

Building Defence Social Licence in the Perth South West Region



**PERTH
SOUTH WEST**
Metropolitan Alliance



DISCLAIMER

This report has been prepared by the Perth South West Metropolitan Alliance (the Alliance) as a record of findings from its recent visit to the United States. The primary purpose of the study tour was to gain insights into social licence dynamics and the relationship between local governments and the defence sector.

While the report outlines numerous initiatives reviewed during the visit and presents recommendations based on these observations, it is essential to note that these recommendations reflect only the views of the Alliance as to the programs that they would potentially be engaging in with the community. They do not necessarily represent the perspectives of individual member councils or other stakeholders involved.

The report aims to offer insights into the potential for certain initiatives within an Australian context, specifically in Western Australia. Recommendations are included as considerations only and should be evaluated by relevant lead agencies and other stakeholders. This document does not imply endorsement or policy direction from any tier of government.

It should also be noted that the Alliance received financial support from the Australian Submarine Agency (ASA) for certain engagements; however, the findings and recommendations of this report remain those of the Alliance alone. Although some recommendations go beyond ASA's original engagement parameters, the Alliance has chosen to identify additional opportunities within the defence, government and political landscape to address the potential social and economic impacts of the AUKUS agreement on the Perth South West region.

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INTRODUCTION

Australia's acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines represents one of the most significant strategic military shifts in the nation's history. The landmark trilateral security partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States, known as AUKUS, was announced in September 2021, with the primary objective being to strengthen security and defence cooperation between the three nations in response to the evolving geopolitical landscape of the Indo-Pacific region.

Under AUKUS, Australia is set to acquire nuclear-powered submarines as part of its broader defence strategy. This will make Australia the first non-nuclear weapons state to operate nuclear-powered submarines, highlighting the scale and significance of this acquisition. These submarines, which will be conventionally armed but nuclear-powered, are touted by Australian Defence officials to offer a considerable advantage in terms of range, endurance and stealth when compared to Australia's current fleet of Collins-class diesel-electric submarines. While conventional submarines have limited operational range and require regular surfacing for refuelling and recharging batteries, nuclear-powered submarines can remain submerged for months, enabling far greater strategic reach and deterrence capabilities.

Australia's acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines is set to occur in two phases. Initially, beginning around 2027, Australia will have rotational access to nuclear-powered submarines from the United Kingdom and United States, hosted at HMAS Stirling in Western Australia. By the early 2030s, Australia is expected to start building its own fleet of nuclear-powered submarines, marking a second major leap in the nation's maritime defence capabilities.

The acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines will enhance Australia's ability to integrate more deeply with the United Kingdom and United States' naval operations. AUKUS represents not just a procurement agreement but a deepening of defence and security ties among the three nations, including technology sharing, joint training and operational integration.

Submarine Rotational Force - West at HMAS Stirling

One of the immediate and tangible impacts of AUKUS will be the rotational deployment of nuclear-powered submarines from the United Kingdom and United States to HMAS Stirling, located on Garden Island near Perth, Western Australia. Known as the Submarine Rotational Force – West (SRF-West), this arrangement will see a rotational presence of one UK and up to four US nuclear-powered submarines at HMAS Stirling from 2027.

HMAS Stirling, Australia's largest naval base, is strategically positioned to support operations in the Indian Ocean and beyond. It will serve as a crucial hub for the deployment of allied nuclear-powered submarines, or Ship Submersible Nuclear (SSNs) in the Indo-Pacific, enabling greater operational flexibility and forward-deployed deterrence in the region. The presence of rotational SSNs at Stirling aims to significantly increase Australia's maritime defence capabilities while providing an opportunity for Australian personnel to train and familiarise themselves with the operations and maintenance of nuclear-powered submarines. It is also expected to enhance the integration of Australian, UK, and US naval operations, facilitating greater joint training exercises, operational cooperation and interoperability, ensuring that Australia is well prepared to operate its own SSNs by the early 2030s.

Infrastructure and Community Support for SRF-West

The rotational presence of nuclear-powered submarines at HMAS Stirling will require significant upgrades to both infrastructure and community support systems. Submarines require specialised facilities for maintenance, sustainment and crew support, which will necessitate investments in infrastructure at the base. The construction of new submarine berths, maintenance facilities and nuclear-specific handling capabilities is required to ensure the successful operation of SRF-West.

Equally important is the need for robust community engagement and support. The introduction of nuclear-powered submarines has raised concerns among segments of the public, particularly regarding environmental and safety issues, but also including questions regarding the necessity of the program. The ASA will need to focus on building social licence for the rotational submarine presence. This includes addressing public concerns, providing transparent information, and demonstrating the economic and strategic benefits of hosting SRF-West. Ensuring community support will be key to the long-term success of the submarine rotational force at HMAS Stirling.

Local Government Perspective

AUKUS is ultimately a commonwealth responsibility, but local government is set to play a critical role in its implementation. While there is some community concern—yet to be fully measured—the tight and relatively inflexible timeline for implementation necessitates proactive engagement with local governments and their communities. This approach will help ensure that AUKUS is rolled out in a way that minimises impacts on communities, the environment and businesses, while also creating opportunities for enhancement wherever possible.

It is important to note that neither the Alliance nor the community were part of the decision-making process leading to the Defence posturing in our region, for understandable national security and strategic reasons. However, as local government is the level of government closest to the people, the Alliance recognises its role in supporting the community through these changes. This involves helping the community to obtain answers to their questions and understand the rationale behind defence decisions; support incoming defence personnel and their families in establishing a new home; assist local businesses to leverage the economic opportunities created by defence growth; and educate defence and commonwealth agencies about the broader implications of their decisions. The unintended consequences of regional growth—such as infrastructure strain, housing demand and social impacts—must also be carefully managed.

Study Tour

In recognition of the evolving role of defence in the Perth South West Metropolitan region, a delegation consisting of the mayors and CEOs of the six Alliance councils, supported and accompanied by the ASA and Alliance officers, travelled to the US in September 2024 to undertake a study tour to explore best practices in local government and defence relationships. Defence leaders in Australia have often referred to the successful collaboration between local governments and the US Navy, citing strong relationships and high levels of cooperation between cities and military bases. This prompted the Alliance to research the key players in these relationships and to understand how the US manages local government-defence cooperation, particularly in regions where shipbuilding plays a critical role in the economy.

The commonwealth's ongoing shipbuilding program and imminent decision on intermediate maintenance, combined with the submarine program, led the Alliance to visit San Diego and Hampton Roads, two of the largest naval bases in the United States. The purpose of these visits was to engage with defence, local government and other relevant organisations to learn how they work together to foster community understanding and acceptance of naval operations.

Initially, the Alliance's intent was to focus on issues within the ASA's sphere of influence, given the agency's direct relevance to submarine-related activities in the region. However, from the visits to the United States it became clear that addressing the social licence challenges in the Perth South West region required a broader range of stakeholders. The social acceptance and understanding of defence activities extend well beyond just the navy and shipbuilding. As such, the Alliance consciously decided to broaden its scope and include recommendations for both the commonwealth and state governments. AUKUS, being a national endeavour, will need support from multiple departments and sectors for its success.

Supplementing the outcomes of these visits with additional research, this report aims to document the findings and offer recommendations to a wide range of stakeholders, including the commonwealth and state governments, with a focus on improving community understanding and engagement in relation to defence and naval activities. The Alliance recognises that the success of AUKUS hinges on cross-sector cooperation and the need to manage the challenges that come with regional growth.

The Importance of Social Licence

Social Licence refers to the ongoing acceptance or approval of a project, company, or industry by the local community and key stakeholders. Unlike formal regulatory approvals or legal permits, social licence is an informal, often intangible, concept that hinges on the perception, trust, and engagement between the community and the entity involved. Without social licence, even a legally compliant project can face significant opposition, delays, or failures due to community resistance or lack of trust.

The concept of social licence to operate (SLO) originated in the 1990s, particularly within the mining sector, as companies realised that securing legal permits and adhering to regulations alone was insufficient for ensuring smooth project implementation. The idea emerged from the recognition that communities directly affected by resource extraction projects had the power to influence or block those activities if their concerns were not adequately addressed.

The term quickly gained traction as companies across resource-intensive industries sought to mitigate the risks associated with community opposition.

In its essence, social licence is built on three pillars:

- 1. Legitimacy:** The perception that the organisation or project operates within a framework of fairness, transparency, and ethical governance.
- 2. Credibility:** The organisation or project's ability to deliver on its promises and commitments while being accountable for its actions.
- 3. Trust:** The most critical component, involving the building and maintaining of good relationships between the project proponents and the community, often requiring ongoing engagement and dialogue.

In the modern context, social licence extends beyond the resource sector, applying to industries such as agriculture, energy, and increasingly, defence. As societies become more aware of environmental, social and ethical concerns, the need for public and stakeholder buy-in for large-scale projects has only grown more important.

Social Licence in the Context of Defence

The management of national defence falls squarely under the commonwealth's jurisdiction, giving the Department of Defence (Defence) considerable autonomy from state and local government oversight. However, despite not being legally required to seek community approval for its actions, Defence recognises the growing importance of securing social licence.

The defence sector has traditionally focused on national security as its core mission, its activities have often been insulated from broader public scrutiny. However, as defence infrastructure projects expand—particularly in the context of high-profile developments like the acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines under AUKUS—there is growing recognition that social licence is essential for ensuring the smooth rollout of these initiatives. Communities, especially those directly impacted by large-scale defence expansions, are becoming key stakeholders, and their support is needed for the success of such projects.

In the world of defence, social licence becomes critically important when there is a massive expansion, such as Australia's acquisition of nuclear-powered, conventionally armed submarines and the establishment of SRF-West at HMAS Stirling. These types of projects can have far-reaching impacts on local communities, including economic, environmental and social. As a result, there is a strong need for defence organisations to proactively engage with the public to gain and maintain social licence.

This report does not aim to provide a comprehensive review of all social licence approaches available to Defence in relation to AUKUS. Instead, it examines the programs observed or referenced during the delegation's visits in 2024. The report should not be seen as an endorsement of AUKUS but as a recognition of the commonwealth's commitment to it as a national endeavour that is primarily focused on the Perth South West geographic region. This region currently exhibits varying levels of understanding and support for the initiative and to date, engagement by commonwealth agencies has fallen short of what local governments would expect, considering the scale and potential impact of the proposed changes.

Social Licence and Defence Expansion: The Case of AUKUS and HMAS Stirling

The acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines presents both challenges and opportunities for social licence. The massive expansion required to support the SRF-West, valued at \$8 billion on HMAS Stirling alone, will transform the local region, requiring significant infrastructure upgrades, increased defence personnel, and changes in the operational tempo of the base. For such a project to succeed, building and maintaining social licence will be essential.

Local governments, such as those in the Alliance, play an important role in facilitating this process. They act as intermediaries between Defence and the community, ensuring that concerns are communicated and addressed. By working collaboratively with local councils, Defence can enhance community engagement, manage expectations and mitigate potential opposition.

The success of Australia's massive defence expansions, particularly under AUKUS, will depend not only on strategic planning and military capabilities, but also on the willingness of local communities to accept and support these initiatives. Only by proactively addressing concerns, fostering transparency and building trust, will Defence secure the social licence and acceptance needed for the success of the project.

METHODOLOGY

The Alliance conducted research through visits to San Diego, California; and the Hampton Roads region (specifically Newport News Shipbuilding) in Virginia, to examine how leading US Navy bases approach social licence and community engagement. These visits involved group sessions with Alliance staff and board members, and engaging in discussions with a range of stakeholders. Key meetings were held with defence personnel, support organisations, local governments and politicians to better understand how they manage social licence in the defence sector. Additional meetings were conducted with shipbuilding companies and economic development professionals to gain insights into the broader economic implications.

In addition, the Alliance compiled and analysed statistics, research reports and economic data on the benefits of defence in the US, comparing them to Australian examples where possible. However, due to differences in census questions and job categorisations between the two regions, the data is not perfectly comparable.

The findings presented in this report are generalised, as individual endorsements were not explicitly sought, nor was a verbatim reporting style used. Instead, the discussions were organic, guided by areas of interest identified during the meetings. While there was no predetermined set of questions, one Alliance member raised specific queries regarding nuclear safety, social licence and community issues, which are addressed later in the report.

The interviews and focus groups produced predominantly qualitative data, reflecting the opinions of stakeholders spoken to, which were validated by other stakeholders, with findings corroborated through subsequent meetings with shipbuilders, defence personnel and local government officials in both San Deigo and Newport News. Quantitative data analysis focused on the economic impact of defence, supported by census data where available.

This report is not intended to be an academic paper and the decision was made to present the findings in a more accessible narrative format. While the analysis is not scientific, the Alliance believes it reflects the key learnings of the delegation and, importantly, highlights actionable insights. These actions, when implemented by stakeholders, will strengthen community understanding and engagement with the defence industry moving forward.

The report examines key regional context issues and analyses the demographics of various areas to gain insights into why certain projects may succeed and how different jurisdictions compare. It will then review the areas of social licence and how they apply to the programs observed during the delegation's study tour, and through subsequent research and assessment of their relevance and applicability to the WA context. The report also includes key learnings that, while not directly related to social licence programs, are included for completeness.



REGIONAL CONTEXT

To address social licence among all stakeholders, the first step is to identify the key issues and concerns raised within the community specifically related to the AUKUS agreement and its implementation in the coming years. It is essential to understand the local context in which social licence operates, acknowledging that certain defence decisions have already been made and are, at least for the purpose of this report, assumed to be effectively irreversible. This means that some of the traditional, proactive approaches to gaining social licence before key decision points are no longer available. Instead, a different strategy will be required, one focused on building trust and community engagement after decisions have been made.

This is not to suggest that Defence faces a widespread social licence problem—in fact, Defence remains one of the more trusted institutions in the country¹. However, in this local context, certain decisions needed to be made confidentially and securely, without broad community involvement. As a result, some local concerns have emerged that now need to be addressed through transparent communication and efforts to bridge the gap between Defence and the community.

Also to be considered is the economic impact of defence, both here and in the US, as this goes to the heart of some of the broader acceptance strategies and needs to be adequately considered ahead of the analysis of the programs.

Community Issues

Through engagement with local authorities, several concerns have been raised by communities regarding the AUKUS agreement and the presence of nuclear-powered submarines at HMAS Stirling. These concerns reflect both immediate practical issues and broader uncertainties about the long-term impact of the project on the community and environment.

¹ <https://www.readersdigest.com.au/true-stories-lifestyle/work/the-most-trusted-professions-in-australia>, 2021

Nuclear Safety

One of the foremost concerns is the safety risk associated with nuclear-propelled submarines in proximity to urban areas. The community's awareness is primarily shaped by high-profile nuclear incidents such as Chernobyl and Fukushima, raising fears about the potential for accidents. There are questions about the inherent safety of nuclear submarine reactors and the risks they pose in the event of an incident. Addressing these concerns will require clear communication about the technology, safety measures and regulatory oversight to reassure residents about the risk levels of nuclear propulsion.

Nuclear Weapons

Despite reassurances from the Australian government that nuclear weapons are not part of the AUKUS deal, and that US and UK submarines stationed in Australia will not carry them, public scepticism persists. There remains concern about the possibility of nuclear weapons being introduced without Australia's full knowledge or consent. Building public trust by prominently affirming Australia's non-nuclear weapons stance will require transparency and clear communications.

Movement of Nuclear Materials

The logistics of handling and moving nuclear materials have sparked concerns about the frequency and safety of such operations. Questions have been raised about how nuclear materials will be transported, how long they will be stored on the base, the safety of the storage and the potential for nuclear waste to be transported through residential areas. Given the long life of nuclear materials, even 'temporary' storage can extend for decades, further exacerbating community fears about long-term environmental and health impacts. Addressing these concerns will involve detailed plans for nuclear material management, including secure transportation routes if required and clear explanations of waste handling processes. Further queries with regard to the long-term storage of all levels of waste remain unaddressed, and this uncertainty adds to the concerns around what 'temporary' storage may mean in this context.

The Region as a Potential Target

A segment of the community has also expressed concerns about whether hosting US submarines will make HMAS Stirling a strategic target in the event of international conflicts. The fear is that closer ties with the US and or UK military could inadvertently draw Australia into conflicts or make the region a first-strike target due to its military assets. Defence will need to provide clear reasoning for how such risks are mitigated and why the strategic benefits outweigh these concerns.

Investment in AUKUS

Another significant question revolves around the broader rationale for Australia's investment in the AUKUS agreement. The \$368 billion commitment to nuclear submarines has raised questions about whether this investment is value for money, particularly when the wider public has not been fully engaged in the defence policy shift that AUKUS represents. This issue taps into deeper concerns about national priorities and how such a large expenditure aligns with the country's broader goals, including maintaining Australia's way of life.

Housing Impact

The influx of US personnel and the increased defence industry activity have raised concerns about housing affordability and availability in markets already experiencing social and economic stresses. Residents worry that the presence of defence personnel will create enclaves such as a 'little America', disconnected from the broader community while driving up housing prices. A clear strategy for integrating new personnel into the community and ensuring that local residents are not priced out of housing markets will be essential. There have also been concerns of the development of Defence Housing enclaves, where due to the need to house large numbers of people, there may be developments with a high concentration of single-occupancy apartments rather than a variety of housing options.

Traffic and Infrastructure

There is also considerable anxiety about the impact on local traffic and infrastructure. The increased activity at HMAS Stirling and the Australian Marine Complex (AMC) in Henderson is expected to lead to an increase in vehicle movement, in addition to the substantial construction traffic in the interim, further straining an already congested road network. The absence of a funded, long-term infrastructure plan exacerbates these concerns, with many residents questioning whether appropriate measures are being taken to support the expected growth in operations on the island.

Environmental Concerns

Environmental impacts are another major area of concern, particularly with regard to the little penguin colony on Garden and Penguin Islands, and the seagrass meadows in Cockburn Sound. There are fears that dredging and construction associated with the base expansion will disrupt marine habitats and harm recreational fishing access. Community members want reassurance that these ecosystems will be protected and that recreational and commercial activities will not be adversely affected in the long term.

Reference will be given to these issues later in the report, including which stakeholders should be responsible for addressing these concerns.

Rebuilding Social Licence

The decision to pursue AUKUS was made within the framework of international security, and not subject to public debate. Given the sensitive nature of the negotiations, Defence could not reasonably be expected to build social licence prior to the announcement, as might happen in a typical business engagement approach.

Now that the decision has been made, the focus must shift to an approach focused on rebuilding that social licence in impacted communities.

The process of rebuilding social licence involves several key steps:

- 1. Acknowledgement and Transparency:** The first step is open and honest communication with stakeholders. This includes explaining why decisions were made in a closed manner, offering a detailed explanation of the strategic imperatives behind those decisions. Acknowledging the community's concerns and providing clarity helps rebuild trust.
- 2. Engagement and Dialogue:** Rebuilding trust requires active and ongoing dialogue with the broader community. This engagement should not be limited to formal organisations or government bodies but should involve listening to a diverse range of voices (such as the formation of community reference groups, at least in the initial phase). Ensuring that community concerns are documented and reflected in decision-making is critical to restoring faith in the process.

