



PENRITH CITY COUNCIL

Social Impacts of Covid-19
on Penrith City

June 2022





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SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

The pandemic exacerbated existing social inequalities

The pandemic magnified social inequalities as health orders increased pre-existing challenges. For example, consultations with residents revealed that single parents were more likely to be impacted by stress from children being at home more, inability to access important services (such as doctors, physios, counselling, etc), and not being able to pay basic living costs.

LEARNING: Improving awareness and accessibility of local services and resources will enhance the capacity and resilience of residents to manage challenges.

LEARNING: Supporting communities to be better connected to each other can result in more informal support being available, such as neighbours minding children when parents have appointments.

Communities that are connected to each other and leaders, recover better

“Social networks - the horizontal and vertical ties that connect us to others - are our most important defence against disasters” (Aldrich, D, 2017). Health orders implemented during the pandemic changed the way people interact, leaving those without existing relationships, limited opportunities for social support, and at increased risk of experiencing negative health and wellbeing outcomes.

The pandemic highlighted the critical role community leaders play as reliable and trusted figures who effectively communicate critical information, link people with relevant services and resources and break down barriers. These community leaders were also well connected to local authorities and decision-makers, such as the Local Health District (LHD) and the Mayor.

Many multicultural and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) community leaders advocated for their community's needs, and improved access to health promotion and education in community languages, which led to increased vaccination rates and an understanding of preventative measures.

LEARNING: Encourage opportunities for people to develop connections with their communities and local community leaders so their needs are advocated for, and they can effectively manage and recover from unexpected challenges with trusted advice and support.

The pandemic stimulated innovation and collaboration

The pandemic rapidly transformed the way societies operate, and in doing so promoted opportunities for innovation and strengthened collaboration. Working in partnership with key stakeholders encourages the pooling of resources and knowledge to develop creative solutions to shared challenges, in an efficient and strategic manner. In Penrith, COVID-19 challenged some residents' ability to access food supplies, and a Hamper Hub was established in partnership with stakeholders to help meet this need.

LEARNING: It is important that we continue to assess and question the way we work to serve the community, leverage opportunities to collaborate, and experiment with new approaches, to ensure we are meeting best practice and changing needs.

Public, open, and shared spaces are crucial in supporting wellbeing

Health orders introduced during the pandemic reinforced the importance of public, open and shared spaces as they support increased physical activity and healthy lifestyles, provide opportunities to socialise, improve overall wellbeing, and play a vital role in connecting communities (Greater Sydney Commission, 2020). As residential density continues to increase, so too does the significance and need for green spaces.

LEARNING: It is important that public, open and shared spaces are inclusive and meet the diverse needs of the community. This includes assessing existing and/or anticipated barriers, such as: accessibility, management and design, location, proximity to services and resources, and perceptions of safety and antisocial behaviours (Australian Urban Observatory, 2020).

Digital access, inclusion and equity is vital

The pandemic accelerated the rapid adoption and dependency on technology amid the closure of many public spaces and services. For those with limited or no access to technology and/or digital literacy skills, the pandemic increased the digital divide.

LEARNING: Building inclusive and digitally capable communities, that are resilient and have the essential skills, access, and awareness of technologies facilitates opportunities to enhance positive health and wellbeing outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

This report highlights key findings from research conducted with the community of Penrith City about the impacts of COVID-19 and provides guidance on approaches to enhance community capacity and create a more resilient Penrith.

For a detailed insight into the impacts of COVID-19 on Penrith's economy, see Penrith City Council's [Economic Impacts of COVID-19 report](#).

Methodology

This report draws on findings from the following community consultations, with secondary resources referenced throughout.

AUGUST 2021:

- 161 random phone surveys with residents
- 59 surveys with local community sector workers
- 24 surveys and 20 interviews conducted with local businesses

OCTOBER 2021:

- 150 random phone surveys with residents

Context

In assessing the impacts of COVID-19 on Penrith, it is important to also consider the significant overlay of natural disasters and acknowledge the compounding of impacts on residents and their wellbeing.

Penrith experienced extreme heat and bushfires in the 2019/20 summer. With parts of Penrith still recovering, COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic on 11 March 2020. Twelve months later, during the ongoing pandemic, Penrith City was hit with a major flood of the Nepean River and its tributaries. Homes were damaged, and people and businesses evacuated. In August 2021, 12 suburbs* of Penrith were identified as areas of concern for over a month and were subject to stricter health measures than other areas.

Towards the end of 2021, vaccination rates increased and restrictions fluctuated as the 'Omicron' variant began spreading rapidly with record case numbers. Whilst learning to live with COVID-19 remained challenging, in March 2022 Penrith experienced another flood event.

*12 Penrith suburbs of concerns included: Caddens, Claremont Meadows, Colyton, Erskine Park, Kemps Creek, Kingswood, Mount Vernon, North St Marys, Orchard Hills, Oxley Park, St Clair, and St Marys.

