



DUNGOG SHIRE COUNCIL

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File EF08/673
CFD
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Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs
PO Box 6100
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Secretary

Inquiry into the factors affecting the supply of health services and medical professionals in rural areas

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to this inquiry on behalf of Dungog Shire Council, in brief Dungog Shire is located within the Hunter Valley approximately 85Km North West of Newcastle and a 2½ hour drive from the Sydney CBD the Shire has an overall population of approximately 8,600 residents. The Shire comprises the town of Dungog (pop'n 3,000) which hosts a 15 bed hospital and a 63 bed nursing home facility and the villages of Clarence Town, Gresford, Vacy and Paterson.

During 2010 and early 2011 our community was in crisis as a consequence of the retirement of 2 Doctors the Shire was left with one Doctor and 2 part time registrars to serve our communities.

For over 2 years prior to the retirements the local medical practice had been advertising in an attempt to attract and recruit doctors for our community without success. In 2010 Council in conjunction with Hunter New England Health, Hunter Rural Division of GP's, Rural Doctors Association and Doctor Dew met on a number of occasions to develop an alternative recruitment strategy and for HNEH to also provide support to the local practice.

The community raised \$40,000 through a GP Stakes series of community events to support the recruitment of additional Doctors and whilst the local medical practice is operating with 4 full time and 1 part time doctor. At the present moment the community is fortunate to have the doctors we have, the waiting list for an appointment is still in excess of two weeks. With only two of them residing permanently in the Dungog LGA there is always the concern with the doctors that commute that they may become tired of travelling.

The provision of GP Services in the villages of Clarence Town and Gresford is still lacking and the Gresford community has been lobbying for many years for the provision of GP service following the retirement of the local doctor some 10 years ago. Unfortunately the last part time service that was provided to the Gresford community only lasted six months. The Clarence Town service was provided part time by one of the Dungog GP's however this service ceased in early 2010. The villages of Paterson and Vacy have not had any GP service and residents from this area would generally be serviced by medical practitioners based in Maitland.


Dungog Shire
Life as it should be...

COUNCIL'S VISION:

A vibrant, united community, with a sustainable economy. An area where rural character, community safety and lifestyle are preserved.

During the recruitment discussions with Dr Dew one of the major impediments related to the distribution of financial incentives. Dungog is categorised as RA 2 which is the same as many lifestyle locations with significant population bases. Whilst Dungog may only be a 1 hour drive to Newcastle or to the Port Stephens coastal areas it still is having to be compared with locations like Port Macquarie, Coffs Harbour or Hobart and accordingly the window shopping that occurs results in small rural communities being disadvantaged as we cannot offer the same facilities as many of the larger regional locations.

The current structure is in need of serious review and Dungog Shire Council supports the call of the rural doctors association of Australia to review the ASGC-RA system as a matter of priority. The Federal Government has to take a lead role and not leave it up to local Councils and local communities to raise funds to attract doctors to work in rural areas.

Yours faithfully

Craig Deasey PSM
General Manager