



Helen
Haines MP

INDEPENDENT FEDERAL MEMBER FOR INDI

Regional development

We need a long-term vision and proper investment to support regional communities to realise their potential

Australia is currently undergoing changes that profoundly affect regional communities. While our cities grow at breakneck speed, many rural areas suffer population decline. Regional Australians have poorer economic, social and health outcomes than our city cousins. We are at the frontline of issues like climate change which will continue to impact our regional industries and our unique lifestyle. The devastating summer bushfires are a compelling case in point. Australia needs a comprehensive, long-term and bi-partisan national plan if it is to successfully address the specific needs of regional Australians.

Policy Paper

Dr Helen Haines MP – Federal Member for Indi

July 2020

A lack of coordinated planning for the future is letting down regional communities

Regional communities face a unique and growing set of challenges

The *Regions at the Ready* report from the previous Parliament found that regional Australia faces two key issues:

- The incorrect perception of regions as ‘second rate,’
- The ongoing trend of regional populations – particularly young people – moving to the state capitals.

On top of this are universal megatrends that have distinct implications for regional Australia. From **climate change**, to the opportunities and challenges of globalisation, rapid technological change, **the need for 21st century skills**, and an ageing population.

Because of these unique challenges, what works in major cities and their surrounding areas does not always work for regional, rural and remote communities.

Over the past 20 years, political attention and Government investment in Australia has increasingly focused on our cities and larger population centres where the majority of Australians live. At the same time there has been **little consideration of the specific needs of regional, rural and remote Australia**.

A lack of coordination between Government departments and all levels of Government is evident, with ad-hoc grants programs often the only response to the issues facing regional communities. While investment and political attention for major cities has ramped up as a result of increasing population pressures, even the reliable collection of data from regional Australia required for **evidence-based decision making** has come under increasing threat from cuts to public spending.

One compelling example that every resident of Indi knows too well is the **North East Rail Line**. The quality of the service today is markedly lower than it was 40 years ago. As Australia has become a wealthier, more prosperous nation, the quality of a critical service for regional Victoria has declined. As a result of dedicated and persistent local advocacy, the NERL is currently undergoing a \$235 million upgrade – but **we need strong advocacy going forward** to ensure that upgrade gets delivered and the performance of the line improves.

We can vastly improve the social, economic and health opportunities for regional communities if we plan together

Without proper investment and planning, Australia and regional communities are missing out on opportunities

Regional communities have the potential to contribute so much to Australia, from manufacturing and agriculture to human services and renewable energy. Yet currently there is little certainty for communities and businesses as short-term political imperatives override the need for thoughtful and imaginative planning and investment in a shared **national vision of what we want our regions to look like in 25 years**.

A long-term, bi-partisan strategy for investment in regional Australia would enable certainty, with certainty leading to increased business investment and social and economic stability for regional Australia.

During the last Parliament, the Government was tasked with developing a comprehensive white paper to **set a clear and ambitious vision for regional Australia** that would be community-driven, well-resourced and drive a renaissance in our regions.

The Government has sat on this recommendation for over two years, despite repeated calls from regional communities, industry leaders, academics, small businesses, health and community services, young people, and politicians across the spectrum. No clearer has this lack of vision been than following the devastating summer bushfires and now the uphill coronavirus recovery.

To unlock the potential of our regional communities we need to do three things:

- **Increase investment in regional, rural and remote councils** to maintain and improve services and key infrastructure;
- **Build and maintain the modern physical and telecommunications infrastructure** needed to connect regional Australia and fast-track decentralisation;
- **Develop and monitor long-term, evidence-based plans with communities** to ensure they can build the future they want for their community.

I joined the **Parliamentary Select Committee on Regional Australia** to advocate for a stronger focus on regional development that addresses these fundamental priorities.

I have a plan to increase the social and economic opportunities for regional communities and ensure the liveability of regional Australia for the next generation.

I will work to:

1. Secure sufficient funding for community-led bushfire recovery and build a resilient Indi in the face of COVID-19

Indi has had a tough year – from the devastating summer bushfires through to the ongoing coronavirus pandemic that took us all by surprise just when we were getting on our feet. The closure of the border with NSW has added yet more difficulty, and will for some time to come. But we do not give up – and I am committed to ensuring the Government does not give up on us either.

