



What we heard, and where to from here?

A summary-level report for Summit attendees.

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PURPOSE

This high-level report captures key observations from the Regional Development South Australia (RDSA) Annual Summit, 'Strong Regions, Smart Growth,' and roundtable discussions held on September 4-5, 2025. It is designed to encourage continued collaboration and spark further conversations that carry forward into action.

OVERVIEW

RDSA Summit - 5 September 2025

Held in Adelaide for the first time, the RDSA 2025 Summit attracted over 200 attendees, representing all three levels of government, industry groups, business, Regional Development Australia (RDA), and community organisations. The Summit showcased a range of perspectives, highlighting both immediate barriers and long-term opportunities for regional growth. Speakers and panellists emphasised the **importance of intentional planning, strong leadership, and the collective responsibility of government, business, and communities to work together** to unlock these opportunities.

Across the Summit discussions, there was a strong recognition that solutions to challenges must strike a balance between ambition and practicality. It is not enough to propose new initiatives — timelines need to be aligned, approval processes streamlined, and regional voices integrated into statewide decision-making. This is essential to unlocking confidence among investors, governments, and communities.

RDSA Regional Roundtable Discussions – 4 September 2025

Three 'Chatham House Rules' roundtable discussions offered an opportunity for stakeholders to engage in open discussions on key topics - housing, infrastructure, workforce planning, and economic growth. These were frank and practical discussions, with information shared about current activities, and potential actions were discussed. Attendees included the RDA Chief Executives, RDSA Executive Chair, and a range of subject matter experts from government and industry. Each of the roundtable facilitators was also a keynote speaker at the Summit and incorporated roundtable insights into their presentations.

Context – Strong Regions, Smart Growth

Both the summit program and the focus of the roundtables aligned with the **RDSA Regional Priorities Statement, Strong Regions, Smart Growth** (<https://regionaldevelopmentsa.com.au/resources/>), released in June 2025.

The statement **calls for an intentional, collaborative, strategic, and long-term approach to regional development**, encouraging stakeholders to move beyond reactive policies and adopt a proactive strategy.

SUMMARY INSIGHTS

CHALLENGES

There are obstacles to overcome – some of which we have no control over, and others that we do.

Global conflict and policy uncertainty are outside our purview, but we must acknowledge their impacts on investor confidence, as well as implications for regional SA. According to the World Uncertainty Index, global uncertainty is at a particularly high level. At these times, people seek places that embody stability, resilience, common sense, and productivity – all of which regional South Australia can offer, and which could be a competitive advantage.

Closer to home, **climate change** is manifesting in tangible ways and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future.

Declining and ageing regional populations – we were provided with some amazing and somewhat stark data on this front, as well as the consequences that would result if we did nothing. For regions to grow and thrive, **population growth is crucial** to sustaining the economic engine. Unfortunately, current data suggests that the population in regional SA, in many locations, is declining and ageing, which can threaten the service viability of regional towns and have a negative impact on economies.

We have low birth rates, we are losing population to other states, and the SA populations are ‘age heavy’, which means we are missing sufficient numbers of working-age people and young families within the population. The data presented indicates that **SA faces a workforce shortfall of up to 50,000 workers over the next decade** if deliberate and targeted population strategies are not implemented.

The average age of a business owner is 55, and the average age of a farmer is 58 – there is a need to encourage young people to move into these roles as this generation ages out of the workforce.

On a more granular level, we are facing challenges related to **infrastructure, housing, and workforce supply**, as well as the capacity for **risk** within regional economies.

High housing development costs in regional SA often exceed bank valuations, limiting investor interest and increasing financial risks due to competition with urban projects. Challenges also include a lack of development-ready land, **inadequate water and sewer infrastructure**, and high costs for augmentation, which complicate project viability and inhibit regional housing supply growth.

Limited access to **skilled builders and construction workers** in regional SA further hinders project delivery. This emphasises the need for collaboration to enhance industry capacity and capability.

