Ovens Murray Regional Roundtable

Regional Roundtable Playback

22nd May 2020

About the roundtable

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

On 22 May 2020 Ovens Murray community and industry leaders, government and MPs came together for a roundtable discussion on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on Ovens Murray'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 Ovens Murray 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 Ovens Murray if we have undertaken a smart recovery?

4. What recovery actions will help us get there?

The Ovens Murray region at a glance

Regional Population **130,038** As at June 2019	Gross Regional Product **$6.49 billion** As at 2019
Annual Tourism Expenditure **$1.03 billion** As at 2019	Tourism Operators **1,522** As at 2018

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

Tourism and visitor economy

The region has experienced significant downturn in visitation which has been magnified by the Black Summer bushfires. For example, in Alpine Shire which relies heavily on tourism, 60 per cent of businesses have now lost 100 per cent of their turnover, compared to the same time last year. Many of the tourist related businesses in the region have suspended operation and accommodation and hospitality have been hit hard. There are also ongoing questions about implementation of social distancing measures for industries that are re-opening and coming out of lockdown.

Mental health

Home schooling and social isolation has increased stress in the home, particularly for families, adolescents and young children. Mental health services are already stretched and the Centrelink office in Mansfield has shut which has added to increased levels of stress and anxiety in that community.

Industry and business

Solvency is a real issue, particularly for small to medium size businesses, with smaller balance sheets. Also, there are a number of niche tourist businesses in the region that will create service voids should they close down. Some businesses are more vulnerable than others, would be extremely difficult to replace and have a significant role in the tourism and the visitor economy.

Digital connectivity

The 'digital divide' has become a real indicator of disadvantage in the region, as parts of Ovens Murray struggle with reliable connectivity. In some communities (e.g. Benalla), the cost is prohibitive for people to be digitally connected. There have been mixed experiences for regional businesses in regard to digital connectivity and capability. Some have adapted well to the digital space, while many others have struggled to set themselves up online or consider it beyond their current capability. There are many 'shopfront' businesses in the area that are reliant on tourist traffic coming through the door and franchise businesses that are subject to the ongoing threat of being shut due to parent company action.

Jobs and Education

Tourism accounts for 21 per cent of employment in the region and businesses that rely on tourism, in particular, have been significantly impacted since the bushfires in January 2020. Young people in particular have been hit hard in terms of engagement in education and jobs. For young people already struggling at school it will be even harder to re-engage them into education or transition them into employment. There is also concern about what will happen when the short term response measures stop and disadvantaged students are required to return digital devices that were provided to them to assist with home schooling.

"We've actually been looking at ABS data and found that digital connectivity mirrors disadvantage or is actually more prevalent in disadvantaged areas. So, in Benalla, there's a lot of people who aren't connected; they're socially isolated."
 - Regional Partnership

"I have a few businesses which are very much dependent on tourism and most of them are closed."
 - Benalla business leader

2. What immediate action is needed?

Tourism and visitor economy

- Provide clear and concise information to tourism operators on how to keep local communities and visitors safe.
- Develop a communications and engagement strategy for communities to ensure local sentiment supports visitors coming back into the region.
- Review branding for the region to better promote clean and spacious environment.

Mental health

- Invest in building community resilience by maintaining face-to-face health services as well as telehealth solutions.
- Continue to undertake action to support health and wellbeing of young people.
- Identify ways to maintain connectivity to social and government services, particularly for young people and disadvantaged communities.

Industry and business

- Support businesses with marketing and sales strategies, particularly as they adapt to changing practices through current and future restriction periods.
- Provide practical support and advice to help businesses adapt to the new operating environment through e-commerce.
- Extend JobKeeper and financial support to those industries hardest hit including retail, food services and NGOs.
- Seek clarity from government on what is happening in the next 6-12 months.
- Work with Business Victoria to provide more support including recovery workshops for business owners and seek support for 'buy local' initiatives.

- Stimulate private sector investment by leveraging government investment.

Digital connectivity

- Increase availability of affordable digital connectivity for businesses and households.
- Resolve connectivity issues for industry and households (black spots/slow internet/poor reliability).

Jobs and education

- Continue to support innovation and entrepreneurship, especially to support emerging talent.
- Identify ways new industries such as renewable energy and other circular economy opportunities such as waste to energy can create jobs, support education and provide pathways to employment.
- Champion and support existing and proposed initiatives in key sectors such as health, community services and education.

Liveability

- Promote and encourage regional living and relocation from city.
- Support and expand on existing investment for public amenity infrastructure.

