



# MOUNT BARKER REGIONAL ROUND TABLE REPORT



**MARCH 4 2024**  
**MOUNT BARKER DISTRICT**  
**COUNCIL CHAMBERS**

Dealing with growth in SA's fastest growing regional city

# SACOSS Mount Barker regional round table Report

Mount Barker District Council Chambers

4 March 2023, 9:30 am-12:30 pm

<b><i>SACOSS secretariat, Policy Council and Board members present:</i></b>
Craig Bradbrook (Playgroup Association of SA), Oliver Carlton (TACSI), Kayla Dickeson (DRAS), Fiona Endacott (Connecting Foster & Kinship Carers SA), Melissa Gibson (Child & Family Focus SA), Geoff Harris (Mental Health Coalition of SA), Tania Manser (Sonder), Geoff Slack (Yourplace Housing), Bill Skinner (SACOSS), Susan Tilley (SACOSS), Rebecca Tooher (SACOSS),  <i>Online:</i> Jala Burton, Nikki Candy (Working Women’s Centre SA), Chelsey Potter (Uniting Communities), Harry Randhawa (Uniting Country SA), Kristina Roberts (proxy for Shane Maddocks) (ac.care), Simon Rowberry (Barkuma), Karen Smith, Michael White (SANDAS), David Adamson (SACOSS Board), Kelly Vincent (SACOSS Board).
<b><i>Sector members present:</i></b>
Karrin Blatchford (Zahra Foundation), Jade Brook (Love Out Loud), Louise Byrne (Mission Australia), Ben Coll (Mission Australia), Ros Cameron (Mount Barker High School), Jaime Cook (Rebekha Sharkie MP), Lana Dulic (Centacare), Ben Footner (District Council of Mount Barker), Bianca Hawkins (Summit Health ConnectCare), Tina Hill (CLA) Sue Horsnell (HCO), Kelly Hughes (Lutheran Care), Airlie Keen (Dan Cregan MP), Mark Kulinski (Community Living Australia), Sandy Langridge (Access4U), David Leach (Mayor, District Council of Mount Barker), Sharon McDougall (Mission Australia), Ingrid Puise (Headspace), Lin Rocks (Summit Health Care Finder), Anne Ross (District Council of Mount Barker), Anthony Tucker (Mission Australia), Hayley Willis (Department of Education).

## Introduction

Within the next decade, Mount Barker is forecast to become South Australia’s largest regional city. As our towns and cities grow rapidly, social services and infrastructure must keep pace with this rapid growth. This needs to happen in a way that works for everyone - equitable and appropriate housing standards, infrastructure that serves community needs, and accessible services are key foundations of good development.

The regional round table event, facilitated by SACOSS and hosted by the Mount Barker District Council on Monday, March 4, provided an opportunity for Policy Council and Board members to engage with members of the community services sector and representatives from local, state and federal government on crucial issues of development in the region. Views and perspectives from

local service providers are particularly important: what is going well, and what is going not so well? What programs, strategies and networks are particularly important, and how might things be improved towards broader goals of social equity? How do we make sure that nobody gets left behind?

Overall, the aim of this round table was to identify lessons and highlight connections that might benefit ongoing development and shaping of the Mount Barker region, as well as other parts of South Australia – particularly outside the Adelaide metropolitan area – that might face similar social and community issues relating to urban growth.

## **Opening addresses from SACOSS Acting CEO and Mount Barker District Council Mayor**

SACOSS' Acting CEO, Rebecca Tooher, provided a brief introduction to SACOSS as the independent peak body for the non-government health and community services sector in South Australia and its mission in working towards justice, opportunity and shared wealth for all. For Mount Barker and for other growing regional cities, towns and communities, there is a real risk that health, transport and other community infrastructure and services may be unable to keep up with rapid growth, potentially entrenching existing disadvantage. SACOSS has been active in advocating in the region around efficiency standards in housing: developments that do not prioritise energy efficiency will cost occupants significantly in the long run, impacting renters and those on low incomes most acutely.

