



12 Ouyen

Prepared by Dr Robyn Eversole, Program Director, Regional Development, RMIT University, Hamilton

Introduction

Ouyen was selected for inclusion in the 1988 small towns study as an example of a town with a dry-farm rural base. It was also noted at the time that Ouyen was an important rural service centre. Despite some significant changes in the interim, Ouyen expects to continue to be an important service centre because of its strategic location, at the intersection of two major highways and some distance from major centres such as Mildura, about 100 kilometres to the north. While dryland agriculture is a smaller employer now than in 1987, it continues to underpin the town's economy.

Ouyen's dry and hot climate, its isolation, and the prevalence of Mallee trees with their hard-to-remove root systems meant that farming populations did not settle this region until the twentieth century. This northern Mallee area is still very much at the margins of intensive farming, and is dependent on scarce rainfall; nevertheless, the land is very productive when the rainfall arrives. The particular conditions of Mallee farming have required farmers to be flexible and adaptable. These conditions have also meant that unlike many other regions of Victoria, the northern Mallee farm sector has seen few new entrants in the past two decades, neither hobby farmers nor corporate farms in any significant

quantity. Rather, the farm sector primarily comprises farms owned by families with longstanding ties to the region who answer the economic imperative to grow their farms by buying out neighbours.

A preliminary look at the population numbers of Ouyen township since the 1980s would suggest a town in decline, a town that has lost nearly a quarter of its population in this twenty-year period. Yet a visit to the town paints a different, more complex picture. Ouyen, like the family farm sector which sustains it, has survived. In the past two decades, it has lost some important resources and gained others. While many gains have been due to the efforts of the district's residents—both long term and newcomers—there are serious concerns about the limits to which the local volunteer workforce can be pushed, and the real limits of community members' influence over policy decisions that affect them deeply.

Indeed, Ouyen's story reveals the inspiration and the contradiction of the Victorian Government's current philosophy of small town self reliance. There is abundant evidence of best practice in community-based small town self reliance in Ouyen's streetscapes, festivals, strong local retail sector, dedicated volunteer base, success

in attracting key infrastructure, and dynamic local progress association, Ouyen Inc. Conversely, the limitations to what small communities can do for themselves is also evident, from the town's powerlessness in terms of the perceived threat of a toxic waste dump at Hattah, its loss of professionals, the decrease in key services such as maternal and child health, the lack of elected representation in local government, and the loss of organisations and retail shops in smaller surrounding towns. The contradictions in government policies that curtail the amount of influence such communities can actually have over their future is also evident.



Ouyen's role, 1987–2005

Ouyen remains an important service centre for the northern Mallee wheat growing area. While farms have grown and more people are working off-farm, Ouyen continues as a dryland farming service centre. Its strategic position at the intersection of the Calder Highway (linking Melbourne and Mildura) and the Mallee Highway (linking Adelaide and Sydney) means it enjoys considerable through traffic. Efforts have been made to beautify the main street and the retail centre remains strong with the addition of two independent supermarkets, cafes, beauty shops, and an assortment of stores selling items such as hardware,

gifts, appliances and clothing. Ouyen was described recently as a 'compact, busy small town' and 'a transport and service centre for a vast area occupied by agricultural and pastoral properties' (*Ouyen urban design advice*).

Ouyen's role within local government structures has changed significantly since the last study. Ouyen was formerly the major centre in the Shire of Walpeup, which included the smaller towns of Walpeup, Murrayville and Underbool. During the Victorian local government amalgamations of the mid-1990s, the Shire of Walpeup joined with the Shire of Mildura and the City of Mildura

on 20 January 1995 to form the current Mildura Rural City. It covers an area of 22,330 square kilometres, about twice the area of the former Walpeup Shire, and is geographically the largest local government area in the state. It has a population of approximately 50,000 people according to 2001 Census figures, about 14 times the population of the former Shire of Walpeup.

According to 2001 Census figures, Ouyen represents only about 2.4 per cent of the total municipal population. The town has no locally based local government representative; the nearest councillor is based in Underbool.

Figure 12.1 Location of Ouyen



Source: Department of Sustainability and Environment



The gap left by elected local government representation has been filled by a voluntary committee, Ouyen Inc., established in 1996 as a community advisory council. Unlike the current all male Mildura Rural City Council, Ouyen Inc. comprises both women and men who organise festivals to promote the town, seek funding, prepare government submissions and liaise with council.

The combination of council amalgamation and the regionalisation of services such as electricity and the railways since the 1980s has meant the loss of some professional positions and associated population from Ouyen. At the same time, Ouyen residents have continued to receive key services and have enjoyed some important infrastructure developments. The Mildura Rural City maintains a service centre in Ouyen that provides a range of government funded services including an impressive multipurpose health service. Many of these services serve a large catchment surrounding Ouyen including Murrayville and Underbool to the west, and Patchewollock, Tempy and Speed to the south.

