

STATEMENT ABOUT NSW-VIC BORDER CLOSURE

The decision to close the NSW border has led to a state of confusion and disappointment for many residents living in our region. As always, our concern is for the people who may fall through unintentional gaps that have been created as a result. This border closure has the real potential to create additional disadvantage for people in our communities, in an already challenging environment of COVID-19.

We understand that difficult measures are required to prevent the spread of COVID-19, however the closure has had a disproportionate impact upon border communities. Despite there being no active cases of COVID-19 locally for some time, the restrictive conditions of permits which prevent travel in most cases are being deeply felt.

Understanding the permit process and conditions has been a full-time focus for our office. The law is difficult to interpret and understand and is changing rapidly. If it is difficult for us to fully comprehend the public health orders and ramifications of not following them, it becomes close to impossible if you have low literacy, mental health issues, or are dealing with significant stress because of family violence or a family law struggle, for example.

Other impacts include being unable to travel to some essential services (such as the Centrelink/Medicare office on the other side of border), and the restrictive need for 14 day self-isolation after accessing some services. This adversely affects vulnerable people such as kids experiencing disadvantage who are unable to access services they rely upon for support, and people who are sick and unable to freely access medical treatment.

Many people are losing jobs because they live outside the border zone and cannot continue to work. This will place an additional burden upon publicly funded services in the future, given the flow-on impacts to those families, and will be further exacerbated in situations where these people need to access vital services on the opposite side of the border.

Many family law arrangements are now unworkable which will lead to some parents and kids unable to see each other, or being required to renegotiate their arrangements if they can (however many are unable to access the Family Relationship Centre due to its location on the other side of the border). COVID-19 has been unsettling enough and children are not immune to what's happened and the anxiety that has been created. Ensuring kids can stick to a normal routine, where possible, helps in this tough time. It's crucial kids continue to see their parents as they normally would.

Part of our role is showing the Government where improvements can be made to ensure people get the help and support they need. We have been advocating with cross border commissioners and local MPs on a number of topics related to the border closure. We are grateful for their advocacy and stand with them, our local Councils, and others in the region, to call for the Government to make changes to allow the border community to operate as one.

Several other key areas of concern remain.

A workable solution is needed for people getting help with childcare from family and friends living over the border. Many parents don't use childcare centres and the permit system needs to accommodate them, so they can continue to work without the fear of getting a fine at a checkpoint or being turned around.

People in NSW access family violence support and case management in Victoria. This is a crucial part of the assistance they need at a stressful time of their lives. We have asked for family violence support and case management to be included under the medical permit, and not just limited to 'border zone residents'. Expanding this to include all NSW residents would be a positive step.

We have advocated for pregnant women and their families to be exempt from self-isolation for 14 days, and sought clarification for day students and teachers about their responsibilities under their permit.

As we identify more issues, we will continue to highlight these to the relevant people in Government. Please continue to share your stories and experiences with us so we have a full understanding and appreciation for what people are going through during this challenging time.