

WA GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO THE REVIEW OF WA'S COVID-19 MANAGEMENT AND RESPONSE

Introduction

COVID-19 was one of the greatest challenges Western Australia (WA) has ever faced. WA's COVID-19 management and response required an unprecedented degree of coordination across government, rapid mobilisation of emergency management resources and agile decision making in the face of continually changing circumstances.

Recognising the importance of capturing the lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic, on 31 October 2022 the WA Government announced an independent Review of WA's COVID-19 Management and Response (Review) to examine what parts of the state's COVID-19 response worked well and what can be improved to ensure that current and future governments are better prepared for the next pandemic.

The Review was conducted between February 2023 and June 2023 by an independent panel comprising of the Hon John Day, Emeritus Professor Margaret Seares AO and Dr Michael Schaper.

The Review's findings and recommendations were shaped by extensive stakeholder engagement with government agencies, community and industry groups, and members of the public. The Review was also informed by an analysis of key economic, social and health indicators relating to WA's performance during the pandemic.

Findings and recommendations

Overall, the Review's findings reaffirm the approach taken to managing the COVID-19 pandemic in WA. The WA Government acted quickly to mobilise emergency management structures under the relevant legislation, leveraged its geographical isolation through border controls to restrict COVID-19 case numbers, maintained a strong and vibrant economy, and took the necessary actions to protect Western Australia from the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Review contains 35 recommendations which provide a blueprint for current and future governments to respond to a pandemic or large-scale public health emergency. The recommendations cover both actions the WA Government should undertake now to improve its pandemic preparedness, as well as actions that future governments should replicate or enhance during the next pandemic response, including:

- strengthening pandemic planning and scenario testing,
- undertaking a review of the pandemic-related elements of the *Public Health Act 2016* and the *Emergency Management Act 2005* to ensure arrangements are fit-for-purpose,
- removing barriers to public sector workforce mobility in a state of emergency,
- improving the accessibility of digital tools and applications developed by the WA Government,
- providing more transparency around the collection and sharing of personal data,
- continuing to provide free and equitable access to government programs that support the health response, such as vaccination and testing,
- continuing to make vaccines widely available and free and taking steps to actively counter health misinformation,

- looking at ways to strengthen the support (including financial support) available for community organisations, peak bodies, health experts, the arts and businesses during a pandemic, and
- better leveraging the expertise of the business, community and health sectors in future pandemic responses.

Implementation suggestions have also been provided alongside most of the recommendations. These do not form part of the recommendations but are intended to provide practical guidance for government as to how they may be implemented.

Government response

The WA Government's successful management of the COVID-19 pandemic delivered some of the best economic, health and social outcomes in Australia:

- WA was nearly COVID-zero in the first two years of the pandemic and achieved a 10% higher rate of third dose vaccinations compared to the rest of the nation. WA's COVID-19 fatality rate (0.074%) was the lowest of all the states and territories.
- WA's economy continued to grow despite COVID-19 and this growth was seen across all sectors. Total employment in WA grew more than most other states relative to pre-COVID-19 levels and WA's retail sector fared better than most other states who experienced extended lockdowns.
- WA's schools remained open during COVID-19, with students offered the option of remote learning.

The WA Government thanks the Panel for their efforts in producing a report that acknowledges the strengths of the state's COVID-19 response while also providing advice for how current and future governments can respond to the next pandemic.

The WA Government supports or supports in principle all 35 of the Review's recommendations as outlined in the below table. Over the next 18 months, the WA Government will work to oversee implementation of the recommendations that the Review's *Blueprint for current and future WA Governments* identifies as needing to be done now in advance of the next pandemic.

As the Review observes, the likelihood of future pandemics is increasing and there is a real possibility that some Western Australians who lived through COVID-19 will experience another pandemic in their lifetime. The WA Government is the first Australian jurisdiction to complete a whole of government review into its handling of COVID-19 and will use the Review's recommendations to continue to strengthen the state's pandemic preparedness.

