



Shoalhaven City Council

Community Wellbeing Plan Engagement Outcomes Report

September 2022

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Acknowledgment of Country

This document acknowledges that the Shoalhaven region is on Aboriginal land where the traditional custodians have been caring for Country for more than 70,000 years.

We pay our respects to the Traditional Owners of this land, their Elders past, present and emerging, and acknowledge the continued rich culture and heritage of all Aboriginal people on this land.



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All care has been taken to prepare this
report for Shoalhaven City Council.
If you have any queries regarding this
report please get in touch:

John O'Callaghan, Director
+61 0400 471 469
john@jocconsulting.com.au

jocconsulting.com.au

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Executive Summary

Extensive engagement for Shoalhaven City Council's Community Wellbeing Plan shows that residents are feeling the impacts of a rapidly changing world and that some groups are particularly hard hit. The community place high importance on neighbourhood connections and local public places as well as access to the natural environment and support services as sources of wellbeing.

The challenges of climate change and major weather events, the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, growing financial stress, and increased risks of mental illness and social isolation are being felt by everyone in Shoalhaven (indeed the world), but may be affecting people in different ways. Shoalhaven City Council commissioned Danny Wiggins to lead the development of the Community Wellbeing Plan to find out more about how people are affected by these increasingly uncertain and challenging times and identify priorities and strategies for improving the overall wellbeing of the community.

JOC Consulting was commissioned to develop a comprehensive community and stakeholder engagement approach that could inform the Community Wellbeing Plan in a meaningful way by exploring specific challenges and pragmatic opportunities for change. This report presents the results of enlightening conversations with more than 450 community members and stakeholders throughout the November 2020 to May 2021 period.

Key findings

The engagement showed that while the community rated their overall wellbeing as slightly better than neutral, significant and longer-term challenges are mounting and have a direct impact on wellbeing. Growing financial stress and the pressures of maintaining a roof over their (and their family's) heads, was nominated as the number one factor that was impacting on the community's health. This stress was also identified as the cause of a number of other key health concerns, with participants nominating cost as the number one barrier to improving health, and work-life balance being another major stress in people's lives.

The need for greater transport connectivity within the region, was the second highest priority identified during the engagement, as stakeholders and community members alike acknowledged the increased health risks of residents unable to access essential services, professional health advice, open space, or employment due to lack of public transport. The Shoalhaven's reliance on personal vehicle was the most common barrier to creating a sense of local community and connection that was identified by key stakeholders and service providers in the region.

In order to respond to these challenges - that have been exacerbated by COVID-19 and related trends (such as population growth and increased housing costs in the region) - engagement participants identified two elements of the Shoalhaven identity that they would like to see better leveraged to improve wellbeing. Access to open space and connected neighbourhoods were the top two assets identified for improving wellbeing in the Shoalhaven, with engagement participants highlighting the important role that these factors play in maintaining their personal wellbeing. The quantitative data of the online survey further supported this community sentiment, wherein individuals who did not have access to open space and did not feel connected to their community reported significantly lower physical and mental health scores.



PARTICIPATION

460+ participants
980+ people informed
5 workshops
304 survey responses

How did we engage?

The community engagement was carried out at key stages in the development of the draft plan, with each activity building on the outputs from the previous, to guide desktop research and provide a nuanced understanding of the key challenges and opportunities within the region.

The resulting engagement findings have been used to develop a place-based approach for the draft Shoalhaven Community Wellbeing Plan.

Engagement	Participation	Output
Online Survey #1 20 Nov- 13 Dec, 2020	112 Surveys 243 Page views	Identified key themes and challenges for further exploration in desktop research and phase 2 community engagement
Community Workshops (x3) 23 – 24 Feb, 2021	31 Community members Online via Zoom	Nuanced understanding of how community members are responding to key health risks and challenges within the Shoalhaven
Stakeholder Workshop 24 Mar, 2021	16 Participants from local service providers and community organisations Online via Zoom	Identified stresses impacting the community, as well as key barriers to taking individual and collective action
Online Survey # 2 25 Mar – 26 Apr, 2021	192 Surveys 454 Page views	Identified key stresses impacting the community Identified key health indicators for the Shoalhaven community Identified key assets to improving wellbeing Identified vulnerable groups within the community Captured community priorities for the draft plan Identified common barriers to improving individual wellbeing
Youth Workshops (x4) 26 Apr – 5 May 2021	39 Students Face-to-face Workshop	Identified key stresses impacting the health of young people Identified youth priorities for the draft wellbeing plan
Seniors Workshop 24 Mar, 2021	16 Local residents aged over 65 Face-to-face workshop	Identified key stresses impacting the health of older residents in the Shoalhaven Identified key barriers to taking action to improve individual wellbeing

Aboriginal Community Interviews 10 Feb – 30 Apr, 2021	6 hours of interviews with key stakeholders and service providers	Better understand the key stresses impacting the health of people of Aboriginal heritage Identified key barriers to taking action to improve individual wellbeing
Stakeholder and Service Providers Workshop Insert Date	TBC	To be completed upon delivering the first draft Shoalhaven Community Wellbeing Plan

Engaging those at greater risk

To improve the broader wellbeing of all residents in the Shoalhaven, the plan (and the engagement) must look at addressing the additional challenges that are facing at-risk groups within the community. As such, the engagement plan included 9 workshops and 3 interviews that were focused on capturing unique insights from young people, seniors, and those of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent, who are living in the Shoalhaven.

In addition to these activities, an online workshop for local Aboriginal community groups and service providers was planned but the 5 registered participants were unfortunately unable to attend. Participation in the online survey shows that 6 of the 193 respondents identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, 10 identified as LGBTQI+, 14 identified as having a disability, and 16 identified as carers or family members of people with special needs. The below table illustrates a number of key insights that were specific to each group, above and beyond those areas where they aligned with the broader community.

Youth	Seniors	Indigenous Community
3 x Schools Workshops	1 x Workshop hosted during Seniors' Week programming	3 x Interviews w/ Stakeholder and Service Providers
<p>Young people expressed a high level of "climate stress", experienced due to perceived inaction on climate change.</p> <p>Highlighted a lack of public spaces in which they felt welcome and/or that catered to their needs.</p> <p>Almost all youth participants were worried about the lack of local jobs or training prospects.</p>	<p>Workshop participants recorded greater levels of social isolation, and highlighted poor transport linkages as a common contributor to this.</p> <p>Accessibility concerns, particularly in open spaces and natural landscapes, were limiting this group's ability to leverage the benefits of these assets.</p>	<p>The need for greater consultation to better understand the unique challenges facing the indigenous community, was the number one priority of those interviewed.</p> <p>Participants highlighted the need for specific consultation during program design and planning for the delivery of specific services/initiatives.</p>

How is the community currently doing?

