

Unique project to boost jobs and business across region

By **TONY FOSTER**

The employment and business support initiative being taken by our South Central Sub-region group of councils announced recently brings with it the promise of significant benefits for Brighton and surrounding municipalities.

The four councils comprising the sub-region group are Brighton, Central Highlands, Derwent Valley and Southern Midlands and we've been working cooperatively and successfully on a range of projects over the past 15 years.

But this is one of the most ambitious projects we've undertaken and one that is crucially important for Brighton and our three partner councils. The key objectives are to identify employment needs and opportunities in the sub-region, the skills shortages and training requirements of business and industry, and to successfully connect the local workforce to local jobs.

We want to see more local businesses employing local people and to this end, we've announced the appointment of experienced specialist Anthony McConnon as the workforce development coordinator to oversee the project. Anthony has already begun work and his initial three-year appointment has been made possible through a grant from the Tasmanian Community Fund, with additional financial and logistical support from the four councils.

This joint project is based on the implementation of the strategies and initiatives recommended in the *Southern Central Subregion Regional Workforce Planning Report* undertaken by consultants KPMG and released at the end of 2017.

This study analysed our sub-region's economic and social profile, the current workforce capability and capacity and key existing educational offerings, projected future workforce requirements, and identified common and industry-specific strategies and initiatives to address the gaps.

KPMG's report concluded there was a significant potential workforce in the sub-region that, because of social and educational disadvantages, had been unable to take advantage of increasing local employment opportunities. But it also found employers in existing and emerging industries were frustrated at not being able to find sufficient suitably trained and qualified local employees.

The KPMG study identified at least 900 jobs to be filled and projected that this would directly benefit at least 2500 people. This figure does not include a number of new developments proposed or announced since the report was written, such the construction of the new Bridgewater Bridge where Southern Central Trade Training Centre will likely play a key skills training role.

As Tasmania emerges from the most immediate effects of the COVID-19 shut-down and restrictions continue to be lifted, the economy, businesses and the labour force will need to reawaken, and it's expected this will involve challenges that society has not had to face for generations.

As a result, the role of the coordinator at the heart of this project will be even more crucial than when the initiative was first mooted. The impact of the pandemic will potentially create major

shifts in the structure of local economies and likely change predictions about which sectors will grow and which will contract within the region. It will also change the skillset many industries will need as their modes of operation change. This will require a far more proactive and agile approach than in the past. The coordinator is the ideal agent to facilitate these changes and support local businesses and their prospective employees in our four municipalities.

One of Mr McConnon's key responsibilities is to proactively engage with employers in the sub-region, both on a one-on-one basis and in group activities such as employer forums, regional job expos and presentations to students preparing to leave the education system.

He has already started doing this and the feedback after only a few weeks in the position, has been incredibly positive.

Our four councils are equally positive that this initial three-year project will bring significant benefits for our sub-region community and for the industries and businesses within our municipalities. So much so, we are confident it will be supported on an ongoing basis by state and local government, business and employment providers. It can become the model for similar programs in other areas of Tasmania.

As chair of the South Central Sub-region of councils, Brighton Council's new general manager James Dryburgh, has been a driving force behind the development of this initiative, the securing of the grant funding and Mr McConnon's appointment. It is another example of Brighton's leadership and a demonstration of what can be achieved for our community through collaboration with our neighbouring councils, as well as with education providers, training organisations, the Job Active network and industry leaders to address shared regional workforce issues.

I look forward to advising you of additional positive outcomes as the project is implemented over coming months.