



The Hon Scott Morrison MP  
Prime Minister  
House of Representatives  
PO Box 6022  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Prime Minister,

## ENHANCING THE LOCAL HEALTH AND ECONOMIC RESPONSE TO CORONAVIRUS

My community of Indi, like the rest of Australia and the rest of the world, is being severely affected by the outbreak of the coronavirus.

Over the last weeks, I have been listening closely to my electorate about what they need right now: answering the many calls that have flooded into my office, speaking to each of the nine local councils in Indi, and hearing from small business owners and health practitioners.

In Parliament last week, you spoke of the need for all parliamentarians to come together in this critical time in a spirit of cooperation. It is in that spirit of practical and constructive unity that I offer some recommendations to enhance the local health and economic response.

### Enhancing the local health response

- **Recommendation 1: Immediately address the shortages of PPE especially in regional hospitals, looking first to local manufacturers to address the gaps**

Doctors and hospitals in Indi have reported to me a shortage of PPE. As a former nurse, I understand how critical PPE is to ensuring the safety of our frontline health workers. This shortage of PPE extends to our disability and home care workers who report that they cannot access sufficient PPE to safely care for their clients. Naturally, these scarce resources must be triaged to where they can be most effectively used, but the supply itself must be urgently increased. There is capability among local manufacturers to contribute to production of PPE.

- **Recommendation 2: Provide financial resources for quarantine facilities using local accommodation providers**

Local Government Areas (LGAs) in Indi have expressed concern at a lack of available facilities to provide large-scale quarantining if residents do not have suitable private accommodation to quarantine within. However, several LGAs have indicated the potential to work with local

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accommodation providers to temporarily use hotel and similar venues as quarantine facilities should they be needed.

Naturally, this would require Government assistance to stand up a solution in a short time frame, to ensure staff are equipped with appropriate PPE and to finance deep cleaning of these facilities to return them to everyday use. Just as this has been achieved for overseas returnees it could also be achieved in regional towns for local people.

- **Recommendation 3: Provide clear and consistent messages supported by a paid-for communications campaign about restrictions on domestic travel to regional towns**

Evidence from the electorate suggests that people are not heeding the instructions from Government around travel restrictions.

For instance, an influx of visitors from outside our region over recent days is first and foremost a hygiene concern but in addition it stretches local food resources and threatens to overwhelm local health facilities in the case of an outbreak. While the closure of caravan parks has been welcomed by local government, I have been told that some accommodation providers are fully booked. There is increasing concern about the expected surge of visitors during the upcoming Easter weekend.

Owners are distressed by a fear of spreading the virus coupled with the tension of cancelling bookings and the implications for their fragile viability after the loss of revenue during the bushfire season.

- **Recommendation 4: Ensure integrity of aged care package assessments and service delivery in short- and medium-term**

Many aged care assessment providers have shifted in-home aged care assessment team visits to tele-health or phone-based assessments. While this is a necessary provision to protect the health of both assessors and clients, conducting in-home visits is ultimately critical to ensuring vulnerable people receive the care they need.

Assessment teams are highly trained to identify the physical, emotional and social needs of clients as well as identifying instances of elder or financial abuse. However, these outcomes are impossible to fully deliver over the phone, and we need a plan to ensure people get the support they need.

Moreover, I understand that some clients are refusing visits from nurses and allied health professionals due to fear of infection. If in-home aged care service provision is disrupted for a long period, we risk deterioration in the health of older Australians, possibly causing an increase in hospitalisation. I am bringing this to the attention of the Government for consideration of how in-home aged care can continue over the coming months.

### Enhancing the local economic response

- **Recommendation 5: Provide clarity to businesses and workers on the impact of staged business closures on access to insurance and Government support**

The staged closure of businesses by the Government, though motivated by a laudable goal of protecting as many jobs as possible, has created confusion and distress among small business owners and their employees.

For instance, many small businesses have expressed concerns that they cannot access business interruption insurance until their business is ordered to close. Yet the interruption to their business is already apparent.

Similarly, many workers have contacted my office distressed at being required to attend work as their businesses have not been closed, exposing them to risk of contracting the coronavirus. Yet many are rightly reluctant to quit their jobs for fear of being ineligible for Government support.

- **Recommendation 6: Immediately bring forward and increase the rate of Financial Assistance Grants to regional councils**

Our local councils in Indi, and across regional Australia, are extremely stretched. Many of these people were at the front line of the bushfire disaster and are now being called on again to lead their communities through another crisis. One possible response floated by the Government is to provide rate relief to local councils as a stimulus measure.

Our local mayors and CEOs are overwhelmingly opposed to such a move and instead request that Financial Assistance Grants be immediately increased and brought forward. The twelve councils in the Hume Region Local Government Network have written to the Federal Treasurer (30<sup>th</sup> March 2020) to make this request and I lend my full support this call.

This would allow greater flexibility to LGAs to provide relief to local communities. I have long argued for this policy and I echo their calls, which have always been important and have now become urgent as well.

