

# Senate Select Committee on COVID-19

## Inquiry into the Australian Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic

### Latrobe City Council Submission

June 2020



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## Introduction

Latrobe City Council welcomes the opportunity to provide its response to the Senate Select Committee on COVID-19 Inquiry into the Australian Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Latrobe City is one of Victoria's four major Regional Cities, located 135 km east of Melbourne. This submission summarises key issues experienced by our diverse community as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the related measures by the Australian Government.

The submission also highlights the actions taken by Latrobe City Council in this context, demonstrating the important role of local government as a trusted point of contact for communities during a pandemic response, and makes recommendations for future consideration.

## Community Impacts

Although the COVID-19 impacts on the Latrobe City community have been diverse and profound, community members have mostly adapted well to the COVID-19 restrictions. In an effort to respond to the COVID-19 related challenges, Latrobe City Council has established a dedicated community Helpline to provide direct and timely support and assistance to community. The Helpline provides an in depth understanding of current and emerging impacts of COVID-19 on our community.

Council is utilising its extensive community and service networks, underpinned by demographic data to provide assertive outreach to vulnerable community members.

In reaching out to the most diverse range of community members, we are ensuring our community is connected, safe and well.

This outreach is also informed by a strong network of partnerships with community leaders, and respected and trusted community agencies.

In addition to providing community focused support and assistance information gathered from the Helpline, subsequent strength based community interventions will inform recovery activities in our communities and the work of the co-designed Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plan.

The direct impacts of COVID-19 on our community, identified in collaboration with other community agencies, include:

**Table 1: COVID-19 Impacts on Latrobe Community**

| Issues  | Council Actions   | Enablers/ <i>Barriers (in italics)</i>   |
|---|---|--|
| Additional support was required for frail, aged and people with a disability to ensure that their basic needs were met. | Increasing the access to:<br>- Meals on Wheels<br>- shopping services<br>- regular phone contact<br><br>- provision of regular written information about COVID-19 and related restrictions. | These programs have funded targets from the state and federal governments and approval to be flexible and provide alternate services was provided.                                     |
| Confusing and inconsistent information from State and Federal Governments including access to COVID-19 testing.         | A local community Helpline provides direct and timely support to the community in relation to testing.  | Re-deployment of Council staff into Helpline roles.<br><br>Fortnightly collation of local service system availability undertaken to inform the availability of services for residents. |
| Social isolation and boredom experienced by community members.  | Increased access to libraries through online memberships and resources and home delivery of books.  | New service delivery model for libraries focussing on online support and home delivery services.   |
| Ongoing financial and social wellbeing of residents.  | 0% rate increase for the 20/21 financial year.  | Council forgoing over \$13 million in revenue over 10 years.   |
| Increased risks of family violence.   | No action taken by Council; Latrobe City service providers and the police identified families experiencing increased levels   | \$150 million Domestic Violence Support Package for 1800 Respect and Mensline Australia welcomed.  |

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|  | of risk of family violence (through their existing databases) and reached out to them. |  |
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## Local Business Impacts

Council undertook an extensive consultation to determine the COVID-19 business impacts (see Appendix 1).

Survey results indicated over 50% of the businesses in Latrobe City have been adversely impacted with the accommodation and food, arts and recreation services, retail trade, and small private health and social services experiencing most significant impacts.

Industry sectors that have not been adversely impacted by COVID-19 include agriculture and forestry, construction, transport and postal services.

COVID-19 has prompted some businesses to make changes to service delivery including online business pathways such as including telehealth, online classes, home based delivery, etc.

The key impacts on Latrobe business are highlighted in Table 2.

**Table 2: COVID-19 Impacts on Latrobe Business**

| Issues   | Council Actions  | Enablers/ <i>Barriers</i>   |
|--|--|---|
| 56% of local businesses reported being affected, with 51% reporting a reduction in turnover. | \$1.7 million Council business and community support package including fee and permit waivers. | JobKeeper initiative (37% Latrobe City businesses applied).<br><br>Boosting Cash flow initiative (17% Latrobe City businesses applied). |

|   |  |  |
|---|--|--|
| Extreme impacts on Arts, Events and Tourism industries (including performers, ride operators, food and beverage suppliers, security and labour hire). | Council Officer support with business planning and training. | <p><i>Business structures (e.g. sole/small trader) have resulted in many businesses being unable to implement JobKeeper.</i></p> <p>The Australia Council Resilience Fund was well received by those eligible.</p> |
|---|--|--|

## Impact on Council Services

Service closures and reduced attendance at some services have resulted in a significant financial impost to Council, with an estimated net reduced income impact of \$1,576 million by 30 June 2020.

The negative impact on revenue due to COVID-19 closures of Council's leisure services alone is forecast at \$1,035,046 (incl. caravan parks and outdoor pools) against the mid-year budget forecast.