Mount Barker Mayor David Leach addressed the meeting, providing insight into the most important concerns facing the region and Council. The most pressing of these relate to the pace of growth: with another 20,000 people forecast to move into the region, there is a struggle to provide not only accessible and affordable housing, but the basic infrastructure to service this growth. For example, one classroom will need to be built every month to keep up with the projected increase in school enrolments. There is a severe lack of office space for services and NGOs. Housing supply, at the moment, is aimed at owner-occupiers with medium-to-high incomes; it is now nearly impossible to secure rental accommodation in Mount Barker and surrounding towns, particularly for those on low incomes. This has a huge impact on an ability to attract the workforce that is required to keep services operating in the region.

An major issue facing Mount Barker is that of homelessness. The Mayor estimates that there are between 50-70 unhoused people sleeping rough, in parks and elsewhere. One initiative that is being implemented, in partnership with four local churches, is the provision of temporary housing 'pods' for shelter. While there are a range of other related priorities that need focus – such a lack of psychiatric services – getting a roof over peoples' heads is in his view the most critical immediate concern.

Mount Barker is promoted as a desirable and aspirational place to live but runs the risk of being treated as a commuter satellite (a so-called dormitory suburb) of Adelaide. Growth raises a series of issues around regional and community identity, and potential lack of integration between long-term residents and newcomers.

## Roundtable Discussion Sessions

Following the introductory addresses, participants engaged in two discussion sessions in small-groups and in the online Zoom group. These focused on the following questions:

### Session 1: What is going well?

- What are the biggest issues in the region?
- What is going well (or heading in the right direction)?
- What programs and strategies are particularly effective, and why?
- What strengths can we draw from existing networks and relationships?
- What positive lessons can other cities and regions learn from Mount Barker's experience?

In this session, participants highlighted a number of areas of success and positive development in Mount Barker. By and large, these rested upon an existing sense of community spirit and openness, an engaged and collaborative community and service sector, and broad support from Council and government (despite issues with resourcing). As well as new healthcare infrastructure, recreational facilities, and parks, initiatives and events including *Head to Health* mental health services, the 'Disco', and Aboriginal-led programs and spaces (APPS, WOW and Woven) were mentioned specifically as bringing valuable benefits to the community.

The success of these elements underscores the value of a robust, resilient and connected community to overall wellbeing. The importance of maintaining a unique town and regional identity, distinct from metropolitan Adelaide, is important in this respect. For Mount Barker and other regions experiencing rapid growth it is imperative that emphasis is placed on preserving and strengthening these existing relationships while ensuring that newcomers, including culturally and linguistically diverse residents, are welcomed and made to feel socially included.

### Session 2: What could be done better?

- What is going not so well in housing, infrastructure and service delivery?
- Which of these issues will be most important into the future?
- How do these relate to other aspects of social equity?
- What actions should be taken to address these problems, here and elsewhere?

Participants identified and discussed various areas of concern. Housing affordability and access remains a pressing issue, particularly for full-time workers who grapple with high housing costs. The scarcity of affordable rentals and public/social housing exacerbates this problem, while the limited options for emergency housing may underrepresent the true extent of homelessness. There is a notable lack of disability-specific housing and transportation, underscoring the need for universal design standards and more inclusive development practices.

Transportation infrastructure presents another set of challenges, with limited options and poor connections between buses, particularly linking Mount Barker with outlying towns. Congestion in key areas like the centre of town and on the freeway is a problem, while unsafe and inaccessible footpaths pose risks to pedestrians and people with disabilities.

Gaps were identified in youth and early childhood programs, and health and social services face numerous challenges, including inadequate support for perinatal, infant, and mental health issues, as well as limited services for early intervention, substance abuse, and suicide prevention. There are also gaps in disability and education infrastructure, along with deficiencies in domestic violence and family support services.

There is significant room for improvement in access for Aboriginal and multicultural community organizations and meeting spaces.

As a (generally) relatively high-income region, Mount Barker is sometimes bypassed by funding programs, resulting in a worsening of poverty, social marginalisation, and related issues. Access to funding is central, an issue that is sometimes made more difficult by the fact that Mount Barker is sometimes classed as 'regional' for funding purposes, and other times 'metropolitan'.