SHOCKS AND STRESSES FOR GREATER SYDNEY 2019 - 2022





217,664
ACTUAL RESIDENT
POPULATION

(ABS Census, 2021)

21.3%
MEDIUM AND HIGH
DENSITY DWELLINGS

(ABS Census, 2021)



HOUSEHOLD COMPOSITION (ABS Census, 2021)

Single (or lone) person households

21.8%

Family households

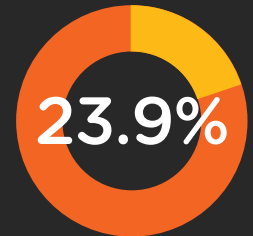
75.6%

2.6%
Group households



HOUSEHOLDS WHERE A NON-ENGLISH LANGUAGE IS USED

(ABS Census, 2021)



TOP 5 LANGUAGES OTHER THAN ENGLISH:

Arabic, Punjabi, Tagalog, Hindi, Mandarin

(ABS Census, 2021)

5% ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER POPULATION

(ABS Census, 2021)



Australia **3.2%**

NSW **3.4%**



\$1,903

MEDIAN WEEKLY HOUSEHOLD INCOME

NSW **\$1,829**

Australia **\$1,746**

(ABS Census, 2021)

5.5%

PEOPLE WITH DISABILITY

(ABS Census, 2021)



33.4%

RENTED PRIVATE DWELLINGS

(ABS Census, 2021)

34.8%

RENT WEEKLY PAYMENTS

Renter households with rent payments greater than 30% of household income

(ABS Census, 2021)

NO ACCESS TO INTERNET CONNECTION AT PLACE OF DWELLING

12.5%



Greater Sydney **11.2%**

NSW **14%**

(Profile ID, 2016)

PENRITH SOCIAL PROFILE

Key statistics about our community.

SOCIAL IMPACTS - OVERVIEW

COVID-19 imposed a myriad of concerns around people's health and wellbeing. Public health orders implemented to manage community transmission increased the risk of unemployment, social isolation, and disengagement from education and the community.

Three primary impacts were identified from consultation with Penrith City residents, community services providers, and business owners. The pandemic:

1. Exacerbated existing social inequalities
2. Increased mental health concerns across a broad spectrum of the community
3. Increased the need for support services, but also created difficulties with access to support services

Results from resident and community sector consultations indicated that there were groups within Penrith City that were negatively impacted more than others. These cohorts include, but are not limited to:

- Families, particularly those experiencing income/job loss, without access to sufficient data or services and in need of food.
- Children and young people, especially those with a disability or disengaged from school
- Single parent families
- Females, particularly those with school aged children
- Seniors, particularly those living alone or in hospital
- Culturally and Linguistically Diverse communities
- Single people, with no children

For a more detailed insight into the findings from consultations conducted with residents, community sector workers, and businesses owners see the [Appendix](#).

IMPACTS ON RESIDENTS

Individual and community wellbeing are influenced by the complex interaction of many factors and conditions, such as socioeconomic status, education, job and food security, working conditions, health status, social support networks, and housing. Understanding how people are impacted by unexpected circumstances and crises, can indicate the needs and priorities of the community, and help inform appropriate responses.

Health and Wellbeing

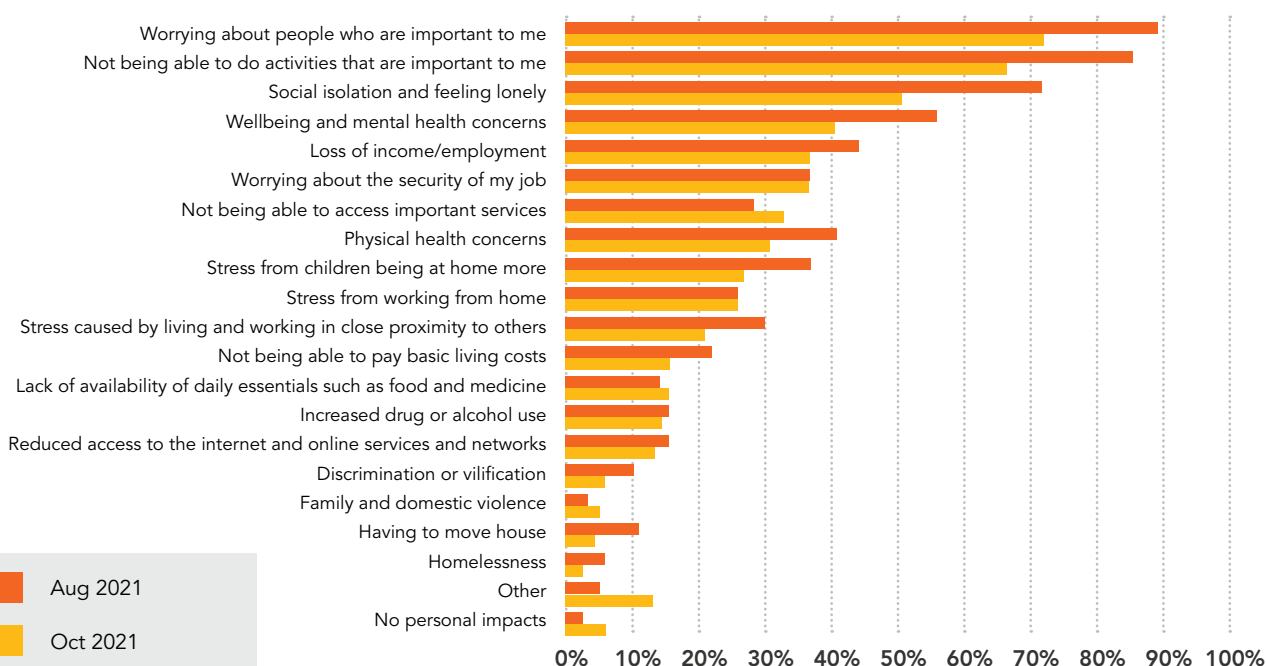
GENERAL IMPACTS: Whilst COVID-19 emerged as a health crisis, its implications have stretched further than physical health. As demonstrated in Figure One, the type five greatest impacts for residents were:

