

Gladstone Region Wellbeing

Our Journey Story

2023



We acknowledge the Bailai, Gooreng Gooreng, Gurang and Taribelang Bunda people, the traditional custodians of this land. We pay respect to Elders, past, present and emerging. We extend this respect to other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

The evolution of Gladstone Region engaging in action Together (GRT)

Timeline

- **July 2021** - The **Australian and Queensland Government** accept a proposal on behalf of the Gladstone Region Community to partner under the SPSP initiative over a 3-year period
- **September 2021** - **CQUniversity** partners with the Gladstone Region community as GRT's auspice enabling community to partner with government and receive SPSP funding
- **September 2021** - GRT Leadership Group commence recruitment of the Backbone Team
- **November 2021** - Rio Tinto's **Here for Gladstone** partners with GRT to enable establishment of the Gladstone Region Wellbeing Data Hub
- **November 2021** - In partnership with GROW, CQ Rural Health, Communities for Children and Gladstone Regional Council the first Referral Pathways Networking Event is held for educators
- **2022** - Workshops continue and Working Groups and begin emerging to focus on specific priority areas identified in the GRT Theory of Change
- **March 2022** - **First Nations Working Group** established
- **March 2022** - Skills Attraction meeting of government, industry and peak bodies identifies the need to raise the profile of Gladstone as an attractive place to relocate for work
- **March 2022** - Community-wide, cross-sector Referral Pathways Workshop to grow collaborative opportunities identifies referral and integrated service system improvement opportunities
- **May 2022** - Coordinated Case Management for Complex Cases Working Group established
- **May 2022** - Early Intervention Working Group established
- **May 2022** - Referral Pathways Housing Working Group established
- **May 2022** - Gladstone identified as one of six communities nationally invited to participate in the development of shared decision-making practice with the Australian Government
- **June 2022** - development of the **Gladstone Region Wellbeing Action Plan** resulting from community-identified actions collated over two years of workshops and engagements
- **July 2022** - Growth Management Working Group established
- **September 2022** - Launch of the **Gladstone Region Wellbeing Data Hub**
- **November 2022** - Community stories captured as Voice of Resilience project commences
- **December 2022** - Gladstone Region Wellbeing Action Plan endorsed by community
- **March 2023** - Gladstone Region community represented at ChangeFest23, a national movement for place-based change
- **May 2023** - Sector-identified Social Service Sector Map released to increase visibility of services
- **May 2023** - **Extension of the Stronger Places, Stronger People initiative** to June 2029 announced by the Australian Government
- **July 2023** - Launch of the Gladstone Region Skills Attraction resources and Employers Toolkit
- **July 2023** - Data requests submitted to Government Partners on behalf of the Gladstone Region community
- **August 2023** - Draft **Gladstone Region Wellbeing Measurement Framework** released for community feedback, resulting from 3 years of community identification and design

For early establishment of the SPSP initiative in the Gladstone Region, see the timeline included in the Gladstone Region Wellbeing Journey Story to 2021.

'Happy Rock' (Glad-stone)

Our Story since 2021

Since our community embraced the opportunity in June 2021 to partner with government in the Stronger Places, Stronger People initiative, the movement has grown from strength to strength with many more voices contributing to our local understanding of needs and opportunities and an extraordinary number of hands in the work.

The publication of the Gladstone Region Wellbeing Our Journey Story to 2021, enabled community to share and own their story. Previously the story of our community and life in the region had been shared many times outside the region for Social Impact assessments or other government and non-government consultations, for use in other contexts, but often without a local legacy of the story being told.

Our Journey Story (2023), now in its second installment, is made up of community feedback, recognising the voice of our community as qualitative data with equal importance to the quantitative statistical data used to inform actions and decisions.

Community – for us community includes everyone who lives, participates, impacts on or is impacted by activity in the Gladstone Region.