Population levels and trends

A smaller population

The population of Ouyen and its surrounding smaller towns of the former Shire of Walpeup has been in decline over the past two decades, a trend that was noted in the 1988 study, and which has continued through to the most recent census (2001). The populations of Ouyen and Murrayville decreased by about one-quarter between 1981 and 2001; Underbool and Walpeup experienced a smaller decline. Interestingly, Walpeup's population gain between 1996 and 2001 is attributed to an increase in funding allocated to its agricultural research station (Table 12.1).

The declining population in Ouyen and its surrounding catchment is in interesting contrast to the larger pattern seen in major rural towns throughout the municipality. While Ouyen's population declined by more than 24 per cent between 1981 and 2001, Merbein's population increased by about 5 per cent, Red Cliffs grew by more than 9 per cent, and Irymple's population nearly doubled. Not surprisingly, Mildura, the municipality's major urban centre, also grew significantly (Table 12.2). Those towns demonstrating growth benefit from their proximity to Mildura and from their location in irrigated horticultural areas.

Because Ouyen and its catchment area is closely tied to the rural dryland economy in a low rainfall area, the tendency towards population decline (also found in neighbouring shires without large urban centres during the same twenty-year period) is shared. West Wimmera, for example, experienced a population decline of 25.8 per cent, Hindmarsh saw its population decline by 20.3 per cent, Yarriambiack's population declined by 23.3 per cent, and Buloke's population declined by 29.4 per cent.

Reasons for the population decrease include larger farm size over time, fewer farms, and fewer people working on-farm; the draw of better jobs and higher education in urban areas; loss of jobs with the regionalisation of services away from Ouyen; and natural decrease. For those who move away from Ouyen, many go to larger regional centres such as Echuca and Bendigo or Mildura and Swan Hill, not to metropolitan areas.



Table 12.1 Population levels and change, Ouyen and surrounding localities, former Shire of Walpeup, 1981–2001

Locality	Number of residents					Total change in period %			
	1981	1986	1991	1996	2001	1981–91	1986–96	1991–2001	1981–2001
Ouyen	1,527	1,503	1,337	1,251	1,157	-12.4	-16.8	-13.5	-24.2
Murrayville	313	296	304	236	233	-2.9	-20.3	-23.4	-25.6
Underbool	274	276	268	233	227	-2.2	-15.6	-15.3	-17.2
Walpeup	133	126	126	112	117	-5.3	-11.1	-7.1	-12.0

Source: Department of Sustainability and Environment, Towns in Time data.

Table 12.2 Population levels and change, Ouyen and other localities, present Mildura Rural City, 1981–2001

Locality	Number of residents					Total change in period %			
	1981	1986	1991	1981	1986	1981–91	1981	1986	1981–2001
Ouyen	1,527	1,503	1,337	1,251	1,157	-12.4	-16.8	-13.5	-24.2
Merbein	1,735	1,750	1,776	1,736	1,824	+2.4	-0.8	+2.7	+5.1
Irymple	726	876	969	1,095	1,436	+33.5	+25.0	+48.2	+97.8
Red Cliffs	2,409	2,450	2,581	2,553	2,636	+7.1	+4.2	+2.1	+9.4
Mildura	16,837	20,512	23,176	24,142	26,626	+37.7	+17.7	+14.9	+58.1

Source: Department of Sustainability and Environment, Towns in Time data.

While most census data reveals a decrease in Ouyen’s population over time, there are two important caveats:

1) A smaller population is not necessarily reflected in empty housing stock. As one resident observed, ‘You look around Ouyen, there are no empty houses’. Full housing stock and even new home construction may contribute to an impression that the population is not decreasing, yet there may be fewer people per house than in the past.

2) Considering population numbers for Ouyen alone can be misleading, because these figures do not take into account the population living outside town boundaries. Ouyen provides services to a much wider catchment that includes smaller towns such as Tempy and Patchewollock and the populations living outside these towns. The local health service, for example, estimates a population of about 2,700 for the catchment it serves, which stretches to Murrayville and across to Manangatang.



An ageing population...

The age structure of Ouyen reveals that between 1981 and 2001, there was a significant decline in the number of young people in the 0–17 and in the 18–34 years age brackets, with each declining by about half (Table 12.3). The 1988 study observed that Ouyen has an ‘ageing’ population, and this appears to have continued.

Over time, considerably fewer people under 35 years old are living in Ouyen, suggesting that there are fewer families with children and/or fewer children per family. This is reflected in the imminent loss of one of the town’s two primary schools. There are currently 139 students at the Ouyen state primary school, but only a handful at the Catholic primary school, which is planning to close. This past year has also seen fewer children entering kindergarten, only 14 compared with an average of about 20 per year in previous years. Together with a large cohort of students in Year 6 this year, this figure indicates that Ouyen’s primary school numbers are set to decrease.

Walpeup, Underbool and Tempy also have small primary schools.

