

Post-Pandemic Workforce & Economic Recovery in Sarnia Lambton: A Scenario-Based Strategic Plan





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The views expressed in this publication are the views of the Sarnia Lambton Workforce Development Board and do not necessarily reflect those of the Province.

The Government of Ontario and its agencies are in no way bound by the recommendations contained in this document.

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Foreword by the Executive Director of SLWDB

When the global pandemic reached the steps of Sarnia-Lambton, the Sarnia-Lambton Workforce Development Board (SLWDB) recognized that local employers and job seekers would need support to weather this time. Part of our mandate at SLWDB to provide support and foster growth in a post-pandemic workforce was to look for opportunities to conduct research to explore what the future workforce might encounter.

Shortly after the pandemic began in March 2020, SLWDB was approached to be part of a regional project with eight other workforce development boards. The scope of the proposal was vast; to help us identify the opportunities for workforce and businesses growth and sustainability following the uncertainties presented by the pandemic. It was anticipated the project would not only identify the challenges but also serve as the basis for positive actions that can be taken moving forward. SLWDB leapt at the opportunity to work closely with our workforce board colleagues across southwestern Ontario, as well as our community partners to identify the sectors hardest hit by the pandemic and the local challenges that would need to be considered.

SLWDB embarked on this project, aptly named the Scenario Planning Project, with the broad goal of developing and vetting workforce scenarios to be utilized to develop community action plans. This project would not have been possible without the on-going support of our community partners (listed in Appendix 1) whose dedication and commitment to the local community was paramount to the great success of this project. To that end, I would like to extend a heartfelt thank you to our many community partners who provided countless hours of their time to see this project come to fruition.

Warmly,



Mikelle Bryson-Campbell
Interim Executive Director
Sarnia Lambton Workforce Development Board

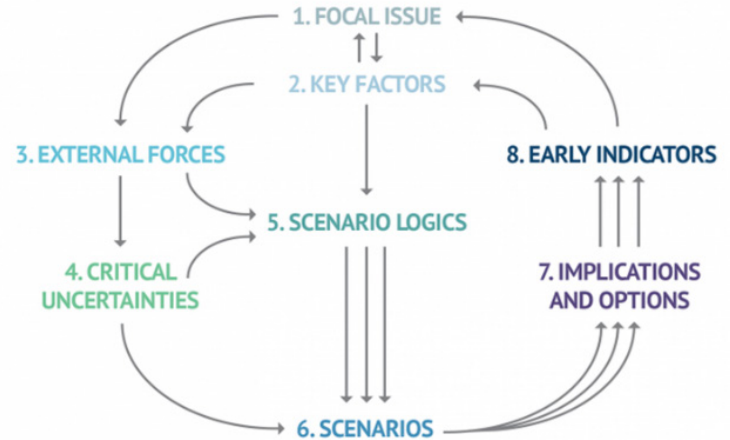
Part I - Project Overview

Methodology: The Scenario-Based Planning Model

Scenario-based planning is a tool used by economic development, economists, and businesses to construct strategic plans when faced with market uncertainties. The narrative for scenarios developed outline likely alternate futures informed by current conditions.

This project adopts the eight-step scenario planning methodology first utilized by Royal Dutch/Shell in the 1970's to inform the direction of the oil and gas industry.

THE EIGHT-STEP SCENARIO PLANNING PROCESS



The focal issue established for SLWDB's post-pandemic strategic planning is:

What new practices, programs, and other interventions will need to be put in place in order to address the needs of the labour market between June 2021 - June 2022?

The goal of this focal issue is to determine recommendations for policies, investments, programs and supports that are needed in each of the four possible future scenarios. Questions that will be considered are:

- What skills gaps, job loss, and new opportunities will emerge?
- What will the labour market look like?
- What are our action plans?
- What parts of our organization will be permanently changed?
- What are our limitations to thriving in each scenario and how do we overcome them?

Once a focal issue was identified, a round table comprised of local stakeholders (known as the Workforce Recovery Planning Round Table) identified internal key factors and external forces impacting the focal issue. Internal key factors included local economic conditions and dynamics commonly found in a business plan. External forces identified were those typically outside of an organization's purview such as broader economic outlooks and social factors. This brainstorming and discussion resulted in a list of over one hundred key factors and external forces.

The round table consolidated the list of key factors and external forces into themes to less than ten critical uncertainties that impact the focal issue locally, across economic sectors in the region. This list of critical uncertainties was discussed in terms of what were the most uncertain items that are out of the control of stakeholders. This also included identifying performance indicators to track how the critical uncertainties evolve over time.

The top two critical uncertainties chosen became the foundation for the Sarnia Lambton scenario-based planning model. Based on these uncertainties, four plausible future scenarios were plotted on an axis. A narrative outlining a predicted landscape for each scenario was developed, including hypotheses regarding likely economic, social, environmental, and political outlooks.

The seventh step in the process involves considering workforce-focussed strategies for each of the four possible futures through discussing options for action and interventions. The roundtable considered current and projected skills shortages and recommendations for businesses to consider. New policies, investments, programs and supports were also discussed.

The eighth step in the process was to determine which scenario was most likely to unfold based on identified measurable performance indicators for the identified uncertainties. The performance indicators are used to monitor how the two critical uncertainties are trending and which of the four scenarios is most likely to become reality. This is being done in an interactive Google Data Studio dashboard that accompanies this report. Examples of indicators identified and tracked include employment levels, economic activity, and the level of COVID-19 viral spread as well as the distribution of inoculations.

In addition to the described scenario-based planning process, the round table of stakeholders also considers four steps of the recovery timeline - React, Restart, Recover, and Resiliency. Recommendations for businesses based on where they are in this recovery timeline are also provided in each of the four scenarios.

Exploring a range of possible futures provided stakeholders the opportunity to consider four possible workforce-related outcomes caused by the pandemic, achieve consensus on the most likely to emerge, and take action to meet the employment challenges that arise. These can then be used as part of strategic planning by non-profits, educational institutions, government, businesses, service providers, and other community stakeholders.

A list of [Workforce Recovery Planning Round Table](#) members, project partners and stakeholder organizations that contributed to this project can be found at the end of this report (Appendix 1).

Benefits of Scenario-Based Planning

Provides framework for managing the unprecedented uncertainty posed by COVID-19.

Supports proactive decision-making by identifying challenges, opportunities, and potential actions well in advance.

Encourages a holistic and collaborative approach to planning that manages system complexity and ensures the COVID-19 Economic Recovery Plans will be robust, comprehensive, and capable of withstanding all future scenarios.

Purposes of the project


This document is intended to broaden and deepen conversations about next steps in addressing the present and future economic and social impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in Sarnia-Lambton. It provides:

1. An overview of the **recovery timeline**, describing four stages of recovery that are our conceptual basis for how the economy as a whole, individual sectors, and individual businesses will progress through the crisis.
2. A summary of **the past**, describing issues since the start of the pandemic that are not relevant to the current situation but provide important historical context.
3. An overview of **the present**, describing the impacts that have been experienced, impacts we can anticipate, initiatives that have been launched, and other ideas for potential actions that are being explored in the region.
4. An overview of **the future**, describing a set of preliminary socio-economic scenarios that have been developed by the project's **Workforce Recovery Planning Round Table**.
5. **Recommendations** and the preliminary design of potential labour market and workforce initiatives up to June, 2022.

Using this current status overview and this set of preliminary future scenarios, the Workforce Recovery Planning Round Table, businesses, and community leaders may continue discussions to identify initiatives that can be put in place today, and in future scenarios. A complete list of Round Table members and project partners are listed in Appendix A.

The next step in developing strategic plans will be to elaborate the scenarios and their indicators further to account for impacts on specific industries, and then to identify scenario-based recommendations for action to overcome the challenges and identify opportunities that each of these scenarios could present to our community.

Scenario-based planning timeline

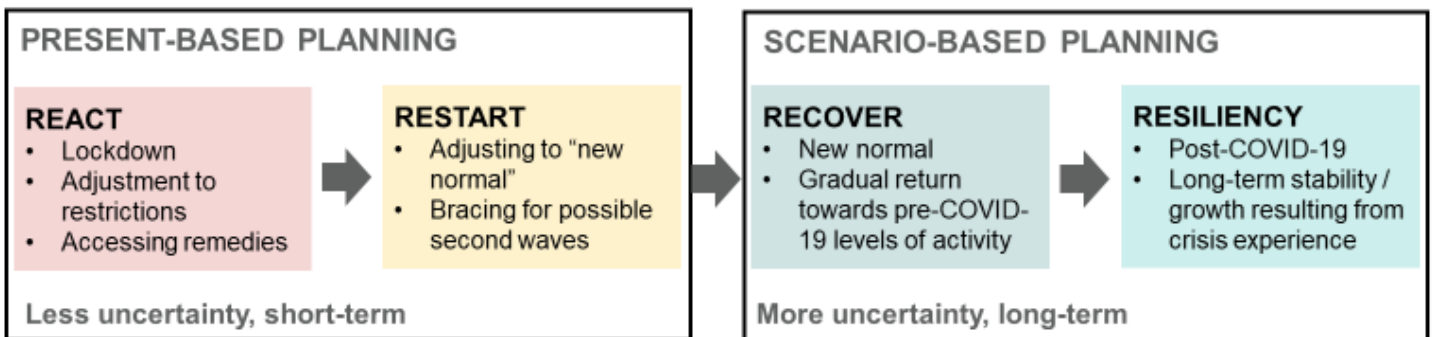
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1. Identify key factors
 2. Identify critical uncertainties and scenario matrix
 3. Build out scenarios and action plans with stakeholders
 4. Revise and validate scenarios and action plans
 5. Publish and incorporate into Economic Recovery Plan
 6. Track scenario indicators, continuously adapt plan

Recovery timeline

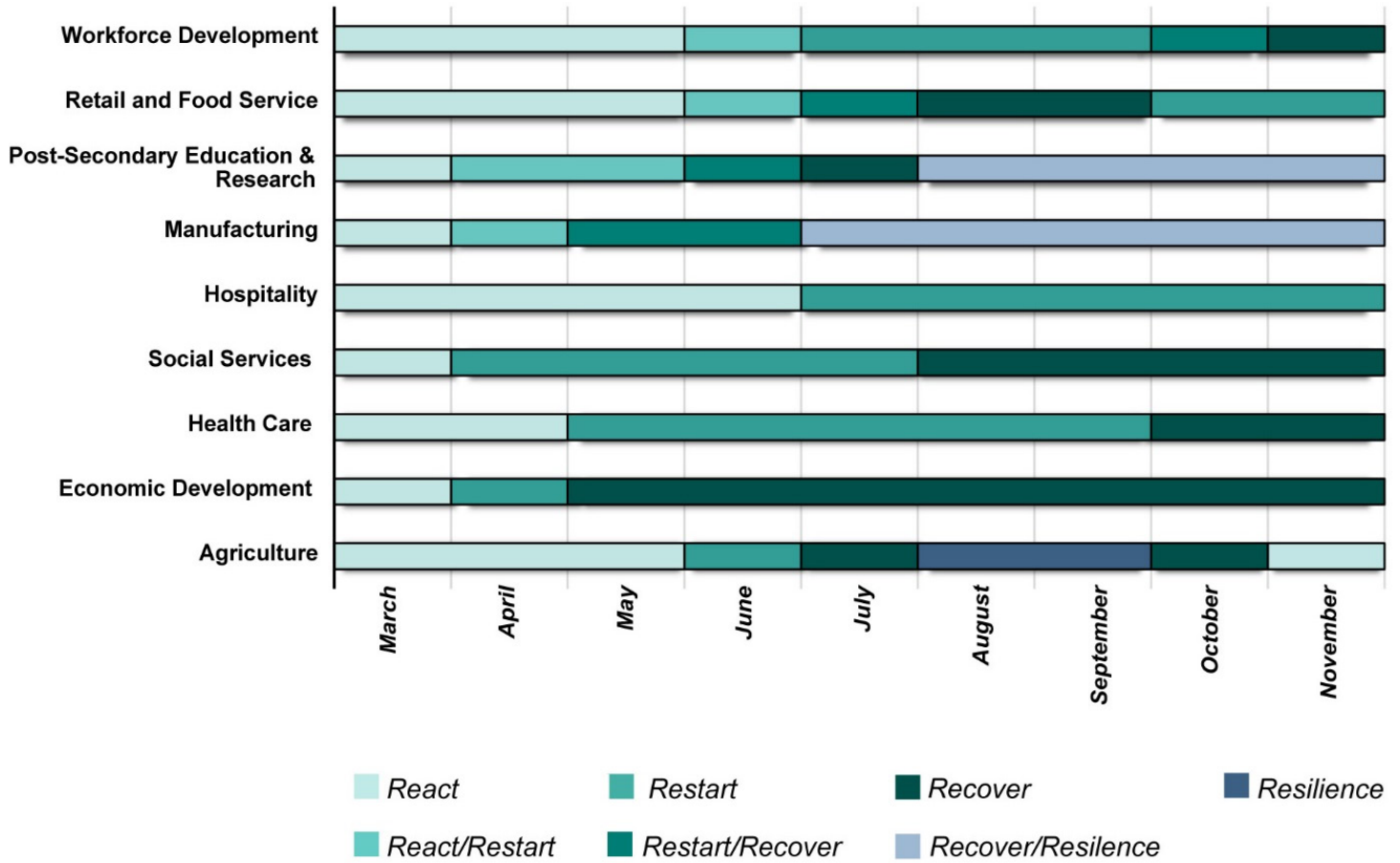
Economic recovery, for our region and for individual sectors or businesses, can be divided into four stages: REACT, RESTART, RECOVER, and RESILIENCY. They are defined as followed:

- **REACT:** Adjusting to lockdown conditions and new restrictions, accessing remedies, taking short-term and reactive actions. Priority is staying afloat.
- **RESTART:** Adjusting to new, more stable conditions that permit a certain level of business activity, while still relying on temporary remedies and preparing for potentially serious threats including new lockdowns. Priority is reaching a new steady state.
- **RECOVER:** A new steady state, or new normal, is sustainably achieved. Depending on the sector, this may represent a return to pre-COVID-19 levels of activity. Businesses may still be dealing with the impacts of downturn in other sectors or in the economy as a whole. Priority is long-term investments and changes to business model that enable success in the new normal.
- **RESILIENCY:** The benefits of investments and long-term changes made in the recover phase are felt. Whether as a result of these changes, or the end of the COVID-19 crisis as a whole, businesses become impervious to negative impacts related to COVID-19. Priority is growth beyond the COVID-19 crisis.

Through previous discussions with the Workforce Recovery Planning Round Table members, we have identified and acted upon recommendations for the REACT and RESTART phases, which are summarized in the next section of this document. While we continue to identify immediate challenges to overcome and opportunities to seize, the next step in developing a recovery plan is to begin planning for RECOVER and RESILIENCY phases, which could span from today to 3+ years into the future. Continued uncertainty about the progression of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as its long-term impacts on the global economy mean that a scenario-based approach is required to plan proactively for these stages of recovery.



Not every sector will progress through these stages at the same rate. As of December 2020, some may still be transitioning from REACT to RESTART, while others are entering the RECOVER stage. Below is a timeline of how key sectors in Sarnia-Lambton have progressed through the crisis to date, based on consultation with representatives and stakeholders across these industries.



How to use this report

The report is designed to provide local stakeholders and the partners the tools and information needed for strategic planning into the workforce and economic recovery phase of the pandemic. These tools will aid decision makers in proactively addressing challenges and opportunities that arise through four probable future scenarios and as the COVID-19 situation evolves. Government, economic development organizations, community stakeholders, educators, employers, employees, and jobseekers can use this report as part of their strategic planning and decision-making process related to workforce, training, jobs, and careers. The terms employer, business and organization are used interchangeably in this report.

