

STATEMENT

Remote WA Councils Unite for Funding for GP Services

Canberra, ACT – June 2025

Six remote and very remote Western Australian local governments have successfully presented a motion at the Australian Local Government Association (ALGA) National General Assembly, calling on the Australian Government to increase Financial Assistance Grants and recalibrate their distribution to better support rural councils funding general practitioner (GP) services. The motion was carried unanimously.

The Shires of Gnowangerup, Jerramungup, Kojoonup, Lake Grace, Narembene, and Ravensthorpe are leading the charge, highlighting the unsustainable financial burden placed on local governments to attract and retain GPs in their communities. These councils are collectively contributing over \$1.475 million annually—funds that would otherwise support core local government responsibilities.

The Alliance was formed by Cr Len Armstrong, the Shire of Lake Grace President. “I felt we needed an alliance of Councils because we live in a rural community where our Shire is putting a substantial cash payment towards medical services and it’s a significant amount when it comes out of our rate base, when in actual fact we should be spending it on infrastructure, and core local government business”.

While in Canberra, representatives from the Rural Health Funding Alliance met with key stakeholders including the Department of Health and Aged Care, the National Rural Health Commissioner, the Australian Medical Association, ALGA’s policy lead, and the National Rural Health Alliance. The Alliance has received strong support from the Western Australian Local Government Association (WALGA).

“What has resonated in our meetings has been when local governments are in the space of providing GPs, locals are paying for their Medicare Levy already, their local government rates and then a fee for a GP consult” said Shire of Gnowangerup President Kate O’Keeffe.

A February 2025 position paper, *Provision of Remote GP Services*, outlines the stark reality: chronic GP shortages, rising market rates, and inadequate incentives are leaving rural communities without essential healthcare. The consequences are severe—life expectancy in remote Australia is up to seven years lower than in urban areas, and rates of chronic diseases like high blood pressure and obesity are significantly higher.

In Lake King, residents must travel 184 kilometers one way to reach the nearest GP, with no public transport options. This lack of access has led to an over-reliance on emergency departments, where over 50% of presentations in rural WA are non-urgent and could be managed by a GP.

Local governments have stepped in, offering cash incentives, housing, vehicles, and medical facilities to attract doctors. A Shire in the Alliance alone contributes \$305,000 annually—16% of its total ratepayer income—to maintain GP services.

While telehealth has been proposed as a solution, the report warns against over-reliance. Virtual consultations cannot replace physical exams or emergency care, and intermittent providers lack the local knowledge needed for personalized treatment, especially for Indigenous patients.

The Alliance is calling on other remote and very remote local governments (Modified Monash 5,6,7) across all States to join the Alliance and push towards a sustainable funded model for GP services in the bush.

WALGA President Karen Chappel AM JP said every Western Australian, no matter where they lived, deserved equitable access to primary healthcare services.

“Accessing medical care in these regions is a challenge and many communities only have access due to Local Governments supporting a GP surgery,” President Chappel said.

“According to WALGA’s Local Government Primary Healthcare Services Survey, 69 Local Governments spent \$6.8 million in 2021-22 to support primary healthcare. The provision of healthcare is a State and Federal responsibility.

“This situation is diverting funds from other essential community services and infrastructure. WA Local Governments cannot, and should not, have to shoulder this cost.”

President O’Keeffe concluded, “Healthcare should not be a postcode lottery. If we don’t get involved, we would not have a GP.”

Further information: www.ruralhealthfundingalliance.au

David Nicholson, CEO Shire of Gnowangerup; Cr O’Keeffe, Shire of Gnowangerup President, Alan George, CEO Shire of Lake Grace, Cr Len Armstrong, Shire of Lake Grace President