Most young people remain in Ouyen to study throughout secondary school; there is not a strong pattern of secondary school students being sent away to boarding school. The Ouyen secondary school (Years 7–12) has an excellent reputation. About 200 students are currently enrolled, with roughly half living in Ouyen and half being bussed in from up to 60 kilometres away. This figure is down from about 280 students in the early 1980s, reflecting the loss of families as various jobs in railways, banks, electricity and the like left Ouyen.

The loss of young people is most apparent at post-secondary level, where the typical trend of young people moving away from rural towns for education, work and other opportunities is evident. More young people go away to university than was the case in the 1980s. Others go away to access a greater range of apprenticeship, training, and employment opportunities than is available in a town the size of Ouyen.

At the same time, there are fewer on-farm opportunities; as one local resident commented: ‘it’s not the farmer and two sons anymore...the profits are not there to keep them there’. While there are some local work and apprenticeship opportunities for young people who want to stay in the area, they are limited in number and choice.

Encouragingly, the population aged 35–59 years (mature working age people) has also shown a slight increase over the period, as has the population aged 60–74 years. The most significant growth in Ouyen’s population has been the near doubling of the population aged 75 years and over, suggesting that more people are living longer and/or that there are good facilities enabling older people to remain in and/or relocate to Ouyen. Indeed, Ouyen has a range of facilities and services catering to the aged, including an aged care hostel (Pattinson House) and nursing home facilities at the local hospital.

Table 12.3 Age structure of Ouyen’s population, 1981–2001

Age (years)	1981		1986		1991		1996		2001		Change 1981–2001 %
	No.	%									
0–17	525	34.4	449	29.8	368	27.6	328	26.3	272	23.4	–48.2
18–34	397	26.0	378	25.1	284	21.2	238	18.9	171	14.7	–56.9
35–59	380	24.8	409	27.2	391	29.3	401	32.0	407	35.2	7.1
60–74	153	10.0	163	10.8	181	13.6	170	13.6	168	14.5	9.8
75+	72	4.7	105	7.0	113	8.4	115	9.2	140	12.1	94.4

Source: Department of Sustainability and Environment, *Towns in Time* data.



...but not a static population

While the older age groups have shown greater growth in Ouyen, the term 'ageing population' does not adequately describe the complex population trends in Ouyen. Long term locals are moving into progressively higher age categories but the population is not static; people are also moving into the town. These newcomers are sometimes, although not always, in the older age groups. The main factors drawing population to Ouyen are existing family ties, relatively inexpensive housing and the perception that Ouyen's quality services for the aged make it 'a good place to retire to'.

Table 12.3 shows that growth in the older age cohorts seems to indicate not just an ageing of the existing population, but the tendency for the town of Ouyen to attract population in the older cohorts. Locals observe that 'there's been quite a few retirees move to town'. These people come from the smaller towns and properties of the district and from urban areas such as Mildura. Ouyen's attractions for this cohort include a safer environment than the cities, less expensive housing, the existence of low care and high care facilities for the aged, and services such as a community bus and community car to Mildura.

Ouyen has also had in-migration of families and individuals in younger age cohorts. The hypothesis of many locals interviewed was that these people have been attracted by inexpensive housing and/or by the lack of work opportunities (for those who do not wish to work). These 'itinerant' populations are not generally well accepted by longer term local residents. While criticised for their lack of involvement in the community, it is questionable how many opportunities for involvement would be open to these newcomers, particularly if they do not fit easily into a local community culture dominated by involvement in sport. We thus see apparent marginalisation of certain newcomer families, which may further encourage newcomers to leave.

In-migration to this region is limited. The nature of the local farming sector has meant that people generally do not move into the area to farm. Some come to run businesses in Ouyen or to take up skilled employment, yet the in-migration of skilled/professional workers is often made difficult by the unavailability of an appropriate job for other members of the newcomer's family.



Industry and employment patterns

Labour force and employment overview

The data demonstrate declining labour force participation over the twenty-year period (Table 12.4), which can be linked to both the smaller number of people living in Ouyen and the larger proportion of older people retired from the labour force. At the same time, anecdotal evidence suggests that the labour force participation of women has increased, influenced by the need for a second household income and an increase in the number of women working off-farm.

Ouyen had a resident labour force of 536 persons in 2001, considerably smaller than the 1981 resident labour force of 675 persons—a decline of about one-fifth in twenty years, and closely matching the overall level of population decrease. Of the 536 people in the labour force in 2001, 519 were employed and 17 were unemployed, equating to an unemployment rate (3.1 per cent) similar to that seen in the early 1980s. The definition of employment is problematic, because employment does not only reflect full time work; the definition can thus serve to disguise underemployment. Part time and casual work are clear features of Ouyen's employment landscape.

A key change since the 1980s is the loss of jobs in some sectors. Job losses include significantly fewer people being employed on-farm (with overall agricultural employment decreasing by about half between 1981 and

2001) and the loss of professional and technical jobs. The latter is associated with the regionalisation of services such as railways, telecommunications, banking and local government and their movement away from Ouyen to larger centres such as Mildura.

