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31 JANUARY 2024

Health Workforce Strategy for Queensland to 2032

**WESTERN DOWNS REGIONAL COUNCIL
SUBMISSION**

Question 1: Do you have any suggested enhancements/refinements to the Objectives and Strategies?

RESPONSE:

Focus Area 1: Supporting and retaining the current workforce

Yes

Western Downs Regional Council is, in principle, supportive of the Objectives and Strategies outlined in Focus Area 1.

Deloitte Workforce Gap Analysis indicated that in 2020 the workforce gap was 110 persons in the Health Care and Social Assistance sector in the Western Downs. This workforce gap is forecast to increase to 334 persons in 2030. This makes it the fifth highest industry to experience workforce skills gap. Western Downs Regional Council plays a proactive role in addressing local labour shortages and delivers collaborative initiatives with Council's strategic partners to grow and retain our own workforce.

Focus Area 1 aligns with the Western Downs Regional Council recently adopted Economic Development Strategy 2023–2028, which focuses on attracting and retaining workforce to the Western Downs to support the region's economic development. An inclusive workplace and support provided to healthcare workers will increase the chance for them to remain in the Western Downs region and continue to contribute to our current workforce.

Council has been in consultation with government agencies, employment service providers, Darling Downs and West Moreton Primary Health Network (PHN), Southern Queensland Rural Health, and the local Chambers of Commerce on identifying the following ways to attract and retain the workforce. Councils Economic Development team has then come up with strategies for ways to retain the workforce. Within the table below, the suggested strategies are listed, along with the relevance to the current strategies already listed in Fous Area 1.

Ways of Retaining Workforce	Relevance
Improving work conditions (e.g. safety, hours, and workload)	Somewhat relevant to strategy number 1
Professional development	Relevant to strategy number 6
Work-life balance support	Relevant to strategy number 1
Recognition and appreciation of staff	Somewhat relevant to strategy number 5
Support, leadership and management	Relevant to strategy number 5
Addressing burnout	Relevant to strategy number 1
Addressing regional challenges (e.g. housing, childcare and infrastructure)	Somewhat relevant to strategy number 2
Competitive compensation and benefits	Missing
Infrastructure and technology upgrades	Missing

Council would like to request the following to be incorporated as part of the Objectives and developed as strategies.

- Competitive compensation and benefits in regional areas: This can enhance health workforce retention in regional areas by providing financial security and addressing the unique challenges of working in regional, rural, and remote locations. The Council strongly believes that to be able to support and retain the current workforce, the State Government should consider Southern Queensland Rural Health's (SQRH) idea of implementing financial incentives for those who work in specific Modified Monash Model regions. An example is that every 5 years of staying in a specific region, workers gain an incentive of a certain financial value, subject to the

remoteness of the Monash region. Implementing this will allow workers to gain rewards for working in regional and rural areas and staying there.

- Infrastructure and technology upgrades: Council welcomes the recent replacement of the Tara hospital and refurbishments of the Jandowae Hospitals. Council would like to seek that other hospitals in the region are reviewed and upgraded when timely. It is expected that this will provide efficient patient care and access to modern infrastructure and resources.

Support of Focus Area 1 Strategy 2: *Develop and Implement workforce mobility initiatives that support rural and remote employment and professional development.*

Council is strongly in support of Strategy 2, as developing workforce mobility incentives will provide a stronger ability to deliver quality healthcare. Consideration should be given to successfully proven place-based programs, ensuring recognition and support for these existing models is given through funding and collaboration.

This includes:

- Cath Cosgrave's Attract Connect Stay program aims to attract more health professionals to regional and rural communities. This program recruits a Health Workforce Recruiter Connector which will develop attraction strategies to identify and encourage health professionals who are a good 'match' for the community and to provide a concierge settlement service to health professionals applying or accepting a healthcare position. They also facilitate in helping health care workers families to settle in and build their support networks. By moving from an economic model of recruitment towards a more person-centred and holistic approach to recruitment, the programs seek to improve retention of health workers in the region. The integration of programs like Attract Connect Stay, and other place-based initiatives can increase attraction and retention of a skilled health workforce to regional and rural areas.

