



North Eastern Wheatbelt Regional Organisation of Councils  
Dowerin | Koorda | Mt Marshall | Mukinbudin | Nungarin | Trayning | Wyalkatchem

## NEWROC Pre-Budget Submission

This submission is made in response to an invitation from The Hon Stephen Jones MP Assistant Treasurer and Minister for Financial Services, inviting individuals, businesses, and community groups to submit their ideas and priorities for the 2025–26 Budget.

### About NEWROC

The North Eastern Wheatbelt Region of Councils (NEWROC) was established in 1994 and is led by Councillors from the Shires of Koorda, Mt Marshall, Mukinbudin, Nungarin, Trayning, Wyalkatchem and Dowerin in the Wheatbelt of Western Australia.

NEWROC is a united voice advocating, promoting and developing their communities. The NEWROC is committed to retaining and growing its population through successful and collaborative partnerships.

#### **1. Recommendation: Continue the Local Roads and Community Infrastructure program to 2030 and beyond.**

LRCI has proved an outstanding program which has been overwhelmingly successful and universally welcomed across Local Government bodies. It has delivered \$3.25bn over four phases. Supporting regional (and urban) councils in this way has ensured an equitable delivery of national funding to back those on the ground, and has underlined Infrastructure Minister Catherine King's narrative regarding better services for people in regional Australia. The fair distribution of LRCI has put aside the typical, and often inequitable, competitive element of program delivery, supporting those smaller rural and remote LGAs which are often disadvantaged compared with their larger, bigger budget counterparts.

A long-term delivery commitment will ensure robust future scheduling and project budgeting. LRCI has benefited NEWROC communities including the Shire of Koorda with the development of subsequent stages of their Recreation Precinct, as well as streetscaping and extensions to the Dowerin Short Stay Caravan Bay in the Shire of Dowerin – a community which hosts one of the largest agricultural field days in the southern hemisphere. Without the LRCI funding, these local governments may not have been able to obtain adequate funding to deliver these projects which has contributed to the economic growth of the district.

**2. Recommendation: Expansion of funding available specifically to Western Australian local governments to promote economic diversification following the transition away from live sheep export by sea.**

The producers in the NEWROC areas have relied on the live sheep export by sea policy to assist them to access alternative markets (particularly as they are in a Mediterranean climate), diversify their production base and revenue as well as contribute to the growth of their local economy through employment and support of businesses within the supply chain.

With the Federal Government’s 2024 announcement of phasing out this market, local governments in the North Eastern Wheatbelt are seeing agricultural businesses moving away from livestock and towards cropping thus resulting in greater grain movements on local roads; loss of employment in the towns e.g. shearers, wool agents, transport providers and subsequently impacting on key services; and the depletion of the sheep flock resulting in local abattoirs closing e.g. Minerva in Tammin closed in January 2025.

NEWROC requests the Federal Government make funding available for LGAs in rural WA, to activate local projects for economic diversification, such as those identified in the NEWROC Economic Development Strategy. There is a significant risk that these communities will continue to see businesses close, and not replaced, putting the sustainability of essential services at risk. The NEWROC Live Sheep by Sea Economic Impact report by Econisis using unit price/value and economic multiplier approaches indicated the potential impact on the regional NEWROC economy at \$128m in economic output and conservatively, \$35m in local household expenditure – just for six local government areas.

NEWROC understands that the Federal Government is providing remuneration for producers and businesses in the supply chain but strongly believe the Federal Government needs to extend this to local governments to ensure the viability of the communities. This investment would support local governments to develop sustainable economic opportunities and build resilience to future economic shifts.

**3. Recommendation: Increase the Financial Assistance Grants to RM5 and RM6 Local Governments for the provision of GPs.**

The Local Governments in the NEWROC are classified accordingly under the Modified Monash Model:

<b>Local Government</b>	<b>Modified Monash Model</b>
Shire of Dowerin	5
Shire of Koorda	6
Shire of Mukinbudin	6
Shire of Mt Marshall	6

Shire of Nungarin	6
Shire of Trayning	6
Shire of Wyalkatchem	5

There are minimum floor costs that exist to maintain basic medical services in any location. These include GPs, nursing and administration staff, premises, equipment and ongoing overheads. In remote communities, Medicare billing alone cannot cover these floor costs for a variety of reasons. There are a range of Commonwealth Government policies, programs and incentives for GPs, including financial incentives under the Practice Incentive Program and the Workforce Incentive Scheme for GPs; and there are Western Australian incentives such as the Country Health Initiative - but these are not specific to RM5, 6 or 7 communities. These incentives generally apply across all practices or all regions (including those nearest to the metropolitan areas).

The NEWROC seeks Federal funding to RM5 and above local governments to attract and retain GPs in their rural and remote communities, as current Federal and State government policy settings are inadequate.

The rates income between the NEWROC local governments ranges from \$618K to \$1.6m. The contribution to GP attraction and retention can be up to 8.3% of a local government's rates income.

The six local governments collectively contribute over \$370,000 cash annually to attract and retain resident GP services (some only providing up to 2 days in the community), plus housing, vehicles, and surgeries. These financial contributions are sourced through rates and are unsustainable. They are essential for community health but place a significant financial strain on local government resources, diverting funds from other vital services that are well within the remit of local government.