Three features characterise the current employment landscape in Ouyen: the limited range of jobs available, particularly for young people and women wishing to work part time; the strong seasonal demand for workers associated with agriculture; and difficulties attracting skilled workers to fill specific vacancies.

Table 12.4 Labour force status of Ouyen's resident labour force, 1981–2001

	1981	1986	1991	1996	2001
Employed (no.)	651	633	555	529	519
Unemployed (no.)	24	52	52	37	17
Unemployment rate (%)	3.6	7.6	8.6	6.5	3.1
Labour force participation rate (%)	62.0	60.8	59.5	57.8	58.3

Source: Department of Sustainability and Environment, *Towns in Time* data.



Employment in key industry sectors

Table 12.5 shows that Ouyen residents work in various industries, with most working locally either in town or on surrounding agricultural properties. The largest category of employment for Ouyen residents in 2001 was retail trade (19 per cent), a change from the 1980s when agriculture was the largest employer (Table 12.6). Agriculture employed 14 per cent of employed residents in 2001. Health and community services (including the local hospital/multipurpose health service) are another major employer (13 per cent), as are the local schools (more than 8 per cent).

Data from Ouyen for the period 1981–2001 particularly suggest declining employment in utilities, transport, and agriculture, with employment in each falling by about half. This decline is largely due to the centralisation of services (loss of railway jobs) and a continuing trend of fewer jobs in agriculture linked to increased efficiency and decreasing profits over time. Residents noted that farms now support fewer family members, with an associated increase in the need for off-farm employment.

The farm sector is still central to the local economy. It continues to be characterised primarily by family owned enterprises, with only a couple of properties being bought by corporations in the last few years. The trend of farm amalgamation continues, with fewer and bigger farms than in the past, but with little entry of outsiders into the sector. This is not a region that attracts lifestyle farmers or dryland farmers from elsewhere. Rather, as some families leave, neighbours buy their properties.

Another ongoing trend is that with increasing costs of production, each farm now supports fewer family members in full time employment. Young people are more likely to leave, and women take additional work off-farm. A recent change is the replacement of open channels with piped water, which may provide important opportunities for local farms.

Despite an expressed concern in the 1988 study that the retail sector would diminish due to a smaller population and loss of local spending to Mildura, this has not happened. In fact, retail trade demonstrated a slight growth in employment over the period, and in 2001, was the largest employer of Ouyen residents. Ouyen now enjoys the services of two locally owned supermarkets and has a prosperous looking retail centre that includes a range of businesses, most of which are locally owned.

Local business people attribute the success of Ouyen's retail sector to three factors:

1. 'buying groups' that enable local businesses to offer competitive prices
2. the high level of service offered by local businesses
3. the awareness among locals that by shopping locally, they are helping their town to survive.

Ouyen also serves as the shopping centre for the smaller towns in its area 'from Patchewollock to Underbool', meaning that it draws its retail trade from a much larger catchment than simply from Ouyen itself, acting as a mini sponge city for retail trade. Gains for the Ouyen retail sector may, however, be at the expense of smaller centres.

While employment in health and community services has decreased over the period, this sector remains a strong employer (13 per cent of the employed population in 2001). This sector also displays good potential for future growth, particularly in the area of aged care. Ouyen is recognised as providing good services and facilities for the aged, and its population trends include an inflow of retirees. Services for a retirement aged population provide employment, not just in health and community services, but in other areas such as the trades. Growth in areas such as personal services and recreational services (Table 12.7) may also indicate more opportunities for providing services to a retired population. A 'retirement industry' may be becoming part of Ouyen's more diversified economic base.

Tourism also has a role. Even though it is only a minor industry, there has been significant growth in employment in the accommodation, cafes and restaurants sector, which is closely linked to tourism. This sector employed 40 Ouyen residents in 2001 (7.8 per cent of the employed population), an increase of 29 per cent since 1981. Though not a popular tourist destination, Ouyen's central location to several national parks (the Murray Sunset National Park, the Hattah-Kulkyne National Park and the Wyperfeld National Park) and at the juncture of two major highways means it enjoys considerable through traffic. Ouyen has three motels and a caravan park in addition to the local hotel. Tour buses are also often evident, enjoying short stays and rest stops. While most tourism involves a brief stopover, anecdotal evidence suggests an increasing trend



among caravans to stay more than one night. The town's residents have also attempted to increase tourism by undertaking a StreetLife project and running events such as the Great Vanilla Slice Triumph.

A new industry starting up in the area is mineral sands mining. Mining at Kulwin, about 28 kilometres east of Ouyen (between Ouyen and Manangatang),

is currently at the pre-feasibility study phase, with a test pit recently completed. Other deposits are located south-east of Ouyen. The project is expected to produce between 200,000 and 280,000 tonnes of heavy mineral concentrate with a mine life of more than 10 years. The potential for mineral sands mining in the area may help to provide a more diverse industry base. While Ouyen

had hoped to attract the mineral sands separation plant now being constructed in Hamilton, the mining itself is raising expectations. Local people are already expressing interest in the potential for employment in this industry.