The engagement looked at community wellbeing from different perspectives and took the pulse on both physical and mental health, across a range of geographical locations and demographics in the community. The survey of nearly 200 community members indicates that they overall are doing okay; when asked to rate their physical health and mental health, survey participants scored an average of 3.5 and 3.6 out of 5 (midway between “Neutral” and “Good”).

While the average community wellbeing score paints a picture of a community that is coping under difficult circumstances, further investigation of the engagement data uncovered a number of key vulnerabilities within the community:

- Young people recorded a high level of day-to-day stress, which was further exacerbated by their concern for global issues and limited future housing and job security
- While online survey data recorded high levels of connectedness, participants used open response questions to express concerns that key sources of connection (work and local neighbourhoods) were under pressure
- Those who felt they were unable to easily access open space recorded a significantly lower health score in the online survey
- Those living in and around Nowra recorded significantly lower scores in satisfaction with their neighbourhoods and opportunities

In addition, detailed interviews were held with Council's Community Capacity Builder and two prominent local Aboriginal medical professionals. The stakeholders interviewed felt that for Aboriginal people, wellbeing is primarily about promoting culture (rather than its destruction), recognition, acknowledgment (respect), and healing. The interviewees identified that this can be achieved at the local level by enshrining a voice in Council activities and assisting with narrowing the health and wellbeing gap.

What are the key challenges we need to overcome?

The engagement identified the importance of open and public space in maintaining the wellbeing of residents in the Shoalhaven. However, participants felt that in the context of a growing population and new challenges facing the community, these spaces and services were becoming increasingly important and that there are opportunities to increase their capacity as well as improve better access for the whole community (and especially vulnerable groups).

Key stresses and challenges directly affecting individual wellbeing

The following stresses and challenges were identified by the 192 survey participants in answer to the question: *"What are some of the biggest issues that affect your own sense of wellbeing or cause you stress?"*

- Financial stress/concern
- Poor work-life balance
- Unemployment and housing security
- Inability to adequately treat existing health concerns (cost)
- Safety in neighbourhoods, particularly for those who do not have family within the region (Nowra a common nomination) - particularly relating to drug use and petty crime
- Decreased sense of community due to high level of holiday rental
- Environmental degradation due to development in the area and global warming

In addition to the above, targeted consultation with Senior citizens in the Shoalhaven uncovered additional key challenges impacting their wellbeing:

- Increased social isolation, leaving residents to handle loss and grief on their own
- Lack of housing diversity resulting in residents living in unsuitable housing types
- Online service provision and education doesn't give consideration to those with low digital literacy

Key challenges facing Council and service providers

The following challenges were identified by the Council and key stakeholder workshop participants in answer to the question: *"What are some of the biggest wellbeing challenges facing the region into the future?"*

- Housing affordability (causing financial stress in households)
- Inefficient public transport network decreasing equitable access to services
- Providing greater local provision of professional and specialist health services
- Managing the impacts of increased holiday rentals
- Low levels of employment and training opportunities
- Increased mental illness (often noted as being connected to increased drug use in the region)
- Significant upgrades to sidewalks and active transport network to create more connected communities
- Responding to the new roles that open spaces and community facilities need to play

Key challenges directly affecting Aboriginal Community wellbeing

The key health challenges raised during the interviews were experiences of mental health, drug and alcohol issues, domestic violence, cultural issues, social and emotional wellbeing (grieving), not feeling safe at home and needing contact with the land (connection to Country).

Actions for Council suggested during the interviews:

- Cultural Protocol Guide
- Promoting the activities of Council's Aboriginal Advisory Committee, and relations with Aboriginal Land Councils
- Incorporating NSW Department of Planning and Environment and the NSW Government Architect recommendations (and publications) on integrating Aboriginal culture into the planning and operation of our public spaces and buildings
- More specific provisions in Council's Community Participation Plan, acknowledging that there should be broader notice of planning and development proposals, reflecting the nature and expectations of the Aboriginal community. This should include consideration of circumstances where an Aboriginal Impact Statement should be required.

What are the key opportunities and assets to building stronger and healthier communities?

Overall, engagement participants painted a picture of a relatively healthy, connected community that is the legacy of previous forward planning and programs offered by Council. Many community participants acknowledged the role and work undertaken by Council and expressed interest in collaborating directly with Council on community development initiatives.

The engagement identified the following key opportunities for leveraging assets to build healthier communities:

- **The Natural environment**
The natural environment of the Shoalhaven, and the abundance of open space are the region's greatest asset in improving and maintaining the wellbeing of residents. Throughout the engagement, participants highlighted the need to provide greater access to these spaces as well as improved amenities that will enable users to stay longer.
- **Strong neighbourhoods**
It is the walkable neighbourhood that is the major support network in the Shoalhaven. The engagement uncovered a high percentage of residents who are living in and relying upon the benefits of pleasant, walkable, connected neighbourhoods – a group who recorded the highest level of personal wellbeing from survey participants.
- **A community-minded Shoalhaven**
Across all engagement methods, participants expressed concern about looking after people who may be particularly affected by the current pressures of living. When asked to consider challenges and solutions for improving wellbeing, participants put aside personal interest to consider what would deliver the greatest good for the broader community.

What are the community's priorities?

The key priorities below provide a summary of the top priorities identified throughout the engagement.



Access to Professional Health Services

The region's growing population now demands adequate access to specialist and professional health services, rather than relying upon the region's proximity to Sydney



Greater Connectivity

The inefficiencies and lack of connectivity of the public transport network in the Shoalhaven is limiting resident's access to essential services, employment and training opportunities, and chances to connect with the community



Increased Access to Open Spaces

The region's greatest asset needs to be made accessibly and enjoyable for all, irrespective of age, ability or proximity to natural assets



Resilient Neighbourhoods


Resilient neighbourhoods are shaping healthy Shoalhaven residents. Open space provision and creating neighbourhood connections should be key goals for promoting wellbeing



Addressing Financial Stress

Increasing financial stress and increasing cost of housing is limiting resident's ability to respond to key health challenges and take action to build resilience

The community and key stakeholders identified a broad range of opportunities for further consideration in the Community Wellbeing Plan, described in detail in the following as related to the identified themes (which were informed by the first stage of the engagement) - Individual Health; Connections; Supportive Environments; and Housing & Employment Security.