This definition includes those outside of our region that might have authority for or influence decisions that impact on us and our place, and those who might be passing through or have some vested interest in the success of our region. It recognises that we want every individual to acknowledge, and hold with high integrity, their accountability to our community for their part in the events that occur here and to be a part of the successes that they contribute to, beyond those that directly benefit them. The definition holds to account and embraces every individual associated with our region, regardless of where they live, whether they be a government employee, shareholder of an industry site, executive of a commercial organisation, a property investor, a transitory resident or worker, or a long-term local.

Our community has continued to see rapid and significant change with the most recent impacts related to the side-effects of the Covid19 pandemic related to in-migration, housing market constrictions and skills shortages.

Additionally the focus and investment in transition to greener energy and industry practices is seeing our region again become a hot-spot for both greenfield (new) and brownfield (existing site) construction and decarbonisation projects and is again putting Gladstone on the map as place of consultation and investment interest.

2021 census and AEDC data confirmed the anecdotal community stories of population growth and demographic change including a significant increase in our First Nations community, identified by First Nations community members as seeing a lot of new families around town over the five year prior to the 2021 census.

GRT's community engagement practices include: a community engagement program across the Gladstone Region; a conversations register to capture community stories and feedback, and; an issues register to track trends. These practices and tools help quantify and understand local issues and opportunities and help evidence needs.

The narrative included in this document is informed by a collection of community stories, observations and anecdotes that collectively provide a community perspective on the events and dynamics of the last two and a half years of life in the Gladstone Region.

It does not capture every event or represent every view, but it does reflect a range of lived experience and diverse voices and is intended as an 'impression' of events that have occurred in recent years.



Our community continues to demonstrate leadership and innovation through the ongoing emergence of new community-led initiatives and organisations. These are just some examples:

NFP House was launched in 2020 as a one-stop-shop for not for profit organisations and community groups. The NFP organisation provides funded programs to build the capacity and resilience of the NFP sector and improve the benefits NFPs offer our community and to boost the local economy.

Heart of Agnes, is a community asset, owned and operated by the people of the Agnes Water regional community to foster local partnerships and collaboration. It is a meeting place for connection and support, a launchpad for building ideas, and a demonstration of Community Spirit in Action!

Rainbow on the Reef cultivates a culture of pride in identity and diversity to empower the LGBTQIA+ community through events, including Gladstone's own Pride Festival, to raise awareness and inclusion of LGBTQIA+ individuals, community education and advocacy for improved services and support in Regional Queensland.

The Real Deal is an investment by the Queensland Community Alliance to bring together faith groups, trade unions, environmental and multicultural associations and has seen community organising efforts emerge around common interests in relation to employment in a transition environment and liveability in the form of the Real Deal.

The First Nations Chamber of Commerce and Industry's (FNCCI), launched in 2022, aims to improve meaningful participation across supply chains of government and industry with large-scale project opportunities emerging in the upcoming 2032 Olympics

and the Australian Government's commitment to net zero by 2050.

New government initiatives continue to reach Gladstone designed to advance community's goals for a more equitable future, including self-determination and a stronger First Nations voice to government.

Local Thriving Communities (LTC) has been extended to include Gladstone. LTC applies a collaborative approach with Queensland Government working differently alongside Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities for a greater voice and decision-making authority in service delivery and economic development for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Queenslanders and to create thriving communities. Community knowledge, research and evidence and lessons learnt over time will inform LTC. The principles of self-determination, participation, equality and culture underpinning the initiative.



The Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic

The COVID-19 Pandemic has been named as likely to be the worst human and economic crisis of our lifetime.

On 11 March 2020 the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) a worldwide pandemic. The devastation unleashed by the new virus spread much further than health impacts and fatalities.

The first COVID-19 case was diagnosed in Australia on 25 January 2020 and while Australia did not experience the levels of devastation seen in some countries, more than 22,000 people lost their lives to the pandemic in Australia.

Since early 2020, COVID-19 related impacts continue to be felt locally despite the Gladstone Region having a much lower direct impact from the pandemic compared to those felt in other Australian locations.