1. Worrying about people who are important to me
2. Not being able to do activities that are important to me
3. Social isolation and feeling lonely
4. Wellbeing and mental health concerns
5. Loss of income/employment

These were the top 5 impacts as reported at both August 2021 and October 2021, however the percentage of people reporting these impacts was lower in October 2021 as restrictions began to ease during the time of consultation.

Figure One: Overall effects of COVID on Penrith Residents – August and October 2021

Overall Effects of COVID-19 Pandemic on Residents















NEGATIVE IMPACTS: Measures imposed to slow community transmission negatively impacted some people’s wellbeing. For Penrith residents, the most reported negative impacts were ‘limited connection with friends and family’, ‘avoiding visiting the elderly and vulnerable people you know’, and ‘events/travel plans cancelled’ (see page 26 of [Appendix](#) for more detail).

Social relationships provide support for people through life challenges as they can provide advice, comfort, empathy, and concern, helping one to feel secure during tough times. Without them, we can feel isolated and less equipped to tackle obstacles (Australian Unity, 2021).

ASSISTANCE AND SUPPORT: Social relationships can influence other aspects of our wellbeing such as mental health, sense of self-worth, and community connectedness. As highlighted in Figure Two, results from resident surveys indicated that most respondents had someone they could rely on for different types of support. However, in October 2021, almost 1 in 10 residents indicated that they had no one to contact for support (9%).

Assistance and Support - August 2021 and October 2021

Q. If you needed support or assistance, do you have someone who you could contact to assist with the following?

	Type of support	August 2021	October 2021	Trend
	Emotional support	86%	86%	
	Advice	87%	82%	
	Maintaining family/work responsibilities	61%	77%	
	Provide emergency food	70%	67%	
	Provide emergency money	57%	64%	
	No one to contact for support	7%	9%	

In August and October 2021 the majority of residents had someone who they could rely on for support or assistance ranging from emotional support to emergency money.

With easing restrictions in October 2021 a higher proportion reported having someone to assist with maintaining family/work responsibilities and provide emergency money.

In October 2021 roughly 1 in 10 said they had no one to contact for support (9%). While the increase of 2% from August 2021 is not statistically significant, it remains a notable consideration.

Figure Two: Access to assistance and support by Penrith Residents – August and October 2021

