

CREATING ECONOMIC RESILIENCY 2021-2027



COBAR SURVIVING AND THRIVING FINAL REPORT

A REPORT PREPARED BY BALMORAL GROUP AUSTRALIA
FOR COBAR SHIRE COUNCIL

MAY 2021



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Commercial-In-Confidence

The Cobar district is the traditional home of the Ngemba and Wongaibon Aboriginal people. The authors acknowledge the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Australia and recognise their continuing connection to land, waters and culture. We pay our respects to their Elders past, present.

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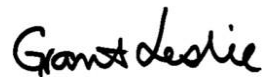
Mr Peter Vlatko
General Manager
Cobar Shire Council
Dear Peter

It has been an enormous privilege to have had the opportunity to work with you and your staff and in particular with the people of Cobar on this project. The cooperation and access that has been afforded to myself and my team has been tremendous. In particular the enthusiasm that your team and in particular Tanya Gilbert has underpinned the success of the project.

We provide our advice and strategy based on the research we have conducted and the extensive consultation with the community, FIFO and DIDO workers, the Business Community and former residents of Cobar.

Our team is very aware that some of our strategies will be difficult to implement and will take time and investment, however we believe that we must present the findings of our research honestly and without influence. It is in this context that we offer the following report and strategies for consideration of Cobar Shire Council.

Grant Leslie



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Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	1
BACKGROUND.....	2
DEFINING THE PROBLEM	3
WHAT THE RESEARCH TOLD US	5
SOCIOECONOMIC PROFILE	5
RESEARCH SYNTHESIS	16
STRATEGY.....	1
STRATEGY 1: Create a Thriving and Engaged Community.....	20
Infrastructure priorities	20
Organisational Priorities.....	20
STRATEGY 2: Retaining the 10-year old child	21
Infrastructure priorities	21
Organisation Priorities	21
STRATEGY 3: Embrace FIFO and DIDO workers	22
Infrastructure priorities	22
Organisational Priorities.....	22
STRATEGY 4: Secure the regions water availability	23
Infrastructure priorities	23
Organisational Priorities.....	23
STRATEGY 5: Grow regional tourism and events	24
Infrastructure priorities	24
Organisational Priorities.....	24
STRATEGY 6: Support the business community	25
Infrastructure priorities	25
Organisational Priorities.....	25
IMPLEMENTATION	26
PROGRAM EVALUATION	26

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For some time, the people of Cobar have held the belief that ‘the town is dying’ and that the principal reason was the change in the shift arrangements of the active mines in the region that enabled a transition of the working population to a Fly In Fly Out (FIFO) or a Drive In Dive Out (DIDO) model of employment. There was a perception that the population was dwindling, the schools were struggling to maintain students and the future viability of the town was in jeopardy.

Balmoral Group Australia has been engaged to conduct research into these issues and develop a series of strategies to address the issues that have been identified as anecdotal evidence and the facts that the research unveiled.

The development of the Cobar Economic Resiliency Strategy involved extensive original research and community consultation. Stakeholders included Cobar Counsellors and Staff, the Business Community, Schools, Sporting and Volunteer groups and the mining companies. All were genuine in discussions and providing opinions. They were generous with their time and are invested in the outcome of this work.

We conducted 18 face to face consultation sessions and an online survey that drew over 400 responses. The survey connected with four principal groups, the general community, business owners, FIFO and DIDO workers and people who were previous residents of Cobar. All response groups with the exception of FIFO/DIDO workers returned sufficient responses for the conclusions drawn in this report to be statistically valid and can therefore be relied upon. All of the groups we connected with during this project provided the Balmoral Group team with data to support the changes to their interest between 2012 and 2020.

Cobar’s population has declined from 4,710 in the 2011 census, to the ABS estimated residential population of Cobar in 2019 of 4,658. A decline of 52 people. The community survey revealed the 50% of respondents thought that the population had declined by 10% or more in the past 5 years which would equate to over 400 people.

The key data such as participation in sport, school enrolments and the availability of skilled and unskilled labour certainly point to a decline in population or certainly a change. This phenomenon is apparent since 2018 which is 6 years after the change to a 7 day – 12-hour roster at all of the major mines in Cobar.

Our research recommends six Economic Resiliency Strategies with the most important being Strategy One – Create a Thriving and Engaged Community. This Strategy underpins all other Strategies.

The full list of strategies are as follows:

Strategy One – Create A Thriving and Engaged Community

Strategy Two – Retain The 10-Year-Old Child

Strategy Three – Embrace FIFO And Dido Workers

Strategy Four – Secure the Regions Water Reliability

Strategy Five – Grow Regional Tourism

Strategy Six - Support Cobar’s Business Community

Implementation of these Strategies will involve all of the stakeholders involved in producing them. It is recommended that an Advisory Committee be set up to oversee and develop KPI’s around each of the Strategy outcomes.

Cobar Shire Council will have ultimate responsibility for delivering these Strategies. This will require an investment in people and a commitment to the process.

It is further recommended that the statistics underpinning this report be updated upon the satisfactory release of the 2021 census, evaluated in June 2024 and revised upon the satisfactory release of the 2026 census.

The Balmoral Group team appreciate the support and input to this process and it has been a privilege to work with Council on this important project for the future of Cobar.

BACKGROUND

For some time, the people of Cobar have held the belief that ‘the town is dying’ and that the principal reason was the change in the shift arrangements of the active mines in the region that enabled a transition of the working population to a Fly In Fly Out (FIFO) or a Drive In Dive Out (DIDO) model of employment. There was a perception that the population was dwindling, the schools were struggling to maintain students and the future viability of the town was in jeopardy.

Balmoral Group Australia has been engaged to conduct research into these issues and develop a series of strategies to address the issues that have been identified as anecdotal evidence and the facts that the research unveiled.

In order to deeply understand the issue, community and stakeholder engagement has been carried out. Stakeholders included the Cobar Business Association and individual businesses, mine management teams, FIFO and DIDO workers, local sporting groups, local accommodation services, community groups, schools, long term residents and residents who have moved away from Cobar. The approach to this project has been a mix of survey, focus groups, social listening and community meetings.

A deep dive into the socioeconomic make up of Cobar has been carried out through the consultation phase of the project and through the contribution of stakeholders and original research by Balmoral Group Australia. This includes data collected from the Australian Business Register (ABR), ABS, Councils rates records, and tourism data.

The outcome of the study will be to develop a strategy that describes what Cobar as a council, a community, and as local businesses, could be doing differently or working toward and investing in, to make sure the region has a strong, stable and attractive town into the long term.

The strategy is implementable and tied to an action plan. The strategies have been prepared and have specific steps, with a schedule, lead entity (council, business community and mining management teams for example) for each goal of the overall Strategy.

Image 2 – GCHC Mine – Photo Credit – Samantha Smith



DEFINING THE PROBLEM

In order to understand Cobar's future, it is important to understand its past. Like many inland Australian towns Cobar has a rich history of discovery, boom and bust which has built the character of the town over the past 150 years.

Mining has been a part of the regions history since the discovery of copper in 1870 and soon after the Cornish Scottish and Australia (CSA) mining company was formed and grew to be the largest copper mine in Australia by 1876.

At the time of its peak in 1912, the Cobar region boasted 14 smelters, a 64-metre chimney stack and it employed over 2000 workers and a regional population of around 10,000.

In 1919 the Great Cobar Copper Mine closed and in 1920 the CSA mine caught fire which burnt for 16 years. These two events had a devastating impact on the town and by 1920 the population had shrunk to just 1150 people.

Over the next 70 years more efficient mining techniques allowed a number of new mines to open up rebuilding Cobar's population to 5,146 people in 2001 according to ABS census data.

Peak Gold Mines, 12 kilometres south of Cobar, opened in 1992. Continued exploration has sourced gold deposits on Fort Bourke Hill where open cut mining is being carried out.

At this time Cobar was a thriving inland town with strong social networks and a range of sporting teams that competed regionally.

A series of changes to the way that the mines operated between 2013 and 2020 has impacted on the fabric of the region.

Figure 1 describes the timeline of significant events during this period. Principally the transition to a 7 day on 7 day off roster in all of the mine sites allowed for Fly In Fly Out (FIFO) and Drive In Drive Out (DIDO) workers to be an option.

