

DIGITAL ACCESS PROJECT CASE STUDY

‘Stories from the Bush’

A snapshot of the experiences of residents living in Loddon Shire and rural areas of Greater Bendigo during COVID-19.



BACKGROUND

With the lockdowns associated with the COVID-19 epidemic from March this year, there was a large and swift move to online services to enable access to education, health and community services. Those whose employment could be continued online rather than face to face made the shift to working from home.

Bendigo Loddon Primary Care Partnership (BLPCP) hosted weekly informal Zoom “catchups” with Board members from the first weeks of the lockdown, providing a forum for partner organisations to exchange information, support each other and respond collaboratively. As partners discussed the impact of the lockdown on the communities they worked with, it became clear that the lack of reliable internet and mobile phone access across Loddon Shire and rural areas of Greater Bendigo was a major issue as people living in the region tried to access services and work from home. Partner organisations reported the frustration of residents who felt that despite expressing their concerns about inadequate digital access, their situation was not improved and that now that they had no choice but to access services online, they were being severely disadvantaged.

Concerns among the partnership group reflect what was outlined in the Department of Health and Human Services Loddon Mallee Region’s Health Sector Working group in the June 2018 publication, **CEO VISION PROJECT**. The project was facilitated through the Loddon Mallee Region Primary Care Partnerships, and summarised outcomes of consultations in

which representatives from the health, community services and education sectors were engaged in discussions about the content and direction of potential investment projects to enhance the health and wellbeing of the communities across the Loddon Mallee Region. **The first priority identified for investment in the publication was connectivity, addressing the digital divide.** Its associated “Imagination Statement” is outlined next page:



EIGHT HOUSEHOLDS
WERE INTERVIEWED
BETWEEN MAY 14
AND JUNE 11, 2020

“Imagine connectivity in all rural communities across the Region. There was no greater infrastructure need identified throughout the consultations. The health and well-being advantages touched the educational opportunities, economic drivers of the community, support for health equity in rural communities, for emergency and all other information access, to access health services through digital platforms (eg: NDIS, My Aged Care), social connection and many other areas. Universal connectivity was the dream. We don’t have to imagine Telehealth as a future reality. It is here, however not everywhere. Access to telehealth is the next major challenge in taking services to the people rather than the people to the services.” - CEO Vision Project.



The connectivity to address the digital divide outlined in the CEO Vision Project is the level of connectivity required by residents to enable them to participate in work, education, telehealth, social connection and community services at all times, and particularly during the pandemic. Rural residents of Loddon and Greater Bendigo LGAs expressed frustration that decision makers do not adequately prioritise actions to address this divide and inequity, and that often the actions that are undertaken do not deliver what is promised.

In response to these concerns, BLPCP agreed to undertake this project which seeks to capture the lived experiences of rural residents navigating work, education, health and community services and social connections during the pandemic, so that decision makers can better understand the impact of digital access issues on people living in these areas.

METHODOLOGY

A flyer was circulated to partner organisations to distribute within their communities, seeking contact details of households willing to be interviewed by phone for about 30 minutes, to share their digital access experiences over this time. Participating households were informed that their contribution would not identify them in any product that came about as a result of this project. Eight households contacted the project worker who arranged a time for a phone interview. Interviews were conducted between May 14 and June 11, 2020.

“STORIES FROM THE BUSH” RESOURCE PRODUCTION

A resource was produced for circulation that documented stories of residents’ lived experiences of the reliance on digital access during the pandemic including the following;

- Access to Education – participation in classes and lectures, and access to work set by teachers
- Working from Home – capacity to connect with colleagues and clients
- Telehealth – capacity to participate in telehealth sessions
- Social connection and support – capacity to connect with others during a crisis
- Emergency access – capacity to contact emergency services
- Attempts to address digital access issues – frustrations relating to the lack of solutions and the higher costs of digital access in rural areas.

MOBILE PHONE AND INTERNET ACCESS ISSUES IN LODDON SHIRE AND RURAL AREAS OF GREATER BENDIGO
‘Stories from the Bush’
 A snapshot of experiences

For many years, rural residents in Loddon and the Greater Bendigo Shires have raised issues about the lack of access to reliable mobile phone and internet services. During COVID-19, when the only way to participate in many aspects of everyday life was through digital access, Bendigo Loddon Primary Care Partnership (BLPCP) partner organisations highlighted the increased burden this placed on rural residents. BLPCP interviewed some self-nominated rural households between May 14 and June 11, 2020, to find out how these issues impacted their access to education, work, telehealth, and social support. These are their stories.

ACCESS TO EDUCATION

“These kids are meant to be doing their VCE. It’s not fair that they don’t have the same access to learning as other kids.”

One mother from Calvel located in Loddon Shire, about 60km north-east of Bendigo, spoke of her frustration in watching her 13 children in high school and university, trying to participate in videoconferences with teachers and lecturers only to have the line drop out.

“First they’d try turning the video off so at least they could hear if not see what was going on. Then that would drop out too. Seeing their reactions has been really tough.”

Another mum located between Boort and Quambatook talked about her children having to try to download work between late and early to access night data through the satellite connection when there was no demand on the connection. When that failed, they sometimes drove into her office in Boort to try to download schoolwork. In the end, the school provided a device which could be used as a hotspot but access through that was also unreliable.

“My telehealth clients were in their cars at the other end of a paddock on a hill to try to get reception.”

“I can’t stand tests without wandering around the paddock.”

“If my mobile phone rings inside, I have to run outside to answer it.”

“I keep my mobile phone up on a ladder outside to get reception and I climb it quickly when it rings.”

Primary Care Partnership | www.blpcp.com.au | JUNE 2020

LIST OF PARTNERS



LODDON PANDEMIC COMMUNITY RELIEF AND RECOVERY COMMITTEE

LODDON COMMUNITY SERVICES PANDEMIC RESPONSE GROUP