A disconnect between housing development timelines and local industry growth leads to a reliance on temporary labour solutions, such as FIFO. Long, uncertain timelines for infrastructure expansion inhibit housing development despite available land.

Infrastructure gaps also hinder economic growth more broadly, including gaps in water, transportation, and digital connectivity. These gaps constrain regional growth and impact on the capacity of regional centres to offer sought-after lifestyles and service provision. In turn, population and economic growth potential can suffer. This is particularly relevant in the context of growing regional cities of 30,000 people or more. To achieve this level of population growth, people need to be assured they can access essentials like housing, transport, and reliable, high-speed internet.

Linked to many regional growth challenges, **workforce shortages exist across almost all regions, sectors, and occupations**. Exacerbating these challenges are the impacts of rapidly changing industries, markets, and technology, as well as insufficient incentives for people to relocate to a regional location to take up jobs. Regional workforce needs necessitate systematic planning and adaptable approaches.

POTENTIAL

On the flipside, from a more optimistic standpoint, what we have on the table is **enormous potential**.

Space – Regional SA is big!! We have room for growth in various sectors, including housing supply, business expansion, farming, technology, clean energy production, mining, forestry, agriculture, manufacturing, food production, and tourism.

Expertise and economic credentials – We recognise that we face economic challenges, but we also have industry and businesses that are achieving enormous success on the global stage. Over 40% of our state's exports come from SA's regions.

Further growth potential exists in sectors such as food, wine, advanced agritech, manufacturing, renewable hydrogen, and green steel, which can underpin the state's future prosperity, resilience, and competitiveness. There are opportunities to leverage experience and success within specific industries to mentor and support others to grow and evolve.

Natural resources – So much on offer that many across the world look upon with great envy. SA regions are rich with natural minerals, including those that are rapidly increasing in demand across global markets. SA's success as a key exporter of minerals such as copper and uranium, and reserves crucial for the energy transition, relies on regional SA.

Landscapes - that are extraordinary and unique – that can compete on a world tourism stage. SA offers unparalleled and often unknown natural beauty. From beaches to ranges and everything in between, SA's landscapes offer untapped potential not only for tourism development but also to enhance the lifestyle offer that attracts population growth.

And so much more.

SOLUTIONS

These are not simple, nor are they always obvious. Perhaps, from the 2025 RDSA Summit, we walked away with more questions than answers. However, to identify solutions, we need to lean into these questions and unpack the challenges head-on, in a comprehensive and integrated way.

With every challenge presented at the Summit, a solution, a pathway, or an opportunity for change was also proposed. There is an overwhelming desire to harness our collective potential and work together.

To increase housing supply, we need to focus on planning for and delivering infrastructure, as well as enhancing the value proposition of regional housing projects for Councils, developers, banks, and, most importantly, for the families who want to live in them. There are examples of where this is being done well right now in regional SA.

To grow the regional population, we need to understand and listen to the specific wants and needs of different generations and plan to deliver living conditions that meet their needs across all life stages. We can then be targeted, intentional, and strategic about sustaining and growing regional populations and communities.

To grow the regional workforce and enhance education and skills capacity, we need to support the large and complex ecosystem that already exists – the many organisations tackling challenges in the regions right now. We must ensure this ecosystem is strong, connected, well-resourced, and collaborative. Strategic investment in 'joining the dots' and increasing ecosystem capacity would better enable workforce and skills development outcomes.

To realise our economic growth potential, we need to continue supporting our strong sectors, local businesses of all sizes, and particularly our primary producers as they transform into 21st-century, efficient, and sustainable entities capable of withstanding uncertainty and competing on a global stage. And while we do that, we need to continue working on diversifying our regional economies and achieving the value-added benefits that increase regional wealth and foster community growth.

KEY ENABLERS

REGIONAL ECONOMIC GROWTH

Certainty as a competitive edge. Certainty in planning and delivery is essential to attract investment and unlock growth. Ensuring transparent and consistent approval processes and achieving better alignment across local, state, and federal governments will also help realise ambitious industry development in the regions. By creating an environment of predictability and clarity, regional projects can be de-risked and positioned as competitive alternatives to metropolitan investments.

