

# Barwon Regional Roundtable

Regional Roundtable Synopsis

9 June 2020



# About the roundtable

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

On 9 June 2020, Barwon community and industry leaders, government and MPs came together for a roundtable discussion on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on Barwon'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 Barwon 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 Barwon if we have undertaken a smart recovery?
4. What recovery actions will help us get there?

## The Barwon region at a glance



Regional Population  
**316,894**  
As at June 2019

Gross Regional Product  
**\$16.71 billion**  
As at 2019

Annual Tourism  
Expenditure  
**\$2.018 billion**  
As at 2019

Tourism Operators  
**3,443**  
As at 2018

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

## **Tourism and visitor economy**

Known for its beautiful natural landmarks, the region has a thriving tourism and visitor economy that attracts many domestic and international tourists. But border closures have significantly limited economic activity in this sector, as movement of people domestically and internationally comes to a halt. While state borders begin to ease, international travel bans are likely to remain in place for some time.

## **Rising unemployment and vulnerability**

The pandemic has put a strain on many businesses and jobs, and there are concerns that more jobs will be lost when JobKeeper ends in September. The pandemic has also put the spotlight on social disadvantage and homelessness in the region. There are concerns that the pandemic is disproportionately impacting the homeless and disadvantaged communities further.

## **Community health and wellbeing**

The pandemic has changed the way people in the region access health services. In particular, residents in the region have increased their use of telehealth during the COVID-19 response. Additionally, increased anxiety, unemployment and health concerns have had an impact on residents' mental health and wellbeing.

## **Digital connectivity**

Working and learning from home has highlighted the 'digital divide' between metropolitan areas of Melbourne and regional and rural communities. The region has experienced inadequate mobile coverage, lack of fast broadband and digital connectivity, more so than our metropolitan counterparts. Similarly, online learning can be a challenge for some parts of the region. There is a need to enhance digital equity and infrastructure and build greater

digital literacy in the regions.

## **Children and young people**

The restrictions have greatly impacted children and young people. Home schooling has disrupted the way children and young people learn. Young adults who make up the casual workforce in hospitality and the arts have also been impacted. There is a risk that young adults who are not connected to education or employment over a long period of time may become disengaged. The region is particularly concerned with the risk of youth unemployment and disengagement leading to a rise in mental health challenges for young people.

## **Arts and culture sector**

The region is home to a vibrant arts and culture sector, with many popular, large-scale festivals and events hosted in the region throughout the year. These festivals and events also support the region's visitor economy. The sector has been heavily impacted by the COVID-19 restrictions, as event and festival organisers are forced to cancel due to lockdown and social distancing restrictions. As a result, business operators, its permanent and casual workforce and suppliers have been impacted.

*"There has been a huge hit to the arts and culture sector as a result of the closure of venues and ceasing of events" – City of Greater Geelong*

*"It is critical that young people retain their connection to education and training opportunities as once disconnected they often don't reconnect, and this is major issue for long term employment pathways" – Regional Partnership*

# 2. What immediate action is needed?

## Tourism and visitor economy

- Market and attract domestic recreational and business-related travel. Encourage mid-week travel as restrictions ease to distribute visitor populations during the week and weekends.
- Provide economic stimulus packages that facilitate business adaptation and business transformation.
- Create safe, protected coastal environments by addressing protracted coastal erosion and inadequate tourism infrastructure.

## Industry, business and infrastructure

- Stimulate the local economy, support local businesses, embed local jobs in government funded regional projects and support inclusion of regional principles (like GROW). Identify short term employment opportunities that can lead to longer term opportunities for the region and supporting local procurement.
- Drive innovation and entrepreneurship, plan for the future by recognising the horizon has changed.
- Build capability (inc.digital) to respond with reliable infrastructure, capacity to transform and harness technology for agile business models.
- Work with Aboriginal communities to find opportunities to promote Aboriginal tourism and create experiences for visitors to connect with Aboriginal culture and history in the region.
- Build on existing manufacturing experience and expertise in the region to revitalise the region's advanced manufacturing industry and empower onshore supply chains.
- Fast track funding and implementation of major projects in the region already approved and committed to in the Geelong City Deal, prioritising building and construction jobs.
- Support development of transport corridors infrastructure and fortify rail, road, freight and port terminals (such as Avalon, Spirit of Tasmania).