Council also acknowledges that supporting rural and remote employment and professional development in the region, will require a coordinated approach between State Government, Local Government, and key stakeholders in the sector to develop person-centred and place-based solutions. This will increase the community capacity to attract and retain healthcare workers based on each region's specific skills gaps. The Council encourages the State Government to continue to engage with relevant stakeholders, as it is essential to the successful development of Focus Area 1.

Focus Area 2: Building New Pipelines of Talent

Yes

Western Downs Regional Council is supportive of the Objectives and Strategies outlined in Focus Area 2. Focus Area 2 aligns with the Western Downs Regional Council recently adopted Economic Development Strategy 2023–2028, which focuses on increasing local training opportunities and enabling study in place.

Council has been consulting with government agencies, employment service providers, Darling Downs and West Moreton PHN, Southern Queensland Rural Health, and the local Chamber of Commerce on identifying the following ways of building new pipelines of talent. Within the table below, suggested strategies are listed, along with the relevance to the current strategies already listed in Fous Area 2.

Ways of Attracting Workforce	Relevance
Regional placement and internship program	Relevant to strategy number 1 & 2

Preceptorship and mentorship programs for prospective students	Missing
Career awareness and community outreach and education	Relevant to strategy number 3
Partnerships with educational institutions and having recruitment events for local career opportunities	Relevant to strategy number 5
Promote regional lifestyle	Missing
Flexible training models	Somewhat relevant to strategy number 6

Council would like to request the following to be incorporated as part of the Objectives and developed as strategies.

- Preceptorship and mentorship programs: A preceptorship and mentorship program which facilitates the transfer of practical skills and knowledge from experienced professionals, by addressing specific needs of the regional health context. Preceptorship and mentorship programs offer continuous professional development opportunities, helping individuals in the region stay current with the latest advancements in healthcare practices. This can also create a structured pipeline for talent development from entry-level positions to advanced roles, ensuring there is a steady supply of skilled professionals in the region. The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP) and the Australian College of Rural and Remote Medicine believe that due to the maldistribution problem, doctors have a far greater scope of choice regarding where they practice as a GP, which can be seen in the larger supply of doctors in urban hospitals compared to rural hospitals. Training centres are therefore limited in encouraging doctors to work in regional, rural and remote areas, and this is why the Council recommends that the State Government works alongside training centres to advocate for a push in doctors to go rural. As mentioned, developing preceptorship and mentoring programs can be done by recruiting a qualified GP to facilitate career pathway mentoring for junior doctors, where virtual advice and encouragement can be given for these junior doctors, as well as face-to-face mentoring when required. Here, the GP can advocate for the need for doctors in rural areas, thus articulating the benefits of working in rural communities.
- Promote regional lifestyle: Council and Darling Downs and West Morten PHN would like to recommend that the State Government works with local Councils in doing destination marketing and promote the benefits of residing in the region. The marketing profile can:
 1. Emphasise the positive aspects of the regional lifestyle, such as a slower pace, cleaner environment, a strong sense of community, and a broader scope of healthcare careers.
 2. Illustrate how these factors contribute to a higher quality of life for healthcare professionals and the potential for professional growth and career advancement in the regional healthcare sector, including opportunities for leadership roles and specialised training.
 3. Highlight the affordability and living expenses in the region compared to larger urban areas.
 4. Feature testimonials from current healthcare professionals who have chosen the regional lifestyle and are thriving both personally and professionally.

Council has already significantly invested in a number of promotional materials and would like to strengthen the collaboration to ensure these are utilised as part of healthcare recruitment.

