

Flying Minute: Submission to the Independent Review of WA's COVID-19 Management and Response

By Nicole Matthews, Executive Manager Policy

That the Submission to the Independent Review of Western Australia's COVID-19 Management and Response be endorsed.

RESOLUTION 219.FM/2023

CARRIED

Executive Summary

- The State Government has commissioned an independent review of WA's response and management of COVID-19, with submissions due by 16 March 2023.
- The scope of the review is limited to the Western Australian Government's response and management of COVID-19 and specifically excludes Local Government, Commonwealth Government and non-government organisations.
- WALGA's Submission is based on the Association's, and Local Governments', experience and interaction with the State Government in responding to COVID-19.
- The Submission acknowledges the effectiveness of the State Government's response and focuses on WALGA and Local Governments experience of the State Government's COVID-19 response relating to public sector capacity and capability, intragovernmental communication and cooperation, community support, engagement and communication and the economic and social outcomes.

Attachment

- Draft WALGA submission to the Independent Review of WA's COVID-19 Management and Response.

Background

The State Government announced the Independent Review of WA's COVID-19 Management and Response on 19 January 2023, with submissions to the Review opening from 17 February to 16 March 2023.

Review terms of reference:

- Pandemic planning and preparedness, specifically:*
 - Public sector pandemic plans and policies; and*
 - Public sector capacity and capability.*
- Government programs and processes to support the health response, specifically:*
 - COVID-19 testing, including the Free Rapid Antigen Test (RAT) program, procurement of ventilators, mask distribution, and vaccine rollout; and*
 - Digital solutions (e.g. PHOCUS, VaccinateWA, G2G, SafeWA and ServiceWA).*
- Intragovernmental communication and cooperation, specifically:*
 - Structures and resource mobilisation across the public sector; and*
 - Data collection, sharing and use.*
- Community support, engagement, and communication, specifically:*
 - Public communications and campaigns; and*
 - Industry and community engagement.*
- The effectiveness of public health levers on health outcomes, specifically:*
 - Public health and social measures, including borders; and*
 - Testing, tracing, isolation, and quarantine.*



In addition to considering Government's future preparedness, the reviewers will also consider the economic, social and health outcomes of WA's COVID-19 management and response.

The limited scope of the review and the information provided on making Submissions makes clear that material outside the terms of reference will not be considered by the Panel.

Comment

WALGA's Submission acknowledges the efforts of the WA Government in responding to the unprecedented circumstances presented by COVID-19 and its success in minimising the social, health and economic impacts on the WA population.

The Submission provides information on the role played by Local Government and WALGA during COVID-19 and experience of the State Government's COVID-19 response relating to public sector capacity and capability, intragovernmental communication and cooperation, community support, engagement and communication and the economic and social outcomes.

The Submission makes recommendations regarding a consultation and engagement with WALGA and the sector in relation to the development of State of Emergency Directions and other COVID-19 response measures and the capacity of State Government to provide advice, respond to queries and provide up to date resources. The Submission also makes specific mention of the sector's exclusion from the JobKeeper scheme.

WALGA's Submission was informed by feedback from a group of metropolitan and regional Local Government CEO's that met regularly with the WALGA executive to provide advice and insights throughout the pandemic.

The WALGA CEO is attending a workshop with the Review Panel and other key stakeholders on Monday, 13 March and this will provide another opportunity to discuss the key role that Local Government played in relation to COVID-19 response and management.



FLYING MINUTE OUTCOME

Poll created: 08/03/2023 at 16:13

Poll closed: 15/03/2023 at 23:59

Total invited to survey: 24

Total finished survey: 19

Endorse the Recommendation: 14

Endorse the Recommendation subject to comment below: 3

Do not endorse: 2

First Name	Last Name	Completed Date
Carol	Adams OAM	13/03/2023 12:34
Phil	Blight	14/03/2023 20:23
Laurene	Bonza	14/03/2023 11:15
Ruth	Butterfield	Not completed
Cheryl	Cowell	Not completed
Frank	Cvitan	Not completed
John	Daw	14/03/2023 12:55
Tony	Dean	11/03/2023 11:11
Catherine	Ehrhardt	14/03/2023 14:48
Russ	Fishwick	14/03/2023 9:29
Moir	Girando JP	13/03/2023 12:58
Patrick	Hall	09/03/2023 12:39
Logan	Howlett JP	08/03/2023 18:54
Paul	Kelly	10/03/2023 16:22
David	Lagan	12/03/2023 15:30
Peter	Long	13/03/2023 11:20
Chris	Mitchell JP	14/03/2023 15:30
Chris	Pavlovich	10/03/2023 15:10
Les	Price	10/03/2023 22:01
Michelle	Rich	15/03/2023 12:36
Helen	Sadler	10/03/2023 16:20
Ken	Seymour	Not completed
Stephen	Strange	Not completed
Doug	Thompson	13/03/2023 11:22

