my Wiradjuri heritage, leads me to showcase what our region has to offer," she explains. "The land here is full of flavours bursting to tell a story."

Her Australia Day Dinner, which featured native plants, Murray Cod, and kangaroo, remains one of the most talked-about events in town — a testament to her ability to blend culture, creativity, and community through food.

“

Narrandera has ticked all the boxes. There's something very special about this place. It's not just a home — it's a heartfelt connection. This will always be our home now.

”



Renovating for the future

Not ones to sit still, Rebekah and Dean are continuing to evolve their business — restoring Hall's to its former glory while responding to the needs of the community.

“We've started to downsize our collectables,” Rebekah says. “There's a huge shortage of housing nationally, and many young people and workers moving here need accommodation. Hall's was once a boarding house after World War II, and it would be nice to share this grand old girl that way again.”

The couple plan to renovate the second-floor apartment and a nearby cottage for future accommodation. “We have the perfect location and loads of space,” Rebekah adds. “It's time to adjust our business plan to meet the needs of the community.”

A lifestyle surrounded by nature

For Rebekah and Dean, one of the biggest benefits of regional living is the balance it brings.

“Our lives have been significantly enhanced since relocating here,” Rebekah says. “We're both busy working people, but having the Murrumbidgee River on our doorstep, koalas in the backyard, and forests and green space all around us — it's the perfect balance.”

Narrandera is famous for its natural attractions, including Lake Talbot Water Park, Koala Reserve, and the tranquil Murrumbidgee Trails that wind through forest and farmland. Whether it's fishing by the river, exploring nearby Barellan's Big Tennis Racquet, or heading to the snow in Victoria for a weekend, Rebekah says there's always something to enjoy.

“We can be by the river one day, in the mountains the next, or visiting our grandkids in the ACT,” she smiles. “We're right at the heart of it all.”

Music and community events also play a big part in their lives. Rebekah is part of a local ukulele group that performs at aged care homes. “It's beautiful to see how music, laughter, and fun can bring so much joy to others,” she says. “It really makes their day — and ours.”

A heartfelt connection

When asked what life in Narrandera means to them now, Rebekah doesn't hesitate.

“We're both country people — we had a good idea of what we wanted,” she says. “Narrandera has ticked all the boxes. There's something very special about this place. It's not just a home — it's a heartfelt connection. This will always be our home now.”

Rebekah's message to anyone considering a move is simple and sincere.

“Just go for it,” she says. “You can really showcase your business in small towns, and Narrandera is especially welcoming. People want to see you succeed. It's like being in a big family — the support and kindness are endless.”

She encourages newcomers to connect with the local business community, which she describes as incredibly supportive. “With housing and living costs much cheaper than the city, the opportunities are just waiting.” ●

Space to Breathe & Room to Build in Temora Shire

WHEN "HOME" STARTS CALLING LOUDER THAN THE CITY



For Hannah Alchin, Temora was never just a hometown she left behind at 18 - it stayed stitched into her life through family, old friends, and regular visits back. But after welcoming her daughter in 2022, the pace and price tag of Sydney living sharpened into focus, and the decision became clear.

"I grew up in Temora... so I was always coming back visiting. However, after the birth of our daughter, the reality of Sydney living and prices really hit, and we realised that it was the perfect time to move back, embrace the slower lifestyle and surround ourselves with community."

It wasn't only about escaping pressure; it was about stepping into support. The kind that makes parenting feel shared, and everyday life feel lighter.

"It has allowed us to purchase a house, get a dog and raise our growing family in a supportive environment surrounded by friends and family."

That same support has also made it possible for both Hannah and her partner, Lachlan, to build careers that fit around family life - not at the expense of it.

"Professionally, we have been able to continue to do what we love, while still having the balance of being able to raise our family."

Building a new chapter: small business, big momentum

Hannah's return to Temora wasn't just a lifestyle shift; it was a springboard.

"We are both very career-driven... we knew we would both be able to progress our careers by starting our own businesses."

Hannah launched Temora Women's Health Physiotherapy, continuing her professional development while staying grounded in family life helped, as she says, by the simple power of proximity.

For Lachlan, the move back to Temora meant stepping away from the relentless pace of Sydney's Eastern Suburbs and into a regional building industry grounded in relationships, trust and local knowledge - without losing momentum or ambition.

"Coming from the fast-paced building game of the Eastern Suburbs in Sydney, it was a huge difference arriving in Temora," he said.

What followed is a new business, Girling-Butler Constructions, and a story that feels distinctly regional: one opportunity opening the door to the next. Lachlan gives the example of while establishing his business, he received a call from a Year 10 student at Temora High School seeking work experience. Two weeks quickly turned into something more. Impressed by the young student's maturity and enthusiasm, a new pathway was quickly created for the young student.

"After discussions with his parents and Temora High School, the young student was released early from school and successfully started an apprenticeship..."

It serves as a perfect example of the opportunities regional life can offer, benefiting both families returning to the area and the new generation establishing themselves there.

“***Professionally, we have been able to continue to do what we love, while still having the balance of being able to raise our family.***”

Why Temora Shire is drawing families and professionals

Ask Hannah what makes Temora Shire attractive to people looking to build or buy, and she doesn't hesitate:

"It's affordable house and land prices, big blocks of land and the tight-knit community."

Temora is proudly community-first – the kind of place where you can feel it in the everyday: from volunteers greeting you at the Town Hall Theatre, to locals showing up for each other in practical ways. There's also plenty for young families to plug into quickly.

Housing growth is creating real choice (and a lot of confidence)

Temora Shire's growth isn't abstract; it's visible in new builds, extensions, and a steady pipeline of work that allows local businesses to plan ahead.

"Temora's housing growth has allowed us to look ahead and book in new builds and extensions for 2026."

And Hannah is seeing more families choose land and custom design over compromising on the existing market, helped by accessible price points and the appeal of creating a home that truly suits their lifestyle.

"Many people in the market are grasping at the idea of purchasing new land and designing their own home to suit their family's lifestyle."

A council that helps you get things done

If you've ever dealt with major-city council processes, you'll appreciate this part. Hannah describes a markedly different experience in Temora – one that prioritises clarity, access, and collaboration.

"Moving to Temora, I was shocked at how accommodating and open to discussion the staff are at Temora Shire Council. I was able to discuss the issue we were having and they were able to offer clear and concise advice..."



Temora has affordable housing and a tight-knit community ©Matt Beaver

"Temora Shire Council and their staff are equally invested in the residents and growth opportunities our town has to offer..."

In other words: it's not just growth happening... there's a genuine willingness to support it!

Temora Shire is known for its strong relationship between council and community, and its beautifully preserved streetscape of historic buildings — the kind of town pride you can feel as you walk around.

It also has a reputation that locals wear with a smile Hannah said. "This is a town that truly deserves its title of the friendliest in NSW."

