

## YARRA RANGES HEALTH SERVICE LOCATION - COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENT

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Ward(s) affected: Billanook; Melba; Ryrie;

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*The author(s) of this report and the Responsible Officer consider that the report complies with the overarching governance principles and supporting principles set out in the Local Government Act 2020.*

### CONFIDENTIALITY

This item is to be considered at a Council meeting that is open to the public.

### SUMMARY

The Australian Government recently announced an additional 50 Urgent Care Clinics – including twelve in Victoria, with one to be located in Lilydale. These are intended to be opened in 2025-2026 and have been funded in the Federal Budget 2025-2026. At this stage, it is unclear how far the federal Opposition would support this program if they were to form Government after the likely May 2025 election.

As this is at the announcement stage, there is potentially an opportunity for Council to contribute to the decision-making process and ensure there is due consideration to the best location to improve healthcare access across Yarra Ranges.

This paper compares community health outcomes of an Urgent Care Clinic location in Lilydale and Healesville. It notes that while both locations have positive impacts on health outcomes, Healesville is the recommended location to provide the most improvement to equity of healthcare access.

### RECOMMENDATION

***That Council advocate for bipartisan support for the recently announced Urgent Health Care Clinic to be located in Healesville.***

## RELATED COUNCIL DECISIONS

Council endorsed Health & Wellbeing Plan 2021-2025 in October 2021 (Item 7.5, 12/10/21).

Council endorsed Appointment of Health & Wellbeing Committee 2022-2026 in January 2023 (Item 10.2, 31/01/23).

## DISCUSSION

### *Purpose*

The Australian Government recently announced an additional 50 Urgent Care Clinics, including twelve in Victoria, with one to be located in Lilydale. These are intended to be opened in 2025-2026 and have been funded in the Federal Budget 2025-2026<sup>1</sup>. This commitment currently has bipartisan support.

As this is at the announcement stage, there may be an opportunity for Council to enquire into the decision-making process and ensure due consideration is given to the best location to improve equity across Yarra Ranges. The process has currently allocated a clinic to Lilydale.

### *Background*

In the Yarra Ranges local government area, key barriers to a healthy community include lack of access to GPs and other primary health services, whereby 'access' encompasses factors of GP availability, long wait times, high costs and transport barriers.

An Urgent Care Clinic is designed to address the gap between hospital and community-based healthcare, with the goal of reducing avoidable emergency department usage and ambulance use. Urgent Care Clinics are especially effective for reducing hospital treatment of chronic and preventable illnesses. Across Yarra Ranges, the level of 'potentially avoidable deaths' has risen, especially amongst males. These are deaths amongst people aged under 75 from conditions which could be prevented through individualised care, or which could have been treated through primary care and hospital care<sup>2</sup>. This location choice could save lives.

GP access is a critical pathway to healthcare, is the first step in referring patients to a specialist and can provide subsidised care plans for chronic conditions (e.g., mental health plans). As of 19 March 2025, Lilydale and the rest of the Urban Area are classified as having an adequate number of GPs for their population<sup>3</sup>. In comparison, Healesville-Yarra Glen is a Distribution Priority Area for GPs (as is the Yarra Valley), indicating a major shortage of GPs. These are more than just statistics. In 2023, 19% of adults surveyed in Yarra Ranges had been unable to see

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.health.gov.au/ministers/the-hon-mark-butler-mp/media/strengthening-medicare-50-more-medicare-urgent-care-clinics>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.yarraranges.vic.gov.au/Community/Health-and-Wellbeing/Human-Services-Needs-Analysis>

<sup>3</sup> [Health Workforce Locator | Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care](#)

a GP when needed over the past twelve months and nearly one-third felt that they waited an unacceptably long time to see a GP.

**Care affordability** is a significant barrier to care, with 26% of adults surveyed unable to see a GP due to cost. The average out-of-pocket cost to see a GP in Yarra Ranges has risen by 23%, from \$35.32 in December 2019 to \$43.28 in June 2024. The level of bulk-billed services has dropped from 83.6% to 75%. Access to government-funded healthcare is also a priority issue due to the high proportion of very low-income households in Healesville. Nearly 30% of households in Healesville and surrounds are in the bottom quarter of household income ranges (less than \$46,000 per year)<sup>4</sup>.

