

Great South Coast Regional Roundtable

Regional Roundtable Playback

11th June 2020



About the roundtable

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

On 11 June 2020, the Great South Coast community, industry leaders, government and Members of Parliament came together for a roundtable discussion on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on Great South Coast'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 Great South Coast 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 Great South Coast if we have undertaken a smart recovery?
4. What recovery actions will help us get there?

The Great South Coast region at a glance



Regional Population

103,928

As at June 2019

Gross Regional Product

\$5.52 billion

As at 2019

Annual Tourism
Expenditure

\$706 million

As at 2019

Tourism Operators

1,227

As at 2018

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

Tourism

Tourism is critical for the Great South Coast, especially for smaller towns like Port Campbell. Restrictions on movement have significantly impacted the region's tourism sector. Events and the creative arts have also been impacted as they make up part of the region's broader tourism sector. Cancelled events have impacted the local economy, as major events are a big part of the region's winter trade. As restrictions ease, competition for domestic tourism will be very high, as all regions across Victoria compete against each other, to attract visitors.

Hospitality, retail and accommodation

The food and beverage, retail and accommodation sectors have seen a significant decline in business as a result of the pandemic. There is concern about a second wave of economic impacts and a rise in unemployment when JobKeeper runs out.

Innovation

The pandemic forced many businesses to quickly adapt to the changing environment and new normal. For instance, Timboon Distillery began producing hand sanitizer in response to the surge in demand. Place of Wonder diversified their products — supplying frozen pizza to the local supermarket. But not all businesses have the capability and capacity to adapt quickly and innovate.

Digital connectivity

A lack of digital connectivity in parts of the region has impacted residents in those areas. This is keenly felt by children and young people studying from home, as well as those working from home.

Women

Women have carried the frontline impacts of the pandemic, as many are primary carers and have supported children in homeschool and education. Many women employed in the sectors most impacted by the pandemic, such as tourism and hospitality, have lost jobs. However, government investment has been in sectors where women represent a small proportion of the workforce, such as infrastructure, building and construction. As a result, government action has so far disadvantaged women, particularly those with low wages and insecure work.

Young people

Many young people in the region take a gap year to travel and access employment opportunities outside the region. With border closures, both domestically and internationally, young people are missing out on these important and formative life experiences. Many will not be able to earn the income required for independent status towards financial assistance before heading into tertiary education. This led to reported mental health issues and concern about the pandemic's impact on young people's education and employment pathways.

Many young people have lost their jobs as a result of the pandemic, and there is a risk that long-term youth unemployment may lead to a spike in youth disengagement.

“Events are a big part of our winter trade. Events and our creative sector have really been hit”. – RDA

*“How can we plan for the future if we don't have the voice of youth?”
– Regional Partnership*

2. What immediate action is needed?

Investment attraction and opportunities

- Realise high-value economic opportunities identified in the Great South Coast Economic Futures Report through facilitation of investment in agriculture, aquaculture, tourism and new energy

Industry adaptation and innovation

- Provide tangible, practical support for businesses to quickly adapt and innovate. This could help businesses in the region get back on their feet, adapt and grow in the new normal
- Invest in marketing campaigns to help small businesses attract visitors for the local economy
- Fast-track shovel ready projects to maximise the opportunities for local builders and contractors

Youth, skills and education

- Connect young people who have lost their jobs as a result of the pandemic to education and training providers
- Broaden criteria and size of the TAFE exemption program for the duration of the pandemic to assist people to acquire skills
- Provide wage subsidies or tax incentives to limit disruption to practical placements required for completion of TAFE and tertiary qualifications
- Provide immediate earning requirements exemption to achieve independent status for young people to access tertiary education for the next two years
- Ensure children and young people are not disadvantaged by the disruption in the school year and home schooling. Engaging children and young people on return to school will be important to ensure they remain engaged
- Immediate action is required to support young people who are considering career options to have the best available knowledge on post-disruption education, employment and jobs

Digital connectivity

- Invest into digital opportunities identified in the GSC Regional Digital Plan to significantly improve public safety, productivity, competitiveness and liveability. The indicative cost to government is estimated at \$38 million over a four-year period
- Ensure residents have access to reliable mobile coverage and internet. This is a critical and immediate need as residents continue to work and learn from home
- Build digital capability and literacy of residents, particularly for the older population to build community cohesion and address social isolation during the pandemic
- Strengthen digital capability in education and training facilities to support online learning through a network of regional study and digital hubs

Transport

- Improve transport connectivity, particularly in public transport and in areas where rail does not currently exist. Increased public transport and rail connectivity can help reduce car dependency
- Prioritise investment into Princes Hwy between Colac and SA border, and into bridges and culverts within the region's primary road network to support GSC agriculture and the renewable energy industry supply chain

Community engagement

- Provide funding to engage and support the community throughout the pandemic. Community cohesion and connectedness is more important than ever during this period of social isolation and disruption
- Support local sports clubs and community events operate in a COVID-safe environment. Community sports and events are critical parts of the region's social fabric

"It is the perfect time to be building and working on roads while it is a bit quiet".

– Regional Partnership

"We would be expecting to see many jobs in agriculture open up. How are we promoting our region and the job opportunities available in this sector?"

– NAB

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

The word 'Great' in Great South Coast rings true as the region's potential as the state's regional economic powerhouse is fully realised.

