

Mallee Regional Partnership

Regional Roundtable Playback

18th May 2020

Discussion Draft



About the roundtable

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

On 18 May 2020, Mallee community and industry leaders, government and MPs came together for a roundtable discussion on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on Mallee'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 Mallee leaders, government executives and regional partnership representatives.

Questions we considered

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 Mallee if we have undertaken a smart recovery?
4. What recovery actions will help us get there?

The Mallee region at a glance



Regional Population
93,088
As at June 2019

Gross Regional Product
\$4.61 billion
For 2019

Annual Tourism
Expenditure
\$551 million
For 2019

Tourism Operators
884
As at 2018

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

Tourism

Tourism employs 15-20 per cent of Mallee's working population. The restrictions along with the absence of the 'grey nomads' and general domestic tourism travelling through the Mallee has had a significant impact on both the tourism and hospitality industries.

Health and wellbeing

There has been an increase in mental health impacts and the full extent of this will not be realised for some time. Groups particularly vulnerable include Aboriginal Elders who are not attending regular appointments, older community members who are socially isolated, those experiencing family violence, youth and people in the agricultural sector who were already impacted by drought.

Sporting and social clubs have been severely impacted. Some activities will not resume for a long time and this will continue to have a social and mental health impact. They have also lost vital opportunities to fundraise.

Financial hardship

A lack of economic and social activity is creating financial (including mortgage) stress and an increased demand for food relief across the region. Backpackers and itinerant workers are struggling to find work and suitable accommodation. Local governments have also been impacted financially and anticipate community expectation of rates relief in response to COVID-19.

Industry and business

The pandemic has had a large impact on small business, most noticeably retail, hospitality, accommodation, caravan parks (employers of women and young people). Many are not expected to survive as they were marginal prior to COVID-19, and the loss of a business can have a huge impact on small communities.

There is a need to address water policy (availability and pricing) that is impacting the agricultural sector. There is concern that current water policy discussions do not adequately reflect the diversity of views in the agricultural sector.

Trade is emerging as a big issue driven by a deteriorating relationship with China. This is particularly impacting barley growers.

Regional airports have been significantly impacted by COVID-19 with most flights cancelled. It is expected that business travel levels might never recover. It is very important that the three carriers continue to utilise Mildura airport to ensure competitive pricing. There has been minimal support available for regional airports.

Skills and education

Universities are under financial strain. There is concern for the future of the Mildura campus of La Trobe University, and SunniTAFE is living off capital reserves and will need to be recapitalised. Training is required to ensure young people (and others) acquire the skills required for the available jobs.

Innovation

There have been a number of innovations as a result of COVID-19 that have benefited Mallee communities such as new arrangements for the family law court and telehealth reducing the need to travel and improving responsiveness. New online businesses and campaigns such as 'buy from the bush' have also been successful.

Digital connectivity

Remote learning has exacerbated disadvantage with many experiencing issues accessing hardware, internet connectivity, and parental support resulting in a greater education gap for already vulnerable learners.

The reliance on digital connectivity showed up the deficiencies of current levels of connectivity across the Mallee. Many households found that they could not sustain working from home or home schooling with the current connection.

"Youth unemployment in the Mallee from my experience will be over 20 per cent by the end of the year and could be even higher" – Regional Partnership

"The impact across the economy is going to be patchy - certain sectors will be significantly impacted - others not so - so important to direct the effort." – Mildura Rural City

2. What immediate action is needed?

Tourism

- Provide support to stimulate regional arts and events
- Continue development of Mallee tourism assets such as the silo art, Lake Tyrrell and the Murray River
- Fastrack the Regional Tourism Review and related funding
- Establish a regional tourism campaign focused on domestic tourism.

Financial hardship

- Support the recommendations in the Mallee Regional Partnership's Deep Dive into 'Addressing Entrenched Disadvantage', especially those actions relating to support for local place-based collective impact initiatives and improved social housing.
- Ensure adequate financial support for low income families
- Invest in social housing stock to provide support for low income families and stimulate the economy
- Establish solar initiatives for lower socio-economic areas
- Provide financial support for local government recovery plans.

Health and wellbeing

- Invest in early intervention mental health services, programs and initiatives including the provision of support for arts and creative industries, community sport, charities and other community organisations.

Industry and business

- Ensure that supports are made available for the agriculture sector, including smaller businesses
- Undertake a review of water policy, ensuring that it is informed by the

diversity of views and needs in the region

- Councils may need to look at changing planning zones from commercial zoning areas to mixed use to encourage occupation of vacant commercial properties.
- Build on the current momentum of consumer support for buy local.

Digital connectivity

- Rapid investment in infrastructure to improve digital connectivity across the Mallee.

