

Loddon Campaspe Regional Roundtable

Regional Roundtable

21st May 2020



About the roundtable

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

On 21 May 2020, Loddon Campaspe community and industry leaders, government and MPs came together for a roundtable discussion on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on Loddon Campaspe'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 Loddon Campaspe 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 Loddon Campaspe if we have undertaken a smart recovery?
4. What recovery actions will help us get there?

The Loddon Campaspe region at a glance



Regional Population
246,930
As at June 2019

Gross Regional Product
\$11.42 billion
As at 2019

Annual Tourism
Expenditure
\$1.23 billion
As at 2019

Tourism Operators
2,554
As at 2018

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

Tourism and visitor economy

Tourism across the Murray is operating at approximately 5 per cent of capacity. In the short term, visitation and spending is expected to be down 40 per cent by the end of this financial year. A key challenge is the viability of businesses based on slow recovery and the low margins with which they operate.

Digital connectivity

Digital connectivity has been a barrier for many to access education with some students studying in library car parks to access internet, and many workers struggling to work remotely. Woodend, in particular has significant connectivity issues.

A lack of hardware, digital connectivity and digital literacy has impacted many refugee and resettlement community members including remote learning, access to information, and access to community support and connection.

Health and wellbeing

The cost approach to healthcare and the improved interface between primary care and hospitals is a positive change. There is a risk that the tele-health model will exacerbate disadvantage for small rural communities where there are digital connectivity or digital literacy issues. Vulnerable people have had reduced access to health and community services which puts them at risk of increased disadvantage.

The gender issue

There has been a significant impact on women who experience higher rates of unemployment and casual work, make up the majority of the front line workforce of health and education systems and have absorbed the enormous demand of remote learning. Access to childcare has also impacted on women's ability to participate in the workforce

Youth

There is a risk that young people will get left behind. Our youth are feeling the impacts of social isolation particularly when combined with poor digital connectivity, with mental health being affected. Pathways to employment for young people will need more attention, with lots struggling to fill the resume gap.

Community services and support

Community groups across the district are concerned about how they re-establish themselves and re-engage with members, and they are also concerned about their sustainability. There is a risk that community service providers may fall through the cracks if they don't receive funding support.

The pandemic has seen a surge in local people volunteering for organisations such as Bendigo Foodshare, and supporting their neighbours reflecting strong community spirit across the region.

Industry and business

Medium sized businesses have been most impacted as they have found it harder to pivot. Stimulus measures have helped in the short-term but there is growing concern about the medium-to-long term as many costs have been deferred and this will create a wave of financial commitments in September.

Food manufacturing has had a dramatic increase in demand, followed by a sharp drop. There is continued uncertainty about future demand from the retail and services sectors as they recover. Positively, people are increasingly valuing all things local and are enjoying local products and supporting local businesses.

Jobs and education

Universities and TAFEs are facing massive disruption and uncertain futures. Bendigo TAFE has been able to remain open and 98 per cent of programs continue to be delivered with attendance higher in some instances than traditional on campus model. Bendigo TAFE has also made use of Optus 'Donate your Data' program to support students who do not have internet access.

"We've been talking to all of our customers, our business customers and, in round numbers, about half of those customers are either concerned or very concerned about the impacts through to their livelihoods".

– Bendigo Bank

"Tele-health has been a challenge in these times as young people are more reluctant to access these services due to 'thin walls' – i.e. family in close proximity. This is especially prevalent in cultural communities where some topics are more taboo". – Multicultural Youth Commissioner

"We clearly don't want to lose the gains that we've made during this period which is the flexible work arrangements to work from home. It is incredibly helpful in a rural setting to be able to have people work more flexibly...but we just need to improve the connectivity". – Regional Partnership

2. What immediate action is needed?

Tourism and visitor economy

- Review and update the tourism models which were reviewed pre-COVID and activate these in the coming months
- Fastrack the Regional Tourism Review recommendations
- Develop local actions plans (linked to regions and state), to assist the industry in working on a common approach to growing the visitor economy and recovery
- Advocate for the return of QANTAS flights to Bendigo.

Health and wellbeing

- Ensure the resumption of non-urgent care as a key priority, particularly for those managing chronic disease
- Encourage continued exercise outdoors (e.g. walking and cycling) as recovery progresses to help reduce or prevent mental health impacts
- Secure funding to continue the Healthy Heart of Victoria initiative.

Gender equity

- Improve the availability of before and after school care to support women's ability to participate in the workforce
- Provide education for business owners to understand gendered impacts and how business practices can improve this
- Ensure that all policy decisions apply a gender lens to consider the impact on women and to ensure the contribution of women to the development of solutions.

Industry and business

- Plan for delayed economic effect for industries such as construction as well as the possibility of secondary infection and restriction effect
- Provide local small and medium businesses with business development, digital literacy, and mental health support and education
- Provide more medium-term stimulus to drive business confidence

- Minimise barriers to new business initiatives from all levels of government (e.g. planning scheme amendment for industrial land in Bendigo, support the new hotel planning applications, progressing GovHub, law courts, TAFE development)
- Strengthen the promotion of living in regional Victoria and encourage the relocation of businesses to Bendigo building on the momentum of remote working
- Support businesses to take advantage of the high levels of support for regionally or Australian made products and produce
- Food manufacturing needs support to anticipate and be prepared to respond to changes in the market and supply chains.