3. Commitment to Long-Term Benefits:

Demonstrating a sustained commitment to the community is essential. This might involve new policies or initiatives aimed at creating local jobs, improving infrastructure, or addressing environmental concerns raised by the community. The focus must be on building a long-term relationship rather than offering short-term appeasements.

4. Third-Party Mediation or Involvement:

In situations where trust has been severely damaged, bringing in an independent mediator can help facilitate neutral and constructive dialogue. However, given the power dynamics between Defence, the Commonwealth and a local community, it may be more appropriate to focus on transparency and direct engagement rather than third-party involvement.

5. Revising Practices Based on Lessons Learned:

It is crucial to demonstrate that feedback from the community is being taken seriously. Defence must demonstrate where it revises its practices based on lessons learned from the engagement process. Regular updates on the outcomes of community consultations, as well as visible changes to policy or operations, can help reassure stakeholders that their concerns are being addressed.

6. Sustained Community Investment:

Finally, long-term investment in the community is key to rebuilding social licence. This could involve ongoing projects that create employment or enhance local infrastructure, demonstrating that the AUKUS project brings tangible benefits. It is important that these investments are perceived as genuine efforts to improve the community, rather than one-time gestures.

The programs and activities observed during the US study tour offer valuable insights into how defence initiatives can be managed in a way that supports social licence. By examining how US projects in areas such as defence infrastructure, community engagement and environmental management have successfully navigated public concerns, there is an opportunity to apply these lessons in the context of AUKUS. The focus will be on adapting best practices in stakeholder engagement, long-term community investment and transparent communication, ensuring that the implementation of AUKUS aligns with local expectations and helps to restore trust.

The programs explored will ultimately be assessed against the five areas above (noting that third-party mediation will not be explored) to ascertain the effectiveness of the programs in rebuilding social licence.

Economic Benefits at Local Level

To understand why a city government in the US is inclined to directly invest in what are essentially defence-related programs, there are two main issues to consider:

Tax System

The presence of defence installations in a region has a significant impact on the local economy, particularly through the spending of personnel who live off base. In cities like San Diego, California, and Newport News, Virginia, which are home to major military facilities, defence personnel contribute to the local financial position through their everyday purchases. While spending on base is generally exempt from sales taxes, the spending patterns of military personnel and their families in the surrounding communities generate substantial revenue for the city and county through local sales taxes (which are not available to local governments in Australia).

San Diego, with its large defence presence, benefits from off-base spending in various sectors. Military personnel stationed in the region often live, shop, and engage in recreational activities outside of the base, which means they are subject to both state and local sales taxes. San Diego's total sales tax rate of 7.75% on goods and services ensures that the city and county benefit directly from this economic activity. Of this rate, 6% is a state tax, with the remaining 1.75% a mixture of local taxes. As a result, local businesses in the city—whether grocery stores, restaurants, or retail outlets—see increased revenue, while the local government enjoys additional tax receipts, strengthening the region's financial position.

Similarly, Newport News, home to the Newport News Shipbuilding yard and a substantial naval presence, sees a steady flow of military personnel contributing to the local economy. Although Virginia's base state sales tax is 4.3%, Newport News applies a combined sales tax rate of 6%, including local and regional taxes. As defence personnel spend their earnings on housing, dining and entertainment in the city, these transactions help fund local services and infrastructure improvements, particularly in transportation. The steady influx of military-related spending thus supports the broader economic health of the city and the region.

In addition to sales taxes, Newport News also benefits from the *Machinery and Tools Tax*, which applies to businesses involved in manufacturing and other industrial activities. This tax is assessed on the machinery and tools used in production and is an essential source of revenue for the city, particularly given the prominence of industries like shipbuilding. The tax is levied based on the original cost of machinery, depreciated over time, with a rate of around \$3.75 per \$100 of assessed value. This additional revenue from industrial sectors helps support the city's infrastructure and public services, further bolstering Newport News' financial position.

Over time, the presence of a defence workforce living off base and the revenue from taxes like the Machinery and Tools Tax enhances the fiscal stability of both San Diego and Newport News, with sales and property taxes helping to support critical public services, infrastructure and community development efforts.

Base Closures

While the cities in the US can benefit from the tax revenue, they also face the prospect of base closure. With approximately 750 military bases operated by the US, their federal government has an ongoing process to examine the need and operational use of their extensive estate. The *Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC)* process, while aimed at optimising military efficiency, can have severe economic repercussions for local communities, especially in states like Virginia where military installations are integral to the local economy.

The closure or downsizing of a base can result in the immediate loss of jobs, reduced consumer spending and a decline in housing demand, all of which may lead to a significant reduction in local tax revenues. Local businesses, which often rely on the steady flow of military customers, may also experience revenue losses or closures, further reducing the city's tax base. The financial impact of lost tax revenue, especially from sales and property taxes, could put a strain on public services and infrastructure investment, leaving communities struggling to adapt.

To proactively address the risks associated with BRAC, regions like Hampton Roads have established organisations such as the Hampton Roads Military and Federal Facilities Alliance (HRMFFA), created by the local governments to explore programs that will mitigate the impacts of urban encroachment on military bases, and address issues that could make local bases more vulnerable to BRAC decisions. By working with communities to limit encroachment and demonstrate the strategic importance of local bases, HRMFFA seeks to ensure that BRAC does not target these installations for closure. In doing so, the organisation helps protect the economic stability of the region, safeguarding the jobs, tax revenues and businesses that rely on the presence of military installations.

Implications for Australian Local Governments

In Australia, local governments primarily rely on property rates as their main source of income. The total amount of rates to be collected by a local government is predetermined based on the council's budgetary needs (Council determines the amount of money required to service the region), and each property owner's liability is calculated proportionally to the value of their property. This means that while an increase in property values redistributes the burden of rates among property owners, it does not necessarily increase the overall revenue available to the local government. As a result, local governments do not benefit directly from an uptick in spending or investment in the region, including that which may result from defence activities.

There is often a misconception that local governments see a financial windfall when property values rise. In reality, higher property values merely shift the distribution of rates contribution with the total pool, without necessarily changing the total revenue collected by the council. This system limits local governments' ability to capitalise on economic growth, such as increased spending by defence personnel or the establishment of new military facilities. Unlike in the US, where local governments gain from sales and other taxes linked to economic activity, Australian local governments do not see a direct financial return from increased spending in the area.

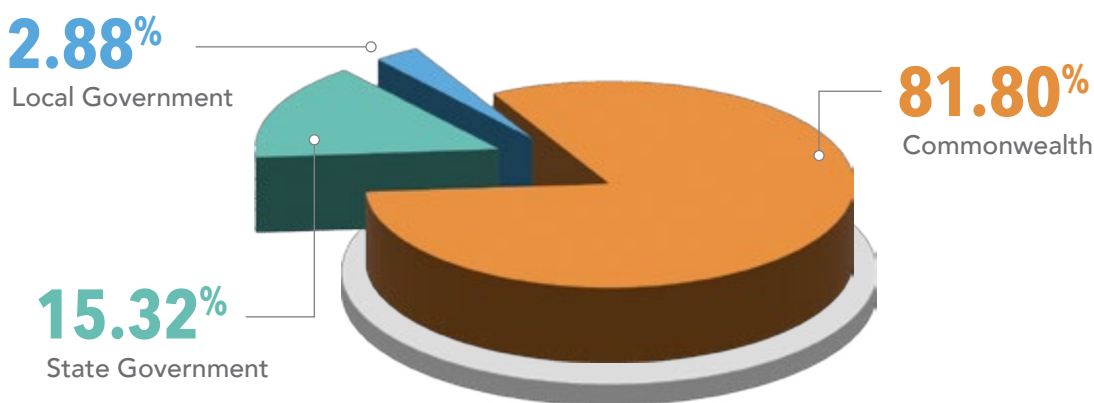
On the other hand, state governments in Australia do benefit more directly from increased economic activity associated with military investment. Through mechanisms such as stamp duty on property transactions and payroll tax on businesses over a certain size, state governments receive a revenue boost when military operations expand the local economy or personnel relocate to the region. This can result in an increase in property transactions or the establishment of larger defence contractors, which directly feeds into state government coffers.

At the federal level, the Commonwealth government gains the most from defence-related economic activity. The federal government collects income tax from military personnel and contractors, as well as GST from purchases made in the region. This revenue is then redistributed to the other tiers of government based on a set of formulas that consider factors such as population and regional need. However, in this context, local governments receive only a small share of this economic uplift, limiting their ability to fund large-scale infrastructure projects, such as upgrading roads or purchasing land around military bases to proactively support defence operations.

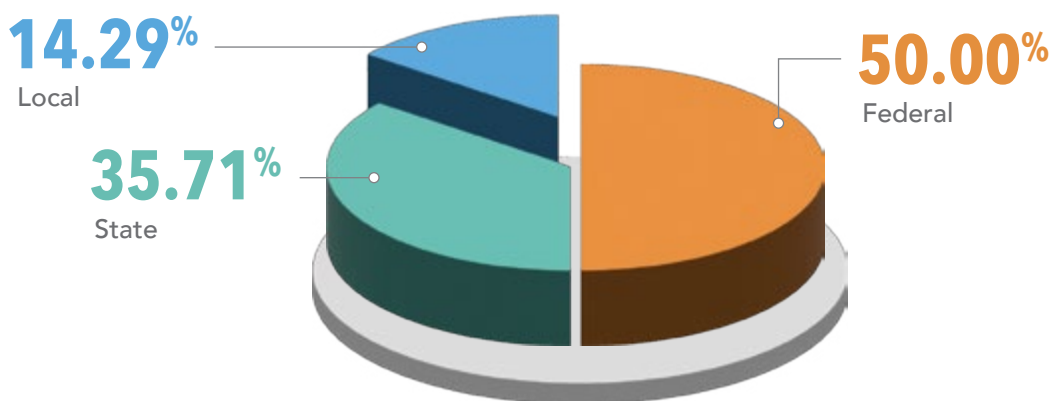
While the presence of military installations and personnel is undoubtedly beneficial for the broader local economy, Australian local governments are not the direct financial beneficiaries. This stands in contrast to local governments in the US, which see significant financial returns from increased sales and property taxes, incentivising them to invest in infrastructure to support military bases. The lack of direct financial benefit to Australian local governments highlights why they are less likely to make significant investments in infrastructure around defence precincts, as they lack the same economic incentives that drive US local governments to do so. This places greater reliance on the commonwealth to fund required infrastructure.

This is not an argument for specific taxation changes in Australia, but rather aims to provide context for the proactive financial commitments made by local governments in the US towards defence projects. These investments partly explain the strong, positive relationships that have developed between these local governments and defence entities.

Taxation income by tier of Government, Australia



Taxation income by tier of Government, US



DEMOGRAPHICS

The demographic and economic characteristics of Hampton Roads, San Diego County, Rockingham and the broader Perth South West region are essential to understanding the foundation of defence social licence in each area. Each of these regions hosts significant military and defence industry operations, with community relationships shaped by military presence, shipbuilding employment, veteran populations and economic stability.

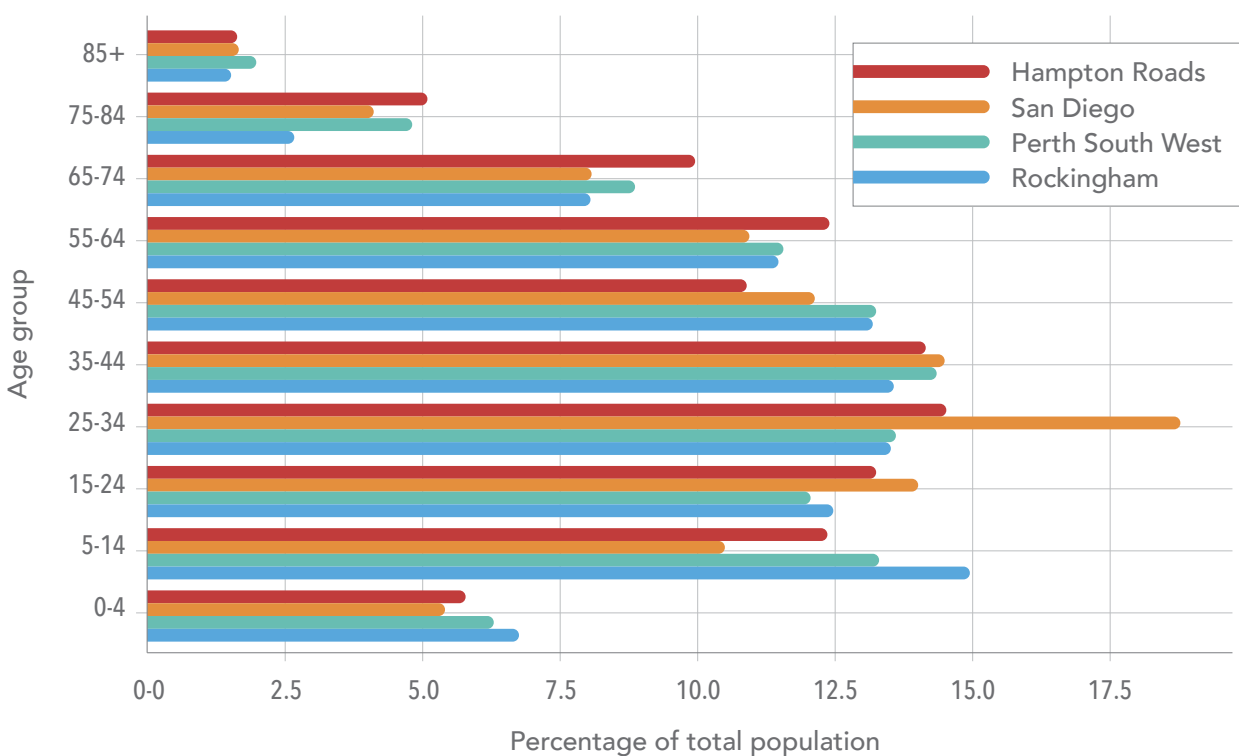
shipbuilding, and tech sectors that support both defence activities and a strong local economy. In Hampton Roads, the distribution is also skewed towards younger and middle-aged adults, reinforcing the area's longstanding connection to military service, shipbuilding, and related fields. The relatively younger age profile in these regions may foster community support for defence expansion, as it aligns with employment opportunities and economic stability tied to defence and shipbuilding sectors.

In contrast, Rockingham and the broader Perth South West region display a more balanced age structure, with a larger representation in the 5-14, 15-24, and 45-54 age groups, indicating both a family-oriented demographic and an established workforce. This distribution suggests that the region may rely less directly on young, mobile defence personnel, with the community instead comprising longer-term residents who may have strong ties to the local economy outside the defence sector. The presence of younger age groups in Rockingham and Perth South West region presents an opportunity to build a sustainable pipeline of local talent for defence and shipbuilding industries, as future initiatives like AUKUS expand. Additionally, the more established age profile may require a targeted approach to fostering defence social licence, emphasising long-term economic benefits and community engagement to gain broader public support for defence projects.

Age Distribution

The age distribution across Hampton Roads, San Diego County, Rockingham and the Perth South West region reveals insights into the socioeconomic dynamics that may impact defence social licence. In San Diego County and Hampton Roads, there is a notable concentration of younger working-age adults, particularly in the 25-34 and 35-44 age brackets. This demographic profile is likely tied to the high presence of active military personnel and civilian employees in defence-related industries, which tend to attract younger professionals. San Diego in particular, has a large share of people in the 25-34 age range, indicating a workforce aligned with military,

Standardised population percentage by age group across regions



Economic Impact

There is limited comparable data on the economic impact of defence across the jurisdictions. Australia's current spending on defence in Western Australia is far smaller than the US, and with the changing nature of defence, particularly with the Australian Navy as part of AUKUS, the economic multipliers are likely to change.

One notable comparison that was considered was the impact of defence investment. San Diego Military Advisory Council (SDMAC) estimates that for every \$1 million USD invested into defence in San Diego, ten jobs are created. When this calculation was converted to AUD and run through the REMPLAN's economic impact modelling, based on national spend data, we see only five jobs created in the region. This is likely due to the much smaller manufacturing base and size of the defence economy, with Australia reliant on overseas markets for its supply chain.

Population and Military Presence

San Diego County, with a population of approximately 3.27 million, hosts 115,000 active-duty personnel, representing 3.52% of the population. Hampton Roads, with 1.78 million residents, has a slightly higher concentration of active-duty personnel at 80,000, or 4.49% of the population. These high proportions indicate a community deeply integrated with military life, likely influencing local support for defence activities. Both regions host key defence installations—San Diego with significant navy and marine corps bases, and Hampton Roads with a mix of navy, air force, army and coast guard facilities. This creates a deeply embedded defence economy that underpins social licence for ongoing and future defence initiatives.

In contrast, the Perth South West region, with a population of 443,407, has a lower percentage of active-duty military personnel at 0.74%. While Rockingham hosts Australia's largest naval base, it has only 2,242 active-duty personnel living in the LGA, or 1.65% of its 135,678 residents.

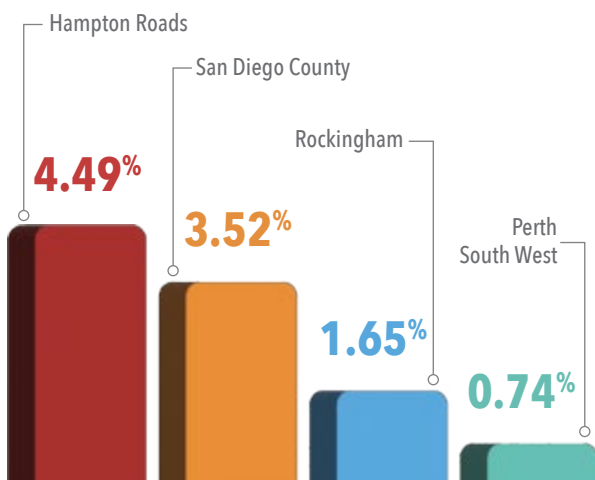
Shipbuilding Workforce

The shipbuilding and repair sectors play a pivotal role in the economic stability of the local economy in which they are located. In San Diego County, the shipbuilding workforce comprises about 14,000 people, or 0.43% of the population, while in Hampton Roads, 26,000 people work in this sector, representing 1.46% of the total population. Due to the difficulty sourcing comparable workforce numbers across the jurisdictions, a comparison to total population has been used. These figures highlight the longstanding maritime industry presence in both regions, providing substantial employment and fostering community alignment with defence-related industries.