In February and March of this year the impact on the Latrobe City community, particularly its local businesses became evident. In response Council adopted a range of support measures, designed to provide financial and non-financial support to the local business community and community groups.

These include:

- reduction of rent for tenants in Council owned buildings,
- refunds of street trading and outdoor dining permit charges,
- refunds of health registrations charges,
- provision of a waiver of rent or fees for sporting groups utilising Council owned lands/grounds and buildings, to name a few.

The impact of this short term support package equates to a further loss of revenue of \$161,492 in the 2019-2020 Council budget.

Council will provide a Business and Community Support package for the 2020/2021 financial year to the value of \$1.7M. Support for residents through a 0% rate increase in 2020/21 will have longer term financial impacts to the value of \$13.13 million over 10 years.

Such projections in the loss of revenue will impact service delivery capacity into the future.



The broader impacts on Council operations are included in Table 3.

**Table 3: COVID-19 Impacts on Latrobe City Operations**

| Issues  | Council Actions   | Enablers/ Barriers  |
|---|---|---|
| Significant loss of revenue across Council services.  | 211 casual staff laid off.  | <i>Local government is not eligible for JobKeeper.</i>  |
| The dog attack investigations have increased by 47%, animal management requests have increased by 15%, and there has been 12% increase in animal infringements issued. The local laws requests for the traffic and compliance team have increased by 30.8%. | Multi-media campaigns reminding residents to walk dogs on leashes and other responsible pet ownership messages.           | Council absorbed the cost of increased local laws staffing hours in response to demand.   |
| Free childcare services resulted in \$425,672 reduced income.   | Council continued to operate childcare throughout the pandemic absorbing the reduction in income.                         | <i>Ineligibility of local government to JobKeeper to cover the reduction in income. Thus this has to be absorbed by ratepayers.</i> |
| Increase in Council immunisation services.  | <p>April 2020: 191 people immunised compared to 68 in 2019.</p> <p>May 2020 252 immunised compared to 74 in May 2019.</p> | <p>New model of immunisation to accommodate social distancing.</p> <p>Council capacity to upscale to meet community need.</p>       |

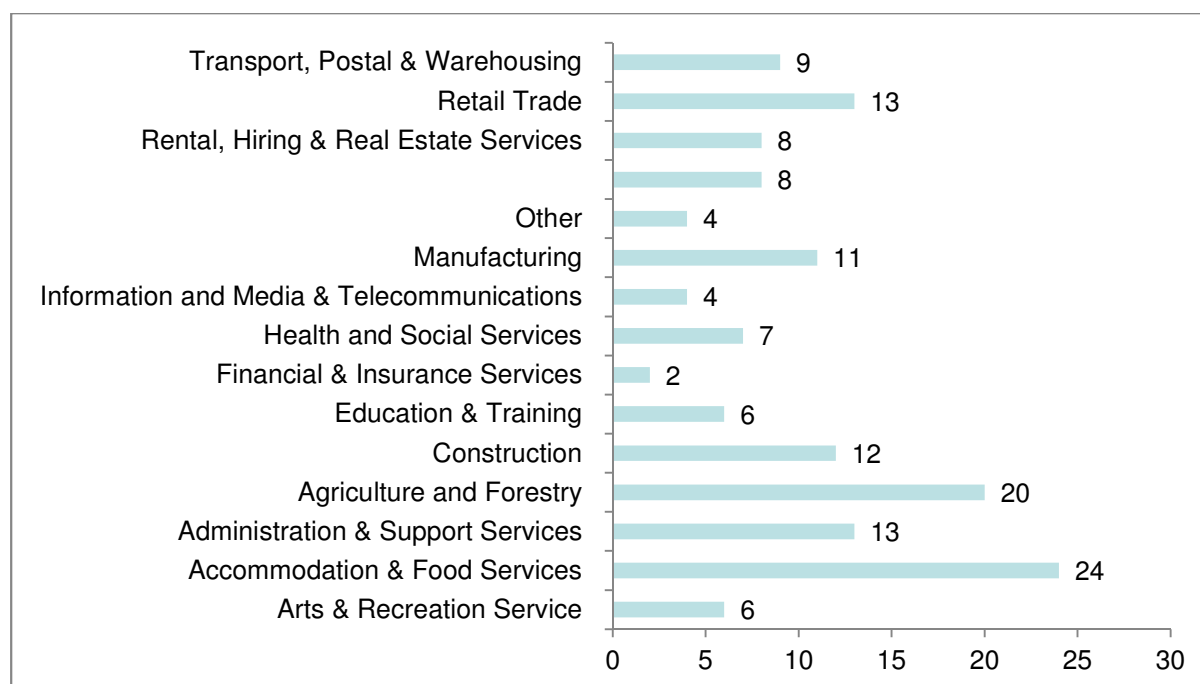
## Recommendations

The Australian Government's COVID-19 response could have been strengthened by:

