



Message from the Advocate



As we reflect on the last year it is clear that COVID-19 has continued to impact communities across Victoria, including here in Latrobe, and we are reminded we are living through a period of extraordinary change.

Despite the challenges posed by the coronavirus, there has been a lot of activity around my office in the past 12 months as we moved to a hybrid model of engagement, working remotely and

in-person when restrictions allowed.

I have heard from Latrobe communities about the impacts of COVID-19, and my office partnered with the Gippsland Primary Health Network this year to produce [COVID-19 Impact and Recovery in Latrobe](#). The report includes an analysis of conversations and engagements I had throughout 2020 and Gippsland PHN's analysis of mega trends, opportunities and risks. The report identifies system gaps and considers broader opportunities for health system reform, including more support for people to access technology and data, greater collaboration between health services, a whole of government approach for bolstering digital infrastructure, patient-centred care, and community-led recovery.

As we move towards a future where a majority of communities are vaccinated against COVID-19 and we are able to once again enjoy some more freedoms, it is vital we consider these insights as we adjust to a new way of living.

While COVID-19 has been a priority for my office, a considerable amount of work has gone into other priority areas informed by my 2020-21 Statement of Intent.

I have continued to engage with people who may not ordinarily have their voices heard, heard about their health and wellbeing concerns and aspirations and what matters most to them when it comes to engagement.

In this Annual Report I am pleased to provide an update on the continuing work and highlight a number of priorities where systems change has progressed.

I will continue to advocate on behalf of Latrobe communities and do what I can to support people during this difficult time.

Jane



Activities 2020/21

During 2020/21 the activities of the Advocate's office were impacted by COVID-19 restrictions and a number of lockdowns, but the Advocate continued to hear from communities across Latrobe in a variety of ways.

The Advocate's office hosted a collaborative workshop with key stakeholders to finalise an action plan focused on improving access to GPs in Latrobe. Released in September, the action plan focused on four themes for the region and was informed by engagement with communities and GPs.

The Advocate attended a virtual Gippsland Health Forum with the Federal Minister for Regional Health, Regional Communications and Local Government Mark Coulton MP. She spoke about the opportunity to support and learn from the work occurring in the Latrobe Health Innovation Zone, emphasised the importance of governments and services listening and responding to community voice and asked about opportunities to embed community engagement into every aspect of the health system.

The Advocate met with the CEO of Mental Health Reform Victoria to discuss the ongoing response to the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System and her recommendations about improving mental health outcomes in Latrobe. The Advocate released a public statement in response to the final recommendations of the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System and found there was a strong alignment between the recommendations, what the Advocate has been hearing from communities and some of the initiatives already underway in Latrobe.

Throughout the year the Advocate met with the executives and boards of the Latrobe Health Assembly, Latrobe Community Health Service, Latrobe Regional Hospital and the Gippsland Primary Health Network. She shared what she had been hearing from Latrobe communities about their health and wellbeing concerns and aspirations, feedback about difficulties accessing certain services and community suggestions to improve the system.

The Advocate worked with Eastern Victoria GP Training to provide local community members with the opportunity to participate in a video production project to educate current and future GPs about the importance of trusted relationships, supporting the whole person and promoting the benefits of living and working in Latrobe.

The Advocate's office held discussions with Latrobe City Council, the Latrobe Health Assembly and the Gippsland Regional Partnership to highlight the importance of involving local communities in discussions and decisions that relate to future visioning for the region. The experiences of local communities in relation to the proposed used lead acid battery recycling (ULAB) plant highlighted both the desire from communities to be involved and the potential mental health consequences of poor engagement.

After a 12-month hiatus due to COVID-19 restrictions, the Advocate was able to resume her On The Buses initiative as part of the Human Connections Project. This has become a regular engagement activity and an effective way for the Advocate to seek out the voices of people who may otherwise not have a voice. Social connection was a prevailing issue throughout the year, and this was highlighted in the conversations the Advocate had with people travelling on the buses who spoke about the impact COVID-19 has had on their own social connections and the way it has changed what social connection looks like for them.

National Rural Health Commissioner Professor Ruth Stewart attended a stakeholder forum hosted by the Advocate in May and remarked on the value of the collaboration occurring in Latrobe to bring about systems change in response to community voice.

The Advocate was invited to share her unique way of working with the Centre For Public Impact and wrote an article, [Centring community voices for improved health outcomes in Australia's Latrobe Valley](#). She shared insights about the establishment of her office, the development of the Advocate operating, research and engagement models, and the instances of systems change she has observed as a result of the integration of community voice.

