Mining towns—does the boom mean bust for health services?

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The Bowen Basin is one of Australia’s fastest growing mining regions and it is anticipated that there will be at least 10 000 new resident and non-residents by 2018 for the Isaac region alone. Resource towns benefit from this growth through the creation of more jobs and strengthened economies. The unprecedented level of mining activity combined with the fast-growing trend of non-resident worker operations in the region has triggered concerns on a range of issues and in particular the impact on the demand for health services.

The project was funded by local mining companies to determine the impact of the expanding resources sector on the health services in the town of Moranbah in Queensland and to identify strategies and new opportunities to ensure sustainability and to meet the health needs of this community.

The project was led by a community steering committee, including representatives from mining, and local and state government. There was extensive consultation with key stakeholders locally and regionally. In addition to consultation, a full-day workshop to discuss interim recommendations was held in Moranbah with key representatives attending.

Some of the key issues identified included:

- health services
  - significant demand by a non-resident population
  - lack of effective occupational medicine services
  - unmet community expectation for accessing health services
- health workforce
  - challenges in attracting and retaining health workforce due to lack of affordable housing and clinical space
- health planning
  - uncoordinated health services planning leading to a disconnected local health service.

Some of the key strategies identified to address these issues included:

- establishment of a Health Care Partnership Group to be a representative group ensuring a coordinated approach to planning to respond to the health needs and priorities of the community into the future
- engagement of a ‘driver’ to ensure the proposed strategies are progressed into actions
• harnessing existing local capacity to make the health services more sustainable
• attracting and retaining staff through provision of affordable housing and clinical infrastructure
• development of private/public service partnerships to meet health service needs, including occupational medicine.

The growth of the resident and non-resident population in Moranbah will continue with the expansion of mining. The project reflects that the ongoing sustainability of the health services will hinge upon the coordination and collaboration of Private Public Partnerships. Effective and timely engagement of the resources sector is also paramount to ensuring sustainable health service delivery and improving health outcomes in the region.