Scenarios tell a story of what the future could look like under certain circumstances. They are a world in which different, unexpected outcomes are possible. They are not policy choices but an opportunity to consider how you, a stakeholder, would react if this future scenario were to occur.

In each of the four scenarios, discuss how your organization would be impacted if this scenario occurred. Consider how you would manage the current and projected skills shortages. Plan how your organization would navigate through the React, Restart, Recover, and Resiliency stages. Questions to consider are:

- What stage are you currently in?
- What programs and supports do you need to support you in this new reality?
- How would you mitigate the problems in each of these scenarios?
- What are the challenges?
- Where are the opportunities?
- What recommendations will help your organization?

The report's accompanying dashboard includes pertinent labour market intelligence that will help decision makers:

- Gain knowledge, review evidence, and examine community-supported recommendations for actions that improve labour market conditions across Southwestern Ontario.
- Identify current and projected skills shortages resulting from the economic impacts and government investments in healthcare, manufacturing, construction, public administration and other industries specific to the nine Southwestern Ontario regions.
- Identify current and emerging issues impacting labour market adjustment in key sectors
- Identify areas for potential value-added growth and innovation that emerge as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and its restructuring of consumer and business needs.
- Recommend potential initiatives that will bridge the gaps between labour market supply and demand up to June 2022.

Some of the scenarios discussed may seem unlikely. However, it is important to think outside of the box and consider how you and/or your organization would react. If anyone told any of us in November 2019 that there would be a highly contagious, deadly airborne virus that would result in worldwide economic shutdowns, travel restrictions, stay at home orders, states of emergency, and physical distancing, no one would have believed them.^{1,2,3,4} A failure of imagination is not a good strategy.

NOTE: The COVID-19 pandemic situation changes daily. This report is current as of February 2021 and focuses on the labour market in Sarnia Lambton.

¹ Center for Disease Control, 'Science Brief: SARS-CoV-2 and Potential Airborne Transmission', <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/more/scientific-brief-sars-cov-2.html> (accessed 5 November 2020)

² World Health Organization, 'Transmission of SARS-CoV-2: implications for infection prevention precautions' <https://www.who.int/news-room/commentaries/detail/transmission-of-sars-cov-2-implications-for-infection-prevention-precautions> (accessed 5 November 2020)

³ Government of Canada, 'COVID-19: Main modes of transmission', https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection/health-professionals/main-modes-transmission.html#_How_COVID-19_spreads (accessed 4 December 2020)

10 ⁴ CBC, 'Canada quietly updates COVID-19 guidelines on risk of airborne spread', Adam Miller, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/health/coronavirus-canada-aerosol-transmission-covid-19-1.5789906>, (accessed 4 December 2020)

Part II: Review of the impact of COVID-19 on Sarnia Lambton

THE PAST: March to December 2020

The COVID-19 pandemic, declared March 11 2020, swept the globe causing economic disruption worldwide. In Canada, the level of impact caused by the public health crisis on the workforce has not been seen since the years of the Great Depression. The all-time low business confidence led the provincial gross domestic product to drop by 5.6%.⁵

Ontario declared a State of Emergency March 17 followed by orders for the mandatory closure of all non-essential workplaces 23 March 2020. The first deaths (2) in Ontario were reported on 24 March.⁶ Since January 31, the number of confirmed cases across the province reached 118,199 as of December 1, over a third of the total number of Canadian cases (383,468). Within this same period, 3,663 Ontarians along with 8,548 additional Canadians have died from COVID-19.⁷

Impacts we have already felt COVID-19 in Sarnia-Lambton

The severity and extent of the impacts on the workforce in Sarnia-Lambton continued to grow as the COVID-19 public health crisis persisted. The first five cases in Sarnia-Lambton were reported on March 25, growing to 37 confirmed cases by the end of the month. The first wave of COVID-19, lasting until early July, was marked by eleven declarations of institutional outbreaks at long-term care (LTC) homes (confirmed cases: 60 residents and 48 staff) accounting for 16 of the 26 total COVID-19-related deaths in Sarnia-Lambton to date.⁸

As of 31 December 2020, there have been 732 confirmed COVID-19 cases reported. Of those cases, over 50% are persons between the ages of 19 – 60, representing the significant impact COVID-19 has had on working-age residents. Also of note is that 67% of all confirmed COVID-19 cases were amongst individuals residing within the City of Sarnia, with the caveat that the LTC homes most heavily impacted are within the city limits. Fifteen workplace outbreaks reported were businesses in Sarnia, accounting for 62 total cases reported between 15 August and 31 December 2020. Case counts, details regarding outbreaks, system capacity for testing and a map of confirmed COVID-19 cases across the region are monitored and reported daily by Lambton Public Health. Resources and consultations through the local public health agency continue to support employers and their workforce through sharing of information resources and one-one-one consultations designed to ensure workforce compliance to mandated safety protocols updated over the course of the pandemic.

⁵ Ontario Chamber of Commerce, '2021 Ontario Economic Report', <https://occ.ca/oer2021>

⁶ Government of Ontario, 'Covid-19: Modelling and Potential Scenarios', <https://files.ontario.ca/moh-covid-19-modelling-potential-scenarios-en-2020-04-20.pdf> (accessed 15 August 2020)

⁷ Government of Canada, Epidemiological summary of COVID-19 cases in Canada, <https://health-infobase.canada.ca/covid-19/epidemiological-summary-covid-19-cases.html>, (accessed 1 December 2020)

⁸ Lambton Public Health, 'Summary of COVID-19 cases in Lambton County', <https://lambtonpublichealth.ca/2019-novel-coronavirus/summary-of-covid-19-cases-in-lambton-county/>, (accessed 1 December 2020)

Early Glimpse at the Impact on the Workforce in Sarnia-Lambton

In the early months of the pandemic, several regional organizations acted swiftly to capture a snapshot of the immediate impacts of COVID-19 on the local workforce. By the middle of April, approximately six million people - one-third of Canada's workforce - had applied for the federal Canadian Emergency Response Benefit (CERB).⁹ In that same period, the COVID-19 Worker Impact survey conducted by Sarnia-Lambton Workforce Development Board (SLWDB) reported that 37% of all respondents were out of work due to COVID-19, either temporarily or permanently. Temporary business closures accounted for over 25% of the reported job loss while 24% reported a slowdown in business as the reason for reduction of work. Along these lines, 21.5% reported that despite still being in the workforce they are working less than they did prior to the outbreak.¹⁰

The occupations most negatively affected by the pandemic were those in the arts, entertainment and recreation (100% of respondents in this occupation were out of work temporarily or permanently) as well as information and cultural industries (80% of respondents in this occupation were out of work temporarily or permanently). Over 50% of respondents in the following occupations were out of work temporarily or permanently: Arts, entertainment and recreation; Construction and utilities; Information and cultural industries; and Mining. In contrast, over 75% of respondents in the following industries were working in their usual place of work or from home: Professional, scientific, technical and administrative services; Public administration; Healthcare and social assistance; Finance and real estate; and Agriculture, forestry and fishing.¹⁰

In terms of the type of worker impacted by COVID-19, those who identified as self-employed described experiencing a bigger impact than employees did, with 72% reporting being out of work. Conversely, only 32.7% of employees indicated they were out of work. In contrast, nearly one-fifth of respondents reported an increase in their workload since the onset of the health crisis. The top three occupations observed to have increases in workload according to respondents were in Health care & social assistance (29.8%), Education (29.4%), and Administrative and support & waste management & remediation services (28.6%).¹⁰

Findings from surveys performed by the two regional Chambers of Commerce, Sarnia-Lambton and Grand Bend & Area, support the trends observed in the SLWDB data. Only 29 of the 394 businesses responding to the Grand Bend & Area survey reported operating at nearly normal levels. As of May 2020, 161 of the businesses reported being operational to some extent, while 233 were closed (59 of these are seasonal and do not typically operate at this time of year). The sectors reporting greatest impact were those in Hospitality and accommodation services, Sports and recreation, Arts and culture, Retail and Food Services.¹¹ The Small Business Recovery and Success Strategy Report compiled by the Sarnia-Lambton Chamber of Commerce noted 29% of respondent businesses were experiencing disruption to their supply chains, which affected their ability to maintain normal levels of business operations. Ongoing consultations and data collection will permit better understanding of the economic impacts of COVID-19 in later stages of the pandemic.¹²

The early local surveys were a representative snapshot of the overall impact of COVID-19 on the economic region of Sarnia-Windsor. Data for the level of employment across industries between March and May revealed that the largest declines in number of employed persons were in the Wholesale and resale trade (13.8%) and Accommodations & food services (15.2%) industries. Surprisingly, the largest employment loss observed within the services sector industries were in Health care & social assistance (15.6%). Overall, these industries accounted for 44% of all service sector job loss in the early months of the pandemic. Manufacturing was the main source of employment loss within the goods producing industries accounting for 83% of loss within the sector. Statistics exclusive to Sarnia-Lambton were not available at the time of this report.¹³

⁹ CBC, 'Nearly 6 million people have applied for COVID-19 emergency benefits', <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/covid19-benefits-cerb-1.5530722>, Kathleen Harris (accessed 12 November 2020)

¹⁰ Sarnia Lambton Workforce Development Board, 'COVID-19 Worker Impact Survey – Complete Results', <https://www.slwdb.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/COVID-19-Worker-Impact-Survey-Complete-Results.pdf>, (accessed 12 November 2020).

¹¹ Grand Bend & Area Chamber of Commerce, 'Status of Lambton-Shores Businesses During Covid-19', (survey results released 15 April 2020).

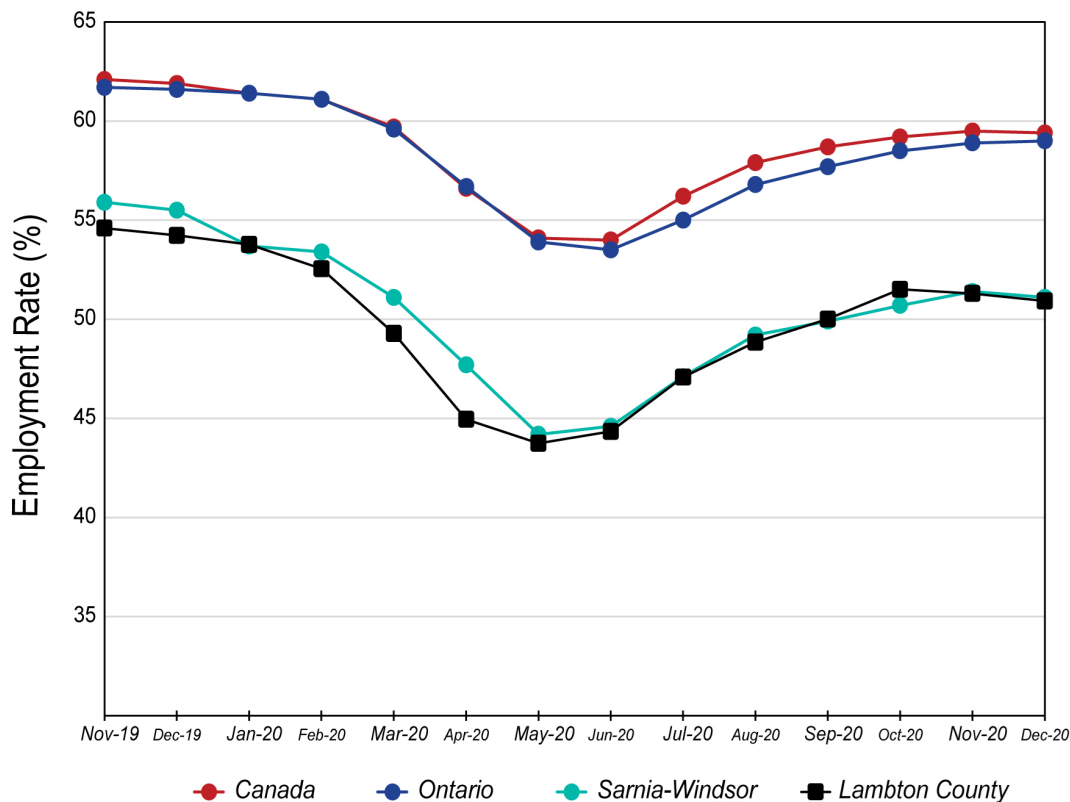
¹² Sarnia Lambton Chamber of Commerce, 'Small Business Recovery and Success Strategy Report', (survey results released 25 March 2020).

12 ¹³ Statistics Canada, 'Employment by industry, three-month moving average, unadjusted for seasonality, provinces and economic regions (x 1,000)' Table 14-10-0091-01 (accessed 13 November 2020).

Labour Force Impact: Statistics for the First Wave of the Pandemic

Between the onset of the pandemic in early March to May 2020, the employment rate in Lambton County declined by 8.9% while that of the economic region of Sarnia-Windsor declined by 6.9%. The employment rate in Sarnia-Lambton started recovering in June (Stage 2 triggered June 19 2020), but remained 3.3% lower than the rate reported the previous year at the end of December 2020, better than that for the Sarnia-Windsor region (4.4% lower in December 2020 compared to 2019). The employment rate lagged behind those reported for Ontario and Canada from the onset of the pandemic, which were 8.1% and 8.5% greater, respectively, than those reported for Sarnia-Lambton.^{14,15}

Employment Rate (%) for Canada, Ontario, Sarnia-Windsor and Lambton County between November 2019 and December 2020



¹⁴ Statistics Canada, 'Labour force characteristics by economic region, three-month moving average, unadjusted for seasonality (x 1,000)' Table 14-10-0293-01 (accessed 4 December 2020).

¹⁵ Metro Economics 2020, proprietary labour market indicator estimates prepared for SLWDB

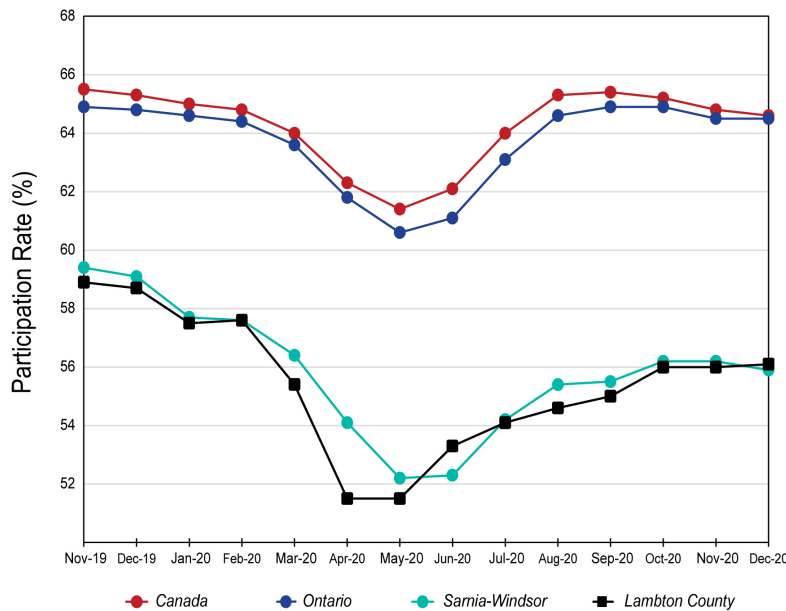
In line with the impact of COVID-19 on employment, the unemployment rate in Sarnia-Lambton rose by 8% between early March and June 2020, slightly lower than the rise seen in the economic region of Sarnia-Windsor (8.2%).^{14,15} In contrast, during that same period in 2019, the unemployment rate dropped 0.4% in Sarnia-Lambton.¹⁵ As lockdown restrictions began to be lifted for some non-essential sectors in June, the unemployment rate dropped by 7.6% from June to December 2020.¹⁵

The unemployment rate reported in December was greater in Sarnia-Lambton (9.2%) than the economic region (8.6%) and remained 1.6% higher than observed in December 2019.¹⁵ In comparison, the provincial unemployment rate in December (8.5%) remains 3.7% higher than observed in the preceding year.¹⁴ Across the province, the unemployment rate rose to levels higher than seen in the 2008-2009 financial crisis and are projected to remain elevated in 2021.⁵

According to the Employer One survey conducted by SLWDB, nearly two thirds (64%) of all local separations experienced in 2020 were due to layoffs, a 36% increase compared to 2019.¹⁶ In November 2020, Statistics Canada indicated 25.6% of all unemployed people - 443,000 Canadians - were long-term unemployed, defined as 27 weeks or more.¹⁷ In December 2020, a Royal Bank of Canada (RBC) report indicated long-term unemployment had increased a staggering 250% since the start of the pandemic.¹⁸ The impact of long-term unemployment on consumer spending and service industry jobs is likely to be a big factor in the rate of the economic recovery in Canada.