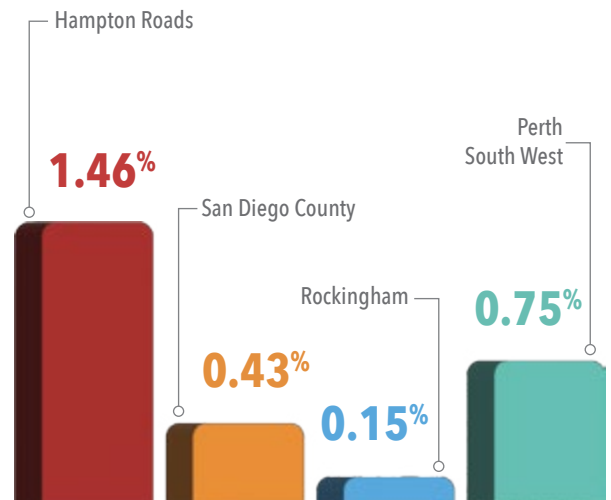
In the Perth South West region, which includes the AMC, the shipbuilding workforce makes up 0.75% of the population, with approximately 3,312 workers. Rockingham specifically has a smaller shipbuilding workforce of 201 people, representing 0.15% of its population, likely commuting to AMC. The workforce in the region provides a foundation for expanding the defence industry locally, especially given the continuous shipbuilding needs anticipated under AUKUS.

The higher number of jobs created through military investment in the US is largely due to the local procurement and manufacturing industry, whereas Australia relies on international supply chains to obtain the diversity of components needed to construct a ship, hence the smaller size of the industry in the Perth South West region.

Military personnel as a percentage of all persons



Ship building workforce as a percentage of all persons



Veteran Community

Veterans are a critical demographic that shapes community attitudes towards defence activities. In San Diego County, veterans make up 5.95% of the population, reinforcing the area's historical connection to the defence sector. Hampton Roads shows an even higher concentration of veterans, with 10.15% of the population in Newport News, reflecting the lower cost of living, particularly house prices, in the region.

In Western Australia, veteran representation is comparatively lower. Veterans comprise 2.45% of the Perth South West region's population, with Rockingham showing a slightly higher percentage at 3.48%. It was noted in discussions with SDMAC that the declining proportion of veterans in the community (as veterans from conflicts such as WWII, Korea and Vietnam age out) has led to less awareness, and acceptance of, negative implications related to the military's presence in the region.

Economic Stability and Median Income

Economic stability, reflected through median income levels per household, also influences defence social licence. In San Diego County, the median income is 134.10% of the national average, indicating a relatively affluent community where well-paying defence and technology jobs have likely contributed to economic security. This higher income level may correlate with strong community support for defence activities, as residents experience tangible economic benefits from the defence sector. Hampton Roads, with a median income at 105.39% of the national average, also benefits from stable defence-related employment, reinforcing the economic foundation of defence social licence.

In the Perth South West region, the median income stands at 108.65% of Australia's national median, reflecting a stable economic environment with potential for further growth in defence industries. Rockingham's median income, at 98.74% of the national average, is slightly below the benchmark, suggesting that expanded defence-related opportunities could provide a meaningful economic boost. It also points to the potential for economically disadvantaged families in the region to be disproportionately impacted by an increased demand for housing or a greater reliance on public health and education resources.

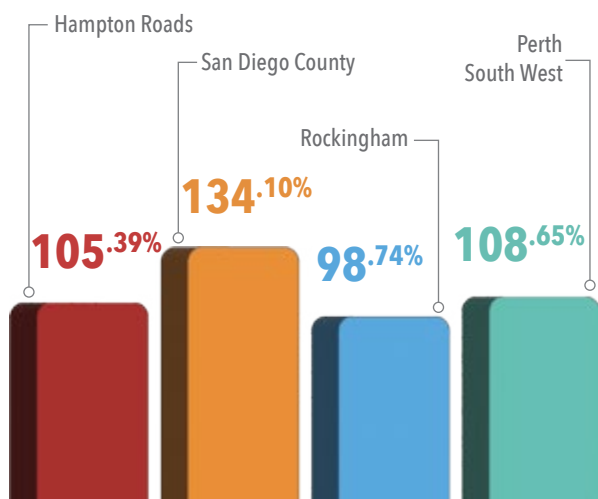
Implications for Defence Social Licence

These demographic and economic indicators highlight the varied social licence dynamics across regions, which will go to underscore the effectiveness of some of the programs used in the US to build community support.

In Hampton Roads and San Diego, where military and shipbuilding sectors are well-integrated and incomes are above the national average, this contributes to a strong existing defence social licence. Public perception is likely shaped by the stability and economic contributions of the defence sector, creating a supportive environment for defence expansion. Sustaining social licence in these areas may focus on continued economic investment and support for veteran services, ensuring the community benefits from defence presence.

In Rockingham and the Perth South West region, a proactive approach to building social licence will be essential as defence initiatives under AUKUS expand, noting that while the region is relatively prosperous, there isn't necessarily a strong understanding of the economic impacts that the sector could bring.

Median income as percentage of national median



US PROGRAMS

This section reviews the programs identified through visits to the US as well as supplemental online research of initiatives that support social licence in those regions. It is intended this will support an analysis of the programs, and the factors that would influence their suitability and success in an Australian context.

In addition to an analysis of the operational aspects of these programs is a more comprehensive examination of their implementation and the experiences of the communities they serve. By understanding both the structural and social impacts of these programs, we hope to identify valuable insights applicable to fostering social licence in Australia.

Grants

One finding of the US study tour was that grant programs represent one of the most significant opportunities for building social licence, albeit with substantial financial investment. The Alliance has chosen to explore these programs in greater detail, focusing specifically on those with direct relevance to the Australian context.

Defense Community Infrastructure Program

The Defense Community Infrastructure Program (DCIP) is an initiative by the US Department of Defense designed to support infrastructure projects that benefit local communities around military installations. It emerged as a response to the growing recognition that civilian infrastructure in these areas plays a crucial role in supporting military readiness and the quality of life for service members and their families.

Origins

DCIP was established in the *2019 National Defense Authorization Act*. The program was created to assist communities in addressing the demands placed on local infrastructure due to the presence of military installations, acknowledging that the surrounding civilian infrastructure—such as schools, hospitals, roads, and utilities—was essential for supporting military operations and the wellbeing of military families. Prior to DCIP, there were limited mechanisms to fund non-military infrastructure directly linked to defence readiness.

Purpose

The primary goal of DCIP is to enhance the military value of installations by investing in critical off-base civilian infrastructure. The program focuses on projects that improve:

- **Resilience:** Infrastructure that can withstand environmental hazards and support long-term military presence.
- **Quality of Life:** Projects that positively impact the wellbeing of military families, such as schools, hospitals and recreational facilities.
- **Military Readiness:** Infrastructure that facilitates troop movements, supply chains and other operational activities.

Annual Budget

The program's budget has varied, but it generally receives annual appropriations through the US Defense budget. Funding began modestly, and as of 2023, DCIP had received approximately USD\$90 million annually. The exact budget may fluctuate based on defence priorities, legislative approvals and community needs. For the 2024 fiscal year, the budget was proposed to remain in the USD\$90 million range.

Focus Areas Over the Years

Since its inception, DCIP has broadened its focus areas to meet evolving defence and community needs:

- **Initial Focus:** The early years primarily targeted community infrastructure that directly benefited military operations and readiness, such as transportation networks, utilities and emergency services.
- **Quality of Life Expansion:** In subsequent years, there has been a growing emphasis on quality-of-life projects for military families, such as educational facilities, childcare centres and recreational amenities.
- **Resilience and Climate Adaptation:** More recently, as climate resilience and environmental security have become key national priorities, DCIP has supported projects that enhance the resilience of communities against natural disasters, energy disruptions and other environmental factors.
- **Transportation and Utility Improvements:** Key projects funded include upgrades to roads and public transport systems that facilitate better access to bases, as well as water, power and sewage systems.

Application and Selection Process

Local governments, state agencies, and other eligible entities apply for DCIP funding through a competitive process. To be considered, projects must:

- 1. Support military readiness** or enhance the quality of life for military families.
- 2. Demonstrate long-term benefits** to both the installation and the surrounding community.
- 3. Address infrastructure deficiencies** that directly impact military installation operations.

The Office of Local Defense Community Cooperation evaluates and selects projects for funding.

Experience of the fund

In discussions with HRMFFA and City of Newport News it was learned that the fund was useful in demonstrating a shared burden to their communities. HRMFFA was active in advocating for specific foci as well as budget allocation. Individual local governments focused on applying to the funding rounds and worked with HRMFFA to review applications to ensure they were competitive. HRMFFA noted that in every round at least one local government in their region had been successful.

Implications for Australia

This sort of funding arrangement would be seen positively by communities and allow Defence to rebuild some public support within areas where their presence has had an impact on both land prices and access to community facilities.

With the Defence Strategic Review report making findings that Defence should be less focused on supporting local emergencies due to climate change and providing disaster relief, funding supporting resilience of local areas is a sensible approach. While there may be other funding streams for similar projects, the linking of the funding back to defence helps the community understand that there is a shared responsibility within the locality and helps demonstrate a more tangible benefit than the difficult-to-comprehend national security.

While not nearly as many bases exist in Australia as in the US, the issues faced are similar.

While there may be some limitations on the ability of Defence to directly offer such grants, they could be administered on an interim basis by another federal department, while any necessary changes to legislation are enacted.

In much the same way as the US established the fund with a pilot program, a similar pilot could be trialled in Australia with a specific focus (such as active transport or natural disaster resilience) for local governments within a certain proximity of a base. A trial fund of \$20 million to target improvements around the Australian Defence Estate's 70 bases could support some much-needed social licence improvements and better prepare a region to support personnel, while demonstrating a shared responsibility to developing the community.

Defense Access Roads Program

The Defense Access Road Program is a collaborative initiative between the US Department of Defense and the Federal Highway Administration designed to address the impact of military activities on public highways. It enables the Department of Defense to fund public road improvements necessitated by sudden or unusual defence-related activities that local or state authorities cannot reasonably be expected to accommodate within their regular highway improvement programs.

Historical Background

The origins of the Defense Access Road Program trace back to the *Defense Highway Act of 1941*, enacted shortly before the United States entered World War II. This legislation provided for the immediate construction of roads urgently needed for national defence. The program was primarily created to address critical facility expansions that state transportation officials could not accommodate within existing federal or state-funded transportation improvement programs. The program continues today as a mechanism to seek federal financial intervention.

Eligibility Criteria

The Defense Access Road Program authorises the Secretary of Transportation to expend funds appropriated for defence access roads. Roadways may become eligible for defence funding under the authority of the program when the required improvements result from:

- a doubling of public highway traffic due to the establishment of a new installation or the expansion or movement of personnel to an existing installation;
- the need for a new access road or gate/entrance requirement;
- a new mission requiring heavy and damaging vehicle traffic on low-grade roads; or
- the permanent closure of public highways due to military necessity.

Process Overview

The process begins when a military installation identifies a transportation deficiency impacting its mission. The installation commander submits a Needs Report through the military chain of command, detailing the existing road conditions, projected traffic data and proposed improvements. The respective military service validates the requirement and forwards it to the Surface Deployment and Distribution Command (SDDC), which determines potential eligibility.

If deemed potentially eligible, the SDDC requests the Federal Highway Administration to conduct an engineering evaluation in collaboration with state and local highway officials, the military installation and the SDDC. This evaluation assesses the defence-generated traffic impacts, identifies solutions, estimates costs and outlines execution procedures. Based on this evaluation, the SDDC determines eligibility and certifies the road segment as important to national defence, allowing defence funds to be expended on the certified roadway segments.

Funding and Execution

There is no separate source of funding for the program. Funding for certified projects is programmed and budgeted by the respective military service as part of the installation's regular Military Construction (MILCON) budget process, approved by the federal government, essentially allowing the roads to bypass grant applications and be considered for financial support directly by government. Once approved, funds are transferred to the Federal Highway Administration, which oversees the execution of the project through federal-aid highway procedures by state or other owning highway authorities.

Implications for Australia

This approach offers a practical solution for managing some of the most immediate community impacts associated with defence projects, without requiring local or state governments to compete for funding or prioritise these needs over other city or state demands.

It also aligns with key points raised in discussions with the San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG): defence departments should not directly fund infrastructure from their own budgets, as those funds are earmarked for defence-specific priorities. Instead, there is a need for federal infrastructure funding to mitigate the broader impacts of defence activities.

Rather than redirecting defence budgets towards infrastructure, this model advocates for separate federal funding specifically allocated to address these impacts. The program enables a shared understanding of the issues, which can then be collectively presented to the federal government as part of the broader budget process, rather than through competitive grant applications.

While unique challenges exist within Australia's governmental system, a funding stream based on these principles could be effective.

Defence Support Organisations

During the study tour, the Alliance met with two organisations that worked alongside defence to support their efforts in the community, promote understanding between the community and defence, and leverage ongoing defence investment in their regions. Both were praised by their respective defence leaders as being strong advocates and central to supporting their engagements with all three tiers of government and the wider community.

It was widely recommended that we consider the establishment of a similar organisation in Western Australia, and this section reviews both organisations and draws parallels with other WA-based organisations already operating in this space.

San Diego Military Advisory Council

The San Diego Military Advisory Council (SDMAC) is a pivotal organisation that plays a central role in supporting and fostering the relationship between the military and the broader San Diego community. Founded in 2004, SDMAC's mission is to advocate for the military's presence in the region while promoting economic, social and civic support for the defence sector. It also addresses challenges related to the military's integration with the local community, such as land use, environmental concerns and operational impacts. SDMAC's work is essential in maintaining the 'defence social licence' — the local community's acceptance and understanding of military activities and infrastructure.

Origins of SDMAC

San Diego has long been a strategic military hub in the United States, hosting several major naval and marine installations such as Naval Base San Diego and Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton. Recognising both the benefits and challenges of this military presence, local civic and business leaders began collaborating to ensure that the military's interests and the region's development could coexist harmoniously.

SDMAC emerged in 2004 following a split from the San Diego Regional Chamber of Commerce. The Chamber had traditionally played a role in promoting the interests of the military and defence industry in the region; However, as the military's presence in San Diego grew more complex and the defence sector required more specialised advocacy, it became clear that a dedicated organisation was needed. The Chamber's committee focus on defence evolved into what is now SDMAC, which could prioritise military advocacy and community engagement. This allowed for a sharper focus on defence-related issues and created an independent platform solely devoted to fostering a strong relationship between the military and the community.

Board Composition

SDMAC's leadership structure is made up of a diverse and experienced board of directors that brings together individuals from various sectors. These sectors include defence, government, industry and local business leaders, all of whom play a role in shaping the strategic direction of the organisation. The composition of the board reflects SDMAC's mission to integrate the interests of both the military and the local community. Board members typically include:

- **Military Veterans and Active-Duty Officers:** These individuals provide insight into the military's operations, needs, and challenges.
- **Defence Industry Professionals:** Representatives from companies that serve the defence sector, such as contractors and suppliers, offer expertise on the economic and industrial impact of military activities.
- **Local Business and Civic Leaders:** These board members ensure that SDMAC remains aligned with broader regional development goals and fosters strong community ties.
- **Government Representatives:** Local and state government officials participate to maintain a connection between military advocacy and public policy.

This mix of perspectives enables SDMAC to advocate effectively for policies that benefit both the military and the wider San Diego community.

Funding and Financial Structure

SDMAC is primarily funded through membership fees, sponsorships and event revenues. The organisation operates as a non-profit and relies on contributions from its members, which include individuals, defence contractors and local businesses that benefit from the military's presence in the region. SDMAC's funding sources include:

- **Membership Dues:** Both individual and corporate memberships contribute a significant portion of SDMAC's revenue. Memberships are tiered, offering different levels of engagement and access to events, reports, and advocacy efforts.
- **Sponsorships:** Local businesses and defence contractors often sponsor SDMAC events and initiatives. This support not only provides essential financial backing but also strengthens the relationship between the defence sector and the local economy.
- **Event Revenue:** SDMAC regularly holds events such as the annual SDMAC Achievement Awards, luncheons, and panel discussions. These events generate revenue while also serving as platforms for military leaders, government officials and industry stakeholders to network and discuss important issues.

SDMAC's funding model is designed to ensure that the organisation remains independent and capable of advocating for the military's interests without being beholden to any single group. This financial independence allows SDMAC to maintain a balanced approach in its efforts to support both the military and the local community.

SDMAC's Operations

SDMAC's core functions include advocacy, research and education to support the interests of both the military and the San Diego community. It achieves this through several key activities:

- 1. Advocacy:** SDMAC works closely with local, state and federal governments to ensure that San Diego remains a military-friendly region. This includes lobbying for military funding, supporting infrastructure projects that benefit military installations, and advocating for policies that help the military and local businesses thrive.
- 2. Community Engagement:** SDMAC regularly engages with local stakeholders, including community leaders, business owners and residents, to build a broader understanding of the military's role in the region. By facilitating public forums and discussions, SDMAC helps foster a positive relationship between the military and the community.
- 3. Economic Impact Research:** One of SDMAC's flagship initiatives is conducting detailed economic impact studies on the military's contribution to the San Diego economy. These reports provide critical data that highlight the importance of the military sector, illustrating how defence spending supports local businesses, creates jobs and generates revenue.
- 4. Defence Industry Support:** SDMAC also plays an important role in supporting the defence industry, which includes a network of contractors and businesses that provide goods and services to the military. Through partnerships and networking opportunities, SDMAC helps local companies access contracts and grow within the defence sector.

Role in Supporting Defence Social Licence

SDMAC's role is in a large part to ensure the military can operate effectively, while being cognisant of their impact in the community. SDMAC's efforts are integral in supporting this balance by:

- **Building Trust and Transparency:** SDMAC promotes transparency between the military and the community. It facilitates open communication about military operations, expansion plans, and their potential impacts on the local area, ensuring that residents are well informed and have a voice in the process.
- **Addressing Environmental and Social Concerns:** One of the challenges in maintaining defence social licence is managing environmental impacts and land use conflicts. SDMAC advocates for environmentally sustainable practices and ensures that the military's presence does not unduly infringe on community interests.
- **Economic Justification:** Through its economic impact reports, SDMAC reinforces the message that the military is not only essential for national security, but is also a major economic driver for the San Diego region. By demonstrating the financial benefits of the military's presence, SDMAC helps to build local support for continued defence investment.
- **Collaboration with Civic Leaders:** SDMAC works closely with civic and business leaders to align military activities with the region's broader goals. This collaborative approach ensures that the military presence supports local development and benefits the wider community. This is completed through programs such as Defence Breakfasts and their celebration of military community leaders.



Hampton Roads Military and Federal Facilities Alliance

The HRMFFA is a vital organisation focused on strengthening the relationship between the military, federal facilities and the Hampton Roads community. Founded in 2006, HRMFFA's mission is to protect, promote and enhance the federal presence in the region, particularly the military installations that are critical to both national security and the local economy. HRMFFA plays a crucial role in fostering the defence social licence, ensuring that the community understands and supports the military's operations and the benefits they bring to the region.

Origins of HRMFFA

Hampton Roads is home to one of the largest concentrations of military personnel and federal installations in the United States, including Naval Station Norfolk, the world's largest naval base, and Joint Base Langley-Eustis. The region's heavy reliance on defence and federal operations as an economic driver created a need for coordinated efforts to support and protect this presence.