Theme 1: Individual health

.....wellbeing starts and ends with individual health and those factors that directly contribute to it, such as nutrition, active living, and arts and culture. Individual health and wellbeing is supported by the public and private health systems.

What we heard

“Most illnesses can be prevented by following a healthy diet and increasing physical activity. I have found this last year quite different, in these times of uncertainty, and maintaining good mental health and wellbeing is a priority for me” – Survey participant

The Shoalhaven community recognise their great fortune in having access to open spaces and natural landscapes that provide an exponential benefit in maintaining one’s individual health. However, participants highlighted that the region lacks access to professional health services, particularly specialist services, and highlighted that limited connectivity further exacerbated this risk.

Insights

A growing awareness of mental health

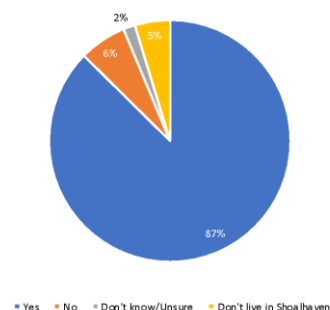
Participants across all engagement activities acknowledged the growing importance of maintaining good mental health practices and the interconnected nature of physical and mental health. The impacts of social isolation measures in 2020 and the sense of uncertainty, was a commonly noted catalyst for this increased awareness and the mental health practices that residents have adopted in the last 12 months. As such, participants noted a number of key barriers to better individual health, as having an impact on physical and mental health, these were:

- Cost – increased financial stress (closely related to the cost of housing), was forcing people to compromise on seeking professional help in addressing physical and mental health concerns, which is causing further concern and worry about ill-health.
- Accessibility – participants noted that the region lacked professional/specialist services, and that poor connections made it hard to access those professional services that do exist.

Key local health indicators

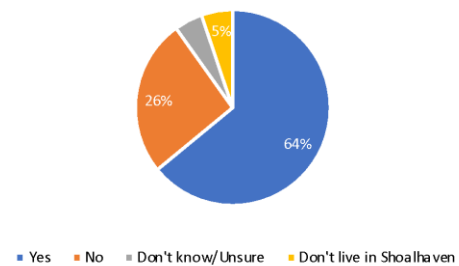
Access to health services and to healthy food presented a direct correlation to how participants scored their personal wellbeing. 85% of all survey participants who rated their mental health as 5/5, acknowledged they had easy access to healthy and fresh food, while 90% of that cohort felt they could easily access the health services they need. In further support of the importance of these two aspects of health, all survey participants who rated their mental health as 1 or 2 out of 5, believed they were not able to easily access health services from where they live (residents of the area of Callala over-indexed in this group, as well as those from Nowra/North Nowra).

Are you able to easily access healthy and fresh food in the Shoalhaven? (n=192)



Exploring the current health of residents also further emphasised the importance of maintaining social connections, and promoting a sense of community in the Shoalhaven. When asked to rate their physical health, all participants who listed 5/5 were currently employed, while all those who select 1/5 were not currently working. Furthermore, 90% of participants who rated their mental health as 5/5 were working, studying, or volunteering regularly.

Are you able to easily access the health services you need? (n=192)



Collaborating with First Nations People

Participants from the Aboriginal community highlighted a need for greater recognition of First Nations people, and greater collaboration between Council and the community to better understand the unique challenges to improving wellbeing of Aboriginal people in the Shoalhaven.

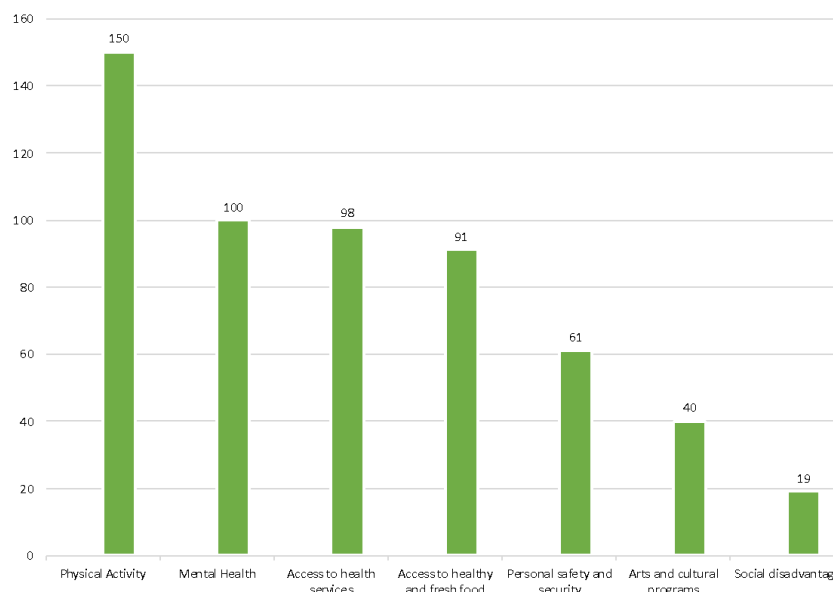
Participants also emphasised that collaboration with the Aboriginal community about ways of appropriately recognising Aboriginal culture in general and as part of the built environment is vital for creating a stronger sense of belonging amongst the Aboriginal community. Participants from the Aboriginal interviews highlighted an immediate need for Council to include specific actions in all strategies and plans that address this need.

The need for greater consultation with the Aboriginal community was identified as a top priority for members of the Aboriginal community, who highlighted that the key challenges to implementing actions and initiatives were vastly different in the Aboriginal community, compared to the broader population, and often subject to specific cultural protocols.

Community priorities

Survey participants were asked to nominate 3 priority areas for improving individual health in the Shoalhaven.

Community priority areas for improving individual health (n=568)



From across the engagement, participants saw the following focus areas as being of critical importance to improving individual wellbeing in the region.

Physical Activity

Participants acknowledged that the Shoalhaven region is well-resourced to enable residents to exercise and improve their physical and mental health for limited/no cost. It was widely recognised that physical activity was the foundation of good health, and participants wished to see Council facilitate more no-cost exercise opportunities in the LGA. Installing more outdoor exercise equipment, increasing walking access to open spaces, and expanding the capacity of community-run exercise classes were three highly common recommendations to achieving this outcome.