Coordination and governance present ongoing challenges, with collaboration across council jurisdictions and between levels of government sometimes difficult. In some areas, clearer guidelines and strategic coordination need to improve, for example in the development of Disability and Inclusion Plans and effective strategies to address inclusivity and accessibility.

Overall, the scaling of services has not kept pace with population growth. There are several problems that impact effective service delivery: its geographic location (and lack of affordable housing) means that many workers commute from Adelaide. Out-of-hours outreach services are lacking as a result, and there is an underutilization of local knowledge and resources. Moreover, inadequate community and office spaces, especially for non-profits and community organizations, strain the region's capacity to deliver essential services.

Mount Barker's geographical location raises broader questions of identity – is it a peri-urban satellite of Adelaide, or a regional centre in its own right? The dominant perspective in the room was that the strengths of local connection should be emphasised and built upon. A deliberate focus on improving community inclusion, emphasising the value of accessible local services and social infrastructure, is vital to fostering community wellbeing, helping to improve problems of loneliness, social isolation and disconnection. Residents should not be reliant on services located 'down the hill' in Adelaide.

In Mount Barker and elsewhere, there is a need for holistic integration in planning – for services and future needs to be anticipated and built into regional development throughout the process. At the moment there is a sense that demographic growth in itself has been prioritised, with social infrastructure continually 'playing catch up', leading to gaps in key services and in the structure of the workforce.

The integration of co-design principles into planning, transparent consultation throughout the process, emphasis on community-led initiatives, and adoption of a multilevel place-based governance approach, guided by the 'subsidiarity principle'<sup>1</sup> and practices of cross-subsidising

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<sup>1</sup> The subsidiarity principle suggests that matters ought to be handled by the smallest, lowest, or least centralised competent authority. In other words, it advocates for decisions to be made at the most immediate or local level possible where possible, rather than being centralised at higher levels of government.

services and programs where possible, were suggested as ways to better prioritise local perspectives and needs, and shape decision-making processes and resource allocation agendas. Giving priority to the needs and desires of a growing and increasingly diverse community will go a long way towards building a thriving and equitable city into the future.

*See Appendix (p. 6) for detail of round table discussion questions.*

## Summary and recommendations

Discussion participants agreed that there were many reasons for optimism about the future of Mount Barker, including good existing community networks and a proactive, engaged and generally cooperative approach across levels of government. Yet there are also areas requiring significant improvement, particularly in the way housing development, population growth and economic growth might integrate holistically with the sorts of social and community infrastructure that will permit a thriving community and 'sense of place', and work to minimise social disadvantage and marginalisation.

Overall, the group noted that a range of lessons that the experience of rapid growth in Mount Barker to date can provide, both for this region and others. Success, in terms of opportunity and equity for all sectors of the population, involves **building upon existing strengths, networks and regional experience, particularly through genuinely collaborative and co-designed planning that incorporates and prioritises community views and needs throughout.**

To achieve this, SACOSS offers the following recommendations:

1. **Undertake demographic mapping to identify future needs of the community and region.**
2. **Incorporate transparent consultation, collaboration and community co-design into planning processes wherever possible.**
3. **Ensure that social and community infrastructure is afforded equal weight to economic and demographic growth, so it is not 'left behind'.**
4. **Foster inclusivity, sense of place and belonging, and community spirit by promoting social and community-led programs, events and initiatives, and providing suitable meeting and organizational hubs and spaces.**
5. **Promote a greater diversity of housing, particularly accessible and affordable for those on low incomes and for those living with a disability, and in alignment with best-practice design standards.**
6. **Develop integrated transport links, especially connecting the urban centre with other towns in the region.**
7. **Promote the development of a skilled, local workforce through vocational training and higher education that can service evolving social needs.**
8. **Foster the strengths of community networks as a collective voice to lobby in an aligned way, where appropriate, for community needs.**

## Appendix: Detail from roundtable discussion questions

*Note: These are aggregated from the discussions across all tables and thematically grouped, so some of the points may contradict or repeat others.*

### What are the biggest issues in the region right now?

#### **Housing Affordability and Accessibility:**

- High housing costs, particularly problematic for full-time workers.
- Scarcity of affordable rentals and public/social housing.
- Insufficient emergency housing options, potentially underrepresenting homelessness.
- Limited disability-specific housing and transportation. Should apply universal design standards.
- Development primarily caters to 'mainstream' individuals and families, neglecting diverse needs.