"Some people within our communities have certainly been a little bit rattled. So, as we do look to come out of what lockdown looks like we do need to acknowledge the fact that we have to take our communities on that journey as we'd love to welcome visitors back."
- Wangaratta business leader

"We're encouraging business to get online and we're hoping this will be a long-term thing for them that once they do get online, they'll see that it is worthwhile, that it's another avenue to get products and services out there".
- Wodonga business leader

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

We are a lead regional tourist destination, more visitors are drawn all year round by iconic attractions such as our alpine areas, rail trails, cycling offering, wineries and the ability to plan and realise holiday dreams.

Our supply chain, transport and freight networks are up and running and supporting new industries such as alternative and renewables energies, and more coordinated logistics and defence.

We are more sustainable and our circular/alternative and renewable energy industries are growing.

Private sector leadership is driving local innovation and entrepreneurship that is regenerating the economy.

Our businesses are working together to realise shared outcomes and diversify the local economy making it more resilient.

We have identified and established a centre of excellence for a new or emerging industry.

Digital connectivity is no longer a barrier to social, education or employment opportunities and connections.

We have a clear pathway from education to employment for our existing and new industries.

The next generation of young leaders has access to local education and employment opportunities.

We are a choice place to live with more people living and working locally but employed centrally.

Community-led recovery initiatives are driven by the community but supported and enabled by government.

Our transport network has expanded and there is better connection across the region.

We have strong regional health partnerships that plan and work together to respond to health emergencies and deliver health services.

"We know that when you create a culture of entrepreneurship, it actually attracts other entrepreneurs and creates a culture that becomes infectious for the next generation…it is about developing out that emerging and existing talent that will attract others as well, so those people not only create jobs for themselves but jobs for others in the future."
- Local Council representative

4. What recovery actions will help us get there?

Tourism and visitor economy

- Support and invest in infrastructure and accommodation requirements for growth in domestic travel, including iconic accommodation options, cycling service offering and tourist attractions.
- Deliver Growing Mount Hotham and Ned Kelly Alive initiatives.
- Research and cater to visitor journey and needs in promotion, planning and service delivery (individuals, groups and corporate visitors).

Industry and business

- Sustain our new business and innovation hubs and strengthen alliances within private sector and community groups, such as local renewable energy community groups.
- Identify ways to accelerate private sector partnerships and create more effective public-private partnership arrangements.
- Undertake review and audit of government infrastructure and identify ways to leverage/maximise use of investments through alternative or shared usage.
- Research new industries (alternative and renewable energies, manufacturing) and support current industries (health and education) to develop clear pathways between education and employment.
- Review and streamline planning and tenure arrangements to support private sector growth.

Digital connectivity

- Improve and restore infrastructure damaged by bushfires.
- Build capability of individuals to digitally access services and social connections.
- Improve reliability and capacity for industry, especially in tourism hot spots.

Mental Health

- Engage schools and community groups to enable meaningful connections outside family networks.

Jobs and education

- Create school-based apprenticeships, work experience and internship opportunities that are connected to clear employment pathways.
- Scale up education opportunities through our local tertiary institutions such as Charles Sturt University Wangaratta campus to increase student capacity and support displaced adults.

Liveability

- Continue to undertake strategic land use planning for residential and commercial growth.
- Continue to invest in alternative and renewable energy to support local energy needs and sustainability.

Transport

- Accelerate and invest in reliable and connected train network / transport infrastructure from Melbourne, i.e. 'fast train project' to enable a one-hour commute from Melbourne and east coast corridor (Melbourne to Sydney) and take action to better connect hubs to surrounding regional towns.

Health

- Review opportunities to create efficiencies and share health service capacity and deliver health services across local public and private health centres.
- Review and better align health sector boundaries.

> *"Need right infrastructure, need to be visitor obsessed and make the visitor journey seamless, make it easy for them."*
> - Tourism North East

Thank you

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Our Regional Roundtable was facilitated by Ben Schramm, Managing Partner Cube Group

CUBE group

Next steps

Some of the next steps we will be exploring include:

- Deepening our understanding of COVID-19 impacts and consequences across region through further engagement as well as deeper differentiated modelling.
- Continuing to work collaboratively with regional leaders and key stakeholders on priorities for recovery and building longer term sustainability and resilience.
- Identifying ongoing socioeconomic development opportunities and challenges at a regional level.
- Designing and implementing place-based approaches to recovery in collaboration with local communities.

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