The participation rate in Sarnia-Lambton was 2.6% lower in December 2020 than in the previous year, and 1.5% lower than the month preceding the declaration of the public emergency.¹⁵ This is in stark contrast to the participation rates observed at the provincial and national levels, which have all recovered to pre-COVID-19 levels while remaining slightly below reported participation rates for December 2019.¹⁴

Participation Rate (%) for Canada, Ontario, Sarnia-Windsor and Lambton County between November 2019 and December 2020



¹⁶ SLWDB, '2021 Employer One Survey Report', (published 3 March 2021)

¹⁷ Statistics Canada, 'Labour Force Survey Brief, November 2020', <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/201204/dq201204a-eng.htm>, (accessed 5 December 2020)

¹⁸ RBC, 'Decentralized economy and diverging paths: Canada in 2021', <http://www.rbc.com/newsroom/news/2020/20201209-economics-navigating-2021.html>, (accessed 12 December 2020)

Several notable observations regarding the labour force of Sarnia Lambton were made because of project collaboration with the nine other workforce planning and development boards of Southwestern Ontario (a group formerly known as Workforce Planning West). In February 2020, prior to the onset of the pandemic and public health restrictions, Sarnia Lambton held the lowest employment rate (52.6%), participation rate (58.7%) and the highest level of unemployment (8.7%) across Southwestern Ontario.¹⁹ As we consider policies and practices to promote workforce and economic recovery in Sarnia Lambton, it will be critical to consider the factors that created such poor employment characteristics in the area prior to COVID-19.

The initial impact of the COVID-19 crisis on employment type was similar for full- and part-time employment positions. Between the onset of the pandemic in March to May, 25,700 full-time positions were lost while the same measure for part-time employment was 24,100.¹⁴ However, the recovery has been uneven for each employment type. Since June, full time employment positions rose to nearly pre-COVID-19 levels with a net gain measured to be 1,400. This is drastically different from 11,400 part-time employment positions that have not yet returned as of November 2020.¹⁴ Compared to November 2019, the region has lost 9,600 full-time and 13,000 part-time employment positions. The decline in persons employed full-time employment was a trend observed at the provincial level while a greater proportional loss of part-time employment was seen in Sarnia-Windsor than those observed for Ontario and Canada.¹⁴ The source and remedy for the significant decline in part-time employment positions and overall reduction in the number of employed individuals within the region will warrant further analysis beyond the scope of the current report.

Impacts on the Health Care and Social Services

The health care and social services are on the front line of this public health emergency, working to support the well-being of our communities, care for the affected patients, develop and implement effective testing and contact tracing procedures all while being transparent with the public through up to date reporting. Shortages in nurses and supporting care staff within the LTC homes (personal support workers, aides, etc.) were exacerbated by COVID-19; care workers holding part-time positions at multiple institutions were only permitted to work within one facility to reduce possible viral spread. In addition, staff exposed to positive patients were required to quarantine, some of which later tested positive, and shortages in staffing grew as the virus spread through the community. These shortages were additionally compounded by the over-representation of women in these roles, many of whom relied on the daycare facilities, schools and programming for childcare that were closed in the early days of the crisis.²⁰ Since the onset of the public health crisis, Health care and social assistance has seen the second greatest decline in employment across all industries with a drop of 9,200 employees in the economic region of Sarnia-Windsor from March to November 2020; 7,200 fewer were employed in this sector than the previous November.¹³

Despite the reduced number of confirmed cases and resolution of all institutional outbreaks within Sarnia-Lambton, LTC homes continued to report staff shortages (limitation of working at multiple institutions, burn out/moving onto different roles) with fears of a crisis looming as the new policies governing time of care requirements for patients within LTC homes in Ontario.²¹ The top in demand occupation every month since the start of the pandemic to the time of this report has been home support workers, including personal support workers (PSW). In that time, there were over 170 job postings for PSWs, 100 postings for nursing positions (LPN, RN, nursing managers and supervisors) and over 140 nurse aide and health care support staff positions.²²

¹⁹ Workforce Planning West, 'Post-Pandemic Scenario Planning Project for Workforce Recovery', www.slwdb.org/pandemic-recovery/, updated 19 March 2020

²⁰ Statistics Canada, 'Just the Facts: COVID-19 and the employment of health care workers' <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/89-28-0001/2018001/article/00019-eng.htm> (accessed 17 November 2020).

²¹ University of Toronto, 'Women in health care at increased risk for stress, burnout and depression during COVID-19: U of T study', University of Toronto News (accessed 17 November 2020).

²² WISL: Work in Sarnia Lambton, (data accessed 1 December 2020).

The pandemic has also brought the mental health and addiction crisis in our region to a head. Canadians report levels of poor mental health four times higher than pre-pandemic levels across all age groups as well as increases in substance use (alcohol, cannabis, tobacco).²³ Moreover, Canadians reported their lowest level of life satisfaction since this data first became available in 2003, with youth reporting the largest declines.²³ Locally, the demands on our social service sector for housing and food supports have reached unprecedented levels.

To date, the County of Lambton has secured over 150 hotel room accommodations for residents displaced by the pandemic, while the central food bank for Sarnia has reported the demand for their food supports increased four times their routinely encountered levels at any given time of year. Since the pandemic, the inpatient mental health services in Sarnia-Lambton have been oversaturated with high acuity adult and youth cases, with several instances of having to turn patients away. For the past several years, Bluewater Health hospital and our Local Health Integration Network (LHIN) have been moving to garner funding for a 24-bed inpatient mental health and addictions (detox) facility to support the growing demand for services. While the prospect of this proposal becoming reality is not yet certain, Bluewater Health (in support with the LHIN) will be opening a 12-bed inpatient transitional housing space equipped with a minimum of eight permanent social service withdrawal management professionals to be hired.

The far-reaching impacts of the pandemic locally will evolve and require continued innovation to address the needs of Sarnia-Lambton communities. Bluewater Health hospital is actively working to ensure the increased demands are being appropriately supported and/or directed to the appropriate social services support providers. Through active collaboration and partnerships, the Sarnia-Lambton Social Service Network best understand the evolving needs of the local communities while not duplicating services. Since the onset of the pandemic, a dozen social service worker job postings sought to fill service gaps experienced.²² Resources and support services have worked rapidly to pivot to a virtual model allowing for continued client access. Unfortunately, a number of barriers remain including the overall saturated caseload and general workforce shortage of local trained mental health care professionals. With the shift to virtual care as an option, this may present the opportunity to seek care from professionals outside of our region. However, it should be noted that barriers remain including accessibility to, and/or discomfort with, the technology required for service delivery.

Impacts on Tourism, Retail and Food Services

Tourism in Sarnia-Lambton has been a tale of two extremes: Lambton Shores versus the rest of Lambton County. Lambton Shores is the home of the beautiful lakefront and beaches of a favorite tourist destination, Grand Bend. In prior years, Grand Bend attracted both Ontarians and Americans throughout the summer season. The lockdown did not immediately affect the tourist season but concerns arose, as businesses remained closed and unable to prepare as late as the beginning of May. As the first wave of the pandemic started to subside, many Ontarians unable to travel outside of Canada focused their tourism dollars on local excursions, including Lambton Shores. By all accounts from local businesses and their Chamber of Commerce, Grand Bend and Area had a very successful tourist season financially. Lambton Shores businesses worked to ensure a safe environment for local residents and the out-of-town travelers, including implementing a mandatory mask mandate which served to limit the overall number of confirmed COVID-19 case in that part of the county to 45 at the time of this report.

In contrast, the hospitality sector in the remaining regions of Lambton County struggled throughout the summer months. Many hotels temporarily closed their doors, contributing to the loss of jobs observed in this sector in the early months of the pandemic.¹³ Visitors traveling for the many local events and sports tournaments were absent; professionals were no longer traveling for meetings or conferences that were made virtual; outside skilled tradespeople and labourers were no longer required for manufacturing and constructions projects postponed or cancelled due to COVID-19.

Hotels reopening their doors did so with reduced staff. Those fortunate to return to work were required to fill multiple roles, taking on additional responsibilities that required new skill sets. Staff having a multifaceted skillset adaptable to many responsibilities is a trend also observed in the retail sector locally, indicating a potential shift in how job seekers will need to prepare for the post-pandemic workforce.

At the time of this report, the summer tourist season for Lambton Shores has come to a close and the winter months look bleaker than those pre-COVID-19. As seen across the county in the summer, large events (i.e. Christmas parties) and sports tournaments that typically buoy the area through the winter have been downsized or cancelled. The majority of the hotel occupancy reported across Lambton are reserved for pandemic-related housing (i.e. homeless; required or voluntary self-isolation). The workforce is limited across the sector and a return of temporary hotel closures are possible in the near future as travel remains regulated. Since the start of the pandemic the Sarnia-Windsor economic region reported 3,400 fewer persons employed in the Accommodations and food services sector. Compared to data from the previous year, there had been total loss of 6,800 employed persons in the sector at the end of November 2020.¹³

Restaurants have faced a number of challenges in the wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. Food services and drinking places suffered an outsized drop in employment compared to other sectors, and remains roughly 20% below the pre-pandemic levels.²⁴ From temporary closures, limited indoor seating, accommodating outdoor dining, shifting operations to delivery and curbside takeout models all while maintaining additional stringent public health requirements for workers and patrons, owners and staff have been adapting as swiftly as possible. These adaptations came with unexpected costs, both with finances and time, as staffing needs fluctuated with business demand and training requirements. The City of Sarnia in partnership with the Sarnia-Lambton Chamber of Commerce created a summer weekend pedestrian walkabout along the main downtown retail district allowing restaurants to expand their dining capacity out onto the roadway. The City of Sarnia worked to aid businesses, including restaurants, across the city through exemptions to bylaws regulating outdoor sale of food, goods and services. Permits would normally have been required at a cost; this exemption will remain in effect until 13 July 2022. Despite best efforts, Statistics Canada and the Canadian Chamber of Commerce predicted in August that 60% of Canadian restaurants will fail by the end of the year largely attributed to the existing social distancing practices. Within the months proceeding the study, the Canadian summer has moved into fall, limiting the ability of most restaurants to offer exterior seating to diners, further restricting the number of patrons able to be served.

Over the last six months, services specializing in personal restaurant delivery have grown locally as has the number of restaurants embracing online menu orders and delivery takeout models. Others have reduced their hours of operations, thus reducing the number of workforce hours along with other operational costs. This was out of the need for restaurants to remain sustainable in the face of seasonal changes and overall reduction in patrons frequenting these establishments. Those that have adapted to this landscape will be best prepared in the event of a second resurgence of the virus and with it another round of social distancing requirements (fewer patrons

²⁴ Eric Lascelles, 'The low-hanging fruit of the recovery has been plucked', excerpt from Maclean's magazine, <https://www.macleans.ca/economy/charts-to-watch-in-2021-the-most-important-canadian-economic-charts-for-the-year-ahead/>, (accessed 12 December 2020)

The wholesale and retail industries were one of the top service sector industries in total number of job loss within the Sarnia-Windsor economic region in the early months of the pandemic, many positions that had not been recovered by November.¹³ Compared to the year prior, there were 11,300 fewer employed persons in these industries. This level of decline observed for Sarnia-Windsor is not seen at the provincial or national levels and is indicative of a local economic shift. Despite this trend, there remains a level of demand for workers. Since March, there have been 219 job postings seeking retail salespersons, 113 support workers (cashiers, store clerks and order fillers) and 134 managers and supervisors.²²

The question remains whether the shift in employment decline within these industries will continue over the long-term. A number of factors will need to be monitored. First, as most positions within these industries are traditionally public facing, they are seen as having a level of risk during a public health emergency. As the COVID-19 crisis becomes controlled and consumer confidence rises, employment opportunities may recover to pre-pandemic levels. Another factor is the nature of retail work moving from traditional brick and mortar to virtual e-commerce models, which requires a smaller workforce overall. A number of local retail businesses pivoted to online service and product delivery often coupled with curbside pick-up options. Between March and May, the rate of e-commerce sales grew exponentially across Canada, jumping 228.8%. This growth was reported mostly among non-essential retailers. In contrast, the rate of in-store retail sales dropped 25.5%.²⁵ The degree by which retailers use e-commerce platforms will act to shape the evolving landscape in retail as will the degree of change in consumer preferences, consequently affecting the workforce trends within these industries.

Impacts on Agriculture

Lambton County is home to over two thousand individual farms including over 1,600 field crop farms, 345 live-stock farms, 43 dairy farms, and 41 orchards and greenhouses.²⁶ The onset of COVID-19 posed a number of challenges for the agricultural sector, largely associated with impact the pandemic had on the ability of migrant workers to enter Canada to work with local farmers. Across the country, migrant workers account for 20% of the total employed persons in this sector. In previous years, between 20 - 25,000 migrant workers arrived in Ontario to work on farms and in greenhouses.²⁷ This year, that number was significantly limited due to pandemic-related border restrictions. This led to fears of severe labour shortages resulting in disruptions to our local food production and supply chain. The uncertainty created by these shortages led local farmers to make dramatic changes to their business operations. Farms that had traditionally produced ground (vegetable) crops heavily dependent on harvest workers began looking to shift to field crops (namely soy) that can be more readily reaped with farming equipment and fewer workers. The impact of this shift to local food supplies is yet to be fully grasped.

The already highly regulated meat-processing sector was hit hard by the introduction of COVID-19 restrictions at the local abattoirs causing a production backlog and reduction in supply in the early days of the pandemic. Easing of regulations has since increased production and reduced the backlog. In the economic region of Sarnia-Windsor, employment levels in Agriculture for November surpassed those from the spring and early summer by over 17% and were shown to be greater than those in November 2019. This is likely due to the increased admission of temporary foreign workers into the region and rebound in food processing operations since the beginning of March.

²⁵ Statistics Canada, 'Retail trade, September 2020' <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/201120/dq201120a-eng.htm>, (accessed 27 November 2020).

