

# Transport and travel affecting access to healthcare services for the North Coast communities

## Better Health community survey 2024

### Purpose

In 2024 Healthy North Coast conducted the Better Health community survey as part of the health needs assessment 2025-2028. This document presents an analysis of responses to the questionnaire by residents in the North Coast region relating to ‘transport’ or ‘travel’.

### Response rate

Through multiple choice options, respondents had the opportunity to identify ‘*limited transport*’ as a challenge to accessing any healthcare services. In addition, some respondents referenced ‘transport’ or ‘travel’ in the free text question ‘*Is there anything else you would like to tell us in relation to the health in your community?*’.

Of the total of 3,285 respondents residing on the North Coast region, 13% (n=440) made reference to ‘transport’ or ‘travel’. Of these, 7 in 10 (n=317) indicated ‘*limited transport*’ as a barrier to access healthcare services. Just over 2 in 10 (n=93) referenced ‘transport’ or ‘travel’ in the free text question about health in their community. Nearly 1 in 10 (n=30) used both the multiple choice and the free text question to report on ‘transport’ or ‘travel’.

**Table 1.** Responses from each local government area (LGA) outlining ‘transport’ or ‘travel’ was referenced. A total of 123 respondents used the free text question to refer to ‘transport’ or ‘travel’ in relation to health in their communities.

LGA	Total respondents from the North Coast region	Transport/travel indicated <b>only</b> as a challenge to accessing healthcare services	Transport/travel indicated <b>only</b> as a comment	Transport/travel indicated <b>both</b> as a challenge and comment	Total number indicating transport/travel	Percentage indicating transport/travel
Kyogle	91	13	7	1	21	23%
Richmond Valley	122	21	4	3	28	23%
Clarence Valley	372	42	19	5	66	18%
Kempsey	199	24	5	5	34	17%
Lismore	303	38	8	3	49	16%
Nambucca Valley	176	18	9	1	28	16%
Byron	153	15	4	2	21	14%
Ballina	273	25	5	2	32	12%
Bellingen	149	11	5	1	17	11%
Port Macquarie-Hastings	544	37	16	3	56	10%
Coffs Harbour	470	40	5	3	48	10%
Tweed	433	33	6	1	40	9%
<b>North Coast</b>	<b>3,285</b>	<b>317</b>	<b>93</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>440</b>	<b>13%</b>

## Qualitative analysis

Inductive thematic analysis of the survey data was undertaken in the following five phases: review of survey data, initial coding framework creation, coding, coding framework modification, and final coding of the survey data.

Of the 123 comments that referenced either ‘transport’ or ‘travel’, three main themes emerged, each one with a number of sub-themes:

Theme	Sub-theme
Cost	Delay treatment due to cost
Distance	Lack of local services
	Delay treatment due to distance
Lack of transport options	Missed appointment due to a lack of community transport
	Ineligible for community transport
	Associated inequities

### Cost

Respondents indicated how *“the expenses/difficulties/inconvenience in having to travel significant distances for necessary healthcare is upsetting and unfair”* (Clarence Valley respondent), highlighting the inequities between rural and metropolitan access to healthcare.

Some respondents noted there is limited financial support available to support people to access necessary healthcare, and people may forgo treatment due to cost – *“Many GP clinics have closed their books to new clients – affecting whole towns such as Casino, Evans Head. Families then have the cost of travel as well if they are able to find a doctor elsewhere”* (Lismore respondent).

As people seek access to specialist appointments, there are added costs associated with travel, creating further expenses for families – *“if families need to drive to Sydney these are the minimum expenses petrol, cost of accommodation last minute...very very expensive”* (Port Macquarie respondent).

### Distance

Many respondents commented on the lack of local services driving people to travel to access primary healthcare – *“I hear of people travelling out of town to access services due to books being closed or long wait times”* (Port Macquarie respondent). Respondents noted that in some cases they are not able to access the required specialists to get a specialist diagnosis due to travel required and in some cases – *“no paediatricians and psychiatrists who are taking on new patients, requiring travel to Gold Coast and Brisbane”* (Byron respondent).

Respondents commented that required travel (and cost) deters people from seeking specialist treatment – *“...if you need a specialist you have to take off work and travel interstate a lot of the time and both the travel, time off work and cost of the appointment*

*deters me going to see a specialist*" (Clarence Valley respondent). Respondents also noted that travel is more difficult and *"is a huge burden"* when sick (Clarence Valley respondent).

Respondents commented on the socio-demographic issues that can affect access to services – *"diverse community, mainly low socio-economic, spread over large geographic area with transport challenges"* (Lismore respondent) and the geography of the region impacting access to primary and specialist health services – *"...by the crow flies – getting there looks not too bad but that doesn't take into account there are mountain ranges & a caldera this means the arterial roads are not direct, travel times are long & transport is limited to cars"* (Ballina respondent).

### Lack of transport options

Respondents commented that *"access to health services is difficult due to a lack of public transport and the cost and rarity of taxi / Uber choices"* (Byron respondent). Even where services might be present, *"the lack of transport to them is a problem..."* (Kyogle respondent).

Some respondents highlighted inequities within different population groups (for example, for Aboriginal peoples or older people), and how people in these groups may be even more limited in transport access – *"...meanwhile the Indigenous community has far less access to transport to attend distant health services than bloody politicians imagine. They assume everyone has a car or access to Uber or taxis and the money to pay for them"* (Richmond Valley respondent).

As people age, they can become more reliant on public transport to access medical services as they may no longer be able to drive – *"...there are insufficient medical resources available for a population that is ageing and unable to travel the distances required to get to specialists and other health resources"* (Bellingen respondent). Some older adults living in residential aged care facilities are not able to access appointments due to a lack of transport options as *"community transport does not allow for residents of aged care facilities and facilities do not have the resources to cover the cost and time associated with transporting a resident to an appointment"* (Port Macquarie respondent).

### Conclusion

Residents of the North Coast region expressed their concerns that transport and travel can represent a barrier to accessing healthcare services. There is an opportunity to explore ways to provide assistance with transport and / or explore alternate models of care that may not require transportation to the point of care.