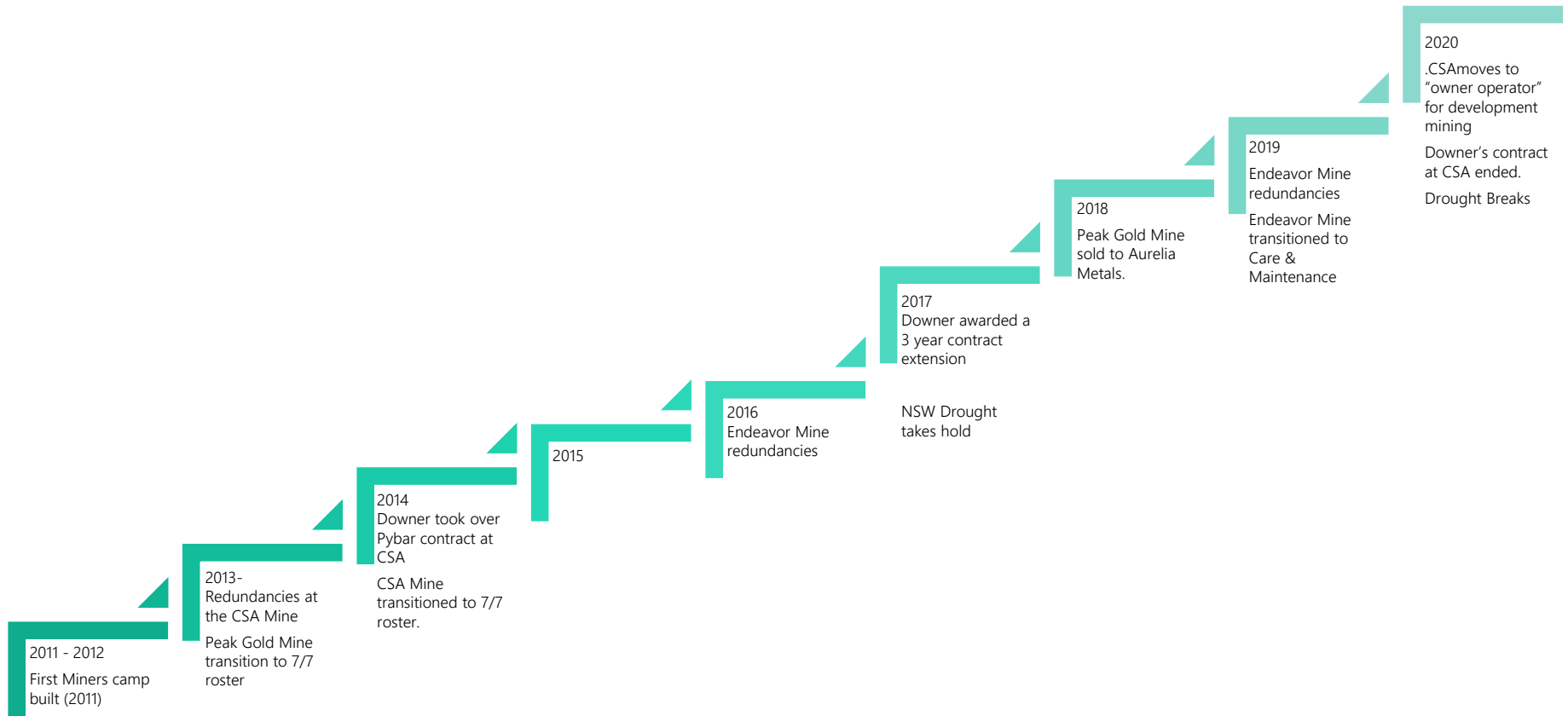
There is a public perception that Cobar faces a range of issues that is impacting on the future of Cobar. The headline issues relate to:

- ~ A declining population
- ~ Mine rosters affecting all aspects of Cobar
- ~ A disconnect between FIFO/DIDO workers and Cobar residents
- ~ A Council that is out of touch
- ~ Inadequate healthcare facilities
- ~ Vulnerable water supply
- ~ Perception of substandard quality of education
- ~ Shortage of childcare places
- ~ Decline in sporting teams for both Senior and Junior players
- ~ Lack of support for local businesses
- ~ Shortage of people to take up employment opportunities
- ~ Volunteer burnout.

The issues facing Cobar in 2021 are common throughout Australia, however these are made more complex by the nature of the region and the operation of the mine rosters that support over 30% of the workforce either directly or indirectly.

The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 and beyond opens up a number of opportunities that may not have existed before.

Figure 1 - timeline of recent events



WHAT THE RESEARCH TOLD US

The development of the Cobar Economic Resiliency Strategy involved extensive original research and community consultation. Stakeholders included Cobar Counsellors and Staff, the Cobar Business Association and individual business owners, Community, Schools, Sporting and Volunteer groups and the mining companies. All were genuine in discussions and providing opinions. They were generous with their time and are invested in the outcome of this work.

ABS records show that there have been 346 mining towns in Australia of which 59 have been abandoned. Of the remaining 287 mining towns only 27 have mining as its primary industry. Three of these, Broken Hill, Cobar and Lithgow are in NSW. In terms of population, Cobar has the 10th highest population of all mining towns in Australia.

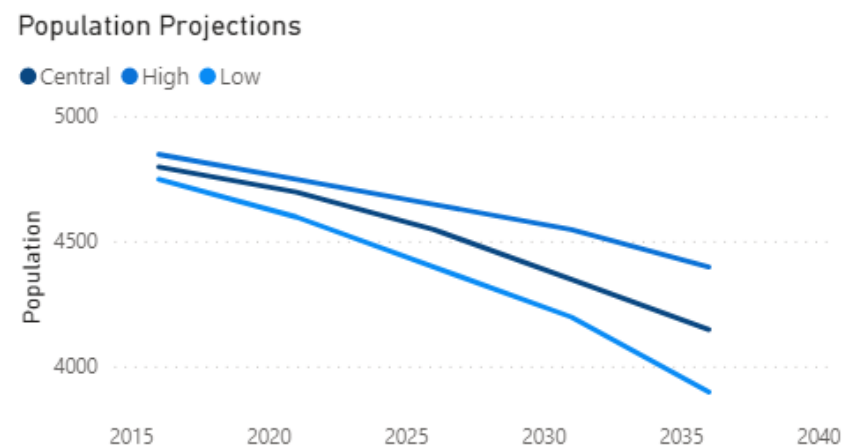
Cobar's population has declined from 4,710 in the 2011 census, to the ABS estimated residential population of Cobar in 2019 is 4,658. A decline of 52 people. This trend is important to note as the history of Cobar from 2012 to today encompasses one of the critical components of this study which is the influence of FIFO and DIDO workers on the resident population of the town.

SOCIOECONOMIC PROFILE

In 2018 there were 4,722 people living in the Cobar Shire LGA. From 2013 to 2018 the population has decreased year by year mainly due to migration out of the area. Conservative population projections estimate that the population will continue to decline to a population of 4,150 people in 2035 (Figure 2).

In 2016, 13.6% of the population were of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) heritage which is much higher than the state average of 2.9%.

Figure 2: Population projections Cobar



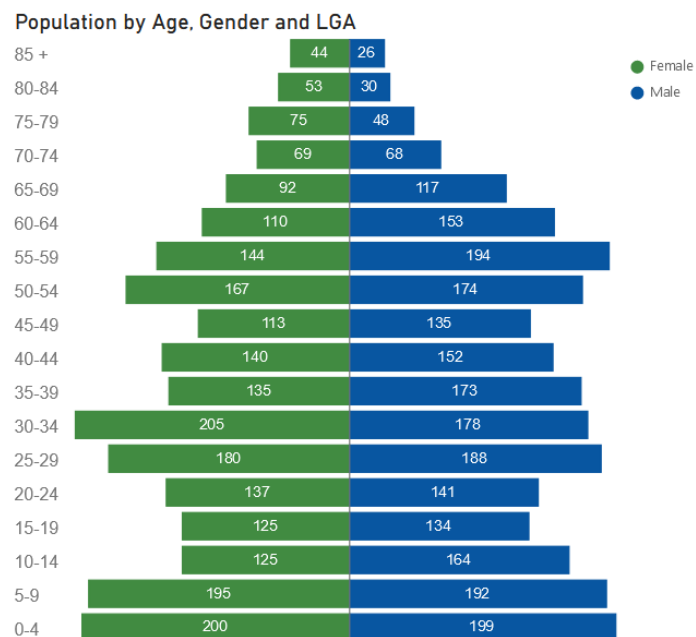
Source:

Department of Planning and Environment, NSW, 2016

In 2016 the population pyramid for Cobar Shire featured an uneven shape with a hollowing out of the population between 10 – 49 years of age, with the exception of peaks in the 25 – 34 years old age brackets (Figure 3). Anecdotal evidence and results from the community consultation indicate that this population decline is caused by the mines shifting to a 7day on 7 day off Roster and working age people entering Cobar for work opportunities and then leaving once children reach the age of 10 for better education and amenities offered outside of Cobar.

Most consider that this trend will continue without intervention.

Figure 3: Population pyramid Cobar 2016



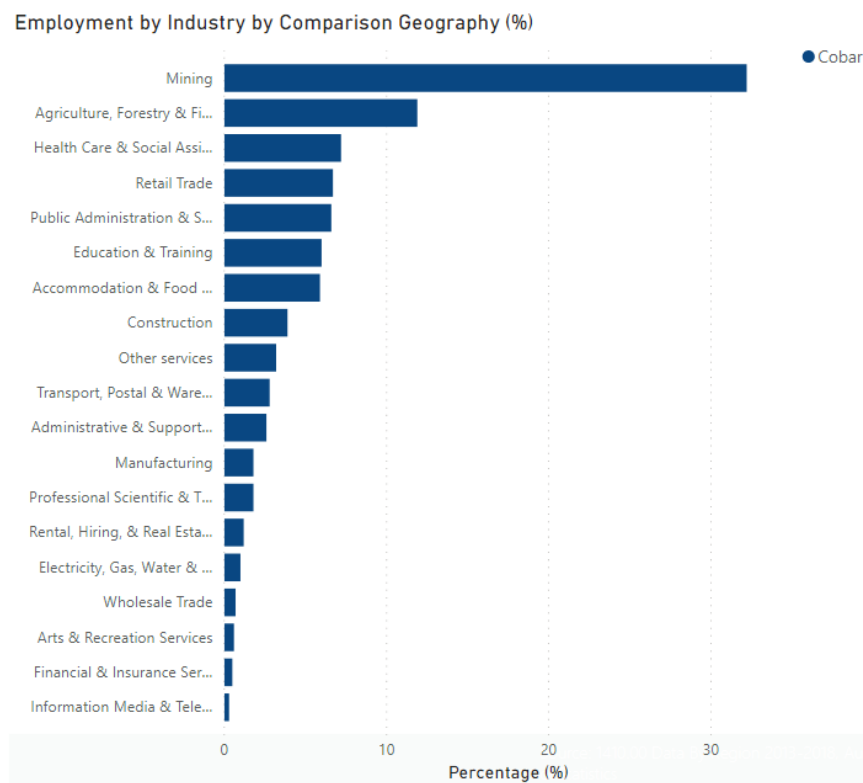
In 2016 most people in the Cobar Shire LGA were employed in the Mining Industry (32%), followed by Agriculture, Forestry & Fishing (11.7%) and Health Care & Social Assistance (7.2%). The total number of people employed in Cobar decreased from 2,221 people in 2011 to 2,014 people in 2016.