Mental Health

Survey Participants and Community Services providers in the region both recognise the growing epidemic of mental illness in the Shoalhaven. Participants highlighted the growing pressures/stresses that were having a noticeable impact on the health of them and their loved ones, commonly highlighting financial stress and the need to maintain job security as the number one factor impacting their mental health.

With a more outward perspective, service providers in the region highlighted the increasing cases of mental illness in the Shoalhaven, and the need to make services more accessible for the most vulnerable members of the community.

Access to Health Services

The lack of internal connectivity and the over-reliance upon specialist services in Sydney are resulting in a large part of the community often not seeking the treatment/advice they require. Participants across all engagement activities highlighted that services within the Shoalhaven were often concentrated in larger town centres, with the existing transport plan giving little or no consideration to how residents outside these areas access essential services.

A large number of survey participants, particularly older residents and those with pre-existing health conditions, noted that the Shoalhaven lacked access to specialist services. It was commonly felt that the region's proximity to Sydney gave residents a false sense of security, which is not realised until residents have a personal need to seek these services/treatments.

Access to Healthy and Fresh Food

While the vast majority of survey participants felt they could easily access healthy and fresh food in their area, it was commonly acknowledged that the most affordable and freshest food was concentrated to farmer's markets that were difficult to access for the large majority of the population – with cost, transport, and lack of inclusion being the three main barriers.

Accessible Health Education For Seniors

Participants of the Seniors Workshop nominated low digital literacy as a key barrier to improving their wellbeing. While this was a challenge not highlighted by other demographic groups in the engagement, Seniors acknowledge the transition to online health education resources as a key risk to their individual health and wellbeing.

Opportunities

The following table provides an overview of the emerging key ideas for addressing the challenges above.

Opportunities that were raised in the consultation (as related to priorities)	
Increasing physical activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Installing a network of outdoor exercise equipment across the LGA • Increasing walking access to areas of natural beauty • Greater support for community ran, low-cost exercise classes/groups
Responding to growing mental illness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outreach services to areas with limited access to mental health support services • Further investigation into programs that will enable residents to reduce the impacts of financial stress
Increasing access to health services	
Increasing access to healthy and fresh food	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Investigating opportunities to expand the farmer's market network in the Shoalhaven • Providing a more accessible co-op for local growers and producers
Equitable and accessible health information services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Utilising hard copy forms of health promotion, such as community notice boards, community centres and libraries, attaching it a rates notice, utilising traditional media such as radio and TV.
Greater consultation with First Nations people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formalising Council's Aboriginal Engagement and Consultation policy, formalising when and how Council engages at different points in a project • Build on the Aboriginal Advisory Committee and pursue other mechanisms for ensuring a strong voice in Council and with other agencies

“Opportunities for connection (arts and cultural activities) have a significant impact on general wellbeing, as does physical activity, however, low wages and lack of full-time employment opportunities in my field mean I cannot afford extra expenses such as medical and health services”

– Online survey participant



Theme 2: Connections

... connections are what makes us a community-based social species, be it gathering places, transport and access, cultural and historical roots or media and communication channels.

What we heard

“People need people. We also need good transport options to enable those without a car to get to work and also to keep connected with one another.” -Survey Participant

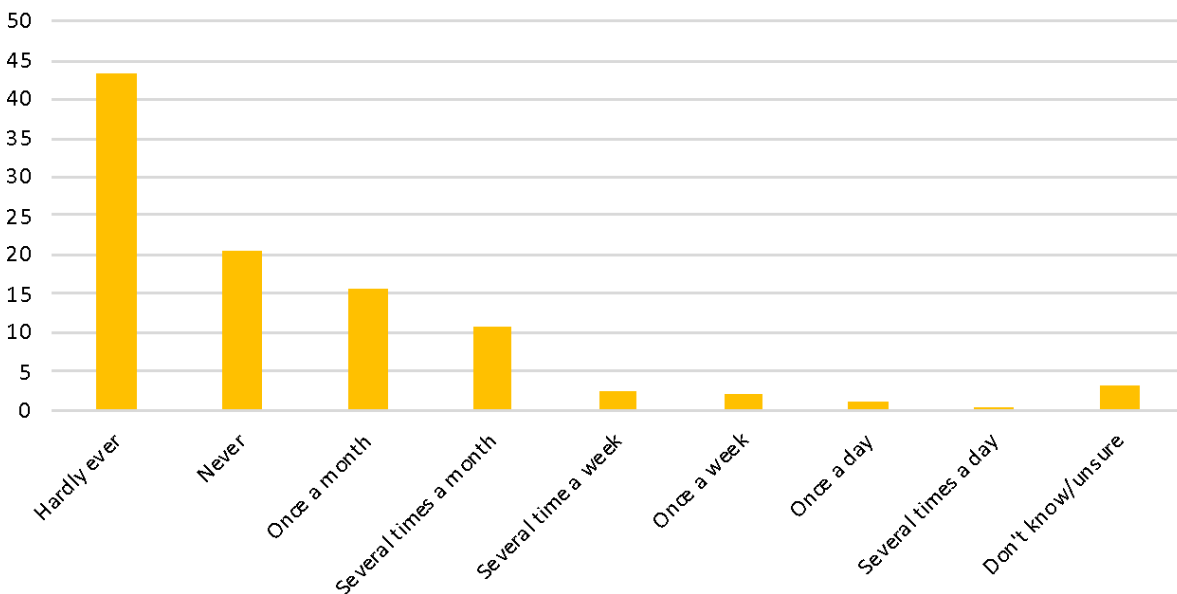
The Shoalhaven community considers social connection a fundamental part of the local identity, and harbour a sense of pride about the region being one that welcomes and encourages new and strong connections with one another. However, participants highlighted poor public transport and lack of events as the key barriers to encouraging a broader sense of connection and coming together with a purpose.

Insights

A welcoming and connected community

Results from the online survey paint a picture of an extremely well-connected and open community in the Shoalhaven, with recorded levels of loneliness and chance interactions at an incredibly positive level. Nearly 80% of the 192 survey participants recorded feeling lonely once a month or less (with 64% saying they feel so *Hardly Ever* or *Never*). These low levels of isolation are further supported by a follow-up question, in which 90% of participants recorded a chance meeting with “a stranger” at least once a month.