TABLE – Government response to the COVID-19 Review recommendations

Recommendation	Government Response
<p>Recommendation 1: The WA Government should, as a priority, undertake a review of the pandemic-related elements of the <i>Emergency Management Act 2005</i> and <i>Public Health Act 2016</i> to ensure WA’s legislative frameworks are fit-for-purpose for future pandemics.</p>	Support.
<p>Recommendation 2: Future WA governments should again establish an Emergency Management Team (or similar information sharing body) when any future state of emergency is called, in addition to the emergency management structures established through the relevant legislation.</p>	Support in principle.
<p>Recommendation 3: The WA Government Pandemic Plan should be reviewed by the State Emergency Management Committee at least every five years, including through cross-agency scenario testing.</p>	Support.
<p>Recommendation 4: Each Department should have an agency-specific pandemic plan, developed to sit underneath the WA Pandemic Plan, overseen by the State Emergency Management Committee (SEMC) and with guidance from the Department of Health.</p>	Support in principle, subject to a better understanding of the resourcing implications for SEMC and individual Departments.
<p>Recommendation 5: All WA Government agencies should schedule regular reviews of crisis management and business continuity plans to ensure they can respond to a future hazard or pandemic of the scale and duration of COVID-19.</p>	Support.
<p>Recommendation 6: When adopting an elimination strategy in response to a future virus or pandemic, future WA governments should again provide convenient, free and widespread access to highly sensitive testing (such as PCR testing or equivalent) that is capable of being scaled up or down as required.</p>	Support. Implementation of this recommendation will depend on the exact nature and circumstances of a future pandemic.
<p>Recommendation 7: When adopting a suppression strategy in response to a future virus or pandemic, future WA governments should again consider providing free and equitable access to testing tools (such as Rapid Antigen Tests) to help the community self-manage their risk</p>	Support. Implementation of this recommendation will depend on the exact nature and circumstances of a future pandemic.

Recommendation	Government Response
of illness where they exist and meet national standards set by the Therapeutic Goods Administration (or equivalent).	
<p>Recommendation 8: The Department of Jobs, Tourism, Science and Innovation (or whichever agency has principal responsibility for economic development in future governments), in conjunction with relevant agencies and local business and industry stakeholders, should consider ways to increase local manufacturing capacity of personal protective equipment and build supply chain resilience more generally.</p>	Support.
<p>Recommendation 9: WA Health should maintain an increased level of essential personal protective equipment (such as masks and gowns) in the State's medical stockpile to ensure that WA is well-equipped for future pandemics and emergencies.</p>	Support in principle.
<p>Recommendation 10: The Department of Finance, in conjunction with WA Health, should implement centralised procurement and distribution of personal protective equipment for all government agencies.</p>	<p>Support in principle.</p> <p>WA Government to undertake further investigations to better understand how to implement, particularly for specialist environments.</p>
<p>Recommendation 11: Future WA governments should again appoint a Vaccine Commander (or equivalent) and do so at the outset of any future State-wide population-level vaccine programs to provide leadership and oversight, with a dedicated focus on increasing uptake by priority groups.</p>	<p>Support.</p> <p>WA Government to ensure the Vaccine Commander has strong links to WA Health.</p>
<p>Recommendation 12: Future WA governments should again ensure that, during a pandemic, vaccines are provided free of charge and that access is as widely distributed as possible.</p>	<p>Support.</p> <p>The WA Government notes that this recommendation intersects with areas of Australian Government responsibility, which include responsibility for the approval and purchasing of vaccines and supplying stock to states and territories for their distribution.</p>
<p>Recommendation 13: Building on the foundation set by the Digital Inclusion in WA Blueprint, the Office of Digital Government should ensure that all digital tools and applications developed by the WA Government meet universal accessibility standards.</p>	Support.

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<p>Recommendation 14: The Public Sector Commission should explore amendments to the <i>Public Sector Management Act 1994</i> to better support public sector workforce mobility where capabilities of the individual and the new task or role are aligned.</p>	Support.
<p>Recommendation 15: The Public Sector Commission should encourage State Government agencies to review existing human resources and industrial relations policies with a view to identifying and removing barriers to workforce mobility for public sector agencies and contracted service providers in a state of emergency.</p>	Support.
<p>Recommendation 16: WA public sector agencies should explore methods to reduce key person dependencies, burn out and fatigue risks for longer-term emergency situations.</p>	Support.
<p>Recommendation 17: The Department of the Premier and Cabinet should again be designated as the lead agency to centrally coordinate communications across government in a pandemic and this should occur at the outset of any future pandemic.</p>	Support.
<p>Recommendation 18: State Government agencies should use the recently signed Intergovernmental Agreement on Data Sharing to strengthen data sharing with the Australian Government.</p>	Support.
<p>Recommendation 19: In line with the Privacy and Responsible Information Sharing reforms currently underway, all WA Government agencies should be required to provide greater clarity up front regarding the purpose of collecting individual information and how they will share, use and dispose of data.</p>	Support.
<p>Recommendation 20: Future WA governments should, from the start of a pandemic, again use WA.gov.au (or its future equivalent) as the primary source of information for critical government communications provided to the community.</p>	Support.