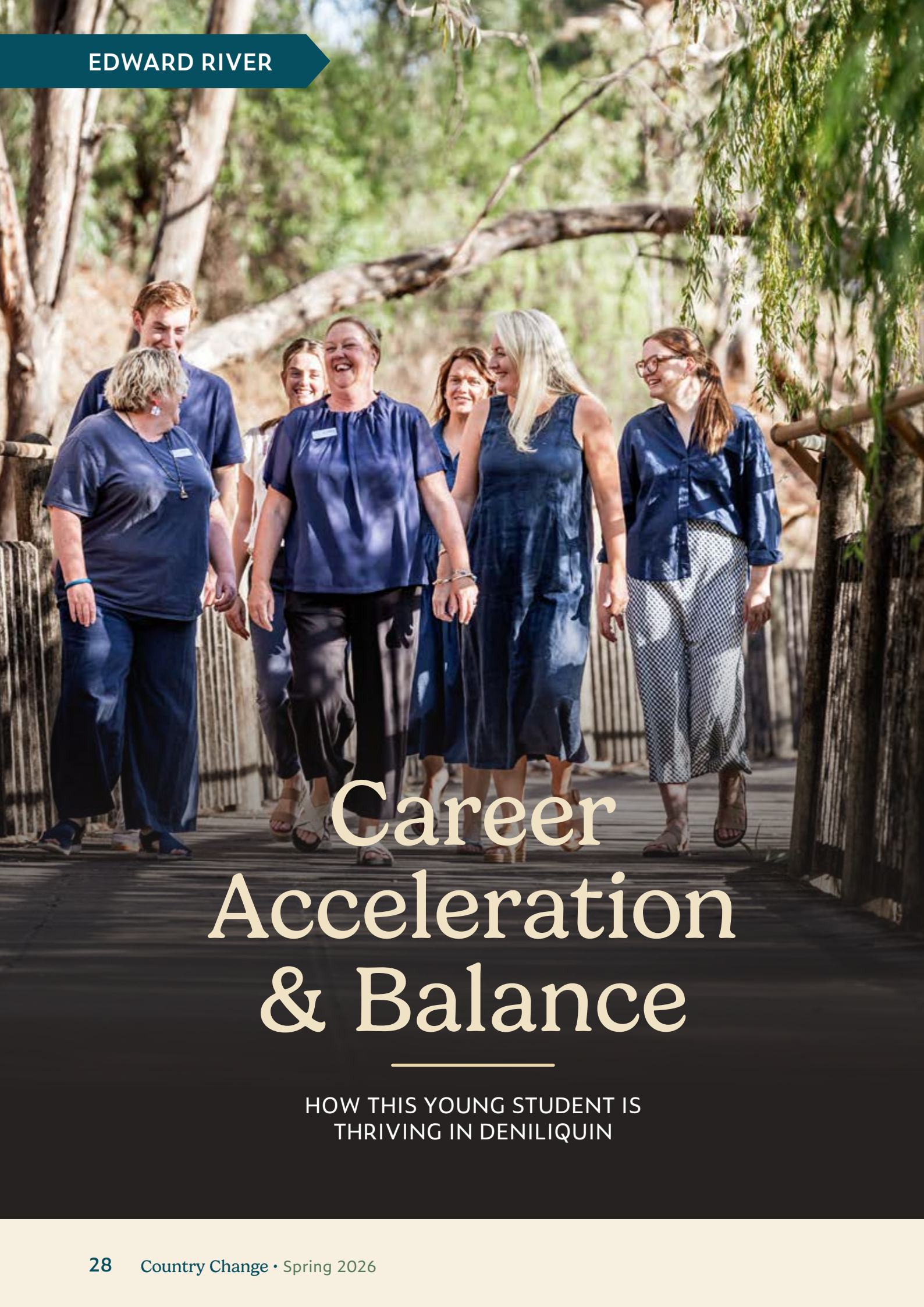
Add in events like EMBRACE festival, Temora becomes the kind of place that's easy to love — whether you're visiting for a weekend or planning a long-term move.

Hannah's vision: family-first, community-aligned

For Hannah, the future in Temora is simple and powerful.

"We came to Temora with family on the forefront of our minds, and our vision for the future is family-oriented."

If you're craving more space, more ease, and a community that actually feels like one, Temora Shire is worth a closer look. ●



Career Acceleration & Balance

HOW THIS YOUNG STUDENT IS
THRIVING IN DENILQUIN

For Juliet Barber, moving from Melbourne to Deniliquin was not about stepping away from opportunity; it was about accelerating her career and stepping into a lifestyle that made more sense.

Now living and working in Deniliquin while continuing her speech pathology studies, Juliet has found a rhythm that combines career development, community connection and the kind of breathing room that can be hard to find in a major city. What began as frequent visits to see her partner gradually became something more permanent: a growing sense that this was where she wanted to build her life.

A country change that made room for more

Juliet had some idea of what regional living might feel like. Originally from Wagga Wagga, she was not unfamiliar with life outside a capital city. Even so, settling into Deniliquin has given her a new appreciation for what a regional move can offer, particularly as a young person balancing study, work and the next stage of life.

"I was ready for a change from the pace of city life," Juliet says. "My partner is from Deni, and when he moved back home, I found myself spending most weekends here. Over time, it just felt right. Deni started to feel like home, and I realised this is where I wanted to be," she said.

That shift in pace has been one of the most noticeable changes. Rather than constantly pushing through long commutes, high living costs and the feeling of always being in a rush, Juliet has found a more grounded way of living, one that supports both her personal wellbeing and professional goals.

"What's surprised me most is just how relaxed it is," she says. "I have more time, a slower pace of life, and the people are incredibly welcoming. I was worried I might feel like I was missing out, but I honestly don't feel that way at all."

Hybrid learning with real-world experience

Juliet is currently studying speech pathology through a university in Bendigo, using a hybrid model that allows her to live regionally while continuing her degree.

"I complete as many subjects as possible online, and most of my other units run in an asynchronous format – a mix of online learning with in-person practical components."

The structure includes in-person practical components, making it possible to stay on track without needing to live full-time in a larger centre. She says flexibility has been key to making it work.

"Staying on track really comes down to passion. I genuinely love what I'm studying. It's definitely a juggle, but I take it week by week and prioritise maintaining a healthy study, work and life balance to stay motivated."

That balance is supported by her role at DeniSPOT (Deniliquin Speech Pathology and Occupational Therapy) where she works as an allied health assistant. DeniSPOT offers in-clinic, school and home visits, giving Juliet valuable exposure to the sector while she studies.

"Working as an allied health assistant has been an incredible opportunity," Juliet says. "I'm gaining hands-on experience alongside experienced and knowledgeable professionals every day."

She has also found that regional life can fast-track professional connections in ways many young people do not expect. In a smaller community, it is often easier to build relationships, access mentoring and become known within your field.

"I've also built meaningful connections, including unexpected mentoring moments with lecturers and other people in the community," she says.

Life beyond work and study

Juliet's week is full, but it reflects a lifestyle that feels sustainable and rewarding. She travels to Bendigo on Mondays and Tuesdays for in-person classes and labs, works at DeniSPOT from Wednesday to Friday, and teaches swimming on Sundays. In between, she makes time for study, family and friends, her partner and their dog, and activities that help her feel part of the community.

She has also joined a local netball team, adding another layer of connection to everyday life in Deniliquin.

That sense of belonging has not happened by accident, but Juliet says it came quickly once she got involved.

"Everyone is genuinely welcoming and supportive," she says. "I think there's an element of putting yourself out there, but it's absolutely worth it. Once you do, the sense of connection and belonging comes naturally."

More affordability, less stress

One of the clearest practical differences Juliet has noticed since moving is affordability. Regional living has made it easier to manage housing and daily living costs.

"Housing is significantly more affordable, which means I can work fewer hours and focus more on my studies," she says.

Her commute to work is just three minutes, and even the drive to Bendigo feels more manageable than navigating city traffic every day. That extra time has had a noticeable effect on her quality of life.

"Overall, it's had a massive impact on my wellbeing," Juliet says. "I feel calmer, less anxious, and I finally have time to slow down and recharge."

"I love walking and swimming at the river. It's my go-to for staying active and clearing my mind. It's good for the body and soul."

“

She also values access to outdoor space and the natural environment, particularly the river, which has become part of her regular routine.”

Why Edward River appeals to young professionals

As the centrepiece of the Riverina Murray region, the Edward River Council area offers a naturally beautiful setting. The commercial centre of Deniliquin sits on the Edward River, helping shape the area's reputation as a place for both relaxed living and outdoor enjoyment. Deniliquin is home to some great clothing stores and gift shops in the CBD, as well as quality cafes and dining options. Social sporting activities are available all year round, with facilities including a pool complex, 18-hole golf course, cycling tracks and multiple gyms. Community events bring everyone together, culminating in the iconic annual Deni Ute Muster.

The wider region includes Deniliquin, Wanganella, Blighty, Mayrung, Conargo and Booroorban, with a mix of welcoming communities, good education and medical facilities, and a range of local employers. Edward River is also known as a can-do community, with dozens of sporting clubs, cultural groups and volunteer organisations that make it easier for newcomers to get involved.

A message for other young people considering the move

Juliet believes one of the biggest misconceptions about building a career outside the city is the idea that opportunities will be limited.

"In reality, doors will open quickly if you're willing to get involved."

Her advice for others considering a similar move is simple: be open, say yes and give yourself the chance to become part of the place.

"Honestly, I'd say just go for it – but be willing to put yourself out there." ●

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From Backpackers to Business Owners

THE PLACE THAT CALLED SIOBHAN VANTYGHEM BACK

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Some places stay with you long after you leave.

For Siobhan Vantighem, Greater Hume Shire was one of those places.