Support of Focus Area 2 Strategy 1: *Optimise student placement by establishing clear pathways to employment across Queensland*

The Council strongly supports Strategy 1, to optimise student placements by establishing clear pathways to employment across Queensland. Additionally, the Council has recognised that currently, initiatives of existing models are already implemented which is why recognising and supporting these existing models through funding and collaboration can enhance the chance of attracting healthcare workforce in the region.

- The Rural Generalist Pathway program recognises the extra requirements and skills of rural generalists and supports participants to meet the diverse health needs of regional and rural Australians. The specific training for rural generalists ensures that GPs and registrars have the right skills to practice in rural settings and can address the shifting needs of regional, rural, and remote communities. The Council recommends that the State Government and Federal Government work collaboratively to ensure that this program can be adequately maintained, thereby supporting pathways for students undertaking it.
- The GROW Rural program aims to attract current health students to a rural career. GROW Rural is a 3-year program, providing first year medical students such as nurses, midwifery and Allied Health students the opportunity to experience clinical practice within rural areas. Since being developed in Central Queensland in 2017, the initiative has spread to Southwest Queensland and North Queensland and works with each region's practices and health services to identify employment opportunities for these students. Health Workforce Queensland covers all travel, accommodation, and catering costs for students.

Support of Focus Area 2 Strategy 2: *Expand grow your own, localised education to employment pathways to retain local talent within the same region, with a focus on rural and remote workforce.*

Council strongly supports Strategy 2, to expand grow your own, localised education to employment pathways and to retain local talent within the same region. Again, the Council would like to advocate for the need for the State Government to work alongside current initiatives which support the idea outlined in Focus Area 2 Strategy 2.

The Health Sustainability Futures Group is a multi-agency steering group, led by Toowoomba Surat Basin Enterprise, with the objective to increase the number of health positions in the region and to decrease the number of vacancies. In addition to attraction and retention initiatives, the group has successfully obtained funding for the Growing Workforce Participation Fund project. Through this project, significant consultation is taking place within the Western Downs to understand and identify the boundaries faced by those who hold health industry qualifications or experience who are not currently working in the industry in the region. Results will significantly benefit and inform organisations to assist re-engaging already qualified residents in the workforce.

Better Movement Clinic has successfully employed 45 students across a range of professions for their 12-month paid work placement. Better Movement strategically recruits for the following year by determining which area needs more recruitment by the number of caseloads each student builds up. Better Movement emphasises on the need to live in Dalby to be involved in the community and to increase the likelihood of long-term employment. By doing so, Better Movement experiences high attraction and retention rates. The Council strongly encourages the expansion of support for grow your own initiatives as an effective way of both training new regional healthcare workers, retaining talent and skills in the regions and meeting existing healthcare workforce gaps.

Focus Area 3- Adapting and innovating new ways to deliver

Yes

Western Downs Regional Council is supportive of the Objectives and Strategies outlined in Focus Area 3. Focus Area 3 aligned with the Western Downs Regional Council recently adopted Economic

Development Strategy 2023–2028, which focuses on attracting and retaining workforce to the Western Downs to support the region's economic development. An inclusive workplace and support provided to healthcare workers will increase the chance for them to come and stay in the Western Downs region and to contribute to our current workforce.

Council has been consulting with government agencies, employment service providers, Darling Downs and West Moreton PHN, Southern Queensland Rural Health, and the local Chamber of Commerce on identifying the following ways of deliver better healthcare. Within the table below, suggested strategies are listed, along with the relevance to the current strategies already listed in Fous Area 3.

Ways of Adapting and Innovating New Ways to Deliver	Relevance
New job share model between sectors	Missing
Incorporate innovation and technology in current healthcare system through training and skilling	Relevant to strategy number 3
Enhance digital capability in regional areas to deliver telehealth services	Relevant to strategy number 2
Work in partnership with Local Government and Chamber of Commerce to connect health workforce in the region.	Somewhat relevant to strategy number 4

Council would like to request the following to be incorporated as part of the Objectives and developed as strategies.