Within this data it should be recognised that employment in the mining sector grew by 14.9% and the Agriculture sector grew by 18.3%. These are the two largest employment sectors in Cobar. These are reflected in the Location Quotients described further in this report.

Potentially emerging industries include Real Estate Services, Professional, Scientific and Technical Services and Transport, Postal and Warehousing.

1

Figure 4 - Employment by Industry - 2016 census

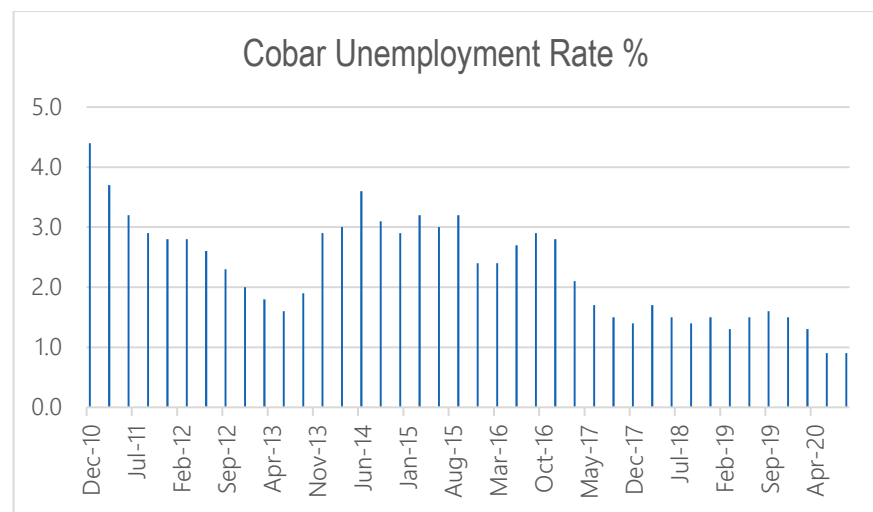


The unemployment rate in Cobar is at historical lows at the moment. The latest Labour force data set for Cobar is for the September quarter 2020 and shows a 0.9%¹ unemployment rate. In fact, 20 people in Cobar were looking for work. At the time of writing there were 24 jobs advertised on www.seek.com.au Most local businesses are advertising for workers and so the opportunities for work completely outweigh the supply of labour.

<https://lmip.gov.au/default.aspx?LMIP/Downloads/SmallAreaLabourMarketsSALM/Estimates>

Figure 5 shows the historical unemployment rate for Cobar over the past 10 years and highlights the current labour shortage.

Figure 5 - Historical unemployment rate



SPECIALISATIONS

Various methods can be used to obtain an understanding of those sectors within a regional economy that offer competitive advantages¹ and can provide further growth opportunities. One form of analysis is the Location Quotient (LQ) which measures the employment concentration in industry sectors within a region, compared with the same sectors across NSW. The higher the LQ, the higher the likelihood that a region is specialised in that industry (relative to NSW).

For the purpose of this analysis, specialisations as defined by LQs, are therefore used as an indicator of those sectors and industries that represent a region's true competitive advantages; as literature suggests, a LQ of 1.25 defines those sectors that can be considered a regional specialisation.

A number of the Region's specialisations are illustrated in 6. The chart plots

selected industries in terms of the LQ and employment growth relative to the NSW industry average (which is a proxy for the anticipated growth in LQ in the future).

A bubble's size represents the number of people employed in the industry. In this analysis, the key industries inside the Region fall into one of the three categories below. The categories are:

Industries which are currently specialisations, and likely to be specialisations in the future

These industries are the bubbles in blue. They possess a LQ greater than or equal to 1.25, and hence are likely to be the Region's specialisations. Employment in these sectors 'grew faster' than the equivalent sector across the whole of NSW², showing regional strength. If these trends in employment continue, their LQs are likely to stay above 1.25 in the future.

Industries which are currently specialisations, but may lose its status as a specialisation in the future

These industries are the bubbles in grey. They possess a LQ greater than or equal to 1.25, and hence are likely to be the Region's specialisations. However, employment in these sectors did not grow as fast as the equivalent sector across the whole of NSW. Hence, if these trends in employment continue, their LQs may drop below 1.25 in the future.

Industries which are currently not specialisations, but likely to be specialisations in the future

These industries are the bubbles in green. They possess a LQ less than 1.25, and hence are unlikely to be the Region's specialisations. However, employment in these sectors grew faster than the equivalent sector across the whole of NSW, showing regional strength. If these trends in employment continue, their LQs are likely to reach 1.25 in the future.

Based on the LQ analysis, the Region has a number of specialisations including Mining and Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing.

A region's competitive advantage for an industry includes its ability to produce goods and services at a lower cost or differentiate its products

from other regions, along with access to external factors which enhance business and operations / minimise risk (Stimson, Stough and Roberts, 2006).

It should be noted that there could be three cases in which employment 'grew faster' in the region compared to the same industry across the whole of NSW. These are the case where:

The industry experienced an increase in employment in the Region and in NSW as a whole, and the % increase for the Region was more than that of NSW,

The industry experienced an increase in employment in the Region but declined in NSW as a whole, and

The industry declined in employment in both the Region and in NSW as a whole, but as a % the Region lost less of its employment in the industry than NSW as a whole.

A similar case also applies to the cases in which employment in the Region's sectors 'did not grow as fast' as the equivalent sectors across the whole of NSW.

MINING

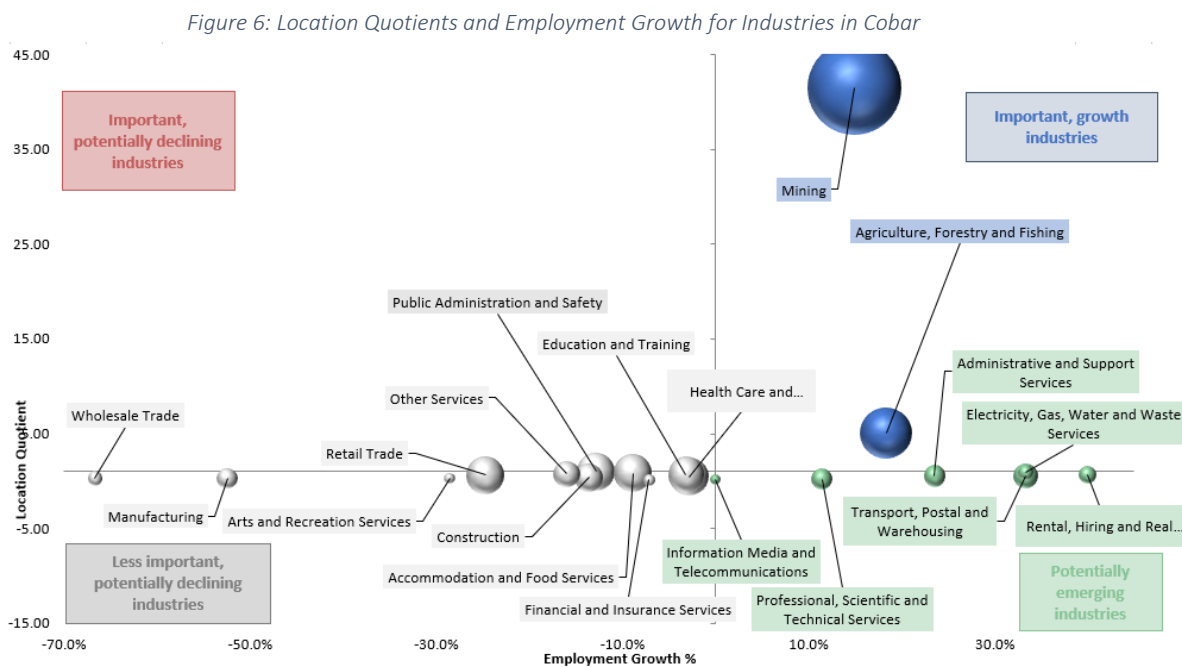
In 2016 Mining was the dominant industry in Cobar accounting for 32% of employment with a location quotient of 41.48 overall. Mining is currently a specialisation in Cobar and employment is growing faster in the region than the state average. Mining is an important growth industry, coloured blue in Figure 6.

ABR data for Cobar reveals that there are 27 registered businesses where the principal activity is recorded as mining. Of these 16 are mining support services and 18 are mineral exploration services.

AGRICULTURE, FORESTRY AND FISHING

In 2016 the Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing Industry accounted for 12% of employment in Cobar with a location quotient of 5.10 overall. The Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing Industry is an important growth industry, coloured blue in Figure 6.