Our communities need secure and sufficient funding for a sustainable, community-led bushfire recovery in Indi, to engage and empower communities in that recovery. So far, by working with our local communities, I've managed to:

- Ensure every fire-affected part of Indi can get access to the **\$10,000 Small Business Support Grant**;
- Ensure that grape-growers and vignerons affected by smoke taint can access the **\$75,000 Primary Producer Grant**;
- Secure funding for our **local softwood timber industry** to transport burned logs, and upgrade their processing facilities.

But the bushfires came to Indi in December and the recovery has been too slow. Over the coming months, I will be working to ensure that Indi receives:

- A fair share of \$448.5m allocated to **Local Economic Recovery Plans** yet to be spent;
- A fair share of \$76m allocated to supporting **tourism** in bushfire-affected regions;
- Further support for our smoke taint-affected **grape and wine sector**.

At the same time, we know that with **COVID-19 dealing another hammer-blow** to our regions, that the Government must continue to support local small businesses and people who find themselves out of work from the pandemic:

- Maintaining **JobKeeper** targeted at those businesses that still need it to keep their doors open and their employees in a job;
- Maintain **JobSeeker** above the old rate of Newstart to ensure people aren't thrown into poverty.

2. Hold Government to account for the delivery of North East Rail Line upgrade

The \$235 million upgrade to the North East Rail Line is set to be completed by the middle of next year, and will bring the line up to a Class 2 Victorian Passenger Rail standard. This should mean **faster, safer services for all of us**.

This is all the more important as our region rebuilds from these devastating bushfires. Since I was elected, I have been in communication with the Australian Rail Track Corporation to ensure they remain on track to complete the rail upgrade on time and up to specification.

I have also called on the Deputy Prime Minister to **guarantee to provide ongoing maintenance funding** to ensure that the NERL stays at this new, higher standard, permanently. Without the guarantee on ongoing maintenance, the upgraded line will quickly deteriorate. I'll continue to advocate for this until long-term funding is locked in.

3. Build new mobile phone towers to close mobile black spots in Indi

The ability to stay connected via mobile phone across vast distances is the social and economic backbone of modern regional communities. This connection, which allows businesses to trade and communities to look after each other, is often taken for granted but remains reliant on the appropriate planning and **building of mobile phone towers**.

All regional, rural and remote Australians have experienced the frustration of trying and failing to make a call or access important information from the internet on their mobile. Like all regional communities, **Indi deserves adequate infrastructure** to enable us to conduct business, connect with our families, access healthcare, education and training.

Following the success of my predecessor Cathy McGowan, I've been working with the **Indi Telecommunications Action Group (ITAG)** consultative committee, comprising of local representatives, local governments, emergency services and telecommunications companies, to develop community-led priorities for new mobile phone tower sites.

In the last funding round **Indi secured 6 of the 13 mobile phone towers in** Victoria making us the most successful electorate in the State. I'm pushing for the next Round 5A to target bushfire-affected communities, and for the Government to roll out this Round, and round 6 after, quickly.

4. Ensure universal access to affordable and quality NBN across Indi

Access to the internet is as essential to daily life as access to electricity or water. Key government services including Centrelink and the ATO increasingly interacting with people through online platforms such as myGov. Yet access is meaningless if it isn't affordable for low-income families or well-suited to people's needs. Coverage has to be universal, not just on paper but in the reality of people's lives.

Indi residents are more likely to access the NBN through more expensive services such as fixed wireless or satellite, as they are often the only services available to their homes.

Regional Australians should not have to accept second-class service simply because of where they live.

Through my membership of the **Parliamentary Committee on the NBN**, I am working constructively with community and the Government to ensure that Indi communities receive universal timely, reliable and affordable access to digital and telecommunications services through the NBN.

5. Establish an independent body to conduct research into and monitor the impact of government policy on regional Australia

Regional Australians need a clear, comprehensive and evidence-based national policy – not last-minute 'quick fix' initiatives or opaque funding programs that are impossible to access.

I am committed to ensuring the **Government delivers on a white paper**, as recommended by the *Regions at the Ready Report* and backed by an Expert Panel, that looks at:

- Urbanisation, ageing, **declining populations** in smaller towns, and migration;
- The use of the **skilled migration program** to support regional development;
- Improving **education and training** of regional young people
- The need for strong and reliable **transport and telecommunications** infrastructure;
- Incentives and strategies to improve **private sector investment** in regional areas.

This cannot be done without good governance and a clear policy commitment to regional Australia that goes above the ad hoc political commitment we have seen from this government. That is why I am also **calling for the establishment of an Office for Regional Australia** as a statutory agency to support regional policy development and keep the focus of the government on a bold, bright and ambitious future for regional Australia and electorates like Indi.