

A tale of two towns:

Addressing postcode injustice in regional Victoria

Comparing the impact of place-based integrated service partnerships to traditional models of legal service delivery

A key learning from our integrated services work across Regional Victoria is the importance of place-based legal services, and the critical role that integrated legal services play, in overcoming barriers to justice for regional Victorians. This has been further highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Maryborough Court House, Victoria





Echuca, Victoria

Over the last five years, ARC Justice has been piloting, evaluating and replicating a model of integrated legal service delivery across the Loddon Campaspe and Goulburn Valley regions.

This model involves a lawyer and a social worker working together across both court and community health settings to support clients with multiple and complex legal, health and social needs – particularly those at risk of criminal charges, family violence or child protection intervention – to address the factors contributing to the client’s legal problems and to improve justice and wellbeing outcomes.

In May 2017, a place-based legal service was established in Maryborough, with a senior lawyer based in the community, in addition to our fortnightly duty lawyer service at the court. A community development officer was also employed to provide community education and stakeholder engagement.

In December 2018, our integrated legal service with Maryborough District Health Service (MDHS) was established, with a community lawyer and a social worker working together at MDHS three days a week to provide additional support to clients, on top of existing services.

This model drew on lessons from an effective pilot program implemented by our Goulburn Valley CLC in Shepparton.

Echuca provides an interesting point of comparison. Echuca experiences similar ‘postcode injustice’ issues to Maryborough. It is located between two regional centres (Bendigo and Shepparton) and often falls through a service gap. There are no health justice or integrated service partnerships based in Echuca.

In Echuca we are currently limited to a drive-in-drive-out model of outreach, which is a common mode of service delivery for regional CLCs covering large catchments. This is the service model that existed in Maryborough prior to the establishment of our place-based service.

In 2018, representation service levels were similar in both locations, but a subsequent increase can be seen in Maryborough following the integrated partnership with MDHS.

Figure 1 shows trends in access to legal advice services in Echuca and Maryborough. Access to legal advice has steadily increased in Maryborough and this positive trend has continued throughout COVID-19.

Legal advice numbers in Echuca are consistently lower by comparison and dropped significantly in 2020 due to the impacts of COVID-19 on court-based operations.

● Echuca ● Maryborough

Figure 1: Number of clients assisted annually since May 2017



Figure 2: Number of ongoing representation services provided annually since May 2017