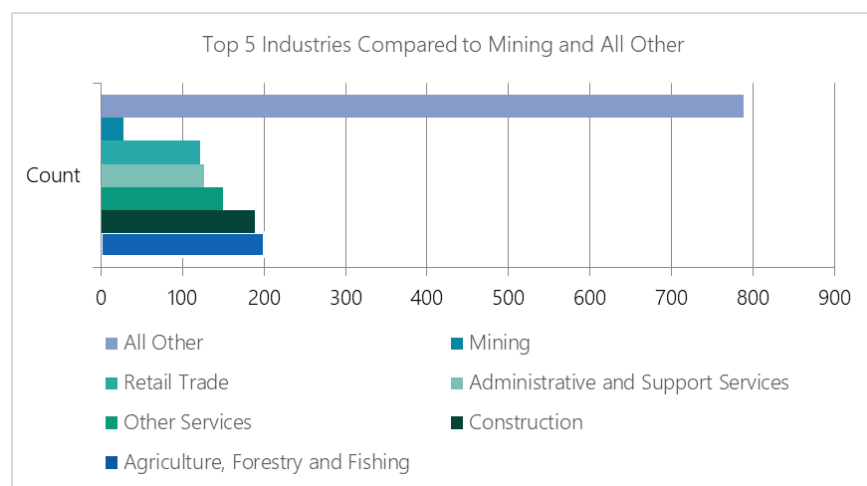
ABR data shows that there are 200 registered ABN's in Cobar of which 40 are listed as Hunting and Trapping while the predominant farming activity is sheep and beef cattle which accounts for over 50% of businesses (107).



REGISTERED BUSINESSES IN COBAR

The Australian Business Register for Cobar was obtained by Council for the purpose of exploring the number and type of businesses in the LGA. There were 1,602 businesses on the ABR. The top five were Agriculture – 200, Construction – 189, Other Services – 150, Administration and Support Services - 127, Retail Trade – 121. These top 5 businesses account for 51% of all businesses in Cobar and represented in Figure 7 below.

Figure 7 - Top 5 industries compared to mining



In breaking down the information for Construction we find that there are 40 Electrical, 21 site Preparation, 16 Carpentry, 16 Concreting Services and 11 House Construction Services businesses registered in Cobar.

It appears from the ABR data that there is an abundance of services available in Cobar. However, evidence from the survey and interviews with the community would suggest that there is a shortage of some of the services in the region.

In order to put this into context we explored Council rates data. Here there are 310 businesses that Council sends a rate notice to of these 280 are located in Cobar, while 15 have their rates notices sent to Victoria, 10 to

Queensland, 2 to South Australia and Canada and one each to the ACT, Western Australia and the Northern Territory. From this data we find that it is clear that many businesses that are located in Cobar are home based or are inactive where an ABN is registered but is not trading. Further research into the business community could provide opportunities to bring some of these small home-based companies into the Cobar CBD by offering shared workspaces and collaboration opportunities. It should be noted that the ABS reported 474 trading businesses in Cobar as at June 2020 and increase of 2.4% or 11 businesses over the previous year.

COBAR HOUSING STOCK

Council rate data was also explored for residential housing. There are 2,122 residential properties to which rate notices are sent to. Of these, 1,585 rate notices are sent to the Cobar post code and 545 (or 25%) are sent to postcodes other than Cobar. Of these 545 properties, 424 are other NSW addresses, 61 in Queensland, 22 in Western Australia, 18 in Victoria, 8 in South Australia, 6 in the ACT, 4 in the Northern Territory and 2 in New Zealand. Table 1 describes the top 5 suburbs where rate notices are sent other than Cobar. Of interest are the suburbs of Minore and Nyngan. Both are within 3 hours drive of Cobar and could be owned by a DIDO family.

Table 1 - Residential Property Count - Cobar

ADDRESS	COUNT_RESIDENTIAL
Cobar NSW	1585
Liverpool BC NSW	101
North Sydney NSW	74
Minore NSW	31
Royal Exchange NSW	30
Nyngan NSW	11

The 2016 census indicated that 21.8% of dwellings were unoccupied at that time which is much higher than the NSW average of 9.9%. The 2016 census also identified that there were 392 unoccupied private dwellings in Cobar.

The average people per household in Cobar is 2.4 which indicates that if all dwellings were occupied Cobar could sustain a population of 5,093 people.

PARTICIPATION IN SPORT

All sporting clubs were invited to participate in the community consultations and to provide data on the registrations of players in their respective sports. We received data from Junior and Senior Rugby League, Junior and Senior Rugby Union, Junior and Senior Netball, Little Athletics, the Auto Club, Girl Guides, and the local Dancing School. In this data it should be noted that not all sports could report data as far back as 2012. This was particularly true for Rugby League who only reported data from 2015. In fact, the only numbers represented here for 2012 are Junior Netball and Dancing.

If we consider 2015 as the baseline we can note that participation in sport started to decline from 2018.

This data set should be considered as an indicative representation of the overall participation rate in sport for Cobar. The survey and community consultation outcomes certainly seem to support the notion that sports are declining in Cobar.

Figure 8 Describes the data in graph form.

Figure 8 - Participation in Sport 2012 to 2020

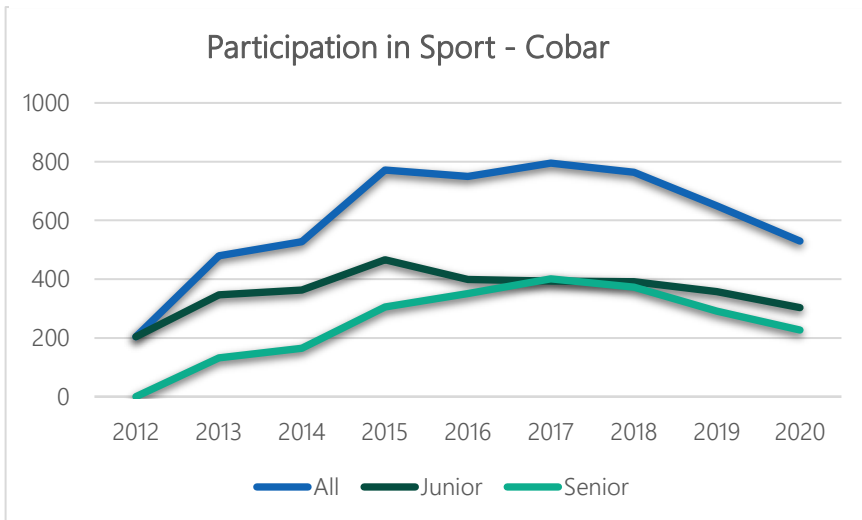


Image 3 - Cobar Football Netball Club Game - Courtesy the CFNC Facebook Page

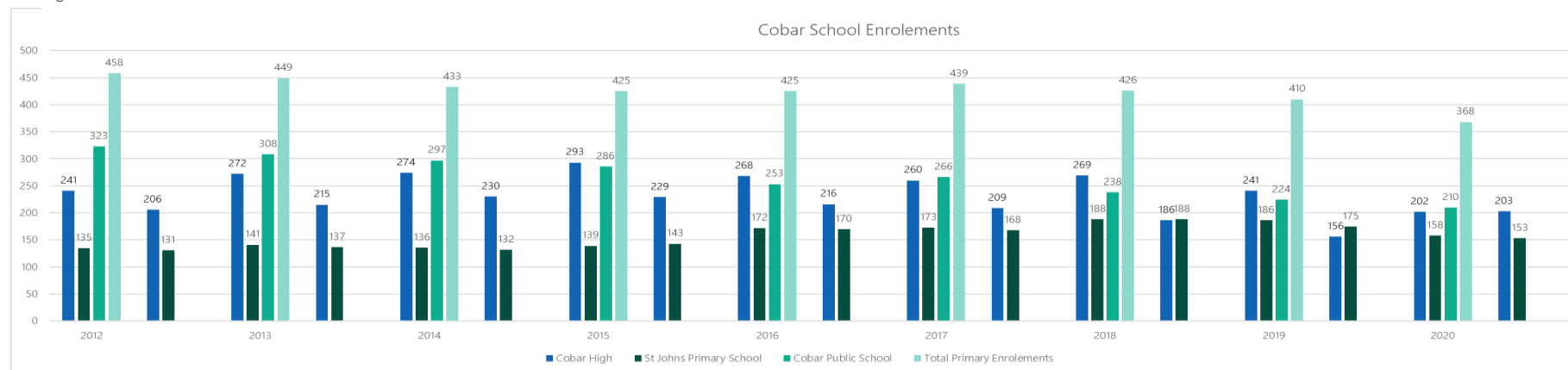


COBAR SCHOOLS

Much of the conversations in the two rounds of face to face consultation relating to schools was that the high school in particular was not of a standard that would attract students to it.

All schools provided data on school enrolments and this is reflected in Figure 9.

Figure 9 - school enrolment data



Total primary school data shows that total enrolments have declined by 19.7% over the study period of 2012 to 2020. The breakdown is interesting as St Johns Primary School has increased its enrolment compared to 2012 to 2020 by 117%. Cobar Public school has had a decline in enrolments of 65%.

Cobar High School has had a decline of 16.2% over the same period. On average Cobar High School loses 77 students per year from the beginning to the end of the year. Looking at all school enrolments the overall decline is 18.5% or 129 students.

There is very little evidence available on the quality of schools in the region. However, one measure that parents may use is NAPLAN results.

The National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) is a

comparison to the national average alone, it does not account for other important context, such as how a school compares to other schools with similar students or how a school's results may have improved against previous years.

The figures below were sourced from The National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN)

The first result is the school result and the second is the National Average. Cobar High School compares favourably to a similar school in Dubbo.

Table 2 - Cobar High School – Comparison to Dubbo College - NAPLAN Results

Cobar High	Year	READ		WRIT		SPEL		GRMR		NMCY	
		Score 1	Score 2	Score 1	Score 2	Score 1	Score 2	Score 1	Score 2	Score 1	Score 2
Year 7	2019	528	539	486	504	510	538	507	533	528	546
	2019	529	575	502	540	549	576	527	566	552	587
Dubbo College	Year	READ		WRIT		SPEL		GRMR		NMCY	
		Score 1	Score 2	Score 1	Score 2	Score 1	Score 2	Score 1	Score 2	Score 1	Score 2
Year 7	2019	508	539	486	504	518	538	499	533	502	546
	2019	531	575	519	540	555	576	527	566	544	587

COMMUNITY CONSULTATION

This project involved extensive consultation with Cobar Councillors and Staff, the general Cobar Community, the Business Community, Mine Managers, Schools, Sporting Organisations and FIFO/DIDO workers.

