

CENTRAL HIGHLANDS WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT AND ACCOMMODATION STRATEGY *in action*



August 2025



Launched in April 2024, the Central Highlands Workforce Development and Accommodation Strategy (WDAS) provides a practical roadmap to tackle workforce attraction and retention challenges, including housing shortages, access to early childhood education and care, and broader liveability issues.

Developed by Infinitum Partners in partnership with Central Highlands Development Corporation (CHDC), the Central Highlands Resources Roundtable (CHRR), and Central Highlands Regional Council (CHRC), the Strategy incorporates insights from more than 30 stakeholders across key sectors.

It focuses on four interconnected areas: workforce, accommodation, childcare, and lifestyle. Sixteen priority actions were identified to guide short- and medium-term efforts to make the Central Highlands a more attractive place to live, work, and invest.

Read the full strategy at chdc.com.au.

AWARD-WINNING

The Strategy received formal recognition with a Commendation in the *Improving Planning Processes* category at the 2024 Queensland Awards for Planning Excellence. The award highlighted the strong stakeholder engagement behind the Strategy and the establishment of the Workforce and Accommodation Collective (WAC), which continues to drive collaboration and progress.

PROGRESS TO DATE

In just 15 months, CHDC has made significant progress in addressing the region's workforce and accommodation challenges.

Key achievements include:

- The Build 12 in 12 campaign, which encouraged new housing supply and showcased a modular display home to inspire fresh thinking.
- A region-wide property review which identified opportunities to unlock underutilised housing and land assets.
- Council support through the release of vacant land and the update of incentive policies to encourage development.
- The *Smart Move* talent attraction campaign, which promoted job opportunities and positioned the Central Highlands as a great place to live and work.
- Collaborative action on early childhood education and childcare, as CHDC partnered with the State Government, stakeholders, and the community to strengthen workforce sustainability.
- Continued advocacy for fairer airfares to improve regional connectivity.
- Valuable support from the WAC, helping ensure a coordinated approach across the region.

ACTION 1 Establish Workforce and Accommodation Collective

Status: Ongoing

Formed in May 2024, the WAC meets regularly to support the delivery of the WDAS. Meetings bring together industry, government, and community stakeholders to progress actions across workforce, accommodation, childcare, and liveability. Sessions have included guest speakers and updates on regional recruitment, housing demand, and early childhood workforce needs, providing a valuable forum for collaboration and practical solutions.

ACTION 2 Property Review

Status: Completed

Review

CHDC and Infinitum Partners worked with major property holders (owners of 40+ properties) along with local and state government, to assess and optimise land and housing assets across the region.

This included Council-owned properties, government employee housing, mining company housing, and underutilised private holdings to identify development and infill opportunities.

Report

In October 2024, CHDC submitted the CHRC Land Assessment Report to Council.

The report created a priority site framework and explored redevelopment opportunities for Council-owned properties to increase housing availability, improve asset utilisation, and support workforce accommodation.

Results

- Surplus Council land is being released via private treaty, tender, and auction to unlock new housing and infrastructure opportunities, encourage private investment, and support sustainable growth across Central Highlands communities.
- Funding has been allocated for staged upgrades to Council-owned staff and community housing, with up to 15 dwellings to be improved by mid-2026 to boost available housing stock and support workforce retention.

ACTION 4 Build 12 in 12

Status: Completed

To fast-track housing supply, CHDC launched the Build 12 in 12 campaign with the goal of delivering at least 12 new residential dwellings within 12 months.

The campaign began with a region-wide Expression of Interest (EOI) process, inviting developers, builders, and landowners to identify the incentives needed to support their involvement. It attracted nine EOIs, featuring a mix of traditional, modular, rapid-build housing, and dual-occupancy models.

CHDC supported proponents by facilitating meetings with Council to explore development pathways. In response, Council introduced key policy and planning changes, including releasing surplus land and updating its Economic Stimulus Policy.