- New job share model between sectors: A job share model between sectors refers to Queensland Health employing health professionals under Queensland Health and having the option to work in another area. Currently, Council is aware of two options which are available; the employee is employed by Queensland Health and works part-time in Queensland Health and additionally works part-time in a private practice. Or the employee is employed by Queensland Health, works part-time in Queensland Health and additionally works part-time in the Department of Education. Council is also aware of the current model which has been successful in Stanthorpe, where local GP's work one week in the public hospital and the next week, work part-time in the private practice. Queensland Health invoices private practice for the hours worked by the GP's and the pay is made directly by Queensland Health. An example for Queensland Health employing someone and working part-time in the Department of Education could be a social worker, where the same condition applies regarding invoicing. This addresses the needs across both sectors and provides job security for the healthcare worker to be employed in full time capacity. The Council would like the State Government to implement and advocate for initiatives like this to be in place for other healthcare professions and extend these programs to other regions across Queensland.

Support of Focus Area 3 Strategy 2: *Design digitally enabled, and innovative 'place-based' workforce design solutions for regional, rural, and remote service delivery.*

Council strongly supports Strategy 2, to design digitally enabled, and innovative 'place-based' workforce design solutions for regional, rural, and remote service delivery. Ensuring Strategy 2 is successful in the Western Downs, and other regional areas of Queensland, will require strong connectivity and coverage for both mobile and internet services. Council advocates for telecommunications and digital connectivity to support and advance our region. Despite Dalby being a Business Fibre Zone and being able to connect businesses from all around the region with pockets of great connectivity, the current mobile and internet coverage in Western Downs is insufficient to support Strategy 2.

Throughout the Western Downs Council, there are 106 mobile towers, however, there are many obvious Mobile Blackspots, and often the service is unreliable and low quality. The NBN fibre optic backbone

runs along the Warrego Highway and Leichhardt Highway, however, apart from Dalby and Miles town centres, much of the region is connected via either fixed wireless or satellite. Both connections are considered to have reduced speed and are more susceptible to weather conditions and outages. While Strategy 2 offers significant potential in addressing workforce gaps and health care needs in regional Queensland, the Council strongly advocates for the necessary infrastructure to be developed to support digitally enabled solutions for service delivery.

Question 2: To ensure our workforce strategy actions make a difference to support and enable the Queensland Health workforce, are there actions that need to be refined, expanded to are there additional actions for inclusion?

RESPONSE

Focus Area 1: Supporting and retaining the current workforce

Yes

Western Downs Regional Council is supportive of the Actions outlined in Focus Area 1. The Council strongly supports:

Action 4: *Increase permanent employment opportunities for our existing temporary and casual workforces.*

Council supports the expansion of permanent employment opportunities for the existing temporary and casual health workforce. The 2021 Deloitte Western Downs Workforce Gap Analysis estimated that the region would experience a 13.5% shortfall in health care and social assistance workers by 2030 (334 workers). Local skills gaps were identified for the following health professions: registered nurses, enrolled and mothercraft nurses, general practitioners and resident medical officers, ambulance officers and paramedics. Council urges the State Government to address these skills gaps over the medium and long term, and to encourage retention of staff in the region, as it is vital for healthcare workers to have increased job security.

However, Council recommends that flexibility in working arrangements is maintained for workers who prefer the flexibility offered by temporary and casual working arrangements. For example, limited access to childcare has been identified as a significant barrier to healthcare workers returning to work in the Western Downs due to significant waiting lists (>1 year) and limited hours available. In these instances, it may be preferable to return to casual work when childcare is available, rather than permanent work.

