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Inquiry into Government Service Delivery Standards in Regional NSW

From Kiama Municipal Council

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Executive Summary

Kiama Municipal Council (Council) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the inquiry on Government Service Delivery Standards in Regional NSW. As a coastal regional community with a population of over 23,000, residents across the LGA experience persistent disparities and structural challenges in access to essential government services compared with metropolitan NSW. These disparities affect health, mental health, transport, housing support, disability services, childcare, aged care and community-based social programs. While the LGA has a relatively high socio-economic advantage rating, there are:

- Significant gaps in service availability and quality between regional and metropolitan areas.
- Impacts on vulnerable groups, including young people, older residents, people with disability, and low-income households are high.
- Structural barriers faced by community organisations delivering government-funded services in Kiama.
- Opportunities to strengthen monitoring, evaluation and reporting to ensure accountability and equity.

This submission aims to outline these challenges and makes recommendations to improve service access and delivery in Kiama LGA and Illawarra region.

Kiama LGA demographics and service delivery challenges

The demographic profile of Kiama is distinct from metropolitan areas, having a median age of 48 years that is significantly higher than the NSW median of 39 years. This calls for a greater demand for aged care, chronic disease management, and home-based support services. While the median household income seems to be high in Kiama (\$1,834 per week, and the median personal income is \$48,845 per year), the high housing costs (median rent of \$485 per week and a median mortgage repayment of \$2,194 per month), makes Kiama unaffordable for many of our population including our young people and working families with young children. The common feedback is they are forced out of the towns due to high market prices, and away from existing networks and family members. These factors contribute to increasing financial stress for many residents and heighten the need for accessible, well-resourced services.

Kiama LGA population are located within six towns and villages (Gerroa, Gerringong, Minnamurra, Kiama Downs, Kiama and Jamberoo). This means our residents' access to services are already compromised by this geographical divide. The geographic distance is a barrier for our residents to access services in regional hubs such as Wollongong, Nowra and

Sydney. The flow of information about regionally based services are inconsistent and many residents including older people, young people, First Nations community and people with disability do not have adequate access to essential services. There is a lack of transparency about services that are funded to deliver services to residents of Kiama, including aged care, carer support, disability or mental health services.

Despite relatively low unemployment (1.8%), Kiama's economy is characterised as a tourism destination, comprised of a high proportion of part-time and seasonal work, particularly in accommodation and food services, construction, and health and social assistance. The community also includes a significant number of residents receiving government support, including over 3,000 Age Pension recipients and nearly 7000 households receiving Commonwealth Rent Assistance.

These indicators highlight the importance of reliable, equitable access to essential services, particularly for older residents, low-income households, and people experiencing housing stress. Additionally, Kiama residents consistently face longer wait times for general practitioners, mental health professionals, and specialist medical services compared with metropolitan NSW, with very few bulk billing services. Many services are only available in Wollongong or Sydney or have very limited operation presence (i.e. Headspace), requiring significant waiting time and travel that is difficult for working parents, older people, young people, and people with disability. A Family reported waiting 2 years for their daughter to receive speech pathology support and 9 months for counselling through school. Many families are forced to pay for these services privately and travel out of the area. there is a significant financial and travel burden, with delayed support serviced in these cases, exacerbating the conditions for the entire family.

Council commends the NSW Government for additions to the Nowra Hospital and the new Shellharbour Hospital. Communications and information the additions and new services delivered from our neighbouring LGAs is lacking and our residents are unaware of services they can receive from these hospitals.

Council understands the children ward at Wollongong Hospital is operating beyond capacity. It is reported that as a result children from Illawarra are transferred to Sydney hospitals due to insufficient beds and resources in our region. This is placing a significant financial and emotional strain on families. These impacts and concerns have been detailed in a letter to Council. In speaking with the family, they have given permission and requested that their letter is submitted to the inquiry on their behalf (attached).