“ The effects of the pandemic have devastated the most vulnerable and left them further behind. ”

The United Nations, Sustainable Development Goals Report 2020, noted that while the world had been making some progress in areas such as improving maternal and child health, it also found that COVID-19 was reversing decades of progress on poverty, healthcare and education.

Our community also experienced the disparity of the pandemic impacts on the more vulnerable in our community and those at risk with impacts exacerbating existing inequalities.

Beyond the health and social distancing impacts on everyday life during peak contagion periods, the lasting impacts have included housing shortages, skills shortages and in-migration to the region of those individuals seeking a changed life balance.

Post Covid Social Changes

A COVID inspired shift has surfaced with refreshed perspectives on what is most important in life. Many Individuals have reported reconsidering their life choices in relation to their values and in the context of a 'life's too short' perspective. Re-assessment has included everything from flexible work and work hours in relation to work-life balance, the value association to remuneration levels and status, geographic proximity to loved ones and interstate relocations for improved liveability.

The significant social changes have led to new language identifying norms in the context of COVID-19 pandemic impacts in regularly understood references to 'pre-pandemic' or 'post-pandemic'.

Many workers shifted to working from home virtually during the peaks of social distancing through the pandemic, using virtual meeting platforms such as 'Zoom' and 'Teams'. This trend has led to a societal-change in the way work is done and has enabled the level of increased mobility for remote or work-from-home arrangements that was originally projected to occur, but was never fully realised, with the digital age.

Many employees and business owners have opted to either work remotely or in a hybrid home/office

environment. Some workplaces have implemented progressive workplace policies in response to employee preferences and an acceptance of virtual business as a new norm.

The pandemic led to early retirement for some individuals, especially those in high-risk categories or who have been impacted by job loss, which has further impacted workforce shortages in certain industries.

Volunteerism has reduced especially in seniors with many not-for-profit organisations, sporting clubs and special interest groups experiencing non-return of original volunteers and groups unable to attract pre-pandemic volunteer levels.

Globally concerns related to a trend in earlier resignations and retirements of leaders and professionals, including the impacts on the representation of females in lead roles, has also played out in Australia.

Our region has also experienced turnover due to retirement across a number of lead roles in local organisations and government departments.

COVID Related Migration

In the years 2021 through to 2022, the Gladstone local government area (LGA) was identified as the LGA experiencing the second greatest growth in net migration in Queensland.

Migration into the region was most visible during and post peak periods of lockdowns in Southern states, particularly Victoria and New South Wales where impacts of long COVID lockdowns were significantly impacting on the wellbeing of individuals and families. Those with the ability to move due to financial capacity or work included consultants and the self-employed, seeking a lifestyle rebalance.

Agnes Water was a hotspot for this migration with sight-unseen house sales and families arriving continuing to homeschool (see section 4 'And now' of the Gladstone Region Wellbeing Our Journey Story to 2021).

New residents arrived by road, air and boat, with some deciding to live aboard their own vessels, staying in the Gladstone Marina, until they found a new place to settle.

Living in the Regions

The top ranking issues reported by community and listed in the Gladstone Region Wellbeing Our Journey Story to 2021 remain the same in 2023, with increasing concerns for homelessness and housing, skills shortages, access to health services and childcare.

Housing

Housing availability tightened in response to the increased demand of interstate in-migration and the lack of availability resulted in rising rents and house prices that continue to displace individuals and families.

The increased demand on social and emergency housing has seen providers at full capacity with extensive waitlists and families and individuals being accommodated in motels and caravan parks for extended periods.

Prior to 2020, the region had a significant lack of visibility of homelessness. Now homelessness is firmly on the agenda for the region with community members and Facebook posts having identified families living in tents and individuals sleeping rough, and services seeing an increase in demand for emergency housing.

Despite the high demand for housing, the release of new stock to market has been slow, with investor confidence still low following the fall in rental prices so soon after the LNG boom, and restricted supply of steel and materials impacting on the building sector.

In addition to material constraints, labour shortages have also contributed to slower average build times for houses nationally.