HRMFFA was formed in 2006 out of a growing concern among regional leaders that the area's military installations might face future closure or reductions through the BRAC process, which had already reshaped many communities across the United States. Local government leaders recognised the importance of maintaining the military's presence and ensuring that Hampton Roads remained a top destination for federal investment and infrastructure. HRMFFA provides a unified platform for regional advocacy and engagement with the federal government.

Board Composition

HRMFFA's board of directors is made up of local government officials, business leaders and military stakeholders who represent the diverse interests of the Hampton Roads region. The board's composition reflects the Alliance's mission to align local priorities with the needs of the federal and military communities. Key members typically include:

- **Local Government Leaders:** Elected officials from the cities and counties of Hampton Roads, who are key to ensuring that regional planning supports military operations and addresses community concerns.
- **Military Representatives:** Active and retired military personnel, who provide insight into the operational needs of local military installations and ensure that HRMFFA remains focused on the interests of the armed forces.
- **Business and Industry Leaders:** Representatives from sectors such as shipbuilding, defence contracting and technology, who have a vested interest in maintaining a strong federal presence in the region.

The board's structure is designed to foster collaboration across multiple sectors, ensuring that HRMFFA's advocacy efforts are both comprehensive and responsive to the needs of the community and the military.

Funding and Financial Structure

HRMFFA operates as a non-profit, funded primarily through contributions from its member localities, which include the various cities and counties in the Hampton Roads region. These localities contribute to HRMFFA's operating budget based on their population size and economic interests. This funding model ensures that the organisation remains accountable to the region's stakeholders and can effectively represent their interests in Washington, D.C.

HRMFFA's key funding sources include:

- **Local Government Contributions:** The cities and counties that make up the Hampton Roads region contribute to HRMFFA's budget, allowing the organisation to advocate on behalf of the entire region.
- **Public-Private Partnerships:** HRMFFA collaborates with local businesses and industries that benefit from a strong federal presence. These partnerships provide additional financial support for HRMFFA's initiatives and strengthen the Alliance's advocacy efforts.
- **Event and Project Sponsorships:** HRMFFA hosts various events and projects aimed at promoting the region's military and federal assets. These initiatives not only generate revenue but also serve as platforms for showcasing Hampton Roads' strategic importance to federal decision-makers.

By maintaining financial independence and relying on contributions from multiple localities, HRMFFA is able to maintain a balanced approach in its advocacy, ensuring that the interests of both the military and the community are represented.

HRMFFA's Operations

HRMFFA's core functions include advocacy, regional planning and research to support the interests of both the military and federal facilities in Hampton Roads. It achieves its mission through several key activities:

1. **Advocacy:** HRMFFA engages with federal lawmakers, defence officials and military leaders to promote policies that protect and enhance the region's military and federal assets. This includes lobbying for military funding, supporting infrastructure projects, and ensuring that Hampton Roads remains a strategic location for defence operations. HRMFFA often engages lobbyists to work on their behalf at the federal level.
2. **Regional Planning:** HRMFFA works closely with local governments and planning agencies to ensure that the region's development supports the needs of the military. This includes addressing issues such as transportation, land use, and housing to accommodate the large number of military personnel stationed in the area.

3. **Economic Impact Studies:** HRMFFA supports research to highlight the economic benefits of the federal presence in Hampton Roads. This research demonstrates the critical role that military and federal facilities play in supporting the local economy, creating jobs and generating revenue, but are produced by the state rather than the organisation directly.
4. **Community Engagement:** HRMFFA also plays a key role in fostering communication between the military and local residents. Through public forums, events and educational initiatives, it ensures the community understands the importance of the military presence and is actively involved in shaping policies that impact both the military and the region.

Role in Supporting Defence Social Licence

HRMFFA plays a critical role in maintaining the defence social licence in Hampton Roads by fostering a positive relationship between the military and the community. The organisation's efforts to support this social licence include:

- **Promoting Transparency:** HRMFFA facilitates open dialogue between military leaders and the local community, ensuring that residents are aware of military activities and how they impact the region. This transparency helps build trust and understanding between the two parties.
- **Addressing Community Concerns:** HRMFFA works to address concerns related to land use, environmental impacts, and infrastructure development. By engaging with local governments and residents, HRMFFA ensures that the military's needs are balanced with those of the community.
- **Highlighting Economic Benefits:** HRMFFA's economic impact studies are essential in demonstrating the financial contributions of the military and federal installations to the local economy. By emphasising the economic importance of the military presence, HRMFFA helps build community support for ongoing federal investment in the region.
- **Supporting Regional Resilience:** Hampton Roads faces unique challenges related to climate change and sea level rise, which can impact military operations and infrastructure. HRMFFA advocates for federal support to address these challenges and ensures that regional planning incorporates resilience measures that benefit both the military and the broader community.

Comparing and Contrasting the Two Organisations

The primary difference between HRMFFA and SDMAC lies in the foundations and goals of each organisation. HRMFFA was created by local governments in Hampton Roads out of concern over potential base closures, with a focus on advocating for the region's economy and ensuring that federal decisions, particularly from Washington, D.C., would not jeopardise the local economy. The driving force behind HRMFFA is to safeguard the area's military and federal presence, primarily through influencing national policy decisions. SDMAC, on the other hand, appears more removed from direct government advocacy and instead centres its efforts on what is best for defence within the broader City of San Diego context; the organisation is less about protecting local government interests and more about integrating the military into the city's wider economic and social fabric.

HRMFFA's strategy revolves around influencing federal policy, with less emphasis on engagement at the state level. A significant aspect of HRMFFA's work involves preventing urban encroachment around military bases by working on land use planning, particularly regarding development along flight paths. In contrast, SDMAC focuses more on building community support for the military's role in the city's growth, especially in areas like defence contracting and economic impact.

Additionally, the leadership and approach of the two organisations differ in how they connect with defence authorities. While HRMFFA is led by ex-servicemen, it does not appear to have the same level of direct engagement with base commanders, or act as an informal channel for conveying military needs to the community, as SDMAC does. SDMAC's leadership seems to be more involved in representing the voice of the military in San Diego, ensuring that the defence sector's needs are considered in broader civic discussions.

This divergence in approach likely reflects the differences in the two regions' economies. Hampton Roads is heavily reliant on continued military investment, particularly in shipbuilding and defence facilities, making HRMFFA's protective stance crucial. San Diego, however, has a more diversified economy, and while the presence of the fleet is strategically important, it is not as economically pivotal as in Virginia. The bases in San Diego are situated more for geographic advantage, whereas in Hampton Roads, their location is tied to historical and ongoing defence investments that are critical to the local economy.

Community Outreach

Community Liaison Officers

Discussions with US base commanders highlighted the importance of community liaison officers in fostering relationships between military installations and the surrounding communities. In addition to high-level connections between base commanders and local mayors—used primarily for significant matters and emergencies—community liaison officers serve as an intermediary layer of engagement. These officers enable more routine issues to be raised and resolved efficiently, working collaboratively with local government, businesses and community members. This role also supports environmental approvals and the coordination with government stakeholders for development reporting and approval processes, enhancing the base’s integration within the community.

In Australia, while defence engagement with mayors and senior levels of local government is well-established, there are fewer formal mechanisms at the officer level for liaising with the community and defence entities. Although HMAS Stirling has a prominent, outward-facing commanding officer, additional outreach opportunities at the lower levels of Defence and in state and local government could strengthen these ties. The ASA similarly engages with local and state governments mainly at the executive level, which may be due to resource limitations in this early phase of the agency’s growth. Introducing designated community engagement roles within Defence, mirroring strategies used by local governments, could address this gap.

Local governments have successfully developed new career pathways focused solely on community engagement, often integrated with media and communications functions. These roles are dedicated to building relationships and ensuring transparent and responsive communication with the community, and similar positions within Defence could provide continuity and strengthen community ties.

While establishing such roles would require substantial operational adjustments and financial commitment from Defence, it is a model worth considering. Determining the day-to-day responsibilities and appropriate level of community engagement for such positions would be essential in ensuring that they effectively bridge Defence, local government and community needs. This approach could provide a structured pathway for Defence to address community concerns proactively and reinforce social licence, positioning Defence as a more accessible and engaged presence in Australian communities.

Fremantle Ports has implemented an effective outreach model that serves as an example of streamlined community and government engagement. This model includes structured interaction with government entities and community organisations, and broader community-level engagement, allowing the executive team to concentrate on core operational responsibilities. Meanwhile, key stakeholders remain engaged on strategic issues, ensuring that important relationships and long-term planning remain priorities. This approach effectively balances day-to-day outreach with high-level engagement, optimising both resource allocation and strategic focus.

Business Breakfasts

In an initiative established by SDMAC is ‘Defence Breakfasts’, a recurring forum for stakeholders to gain insights into the military’s role within the community. These monthly breakfasts bring together a diverse set of speakers, including military personnel, government officials and business representatives, fostering a deeper understanding of defence activities in the region. From these sessions, SDMAC has been able to educate the community on the military’s mission and the broader economic and strategic roles of defence, especially those that might otherwise be overlooked. These gatherings are integral to SDMAC’s outreach program, both raising awareness and generating funds to support other community initiatives.

During discussions with SDMAC, they underscored that speakers are expected to outline both their mission and the operational requirements to fulfil it, emphasising the importance of context and clarity. This approach facilitates a holistic understanding of defence’s purpose, helping the audience grasp why these roles exist and how they contribute to the collective security and economic stability of the region. SDMAC’s speakers range from senior defence personnel and elected officials to influential business figures, reflecting the breadth of community interest in San Diego’s defence sector.

In exploring a similar program for Perth, it is evident that while defence-focused events occur occasionally through chambers of commerce or business networks, there is no dedicated series akin to SDMAC’s Defence Breakfasts. A Perth-based initiative would need to engage a broad spectrum of stakeholders, many of whom may have limited knowledge of defence’s role in Western Australia. As commonwealth investment in defence continues to grow in the region, understanding these investments’ long-term impacts and aligning strategic planning will become increasingly important for local businesses. Much like the mining sector’s integration into Western Australia’s economic identity, defence could become an equally central theme within Perth’s broader business landscape.

This presents an opportunity for local government to play a pioneering role. Given the relatively low base of defence knowledge in Western Australia, a program could start with foundational awareness around initiatives like AUKUS and HMAS Stirling’s role in the region. By building understanding, the program could gradually introduce participants to the specific work streams and expansive operations happening in Western Australia, which are rarely part of the public dialogue.

While SDMAC can sustain monthly events given the higher density of military engagement in San Diego, a Perth counterpart would likely be better suited to a bi-monthly or quarterly schedule. Events could be branded to capture the public's interest and delivered through diverse communication channels to engage a wide cross-section of Perth. Collaboration with non-defence organisations might also enhance outreach, with a longer-term vision of transferring the program to a local association with a shared strategic vision.

Alongside broader Perth outreach, local chambers of commerce in the Perth South West region could continue dialogues with local businesses to strengthen the connection between defence and small enterprises. A coordinated event series—perhaps with high-profile speakers appearing at breakfast, lunch and sundowner events across multiple locations—could maximise engagement and provide tailored insights to the smaller businesses in the area. Such a series would ensure that businesses of all sizes understand and can engage with the strategic and economic opportunities emerging from increased defence activity in Western Australia.

Political Engagement

Engagement with state and federal lawmakers, as demonstrated by organisations like SANDAG and HRMFFA, plays a crucial role in maintaining defence social licence. Although the primary driver of these engagements may often centre on securing economic success for the region, these interactions also enable lawmakers to gain insight into the local implications of their policy decisions.

By fostering a continuous dialogue with defence-affiliated stakeholders, organisations like SDMAC create opportunities for political leaders to communicate directly with the wider community, explaining not only the decisions themselves but also the strategic considerations that shape them. This approach helps build a more informed and engaged community by aligning public understanding with the key drivers behind major policy shifts.

In Australia, a variety of commonwealth and state ministers bear some responsibility for overseeing and implementing defence projects within their regions. While the Minister for Defence is a central figure, other ministers—such as those responsible for regional development, veterans' affairs, and defence industries—also play integral roles in conveying the impact of Australia's evolving defence posture. At the state level, the Ministers for Defence Industries, Transport, Planning and State Development contribute to this dialogue by helping businesses and communities understand not only why major shifts are occurring but also what these changes mean for infrastructure, workforce development and local design considerations.

Clear communication from these leaders is essential, as it allows them to address both the opportunities and the challenges that accompany Australia's defence aspirations. By being transparent about the economic and social impacts of initiatives like AUKUS, political leaders can engage communities on the potential benefits and challenges, while openly addressing the mitigation measures that will be in place to manage any adverse impacts. Although there have been several significant announcements related to AUKUS, there has been limited engagement from decision-makers to explain why these decisions were necessary or how they may impact the region's most directly affected.

In this context, there is a clear need for ongoing political engagement to complement the work being done by the Australian Defence Force in the region. Defence's role is to implement the strategic policy set by the government of the day, meaning it falls upon the government to articulate the rationale behind these policy decisions. This ensures that communities are not left seeking answers solely from those tasked with implementation, but instead gain a holistic understanding of the policy objectives, considerations and expected outcomes directly from the decision-makers responsible.

Communications

Communications Approach Generally

Communications emerged as a significant point of contrast between Australian and US naval personnel. US personnel were notably open, transparent and exploratory in their communication, despite clear boundaries regarding sensitive topics. They demonstrated a willingness to speculate and provide contextual examples, even when specific details were unavailable. For instance, while they were not informed on specific decisions around nuclear waste management for US submarines in an Australian context, they referenced Japanese models, making it clear where these examples were relevant and adding caveats as needed. This communication approach showed a level of confidence that likely stems from seven decades of experience with nuclear reactors—experience that Australia is only beginning to build upon.

This confident, open dialogue underscored the ease with which senior US defence personnel could discuss their roles and responsibilities without fear of reputational risk. It is worth noting, however, that the visiting delegation engaged with very senior members of the US defence establishment, who likely possess a more strategic perspective and thus a higher level of comfort in public communications than their junior counterparts.

By contrast, while engagement with the ASA has always been professional and responsive, challenges do arise from a disparity in language and understanding. Local governments often lack the foundational knowledge in defence strategy and nuclear stewardship, yet still need to educate community leaders and the public on these complex issues to foster better comprehension. Questions from local governments that seem straightforward regarding nuclear materials are often multifaceted, and ASA's responses tend to prioritise accuracy over simplicity. As a result, rather than offering straightforward answers, ASA often provides highly conditioned, detailed responses that are confidential or cannot be shared.

This cautious approach to communication from ASA appears to reflect its reliance on meeting the exacting standards of the Naval Reactors Group, which is essential for progressing Australia's nuclear program. ASA's caution may stem from concerns over reputational risks or potential misinterpretations, leading them to dissect complex issues thoroughly before crafting highly specific responses. This approach, however, requires considerable time and resources and can sometimes be perceived as secretive. Although certain aspects of ASA's program must remain confidential, the perception of secrecy extends to other areas where it may not be necessary and may simply reflect a cautious communication style.

Addressing this requires building 'nuclear literacy' among community leaders and the broader public, which will be an ongoing process. ASA and allied organisations will need to proactively foster this awareness and establish continuous programs that help communities understand the strategic and political context of defence activities in the region. The delegation noted that this difference in communication styles was one of the most striking aspects of the engagements, highlighting a key area for ASA and the Australian Defence Force (ADF) to re-evaluate their communication practices to enable highly engaged, two-way dialogues. Encouraging a communication culture where all members feel free to speak confidently, with appropriate caveats, would allow them to engage without fear of unintended consequences.

While community unease around AUKUS and its implications remains, this sentiment may ease over time, allowing more freedom in defence communications. However, the coming years will be crucial for building social licence and community understanding well in advance of the arrival of US submarines. Ensuring clear, open and interactive communication now is essential for establishing the community trust that will support Australia's evolving defence role.

Economic Impact Report

One of SDMAC's most effective outreach tools is their annual economic impact study, which measures defence's contribution to the San Diego economy. This study provides key statistics and research that directly link defence activities with job creation, making it a highly effective tool for engaging political stakeholders at federal, state and local levels. It also helps inform members of the public about defence's economic significance to the region. SDMAC's approach has involved partnering with respected economists from a local university to create a reliable framework for measuring economic impact, lending credibility to the report's findings. Their advice for replicating such a report in Western Australia was to involve a reputable economics academic to enhance the report's legitimacy, rather than simply engaging a firm to develop metrics; the report's credibility, they noted, is as important as its findings.

Each year, the report also delves into a specific area to highlight aspects of defence that may otherwise go unrecognised. For example, one year's focus on the Marines illustrated the economic role of that branch in San Diego, a contribution that might not typically be seen as central to the defence profile of the region. Similarly, in Western Australia, while the current focus remains on the navy, there are equally valuable stories to tell about the army, air force, and even the infrastructure that supports defence activities more broadly.

The prospect of developing a similar report in Western Australia has garnered interest, as it would provide a clearer picture of the region's defence spending and its tangible impact on jobs, the supply chain, and overall economic activity. Although there is general awareness of defence investment in the region, quantifying its direct and indirect effects remains a challenge, beyond the basic analysis through impact modelling software. A report with rigorous data would help stakeholders understand the specific economic impact of defence in terms of job creation and business activity across the region.

This type of economic impact study would be particularly valuable in building engagement with the business community around defence social licence, as it clearly outlines the financial benefits of defence. However, it is important not to overstate the tool's impact. While an economic impact report can effectively communicate the business and employment benefits of defence, it does not address the social and environmental impacts or opportunities defence brings to a community. As such, while this report would be a vital engagement piece for the business community, its ability to resonate with the broader community may be more limited.

Websites

The Alliance reviewed key websites of US and Australian defence entities, observing that US bases provide a robust range of information on base activities, contact points and support services. US base websites typically feature detailed updates on base operations, accessible contact forms, a comprehensive overview of the base's role within the larger defence structure, and emergency contacts. These websites also provide information on transportation incentives, local support programs and resources for those working on the base. Additionally, the contact information includes direct communication channels, mailing addresses and a variety of supplementary resources, making it easier for the public to engage with base operations.

In contrast, the Australian example for HMAS Stirling was markedly less comprehensive. Although relevant information is available on a range of topics, there is no centralised platform to act as a 'single source of truth' for users. Similarly, the ASA website includes basic contact information but only lists a general Defence phone number, with no direct email addresses or specific contact points. The only available form is for media inquiries, and while links to social media pages (LinkedIn, Twitter, Instagram, Facebook) are provided, they may not be sufficient for public engagement or information-seeking on nuanced issues.

A simple Google search for nuclear shipbuilding in US bases yields numerous FAQs that address a range of community questions and concerns, underscoring the potential for websites to serve as reliable, comprehensive information hubs. For Australian audiences, however, the current digital landscape creates challenges. Many residents may find it difficult to differentiate between the navy, ASA, HMAS Stirling, and the Minister for Defence, each with their distinct responsibilities. This situation is likely to become more complex as a new Naval Nuclear Regulator is established, introducing additional sources of information for AUKUS-related matters. Without a clear, centralised source of information, the public may struggle to locate accurate, relevant details.