Responses

(14) Endorse the Recommendation: Mayor Logan Howlett JP, Mayor Patrick Hall, President Cr Chris Pavlovich, Cr Helen Sadler, President Cr Tony Dean, Cr Les Price, Mayor Peter Long, Cr Doug Thompson, President Cr Moira Girando JP, Mayor Carol Adams OAM, Cr Russ Fishwick JP, Cr Catherine Ehrhardt, Cr Chris Mitchell JP, President Cr Michelle Rich

(3) Endorse the Recommendation subject to comment below: Cr Paul Kelly, Cr David Lagan, President Cr Laurene Bonza

(2) Do not endorse: Cr John Daw, President Cr Phil Blight

Comments

Cr Paul Kelly:

It is disappointing that the terms of reference were very limited and largely relate to the communication and liaison areas. I would have liked for us to try and 'weave in' some comments about unnecessary economic stimulation such as the overriding of LG planning powers which in turn, along with artificial stimulus packages for housing, lead to a significant overheating of the economy and is the most significant contributor to the massive inflation problem that we are now experiencing.

Cr David Lagan:

- 1. Schools in WA were over supplied with RAT test packs and many were thrown out due to nearing expiry date. Huge taxpayer cost due to over ordering of packs.*
- 2. Hospital staff in WA were subjected to draconian measures of PPE usage which contributed to many hospital staff suffering severe depression due to the workplace load of 12 hour shifts in PPE. Many nursing staff have not and may never recover to full time work in WA.*
- 3. World data indicated at wave two and three of the pandemic that those over 65 years of age and those with compromised health were at risk from COVID 19. There was little benefit in drastic lock down measures that resulted in business losses and huge expense to government via JobKeeper payments.*
- 4. The lack of technology and curriculum preparedness for WA schools to go to a fully online model had huge workplace workload implications for teaching staff in WA schools.*
- 5. Many WA schools paid full Zoom subscription costs of over \$5,000 per site to enable Zoom learning only to find the full payment was not necessary.*
- 6. Response cost via government were huge from 2019 through to the end of 2022 with local governments outlaying millions or many millions in COVID payments for club fees and subscriptions. Will those local governments have ability to reclaim those costs over the next few years from the Federal Government?*

President Cr Laurene Bonza:

The Goldfields Esperance Zone was in the direct line of COVID incursions into the State with two road entry points, at Eucla and Laverton. Laverton became less of an issue due to travel restrictions imposed on the Aboriginal communities along the route. Nearly 100,000 people entered the State through Eucla by 'legal' means through the control point. These people then had various conditions imposed on their travel arrangements in relation to isolation/quarantine, testing and etc. This generally put them squarely into our small community of Norseman where we had limited capacity to deal with any outbreak.

The same could be said for Coolgardie, often the next stop along the way. Once people left the border area, there were no checks on whether they were adhering to the rules, and we had several instances where they were found not to be. The restrictions and the lack of consultation from any State Govt Dept on the arrangements around people isolating/quarantining and testing in our community caused an extreme level of anxiety and often outright fear amongst our community, that was sustained for the duration of the SOE.

Lack of consistency in the messaging around current restrictions and rules increased the anxiety levels. There was no one point of contact for people, (who were, in the main, trying to do the right thing), to have issues around the G2G pass and the Services WA app resolved. Shire staff and local police spent many, many hours assisting travellers with these issues. And also, without access to anyone who could give clear instructions on how to resolve issues surrounding approved G2G passes which suddenly became not approved and difficulties getting info loaded onto the Services app. The COVID hotline was of no practical benefit to anyone as they also did not have any access to solve these issues and often weren't giving the latest info on travel restrictions, masks etc. Some of the



restrictions imposed on people and their movements, failed to take into account the vast distances between services and access to suitable accommodation, road safety best practice and caused a level of sometimes, extreme distress to people trying to follow the rules.

Several alternative solutions were proposed by our LG but, received no response. Much more consultation with the LGs, particularly in entry 'hot spots' would have gone at least some way to relieving the levels of anxiety in our communities. Also, some consultation around the fact that our communities would be used as isolation and testing centres would have been nice. An announcement that people would have to quarantine prior to being allowed to travel freely in the State, and that they would have to do that in Norseman, happened with zero consultation or advice that this would be the plan.

