



# BETTER ACCESS TO HEALTH SERVICES FOR RURAL COMMUNITIES

The Greens' plan will:

1. Develop a new National Rural Health Strategy and minimum standards for service access
2. Support the expansion of the national rural generalist pathway and investigate the expansion of other professional pathways
3. Provide ongoing funding for the national rural health commissioner
4. Develop a rural health workforce innovation fund
5. Investigate increasing the rural and remote bulk billing incentive payment
6. Invest \$180 million in infrastructure and increased Medical Benefits Schedule (MBS) expenditure over the next three years to increase access to health services for people in rural and regional areas

## OVERVIEW

For too long we have seen poorer health outcomes in rural and regional Australia. Patients in the bush need access to health professionals that can meet their needs, and security to know their geography won't determine their health outcomes.

People living in rural and regional communities experience poorer access to health services, significantly higher rates of disease and injury, worse health outcomes and a significantly shorter life expectancy compared to people living in major cities.

The Greens have listened to people's concerns and will fight for better health outcomes in rural Australia through a targeted plan and key health measures to better align our health system with the needs of people in the bush.

### **ONE: DEVELOP A NEW NATIONAL RURAL HEALTH STRATEGY AND MINIMUM STANDARDS FOR SERVICE ACCESS**

For too long, your postcode has determined the kind of health care you can access, and the health outcomes you and your family enjoy.

The 2011 National Strategic Framework for Rural and Remote Health needs to be updated. That framework was developed with the intention to recognise and address the specific needs associated with delivering health care in rural and remote Australia, and to be used proactively in the development of policy solutions to delivering world-class healthcare in the bush. However, no reporting or evaluation has been carried out regarding the success of rural health policies in rural and regional areas in line with the framework.

The Greens will:

- commission a review of the existing framework, and develop an updated framework to include: access; service models and models of care; health workforce; collaborative partnerships and planning at the local level; and strong leadership, governance, transparency and performance;
- invest in the development of national minimum standards for service access in rural and regional areas.

## **TWO: SUPPORT THE NATIONAL RURAL GENERALIST PATHWAY AND INVESTIGATE THE EXPANSION OF OTHER PROFESSIONAL PATHWAYS**

Delivering healthcare in rural communities is a unique and rewarding challenge for medical professionals. The Australian Greens supported the establishment of the National Rural Generalist Pathway (NRGP) as a requirement to develop the appropriately trained workforce for rural Australia.

The Greens will continue to support the NRGPs and advocate for appropriate and sufficient funding for it to deliver on its potential to train and support medical professionals suitable for our rural communities.

The Greens also support the investigation of multi-professional rural generalist pathways as a means to address the maldistribution of the health workforce more generally.

## **THREE: PROVIDE ONGOING FUNDING FOR THE NATIONAL RURAL HEALTH COMMISSIONER**

The Greens support the ongoing funding of the National Rural Health Commissioner (\$1.4 million per annum) to ensure the best oversight of this work, and will continue to work with the Rural Doctors Association of Australia and others, to monitor progress and ensure the best resourcing of the NRGPs.

## **FOUR: DEVELOP A RURAL HEALTH WORKFORCE INNOVATION FUND**

The challenges of how to best resource rural health require extensive and ongoing work. The Australian Greens will invest \$10 million per year over the forward estimates in a rural health workforce innovation fund to allow community organisations to use this funding to develop solutions which are appropriate to the needs of their communities.

## **FIVE: INVESTIGATE INCREASING THE RURAL AND REMOTE BULK-BILLING INCENTIVE PAYMENT**

Cost is a significant barrier to access to health care in rural and remote communities.

The years of the MBS indexation freeze has taken a particular toll on practices in rural communities, many of which have been faced with the difficult choice of either charging patients out of pocket, or closing their doors entirely.

The Greens will immediately remove the MBS indexation freeze to take the pressure off, and we will immediately review the rural and remote bulk-billing incentive with a view to increasing that payment to improve access to healthcare in the bush.

## **SIX: INVEST \$180 MILLION IN INFRASTRUCTURE AND INCREASED MBS EXPENDITURE OVER THE NEXT THREE YEARS**

Access is the key challenge in health care in regional and rural Australia. As technology improves, we should be investing in ensuring that health services are available wherever you are. However, at present only limited services are available via telehealth on the MBS. The Australian Greens would change this by:

- Providing \$45 million in year one of grant funding for very remote, remote and outer regional communities to build their infrastructure capabilities to allow them to better use telehealth technologies;

- Provide \$45 million in year two, and \$90 million in year three of additional funding to allow Australians in very remote, remote and outer regional areas to access GP and allied health services via telehealth consultations;
- Provide \$90 million ongoing to allow Australians in very remote, remote and outer regional areas to access GP and allied health services via telehealth consultations.



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