Engagement Inspiration

During 2020/21 the Advocate continued to hear from communities across Latrobe and released three reports in the *Engagement Inspiration* series. These reports include insights and suggestions for governments and services about how people in Latrobe want to engage and be engaged, hearing directly from people who may not usually have their voices heard.

Advocacy based on 2019/20 Engagement

The Advocate shared the insights from [Engagement Inspiration from People Experiencing Financial Stress in Latrobe](#) with services and governments across Latrobe and more broadly. She encouraged the Victorian Government, local health services and Latrobe Valley communities to focus on prevention rather than cure, to look at financial stress from a health and social perspective and implement appropriate treatments and interventions to minimise or prevent the devastating impacts of living with little or no income.

Things that concern me the most are people being left behind in society.

The Advocate released [Engagement Inspiration from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People in Latrobe](#) and during this work she learned more about the importance of connection to the land, community spirit, health and healing. This approach differs with the medicalised model of health that dominates how many health services are currently designed and delivered and the Advocate is asking: how much further our health system must go to be more in tune with the holistic approach of Aboriginal communities? Aboriginal community members must determine their own ways of achieving their health and wellbeing goals, and how they want to access and receive services.

There are different layers to the community. People need to represent their community and not their organisation

The Advocate continued to elevate the voices of [LGBTIQ+ communities in Latrobe](#), and shared feedback from LGBTIQ+ people about the importance of designing buildings with non-gendered toilets.

The Advocate heard about the negative effects of gendered language in health screening messaging and facilitated collaborative discussions between the Gippsland PHN, Breast Screen Victoria and Cancer Council Australia to drive discussion about how to use more inclusive language. As a result, a number of LGBTIQ+ people are now working directly with services to share their ideas and provide feedback. Screen For Me, an initiative of the Gippsland PHN, is now working to incorporate more inclusive messages and images in their promotional material.

It's awesome when people don't make assumptions. It doesn't take much to make our lives easier.

2020/21 Engagement

The Advocate released [Engagement Inspiration from Young People Aged 12-25 in Latrobe](#) which captured the voices of young people in Latrobe, highlighting what enables good health and wellbeing. The young people the Advocate met with expressed a strong desire to have their voices heard and for their concerns and suggestions to be acted upon.

Young people have talked to the Advocate about feelings of belonging, enjoying good mental and physical health and having the support of a community that is there for them. The young people the Advocate heard from also took the opportunity to write messages to the Victorian Minister for Health about their health and wellbeing concerns and aspirations and the changes they want to see in Latrobe.

Equality is a big thing that I see as important. Everyone should have an equal footing in life.

The Advocate engaged with [people experiencing family violence in Latrobe](#) and heard about the barriers and enablers of good health and wellbeing and what matters when it comes to engagement. The people she met with trusted her with their stories and were vulnerable in sharing their experiences of family violence. They showed remarkable courage and strength, and their desire to achieve change for themselves and others was inspiring.

The people the Advocate met with expressed a desire for empathy to be real and visible and spoke about the importance of knowledge and access to appropriate information. She heard there is no one-size-fits-all approach to engagement with people experiencing family violence and that everyone has their own needs and preferences depending on their circumstances.

People described the difficulties of navigating a complex service system and the toll this can take on their mental and physical health, self-esteem and confidence. The Advocate heard family violence can be an enduring issue for some people and occur in both intimate and family relationships again and again.

I want to be part of the voices in Latrobe Valley having our voice for positive change, systemic change

In hearing from people aged 60 and over the Advocate learned how important it is to appreciate the wisdom and experience of older people in our community. She also learned about the health and wellness challenges that people can face as they get older.

People over 60 expressed the frustrations they can experience when their views are not sought out or listened to. This frustration was stronger for people who felt that they could contribute their wisdom to a particular conversation, yet they were overlooked.

The Advocate heard that while some people over 60 embrace and engage with technology, others do not, some believing they don't have the skills or know-how to use smart phones properly. These issues with technology extend to accessing the My Aged Care system, and there are suggestions from people over 60 that there is a need for a helpline to assist with the general functions of a phone, tablet or computer to help combat the exclusion that some experience as the world moves online.

I'm a big one for actions speak louder than words, and a smile is worth a thousand words

The Advocate heard from people over 60 that there are simple and effective ways for governments, services and communities to truly hear them. People said that communicating through age-appropriate channels, using technologies of past and current generations, and directly inviting them to share their views were effective ways to engage.

The Advocate continues to share her engagement work with governments and services to support them to provide a better engagement experience for communities in Latrobe.

Community Voice



The Top Five

1. Mental health



Mental health was again among the aspirations most spoken about this year. Young people and people from LGBTIQ+ communities expressed their concerns about the lack of mental health services and supports in the region.