#### **Employment and Services:**

- Difficulty in staffing due to unaffordable living costs.
- Lack of out-of-hours outreach services and reliance on commuting staff, leading to underutilization of local knowledge.
- Inadequate community and office space, especially for non-profits and community organizations.

#### **Transportation:**

- Limited transportation options and poor connectivity between buses, especially from outlying towns.
- Congestion in key areas like central Mt Barker and on the freeway - unable to accommodate increasing traffic.
- Unsafe and inaccessible footpaths, especially detrimental to pedestrians and people with disabilities.

#### **Community Infrastructure and Services:**

- Inadequate youth and early childhood programs.
- Limited accessibility to Aboriginal community organisations, an absence of Aboriginal-controlled entities and meeting spaces.
- Shortage of vocational education opportunities.
- Scaling of services not keeping pace with population growth.

#### **Local Identity:**

- Lack of clear regional identity and confusion over categorization (is Mt Barker a regional centre or a peri-urban satellite suburb?).
- A perception of relative affluence means key resources are often directed elsewhere.
- A sense that past 'community spirit' is being eroded.

#### **Health and Social Services:**

- Inadequate support for perinatal, infant, and mental health support.
- Limited services for early intervention, alcohol and drug issues, mental health and suicide prevention.
- Insufficient disability and education infrastructure.
- Gaps in domestic violence and family support services.

#### **Coordination and Governance:**

- Challenges in collaboration across councils (Mount Barker / Adelaide Hills).
- Requirement for councils to establish Disability & Inclusion Plans per the Disability Inclusions Act – what should this look like?

## What is going well (or heading in the right direction)?

### **Engagement and Community Spirit:**

- Strong sense of generosity, kindness and community support.
- Increased collaboration and creativity among services, exemplified by initiatives like the Mt Barker Community Centre and community events like the Disco.
- Generally open dialogue about problems and solution-focused approaches contribute to a proactive community spirit.

### **Effective Governance and Collaboration:**

- Successful collaboration between local, state, and federal governments, with active involvement of MPs.
- Supportive approach from the Council, with a grassroots emphasis and fostering community engagement.

### **Positives of Regional Growth:**

- Opportunities for community development and improved networks.
- Investment in infrastructure, such as recreational facilities and public spaces (e.g. town square), supports growth and enhances the quality of life.
- Development of infrastructure like regional aquatic centres and sporting grounds promotes physical activity and community engagement.
- Presence of parks, gardens, and walking trails enhances the area's appeal for newcomers.

### **Healthcare and Disability Infrastructure and Services:**

- Introduction of new healthcare facilities like the hospital and ambulance services improves healthcare accessibility and quality.
- Emphasis on accessibility and care for people with disabilities reflects a commitment to inclusivity.

### **Cultural Diversity and Inclusion:**

- Support for Aboriginal-led programs, events, and spaces (including APPS, WOW, and Woven).
- Initiatives like Head to Health mental health services cater to community well-being.
- Multicultural community growth provides opportunities for diversity and enriches the social fabric.

## What programs and strategies are particularly effective, and why?

### **Engagement, Strategic Planning and Economic Development:**

- Opportunities for engagement with governance bodies, like council/community cabinets, facilitate effective communication of local issues, fostering a sense of being listened to and responsiveness.
- Linked strategic plans for industrial and commercial development land, along with vocational and university placements, bolster local job markets and business growth, enhancing economic vitality.



- Proactive investment in infrastructure by the Council.

**Service Provision and Local Employment:**

- Workforce strategy for Mt Barker promotes local employment opportunities.
- Employment of local workers over FIFO/DIDO arrangements supports community resilience.
- Expansion of vocational training places creates pathways for local students, fostering skill development and employment opportunities.
- Co-location initiatives foster collaboration and accessibility, making services more visible and enhancing community engagement.
- Efforts to improve access to services and resources in outlying towns, addressing staffing and resource limitations.

