

Queensland Government submission to the  
Commonwealth Government COVID-19 Response Inquiry

## 1. Introduction

The Queensland Government welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the examination of the Commonwealth Government’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic, with the aim of improving Australia’s preparedness for future pandemics.

The Queensland Government’s top priority during the pandemic was keeping Queenslanders safe. To do this, Queensland’s COVID-19 response broadly occurred in two phases: keeping the virus out for as long as possible until high levels of vaccination coverage were achieved (2020–2021) and focusing efforts on protecting those at highest risk (2022–2023).

Queensland’s effective COVID-19 response meant shorter and fewer lockdowns than other jurisdictions, consequently resulting in a reduction in the broader social, health, and economic effects of the pandemic. While Queensland had six outbreaks and 53 community cases recorded before the borders reopened, those figures were relatively low in the context of COVID-19 outbreaks and cases nationally.

However, Queensland could not respond to the pandemic alone – collaboration and coordination with the Commonwealth and other state and territory governments was critical.

This submission is based on Queensland’s experience of the COVID-19 pandemic and outlines:

- the successes of Queensland’s health response and economic recovery within the context of the overall national response
- key lessons for future pandemic planning, including governance, funding, collaboration, roles and responsibilities, consistency of approach, and resourcing.

## 2. Queensland’s health response

### 2.1 Rapid activation of existing emergency management systems

Queensland’s unique geography and population distribution provides a more complex risk profile for natural disasters than any other state or territory. Queensland has consequently developed systems that can be rapidly stood up to deal with disasters and emergencies. Queensland’s health response was swift and coordinated, considering the seriousness and unprecedented nature of COVID-19.

Queensland’s ability to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic effectively and with support from the community was due largely to the ability to quickly apply existing systems to a broad scale health emergency.

On 22 January 2020, the Queensland Chief Health Officer (CHO) declared a public health event and stood up the Queensland Health Public Health Incident Management Team.

On 25 January 2020, the State Health Emergency Coordination Centre, which included Liaison Officers from several Queensland Government agencies and the Australian Defence Force, was stood up. The State Disaster Coordination Centre, led by the State Disaster Coordinator under the direction of the Queensland Disaster Management Committee, chaired by the Premier, was activated to coordinate the whole-of-government response.

## 2.2 Responsive legislation

On 29 January 2020, Queensland was the first Australian jurisdiction to declare a public health emergency, activating powers and functions under the *Public Health Act 2005* (Qld), Chapter 8.

On 18 March 2020, the temporary emergency powers of the CHO were further strengthened through the passage of the *Public Health and Other Legislation (Public Health Emergency) Amendment Act 2020* (Qld). These powers enabled rapid implementation of public health measures necessary to assist in containing or responding to the spread of COVID-19.

Providing the community with access to up-to-date, reliable, and evidence-based information was vital to ensuring ongoing support for the unprecedented and far-reaching public health measures implemented during the pandemic.

Specific protections were put in place for Queensland's remote First Nations communities, which were first given effect through a Commonwealth Government Biosecurity Determination and subsequently Queensland public health directions. Specific consideration was given to the situation, needs, and vulnerabilities of First Nations Queenslanders, which resulted in low mortality of First Nations Queenslanders from COVID-19.

Queensland legislative and governance frameworks continued to be updated as required as the pandemic evolved to ensure agencies were able to respond effectively.

## 2.3 Strong decisions

The Queensland Government followed the expert advice of the CHO throughout the pandemic, including taking the tough decisions to close Queensland borders when the expert advice indicated that was the best way to keep Queenslanders safe. Border restrictions were reviewed regularly and removed as soon as it was safe to do so.

Similarly, Queensland instituted short, sharp lockdowns, on the expert advice of the CHO, when needed to limit spread and to ensure hospital capacity was not exceeded.

## 2.4 Innovative health service delivery

Responding to COVID-19 demanded responsiveness and adaptability throughout Queensland Health to unprecedented and complex challenges. Innovative health service delivery models and programs, such as the statewide COVID-19 vaccine rollout and expanded use of telehealth, were rapidly implemented to respond to COVID-19, protect the capacity and capability of the health system, and continue to deliver high quality care to patients. Queensland's health system now retains capacity and capability to respond to future pandemics.