The consultation took the form of face to face interviews, group meetings and an online survey.

In Mid-September 2020 a series of eight meetings were held in Cobar to get an understanding of the issues facing the Cobar Community. This was a listening exercise and formed the basis for developing the online survey which was conducted during the month of October 2020.

The online survey was developed and advertised widely through social media, newspaper advertising and through direct email invitation. Our goal was to reach 32 respondents in each of the four categories targeted. After three qualifying questions respondents to the online survey were directed to one of the four online surveys. The survey was customised for each market segment and had common questions that underpinned the analysis. The four segments were, the Cobar community members, Cobar businesses, FIFO/DIDO workers and past residents of Cobar. A separate report has been prepared with a comprehensive review of the survey

The third round of consultation was held on the 17th, 18th and 19th of November 2020. This was a series of 11 face to face sessions with the full cross section of the Cobar community. The workshops reviewed the outcomes of the online survey and was used to ground truth the data collected from the survey.

KEY THEMES FROM THE FIRST ROUND OF COMMUNITY CONSULTATION

Consultations were held with key stakeholders that had been identified by the project team on the 9th and 10th of September 2020. These were face to face meetings adhering to strict COVID protocols for each meeting. Meetings were held with Cobar Shire Council, Cobar Public School, Cobar Business Association, Cobar Weekly, Cobar High School, St Johns Primary School and Mine managers from all of the principal mines in the region.

The purpose of the consultations was to listen to the key issues and opportunities that each of these groups had to form the structure of the development of the next phase of the work which was the online survey.

The following is a summary of the key comments from the collective of consultations. The outcome of this listening exercise helped to develop the online survey which was conducted through October 2020.

Key report themes as presented by Cobar Council

- Key report Aspects: - Attraction, Retention of citizens, and Tourism opportunities.
- Need to consider health aspects - need to define whether these relate to mine workers of the general population.
- Explore the perception that everyone is leaving town. It is likely that residents who have been in Cobar for a long time and loose friends to other towns. These long-term residents see the loss of their friends but don't see the new people coming to town.
- Investigate ways to lessen the dependence of mining employment in Cobar, principally by increasing the population.
- In order to lessen the dependence of mining on employment we will need to grow the population by a certain number or attract particular set of skills – so we want to look at how many more people we need to saturate the mines and develop new businesses to employ new people.
- Consider the turnover of people in Cobar and consider a strategy that acknowledges that people/families will only stay in Cobar for 3-4 years and make their time in the town – Amazing.
- Current school staffing is being supported by drought funding and when lost, critical teaching positions will be lost.
- Need to develop a strategy to increase the number of students for the schools.
- Mine employee negotiations at the time of the introduction of a 7/7 shift was employee driven and when offered, workers voted 100% in one mine and 89% in another mine.
- From 2004 there has been a deficit of mining engineers and from

this time the terms and conditions of these engineers has been very competitive.

- Mine operators do not provide a preferential arrangement to FIFO workers. In fact, they provide incentives for workers to live in Cobar by providing rent subsidies.
- They do pay for the flights of FIFO workers from Brisbane and Sydney Airports only. But no other support.
- Support is only offered to certain pay groups – mainly the Professionals group.
- A significant issue is that they can recruit staff however most have a partner and it is they who are a block to moving to Cobar, Therefore, FIFO is the only option.
- All mines spend significant time working with prospective families in showing them around to schools, child minding services and accommodation (such as a free house). There is no support from council for this activity.
- FIFO workers have about 1hr a day free time as they work a 12 Hr shift. Including 8hrs sleep, travel time between home and the mine, eating 2 meals and clean up time. Not such a great life.

SURVEY RESULTS

During the month of October 2020 an online survey was conducted. After three qualifying questions respondents to the online survey were directed to one of the four online surveys. The survey was customised for each market segment and had common questions that underpinned the analysis. The four segments were, the Cobar community members, Cobar businesses, FIFO/DIDO workers and past residents of Cobar.

In all 408 survey responses were received and our target of 32 responses that would allow statistically relevant sample sizes were achieved in three of the four categories. This is a very good result for a project like this and for a town the size of Cobar. The only one that did not achieve 32 responses was FIFO/DIDO workers with 26. We believe that we can draw sensible conclusions from that survey group.

COMMUNITY SURVEY RESULTS

There were 287 responses for the community survey which asked residents a range of demographic and liveability questions. The majority of participants were involved in employment associated with the mining industry (34%) followed by Education and Training (18%). Key results from the survey include:

- 50% of respondents reported a decrease over 10% of people in their neighbourhood. These respondents indicated that the changing of mining workday to 7 days on 7 days off and the closure of the Endeavor mine led to the declining population.
- Some respondents indicated that the services provided in Cobar changed with the change in mining work schedule. Many mentioned a lack of services including childcare services, medical services, and education quality.
- A majority of respondents ranked most of Cobar's infrastructure and amenities to be average. However, 50% of respondents ranked Cobar's parks and playgrounds to be above average, the highest 'above satisfactory' rating out of all of the services. Over 40% ranked air access, cafes and restaurants and water availability as below average.
- 91% of respondents indicated that a clean and reliable water supply was a very important part of the infrastructure and liveability of Cobar.
- Over 80% of respondents indicated that having a safe and clean community; and supporting families and young people to keep them in the region and providing a good quality of life were very important community strategies impacting the liveability of Cobar.

BUSINESS SURVEY RESULTS

There were 42 responses from the business survey which asked residents a range of demographic, business and liveability questions. Most participants were involved in employment associated with Mining (20%) or Retail trade (20%) or Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing (20%). Key results from the survey include:

- Most businesses are located in the region to service a local market (49%) followed by personal reasons (29%). Most respondents were operating small businesses with fewer than 20 employees.
- The highest-ranking infrastructure services by business owners included local parks and playgrounds (54%). Most infrastructure services ranked average (including roads, sporting facility, electricity availability, access to customer base, and mobile phone services). Many also ranked below satisfactory with 63% of respondents noting a lack of availability of qualified workers, 61% noting a lack of effective business support, and 71% noting a lack of access to specialized materials.
- The majority of respondents were not aware of any specific economic development programs offered by Cobar (61%). Only 5% of respondents utilised a program and found it beneficial to their business.
- Most of the respondents voted for more economic development support from Cobar Shire Council in the form of information on business development and strategic planning (25%) followed by marketing support (21%).

FIFO/DIDO SURVEY RESULTS

There were 26 responses from the Fly-In Fly-Out or Drive-In Drive-Out survey. Key results from the survey include:

- The majority of workers travel to Cobar from other areas of New South Wales, but some travel from interstate as well. 67% of respondents reported traveling to Cobar by car, while the other 33% reported traveling by plane.
- The majority of respondents work on a 7 on 7 off or 8 on 6 off roster schedule and work 12-hour long shifts. When workers are in Cobar, they primarily stay in the central business district or in a work provided accommodation on site (camp facility).
- The respondents rated the majority of infrastructure services and amenities in Cobar (such as roads, sporting facilities and playgrounds and parks) as average.
- Most of the respondents reported that they work in either Cobar surrounds or Nymagee.
- When asked about changes in employment over the past five years, respondents were mixed in their answers. An equal number of respondents believe that employment has increased by more than 10% as the amount that believes employment has decreased by more than 10%. 41% were unsure or believe there was no change in employment over the past five years.
- When asked about the likelihood of relocating permanently to Cobar from 0 to 10 with 10 being the highest and 0 the lowest, respondents on average ranked this at a 1. Many believe that Cobar wouldn't be able to support their family's needs. They cited things like lack of services, lack of employment opportunities for their spouses, and the education quality as reasons Cobar couldn't meet their needs.

FORMER COMMUNITY MEMBERS SURVEY

There were 53 responses from the survey designed for former members of the Cobar community. This survey was designed to find out why respondents left Cobar. Key results from the survey include:

- The majority of respondents were involved in employment related to the mining industry (36%).
- Around 43% of the responses cited a new job or career opportunity as at least one of the reasons they left Cobar. The second highest was due to a lack of or poor medical/health (mentioned in roughly 17% of responses). Schooling and family followed closely behind as a theme in roughly 11% of responses each.
- In order to attract and retain future residents most respondents highlighted the need for better healthcare. Some residents stated more specialists including those that address speech therapy, disabilities, etc.; others claimed more access to permanent doctors would be helpful in addition to improving and expanding medical services. Other higher-ranking themes included removing or reducing FIFO/DIDO, increasing job opportunities for adults and teenagers, and adding more retail/restaurants.
- A majority of respondents ranked most of Cobar's infrastructure and amenities to be average. None of the services and amenities were ranked above average. However, 58% of respondents ranked Cobar's Air Access to be below satisfactory, and 62% ranked Water Availability to be below satisfactory.
- While many former community members stated a positive experience during their time in Cobar, concerns did arise such as the lack of things to do, limited health services, lack of retail/restaurants, and lack of career options.

KEY THEMES FROM THE SECOND ROUND OF COMMUNITY CONSULTATION

A second round of face to face consultation was conducted in November after the survey had closed and the results analysed. The purpose of this consultation was to ground truth the outcomes of the survey that would ultimately lead into the development of a number of strategies for Cobar Shire Council. Eleven meetings were held over three days supported by Council staff and all of the Cobar community was invited to attend. The same presentation was provided to all meetings. The following are the key perceptions from that series of meetings.