²⁶ Lambton Federation of Agriculture, 'Lambton County Ag Facts', <https://lambtonfederation.ca/home/lambton-county-ag-facts/>, (accessed 6 October 2020)

²⁷ Statistics Canada, 'COVID-19 Disruptions and Agriculture: Temporary Foreign Workers', (accessed 6 October 2020)

The long-term concerns centering around the supply of skilled labourers to work within food processing have been exacerbated by the pandemic, due in large part to the reduced hands-on training available. Several local initiatives predating COVID-19 were designed to introduce high school students to the diverse career opportunities within agriculture, including a co-op program (postponed indefinitely) and job fairs (held virtually in place of in-person events). Being a leader in adaptability and innovation, the agricultural sector has been working to seize the opportunities presented by these times of change to develop resilient operating and growth models designed to support farmers and attract local skilled talent. These stabilizing sector adaptations will be critical to ensuring stability in the food supply chain.

Impacts on Manufacturing and Construction

The manufacturing sector was one of the most affected sectors in the early months of the pandemic in Ontario. Since May, the number of persons employed in manufacturing across Sarnia-Windsor began to recover to pre-COVID-19 levels. By November, employment in the sector was greater in the economic region than the year prior. The provincial profile is similar to the regional profile while overall employment in manufacturing across Canada remains below levels reported in 2019.¹³ The majority of manufacturing employment in Sarnia-Lambton is either directly or indirectly associated with the diverse chemical processing businesses in the area. Over 100 local businesses, including manufacturers, rely on local operations of oil and gas energy facilities. The workforces from each of these organizations were affected when a number of large-scale projects planned for these facilities were postponed or delayed indefinitely while critical maintenance projects were significantly scaled down in terms of labour force to ensure compliance with COVID-19 workplace health regulations. The WISL job board only featured 72 manufacturing postings since March but it should be noted that there is a vibrant union presence in the region and many of the job opportunities in these industries do not recruit using online job boards.

Sarnia-Lambton has a well-established supply chain in place to support the manufacturing of vessels, reactors and modules required for modern energy complexes worldwide. In order to improve the competitiveness of the local manufacturing industry: the development of an oversized load corridor (OLC) continued through the pandemic. The OLC will reduce the barriers of product transportation from the Sarnia harbor to area fabricators. This will promote the growth of the local economy by allowing local businesses to pursue international markets presently physically inaccessible. The impact of the project will require investments in the growth and retention of manufacturing jobs including skilled trades labour, providing the local fabrication sector with a light at the end of the tunnel post-pandemic.

The oil and gas energy sector worldwide has been volatile since the early days of the pandemic. The drop in global demand can be attributed to stay at home orders, work from home practices, and travel (air, land and sea) grinding to a near-complete halt. The question of the long-term ramifications of this volatility locally has very high stakes for the economy in Sarnia-Lambton. There have been several notable developments over the last six months. NOVA Chemicals continued their ongoing project to expand their operations with minor disruptions since the provincial lockdown initiated in March. At the same time, they are restructuring their organization, including the sale of their plastics facility to a Mexican entity and downsizing their workforce by 30 persons. Royal Dutch Shell retracted their Sarnia oil refinery facility from the market after no offer to purchase it was accepted. It remains to be seen if this decision by the corporation is part of a long-term strategy to invest in their workforce in Sarnia or whether the refinery will be offered for tender again in the near future again presenting uncertainty for their workers. Lastly, the fate of Enbridge Energy's Line 5 pipeline was once again placed in the hands of the court in Michigan. The Line 5 pipeline has carried over 500 thousand barrels of light crude oil and propane from Wisconsin to Sarnia through Michigan to three local refineries for a number of decades. Cutting off this supply would drastically reduce the workforce required for processing and cause measurable damage to our regional economy. This decision by the Governor to shut the pipeline down is being legally contested in court in the summer of 2021.²⁸

²⁸ Government of the State of Michigan, 'Review of Enbridge Line 5 tunnel application extended to January 2021', Department of Environment, Great Lakes & Energy, Government of the State of Michigan, (published 2 December 2020)

Sarnia-Lambton has been working to promote the production and harvesting of a number of other energy sources. The local infrastructure and renowned research facilities have made the region a favorable destination for investments in biofuels processing facilities. With these investments come a great number of temporary jobs for the engineering, construction and development phases. Facility operations serve to secure permanent employment opportunities for the local labour force. Forward-facing business and economic development officers as well as community leaders in manufacturing have been working to pave the way for Sarnia-Lambton to lead the province (if not Canada) in hydrogen energy production. As with biofuels, hydrogen energy would enhance the sector profile of the region thus attracting more investment and job opportunities for the local workforce.

Construction remained a great driver of economic recovery following the disruptions caused by the pandemic. The top concerns faced by the industry in Ontario through the pandemic have been disruptions in the building supply chain along with project delays or cancellations due to industry shutdown and increased public health restrictions.²⁹ A challenge faced by over half of contractors across Ontario was the increased difficulty in accessing the required skilled labourers needed for these project compared to the year preceding the COVID-19 outbreak. Government assistance programs were accessed by 64% of contractors and are credited with ensuring the sustainability of construction businesses throughout the pandemic in 2020.²⁹

Investment in non-residential construction rebounded from its dramatic decline in April across Canada, reaching higher levels in October 2020 than levels at that time in the years prior. Investment in residential construction showed similar trends, with a drastic decline observed in April and levels higher in October than those measured the year prior. The trend in residential housing investment across Canada was observed through the rise in employment levels within the construction sector in the Sarnia-Windsor economic region. Between November 2019 and 2020, there was an increase of more than 1,000 persons employed in construction in the region. The City of Sarnia reported that the overall building totals for 2020 surpassed those in 2019.³⁰ Since March, there were over 150 job postings for employment in construction. The caveat to note is that, as with manufacturing job opportunities, there is a strong union presence in Sarnia-Lambton and the construction sector relies on a number of other methods to recruit.

The Sarnia-Lambton Real Estate Board has noted an increase in residential homebuyers relocating from larger urban centres, favouring the smaller communities in the region.³¹ An anticipated result of this shift has been the sharp increase in the cost of housing and a strain on the local available housing supply. A positive consequence of this population influx will be an increase in the local tax base, which has remained stagnant over the last couple of decades.

In contrast to the rebound and growth in the residential construction sector, levels of commercial and industrial construction across the country showed a declining trend.³² Work from home options have led some businesses to reconsider their office space needs while pandemic-induced business closures have led to a rise in commercial vacancies. It remains to be seen whether the current reduction in commercial construction demand is temporary or is the beginning of a permanent trend by businesses seeking to reduce their office footprint as they expand to virtual-based operations.

²⁹ Ontario Construction Secretariat, '2021 Contractor Survey', (accessed 3 March 2021)

³⁰ Blackburn News, 'Sarnia's pandemic year building totals surpass 2019', Dave Dentinger, Blackburn News, (published 9 December 2020)

³¹ Blackburn News, 'Rising prices factor in record 2020 real estate numbers', Melanie Irwin (published 7 January 2021)

³² Arlene Kish, 'Is this a temporary hit to commercial construction or something more?', excerpt from Maclean's magazine, <https://www.macleans.ca/economy/charts-to-watch-in-2021-the-most-important-canadian-economic-charts-for-the-year-ahead/>, (accessed 12 December 2020)

Education and Training

In brief, education at all levels was up-ended by COVID-19. For the purposes of this report, the discussion regarding education will be limited to post-secondary education within Sarnia-Lambton as this represents several pathways into our workforce. The adaptations and accommodations put in place by Lambton College at the onset of the pandemic are a study in pivoting delivery models. Classes capable of being delivered via an online format underwent full curriculum translations for virtual teaching. Those with hands-on components (namely labs) required physical investment in making spaces compatible with social distancing measures including installation of physical barriers. When in-person classes were held, classes were divided into smaller cohorts, meaning instructors needed to teach a given session multiple times. Instructors and students alike had steep learning curves for this new way of learning. Lambton College reported a declined level of enrollment in the face of COVID-19 for the 2020-2021 school year. Aside from its impact in our community, COVID-19 has dramatically impacted the number of international students able to travel into Canada. This will have a detrimental impact on the diversity of skills in the local labour force and the community.

Several industrial sectors, including manufacturing and construction, are reliant on trained skilled trades persons. Last year, there was an overall 4.9% reduction of total skilled trades apprentice certifications across Canada. In Ontario, this number dropped by 7.3% despite noting small increases within a number of manufacturing trades. Due to the increased workplace regulation requirements in place during COVID-19, the training programs, and hands-on technical experience required for apprentice certifications were negatively affected, further impacting the shortages being experienced in many trades.³³ The scale of the impact on these training tradespeople depended on the trade of study, with many restricted to online learning and stalled in accruing the number of hours needed for certification. Secondary students enrolled in co-operative (Co-Op) and Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Program (OYAP) opportunities to explore careers within various sectors including skilled trades were unable to complete their programs when in-class learning was shutdown in March. The resulting disruptions and lack of hands-on experience may impact their post-secondary and career trajectories. The extent of the long-term impact that the disruption in education will have on the workforce at all levels across economic sectors are unclear to date.

Childcare and the Workforce

The impact of childcare, specifically a shortage of childcare, on the workforce over the course of the COVID-19 crisis has been well documented.^{34,35,36} The early end to the school year and the shuttering of daycare facilities presented a great challenge and, in many cases, a barrier to work. In Sarnia-Lambton, 53% of employers listed the lack of/inadequate access to childcare as one of the top barriers to work experienced during the pandemic.¹⁶ Despite the return to in-class learning and most daycare facilities opening their doors to a provincially limited number of children, the pre-COVID-19 shortages in early childhood educators in Sarnia-Lambton have remained. In order for efforts to promote the return to work and support job seekers within the community to be successful, the lack of accessible childcare and early educational supports must be addressed and corrected.

Impacts on Workforce and Economic Development

Public and private employment services experienced an overall decline in the number of persons accessing job seeker services and supports despite elevated levels of unemployment and growing job demand following the lack of employment opportunities available through the early stages of the pandemic. As businesses began to reopen, the availability of government supports put in place to provide financial wellbeing for those unemployed and/or unable to work, barriers such as lack of childcare or the need to care for a dependent, and general uncertainty surrounding the health crisis may all have been contributing factors to the delayed re-engagement in the workforce.

Most workforce and business support services shifted to virtual service delivery models in some capacity, allowing service providers to continue to work with clients without posing any health risks. The transition of these programs and service models to a virtual delivery model required several weeks to troubleshoot and effectively launch, resulting in a short timeframe of service disruption. As reported by health and social service providers, barriers associated with access to reliable internet and/or devices to gain access to these services remains a barrier for many. As the first wave of the pandemic appeared to recede, many service providers started to shift to a recovery mindset and adopted a hybrid model of service delivery, in part virtual where practical while meeting with clients in person using strict COVID-19 workplace guidelines outlined by the Government of Ontario.³⁷

In anticipation of the immediate and long-term effects of the pandemic on the economy, the Sarnia-Lambton COVID-19 Business and Economic Task Force was established to address the challenges and work to mitigate the negative impacts of the pandemic on the economic well-being of employers and entrepreneurs across the region. The task force consists of several key business-facing workforce and economic development centered organizations assembled to collect, coordinate and disseminate information in a timely manner on strategies, programs and initiatives designed to support the local workforce through the stages of recovery as they evolve. The partnerships and collaborative network stemming from the task force led to a number of business data collection surveys, information sharing and development of an action plan to support local employers through the uncertainties presented by COVID-19. Ongoing efforts by the task force continue to engage the local business community as Sarnia-Lambton works to pave the path to post-COVID-19 recovery.

³³ Sarnia Lambton Workforce Development Board, 'Sarnia Lambton's In-Demand Skilled Trades: Results of Consultations, Interviews and Online Surveys', <https://www.slwdb.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Skilled-Trade-Community-Report-Final-March-2020.pdf>, (published February 2020).

³⁴ Ontario Chamber of Commerce, 'The She-Covary Project: Confronting the Gendered Economic Impacts of COVID-19 in Ontario', Claudia Dessanti, Ontario Chamber of Commerce, (accessed 30 October 2020).

³⁵ Margaret and Wallace McCain Family Foundation Inc., 'Early Years Study 4: Thriving Kids, Thriving Society' https://earlyyearsstudy.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/EYS4-Report_01_15_2020.pdf, (accessed 4 December 2020).

³⁶ Government of Ontario, 'Strengthening early years and child care in Ontario, 2020 report', <https://www.ontario.ca/page/strengthening-early-years-and-child-care-ontario-2020-report>, (accessed 14 December 2020).

³⁷ Government of Ontario, 'Resources to prevent COVID-19 in the workplace', <https://www.ontario.ca/page/resources-prevent-covid-19-workplace>, (accessed 1 December 2020).

THE PRESENT: January – March 2021

Impacts felt in Sarnia-Lambton

Sarnia-Lambton is now in the second wave of the COVID-19 public health emergency. From the time the Government of Ontario unveiled its latest COVID-19 response framework until 30 November 2020, the Sarnia-Lambton region was at the lowest level of restriction, green. The requirement of the region to move into strengthened measures (yellow) has been in conjunction with the rising number of confirmed community cases including cases in several schools, a workplace outbreak and a death, the first in the region in six months. To date, no local schools have been shut down due to viral exposure.

The limited number of cases reported in the previous months appears to have led to a level of 'COVID-19 fatigue' to social distancing and protective measures and/or negligence despite the growing positivity rate. This is a concern with public health officials as we move into the holiday season. At the date of this report, the Canadian campaign for COVID-19 vaccination has not been initiated, and the timeline for its arrival in Sarnia-Lambton is unknown. In anticipation, Lambton Public Health is working with community partners to prepare for arrival and swift deployment of the approved vaccine(s).

Impacts we can anticipate through the SECOND WAVE

- Continued rise in the number of confirmed cases associated with interactions during the holidays, family gatherings, visitors from out of region and/or traveling out of region
- Increased number of cases in school as more students opt into in-class learning; returning from Christmas break, holiday socializations with family and friends
- Potential rise in the level of response status (yellow to orange or greater) due to post-holiday spike in confirmed cases, institutional outbreaks and hospitalizations
- Reduction in employment numbers within retail (goods and services), food and accommodations associated with termination of seasonal employment
- Continued shift to virtual and e-commerce platforms to support consumers not yet confident with face-to-face interactions
- Negative impact of social distancing measures and imposed food and beverage serving curfews limiting number of patrons for indoor dining at restaurants; continued use of delivery and curbside takeout options
- Impact on sale of local agricultural/food products associated with lower demand from restaurants
- Slow down in rate of construction associated with season, not necessarily COVID-19 related
- Unemployment rising following end of year job losses; similarly observed in October following summer seasonal employment
- Concern for 'brain drain' as immigration policies with the United States are relaxed under the new presidential administration
- Increased demand for social services and supports; in part COVID-19, in part based on time of year/seasonal
 - Housing, food services and financial supports
 - Mental health and addition supports
- Lambton College will welcome new international students using a strict public health process ensuring the well-being of all students
- Early childhood education and care still reporting shortages; the announced investment by the Government of Ontario to train job seekers in this sector will start in January 2021³⁸
- New 12-bed transitional housing for withdrawal management will open under the supervision of Bluewater Health hospital
- Legal decision regarding Enbridge Energy Line 5 to be argued in court January 2021
- Review the strategic role of local manufacturing and supply chain logistics as a major economic driver based on proximity to international border
- Continued drive by local social services, workforce development and economic development organizations to collaborate and form partnerships to support the local workforce into post-pandemic recovery.

³⁸ Government of Ontario, 'News Release: Ontario Supports the Training of Early Childhood Educators', <https://news.ontario.ca/en/release/59631/ontario-supports-the-training-of-early-childhood-educators>, (accessed 14 December 2020).