Display home

A modular display home was delivered in partnership with Duke Housing, Kestrel Coal Resources, and CHRC, and opened to the public to demonstrate the speed and quality of modular construction. Kestrel later purchased the home and generously donated it to the Central Queensland Hospital and Health Service, where it now provides much-needed accommodation at Emerald Hospital.

A promising outcome of the campaign was the approval of a 14-home modular development in Emerald. While not all results can be directly linked to the campaign, 15 new homes were built across the region in 2024–25. The initiative has laid valuable groundwork by accelerating conversations, removing barriers, and fostering collaboration.



ACTION 5 Childcare Alliance

Status: Underway

In September 2024, CHDC successfully secured *Grow Your Own* funding from Jobs Queensland to address workforce shortages and improve sustainability in the early childhood education and childcare sector across the Central Highlands.

Delivered in partnership with Astute Early Years Specialists and Infinitum Partners, the project focused on defining sector, stakeholder and community needs for Blackwater and Emerald.

Results

The completed first stage included:

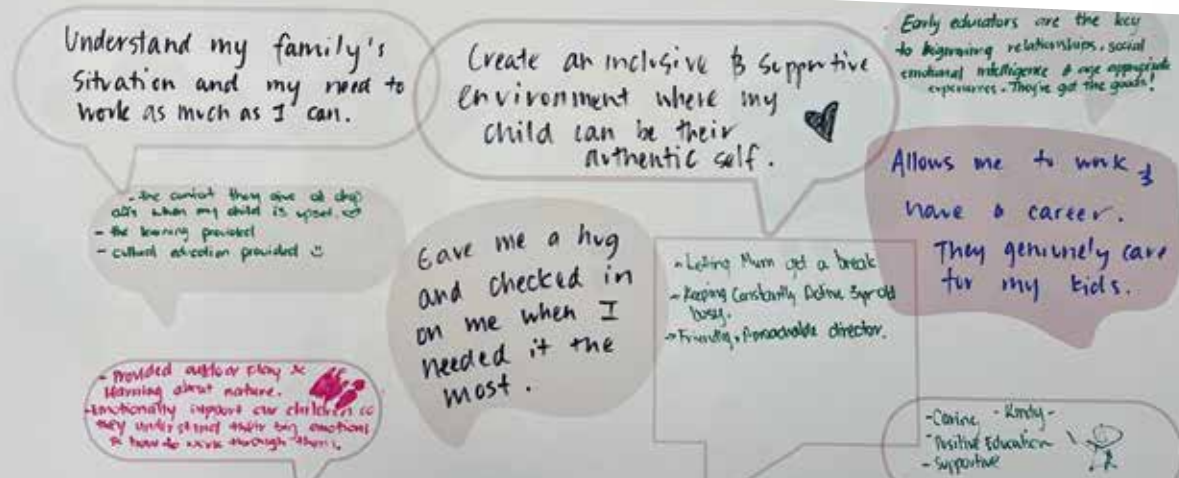
- Centre assessments in Emerald and Blackwater
- A regional childcare survey with 243 responses
- Community Childcare Chats engaging families and educators
- A four-part webinar series to support staffing and workforce planning
- Review of local certificate delivery and upskilling options
- One-on-one workforce planning support

Next steps

These activities are helping to determine local needs and potential solutions. A second stage is being considered, which may include tailored community strategies and international workforce recruitment, subject to resourcing.

Community input has been central to shaping long-term, locally appropriate investment in early childhood education and care across the region.

What local families shared about the positive impact educators have had on their children and families.



ACTION 6 Capital Investment

Status: Ongoing

Park upgrades in Blackwater (Dempsey Park) and Emerald (Devonport Street) are included in Council's 2025–26 capital budget, reflecting targeted investment in areas of highest need.

Additionally, meetings were held with Blackwater Town Centre owners to discuss potential improvements and options to extend trading hours.