The financial incentives to attract a GP are currently influenced by the local government tender process where providers have the ability to set and negotiate the market rate. This is unsustainable. The local governments in the NEWROC are also set to see their annual cash contributions rise, as contracts near end of life and negotiations occur – with some local governments in RM5,6 and 7 communities of WA paying more than \$300K cash annually.

The Federal Government should be aware of the market rates GPs are now charging to be attracted to an outer regional and remote community such as those in the NEWROC. The expenditure by the NEWROC local governments is crucial for maintaining the health and well-being of rural populations, who otherwise face significant barriers to accessing health care.

Local governments are required to step into the space of primary health care because the per capita expenditure by the Federal and State Government on health is lower in the regions, the viability of practices is challenged due to remote geography, increased business costs, less patients and the inability to charge 'gap' fees due to local demographics (less number of patients under the age of 16yrs and concession card holders).

The current Medical Facilities Cost Adjustor within the Financial Assistance Grants paid to local governments is insufficient. Higher income incentives are currently required by local governments and practice operators to attract GPs to remote areas, and existing programs do not meet these

needs. The NEWROC is also raising awareness that telehealth is not the answer to shortages of GPs in remote communities.

They are seeking sustainability payments from the Federal Government to reduce ratepayer funding towards primary health care. Currently the NEWROC local governments contribute the following to the attraction and retention of GPs in their RM5 and RM6 communities:

Local Government Grouping	Number of GPs	Annual cash	Additional contributions
Shire of Trayning, Shire of Mukinbudin, Shire of Nungarin, Shire of Mt Marshall	1	\$120K (split across the four Shires)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Vehicle</li> <li>✓ Residence</li> <li>✓ Surgery (provided at hospital)</li> </ul>
Shire of Koorda, Shire of Wyalkatchem	1	\$100K per Shire (receive 2-3 days each)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Vehicle</li> <li>✓ Residence</li> </ul>
		Total \$200K	
Shire of Dowerin (contributes to Shire of Goomalling practice)	1	\$50,000	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Vehicle</li> <li>✓ Residence</li> <li>✓ Surgery</li> <li>✓ Utilities</li> </ul>

**4. Recommendation: Expansion and continuation of Regional Precincts and Partnerships Program to 2030 and beyond.**

The implementation of the Federal Government’s Regional Precincts and Partnerships Program in 2023 demonstrates an understanding of the importance of investing in regional placemaking. As each regional community has its own individual needs, it is vital that the projects delivered in each community are tailored to these needs.

NEWROC understands that the Federal Government has allocated \$400 million to the rPPP over three years, with \$100 million available for 2023-24, and \$150 million for each of 2024-25 and 2025-26. This is welcomed, although NEWROC believes this unique funding must continue further in order for regional communities to reap the benefits of this collaborative funding stream.

NEWROC is of the belief that Stream One of the rPPP is of particular importance to the regional local governments it represents as the costs associated with master planning, consultation, design, business cases and partnership establishment can at times cause financial strain to local governments with smaller rate paying populations. The rPPP funding means that, if awarded funding, these local governments can invest the appropriate time and money into the planning of future precinct projects allowing them to be more financially sustainable and ensure maximum benefit to the community.

**5. Recommendation: Expansion of telecommunication funding provisions to see the Federal Government partner with State Government and Telstra to fund Automatic Transfer Units (ATU) in the regions.**

Following an extreme weather event in regional WA in January 2024, that saw prolonged power outage peaking at over 34,000 businesses and households, it became evident that further financial investment is needed to ensure regional emergency preparedness. A report published by Econis exploring the impacts of the outages to the NEWROC economy found that business and industry were severely impacted, with some businesses recording economic and financial losses in excess of \$100,000.

While Extended Power Outage compensation of \$240 per household was offered by the WA Government for residents, no compensation has thus far been offered to businesses that experienced significant loss. Power was finally restored in the wider region to all households 9 days after the storm event.

NEWROC believes the Federal Government needs to expand telecommunication funding provisions to fund Automatic Transfer Units (ATUs) throughout regional WA, in partnership with the State Government and Telstra as a way of preventing future prolonged outages such as that experienced in January 2024. The co-investment is required as Telstra is unwilling to undertake it as part of their core business.

WA Regional Development Minister Don Punch announced a \$2.9 million commitment comprised of \$1.9 million of State funding and a \$1 million contribution from Telstra to make telecommunications infrastructure more resilient during extreme weather events and power outages across the Wheatbelt and Goldfields regions of Western Australia, in November 2024.

NEWROC would like to see the Telstra Automatic Transfer Unit Pilot Deployment Program expanded and continued, as a partnership between the Federal Government, State Government and Telstra to secure critical mobile coverage for emergency services and communities during extended power outages.

With regional businesses relying on reliable telecommunication infrastructure in order to provide services to their communities, ATUs would allow them to continue to trade through unprecedented outages. Joint funding of ATUs, led by the Federal Government would ensure that communities can access reliable phone and internet services, which are crucial for both everyday communication and emergency situations. Many NEWROC local governments are situated in telecommunication 'black spots' which already create challenges economic sustainability and advancement, putting them on the backfoot to their metropolitan counterparts. A national program funding ATUs would help bridge the digital divide, ensuring that all Australians,

regardless of where they live, have equal access to the opportunities that modern telecommunications provide.