Table 12.5 Major employment categories of Ouyen residents, 2001

	Number employed 2001	% of employed 2001
Retail trade	99	19.0
Agriculture, forestry & fishing	73	14.0
Health & community services	67	13.0
Education	45	8.6
Accommodation, cafes & restaurants	40	7.8
Transport & storage	34	6.6
Construction	31	6.0
Government administration	22	4.2
Wholesale trade	20	3.8
Personal & other services	19	3.6
Manufacturing	16	3.0
Electricity, gas & water supply	16	3.0

Source: Department of Sustainability and Environment, Towns in Time data.



Table 12.6 Employment of Ouyen residents in key industries, 1981–2001

	1981	1986	1991	1996	2001	% change 1981–2001
Agriculture, forestry & fishing	152	103	93	76	73	–52.0
Retail trade	97	94	85	82	99	2.1
Health & community services	83	83	82	68	67	–19.3
Transport & storage	68	82	59	30	34	–50.0
Education	45	61	56	50	45	0.0
Construction	42	50	31	30	31	–26.2
Electricity, gas & water supply	33	27	14	10	16	–51.5
Accommodation, cafes & restaurants	31	32	30	36	40	29.0
Wholesale trade	28	14	14	30	20	–28.6
Government administration	22	35	19	51	22	0.0

Source: Department of Sustainability and Environment, Towns in Time data.

Table 12.7 Employment of Ouyen residents in growth industries

	1981	1986	1991	1996	2001	% change 1981–2001
Property & business services	3	4	7	15	12	300.0
Personal & other services	9	14	19	16	19	111.0
Cultural & recreational services	3	3	8	3	6	100.0
Manufacturing	9	3	8	3	16	77.8

Source: Department of Sustainability and Environment, Towns in Time data.



Employment Issues

There is a limited range of jobs available in Ouyen, with most involving casual work in retail shops, supermarkets or cafes. Traineeships for young people are available, but are few in number. There is a strong demand for office jobs, particularly among women, yet few vacancies exist. In contrast, there are skills gaps in various trades and professions, where vacancies are difficult or impossible to fill. The key issue is that if the resident population does not already have the requisite skills, it is difficult to attract outsiders to move into the area. This issue is particularly evident in skilled jobs that are primarily seasonal or occasional such as tractor and header drivers and casual replacement teachers, all of which are particularly difficult to fill.

Recruiting skilled workers such as teachers and health workers from outside the area is difficult for a number of reasons. People from outside the area simply do not apply for vacancies in a country town. Even when they do apply, there are other issues such as the availability and suitability of employment for spouses. In a small labour market such as Ouyen, it is very difficult to match the employment needs of both a husband and a wife who are contemplating a move to the area. Another issue in recruiting skilled workers is the unavailability of land for house construction.

Work for young people and others without specialised skills is also limited. Jobs in agriculture increasingly require specialised skills, yet the cost of training means it is difficult to attract viable numbers for courses. Many women seek part time work to fit with school

hours, meaning that flexible part time jobs are in high demand. A lot of mothers work part time in casual retail or hospitality jobs. The number of long term unemployed people in the area has decreased due to government employment subsidies, but there is a small core (less than a dozen) of long term unemployed people.

Because options for youth who want to work in Ouyen are mainly limited to casual retail/café work, odd jobs, or the handful of available apprenticeships and traineeships, about 80–90 per cent of students who finish Year 12 leave the area, often to study at university or to undertake apprenticeships and traineeships in larger centres. Few return. The local hospital has a new initiative to assist local youth who want to go away to study, providing help with fees in exchange for agreeing to return to work locally.

Services and facilities

Ouyen continues to function as an important service centre for its surrounding district. While its location 100 kilometres from the local government seat has meant that some government funded services have moved to Mildura, Ouyen has nevertheless retained an important service role for the smaller towns and agricultural properties of the area, from Murrayville in the west to Manangatang in the east, and south to smaller towns such as Patchewollock, Tempy and Speed. It is particularly known for its excellent services for the aged, with one 81-year old resident stating that ‘the older people of this town are very well looked after’.

While some services have been lost or reduced over the period, others have been added. Important new facilities and infrastructure developments have also been provided. Even though some important service gaps are apparent, Ouyen has demonstrated a remarkable ability to retain and develop an impressive array of services for the local population, much of which is due to the efforts of local residents themselves.

Many of the town’s main services and facilities are at least partly government funded, but there has been a significant change in the past two decades in how this funding is obtained. As one resident noted, ‘if you don’t have drivers that are prepared to write funding submissions... the funding doesn’t get there’. For Ouyen, the efforts of many community members have meant that the town has been able to tap into government support for key programs and infrastructure. However, this has come at considerable cost to the volunteer effort, drawing continually on the time and energy resources of a small pool of local volunteers.