ACTION 7 Investment Incentives

Status: Completed

As part of the WDAS, CHDC conducted a review of existing regional incentives, including CHRC's Regional Economic Development Incentives and rates on non-principal places of residence, to identify ways to better support property development. Feedback from the Build 12 in 12 applications was provided to CHRC for consideration.

In December 2024, Council released a revised Economic Stimulus Framework introducing Stream 5, which reimburses development application fees and infrastructure charges for long-term residential accommodation. The program aims to reduce upfront costs and encourage residential development aligned with regional growth goals.

ACTION 8 Fairer Airfares

Status: Ongoing

CHDC has engaged regularly with Qantas, the Federal Member for Flynn, and other key stakeholders to discuss fare discounts, flight availability, and the region's inclusion in the Qantas Resident Fares program. Discussions have also covered the implications of the new E190 fleet, sustainable aviation fuel initiatives, and regional education support.

To reinforce advocacy efforts, CHDC developed a position paper calling for more affordable airfares and improved access to regional subsidy schemes for Central Highlands residents.

The position paper highlights the essential role of Emerald Airport in workforce retention, healthcare access, and economic development. The publication continues to guide CHDC's advocacy as efforts progress to secure fairer airfares for residents and ensure reliable, equitable regional air services.

Read the position paper here:



ACTION 9 Talent Attraction

Status: Ongoing

To address local workforce shortages, CHDC launched a talent attraction campaign, combining regional awareness with targeted industry promotion to position the Central Highlands as a desirable place to live and work.

In April 2024, CHDC engaged marketing specialist Neon Logic to consult with local businesses and industry representatives through focus groups and surveys. These insights shaped the *Smart Move* campaign, which promotes hard-to-fill roles and the lifestyle benefits of the region.

Filmed on location and featuring real residents, the campaign focuses on sectors critical to workforce growth, including health, education, childcare, and construction. It launched in October 2024, with paid advertising running for two months across multiple platforms. During this period, it generated over 40,000 online clicks and 425,000 video impressions.

To maintain momentum, supporting materials continue to be distributed throughout the community, and an online employer toolkit is available to help businesses attract candidates.

Watch the campaign videos here:



ACTION 10 Small Business Friendly

Status: Ongoing

Council has undertaken an initial review of the Small Business Friendly Program, a charter focused on improving interactions, transactions, and overall support. Further assessment is required before progressing.

ACTION 11 Regional Build-to-Rent

Status: Investigated

Land identified through Action 2 and EOIs from Action 3 were assessed for a regional build-to-rent scheme. However, the model was deemed not feasible for the Central Highlands region at this point in time.

ACTION 12 Shutdown Coordination

Status: Investigated

The WDAS recommended creating a shutdown coordination calendar. Industry has held initial discussions with additional engagement and resources needed to advance this initiative.

ACTION 13 Accommodation Management

Status: Investigated

CHDC sees value in developing a real-time occupancy tracker for mining accommodation to improve efficiency and free up alternative in-town motels and hotels. Industry has been engaged in this discussion. However, additional resources are needed to advance this initiative.

ACTION 14 Fit-for-Purpose Accommodation

Status: Completed

CHDC has briefed Council and industry on the need for fit-for-purpose accommodation across the region. This has included industry accommodation, modern methods of construction, major property holder engagement, Council land assessment optionality and concierge service for potential developers.

ACTION 15 Move to More Campaign

Status: Priority

As a member of the Regional Activators Alliance through the Regional Australia Institute, CHDC is assessing opportunities for the Central Highlands to join the Move to More campaign. Potential benefits and investment requirements will be explored in line with budget considerations.

ACTION 16 Community Support

Status: Ongoing

CHDC continues to support access to funding opportunities through its Grant Finder portal, which lists over 2,000 grants for local businesses and community groups. Efforts are ongoing to identify and communicate relevant opportunities and encourage collaboration between major employers and community organisations.

For full details and future updates, visit *visit* chdc.com.au.