Job and Income Loss

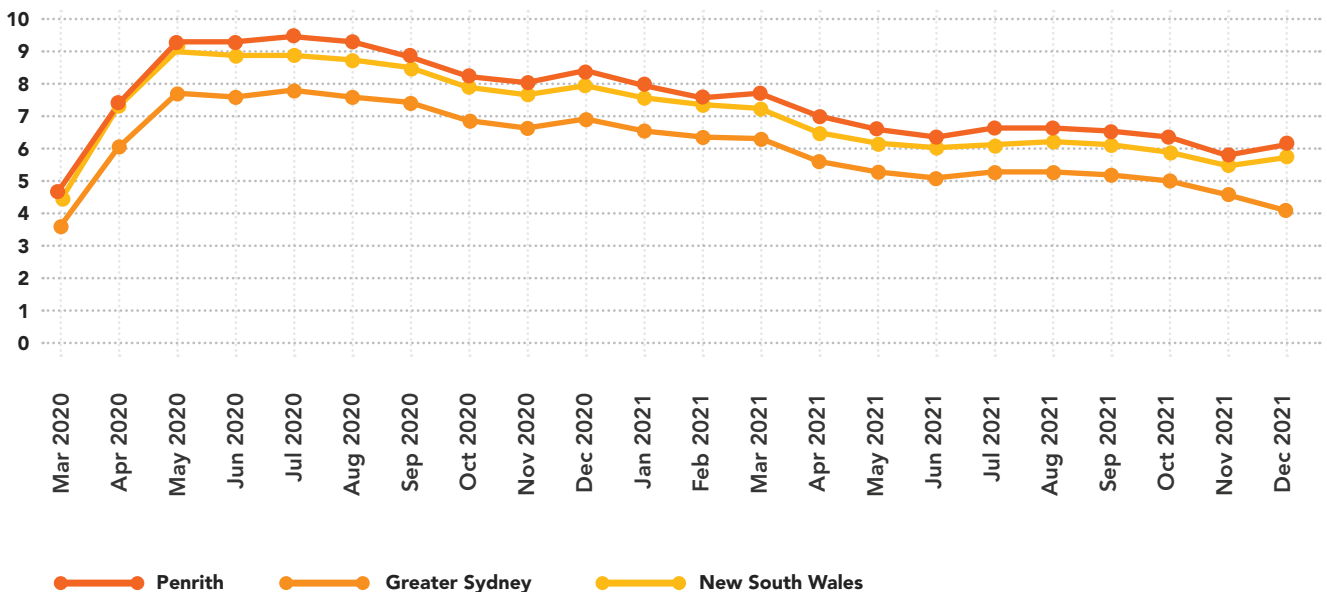
UNEMPLOYMENT: COVID-19 restrictions led to national widespread job loss with Australian unemployment rates surging to a 20-year peak of 7.5% in July 2020, from 5.2% in March 2020 (pre-pandemic; ABS, 2020). To counteract the losses and support Australians through these extenuating circumstances, the Federal Government announced new fiscal policies such as 'JobSeeker' which replaced the previous unemployment benefit.

As illustrated in Figure Three, since March 2020, Penrith has consistently had a higher proportion of JobSeeker and Youth Allowance recipients than that of Greater Sydney and NSW. However, Penrith has followed the same trendline, with an overall decrease in the percentage of recipients between May 2020 and November 2021.

REDUCED INCOME: Resident consultations revealed that 53% of respondents in August 2021 had experienced a reduction in hours/work opportunities. Income and job losses can cause financial strain which can impede on one's ability to cover basic needs. In August 2021, 22% of residents revealed that they were unable to cover basic living costs such as bills, rent, rates, and childcare fees. For an insight into how job/income loss can impact wellbeing, see '[Safety and Security](#)' on page 12.

Figure Three: JobSeeker and Youth Allowance recipients for Penrith, Greater Sydney and New South Wales, March 2020 – December 2021

JobSeeker and Youth Allowance Recipients (%)



Housing and Liveability

HOUSING STRESS: As unemployment and underemployment rates increased due to the pandemic, housing stress also rose with the housing price boom of the private market in late 2020, combined with longstanding unaffordability and inequality (Pawson, H., et al., 2021). According to the 2019 Housing Affordability and Homelessness Insights Report, 1 in 10 households in Penrith were in housing stress, and almost one-third of renters were in rental stress (Wentworth Community Housing & Western Sydney Community Forum, 2019). The impacts of the pandemic have increased housing stress for those who were already experiencing it, and exposed some people to housing stress for the first time (Hornet, Dorignon & Middha 2020). With a significant number of people already experiencing housing stress in Penrith we can assume this was a potential issue during the pandemic, that will remain into the recovery phase.

OPEN AND PUBLIC SPACES: Public, open, and shared spaces have become more important as residential density increases in parts of Penrith, and further were considered extremely important to residents during the pandemic. Green spaces support increased physical activity and healthy lifestyles, provide opportunities to socialise, improve overall wellbeing, and play a vital role in connecting communities (Greater Sydney Commission, 2020). With more people working from home and greater flexibility with regards to hours, people are increasingly spending more time and money in their local areas on leisure, and expecting quality and varied recreation and open space assets close to home.

HOUSEHOLD WELLBEING: The transition to working and learning from home also brought about a new set of challenges, as many families tried to juggle working and learning in close proximity, with shared spaces, devices and data. In resident surveys, 56% of residents in August 2021 and 48% in October 2021 reported stress at home as a result of the pandemic (see [Figure One](#)).

Safety and Security

DOMESTIC AND FAMILY VIOLENCE:

Feeling safe and secure at home, work, and in the community is a significant factor that can impact wellbeing. During periods of high community transmission of the virus, the government imposed health orders to help slow the spread. This raised significant concerns for those experiencing domestic and family violence, as victims were confined at home with their perpetrators under potential increased tensions and stressors related to job loss, at home learning, food shortages, and increased alcohol and drug consumption (AHURI, 2020). Anecdotally, local service providers have indicated domestic and family violence has been an increasing issue during the pandemic.

