

ADDRESSING HOUSING AND LABOUR FORCE ISSUES IN THE BOWEN BASIN

Mining companies and local governments are using results from research carried out by Central Queensland University (CQU) to plan and manage housing and labour force issues associated with new mining projects in the Bowen Basin.

“This ACARP report remains the most useful metric for all stakeholders to use in understanding the financial implications of any aspirational targets in accommodation ratios or the demographics of the workforce,” said Industry Monitor John Merritt.

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Funded by ACARP, CQU researchers used a case study approach in Moranbah to identify and model housing market issues generated from the expansion in the coal mining industry. The research showed that while the core of the workforce at older mines was generally happy to live in Moranbah, newer workforce tended to prefer fly-in/fly-out or drive-in/drive-out from other locations, with only between 11 and 20 per cent of new workforce wanting to live locally. In addition, the results identified the average length of residence that people planned in Moranbah (eight years), and that almost all residents would shift onto a coastal or regional community in Queensland at some stage.

Future workforce patterns that relied wholly on fly-in/fly-out operations were viewed very negatively by the local population in the town, and would reduce the length of time that people would live in Moranbah. More direct environmental impacts on the town from mining operations (dust, noise) were also a major issue for residents. In contrast, some of the other issues raised in interviews, such as the availability of water supplies in the town and the use of shared housing, were not confirmed as serious issues in the wider community.

Project Leader John Rolfe said it had been generally accepted that some fly in, fly out workforce was here to stay; the argument now was around what percentage of the workforce would be allocated to commuting from further afield.

“Some companies are using our figures to give an estimate of the upper limit of how many people are likely to live in town. That’s probably where our results have been most influential because they give industry some sort of basis to judge the likely amount of local workforce. This has huge implications then for building, for housing and for service provision,” he said.

“Some of the new developments at Moranbah have talked about up to 25 per cent of new workforce living locally. I think those estimates could be an aspiration target; our work suggests about 20 per cent living locally is a more realistic aim for new projects.”

John said the Moranbah community was strongly opposed to the development of work camps in town.

“They don’t want work camps and they identified that. If Moranbah becomes a big work camp town, a lot of people would leave sooner rather than later,” he said.

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“We’ve done some work with housing modelling and we also made recommendations about trying to break down the dichotomy between building four bedroom houses and work camp accommodation. We recommend some graduation in the middle – duplexes or similar types of accommodation. Certainly the Isaac Regional Council has been working very hard over the past few years to try to get developers to build more of this type of graduated accommodation.

“I think for regional development purposes it would be nicer to see a number of smaller work camps scattered through the town rather than one big one.”

Industry Monitor John Merritt said that the ACARP report remains the most useful metric for all stakeholders to use in understanding the financial implications of any aspirational targets in accommodation ratios or the demographics of the workforce.

“I am pleased that John Rolfe’s CQU research group is still able to contribute sound technical information on this issue as industry and government finalise the social impact management plans for new coal projects in the region,” he said.

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