

Mental Health Centre Sale

Community Consultation and Co-design Summary Report

The Australian Government is investing in a new Medicare Mental Health Centre for Gippsland, to be located in Sale and expected to open in the first half of 2027. The new centre will strengthen access to free mental health care and support for people across the Wellington Local Government Area (LGA) and surrounding communities.

Gippsland Primary Health Network (Gippsland PHN) is leading the design and commissioning of the new centre and as part of this work, undertook a comprehensive community consultation and co-design process throughout July and August 2026. The feedback is being used to inform the development of the service delivery model for the centre, to ensure the service is responsive to local priorities, access barriers and community needs.

More than 100 people participated in the consultation program, which included online surveys, workshops, community and health professional engagement, and targeted consultation with priority communities and stakeholders.

The local landscape

Wellington Shire has approximately 46,551 residents and is projected to grow to 49,277 by 2031. Its communities include Sale, Yarram, Maffra, Heyfield, Stratford and Loch Sport, with an estimated 9,890 residents experiencing a mental health condition each year.

Key local considerations identified through the consultation and available local data include:

- Wellington Shire has one of the most dispersed populations in Victoria, creating significant access challenges for people living outside Sale
- Yarram, Loch Sport and surrounding coastal communities experience higher levels of disadvantage and barriers to accessing services
- The population is ageing, with strong projected growth in older age groups
- Local communities experience higher-than-average suicide rates and significant levels of social isolation
- Workforce shortages remain a significant challenge across health and mental health services

What we heard

The consultation highlighted a strong desire for a service that is welcoming, easy to access and connected to the communities it serves. Participants consistently emphasised the importance of receiving support earlier, closer to home and throughout their mental health journey.

Participants identified five key priorities for the new Medicare Mental Health Centre in Sale:

- A warm welcoming environment that is inclusive for all
- A viable community-based alternative to emergency department presentation, where appropriate
- Improved integration to close gaps and reduce siloes between services
- Utilise Lived and Living Experience and Peer Support throughout the service
- Improved access to psychiatry, alcohol and other drug (AOD), prescribing and medication reviews

Overarching themes

1. Easy access and navigation

Participants described a system that is difficult to navigate, with multiple referrals, repeated storytelling and confusion about eligibility and pathways. There was strong support for a 'no wrong door' approach, care navigation and warm referrals.

“ *When someone is in distress, they shouldn't have to work out the mental health system on their own* ”

3. Lived experience and peer support

Peer workers were viewed as one of the most trusted and valued elements of the mental health system. Participants described peer support as critical to building trust, reducing stigma and helping people engage with services. There was strong support for lived experience leadership and representation throughout governance and service delivery.

“ *Sometimes the person who understands you best is someone who has been through something similar* ”

5. Outreach and rural access

Access barriers associated with geography and transport were among the strongest consultation themes. Participants advocated for outreach into Yarram, Maffra, Heyfield and Loch Sport and emphasised that telehealth should complement, rather than replace, face-to-face services.

“ *Not everyone can get to Sale* ”

7. Access to prescribing support and medication reviews

One of the strongest themes to emerge was the need for improved access to psychiatry, prescribing support and medication reviews. Participants described people remaining on medication for extended periods without specialist review because they could not access psychiatry services.

“ *Many people have not had their medication reviewed in years because they cannot access or afford to see a psychiatrist* ”

9. Earlier intervention and alternatives to crisis care

Participants repeatedly highlighted the need for earlier support and community-based alternatives to emergency department presentations. Prevention, early intervention and support before people reach crisis point were consistent priorities.

“ *People shouldn't have to get really unwell before they can get help* ”

2. Better integration across services

Participants consistently called for stronger collaboration between general practice, hospitals, community mental health services, alcohol and other drug services and community organisations. People wanted services to coordinate care rather than requiring consumers and carers to manage multiple systems themselves.

“ *People shouldn't have to coordinate their own care* ”

4. A welcoming and non-clinical environment

Participants wanted a welcoming environment that feels different from traditional health care or hospital settings. Commonly requested features included sensory rooms, family spaces, children's areas, natural light, outdoor spaces and places where people can connect socially.

“ *People want somewhere that feels safe to walk into, even if they're not ready for an appointment yet* ”

6. Workforce and service gaps

Participants consistently raised concerns about workforce shortages and limited access to specialist services. Psychology, psychiatry and trauma-informed services were frequently identified as areas where access remains challenging.

“ *People wait months for the support they need* ”

8. Inclusive and culturally safe services

Participants highlighted the importance of creating a service that is welcoming, inclusive and culturally safe for Aboriginal communities, multicultural communities, LGBTQIA+ communities, veterans, people with disability and neurodivergent people. Visible inclusion and culturally-informed practice were viewed as essential.

“ *People need to see themselves in the centre* ”

10. Mental health and alcohol and other drug integration

Participants frequently spoke about the challenges facing people experiencing both mental health and alcohol and other drug concerns. There was strong support for integrated care planning, improved pathways and greater collaboration between services.

“ *Mental health and alcohol and other drug issues don't happen separately, so the services shouldn't either* ”

What success looks like

Participants described success as:

- Earlier access to support
- Reduced reliance on emergency departments
- More people receiving support closer to home
- Better integration of services
- Improved access to psychiatry, prescribing support and medication reviews
- Families and carers feeling supported
- Fewer people falling through service gaps
- A welcoming, safe and community-connected service

Engagement activities

Community survey	1
Provider survey	1
Community engagement sessions	2
Health professional sessions	2
Targeted workshops	6
Frontline mental health workforce sessions	2
Health service leadership meetings	4
Regional and remote Medicare Mental Health Centre consultations	8
Total engagement activities	26

Next steps

Gippsland PHN sincerely thanks everyone who contributed to this consultation and co-design process. The insights, experiences and ideas shared will help shape the design and service model for the new centre and ensure it reflects the needs of local communities, alongside funding, workforce and program requirements.



Gippsland PHN will continue to keep the community informed as planning progresses and will provide updates via its website.



An Australian Government Initiative