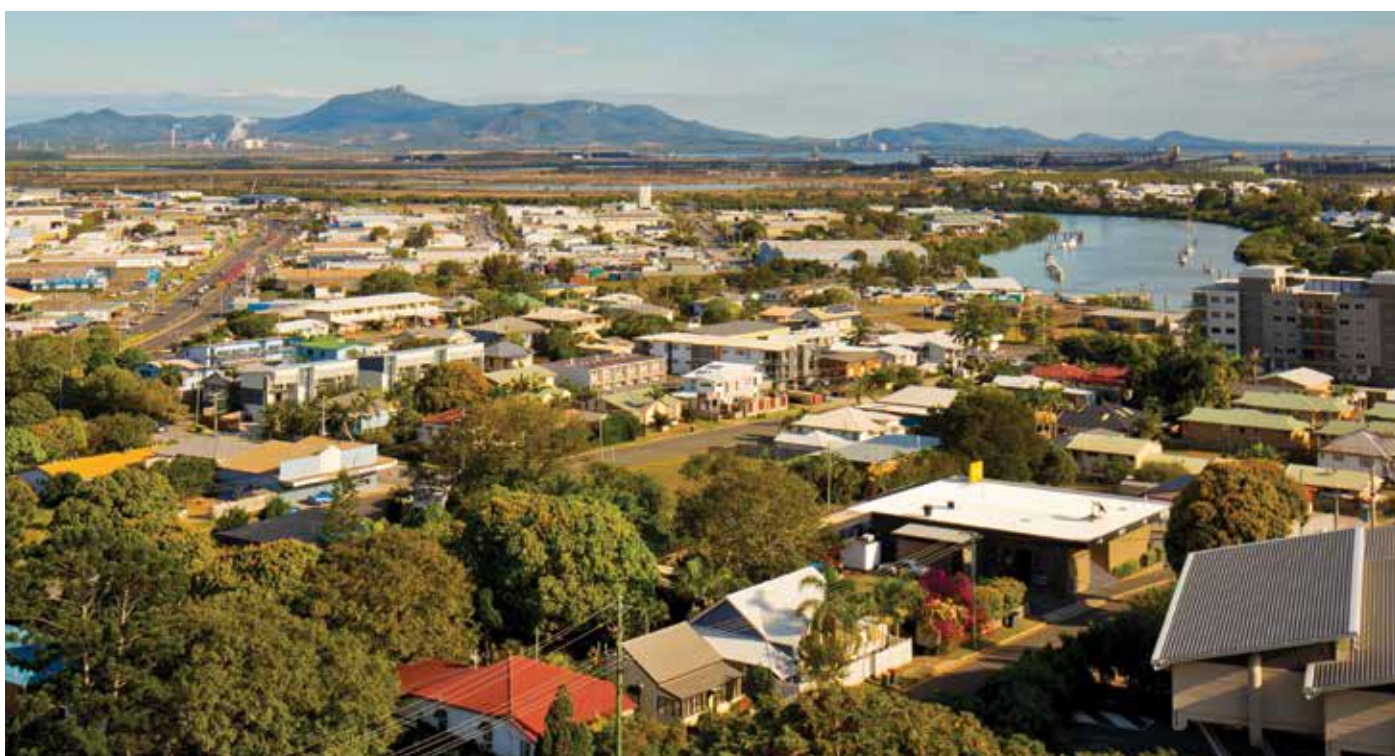
“There are so many empty homes and buildings around town. If we could offer them all up as rentals, we could fix half the availability issue.”

Residents frustrated by the lack of housing solutions at peak times find it hard to understand homeowners' preferences to keep a property empty instead of renting it out to meet demand. Some stories of property damage and costs for repairs have been cited as reasons why properties in the local rental pool have decreased.

Suggestions to house those homeless in unoccupied facilities, such as vacant work camps or training facilities are often raised without visibility of the costs and constraints to make these facilities habitable.

