

Country migration doubles

JACINTA CANTATORE

City-siders seeking a sea or tree change have moved to the regions in droves, the South West just one of many regions around the country welcoming new residents.

But the move to the regions hasn't flooded the job market and job vacancies remain high, with regional WA seeing an almost 20 per cent increase in advertised vacancies at the end of last year compared to December 2020.

Migration to regional areas in the same period more than doubled, according to the latest Regional Movers Index.

The index — formed by the Regional Australia Institute and Commonwealth Bank — tracks movements between capital cities and regional

areas. RAI chief economist and acting CEO Dr Kim Houghton said quarterly migration from capitals to regional areas during 2020 and 2021 was about 15 per cent higher than during the two years prior.

"At the same time, more people who have been living in regional Australia have chosen to stay there," Dr Houghton said.

"With two years of the index we can now clearly see the positive impact that COVID has had on people seeking a regional lifestyle.

"Many areas experiencing growth were inland towns.

"It looks like the pandemic is changing some long-established movement paths, which is a good sign for more balanced population growth across Australia in future."

Region's housing

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If you take a drive through Bunbury, Australind, Eaton, Dalyellup or Busselton, the stand-out feature is the sheer quantity of houses under construction.

These areas are in the middle of a building boom that shows no signs of slowing.

After a quiet five years on the South West front, the region has become a "buyer's frenzy", kicked off 12-18 months ago thanks to State and Federal government grants which added \$55,000 to first-homebuyers' pockets.

As many South West residents returned home from overseas or interstate and more people started working remotely, the appeal of the big smoke dwindled.

Long-established estates such as Kingston, Treendale, Millbridge, Flynnwood and Dalyellup, or further south in Vasse Newtown and Broadwater Farm, have become a hive of building activity. But among this activity developers have noticed a surprising new trend.

No longer just the sprouting ground for first-homebuyers looking to put down sapling roots — these estates have become the target for existing homeowners to buy or build a forever home that ticks all the boxes of a COVID-adaptive lifestyle.

Joint general manager of the

JWH Group, Jay Walter, said the South West in particular has had an increase in residential home building.

Parent company of Plunkett Homes, WA Country Builders and the Rural Building Company, JWH has builds in progress across the region's estates.

"Prior to COVID, WA had seen a pretty depressed housing market for about five years, with worsening levels of building activity and established house prices either dropping or experiencing little positive movement," Mr Walter said.

"This led to a slowdown in the stages of developments as the industry was wary of oversupply which would put further pressure on the established house market."

But the market came out of this hibernation with a bang when people began spending more time at home. "This was initially triggered by COVID, with people wanting to move to the regions and away from larger cities," Mr Walter said.

"They'd seen they could work from home, but could now get a better lifestyle.

"We've seen many people return to WA from overseas and interstate, but I also think over the last couple of years we've really cemented globally how great a place WA is to live, especially if they're looking to start and raise a family."

Mr Walter said no one really an-

icipated the huge uptake of home-buyer grants. "I think when they first announced the stimulus, both the State and Federal governments never expected this level of take-up, and then the butterfly effect it would create in both the new and established housing markets," he said.

"The State and Federal stimulus then set off a buyer's frenzy, and now over 12 months since the stimulus finished we've continued to see strong interest in building in the regions."

Ardross Group sales executive John Waring has been with the Millbridge Estate development since its inception in 2003 and said demand was outstripping supply.

"I think a portion of the increase was definitely expected, but with the \$55,000 in grants for the first-homebuyer the supply chain could not keep up with the demand," Mr Waring said.

A shortage of titled, build-ready land in turn put pressure on the established-house market.

"Existing housing started to get taken up quite quickly, again very much a supply-and-demand market, but we probably didn't expect to see the established house prices rising as quickly as they have," he said.

Mr Waring said he'd been surprised at not just the amount of homes being built but who was building them. "We were really a first-homebuyers' market for the



Protect home sharing in Bunbury

The WA government is considering a proposal for the most restrictive rules for short-term rental accommodation across Australia.

This could mean:

- More expensive trips and family holidays
- Fellow Western Australians who share their homes to make ends meet and achieve financial independence will be worse off
- Local businesses will lose out on valuable tourism dollars, costing local jobs

Hundreds of thousands of Western Australians travel on Airbnb every year around the state for work, holidays, family gatherings, FIFO arrangements, and medical care.

Four in five West Australians surveyed say short-term rentals make it easier to travel within WA, and 90 per cent say it helps make their holidays more affordable.

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boom in full swing

past few years, but now we are seeing less first-homebuyers and more second-homebuyers," he said.

"As people started to spend more time at home at the start of the pandemic, people who already owned a home wanted to buy or build something more suited to spending quality time at home."

However, this spike in demand has been difficult to keep up with.

Worker and material shortages coupled with rising construction costs have been huge factors in slower build times. Global shortages have pushed steel and timber prices to record highs.

"Construction times were blowing out to 18 months, the pressure has eased somewhat and some of the local builders are now bringing those times back into a respectable 45-week build time," Mr Waring said.

But workforce shortages were being felt long before COVID hit. Mr Waring said many tradies — cabinet makers in particular — had been lured up north to the mines.

Over at JWH headquarters Mr Walter has felt the same pinch, expressing hope, like many in the industry, that the border opening will ease the skills shortage.

Rising materials costs and a shortage of workers has flowed through to the consumer, triggering a price increase of about 20 per cent — not for the land, but for the build.



John Waring at Millbridge Estate.
Picture: Jacinta Cantatore

Know the signs before a bushfire strikes.

The Australian Warning System is now being used for bushfires.



ADVICE

Be aware and keep up to date.



WATCH AND ACT

You need to leave or get ready to defend – do not wait and see.



EMERGENCY WARNING

You are in danger and need to take immediate action to survive.



GOVERNMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

DFES

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