FINANCIAL WELLBEING:

Financial security and standard of living also contributes to overall wellbeing as it provides a sense of control over one's life with the ability to meet current and projected needs. Stable and reliable employment is often a key contributor to a person's financial wellbeing and feeling of security (Australian Unity Limited, 2021). Research suggests that poor mental health outcomes can be associated with financial hardship and precarious work such as informal, temporary, or contract work (CSDH, 2008). Findings from resident surveys revealed that 37% of respondents in both August and October 2021 were worried about the security of their job and 22% (August 2021) and 16% (October 2021) stated that they were unable to pay basic living costs such as bills, rent, rates and childcare fees.

Community Connections

SOCIAL CAPITAL: Various research studies show that having a strong sense of community connectedness has a positive impact on wellbeing and plays a key role in combatting loneliness. In Penrith, 93% of residents indicated social isolation and not being able to do activities as factors affecting them during the pandemic. Community connection supports a sense of belonging, as it provides opportunities to create relationships and share experiences with others, giving purpose to our lives (Australian Unity Limited, 2021). A study by Aldrich et al. (2020) suggests that people with strong social capital are more resilient in times of crises and are more likely to follow official orders and recover faster.

COMMUNITY LEADERS: The pandemic further confirmed the importance of community connections through the critical role community leaders played in disseminating key health information and messaging to their networks and connecting with government officials. As established, reliable, and trusted figures within their communities, leaders were able to distribute accurate and dependable information, effectively influence behaviours in their communities and advocate to government for their needs. For example, one local community group established a vaccination hub for Pacific communities in the Western Sydney district, facilitated by bilingual staff, which saw a positive uptake in vaccination and emergency food relief. Click [here](#) for further details.



Access to Resources and Services

TECHNOLOGY: Health orders encouraged people to become more reliant on technology as an alternative to in-person connection. People quickly became dependent on technology for working, learning, socialising, shopping, and accessing services. This surge accelerated the digitisation of communication and services, highlighted the growing digital divide, and exacerbated existing inequalities and access barriers (Beauoyer, Dupéré & Guitton 2020). For example, some barriers to accessing and using technology during the pandemic include:

- Access to data and devices due to affordability and/or connectivity issues
- Digital literacy issues compounding other challenges such as food security, social isolation, or reduced capability to access health and social support services, resources and/or information
- Inability to work remotely or have the access and/or skills to apply for jobs online

In Penrith, difficulties in accessing resources and services because of the pandemic were noted by residents, with:

- 28% (August and October 2021) revealing issues accessing basic community services
- 27% (October 2021) having difficulties accessing medical services
- 16% (August 2021) indicating reduced access to the internet/online services/networks.

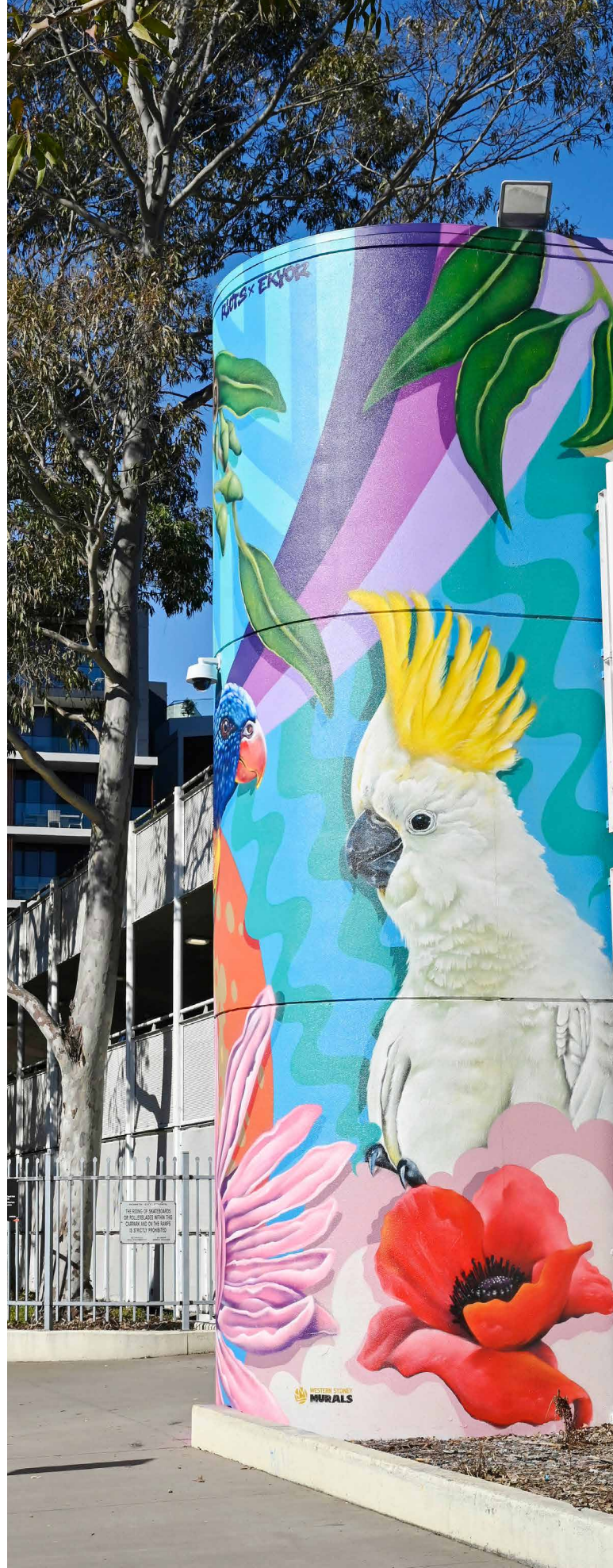
Moving forward, as technology continues to be an essential resource, it is important that we build inclusive and digitally capable communities, that have the essential skills, access, and awareness of technologies that enable health and wellbeing.