Innovation

- Retain and build on the new arrangements for the family law courts and telehealth that reduce the need for travel to Melbourne for regional Victorians
- Harness what we have learned about staying connected when living remote/rural (e.g. accessing training, development skills learning).

Skills and education

- Provide active upskilling support for digital business
- Update the Mallee Regional Skills Demand Profile and the Robinvale Jobs Ecosystem
- Maintain funding required to support RTO training in rural areas (previously provided through RSTF and WTIF funds)

"Expand funding support for Neighbourhood Houses that provide community support, education, local communication. Strong contributors of local social connection and can commence immediately"
– Gannawarra Shire Council

"Telehealth rules changed so that now people can access GP visits without travel - great benefit for rural areas" – RDA

"Often those who need/would benefit from reduced heating and cooling costs are those who can least afford to access the opportunity" – DELWP

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

Regional Victoria will have enabled best practice connectivity to enable digital and transport connections to Melbourne, all regional cities, Australia and the rest of the world.

There is increased connectivity between Mallee towns by both road and rail.

Mallee is a great place to live locally and work remotely anywhere.

There is a strong domestic regional tourism market enjoying Mallee's many and diverse and linked offerings from water tourism to art silos.

Mallee has an established waste management/recycling centre that services large parts of the state, provides jobs and exports usable product.

Mallee's education providers offer flexible learning options including different modes of delivery to cater to a range of needs and circumstances.

Regional health services are equipped and financed to respond to future health needs of the community.

The Mallee region has greater self sustainability with people buying local and travelling local.

Mallee industries and businesses are able to attract the workforce with the skills they need to support their growth.

Mallee residents can access the training they need locally to upskill or reskill and access local job opportunities.

Mallee will have improved residential housing stock including social and affordable housing, and worker accommodation in the areas where it is needed.

A number of new infrastructure projects will have been delivered across the region improving liveability, boosting employment, attracting investment and visitors.

"We are open for business and wanting to move forward - Mallee is a great place to live, work and play" – RDA

"This is a great disrupter and our real estate agents are fielding more enquiries than ever. Many businesses will realise their staff can work from anywhere. Requires strong connectivity, co-working hubs/spaces" – Buloke Shire

"Infrastructure Investment by State and Federal needs to be delivered at different levels not just large scale investment and construction jobs that have no impact on our region's ability to recover." – RDA

4. What recovery actions will help us get there?

Tourism

- Invest in waterfront and ecofriendly tourism initiatives (e.g. the Murray River Adventure Trail)
- Invest in corridor infrastructure to link Mallee towns
- Established a coordinated regional tourism campaign that links up packages and offerings across the regions (e.g. establish car based touring routes at a statewide level)
- Enhance the quality of Mallee's tourism accommodation and services.

Digital connectivity

- Prioritise investment in NBN and phone coverage across the region ensuring equity of access
- Establish a coordinated policy and approach to support decentralisation/ regionalisation
- Promote Mallee as a great place to live locally with the connectivity to work remotely anywhere.

Health and wellbeing

- Secure funding for regional health services to respond to emerging and future health issues in our region
- Provide long-term funding for place based community development programs.

Industry and business

- Invest in both large and small-scale infrastructure construction to stimulate the economy (Murray Basin Freight Rail, Swan Hill Bridge replacement, civil projects, upgrades to key freight routes)
- Support growth opportunities in the agricultural and horticultural sectors by ensuring the infrastructure and services exist to attract required skills and workers (appropriate housing, transport, training and healthcare services)

- Attract investment towards growth sectors including horticulture, agriculture and food and beverage production.
- Ensure ongoing support for the Mallee Research Innovation Centre
- Upgrade the Kerranglink transmission line to unlock the \$6 billion of identified solar investment from Moira to Mildura
- Stimulate housing construction (including social housing) to maintain and grow jobs in regional centres
- Establish a waste management and recycling facility for Mallee
- Invest in the sustainable energy production supplying locally and exporting regionally
- Progress Mildura Future Ready projects

Skills and education

- Progress the recommendations within the 2020 Mallee Skills Demand Profile
- Maximise training facilities such as at the Charlton Trade School, Kerang Tech High, provide new trade facilities at Robinvale and provide funding that supports the provision of training in thin markets.

Government funding structures

- Ensure funding for regional structures to support regional recovery and links with state and federal agencies (e.g. RDV)
- Provide regions with improved flexibility and independence to direct government financial support in line with community recovery needs.

"Once in a lifetime opportunity to stabilise domestic tourism. It won't happen individually, it needs to be coordinated across regions" - RDA

"There are permanent plantings of about 2 billion dollars in a 90 km radius both sides of the river and no real localised training" – Regional Partnership

Thank you

Our contributors and attendees

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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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