Compared to the Urban Area of Yarra Ranges, the Healesville-Yarra Glen area has **greater health vulnerability**. It has the highest proportion of residents aged 65+, and this population is forecast to grow substantially; and it has the highest level of long-term health conditions (37%)<sup>5</sup>. Healesville-Yarra Glen also has a significant population of Indigenous residents, who have much higher risk of having chronic health conditions and can be averse to using hospital care.

The Yarra Ranges Statistical Area (SA3) has a high level of potentially preventable hospital admissions (PPH) for:

- Bronchiectasis (57% higher than national average admission rate)
- Iron deficiency anemia (37% above national average)
- Diabetes complications (8% above national average)<sup>6</sup>

Upper Goulburn Valley, which includes the easternmost Upper Yarra area of the Yarra Ranges, has an extremely high level of PPH. It is 20% above average for PPH for chronic conditions, with key health issues including:

- Diabetes complications (55% above the national average)
- Iron deficiency anemia (48% above national average)
- Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (23% above national average)
- Angina (10% above average)
- Congestive cardiac failure (7% above national average)

While Lilydale is an area where an urgent care centre would be of benefit, it is clear there is higher vulnerability and lower health service access for residents in the outer areas of the Yarra Ranges.

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<sup>4</sup> .idCommunity, 'Healesville and surrounds: Household income quartiles' <https://profile.id.com.au/yarra-ranges/household-income-quartiles?WebID=130&BMID=20>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.yarraranges.vic.gov.au/Community/Health-and-Wellbeing/Human-Services-Needs-Analysis>

<sup>6</sup> AIHW (2024). Potentially preventable hospitalisations in Australia by small geographic areas, 2020–21 to 2021–22. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/primary-health-care/potentially-preventable-hospitalisations-2020-22/data>

### ***Options considered***

The proposed location of Lilydale was compared to an outer-urban potential location of Healesville, based on the community health needs assessment<sup>5</sup> and regional health profile summary<sup>6</sup>. A comparative summary is presented in the following table.

<b>Factor</b>	<b>Healesville</b>	<b>Lilydale</b>
<b>Population Health Needs</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>❖ Smaller population (7,000) but proximal to serves broader catchment area of rural and semi-rural communities who also have fewer healthcare options.</li><li>❖ Higher chronic healthcare needs.</li><li>❖ High levels of hospital use for potentially preventable conditions in the Upper Yarra area, in the Outer East of Yarra Ranges</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>❖ Larger population (15,000)</li><li>❖ More urbanized population with existing geographical access and availability to GP and hospital services.</li></ul>
<b>Health Disparities &amp; Vulnerable Populations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>❖ Vulnerable populations (elderly, low-income, chronic conditions, Indigenous) more reliant on limited local services.</li><li>❖ Larger rural catchment with fewer healthcare options</li><li>❖ Urgent care clinic would significantly improve health equity.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>❖ Vulnerable populations exist (elderly, low-income, etc.)</li><li>❖ Urgent care clinic would help alleviate pressure on emergency services and offer timely care.</li></ul>
<b>Healthcare Accessibility</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>❖ Limited healthcare providers in Healesville and surrounding areas.</li><li>❖ Long travel and transport times for resident and emergency medical transport services.</li><li>❖ Very low public transport availability, particularly outside business hours.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>❖ Better access to healthcare resources, including GPs, allied health, and hospitals.</li><li>❖ Better public transport and road infrastructure.</li></ul>
<b>Public Health Infrastructure &amp; Resources</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>❖ Limited public health infrastructure, but partnership with Yarra Ranges Council and Eastern Health is an option to leveraging existing Healesville Hospital infrastructure.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>❖ Access to Maroondah Hospital, proximal to allied health services</li><li>❖ An urgent care clinic would ease hospital pressure.</li></ul>
<b>Public Health Impact</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>❖ High impact in improving access to healthcare for underserved rural populations.</li><li>❖ Addresses significant health equity issues in a geographically isolated area.</li><li>❖ Reduced ambulance pressure</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>❖ Moderate impact in providing timely care, reducing emergency department pressure.</li></ul>

### ***Recommended option and justification***

Healesville is best suited for an urgent care clinic from a public health equity perspective due to its limited healthcare providers, proximal location to the Upper Yarra, and the significant healthcare needs of surrounding rural areas. While Lilydale offers a larger population base, it is already comparatively well serviced. An urgent care clinic in Lilydale would be valuable but would have a lesser impact on health disparities compared to a Healesville location. A Healesville urgent care clinic could address major health equity gaps for vulnerable populations, is more likely to overcome significant transport barriers and could be a less expensive option if existing infrastructure could be leveraged or expanded.