Existing, ongoing, and planned REACT and RESTART initiatives

Federal and provincial initiatives

The federal and provincial governments have provided financial support for individuals, businesses, non-profit organizations, and municipalities in Ontario. Federally, the workforce is supported through the Canadian Emergency Wage Subsidy (CEWS), a program available until June 2021 that covers up to 75% of employees' wages. To support youth in the workforce, the 2021 Canada Summer Jobs program has funding for up to 120,000 job opportunities (Government of Canada, 2021). Each program is designed to assist businesses in maintaining their workforce as they go through the React and Restart stages.

The federal government has provided the following financial support programs to assist businesses with the costs associated with their operations (Government of Canada, 2021):

- Canada Emergency Business Account (CEBA) interest-free loans
- Canada Emergency Rent Subsidy (CERS)
- Loan Guarantee for Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises
- Co-Lending Program for Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises
- Regional Relief and Recovery Fund
- Canada United Small Business Fund
- Black Entrepreneurship Loan Fund
- Mid-Market Financing Fund
- Mid-Market Guarantee and Financing Program
- Large Employer Emergency Financing Facility (LEEFF)
- Sector specific support in academic research; agriculture; agri-food; air transportation; construction; culture, heritage and sport; energy; infrastructure; mining; and tourism.

Small businesses in Ontario are supported through the React and Restart phases through the following provincial funding programs (Government of Ontario, 2020):

- Ontario Small Business Support Grant
- Ontario Mainstreet Relief Grant (PPE support)
- Property tax deferrals
- Energy cost rebates

As the impact of the pandemic is better appreciated, the government anticipates creating more programs for sector-specific supports and resources.

Local initiatives

Sarnia-Lambton COVID-19 Business/Economic Taskforce (see Appendix B for complete list of member organizations)

- COVID-19 Resources for Business: online resource created to collect, coordinate and disseminate information on strategies, policies and Federal, Provincial, and Local resources made available to mitigate the effects the pandemic is having on the economic well-being of the workforce in Sarnia-Lambton. Resources are updated regularly and catalogued on the Sarnia-Lambton Economic Partnership Task Force webpage.
- Emergency support loans: financial support programs led by the Sarnia-Lambton Economic Partnership and the Sarnia-Lambton Business Development Corporation to promote local business sustainability.
- Educational resources for employers
 - COVID-19 Workforce Solution – weekly webinars to connect local employers with local experts on strategies and tactics to address COVID-19 workforce challenges

Lambton Public Health: publishes up to date information about the status of COVID-19 in local communities; provides resources and government guidelines and policies; provides consultations regarding workplace requirements and restrictions and best practices for workforce health, upon request, to employers and community members.

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) Inventory of Local Suppliers: Compiled by the Sarnia-Lambton Chamber of Commerce, this list of contact details for local PPE suppliers serves to make PPE accessible for local businesses and organizations.

Blue Coast WOW: led by the Sarnia-Lambton Business Development Corporation, this retail and hospitality/accommodation customer service training program is designed to assist businesses in training front line workers and management teams to navigate through the realities of business in those sectors in 2021 and beyond.

SAFE TRAVELS Sarnia-Lambton: Led by Tourism Sarnia-Lambton, it is a retail and hospitality safety program to help businesses prepare and navigate through the various stages of COVID-19 reopening. It serves to help residents and visitors identify businesses that have been trained in industry best practices around safety and COVID-19 protocols.

Discover Sarnia-Lambton: Ontario Blue Coast Travel Rewards Program: led by Tourism Sarnia-Lambton in partnership with Federal Economic Development Agency of Southern Ontario to strengthen and directly support our local accommodations sector, attractions sector, restaurant sector and retail sector.

Restart Sarnia-Lambton Business Toolkit: created by Tourism Sarnia-Lambton, this resource guide outlines resources to support businesses through the phased approach of re-opening while keeping employees and customers safe.

Shop Lambton by Sarnia-Lambton Economic Partnership: a visual and interactive database featuring 350+ local businesses including their contact information, hours of operation, and how products/services are being provided depending on the state of COVID-19 restrictions.

WISL: Work in Sarnia Lambton toolkit: an all-in-one interactive toolkit operated by the Sarnia Lambton Workforce Development Board designed to match job seekers with job opportunities across the Sarnia-Lambton area, encourage local training and skill development resources as well as access to local employment service providers.

- **Regional Job Board:** Searchable list of job opportunities found exclusively within the Sarnia-Lambton region collected from the top 24 job posting websites for the region.
- **Regional Job Map:** Geolocates the job opportunities listed on the Regional Jobs Board onto a map of the Sarnia-Lambton region. In addition, built-in filters make it easy to view locations for childcare, schools, apprenticeship training, employment service providers and Ontario Disability Support Program centers to help job seekers find job opportunities and resources that best fit their needs, their lifestyle as well as their career path.
- **Career Explorer and Library:** provides details about occupation description, alternative job titles, median wages, and local employment participation statistics. It also links job seekers to the active occupation job listings on the Regional Job Board and allows users to trace and explore the occupations that lead into a given occupation, as well as the paths that are available as next steps following that career trajectory.

Digital Main St. E-commerce Support: initiative supported by the Sarnia-Lambton Economic Partnership to educate businesses about their options to expand or develop an e-commerce website including such features as an online shopping cart and checkout.

Starter Company Plus: Program is designed to support entrepreneurs by combining financial grant-based funding with coaching, mentorship and community. The initiative is administered by the Sarnia-Lambton Economic Partnership's Business Enterprise Centre and is funded by the Ontario Ministry of Economic Development, Job Creation and Trade.

A variety of **Shop Local** initiatives and events have been developed to promote community support of local businesses and services. These have been championed by the Sarnia-Lambton Chamber of Commerce, Tourism Sarnia-Lambton, the Sarnia-Lambton Business Development Corporation, and a number of grassroots groups.

Locally Lambton: Agri-sector, pivoted to gifts baskets and gift-able products made available online.

Ideas for additional REACT, RESTART, and early RECOVER initiatives

- Making resource and grant applications more accessible:
 - Continue to promote the initiatives available to employers and the workforce.
 - Promote services available to help employers understand what initiatives they qualify for.
 - Continued support of businesses shifting to e-commerce, creating a virtual presence.
- Continued outreach with employers and the labour force to understand their challenges, training needs and any resource shortages.
- Develop a process to allow follow up with businesses / organizations who have reached out for support to understand the efficacy of the resources.
- Increased channels of effective communication between business supports and social services sectors:
 - Help direct those who need or are looking for training and professional development opportunities to most appropriate resources.
 - Avoid services duplication.
 - Share services and resources.
 - Share information including development of collaborative surveys.
 - Work to build partnerships.
- Work with community leaders and government representatives to target supports in a cost-effective – benefit manner.

Part III: Post-pandemic scenarios for Sarnia Lambton

THE FUTURE: A range of realities, impacts, and responses

The Workforce Recovery Planning Round Table was established in September 2020 to review the impacts of the pandemic on our regional labour force to date, identify the key factors and external forces that were acting on our economic state and outline a plan of action to prepare local businesses for the post-pandemic landscape. Economic sector representatives worked to define the main themes focused on clear, critical uncertainties of primary concern for the workforce in every sector. The critical uncertainties outlined serve to establish the foundation of the scenario-planning matrix introduced in this report. The core themes represented by each scenario matrix axis are broad, and reflective of our need to address the extensive and diverse workforce in Sarnia-Lambton as we move into post-pandemic recovery planning.

Critical uncertainties

The State of the Public and Economic Health Crises

The first critical uncertainty of the scenario matrix focuses on both the level of the public health crisis and the state of the economy. While both could be stand alone critical uncertainties, reporting to date highlights the fact that these two factors are intrinsically connected.^{39,40} Specifically, growing levels of confirmed cases and the need to combat the spread of COVID-19 has led governments to impose a number of regulatory measures impacting consumer confidence and standard business operations (including mandatory closures), negatively impacting the economy at the regional, provincial and national levels. In contrast, the economy thrives when the community infection rate is minimal/non-existent and well under control, and businesses can maintain standard operations while consumers are comfortable to work/shop/play in their communities.

The following indicators will serve as measurable indicators in evaluating the state of the public and economic health crises:

- Status of the region within the Ontario government COVID-19 response framework, outlining required public health measures⁴¹
- Rates of confirmed COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations (including ICU admittances), institutional and workforce outbreaks, capacity of testing programs within the region, the province, nationally and internationally
- Status and capacity of the regional, provincial and national COVID-19 vaccination program
- National Gross Domestic Product (GDP), month to month
- Labour force statistics: employment rate, unemployment rate, participation rate, percentage of part-time employment, percentage of full-time employment
- Number of businesses opening and permanently shutting down
- Rates of consumer spending (consumer confidence levels) at the regional, provincial and national levels
- Status of international border traveller crossings for non-essential land and air travellers

³⁹ Statistics Canada, 'Economic Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Canadian Businesses across Firm Size Classes', <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-626-x/11-626-x2020017-eng.htm>, (accessed 4 October 2020)

⁴⁰ Reuters, 'Economic impact of COVID-19 second wave on Canada has been deeper than expected: Finance Minister', Reuters Staff, (accessed 3 December 2020)

⁴¹ Government of Ontario, 'COVID-19 response framework: keeping Ontario safe and open', https://www.ontario.ca/page/covid-19-response-framework-keeping-ontario-safe-and-open?gclid=Cj0KCQiA2uH-BRCCARIsAEeef3msw9ntrSE5jS_1_-Wq1uE_7zYd1U1-zgz_2qr6en8E8zx7Yd-SCOA0aApclEALw_wcB, (accessed 2 December 2020)

The Degree of Structural Change in the Workforce

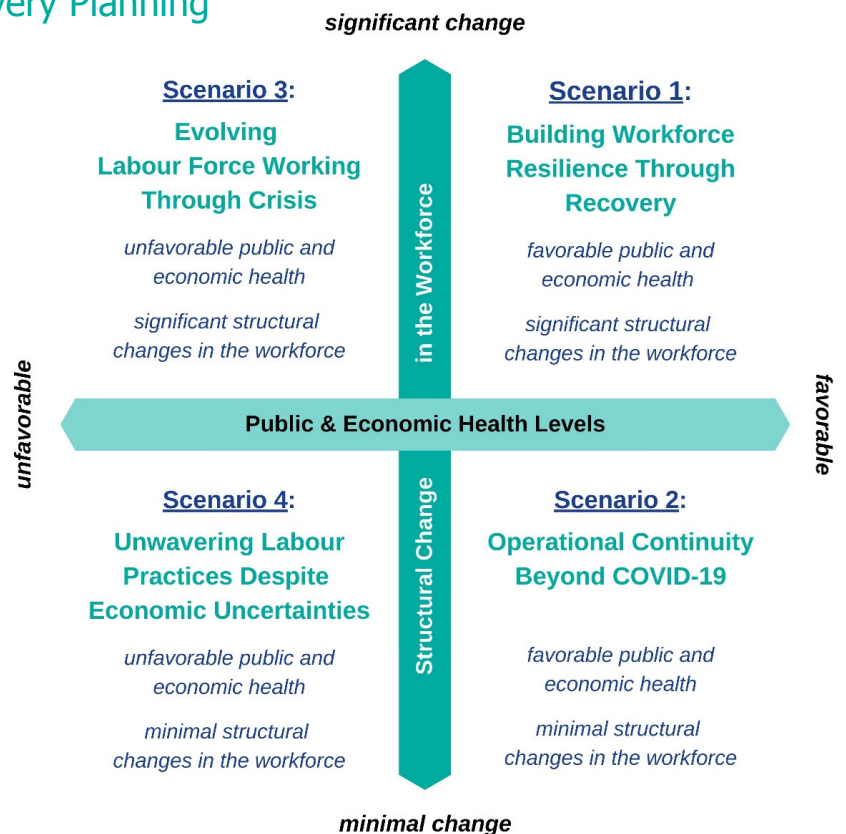
The second critical uncertainty faced by our workforce is the impact the pandemic had, and continues to have, on workforce norms. In the early weeks of the pandemic, many businesses were temporarily closed to the public. This required them to pivot their operations in order to accommodate the community needs and sustain their fiscal viability. Through the ebb and flow of the public health crisis, several creative and innovative methods adopted by businesses have meant shifts in the day-to-day operations, skills sets and responsibilities of many in our local workforce. The question remains whether these shifts in workforce behaviours represent a short-term remedy for an unprecedented marketplace or whether these changes become permanent fixtures in our 'new' normal economy.

The following will serve as measurable indicators in evaluating the degree of structural change in the workforce:

- Trends in workforce behaviours become established operational norms
 - Levels of remote workforce in various sectors
 - Demand for commercial space
 - Status of government and insurance policies for legal compliance
 - Levels of curbside pick up/delivery
 - Online service delivery models (e-commerce platform use)
- Shifts in workforce development and training due to shift in the in-demand skills required by employers
- Increased trends in business development and human resource supports to pivot to sustainable, resilient business operation models
- Changes in consumer and business practices:
 - Virtual service delivery models
 - Trend towards e-commerce and virtual shopping
 - Trends to shop local, support locally-sourced products and services (including tourism, arts and culture)
 - Trend towards curbside pick up or delivery models from local businesses
 - Return of migrant workers to pre-COVID levels

Scenario Matrix for Workforce Recovery Planning

Based on the possible interactions between the two identified critical uncertainties, the Workforce Recovery Planning Round Table has drafted the four following scenarios:



Four scenarios: in detail

Please note the following:

- These scenarios **ARE**:
 - Hypothetical narratives that represent probable realities.
 - Descriptive of the entire economy, not just a specific sector. Within each of these scenarios, each sector will experience varying levels and types of impacts, contingent on the global evolution of the COVID-19 crisis, and also contingent on the impacts of other local sectors.
 - The outcome of global and national trends that are beyond our control. What would be within our control is how we, as a community, react to the challenges and opportunities that emerge in each scenario.
 - A first version of scenarios. They are meant to start a conversation about how Sarnia-Lambton could overcome challenges and seize opportunities in each of these potential futures.
- These scenarios **ARE NOT**:
 - Predictions about the future. For now, we are not suggesting which of these scenarios is more likely.
 - Complete. We rely on community and industry partners to complete the image of what these possible scenarios might look like.
 - Final. We will adapt these as the situation evolves. Specific scenarios may be reformulated, ruled out, or added in the future.
 - Attributions of value or likelihood. We are also not suggesting which scenario is better than the other.

All scenarios present opportunities for growth. Depending on the scenario, economic growth for the region is simply a matter of how, when, and in what activities.

Scenario 1: BUILDING WORKFORCE RESILIENCE THROUGH RECOVERY

Low public health and economic crisis; Significant structural changes in the workforce.

Public health measures and available treatments have been effective in containing the virus. Widespread vaccine distribution programs are prepared and in the early stages of being effectively deployed. As the public health crisis dissipates, the beginning of the end to the COVID-19 outbreak ushers in the start of economic recovery to pre-pandemic levels.

Eradication of the virus has led to a rebound in consumer confidence and desire for face-to-face interactions. In this environment, non-essential international travel has reopened and stringent social distancing measures are greatly alleviated/eliminated. Large-scale events are becoming common and accepted within communities but defined restrictions are in place to assuage post-pandemic public health concerns.

Economic activity in Sarnia-Lambton is on the rise, as is that of the province, though not necessarily at the same pace. Organizations who adapted their business models and/or operational practices to withstand the economic crisis induced by COVID-19 largely maintain their adapted measures in the post-pandemic reality. Some businesses that struggled during the crisis are starting to recover, rehiring employees temporarily laid off and new employees to meet the growing economic demands. The ability of these businesses to recover losses will depend on their ability to adapt to the post-pandemic market.

