



Parliamentary Standing Committee of Public Accounts

Media Advisory

Tuesday, 17 October 2023

Final Report:

Inquiry into the Tasmanian Government's Continuing Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic: Preparation for the State Border Re-opening on 15 December 2021

The Parliamentary Standing Committee of Public Accounts (Committee) is finalising its targeted inquiry into the Tasmanian Government's continuing response to the COVID-19 Pandemic. The Committee tabled its second report (Report 2 of 3) in Parliament relating to the Government's planning and preparedness for re-opening of the Tasmanian border on 15 December 2021.

The Committee noted in late 2021, the Tasmanian Government began planning and preparation guided by specific modelling undertaken by the Kirby Institute and national modelling undertaken by the Doherty Institute based on the likely social, health related and economic impacts of the border re-opening. This modelling was based on the predominant variant at the time, the Delta variant.

The date of 15 December 2021 was determined by the Government to be the fixed date to re-open the border. At this time, it became apparent the Delta variant was being superseded by the more transmissible Omicron variant as the predominant variant. The Omicron variant whilst more transmissible, generally caused less severe symptoms.

A key measure in the planning for border re-opening included the achievement of high rates of vaccination. This was achieved in all cohorts other than children between 5 and 12 years of age who only became eligible in late 2021. Rates of vaccination in this younger cohort remains lower than some other Australian jurisdictions.

The Committee noted that public health advice supported the importance of high rates of vaccination as a key measure to reduce serious illness, hospitalisation, intensive care admission and death.

The Department of Health established an Adverse Event Following Immunisation (AEFI) surveillance system to enable close oversight of adverse events, including vaccine administration errors. This system will be utilised to monitor vaccination related adverse events for other non COVID-19 vaccines.

The Vaccination Requirements for Certain Workers Direction applied to, among others, all workers employed, or engaged by, public and private health care facilities and included all Department of Health employees. The Committee noted workers subject to the Vaccination Requirements for Certain Workers Direction were given the opportunity to comply with the mandate or provide a medical exemption and less than one percent of the State Department of Health's employees had their employment terminated as a result of non-compliance with the vaccination mandate.

In preparation for and following the border re-opening, the Government conducted a range of regular communications with key stakeholder groups, including vulnerable cohorts. The Department of Health utilised an application, the Reach App, which was well received by health staff and assisted effective and timely communication.

The Committee has made five (5) overarching recommendations to inform future planning for the management of a pandemic. The Committee recommends Government take a multidisciplinary approach to health care and service delivery that includes all health care providers in the acute and community health care settings in all future pandemic planning.

This includes services predominantly managed under the Australian Government such as pharmacies and the full utilisation of pharmacist's capability and general practice.

A similar multi-disciplinary approach is recommended to be taken when planning for and managing communication with all key stakeholders and health care providers. The implementation of a timely, coordinated and consistent communication plan during the planning for and management of a future pandemic is also recommended. Such communication plans should ensure the most contemporary information and communication tools are utilised.

The Committee also recommends consideration be given to the use of modelling that can be updated in a timely manner when needed to respond to rapidly changing circumstances including increased health related risks and threats.

The Committee made five (5) recommendations on specific areas related to the planning, preparedness, management of and response to the re-opening of the Tasmanian border on 15 December 2021. These relate to the COVID@home and subsequent COVID@homeplus programs, use of the Reach App, a communication tool utilised by the Department of Health and vaccine accessibility.

The Committee noted the importance of review of the COVID@home program to inform service delivery planning for future pandemics. The Committee recommended the COVID@homeplus program be maintained and adapted to respond to other communicable diseases. The Reach App was a very effective communication tool and one that could have much broader application across a range of government departments. The importance of access to vaccination services was also noted as an important health measure, and the failure of the State Government to respond promptly to changing guidelines of Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation (ATAGI) was noted as a barrier to access in some regional areas.

Committee Chair, Hon Ruth Forrest MLC stated "The Committee acknowledges the challenges associated with the decision to re-open the Tasmanian border and the lack of universal acceptance of the hard date of 15 December 2021. It is clear health care providers would have preferred a longer

leads time to prepare, particularly in light of the emergence of the highly transmissible Omicron variant.”

The Committee acknowledged the extraordinary workload of many in the planning and preparation for the border re-opening that was made more challenging by the arrival of the more highly transmissible COVID-19 Omicron variant.

“The emergence of the highly transmissible Omicron variant created additional pressure on the Tasmanian health system and health care providers. The associated challenges contributed to increased community anxiety with many vulnerable Tasmanians electing to isolate during this period of uncertainty in what was described as a ‘shadow lockdown’”. Ms Forrest stated.

A copy of our Report is available on the Committee’s Inquiry webpage: [Tasmanian Government’s Continuing Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic](#).

The Members of the Committee are:

Legislative Council

Hon Ruth Forrest MLC (Chair)

Hon Meg Webb MLC

Hon Josh Willie MLC

House of Assembly

Ms Lara Alexander MP

Dr Shane Broad MP (Deputy Chair)

Mr Dean Young MP

Further information about the Committee is available on the [Committee website](#).

Ends

Further information: Hon Ruth Forrest MLC (Chair) – 0419 879 524