

Good Food Purchasing Australia

Briefing Paper

Health and Care Settings

April 2026



The Opportunity for Health – Using food procurement in health and care settings to improve health outcomes

This policy brief is based on evidence collated in the *Transforming the Public Plate – A Menu of Options for Public Food Procurement that Nourishes People, Place and Planet* report. Its purpose is to provide you with background information for supporting and advocating for a more sustainable approach to public food procurement.

Food is an important part of health and care settings

Current estimates by CSIRO have the hidden costs to health of our food systems in Australia at \$49 billion per year. Health and care settings in Australia serve millions of meals each year to patients, residents, staff and visitors. These meals influence recovery, nutrition, dignity of care and broader public health outcomes.



Across Australia, publicly funded health and care institutions purchase significant volumes of food each year, including:

Residential aged care: approximately **\$1.07 billion annually**

Public hospitals: approximately **\$345 million annually**

Long day care: approximately **\$332 million annually**

Meals on Wheels : approximately **\$65 million**

These purchasing decisions shape diets, food supply chains, and environmental outcomes. When health and care organisations prioritise healthy and sustainable food procurement, they can improve health outcomes while building resilience in our food systems. Hospitals and residential aged care providers are considered anchor institutions – stable organisations whose purchasing power can influence regional food systems and diversify markets for food producers and processors.

Why food procurement matters in health and care settings

Food served in hospitals and residential aged care facilities directly affects the health and wellbeing of patients and residents. For example:

- **Better health and recovery** – Nutritious meals support healing, recovery and wellbeing for patients and improve quality of life for people in hospital and living in

residential aged care.

- **Dignity and quality of care** – Food is central to daily life in residential aged care. High-quality meals contribute to comfort, enjoyment and dignity for residents.
- **Preventive health** – Increasing access to fresh, minimally processed foods in institutional meals can improve diet quality and reduce long-term health risks.
- **Climate and environmental health**– Food and catering account for an estimated 10% of health sector Scope 3 emissions, making food procurement a significant opportunity for climate action.
- **Stronger regional economies** – Local procurement can support farmers, producers and regional food businesses creating employment training opportunities.

The opportunity – what can health and care setting leaders do ?

Health and care organisation leaders can strengthen sustainable food procurement through practical actions. Consistent with the report findings and recommendations, they can advocate for and/or deliver demonstration projects that:

- **Embed sustainable food procurement targets in contracts and policies** – Include nutrition, plant forward meals, meeting cultural needs of patients, climate and regional sourcing goals in organisational strategies and contracts.
- **Get started by auditing food origins**
Track where food is sourced from to identify opportunities for local procurement.
- **Identify and support regional suppliers**
Create pathways for local farmers, small and medium businesses and Indigenous food producers to be suppliers.
- **Invest in workforce capability**
Provide and /or connect to training and leadership opportunities for chefs and food service staff, dietitians and procurement teams.
- **Participate in learning networks**
Engage with initiatives such as the *Global Green and Healthy Hospitals* network to share knowledge and scale solutions and/or register your interest to join the Good Food Purchasing Australia's Community of Practice activities.

Case Studies: Where Good Food Purchasing is already happening

Rockingham General Hospital - Cultural food as part of patient care

At Rockingham General Hospital in Western Australia, Aboriginal Health Liaison Officers worked with catering staff and their food supplier to introduce Bush Tucker meals into the hospital menu.

Patients can now choose culturally appropriate foods such as kangaroo, goat and wild boar.

The initiative emerged from discussions about improving care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander patients and required no additional funding – only collaboration between hospital staff and suppliers. This initiative demonstrates how procurement decisions can support culturally safe healthcare, improved patient experience and stronger cultural connection in care settings.



Dubbo Hospital- Local procurement strengthens supply resilience

Western NSW Local Health District has embedded sustainable food procurement within its *Environmental Sustainability Strategy*. At Dubbo Hospital, many ingredients are sourced from regional suppliers including local butchers and fruit and vegetable wholesalers. Local sourcing strengthens relationships with producers while improving supply reliability in regional and remote areas. It also supports local economies and helps hospitals maintain consistent food service during supply disruptions.