Positive Impacts

Whilst the pandemic presented many negative challenges, it also created positive opportunities. Respondents from both resident surveys (August and October 2021) indicated that a considerable number of residents were getting outside to exercise, helping others, receiving support from family/friends/neighbours, and being creative with art, crafts, and cooking. These findings coincide with results from other studies which found some of the positive outcomes to emerge from the pandemic to include:

- More family time
- Increased work flexibility
- Additional leisure time for new hobbies and interests
- Financial benefits
- Improved self-care
- Perceived environmental benefits
- More services, activities, and resources online

(Cornell, S, et.al., 2021)



IMPACTS ON SERVICES SUPPORTING THE COMMUNITY

Profound changes in the way we live, caused by the pandemic, placed a strain on Australia's community sector as it concurrently experienced:

- A surge in demand for services
- A change in service delivery models, from face-to-face to online
- A collapse in volunteering, and
- Budget constraints

(Our Community, 2021)

Changes to Service Delivery

DELIVERY MODELS: The pandemic accelerated the adoption of digital technologies for service delivery in the not-for-profit sector, with face-to-face delivery severely limited or prohibited during periods of strict health orders. The community sector had to establish online/ remote service delivery methods which presented a new array of challenges. Surveys conducted with representatives from the local community sector in both May/June 2020 and August 2021 revealed the top challenges for the sector:

1. Engaging service users, particularly those without access to data or devices
2. Access to IT equipment to allow staff to work remotely (and support staff through unfamiliar circumstances)
3. Clients presenting with new and unprecedented needs
4. Funding to deliver services and meet the needs of clients in new and different ways, under increased demand

VOLUNTEERISM: Another obstacle for the community sector was a decline in volunteerism. With older people making up the majority of volunteers, many opted not to volunteer as a health precaution or because they could not move to an online format (Our Community, 2021). Research also showed that fundraising opportunities were also hindered, with many organisations reporting a decline in fundraising income (Our Community, 2021).

Increased Demand and Complexity of Client Needs

INCREASED DEMAND: With the emergence of the pandemic and its social and economic impacts, the community sector experienced a rapid surge in demand. Combined with new models of service delivery, reduced staff and/or volunteers, and existing funding challenges, concerns about the capacity for the sector to meet demand were raised (Cortis & Blaxland 2020).

COMPLEXITY OF CLIENT NEEDS: Consultation with local Penrith City community sector workers showed the key issues for clients during July/ August 2021, included:

1. Feelings of loneliness and social isolation
2. Mental health concerns
3. Financial pressures
4. Access to community services
5. Challenges or stress associated with home-based learning, access to technology/internet, unemployment and/or loss of income.

Consultation also revealed that many people in need of support were delaying reaching out due to strict health orders and for fear that others needed support more than them. Job and income losses also saw residents struggle to access food and other basic needs for the first time, which brought about uncertainty as to what services and resources were locally available, and how to seek assistance. A representative from a local domestic and family violence service revealed challenges associated with speaking to and supporting victims with the perpetrator at home and children in close proximity. Such local findings are reflected in a broad range of research with the Australian community sector which recognised an increase in the complexity of client needs and issues, as clients were presenting later, and this required not only additional time but also skilled staff to manage client requirements. Research conducted by Our Community (2021) with the not-for-profit sector identified a pronounced rise in demand for family violence, homelessness, food relief, and childcare services. When local community sector workers in Penrith City were asked what they saw as a priority for their clients over the coming months, 27% of respondents indicated mental health as a priority need, as well as health, financial and social support.

Staff Capacity

The changes for the sector, combined with the ongoing uncertainty around the pandemic, gave rise to increasing worker burn out. Local community sector workers indicated in August 2021 that anticipated organisation needs over the coming months to be 'supporting staff engagement and mental health', 'promoting services', and 'community engagement support'. Local sector workers also identified 'government updates', and 'support from staff and team members' as their most significant forms of support during these times. Many local organisations reported taking measures to ensure staff felt supported and connected with their teams despite working remotely to keep working relationships strong and morale high.

