This resource guide has been prepared to help you identify opportunities for Local Government leadership in improving the community’s access to health services, particularly through the council integrated planning framework.\(^1\)

**How is your community affected?**

The diagnosis and treatment of cancer places a significant burden on the patients, their families and carers, the health system and the broader community. Health-related transportation and accommodation present particular challenges for patients and their families and carers. Radiotherapy treatment, for example, often requires daily outpatient attendance over six weeks. As many as one in ten people diagnosed with cancer will need to travel and stay away from home to access health services during the first 12 months after diagnosis.\(^2\) Also, many people face difficulties in accessing general health services such as GP clinics.

These needs are felt particularly strongly in regional areas, because many health services are centralised around major towns and cities.

Specialised treatments are available only in certain hospitals, and so clinicians often refer patients out of their local area. Cancer patients can incur substantial effort and expense related to transport to and from health services, and this is a major obstacle in their recovery and return to health.\(^3\-^4\) Cancer survival rates decline as remoteness increases.\(^5\)

But transport issues are not solely problems for people from rural and remote areas of NSW.\(^6\) A shortage of free or low-cost car parking around major hospitals and other health services is commonly reported to Cancer Council by cancer patients, and difficulties are experienced when there is a need to travel across the city for services, especially if using public or community transport when unwell.\(^3\)

The demand for health-related transport and accommodation is expected to increase due to the ageing population and the corresponding increase in the incidence of cancer and other chronic diseases.\(^5\-^8\) The needs of cancer patients and their carers is a growing community concern.\(^3\)
How is this relevant to Local Government?

When a person is diagnosed with cancer, it affects many more people than just their family. A community that is engaged in tackling the challenges of cancer together with their council will become a resilient, strong and cohesive one. While health services are the primary responsibility of State and Federal Governments, Local Governments also have an important role. Through their local knowledge of community needs, councils are able to provide leadership in advocating for improved services and assist in long-term planning for the growing needs of cancer patients. Councils know where local disadvantage is felt and have expertise in identifying effective local solutions. Councils are well placed to complement the role of other government agencies and non-government organisations.

As outlined in section 8 of the NSW Local Government Act 1993, councils have a responsibility to exercise their functions in a manner that is consistent with social justice principles of equity, access, participation and rights. Relevant to this is council’s role in facilitating equal access to services by all sectors of the community. Councils commonly undertake a range of initiatives to help community members access essential services and often provide support to non-government organisations that offer services to chronically ill patients and their families and carers. Better access to services not only improves the health and recovery of patients – it can reduce health care costs, and in regional areas can play a vital role in sustaining social capital and the local economy.

How can councils help?

Through their many roles and responsibilities, councils already make a major difference to community health and wellbeing. Councils can also make significant contributions towards helping community members cope with and recover from cancer and other chronic illnesses. Enhancing access to appropriate services will improve patients’ outcomes and help to minimise the social, financial and health costs of a chronic illness:

- **As a planning authority**, a council has influence over land use and transport planning, and the location and amenity of facilities and services.
- **As a community leader**, a council can advocate for local cancer patients and their families and carers, and influence provision of services and allocation of resources by State and Federal Governments.
- **As a service provider**, a council can help plan and coordinate transport services, work in partnership with and bring together service providers, identify State and Federal Government funding options, and be a valuable source of information to patients and their families and carers.

An integrated approach

Your council is encouraged to take a strategic approach towards improving the community’s access to health services. This can be progressed by consulting the community. Ask community members what they think, how are they affected, and what they believe would help to address the issue. This will help identify the problems faced locally and determine those groups in the community that may experience greater disadvantage. Priorities and objectives relating to health and wellbeing in the Community Strategic Plan can be the catalyst to progressing strategies and activities across the broader planning framework.

As outlined in the Planning and Reporting Guidelines produced by the NSW Division of Local Government, the four dimensions of “the quadruple bottom line” of social, environmental, economic and civic leadership, all lend themselves to broad objectives that will pave the way for councils to undertake activities and initiatives to improve access to health services.