- Feeling that the town has declined and that a vibe "like Parkes" needs to be created to rejuvenate Cobar. There is volunteer burnout however others feel that the community spirit is high but this hasn't been observed by all parts of the community.
- The community needs to work with the mines to improve mine worker turnover and target lower level trades to stay in town.
- There is a disconnect between Council and the business community with some reporting that Cobar's regulations are more difficult to navigate. Council could do more to support the business community and facilitate economic development.
- Cobar needs to diversify its economic base and can pivot into tourism.
- Medical facilities in Cobar are inadequate.
- The school community in Cobar needs to work on marketing, teacher retention, improving subject options for students and getting better internet services.
- Create a partnership between the high school and the Council and Businesses to try and keep kids in town and have them engaged earlier
- There is a lack of accommodation in Cobar.
- Council needs to improve its communication with the community and can do more to facilitate community activities and events.
- Need to get 18- 25-year-old kids involved in sport.
- Staffing a business is hindering new organisations as there isn't

- enough people to work in them.
- Need to create things to do in the villages such as the historic goat races and the Nymagee Gymkhana.
 - Town nearly ran out of water in 2019 and this was of great concern to the town. Water security is a higher value than water quality.
 - Childcare facilities are significantly inadequate.
 - Negative FIFO comments are not helping them feel welcome and drives them away.
 - Promote success stories at council, in the community, and in the schools.
 - Can't get breakfast or a coffee on Sunday.
 - Potential to open NSW Government offices such as NSW Mine Inspectors.
 - Promote Cobar as a COVID safe place to live, work visit and play.

Image 4 - Cobar Shire Councillor Workshop



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²[Interaction Design Foundation](#)

wicked problem is a social or cultural problem that's difficult or impossible to solve—normally because of its complex and interconnected nature.² This study aims to unravel the complex issues facing Cobar and to provide a pathway to resolving those issues. This will be a challenging process and it will take the collective effort of Cobar Shire Council, the business community and the mining operators to embrace these strategies and implement them

Mining is the principal industry in Cobar and it has been since the town was established over 150 years ago. The industry has seen boom and bust over that time and like most industries has seen a steady change in technology and staffing arrangements. This has impacted on Cobar, its way of life, and its future.

The evidence is clear that the change to a 7 day/12-hour roster has had an impact on the residents and the social make up of Cobar. This change was, as we understand it, an initiative of the mine workers who mostly lived in Cobar at the time. The change in roster allowed the opportunity for workers to Fly In and Fly Out or Drive In and Drive out of Cobar for work. This also expanded the reach of the mines to employ staff that were not residents. Consulting with mine Managers indicated that they have a definite preference to have their workforce living in town. It was also clear from the FIFO/DIDO survey that many believe that Cobar wouldn't be able to support their family's needs. They cited things like lack of services, lack of employment opportunities for their spouses, and the education quality as reasons Cobar couldn't meet their needs.

However, the FIFO/DIDO work arrangement will not change and Cobar Shire Council and the Cobar community need to realise this fact and embrace it if the town is to survive and thrive.

Two rounds of consultations and the survey highlighted the lack of services. This included healthcare, childcare, and water security as the headline "liveability" issues facing Cobar.

One of the most common issues raised in our consultation is the lack of healthcare. Many comments identified that there were three mines in Cobar and a lack of primary health services such as being able to set a broken arm or to give birth. This issue is commonplace in regional Australia and there is no quick fix.

For families to live and work in Cobar, childcare is an important component of life. Many respondents identified this an issue. At the time of the last census there were about 400 children in the 0-4 age bracket in Cobar. Anecdotal evidence in our consultations indicated that this age range has potentially swelled since the 2016 census. The only childcare facility in Cobar is Kubby House which has 31 places and this caters for less than 8% of the children in the 0-4 age bracket. More places are needed to cater for the demand.

Employment is a very "mixed bag" as FIFO/DIDO workers identified a lack of opportunities for spouses as a key reason that they would not consider settling in Cobar. The LGA has 0.9% unemployment and has more jobs available than people to fill them. Cobar needs to have FIFO/DIODO workers to settle into Cobar and fill the jobs that are available. The latest statistics available (Sept 2020) indicate that 20 people in Cobar are looking for work.

In order for people to settle in Cobar they will need a place to live. Evidence from the survey and the consultations indicate that mine workers generally stay at the mines for two years, therefore are unlikely to buy a house unless they are convinced that Cobar is a place to settle. Therefore, having a good stock of rental properties is critical to the long-term success of the town. We have identified that there are potentially 400 unoccupied private dwellings in Cobar. There were only eight available for rent (Domain March 7, 2021), and 40 houses for sale (Domain, March 7, 2021). Many of these properties are in a state of disrepair and are not overly attractive to new residents. It is likely that the remaining housing stock is largely in the ownership of mining companies. These properties should over time be made available to the market for sale or as rentals.

Over the past two years Cobar and much of Australia experienced its worst

drought in recorded history. Cobar has as sufficient allocation to meet the towns unrestricted water demand in most years. The last drought saw this allocation as being quite vulnerable. We understand that a resolution of Council appointed a consultant to prepare an Integrated Water Cycle Management Plan in September 2020. This plan should consider the implications of the last drought.

Schools appear to be a pinch point with a lot of families in the region. In particular there were many comments during our consultation about Cobar High School. We heard on a number of occasions that parents made choices to leave Cobar at the end of year 6 to take their child to a different High School with better educational outcomes and more choice of subjects.

The population pyramid for Cobar shows evidence of this where the number of children declines by about 100 between the ages of 5-9 and 10-14. This part of the population appears lost to Cobar until the age of 30 – 34 when that age group starts to recover. Compared to the rest of NSW, Cobar has a higher proportion of children in the 0-9 age group but an average proportion in the 10-14 age group providing further evidence of the loss of the population around the 10-year-old. Schools will play a major role in keeping families in the town by communication and marketing strategies.

The Cobar Business Association (CBA) has a good relationship with Cobar Shire Council, but does not represent all businesses in the LGA. In consultation with the CBA it was noted that they had about 40 members (less than 10% of businesses in Cobar – 474 as at June 2020 - ABS) and struggled to get the members involved in activities. The Business Community survey revealed that there is some tension between some Businesses reporting that the relationship they had with Council was very poor. They were not aware of any economic development or support that Council offered and that often it was impossible to do business in Cobar. Council has a significant role to play in the overall success of Cobar. This provides an opportunity for the Business Community to unite through the Cobar Business Association and work hand in hand with Cobar Shire Council.

In many other regional and rural towns of similar size, investments have been made in Economic Development and working with the business community to help the towns prosper. Two examples are Narromine and Parkes. These Councils have very clear Economic Development strategies that are well staffed and they are highly successful. The feedback we received was that Cobar Shire Council is somewhat the opposite to this. Perhaps an indicator is that there are no dedicated Economic Development staff in Council and the current Economic Development Strategy of 2017 has largely been ignore

One clear strategy is the promotion of events to attract tourism to Cobar. Council has a key role in attracting and assisting in developing a program of events. Some events are already established or establishing, and these need to be encouraged and supported by Council. There needs to be a clear strategy to capture the Grey Nomad community. This may involve reinstating free camping at the Newey or developing a picturesque free camping site in or near the Cobar CBD. One business owner told us during consultations that their business lost around \$100,000 in revenue as a result of the ban on free camping.

Image 5 FMG - Photo Credit Samantha Smith



STRATEGY

The six Strategies for Cobar link directly to the opportunities that have been identified in this research and aims to address some key regional risks. It is assumed that all participants in the consultations will be a party in some way to the outcome of each strategy. Principally Cobar Shire Council will be responsible for the implementation and coordination of the Strategies.

Each Strategy is designed to be on one page. This makes it easier to implement, makes it succinct and allows the document to be easily shared.

The Strategies were derived from an analysis of the specialisations of the region and deep community consultation.

Organisational Priorities are designed to provide guidance for Council on internal processes required to be put in place to allow the Strategies to be implemented. Infrastructure Priorities are designed to provide guidance on what priorities are required to be funded and built or put in place to allow the outcome of the Strategy to be realised.

Each Strategy contains Inputs, Activities, Outputs, Intermediate Outcomes and Strategy Outcomes. These provide a pathway to achieving the desired outcomes.

THE SIX ECONOMIC RESILIENCY STRATEGIES

STRATEGY ONE – CREATE A THRIVING AND ENGAGED COMMUNITY

STRATEGY TWO – RETAIN THE 10-YEAR-OLD CHILD

STRATEGY THREE – EMBRACE FIFO AND DIDO WORKERS

STRATEGY FOUR – SECURE THE REGION'S WATER RELIABILITY

STRATEGY FIVE – GROW REGIONAL TOURISM

STRATEGY SIX - SUPPORT COBAR'S BUSINESS COMMUNITY

Strategy Outcome

A thriving and engaged community where people want to live and work.

Intermediate Outcome

Improved perception of the quality of life in Cobar.

Outputs

The social amenity of Cobar is improved.

Quality internet and phone infrastructure.

Improved access to essential health services.

Marketing strategy for Cobar schools.

Activities

Develop and action town beautification strategy.

Encourage the development and renovation of residential properties.

Invest in mobile and internet connectivity.

Develop a marketing strategy for Cobar schools.

Negotiate improved health and child care facilities.

Create a Work In Cobar job portal and advertise Expressions of Interest to work in Cobar.

Inputs

Funding for town beautification.

Resource funding for essential services such as healthcare, childcare and support services.