Long-term unemployment continues to be a problem post-pandemic. Although the hardest hit sectors are beginning their recovery by the Fall of 2021, they will not be able to scale up and rehire everyone in the short term. This will lead to people turning to the gig economy for income. However, it also creates an increased interest in entrepreneurship and helps fuel the resurgence of small businesses. Although the pandemic restrictions and shutdowns resulted in a lot of small businesses closing, it also caused an increased interest in people looking to start their own businesses.

The post-pandemic economy will also require a labour force that has reskilled, upskilled and continues to learn emerging skillsets to adapt effectively to the new normal working conditions. Job seekers entering the job market will require an understanding of how to develop and translate their abilities into marketable skill sets. The availability of training, upskilling and reskilling is likely to be inadequate to address the increased demand following the pandemic. Even prior to the unemployment crisis caused by the pandemic, Sarnia Lambton experienced relatively high unemployment and low participation rates. Although the federal government has invested in the future of work and future skills, there is still not a widespread culture of lifelong learning and career development in place locally.

Current and Projected Skills Shortages

Digital Literacy

The pandemic drove the acceleration of a number of technology trends across industries. Remote work, cloud computing, virtual conference meetings, social media management and marketing, e-commerce, virtual service delivery, and cybersecurity in addition to the automation of traditionally human-driven processes will be commonplace for the workforce after the COVID-19 era. The result is a workforce inadequately prepared for the new tools and emergent in-demand tech skills required post-pandemic. This will be most evident in those re-entering the workforce after working in positions that did not previously require literacy.

Soft Skills for the New Normal

Pre-dating the pandemic, many employers identified shortages in a number of core soft skills that will continue to be in high demand in this new normal. For example:

- Customer service and interpersonal skills
- Effective communication including conflict management and resolution
- Self-motivation and initiative in the workplace including the drive to continually learn

Soft skills, particularly communication skills and the development of effective teamwork dynamics will also need to be adapted for the new technological interfaces with colleagues, customers and clients.

Apprenticeship and Hands-on Training Experiences

Gaps in apprenticeship and hands-on training programs caused by COVID-19 exacerbated the pre-existing shortages in a number of skilled trades.³³ The pre-existing skills shortage has been associated with the negative social stigma surrounding a career in the trades, a lack of knowledge regarding the diverse career opportunities in the skilled trades as well as the lack of awareness many employers have had regarding financial supports for apprenticeship training.

In addition to traditional apprenticeship-based skill sets, hands-on workplace training programs impacted by the pandemic were limited to training made available virtually. Due to the lack of employment opportunities and financial income supports by the government prior to COVID-19, many were not motivated to access these or were unable to access these due to barriers such as internet access, childcare, etc. For that reason, many of the skill sets supported by these programs (soft skills, virtual literacy, food processing, financial literacy, workplace safety, etc.) are in shortened supply as the economy moves toward recovery.

Human Resource and Workplace Culture

The dramatic evolution of the workforce since the onset of the pandemic will require many businesses to update human resource policies. Small- and medium-sized businesses generally lack a human resource specialist on staff with the knowledge required to direct the development of policies centered on remote employee management, performance and experience strategies for the new landscape of work. In addition to these skills, the guidance to develop strategies to re-evaluate a job description, responsibilities and performance measures as well as reskilling and training practices will be in demand.

Mental health and resilience will be important skill sets in the new workplace cultures following the turbulence brought by the pandemic. Management will need to develop the skills required to build a culture of resilience and understanding surrounding mental health as a critical aspect of employee wellbeing and productivity in the workplace. Authentic, empathetic leadership will become a necessary skill set to marry working hard with a working well mentality.

RECOVER Stage: MARCH – AUGUST 2021

The Second wave of COVID-19 triggered by the Thanksgiving holiday and exacerbated by non-compliance to public health regulations recommended over the Christmas holidays has subsided. The sustained local testing capacities help manage the spread of COVID-19 and ensure a rapid response in the event of an outbreak. As regions across the province transition back to the lowest level on the provincial COVID-19 response framework (green), in-person services resume and travel within the country increases.

Consumer confidence will grow over the course of the recovery as the deployment of an effective vaccination protocol becomes widespread. Labour force measures (employment rate, unemployment rate) strengthen, reaching levels reported pre-pandemic, pushing economic indicators forward. In-person activities such as dining, shopping, traveling (within Canada) and recreation gradually climb to near pre-COVID-19 levels. Efforts to support the local economy continue as cross-border and international travel remain limited.

Many businesses and organizations remain largely virtual or operate using a hybrid model to increase the efficiencies of their operating capacities while abiding by remaining public health guidelines. Adoption of virtual delivery models for training and education at all levels highlight the need for basic technology literacy as well as access to reliable broadband internet across the county, specifically in rural regions not currently well serviced.

Many businesses will struggle to hire staff in part due to the wage competition created by several government supports still in place until mid-recovery. Those returning to the workforce will require a varied level of reskilling, upskilling and training for the in-demand skills that have emerged since many of these workers left their positions at the onset of the pandemic.

The path to recovery for the agricultural sector remains less clearly defined. The number of migrant workers able to join Ontario farmers is dependent on the management of the pandemic by foreign governments. Both the federal and provincial governments will need to work collaboratively with the industry to facilitate the safe transportation and housing of temporary foreign workers needed to sustain the productivity of the sector while ensuring the health and safety of the communities they are entering.

Shortages remain in the health care sector despite the decreased COVID-19 caseload. This is attributed to the backlog of care as well as the consequent impact of the pandemic on mental health and levels of addiction management needs as well as an increased demand for trained PSWs and care staff to levels greater than pre-pandemic. An exodus of talent out of the sector will exacerbate shortages after the pandemic due to reported stress and burnout has led to numerous health care workers transitioning into new careers or retirement.

Early RESILIENCE stage: MAY 2022

COVID-19 will be largely eradicated, in great part due to the global leadership in vaccination distribution. However, there are many lasting impacts left on our workforce and societal norms. Most of the digitization adopted through the pandemic has become a fixture of everyday life, including e-commerce, virtual service delivery (education, training, health care) and remote work. Since the elimination of the public health measures enacted during the pandemic, the market has stabilized around a hybrid way of life. In this hybrid model, virtual access to goods and services is as common as in person thus allowing consumers to choose their preferred means of interaction. Such flexibility serves to increase consumer confidence and drive economic growth while ensuring businesses are prepared to adapt to a future public health emergency.

Resources for business and workforce development and support have gained great insight from the experiences of employers and their workforce in the time since the onset of the pandemic. This collection of data continues to serve as the source for creative and effective initiatives aimed at growing and sustaining an adaptable workforce.

Recommendations for businesses in this scenario

- Continue symptom monitoring and train all staff on the modified standard health and safety protocols for COVID-19.
- Continue to monitor and take preventive measures to maintain a healthy environment for staff and clients/visitors.
- Review business plan, including your succession plan, to ensure current operations are sustainable in the new economy.
- Review talent acquisition and retention strategies.
- Provide access or direction for professional development training of the workforce to develop current workforce talent, resolve talent gaps and skill mismatching, as well as promote a culture of continuous learning, engagement and support.
- Identify needed emerging skills or skill clusters critical to the growth and efficiency of the workforce. For example, digital dexterity is necessary for a business transitioning to an online operation model and/or relying on a remote workforce.
- Identify opportunities to cross-train staff in order to create a more resilient workforce with multifaceted strengths.
- Start, continue and strengthen your online presence and the ability of your clients to access your services and product via e-commerce allowing your business to adapt to the shift in consumer preferences.
- Remain flexible in the methods of goods and services delivery; despite the adoption of e-commerce and virtual services, many consumers value traditional methods of service.
- Prepare for consumer demand to resume pre-pandemic levels quickly as onerous restrictions are lifted
- Businesses reliant on skilled trades should consider developing (or expanding) an apprentice program. Many financial incentives and supports exist for training apprentices and it will serve to strengthen the sustainability of the business.
- Businesses reliant on a non-trade expertise should consider developing (or expanding) an internship program. Financial incentives and supports exist for training and it will serve to strengthen the sustainability of the business.
- Connect with local workforce and business development service providers for the following resources:
 - filling skills gaps
 - filling employment gaps
 - guidance in accessing available financial supports for training and development of talent in their existing workforce

Recommendations for new policies, investments, programs and supports

Workplace Policy Recommendations

- Mental health, well-being and resiliency in the workplace
 - strategies to instill resiliency in the workforce
 - strategies to create a supportive environment for mental health and well-being
 - strategies to combat isolation for remote workforce
 - policies for mental health leave
- Remote workforce performance monitoring and measurements
 - policies outlining expectation of remote workers i.e. recording hours of work vs. maintaining a specific schedule
 - policies for monitoring workforce activity i.e. keystroke recording
 - remote workforce workspace and equipment
 - policies outlining the equipment required to be provided by employer
 - policies outlining use of equipment provided by employer
 - policies outlining remote workspace requirements for employee health and safety
 - policies outlining confidentiality and preservation of work products remotely
- Talent development policies
 - mentoring and shadow training policies
 - work integrated learning outside of apprenticeships to provide hands-on experience to develop soft skills in youth
 - incentives for professional development and training
 - teambuilding practices including employee working to develop solutions for operational challenges and opportunities

Program and Supports Recommendations

- Programs to support training in digital literacy and soft skills
 - initiatives to build partnerships between agencies and organizations specializing in workforce and professional development and local businesses will allow businesses to develop their talent and provide training for new recruits without straining their resources to develop and run such programming in house
 - currently, several local organizations provide courses and online training designed based on consultations with local employers and the workforce
 - the critical element to be developed is awareness between resources available and those who would benefit from them
- Supports for mentoring, co-ops and volunteer programs as career development
 - practical, technical experience within a workspace or in a volunteer position both provide training experiences that translate into in-demand skill sets sought by employers
 - establishing mentoring programs and supporting/expanding existing co-op programs will serve to expose more job seekers to the skills needed for a given career as well as exposure to the sector. This exposure will help job seekers appreciate what different roles within an organization do and explore diverse career paths i.e. within the skilled trades, early childhood education, health care, agriculture
- Promoting skilled trades as a resilient and rewarding career path
 - develop a campaign to effectively communicate the diversity of careers in the skilled trades, the benefits of being a tradesperson and counter the many misconceptions associated with the skilled trades
 - increase awareness of the pathways to various skilled trades careers including OYAP, post-secondary opportunities as well the financial supports available for education and training
 - information campaign geared towards recruiting women, an under-represented population in the skilled trades, by addressing many gendered stereotypes and misconceptions about being a tradesperson

- Supports for businesses looking to access financial resources
 - financial resources made available by local agencies, municipal organizations, provincial and federal governments are extensive but mired in complex application processes
 - one-on-one consultation with an organization specializing in these types of application processes would serve many businesses working to recover by identifying for which resources they qualify. Several local organizations provide courses and online training designed to suit the needs of local employers and the workforce based on consultations with stakeholders
- Programs to support second act careers
 - workers unemployed as a direct consequence of the pandemic seeking to find careers that are more resilient in the new economy will require supports for training and employment
 - a program counselling these individuals through the transition into sustainable careers, including those in high demand locally (trades, PSW, early childhood education) would promote a more resilient local workforce
 - Lambton College supports a second career program and the Government of Ontario offers skills training and financial support for eligible candidates.
- Survey of known and emerging skills gaps
 - workforce and business development organizations, along with employment service providers, will need to collect information from employers and the workforce regarding the local in-demand skill sets and current workforce skills shortages
 - a good understanding of what skills are needed and in short supply will serve to inform training and professional development services geared towards helping businesses training their staff as well as the general workforce talent pool.
- Task force to address shortages in childcare, health care and health services
 - the shortage in medical professionals, including general practitioners and specialists, was alleviated in great part due to a taskforce aimed at recruiting and retaining medical talent in our region. A similar strategy will be needed to fill the workforce gaps experienced in:
 - general health care and supports, specifically PSWs and social workers specializing in mental health care
 - early childhood educators are in high demand and short supply locally
 - Lambton College currently offers programs for both of these workforce shortages, reducing the need to recruit from out of region and allowing any taskforce to work with the college to increase student retention
- Multi-platform advertising campaign
 - increase awareness in the general public about the many services, programs and training supports available locally

Investment Recommendations

Accessibility to reliable broadband internet is a necessity in this new economy. The adoption of operating models reliant on a remote workforce, e-commerce and virtual financial transactions, social media marketing, virtual conferences and delivery of services (i.e. health care, education) will require equitable access to the infrastructure for all businesses and individuals in order to maximize the economic potential of this new normal. Governments at all levels will need to work to promote the development and maintenance of this infrastructure, especially in rural regions, which current lack even basic reliable internet access.

In the years leading up to the pandemic, the Ontario government had committed a substantial investment in our region to address the growing shortage in our skilled trades workforce.⁴² Moving beyond COVID-19, those investment dollars are needed to recruit, train and retain tradespeople in the most in-demand skilled trades careers in Sarnia-Lambton. The technology & trades program at Lambton College, along with a number of local union facilities, are well positioned to expand the population of tradespeople locally. Investments will be needed to expand and modernize current facilities to accommodate the anticipated incoming apprentices who will be working in environments more technologically advanced than their predecessors.

Another growing avenue of education and training has opened with the development of micro-credentials. Micro-credentials allow learners to gain core competencies, knowledge and demonstrable soft or technical skills within a condensed and focused timeline. Micro-credentials are learner-friendly, they do not require the same commitment that full college courses require and can be grouped to earn a formal certification. Lambton College has recently been awarded a grant to develop micro-credential streams for training as a PSW and becoming a red seal welder. Investment into developing such modules would be beneficial to workforce training organizations as well as for vocational studies to address both general and specialized in-demand skills. Along with investments into the development of these programs, there will need to be an investment in employer awareness of how micro-credential based skills and training can be an asset to their workforce.

Training is the main theme of this scenario, which predicts the workforce adapting to a number of technological and societal trends. Many businesses and organizations, having weathered the storm of the pandemic, are more than likely not in a financial position to undertake the needed investments into the resources that will be required to upskill, reskill and/or train their workforce. As part of their post-pandemic recovery strategy, the government of Ontario will need to create financial incentives and supports for workforce retraining. This should come in the form of grants to local agencies producing and supporting workforce training programs for job seekers; in the form of grants to local businesses interested in seeking professional development for their current workforce; and in the form of supporting partnerships between training organizations and local businesses and organizations. As COVID-19 subsides, the workforce we have will be the workforce that we develop to be resilient.

⁴² Government of Ontario, 'News Release: Ontario Takes Action to Address Skilled Trades Gap: Government Funding Close to 400 Trainees in Sarnia', <https://news.ontario.ca/en/release/55499/ontario-takes-action-to-address-skilled-trades-gap>, (published 27 January 2020).

SCENARIO 2: OPERATIONAL CONTINUITY BEYOND COVID-19

Low public health and economic crisis; minimal structural changes in the workforce

In this scenario, the public health and economic crises factors are similar to those outlined in Scenario 1. The key differences between these two scenarios are the fundamentally differing responses of workforce practices in response to these crises.

In contrast to Scenario 1, organizations have emerged from the public health and economic crises having relied largely on their traditional business practices, with minor temporary changes to accommodate the imposed public health measures. Those businesses unable to operate while abiding by social distancing measures are able to reopen. However, there will remain a number of businesses and organizations that could not sustain the damaging financial impacts and losses of the pandemic.

The businesses who were able to maintain their baseline operations through virtual and/or remote work practices are returning to their standard office environments and face-to-face meetings, conferences and business interactions. Remote work and virtual teleconferences have returned to levels seen pre-pandemic. Restaurants and retail have largely abandoned the curbside and delivery programs established in response to the COVID-19 outbreak and have reverted to their pre-pandemic business models. With very few permanent shifts in operations observed across organizations, the labour force skill requirements and operational policies remain largely unchanged from the pre-pandemic era.