We also had people transported from areas in the Northern Goldfields to quarantine in Norseman, and other people put into quarantine in Coolgardie. Once the quarantine period was over, there was no further assistance provided and some people then had to fund and find their own way home. The same support as far as getting supplies etc. was not extended to our own community. As far as public sector capacity and capability was concerned, we spent many hours at OASG meetings where plans were outlined as to the ability to get supplies to people, ensure people had access to suitable accommodation etc. The plans appeared to be quite sound. Until we needed to act on them and all support from the Dept vanished in a travel ban. Once again LG was leaned upon heavily to deliver State initiatives with no support or funding. It would be very helpful to have a full and more wide-ranging examination of the management and response to this pandemic. Other than the above additional comments, support the submission and recommendations as presented.

Cr John Daw

Perhaps the WALGA submission required a greater range of feedback from across the sector not just WALGA's submission being informed by feedback from a group of metropolitan and regional Local Government CEO's that met regularly with the WALGA executive to provide advice and insights throughout the pandemic. Broader based feedback from Councils across WA on the submission could have allowed for a more informed sector wide response especially related to community wide social, economic and health impacts of the government's COVID management and response.

President Cr Phil Blight

I cannot endorse this submission because it is so constrained by the terms of reference that it is impotent. Having said that, I agree with Cr Kelly's comments. I also took exception to the poor management of emergency services during the pandemic. Placing the virus at a higher priority over bushfire was unacceptable and totally ignored on February 5 2022 when Narrogin, Corrigin and Bridgetown were burning at level 3 simultaneously.

Secretariat Comment

Comments from State Council have been incorporated into the Submission where they relate to Local Governments experience and aligned with the very limited terms of reference for the Review. Consideration was given to WALGA not making a Submission to the Review because the terms of reference were so limited. However, it was considered there were some key issues which could be identified in the Submission which made a response worth providing. The short timeframe for the development of the Submission unfortunately inhibited wider consultation with the sector.

The WALGA CEO attended an in-person workshop with those undertaking the Review on Monday, 13 March and reiterated the concerns raised in the Submission.

Independent Review of Western Australia's COVID-19 Management and Response

WALGA Submission

March 2023

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Submission on the Independent Review of Western Australia's COVID-19 Management and Response

1. About WALGA

The Western Australian Local Government Association (WALGA) is the peak industry body for Local Government in Western Australia. WALGA is an independent, membership-based organisation representing and supporting the work and interests of 137 mainland Local Governments in Western Australia plus the Indian Ocean Territories of Christmas Island and Cocos (Keeling) Islands.

WALGA provides an essential voice for 1,213 Elected Members, 23,000 Local Government employees and the 2.6 million constituents that they serve and represent. WALGA also provides professional advice and services to Local Governments.

WALGA's vision is for agile and inclusive Local Governments that enhance community wellbeing and enable economic prosperity.

2. Background

WALGA welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback to the Independent Review of the [State's COVID-19 Management and Response](#) (the Review), which is intended to inform the WA Government's response to future pandemics and events.

In providing this Submission, WALGA acknowledges the efforts of the WA Government in responding to the unprecedented circumstances presented by COVID-19 and its success in minimising the social, health and economic impacts on the WA population.

WALGA notes that the Terms of Reference for this review are limited to the WA Government's management and response to COVID-19 and exclude the response and management of Local Government, the Commonwealth Government or non-government organisations. This narrow focus misses the opportunity to consider and learn lessons from the broader response to COVID-19 in Western Australia, including the role of Local Government.

To ensure the Review has the relevant context for WALGA's comments this Submission provides a summary of the role of WALGA and Local Government in COVID-19 Management and Response as they relate to the [Terms of Reference](#).

This Submission focuses on the areas where WALGA had direct experience of the Government response to COVID-19, including the public sector capacity and capability, intragovernmental communication and cooperation, community support, engagement and communication and the economic and social outcomes of WA's COVID-19 management and response.

3. Role of Local Government and WALGA

Local Government

Local Government, as the level of government closest to the community, played a vital role in responding to COVID-19. Throughout the pandemic each of the 30 metropolitan and 109 non-metropolitan Local Governments (ranging in population from less than 100 to more than 230,000 people, spanning 1.1 square kilometres to 372,000 square kilometres and employing from 10 to more than 1,000 people) were solely focussed on doing what was necessary to ensure continuity of services and support to their communities.