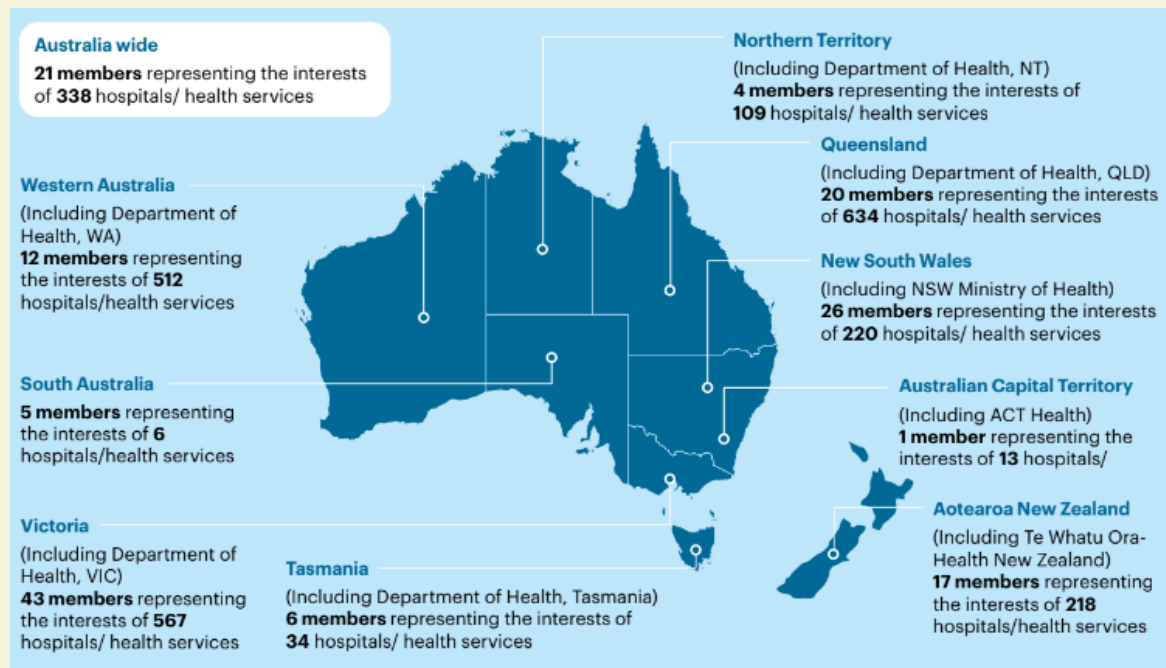
Sustainability in Hospitals - A growing movement in healthcare

Health services across Australia are increasingly working together to improve food systems through the *Global Green and Healthy Hospitals (GGHH)* network, coordinated by *Climate and Health Alliance*. The network has 167 members in the Pacific region representing over 2,815 hospitals and health services committed to improving environmental sustainability and public health. Food procurement is a key area of action.

Through the GGHH Food Community of Practice, hospitals and health services collaborate on:

- sustainable procurement models
- food waste reduction
- local food sourcing
- climate-friendly menu design

The community currently connects members enabling organisations to share practical solutions and accelerate progress.



In the kitchen - the leadership role of chefs and food service teams

Chefs and food service teams play a critical role in translating procurement policy into practice. Menu design and purchasing decisions made in hospital and aged care kitchens directly influence nutrition, food waste and supply-chain emissions. When supported with training and leadership opportunities, research shows chefs can drive positive change by:

- designing seasonal menus that use fresh ingredients
- reducing food waste through creative menu planning
- supporting local producers and suppliers
- improving the quality and appeal of institutional meals

Research suggests that sustainable menu design and improved kitchen practices can reduce emissions by up to 20–50% while also improving resource efficiency. Strong kitchen leadership, training and organisational support are key enablers for change.

Residential Aged Care - opportunities through new standards

In recent years food quality in residential aged care has received increasing national attention. New Aged Care Quality Standards, came into effect in November 2025, strengthening expectations around nutrition, meal quality and monitoring of food provision in aged care services. These reforms create an opportunity for providers to strengthen procurement practices by:

- prioritising fresh and nutritious foods
- improving menu planning and food service systems
- building stronger relationships with local food suppliers
- ensuring meals support residents' health, wellbeing and cultural needs and preferences

Food procurement therefore becomes an important lever for delivering the intent of the new standards

Food procurement in health and care settings is not only an operational decision — it is a strategic opportunity to improve population health and contribute to building more sustainable and resilient food systems.

Health and care settings are catalysts for healthier food systems

Hospitals and aged care providers are among the largest institutional purchasers of food in Australia. By aligning procurement with health, sustainability and regional development goals, health and care settings can help create:

- healthier meals for patients and residents
- reduce food waste
- stronger regional food economies
- lower-emission food systems
- more resilient supply chains

Have a question or would like to know more? Please get in touch

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