The operational skills gaps, talent acquisition and retention challenges experienced pre-pandemic persist. Businesses do not adopt employee training policies and expect workers to seek professional development independent of organizational leadership. Many decide to leave jobs that they do not find personally and professionally fulfilling leading some to pursue career changes or explore entrepreneurial opportunities. Digital infrastructure and rural connectivity prevent some people being able to work remotely, despite employer flexibility to do so.

Current and Projected Skills Shortages

The minimal changes made to the operating models of the workforce across industries following the waning of the pandemic results in the re-emergence of skills shortages pre-dating COVID-19. Shortages and training needs will need to be quickly identified and understood so that effective programing can be developed and deployed as soon as possible.

Digital Literacy

The technology trends emerging across industries prior to COVID-19 continue to emerge in the local economy. The gradual introduction of social media management and marketing, e-commerce, virtual service delivery, and automation of traditionally human-driven processes will require training to adapt with these evolving needs. A failure to address this cluster of skill sets in the short term will result in a workforce inadequately prepared for the new tools and in-demand tech skills that will continue to emerge.

Soft Skills for the New Normal

Pre-dating the pandemic, many employers identified shortages in a number of core soft skills that will continue to be in high demand in this new normal. For example:

- customer service and interpersonal skills
- effective communication including conflict management and resolution
- self-motivation and initiative in the workplace including the drive to continually learn

Soft skills, particularly communication skills and the development of effective teamwork dynamics will also need to be adapted for emerging technological interfaces with colleagues, customers and clients.

Apprenticeship and Hands-on Training Experiences

Gaps in apprenticeship and hands-on training programs caused by COVID-19 exacerbated the pre-existing shortages in a number of skilled trades.³³ The pre-existing skills shortage has been associated with negative social stigma surrounding careers in the trades, a lack of knowledge regarding the diverse career opportunities in the skilled trades as well as the lack of awareness many employers have had regarding financial supports for apprenticeship training.

In addition to traditional apprenticeship-based skill sets, hands-on workplace training programs impacted by the pandemic were limited to skills and learning able to be delivered virtually. Due to the lack of employment opportunities prior to COVID-19 subsiding, many were not motivated or were unable to access these due to barriers such as internet access, childcare, etc. For that reason, many of the skill sets supported by these programs (soft skills, virtual literacy, food processing, financial literacy, workplace safety, etc.) are in shortened supply as the economy moves toward recovery.

RECOVER Stage: MARCH – AUGUST 2021

The Second wave of COVID-19 triggered by the Thanksgiving holiday and exacerbated by non-compliance to public health regulations recommended over the Christmas holidays has subsided. The local testing capacities are sustained to manage the spread of COVID-19 and ensure a rapid response in the event of an outbreak. As regions across the province transition back to the lowest level on the provincial COVID-19 response framework (green), in-person services resume and travel within the country increases.

Consumer confidence will grow over the course of the recovery as the deployment of an effective vaccination protocol becomes widespread. Labour force measures (employment rate, unemployment rate) strengthen, reaching levels reported pre-pandemic, pushing economic indicators forward. In-person activities such as dining, shopping, traveling (within Canada) and recreation gradually climb to near pre-COVID-19 levels. Efforts to support the local economy continue as cross-border and international travel remain limited.

Many businesses and organizations will return to operations very similar to those in place pre-pandemic while abiding by remaining public health guidelines. Digital delivery of services and goods remain for a minor number of businesses and organizations. Many businesses will struggle to hire staff in part due to the wage competition created by several Government supports still in place until mid-recovery. Those returning to the workforce will require skill sets in demand pre-COVID-19, with an eye towards the technological trends gradually entering industries across sectors.

The path to recovery for the agricultural sector remains less clearly defined. The number of migrant workers able to join Ontario farmers is dependent on the management of the pandemic by foreign governments. This will affect the crop type and yield for the coming years based on anticipated availability of labour.

Shortages remain in the health care sector despite the decreased COVID-19 caseload due to the backlog of care as well as the consequent impact of the pandemic on mental health and levels of addiction management needs. In addition, the requirements of care for LTC homes has increased the demand for trained PSWs and care staff to levels greater than pre-COVID-19.

Early RESILIENCE stage: MAY 2022

COVID-19 will be largely eradicated, in great part due to the global leadership in vaccination distribution. Many of the temporary adaptations made by organizations to sustain operations during the pandemic have been discontinued. Some businesses have adopted practices established during the pandemic based on consumer preferences and efficiency of their operations. Since the elimination of the public health measures enacted during the pandemic, the market has stabilized with consumers returning to traditional interactions with goods and service providers. Organizations dedicated to post-secondary and workforce training will maintain hybrid delivery models in which virtual teaching is combined with in-person, hands-on training. The move towards hybrid learning pre-dated the pandemic. The advances made in course development and technology infrastructure for education and training over the previous two years will allow increased flexibility for adult learners.

Resources for business and workforce development and support have gained great insight from the experiences of employers and their workforce in the time since the onset of the pandemic. This collection of data continues to serve as the source for creative and effective initiatives aimed at growing and sustaining an adaptable workforce.

Recommendations for businesses in this scenario

- Continue symptom monitoring and train all staff on the modified standard health and safety protocols for COVID-19
- Continue to monitor and take preventive measures to maintain a healthy environment for staff and clients/visitors
- Review business plan, including your succession plan, to ensure current operations are sustainable and able to effectively adapt to the re-emergence of a public health emergency
- Identify needed emerging skills or skill clusters critical to the growth and efficiency of the workforce. For example, the need for digital literacy will become more necessary as trends towards digitization across industries continue to progress
- Provide access or direction for professional development training of the workforce to develop current workforce talent and promote a culture of engagement and support
- Identify opportunities to cross-train staff in order to create a more resilient workforce with multifaceted strengths
- Remain flexible in the methods of goods and services delivery; despite low levels of COVID-19 cases, some persons will still value accessing goods and services virtually while others will return to traditional in-person services
- Businesses reliant on skilled trades should consider developing (or expanding) an apprentice program. Many financial incentives and supports exist for training apprentices and it will serve to strengthen the sustainability of the business
- Businesses reliant on a non-trade expertise should consider developing (or expanding) an internship program. Financial incentives and supports exist for training and it will serve to strengthen the sustainability of the business
- Connect with local workforce and business development service providers for the following resources:
 - filling skills gaps
 - filling employment gaps
 - guidance in accessing available financial supports for training and development of talent in their existing workforce

Recommendations for new policies, investments, programs and supports

Workplace Policy Recommendations

- Mental health, well-being and resiliency in the workplace
 - strategies to instill resiliency in the workforce for increased talent retention
 - strategies to create a supportive environment for mental health and well-being
 - strategies to combat isolation for remote workforce
 - policies for mental health leave
- Talent development policies
 - mentoring and shadow training policies
 - incentives for professional development and training
 - teambuilding practices

Program and Supports Recommendations

The recommendations for this scenario are the same as those for Scenario 1. Despite the fact that many of the technological and workforce adaptations made for sustainability during COVID-19 have been phased out with economic recovery, the trends toward digitization and building a resilient workforce continually learning emerging skill sets are both foundational to continued economic growth.

Investment Recommendations

As outlined in Scenario 1, continued investment in the development and maintenance of reliable broadband internet throughout Sarnia-Lambton will be essential to support economic growth and increase economic development in the region. Investments in the development and expansion of existing skilled trades programs and training resources will be needed to address these workforce shortages.

Continual training of the workforce will be essential to promote the sustainability of the workforce locally as workforce operations show a growing trend towards digitization while still experiences shortage of basic skills. Organizations and governments need to acknowledge the lessons from the impact of the 2009 economic crisis on the workforce. People lost their high-paying manufacturing jobs and did not have the skills to transition into jobs that paid the same rates. A recognition that society cannot afford the cost of going through this every decade changed the way society addresses career development and lifelong learning. Organizations need to recognize the need to develop skill plans for employees and provide more frequent training so they are not constantly faced with lack of skills, turnover and never-ending talent acquisition cycles. Workforce development needs to be realigned so people are proactively given the opportunity to develop and grow skill sets instead of waiting for them to be underemployed or unemployed. Investments in module-based learning programs such as micro-credentials will allow learners to skill, reskill, upskill and forge tailored career trajectories based on their individual lifestyles. Availability of such programs will also support employers by eliminating the need to expend their own valuable time and resources developing and maintaining ever-evolving professional development tools.

SCENARIO 3: EVOLVING LABOUR FORCE WORKING THROUGH CRISIS

Severe public health and economic crisis; Significant structural changes in the workforce

COVID-19 is unrelenting and public health policies cannot adequately control its spread. Outbreaks in workplaces, schools and LTC homes continue to occur while rolling lockdowns and imposed closures are announced on a regular basis. The great uncertainty surrounding containment of the virus is exacerbated by the fact that widespread availability of a vaccine is not expected until 2022 due to setbacks encountered during vaccine development and distribution.

The economy has slowed to a near standstill and fears of a recession are creeping towards reality. The lagging economy raises the risk of business closures becoming permanent and the unemployment rate continues to climb as temporary layoffs of the labour force become permanent.

The economic activity within Sarnia-Lambton is on the decline, with general business operations further impacted by the disruption in the global and regional supply chains. The public health crisis has created a workforce hesitant to interact with the public while also resulting in a drop in consumer confidence for face-to-face services. Public health policies have been imposed to limit the number of individuals within a closed space and social distancing practices are strictly enforced.

In this environment, non-essential international travel is highly restricted and measures to limit inter-regional travel are under consideration to contain provincial COVID-19 'hotspots'. Organizations work to change their business models and/or operational practices to withstand the growing state of crisis while the labour force strives to meet the needs of their employers. This leads to new skill sets emerging as being in high demand, and with existing skill sets requirements remaining unchanged.

Current and Projected Skills Shortages

Digital Literacy

The unrelenting spread of COVID-19 is driving the need for digitization of businesses and organizations across sectors. Remote work, cloud computing, virtual conference meetings, social media management and marketing, e-commerce, virtual service delivery, and cybersecurity in addition to the automation of traditionally human-driven processes are essential as health measures limit in-person interactions. The result is a workforce inadequately prepared for the new tools and emergent in-demand tech skills required in this rapidly evolving landscape. This may be most evident in those re-entering the workforce after working in positions eliminated by the pandemic conditions and that did not previously require digital literacy.

Soft Skills for the New Normal

Pre-dating the pandemic, many employers identified shortages in a number of core soft skills that will continue to be in high demand in this new normal. For example:

- Customer service and interpersonal skills
- Effective communication including conflict management and resolution
- Self-motivation and initiative in the workplace including the drive to continually learn

Given the digital nature of most interactions, training for such soft skills will need to be adapted for the new technological interfaces with colleagues, customers and clients.

Apprenticeship and Hands-on Training Experiences in Secured Training Facilities

Gaps in apprenticeship and hands-on training programs caused by COVID-19 exacerbated the pre-existing shortages in a number of skilled trades. The pre-existing skills shortage has been associated with negative social stigma surrounding careers in the trades, a lack of knowledge regarding the diverse career opportunities in the skilled trades as well as the lack of awareness many employers have had regarding financial supports for apprenticeship training.

In addition to traditional apprenticeship-based skill sets, the foundation of hands-on workplace training programs can be provided through e-learning modules. However, the technical aspects and hands-on components will require modified training facilities to support social distancing measures, adequate ventilation and ability to sterilize tools and space to ensure compliance with government regulations.

Human Resource and Workplace Culture

In an unrelenting pandemic and a declining economy, mental health and resilience practices and skills will be paramount in the workplace. Management will need to develop the skills required to build a culture of resilience and understanding of mental health as a critical aspect of employee wellbeing and productivity in the workplace.

RECOVER Stage: June 2021 – May 2022

The Second wave of COVID-19 triggered by the Thanksgiving holiday and exacerbated by non-compliance to public health regulations recommended over the Christmas holidays subsides temporarily in March. The announcement of an effective vaccine and its early deployment by health officials ushers in several weeks of relaxed behaviours and failures to comply with established public health measures and a consequent Third wave across the province. The local testing capacities are sustained to manage the spread of COVID-19 and ensure a rapid response in the event of an institutional or workplace outbreak. As the virus is once again contained and vaccination programs sweep the province and summer weather accommodates outdoor activities, Sarnia-Lambton transitions back to the lowest level on the provincial COVID-19 response framework (green), in-person services resume and travel within the country increases.

Consumer confidence will grow over the course of the recovery. Labour force measures (employment rate, unemployment rate) strengthen, reaching levels reported pre-pandemic, pushing economic indicators forward. In person activities such as dining, shopping, traveling (within Canada) and recreation gradually climb to near pre-COVID-19 levels. Efforts to support the local economy continue as cross-border and international travel remain limited.

Many businesses and organizations remain largely virtual or operate using a hybrid model to increase the efficiencies of their operating capacities while abiding by remaining public health guidelines. Adoption of virtual delivery models for training and education at all levels highlight the need for basic technology literacy as well as access to reliable broadband internet across the county, specifically in rural regions not currently well serviced.

The path to recovery for the agricultural sector and the lingering shortages in health care are similar to those describe in Scenario 1.

Early RESILIENCE stage: May 2022

Same as outlined in Scenario 1.

Recommendations for businesses in this scenario

- Vigilant monitoring programs and train all staff on the modified standard health and safety protocols for COVID-19
- Vigilant maintenance of a clean and sterilized environment for any staff and clients/visitors
- Review business plan, including your succession plan, to ensure current operations are sustainable given the persistent pandemic and economic decline
- Provide flexible work schedules for employees working remotely while having to care for children due to school and daycare closures
- Identify needed emerging skills or skill clusters critical to sustained business operations. For example, the need for digital literacy will be essential to maintain virtual interactions and a productive remote workforce
- Provide access or direction for professional development training of the workforce to develop current workforce talent and promote a culture of engagement and support
- Identify opportunities to cross-train staff in order to create a more resilient workforce with multifaceted strengths
- Start, continue and strengthen your online presence and the ability of your clients to access your services and product via e-commerce
- Invest in the digital tools needed to sustain operations i.e. virtual conferencing, cloud computing, increased cybersecurity protocols, hardware for remote workforce
- Businesses reliant on skilled trades should consider developing (or expanding) an apprentice program. Many financial incentives and supports exist for training apprentices and it will serve to strengthen the sustainability of the business
- Businesses reliant on a non-trade expertise should consider developing (or expanding) an internship program. Financial incentives and supports exist for training and it will serve to strengthen the sustainability of the business
- Hospitality facilities (hotels, motels) should consider alternative use of their facilities. For example: continued partnership with the municipalities for housing support; partnerships with organizations (Lambton College, Lambton Federation of Agriculture, etc) for student and migrant worker housing; modified rooms or spaces into alternative/flex office spaces
- Connect with local workforce and business development service providers for the following resources:
 - filling skills gaps
 - filling employment gaps
 - guidance in accessing available financial supports for training and development of talent in their existing workforce
 - guidance in accessing financial supports for business sustainability including wage subsidies, capital expenses, installation of protective barriers in the workplace, tools for remote staff, etc.

Recommendations for new policies, investments, programs and supports

Workplace Policy Recommendations

Same as those outlined for Scenario 1

Program and Supports Recommendations

Same as those outlined for Scenario 1, with the following additional recommendations due to the unrelenting pandemic and declining economy.

