

**INQUIRY INTO HEALTH OUTCOMES AND ACCESS TO
HEALTH AND HOSPITAL SERVICES IN RURAL,
REGIONAL AND REMOTE NEW SOUTH WALES**

Organisation: Gunnedah Shire Council

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Legislative Council

Inquiry into Health Outcomes and Access to Health and Hospital Services in Rural, Regional and Remote New South Wales

26 November 2020

Gunnedah Shire Council Submission

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to this important Inquiry on behalf of the Gunnedah Shire Council.

It is well established that rural, regional and remote communities have lower levels of access to health services and alarmingly, the gap continues to widen. The Gunnedah Shire has for many years suffered a chronic shortage of General Practitioners (GP's), an ageing hospital facility (now slated for future upgrade) and an ongoing gradual reduction of essential local health services through centralisation of services to regional centres and cities.

This reduction in services and chronic shortage of GP's has been compounded by continuing increases in the local population and demographic challenges associated with an ageing population and a high proportion of indigenous residents with complex health needs. Gunnedah currently has a ratio of approximately 1 General Practitioner to 3000 residents. This is believed to be one of the highest ratios in the Hunter New England Health area.

With GP's unable to cope with the local demand for services, a large proportion of Gunnedah residents are now forced to travel outside the area to seek professional medical services. This has escalated to an extent that pressure is being added to medical practices in surrounding communities. For those that don't have the means to travel, an additional demand is placed upon the local hospital emergency ward, clogging up the hospital system.

Community members who are required to undertake medical check-ups by legislation (ie licence renewal for over 75's, workers compensation cases) are forced to travel out of town if they can gain appointments in other neighbouring towns.

Local GP's are effectively running a crisis medical service and preventative practice is non-existent. Those lucky enough to get an appointment with a local GP face long waits and appointments are significantly delayed or not sought until a health complaint has escalated to a critical level. The concept of an annual health check-up with a local GP is a luxury that is simply not attainable for many local people. The complete lack of preventative care has a compounding effect, creating further demand on local services and in turn further escalating an increasingly desperate situation. Undoubtedly, this will lead to a continuation of the ongoing decline in local health outcomes when compared against a metropolitan population and it may be many years before the full extent of this problem is apparent in health statistics.

Whilst Council eagerly anticipates the progression of planning for a new hospital in Gunnedah the community remains concerned about how the hospital will be staffed and what services will be provided given the ongoing difficulties we're already experiencing. Members of the community are filled with praise for our local hospital staff who are working very hard under difficult circumstances to deliver the best care they can but they are clearly under resourced. This shortfall results in transfers to the Tamworth hospital for many cases beyond basic care and for basic services such as after-hours pathology. The standard of care at the Tamworth hospital is generally perceived to be very good but any comparison between the two facilities is stark, in terms of availability of qualified personnel, equipment and services.

The local maternity ward is a much loved component of the Gunnedah Hospital and has received welcome attention from local fundraising groups to ensure that it is at a standard suitable for our residents. However, the operation of the maternity ward is dependent upon the availability of two local doctors and if they are unavailable, the ward simply shuts with patients transferred to the Tamworth Hospital. It is unthinkable that metropolitan based mothers would have to deal with the possibility that the maternity ward at their local hospital may or may not be open on the day or hour they arrive to have their baby. It remains a great fear for the Gunnedah community that when we inevitably lose one of the local GP's required to operate the maternity ward, the service will go the way of so many other local health services and simply be closed forever and centralised to the regional city of Tamworth.

Council has been focused on growing the local economy and building the local population with many great initiatives and partnerships with the State and Federal Government helping to achieve this outcome. However, one of the greatest obstacles to Gunnedah's continued growth remains the unavailability of local health services. If a prospective resident is making a decision to relocate from the city and settle in a rural area such as Gunnedah or if a current resident is determining whether to stay or move away, the availability and quality of local health services is often a key consideration when choosing where to live. The current situation not only creates immense distress for current residents it remains a handbrake on future growth and productivity.

Council is one of the Shire's larger employers and our organisation is experiencing productivity issues as a result of these shortages. Our experience is reflective of other local businesses. The difficulty in accessing doctors has resulted in the need to send employees out of area to attend appointments for workers compensation, rehabilitation or for return to work programs ultimately leading to increased costs. Workers needing to attend medical appointments need to take more time off work in order to facilitate travel out of area and that results in employers bearing the cost of the associated increases in sick leave or other entitlements.

Council strives to position itself as an employer of choice to attract and retain skilled personnel in a very competitive market. However, concern around the unavailability of local health services continues to be a major issue for our employees and remains a measurable obstacle in retaining our current workforce; this has also resulted in an unmeasurable quantity of missed opportunities to attract skilled workers to the area.

By way of example, a recent quick poll of the perceptions of our current workforce yielded the following results:

- 94.12% of employees said that the availability of quality medical services is important to them and their family when choosing whether to live or continue living in Gunnedah.
- 88.23% of employees either disagree or strongly disagree with the statement that 'medical services in Gunnedah have generally improved over the last 10 years'. 0% of respondents agree or strongly agree with the statement.
- 91.17% of employees generally rate the current availability of medical services as a whole in Gunnedah as either 'Bad' or 'Terrible'.

- 82.35% of employees or members of their families have had to seek normal GP appointments outside of the Shire in the last 12 months. More than 50% have sought appointments outside of the area more than five times in the last 12 months. Just 17.65% of respondents said that they or members of their family had been able to secure all GP appointments within the Shire for the year.
- 100% of employees responded that they or members of their family have put off check-ups or medical appointments that normally would have occurred because services have not been available in Gunnedah. 55.88% of those respondents indicated that this had occurred three or more times in the last 12 months.
- 52.94% of employees said that they or a family member had been transferred to Tamworth or another hospital because Gunnedah did not have the available staff or facilities to treat them.

Gunnedah Council is not an idle partner in helping to address the issue and recognises that in order to resolve this complex problem all levels of government, State, Federal and Local have to work together.

To that end Council delivers the following services:

- Provides subsidised housing accommodation for visiting GP's, registrars and locums.
- Operates a regional scale aged care provider (home care).
- Operates a community transport service for aged, disabled and disadvantaged persons and this service provides transport to those seeking appointments with doctors out of area.

The local community has also contributed to fundraising for initiatives to facilitate the improvement of services in our local hospital and the establishment of our Rural Health Centre. This is clearly an issue that the local community cares deeply about, is very invested in and have been prepared to play a role in being part of the solution. However, the power to make real and lasting change to the current circumstances rests with the State and Federal Governments.

The issues that we face are complex and it is accepted that there is no simple or quick fix. However it is clear that a fundamental shift is required to address these problems. The future of rural areas and the lives of rural people depend upon it.

Yours faithfully

Eric Groth
GENERAL MANAGER

Reference: cf:dmm