How often do community member's experience loneliness?
(n=192)



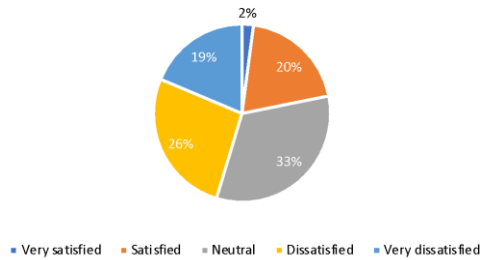
While the broader data suggests that the Shoalhaven is welcoming and willing to connect, those who recorded the greatest levels of isolation help to highlight the key barriers to being more connected – transport.

Connectivity - The Greatest Barrier

Both the survey participants and workshop attendees acknowledged poor transport connectivity as the number one barrier to greater wellbeing in the Shoalhaven. When asked to provide big ideas for improving wellbeing, *Better transport services within the region* was the most common response from both engagement activities, and a top three priority echoed in both the youth engagement and seniors workshop.

Of the survey participants who recorded the highest levels of isolation and loneliness, 85% also noted that they were dissatisfied with the transport options in their neighbourhood, and 100% of them were over the age of 35. The impacts of poor connectivity were further supported by the broader survey participants, of whom only 22% felt that transport connections in their area were suitable for promoting better health. The lowest levels of transport satisfaction were recorded by those over the age of 60, with Bombaderry recording the highest level of dissatisfaction, closely followed by Nowra (where residents noted that connectivity outside of Nowra was not suitable). Furthermore, it should be noted that females expressed a much higher level of dissatisfaction with public transport options, and further investigation may need to be undertaken to better understand if this is closely related to safety.

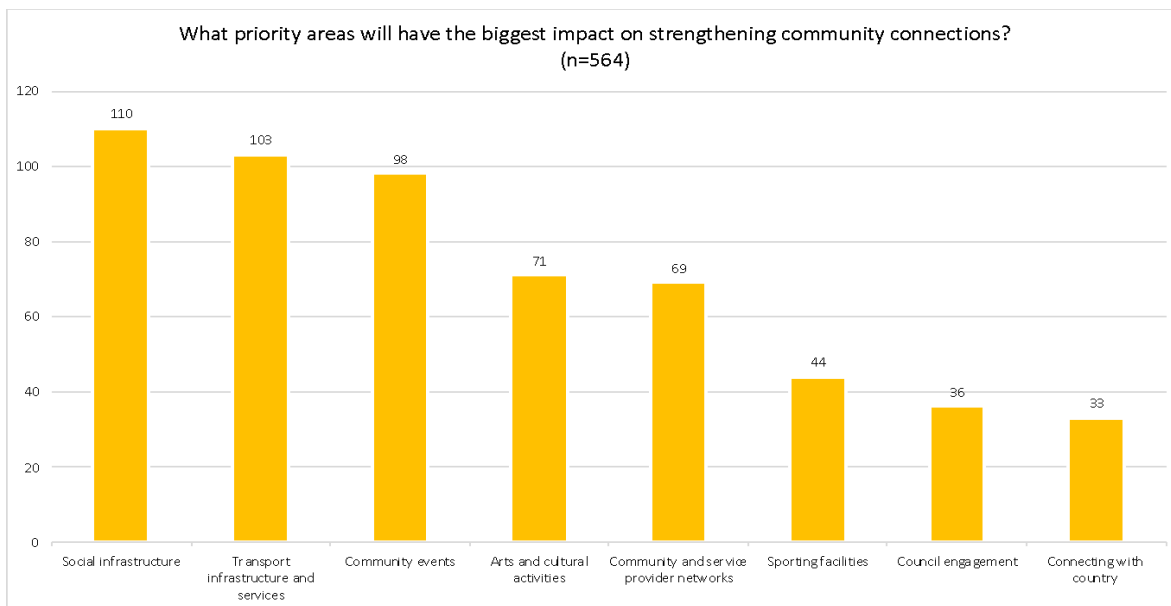
How satisfied are you with transport connections in your area? (n=192)



The Youth Workshop uncovered a lack of transport connectivity as a key barrier to the wellbeing of young people, and their ability to connect with one another face to face. 87% of workshop participants acknowledged that they would prefer to use public transport if it were an option, and that it was the second biggest barrier to being more social with friends. Furthermore, participants in the Seniors Workshop highlighted insufficient transport linkages as a key barrier that was preventing them from fostering more community connections and limiting their ability to access professional health services.

Community priorities

Survey participants were asked to nominate 3 priority areas for improving community connection in the Shoalhaven.



From across the engagement, participants saw the following focus areas as being of critical importance to improving connectivity in the region.

Social infrastructure

Participants acknowledged that the Shoalhaven region is lacking places to come together. In particular, respondents wished to see social infrastructure such as sporting facilities, libraries, and community centres that embraced and leveraged the region’s natural landscape and the resident’s desire to come together in an outdoor setting.

Transport Infrastructure and services

Across the entire engagement, the lack of connectivity within the Shoalhaven was highlighted as the number 1 barrier to achieving better health outcomes. As it relates to connectivity, survey and workshop participants were in agreeance that residents are unable to partake in community events, work, study or join organisations/clubs due to poor public transport connections, and a lack of active transport options.

Community Events

Participants from both the workshops and community survey acknowledged the importance of organised events to foster community spirit and create a broader sense of connection across the entire Shoalhaven. The desire to see a larger events program across the entire region was further reiterated in the open comments captured in the survey, wherein *More community events* was the 7th most common recommendation for improving health and wellbeing in the Shoalhaven.

Opportunities

The following table provides an overview of the emerging key ideas for addressing the challenges above.

Opportunities that were raised in the consultation (as related to priorities)	
Increased social infrastructure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Revitalise town centres, with a focus on fostering greater community connections – Nowra being the most common recommended location ● Investigate small interventions and installations that will provide meeting points alongside key environmental sites in the region ● Map and investigate opportunities for multipurpose community centres, with particular attention paid to servicing youth and elderly residents
Increasing connectivity within the region	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Expansion of greater active transport network within major town centres ● Investigate gaps and opportunities within the regional transport plan, to create better connectivity between townships ● Identify plan for unified “Opal card” system, that will enable subsidised travel, irrespective of the service provider being used for the trip
Expanding events programming	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Identify opportunities and gaps within the events program to better cater to fringe and niche groups in the LGA ● Targeted events for youth and older residents ● Transport and connectivity to be a priority within event planning

“Without social connections we are not optimising our greatest resource... our people”

– Stakeholder workshop participant



Theme 3: Supportive Environments

... natural and built environments support community wellbeing, from connections to nature, fresh air and clean water to walkable neighbourhoods and access to food outlets, green spaces, and sporting facilities