By way of example, the Community Strategic Plan could include the objectives:

- to promote the health and wellbeing of our community
- to enable equitable access to health services by those affected by cancer and other illnesses.

A corresponding strategy could be:

- to promote and implement a range of measures, such as community transport, accommodation opportunities or location of new facilities, that improve the access to health services for community members.

Relevant Community Strategic Plan objectives and strategies can then be translated into programs, projects and activities that will contribute towards improving access as well as strengthening the community to better cope with the challenges of cancer and other illnesses. These activities and initiatives can be detailed in the Delivery Program and Operational Plans.
Actions councils can take

The following section will help you with reviewing what your council is currently doing to improve the health and wellbeing of the community in relation to their access to health services. There are also suggested activities and initiatives that can assist with implementing and measuring objectives and strategies contained in the Community Strategic Plan. Your council can adopt a variety of measures that can significantly improve community wellbeing in your Local Government Area.

Translating community priorities into action

Which ‘health and wellbeing’ objectives and strategies in the Community Strategic Plan have relevance to improving access to health services by the community?

Taking action

A starting place is to consider suitable activities and initiatives that flow from the Community Strategic Plan and can be included in the Delivery Program, or promoted to other agencies. Strategies should aim to support access by patients to local health services, including GP clinics, hospitals and specialist health services (for example, radiotherapy).

Cancer Council, Area Health Services and community transport service providers are relevant stakeholders that may be engaged in consultations to develop the Community Strategic Plan and for collaboration with actioning relevant objectives and strategies.

Resources and further information

For Area Health Service and Local Government Area data to assess community needs and to inform planning, refer to NSW Health publications that report on the health status of the community:

- Report of the NSW Chief Health Officer at www.health.nsw.gov.au (search ‘Chief Health Officer’)
- The Health Survey Program, which includes health behaviours, health status, use and satisfaction of health services, and other factors that influence health, at www.health.nsw.gov.au (search ‘public health survey’).

The Australian Bureau of Statistics is a useful source of data about your community: www.abs.gov.au

Cancer Council may be able to assist with assessing community need to determine what problems exist in relation to accessing health services. Contact your nearest Cancer Council office (see back page for details).

Ask community members what they think, how are they affected, and what they believe would help to address the issue. This will help identify the problems faced locally and determine those groups in the community that may experience greater disadvantage.
Land use planning and location of facilities

Councils have local knowledge of population trends and level of demand for services. Therefore, councils are well positioned to have input and influence over decisions about new patient accommodation or health care facilities and their location in relation to hospitals in their Local Government Area.

Are accommodation services adequate to meet the needs of cancer patients and their families and carers, many of whom need to relocate for up to six weeks during their treatment?

Taking action
If your Local Government Area or region has a major cancer treatment centre and/or a major base hospital, identify if there are adequate accommodation options for cancer patients, others with serious illness and their families and carers. Drawing on the needs identified through Community Strategic Plan consultations, consider ways to support the establishment and/or expansion of patient accommodation and health care facilities in appropriate and easily accessible locations near hospitals and public transport links.

Resources and further information
Work with local Area Health Services to determine solutions to identified and projected shortfalls in health care facilities and hospital-allied accommodation services.

Orange City Council is one example of a regional council that has advocated for the establishment of a new accommodation service for cancer patients. Care West Lodge, which will provide 14 rooms for cancer patients, has received $100,000 in-kind support from Orange City Council towards project managing the construction of the facility.

Community transport services

A number of NSW councils auspice or facilitate community transport services with funding support from Transport NSW. These services are provided to people who are transport disadvantaged because their access to mainstream transport services is limited by physical, social or geographical factors. Many community transport services rely on volunteer drivers.

Taking action
Councils who play a role in community transport service provision can review the effectiveness of these services in meeting the needs of cancer patients and other chronically ill people. If an area is not serviced by a local or regional community transport service, a council (or group of councils) may advocate and support the establishment of new services.

Resources and further information

Visit www.health.nsw.gov.au/initiatives/iptaas/ for information about NSW Health’s Transport for Health initiatives. This website contains point-of-contact information for people needing assistance and provides useful information for organisations who would like to advocate for improved travel and assistance services.