Coordinate with NBN Co. and mobile service providers.

Coordinate with the retail and food and beverage industry.

Resource a specialised Economic Development position within Council.

STRATEGY 1: Create a Thriving and Engaged Community

A key theme emerging from the stakeholder consultation and survey was the perception that Cobar lacked the services, activities and jobs required to support families. Survey respondents cited a lack of adequate healthcare, specialist care and education in Cobar. For miners working in Cobar there was a belief that there are few job opportunities for their spouses. Community consultation also highlighted the lack of liveable accommodation as an impediment to attracting new people to Cobar.

Infrastructure priorities

Develop and renovate residential property: The lack of adequate residential property has been cited by various stakeholders as an impediment to attracting labour into the towns of the Region, even when there is work available. Cobar can encourage the refurbishment and renovation of existing properties and the development of new residential property. Potential reforms to existing guidelines may encourage investment into this area.

Develop town beautification strategies: Actions such as cleaning and maintaining public parks and squares and helping local businesses repaint and brand their stores are all examples of things that towns can do to 'lift up' their communities. Maintaining the appearance of the town can also encourage passing visitors to stop and spend. A sense of civic pride associated with living in a place that looks and feels like a healthy and vibrant community can instil a culture of community in residents that encourages them to stay and work in the Shire.

Invest in internet and phone connectivity: the ADSL internet connection and existing mobile network currently available in Cobar is inadequate to support growing businesses and deters remote workers from living in Cobar. The Shire can coordinate with NBN Co. and mobile service providers to improve services to the region.

Organisational Priorities

Invest in the provision of essential health services: Several stakeholders have highlighted that the lack of adequate healthcare and specialist care are barriers to living and staying in Cobar. The Shire can provide incentives to medical professionals to live and work in Cobar.

Develop a marketing strategy for Cobar schools: The perception that there are better education opportunities in other towns is a major factor contributing to the migration of families out of Cobar. The Shire can develop a collaborative marketing strategy to enhance the reputation of Cobar's schools and attract students and families to the region.

Invest in the development of the retail and food and beverage industry: A healthy and vibrant retail and food and beverage industry contributes to a sense of community and can help maintain and attract residents. The Shire can provide incentives to business operators in these industries to develop the town centre.

Develop and promote recreation activities: Stakeholder consultation indicated that there weren't enough 'things to do' in Cobar. The Shire can develop better marketing strategies to highlight the unique natural endowments and events in the region.

Consolidate job opportunities: Community consultation and the low unemployment rate indicates that there are more job opportunities in Cobar available than expected. Cobar can dispute the notion that there are few job and career opportunities by developing and promoting an online interface with available jobs in the region. This may assist mining families in deciding to move to Cobar as lack of job opportunities for spouses has been noted as a deterrent to living in the region. By creating an Expression of Interest approach to the job market could create a pool of potential employees that could be call on in future years. As an example, "Expression of Interest for Electrician's to live and work in Cobar."

Promote TAFE: Education opportunities at Cobar TAFE can be promoted at Cobar Highschool to encourage the development of skills required in the region.

Strategy Outcome

Families decide to keep their children in Cobar schools and work in the Shire rather than migrating to another region.

Intermediate Outcome

Better perception of the quality of education available in Cobar.

Greater sense of community built around after school activities.

Steadily increased number of students being retained by all schools in Cobar.

Outputs

E-learning capabilities.

A successful Marketing campaign.

Teacher tenure is improved.

Collaboration between primary and high schools.

A healthy and vibrant community built around after school activities.

Activities

Invest in e-learning capabilities.

Invest in a marketing campaign promoting local schools.

Support after school activities.

Invest in a teacher retention strategy.

Inputs

Coordinate with Cobar primary school and High School.

Resource funding activities to leverage State and Federal opportunities.

STRATEGY 2: Retaining the 10-year old child

One of the key obstacles to retaining residents in Cobar was attributed to the perception of better education opportunities in other towns. Community consultation with schools in the region indicated that many parents will leave the region once their children have completed year 6 or around 10 years of age for education opportunities elsewhere. A key strategy to retain working age parents in Cobar includes 'retaining the 10-year old child' – which involves improving the perception of Cobar's education facilities and the liveability of Cobar to attract and maintain families.

Infrastructure priorities

Invest in e-learning: Stakeholder consultation highlighted the lack of range of subjects available to students at Cobar High School. The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 saw all educational institutions create an on-line learning environment. Further developing e-learning capabilities will improve education opportunities and make Cobar High School more attractive to students when selecting the subjects they would like to undertake in High School.

The infrastructure enabler for creating an online environment is high speed high band with internet. Stakeholder consultation indicated that the High School in particular did not have sufficient band width to sustain an on-line learning environment.

Organisation Priorities

Fund research into attracting and attaching 10 year-old children: encouraging a sense of attachment to place will encourage families to stay in Cobar. Further research into attachment to place for young children is required to understand the factors involved in people's decision to stay or leave a region. This study provides some baseline data into the factors that influence the family decision to stay or leave Cobar. Further research will enhance the successful outcome of this strategy.

Encourage cross-promotion between primary and high schools: create opportunities for schools to develop collaborative relationships so that primary schools can promote Cobar High school as a superior education option. This will assist in retaining youth and therefore families in the region.

Retention of teachers in Cobar: Many teachers are placed in Cobar in the early stage of their careers to enable them to gain placements in metropolitan schools and promotion opportunities quicker. Retaining teachers for longer in all schools will help to instil a level of confidence in the schools for parents. Having teachers engaged in the community that is vibrant will help to keep them for longer.

Develop a marketing Strategy for Cobar High School: Promote the achievements and school ranking of Cobar High School to develop the school's reputation as a quality school. This will encourage parents to enrol their children in Cobar Highschool and to stay in the Shire.

Support after school activities: enhance the sense of community by developing after school activities such as team sports, dance and other recreational activities. Developing community activities outside of school will encourage students to stay in Cobar as they have a sense of belonging in the community.

Strategy Outcome

Current FIFO and DIDO workers decide to live in Cobar with their families.

Intermediate Outcome

Better perception of the quality of life available in Cobar.
FIFO/DIDO workers spend short stays in Cobar and participate in community life.

Outputs

Community Centres that meet more of the needs of FIFO/DIDO families and individuals.
Workers stay in Cobar after their shift changes for activities.

Activities

Create a welcome to Cobar day for DIDO families on a regular basis.
Develop activities that are attractive to FIFO/DIDO workers at shift changeover.
Develop a collaboration space that keeps workers returning on a regular basis.

Inputs

Funding to develop community centres.
Create a working group with Council, Mines and the Business Community to implement this strategy.

STRATEGY 3: Embrace FIFO and DIDO workers

FIFO and DIDO workers are a reality in Cobar not just for the mining sector but for all businesses in Cobar, including Cobar Shire Council an abundance of work and a lack of workers is a principal indicator of this. These workers cited a lack of services, a lack of employment opportunities for their spouses and education quality as some of the reasons Cobar did not meet their needs. Council needs to embrace these workers and welcome them into the community to help promote the Shire as an attractive place to live and work. Of those who responded to the survey 66% were DIDO workers which provides a significant opportunity to encourage them to live and work in Cobar. 33% travel between 500 and 100k to get to work and 22% travel more than 1000km and 44% live in the Cobar CBD when they are working and 62% had children.

While at work all mine workers on shift have around 1 hour a day leisure time and so targeting outside shifts is critical to this strategy's success.

Infrastructure priorities

Develop community Centres to meet the needs of FIFO/DIDO families: In the FIFO/DIDO survey respondents reported that community centres could be made more attractive and useful by including counselling services, helping workers find housing and developing an emergency hotline.

Develop collaboration spaces: These could include activities such as brew clubs where members of the community can brew beer, cider or make wine. These activities don't require participants to be there all the time and a two weekly cycle would be ideal.

Develop a number of short-term rentals for FIFO/DIDO families: A certain amount of housing stock would be renovated and primarily used for non-resident families to lease during school holidays and interact into the community. This would be a collaboration with the mining companies that own vacant housing stock.

Organisational Priorities

Develop a DIDO attraction strategy: Cobar can collaborate with mining companies to promote the quality of life available in Cobar and incentivise workers to stay in the region rather than take up the DIDO lifestyle. This strategy works alongside Strategy 1.

Market Activities directly to FIFO/DIDO workers: The survey identified that outdoor activities such as the Newey was used by 46% of workers in this category. Designing activities that coincide with the shift change will encourage workers to either come early or stay later if there are activities that attract them to stay. Wake Boarding on the Newey could be an example of this.

Target School Holiday activities in Cobar for FIFO/DIDO workers families: School holidays are perfect opportunities for non-resident workers to come to Cobar and interact will activities that give families an opportunity to see what the place is all about. These activities would also be made available to the general public and not be exclusive

Strategy Outcome

Residents and Industry are more satisfied with water reliability in Cobar.

Intermediate Outcome

Residents have greater access to water during times of drought.

Mining, Agribusinesses and Cobar Businesses can develop without uncertainty around water availability.

Water is available for parks and sporting facilities thereby facilitating continued community sports.

Outputs

Water security is improved.

Mining, Agriculture and Businesses are not constrained by water availability.

Activities

Develop and Implement an IWCM.

Invest in small scale water infrastructure projects.

Develop Business Cases for water infrastructure projects supported by the IWCM.

Inputs

Funding for water recycling feasibility study.

Coordinate with Water NSW.

Coordinate with DPIE-Water.