Originally from Ireland, Siobhan met her Canadian husband while living overseas. After a few years together, they packed their bags, set their sights on Australia and began the kind of adventure many young travellers dream about.

They did not arrive with a five-year plan. They did not know they would one day return with children, businesses and a life built around the very place they had once passed through as backpackers.

"We came here within two weeks of being in Australia, and we spent 18 months out of our two years here in this area," Siobhan said.

The couple found themselves surrounded by wide-open spaces, farming landscapes and people who made them feel welcome. For Siobhan, who grew up on a dairy farm in Ireland, and her husband, who grew up on a tobacco farm in Canada, there was something familiar about the rhythm of rural life.

There was also something new.

"I think what it was is there was a beautiful sense of space here," Siobhan said.

"There's a beautiful, calm presence and the community was extremely welcoming."

It was a feeling they couldn't shake even years after they moved back overseas. It was a feeling that led them to moving back to Greater Hume Shire.

Today, Siobhan and her family live in Little Billabong, about 20 kilometres north of Holbrook. What was once a stop on their travels has become the place they now call home.

A life built with many moving parts

Like many regional families, Siobhan and her husband do not live a quiet one-dimensional version of country life. Their days are full.

Her husband runs a farm contracting business and spends his days working on the land, while Siobhan works full-time at Jayfields Nursery, where plants are grown for farms and environmental plantings across the region. She has also launched Rural

Wise Marketing, a business focused on supporting rural and regional businesses. "Getting into the tourism and the economic development within this area, just trying to give back to the community."

Together, they are raising two young children, building businesses and contributing to the community that first welcomed them years ago.

It is busy, but it is also deeply connected to the kind of life they wanted.

"The opportunities and the support that you get in a place like Greater Hume and Holbrook has been absolutely amazing to us," she said.

"It's just knowing how to connect it and put it together."

A regional shire with room to grow

Greater Hume Shire sits in southern NSW, just above Albury and within reach of Wagga Wagga, the ACT, the Snowy Valleys and the Murray region.

It is made up of towns, villages and rural communities, including Holbrook, Henty, Jindera, Culcairn, Walla Walla and smaller localities such as Little Billabong.

For people considering a move, the region offers the kind of balance many families, professionals and business owners are searching for: space without isolation, community without losing access to services, and a rural lifestyle that still connects to larger regional centres.

For Siobhan's family, that balance matters.

"In Holbrook, for example, they're 40 minutes from Albury, they're an hour from Wagga Wagga," she said. "There's plenty of choice and options for all varieties of people."

It means they can enjoy the feeling of rural life while still having access to what they need as their children grow.

Raising children with people who know their names

For Siobhan, one of the most meaningful parts of living in Greater Hume has been watching her children become part of the local community.

Her daughter attends school in Holbrook, while her son goes to daycare locally. As a parent, Siobhan says the services have been important, but the people within those services have mattered even more.

"The services that we have available to us here have been amazing," she said. "But not only the services, the people in the services."

"To see her form those attachments with primary givers in there has been absolutely so beneficial to not only my life but to hers," she said.

It is the kind of detail that can be hard to measure, but easy to feel.

The landscape becomes part of the story

Outside of work, school and business, the family makes the most of the natural beauty around them.

There are local walking trails, Woomargama National Park, rivers, Lake Hume and the Murray all within reach. The region offers the kind of outdoor life that becomes part of a family's weekly rhythm – hiking, canoeing, exploring, watching the seasons change and giving children room to move.

For anyone thinking about making a Country Change, Siobhan's advice is gentle but clear.

"Reach out," she said. "There's plenty of support around. You're not alone if you're thinking of doing it."

And after travelling, leaving, returning and building a life in Greater Hume, her final reflection says it all.

"If you're thinking of doing it, do it," Siobhan said. "For someone who's travelled quite a bit, this is one place that I found home and that I will call home for the rest of my life." ●

“

Raising children in a rural setting like this has been absolutely amazing for my life and for their life.

”



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From Sydney to Junee

A FAMILY COUNTRY CHANGE BUILT AROUND TIME,
SPACE AND COMMUNITY



When Samantha Patten and her husband were raising two young children in Sydney, life worked on paper but felt stretched in practice.

Her husband was commuting long distances for work while Samantha worked from home. Professionally, the arrangement was manageable. Personally, it came at a cost.

"Although this arrangement suited our professional needs, it significantly limited the amount of quality time we were able to spend together as a family," Samantha says.

With children aged 2.5 years and 6 months, the family decided to relocate to Junee after Samantha's husband secured a position in the Riverina.

"This move marked an important shift for our family, allowing us to prioritise a more balanced lifestyle and increased time together."

Finding what felt out of reach in Sydney

Like many young families considering a move from the city, the Pattens were looking for more than a different address. They wanted a home of their own, a safer rhythm for family life and a community where their children could grow up connected.

"We were also motivated by the desire to purchase our own home, something that felt increasingly unattainable for a young family in Sydney," Samantha says. "Beyond affordability, we were seeking a strong sense of community in which to raise our children."

Junee Shire sits in the Riverina region of NSW, halfway between Sydney and Melbourne and around 30 minutes from Wagga Wagga. The shire includes Junee, Bethungra, Illabo, Old Junee and Wantabadgery, offering a country lifestyle with access to schools, shops, sporting clubs, healthcare services, parks, cafés and local businesses.

For Samantha's family, the move quickly became both practical and personal.

"Housing affordability was a major factor in our decision to move to Junee," she says. "At the time, it was actually more affordable for us to buy a home than it was to rent, which made the decision feel both practical and long-term."

That affordability gave them the chance to create something lasting.

"We have been able to purchase and renovate a house, truly making it our home."

A town that makes room for you

Affordability may have made the move possible, but the welcome they received made Junee feel like home.

"Junee has exceeded our expectations in every way," Samantha says. "From the moment we arrived, we were warmly welcomed into the community and have since built meaningful connections and lasting friendships."

That sense of belonging now shapes their everyday life.

"I have come to truly value the sense of community that Junee offers. It feels safe, welcoming, and connected," she says.

For Samantha, it is found in the small, ordinary moments: knowing neighbours, seeing familiar faces at the shops, supporting local businesses and being involved in children's sport.

"There is a strong sense of pride in supporting small businesses and being involved in local sporting teams."

Junee Shire is known for its strong community spirit, railway heritage, rolling rural landscapes and attractions such as the Junee Licorice & Chocolate Factory and Junee Roundhouse Museum. Its location also gives residents access to larger services and opportunities in nearby Wagga Wagga, without losing the ease of small-town living.

The freedom of a less rushed life

One of the greatest changes for the Patten family has been the pace of daily life.

"I'm now able to drop my kids off at school, get to work, and manage after-school activities like football and soccer training without the stress of long travel times or traffic," Samantha says.

In Junee, the essentials are close. Schools, shops, parks, cafés, restaurants, gyms, sporting clubs, the butcher and the post office are all within easy reach.

"In Sydney, even simple tasks could require significant travel time and planning, whereas in Junee everything is close by and convenient."

That ease has changed what the family can say yes to.

"We can see friends, go out for dinner, and I can prioritise things like working out, all without needing to carefully plan around logistics," Samantha says.

"It feels like we have more time back in our day, and as a result, I'm able to say yes to more opportunities for both myself and my family."

Careers that grew in a different direction

Moving regional did not mean giving up professional ambition. For Samantha, it created the conditions for a new career chapter.

Before relocating, she had worked as a hairdresser with an established Sydney clientele. While that client base could not move with her, the timing aligned with a shift she had already been considering.

"I had already been considering a career change, so this transition became an opportunity rather than a setback," she says.

The move gave Samantha the financial breathing room to study while raising her children.

"The financial freedom that came with our move meant I could focus on raising my children while also committing to a full-time online university course."

She has since completed her bachelor's degree and moved into a career she loves, with flexibility that supports family life.

"One of the greatest benefits is the flexibility it provides—I'm able to drop my children off at school, be there when they get home, and spend quality time with them during school holidays."

Her husband has also been able to grow professionally in the Riverina.

"He has had the opportunity to work across different areas within his industry, gaining valuable and diverse experience that has supported his career growth."

Raising children in a community that looks out for them

For Samantha, Junee has given her children something she deeply values: freedom with a sense of safety.

