

Briefing Note 1/4/2026

Summary: Impacts of Fuel Disruption on Financial Counselling Services and Clients (WA)

Context

Financial counselling (FC) services were recognised as an essential service during COVID-19, with flexibility built into service delivery to ensure continuity of support for people experiencing vulnerability.

The current fuel disruption—characterised by high fuel prices, limited availability in some regions, and broader supply-chain impacts—presents a comparable systemic shock, particularly for regional and remote Western Australia. These pressures are compounding existing cost-of-living stresses and are already affecting both service delivery and client access.

Key Message

Financial counselling is critically undervalued as an early-intervention service. With a 15% increase in calls to the National Debt Helpline and growing presentation from working and mortgage-holding households, demand is rising rapidly at the same time access is becoming harder. Ensuring financial counselling is accessible early and treated as an essential service is key to preventing escalation into crisis, homelessness, and long-term economic harm. Financial counselling is also valuable in as a support for small business.

Impacts on of fuel disruption on Financial Counselling Services

1. Reduced capacity for face-to-face and outreach services

Many agencies are increasing work-from-home arrangements to manage rising fuel costs and availability issues. This has resulted in:

- Reduced face-to-face appointments
- Scaling back or reassessment of regional and remote outreach
- Fewer opportunities for in-person engagement with stakeholders and referral partners

While phone and online services were effective for some clients during COVID-19, they do not adequately meet the needs of all cohorts, particularly in regional and remote areas where:



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- Internet access is unreliable
- Digital literacy is limited
- Trust and rapport are best established face-to-face

2. Workforce impacts

- Staff commuting from regional areas are already experiencing fuel shortages and rationing, in some cases with only one supplier remaining.
- Rising fuel costs (estimated to account for 20–35% of transport operating costs) are placing direct financial strain on organisations.
- If fuel prices continue to rise or supply worsens, agencies may struggle to maintain staffing levels, outreach capacity, and service reach.

3. Increased organisational costs

Service providers and partner organisations are responding to fuel pressures by:

- Adding fuel surcharges
- Increasing base service prices

Many not-for-profit organisations are unable to absorb these increases, leading to service reductions rather than expansion, despite rising demand.

4. Loss of specialist support in the small business and primary production space

Rural West has lost all funding for small business financial counselling, including support for businesses associated with primary production. This loss coincides with escalating fuel disruption, meaning:

- Farmers are changing or abandoning cropping plans due to fuel shortages
- Some are unable to plant crops at all, removing income at harvest
- Ongoing overheads remain, creating compounding stress across current and future seasons

The loss of this specialist support significantly reduces early-intervention capacity for rural and farming communities at a critical time.

Impacts on Clients of Financial Counselling Services

1. Increased financial distress

Fuel is a non-discretionary expense for clients (work, education, medical appointments, food access). Sudden fuel price spikes are forcing already-vulnerable households to:



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- Reallocate money away from essentials such as food and medication
- Rely more heavily on high-cost, short-term debt (credit cards, BNPL, payday loans)

This accelerates budget depletion and deepens financial crisis presentations.

Importantly, the scale of financial stress is increasing. The National Debt Helpline is reporting a 15% increase in calls, including a growing number from:

- Dual-income households
- People experiencing mortgage stress

This reflects a widening cohort of people who previously managed but are now unable to absorb cumulative cost-of-living pressures.

2. Reduced access to services

Clients, particularly in regional and rural areas are increasingly:

- Unable to afford travel costs to attend appointments
- Facing fuel rationing or complete lack of supply
- Struggling to reach towns for multiple essential needs, not just financial counselling, but also:
 - Food
 - Medical care
 - Employment

Public transport alternatives are limited or non-existent in many areas.

3. Increased demand for emergency relief

Agencies are already seeing:

- Rising demand for fuel vouchers
- Increased requests for emergency relief
- Greater complexity in client presentations as fuel costs cascade into:
 - Food insecurity
 - Housing stress
 - Debt escalation

4. Heightened vulnerability in regional and remote communities

Regional and remote clients are disproportionately impacted due to:

- Isolation



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- Higher baseline transport costs
- Limited-service choice

While phone and online alternatives are helpful for some, they risk excluding the most vulnerable, particularly Aboriginal communities, older people, and those without reliable access to technology.

Key Risks if Fuel Disruption Persists

- Reduced access to essential financial counselling support in areas of highest need
- Delayed intervention leading to deeper financial crises and higher long-term costs
- Increased reliance on emergency relief and high-cost debt
- Compounding economic impacts on farming, small business, and regional economies

Strong Alignment with WACOSS Recommendations

Agency evidence strongly supports:

- Immediate funding for financial counselling and emergency relief
- Fuel subsidies or grants for essential community services
- Regional transport and access supports
- Clear government communication
- COVID-style government–sector coordination