Economic diversification and sustainability. Whilst economic diversification is important, increasing the complexity and resilience of existing significant sectors (food, wine, agriculture, mining, energy) is also critical. These key sectors face substantial challenges, including external factors that are beyond their direct control. Strategic planning and investment in the evolution of these industries are required.

Industry sector support. Despite having abundant natural resources and the establishment and growth of industries that support and capitalise on those resources, SA has the capacity to increase its leveraging of value-added opportunities compared to its global peers. Unlocking these opportunities will require improved infrastructure and enhanced export capacity, as well as targeted support for specific industry sectors.

Supporting small and medium enterprises. Many regional small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are risk-averse and ‘comfortable’ at their existing scale. Greater access to mentoring, business development support, incentives, and practical support will encourage SME innovation and growth. Individual businesses require support to modernise and adapt to changing market and climatic conditions, ensuring their ongoing sustainability and capacity to grow. Greater access to data and networks will also help businesses enter new domestic and global markets.

INTENTIONAL POPULATION GROWTH

Population growth planning and support. Regional population growth must be intentional and planned, with liveability at its core – economic growth and sustainability depend on it. To promote the growth of regional towns and centres in SA, collaboration among all government levels is vital, focusing on high-quality health, education, housing, and cultural amenities. Growth ambitions need to be place-based and consider specifics such as state strategic importance, economic and jobs potential, and impacts of proximity to Adelaide.

Attraction strategies. We need to consider how we compete effectively on a global stage to attract people and businesses, and how we can grow in a way that regional South Australians will embrace. This could include campaigns to highlight regional lifestyle benefits, attracting young families and skilled migrants, offering incentives to industry to establish, relocate, and grow, as well as establishing public sector hubs in regions. Addressing the retention of overseas migrants is also important for long-term population stability.

WORKFORCE AND SKILLS

Regional skills and workforce mapping. Regional economies and communities often require a workforce with adaptable capabilities, in addition to specialist skills. Recruitment, workforce planning, and development need to be informed by and aligned with specific place-based needs.

Workforce attraction and retention. Reliance on Fly-In-Fly-Out (FIFO) and Drive-In-Drive-Out (DIDO) models to meet regional workforce needs undermines community growth. A systemic approach to housing, education, and liveability is essential to making regional work and lifestyle genuinely attractive.

Workforce resilience. Building a resilient regional workforce necessitates investments in skills, training, and infrastructure. Key strategies include offering flexible learning opportunities to foster cross-industry adaptability, increasing access to childcare and social support to promote workforce participation, and developing regional workforce hubs that connect education, training programs, and employers.

Partnerships and data. Collaboration among workforce and skills development stakeholders is crucial for effective project delivery and data sharing. Additionally, creating expertise clusters can attract talent by

providing an excellent industry environment, while retention strategies such as graduate pathways, housing options, and lifestyle incentives will help maintain skilled workers in regions.

Fostering partnerships among educational institutions, RDAs, industry groups, and employers is crucial to enhancing skill development and meeting local employment needs. Better use and sharing of data will assist in defining regional priorities and tracking outcomes.

HOUSING

Expand housing supply. This is a complex challenge that requires a collaborative approach among all levels of government to create an evidence-based, visionary strategy. This strategy should focus on data-driven initiatives and incorporate various project models while facilitating investment in critical infrastructure through public and private means.

Enable greater housing diversity. By moving beyond traditional large family homes to incorporate innovative solutions such as modular and prefabricated builds, diverse dwelling types, and public-private partnerships, we can enhance flexibility and affordability.

Innovative Housing Models. Greater use of models such as modular housing, public-private partnerships, and government-backed leasing schemes as mechanisms to mitigate financial risk and accelerate housing supply.

Supporting builders to increase efficiency and capacity, collaborating with financial institutions to **improve housing development valuation metrics**, and establishing investment programs that **leverage public and private funds** can further accelerate the provision of essential services for housing developments.

