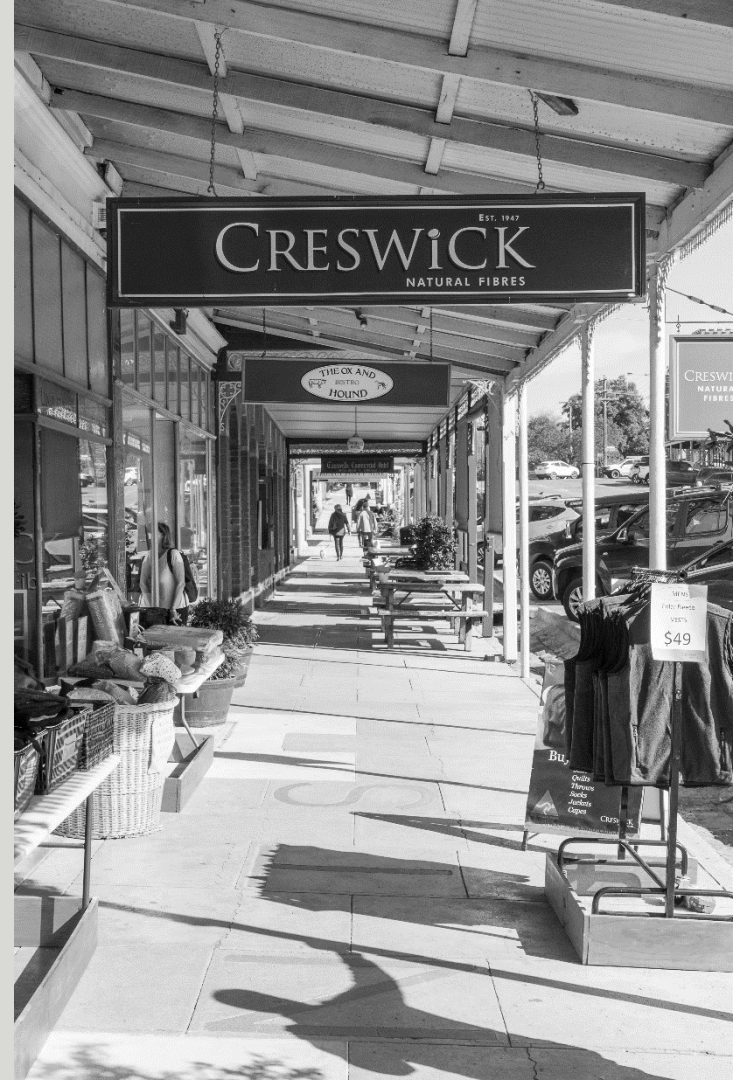


# Central Highlands Regional Roundtable

Regional Roundtable

29<sup>th</sup> May 2020



# About the roundtable

The COVID-19 Pandemic has created unprecedented challenges for our communities, governments, industries and business.

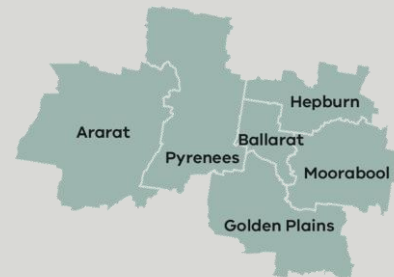
On 29 May 2020 Central Highlands community and industry leaders, government and MPs came together for a roundtable discussion on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on Central Highland's rural and regional communities, and opportunities for a strong post pandemic recovery.

This document reflects a summary of the roundtable discussion including opportunities for short, medium and long term action. It is not an exhaustive account or analysis but serves as a record of the roundtable conversation and will inform further discussions by local Central Highlands leaders, government executives and regional partnership representatives.

## Questions we asked

1. Where have we felt the impacts of the pandemic most strongly?
2. What immediate action is needed?
3. What does 2025 look like for Central Highlands if we have undertaken a smart recovery?
4. What recovery actions will help us get there?

## The Central Highlands region at a glance



Regional Population

**203,568**

As at June 2019

Gross Regional Product

**\$9.49 billion**

As at 2019

Annual Tourism  
Expenditure

**\$1.073 billion**

As at 2019

Tourism Operators

**1,534**

As at 2018

# 1. Where have we felt the impacts of the pandemic most strongly?

## Tourism and visitor economy

The cancellation of major events this year has had a significant impact on visitor economy. Popular tourist attraction Lavandula Farm has stood down the majority of its workforce and as a consequence doesn't have enough staff for harvest. There is concern that many tourist related businesses won't survive a second wave of the pandemic.