Creating a streamlined single source of truth would significantly benefit the Australian context, offering clarity and easing navigation for those seeking information. A comprehensive website with a consolidated directory and clearly delineated responsibilities would allow the public to better understand and engage with the Defence initiatives impacting their communities. This is of particular need in the short term, and stands to best engage with the wide range of stakeholders who are seeking information across a range of issues related to AUKUS.

Social Media

In discussions with US representatives, the significant role of social media in defence communications became evident, particularly with regard to the bases' outreach. For example, the US base in Japan is one of the most-followed social media accounts for any US base globally, reflecting high engagement within the host country. The content largely focuses on the day-to-day life of the base, which might appear mundane but offers transparency and builds trust, giving the public an authentic view of routine operations. Similarly, Naval Reactors maintains an active presence on platforms like LinkedIn, where they emphasise their 70-year track record of safe operations. This long history of content and consistent messaging reinforces public confidence and highlights a strong commitment to safety.

In San Diego, bases actively monitor social media channels, responding quickly to dispel misinformation or address community concerns. The team closely watches community sentiment online, reporting key issues to senior leadership who can then adjust messaging to provide clarity or directly address concerns. This approach not only mitigates the spread of misinformation but also reinforces a responsive relationship between the base and the surrounding community.

When reviewing the social media presence of both HMAS Stirling and the ASA, it was noted that their engagement tends to be more passive, primarily linking to informational web pages rather than directly engaging the public. While informative, this content lacks the interactive engagement commonly seen on US bases' social media. Furthermore, the HMAS Stirling page, for example, has minimal updates; significant events, such as the recent Submarine Tendered Maintenance Period (STMP), received no mention on their Facebook page, missing an opportunity to connect with the community on current initiatives.

In local government, social media has become a critical outreach tool that requires constant monitoring and regular updates to engage effectively with the community. Traditional communication methods—newsletters, media statements, notice boards—no longer achieve the same level of engagement they once did, and local governments now rely on social media as a primary communication channel. These platforms allow for a dynamic exchange, enabling quick sharing of essential information, such as road closures, events, and other community updates, while also providing insights into community sentiment on specific projects or issues.

For the ADF AND ASA, decisions regarding social media engagement ultimately rest with their internal strategies. However, it is important to acknowledge that community expectations have shifted; the public now expects engagement through these platforms. Social media offers a unique opportunity to share images, videos and updates about base activities; engage a broader audience about successful programs, upcoming events or pertinent issues; and through skilled social media management, provide responsive, direct communication. Although implementing such a strategy would require investment in resources and a more proactive communication approach, the benefits of fostering community trust and transparency through consistent social media engagement are clear, as demonstrated by the US defence approach.

Build Submarines Website

The US-based 'Build Submarines' website serves as a comprehensive landing page for anyone interested in careers related to submarine construction. This site provides detailed information on various career paths, the strategic objectives of the submarine program and the program's long-term goals. It focuses on instilling a sense of purpose in potential recruits, emphasising the meaningful contributions they can make within the submarine workforce. The website also showcases the extensive supply chain network, mapping thousands of job opportunities across the United States to demonstrate the program's broad economic impact.

Developed by BlueForge Alliance, a not-for-profit organisation working with companies in the submarine supply chain, the 'Build Submarines' initiative is designed to cultivate community awareness and understanding of the sector's workforce needs. Companies like Huntington Ingalls Industries (HII) rely on these outreach efforts to sustain and expand their workforce. To bolster visibility, the program sponsors major sporting events, including Major League Baseball, college football and NASCAR, which has helped raise the profile of their brand significantly. According to their website, Build Submarines has attracted over 400 million visitors, demonstrating the reach and impact of its awareness campaigns.

In an Australian context, multiple websites discuss the opportunities arising from AUKUS, including the Western Australian Government's website, 'WA – The Other Force' (theotherforce.wa.gov.au), which highlights the shipbuilding sector. However, as Australia's submarine program will rely on supply chains stretching across the nation—encompassing construction in South Australia, maintenance in Western Australia, and opportunities to engage in US and UK supply networks—there is a strong case for a centralised platform akin to the US model. Such a site would not only help build social licence by increasing public understanding and acceptance, but would also clearly illustrate the program's economic benefits.

Furthermore, it is essential to reinforce that these submarine-related roles are not limited to traditional trade positions; many are high-tech, analytical, and offer significant career advancement. A centralised, well-promoted platform could highlight this diversity in roles, helping to attract a skilled workforce ready to meet the sophisticated demands of the program.

Base Access

Another notable difference between the US and Australian approaches lies in access to defence bases. While US bases require substantial approvals for entry, once on-site, there is a far more relaxed approach to civilian presence. For instance, at Coronado in San Diego, the delegation observed considerable autonomy in movement once the initial security checks were completed. Although accompanied by senior personnel, delegates were allowed to freely experience various parts of the base. The experience was similar at Norfolk, with high security at the entrance but a greater sense of openness and engagement once inside. The US model also includes public events on base grounds, such as Little League games, concerts and open days, allowing the community to engage directly with the base. Norfolk's approach even extends to private tour operators who, with appropriate clearances, offer tours of naval facilities, providing a distinctly different approach to community engagement. What stood out most, however, was the encouragement from US personnel to take photos of the base, including aircraft carriers and other military assets. This openness, coupled with pride in showcasing the base, created a more welcoming atmosphere.

In contrast, HMAS Stirling enforces much stricter control over base access, with defence personnel closely managing where groups can go and what they can experience. Although the Garden Island base was at one point open to the public on select days, this practice has since been discontinued.

The openness of US bases aligns with the statement made by a US base commander, who described part of their role as “demystifying Willy Wonka’s Chocolate Factory”. They illustrated this by highlighting the similarity between running a navy base and managing a small city. Navy base operations involve many tasks akin to local government responsibilities, such as congestion management, infrastructure planning, parking and environmental stewardship. Allowing local government representatives to witness this day-to-day reality fosters a more profound mutual understanding between defence and local government stakeholders.

While public base access serves as a valuable engagement strategy, it is recognised that regular large-scale public access may not be practical for HMAS Stirling. However, there are significant opportunities for increased engagement with local leaders and community groups, allowing these individuals to gain a broader understanding of the base’s daily operations and the intricate planning and safety protocols that govern such an environment. This more targeted approach would help build a foundational appreciation for the responsibilities defence personnel undertake.

Additionally, allowing photography and encouraging visitors to share these images on private and public social media could significantly amplify the influence of community leaders who attend. This organic form of engagement, led by trusted local figures, can be highly effective. However, there is also value in curating and providing high-quality images to visitors during times of enhanced security (such as during visits of particular vessels) to enhance narratives and outreach efforts across their broader networks. Such a strategy allows for stakeholders to share messages with their audience, while ensuring that photographs do not impact the security requirements.

Public Radiation Monitoring

In separate discussions with representatives from Naval Reactors, the topic of publicly accessible data from radiation monitoring stations was explored, particularly in foreign jurisdictions like Japan. In these programs, radiation sensors are strategically placed to provide real-time, publicly available data on radiation levels. This approach offers communities transparency, as it allows them to observe and understand baseline radiation levels, which include naturally occurring sources, and to distinguish these from any defence-related readings, if any. Making such data openly accessible helps build nuclear literacy within communities, fostering a clearer understanding of radiation norms and helping to establish trust.

The availability of open-source, mapped data on public websites contributes to social licence by demonstrating whether naval vessels emit any radiation into their surroundings. This transparency reassures the public about safety and reinforces the perception that Defence is committed to accountability.

In examining available resources, we reviewed several Japanese websites, where general nuclear and radiological monitoring data was accessible. Although none focused specifically on military bases, annual reports from Naval Reactors were published, disclosing emission levels. While this offers a degree of transparency, the advantage of having real-time, easily accessible data is clear. Real-time monitoring would provide continuous assurance, fostering public trust by giving communities direct insight into radiation levels in their region.

A similar initiative could be beneficial in the Australian context, particularly with a focus on transparency around nuclear-powered submarines. Establishing a real-time monitoring site could be managed by a suitable regulator, linking to both Defence and community-based environmental websites. This resource would help build awareness and confidence in Defence’s environmental safety measures, making nuclear operations more comprehensible and less mysterious to the public.

Traffic and Transport

Vanpool

Run by SANDAG in partnership with Enterprise Rideshare, the Vanpool program is an affordable, sustainable commuting solution designed to reduce both the expense and environmental impact of driving to work in San Diego County. Residents are able to share rides, significantly cutting down individual transportation costs and easing traffic congestion across the region. The initiative provides a substantial monthly subsidy—up to \$400 per vanpool group—covering the costs of van leasing, fuel, insurance and maintenance, making it a highly accessible option for commuters.

Participants in the program can choose from a range of van sizes, seating from five to fifteen people, which allows groups to form around their specific commuting needs. The flexibility extends to route planning, as each vanpool determines its own pick-up and drop-off points based on the convenience of its members. In addition, Vanpool vehicles can utilise High-Occupancy Vehicle (HOV) lanes, allowing them to avoid peak-hour congestion and further reduce travel times.

Environmental benefits are central to the program's purpose, as the reduction in single-occupancy vehicles on the road translates to lower greenhouse gas emissions and less traffic congestion. The initiative is open to anyone commuting to work in San Diego County who can coordinate with others travelling similar routes and schedules, creating a flexible yet structured approach to shared transport.

One notable feature of the program is its emergency support, which ensures no participant is left stranded. If a Vanpool driver or a passenger has an emergency, alternative arrangements are made to get members to their destinations safely and without disruption (through Uber or taxis). This commitment to continuity strengthens the program's appeal, addressing commuter concerns about reliability.

By sharing a vehicle, participants reduce their fuel, parking and toll expenses while also enjoying access to HOV lane access and in some situations, to prioritised parking. The program is further incentivised through defence schemes to financially support Vanpool for workers on the base.

This model has potential relevance for Australia, especially for regions where defence installations create high commuter volumes but where public transport infrastructure is not yet fully developed. In such areas, a similar vanpool system could alleviate pressure on local roads, support environmental goals and provide an affordable and reliable commuting option, making a substantial contribution to social licence and community integration efforts around major installations. Success, however, hinges on financial incentives and the added fast commute related to carpool lanes. Without these associated programs, the success of the program may be limited.

Carpool Incentives

Linked to the Vanpool initiatives are the wider carpool incentives. When comparing Perth with US cities, Perth may have stronger public transport usage, but carpool uptake lags behind.

One effective carpool incentive in the US is the use of HOV lanes (like a bus lane, but for carpools), which allow carpool vehicles to bypass traffic, as seen in cities like Los Angeles, San Diego and Newport News. However, these lanes are most useful when employment centres are adjacent to freeway systems, unlike locations like HMAS Stirling, where this incentive is less applicable. It may however work in other contexts for employment centres adjacent to high volume road systems.

A simpler yet effective strategy is the provision of priority parking for carpool vehicles, offering spaces closer to office buildings or amenities. This has been successfully implemented in some US bases with limited parking. As HMAS Stirling continues to intensify, restricting parking space expansion could encourage a shift away from single-occupant vehicles to carpooling by opening up preferred car bays or even pricing parking for single-occupancy vehicles. With Perth experiencing more extreme weather, there would likely be some value placed on priority parking locations by employees not wanting to traverse the base in high temperatures or storm events.

The strategy of capping or limiting additional parking on base aligns with other successful models, such as the University of Western Australia's parking cap. UWA has maintained a maximum number of parking spaces despite land use intensification, prompting a shift towards public and active transport. A strictly enforced car limit for base access may support behavioural shift at HMAS Stirling, however this may have the negative consequence of lowering the attractiveness of the destination for workers.

Transportation Incentive Program

In the US, a transport incentive program offers personnel up to \$300 per month towards commuting costs, covering various public transport options and vanpool schemes (distinct from carpool schemes). This initiative effectively offsets the anticipated monthly costs of public transport, encouraging personnel to use alternatives to single-vehicle commutes, thus reducing congestion on and around military bases. To maintain accountability, personnel must have their commanding officer's approval and provide evidence of how the funds were spent for continued eligibility.

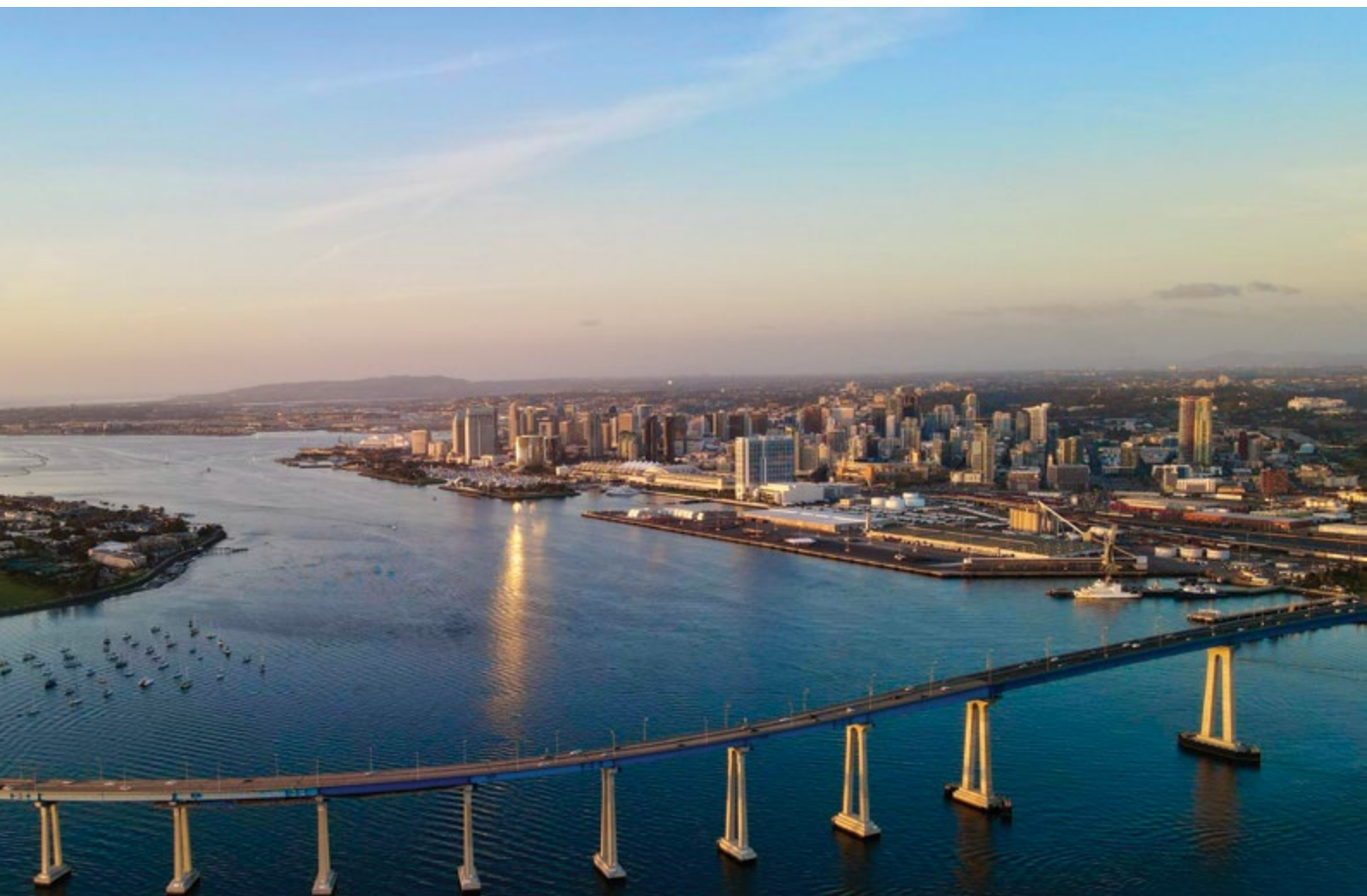
The program is particularly effective in locations where bases are closely connected to public transport infrastructure. For instance, in Norfolk, an interchange between the city's public transport system and the on-base transport network allows personnel to move seamlessly between the two while preserving the base's security protocols. Similarly, in San Diego, public transport access to the Coronado base facilitates straightforward commutes for personnel.

In the context of HMAS Stirling and the AMC, however, public transport infrastructure remains limited. Although some transport services exist in the surrounding areas, they are not yet at a level where public transport could

serve as a practical option for regular commutes. At HMAS Stirling, the combination of Causeway navigation, the distance between the Rockingham train station and the base's security gate, and the lack of direct access, makes public transport an impractical choice. Likewise, the AMC's limited connection to train services, coupled with bus services that may not align with peak shift hours, further hinders the viability of public transport for personnel commuting to the complex. Moreover, many professionals commuting to the AMC are trade workers who often need to bring specialised tools, which can pose an additional barrier to using public transport.

Currently, Australian personnel have access to salary sacrifice options for commuting, though they are far less substantial than the US transport incentives. Additionally, the Vanpool program in the US is closely linked to the transport incentive initiative, which helps ensure its effectiveness by covering a range of commuting options.

Implementing a similar program in Australia could help reduce the transport burden on local road networks. However, this would likely require significant improvements to public transport services, including extended hours and routes to better serve HMAS Stirling and the AMC. Dedicated bus linkages from key transport hubs, such as Rockingham and Aubin Grove train stations, may also be necessary to make such a program viable.



Local Engagement

Defence Engagement at Regional Planning Level

The San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG)—an organisation comparable to the Perth South West Metropolitan Alliance—includes representation from defence as part of its strategic planning and communication efforts. This collaboration fosters a closer working relationship between government and defence and ensures a deeper understanding of issues that impact both bases and the surrounding communities.

While the Alliance has met with defence representatives on several occasions, no formal arrangement currently exists for regular defence involvement in Alliance matters. Although not every issue raised by the Alliance is directly relevant to defence, a consistent engagement framework could significantly enhance mutual understanding over regional issues. In SANDAG, defence representatives serve as non-voting members, contributing to discussions without formal decision-making power. This participation has led to successful programs, such as the Vanpool initiative, and informed decisions around road construction priorities. In the US context, local governments often have a more direct role in regional road planning and funding than local governments in WA, where such matters typically fall under state jurisdiction.

In Western Australia, it is not entirely clear how defence engages with the state government in regional planning matters, although there is scope for a more integrated approach. Defence could benefit from closer engagement with agencies like the Department of Planning, Lands and Heritage, which oversees long-term regional planning. This type of engagement could ensure future planning aligns with the anticipated needs of Defence, and help address any strategic planning implications for broader state development. Although Defence has a strong relationship with the Department of Jobs, Tourism, Science, and Innovation, which oversees economic growth and defence industry development, this department does not lead strategic state planning. Greater collaboration with additional agencies, such as Main Roads WA, the Western Australian Planning Commission and utility providers, could provide a more comprehensive approach to accommodating defence's future demand.

From the Alliance's perspective, establishing a structured approach to ongoing engagement with Defence will be explored, balancing the need for productive discussions with an awareness of Defence priorities. Regular dialogue would allow both local government and Defence to share insights and anticipate impacts more effectively, benefiting the broader region.