WA Local Government performed its roles and responsibilities in accordance with the [Western Australian Government Pandemic Plan](#) to:

- provide community leadership and support the maintenance of civil society;
- maintain emergency management plans and capabilities under the State's emergency management framework;
- maintain business continuity plans to deliver essential services;
- represent the interests of local communities and businesses in broader planning processes;
- in partnership with State and Territory Governments, inform the public of planning, preparations, response and recovery activities;
- work with State and Territory Governments to tailor public information to the needs of the community, particularly to support vulnerable groups; and
- provide support with other local resources as requested by the SHEC or local State, Metropolitan or Regional Human Epidemic Control Centres.

In practical terms this included:

- the timely implementation of complex (and at times ambiguous) State of Emergency Directions and legislation relating to Local Government facilities, operations and workforce;
- ensuring continuity of essential and valued services to communities;
- providing facilities for COVID-19 testing and vaccination;
- supporting those experiencing financial hardship;
- distributing pulse oximeters to vulnerable community members;
- facilitating access to communities in need of vaccination;
- providing information to inform targeted approaches to the vaccination rollout for populations at risk; and
- Local Government Environmental Health Officers approving COVID Event Plans and undertaking contact register inspections and compliance checks.

[WALGA](#)

WALGA appointed a COVID-19 Response Coordinator and Response Team on 23 March 2020 to support the sector and engage with key State Government agencies, including Department of the Premier and Cabinet, Department of Health, the Office of the Chief Health Officer, WA Police, Department of Communities, and Department of Fire and Emergency Services.

WALGA placed a liaison officer at the State Health Incident Coordination Centre (SHICC) and WALGA CEO, Nick Sloan, is a member of the State Emergency Management Committee (SEMC) and represented the Local Government sector as a member of the State Emergency Coordination Group (SECG). These key linkages were vital and WALGA appreciates the opportunity they provided to assist the sector to understand and engage during the pandemic.

A key area of focus was liaison with the State Government to inform the development and implementation of the State of Emergency Directions, regulations and legislation relating to Local Government premises, operations and employees.

Throughout the pandemic, WALGA supported Local Government and sought to work constructively and collaboratively with the State Government and act as a key point of contact to facilitate information flows and ensure that the sector was kept informed in an uncertain and rapidly changing environment.

WALGA hosted regular COVID-19 State-Sector Briefing Webinars for Local Governments. These webinars provided an opportunity for the Local Government Minister, other Ministers, Director Generals, the State Health Incident Controller, State Recovery Coordinator, WA Police (WAPOL) and other senior State Government officials to communicate directly with Local Governments on the State's COVID-19 response and recovery measures.

WALGA also created a dedicated COVID-19 landing page on the WALGA website with specific information for Local Governments and links to relevant information on wa.gov.au and other State and Commonwealth Government websites. WALGA issued 235 COVID-19 Updates for Local Government between March 2020 and the end of the State of Emergency, with over 1,700 subscribers to this service.

4. Response to Inquiry Terms of Reference

Public Sector Capacity and Capability and Intragovernmental Communication and Cooperation – Terms of Reference A and C

WALGA acknowledges that responding to the rapidly evolving threat to human health posed by COVID-19 necessitated swift and decisive decision making, often with insufficient information and little time for consultation. However, in some cases a lack of consultation and/or consideration of information provided by WALGA during the development of Directions resulted in unnecessary confusion, practical difficulties and delays in implementation. Local Governments also reported that the same Directions were being interpreted differently by enforcement officers in different locations. This was compounded by Directions being issued just prior to, or even after, coming into force and difficulties in accessing directions on the www.wa.gov.au website.

WALGA sought to provide information to the Department of Premier and Cabinet, Department of Health and/or the SHICC on relevant considerations for Local Governments to inform the drafting and assist in the smooth implementation of Directions (for example, in relation to Local Government operations, workers and premises, and regional travel restrictions). Further, WALGA provided a sample list of 176 Local Government job roles, mapping out how the work location for each role related to the proposed areas for Directions, however this industry specific information was not reflected in the drafting of the Directions.

Local Government's questions and requests for clarification on Directions often did not receive a response in a reasonable timeframe (or in some cases at all) and in many cases the SHICC, WAPOL and/or DPC were unable or unwilling to provide assistance to clarify or interpret Directions, advising WALGA and/or Local Governments to seek their own legal advice. When legal advice was sought, it was not consistent between legal providers. Further instruction from the WA Government on the Directions could have resolved this issue.

While in some areas WALGA/Local Government could more easily interpret regulations and intent, for matters relating to the closure of facilities and mandatory vaccination requirements the sector needed to review the legal instrument and understand how it would apply.