## Food and fibre

Wine producers in the Pyrenees and surrounds are suffering, with smaller wineries having lost 70-90 per cent of revenue through cellar door and restaurant closures. However other areas of agriculture have had a good season, with high demand on their commodities. Innovative programs such 'Eat Drink West' and 'Farmers2Founders' have enabled food producers to connect with more consumers, collaborate with others and develop their entrepreneurship and technical capabilities. However, many artisan agricultural groups have lost access to their main markets, namely restaurants.

## Mental health

Hospital presentations for suicides and drug and alcohol abuse have increased in the area, and there has been an increase in addiction and online gambling. A temporary halt on volunteering services and opportunities has further socially isolated older citizens in the area. There is a high level of anxiety for those on JobKeeper and what will happen when the subsidy is stopped.

## Industry and business

There is uncertainty over which businesses will reopen and which ones won't. Retailers and business owners are worried if they don't act fast, they will miss the opportunity to attract visitors back to the area. There has been significant transition of people into 'safer' industries and employment opportunities which has caused a 'brain drain' for hard hit industries. Businesses are competing for

the same consumer base and are struggling to connect with the right audience and markets. Small businesses that had some digital capability and skills have fared better than others. Distribution challenges have remained an issue during the pandemic. At present, businesses and individuals do not have the confidence to make longer-term and large-scale investment commitments.

## Digital connectivity

Constraints around digital connectivity remain, with community members experiencing accessibility issues and bottlenecks on broadband and wireless technology, making it difficult to communicate and leverage digital technology and services.

## Health

Demands on rural health services have increased, particular in areas where there is less capability, mental health and psychological services. Vulnerable groups have been further disadvantaged due to digital poverty and their inability to access telehealth services. The transition to online health treatments and support services has highlighted skills and capability gap for some clinicians, general practitioners and local health services.

## Jobs and education

Many people in the region have already fallen through the cracks and not been able to access financial assistance, namely 457 visa holders and other short-term casuals from the hospitality, arts and retail sectors who were not eligible for JobKeeper.

*"The initial treatment of non resident workers and students has damaged our reputation."*

- Business advocate

*"COVID-19 has highlighted the vulnerability of our health services and infrastructure in being able to cope if the epidemic had not been controlled across our wider region."*

- Regional Partnership

## 2. What immediate action is needed?

### Tourism and visitor economy

- Research visitor/consumer cohorts, interests, motivations and requirements
- Develop tourism and marketing plan that identifies ways to diversify economy, attract repeat visitors and longer-term stays and secure market share of domestic travelers
- Provide better support for community run and private events (e.g. grant funding, subsidised costs) to rapidly generate casual employment and economic stimulation
- Ensure visitor information on events, attractions and businesses is easy to access and up-to-date
- Ensure local community advocate for and support return of visitors to the region, particularly older community around Hepburn and Daylesford.

### Food and fibre

- Support and enable smaller wine producers to create virtual cellar doors
- Connect producers and suppliers with existing innovation programs i.e. Farmers2Founders and Ballarat Commerce.

### Mental health

- Create social and volunteer opportunities to bring community members back together.

### Industry and business

- Better support businesses to connect with consumers and each other and work together to attract consumers and distribute goods and services
- Provide practical support and guidance for small businesses who don't have the capability to interpret and implement contact tracing and other functional requirements and who require support with e-commerce
- Advocate to federal government to extend JobKeeper program for sectors who have felt the highest impact
- Promote buying local and better leverage consumer sentiment to support locally made products

- Provide training on locally made produce and products for hospitality staff
- Review viability of previous 'Made of Ballarat' campaign
- Increase coordination and collaboration across the region in terms of planning for and use of physical assets and skilled people
- Identify opportunities to manage the retail space within the town centre to ensure it continues to positively evolve and represent as a focal point of our community.

### Digital connectivity

- Review viability of existing regional web portals and domains (ballarat.vic.au)

### Health

- Continue supporting telehealth services and leverage shift in community attitudes to expand use across other services.

### Jobs and education

- Identify skills required for new and emerging industries
- Create clear linkages and connections between education providers and industries, particularly as it relates to future workforce requirements.

### Transport

- Support Bacchus Marsh and Melton push for 'on demand' bus services to better meet current and future demand and create better transport connectivity.

### Liveability

- Entice people from all around the world and within Australian cities who want to relocate permanently
- Promote the benefits, services and points of difference region has to offer (excellent schools, nature etc.)
- Advocate for statewide plan for critical investment.