## Jobs and education

- Amplify connectivity for schools to support online learning platforms by addressing digital affordability and accessibility issues.
- Provide structured education, workplace support for programs (VCAL) via digital platforms, alternatives such as microcredentials, incentivised funding to kick start apprenticeships, training to retain connections, upskill or reskill workforce.
- Work with the local Aboriginal community to revitalise the Kitjarra Aboriginal Education Centre and ensure meaningful engagement and education service response that is lead by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.
- Collaborate with Deakin University to provide additional financial and social support to displaced international students, along with communication and marketing activities to rapidly rebuild Australia's reputation as a safe, caring and desirable destination for the multibillion dollar international student market.

## Healthy and Resilient Communities

- Support precinct development (like Northern Arc), mental health and community programs (like Vital Communities) to improve infrastructure and foster prosperity.
- Intensive and earlier intervention, to support integrated family centred practices across the Barwon Blueprint - Continuum of support.
- Support for Social Housing across the region, including the identification of suitable State Government land for social housing

## Digital connectivity

- Address immediate digital infrastructure needs, including enhancing mobile coverage in some areas of the region and improving access to business grade broadband to support improved digital connectivity.
- Ensure children and families have the hardware and digital tools (e.g. laptops, internet) they need to support home learning.
- There is an immediate need to pivot to telehealth. Some health services such as Barwon Health have pivoted to a substantial use of telehealth during the COVID-19 response period and are currently evaluating the telehealth program with support from Deakin University.

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

The region's prosperity is shared by all. We have a fairer, more inclusive and resilient community.

Our young people are connected and engaged in their communities. They are excited about the future of the region.

Our Aboriginal communities thrive and enjoy the social, economic and environmental outcomes of our region. Aboriginal arts and culture are celebrated and recognised throughout the region.

Our region attracts visitors from all over Australia, the world and we have a thriving visitor economy. Visitors enjoy a diverse range of experiences in the region, stay for longer and return more often.

Our local economies support high value agriculture and are home to sustainable high value food precincts that are critical to the nation's food security.

Our region is connected by public transport, roads and rail. At the same time, our region is digitally connected to the rest of Victoria, the nation and globally.

We are known as leaders in digital connectivity, sustainability and the green economy. Our local economy, renewable energy sector is thriving and is a vital part of Australia's future landscape.

Our arts and culture sector is thriving, providing employment opportunities to local artists and attracting both domestic and international visitors.

*"We need to make sure that by 2025 we have proactively worked with our Traditional Owners to ensure they are included in all outcomes for our region"*  
– Regional Partnership

# 4. What recovery actions will help us get there?

## Creating a fairer Barwon

- To build a fairer Barwon and address social and economic disadvantage, the region should take a holistic and integrated approach across five domains which includes housing, health and wellbeing, employment, education and people's connectedness to their communities.
- There is an opportunity to create a more equitable community by supporting and providing economic opportunities for disadvantaged communities.

## Skills and education

- Invest in building a stronger regional education system focused on skills development and bridging stronger links between students and employers.
- Provide training and skills development in priority growth areas such as high value agriculture, renewable energy and advanced manufacturing.
- Facilitate domestic and international labour mobility pathways - enabling employers to directly recruit skilled jobseekers to address key skills gaps.

## Industry and business

- Continue investment in Central Geelong revitalisation and infrastructure to support and stimulate private sector investment.
- Continue to plan for growth, both greenfield and infill development and investing in the appropriate infrastructure (this will provide jobs for the region).
- Fast track investment from the Victorian Higher Education Investment Fund to establish a National Centre of Composite Materials at Deakin University's Geelong Future Economy Precinct.
- Progress internationally significant icons such as CORA and Eden Project Anglesea to improve product reputation leading to extended visits.

- Develop an integrated transport plan across the region, with a focus on port and rail access and enhancing regional connectivity. Avalon Airport could be a key connector for regional travel in a COVID-safe environment.

## Environmental sustainability

- Develop advanced circular economy and strengthen renewable energy advancements and supply chain technologies by leveraging the region's capabilities and emerging expertise.
- Strengthen the region's reputation as the most sustainable in Victoria by promoting jobs in areas such as renewable energy and green hydrogen.
- Promote action on climate change as a key driver, creator of jobs and economic prosperity for the region.

## Working in partnership with Aboriginal communities

- Aboriginal communities and Traditional Owners must be at the core of everything we do.
- Arts and culture, the Geelong Arts Centre and Aboriginal tourism product development are pivotal to creating experiences for visitors to connect with our region. This will drive jobs growth and workforce development to support many sectors of the community.

*"Deakin has been pivotal in Geelong's/ the region's redevelopment particularly over the last decade in many ways. It is so important we support such an essential, visionary and proactive organisation such as Deakin" – Barwon Water*

# Thank you

## Our contributors and attendees

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Commonwealth representatives from Assistant  
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Our Regional Roundtable was  
facilitated by: Ben Schramm,  
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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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