Feedback from some regional Local Governments, and WALGA's observations during the pandemic, indicated there was not always clear communication and engagement with the regional branches of WAPOL, who were tasked with implementing the Directions. In some instances, this led to the local officers being placed in the difficult position of being required to interpret the Directions themselves.

Recommendation: In developing the legal instrument to enact a Government decision, the public sector needs sufficient capacity and capability to ensure effective communication, with those enforcing and impacted by Directions, is in place to ensure the operational implications of the Directions are consistently understood and addressed.

WALGA was requested to provide all queries through a single email address to the SHICC to streamline the consideration of issues. Frequently, the SHICC did not have the capacity to respond to these queries, and WALGA had to seek the information required from other sources or by escalating the matter within the Department. These queries often related to the interpretation or implementation of Directions which were time critical.

Recommendation: Response capacity and capability is required within Government to enable the provision of timely responses to queries.

Community Support, Engagement and Communication – Terms of Reference D

The Directions, as the legal instruments, were not the main tool used to communicate the public requirements. Infographics and frequently asked questions were developed and provided effective and useful tools to communicate many of the requirements. However, for many of the requirements there was a significant time lag between the Direction being enacted and the FAQs being released. In relation to the Directions regarding mandatory vaccinations, there was little to no guidance material developed. The absence of FAQs meant that WALGA and the sector were seeking additional information from SHICC, or other Government sources. These issues could have been addressed at a broad level if the FAQs were available at the same time as the Directions and informed by questions/issues WALGA and the sector had identified.

Recommendation: Ensure public communications resources are developed and released at the same time as the Directions and other requirements are introduced.

The 13COVID hotline and wa.gov.au website, which included health information, State of Emergency Directions, infographics and other relevant resources such as FAQs, was the central location of information for the community, Local Government, industry and other stakeholders. This generally worked well, however there was often a significant time lag between an announcement being made and information being published on the website. In addition, information and resources on the Department of Health and Healthy WA websites was not always current and consistent with that on wa.gov.au, which caused unnecessary confusion for Local Governments.

Feedback from some regional Local Governments indicated that they used the COVID hotline as a source of information, however the information received was sometimes out of date or, in the case of different Directions applying to different areas of the State, not relevant to their region.

Recommendation: Where possible have one central source of information regarding the emergency event. Where there are multiple websites, or sources of information, ensure these are consistent, kept updated and regionally relevant.

Effectiveness of public health levers - Terms of Reference E

Some regional Local Governments provided feedback that restrictions imposed on people and their movements, failed to take into account the vast distances between services, ability of travellers to access suitable accommodation and supplies and road safety best practice. This caused a level of sometimes extreme distress to people trying to follow the

rules and to small remote communities concerned about their limited capacity to deal with any COVID outbreak.

Local Governments and communities, particularly on or near the WA border were not equipped to deal with the number of interstate arrivals and issues arising from isolation and testing requirements. In some of these locations there was limited accommodation and supplies available for those required to quarantine, but an expectation that there would be accommodation and services provided. Better planning and consultation with Local Governments and communities would have assisted in managing these impacts.

Recommendation: Consideration be given to the limitations of resourcing in regional and remote areas and additional resourcing be allocated where required.

Economic and Social Outcomes of WA's COVID-19 management and response

The significant potential economic and social impacts of COVID-19 required all levels of Government to support local communities and economic activity. Local Governments provided approximately \$512 million in financial relief and economic support across WA's communities in response to COVID-19, in the form of rate relief, fees and charges relief, rent relief, financial grants, additional capital works and maintenance, and redeployment of staff.

WALGA also proposed a stimulus initiative where the State and Local Governments would work together to stimulate the economy through a jointly-funded, Local Government-led, capital and maintenance blitz. The proposed initiative sought a 50% funding contribution by the State Government to bring forward \$514 million of capital and maintenance projects. The proposed initiative was estimated to support 2,951 jobs and boost WA's gross state product by \$506 million. This proposal was not adopted by the State Government, which represented a missed opportunity to use stimulus spending to deliver on a range of local projects that provide value for money and deliver long-lasting benefits for the community.

Local Governments were excluded from JobKeeper, despite the significant impacts of COVID-19 restrictions on their operations. While most WA Local Governments were able to avoid laying off staff through redeployment into other roles, providing training or upskilling opportunities, or reducing working hours, a small number had no option but to end the employment of some employees or stand them down. These issues were particularly acute in relation to staff (often casuals) impacted by the closure of sporting and cultural facilities such as recreation centres, gymnasiums, public pools and libraries; where roles could not be performed from home; and in regional and remote communities where Local Governments are the major employer and service provider, including childcare, caravan parks, regional airports and visitor centres.