Focus Area 2: Building new pipelines of talent

Yes

Western Downs Regional Council is supportive of the Actions outlined in Focus Area 2. Council strongly supports:

Action 3 and 4: *Prioritise growth and retention of our rural and remote workforce & enhance attraction and retention incentives offered to support and attract health workforce.*

The Council supports the action of prioritising growth and retention of our rural and remote workforce and enhance attraction and retention incentives offered to support and attract the health workforce. When acting to attract health workers to the regions, Council recommends that models of existing and previously successful programs supporting and incentivising healthcare workers to live and work in the

regions, are leveraged. Examples of the existing and previously successful programs have been tabled in the above sections.

Action Five: *Enhance scholarships and education support to increase uptake of health courses*

Western Downs Regional Council supports actions to enhance scholarships and education support to increased uptake of health courses. Council recommends that additional enhancements are made to scholarships focusing on building a pipeline of talent, to encourage student health worker mobility to the regions.

Southern Queensland Rural Health (SQRH) has expressed that they would like Western Downs Regional Council to assist students who have expressed to have their placement in Western Downs region to be connected with local employers and the Council agreed to work with SQRH to do so. With their continuing support of nursing, midwife, and allied health students, SQRH have successfully developed the Rural Immersion Placement Program-Allied Health (RIPPAH), which support students socially and financially during the required extended placement within a rural community. Currently, students going on placement are not being paid and often are required to leave their casual or part-time job when undertaking placement. The RIPPAH allows students to receive a bursary, free accommodation, and additional support from an independent supervisor to support their professional practice but also assist them in connecting to the wider community. This provides a better support network between local employment and addresses the maldistribution of the health workforce in regional areas. Council would like to see the State Government to work together with SQRH and Council to support new pipelines of talent working in regional areas.

Other Action

In line with 2023 Health Workforce Queensland Health Workforce Needs Assessment, Council recommends the expansion of training and Nurse Practitioner programs in regional Queensland. Nurse Practitioners has demonstrated the ability to improve primary healthcare access for marginalised and geographically isolated populations. Nurse Practitioners' services are currently limited by Medicare Benefits Scheme restrictions on requests and referrals, such as diagnostic imaging investigations, despite this being part of their scope of practice. These restrictions are a barrier to the provision of timely, effective, and accessible services. Extending the services of Nurse Practitioners, will create clear profession development pathways for Registered Nurses, allowing the skills of existing Nurse Practitioners to be leveraged and improve access to healthcare services in regional communities.

Focus Area 3: Adapting and Innovating New Ways to Deliver

Yes

Western Downs Regional Council is supportive of the Actions outlined in Focus Area 3. Council strongly supports:

Action 3: *Fully embed digital capability*

Council also strongly recommends that adapting new and innovate ways to deliver healthcare, should include actions which facilitate the expansion of telehealth service delivery in regional Queensland. Council considers it essential for Western Downs residents to have access to telehealth services where local services are not available. Currently, many services, in particular specialist services, can only be accessed in Toowoomba or Brisbane. This can mean a 4-hour plus one-way trip to attend appointments for Western Downs residents, which is often prohibitive due to the inability to access transport and the costs associated with longer stays if required. In addition, when our residents must travel these distances and stay elsewhere for treatment, they often must do so without the support of their family and friends. The inclusion of telehealth services in Focus Area 3 will facilitate improved access to health care for regional Queenslanders in instances where there are local health skills gaps, or it is not practical or possible to attract specialist health workers to regional areas. To ensure this is successful within the Western Downs, and other regional areas of Queensland, it will require strong connectivity and

coverage for both mobile and internet services. Facilitating this will require coordination between the Federal, State and Local Government.

Question 3: Relevant to you, or your organisation, are there actions Queensland Health should consider as part of the specific cohort or workforce action plans?

Work group:

- Women's Health
- Allied Health
- Oral Health
- Palliative Care
- Nursing
- Midwifery
- Rural and Remote
- First Nations
- Mental Health, Alcohol and Other Drugs
- Other

Actions Queensland Health should consider

RESPONSE

Western Downs Regional Council strongly advocates for actions in the Health Workforce Strategy to address serious identified gaps in the Western Downs Region in both the available healthcare workforce and service delivery.