What we heard

“The Shoalhaven is all about nature and outdoor living. We try to spend as much time outdoors with our young kids so having access to community facilities, having recreation facilities is important” – Survey participant

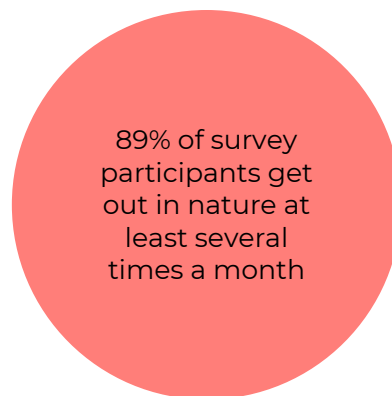
Neighbourhoods play an important role in the health and wellbeing of Shoalhaven residents, who frequently utilise local parks, facilities, and sidewalks to get active, foster connections, and seek respite from day-to-day stresses. However, engagement participants highlighted the need for more regionally significant infrastructure that allowed them to better access the benefits of open spaces across the LGA.

Insights

Open space and the environment are the backbone of community wellbeing

The wellbeing benefits of the natural environment and open spaces were seen as the number one asset within the Shoalhaven region. When asked how often they get out in nature, 58% of survey participants did so at least once a week, and 89% did so at least several times a month (with the additional 11% all acknowledging the importance of open spaces in a separate question).

It is apparent that Shoalhaven City Council has responded to the importance of open space, with 80% of survey participants acknowledging that they were able to easily walk to a park or natural surroundings. Further highlighting the importance of this access, the 20% of participants who said they could not easily access open space recorded a significantly lower mental health rating of 2.7/5 and health rating of 3/5 (compared to the community average of 3.6). Within this particular group, 6 of the 10 respondents were from the Nowra or Worrigea area, and all recorded being dissatisfied with the transport connections in their area (placing them at a high-risk level of being unable to access open space at all).



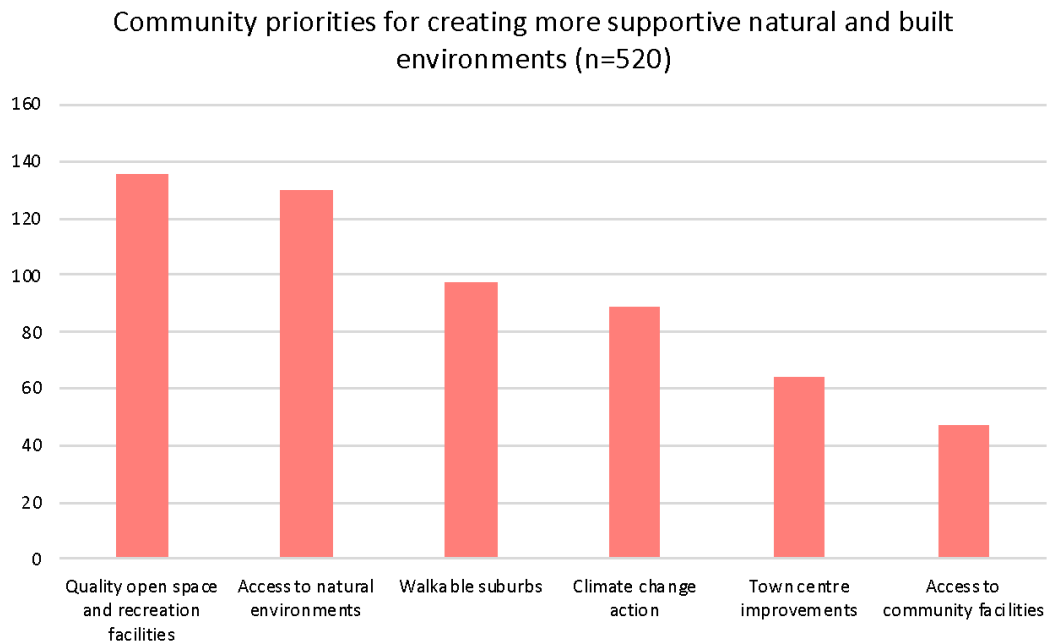
Workshops comments and discussions further highlighted that community members wish for natural and open spaces to be the setting for community events, with participants across all workshops and the ideas wall wishing to see more events and activations in these landscapes that are part of the local identity.

The importance of neighbourhoods

Survey questions relating to the walkability and quality of neighbourhoods, emphasised the important role that these micro-communities play in improving wellbeing. When asked to rate “how pleasant and welcoming is your neighbourhood”, survey participants who rated their neighbourhood *not very pleasant* or worse, averaged significantly lower mental health scores (averaging 3.0). Notably, 27 of the 28 participants who rated their neighbourhood not pleasant were female, with the suburbs of Nowra and Worrigea most commonly highlighted in this group (the same suburbs where participants felt they were unable to easily access open space)

Community priorities

Survey participants were asked to nominate 3 priority areas for creating supportive environments in the Shoalhaven



From across the engagement, participants saw the following focus areas as being of critical importance to creating supportive environments in the region.

Quality open space and recreation facilities

Survey participants acknowledged the diverse roles that open spaces have played in recent times (particularly during times of social distancing in 2020 and 2021) and the increased importance of recreational facilities in suburbs of increased density. Engagement participants more broadly wished to see Council adapt to these new functions that parks and outdoor recreational facilities are playing as a place for exercise, for social gatherings, for children’s play, sporting contests, barbecues, picnics, birthday parties, play dates, and simple walks.

Young people in the engagement placed particular importance upon recreational spaces within the region, highlighting that they felt welcome and safe in very few spaces across the entire LGA. In fact, the *Lack of recreation/social facilities and events* was voted the number one challenge facing young people wanting to improve their health and wellbeing in the Shoalhaven. In JOC Consulting’s extensive experience in youth engagement, the theme of young people not feeling welcome and safe in public spaces is a common challenge facing youth and extends to a broader community discrimination against young people “loitering” in public spaces, and the assumption that they are partaking in antisocial behaviour. When asked “How can Council better support young people?”, Youth Workshop participants’ top two responses were *More recreational/social facilities* and *More festivals and events*.

