

WE-ROC

WHEATBELT EAST REGIONAL ORGANISATION OF COUNCILS

Incorporating the local governments of Bruce Rock, Kellerberrin, Merredin, Westonia & Yilgarn
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Our Ref: 075-1 Local Hospitals/013-2 Strategic and Future Planning

The Country Ambulance Strategy
WA Country Health Service
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To whom it may concern

The Country Ambulance Strategy - a Submission from the Wheatbelt East Regional Organisation of Councils (WE-ROC)

I write in my capacity as the Executive Officer to the Wheatbelt East Regional Organisation of Councils (WE-ROC). WE-ROC's membership includes the Shires of Bruce Rock, Kellerberrin, Merredin, Westonia and Yilgarn.

WE-ROC's Member Councils are appreciative for the opportunity to provide comment on the draft Country Ambulance Strategy (the Strategy). It also acknowledges the considerable regional engagement process undertaken in preparing the draft Strategy, a process which highlighted many of the concerns held by Member Councils with respect to the issue of ambulance services across the Wheatbelt.

WE-ROC's Member Councils are broadly supportive of all 19 recommendations contained within the Draft Strategy but have a number of concerns. This brief submission will cover each of these concerns.

▪ **Declining Volunteer Numbers**

Whatever recommendations are implemented, the Strategy's success is heavily premised on the ongoing use of locally based volunteers. This is a dangerous premise to use because the number of suitably qualified and interested people are not coming through in sufficient numbers to replace those retiring either because of age or "burnout". Whilst some subcentres have strong volunteer numbers that is not the case across all regional communities. The demographic profile for the Wheatbelt region as a whole is one of a region with declining population. The latest ABS figures indicate that the Wheatbelt is rapidly greying as younger people move out of the region and an increasing number of older people choose to spend their retirement years in small rural communities such as those within WE-ROC. Across the entire Wheatbelt in fact, the median age has increased rapidly from a decade earlier when it was 40 years, to reach 43.7 years in 2016. This means the State's Wheatbelt region now has an older population than the traditional retirement magnet of WA, Mandurah, where the median age has fallen to 42.8 years.

This means that the very people most likely to require ambulance services, either for Inter Hospital Patient Transfer or Primary Response Transfer, are the source of volunteers for this vital service. With increasing corporatisation of agriculture across the Wheatbelt along with continued urban drift experienced within the towns themselves, due to fewer job prospects and reduced government services, it is difficult for WE-ROC's Member Councils to see how a long-term solution to this problem can be achieved.

▪ **Implementation of the Strategy's Recommendations – Transfer of Responsibilities from St John Ambulance to WA Country Health Service**

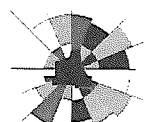
A number of the Strategy's 19 Recommendations are WA Country Health Service (WACHS) led. Where this involves a transfer of control from St John Ambulance (SJA) to WACHS may



Shire of Bruce Rock



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Shire of Westonia



Shire of Yilgarn

be problematic if SJA is reluctant to relinquish responsibility. This is understandable and every effort should be made to ensure transfer of responsibility is transitioned smoothly and without detriment to the delivery of ambulance services across regional WA.

- **Viability of Saint John Ambulance Subcentres**

WE-ROC's Member Councils also have some concerns regarding the potential adverse impact the outsourcing of Country Ambulance contracts to WACHS may have on the viability of some SJA Sub-Centres. Given that it is possible SJA won't necessarily be awarded a contract this may leave some SJA Sub-Centres uneconomically viable without access to the income brought in from patient transfers and in particular Inter Hospital Patient Transfers. This leaves a community vulnerable because if its sub-centre closes it will also be left without an emergency ambulance service.

This is of grave concern to WE-ROC because were this to occur it would be another "nail in the coffin" of a rural community's efforts to sustain itself into the future.

- **Adoption of a Paid Staff Model**

To quote from the Overview of the Draft Ambulance Strategy:

Western Australia (WA) has the greatest reliance on volunteer ambulance officers of any Australian State and is the only State where the service is not state operated. The situation is complicated by the vast geography and widely dispersed population outside the Perth metropolitan area.

If a community can't get volunteers to assist in the operation of ambulances within its community then paid staff would need to be employed. This would be the only way country ambulance services could be provided to that community's residents and would be required to ensure the provision as an essential component of the State's health system.

And therein lies the danger to non-metropolitan Councils such as those within WE-ROC. If paid ambulance officers are required to operate a community's ambulance who is going to house and pay for these ambulance staff? In the first instance, it will be the State Government through WACHS and the Health Department but who will bear the financial responsibility in the longer term? Local Government's resources are already stretched and should not be seen (now or ever) as a solution to a problem which has never been theirs. The State Government must ensure that it is the primary (perhaps sole) investor into the WA's country ambulance service.

As stated above, WE-ROC's Member Councils are appreciative for the opportunity to provide comment on the draft Strategy. In closing it would also like to emphasise the critical importance of a well-resourced and effectively managed country ambulance service. Communities such as those within WE-ROC's membership are entitled to such a service.

As Professor Fong articulates clearly in his message as Chair of the WA Country Health Service on the opening page of the Draft Strategy ... "A country ambulance service is an essential component of the health system in Western Australia."

Along with other communities across regional WA, WE-ROC's Member Councils look forward to the implementation of the Country Ambulance Strategy's recommendations ensuring the future needs of their residents will be met.

Yours faithfully



Helen Westcott
Executive Officer

10 December 2018