

Wimmera Southern Mallee Regional Roundtable

Regional Roundtable

2nd June 2020



About the roundtable

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

On 2 June 2020, Wimmera Southern Mallee community and industry leaders, government representatives and an MP came together for a roundtable discussion on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on Wimmera Southern Mallee's rural and regional communities, and opportunities for a strong post pandemic recovery.

The roundtable was titled "Building a Better Wimmera Southern Mallee – using the impacts of the coronavirus to strengthen, shape and innovate the entire Wimmera Southern Mallee" to frame it as a long-term and solutions-focused session.

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

The Wimmera Southern Mallee region at a glance



Regional Population
47,391
As at June 2019

Annual Gross Regional Product
\$2.50 billion
As at 2019

Annual Tourism Expenditure
\$391 million
As at 2019

Tourism Operators
418
As at 2018

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

Health and wellbeing

Many families have reverted into more traditional roles, with women acting as primary carers and men decision makers. Access to support outside the home has been limited, creating further burden for women and increasing risks associated with family violence.

Women's and children's health has been impacted as more babies are entering the tertiary health system and financial strains have placed greater demands on women's sexual health services. Unintended pregnancies have caused angst due to the added financial burden this will create. Support has been sought through St Kilda Mums, providing much needed provisions for parents and children.

Equitable access to health services has been a problem with some members of the Wimmera community having to wait for transfers due to the system being at capacity. Others found it harder to access health services as needed because of restrictions around access to facilities due to response protocols and telehealth was not accessible by all.

Mental health

Families, people with young children and students have faced increased pressures as a result of remote learning requirements. Some, including indigenous and more remote families were not equipped with the resources to enable learning from home. Elderly residents have felt the impacts of social isolation, having been disconnected from friends, family and other community networks. Social isolation has also led to an increase in mental health issues for the local indigenous community. While there has been an increase in substance abuse, access to support services in the area is limited, with only one withdrawal nurse servicing the region, many people need to leave to get help.

Housing and homelessness

Homelessness has also increased due to 'couch surfers' no longer being able to remain at temporary locations. Transitional and crisis housing in the region is at full capacity. Housing remains a real issue, despite having vacancy rates that do not reflect the true amount of habitable homes available for rent.

Tourism and visitor economy

The region's pubs have been hard hit. Forced closures have taken away the agricultural region's social and networking hubs. Of the 14 pubs across the Yarriambiack Shire, there is concern 25 per cent of these will not reopen. As there is a lesser reliance in tourism in the area, cafés and other businesses have been able to survive to date through JobKeeper supplements although there will be impacts once this ends.

The Grampians has felt the greatest hit from a decline in tourism, with 9 per cent of jobs in the region reliant on the visitor economy. The cancellation of arts events and festivals has also had a big impact on the visitor economy.

Industry and business

Local agriculture and some manufacturing have experienced increased trade, triggering a temporary increase in employment. Export markets have been affected but a steady domestic food and fibre market has enabled businesses to retain their workforce. Local agri-business Luv-a-Duck has experienced a 70 per cent decline in the market, impacting all staff at its processing plant, who are now reduced to working three days a week. Many other food manufacturers have experienced declines due to the collapse of the food service industry.

Local 'strip' shopping is at risk of having a 50-60 per cent vacancy rate, with many middle-aged small business owners considering whether or not they should continue operating. The rate of closures will accelerate as a result of the pandemic.

Digital connectivity

Low digital literacy and language barriers has made it harder for some to connect with services and support. Telephone and internet connectivity in the area is problematic and cannot keep up with demand. Internet speed goes from 40MB to 2MB per second in the afternoon when schools finish.

Jobs and education

Existing unemployment issues have been exacerbated, many indigenous people have lost their jobs.

Online teaching capability, capacity and credibility has been boosted and there is a far greater appreciation of teachers and schools. Relationships between parents, teachers and children have been developed and strengthened for some due to challenges with online-learning.

Community engagement

Community and charity groups and volunteer organisations such as the Lions Club have experienced significant revenue loss through membership loss, cancelled events, catering and fundraising events. The Agriculture Society is likely to face difficulties in bringing back the Horsham Show next year, as will many other volunteer organisations. Volunteers in leadership roles are under increased strain as they face additional challenges.

2. What immediate action is needed?

Health and wellbeing

- Ensure policy decisions and recovery initiatives are reviewed through a gendered lens
- Better leverage technology to support health professionals to monitor people living with chronic disease
- Promote greater education on health prevention measures i.e. healthy eating
- Better connect and align specialist health services and treatments with more robust COVID-19 regulations from tertiary health facilities
- Re-introduce community and local sports.

Mental health

- Hold local events to boost morale, energy and mental health
- Better connect elderly and disabled people with technology to mitigate against isolation
- Increase investment in case workers and social services.

Housing and homelessness

- Increase availability of affordable and habitable housing.

Tourism and visitor economy

- Support implementation of recommendations and actions from the Grampians Tourism Recovery Taskforce report
- Develop and implement reactivation strategy and action plan to grow domestic market and better position area in the domestic travel market
- Develop marketing strategy to better promote and strengthen local products and attract more visitors to the region
- Continue to invest in and promote regional events
- Acknowledge Indigenous cultural assets and support sustainable tourism
- Deliver training to improve digital capabilities of those in the tourism industry
- Review requirements for long-term lease arrangements in National Parks
- Encourage locals to promote and champion region as a holiday destination to friends and family.