"They can ride their bikes to a friend's house or head to the park for a game, and I feel confident that they are safe and supported," she says. "There is a shared understanding within the community that we look out for one another, and that sense of trust is incredibly meaningful for our family."

Growing up in a regional community has shaped their confidence, independence and sense of responsibility.

"They've experienced a level of freedom that has allowed them to explore, take responsibility, and develop resilience from a young age," she says.

That connection to place is something Samantha can see in the people they are becoming.

"More importantly, that environment has helped shape them into responsible young people who feel connected to and actively contribute to their community."

It takes a village

For many parents, "it takes a village" is something they hope to find. In Junee, Samantha says her family lives it.

"Junee truly is the epitome of the saying 'it takes a village,'" she says. "Everything about the town reflects a strong sense of community and support. There is a genuine willingness among people to look out for one another."

That support has become one of the family's greatest sources of comfort.

"We have experienced this in so many ways, whether its other parents helping out, familiar faces checking in, or the broader community creating a safe and welcoming environment for our children to grow up in."

For Samantha, the value of that village is hard to overstate.

"Living in Junee has reinforced just how powerful and important that 'village' is, and we feel incredibly fortunate to be raising our family in a place that truly embodies it."

Advice for other city families considering a country change

Looking back, Samantha says the move to regional NSW has given her family more time, more stability and a better quality of life.

Her advice to other families in Sydney or other cities is simple.

"I would say do it. You won't regret it. For our family, moving to regional NSW has been one of the best decisions we've ever made, and it's not something we would ever reverse."

"It's given us more time, more space, and a stronger sense of community," Samantha says. "If you're considering it, take the leap, you might just find it gives your family a better quality of life than you imagined." ●

TWO DECADES LATER

Charlie James Followed his Heart to Hay

More than 20 years after first considering a teaching position in Hay, Charlie James finally made the move.

In 2005, he was offered the chance to begin his career in either Lismore or Hay and chose the coast. Years later, with greater experience behind him and a growing desire to work in a smaller school, Hay emerged as the right fit.

"At this stage of my career, I value working in smaller schools where I can build strong relationships with students and develop a deeper understanding of how they learn," Charlie says.

The position at Hay War Memorial High School brought together the things he values most: practical agricultural education, closer connections with students and the opportunity to contribute to a rural community.

Answering the call to regional education

Charlie studied a Bachelor of Education in Technology and Applied Studies at Charles Sturt University through a scholarship that allowed him to work anywhere in New South Wales.

After teaching in larger schools, he became increasingly aware of how difficult it could be to know every student well and provide the individual support they needed.

"I found it more challenging to get to know every student on a personal level and provide the individual support they may need," he says.

Hay War Memorial High School's extensive farm facilities were another major attraction. They allow Charlie to apply and expand his knowledge of plant and animal production while giving students access to practical, hands-on learning.

He also recognised the importance of taking on a role that can be difficult to fill.

"I saw this as an opportunity to contribute positively to a regional school community, support students in agricultural education and gain valuable experience working within a rural setting."



Making learning meaningful

Agriculture is central to Hay Shire's economy and identity, with the region known for Merino sheep, wool production, cropping and horticulture.

That connection to the land gives Charlie the chance to make Agriculture, Primary Industries, Technology Mandatory and Science directly relevant to students' lives.

The school farm supports practical activities involving livestock, plant production, agricultural machinery and scientific investigations, helping students build both skills and confidence.

Charlie also enjoys opening students' eyes to future pathways in agriculture, science and trades.

"It is rewarding to see students develop skills that they can apply both at school and within their local community."

Career opportunities in Hay Shire

Charlie's position reflects the need for skilled professionals across Hay Shire.

Agriculture remains a major source of employment, while opportunities are also available across hospitality, retail and service industries. Skilled teachers, healthcare workers and other professionals play an important role in supporting the community.

For teachers and professionals considering a regional move, Hay can provide the chance to take on broader responsibilities and become involved in programs and activities beyond a standard job description.

"Regional schools often provide opportunities to become involved in a wide range of programs, activities and leadership experiences that may not always be possible in larger settings," Charlie says.

"You can make a genuine impact on students' lives and become an important part of the wider community."

Hay Shire also provides access to childcare, primary and secondary education, Hay School of the Air and a TAFE NSW campus, supporting learners from early childhood through to vocational education.

A landscape that feels familiar

Hay sits on the Murrumbidgee River, surrounded by the vast Hay Plains and connected to other centres through the Sturt, Cobb and Mid-Western highways.

The climate and landscape were among the factors that attracted Charlie to the area.

"What eventually brought me to Hay was the climate, which reminds me very much of Africa, along with the friendliness and welcoming nature of the local community," he says.

When he arrived, the open spaces and rural environment immediately stood out.

"The weather is something I have come to love, particularly the clear skies and beautiful sunsets across the plains," he says.

"There is something unique about watching the sun set over the Hay landscape — the colours and wide-open views make it feel calm and peaceful."

The quieter pace has also given Charlie a greater appreciation for balance. He has found that people make time for sport, social connection and community involvement alongside their work.

Hay's location suits Charlie and his wife's love of travelling.

Since moving, they have purchased a motorhome and begun exploring the small towns and villages surrounding the region. They are also planning to travel through Victoria and South Australia during the school holidays.

"One of the great things about Hay is its location," Charlie says. "Hay is a gateway to many cities, towns and states across Australia."

Bringing people together through Drumbeat

Music and drumming have been part of Charlie's life for many years.

As a trained Drumbeat facilitator, he can share that experience with students, teachers and community members.

"Drumbeat is not only about learning rhythms and drumming skills, but also about building confidence, teamwork, communication and positive relationships," he says.

The program creates an inclusive environment where people can participate regardless of their experience or ability.

Charlie enjoys seeing participants grow in confidence, learn to work together and find new ways to express themselves.

"It is very rewarding to watch participants connect with others, develop new skills and enjoy the positive energy that drumming brings."

A place where relationships matter

Charlie's first impression of Hay was how welcoming and close-knit the community felt.

"From the moment I arrived, people were friendly and willing to make me feel part of the town," he says.

"What stands out to me most is how involved people are in local events, sporting groups and community activities."

"It is a place where people know each other, and there is a strong sense of belonging that makes the town feel special."

Take the opportunity seriously

Charlie encourages other teachers and professionals to consider what a move to Hay could offer.

"It is a wonderful opportunity both professionally and personally," he says.

"Hay offers a relaxed pace of life, friendly people, beautiful landscapes and a strong sense of community."

Whether you are looking for a rewarding teaching role, a new career direction or a community where your skills can make a visible difference, Hay Shire offers the chance to build a meaningful career and a fulfilling life. ●



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Tanya's Return to Wagga Wagga

COMING HOME WITH FRESH EYES



A country change that was never part of the plan. When Tanya Webber left Wagga Wagga at 19, she was ready for something bigger.

Like many young people growing up in regional Australia, she felt the pull of city life and all the possibilities that came with it. "I grew up in Wagga Wagga and, like many people, couldn't wait to leave when I was younger," she says. "At the time, it felt small and limiting — I had big ambitions and a curiosity about the wider world."

What followed was a career that took her far beyond the Riverina. Tanya built a successful professional life in Sydney, Brisbane, Melbourne and Singapore, stepping into fast-paced corporate environments that shaped her both personally and professionally.

"I learnt a lot about people, business, and myself — how to adapt, how to lead, and how to navigate very different environments," she says. "It was exciting and challenging, but also quite consuming."

But after decades away, and following a significant personal loss, Tanya found herself rethinking what she wanted the next chapter of life to look like.

"I didn't think I would ever return to Wagga. It really wasn't on my agenda for life at all," she says. "But life shifts as you get older and priorities change."

Returning with a different perspective

For Tanya, returning to Wagga in her fifties was not about going backwards. It was about coming home with more clarity, more confidence and a renewed sense of what matters.

"Wagga offered space — not just physically, but mentally and creatively," she says. "It also offered connection, familiarity, and a chance to slow down in a way that felt intentional rather than limiting."

That shift in mindset changed everything.

After years of building a life in major cities, Tanya realised she no longer wanted to spend her energy chasing a version of success that no longer felt aligned. "I realised that life is too short to spend it working long hours building something for someone else while neglecting yourself," she says.