In an increasingly digital world, young people of the Shoalhaven are yearning for places to come together

Access to natural environments AND Climate change action

The importance of the natural environment to the wellbeing of Shoalhaven residents is a theme throughout the entire engagement. This was a top three theme for Local Stakeholders and Service Providers, the Youth Workshop, Seniors Workshop and the Online Survey. Participants wished to

see Council provide greater access to and opportunities to enjoy the natural beauty of the Shoalhaven. Notably, engagement participants reiterated the importance of ensuring these spaces are accessible for all members of the community, with many noting the need for more off-leash dog areas amongst the natural landscape (this final point was a key priority for engagement participants over the age of 65).

Participants identified two common actions to create greater access to the natural environment and natural assets in the region. Firstly, the need for better public transport connectivity between suburbs and areas of natural beauty was a common recommendation within the broader desire to see better transport linkages in the region. Secondly, participants from the community workshop and the second survey highlighted the need to ensure that pathways and connections within these landscapes and parks were accessible for people of all ages and abilities.

Comments captured in the Online Survey highlight that the priority given to *Climate change action* is directly related to the importance that the community place on being able to access pristine natural environments. Furthermore, almost 80% of Youth Workshop participants acknowledged that they *Worry deeply about climate change* – having a profound impact on their mental health. *“We live in an area of excellent natural environment. It is important it is not carved up into housing or with any more wedding venues. We need walking tracks, bike tracks, the community pool”* (survey participant)

Walkable suburbs

While 78% of survey participants were satisfied or indifferent about the walkability of their neighbourhood, it is the walkability of suburbs and town centres that are a priority for the community. Across all engagement methods, it was acknowledged that moving within suburbs and town centres was difficult in the majority of towns in the Shoalhaven. The topography of the land and the prioritisation of vehicular traffic were the two most common causes captured during the engagement.

Furthermore, the need for more active transport within suburbs and the broader region was a key priority captured across all engagement methods. When asked to nominate a big idea that would improve community wellbeing, survey participants nominated *Increased Active Transport* as the second most common response, noting an immediate need for repairs to sidewalks throughout all suburbs. *“we need to improve active transport connections to the beautiful destinations in our LGA, since having a kid recently I've noticed a lot of the natural areas, open spaces or recreation facilities I want to go to aren't accessible in a pram”* (survey participant)

Opportunities

The following table provides an overview of the emerging key ideas for addressing the challenges above.

Opportunities that were raised in the consultation (as related to priorities)	
Providing quality open space and recreation facilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Undertake an audit of open space within the LGA to identify gaps in provision • Undertake community engagement to better understand the evolving open space needs of the community • Undertake an audit of community centres and youth spaces within the LGA to identify gaps in provision, and opportunities to better utilise space.
Increasing access to natural environments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish a plan for expanding dog off-leash areas across the LGA • Undertake further youth consultation to better understand how young people wish to come together in open spaces and in the natural environment • Expand the provision of facilities and amenities around key natural assets in the LGA – with a focus on facilitating social gatherings and coming together. • Expand the network of walking trails and access paths along all key environmental sites, with special consideration for accessible spaces
Creating walkable suburbs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited community recommendations – to be further workshopped with the project team

“Moving back to having small community hubs to allow for incidental connection”

– Stakeholder workshop participant



Theme 4: Housing and Employment Security

... housing, employment and education are fundamental determinants of the opportunity for security and wellbeing

What we heard

“Opportunities for education and employment for my family and other young people. Multi-generational involvement in an area is a positive contributor to community and belonging. I worry about the proliferation of holiday houses / Airbnb driving house prices up for residents and hollowing out neighbourhoods” – Survey participant

Sydney’s increasing house price and regional migration due to Covid-19 has created a housing bubble within the Shoalhaven that is out of step with local wages and work opportunities, and the number one source of stress within households. Survey participants acknowledged that responding to this issue is not a short-term action, but must begin with a plan to provide greater employment and education opportunities locally. When asked to identify **“What are some of the biggest issues that affect your own sense of wellbeing or cause you stress?”** all of the top 3 responses from survey participants related to employment and housing in the region:

1. Financial stress/concern
2. Work-life balance
3. Unemployment and housing security

While the high-level survey data suggested that over 80% of participants felt financially secure, it was nominated as the number 1 issue impacting their mental health. Furthermore, the cohort of participants who did not feel financially secure, recorded a significantly lower health and mental health rating (3 and 2.8 average), despite all of them currently working full or part-time. Participants acknowledged that improving one’s health begins with feeling secure and empowered to act, rather than merely treading water to stay afloat.

Insights

Struggling under the weight of the roof over their head

The results from the online survey uncovered the financial stress that is crippling many members of the Shoalhaven community and having greater impacts on their health as they forgo professional medical assistance in order to make rental and mortgage payments. Both survey and workshop participants identified the high number of holiday home purchases as the root cause of the issue, as Sydneysiders are eliminating any affordability by purchasing holiday homes, which are only made available for short-term rental.

While engagement participants were not ignorant to the financial benefits of increased tourism in the region, many provided stories of families who are living in separate houses, parents travelling long distances from home for work, and elderly people living in unsuitable housing, due to the unaffordable rental market in the region (driven by a lack of stock in the long term rental market). Key demographics who were struggling to find/afford a suitable dwelling included:

1. Young families or single parents attempting to live in close proximity to schools
2. Older residents with special access requirements
3. Residents with pets (whom many listed as an essential component to maintaining their mental health)

4. Residents requiring good public transport access

“Affordable housing has become completely inaccessible. I myself am paying almost half of my weekly wage to keep a roof over my family's heads, while employment opportunities are few, rental prices continue to increase and security of keeping that rental has become very stressful for a lot of families” – Survey Participant

A diluted sense of community

Further to the housing bubble created by investment and holiday home purchases, engagement participants highlighted the negative impact that a high number of holiday rentals was having on the sense of community within the suburbs of the Shoalhaven. Beyond the stress that participants reported feeling due to roads and local infrastructure struggling to accommodate peak holiday crowds, participants also felt that an increasingly “temporary population” was eroding the fabric of neighbourhoods, and ultimately residents' sense of safety in their own homes.

“...people buying houses to use as a holiday rental is taking away the options for locals...This is also destroying the sense of community with so many empty houses in non-peak times” – Survey participant

Limited training and employment - youth focussed

Participants across all engagement methods acknowledged the limited work and training opportunities that exist within the Shoalhaven, particularly for young people who are looking to start out their careers. Participants of the Youth Workshop acknowledged the impact this is having on their wellbeing, with 37 of the 38 participants acknowledging that *school and work prospects* were something they cared and worried about.