Rentals applicants report having to submit large numbers of applications before securing a rental. However, while our region is feeling the pressure of rising rents and lack of availability, reports of movement out of the region appear lower than experienced during previous periods of rental stress, due to a lack of alternate options.

Housing pressures are being felt nationally, and movement to the region continues as rental prices and stock in other regions continue to be worse in some surrounding areas (eg Gracemere).



Cost of Living

Cost of living and housing have been a reoccurring issue in Gladstone during boom periods. The current housing market constraints and increased housing stress have been exasperated by other rising costs including fuel prices.

Stories of individuals having to make choices about travel to services and supports and the strain is particularly felt by those most vulnerable in remote or regional areas where travel distances to supports are longer and social isolation is more prevalent.

“One gentleman residing in a more remote part of our region, shared that his neighbour was helping out by doing his grocery shopping, as his money would not stretch to both fuel to access the supermarket, and food shopping.”

In 2023 interest rate rises are already impacting on homeowners with projected mortgage stress expected to rise, adding further pressure to those already finding it challenging to make ends meet.

Transport

Transport is a common and consistent challenge experienced in regional communities due to the demand making public transport routes either unviable for providers due to insufficient volume, or unaffordable for community members.

With recent national attention on social isolation and access to services, transport commonly rates as a priority for regional centres.

Where public transport routes are available, timetabling or location of stops are often cited as inappropriate to solve the issues.

“Some new residents arrive under-informed about the location they are moving to. They get caught up in the romance of a tree-change or sea-change and a lower cost of living, then once they are settled, reality sets in about the real price of living in the regions. They realise the level of service availability and accessibility they have given up by chasing their dream and become dissatisfied with the circumstances they have chosen to move to.”

Childcare

Childcare has been an ongoing, fluctuating issue for our region for decades due to the ebb and flow of population and workforce. Previous access barriers have included: lack of available childcare places; long waitlists; limited or restrictive hours available; unsuitable hours offered to accommodate shift workers; lack of vacation care and outside school hours care; and inhibitive costs.

With positive Government responses to advocacy for more affordable childcare, more families in our region will be seeking childcare places. However a key access barrier at the time of writing this report were skills shortages in the region, limiting the places that could be offered by centres due to the inability to employ sufficient numbers of suitably qualified employees. This included centres with the physical space to accommodate more places, but had restricted

places due to the lack of qualified child carers available (child:carer ratios).

“Families are seeking childcare places even before bub is born, knowing that the waitlists will prevent parents returning to work when they might like to.”

The limited number of childcare places available continues to impact employment, with many families unable to secure childcare places, and waitlists of over two years for specific age groups in some locations. This has made it impossible for some parents to return to work and for others it has meant a higher demand on other family members to provide childcare.

Skills Shortages

Skills attraction and retention is another challenge commonly identified in regional areas. The topic continued to grow in importance throughout 2020-22 with stakeholders across multiple sectors reporting the same challenges.

Increasingly stories of roles being filled by applicants with insufficient skills and experience were surfacing as a result of the challenges to fill roles.

“Skills shortages, lack of housing availability, and limited childcare places, are inextricably linked as the main challenge that local employers are facing to maintain the organisational capacity required to deliver quality, timely services to clients, patients and customers.”

While no sector was immune, of particular significance for our families and children in our region was the impact that these skills shortage related impacts had on our social, health and education sectors, which consequently impacted on quality and timely supports that enable wellbeing.

Service providers report unfilled roles for long-periods, or appointing applicants with insufficient skills including essential case management roles. These services also reported that reduced service levels and waitlists for services resulting in families disengaging from supports or returning for further support due to unmet needs.

Health Services

Our health services have also felt the strain of skills shortages with the recruitment of key qualified medical professionals impacting on both existing staff and the reputation of the health sector in the region, due to dissatisfaction of locals having to travel to essential health services, where previously they could be accessed locally.

This has been further compounded by the closure and sale of the Mater Hospital in 2020.

Impacts to local services were felt most significantly when Queensland Health were forced to implement a Maternity bypass for Gladstone which saw pregnant mothers having to travel over 100km to Rockhampton to birth babies, due to a lack of suitably qualified obstetricians in the region.