**Community and Place-Based Programs:**

- Promotion campaigns for community centers facilitate better connections for vulnerable populations, addressing social isolation and expanding support networks.
- Place-based approaches with state and federal government commitment foster community development and address localized needs effectively.
- Programs like the WOW group for Aboriginal women and events celebrating Aboriginal culture promote social inclusion and address specific community needs.
- Collaborative efforts between diverse stakeholders, including churches, councils, and service providers.
- Support for arts and recreational facilities, such as libraries and sports facilities, promotes community cohesion and well-being.

## What strengths can we draw from existing networks and relationships?

**Governance and Funding Support:**

- The council provides underpinning support and coordination for community initiatives.
- Funders acknowledge the region's high-growth status and support unique models, such as training for mental health peer workers, enhancing service provision.
- All levels of government work together regularly, demonstrating a commitment to community well-being and effective planning.

**Organizational Partnerships and Networks:**

- Many organizations are eager to partner, fostering collaboration and resource sharing.
- Efforts to build connections between services instead of operating in silos enhance efficiency and effectiveness in addressing community needs.
- Existing networks like the Adelaide Hills Youth Network and Adelaide Hills Reconciliation Action working group contribute to community cohesion and resilience.

**Collaborative Events and Spaces:**

- Community Centre acts as a central hub and partner for numerous organizations, facilitating access to support services and fostering connections within the community.
- Initiatives like the Disco demonstrate positive outcomes when organizations collaborate, with stewardship from the council enabling successful partnerships.

**Aboriginal-Led Initiatives:**

- Aboriginal-led initiatives such as APPS, Woven, and WOW provide culturally sensitive support and services to the community.

**Disaster Response and Preparedness:**

- Strong networks exist for disaster action, particularly relevant in bushfire-prone areas.

## What positive lessons can other cities and regions learn from Mount Barkers' experience?

**Maintain Community Engagement and Collaboration:**

- Strong community spirit fosters cohesion and resilience.
- Foster collaboration and communication between different sectors and stakeholders to address community needs and avoid silos.
- Coordination between all levels of government is essential for effective planning and delivery of services.
- Approachable councils that actively listen to ideas and collaborate with the community contribute to effective governance and decision-making.

**Holistic Planning to Manage Growth:**

- Growth can enhance vibrancy but requires proactive planning to manage congestion and develop necessary infrastructure.
- Prioritize comprehensive planning to address infrastructure, business, community, and service needs, particularly in the face of rapid growth.
- Ensure that social infrastructure keeps pace with rapid growth to maintain community well-being and cohesion.

**Social Infrastructure:**

- Ensure availability of social infrastructure, including educational and recreational facilities, to support community well-being.
- Explore cooperative and innovative models, particularly in areas like disability support and alcohol and drug services.
- Community-led events & festivals strengthen social bonds and create a sense of belonging.
- Establish spaces conducive to collaboration to facilitate community engagement and partnership.
- Create hubs and spaces that foster community spirit and engagement, contributing to a cohesive and resilient community fabric.

## What is going not so well in housing, infrastructure and service delivery?

**Barriers to Service Accessibility:**

- Some geographical barriers hinder access to health services, especially post-hospital discharge.
- Inconsistent classification of Mt Barker as regional or metropolitan affects resource allocation and service provision.
- Lack of availability of not-for-profits and inadequate transport further exacerbate exclusion and service gaps.

**Lack of Understanding in Planning:**

- Government departments and metropolitan services (based in Adelaide) often fail to grasp the specific regional needs, leading to gaps in understanding and service provision.
- Many planning and infrastructure decisions are retroactive – planning should be holistically integrated, rather than building houses first and supplying infrastructure and services after the fact.

**Housing Issues:**

- Housing developments lack coherent planning and supporting infrastructure, leading to haphazard development and playing catch-up with infrastructure needs.
- High housing costs, particularly burdensome for low-wage earners and people with disabilities, contribute to affordability challenges.
- Accessibility of housing for people with disabilities remains a concern.
- Councils have limited ability to shape development if plans meet compliance, hindering their capacity to address community needs effectively.

