

26 March 2025

The Hon Simeon Brown  
Minister of Health  
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CC:

Rt Hon Christopher Luxon, Prime Minister  
Rt Hon Chris Hipkins, Leader of the Opposition  
Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall, Spokesperson for Health

Dear Minister

I am writing on behalf of community-led advocacy group, Health Action Wānaka, to share with you our community health needs report, **'Perception versus reality: the true state of healthcare in the Upper Clutha'**. We are sending you the report before its public release on 2 April, to give you an opportunity to read it in advance of media commentary on its contents, and in the interests of working constructively with you to achieve the best possible outcome for our community.

The report is the result of consultation with more than 300 members of the Upper Clutha community and health stakeholders, and records the entrenched inequity faced by our rural community when seeking to access health services.

### **Three 'quick wins'**

While we recognise the health system faces many problems that will take some time to fix, we would like to seek your commitment to achieving three 'quick wins' which we believe would make an immense difference to our community while work continues on solving the system's more intractable problems. We are seeking your commitment to do the following:

- 1. Introduce psychiatric consultations via telehealth in our region within twelve months.**
- 2. Deliver a publicly funded blood collection service in Wānaka within two years.**
- 3. Increase local access to publicly funded radiology services via the government's \$30m funding boost announced last June.**

### **Psychiatric consultations via telehealth**

Our research suggests that the psychiatric and other specialist workforce in our region's hospital and specialist services are doing their best, but are stretched to the point where they can only focus on people being supported by their services. This means they lack the capacity to provide consultation to NGO and community frontline mental health and addiction services.

The challenges being experienced by hospital and specialist services, and the increasing psychological distress of our children and young people, mean NGO and community frontline mental health and addiction services are supporting people with increasingly complex needs.

Youth NGO and community frontline mental health and addiction services are capable, skilful, and qualified but are stretching their services to provide this support, with such issues significantly exacerbated in isolated and rural communities such as ours. Access to consultant psychiatry and other specialist mental health and addiction expertise would increase youth NGO and community frontline mental health and addiction services' capacity to provide this support, leading to improved outcomes for children, young people and whānau, without placing extra demand on hospital and specialist services.

### **Delivery of publicly funded blood collection service**

Currently, people living in the Upper Clutha (pop. 17,000) pay for blood collection, a service that is publicly funded (free) in most places in New Zealand, including towns such as Balclutha (pop. 4340), Clyde (pop. 1260) and Gore (pop. 8240).

The 'WellSouth Rural Services Review: Southern Region' (2024) reported that there had been 11,140 blood tests conducted by Wānaka Medical Centre in the year to 31 May 2024 ... signalling demand for a standalone blood service in the area.' (Wanaka Medical Centre, June 2024), and we know of locals with chronic conditions who've paid up to \$800 in two years for blood collection, tests that would be free if they lived elsewhere.

We have met with Awanui Labs (the provider contracted to deliver publicly funded blood collection services) and Health New Zealand, and we understand that the location of Awanui-run blood collection centres is determined by Health New Zealand, and is currently contracted until 2028. As such, any new Awanui-run blood collection services would require new funding from Health New Zealand. While a new Awanui contract is negotiated, we would like our local medical centres to be funded for blood collection.

### **Access to radiology funding**

The roll-out of new radiology funding was announced by Minister Reti on 6 June 2024. In that [announcement](#), Mr Reti said a \$30 million funding boost would give people free access to radiology services when referred directly by their general practitioner. While funding has been rolled out to Wellington and the Hutt Valley, we are not aware of any other districts benefitting from this funding.

In a rural area like the Upper Clutha, it would make a profound difference if people could be referred to radiology services directly by their GP, given the often significant distances people have to travel to get a referral for diagnostic imaging. For example, there are people who live in Wānaka travelling more than three hours each way for a ten-minute appointment with a specialist in Dunedin to get a referral for diagnostic imaging. People living in our community often have to take time off work and stay overnight in Dunedin or Invercargill to see a specialist for a referral.

### **Seeking a meeting please**

We would welcome the opportunity to meet with you in person to discuss the issues raised in our report, either in Wellington, or would be happy to host a meeting for you in Wānaka.

Thank you in advance for your consideration of our request and we look forward to your timely response.

Ngā mihi

**Monique Mayze**  
**Chair, Steering Committee**  
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