Positive Impacts

The pandemic highlighted the crucial role the community sector plays in supporting vulnerable people, and many leveraged this opportunity to advocate for further support for the sector. Many not for profits reported that philanthropic grants and government assistance such as Jobsaver payments provided significant support during these challenging times.

The pandemic also created opportunities to transform, reassess, and innovate the way community services operate. Many community organisations have expanded their service delivery models online, diversified their services, and increased accessibility, and it is anticipated that these offerings will continue post pandemic.

Nepean Food Services, Mark Blattman – Operations Manager, July 2021

Like many other service providers, businesses and Australian's, Nepean Food Services (NFS) experienced a lot of uncertainty and concern with the initial Federal Government announcements of the COVID-19 outbreak. However, as more information came to light and there was a greater understanding of the potential impacts the pandemic could have on the community on both a micro and macro level, NFS undertook changes to its staffing and operations which had to be implemented rapidly. As a service that provides nutritious food, social support, and transport to some of Penrith's most vulnerable, it was vital that we adapted and changed in order to continue our essential service.



Challenges and changes included:

- Losing half our workforce overnight with many volunteers aged over 70 and government advice recommending the elderly remain at home
- Simultaneously, demand for the service almost doubled
- Being based out of a shared office space, half the staff were asked to work from home, the other half to work from the office in order to meet physical distancing requirements.
- With the assistance of social media, NFS recruited new volunteers which were predominately made up of people who had lost their jobs. This required running induction sessions every day for two weeks
- Implementing new processes, policies and operating procedures which was a big change for many of our long-standing volunteers. This included the immediate halt of social outings and changes to protocols regarding social interactions upon food delivery, with staff no longer allowed to enter client's homes. However, we also implemented some new protocols such as volunteers calling clients on a regular basis to ensure the socially isolated were still receiving some form of social support. At the time of writing, a total of 28 policies and procedures were either implemented or updated as a result of COVID-19.
- We also established contingency plans in the event of office closures or further restrictions
- In order to maintain staff wellbeing and morale during these difficult times, NFS implemented games and other fun activities as part of its regular operating as well as maintaining communication with existing inactive volunteers so they were up to date and still felt connected and ready for when it was safe to return.

With the easing of restrictions around May 2021, NFS saw social support services such as luncheons resume. However, with a large back log of referrals, the frequency increased to meet heightened demand. The COVID-19 experience was a challenging one for both clients and staff. Though despite the barriers, we all pulled together and managed to continue as an essential service throughout the harshest of restrictions and are prepared should the COVID-19 situation intensify again.

IMPACTS ON BUSINESS OWNERS

COVID-19 challenged the resilience of many businesses due to the impacts of restrictions. As such, business agility has been tested as organisations continually react and adapt to changing circumstances. This section of the report will explore the impacts of the pandemic on business owners. For a detailed insight into the economic impacts of COVID-19 on Penrith City, see 'Economic Impacts report'.

Overall Impacts and Concerns

Findings from consultations with local businesses revealed the top five greatest impacts over the 20-21 financial year were:

1. Reduced operating hours
2. Reduced demand or goods/services/patronage
3. Partial loss of income/revenue
4. Complete closures
5. Financial pressures due to reduced cash flow

Issues of greatest concern were:

1. Business viability with reduced demand/patronage/foot traffic
2. Impact of cancelled activities/events/mass gatherings
3. Mental health of themselves and/or employees
4. Their obligations as an employer
5. Increased overheads/costs/workload to meet social distancing requirements (e.g., cleaning, installation of protective screens, etc)

Positive Impacts

Consultations with local businesses and organisations in August 2021 confirmed that access to government financial support such as JobKeeper, was a key pillar of support. Many businesses also discovered new and innovative ways of working that have positively benefited staff and revenue and are likely to continue post-pandemic. Several organisations allowed employees to work from home and vary working hours, allowing for greater flexibility and work-life balance.

Health and Wellbeing Impacts

The compounding challenges such as business closures, relocating or laying off staff, and exploring new and innovative ways of working, whilst managing concerns about family/personal life, impacted upon the health and wellbeing of employers. Poor mental health and work-life balance, as well as burnout/fatigue were likely consequences for business owners over the previous two years (Department of Industry, Innovation and Science, 2020). Local businesses also spoke of challenges associated with last minute cancellations, loss of staff morale/motivation, juggling work and home-based learning, and competing with similar companies to survive.

When local businesses were asked what would support the economic recovery of Penrith, responses included easing of restrictions and economic stimulus packages. However, during periods of eased restrictions, some businesses were presented with new obstacles such as complying with social distancing requirements, keeping staff and patrons safe, and keeping up to date with fluctuating restrictions and requirements.