The Advocate consistently heard that it makes a difference when people feel a sense of belonging, and where there is a wholistic approach to health that includes physical, mental, and spiritual care.

She heard that it makes a difference when young people feel a sense of belonging, can spend time doing things that they enjoy and importantly have goals to focus on. Young people have these goals for themselves and others and talked about their intentions to spread love and positivity and stay in contact with friends.

People spoke about the importance of designing mental health strategies in a way that considers local social demographics such as housing and education. They shared their wishes to be able to access mental health services when they need them. Some people said that they want to stay healthy and not deteriorate.

Find someone in your neighbourhood and have a chat with them

People talked about the disconnectedness they experience between mental health and other health services. They described the challenges of not being able to access mental health support since they must first visit a GP but cannot see a GP as the "books are closed".

Others said their mental health declines if they don't eat proper food, dwell on the past, don't take notice of their own triggers or watch too much television.

Suggestions from communities included designing solutions with local people and service users, establishing relationships with patients prior to offering telehealth appointments, empowering people to be assertive and to understand which questions to ask of health services.

2. Access to Services



People in Latrobe continued to share their aspiration for local services to understand and accommodate their diverse needs. They said their ability to get the help they need is impacted by their knowledge of the health system, how well services work together, and the experience people have with health professionals.

The Advocate continued to hear that people in Latrobe find it hard to get an appointment with a doctor. People said they can feel conflicted between wanting to maintain a consistent and trusted relationship with their GP and making appointments with an alternate GP to be seen.

People said that telehealth is a great feature of the system but is not appropriate for every health issue. Some people said that it was not an appropriate substitute for face-to-face consultations for certain issues.

There needs to be more access to doctors on the weekends... free up the ED

The Advocate has heard about a potential gap in the provision of sexual and reproductive health supports and medicines in Latrobe and heard feedback that local pharmacies may not have staff with the appropriate training and that there may not be enough demand from communities. It has been suggested that greater awareness raising, and education may help in addition to creating more accessible health hubs.

People said they had been encouraged to visit the Emergency Department to access healthcare, despite the fact their problem did not constitute an emergency.

People shared their aspirations to live long and healthy lives, and in order to do this they need reliable access to health services. Some people described poor experiences with local services where they left appointments with health professionals feeling overlooked and not informed.

3. Social Inclusion



Latrobe communities continued to acknowledge that social inclusion can improve quality of life. People shared views that community events and activities can help connect them with others and participate in society.

When people talked about connecting with others in their community, they consistently said they need the experience to be positive and non-judgemental. Local communities identified a range of places that can enable social connection including libraries, skate parks, bus stops, supermarkets and churches.

Some of the themes the Advocate heard include the importance of having a variety of events and activities available. People said that children, clubs, food, coffee and local groups can be great enablers for social connection.

It is important to do things and have a sense of satisfaction

The Advocate heard that people in Latrobe want to stay connected with each other and to enjoy an inclusive and safe place where everyone can be themselves. COVID-19 restrictions have changed the ways people in Latrobe connect with each other.

People recognised that online technologies have enabled schools, workplaces, families, volunteers, health services and community groups to stay connected, but they said that digital connectivity had limits. Many people were experiencing fatigue, and some people have not been able to connect online and there was a realisation that online human interactions are not the same as seeing other people in person.

4. Healthy Lifestyles



Healthy Lifestyles was high on the priority list for people in Latrobe. Some people over the age of 60 shared what it means for them to live a healthy lifestyle. They talked about keeping physically fit, appreciating what they have, enjoying the company of others, staying connected and living pain-free.

The Advocate heard about the importance of nutritious food and how COVID-19 restrictions have impacted both the physical and mental health of people in Latrobe.

I could live outside for the rest of my life if I needed to

People suggested they may be more likely to achieve a healthy lifestyle if they stay connected to others, learn to embrace change, maintain their fitness, avoid negativity and make a conscious effort to keep well.

5. Safe Environment



Concerns were raised with the Advocate about the proposed used lead acid battery (ULAB) facility proposed for Hazelwood North.

Some people called on the government to acknowledge and respond to community voice and expressed concerns about potential health impacts of the development and doubts about the economic benefits. The Advocate heard that the prospect of the development and the experience of communities in making efforts to be heard by government and industry resulted in heightened levels of fear and anxiety.

We know enough about lead to be concerned but not enough to be informed

The Advocate heard from people in the community about concerns surrounding the development of the Delburn Wind Farm. People were seeking assurances from government and industry that there will be ongoing opportunities to be genuinely engaged in all steps of the development. They also wanted to be assured that any potential health impacts, such as infrasound from the turbines, noise pollution or fire risk, will be prevented and managed appropriately.