Many families reported traveling and paying to stay close to Hospitals with birthing services, rather than risking being caught short by a quick labour or birthing complications.

“We had the financial resources to stay in a motel near the closest available birthing hospital, an hour and a half from home, and family supports locally to be able to care for our children at home, while we were gone. What do families do when they can’t afford that option?”

Birthing services were reinstated at the Gladstone Hospital in June 2023.

Since 2021, an increased number of health services and specialist appointments require travel outside of the Gladstone Region.

Pediatric and allied health waitlists that support child development have been reported as having excessive waitlists including occupational therapists and child behavioural assessments. At the same time services are reporting an increasing demand for these services due to increasing complex cases being seen in children and families.

Costs to access privately available assessments and supports are seen as both positive and negative. While the inequity of access is significant with low-income families not having the same means to accelerate access to supports for their children, those families that can afford to bypass public system waitlists, reduce the demand on the public system. However, with increasing skills shortages, the attraction for health professionals to provide private practice rather than bulk-bill or work in the public system is exasperating the supply and demand balance.

Service Provision

In addition to the skills shortage impacting our social sector, providers report the growth of the sector over the last decade to be a contributing factor to reduced capacity to meet client needs in a timely and efficient manner. Practitioners report finding it harder to identify referral points and eligibility requirements to help refer clients and commonly report finding it hard to access current and accurate information about the services and programs that exist.

A growing interest is emerging in the use of local data to inform service evaluation, evidence needs and make improvements to client services.

Some services report the competitive nature of government funding provision for services that must apply to deliver creates a culture that limits collaboration.

In some cases services identify limitations or challenges in the funding model that restrict outcomes for clients. These aren't always reported to funding providers, for fear of perceptions about the providers capacity to deliver, or when they are shared with funders without

responsive action, providers attribute the inaction to contract managers not feeling they have the authority or escalation channels to address local challenges within statewide or nationally delivered programs. This inability to improve funded program delivery at the local level to achieve program objectives can lead to providers disengaging from the feedback process due to not feeling heard and feeling disempowered, or can lead to creative solutions at the local level in the form of 'work arounds'.

'Work arounds' to achieve outcomes for families, can hide the real shortfalls being felt in the local environment, as providers resource solutions outside of their funded scope, making it challenging to create visibility of the 'gap' as the work arounds are not reportable as they breach funded program guidelines or client eligibility. While this occurs with good intentions of providers to meet clients immediate needs, it also inhibits the use of data to evidence the service gaps. The greater risk is a maverick approach to provision of supports that make it harder to manage the balance of supports as enablers rather than creating dependencies that hold disadvantage in place.

Gladstone Region engaging in action Together (GRT)

“The opportunity presented by the Stronger Places, Stronger People initiative enabled the mobilisation of community to centralise, and harness the collective energy of all stakeholders, to define priority issues and to proactively get ahead of the social challenges that had emerged.”

In 2023 the Australian Government announced a further \$64M investment over 6 years for the Stronger Places, Stronger People (SPSP) initiative nationally, taking the length of the investment to 30 June 2029. The announcement included a continued commitment to community-led, place-based work and a further commitment to advancing shared decision-making of government and communities.

Gladstone is one of 6 SPSP demonstration communities provided the opportunity to shape the national agenda

on the shared decision-making processes, practices and culture of governments and communities, with a growing support from State and Local Government partners to collaborate in this new opportunity.

This announcement recognises the value of community-led, place-based collective impact as a result of collective efforts across many communities including our Gladstone Region community and is a credit to the whole of community investment made through participation, shared lived-experience and local expertise.

To learn more about how Gladstone was identified as a Stronger Places, Stronger People demonstration community, see section one of the Gladstone Region Wellbeing Our Journey Story to 2021 - SPSP Eligible.

“We all need to get behind this opportunity to collectively achieve outcomes for our children. We are already doing a lot, but it isn't enough”



Library

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