**Health and education:**

- Limited availability of health services adds strain to an already stretched healthcare system.
- Inadequate education resourcing and infrastructure in primary and high schools fail to meet the needs of children and students.

**Transport:**

- Expensive transportation options and inadequate infrastructure for fire planning pose safety and accessibility concerns.
- Centralization of services in Mt Barker leads to traffic congestion and limits accessibility for outlying communities.

## Which of these issues will be most important into the future?

**Housing:**

- Concerns about infill, density, and smaller homes impacting community well-being, play areas, and neighbourhood dynamics.
- Potential conflicts arising from parking issues, noise, and close living conditions, necessitating thoughtful planning for community cohesion.
- Increasing need for appropriate, affordable, and supported housing options to accommodate diverse needs within the community.

**Infrastructure and Services:**

- Importance of accessible and inclusive community buildings, as well as the necessity for local services to meet people's needs where they are, reducing reliance on traveling to urban centres.
- Growing demand for improved transportation infrastructure, including better connectivity between towns, additional access points to Mount Barker, and strategies to alleviate congestion.
- Anticipated strain on public transport and health systems due to population growth and an ageing population, necessitating proactive planning and resource allocation.

**Social and Economic Pressures:**

- Recognition of the social impact of financial pressure, poverty, and hardship, highlighting the importance of addressing these issues alongside infrastructure development.

- Ensuring an adequate local workforce across various sectors, including trades, professionals, and social services, to meet the needs of the expanding community.
- Focus on growing and nurturing the community base, as well as increasing the presence of governmental institutions and educational facilities like university campuses.

## How do these relate to other aspects of social equity?

### **Barriers to Access and Isolation:**

- Barriers to access, including transportation limitations and unaffordable rentals, can exacerbate social isolation and loneliness, particularly for marginalized groups.
- Transport plays a pivotal role in social equity by making services and amenities accessible to all members of the community, regardless of location or socioeconomic status.
- Prioritizing the needs and perspectives of youth and minority groups is essential for promoting equity and inclusion.

### **Environmental Impact and Values:**

- Inappropriate development can compromise environmental values, highlighting the need for sustainable and equitable urban planning.

### **Diverse Community Spaces:**

- While recreation and sports facilities are important, there's also a need to develop diverse community spaces, such as cultural centres and artistic venues.

### **Community Participation and Equity in Decision-Making:**

- Ensuring a whole-of-community approach from the outset is crucial to prevent exacerbating social stratification and inequities in access to resources and opportunities.
- Involving the community in co-designing and building a shared vision fosters inclusivity and ensures that diverse needs and perspectives are considered.

## What actions should be taken to address these problems, here and elsewhere?

### **Community Engagement and Inclusion:**

- Prioritizing community engagement, transparency, and nurturing a strong community identity can foster a sense of belonging and pride, attracting residents and promoting social well-being.
- Engaging newcomers to the community is essential to foster a sense of belonging and encourage active participation.
- Encouraging intergenerational play groups and providing community meeting spaces for diverse demographics fosters inclusivity and social cohesion.
- Prioritizing community-led co-design and consultation ensures that local voices shape decision-making processes and resource allocation.

### **Demographic Mapping and Holistic Planning:**

- Mapping future demographics, particularly by assessing childcare enrolment, helps anticipate developing community needs and planning accordingly.
- Social infrastructure and services need to be taken into account in an integrated way right throughout the planning process.

- Implementing strategies to manage growth sustainably, such as slowing growth rates if possible and focusing on usable town centres.
- This requires careful planning with benchmarks and checkpoints.
- Transportation must be recognised as a critical component. Investment in infrastructure like a ring road and free loop bus services enhances accessibility and connectivity.

**Institutional Approaches:**

- Establishing specialized units like the Housing Infrastructure Planning Development Unit (HIPDU) facilitates intergovernmental collaboration to address social equity issues effectively.
- Adopting a multilevel place-based governance approach, guided by the subsidiarity principle, ensures decisions are informed by local perspectives and needs.