

Submission
No 402

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

Organisation: Port Stephens Council

Date Received: 12 January 2021



PORT STEPHENS
COUNCIL

Portfolio Committee No. 2 - Health
Parliament of NSW
Legislative Council
Macquarie Street
Sydney NSW 2000

Dear Committee,

Re: Submission to Inquiry – Health Outcomes & Access to Health & Hospital Services in Rural, Regional and Remote New South Wales

Port Stephens Council welcomes the inquiry into health outcomes and access to health and hospital services in rural, regional and remote NSW. Better health facilities have been identified as an advocacy priority for 2020/21 and we are pleased to have the opportunity to outline the priorities of the Port Stephens community.

Overview

The regional Local Government Area (LGA) of Port Stephens is located to the north of the City of Newcastle. It is part of the Hunter Region. The LGA has a population of 73,691, which is predicted to grow to 88,920 by 2040. Population growth is being driven primarily by:

- Tree/sea changers and retirees attracted to affordable real estate in a beautiful natural environment. By 2040, it is the elderly (80+) cohort that is forecast to experience the largest increase; and
- Migration of the workforce required by our thriving manufacturing, defence/aerospace and tourism sectors.

The health of our community is a key concern for Council, reflected in policy and operational documents as follows:

- Council's 2020-2021 **Community Advocacy Priorities** include:
'Better community health facilities – to support the well-being of our growing community and improve health outcomes including specialised services such as renal dialysis'
- Port Stephens Council's **Community Strategic Plan** sets out our community's long term vision, and the **Operational Plan** outlines Council's priorities for delivery. Relevant objectives include:
C1 Our community accesses a range of services that support diverse community needs; and C1.4 Support the needs of an ageing population
C3.1 Assist community service providers to effectively deliver services in the region
L3.4 Provide a voice for the community

Hunter Regional Plan: 26.2 Enable the delivery of health facilities, education, emergency services, energy production and supply, water and waste water, waste disposal areas, cemeteries and crematoria, in partnership with infrastructure providers.

Greater Newcastle Metropolitan Plan (p64): identifies the health cluster centred on John Hunter Hospital as a catalyst area.

Community Consultation

Port Stephens Council conducted the annual **Community Satisfaction Survey** from May to June 2020. To better understand complex community needs, unique impacts and their vision for the future, COVID-19 specific questions were also included in the survey –

1. Thinking about the COVID-19 pandemic, what do you think are the biggest issues facing Port Stephens as a whole?
2. How would you like Port Stephens to be different after COVID-19, to create a better community for yourself and the next generation?

A total 1,542 respondents completed the survey, and 62 comments related to healthcare services, in summary the responses cited -

- Distance from hospitals/ medical services
- Quality of the health services
- Lack of hospitals and infrastructure in the Port Stephens area
- Ageing population adding extra burden on the healthcare services
- Tourists visiting Port Stephens adding extra burden to the healthcare services

Below are some specific comments from the Survey –

“Access to specialist medical practitioners is so limited within the area, in most instances you are required to travel to Newcastle or beyond.”

“Start building a proper hospital. Port Stephens is almost equivalent to a big retirement village with a majority of aged population in dire need of medical services. The many medical centres we have are insufficient as long waiting periods to see a doctor still prevail.”

“Having no access to a big hospital close by”

“Increased realisation that we do not have adequate medical infrastructure (i.e. a proper hospital) to cope with the medical requirements for our demographic (not just the pandemic, but regular and ongoing requirements)...”

“Improve the quality of the health care provided at the local hospital. (I among others, am not confident to go there in the event of an emergency).”

Port Stephens Council has recently engaged an independent market research tool **PlaceScore** to help plan for future improvements to the health, wellbeing and quality of life for Port Stephens residents. Whilst PlaceScore does not specifically collect data about health facilities such as hospitals, it does look at access to family and community

services (i.e. aged care, disability, home care, support services) – which the community reports are performing quite well, with the exception of Shoal Bay where access to family and community services have been identified by the community as a medium priority for action.

In 2018, Council undertook a **Business Health Check**, to survey our business community and gather feedback on a number of issues, including the importance and quality of various lifestyle attributes. In relation to health and medical services, 88% of respondents reported this was quite or very important, but only 48% reported the quality as good or excellent. Clearly the community finds provision of these services important, but expectations are not being met.

Specific Issues in Port Stephens

1) Transport

A key limiting factor for the community of Port Stephens is utilising health services and facilities in greater Newcastle due to lack of accessible public transport links.

Currently a patient needing to access medical services in Newcastle or Maitland by public transport will require several changes of service and a very limited timetable.

2) Barriers to accessing specialist services

The lack of access to treatments and facilities for Port Stephens cancer patients is reflected through the community relying on 2 volunteer-run groups – The Tomaree Breast Cancer Support Group and the Tomaree Prostate Cancer Support Group. Both groups rely heavily on donations and volunteers to ensure that cancer patients are able to access the treatment needed that is not on offer within the Port Stephens Local Government Area. In 2019 the Tomaree Prostate Cancer Support Group transported 49 patients across 469 trips, totaling 52,300 kms of distance travelled which reflects the geographical challenges that Port Stephens residents face.

Recently a petition was circulated by the Member for Port Stephens, Kate Washington, which collected over 400 signatures calling for a dialysis facility to cater for Port Stephens residents who need to travel to Newcastle for treatment multiple times a week. Similar to the services for cancer patients, the Port Stephens Community Transport Service provides travel assistance to patients who require dialysis at Raymond Terrace that are unable to access dialysis treatment locally.

A mental health round table held in November 2020 which included mental health providers, care services, GPs and state MP Kate Washington highlighted the consistent decline of General Practitioners within Port Stephens. As a result of COVID-19 there is increased pressure on local General Practitioners, especially in the area of mental health. This is further exacerbated by the 20% fall in the number of students applying for General Practitioner training which will result in a decline of the numbers of General Practitioners available in rural and remote Australia.

3) Disadvantage

Port Stephens has several areas which experience a relatively high level of socio-economic disadvantage, including Raymond Terrace which is forecast to experience the largest population increase in Port Stephens, growing by 6,410 people from 13,955 in 2016 to 20,365 people by 2040. Raymond Terrace however, has no general access to bulk billed medical services.

Conclusion

Advocating for better health facilities is a key focus for Council. Our ageing population requires improved services locally and better access to services further afield, and health services for the general population, including mental health, and specialist services are also necessary to retain our population and service its growth.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.

Yours sincerely,

Wayne Wallis
General Manager

23 December 2020