PRACTICAL ACTIONS

The COVID-19 pandemic has influenced and transformed the way societies operate. For Penrith, the community has endured significant social impacts that have been experienced disproportionately amongst the community. As Penrith City Council is well placed to collaborate with community, other levels of government, local services, and businesses in our area, it has taken a lead role in developing and delivering a proactive and strategic response, to help support and build a more resilient community.

Some examples of the practical and innovative actions Council has implemented to support the community during the pandemic include:

COVID-19 COMMUNITY SUPPORT FUNDING

Council provided and coordinated funding to support a range of local community groups and organisations to assist them in responding to the needs of diverse and vulnerable community members related to the impacts of the pandemic.

TAILORING EXISTING PROGRAMS

Modifying existing grant programs, such as Magnetic Places, to address issues related to the pandemic.

COMMUNICATION CAMPAIGN

To disseminate COVID-19 information to the local community. This included initiatives such as printed resources in community languages, video featuring local community leaders sharing messages in different languages, new public artworks promoting positive messaging around COVID-19, and resources to assist local businesses manage COVID-19 restrictions.

INCREASED ACCESS TO INFORMATION

Increasing information sharing through networks and inter-agencies on grant opportunities.

SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC RECOVERY TASKFORCES

Established two taskforces to coordinate recovery plans for the city focused on social and economic outcomes.

ACCESS TO FOOD

Drive and Collect Hamper Hub in St Marys to provide food for community members. Run by Penrith City Council and Ripples, food was delivered in partnership with local services including Community Junction, FoodBank and WestCare and supported by volunteer group Turbans 4 Australia.

SUPPORTING VOLUNTEERING

Creating a Community Volunteer Programs webpage to promote local volunteer opportunities.

COMMUNITY SUPPORT SERVICES GUIDE

Creating a Community Support Services guide for the general public with regular updates on services and resources available locally.

LIBRARY PROGRAMS

Programs such as 'Storytime' and 'Babytime' moved to an online format and were well attended.

LOCAL ENTERTAINMENT

Traditional open mic nights moved online to become 'Thursday Night Live: Lockdown Series' featuring a one-hour gig from local talent each week.

OPEN PUBLIC SPACES

Improving access to public, open and shared spaces with extended lighting times and keeping playgrounds open.

NEIGHBOURHOOD SUPPORT

The 'Good Neighbour' program was expanded and modified to promote neighbour connection.

Many local organisations have also implemented successful initiatives to assist the community. Some examples include:



WESTCARE – ‘KIDZ BLITZ’

In 2020, the WestCare ‘Kidz Blitz Penrith’ project provided high quality baby and infant clothing to a variety of local organisations to reach many of our City’s most vulnerable families. The program was designed to supplement the vital work of social workers, case managers, domestic violence workers and others as they navigate their high-need clients. The Nepean Young Pregnancy Support group from Nepean Community & Neighbourhood Services (NCNS) is one of the project partners, distributing clothing items sized from 0000 upwards to group attendees.

ACTIVE CARE NETWORK

– ‘CARE AND REPAIR’

The Care and Repair project assisted some of the most isolated members of the community in 2020, including the elderly and those with disability who are ineligible for other government subsidised garden and home supports. The project combats isolation and builds on the individuals’ health, wellness and reablement outcomes, whilst also increasing the amenity of their homes.

PACIFIC ISLANDS MT DRUITT ACTION NETWORK INC – CORE PACIFIC COLLECTIVE - PACIFIC COMMUNITY VACCINATION HUB

A vaccination hub established for Pacific communities in the Western Sydney district with culturally appropriate/bi-lingual support staff to assist with language, facilitation, and administration of vaccinations. The service also provided emergency relief food for families in need and COVID-19 messaging developed for and by young people aged 12-18. The vaccination hub was utilised by approximately 150 Penrith residents.

DV WEST – CLIENT AND REFUGE SUPPORT

Interior upgrades to create a safe and comforting environment were completed on a refuge facility for women and their children fleeing perpetrators of violence during the pandemic. Wellbeing boxes were also provided for children, as mothers reported children suffering mental health issues and decreased confidence during lockdowns. Vouchers were supplied to clients to assist with access of basic essentials such as food, clothes, and toys, as well as Uber vouchers for those who felt unsafe using other forms of public transport during the pandemic.

LEARNINGS FOR CONSIDERATION

As we continue to adapt to life with COVID-19, and in time recover from its implications, some key learnings to consider include:

- Improving awareness and accessibility of services and resources can enhance the capacity and resilience of community
- Creating opportunities for the development of social capital and community connections can play an important role in the way people manage and recover from challenges
- Collaborative and innovative approaches are beneficial to the strategic prioritisation of support and can assist in achieving best outcomes for community
- Public, open, and shared spaces need to be inclusive and accommodate the diverse needs of community to support positive health and wellbeing outcomes
- Building inclusive and digitally capable communities that have the essential skills, access, and awareness of technologies will be essential

APPENDIX

Social and economic impacts of Covid-19

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