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<p>Recommendation 21: Future WA governments should again ensure that a central telephone helpline (or another alternative to online information) is available in a future pandemic or public health emergency.</p>	Support.
<p>Recommendation 22: The WA Government should consider ways to improve how it leverages external expertise from the business, community and health sectors to ensure better collaboration during future pandemics or emergencies.</p>	Support.
<p>Recommendation 23: Recognising the global mental health impact of COVID-19 experienced by all jurisdictions, the WA Government should review and consider ways to improve mental health supports available during a pandemic to help people manage their mental health and wellbeing.</p>	Support.
<p>Recommendation 24: The WA Government should review the emergency support provided for small and medium businesses and not-for-profit organisations during COVID-19 and consider what support should be provided in the event of a future pandemic.</p>	<p>Support in principle.</p> <p>The WA Government agrees that it will consider what forms of financial support it made available for small and medium businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic and look to include high level information on the types of supports that it would seek to make available during a future pandemic in the WA Pandemic Plan.</p> <p>The WA Government is unable to specify exactly how much or what types of financial support it would provide in a future pandemic as this will depend on the scale and duration of the emergency as well as the broader economic and budgetary conditions at the time.</p>
<p>Recommendation 25: The Office of Digital Government should consider how to improve the capacity of the WA Government to implement time sensitive and emergency-related grant payments to individuals and businesses.</p>	Support.

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<p>Recommendation 26: Reflecting on the lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic, current and future WA governments should continue to consider the trade-offs between health, economic and social outcomes and the broader risk appetite when making future decisions on public health and social measures such as border restrictions.</p>	Support.
<p>Recommendation 27: Where border restrictions are in place, current and future WA governments should again ensure that the process for granting exemptions is clear, transparent and widely publicised, and that exemption criteria are consistently applied.</p>	Support.
<p>Recommendation 28: Current and future WA governments should consider how they can more effectively support organisations delivering critical services across border controls in times of emergency.</p>	<p>Support in principle.</p> <p>Implementation of this recommendation will depend on the exact nature and circumstances of a future pandemic.</p>
<p>Recommendation 29: The WA Government should advocate for an expansion of the existing Australian Government COVID-19 no-fault vaccination injury compensation scheme to cover a broader suite of vaccines.</p>	Support.
<p>Recommendation 30: Future WA governments should ensure that any future decisions on vaccine mandates are informed by the emerging research and data on vaccine mandates, including the outcomes of the research currently underway by the University of WA on the impact and effectiveness of COVID-19 vaccination mandates.</p>	Support.
<p>Recommendation 31: The WA Government and health authorities should be continually alert to misinformation and disinformation regarding public health measures, and take necessary actions to engage with community groups, and the wider public as appropriate, to counteract such messages.</p>	Support.

Recommendation	Government Response
<p>Recommendation 32: The WA Government should continue to use the recommendations in the Halton Review and Weeramanthi Review as an ongoing source of guidance for any future quarantine programs.</p>	<p>Support.</p> <p>All recommendations from the Halton Review have been adopted by National Cabinet and implemented by WA. The WA Government has separately implemented the recommendations in the Weeramanthi Review (available here).</p>
<p>Recommendation 33: In future pandemics, WA governments should again implement a mixed model of quarantine, including home quarantine, hotel quarantine and quarantine facilities, depending on the risk profile of the pandemic and circumstances of the individuals subject to quarantine.</p>	<p>Support in principle.</p> <p>Implementation of this recommendation will depend on the exact nature and circumstances of a future pandemic.</p>
<p>Recommendation 34: Future quarantine arrangements should be adopted that allow maritime crew to be safely rotated off ships and brought ashore.</p>	<p>Support in principle.</p> <p>Implementation of this recommendation will depend on the exact nature and circumstances of a future pandemic.</p>
<p>Recommendation 35: Future WA governments should again ensure that, where possible, schools remain open during a pandemic so that they can continue to provide essential support to students and the wider school community.</p>	<p>Support.</p>