Transport

The town’s public transport options have decreased over the period, with passenger trains no longer running. V/Line bus services are available with connections to Melbourne and Mildura, but under a very limited schedule. Most people rely on private cars for transport, and long distance travel is very much a part of life, particularly for those involved in sport. Ouyen now has a community car that provides a valuable service for elderly residents travelling to Mildura, and a community bus. A new private taxi company has just started in Ouyen.



Education

Ouyen has a pre-school, two primary schools and a secondary college. The Catholic primary school is set to close because of declining student numbers. Ouyen Primary School has 139 students, though numbers are expected to decline slightly with a smaller intake next year. Ouyen Secondary College has about 200 student in Years 7–12, drawing from a wide catchment up to 60 kilometres away.

The town now has a campus of Sunraysia Institute of TAFE, which was begun in the late 1990s. The TAFE offers general education courses, certificates in information technology, and other training opportunities such as agriculture-related courses. There is also a visiting agronomist to work with a small group of agricultural trainees.

Ouyen now also has a local office of the Mildura and District Education Council (MADEC), which was also established in the 1990s. In addition to employment assistance, MADEC offers recreational and lifestyle-related courses.

Health services

The Mallee Track Health and Community Service (MTH&CS) is a multipurpose health service serving a large catchment around Ouyen including Murrayville, Patchewollock, Tempy, Speed and Manangatang. It includes a high standard of services for the elderly (low care, high care, and other services), a hospital and various community health and support services (medical clinic, allied health, community link, child care, neighbourhood house and other services). There is only one resident

doctor at the hospital, which is an issue for emergency medicine. The hospital includes 20 nursing home beds and 6–8 acute care beds. The Pattinson House Hostel for the aged has 20 rooms, two of which are for respite care. Ouyen also has a range of visiting services through the MTH&CS, including visiting dental, psychiatric, pathology and chiropractor services.

Ouyen has a maternal and child health service, but because services in this area have been reduced, it is now necessary to make an advance appointment with the visiting nurse. No home visiting service is available. There is no home- or hospital-based childbirth support in Ouyen, so women must travel to Mildura to give birth. Another notable health service gap is in the area of mental health support services such as counselling. Overall, however, the range of services provided is impressive. Understandably, some areas of specialist health support areas are not available in Ouyen. One option to explore could be consultation with specialist doctors via video conferencing.

The Loddon Mallee Women's Health Service has been in Ouyen for eight years and provides support for women experiencing health issues such as mental health and family violence.

Recreation facilities

Ouyen's recreational facilities include Blackburn Park with the football club and trotting track; a swimming pool that is open from 1 November until 31 March; tennis courts; a golf course; basketball/netball; and other sporting facilities. The local football club, Ouyen United, has just finished constructing

new football clubrooms at Blackburn Park which opened in 2004. The town has access to a mobile library that opens on Thursdays. Internet access is available via the Mallee On-line project, via the TAFE campus (on the main street) and the community house. The Tin Shed has been established for youth activities, and the council offices include a meeting room. A refurbishment of the community theatre is in process and may provide a future venue for arts events.

Council services

The Mildura Rural City Council maintains a service centre in Ouyen. This centre answers enquiries and provides a range of basic local government services such as issuing permits, lodgement of town planning applications and providing other information to residents. It also serves as a VicRoads agency and provides office space for visiting professionals. The Ouyen regional saleyards were formerly managed by council but are now community managed via a board of management. The town has an attractive streetscape.

Key infrastructure

Important improvements have been made in key infrastructure in Ouyen in recent years. Most notably these include:

- piped water replacing open channel water service to farms
- a new water treatment plant in Ouyen that uses a low chemical micro filter system
- sewerage services in Ouyen
- broadband internet access in Ouyen, although not yet for agricultural properties outside Ouyen, despite the need.



Community organisations and activities

Community organisations

Ouyen has a large number of community organisations, demonstrating significant ‘community’ involvement. While somewhat limited in range, they are impressive in number and in the commitment of their members, and can be roughly classified roughly as:

- **sporting organisations**—by far the dominant type of community organisation in Ouyen, these include football and netball clubs (Ouyen United), cricket, lawn bowls, lawn tennis, gymnastics, harness racing, junior basketball and golf. A recent program at the primary school targeted ‘non-active’ children to encourage greater participation in sport. Despite the position sport holds in the local culture, some clubs are struggling with smaller membership bases
- **service and community support organisations**—including volunteer-run services such as the Country Fire Authority (CFA), the State Emergency Service (SES), meals on wheels, the hospital auxiliary, the St Vincent de Paul Society, and service clubs such as the Lions. These organisations are generally struggling because of the lack of volunteers; the local Red Cross has already closed. The SES encourages young people to get involved, but loses them when they leave town. The bulk of the work therefore falls on seven dedicated

members. While meals on wheels does not have enough volunteers to meet demand, young people are heavily involved in the CFA

