

**Submission  
No 101**

## **HEALTH SERVICES AMENDMENT (SPLITTING OF THE HUNTER NEW ENGLAND HEALTH DISTRICT) BILL 2025**

**Organisation:** Moree Plains Shire Council

**Date Received:** 9 May 2025

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Reference: FILE24/519



8 May 2025

**Legislative Assembly Committee on Community Services**  
**Via online submission**

Dear Committee Members,

**RE: Moree Plains Shire Council Submission – Health Services Amendment (Splitting of the Hunter New England Health District) Bill 2025**

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on the proposed Health Services Amendment Bill 2025 regarding the splitting of the Hunter New England Health District (HNEHD).

Moree Plains Shire sits within the New England North West region and is home to a diverse population, including an Indigenous community comprising over 20%. The Moree District Hospital plays a critical role in delivering health services across an expansive 18,000 km<sup>2</sup> area and beyond.

Currently, the region relies heavily on the John Hunter Hospital as a Level 6 tertiary facility. For serious and complex medical cases, this link provides vital access—patients from Moree can reach John Hunter within approximately six hours, a connection not afforded to many rural areas. However, in practice, this system is increasingly strained. Patients are at times first diverted to Tamworth Hospital, only to be redirected again to John Hunter. This double diversion reflects a systemic lack of resourcing and coordination, and adds stress, delay, and risk to critical care pathways.

The impact on local families and carers is considerable. For example, residents from Mungindi, Boggabilla or Toomelah in our shire's north face a journey of more than 600km to reach John Hunter Hospital—a distance that is not only cost and time prohibitive, but one that significantly impairs access to consistent support, follow-up care, and family presence during treatment. These factors contribute to poorer health outcomes and compound existing rural and Indigenous disadvantage. By contrast, Tamworth is under 400km away—a significantly more manageable distance that would provide the region with a much more accessible and realistic tertiary care hub.

Meanwhile, service levels at Moree District Hospital have declined. The maternity unit is frequently on bypass due to staffing shortages in key roles including midwives, GP Anaesthetists, and GP Obstetricians. At present, just one resident GP Obstetrician doctor supports the region, with locum assistance. We have seen shifts at the hospital increasingly filled by locum doctors, from 100% filled by local GPs in 2014 with 14 local GPs dropping to 7. During a resident's recent call to the emergency department to ask if a radiographer was on duty to x-ray an injured child, the switch responded 'I can do you one better, we don't have a doctor on.'

While access to the John Hunter facility remains essential, it underscores a broader issue—our region requires reliable, high-quality healthcare infrastructure closer to home. Any structural change to the HNEHD must address this critical need.

Moree Plains Shire Council supports the proposed split of the HNEHD on the condition that it is accompanied by substantial investment in regional infrastructure in the New England region — specifically, the upgrade of Tamworth Hospital to a Level 5 or 6 tertiary facility, with full resourcing. A growing region like ours requires a robust, regionally based clinical hub to reduce pressure on stretched local services and anchor a tiered, sustainable network of care.

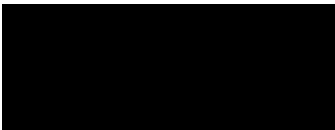
In summary, any boundary changes must:

- Be underpinned by a comprehensive investment plan, prioritising the upgrade of Tamworth Hospital to a Level 5/6 tertiary facility.
- Ensure continuity and enhancement of patient care within a restructured, regionally responsive clinical network.
- Be supported by long-term strategies to address workforce shortages beyond funding alone.
- Take into account the geographic realities and burdens of travel for patients, carers and families in remote communities, and seek to reduce these burdens—not entrench them further.

Council is committed to working constructively with the Committee to ensure that any proposed reforms deliver stronger, more equitable healthcare outcomes for the Moree Plains and the wider New England North West community.

We welcome continued engagement on this important matter.

Yours sincerely,



Cr Susannah Pearce  
**MAYOR**