Back in Wagga, she found the room to grieve, to heal and to reconnect with creativity through art. "Returning to Wagga felt less like going backwards and more like coming home — but with a completely different perspective," she says. "It gave me the space to nurture my heart, to grieve, and ultimately to reconnect with what I'm truly passionate about."

Building a creative business in regional NSW

That passion has now become Tanya's business, Paint and Sip with Tanya, which offers relaxed, welcoming art sessions designed to bring people together.

"I run 'Paint and Sip with Tanya,' which is all about creating a fun, and inspiring environment where people can explore their creativity — regardless of experience," she says.

Importantly, her sessions are not about perfection. "What makes my sessions a little different is that they're not rigid, step-by-step classes," Tanya explains. "I give people inspiration, guidance and techniques, but ultimately encourage them to make the artwork their own. It's about creativity, not perfection."

Starting the business in Wagga has been deeply rewarding. She says the city has shown a strong appetite for experiences that are social, creative and community-minded. "There's a strong appetite for experiences that bring people together, and I've found that people are very open to trying something new."

That openness is one of the things she now values most about living regional. "People show up for each other, and there's a genuine willingness to support local businesses and creative ventures," she says. "That's something I don't think I fully appreciated about Wagga until now."

Why Wagga Wagga appeals to people considering a move

Tanya's story sits within a bigger picture. Wagga Wagga is not just a place to slow down, it is also a major regional city with real economic and lifestyle advantages.

“

Returning to Wagga felt less like going backwards and more like coming home — but with a completely different perspective.”

Wagga Wagga City's estimated population was just over 69,000 as of 30 June 2025, reflecting its role as one of inland NSW's key regional centres.

The city has a diverse economy, too. According to Wagga Wagga City Council, the largest employment sectors are health care and social assistance, construction, education and training, retail trade, and public administration and safety. Council's long-term planning also points to continued opportunities linked to defence, logistics, agribusiness and major infrastructure projects.

For people seeking career options outside the capitals, that breadth matters. Wagga has long served as a regional hub for the wider Riverina, supporting jobs in health, education, transport, government and agriculture, while also offering space for small business and creative enterprise.

Housing is another drawcard. Domain's current suburb data shows median house prices in Wagga Wagga at around \$565,000 for a two-bedroom house and \$702,500 for a three-bedroom house, with two-bedroom units sitting around \$431,000.

Access is a major advantage, too. Wagga is about three hours by car from Canberra, and around five hours from both Sydney and Melbourne. There are regular flights to Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane, while rail links connect Wagga to Sydney and Melbourne as well.

That combination of connectivity and lifestyle is part of what makes the city attractive to returners, career movers and families alike.



A lifestyle that feels more intentional

What has surprised Tanya most about returning is just how much both she and Wagga have changed.

"Wagga is far more vibrant and progressive than I remember," she says. "There's a growing creative scene and a real appetite for new experiences."

She also now values the simplicity of regional life in a way she could not have when she was younger. "Compared to the city, there's a sense of ease — whether it's going for a walk, catching up with friends, or just having the time to slow down," she says.

Outside of business, Tanya enjoys running, the gym and continuing to explore her own creativity. It is that balance between activity and stillness that has made this chapter feel so meaningful.

Her advice to others considering a similar move? "Don't think of it as going backwards — think of it as bringing everything you've learnt back with you."

For Tanya, Wagga Wagga is no longer the place she once rushed to leave. It is the place that has given her the space to create, contribute and build a life that feels more like her own.

And for others considering a move, that might be the most compelling reason of all. ●



A Country Change Back to Community

CONNECTION AND SCENIC LIVING IN GUNDAGAI

For many people dreaming of a slower, more grounded lifestyle, a move to regional NSW is more than a change of address; it's a chance to reclaim space, time, and community. For Ted and Sue Weeden, that's exactly what their move to Gundagai offered.

After decades of living and working across regional Australia, the couple found themselves at a crossroads. Ted had wrapped up a long career in regional banking, much of it spent in Tamworth, and the pair had spent five enjoyable years caravanning around the country. But gradually, the question began to loom: Where to next?

For Ted and Sue, the answer lay in the place where their story began – the Riverina.

Returning to their roots

Both Ted and Sue spent their early years in the Riverina. Sue grew up in Temora, while Ted's childhood spanned Coolamon, Hay, Wagga Wagga and The Rock. Eventually, work pulled them away, but their connection to the region never faded.

"After years on the road in the caravan, it was time to decide our future plans," Sue explains. "We wanted to move back to the Riverina, where we both had family and friends."

With family spread across the region and Canberra, the Riverina offered the familiar warmth of home, and the chance to begin a new chapter with the comfort of community close by.

Finding their new home in Gundagai

Once the couple sold their home in Tamworth, the search was officially on. Coolamon was their first choice, and they spent three months parked at Ted's brother's place while they explored properties. But nothing quite felt right.

It wasn't until one of their regular trips through Gundagai – visiting their son and grandchildren in Sydney that something shifted.

"We passed through Gundagai on the way to Sydney several times," Ted says. "That's when we thought we would look at some possible sites."

A local real estate agent, Ab McAlister, showed them a block with sweeping views. That outlook, coupled with the convenience of direct highway access to Sydney, sealed their decision.

And just like that, their country change began.

Building a new life in a scenic regional hub

While they wrapped up remaining commitments in Tamworth, Ted and Sue entrusted the build of their new home to G.J. Gardner. "Everything went smoothly," Sue says. "We rented and house-sat for a few months while visiting regularly to check on progress."

Once they received the keys, settling into Gundagai came naturally... helped by the warm welcome of locals and the presence of Ted's long-time relative, who made sure they were introduced to community events and friendly faces.

Although smaller than Tamworth, the couple quickly discovered that Gundagai had everything they needed.

"Gundagai has good medical and hospital services, two decent supermarkets and the other specialty shops I like," Sue says. "Life is just easier here."

The Cootamundra–Gundagai region: A connected, liveable lifestyle

The Cootamundra–Gundagai Regional Council area spans the eastern Riverina, offering residents the best of both worlds – a vibrant rural lifestyle with effortless connectivity. The region is home to around 11,500 people across two main towns, Cootamundra and Gundagai, and the surrounding villages of Adjungbilly, Coolac, Muttama, Nangus, Stockinbingal, Tumblong and Wallendbeen.

With easy access to the Hume and Olympic Highways, residents enjoy the space and serenity of the country while remaining close to everything they need. Wagga Wagga and Canberra are just a short commute away for additional services, airports, and specialist medical appointments.



Major local employers include Gundagai Meat Processors, Lynch Engineering and the Cootamundra–Gundagai Regional Council — making the region a practical choice for families and workers seeking regional stability.

Exploring the region

For Ted and Sue, one of the biggest joys has been the freedom and beauty of their new backyard.

"Tumut is an easy drive and gives you access to the mountains, dams, fishing and the snowfields," Ted says. "There are numerous scenic drives along the Murrumbidgee and Tumut Rivers."

Canberra is only an hour and a half away, and Junee, Cootamundra, Wagga Wagga — along with many charming villages — are all close enough for a casual day trip.

"Gundagai really is so accessible," Sue adds. "Everything we need is here, and the rest is just a short drive."

Community, connection and giving back

Despite arriving during lockdowns, Sue quickly found her place in the community.

"Through Ted's relative, I was introduced to numerous organisations," she says. "The first involvement was the Gundagai Spring Anglican Flower Show. I had a flower and plant stall."

“

Gundagai really is so accessible, everything we need is here, and the rest is just a short drive.”

”



From there, her connections blossomed. She joined the local CWA, assisted in the pavilion at the local show, attends weekly yoga, uses the swimming pool for regular exercise, and volunteers with both the Hospital Auxiliary and Can Assist.

Meanwhile, Ted embraced the peaceful rhythm of country living.

"We've lived regionally most of our lives — the open spaces and slower pace really suit us," he says. "Our block was a bare canvas. I've spent a lot of time shaping the yard, and now it looks great."

Gundagai's strong sporting culture has also been a highlight. "It's a great sporting town," Ted says. "Golf, bowls, tennis, the pool – there's so much on offer."

Why they recommend a Country Change

For anyone considering a move to the Cootamundra–Gundagai region, Ted and Sue offer simple, heartfelt advice: "Go for it."

When asked to describe Gundagai in three words, they choose: Scenic. Friendly. Accessible.