### **Case study: Expanded telehealth**

Supporting continuity of care closer to home, Queensland Health leveraged opportunities to increase uptake of virtual care and telehealth. Queensland Health's telehealth capacity rapidly increased from approximately 90 concurrent calls to 1600, supporting over 20,000 telehealth outpatient appointments each month. Telehealth services delivered in April 2020 tripled from those delivered in the nine months prior to the COVID-19 response. This increase was reflected in many clinical areas. COVID-19 provided the impetus for widespread and sustainable change towards a more empowered, collaborative, transparent, and agile health system.



**Case study: COVID-19 vaccine rollout**

Queensland's proactive and innovative COVID-19 vaccine rollout was the most significant vaccination program in the state's history, facilitating over 12 million vaccinations. Over 80 per cent of eligible Queenslanders were fully vaccinated before borders reopened on 13 December 2021. Queenslanders could be vaccinated at their local school or shopping centre, when visiting Bunnings, at football games, and at other tourist attractions. A total of 66 community-based COVID-19 vaccination locations were established, in addition to 925 pop-up or outreach clinics and the September 2021 'walk in weekend', which represented the peak of the vaccination roll-out program, with 31,287 vaccine doses delivered on 18 September 2021.

### 3. Queensland's economic response

#### 3.1 Immediate and broad support measures

With the emergence of COVID-19 in early 2020, the outlook for the Queensland, national, and global economies was characterised by extreme uncertainty and volatility.

Queensland's strong health response provided the foundations for our outstanding economic recovery.

From as soon as mid-February 2020, the Queensland Government announced a range of economic stimulus support measures. According to the Queensland Audit Office report, *Managing Queensland's COVID-19 economic response and recovery*, the Queensland Government committed \$17.2 billion for over 300 economic response and recovery initiatives in the form of state tax relief, temporary fee relief, grants, and loans.

**Case study: The Small Business COVID-19 Adaptation Grants program**

The Small Business COVID-19 Adaptation Grants program supported small businesses in Queensland who were forced into hibernation, experienced significant structural adjustment, or had to significantly change their business operations as a result of the pandemic. Under the program, eligible small businesses who fell under the payroll tax threshold were able to apply for a grant of up to \$10,000 to adapt and sustain their operations and build resilience. A total of \$182.24 million was paid to 20,498 Queensland small businesses through the program.

Following the impact of the initial health response, across 2020 the combination of the successful containment of the virus in Queensland and the comprehensive support provided from all levels of government saw the Queensland economy start to recover.

#### 3.2 Manufacturing pivot to PPE and other essentials

To boost local manufacturing of critical goods during the pandemic, the Queensland Government released the Personal Protective Equipment and Other Essential Products – Manufacturing Sector Directions Statement which set actions and targets to support local manufacturing.

The Queensland Government also provided a range of financial support to local business to assist them to transition to manufacturing the goods Queenslanders most needed and ensure Queensland had priority access to the products. For example, the Queensland Government gave \$1.2 million to Logan's Evolve Group to support them to urgently commence making disposable N95 medical masks in high volume.

**Case study: The Bearded Chap repurposes for hospitals**

Brisbane-based the Bearded Chap retooled during the pandemic to urgently produce 13,000 bottles of hand sanitiser, to help Queensland hospitals. The Queensland Government, through the supply-matching program, linked Bundaberg Rum with the Bearded Chap. They secured 3000 litres of ethanol to get their hand sanitiser production up, running and into hospitals.

### 3.3 Longer term plan and outcomes

In August 2020, the Queensland Government released *Unite and Recover: Queensland's Economic Recovery Plan* (Plan), which outlined six key areas of focus over the next two to five years: keeping Queensland pandemic ready; helping small business, growing manufacturing; driving infrastructure investment; growing the regions; and investing in skills.

The Plan was formulated in partnership with industry stakeholders including Ai Group, Master Builders, the CCIQ, AgForce, the Queensland Resources Council and the RACQ

The Plan was based on a solid partnership focus in recognition of the fundamental role that collaboration between Commonwealth, state and local governments and with businesses, industry, the workforce, and the community plays in a strong recovery and included:

- a commitment to maintain infrastructure investment at more than \$50 billion over the following four years, despite the financial challenge of supporting Queensland through the pandemic;
- a \$400 million Accelerated Works Program to deliver new road, bridge and pavement sealing works across the state;
- a further \$200 million in 2020-21 for a Works for Queensland program to support jobs and fund productive building projects;
- a \$11.25 million expansion of the Household Resilience Program in cyclone affected areas;
- \$50 million for tourism infrastructure and more funding towards a domestic tourism campaign;
- redirecting \$50 million of industry attraction funding under the Making it for Queensland initiative to continue to expand manufacturing capacity for PPE, hand sanitiser and medical supplies to respond to COVID-19;
- a \$10 million support package to support international students and safeguard Queensland's global education brand;
- a further \$14.8 million to support project development of the CopperString project to connect the North West Minerals Province with the national electricity market; and
- \$20 million towards construction of a Queensland Apprenticeships Centre in renewable hydrogen at Beenleigh.