STRATEGY 4: Secure the regions water availability

Survey participants rated having a clean and reliable water supply as being very important to the livability of Cobar (73%). The majority of stakeholders surveyed also ranked water infrastructure in Cobar as below satisfactory which highlights the importance of improving water infrastructure in the Shire. Water availability is insecure during drought periods impacting mining, agriculture and the livability of the town.

Water security was also a constraint on the long-term viability of the mining industry

Infrastructure priorities

Invest in regional and small-scale water infrastructure projects: Regional-scale water security infrastructure to increase the reliability of supply and reduce the risk that any part of the Region has shortages.

At the same time, investment in small-scale water efficiency projects that reduce losses in the system will reduce costs and uncertainty. Stakeholders engaged in consultations identify the effects of prolonged periods of drought, and uncertainty in future water security as reasons for declines in population and activity in Mining and Agriculture. This action has been identified as a priority for Cobar.

Commission a feasibility study on a water recycling plant: Maintaining adequate water supplies in Cobar may be possible with a water recycling plant. Cobar can investigate the feasibility of this option as a method of securing water for the community and industry.

Support the developed Integrated Water Cycle Management Plan (IWCM): Once developed the IWCM should be fully supported and implemented by Council.

Organisational Priorities

Develop an Integrated Water Cycle Management Plan: We understand that Cobar Shire Council has engaged a series of consultants to develop an Integrated Water Cycle Management Plan (IWCM). Fundamentally an IWCM should provide guidance to Council on the infrastructure requirements of Cobar for the next 30 years. In the past IWCM's all over NSW have fundamentally failed as all Regional Water Utilities have sufficient Town Water Supply Entitlements to provide an unrestricted supply of water. The IWCM being developed should consider indirect-potable water recycling to enhance its water security options.

Identify and Develop Business Cases for funding of water projects: Council should develop a suite of Business Cases to support the infrastructure priorities identified in the IWCM.

Strategy Outcome

A vibrant tourism industry which supports local businesses and develops Cobars reputation as a destination.

Intermediate Outcome

Increase in the number of tourists in Cobar.
Additional spend in tourism related businesses in Cobar.

Outputs

A Tourism, Events and Museum Business Plan.
A marketing strategy for Cobars big events.
Improved facilities required to host events and campervans.

Activities

Develop the "Visit Cobar Shire" website.
Develop and implement a Tourism, Events and Museum Business Plan.
Develop a marketing strategy for Cobars big events.
Reinstate free camping at the Newey.

Inputs

Funding for the Tourism, Events and Museum Business Plan.
Funding to develop infrastructure to host events and campervan tourism.
Council to engage a dedicated internal resource to support this strategy.

STRATEGY 5: Grow regional tourism and events

Cobar has a range of events and natural endowments to attract visitors to the area. Developing tourism in Cobar will help diversify the region's economy and support sub-industries of the tourism industry including the Accommodation and Food Services, Retail Trade and Arts and Recreation Services industry.

Infrastructure priorities

Develop the "Visit Cobar Shire" website: this website has the potential to attract more visitors to Cobar by highlighting some of the events taking place in the region such as the Cobar markets and Cobar races. By showcasing the diverse range of events taking place in Cobar at any given time, the Shire can attract regional tourists.

Develop the infrastructure needed to host events: Cobar needs to ensure it has the right infrastructure such as event tents and portable toilets to ensure the Shire can host a large number of people.

Improve the facilities required for campervans: grey nomads will become an increasingly large tourist segment and having the facilities to accommodate campervans will help Cobar stand out as a destination.

Organisational Priorities

Develop and implement a Tourism, Events and Museum Business Plan: The Shire could enhance tourism in the region by developing a range of interesting annual events and through promoting activities, attractions and cultural experiences that are available in Cobar to locals and tourists.

Promote local businesses at events: Cobar can provide pop-up stalls at events which will enable existing businesses to showcase their unique products and services to a new audience. This can help enhance the visitor experience whilst supporting local businesses in acquiring new customers.

Extend local business opening hours during events: encourage local businesses to extend their opening hours during big events to capitalise on the extra tourists in Cobar looking for things to do once then event has ended.

Develop a marketing strategy for Cobar's big events: Cobar has a range of popular events including the Grey Mardi Gras, Running on Empty Festival and the Local Agricultural Show. Cobar can extend the reach of these events through developing a marketing strategy to attract more visitors.

Collaborate with local providers before big events: At the last Running on Empty Festival it was reported that Cobar ran out of food and fuel for those visiting the Shire. Cobar can collaborate with local providers of food and fuel to ensure the Shire has adequate supplies for visitors during big events.

Reinstate free camping at the Newey Reservoir: free camping grounds at the Newey Reservoir attracted grey nomads who then spent time and money in the region. Stakeholder consultation indicated that the removal of free camping at the Newey Reservoir adversely impacted revenue and the tourism industry in Cobar.

Strategy Outcome

Growth in existing and new businesses in Cobar.

Intermediate Outcome

Improved perception of the support available to businesses in Cobar.

Outputs

A well recognised business development program.
A business mentoring program.
Improved customer service.

Activities

Improve the Council customer service experience.
Develop a local procurement policy.
Develop a common workspace for small businesses.

Inputs

Funding for a Business Development Program.
Funding for a business mentoring program.
Funding for a Business Development Officer role

STRATEGY 6: Support the business community

There were 474 businesses in the Cobar Shire LGA as of June 2020 which is an increase of 2.4% or 11 businesses over the previous year. 60% of the survey responses were engaged in Agribusiness, Mining and Retail Trading and almost all were located in Cobar. Of those who responded 73% had either no change or had increased their staff numbers over the past five years. Consultation with the business community in Cobar indicated that more support and collaboration from the Council in terms of business development and marketing would be beneficial to businesses.

Infrastructure priorities

Develop a Common Workspace for small Businesses: As identified in this report a large number of businesses do not have employees that are located in Cobar. In 2019 the ABS identify 282 of the 462 businesses in Cobar fall into this category. The development of a shared workspace in Cobar's CBD would allow these businesses to collaborate and have access to NBN Internet, printers, copiers and meeting spaces that are not in someone's lounge room. A scaled version of the NAB small business hub should be considered

Organisational Priorities

Create a business development program: The majority of business survey respondents were not aware of any economic development programs run by Council. In addition, those who would not recommend locating or expanding a business to Cobar cited the lack of support for new industry and business. Cobar can create a business development program to support new and existing businesses access grants, learn new skills and market their business.

Develop a business mentoring program: Cobar can facilitate a week or month of online workshops with business experts to help grow the regions existing businesses. These workshops can cover an array of topics which address some of the pain points experienced by local businesses.

Hire a Community Liaison Officer: Council should create a Community Liaison Officer role to act as a conduit between council and businesses and associations in Cobar. The Community Liaison Officer would assist in cutting red tape and facilitate the business mentoring program.

Improve the council customer service experience: Of the business survey respondents who had an experience with the council, most rated the experience as negative. There is scope for Cobar Shire Council to improve its relationship management and customer service with the business community.

Reinvigorate the Cobar Quids initiative: encourage local residents to shop locally by reinvigorating the Cobar Quids initiative. The initiative involves exchanging a Cobar Quid for goods and services at participating local businesses.

Develop a FIFO/DIDO buy local strategy: work with mining companies to promote Cobar's unique businesses and attractions to FIFO/DIDO workers to encourage them to spend local whilst they are working in Cobar.

Facilitate Carbonfarming/Biobanking opportunities: Cobar can leverage the development of a Carbon Farming/Biobanking industry in the Shire by facilitating events and information nights with Biobanking experts.

IMPLEMENTATION

The effective implementation of the Strategy will involve the key stakeholders and Cobar community that contributed to its development, including all sectors, Mining Companies, Local Businesses, Cobar Schools, Sporting Groups and Cobar Shire Council as well as state government agencies.

The completion of this document is intended to be the first stage of an ongoing process where new specific actions to further progress the Vision – COBAR SURVIVING AND THRIVING are identified through application of the Strategies.

It is therefore recommended that an Advisory Committee made up of representatives from each representative group and other groups where identified be established to progress the implementation of actions listed in this Strategy, and apply the Strategy's framework to identify new actions to be added, where appropriate. The Committee should develop key performance indicators and evaluate outcomes.

The Advisory Committee would meet every quarter and would report progress on actions to Cobar Shire Council who is ultimately responsible for the implementation and management of this Strategy.

To support the efforts described in this document Cobar Shire Council will need to invest in the creation of a dedicated Economic Development role that will have overall responsibility for implementing this Resiliency Strategy. This role should be supported by a Council Grants Officer as many of the strategies outlined herein will require the support of the State and Federal Governments.

Upon the release of the 2021 census in early 2022, the Advisory Committee will initiate an update of the data underpinning the current Strategy. The Strategy should be formally reviewed in mid-2024 and completely updated upon the census data release in 2027.

As part of this project Balmoral Group would be prepared to conduct a workshop to initiate the Advisory Committee and help Develop suitable KPI's.

PROGRAM EVALUATION

A Program Evaluation is a systematic method of analysing the effectiveness and efficiency of this Strategy. An evaluation provides an independent assessment of the progress of this Strategy against its intended effect. While a program evaluation first focuses around this definition, important considerations often include how much the Strategy costs, how the Strategy could be improved, whether the Strategy is worthwhile, whether there are better alternatives, if there are unintended outcomes, and whether the Strategy goals are appropriate and useful.

It is recommended that a Strategy Evaluation be conducted in June 2024 allowing sufficient time for the Advisory Committee to get work underway and start implementing the key strategies. It is likely that just setting up the Advisory Committee, recruiting staff, and developing the programs will take 12 months. After which the updated census data will be available.

Image 7- Entrance to Cobar Rugby Club - Photo Credit Grant Leslie