Youth

- A program which supports youth and business to engage, support and create pathways from education to employment.

Community services and support

- Provide funding support for community service providers, many of which have experienced increase in demand for their services during COVID-19
- Introduce a more sustainable food relief model within the region.

Jobs and education

- Continue working with government on Working for Victoria platform to provide TAFE courses for high demand jobs
- Continue to build on the progress made in pivoting to digital delivery of TAFE courses, counselling and job and skills support.

Digital connectivity

- Support for business to utilise technology and target support for vulnerable groups to access and utilise technology.

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

Loddon Campaspe will have great connectivity throughout the region, allowing tele-health growth, other forms of remote connection and overcoming some of the rural disadvantage that currently exists.

There will be a diverse, flexible, agile workforce focused on innovation and able to work from multiple locations using smart technology.

The region will have built better safety nets around the transition from youth to young adulthood in education, employment and housing.

The region will be known as a welcoming region for new migrants and international students to get a head start.

Loddon Campaspe will be building a resilient diverse workforce that meets the needs of the regional community starting with best practice early years learning and development programs connecting through to the wider education and employment sectors.

The region will have become renowned for its expertise in manufacturing technology having shifted its focus from volume to manufacturing technology including owning IP and production technology.

Industries will operate and trade in a more coordinated way across the region, understanding consumers and aligning their business and service delivery to meeting these needs.

The region will have a well developed plan identifying the 'supply chain gaps' highlighted by COVID-19 and mechanisms in place for these opportunities to

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be brought to fruition.

There will be a great pipeline of economic and social impact projects that make the Loddon Campaspe community more liveable.

There has been a resurgence in the value and attractiveness of volunteering amongst the communities.

Local businesses and industry (such as cultural and artistic sector) will have improved marketing and sales capability and have broadened their markets (including online).

The divide in access to services and technology in large regional towns and the small/rural communities has been reduced.

A diverse, flexible, agile workforce focused on innovation and able to work from multiple locations using smart technology.

Loddon Campaspe will have attracted a range of innovative entrepreneurs to live in the region who are connected into our networks.

Free childcare is a significant contributor to women in the workforce, universal support for vulnerable children, increased employment opportunities, economic stimulus.

“However it looks in 2025, let’s make sure the “Class of 2020” is not the cohort left behind”.
– Cross Border Commissioner

4. What recovery actions will help us get there?

Tourism and visitor economy

- Provide simultaneous investment in key pillars to support tourism led recovery: Marketing, Industry Education and Capacity and Infrastructure
- Build the Murray River Adventure Trail as a key enabling project delivering a range of economic and social benefits to visitors and the community
- Help to stimulate artisan food providers and farm gate sales by looking at planning zones and consider easing the restrictions created by Rural Conservation Zones
- Ensure that programs in the Echuca area (business, tourism, training, health, youth) are co-designed with Moama to maximise the benefit - connect with Murray River Council, the next RDA, and other cross border stakeholders.

Digital connectivity

- Deliver on the Digital Plan for the region and the digital projects identified by the LCRP for high speed internet access and telehealth.

Health and wellbeing

- Support Bendigo Health to expand its research development and digital capability into remote patient modelling and digital care which will reduce the load on hospitals (digital health centre of excellence)
- Utilise the existing framework of the Healthy Heart of Victoria initiative to facilitate recovery actions throughout the region to support to be active and eat well
- Establish new and innovative childcare and early years models that provide improved access across the region. Scale up the *Strong Families, Strong Communities* approach strengthening the link between economic outcomes and social outcomes.

Jobs and education

- Support the growth of the local workforce and articulate the future skills required by developing Skills Roadmaps for sectors largely impacted by COVID-19. These sectors include Tourism, Agriculture, Entrepreneurism and Technology.

Industry and business

- Build the business capability of Loddon Campaspe's arts and cultural sectors so that they can attract business from beyond the region
- Improve the coordination of planning projects and proposals across government agencies to reduce delays in project approvals and commencement
- Develop a regional relocation program, strengthening the promotion of living in regional Victoria
- Establish an innovation grant program to help maintain the momentum of innovation that has been established through COVID and support the recovery process
- Ensure that recovery initiatives interlink economic and social outcomes providing a focus on inclusion and addressing the conditions that create vulnerability
- Identify the supply-chain gaps highlighted by COVID and the mechanisms required for opportunities to be brought to fruition
- Prioritise the building of the Murray Basin Rail to improve transport and freight across the region
- Support the implementation of the Loddon Mallee Renewable Energy Roadmap by progressing upgrades of the transmission network.

Youth

- Establish a youth foyer in Bendigo, to provide housing and education assistance to vulnerable young people
- Provide incentives to local businesses to engage, train and support young people in their early stages of employment
- Re-engage and resource LLENS to support vulnerable young people, youth well-being and post school transitions.

"The fourth industrial revolution is in process, some countries are understanding and taking the opportunities that are presented. We in the regions of Australia have great opportunity to take advantage, if we prepare ourselves." – RDA

"There's lots of opportunity to not resume doing things in the same way and in fact becoming much more systematic and collaborative". – Bendigo Health

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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