From early 2021, the impact of sustained low case numbers and stimulus drove a faster than expected recovery in domestic activity, underpinned by a surging housing/property sector, with the Queensland economy growing 2.8% in 2020–21 and 5.5% in 2021–22.

Queensland's strong recovery was reflected in the exceptional performance of the state's labour market, with employment in Queensland growing by 2.4% in 2020–21, 5.1% in 2021–22, and 3.7% in 2022–23. In 2022–23, the Queensland unemployment rate fell to 3.7%, the state's equal lowest year-average unemployment rate since the ABS data series commenced in 1978.

Queensland's ongoing strong economic recovery and performance following the pandemic continues to highlight the success of the Queensland Government response to the pandemic and the resilience of the state's diversified economy.

Reflecting the success of Queensland's health response and strong labour market conditions following the initial health crisis, Queensland has attracted a substantial in inter-state migration. Since the onset of the pandemic, Queensland has welcomed nearly 120,000 net inter-state migrants, more than triple than the next closest state, Western Australia.

## 4. Key lessons for future pandemic planning

### 4.1 Importance of a First Ministers' decision-making body

The establishment of National Cabinet as a governance vehicle was effective for rapidly bringing together First Ministers at the outset of the pandemic when key decisions were required around the direction of the national and state and territory approach to COVID-19.

Virtual meetings allowed for increased engagement between First Ministers at a scale and pace not previously seen during the Council of Australian Governments era. National Cabinet convened 32 times in 2020, 29 times in 2021, and 13 times in 2022.

National Cabinet's mechanisms provided for direct briefings from experts (such as the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee, and key Ministerial Councils), which were central to informing National Cabinet's decision-making.

While one of the key successes of National Cabinet has been the flexibility for states and territories to consider and act upon their local circumstances, more timely information from the Commonwealth Government to state and territory governments would support a more comprehensive briefing of First Ministers ahead of National Cabinet discussions.

### 4.2 Joint Commonwealth-State funding measures

A number of joint Commonwealth-State funding measures were put in place to support the health response and economic recovery, such as the National Partnership on COVID-19 Response, National Partnership on Homebuilder, National Partnership Agreement on COVID-19 Domestic and Family Violence Responses, JobTrainer Fund, and Sole Trader Grant.

These measures were in recognition of the joint responsibility of governments to protect the health of the community and stimulate the economy. Commonwealth funding provided through these measures was a welcome complement to state funding measures.

### 4.3 Strong collaboration between levels of government

Strong collaboration between the levels of government was critical to the management of several pandemic related matters. Examples include: developing COVID-safe plans for workplaces; coordinating protections for remote communities; developing the implementing the National Plan to Transition Australia's COVID-19 Response; determining the international air passenger cap; and establishing stores of PPE and health consumables to protect against significant supply chain disruption, rapid large-scale vaccination networks, scale up sovereign manufacturing capability, and a staged approach to reopening international borders.

Queensland Government officials regularly participated in National Coordination Mechanism (NCM) meetings, often multiple times per day, which supported the rapid dissemination of information to officials and often private organisations. Queensland supports the continuation of NCMs and recommends the Commonwealth consider avenues to improve the strategic nature of meetings and maximise the flow of critical information with a view to reduce time and resource demands of officials in attendance.

#### 4.4 Clearer delineation of roles and responsibilities

All jurisdictions would benefit from clearer delineation of roles and responsibilities.

Greater clarity on the expectations of states and territories in delivery of services that are typically considered a Commonwealth responsibility would provide better outcomes for the community. Clear, principles-based service delivery arrangements agreed to by the Commonwealth, state and territory governments may assist in this regard.

## 5. Conclusion

Queensland's strong, swift, coordinated, and effective health response was the foundation for Queensland's strong economic recovery.

Underpinning Queensland's success was cooperation and understanding of the people of Queensland to listen to and follow the health advice and public health measures asked of them by the Government. Foundational to the cooperation was trust in the institutions of government providing the advice and an obligation of those institutions to provide timely, accurate and understandable communication to all Queenslanders. It is critical all governments, and their institutions, maintain the trust and confidence of citizens to ensure future responses to disasters and pandemics can minimise negative impacts and support recovery efforts.