- **churches**—Ouyen has the Catholic church, the combined Anglican/Uniting church (Central Mallee Co-operative Parish, formed in 1994), and an Assembly of God church. There is also a Lutheran church in Walpeup, which has a church-based Kids Club. While there are no church youth groups in Ouyen, there is a guild and a women’s fellowship group. Two of the three churches have resident clergy; the Catholic church has a visiting priest. The Ouyen Inter-church Council occasionally coordinates special events. Religious education is offered in the primary schools and run by volunteers
- **school organisations**—parents are often involved in school-based volunteer activities such as school councils, parents and friends groups and kindergarten/pre-school activities
- **arts organisations**—while conspicuous by their absence, Ouyen has a small brass band. An artists’ organisation, the Murray Mallee Outback Artists, was established in 2003 to encourage artists from various rural communities in the area including Ouyen. It is unclear to what extent, if any, Ouyen residents are involved. There are some quilters’ groups (including a day and evening group in Ouyen and a new group in Speed)

that are quite popular, providing social support for women particularly in isolated areas. Ouyen also had a theatre group which is currently in recess

- **other special interest community groups**—include groups such as the Country Women’s Association, the senior citizen’s club, and a Centacare dad’s group. A new Probus group has just been formed
- **community promotion and advocacy**—this role is filled primarily by Ouyen Inc., a dynamic group of local volunteers. Ouyen Inc. serves as an advisory group to the Mildura Rural City Council and supports a range of local initiatives to benefit the town
- **management groups**—include the Blackburn Park Committee of Management, the Mallee Lands Implementation Committee of the Catchment Management Authority (meets bi-monthly at Ouyen), boards of local organisations (such as the hospital) and volunteers who oversee the Local History Resource Centre and the Ouyen Cemetery
- **project-based groups**—coordinate specific events such as the Ouyen Farm Safety Expo and the Great Vanilla Slice Triumph.



Activities for children are primarily limited to sports such as basketball, netball, gymnastics and football. There is also a VicSwim program in the summer holidays. There are no local scout groups, and no church-based groups for children in Ouyen, but the Kids Club based in Walpeup is attended by some children from Ouyen. There are no arts groups or classes for primary school children, though one resident offers private music lessons.

The scope of activities for youth is similar, primarily sport. The Ouyen Secondary College places heavy emphasis on sport, but it also has an active debating team. Occasionally there are activities such as a blue light disco, with the Tin Shed youth centre providing a resource. There is a sense however that children and youth not involved in sport are at risk, simply because the community does not offer other channels for involvement.

Issues facing community organisations

Local residents are heavily involved in their community organisations. In addition, local people are likely to be involved in multiple organisations, which contributes toward a strong 'sense of community'. Community organisations provide valuable services to the town, valued opportunities for recreation and social interaction, and important personal support and friendship networks. They also aid communication and a sense of belonging among different community sectors. At the same time, community organisations face some important challenges:

- **volunteer workload and time issues**—community activities 'rely very heavily on volunteer input from the community' yet 'the majority of people are now working'. The result is that 'those busy people are now busier'. A single night in Ouyen may see several meetings scheduled concurrently. Increased need for paid work, high levels of expectations on volunteers, smaller populations to draw from, and the demands of travel (particularly for those living outside Ouyen itself) all contribute to time and workload pressures

- **external regulatory burdens on volunteers and volunteer organisations**—regulatory requirements imposed by government, characterised as 'red tape', can have debilitating effects on community organisations. This has diminished the ability of local groups to conduct fund raising, for instance, while the planned introduction of mandatory police checks currently threatens organisations' ability to attract and afford volunteer labour. In a town where 'everyone knows everyone', the informal involvement of locals (in junior sport, for example) is likely to be severely curtailed by such regulations. There are also issues around the current funding requirements for community organisations to access government funds, placing a large grant writing and administrative/reporting burden on local volunteers and adding to the workload and time issues already identified

- **survival and succession issues**—some community organisations have closed, others have amalgamated, and others comprise elderly volunteers who continue to maintain important services for the community, but who will not be able to continue to do so indefinitely. Amalgamation is one strategy for survival, but it creates access issues, for example, as rural sports clubs amalgamate, more travel is necessary and casual community involvement decreases when games are not held locally. Service and community support organisations seem to be taking a backseat to sporting organisations in many cases, leaving the former with a very small volunteer base and raising the question of whether the community will continue to have access to these services in future. A related issue involves the survival of successful events such as the Ouyen Farm Safety Expo. While this event has won a national Safety Council award, the volunteer organising committee is unable to hand it on to an established organisation. And while the government is willing to provide some funding for these kinds of events, the assumption is that volunteer labour will continue to be available to sustain such events into the future, an attitude that overlooks the time pressure on community volunteers, and the real value of their time.



Key changes, 1987–2005

Since the 1980s, Ouyen has shown itself to be a sustainable town. The challenges of heavy economic reliance on dryland agriculture in a drought-prone region, a diminishing and ageing population, and the loss of services through regionalisation and local council amalgamations would seem to have conspired against the town's viability. Yet Ouyen has done well, maintaining a significant core of local businesses, services and community activities. It has been able to do so largely because of the commitment of local people and because of its central location.