Cancer Council offers technical support for assessing transport needs. It also holds Transporting Cancer Patients Workshops to assist drivers and coordinators to improve their service to people affected by cancer. Contact your nearest Cancer Council office (see back page for details).

The Community Transport Organisation is a peak body representing providers of community transport services across NSW. Visit www.cto.org.au to find out more information.
Advocating for improved access to services

Cancer patients from regional and rural communities who travel more than 100 kilometres to access specialist medical treatment receive limited financial assistance through the Isolated Patient Travel and Accommodation Assistance Scheme (IPTAAS). Feedback from patients to Cancer Council confirms that IPTAAS provides an inadequate level of reimbursement, and that the IPTAAS claim process is complicated and cumbersome.

Another major problem reported by patients and their families and carers is the high cost and scarcity of parking around hospitals.

Taking action

Your council can lobby the NSW Government for greater reimbursement rates for travel and accommodation expenses incurred when accessing essential health services, and for the IPTAAS reimbursement process to be made simpler.

If there is a major hospital or health service in your Local Government Area where parking problems exist, your council can consider a joint initiative with the health service to improve parking options and minimise costs to patients.

Resources and further information


During 2010/11, Cancer Council is running a campaign “Saving life: why wouldn’t you?” to lobby the NSW Government to improve transport assistance and services, and to provide more accommodation and affordable parking at treatment centres. Visit [www.cancercouncil.com.au/localgovernment](http://www.cancercouncil.com.au/localgovernment) for information about developing a council motion in support of the Saving Life campaign.

Contact Cancer Council to discuss joint advocacy or support initiatives. Cancer Council may be able to assist with assessing community need to determine what problems exist in relation to accessing health services. Contact your nearest Cancer Council office (see back page for details).
Providing community information

People affected by cancer and other chronic illnesses, and their families and carers, can feel isolated and may not be fully aware of the range of services and support available to them. Councils are often the first port of call for information about local services.

Taking action

Your council can raise awareness of support and health services by including information on its website, in the library and in relevant publications. Include information about:

- commonly accessed health services and the transport links (‘how to get around’)
- transport and assistance programs for the elderly and people who have an illness
- the IPTAAS scheme and how to complete reimbursement claims
- transport and accommodation services provided by Cancer Council and other organisations
- links to Cancer Council support and information services and the online service directory (www.cancercouncil.com.au/directory).

Include in Mayoral columns and other council/community publications information about council’s commitment to improving access to health services, the initiatives being undertaken and the partnership with Cancer Council.

Resources and further information


The Community Transport Organisation (www.cto.org.au) is a peak body representing providers of community transport services across NSW.

For information about Cancer Council transport and accommodation services, visit www.cancercouncil.com.au/directory or call 131120.

Cancer Council values the achievements of councils and would like to share news of your successes across the Local Government sector and the general community. Please send details of your local initiatives to localgovernment@nswcc.org.au

Congratulations to your council for supporting improved access to health services for cancer patients and those with other chronic illnesses.
Information and support

Cancer Council NSW

- For further information on resources for Local Government provided by Cancer Council, visit www.cancercouncil.com.au/localgovernment
- For discussion and advice with undertaking initiatives and for input as a community stakeholder, please contact your nearest Cancer Council office (see back page).

Area Health Service and Local Government Area data

To help inform your planning, refer to NSW Health publications that report on the health status of the community:

- Report of the NSW Chief Health Officer at www.health.nsw.gov.au (search ‘Chief Health Officer’)
- The Health Survey Program at www.health.nsw.gov.au (search ‘public health survey’), which includes information about health behaviours, health status, use and satisfaction of health services and other factors that influence health.


The Australian Bureau of Statistics is a useful source of data about your community: www.abs.gov.au

NSW Healthy Communities grants scheme is a partnership between the Local Government and Shires Associations of NSW and NSW Health. The program aims to improve the capacity of councils throughout NSW to promote health and wellbeing with communities that experience disadvantage. Visit http://healthycommunities.lgsa.org.au for more information.

References


Page 3 image supplied courtesy of Queensland Health 2008.
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