

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

15 December 2021

To the Secretariat of the Regional Banking Taskforce

I am writing from Regional Western Australia. As a rural resident of our small community located at Jerramungup in the Great Southern region, our community is experiencing the lose of our towns banking institution "Bankwest." We are a town population of approx. 370, and a Shire population of approx. 1500 – this also encompasses the seaside town of Bremer Bay.

We have had this banking service for many years in our town. I moved to the town in the year 2000, at which point there was a Regional Banking Manager, a Bank Manager and staff, the bank was operating five days per week, and served as an essential service for our farming community. Services included over the teller transactions and a dedicated Business Manager. As we move forward to 2022, our branch will be permanently closed as over the past few years the hours of operation have run from five days per week, to only a banking service (no Relationship Manager) to three days per week and now to sporadic opening hours that are often cancelled within a few days' notice due to staff unavailability from other branches, to a total closure.

This planned closure is extremely disappointing to our community, as not only is there a lack of employment opportunities within our town, but also the loss of services available to us. The letter sent by Bankwest informing clients of the decision stated that we can use the local Post Office for banking transactions, but this does not allow us the ability to open accounts and do various transaction and enquiries that can only be conducted at a proper banking branch. In addition, its closure, there will now be only the availability to withdraw cash funds from the Post Office, as there has been no ATM at the bank and upon its closure will not put one in either. Staffing was not previously an issue until the Bank changed their employment policy and would not employ casual tellers to fill in for sick days – instead, relying on staff from their other branches – over a minimum of 150km away, to drive to town to fill the vacant position. This has been the practice for quite some time, and women that had been previously employed at the bank and had offered their skills for casual employment were informed of this policy – this was obviously done in the attempt to limit available staff and therefore moderate hours to the point that there was no availability of staff which would in turn force the permanent closure of the branch.

Within our greater region, we have had two bank closure of NAB and ANZ at the nearby town of Gnowangerup (~90km to our west), within the last 5 years, so the opportunity to go to neighbouring towns to do banking has been limited due to their closures.

Our main regional Centre of Katanning which is approx. 160km to our towns Northwest, has had their operating hours cut back also. I was recently conducting business activities in this town and upon trying to go to the local Bankwest branch to conduct personal banking, this was not an operating day, and the branch was closed. Attempting to enter the ANZ branch on the same day I was also met with a closed door and was informed by a passing pedestrian that the branch closed at 12.30pm. How are we to conduct any form of personal and business banking if the major towns in our region are to be closed at hours that are not known to a passerby?

I see in business and stock market reports that these banks are all considered to be 'blue chip' investments and return healthy dividends to its shareholders – yet they have lost the focus of being open and operating to its clients.

Living in a small regional community definitely has its difficulties, and with the closure and reduced hours of every banking institution in my region of Western Australia, it is only becoming harder to conduct day to day activities with our finances. The local Australia Post does offer banking services to a few banks, but one cannot open accounts, and offer many other services that only a bank can. There is the obvious choice of calling or doing online chat for these banks, but I have tried unsuccessfully several times to get through to person via a phone, only to be informed of the long wait time due to covid restrictions. With the already marginal mobile phone coverages in regional areas, and the long wait time, it has taken me over two weeks to get through to a service agent as I only have limited time to make phone calls due to the nature of my self-employment.

These types of service reductions, either by hours per day or by shutting smaller regional town banks is limiting the ability to go about community group banking, personal banking and our business banking activities whereby we need to have access to a physical branch. If there are operating hours in these bigger regional centres, then they need to be open for more than the five days per week and look at opening on a Saturday to allow people from smaller areas the ability to access banking services.

The online revolution has improved a lot of areas of our banking and made our lives a lot easier, but my removing banks in small towns and also reducing hours, staff, and expertise in the bigger regional centres near those smaller closed branches, it is only making it harder for our residents in the Great Southern to conduct essential banking services. We do pay for these services through fees that go directly to the bank, so why can we not have the right to also access to help and expertise of the company that we are paying to help us with our money?

Yours sincerely

Wendy Brown