Use of Veterans

Both SDMAC and naval officers from San Diego highlighted the significant role veterans play in supporting defence's social licence within the community. Veterans serve as trusted voices who can help the public understand the purpose behind certain inconveniences, such as jet noise or heavy commuter traffic near military bases. Their insights, grounded in first-hand experience, are particularly valuable in addressing public safety concerns and dispelling rumours around sensitive issues, such as nuclear safety in informal settings. Veterans can clarify defence initiatives, explaining why certain programs, which may appear costly at first glance, are essential investments.

An analysis of veteran demographics shows a much higher percentage of veterans in regions like San Diego and Newport News compared to Western Australia. San Diego, despite its high cost of living, retains a substantial veteran population, while Newport News, with more affordable living conditions, sees even greater veteran presence. This strong veteran presence has been instrumental in maintaining public trust in defence matters, as veterans are often deeply embedded within the community and serve as informal liaisons between defence and civilians.

In the context of Australia, particularly Western Australia, the role of veterans will be vital in communicating information about the military's operations, however as Australia moves towards nuclear-powered submarines, the relatively few ex-military personnel with specific nuclear-related experience are often already engaged with Defence. Given Australia's nascent stage in nuclear submarine operations, veterans will have limited immediate impact on public perception, particularly in dispelling misconceptions around nuclear-powered submarines. However, in the future, as Australia gains more experience in this domain, the veteran community could become an invaluable resource for public engagement, with their insights contributing to the gradual building of social licence.

In time, veterans will likely become integral to building defence's social licence around nuclear-propelled submarines in Australian communities, contributing to the shared understanding of Defence activities. However, in the current climate, their role in countering misinformation about nuclear-powered submarines is somewhat constrained.

School Engagements

Engagement with Norfolk has underscored the importance of building relationships with youth through initiatives like an annual Science Technology Engineering Mathematics (STEM) outreach day, held during Fleet Week. Each year, approximately 2,500 fifth graders from primary schools across the region attend, participating in interactive exhibits led by defence-affiliated businesses and naval personnel. Throughout the day, students are paired with members of the navy, who guide them through naval ships and showcase equipment, including aircraft and other vehicles, allowing the children to witness first-hand how STEM is integrated into daily naval operations.

This hands-on approach to STEM engagement includes demonstrations on concepts like sonar, illustrating practical, real-world applications of these subjects. The event's aim is twofold: to inspire a lasting interest in STEM subjects and career paths; and to introduce students and teachers to potential defence careers that extend beyond traditional roles, highlighting the broader array of opportunities within the defence sector. Holding the event during Fleet Week amplifies its impact, raising awareness of defence's role in the community and reinforcing these messages to the children's parents.

In Australia, similar initiatives are beginning to take shape. The ASA has announced plans to develop an engagement centre designed to offer immersive experiences, but there is an opportunity to extend this outreach further by developing programs with local schools that are focused on HMAS Stirling. Such a program could help demystify the base's role within the community, fostering an early understanding of Defence's presence and purpose in the region.

In the Perth South West area alone, there are approximately 100 primary schools, which is a significant potential reach comparable with the scale of resources required for a Norfolk-style STEM outreach program. While implementing a program of that magnitude would demand substantial investment, there are more accessible options that could be considered in the shorter term. For example, sponsoring STEM awards as part of primary school graduation ceremonies could offer a meaningful start, promoting awareness of Defence's role in the community and encouraging interest in STEM careers. Such sponsorships would allow Defence to engage with the community in a positive and visible way, showcasing the evolving landscape of Defence roles beyond conventional perceptions and creating a bridge for future outreach initiatives.

Celebration of US Occasions

Discussions with US naval officers about their international deployment experiences revealed valuable insights into how personnel are integrated into host communities. Officers highlighted that considerable groundwork is undertaken before deployment to help personnel familiarise themselves with the local environment. This includes briefings on practical aspects, like navigating local public transport, and cultural orientation on community norms. This preparation helps ease the transition, ensuring that incoming personnel are well prepared to engage with their new surroundings.

Particular consideration was raised about the potential for homesickness. In some overseas deployments, the US personnel would be housed in a central location in a 'little America' model, however the preference for AUKUS is a more dispersed 'salt and pepper' style of integration throughout the community.

US officers stressed that a primary motivation for joining the navy is the chance to experience new cultures and engage with diverse communities by exploring the world. Most personnel are enthusiastic about immersing themselves in local life, enjoying the opportunity to understand and feel at home within their host communities. Yet, even among those eager to adapt, some naturally seek occasional reminders of home, such as familiar foods or cultural events.

This context presents a meaningful opportunity for local governments to support the integration of incoming personnel. A practical approach could involve inviting US personnel to participate in Australian cultural events, enhancing their connection to the community. Additionally, recognising American cultural events, such as Thanksgiving or the Super Bowl, would provide familiar touchpoints for US personnel. This aligns with the efforts many local governments already make to celebrate cultural events like Ramadan or Diwali for diverse community groups, fostering inclusivity.

There are also economic development opportunities for local businesses around these engagements. Informing shops and restaurants about potential demand for American goods or celebrations of holiday events could create mutual benefits. For example, stocking certain imported foods around major US holidays or hosting themed events in local bars and restaurants could enhance the appeal of a local business and draw in both US personnel and locals interested in experiencing American traditions.

At the same time, it is crucial to embrace opportunities for US personnel to immerse themselves in Australian culture. Celebrating the Australian way of life by including them in local events—particularly as new cohorts arrive—will deepen their understanding and connection to the community. This dual approach of cultural celebration and local integration offers a balanced pathway for supporting incoming personnel, ultimately fostering a shared community spirit and greater social cohesion.

Defence Band

One initiative highlighted in discussions on social licence in the US involved US defence personnel singing the national anthem at major sporting events. This practice reflects a high level of visible patriotism, a defining element of the American approach to defence-community relations. In the US, military presence at such events reinforces the deep connection between national identity and pride in defence, making it a familiar, even expected, part of the American cultural landscape.

In contrast, while Australia's military presence is strong through events like Anzac Day and Remembrance Day, these observances are typically reserved for commemorative occasions rather than everyday public gatherings. The ADF does play an outreach role, such as through the Australian Army Band, yet this is generally limited to dates of national significance, rather than appearing as a routine part of popular events.

Adopting a similar practice in Australia might be seen as inconsistent with how Australians traditionally perceive the ADF. While the 'Anzac spirit' is undeniably central to Australian identity, the everyday role of the Defence Force is less prominently displayed in public life. Australians express pride in their Defence Force and their country, yet the instances of national anthem performances at sporting events are generally reserved for special occasions, not regular occurrences. Integrating defence personnel into frequent public events in Australia may not align with the existing cultural expectations surrounding the Defence Force's presence, which is largely understated compared to the overt patriotism seen in the US.

Defence in the Community Awards

SDMAC also connects with the local community through an annual award recognising defence volunteers in the San Diego community. The purpose of this award is to bring attention to the scope of volunteer efforts by defence personnel, particularly those involving non-defence-related activities, such as supporting community groups, charities, and other civic organisations. This high-profile event, where senior military leaders present the awards, is attended by military, civilian and government leaders, marking it as a prestigious recognition for military personnel in the region.

The event also garners substantial media attention, which further raises community awareness of the positive contributions that defence personnel make beyond their traditional roles. In Western Australia, while many local governments host Australia Day awards that recognise various categories of volunteers, including outstanding citizens, seniors, and youth, there is no specific award for military volunteers. Given that the Perth South West corridor has one of the highest concentrations of defence personnel in Australia, an award specifically for Defence Force volunteers could be valuable in acknowledging their unique contributions. However, as the distribution of defence personnel varies widely across local governments, it might be challenging to implement this award at the individual council level. Instead, a regional or even state-level award could be considered, potentially led by a regional body or in collaboration with the state government, to celebrate the contributions of Defence Force personnel across Western Australia.

Additionally, this award could serve as an opportunity not only to recognise Defence personnel but also to encourage volunteerism more broadly, highlighting the avenues for community involvement available to both defence members and civilians. Alternatively, Defence could consider an internal award program for volunteers within the organisation. Hosting it as a public event, with both civic and defence leaders present, would amplify its visibility and impact.

A logical approach might be to align such an award with existing civic recognition programs, such as Australia Day or WA Day celebrations, which already honour community contributions. This integration would elevate the profile of volunteer efforts by Defence personnel within a broader context of civic service, drawing attention to their unique role in community building and fostering a deeper connection between Defence and the general public.

Education Training Pathways

The US has established strong educational pathways, particularly in STEM subjects, to support shipbuilding and naval careers. Initiatives like the HII 'Build Submarines' website serve as an effective starting point for raising awareness about these opportunities, but HII's approach demonstrates a much deeper, integrated strategy. Their educational model is specifically designed to showcase shipbuilding as a long-term, meaningful career with a strong sense of purpose. This messaging is particularly aimed at younger generations, emphasising not only the financial rewards but also the societal value of contributing to national defence through shipbuilding.

HII has developed a comprehensive pathway that extends far beyond traditional trade roles, incorporating clear opportunities for progression into management, supervisory and business development positions. This structure reflects a commitment to fostering lifelong careers within the industry, ensuring that workers can advance their skills and responsibilities over time. HII is not just a shipbuilder but also an educational institution in its own right, seamlessly integrating hands-on training with classroom-based learning. The program also allows individuals to 'earn while they learn', providing a practical pathway into shipbuilding careers while removing the financial burden often associated with traditional US college systems.

The HII model is widely recognised as a leading educational approach in the US, making it particularly attractive to those seeking careers in the shipbuilding and defence industries. By aligning training directly with industry needs, the program ensures that graduates are equipped not only for immediate employment but also for long-term growth within the sector.

In the context of AUKUS, Western Australia stands to gain a range of new career opportunities in shipbuilding and associated industries. Institutions like South Metropolitan TAFE and local universities are beginning to explore these opportunities, but there is not yet an overt pathway linking these educational institutions with shipbuilders ASC in the same way HII has achieved. The connection between post-secondary education and a career in shipbuilding does not yet appear to be well understood by the general public or those entering the workforce. There is a need to better articulate how such pathways could support apprenticeships, trade qualifications and the development of additional skills to help shipbuilders transition into supervisory and managerial roles.

While the promise of high-paying jobs associated with AUKUS has been highlighted as a major benefit to the region, there is a disconnect between this promise and the visible pathways that could make these careers accessible and aspirational. Bridging this gap will require a concerted effort to create clear, structured and well-communicated educational and career development pathways, demonstrating to the community that shipbuilding is not only a viable career but also one that is highly valued and offers long-term growth potential.

Research

Forecast Demand Study

The SANDAG and Hampton Roads are two regional authorities who actively lead forecasting efforts that incorporate defence-related growth. Their studies extend beyond general population projections, incorporating defence aspirations and expected investments to assess the impacts on housing, traffic and other civic infrastructure needs. This approach allows them to prepare for the social and economic demands that accompany significant defence activities.

Given the substantial defence growth anticipated in Western Australia over the next two decades, there is still some uncertainty around the specific growth demands and timelines related to continuous shipbuilding and AUKUS initiatives. While incoming personnel numbers are becoming clearer, the broader impacts on the supply chain and local economy remain challenging to quantify. Developing a targeted social strategy for the region could help address these gaps, ensuring adequate housing supply and appropriate housing typologies to meet expected needs. Once established, these social strategies can be shared with the private sector to guide investment decisions and help align development timing with demand.

In Western Australia, the Department of Planning, Lands and Heritage typically handles growth forecasting through the *WA Tomorrow* publication, which provides long-term growth scenarios. However, these projections do not yet appear to consider recent defence-related announcements, indicating the need for a more localised, regional approach to forecast modelling. Such an approach would need to consider not only defence projects but also other major infrastructure initiatives like Westport, the Western Trade Coast, Fremantle's redevelopment, and planned expansions in medical infrastructure for the region.

As noted in the region already, defence activities can have significant localised impacts on infrastructure demands, which may not be fully captured in state-level forecasts. For instance, the Cape Peron Transport Needs Assessment considers defence aspirations alongside community needs to address transit requirements at a highly localised level. This type of reporting provides valuable insights into areas that may require more focused planning and support, identifying infrastructure needs of national significance but with critical implications at the local level.

Incorporating defence-focused forecasting within Western Australia could create a more comprehensive planning framework, aligning social and economic strategies with anticipated growth. This would enable local governments to better anticipate and manage the ripple effects of defence investments, helping to ensure that the necessary civic and residential infrastructure is in place to support the growing defence community and related sectors. It would also help the community to understand the growth pressures and timeframes that the region will likely face, allowing them to plan and determine how they choose to live and participate in the region.

Engagement With Other Defence Communities

Discussions with US government representatives revealed a strong awareness of other defence communities, shaped by both cooperation and competition, particularly concerning base closures and resource allocations. Despite these competitive elements, there was a shared interest in understanding the various programs being implemented across defence communities, especially those led by allied defence associations, to learn from each other's successes and challenges. This interest extended beyond core defence concerns to encompass common community issues like traffic congestion and the interface between bases and their surrounding communities, which are widely experienced across the US. It became clear that these challenges are equally familiar to Australian communities, underscoring that the insights and best practices around social licence explored in this delegation may hold broad relevance for local governments throughout Australia. Additionally, other Australian local governments may already be operating similar programs or tackling similar issues in defence engagement, the specifics of which remain largely unknown without a platform for shared discussion.

In Australia, although the number of defence bases is far fewer than in the US, their geographical spread presents a unique set of challenges and opportunities for local engagement. Currently, no formal mechanism exists for local governments to regularly connect and discuss the nuances of their relationships with Defence, share experiences or collectively address common challenges. In other sectors, such forums have been successful. For example, local governments responsible for major airports have developed a regular dialogue to discuss issues of social licence, interface safety, traffic management and community engagement. This collaborative approach has allowed these councils to deepen their understanding of the relationship between airport authorities and local communities, leading to more unified and effective advocacy. Adopting a similar model for defence-focused councils could allow Australian local governments to create a dedicated space for discussing engagement strategies, sharing insights, and developing a unified approach to defence-related challenges.

Establishing a formal forum for local governments that host or are affected by defence facilities would allow these councils to present and discuss learnings from this delegation, while also gathering insights into the specific issues other defence communities are managing. Such a group could explore ways to address both localised concerns and national-level issues, fostering collaboration on best practices and, where necessary, advocating jointly on behalf of defence communities to the federal government. For instance, a unified body could help raise awareness of common challenges at a national level, whether related to social licence, workforce impacts or infrastructure strain, allowing these issues to be addressed in a coordinated manner rather than through fragmented, individual efforts.

The aim of such a collaborative platform is not merely to acknowledge shared challenges but to genuinely support one another in developing actionable solutions. Through regular dialogue, defence-hosting local governments could work together to refine their approach to defence social licence by sharing resources, experiences, and innovative solutions. This could ultimately help Australia to establish itself as a leader in defence social licence, building a strong, informed and supportive network of defence-engaged communities. Such a model would serve to create not only a more effective local approach to defence engagement, but also a more cohesive national strategy, fostering understanding and trust between Defence, local governments and their communities.

Ongoing Research

Extensive engagements with stakeholders in the US, together with ongoing research into defence social licence, has highlighted critical insights encompassing defence-affiliated organisations, local governments and military representatives. There is an evident interest within the sector to learn how similar jurisdictions tackle issues related to social licence and the ways in which their approaches might align with, or differ from, counterparts abroad. This underscores a pressing need for a more extensive body of research in defence social licence. While some academic studies touch on related areas, they lack the comprehensive breadth needed to fully address the sector's emerging challenges.

Social licence, in its most enduring form, represents an evolving relationship with the community, and defence social licence is no exception. Our review of US-based social licence programs shows that these initiatives are developed gradually, shaped over time, and constantly adapt as new ideas, societal trends, and circumstances come into play. The examples examined in the United States offer valuable snapshots of strategies praised for their community engagement, yet they represent a specific moment in time in two localities rather than providing a one-size-fits-all solution to defence-community relations.

The issue of social licence and defence is becoming increasingly relevant not only in the US, but across Western countries, where shifting social expectations, political landscapes and advancing technologies continue to influence the relationship between defence and the broader community. A key insight from the study tour came from the direct involvement of both local government elected representatives and ASA personnel. Their combined presence allowed for a thorough understanding of each group's historical and operational context, which in turn highlighted that the social licence needs of Western Australia may differ significantly from other regions within Australia. While shared challenges exist, each defence community also faces unique, localised pressures in fostering relationships and public acceptance within their respective regions.

This insight supports the case for building a sustained, research-focused partnership between Defence and local governments across Australia in order to delve into defence social licence more comprehensively. Through collaborative research and practical assessment of social licence approaches in a range of international and national jurisdictions, these partnerships could identify projects that not only align with Australian needs but also resonate at a local level. This collaborative approach would allow communities and defence bodies to design tailored programs suited to each locality's distinct characteristics and needs, offering a model of social engagement that ensures projects are carefully evaluated for their feasibility and community fit.

Such an approach, based on cooperation between defence entities and local governments, would provide the foundation for a robust social licence framework. This would allow community and defence representatives to jointly review which elements of social licence programs may be adaptable to specific regions and, more importantly, to understand why some strategies might work well in one locality but may not be viable in another. The process of consultation and project identification can bridge knowledge gaps and help ensure defence programs are as community-aligned as possible.

The broader objective of this ongoing research is to establish a richer and more cohesive understanding of the various approaches to defence social licence across global defence communities. By sharing these insights, Australian communities and defence stakeholders would gain access to proven strategies and valuable lessons from other jurisdictions. This exchange of knowledge would contribute to more effective, informed, and adaptive approaches to defence social licence that not only foster acceptance but also reflect the values, needs, and diversity of each unique region.

Baseline Study

Although we did not encounter direct examples of baseline social licence studies in the US, it is clear that establishing a foundational understanding of community awareness around AUKUS is essential in our region. Currently, while some community groups are engaged and aware of the implications of AUKUS, there has been no comprehensive audit to assess overall community sentiment or understanding. This gap highlights the need for a baseline study to provide a measurable starting point for evaluating public awareness and concerns.

To ensure accuracy and reliability, this baseline study should involve a well-defined methodology, a representative sample size, and be conducted by an independent third party with expertise in social research. Initial discussions with Western Australian universities have shown interest in leading such research, and these institutions possess the necessary skill sets and experience to carry out a study of this scale effectively. Given the credibility and objectivity required, engaging with a university-based research team would likely offer a more rigorous approach than using a consultant, and it would provide an unbiased assessment of community sentiment.

In addition to measuring public awareness, this baseline study could serve as an opportunity to catalogue key community concerns, helping frame future conversations and engagements. Although the precise levels of public engagement are not yet fully understood, there are clear indicators within local government that these issues are increasingly raised at community meetings and formal council discussions. This trend points to a need for enhanced communication and greater transparency around AUKUS and its regional impacts.