With assistance from government and private investors, the region's stakeholders worked in unison to lead economic recovery and actioned the two key regional strategic frameworks – the Great South Coast Economic Futures Report and the Regional Digital Plan.

Tourism in the region has rebounded. Our globally recognised natural assets – the Great Ocean Road, Budj Bim and Grampians National Park – together with our arts and cultural sector attract visitors from all over Victoria, Australia and the world. Visitors stay longer and return more often. We have a globally competitive tourism sector.

The local economy is thriving. Our agricultural sector is valued and new high-value investment opportunities are explored. Our fully water-secure region with a geographical climate change advantage continues to be Victoria's biggest food and fibre producer and one of the biggest contributors to GDP nationally.

Our manufacturing sector provides job opportunities and economic growth for the region. We support circular economy and continue to generate more than 50 per cent of the state's current operating wind power with addition of other renewables. We are exploring opportunities in renewable energy, hydrogen storage and production, as well as green energy research and development.

Our region is green and sustainable. Our beautiful natural environment is protected for future generations and the risk of coastal erosion is mitigated. Our people feel connected to the region and are benefitting from what the region has to offer. More people are choosing to live in the Great South Coast, our population is younger and more diverse, and we have a skilled workforce that contributes to strong, inclusive and equitable economic growth.

We celebrate our Aboriginal history. Our young Aboriginal Victorians are supported to develop their skills across all sectors and our Aboriginal small businesses are able to realise unique opportunities and benefit from their connection to and custodianship of the land.

We are more connected by public transport, roads and rail. This increased connectivity facilitates economic productivity of the region and across Victoria and nationwide, both through movement of freight and passenger travel.

Students, families and businesses have high-quality digital tools and infrastructure they need to study, work and earn a living. The region has a well developed network of regional study hubs supported by smaller digital hubs located in more remote areas of the region. Digital infrastructure and connectivity is world-class and is accepted as a basic human right.

"I believe the GSC Region is on the cusp of an extraordinary future".
– Regional Partnership

"Internationally we know healthy and more equal communities do better environmentally and economically and beyond".
– Women's Health and Wellbeing BSW

4. What recovery actions will help us get there?

Digital Connectivity. Digital Literacy. Digital Equity.

- Digital is the future - for economic diversification, community resilience and social equity. Staying connected nationally and globally is critical to the region's success. GSC Regional Digital Plan is in place, key initiatives identified - we are ready to go.

Agriculture is Our Region's Economic Workhorse

- The GSC Economic Futures Report identifies several high-value opportunities that build upon our existing advantages. Let's capitalise on what we are already good at. Let's remove the impediments and realise the growth through innovation and jobs.

Regional Economic Diversification

- Opportunities identified in the GSC Economic Futures Report will unlock our tourism potential to attract more visitors with increased dispersal, length of stay and spend.
- Investment pipeline and Regional Tourism bodies' endeavours will transform our tourism through Shipwreck Coast Masterplan, Budj Bim and Grampians National Park, as well as Aboriginal interpretation and product development.
- Investment into renewable energy, hydrogen production and storage, alongside development of new industries, manufacturing and robotics, will grow jobs and boost innovation, research and development through initiatives like HycleL@Warrnambool.

Environmental Sustainability

- Supporting a more circular economy and an environmental future is critical and the recovery actions should consider the region's environmental sustainability.

Socio-economic recovery

- SW Healthcare construction of Stage 2 Warrnambool and upgrade of Camperdown support the most disadvantaged community cohorts through access to local amenities and community connectedness.
- Increasing and diversifying housing stock will attract people to GSC, improve rental affordability and access to social housing, and ensure growth of skilled workforce.
- Applying a gender lens to recovery planning and policy decisions will ensure that needs of women are responded to, through provision of affordable and accessible childcare services and establishment of a local Support and Safety Hub in GSC.

Regional Governance and Policymaking - the Pursuit of Rural Equity

- Further out should not mean left out. Regional voices need to be elevated. Let not a policy or investment be approved in the absence of a rural and regional overlay. The nation's life and work focuses have changed from inner to outer. Now is the time to capitalise through evidence-informed policies, recovery actions and better data.

Skills and Education

- Current generation of young people face unique challenges as they navigate a dramatically disrupted and changed landscape. A long-term youth engagement, pathway and employment strategy will include a youth voice in economic recovery.
- GSC NDIS Workforce Action Plan and GSC Jobs Led Population Growth will train, attract and retain a skilled workforce, and education and training providers will work with businesses to match up skills and jobs in new and existing markets.
- A network of regional study hubs supported by smaller digital hubs in more remote areas of the GSC will introduce our students to innovation and global opportunities through access to digital infrastructure, digital skills and a focus on STEM.

Transport

- Enhance road, rail and air connectivity through investment into Princes Highway between Colac and the SA border, and planning for revitalised Warrnambool Melbourne rail corridor and resumed regional air passenger service.
- Better cross-regional services, such as by bus, would encourage visitors, support local economy and enhance liveability in the region.
- Upgrades to bridges and culverts within GSC principal road network as per GSC Dairy Supply Chain Study allow the use of high productivity freight vehicles to support agriculture and renewable energy industry supply chain.

"We are ripe for a bright future to attract people to the region but need government to invest in road and rail to help get people here and commit to decentralisation".

– Regional Partnership

"Data suggests that after other economic turn downs it took up to ten years for youth unemployment to get back to usual levels. We need a longer-term strategy".

– 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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