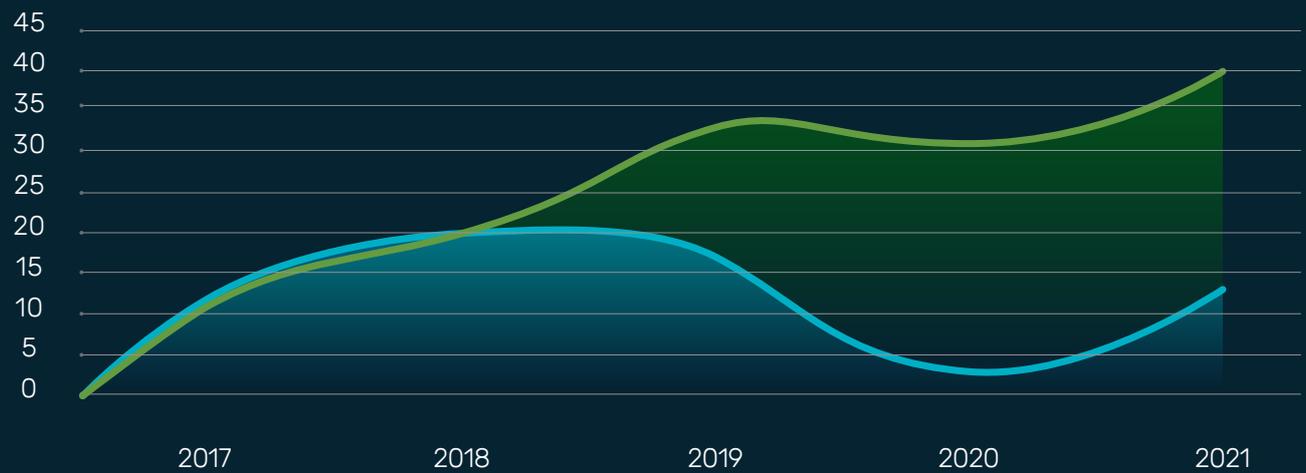
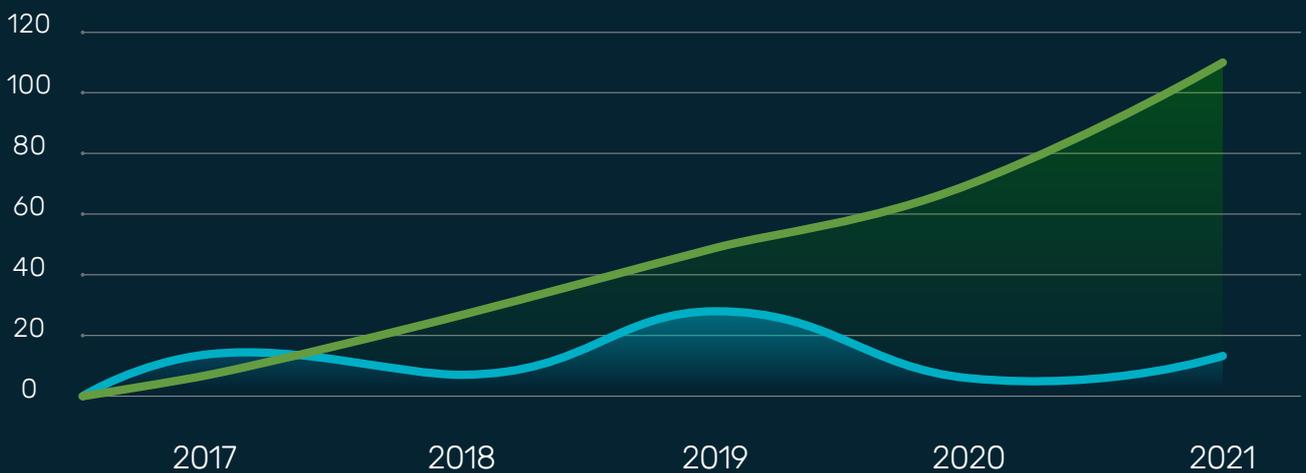


Figure 3: Number of discrete advice services provided annually since May 2017



A MODEL TO ADDRESS 'POSTCODE INJUSTICE': A TALE OF TWO TOWNS CONTINUED

Over the last three years, we have reached less than 1% of the Echuca population through the drive-in-drive out service model. This is contrasted to the 5% of the total population in Maryborough who we have reached through our place-based legal service.

The potential for place-based services to overcome access to justice barriers was further highlighted during COVID-19. The integrated service partnership with MDHS enabled a continued flow of referrals – and the provision of in-person services – for vulnerable clients during periods of lockdown, mitigating the impact of service disruptions and providing clients with more options to access appropriate levels of support throughout COVID-19.

Our community development worker in Maryborough, was invited to join the local council's pandemic relief committee, playing an active role in service coordination over this period. She also contributed to large-scale campaigns to disseminate information about our legal services to all households across the shire, in partnership with the council and local police.

As a result of this work, ARC Justice has reached 215 vulnerable community members impacted by COVID in Maryborough, compared to only 53 clients in Echuca.

Figure 2 shows similar trends in access to ongoing representation services in Echuca and Maryborough. In December 2018, representation service levels were similar in both locations, but a subsequent increase can be seen in Maryborough following the introduction of the Maryborough Therapeutic Justice Partnership. Access to ongoing representation services in Maryborough reduced slightly in 2020 during the COVID-19 crisis, while in Echuca the impact was more severe.

Figure 3 shows similar trends in access to discrete advice services in Echuca and Maryborough. In 2017, representation service levels were similar in both locations, but a continued increase can be seen in Maryborough with the introduction of place-based services. People accessing this support in Maryborough increased even further with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ensuring access to justice in regional towns outside of the major hubs in our catchment, will be a key focus of ARC Justice in the years ahead. Committed to learning from our successes and our mistakes, we continue to document, evaluate, learn from and adapt our place-based integrated service model, to ensure we are achieving the most impact.

We have learned an incredible amount during this time, with our integrated service model achieving excellent results and showing that it can be replicated in other local government areas. These learnings will underpin our work to increase access to justice in regional Victorian towns into the future.

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We are grateful to the Victorian Legal Services Board and the Victorian Department of Justice and the Community Safety Integrated Services Fund (administered by the Federation of Community Legal Centre) for their ongoing support of our work in Maryborough.