While the baseline study would undoubtedly help refine the timing and prioritisation of proposed engagement programs, it should not delay immediate efforts to address existing issues. There are clear opportunities to proactively engage with the community and address underlying concerns, even as the baseline study progresses. Moving forward, this research should be prioritised to guide a more structured approach to social licence, ensuring that all recommendations are grounded in a comprehensive understanding of the community's current perspective on AUKUS.

ANALYSIS

For ease of reference, the following table consolidates the range of programs reviewed, highlighting the specific issues they aim to address and the aspects of social licence they seek to rebuild. Each program is assessed in terms of its potential effectiveness in the Australian context, with an indication of anticipated cost.

The programs are organised by descending impact and then by ascending cost, offering a broad overview. This ordering is not intended as a recommended sequence for implementation; rather, it provides a comparative view. There is value in considering each program independently, recognising that other agencies may have differing perspectives on the feasibility and responsibility for implementation.



Program	Summary of US Experience	Australian Context	Issues Addressed
Defence Breakfasts`	Regular business engagements where key defence leaders and industry representatives present a clear overview of their mission, along with the challenges and opportunities it brings. These sessions aim to keep the wider community well informed about ongoing projects in the region.	There seems to be limited understanding of the purpose and drivers behind the AUKUS project. Expanding engagement beyond direct defence groups to include other industries will raise awareness and help address key communication challenges.	Nuclear Safety; Purpose of AUKUS; Traffic and Infrastructure;
Ongoing Research	The US programs varied, with some genuine curiosity from allied organisations about how we saw their peers operating and where the various strengths and weaknesses are. What is clear from this, is that there is no definitive single best practice, but a range of experiences, with programs and undertakings that work for different communities in differing sectors.	There are other countries with defence social licence programs, some related to nuclear power and others more broadly that can be studied. Given Social Licence is an ongoing conversation, there is a need for ongoing research and engagement with other countries to look at how the ADF's engagements with local government more broadly can eventually be viewed as world's leading practice.	Purpose of AUKUS; Housing Impact; Traffic and Infrastructure; Environmental Concerns
Political Engagements	SANDAG and HRMFFA demonstrated clear political engagement with both state and federal governments, providing avenues for political messaging back to their communities. While overt patriotism in the US was more pronounced compared to Australia, the community was still effectively engaged by politicians on the importance of supporting defence.	As this report has highlighted, the decision to invest in nuclear-powered submarines was announced in the US, with dialogue primarily focused on the US due to their increased presence in Pillar One, while the UK's role has been smaller. Despite the significant ramifications for the Perth South West region, there has been little engagement at a political level explaining the shift in defence policy, its implications for the community, or the opportunities that this investment could bring. While discussions have largely been held in Canberra or at HMAS Stirling, the wider community has not been fully engaged.	Nuclear Safety; Presence of Nuclear Weapons; Movement of Nuclear Materials; Rockingham as a Potential Target; Purpose of AUKUS; Housing Impact
Public Radiation Monitoring	The use of open data radiation monitoring has been used in other countries, allowing communities to note radiological levels in environment. This also allows comparisons to be made to ship visit times to note if there is any change. It also builds community awareness of background radiation and offers transparency about the impact of nuclear operations at the base.	Public environmental monitoring of radiation has typically been limited to UV indexes and administered by Australia's nuclear regulator.	Nuclear Safety

Social Licence Aspect	Recommendations	Impact	Cost	Responsible Agency	Support Agencies
Acknowledgement & Transparency; Engagement & Dialogue; Commitment to Long-Term Benefits;	This is a straightforward program to implement among stakeholders. However, presentations should be considered both within the region and in the Central Business District to ensure broad engagement across all stakeholder groups.	High ★★★	Inexpensive \$	Local Government	All parties
Acknowledgement & Transparency; Engagement & Dialogue; Commitment to Long-Term Benefits; Revising Practices Based on Lessons Learned; Sustained Community Investment	The Department of Defence should undertake ongoing research in collaboration with local governments to identify best practice social licence programs and report on how these could be applied in the Australian context.	High ★★★	Inexpensive \$	Department of Defence	
Acknowledgement & Transparency	Engagements by Ministers for Defence, Defence Industries, Veterans, and Regional Development would not only drive awareness of the role of Perth's South West corridor but, more importantly, send a demand signal to a business community largely unaware of the scale and scope of opportunities. These engagements would also assist a community seeking to understand the strategic purpose of the changes ahead.	High ★★★	Inexpensive \$	Federal Government	
Acknowledgement & Transparency; Engagement & Dialogue	While there is a new naval nuclear regulator being established, it has been noted that Naval Reactors in the US publishes significant amounts of data and that real-time monitoring and public access to this data would be consistent with this practice. This offers a real opportunity to build public trust if the data is freely available.	High ★★★	Moderate \$\$	Federal Government	

Program	Summary of US Experience	Australian Context	Issues Addressed
Baseline Study	No defence social licence studies were noted, particularly given the lack of public concern in the community.	There have been universities in WA who have indicated an interest in pursuing social licence studies in relation to AUKUS with the communities in the region. There are numerous independent and capable research institutions who could develop a methodology that could be implemented to measure public sentiment now, and into the future.	Nuclear Safety; Presence of Nuclear Weapons; Movement of Nuclear Materials; Rockingham as a Potential Target; Purpose of AUKUS; Housing Impact; Traffic and Infrastructure; Environmental Concerns
Economic Impact Study	The SDMAC economic impact study measures the effect of defence spending on the local community. It provides an annual analysis, focusing on a specific topic each year, and tracks key metrics that highlight the ongoing influence of defence activities. The study is conducted by a reputable university to ensure accuracy and credibility.	There has been discussion around developing such a report, but challenges exist in measuring the defence industry within census data. The inaugural report will likely require significant investment due to the need for a robust, ongoing methodology. While some basic modelling has been done using trade numbers, new technologies will introduce further complexities in assessing the value of supply chains before they are fully developed. As recommended by SDMAC, the report should be led by a distinguished economist from a leading university.	Purpose of AUKUS; Housing Impact; Traffic and Infrastructure
Allied Associations	In the Alliance's opinion, SDMAC was the pinnacle of the Allied Associations engaged, becoming an unofficial voice for defence and taking a leading role in raising public awareness and brokering the relationship between Defence and the community.	There are several Western Australian groups with similar roles, but none match the independence of SDMAC. However, given the scale and maturity of the defence sector in San Diego, replicating SDMAC in WA would be challenging and perhaps unnecessary at this stage. Many of SDMAC's programs, mindsets, and activities could, however, be incorporated into existing forums.	Nuclear Safety; Movement of Nuclear Materials; Purpose of AUKUS
Websites	Each base has a comprehensive website for the public, providing key contacts and information on environmental, emergency management, and operational plans. These sites offer a range of resources and information about the purpose of the bases, as well as news (though some of it was noted to be outdated). The website also includes various forms, links, and relevant information on proposed programs of work.	The website for HMAS Stirling is notably less comprehensive. While the required information may be available online, it is scattered across multiple locations rather than consolidated in one place.	Nuclear Safety; Presence of Nuclear Weapons; Movement of Nuclear Materials; Rockingham as a Potential Target; Purpose of AUKUS; Housing Impact; Traffic and Infrastructure; Environmental Concerns

Social Licence Aspect	Recommendations	Impact	Cost	Responsible Agency	Support Agencies
Acknowledgement & Transparency; Engagement & Dialogue	This needs to be pursued as a priority, to measure the effectiveness of programs. Ideally these studies should occur ahead of interventions, however given the urgency and timeframes association with AUKUS, these studies will need to occur in tandem with other programs.	High ★★★	Moderate \$\$	ASA	
Acknowledgement & Transparency; Engagement & Dialogue; Commitment to Long-Term Benefits	SDMAC identified this report as a key advocacy tool, helping to explain to community leaders and new residents the importance of continued defence investment for the local community. It clearly demonstrates the link between the community's economic wellbeing and defence's presence in the region and would prove useful to engagement in WA.	High ★★★	Moderate \$\$	State Government	ASA, Local Government
Engagement & Dialogue	A review of the current allied organisations, their roles, and opportunities for collaboration or more efficient resource use should be conducted to better align efforts.	High ★★★	Moderate \$\$	State Government	All Stakeholders
Acknowledgement & Transparency; Engagement & Dialogue	The base's website provides a logical platform for FAQs on nuclear safety, the purpose of the base, and general community engagement, which should be considered a priority for improving public interaction. The site could also serve as a hub for updates on upcoming works or news stories about the base's role and the personnel stationed there, offering greater transparency and involvement opportunities for the community.	High ★★★	Moderate \$\$	Department of Defence	ASA

Program	Summary of US Experience	Australian Context	Issues Addressed
School Engagements	Norfolk highlighted that, as part of their Fleet Week activities, they host a STEM day for 2,500 fifth graders. Students are guided by personnel, where they learn about the practical applications of STEM, explore vehicles and vessels, and gain insights into Defence.	There have been outreach programs related to visiting US submarines, but no clear long-term strategy has been noted. However, plans for an ASA engagement centre may enhance future school engagement efforts.	Nuclear Safety; Purpose of AUKUS;
Communications	This was the most significant difference noted by the Alliance. US defence personnel were very open and transparent in their engagement, with clear boundaries on what they could and could not discuss. This openness likely stems from their confidence in the program and a long history of understanding what could be shared. As the leading partner with nuclear expertise, they were unlikely to misrepresent information or say anything that could upset Naval Reactors.	Australia's nuclear-powered submarine program is still in its early stages, and with the US being 70 years ahead on this journey, their communication experience at this stage of engagement may not be directly relevant. As previously noted, Australia appears to take a more cautious approach to communication, which can sometimes be perceived as secretive. While ASA personnel have a strong understanding of the various aspects of nuclear-powered submarines, sharing this knowledge can be challenging when engaging with a community that lacks the same technical understanding. This can lead to delays in addressing correspondence or answering questions, as there are concerns about what information can or cannot be shared.	Nuclear Safety; Presence of Nuclear Weapons; Movement of Nuclear Materials; Rockingham as a Potential Target; Purpose of AUKUS; Housing Impact; Traffic and Infrastructure; Environmental Concerns
Roads Grants	The US program is not a direct funding mechanism from Defence but a pathway for the federal government to consider road contributions as part of the federal budget. It does not depend on annual allocations or competitive funding; instead, it assesses the merits of road projects linked to national defence, allowing the government to provide direct funding.	While Australia has various grant programs, defence-related upgrades present unique challenges. Since state or local governments cannot legally impose conditions requiring road upgrades, there must be a mechanism to mitigate the impact of increased defence use. This is especially important when such intensification could lead to safety issues within the road network, which would typically require conditional approval in other projects.	Traffic and Infrastructure; Environmental Concerns

Social Licence Aspect	Recommendations	Impact	Cost	Responsible Agency	Support Agencies
Engagement & Dialogue; Commitment to Long-Term Benefits;	Engagement with approximately 100 primary schools in the Perth South West region is feasible, though time-consuming. Smaller initiatives, such as sponsoring STEM achievement awards, would allow ASA to engage with community stakeholders effectively and raise awareness of submarines and AUKUS Pillar 2 technologies as career pathways for young people. Larger initiatives, such as programs involving visits to ships, would be more impactful but would require significant resources and planning.	High ★★★	Moderate \$\$	Department of Defence	ASA
Acknowledgement & Transparency; Engagement & Dialogue; Revising Practices Based on Lessons Learned	This is the area where the most effort is required. While changing communication styles may not be straightforward, initiatives such as employing non-technical communications team members, with no access to confidential information, could help establish internal benchmarks to ensure responses are clear and the information shared is sufficient. There is a significant disconnect between the community's nuclear knowledge and ASA's, meaning special attention will be needed to ensure communications are always tailored to the right level, along with a sustained commitment to public education.	High ★★★	Moderate \$\$	ASA	Department of Defence
Sustained Community Investment	This is undoubtedly a key issue in the local community, with no legal mechanism to require Defence to address traffic problems caused by the intensification of locations such as HMAS Stirling and potentially Henderson. While a direct fund may not be necessary, the pathway provides an ongoing mechanism for the commonwealth to take timely and direct action to mitigate these impacts.	High ★★★	Costly \$\$\$	Federal Government, Department of Defence	

Program	Summary of US Experience	Australian Context	Issues Addressed
Community Infrastructure Program	While local governments in the US benefit significantly more from defence investment than Australian LGAs, their federal government continues to invest heavily in defence communities to support social licence initiatives. The US recognises that community resilience is essential to sustaining their defence program, ensuring that families of deployed personnel or base workers are well supported, thereby reducing potential distractions for individuals whose focus is required on critical matters.	The Defence Strategic Review 2023 acknowledged that the ADF's role in assisting civil communities during natural disasters comes at the cost of force preparedness. This is similar to the Community Infrastructure Program in the US, which has invested in areas such as flood mitigation, fire departments, and water infrastructure to build resilient communities. The US program also adjusts its focus annually, supporting various priorities, including community building efforts in defence areas. Although Australia has fewer bases, the same challenges exist. With local and state governments receiving less direct financial return from Defence investments, there is a greater need for federal government intervention to support these communities.	Purpose of AUKUS; Housing Impact; Traffic and Infrastructure; Environmental Concerns
Community Liaison Officers	US bases employ community liaison officers to engage with local governments, approval agencies, and communities, providing a clear point of contact for daily enquiries. While Mayors and Base Commanders maintain high-level relationships, the presence of a non-uniformed liaison facilitates a less formal approach for all levels of the community to interact with the base. This helps to reduce any perceived power imbalance and ensures that minor matters are not escalated to the base commander or Mayor.	Engagement between the government and Defence bases primarily occurs at higher levels, involving relationships with the base commander, Defence's Senior Officer for Western Australia, and predominantly high-ranking members of the ASA. Similarly, local government interactions are usually at the Mayor or Executive level. This structure creates potential barriers, as only significant matters that require the attention of top officials on both sides are addressed, limiting the ability of personnel at all levels to resolve smaller issues.	Nuclear Safety; Presence of Nuclear Weapons; Movement of Nuclear Materials; Rockingham as a Potential Target; Purpose of AUKUS; Housing Impact; Environmental Concerns
Build Submarines	The Build Submarines campaign takes a multifaceted approach to raising community awareness about supply chain and construction opportunities in the shipbuilding sector. Its primary platform is a website that attracts millions of visitors and showcases thousands of job opportunities. The campaign also sponsors a variety of high-profile sporting events to increase awareness.	In Australia, various websites from defence organisations and shipbuilders engage the public on submarine-related topics. However, there is limited coordination in delivering a unified message.	Purpose of AUKUS;

Social Licence Aspect	Recommendations	Impact	Cost	Responsible Agency	Support Agencies
Acknowledgement & Transparency; Commitment to Long-Term Benefits; Sustained Community Investment	A pilot program, managed by a suitable government agency and ultimately linked to the Department of Defence, should be trialled to address key community resilience initiatives. The goal would be to create an ongoing program that acknowledges the negative impacts defence can have on communities, such as limited housing access, increased demand for facilities, and infrastructure upgrades that cannot be adequately funded through existing tax systems. It should also be noted that defence bases do not pay rates or equivalent contributions, yet they rely on local and state resources for their operations.	High ★★★	Costly \$\$\$	Federal Government, Department of Defence	
Acknowledgement & Transparency; Engagement & Dialogue; Revising Practices Based on Lessons Learned;	The employment of Community Liaison Officers at the base would be a significant undertaking and could necessitate operational changes. However, there is clear merit in having dedicated outreach positions at the base to handle community engagement roles.	High ★★★	Costly \$\$\$	Department of Defence	
Engagement & Dialogue; Commitment to Long-Term Benefits;	In a region where there is already substantial competition for employees from the mining sector and advanced manufacturing, there will always be a challenge to find skilled labour in a buoyant economy. There are opportunities to, at the very least, develop an outreach website in conjunction with defence primes to raise awareness of economic opportunities related to the sector and promote the site at appropriate opportunities.	High ★★★	Costly \$\$\$	Private Sector	ASA, Department of Defence

Program	Summary of US Experience	Australian Context	Issues Addressed
Base Access	In the US, there are numerous examples of community groups being granted limited access to military bases. While these arrangements involve complex security protocols, they are consistently managed by US base commanders. At the more extreme end of this practice is the well-known Base Tour operator in Norfolk.	At some point, access to HMAS Stirling was restricted. However, the island, particularly the western side, remains open to the public during daylight hours. The base itself is less accessible, especially with visiting US submarines. As these visits increase, there is a balance to be struck between demystifying the base and maintaining the necessary level of security.	Nuclear Safety; Presence of Nuclear Weapons; Movement of Nuclear Materials; Rockingham as a Potential Target; Purpose of AUKUS;
Engagement with other Defence Communities	The US local government/defence relationship is certainly closer and more developed than in Australia. It was highly beneficial for local government and ASA representatives to observe these differing approaches first-hand. The collaboration between the two groups provided a deeper understanding of both sectors' strengths and limitations in addressing community building and national security.	There are likely to be some similarities and differences across Australian jurisdictions in how local governments and Defence collaborate. For example, the Western Australian and South Australian Governments take different approaches to engagement but aim for similarly proactive relationships. It is likely that many local government-Defence communities in Australia could benefit from an ongoing relationship. Similar forums exist in Australia for local government and airport relations, which have proven effective in raising awareness about social licence and communication aspects of these relationships.	Purpose of AUKUS; Housing Impact; Traffic and Infrastructure; Environmental Concerns
Defence in the Community Awards	SDMAC runs an annual award for defence volunteers within the community. The purpose is not only to recognise the efforts of personnel contributing to their communities, but also to raise awareness of the role and participation of defence personnel within the local area.	While local governments run Australia Day awards, recognising youth, sporting achievements, and senior leaders within the community, we are not aware of any that specifically target defence personnel. While some local governments do not have large defence populations, local authorities like Rockingham or the Perth South West region do.	Purpose of AUKUS; Housing Impact; Traffic and Infrastructure;
Forecast Demand Study	Regional Councils conducted data forecasting for their members through SANDAG and the Hampton Roads Planning District Committee. SANDAG, in particular, had deeper insights into Defence's role, which helped shape its assumptions.	In WA, the Department of Planning, Lands and Heritage fulfils this role through the WA Tomorrow publication. However, the assumptions in this report do not necessarily account for recent defence announcements. Local governments often use their own forecasts to guide planning strategies, but these are also unlikely to align with Defence aspirations.	Housing Impact; Traffic and Infrastructure; Environmental Concerns