Council also advocates for a holistic approach to be taken regarding addressing workforce shortages and maldistribution of health care workers in Queensland, including working in a coordinated and collaborative way with Federal, State and Local Government Authorities to address barriers in attracting health workers to the regions.

Western Downs Regional Council strongly advocates for Actions in the Health Workforce Strategy to address serious identified gaps in the Western Downs Region in both the available healthcare workforce and service delivery.

Workforce Gaps

The Darling Downs and West Moreton Primary Health Network has, in collaboration with Health Workforce Queensland, identified the following workforce gaps in the Western Downs Region. Based on the rating assigned, the following workforce gaps are considered serious:

- Physiotherapy
- Social work
- General Practitioner
- Podiatry
- Nursing/midwifery
- Audiology
- Optometry
- Pharmacy

Service Gaps

The following service gaps in the Western Downs have also been identified as serious by the Darling Downs and West Moreton Primary Health Network, in collaboration with Health Workforce Queensland:

- Mental health
- Social support
- Health prevention/promotion
- Oral health
- Palliative care
- Disability
- Child health
- Maternal health
- ATSI health

In addition, Western Downs Regional Council has identified many critical services not offered by the region's hospitals, resulting in residents having to travel to Brisbane or Toowoomba. These services include but are not limited to:

- Cardiology
- Dermatology
- Ear, Nose & Throat
- Nephrology
- Neurology
- Obstetrics / Gynaecology (Dalby Hospital Only)
- Oncology
- Ophthalmology
- Orthopaedic
- Paediatrics
- Psychiatry
- Respiratory
- Rheumatology
- Urology
- Vascular

Council strongly advocates for a focus on holistic actions to be adopted when addressing workforce shortages in regional Queensland, including working in a coordinated and collaborative way with Federal, State and Local Government Authorities to address barriers in attracting health workers to the regions. These barriers include limited access to affordable and appropriate housing and limited access to childcare.

Question 4: Do you have any other general comments?

To ensure that adequate support, retention, and attraction of the current workforce is successful, Council strongly advocates for a coordinated approach between the State Government, Local Government Authority, and other stakeholders to address broader barriers to workforce retention and attraction in the region. Consultation undertaken with a variety of stakeholders identified that the primary barriers to healthcare workforce retention and attraction to the regions were:

- Housing: Limited housing supply, including suitable housing for families, is a barrier to attracting health services staff to the region.
- Childcare: There is high demand for more childcare services in the Western Downs, particularly for children aged 6 weeks to 3 years. Long waitlists (up to 24 months) prevent parents from returning to work.

- Clear pathways for employment across Queensland must be supported by the social infrastructure that makes mobility of healthcare workers to the regions both possible and attractive.
- Local Skills and Training Availability: Currently, the availability of upskilling locals requires them to move away from the region. This significant inhibitor risks the potential of newly acquired skills to not return to the region as they must travel large distances to be able to acquire these skills.

Addressing these broader barriers to workforce retention and attraction in the region is essential in ensure that the health workforce gap is adequately addressed.

The 2022 Estimated Resident Population in the Western Downs was 34,542. The Queensland Government Statistician's Office projects this to increase to 36,371 in 2046 (medium range) or 38,251 (high range), representing a 5.3% and 10.7% increase, respectively. To service the health care needs of a growing population, it is critical that the Western Downs region both retains and expands its existing healthcare workforce. Whilst health service delivery is outside the realm of Local Government, Council is highly supportive of efforts by Queensland Health to engage in proactive, medium term workforce planning and to support this through investment in liveability.

To cater for the growing population, Council strongly recommends the State Government to provide a more detailed solution to the actions provided in each Focus Area. Listed in Focus Area 1 Action 1, the State Government plans to, "Implement a positive workplace culture...". By providing a more detailed set of actions, Council and community can gain a better understanding of how such actions will be carried out to retain and attract healthcare workers across Queensland.