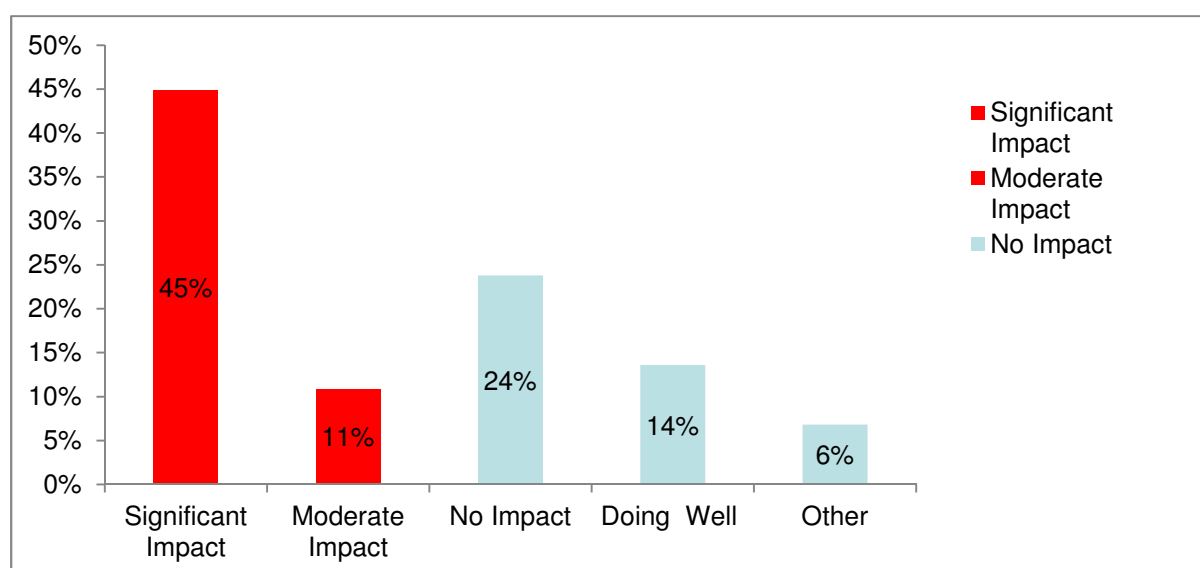
- Recognition of the role of local government in supporting communities during pandemic responses.
- Greater consultation with local government to implement pandemic responses.
- Consistent messages from State and Federal Governments to reduce confusion and support individuals to remain safe and comply with regulations.
- Extension of the JobKeeper program to casual workers and local government services affected by Government decisions (e.g. free childcare).
- Provision of specific support to galleries and performing art centres in regional areas.