### **FINANCIAL ANALYSIS**

There are no immediate financial impacts to Council. There may be future opportunity to activate Council Assets to support this initiative.

### **APPLICABLE PLANS AND POLICIES**

This report contributes to the following strategic objective in the Council Plan:

- Connected and Healthy Communities: Communities are safe, resilient, healthy, inclusive and socially well connected. Quality services are accessible to everyone.
  - Strategic Initiative: Improve mental health outcomes for the community, strengthen social connections, and advocate for equitable and accessible mental health services across the municipality.
- Council endorsed Health & Wellbeing Plan 2021-2025 in October 2021 (Item 7.5, 12/10/21).

### **RELEVANT LAW**

Not applicable.

### **SUSTAINABILITY IMPLICATIONS**

The ageing population projections show that the ageing population in regional areas is forecast to proportionally increase, further galvanising the position that the regional service needs will grow and will remain difficult to access if based in Lilydale.

### ***Economic Implications***

The opportunity for infrastructure alignment and costs savings could be a strong incentive for all levels of government to work in partnership to achieve community health outcomes.

### ***Social Implications***

The social determinants of health can influence health equity in both positive and negative ways. These include income, housing, education, employment, food security, social inclusion, early childhood development, access to health services, life conditions and structural conflict. These need to be considered in the location of health services, with consideration for the different regions of the Yarra Ranges.

### ***Environmental Implications***

There are few environmental implications of this specific paper. Climate change presents a range of significant risks for Council, and all decisions must have regard to the Climate Change Act 2017 and should have close alignment with the Liveable Climate Plan 2020-2030.

## **COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**

Inclusion of a question focussed on Health and Wellbeing was included as part of the Council Plan Summits and Deliberative Panel to understand community perspective of health needs across all areas of Yarra Ranges Council in preparation for the 2025-2029 Council Plan. Council has an established Health and Wellbeing Advisory Committee that provides a community voice and advisory function to Council.

The Services for Healesville Health Action Group (SHHAG) has been advocating for health service provision in the Healesville area for over 10 years, and this paper has considered these perspectives.

The Health Services Needs analysis has collected comprehensive information on health service needs and access across the municipality, including service provision, waitlists and unmet needs.

The Upper Yarra Regional Context Analysis identified Lack of Health Services as impacting 11% of respondents. Health Services challenges was impacted by Transport Challenges which was raised by 39% of those interviewed – this included people who were unable to access health services as they had to travel “down the line” to Lilydale, Ringwood and beyond.

## **COLLABORATION, INNOVATION AND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT**

Yarra Ranges Council has a strong relationship with Eastern Health and has been collectively advocating for more health services for Outer East Melbourne. The discussions about ideal location are positive and ongoing, with a shared goal of optimal health service access for our community.

Council’s Health Planner and Social Planner attend the Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV) and North-Eastern Public Health Units community of practice meetings quarterly.

## **RISK ASSESSMENT**

Strategic reputation and relationship management:

- We need to advocate for our community in a way that balances needs of the whole community to ensure fair and equitable health service access.
- We need to advocate in alignment with key partners, including Eastern Health, to amplify our community voice in a helpful and impactful way.
- We need to ensure our messaging reflects the gratitude for additional services to our region and work in partnership with state and federal representatives to ensure best community benefit from those services.

## **CONFLICTS OF INTEREST**

No officers and/or delegates acting on behalf of the Council through the Instrument of Delegation and involved in the preparation and/or authorisation of this report have any general or material conflict of interest as defined within the *Local Government Act 2020*.

## **ATTACHMENTS TO THE REPORT**

Nil