

The great western growth race



Making liveable, doable.

The west of Melbourne has been the fastest growing region of an already fast-growing city, and this is likely to remain the case for some time to come. The proximity of affordable and developable land, combined with significant infrastructure investments such as the Western Ring Road and Regional Rail, have helped Melbourne's west to boom.

Tarneit and Truganina are among Australia's 10 largest growing locations, and large tracts of the west experienced a more than 20 per cent increase in the rate of population growth in the decade to 2016.¹ Areas such as Werribee, Melton, Caroline Springs and Point Cook have also absorbed a substantial proportion of Melbourne's population growth in the last 15 years. These growth rates are borne out by the high rates of building approvals right across the west, but most particularly the outer west and south-west.

Such sustained, rapid growth is increasingly placing pressure on infrastructure, and affecting the accessibility and liveability of our suburbs in the west. The West Gate Tunnel will improve the access story for many areas in the west, but it is only part of the solution.



Live

Investment in supporting infrastructure and services is struggling to keep pace with residential growth:

- Access to health facilities, like many areas outside the inner suburbs and inner south-east, is below average (with the outer areas all around Melbourne having least access).
- Access to education for the inner west is relatively similar to other areas of Melbourne, but the middle and outer west are below average (as are other middle and outer areas of Melbourne).

When considering house prices across Melbourne by distance from the city centre, the west has always been comparatively less expensive than the east and south-east. But unsurprisingly, housing affordability is a much more complex matter:

- Historically, areas in the west like Tottenham and West Footscray were industrial centres, with comparably fewer amenities and associated lower house prices.
- A changing profile (in pockets), the introduction of newer amenities, continuing demand for housing, and the regeneration of areas such as Footscray and Sunshine (and previously Williamstown and Yarraville), is pushing up house prices in these areas. When overall affordability is considered as a function of housing costs and incomes (rather than absolute house prices), the welfare-dependent pockets of the west in particular are facing affordability challenges.
- As the city continues to grow and 'move west', this may place affordability pressure on those currently living in inner west suburbs, with vulnerable people potentially being pushed further out.

¹Australian Bureau of Statistics: 3218.0 – Regional Population Growth, Australia, 2016



Work

The story on work for the west is somewhat mixed. The western suburbs have higher unemployment rates compared to the other areas of Melbourne (9 per cent²)

However, the west can draw some positives from relatively high growth rates in Gross Regional Product (GRP) and business growth, which is providing some improvement to the work story. But these increases are coming off a low jobs and GRP base relative to other areas, with absolute access to jobs and GRP remaining a challenge (other than perhaps in the inner west with access to strong jobs bases in inner Melbourne). For example, there is a high growth rate in jobs accessible by car for the outer western suburbs, however, the number of jobs accessible by car remains poor relative to other suburbs, suggesting even greater jobs growth in the area is needed.

The rate of jobs growth and accessibility to jobs needs to keep pace with population growth. As population growth continues, and Melbourne keeps expanding westward, further from the inner city jobs, the work story for the west (particularly outer west) will be increasingly challenging. New jobs centres need to be developed and access to existing job centres improved.

Access to transport gateways at Tullamarine, Avalon and the Port of Melbourne, and the close proximity to major road and rail networks should help, but more is needed. This includes building major interchanges in places such as Sunshine (which has been earmarked as a National Employment and Innovation Cluster [NEIC] by the Victorian and Commonwealth governments).

Another NEIC is earmarked for a greenfield site at East Werribee, an area well served by transport infrastructure and at the heart of Melbourne's fastest growing region. The government currently considering a proposal called 'Australian Education City' for a major innovation zone on the site.



Play

While live and work indices for the west paint a somewhat mixed story, with some positive growth strengths but challenges as you move further west, the story for play is simpler. There is a distinct lack of play for most areas in the west.

Access to active living, entertainment and culture are below average across the west. It's not that there aren't any facilities – contemporary arts and community hubs such as the Footscray Community Arts Centre, the Substation Centre for Arts and Culture in Newport, the Wyndham Cultural Centre and the Clocktower Centre in Moonee Ponds are important parts of the west's fabric. Scienceworks and Werribee Open Plains Zoo have established themselves among Melbourne's most successful attractions. And Whitten Oval has transformed itself from a football ground into a hub for community programs. But our rate of population growth demands we do more and we do it smarter.

Perhaps most starkly revealing for the west is its comparatively lower access to open areas, with the northern and eastern suburbs having significantly higher access to parks, gardens and ovals.

As the west continues to grow, we need to create an environment for its people to truly thrive by investing in the area and leveraging its strengths and opportunities to create communities in which people want to live and play.

The opportunities

There are a variety of opportunities to improve the work, live and play options in the west.



Some are very much on a small, local scale, such as providing training and resources to local libraries in response to the influx of people using their spaces for community meetings and start-up businesses. At the other end of the spectrum are flagship projects requiring more significant investment, such as using the example of Sydney's relocation of the Powerhouse Museum to Parramatta to examine similar options for our iconic, centrally-located institutions to create new opportunities in the region. We should also examine how we better connect the west with Geelong and leverage its growth and strengths.



Another opportunity that stands out is to draw on the west's significant level of cultural diversity (56.9 per cent of Wyndham residents' parents were born overseas compared to 38.5 per cent in Victoria – source 2016 census) to create iconic cultural institutions and experiences on the doorstep of the country's fastest growing region.



We need to get better value from a great natural asset in the Maribyrnong River, and change the current perception of the river as a divide through our city. Similarly, there is an opportunity to further open up access to the great natural assets on the western side of Port Phillip Bay.

Another consideration is to address the seeming reluctance for residents of the west to join sports clubs in our most popular sporting codes.



For example, less than 12 per cent of people in suburbs such as Wyndham and Melton are joining sports clubs, a far cry from the more than 45 per cent who do so in rural and regional areas.³ It's worth stating that getting this right is about much more than simply building new facilities or rezoning a few areas of land. The economic benefits of better play opportunities can be game-changing. As creativity becomes an increasingly important driver of our economy, we will see the positive impact flow through to the attraction of knowledge workers and the growth of advanced industries that will create quality sustainable jobs for more Melburnians.

²Source: Labour Market Information Portal. Unemployment Rates (15+) by State and Territory, December 2017 (%)

³Victoria University, Low sport participation in growth suburbs, 28 November 2016.



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