Comprehensive Planning. An integrated, long-term approach to infrastructure and housing planning is essential. Both statewide master-planning and local area strategies are necessary to align housing supply with economic opportunities. Further thinking is needed to determine how regions can more directly contribute to state government planning processes and the necessity of building an economic case for future investments beyond current four-year plans.

Local area housing plans. There is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ solution to regional housing challenges. Each RDA region / local government area requires customised housing strategies to align with its specific needs and opportunities.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Growing cities is easy – or perhaps easier than growing regions, but it can be perilous. Complicating and expanding our cities can compromise lifestyle, the environment, and impact our valuable agricultural land – as we’ve seen in other parts of Australia and around the world. Here in South Australia – a state known for its capacity to do things in a planned, considered, yet creative way - we have the opportunity again to be a world leader and embrace regional development in brave, strategic, and innovative ways.

Despite the range of challenges presented at the Summit, speakers conveyed the potential of SA’s regions to play a significantly larger and more sustained role in the state’s future success.

WHAT’S NEXT?

The RDSA *Strong Regions, Smart Growth*, Statement, Summit, and roundtable discussions have laid a solid foundation for actionable strategies that can drive sustainable regional growth for South Australia.

The **ongoing collaboration** between RDSA, government, industry groups, businesses, and communities will be vital in implementing these strategies. **Continued dialogue** and collaborative, **strategic planning** will empower regions to harness their potential, overcoming challenges while capitalising on opportunities for growth and sustainability.

The Summit reaffirmed the vision and ambition of the **RDSA Regional Priorities Statement** — particularly ‘How We Get There Together’.

The statement remains a foundation for growing regional SA, and we encourage stakeholders to utilise it when advocating for and planning regional growth and investment.

Both the roundtable discussions and the Summit highlighted that **while the challenges are significant** — population decline, infrastructure deficits, housing shortages, and workforce gaps — **the opportunities are equally powerful**, and the potential of regional SA is extraordinary. Realising this requires collective action, guided by a **shared roadmap** that integrates regional voices into state and national priorities and provides a clear path for investment and action that delivers tangible outcomes.

RDSA will continue to advocate for a **coordinated approach** that positions regional development as a central driver of South Australia's future prosperity and uniting government, industry, and community around a **shared vision and priorities**.

We will continue to advocate for **investment in enabling infrastructure** (housing, water, sewer, transport, digital connectivity, childcare, health, and education) that underpins growth.

To realise regional growth potential, we need **leadership** that is bold and consistent, cutting across election cycles and policy shifts, and collaboration across agencies, RDAs, councils, and sectors. This will ensure momentum is sustained and opportunities are identified and acted upon in a timely way.

Every delegate has a role to play. We encourage you to:

- Advocate for regional priorities within your sphere of influence, networks, and communities.
- Contribute to policy and investment conversations through your professional expertise and lived experience.
- Continue the conversations sparked at the Summit — keep them alive in boardrooms, councils, and community forums.
- Share information with colleagues and partners to build a broad coalition for change.

Key stakeholders can play a crucial role in transforming ideas into action. They can:

- Plan strategically for housing, services, and infrastructure that anticipates rather than lags growth.
- Partner and collaborate across levels of government, industry, and community to break down silos.
- Invest now in key enablers of growth - including:
 - Housing pilots and diverse supply models
 - Regional workforce development and training pipelines
 - Infrastructure - water, sewer, energy, transport, and digital connectivity
 - Support for industry transformation and value-adding

GET IN TOUCH

The Summit was only the beginning. Delegates are encouraged to **connect with RDSA**, or their local Regional Development Australia (RDA) organisation (<https://regionaldevelopmentsa.com.au/contact/>), to explore collaborative projects, share insights and experiences, and continue shaping the statewide conversation on regional growth.

Be part of our army – work with the RDA network, invest, and help join up strategies and activities across all levels of government, industry, and community, and activate solutions in practical ways.

This report was developed for Regional Development Australia Adelaide, by:



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