Public transport options remain highly constraint for our residents. Bus and train services are infrequent, there are no taxi services and there is lack of direct connections to key service hubs, further entrenching transport disadvantage. This leaves Kiama LGA residents entirely care dependent to get to any services, within or outside the LGA.

Locally based services such as neighbourhood centre, aged care providers, disability support organisations, and volunteer-run programs are non-existence or limited in Kiama or are facing increasing demand without an increase in funding/ support. While Council notes the significant role played by the local community sector in filling service gaps, it is challenging where many community organisations funded are not located in Kiama LGA and our residents need to travel to receive basic services. They also face ongoing challenges, including workforce shortages and short-term funding arrangements that undermine service continuity.

A challenge unique to Kiama LGA is the many services, particularly non-government, that are funded to provide services to the Kiama residents but do not have a base or presence in the community. Almost all funded services are based at neighbouring LGAs and there is little information on the level of outreach service or referral mechanisms. This makes it not only challenging for residents to access services, but it's also challenging for Council to make service information available to our population. Some examples as noted earlier include access to early intervention services locally for young people, home care support/ carer respite support, lack of consistent disability support workers, limited availability of crisis services such as homelessness support or domestic violence crisis accommodations.

There are no crisis accommodation within the Kiama LGA, meaning young people experiencing homelessness or women escaping domestic and family violence must travel to Wollongong or Nowra for support. Further, there are no women's shelters and social housing is extremely limited due to housing prices. NDIS participants report difficulty securing consistent support workers, and older residents face long delays accessing home-care packages.

Access to education options is another major gap in our LGA. There are five public school and one high school; however, there are no flexible school or special needs schooling options. Further, in a region with aging population, digital connectivity is found to be inconsistent across parts of the LGA, affecting access to telehealth, online learning, and digital government services. This digital divide compounds existing barriers for residents with limited mobility or transport options. The Kiama Community College, the only adult education provider is relocating out of the LGA and that leaves our residents with no local education options. This combined with lack of reliable transport options leaves our community further disadvantaged to access fair and equitable education and learning opportunities.

Childcare services in our LGA is non-existing and day care/ pre and after school care are highly limited. Many families report long waiting lists; limited availability and a lack of flexible or extended-hours care that aligns with modern work patterns. The area does not have enough specialised services such as occasional care, or special needs childcare. This unavailability of service and shortage places pressure on local families (mostly women), often forcing parents to reduce work hours, decline employment opportunities, or travel outside the LGA for care. Expanding childcare capacity is essential for employment participation, attracting young families to the region, and ensuring children have access to early learning programs that are essential for development, wellbeing, and long-term educational outcomes.

Kiama has a growing older population, yet aged-care services have not kept pace with ongoing demographic change. Kiama LGA has a small number of residential aged-care facilities and some community-based services, however there are significant gaps in availability, affordability, and service diversity. Families and individual report waiting times for home-care packages remain long, respite options are limited, and there is a shortage of specialised dementia care and culturally appropriate services. Many older residents are forced to relocate outside the area to access suitable care. These breaks existing social and family connections and networks and placing additional strain on families. Strengthening aged-care provision is important for older people to remain in their community. It also reduces hospital pressure and maintaining the social fabric of the community as the population continues to age. Another important aspect to Kiama is support for carers, which is almost non-existence, except for outreach or volunteer-based networks.

These examples illustrate the cumulative impact of regional service inequity and the social justice implications for residents who receive lower standards of service across many area (health, mental health, education, transport, aged care, child care etc.). The combined

challenges are of high concern for community and Council. Lack of services means that Council has to take a pivotal role in running services and filling these gaps, particularly around information and referral services and or run community programs around health, mental health, ageing, disability and social support to name few. This have extensive resource and cost implications to Council. Our residents are contributing equally through taxation and civic participation yet face systemic disadvantage due to geographical location. In summary, our residents receive much lower service access and standards, limited options and incurring additional costs for services, while community place expectations on Council to respond to the shortfalls.