Priority Project Campaigns

In 2020/21 The Advocate continued work on the priority projects identified in her Statement of Intent.

Achieving Victoria's best end of life experience for people in Latrobe



The Advocate heard from people about their concerns surrounding end of life palliative care services in Latrobe. This came from multiple perspectives including families, carers, local nurses and health professionals.

People shared their first-hand experience and expressed concerns about the lack of a dedicated palliative care facility and suggested that the few allocated beds at the hospital were inadequate.

Workforce shortages, skill deficits, high staff turnover, an absence of spiritual care and the need for work to be done to help health services to listen to and understand the experiences of patients and their families have all been mentioned.

Bureaucracy moves too slow compared to the disease

People spoke about the importance of offering spiritual care as part of a comprehensive suite of bereavement services for communities. It was suggested that spiritual care is not visible within local end of life care services and this could be addressed through adequate oversight, training, and supervision.

The Advocate released a [second progress report](#) detailing the changes that have been implemented across the local palliative care system following her 2019 recommendations to achieving Victoria's best end of life experience for people in Latrobe.

There has been measurable change reported against several of the Advocate's 12 recommendations. In response to recommendation 7, the Gippsland Regional Palliative Care Consultancy Service (GRPCCS) along with the Gippsland Region Palliative Care Consortium (GRPCC) are working on implementing a Speciality Palliative Care Practice Course for registered nurses to build workforce capacity. GRPCCS and GRPCC are also working together to develop a palliative care curriculum for healthcare professional education in Gippsland.

In response to recommendation 2, Latrobe Regional Hospital has completed a refurbishment of a sub-acute area in the hospital and now has some capacity for family to stay in a patient's room, as well as flexible visiting hours and options for domestic pets to visit.

COVID-19

When COVID-19 emerged as a global, national, state, and local issue during 2020, the pandemic became an important consideration for all work at the Advocate's office. The pandemic continues to impact Latrobe communities as Victoria endures multiple lockdowns.

The Advocate heard from communities, businesses and governments throughout the pandemic. She heard about issues including digital inclusion and exclusion, mental health and wellbeing, access to services, social connections, food insecurity and financial stress.

Friends are important to keep close for bad and good

Digital literacy improved for some people and services, but others reported that they did not have technology or the ability to link to technology and felt excluded as a result.

The Advocate heard that people who were experiencing loneliness and isolation before COVID-19 were feeling even more disconnected. They were separated from friendships and community services that they depended on for their general and mental health.

The Advocate utilised what she had been hearing from communities about COVID-19 when partnering with the Gippsland Primary Health Network to produce [COVID-19 Impact and Recovery in Latrobe](#).

The Advocate is committed to continuing to work with governments and service providers to make the connection between recovery and all the social determinants of health.

Improving access to services in Latrobe



Following the release of the [Access to Services Action Plan](#), the Advocate's office convened regular stakeholder forums where action plan agencies came together to provide updates on the work underway, discuss strategies to advance our systems change efforts and identify challenges and ways to address them. The forums were well-attended by action plan agencies and served as a platform for them to hear from others about interventions underway and assess their progress against the **four action plan themes**:



1: Improving training and accreditation pathways for doctors in Latrobe.



2: Enhancing and promoting the liveability of Latrobe and strengthening local GP recruitment systems.



3: Building health and digital literacy and enabling greater responsiveness to community voice.



4: Local system design and innovation; reducing the burden on the emergency department and creating a multidisciplinary business model for the future.

There have been actions taken to improve training pathways for doctors, build digital literacy, promote the liveability of Latrobe, and enable local system design and innovation to reduce the burden on the emergency department.

Monash University's End-to-End Program at the Churchill campus has been reviewed and the local cohort of students will next year be joined by a contingent from the university's direct entry program known as the Extended Rural Cohort, a group of students who have committed to spending their clinical years in Gippsland.

Local innovations in telehealth have diversified and streamlined access to GPs for many communities. Latrobe Community Health Service implemented a central management system where all client files are held, meaning GPs can access patient information and data in one central system regardless of location.

Gippsland PHN rolled out One Good Community General Practice grants for local clinics with the aim to build the capability of general practice to adopt and embed digital tools and technologies. GPHN's Remote Patient Monitoring is one of the tools and allows patients to conduct simple daily health checks and report their vital signs and any symptoms using a smartphone. Health professionals are able to monitor patients in their own homes and the program is designed to streamline care for people with chronic health conditions.