"There's always a smiling face or someone ready to help. And the highways and transport services make it so easy to get anywhere." ●

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For many people, a country change begins with a feeling and is rarely just about changing your address. It is about unlocking potential... It might be the dream of giving children more freedom, building a business, buying a home that once felt out of reach, or simply creating a life with more time, connection and possibility.

But turning that dream into reality can come with financial questions that may feel far less inspiring. How much can you borrow? Will lenders understand your needs? What happens if you are self-employed, purchasing acreage or making the move before your city home has sold?

That is where Alcove Regional comes in.

Based in Griffith, NSW, Alcove Regional was created to bridge the gap between sophisticated mortgage strategy and a genuine understanding of regional life.

Founder Katrina Childs knows the opportunity regional living can offer. A CPA-qualified mortgage strategist with more than 15 years of experience across accounting, non-conforming lending and mortgage broking, Katrina worked in Sydney and saw first-hand the level of strategic advice available to city clients. She returned to the Riverina determined to make that same expertise accessible to regional Australians.

Every client's story is different. That's why Alcove Regional's team of CPA-qualified strategists, with backgrounds spanning accounting and financial planning, take the time to build a loan strategy around each client's individual circumstances rather than applying a one-size-fits-all approach. Working with a wide panel of lenders, they guide clients through the entire journey, from the first conversation to approval and settlement.

Because the right mortgage advice should do more than help you buy a property, it should help unlock the life you moved to the country to create.

“Buying a property is not only about securing a loan,” Katrina says. “It is about understanding what that loan can help you create. Whether that is a family home, a new beginning, an investment or greater financial freedom.”



Start the conversation

Katrina Childs 0493 702 714

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How a Regional Move to Leeton Shire Changed a Family's Life



Kellie and Kurt Ashton and their two young children were only expecting to stay in Leeton for a three-year work contract. But they fell in love with the Riverina beauty and have never looked back.

"We absolutely love Leeton! Our plan was to initially stay for the three years, save some money and then move back to Newcastle," explains Kellie. "Now that we're here, it's so much better than we could ever have predicted."

"We love the slow lifestyle, being close to everything and how everyone is so friendly and welcoming. Leeton is a real community-based town and they have so many things you can join or attend."

A bountiful surprise

Moving from the city, the family expected that country life would have fewer opportunities and facilities.

"I thought [moving to a regional area] would be a lot harder – more driving and less things available," says Kellie. "Turns out, Leeton has everything on offer that I've ever needed. I had a warped idea that the country had little to offer."

"I thought we'd struggle to find all the services we need, but Leeton ended up having them all. My youngest child has a disability and I thought it would be impossible to find her therapy but turns out there's a facility at Narrandera that has been fantastic," says Kellie.

"Every struggle I thought we'd face didn't happen and it's been such a smooth transition."

“
***We love the slow lifestyle,
being close to everything and
how everyone is so friendly
and welcoming.***”

Kellie says the family has appreciated the abundance of local parks, coffee shops and shopping facilities as well. And, as she says, "if there's anything major we need we could just head to Wagga which is only an hour and a half away."

Regional lifestyle a perfect fit for families

Leaving the fast pace of the city for the slower flow of the country has brought many life-changing benefits to this young family.

Most importantly, they can now spend more time together. "[The work/life balance is] so much better now that we're here," explains Kellie. "It's a two-minute commute to work versus an hour."

"I actually see my children in daylight hours and I've gotten so much of my life back."

The warm community atmosphere has also helped the family feel right at home. "It's just such a friendly, welcoming town. If you sign up to anything, people welcome you with open arms and go above and beyond to help you."

This has given Kellie the confidence to take on new hobbies and interests. "I've joined a few community committees, entered an art prize exhibition and joined a gym that feels more like a community. I never would have done any of these things back where I used to live."

Affordability and employment opportunities abound

The couple had considered a country change for several years before the perfect opportunity arose.

"We often spoke about potentially moving rural but never actually committed to it. When the job at Leeton High [School] came up, my husband decided to apply because we have friends in Griffith and really liked the area. We loved the idea of moving somewhere quiet and slower than a city."

With 14 years of marketing experience behind her, Kellie assumed that finding a rewarding role in her field may prove difficult in the country. But she soon found a position as a Tourism and Events Officer with the Leeton Shire Council – a job that she loves.

The affordability of housing has also been a pleasant surprise. "We were offered a teacher house to rent, only a few streets away from Mountford Park. It's been very affordable – especially compared to where we've come from. House prices are much cheaper here in comparison."

Family life as Leeton locals

Positioned around 550km west of Sydney and 450km north of Melbourne, Leeton offers young families a country change full of outdoor leisure pursuits. The region boasts many scenic parks and playgrounds, the Leeton Regional Aquatic Centre, a sport and recreation precinct, golf club, tennis courts, skate parks, cycling paths and of course the iconic Fivebough and Tuckerbil Wetlands.

Families are also spoilt for choice when it comes to educational facilities, spanning public, private, specialised and tertiary. There are plenty of cultural experiences on offer, from festivals and community events to live performances at the heritage-listed Roxy Community Theatre.

Known as both the birthplace of the Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area and "the heart of Australia's food bowl", Leeton's prime Riverina location invites agricultural diversity – and of course wonderful farmers and makers markets for the locals and visitors.

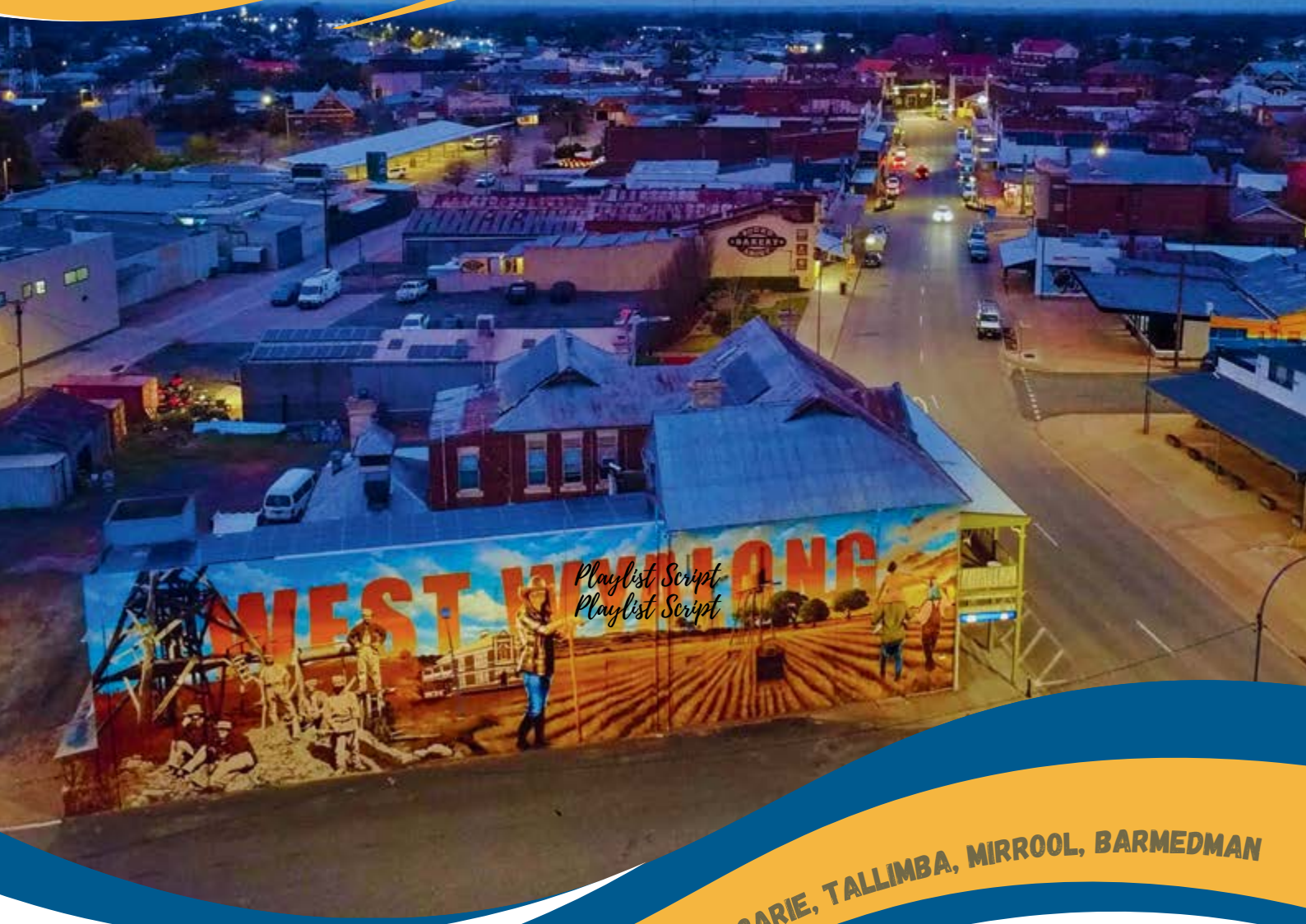
The Ashton family is grateful for all of the blessings their country change has brought them. "[The move was] the best thing I've ever done. It's been so great for myself and my family."