First Nations Community

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander residents in the Kiama LGA form a small (2.2%) but significant community whose wellbeing depends on access to culturally safe, community-led, and place-based services. Service delivery level, particularly those linked to Closing the Gap require services that are accessible, co-designed, culturally responsive and delivered in partnership with Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) wherever possible. Council works closely with our First Nation community through cultural support, coordination and co-design of cultural events and programs and support engagement and participation.

A key feedback/ concern raised by community is the lack of culturally safe services locally. The specialist services such as health services, family and youth support program and NSW Aboriginal Affairs programs are delivered regionally. This regional model means Kiama residents often rely on travel to Wollongong, Shellharbour, or Nowra for essential services. While some aspects of service delivery meet expectations, particularly cultural engagement and Council level support, significant gaps remain in relation to the standards set by NSW Government and the Closing the Gap reforms.

Areas where standards are not being met include:

- Limited local access to Aboriginal community-controlled services
- Travel burden to access health, family, and youth services
- Insufficient place-based programs tailored to Kiama's community size and needs
- Lack of local Aboriginal-specific health and wellbeing services

These gaps mean that service delivery in Kiama does not fully align with the Closing the Gap Priority Reforms, particularly Priority Reform 1 (Shared Decision-Making) and Priority Reform 2 (Strengthening the Community-Controlled Sector).

To improve service delivery standards for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in the Kiama LGA, this submission recommends:

- Investment in local, place-based Aboriginal programs
- Expansion of ACCO-delivered services into the Kiama LGA
- Improved transport and outreach models for regional service access
- Increased funding/ resourcing for culturally safe youth, family, and wellbeing programs

These actions would enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander residents in Kiama to receive equitable, culturally safe, and community-led services consistent with NSW Government standards.

Considerations/ recommendations

Kiama LGA, like many regional communities, experiences persistent inequities in government service delivery. Addressing these disparities requires a commitment to equity, transparency, and place-based service design.

As articulated above, current government service delivery standards fall short in regional contexts and particularly impacts the Kiama residents. Council strongly supports the development of a more robust and transparent system for monitoring, evaluation, and reporting of government-funded services in our area. Currently there is a lack of information on services in our region which are funded to deliver services in the Kiama LGA.

Region-specific performance indicators and reporting on wait times, unmet demand, workforce vacancies, and service coverage would provide a clearer picture of regional needs. Council supports and welcomes community-led evaluation approaches. Local and regional organisations hold deep knowledge of community needs and should be partners in designing and assessing service delivery models, particularly for vulnerable communities. A place-based approach that incorporate lived-experience voices would ensure that services are responsive, culturally appropriate, effective and sustainable.

Funding and contracting reforms are necessary to support sustainable service delivery in regional areas. Longer-term funding cycles and flexible contracts tailored to regional conditions would enable providers to adapt services to local needs. Performance incentives tied to regional service quality would encourage continuous improvement and ensure that government investment delivers meaningful outcomes for communities.

Council urges the Inquiry to recognise the unique challenges faced by regional communities and to establish minimum service standards that guarantee equitable access to essential services across NSW. Investment in digital and transport infrastructure, regionally tailored service models, and strengthened community sector capacity will be essential.

In Summary, Council makes the following recommendations to the inquiry:

- Establish minimum service standards for regional NSW across health, mental health, disability, childcare, aged care, housing including social and affordable, and transport.
- Consider options for monitoring and reporting including data gathering, reporting, place-based evaluation model, funding/ contract cycle and local partnerships.
- Develop regionally tailored service models that reflect local demographics and geography.
- Implement transparent monitoring, evaluation and reporting frameworks with specific indicators for Illawarra region.
- Increase investment in digital and transport infrastructure to support equitable access.
- Strengthen community sector capacity through stable, long-term and flexible funding.
- Collaborate with local government for delivery of locally tailored essential services.