Human Connections in Latrobe

In her 2019-20 Statement of Intent the Latrobe Health Advocate identified social isolation and loneliness as priority health issues impacting Latrobe communities. The '*Human Connections Latrobe*' project is a collaboration with the Latrobe Health Advocate, the Latrobe Health Assembly (LHA), Latrobe City Council (LCC), Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and the Latrobe Valley Authority (LVA). The overall purpose of the project is to better understand opportunities for human connections in Latrobe and the population health impacts of loneliness and isolation.

Project partners have worked together to engage with communities and learn from experts to identify any necessary systems changes and consider potential innovations that could be designed and tested to improve human connections into the future.

People shared their views that community events and activities can help them to connect with others and participate in society. Some people said that it can be hard to join in where there is a large crowd. The Advocate heard that opportunities to volunteer or be involved with a group might be the only reason a person leaves their house.

People said that they are more likely to feel like they belong when they can see that the people around them are accepting of others.

A welcoming environment was described as one where people say hello to each other and do not criticise. People said they need their experiences to be positive and non-judgemental. People identified a range of places that can enable social connections including libraries, skate parks, bus stops, supermarkets, churches, and the shops.



The Advocate, along with partners involved with the Human Connections in Latrobe project, drafted community engagement insights that will be used to inform advice to government about ways to improve social connectivity in Latrobe. The insights focus on: understanding the value and health impacts of community connection; connection to place, people, animals and music in Latrobe; community events, activities and experiences; connecting Latrobe to the online world; community groups, clubs and volunteering; being connected to 'what's on' in Latrobe; and the role of public transport in enabling connection. The final report on this project is due to be published in October 2021.

Health is everyone's business

In her role, the Advocate continues to promote the position that *Health is Everyone's Business*. She has been encouraged by the willingness of businesses in Latrobe to consider and prioritise the health and wellbeing of communities as they develop new enterprises and reflect on how their practices can support good mental and physical health both within their workforce and the communities in which they operate.

There has been significant interest in the work and recommendations of the [Latrobe Valley Asbestos Taskforce \(LVAT\)](#). The Advocate presented at a range of forums including whole of government briefings and online community webinars. LVAT members raised awareness of the risks of removal of asbestos in residential settings; the need for more safety and awareness training for specific occupations; and stronger protocols regarding demolition and reporting of asbestos concerns.



The LVAT made **four formal recommendations to minimise the risk of asbestos exposure to the Victorian community**, both in workplaces and homes:

- 1) Asbestos removal only permitted on residential properties in prescribed circumstances
- 2) Compulsory asbestos awareness training for specified occupations
- 3) Notice of intent to undertake demolition work to be made compulsory
- 4) Provision of an Asbestos status certificate/report compulsory on the sale or rental of a residential property built before 1990

The Advocate provided advice to the Victorian Government, via the Minister for Health, about the proposed used lead and acid battery (ULAB) recycling facility proposed for Hazelwood North. In her advice she highlighted what she was hearing from communities and urged the government to engage and communicate with people in Latrobe. She also sought greater assurances from government about preventing environmental

contamination and protecting the health of workers, school children and communities.

The Advocate requested the Environment Protection Authority Victoria (EPA) ensure local communities they will continue to be engaged, that human health will be monitored and protected, and the psychological impacts of the development will be recognised and addressed.

The Advocate attended community and stakeholder forums hosted by Member for Eastern Victoria Harriet Shing. The forums were attended by government representatives, the EPA, Latrobe City Councillors and staff, community representatives and the Latrobe Health Assembly. The forums provided opportunities for people to ask questions and hear more from the government about the decision-making processes that have occurred. Government representatives in attendance were able to hear directly from local communities to gain a greater understanding of their concerns and aspirations.

The Advocate met with OSMI to learn more about the development of the Delburn Wind Farm and encouraged OSMI to continue to engage with local communities and to utilise the evidence and engagement insights from her office and Latrobe Health Assembly to inform its approach to working with local communities.

She will continue to monitor these significant projects and looks forward to participating in future conversations about the future vision for Latrobe.

The Advocate extends her sincere thanks to communities across Latrobe who continue to reach out and engage with her office to share their health and wellbeing concerns and aspirations and suggestions for improvements to a local healthcare system that meets their needs.

She will continue to seek out the views of people whose voices may not be heard and advocate to all levels of government for systems change to improve the health and wellbeing of all Latrobe communities.



The team at the Latrobe Health Advocate's office

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**Latrobe Health
Advocate**



The Latrobe Health Advocate respectfully acknowledges Aboriginal people as the Original Custodians of the land we walk on today – the land of the Braiakaulung people of the Gunaikurnai nation – and passes on respect to their Elders past and present, future and emerging.