- **Recommendation 7: Urgently consider options to accelerate delivery of cash payments to vulnerable people**

The Government's economic response to the coronavirus involved measures critical to ensuring people can survive the challenging weeks and months ahead. However, many of these measures will not flow for some time. The coronavirus supplement will not start until April 27. The small business cash flow boost will not come until April 28. Pensioners will not see any boost in income from deeming rate changes until May 1. And the new JobKeeper payment will not flow until May 1.

For many, this is too long to wait. My office has fielded calls from constituents who have already run out of money. For people who have lost incomes, waiting five weeks or longer for support is not possible. It is welcome that payments will be backdated to the date that people applied, but immediate cash flow is a pressing concern.

I welcome the announcements from the Government to introduce measures to ensure that the millions of Australians who have lost jobs or income are not evicted, but faster cash payments need to flow so that no-one goes hungry in the immediate term.

- **Recommendation 8: Assess whether bushfire-affected businesses are disadvantaged by the *Boosting Cash Flow for Employers* scheme and consider additional funding for bushfire-affected small businesses**

The *Boosting Cash Flow for Employers* scheme is a welcome announcement and will assist many small businesses in Indi with cash flow. However, the amount of refunds for the initial payment is calculated according to the taxes withheld in the January-March quarter of 2020. For many small businesses affected directly or indirectly by the bushfires, these months coincided with a significant decline in business activity and employment.

Small businesses affected by fire, therefore, may miss out on cash they otherwise would have received under this scheme. Our bushfire-affected businesses deserve more, not less support, given they enter this current crisis after several months of devastating income and property loss.

- **Recommendation 9: Immediately expedite all bushfire recovery grants and other payments**

Before the coronavirus hit, it was well known that the Government's bushfire recovery support was not being delivered at the pace required by our communities. Much of this is due to an onerous application process and unreasonably strict eligibility criteria, which has meant people missing out on support they desperately need.

The Coronavirus Economic Response Package, which I was proud to support in the House, demonstrates that the Government is able to deliver significant cash payments within specific deadlines. Support for bushfire-affected communities should be similarly expedited.

The coronavirus stimulus will begin within five weeks of being legislated, while some bushfire-affected communities have now been waiting three months for support to flow. Measures like the primary producer grants and small business grants should be drastically expedited.

- **Recommendation 10: Provide direct support to regional newspapers including through targeted communications campaigns**

The disruption to business from coronavirus means that advertising revenues for regional newspapers have dried to a trickle. Our regional newspapers were already operating on extremely thin margins, and we have seen many mastheads close in recent years.

Devastatingly, the coronavirus has now claimed more titles. *The Sunraysia Daily* based out of Mildura has closed, with staff being stood down at the *Swan Hill Guardian*, the *Gannawarra Times* at Kerang, and *The Loddon Times* in the Loddon Mallee region. This leaves vast swathes of regional Victoria without local newspaper coverage, a devastating blow for our communities.

I echo calls from The Hon. Darren Chester MP and from the Country Press Association for the Commonwealth Government to step in and provide assistance to this industry. Our local press is as critical for regional livelihoods as the regional airline industry. For instance, the Government could take out regular full-page advertisements in regional papers to communicate public health and safety messages throughout the crisis.

- **Recommendation 11: Ensure viability of rural workforce by guaranteeing support to working visa holders**

People on working visas are the lifeblood of many rural economies, particularly those reliant on agricultural labour and hospitality. Unfortunately, people on working visas have largely missed out on the Government supports announced to date. Moreover, many seasonal pickers on temporary visas will likely have their visas expire in the coming months.

If we do nothing to support these people, either financially or with visas, they will leave our communities, leaving us without critical labour supply both now and in the future. Cafes and restaurants that currently employ foreign chefs will not be able to re-open once the crisis passes. Once these people leave, it is nigh impossible to bring them back.

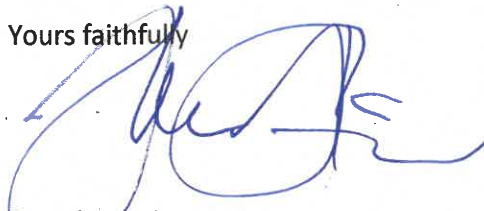
Moreover, I echo the calls of the National Farmers' Federation Horticulture Council and the Australian Fresh Produce Alliance (AFPA) in calling on the Government to extend the visas of seasonal agricultural workers already in the country.

I offer these recommendations in good faith. The Commonwealth Government cannot be expected to know everything that is happening on the ground in a fast-moving crisis like this. But I hope to play a positive and practical role by providing clear recommendations about what is happening in our local community.

The situation will continue to evolve and I will continue to communicate with you to help you deliver the best response possible for Indi and for Australia.

I look forward to working with you on this.

Yours faithfully



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Independent Federal Member for Indi

1 April 2020

Ref: HH29069/EG