Industry and business

- Greater focus on and support for small-medium sized businesses, including capability building to establish and support e-commerce
- Consider new industry renewable and alternative energy opportunities i.e. energy, water, wind, electric cars
- Support shovel-ready projects and develop new ones
- Better invest in and support delivery of strategy and governance initiatives through the Wimmera Development Association.

Digital connectivity

- Improve digital capabilities and capacity, resolve issues with black spots.

Jobs and education

- Support smaller schools in the region to leverage success of online learning and Grampians Virtual School to expand and broaden the range of subjects available to students
- Review and remove barriers that keep people from staying, or returning to the region after they have completed their tertiary studies
- Improve and increase the education, apprenticeships and vocation options for young people in the area especially in agriculture
- Support small businesses and 'strip' shops to adapt and diversify, encourage landlords to work with business owners to avoid increased vacancies.

Community engagement

- Provide more funding for community groups
- Create opportunities for young people to socially connect safely.

Liveability

- Actively market and promote region to attract new residents
- Hold town hall forums to engage locals in planning and designing the future.

"We know that one in 10 people in Melbourne don't know where the Grampians region is to start with, so there's still some work we need to do on building brand awareness for our region. – Grampians Tourism

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

There is more equitable access to all types of health services and facilities, including mental and sexual health and rehabilitation services and health outcomes for all have improved.

Our aged care sector is thriving, we are providing high-quality care that continues to attract new retirees from major metropolitan centres and we are employing and training locals.

We have more social and affordable housing, there are enough quality affordable homes for those who want to live and work here.

We have attracted more government investment in our National Parks and our cultural and eco-tourism industries are growing.

We have a vibrant and active arts industry supported by festivals, events and performances all year round.

Our industries, businesses and leaders are collaboratively diversifying the local economy and value-adding to local produce.

We are leading the way, as a sustainable region, we are carbon neutral and support our own energy needs.

Our agriculture sector has grown, our young people are coming together to focus on agriculture and new ways to work together.

Our young people are returning to live and work in the area they grew up in, bringing with them new skills and new opportunities.

We are better connected and our entire community is more digitally engaged both socially and professionally.

We are a centre of excellence for health, education and renewable energy.

The region's products can efficiently reach markets through a suitable transport network.

Education and employment opportunities for young people have increased and they don't need to leave the area unless they want to.

Our community is bigger, better and stronger and people really want to live and work in the Wimmera Southern Mallee.

The region and nearby towns are accessible by public transport and people can get to and from Melbourne easily.

"There will be roads full of electric cars, good internet, increased tourism, people (and bosses) having learnt through COVID that they can work remotely and buy affordable houses in the Wimmera. There will be increased funding for artists, not infrastructure, and there will be more theatre, more music, innovative films, etc. – Local arts industry

"By 2025 we have cracked open the nut that allows private sector investors to invest in housing both building and renovating and they get a return on investment that is equal to the investment of housing in metro region i.e. our housing shows capital growth." – WDA

4. What recovery actions will help us get there?

Health and wellbeing

- Increase accessibility and availability of health facilities and services including rehabilitation services
- Ensure there is a focus on health, to support the region's greatest asset - its people - and attract more people to move to the area
- Attract additional funding for social and health services and resources including Grampians Community Health.

Housing and homelessness

- Increase availability of affordable and habitable housing in the area
- Reuse and repurpose existing government land and infrastructure to support more affordable and public housing.

Tourism and visitor economy

- Invest in National Parks and tourism infrastructure to preserve attractions, disperse visitors within the Grampians and across the Wimmera Southern Mallee and better activate its lakes and waterways
- Develop more quality accommodation options for Halls Gap and surrounds
- Attract more events, performances, festivals and nurture more cultural activities
- Invest in Brambuk Cultural Centre in Halls Gap
- Encourage greater interaction between the arts and business sector
- Advocate for development of a state-wide Nature Based Tourism Strategy
- Explore user-pays system for access to National Parks with funds reinvested into eco-tourism
- Support nature-based and indigenous tourism e.g. attractions, activities and experiences and interactions with natural and cultural resources.

Digital connectivity

- Improve connectivity by increasing supporting infrastructure i.e. mobile towers.
- Look at ways to promote connectivity across sectors where it is lacking (e.g. amongst aged, disabled and those with limited English)

Liveability

- Develop incentives and initiatives to attract young people back into the region

- Invest in social infrastructure and create more co-working spaces.

Industry and business

- Review regulatory framework around sustainable resources and energy
- Explore opportunities to create microgrids and support local energy needs
- Leverage existing renewable assets to develop alternative and renewables industry e.g. manufacturing opportunities
- Increase energy infrastructure capacity to support more renewable energy
- Support more mixed-use planning and development, particularly to alleviate shopfront vacancies and re-imagine main street and stalls
- Better partner and collaborate with neighbouring regions to create more opportunities, attract investment and support economic development
- Improve supply chains to and from smaller towns and regional hubs
- Encourage corporate businesses, government departments and semi-professionals to relocate to Horsham, Nhill and Warracknabeal
- Encourage more public-private enterprises i.e. Grains Innovation Hub
- Adopt more gold standard practices across industries including artificial intelligence, robotics and automation.

Jobs and education

- Ensure all tiers of education support and focus on agriculture and horticulture and continue to champion these as career pathways
- Provide training and development support for trade apprenticeships to mitigate risks of substantially reduced migration
- Support education precinct funding and reinvigorate local TAFE and vocational education and training
- Recruit school-leavers with school-based traineeships and apprenticeships that support local employment gaps
- Better connect Longerenong College with community, industries and businesses.

Transport

- Ensure investment in road and rail to support better freight systems and improve accessibility from the city and between nearby towns.

Thank you

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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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