At the broadest level, participants identified an immediate need for the region to begin to attract major industries or employers who can offer stable, full-time employment in large numbers, and provide residents an opportunity to build a career in the Shoalhaven, rather than simply working a job. This sentiment was more strongly echoed for the future of young people in the region. Participants of all ages, including those in the Youth Workshop, considered the lack of employment and training opportunities for young people as a key risk for the future of the region.

Beyond simply not being home to large industry, it was acknowledged that the region did not provide a business ecosystem that facilitates the growth of medium-sized businesses, or leverages the region's proximity to the national and international gateway of Sydney. Ultimately, it was felt that the local economy was built on small businesses that lacked resilience, and was unable to provide job security or provide training or development for young people.

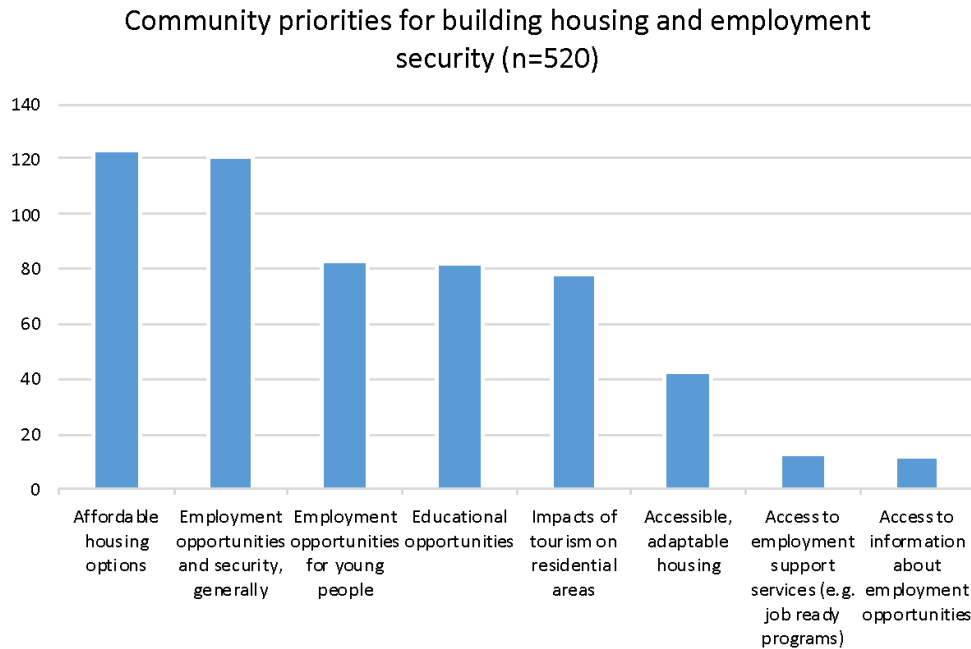
“Although it seems that nothing can be done to stop house prices rising to unnaturally high levels, there is no point in having even affordable housing if people do not have the educational and employment opportunities to have the money to pay for it.” – Survey participant

Increased financial vulnerability for women in the Shoalhaven

Across all questions relating to financial stress and stability, female survey participants faced greater risk than their male counterparts. Most poignantly, when asked “If you suddenly had to raise \$5,000 for an emergency, would you be able to do so?” there were 5 times as many women as men who responded “No”. (Note: the \$5,000 figure was selected by JOC Consulting to test a participant's ability to respond to a major shock or stress that posed a threat to the safety of a household)

Community priorities

Survey participants were asked to nominate 3 priority areas for improving employment and housing security in the Shoalhaven



From across the engagement, participants saw the following focus areas as being of critical importance to helping to alleviate financial stress in the region.

Affordable housing options

Participants could not overstate the importance that housing security placed on personal wellbeing. Importantly, almost all participants who highlighted this as a key theme nominated increased holiday housing as the root cause of an issue that is forcing local residents into unsuitable homes and causing financial stress.

Employment opportunities and security

With Financial Stress and Work-life Balance being nominated as the number 1 and number 2 stresses impacting survey participants' wellbeing, it was acknowledged that job security was an issue having widespread impacts on the wellbeing of the Shoalhaven community. Participants wished to see Council build a strong, long-term economic proposition for the industry in the region, and work to create a foundational job market on which all else could be built.

Employment and Educational opportunities for young people

Participants acknowledged that retaining and nurturing young people was more important than ever, as the region has an aging population and limited current career prospects for young people. Furthermore, it was commonly highlighted that the Shoalhaven's greatest asset (its natural environment and coastal lifestyle) no longer has great appeal amongst young people who are aware they will be unable to afford a home or rent in the region.

Opportunities

The following table provides an overview of the emerging key ideas for addressing the challenges above.

Opportunities that were raised in the consultation (as related to priorities)	
Providing affordable housing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Council to consider the findings of this engagement in the development of the Affordable Housing Strategy, which is currently in development • Council to advocate for stronger state and federal taxation on investment properties • Council to investigate affordable housing models, and best-practice and update LSPS accordingly • Council to take immediate action on increased road traffic during the peak holiday season • Council to provide facilities and amenities that cater for peak holiday season crowds, so as to not reduce the quality of life for local residents • Council to work with local social housing providers to better understand the key risks and needs of vulnerable community members • Council to undertake further engagement to understanding housing security and homelessness amongst young people
Creating employment opportunities and job security	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited community recommendations – to be further workshopped with the project team
Creating employment, education and training opportunities for young people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited community recommendations – to be further workshopped with the project team • Council to establish an internship program for young people looking to work in local government • Investigate opportunities to establish local apprenticeship and graduate networks within local medium-sized businesses • Investigate opportunities to attract tertiary institution outposts • Identify co-working spaces that will facilitate distance tertiary education • Undertake engagement with young people, to understand the key barriers to training and employment in the Shoalhaven

“...Not just employment but good employment, healthy work and work that enables people to thrive...”

-Stakeholder Workshop participant

Conclusion

Overarching sentiment

The Shoalhaven is a tight-knit community, that values the health benefits of its pristine environment, and leverages the strength of its neighbourhood connections. However, as Covid-19 and the Sydney housing market brings unprecedented change, the region must adapt in order to maintain the character of the area and the quality of life that it affords local residents and visitors alike.

Responding appropriately to these new challenges will require investigation into global best practices and implementation through the already strong neighbourhood network. Improving the health and wellbeing of all residents, young and old, new and established, demands a long-term approach to build a foundation of strong and equitable access to employment, training, housing and healthcare.