## Appendix 1: Latrobe City Business Survey Results

**Table 1: Industry Categories Surveyed**

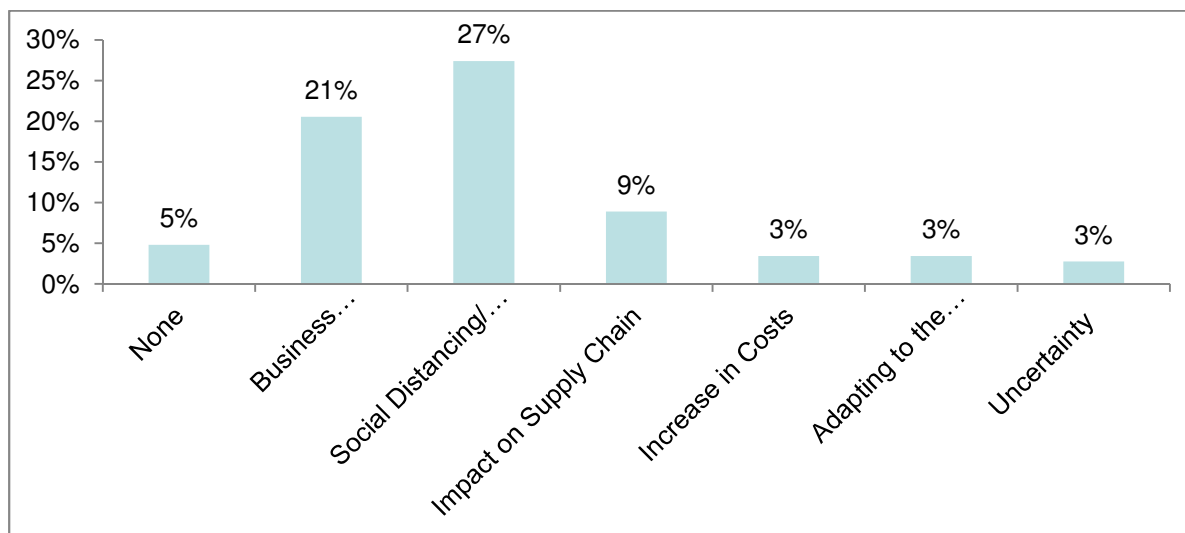


**Table 2: COVID-19 Business Impacts**

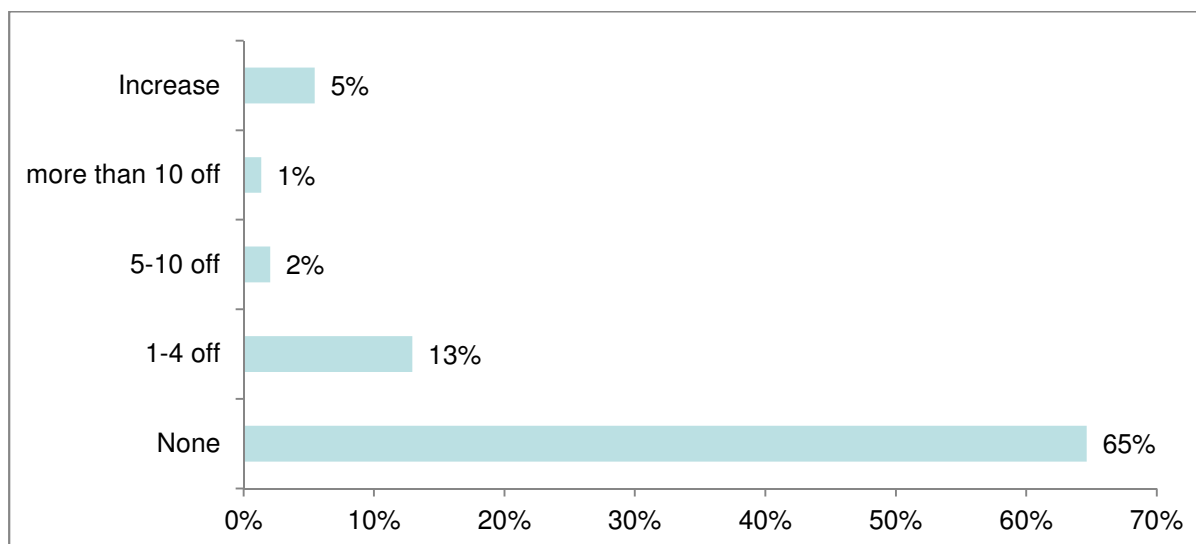




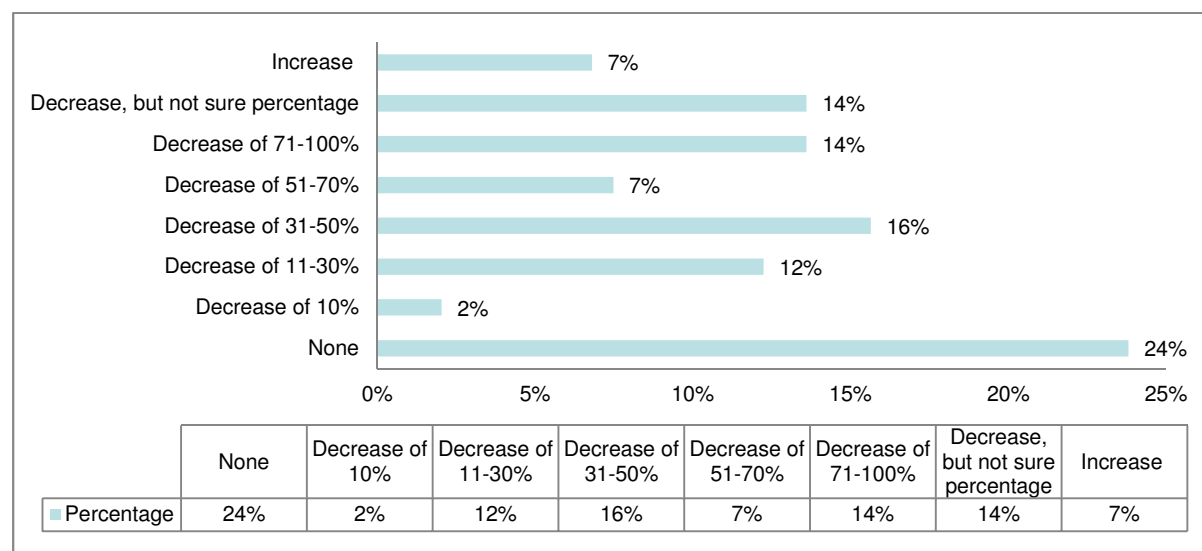
**Table 3: Business Challenges Experienced Due to COVID-19**



**Table 4: Impact on Staff Retention (% of businesses that have put staff off)**



**Table 5: Impact on Business Turnover**



**Table 6: Applications to State and Federal Business Support Packages**