*"How do we connect in the distribution space, and enable our chefs and cafe restaurants to work together? One chef said to me one day that they needed a kilo of show Wagyu beef, but they could only buy it in 10 kilo lots."*

- Industry leader

### 3. What does 2025 look like for Central Highlands if we have undertaken a smart recovery?

Central Highlands has a strong, clearly articulated brand that connects all parts of the region.

All tourism providers are communicating digitally, and visitors are spending more time in the area.

Local creative and innovative industries and individuals are driving growth in food and fibre and other new businesses that align with visitor and consumer needs.

Our workforce is agile and can respond to increased demands for labour making us less reliant on overseas manufacturing and imports.

Local businesses and industries are confident, have diverse revenue sources, customer bases and service offerings that enable them to employ locals and invest in growth.

Our health services have the capability and capacity to respond to the next pandemic.

There is access to secure employment opportunities and our economy is growing again.

Universities, businesses and industries are working together to improve education and employment outcomes for Western Victoria.

Transport connectivity is strong, our regional rail network enables access to metro areas, Melbourne and other regional cities.

Road infrastructure enables our farming and manufacturing industries and supports distribution of goods and modern agriculture equipment.

Our towns are vibrant, and we have attracted more people who have relocated from the city.

Our region is on equal standing in terms of liveability with big cities.

We are a zero emissions economy as we become a powerhouse of renewable energy.

*"In 2025 if you have a job you should be able to get there via NBN, a bus, a train in the region or Melbourne and have the infrastructure (childcare, education, after school care, sports, etc) that means if you have a job you can keep it!"*

- Regional Partnership

*"We need to have a region, a society, an education system that makes people want to stay and contribute to the growth and the development of the region and of the cities that we're living in and the towns that we're living in."*

- University representative

# 4. What recovery actions will help us get there?

## Visitor and tourism economy

- Review and update branding to reflect and better define entire Central Highlands region and attract events that benefit local economy
- Take advantage of international travel restrictions and maximise local and national tourism opportunities, extended stays and repeat visitors
- Invest in and support growth and strategy plans i.e. Ballarat Tourism Experience Plan.

## Mental health

- Continue to invest in mental health and family violence services and increase availability of, and access to, rural and regional counselling services.

## Industry and business

- Develop local skills to support the construction industry and ensure there is adequate capacity and capability to deliver stimulus related projects and maintain a competitive market
- Explore opportunities to attract, develop and grow renewable energy industry and establish centre of excellence
- Support industry growth in defence and manufacturing and encourage private sector investment in infrastructure and scaled product development
- Attract large corporations from the city, encourage office-based organisations to establish regional presence.

## Digital connectivity

- Support digital infrastructure and build digital capability skills for small businesses and individuals.

## Jobs and education

- Attract people with university qualifications and engineering skills to support growth in local businesses and industries to Ararat and other major towns
- Create leadership and mentoring opportunities for young leaders that enables

collaboration with young people and gives them a voice

- Better position Central Highlands to embrace and effectively utilise the skilled workforce predicted to come from people relocating from the city
- Attract and recruit creative innovators and those with capabilities that align with identified skills gaps
- Invest in local, place-based research and design and establish alliances between educational institutions, industries and government
- Create pathways for in-demand social services like housing and social work.

## Liveability

- Encourage expansion and growth in good quality food services
- Explore opportunities to expand well connected towns such as Ararat
- Improve childcare availability to remove barriers to employment, education and community participation.

## Health

- Review health infrastructure and resourcing needs across the region, including the Grampians to meet next spike of pandemic and longer-term future health demands
- Capture and capitalise on improvements in health service delivery (i.e. telehealth)
- Review health service delivery practices and drive change in delivery of primary and acute health service care.

## Transport

- Better connect the Ballarat transport network and improve access to larger towns and nearby regional cities
- Better plan for and more effectively deliver major infrastructure projects like the Beaufort bypass
- Identify, develop and implement alternative transport solutions (i.e. Uber bus model, trackless trams, electric vehicles, active transport, on-demand vehicle services).



# Thank you

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Our Regional Roundtable was  
facilitated by: Ben Schramm,  
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# Next steps

Some of the next steps we will be exploring include:

- Deepening our understanding of COVID-19 impacts and consequences across regions (through further engagement as well as deeper differentiated modelling)
- Continuing to work collaboratively with regional leaders and key stakeholders on place-based recovery
- Identifying ongoing opportunities and challenges for recovery at a regional level
- Designing and implementing a place-based approach to recovery in collaboration with community.

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