And as for Kellie's advice for others considering a country change? "Just do it!" ●



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Early childhood education and care

The Riverina and Murray is home to many early childhood education and care services, including: long day care, family day care providers, preschool and outside of school hours care (OOSHC).

Primary schooling

Across the Riverina and Murray There are 122 public schools catering to years K (or Pre-K) – 6. There are 13 public schools catering for years K-12. There are also 3 Schools for Specific Purposes including two schools providing intensive learning support and another situated within the Juvenile Justice Centre.

There are 33 private schools catering to years K-6, and a further 13 private schools catering for years K-12.

Secondary schooling

There are 25 public schools catering from year 7 to year 12. There are also 5 Schools for Specific Purposes for students with medium/high support needs.

There are 13 private schools catering from year 7/9 up to year 12.

Vocational education & apprenticeships

Finding the right path after High School, upskilling or retraining in the Riverina and Murray is easy with Tafe NSW operating 16 campuses across the region, including Wagga Wagga, Albury and Griffith. There are also opportunities for vocational training such as apprenticeships.

Country University Centres

All students studying any degree at any university in Australia can register with a Country University Centre (CUC). CUCs are a secure space where students can focus entirely on their studies. Students can connect with like-minded people and experience a campus-like environment while they study locally.



St Anne's Catholic College, Temora © Matt Beaver

“

Regional schools often provide opportunities to become involved in a wide range of programs, activities and leadership experiences that may not always be possible in larger settings.”

Charlie, Teacher in Hay

CUC Western Riverina features dedicated study areas, access to technology including high speed internet, videoconferencing, printing & copying facilities. One-on-one support is available from Academic Advisors who can assist with general academic skills, navigating university learning portals, connecting with university support teams, and even finding and applying for scholarships.

There are currently four CUC sites in the Riverina region, located in Hay, Griffith, Leeton and Tumut.

Higher education & specialised training

Charles Sturt University (CSU) is the largest regional university in Australia, hosting major campuses in Wagga Wagga and Albury. La Trobe University also has a campus in Albury-Wodonga.

UNSW Rural School of Clinical Medicine provides the opportunity for students to undertake their full medical program at a rural campus in several locations, including Wagga Wagga in the Riverina. The Wagga Wagga UNSW Rural Clinical Campus is a \$26 million world-class medical education facility.

Agricultural College

Total College has a campus in Yanco, just 10 minutes drive from Leeton. A wide range of short training courses for primary producers, owners of small farms, new entrants to agriculture and horticulture, and to those thinking of investing in a rural enterprise is provided at the Yanco campus.

Riverina Environmental Education Centre

The Riverina Environmental Education Centre (REEC) is a NSW Department of Education facility providing high quality fieldwork programs for approximately 5,000 students in Kindergarten to Year 12 annually.

REEC works cooperatively with other Environmental Education providers including Lake Cowal Conservation Centre, Environmental and Zoo Education Centres, Riverina and Murray Regional Organisation of Councils, Wagga Wagga City Council and NSW Universities.

Conclusion

From early childhood, primary and high school through to TAFE, vocational education and university, there are opportunities for students of all ages and abilities in the Riverina and Murray.

To find out more about education in the Riverina and Murray, see countrychange.com.au/education •

“

What stands out to me the most about teaching in Gundagai in comparison to the city is the benefit of having fewer students in the classroom. Rather than 30 students each lesson, I have 15. This significantly benefits the student's education.

I feel more fulfilled teaching in the country as I can have a greater positive influence.”

Rebekah, Teacher in Gundagai



FROM BACKPACKER TO
COMMUNITY CONNECTOR

Mendie's Country Change to the Snowy Valleys

© Matt Beaver

When Mendie first arrived in Australia in 2005, she came with a backpack and a sense of adventure. Like many travellers, she planned to explore the country for a year before moving on. Instead, that journey would quietly transform into a new life, a family, and a deep connection to the Snowy Valleys -a region she now helps others call home.

Today, Mendie is a Local Welcomer for The Welcome Experience host organisation, RDA Riverina, supporting people who move to the Snowy Valleys to settle, connect and feel part of the community. But her passion for the role comes from lived experience: she knows firsthand how challenging and how rewarding a country change can be.

A journey that began with a backpack

Originally from the Netherlands, Mendie began travelling Australia as a backpacker in 2005. During that year, she met her former partner, and what was meant to be a temporary stay quickly became something more permanent. In 2006, the couple returned to Holland to marry before coming back to Australia and making the decision to stay for good.

That same year, Mendie moved to the Snowy Valleys, settling first in Batlow. It was a significant shift – from a city in Europe, to coastal living, to a rural Australian town.

"I moved from a city to the country, and I found it really hard at first," Mendie says. "It was very different to anything I'd known."

Like many newcomers to regional Australia, the adjustment took time. But slowly, the landscape, lifestyle and people began to shape a new sense of belonging.

Finding home in the snowy valleys

Mendie lived in Batlow for eight years, where she and her partner started a family. As their children grew, the family began looking for a town that offered more schooling options and activities while still keeping the close-knit, regional feel they had come to value.

That led them to Tumut.

"Tumut was a little bit bigger for children to go to school and to have more activities," she explains. "It also felt a bit closer to everything."

Located in the western foothills of the Snowy Mountains and bordered by Kosciuszko National Park and the Murray River, the Snowy Valleys is uniquely positioned. With strong geographic ties to Canberra and Wagga Wagga, the region offers both connectivity and a distinctly rural lifestyle.

Major centres include Tumut and Tumbarumba, supported by welcoming towns and villages such as Adelong, Batlow, Brungle, Talbingo, Jingellic, Khancoban, Laurel Hill, Rosewood and Tooma.

Learning to love the country pace

Adjusting to regional life didn't happen overnight. Mendie describes the transition as challenging, especially coming from more densely populated places.

"The pace is different. Things aren't as fast," she says. "You don't have one-day deliveries, and you need to plan a little more."

But with time, that slower pace became one of the region's greatest strengths.

"Once you adapt, you really start to love it," she says. "It's relaxed. People know each other. Children feel safe. There's a freedom to it."

The Snowy Valleys is a region that changes beautifully with the seasons – crisp mountain air in winter, lush green hills in spring, cool, clean waterways in summer and vibrant colour in autumn. For Mendie, the connection to nature, especially water, has been central to falling in love with the area.

"The water really attracts me," she says. "The rivers, the outdoors, the nature—you can access it all."

Turning experience into purpose

Mendie's own journey of settling into regional Australia eventually led her to a role that feels like a natural extension of her story. As a Local Welcomer, she supports people moving to the Snowy Valleys, helping them navigate both the practical and personal sides of relocation.

"I know what it's like to move to a different country and a different town," she says. "How important it is to have someone there—to talk to, to help you connect, to give you information."

Her work involves meeting new residents, learning about their needs, and helping them find their feet—everything from schools and healthcare to libraries, sporting clubs and social groups.

Often, it's the small details that matter most.

"People ask things you don't think about when you already live somewhere," Mendie explains. "Where's the police station? How does healthcare work? Where do I meet people?"

She also helps newcomers connect beyond work, encouraging participation in book clubs, parent groups, community organisations and local events.

Why feeling welcome makes all the difference

Mendie strongly believes that feeling genuinely welcomed is key to whether people stay long-term.

"If people feel seen and welcomed into the community, it makes all the difference," she says.