- Supports for businesses looking to access financial resources and aid programs
 - financial resources made available by local agencies, municipal organizations, provincial and federal governments will grow with the increasing severity of the economic outlook.
 - one-on-one consultation with an organization specializing in these types of application processes would serve many businesses working to recover by identifying resources for which they qualify. Several local organizations provide courses and online training designed based on consultation with local employers and the workforce.
- Programs dedicated to supporting the growing number of unemployed persons as businesses close, temporarily or permanently
- Programs dedicating to ensuring the supply of personal protective equipment for the public, making these resources financially accessible and provide training on how to utilize these resources effectively
- Campaign for continued awareness of health and safety practices to prevent the spread of COVID-19 at home, at work and in public spaces. Increased funding for enforcement of imposed restrictions and public health measures will serve to promote compliance
- Support services, communication networks and community outreach programs needed to help alleviate the stress, isolation and mental exhaustion created by the protracted public health and economic crises will be critical to maintain the mental health and well-being of the workforce

Investment Recommendations

The recommendations for this scenario are similar to those for Scenario 1, with the following additional recommendations due to the unrelenting pandemic and declining economy. The prolonged duration of unemployment for a large proportion of the workforce will require the government to continue to invest in emergency relief, rent relief, child benefits and other social supports.

Investments in local public health agencies will be needed to ensure adequate testing capacity, capacity to perform contact tracing and keep the public at large informed about this unprecedented public health crisis. A push for the development and mass production of 'fast-testing' technologies will be critical to help keep essential workers healthy, and help businesses safeguard their operations while keeping their doors open.

In addition to the supports from public health, businesses will need to invest in their physical workspaces. Remote workers will require the same tools accessible in their offices; workplaces where multiple people must share a space will need protective barriers, proper social distancing and sanitation protocols for common equipment, and proper ventilation are a few examples modifications that will be required to continue operating safely. For business that are strained due to the impacts of the pandemic, these investments will be dependent on the availability of grants and loan programs made available by regional, provincial or federal agencies.

SCENARIO 4: UNWAVERING LABOUR PRACTICES DESPITE ECONOMIC UNCERTAINTIES

Severe public health and economic crisis; minimal structural changes in the workforce

In this scenario, the public health and economic crises conditions are similar to those outlined in Scenario 3. The key differences between these two scenarios are the fundamentally differing responses of workforce practices to the public and economic crises.

In contrast to Scenario A, organizations are riding out the crises using most of their traditional business operational practices. Despite the pressures to adapt to the social distancing practices for business continuity, operations continue as status quo by making minor adjustments such as working from home and offering virtual services, curbside pick-up, etc. on a temporary basis, when possible. No permanent changes in operational policies, labour force skill requirements or organization policies are considered as being in high demand, and with existing skill sets requirements remaining unchanged.

Current and Projected Skills Shortages

The minimal changes made to the operating models of the workforce across industries despite the prolonged battle against COVID-19 and the consequent economic fall results in the re-emergence of same skills shortages pre-dating COVID-19, as outlined in Scenario 2.

RECOVER Stage: June 2021 – May 2022

The Second wave of COVID-19 triggered by the Thanksgiving holiday and exacerbated by non-compliance to public health regulations recommended over the Christmas holidays subsides temporarily in March. The announcement of an effective vaccine and its early deployment by health officials ushers in several weeks of relaxed behaviours and failures to comply with established public health measures and a consequent third wave across the province. The local testing capacities are sustained to manage the spread of COVID-19 and ensure a rapid response in the event of an institutional or workplace outbreak. As the virus is once again contained and vaccination programs sweep the province and summer weather accommodates outdoor activities, Sarnia-Lambton transitions back to the lowest level on the provincial COVID-19 response framework (green), in-person services resume and travel within the country increases.

Consumer confidence will grow over the course of the recovery. Labour force measures (employment rate, unemployment rate) strengthen, reaching levels reported pre-pandemic, pushing economic indicators forward. In-person activities such as dining, shopping, traveling (within Canada) and recreation gradually climb to near pre-COVID-19 levels. Efforts to support the local economy continue as cross-border and international travel remain limited.

Many businesses and organizations will return to operations very similar to those in place pre-pandemic while abiding by remaining public health guidelines. Digital delivery of services and goods remain for a minor number of businesses and organizations. Many businesses will struggle to hire staff in part due to the wage competition created by several Government supports still in place until mid-recovery. Those returning to the workforce will require skill sets in demand pre-COVID-19, with an eye towards the technological trends gradually entering industries across sectors.

The path to recovery for the agricultural sector and the lingering shortages in health care are similar to those describe in Scenario 1.

Early RESILIENCE stage: May 2022

Same as outlined in Scenario 2.

Recommendations for businesses in this scenario

- Vigilant monitoring programs and train all staff on the modified standard health and safety protocols for COVID-19
- Vigilant maintenance of a clean and sterilized environment for any staff and clients/visitors
- Review business plan, including your succession plan, to ensure current operations are sustainable given the persistent pandemic and economic decline
- Provide flexible work schedules for employees working remotely while having to care for children due to school and daycare closures
- Identify needed emerging skills or skill clusters critical to sustained business operations. For example, the need for digital literacy will be essential to maintain virtual interactions and a productive remote workforce
- Provide access or direction for professional development training of the workforce to develop current workforce talent and promote a culture of engagement and support
- Identify opportunities to cross-train staff in order to create a more resilient workforce with multifaceted strengths to help reduce operational costs
- Start, continue and strengthen your online presence and the ability of your clients to access your services and product via e-commerce
- Invest in the digital tools needed to sustain operations i.e. virtual conferencing, cloud computing, increased cybersecurity protocols, hardware for remote workforce; these can be temporary and are not required to become permanent operational models when the pandemic subsides
- Hospitality facilities (hotels, motels) should consider alternative use of their facilities. For example: continued partnership with the municipalities for housing support; partnerships with organizations (Lambton College, Lambton Federation of Agriculture, etc.) for student and migrant worker housing; modified rooms or spaces into alternative/flex office spaces
- Connect with local workforce and business development service providers for the following resources:
 - filling skills gaps
 - filling employment gaps
 - guidance in accessing available financial supports for training and development of talent in their existing workforce
 - guidance in accessing financial supports for business sustainability including wage subsidies, capital expenses, installation of protective barriers in the workplace, tools for remote staff, etc.

Recommendations for new policies, investments, programs and supports

Workplace Policy Recommendations

Same as those outlined for Scenario 2

Program and Supports Recommendations

- Supports for businesses looking to access financial resources and aid programs
 - financial resources made available by local agencies, municipal organizations, provincial and federal governments will grow with the increasing severity of the economic outlook.
 - one-on-one consultation with an organization specializing in these types of application processes would serve many businesses working to recover by identifying resources for which they qualify; several local organizations provide courses and online training designed based on consultation with local employers and the workforce
- Programs dedicated to supporting the growing number of unemployed persons as businesses close, temporarily or permanently
- Programs dedicating to ensuring the supply of personal protective equipment for the public, making these resources financially accessible and provide training on how to use these resources effectively
- Campaign for continued awareness of health and safety practices to prevent the spread of COVID-19 at home, at work and in public spaces; increased funding for enforcement of imposed restrictions and public health measures will serve to promote compliance
- Programs supporting workforce development and training will serve to prepare the workforce and provide a path for professional development or towards a second career for persons unemployed because of the pandemic
- Support services, communication networks and community outreach programs needed to help alleviate the stress, isolation and mental exhaustion created by the protracted public health and economic crises will be critical to maintain the mental health and well-being of the workforce

Investment Recommendations

Same as those outlined for Scenario 3.

Part IV: Overview of Recommendations

The Workforce Recovery Planning Round Table identified six critical areas of focus for the recovery and development of a resilient workforce in Sarnia-Lambton:

1. Post-pandemic health and safety policies and practices

- Health management of workforce including education about pandemic
- Learning, understanding and developing mitigation plans for risk of public health crisis
- Learning, understanding and developing support resources for mental health including
 - a broad strategy to de-stigmatize mental health issues
 - creating a supportive environment, support for isolation (observed in remote workers)
 - paid mental health and sick leave available to all workers
 - affordable, accessible childcare which will have the added benefit of improving the labour participation of female workers
- Communication policies to ensure the workforce and consumers follow best practices for their health and safety

2. Training: Upskilling, Reskilling and Cross-Training the Workforce

- Professional development and training programs specifically designed to target the full spectrum of the workforce, from job seekers (youth and adult), employees (entry level to managers and C-suite executives)
 - cultivate an ecosystem of talent
- Skills gap (pre-existing and created by 'new normal') i.e. soft skills, digitization, cybersecurity, financial literacy, food processing (crop and meat)
- Employment support system to facilitate the understanding and application of individuals' transferable skills between occupations and industries
 - create a resilient workforce able to adapt to rapid changes in the labour market and/or develop alternate career paths based on existing skills
- Micro-credential programs allowing flexible delivery of training programs to increase accessibility for workers from a broad range of educational backgrounds and lifestyles
- Increase infrastructure and program availability for skilled trades, agriculture, and accessing second careers supports
- Generate a database or inventory of training and support resources available to the local workforce
 - co-location of job opportunity listings and training resources in a single destination website within Sarnia-Lambton to facilitate effective workforce development

3. Recruitment and Retention Practices for Employers

- Training, understanding of best practices for recruitment and retention of talent
- Best practices for incentivizing training and local retention for in-demand occupations
- Programs to support newcomers to Sarnia Lambton (intraprovincial, interprovincial, and international immigration)
- Contingency planning and risk mitigation for workforce and business continuity
- Developing new incentives and promoting features of Sarnia-Lambton to attract new businesses in the 'new normal'

4. Operational Supports for Businesses

- Policy development regarding employment through COVID-19, remote workforce, etc.
- Guidance for policies and best practices for workforce mental health and resiliency
- Expertise to advise businesses/organizations on structural and/or operational changes especially related to technological trends (virtual product and service delivery)
- Review of local, intra-provincial, national and international trade supply chains including labour mobility

5. Financial Supports for the Workforce: Funding, Leveraged Grants & Financing

- Workforce training for identified in-demand skills gaps, second career, etc.
 - develop accessible and flexible training programs including online learning options, independent and employer-led modules in partnership with local educational facilities (secondary, post-secondary, non-profit workforce development organizations)
- Career coaching and/or guidance to assist workers transition between occupations and/or industries
 - apply labour market research collected by workforce development organizations to inform workers about local labour market including in-demand occupations and skills
 - programming designed to educate youth and/or adult workers about the available career paths from professionals with knowledge of the local workforce landscape
- Incentive programs for labour force shortages in essential workforce i.e. PSW, nurses, skilled trades
- Capital for changes in workforce needs i.e. health and safety, remote work, cybersecurity tech costs, infrastructure, rent/taxes, etc.
- Support civic research and innovation
 - create a systemic, structured approach to collaboration between workforce and economic development organizations to connect and collaborate with local experts and stakeholders to facilitate project development and research needs
 - supports the local workforce, community groups, economic sectors and under-represented groups (i.e. First Nations, newcomers)
- Renovating and upgrading current infrastructure (i.e. high speed internet across the county) to accommodate commercialization and drive economic growth
- Support in maintaining open inter-regional, international trade routes for supply chain and business operations
- Support for the agricultural sector, including training, support of migrant workers and processing infrastructure
- Support for self-employed individuals who have been left out of many of the currently existing government programs

6. Strengthening Community Partnerships & Collaboration

- Increase communication between economic and business development organizations, including across levels of government, to best:
 - share resources, reduce incidence of service duplications
 - strength for lobbying effort targeting business-friendly policies
- Support the development of collaborations and partnerships between secondary schools and local industry as a bridge between education and in-demand occupations
- Develop partnership between entrepreneurs, business development and workforce development organizations
- Revise the objectives and action plans of the Workforce Recovery Planning Round Table, creating an established network of local expertise tasked with the promotion and continued support for local workforce development including:
 - promote continued collaborations and partnerships of the workforce development board with employment service providers, educational and training institutions, government agencies and leaders, industry representatives
 - create more opportunities for collaborations and partnerships with local employers and entrepreneurs
 - develop an accessible, interactive platform of tools to effectively share relevant labour market information to community stakeholders(employers, job seekers, business development organizations, etc.); these instruments will help analyze current local workforce trends and future needs of our labour force

- Enhanced and on-going communication to stakeholders regarding opportunities for:
 - funding
 - training
 - collaborations and partnerships
 - public health initiatives

Each of these themes are relevant to the workforce in Sarnia-Lambton, regardless of the scenario narratives conceived for the post-pandemic landscape of the local workforce. However, each scenario features a set of highlighted priorities targeted to the most pressing anticipated needs of businesses and the workforce.

The Workforce Recovery Planning Round Table is in the preliminary stages of outlining a number of potential initiatives that will be essential to bridging the gap of skills and resources anticipated in the local post-pandemic labour market. Not successfully closing this gap will hold back not only the local workforce but also the businesses and whole economy of the region.

This process is an exercise in community collaboration and partnerships to identify effective existing skills development programs available in the region as well as coordinate with local organizations to develop new approaches to address emerging resource shortages. Pilot programs will serve as trials to evaluate new strategies. Analyses of the strategies created in reaction to the onset of COVID-19 (financial supports, information dissemination, training programs) will serve to develop cost-effective resources for job seekers, workers and employers.

Given the broad nature of the local workforce needs post-pandemic, the Round Table will take a multi-pronged approach that will require the engagement and support from all levels of business and government. The discussions to date focused on the deficiencies in our workforce will serve as the foundation for opportunities and growth as the Workforce Recovery Planning Round Table forges ahead into post-pandemic recovery preparations.

Appendix 1: Workforce Recovery Planning Round Table Members, Titles and Professional Affiliations

Name	Role	Professional Affiliation
Meghan Realesmith	Project Lead, Research Associate	Sarnia Lambton Workforce Development Board
Katherine Albion	Executive Director	University of Western Ontario Research Park
Don Anderson	Executive Director	Sarnia Lambton Business Development Center
Mikelle Bryson-Campbell	Executive Director	Sarnia Lambton Workforce Development Board
Allan Calvert	Chief Executive Officer	Sarnia Lambton Chamber of Commerce
Shauna Carr	Economic Development Officer	Sarnia Lambton Economic Partnership
Valerie Colasanti	General Manager of Social Services	County of Lambton
Anthony Folan	General Manager	Integral HR Solutions
Stacey Forfar	Director of Community Development Services and Standards	Corporation of the City of Sarnia
Joanne Fuller	Member Service Representative for Lambton & Middlesex counties	Ontario Federation of Agriculture
Andrea Hands	Partnership, Strategic Initiatives and Communication Manager	Lambton College - Department of Research and Innovation
Bruce Hein	Owner - Operator	Express Employment Professionals
Eric Hyatt	City Planner	Corporation of the City of Sarnia
Karolyn LaCroix	Registered Nurse for Public Health	Lambton Public Health
Gary Martin	President, Board of Directors	Lambton Federation of Agriculture
Cari Meloche	Economic Development Officer	Sarnia Lambton Economic Partnership
Susan Mills	Chief Executive Officer	Grand Bend and Area Chamber of Commerce
Donna Morreau	Professional Practice Supervisor for Mental Health and Addictions	Bluewater Health
Mark Perrin	Executive Director	Tourism Sarnia-Lambton
Karen Richards	Economic Development Officer	Sarnia Lambton Economic Partnership
Mehdi Sheikhzadeh	Vice President, Research and Innovation	Lambton College
Monica Shepley	Economic Development Officer	Corporation of the City of Sarnia
Stephen Thompson	Executive Director	Sarnia Lambton Economic Partnership



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