

Global Events and Fuel Price Impacts on the Peer Support Group Sector

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Executive Summary and Context

Western Australia is home to over 800 peer support groups operating in communities across the state. These place-based, lived-experience-led initiatives provide safe and welcoming spaces where people can share stories, reduce isolation, and connect with others who genuinely understand their experiences. Together, they offer early connection, social support, and practical navigation through complex health, mental health, and social service systems, particularly for people who face barriers accessing formal services.

Beyond connection, peer support groups foster strong relationships, improve health and wellbeing outcomes, and deliver meaningful early intervention and prevention. They support Western Australians to live longer, healthier lives within their own homes and communities, often engaging people well before they reach thresholds for clinical or crisis services. In doing so, peer support groups form a critical but largely unfunded layer of preventative infrastructure, helping to reduce pressure on formal systems by addressing needs early and holistically.

Peer support groups also function as trusted community connectors and navigators, guiding individuals through uncertainty and linking them to appropriate supports when needed. Importantly, they are often the first place people turn during periods of disruption or heightened stress. When broader systems feel complex, inaccessible, or overwhelmed, lived-experience communities provide familiar, trusted, and non-judgemental support. During times of economic pressure, global instability, and social disruption, demand for peer support typically increases as people seek reassurance, belonging, and guidance before engaging with formal services.

While some peer support groups utilise online or hybrid approaches, the sector consistently reports that digital delivery is not a universal or cost-neutral substitute for in-person connection. For many groups, particularly those supporting families, older people, culturally and linguistically diverse communities, and cohorts where trust, safety or physical presence is essential, face-to-face peer support remains critical to accessibility and effectiveness.

This brief draws on findings from a sector needs survey of peer support groups operating across metropolitan, regional, remote, and online settings in Western Australia. The findings show that peer support groups are experiencing widespread and escalating pressure as a result of current global events and rising fuel and living costs, at the same time as community need is intensifying.

Key Headline Findings

- 71% of groups report that current global events are affecting their group or members.
- 67% of groups report that rising fuel costs are affecting their ability to operate.
- 13% of groups report being at high or immediate risk of reducing services or closing within the next 3–6 months.

Peer support groups function as essential preventative and early-intervention infrastructure, particularly for populations that experience inequity or exclusion within formal systems. Without targeted and timely investment, the findings point to a strong likelihood of service withdrawal, widening geographic and demographic inequity, increased facilitator burnout, and growing downstream demand on crisis and clinical services.

Impact of Current Global Events

A significant majority of groups (71%) report that current global events are affecting their group or its members. While impacts vary across cohorts and locations, common themes are emerging consistently across the sector.

Groups report:

- Increased member distress and anxiety
- Trauma reactivation, including resurfacing of COVID-19-related experiences
- Heightened emotional and mental health impacts
- Increased requests for support
- Challenges facilitating conversations about global events and uncertainty
- Increased emotional and administrative load on facilitators

Facilitators describe spending more time supporting members in distress, navigating sensitive conversations, and managing increasingly complex group dynamics. These pressures are often layered on top of facilitators' own lived experience of cost-of-living stress and uncertainty, compounding risks of burnout and disengagement.

Impact of Rising Fuel Costs

Rising fuel and broader living costs are having a direct and operational impact on peer support groups.

- 67% of groups report that fuel costs are affecting their ability to operate.
- Many groups report that fuel costs now directly determine whether members or facilitators can attend.

Reported operational impacts include:

- Reduced attendance at in-person meetings
- Members, facilitators, and volunteers unable to afford fuel or public transport
- Reduction in meeting frequency
- Consideration of service reduction or online shift

Members are described as having to choose between paying for fuel or public transport **and** purchasing food, medication, paying rent, or other essential living expenses. These pressures are particularly acute in regional and remote areas, where long travel distances are unavoidable.

Risk to Service Continuity

While many groups are continuing to operate, indicators of risk are evident across the sector.

- 13% of groups report being at high or immediate risk of reducing services or closing within the next 3–6 months.
- A further 25% of groups report being “unsure”, suggesting emerging but unquantified risk.

Key contributing factors include:

- Declining attendance
- Facilitator burnout and overwhelm
- Volunteer shortages
- Rising transport and venue expenses

Groups consistently report that once peer support services close, they are difficult or impossible to re-establish due to loss of skilled facilitators, volunteer fatigue, and erosion of community trust.

Region-Specific Trends

Metropolitan Perth

- Declining attendance despite shorter distances
- Members facing broader cost-of-living pressures
- Rising venue and delivery costs
- Hybrid delivery models viable only where adequately supported

Regional and Remote WA

- Long travel distances, often 60–80km or more, for both members and facilitators
 - Fuel costs directly influencing whether meetings can proceed
 - Reduced meeting frequency or cancellations due to travel constraints
 - Increased vulnerability when a facilitator is unable to travel, with limited backup capacity
 - Ongoing digital connectivity challenges that limit online alternatives
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Demographic-Specific Trends

Parents, Young Parents and Families

- High levels of financial stress, housing insecurity and transport barriers
- Attendance strongly linked to fuel and public transport affordability
- Online delivery often unsuitable, particularly for play-based or child-inclusive groups

LGBTIQA+ Communities

- Elevated distress, anxiety and social isolation
- In-person connection critical for safety, belonging and identity affirmation
- Dispersed communities experience disproportionate transport burdens, including cost, distance, and safety concerns related to discrimination on public transport

Older People and Carers

- Fixed incomes amplify the impact of rising costs
- Lower digital access and confidence
- Increased risk of social disconnection if in-person support reduces

Chronic, Rare and Complex Conditions

- Attendance decisions closely tied to fluctuating health and financial stress
- Additional medical and travel costs compound fuel impacts
- Medication and treatment costs, alongside access and supply issues, compound financial stress and participation barriers
- Peer support groups function as stabilising, non-clinical support systems

Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Communities

- Strong preference for trusted, in-person or low-tech connection
- Digital exclusion reported more frequently
- Global events and experiences or fear of discrimination add emotional strain and affect confidence in accessing transport and services

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities

- Peer support valued as a culturally safe, relational form of connection
- In-person engagement preferred, with online delivery often reported as culturally unsuitable
- Transport, distance, and cost barriers compounded in regional and remote locations, increasing reliance on local, place-based support

Long-Term Outcomes if Support Is Not Provided

If current pressures are not addressed, likely long-term outcomes include:

- Escalation of mental health distress and social isolation
- Increased reliance on crisis, emergency and clinical services
- Widening inequity across regions and population groups
- Loss of skilled facilitators and volunteer capacity
- Permanent reduction in preventative and early-intervention supports

Small, flexible investments in peer support are likely to prevent significantly higher costs elsewhere in the system.

Alike WA's Recommendations to Government:

1. **Provide temporary, flexible micro-grants** to peer support groups to offset essential operational costs (e.g. venue hire, insurance, basic delivery expenses) and prevent service reduction or closure during current cost-of-living pressures.
2. **Introduce targeted transport assistance** (such as fuel vouchers or public transport subsidies) to enable members, volunteers, and facilitators to attend peer support groups, particularly in regional and remote areas where travel costs are a primary barrier.
3. **Offer optional, light-touch digital capability support** where groups identify readiness or need, to support communication and continuity without replacing in-person peer support.

These targeted measures would provide immediate relief, protect community access to support, and preserve critical preventative infrastructure.