This sense of belonging is especially important in a growing region like the Snowy Valleys, which continues to attract new residents and workers. The local economy spans agriculture, forestry, healthcare and social assistance, manufacturing and construction, energy and tourism.

Major employers include AKD Softwoods, Hyne Timber, Visy Pulp and Paper, Murrumbidgee Local Health District, Forestry Corporation of NSW, National Parks & Wildlife Services, Snowy Hydro and the Future Generation Joint Venture.

The region is actively seeking skilled workers, particularly in health services, trade labour and engineering trades – making connection and retention critical.

“

If people feel seen and welcomed into the community, it makes all the difference.”

”

An inclusive region with room to belong

Mendie is passionate about ensuring the Snowy Valleys feels welcoming for people from all cultural and religious backgrounds.

"There are opportunities to connect no matter where you're from," she says.

She points to the range of churches, multicultural networks and community groups, including the Mosaic group, as examples of how newcomers can find connection and support.

"There are more people coming here now, and it feels more accepted," she says. "Different communities can connect with each other, and everyone is welcome."

Advice for anyone considering a country change

Mendie is honest with people considering a move from the city: regional life isn't for everyone, and it does require adjustment.

"It's not for the faint-hearted," she says. "The lifestyle is different. It's slower, and you need to give yourself time."

But she's equally clear about the rewards.

"Once you adapt, it's nothing like anything else," she says. "The lifestyle, the community, the safety for your children – it's special."

For anyone sitting on the edge of making a country change to the Snowy Valleys, her advice is simple and heartfelt:

"Take the plunge. Do it anyway." •



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MORE THAN A BANK

Backing the Communities that Back Each Other

When the Harden Junior Rugby Union Club returned to the field after a 13-year absence, it was about more than bringing rugby back to town.

It was about rebuilding community.

In 2024, the Junior Red Devils relaunched with four teams and a determined committee behind them. But enthusiasm alone could not cover the cost of jerseys, equipment, registrations and administration.

Club president Jeremy Martin says the committee approached local businesses carefully, knowing just how often regional businesses are called on to support clubs, charities and community events.

"In country towns, businesses are hit up for sponsorship for every club, organisation and event. We were acutely aware of that when we approached the businesses, trying to not ask for too much and overwhelm them," Jeremy says.

Then SWSbank stepped in.

"That's when SWSbank blew us away with a generous offer. They wanted to sponsor all four teams we had planned on launching."

It is a small-town story with a much bigger message about the role community banks continue to play across regional Australia.

For 54 years, SWSbank, formerly South West Slopes Credit Union, has provided member-owned banking across the region, with branches in Young, Temora, Cootamundra and West Wyalong.

Its local roots matter, but so does its capability.

Regional customers should not have to choose between sophisticated banking services and personalised support. SWSbank offers traditional and digital banking solutions while retaining something increasingly difficult to find: the ability to sit down with someone who understands the community, the local economy and the people behind the account.

It is professional banking with regional relationships.

At a time when banking services have been disappearing from many country towns, that



presence is significant. SWSbank captures it in its own slogan: "As other banks close their doors, we open ours a little wider."

As a member-owned institution, profits are returned to members and communities through improved products, services and local investment. In the 2024/25 financial year, SWSbank contributed more than \$100,000 in sponsorship across its communities. In 2025/26, that increased to more than \$170,000.

For regional towns, that support creates a powerful cycle.

Locals shop locally, use local trades and professional services, bank locally and support local businesses. In return, those businesses help sustain the sporting clubs, organisations and events that create connection, opportunity and belonging.

The Red Devils are a clear example.

SWSbank's support helped give the club the confidence to relaunch its under 6, under 8, under 10 and under 12 sides in 2024.

"It was an amazing feeling to be part of something so special," Jeremy says. "The kids and their families all felt like they were part of something monumental. We had no expectations of them that year other than forming the teams and taking the field. But what we got was a community, extended family, and a successful club."

Two years later, the club now fields teams from under 6s through to under 16s, with players progressing into representative rugby and competing at State Championships.

But Jeremy says the real value goes well beyond results.

"These kids have learned what it means to be part of a team – humility, drive, passion and commitment."

"It's because of the support from businesses like SWSbank that all this is possible. Their sponsorship helps us put teams on the field, sure, but it also makes room for everything else that comes with it – the camaraderie, the drive, the commitment and the feeling of belonging. That's what it is really about."

And perhaps that is the real value of a community bank: not simply providing financial services, but helping strengthen the places its customers call home. ●



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Directory

Berrigan Shire Council

Merran Socha

Manager, Economic Development & Tourism

03 5888 5100, merrans@berriganshire.nsw.gov.au

56 Chanter Street, Berrigan, NSW 2712

Coolamon Shire Council

Laura Munro

Tourism and Business Development Officer

02 6927 2492, lmunro@coolamon.nsw.gov.au

55 Cowabbie Street, Coolamon, NSW 2701

Cootamundra-Gundagai Regional Council

Leah Sutherland

Tourism and Economic Development Officer – Cootamundra

1300 459 689, leah.sutherland@cgrc.nsw.gov.au

81 Wallendoon Street, Cootamundra, NSW 2590

Casey Polsen

Tourism and Economic Development Officer – Gundagai

1300 459 689, casey.polsen@cgrc.nsw.gov.au

255 Sheridan Street, Gundagai, NSW 2722

Edward River Council

Lachlan McIntyre

Coordinator Economic Development

03 5898 3000, lachlan.mcintyre@edwardriver.nsw.gov.au

180 Cressy Street, Deniliquin NSW 2710

Greater Hume Council

Emily Jones

Tourism/Communications Officer

02 6036 0100, ejones@greaterhume.nsw.gov.au

39 Young St, Holbrook, NSW 2644

Griffith City Council

Karly Sivewright

Economic Development Coordinator

02 6962 8100, karly.sivewright@griffith.nsw.gov.au

1 Benerembah Street, Griffith NSW 2680

Hay Shire Council

Alison McLean

Executive Manager Economic Development & Tourism

02 6993 4045, amclean@hay.nsw.gov.au

134 Lachlan Street, Hay NSW 2711

Junee Shire Council

Emma Hedlund

Community Engagement Officer

02 6924 2111, emma.hedlund@junee.nsw.gov.au

29 Belmore Street, Junee, NSW, 2663

Leeton Shire Council

Michelle Evans

Director Economic & Community Development

02 6953 0994, michellee@leeton.nsw.gov.au

23-25 Chelmsford Place, Leeton NSW 2705

Lockhart Shire Council

Matthew Holt

Manager Communications, Tourism and Economic Development

02 6920 5305, mholt@lockhart.nsw.gov.au

65 Green Street, Lockhart NSW 2656

Murray River Council

Izzy Rees

Economic Development Officer

1300 087 004, irees@murrayriver.nsw.gov.au

PO Box 906, Moama NSW 2731

Murrumbidgee Council

Eden Hercus

Economic Tourism & Events Officer

03 5886 1200, edenh@murrumbidgee.nsw.gov.au

35 Jerilderie Street, Jerilderie NSW 2716

Narrandera Shire Council

Meg Hollins

Visitor Economy and Marketing Coordinator

02 6959 5539, meg.hollins@narrandera.nsw.gov.au

141 East Street, Narrandera, NSW 2700

Snowy Valleys Council

Sara Johnston

Communications Coordinator at RDA Riverina

02 5924 5861, comms@rdariverina.org.au

Building 474 (Car Park, 27 Bangala Way,

Charles Sturt University NSW 2650)

Temora Shire Council

Brooke Bremer

Economic and Community Development Officer

02 6980 1124, bbremer@temora.nsw.gov.au

105 Loftus Street (PO Box 262), Temora NSW 2666

Committee 4 Wagga

Michelle Ford

Executive Assistant

02 6921 2490, michelle@c4wagga.com.au

2/129 Fitzmaurice St, Wagga Wagga NSW 2650

Wentworth Shire Council

David Fry

Marketing and Communications Coordinator

03 5027 5027, david.fry@wentworth.nsw.gov.au

61 Darling Street, Wentworth NSW 2648

For enquiries relating to any places not listed in the directory, please contact RDA Riverina.

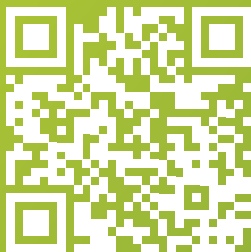


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