Social Licence Aspect	Recommendations	Impact	Cost	Responsible Agency	Support Agencies
Acknowledgement & Transparency; Engagement & Dialogue;	Public access to the base is unlikely to be a “silver bullet” for resolving the community/defence relationship, but greater outreach should certainly be achievable. Notably, many local government Councillors from the City of Rockingham have not visited the base, suggesting there is significant potential to engage key decision-makers, community groups, or schools where social licence could be developed. In the US, groups were encouraged to take photos on the base, reflecting a different approach, especially considering that clear aerial imagery is commercially available.	Medium ★★	Inexpensive \$	Department of Defence	Federal Government
Revising Practices Based on Lessons Learned; Sustained Community Investment	Local Governments to look at convening an online meeting of Mayors of Defence Communities to allow for information sharing and joint understanding of challenges faced and programs to support.	Medium ★★	Inexpensive \$	Local Government	
Engagement & Dialogue; Commitment to Long-Term Benefits;	Consideration should be given to recognising the contributions of defence personnel as active members of the community. This could be done through local government awards, state-level recognition, or even via chambers of commerce. Such an initiative would highlight not only the important role defence personnel play in the community but also the broader contributions of volunteers.	Medium ★★	Inexpensive \$	Local Government	
Revising Practices Based on Lessons Learned;	While there is no need for a new report, it is necessary to update regional planning documentation and assumptions based on commitments related to AUKUS and other projects such as Westport. These changes will likely impact the priority and timelines for infrastructure upgrades in the region, as highlighted by insights from the Cape Peron Transport Needs Assessment.	Medium ★★	Moderate \$\$	State Government	Local Government; Department of Defence (SEG)

Program	Summary of US Experience	Australian Context	Issues Addressed
Carpool Incentives	Incentives included priority parking on base, particularly in areas with limited parking availability. Priority processing at security points was also available at some entrances.	In an Australian context, priority security screening at site exits would only be feasible where lane lengths allow for separate vehicle stacking. However, implementing priority base parking in certain areas could encourage a shift away from single-occupancy vehicles, especially if a cap on parking bays is introduced to promote behavioural change.	Traffic and Infrastructure;
Social Media	In San Diego, it was noted that the bases maintain a social media presence to engage with the public. Even bases in Japan had social media platforms, which in some cases only posted pictures of daily activities on the base, yet still achieved high engagement rates. Naval Reactors has a significant social media presence focused on the ongoing safe management of vessels, supported by 70 years of historical content.	There is a lack of social media engagement from the ASA, and the ADF's presence is more general rather than base specific. While ASA has a Facebook account, the content is not necessarily focused on engagement (such as sharing details of drop-in sessions or directly interacting with the public). Similarly, the HMAS Stirling page has not been updated in five months, despite high-profile events like the STMP. Although there may be limited direct communication from an account linked to HMAS Stirling, such an account could help demystify day-to-day activities and foster a connection with the community.	Nuclear Safety; Presence of Nuclear Weapons; Movement of Nuclear Materials; Purpose of AUKUS; Environmental Concerns
Transportation Incentive Program	The Transport Incentive Program for US personnel allows them to claim up to \$300 per month, reflecting the actual cost of commuting if they travel by public transport or Vanpool. This reduces the demand for single-occupancy vehicles and incentivises mass transit use, making vanpool a more viable economic option. It was also noted that on larger bases, such as Norfolk, public transport interchanges within the base to create an on-base network supporting commuters.	There are salary sacrifice options available to Australian personnel, but they are not as generous as those in the US and in some cases only apply to travel away from home.	Housing Impact; Traffic and Infrastructure;
Education Training Pathways	Demonstrating the career pathways that exist through integration of STEM pathways into shipbuilding industry, particularly in the development of a new specialised skilled workforce for submarine maintenance and construction.	While there is clearly much happening behind the scenes to integrate TAFE and local universities into workforce supply chains, they are not as seamless as what we see at HII, with a shipbuilding school that provides a range of education and lifelong learning approaches to build and develop the necessary skills needed.	Purpose of AUKUS;

Social Licence Aspect	Recommendations	Impact	Cost	Responsible Agency	Support Agencies
Revising Practices Based on Lessons Learned;	This is ultimately a defence policy decision. However, with the significant growth anticipated at the base, establishing a new normal for personnel operating there for the first time could help set new behavioural models, similar to the success seen in the university sector.	Medium ★★	Moderate \$\$	Department of Defence	
Acknowledgement & Transparency; Engagement & Dialogue;	Ultimately, this is a decision for the ADF. From local government experience, positions like these require staffing and a commitment from leadership to provide content. This form of engagement would benefit Defence by allowing it to quickly understand community issues and respond directly, but it would require a broader shift in the communication approach. Similarly, ASA could expand its presence to enhance the region's nuclear literacy, though this would need to be done in coordination with the base to ensure that concerns are addressed through the appropriate channels.	Medium ★★	Costly \$\$\$	Department of Defence; ASA	
Revising Practices Based on Lessons Learned;	There is merit in exploring the connection between the base and major rail stations such as Rockingham or Aubin Grove for Henderson. While financial incentives may encourage changes in behaviour, they need to be paired with suitable transit options, which are not immediately available at HMAS Stirling in the short term.	Medium ★★	Costly \$\$\$	Department of Defence	State Government
Engagement & Dialogue;	There is a need to better explain the shipbuilding career paths that are being developed from AUKUS and how they may differ to existing shipbuilding roles in the region. In the US, it was noted the demand for the Hill school, which perhaps is related to the lack of other economic drivers in some locations, whereas the WA experience will see it compete with the mining sector. Much is already underway, but it is not a well told story and closer integration is needed, as well promotion of the relationships.	Medium ★★	Costly \$\$\$	State Government	

Program	Summary of US Experience	Australian Context	Issues Addressed
Defence Engagement at Regional Planning Level	SANDAG highlighted the presence of Defence representatives as non-voting members of their regional government bodies. This facilitated better communication and understanding of the evolving needs of the base, enabling improved planning for regional transport initiatives to support Defence, as well as enhancing overall communication between entities.	In WA, the PSWMA, although a voluntary regional council without binding powers, serves as a platform for local governments to collaborate. It would be logical to use this forum as a conduit for fostering a deeper understanding of Defence initiatives and strengthening relationships between Defence and local government.	Nuclear Safety; Purpose of AUKUS; Housing Impact; Traffic and Infrastructure; Environmental Concerns
Use of Veterans	Both SDMAC and naval officers from San Diego highlighted the role veterans play in the community by debunking myths about how the navy operates or explaining why certain inconveniences (such as noise and traffic) may be necessary for national defence. There are avenues for veterans to remain engaged, allowing them to act as unofficial ambassadors within the community.	While Perth has a lower ratio of veterans in the community, the region does have a higher-than-average presence. Veterans can play an important and informed role in explaining how defence operates; however, in the context of nuclear-powered submarines, very few have first-hand experience. This means that building community trust in the technology through veterans may take time. Nevertheless, they will continue to play a vital role in raising the general understanding of defence within the local community.	Nuclear Safety; Presence of Nuclear Weapons; Movement of Nuclear Materials; Purpose of AUKUS; Environmental Concerns
Celebration of US Occasions	It was noted in engaging with US Navy personnel that while sailors joined the navy to see the world, there would inevitably be some homesickness. Events celebrating key US traditions such as the Superbowl or Thanksgiving may help to support their emotional wellbeing. It was also noted that there would be a keenness from deployed personnel to experience all aspects of Australian culture.	There are already some celebrations of the Superbowl in the region, with several pubs holding events. Likewise, local governments with close ties to overseas groups recognise key events in their cultural calendars.	Purpose of AUKUS; Housing Impact;
Vanpool	The Vanpool program in San Diego addresses the issue of long commutes to the base, particularly due to local affordability challenges. The program offers subsidised vehicles and helps identify potential carpool companions. Carpool lanes on freeways further incentivise participation, contributing to a more efficient commute.	The program offering discounted van rentals could be considered in Australia, but it would require additional incentives, such as carpool priority at key intersections and roads. The Vanpool program in the US is further incentivised through transport allowances paid to US personnel, which are not available to Australians. While our region lags behind the US in vehicle sharing options, this could be due to factors like shorter commutes and the lower prevalence of car leasing for work commutes.	Traffic and Infrastructure;
Defence Band	It was noted during the engagements that the defence forces band (vocalists) were made available for the national anthem at major sporting events, serving as a display of patriotism and raising awareness of the military's role.	Australia has an Army Band that does community outreach at events, particularly those aligned with defence.	Purpose of AUKUS;

Social Licence Aspect	Recommendations	Impact	Cost	Responsible Agency	Support Agencies
Engagement & Dialogue; Revising Practices Based on Lessons Learned;	PSWMA should consider inviting the base commander of HMAS Stirling and possibly the lead officer involved with Henderson to attend quarterly board meetings.	Low ★	Inexpensive \$	PSWMA	Department of Defence
Engagement & Dialogue;	In the long term, this holds great potential for quickly engaging with the community to debunk myths or enhance understanding of nuclear-powered submarines. However, in the short term, there are limited numbers of experts not already engaged by Defence in some capacity.	Low ★	Inexpensive \$	Department of Defence	
Engagement & Dialogue;	Consideration by individual local governments about recognising certain US traditions where appropriate could be explored, potentially through an economic development lens. Opportunities may also exist to engage the business community by involving local restaurants and bars or sourcing specialist foods.	Low ★	Inexpensive \$	Local Government	
Revising Practices Based on Lessons Learned;	The program demonstrates that behavioural change is possible, though direct implementation may not be feasible. However, there could be a willingness and acceptance of the program among incoming US personnel, particularly in areas with high concentrations of personnel. This approach would be best considered in collaboration with US support staff for the AUKUS arrivals.	Low ★	Moderate \$\$	ASA	
Engagement & Dialogue;	While Australia has this capability, our sense of patriotism is less overt, with defence arguably playing a smaller role in Australia's national identity compared to the United States. Such a program may not be well received.	Low ★	Costly \$\$\$	Department of Defence	

ADDITIONAL INSIGHTS

Beyond the central theme of social licence, the delegation gathered valuable insights into various operational and safety practices within the US defence landscape. Although these learnings are not directly related to social licence, they contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the issues explored during the visit. This section covers these insights in no particular order to capture the broader learnings.

Nuclear Safety Approach

One key observation from the delegation's interactions, especially with personnel overseeing nuclear submarines, was the uncompromising approach to nuclear safety in the US. Every aspect of nuclear management, including waste movement, adheres to stringent protocols. The transport of nuclear waste, for example, is meticulously planned, involving specialised containers, rehearsed procedures and a series of audits. Compliance is strictly enforced, and even minor breaches result in severe consequences, reflecting an intolerance for any deviation from established protocols.

During discussions on Japan's handling of low-level nuclear waste from submarines, it was noted that waste is temporarily stored before being transported back to the US. While there is no indication that this approach will be used in Australia, the insight was that the process is systematic, involving precise planning, practice, and execution. The approach ensures comprehensive contingency planning to mitigate risks, highlighting the deliberative, process-driven nature of the US nuclear program.

Personnel Deployment to Australia

In discussions regarding personnel deployments to Australia, US representatives emphasised a highly selective approach. Deployments are normally determined based on the personal and financial stability of individuals, as well as their readiness to integrate into new communities. This methodical selection aims to ensure smooth transitions and effective integration within local communities, particularly for groups required to relocate together, such as submarine crews.

Community Liaison and Family Support

The delegation also explored life on US military bases, including the role of community liaison officers in facilitating relationships between the base and the surrounding community (previously covered). There are also liaison officers to support families by engaging with local schools and addressing the impact of deployments on children and when family members reunite after deployment. They also support the families during this time to ensure that they do not become isolated and remain engaged in the community. This proactive approach to family support helps maintain the wellbeing and community integration of personnel families.

Submarine Robustness

Insights were shared on the resilience of nuclear submarines. Examples of past incidents—such as a submarine colliding with an uncharted underwater mount—demonstrated the submarines' structural strength. Despite significant damage to the front of the vessel, the nuclear reactor remained unaffected, enabling the submarine to return to base under its own power. This robustness reflects the rigorous safety design inherent in US submarines, which are engineered to withstand attacks and environmental challenges without compromising reactor integrity.

In terms of fire risks, a major concern within submarines, it was noted that the reactor is well-shielded and devoid of flammable components. The design is specifically crafted to avoid the need for direct intervention, underscoring a proactive approach to safety. The key takeaway was that the reactor is far from fragile, designed to withstand significant impacts to the remainder of the vessel, and not require the more constant attention that we may associate with internal combustion engines.

Local Government and Emergency Management Perspectives

In discussions with local government and emergency management officials, the delegation found that nuclear-powered naval vessels were not considered a significant risk by these communities. Instead, concerns were more focused on natural disasters such as fires and flooding. There was almost no consideration of the risk of naval nuclear reactors, with local government noting that they have never had an issue and that it was not a community concern.

Housing

No defence programs reviewed were directly related to housing delivery. In the US, military personnel receive a fixed housing allowance, which presents challenges in securing accommodation in high-cost locations like San Diego. Notably, a significant number of US military personnel reside in Mexico, commuting daily to their bases in the United States.

The search for affordable housing has also driven the development and success of vanpool programs, as rising living costs necessitate long commutes and the coordination of transport. In cities like San Diego, we observed a preference for mid- and high-rise infill development rather than urban sprawl. This type of housing may appeal to both overseas personnel and Australians, with the housing demand associated with AUKUS potentially serving as a catalyst for increased infill development in the Perth South West region. This approach could help avoid continued reliance on low-density development in the area.

Perceived Risk to Rockingham and Greater Perth

The delegation also addressed concerns about potential increased risk to Rockingham and Greater Perth due to the US presence in the region. US representatives suggested that Rockingham is unlikely to be a strategic target in potential conflicts due to its geographical distance from likely conflict zones, noting that there were far greater and more impactful targets, closer to these zones. They also noted that, in high-conflict scenarios, submarines would likely be deployed elsewhere, reducing the likelihood of Rockingham becoming a target. This perspective, while logical, might be challenging to communicate effectively.

Summary of Community Perceptions

In summary, communities visited by the delegation appeared to feel either a sense of security regarding the nuclear presence or were simply unfazed. While some individuals may harbour concerns, the US nuclear submarine program's long history—spanning over 70 years—provides a level of public trust that is currently absent in Australia. The delegation observed that Australia's nuclear stewardship program, based on the US model, requires significant upskilling to meet the standards set by Naval Reactors before acquiring Virginia-class submarines. The division's commitment to a legacy of safety is central to its mission, and the need for its endorsement serves as a quasi-regulatory measure, driving Australia to develop nuclear management capabilities that align with US standards.

Finally, the delegation noted that the US program's social licence was established in a very different context—during the Cold War – leaving Australia's journey towards achieving social acceptance for the AUKUS program its own unique path.

CONCLUSION

Social licence is crucial for community acceptance of AUKUS, particularly in the Perth South West region, where its impacts will be most visible. As the home of Pillar One of AUKUS, the region will experience the program's effects rapidly, though the long-term benefits may be overshadowed by short-term challenges arising from the swift expansion of naval capabilities.

The primary purpose of the delegation was to examine the San Diego defence and local government relationship, widely regarded as world's best practice for its close ties between the community and defence. This connection was evident in our engagements with regional stakeholders, showcasing an integrated approach that drives both social acceptance and economic benefit.

Our analysis reveals that beyond social acceptance and patriotic support, defence's economic impact on local governments is substantial. In Newport News, as in San Diego, the risk of losing defence investment due to urban encroachment serves as a strong motivator for urban planning and community development to align with defence interests. Although local taxes from defence spending and machinery provide direct revenue to these communities in the US, the federal government also invests strategically in social licence initiatives to bolster community support beyond economic returns.

In the Australian context, where local economic returns are less direct, the commonwealth must play a more active role in financially supporting affected communities. Organisations like SDMAC emphasised that community investment need not come directly from defence budgets. Instead, federal investment, with defence's involvement in fund allocation, would demonstrate coordinated support across government levels, building resilience and reinforcing community alignment with defence objectives.

The analysis also identified numerous smaller, cost-shared initiatives that can enhance community support. However, the most significant point of difference between the US and Australia is communication strategy. In the US, communication is typically confident, open, and exploratory—unlike the more cautious approach seen in Australia. This contrast must be addressed to gain public acceptance of the changing role of defence in the region, as the current communication gap contributes to community unease.

Confidentiality requirements surrounding the nuclear-powered submarine program introduce complexity. Discussions with the ASA clarified that maintaining secrecy is vital for Australia's rapid upskilling as a nuclear steward, though this necessity must be communicated more effectively to the public. Further complicating the situation is limited engagement from politicians who were pivotal in advancing Australia's defence posture but have not clearly communicated the rationale behind such a significant national investment. This has led to limited community understanding of the purpose behind AUKUS.

Finally, while AUKUS is positioned as a national endeavour, its primary focus and impact will be concentrated in the Perth South West region. For the region to meet Australia's defence aspirations, a shift in community engagement is needed, with greater investment, communication and collaboration tailored to this community.

APPENDIX

List of Abbreviations

ADF	Australian Defence Force
ASA	Australian Submarine Agency
AUKUS	Australia, United Kingdom, United States security pact
DoD	Department of Defense (US)
HRMFFA	Hampton Roads Military and Federal Facilities Alliance
PSWMA	Perth South West Metropolitan Alliance
SANDAG	San Diego Association of Governments
SDMAC	San Diego Military Advisory Council
SRF-West	Submarine Rotational Force – West
SSN	Ship Submersible Nuclear (nuclear-powered, conventionally armed submarines)

List of Engagements

San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG)

Chief Executive Officer, SANDAG

Regional Plan and Major Projects, SANDAG

Deputy Director of Mobility Planning, SANDAG

Manager of Strategic Partnerships, SANDAG

Boarder Program Manager, SANDAG

County of San Diego

Senior Emergency Services Coordinator, Office of Emergency Management

City of San Diego

Mayor, City of San Diego

San Diego Military Advisory Committee (SDMAC) Military Panel

Regional Commander, Navy Region SouthWest

Commanding Officer, Submarines Base Pt Loma

Commanding Officer, Naval Base San Diego

Commander, Submarine Squadron 11

Industry Panel

NASCCO - General Dynamics, General Manager of Repair, San Diego

BAE - Vice President BAE Systems San Diego Ship Repair

Senior Economic Development Manager EDC

SDMAC Panel

President and CEO SDMAC

Vice Chair of the Board SDMAC

Legislative Committee Chair, SDMAC

Huntington Ingalls Industries (HII)

Social License and Corporate Responsibility

Director of Education

Community Engagement on Risk Management

Interface B/T Operational and Local Community (Land Use Perspective)

Director of Australia and United Kingdom emerging markets

Naval Station Norfolk

Commander Navy Region Mid-Atlantic

Naval Station Norfolk Commanding Officer

CNRMA Housing

Norfolk Naval Shipyard

Hampton Roads Military and Federal Facilities Alliance

Executive Director

Deputy Executive Director

City of Newport News

Mayor, City of Newport News

City Manager, City of Newport News

Assistant City Manager, City of Newport News

Participants

Perth South West Metropolitan Alliance

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Deb Hamblin	Mayor	City of Rockingham
Logan Howlett	Mayor	City of Cockburn
Jim O'Neill	Mayor	Town of East Fremantle
Hannah Fitzhardinge	Mayor	City of Fremantle
Peter Feasey	Mayor	City of Kwinana
Gail Bowman	CEO	City of Melville
Michael Parker	CEO	City of Rockingham
Dan Simms	CEO	City of Cockburn
Jonathan Throssell	CEO	Town of East Fremantle
Glen Dougall	CEO	City of Fremantle
Wayne Jack	CEO	City of Kwinana
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