The key areas of change in Ouyen since the 1980s can be summarised as follows:

- With local government council amalgamations, Ouyen has a much smaller role. It has no directly elected local government representation although the town's interests are represented to the Mildura Rural City Council via the active voluntary community organisation, Ouyen, Inc.
- Ouyen's role as a service centre for its dryland agricultural district has not changed significantly, and the town remains strongly dependent on the fortunes of the farm sector.
- The town's population is smaller and older but it is an active community with a strong base of dedicated volunteers.
- There are moderate outflows and inflows of population. People moving into the town come from both smaller centres and/or properties in the district, and larger urban centres. Ouyen is attractive to retirees and low income people seeking inexpensive housing in Ouyen or surrounding towns. Population outflows include young families moving to regional centres such as Echuca and Mildura.
- There are fewer on-farm jobs and fewer family members employed on-farm. Costs of production have increased and farms have continued to get bigger. There have been significant changes in farming practice toward more 'conservation' farming. Piped water has replaced open channels, creating new opportunities.
- The retail sector has not declined as expected and is now a larger employer than agriculture. Most retail businesses are locally owned. Gains in the Ouyen retail sector may be at the expense of smaller centres.
- There are fewer professional jobs due to regionalisation of services.
- More women are in the labour force, influencing the recruitment of professionals and skilled tradespeople (when both spouses need a local job). There is a strong demand for flexible part time jobs from farm women.
- More young people are leaving to study at university and to access better training and employment opportunities.
- Mineral sands mining is a new industry in the area.
- The town retains an impressive variety of services. Services for the aged, in particular, are excellent.
- Recent important new infrastructure developments include sewerage, water treatment and broadband access.
- Because of a significant reliance on volunteer labour to support community services and community advocacy, there is a high risk of volunteer burnout.
- Increased levels of government red tape (such as accreditation, police clearances and regulations) create obstacles for volunteers and add further pressure on community services and organisations.
- While some community organisations are losing numbers or closing, many have survived and some are new. Amalgamation is a frequent survival strategy.
- There is a suggestion that women may be playing stronger leadership roles than in the past, though men still dominate top roles.



Current key issues

Many of the key issues identified for Ouyen are likely to resonate with other rural Australian communities, including the gap between rural realities and urban policy and the perceived powerlessness of rural residents who work hard to build their communities, yet have little or no say over policy decisions that directly affect them. Some of the key issues currently facing Ouyen are summarised below:

- Many residents demonstrate a high level of community involvement, but expectations on volunteers are also high. The risk of volunteer burnout is exacerbated by government expectations, funding protocols and population demographics. Many individuals (including elderly residents) are involved in multiple organisations and roles.
- The community's lack of political voice on key issues such as the toxic waste dump at Hattah, and their necessary reliance on volunteer advocates (often without specialised training), leads to a lack of control over key policy decisions that directly affect the community's future. Farmers and community organisations are vulnerable to increased levels of government 'red tape' over which they have no control. Though a vibrant 'self-help' community, Ouyen has little power to influence key policy decisions.
- Amalgamation of community organisations and services permits their survival, but creates access issues with, for example, community involvement in sport in the smaller centres being curtailed when games are no longer held locally. This can aggravate social isolation.
- There are only limited opportunities for social involvement for youth (and others) not involved in sport.
- The farm sector struggles in a marginal dryland environment, and farming is a less attractive option for the next generation. Farming can be very productive in the area but involves large effort and risk. Farms are getting larger and employing fewer people, including fewer family members. Long term environmental issues are generally placed in the 'too-hard' basket, although there have been some positive changes in farming practices. Piped water on-farm is now creating new potential for activities such as more intensive livestock farming.
- Population loss remains a concern. One of the town's two primary schools is closing; numbers at the state primary school have held reasonably steady but are expected to decline due to a small intake next year. Most youth remain for secondary schooling but then leave to seek greater opportunities. The population working on-farm is declining.
- While access to services is good, there are still some important gaps in maternal health services, mental health support, and access to specialist services.
- Housing availability and access to land for house construction is an issue.
- Ouyen is attractive to retirees and has good services and schools, but has difficulty attracting and integrating new residents. Opportunities for community involvement are limited and newcomers, particularly those on low incomes, appear to be marginalised and largely outside community life. Social support services are inadequate. And even when positions open for professionals and tradespeople, because there is a lack of appropriate employment opportunities for their spouses, many people do not come, or do not stay.

Locals expect Ouyen to continue its service centre role and expect that there will be a stronger demand on health services as the population continues to age. The number of farms will continue to decrease and the smaller surrounding towns will rely more heavily on Ouyen as their retail and service centre. Local people see this as a 'can-do' town with 'a vibrancy...that you don't see in other Mallee towns', but they are concerned about the pressures on volunteers and the implications of external policy decisions such as the location of a toxic waste dump at Hattah. Even though 'the toxic waste dump has received a universal thumbs down', locals feel that 'we don't have the voting power' to influence policy. Given the policy environments within which they must work, there is only so much a 'can-do' community can do.