AUSTRALIAN
LOCAL GOVERNMENT
ASSOCIATION

19 December 2023

COVID-19 Response Inquiry Panel
Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet
Via online form

Dear Panel,

COVID-19 Response Inquiry

The Australian Local Government Association (ALGA) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Inquiry to review the Commonwealth Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

ALGA is the national voice of local government in Australia, representing 537 councils across the country. In structure, ALGA is a federation of State and Territory Local Government Associations. This submission should be read in conjunction with any separate submissions received from State and Territory Associations as well as individual councils.

ALGA acknowledges that the COVID-19 response was one that relied heavily on localised delivery – be it through lockdown zones, vaccination roll-out or direct community support. As the closest level of government to the community, local government was in a unique position to identify community needs and make sure that those needs were met in the most appropriate way.

The response below is a summary of our key recommendations with the attached background document providing further support to align with the terms of reference.

Summary of key recommendations

We call for local government representation to be fully reinstated to the primary intergovernmental forum in Australia, the National Cabinet, with full membership extending to all meetings and voting rights. Local governments were excluded from the decision-making process for COVID-responses by dissolution of the Council of Australian Governments and the formation of National Cabinet. Our experience with local implementation, our extensive community networks and established relationships and experience in supporting communities were not leveraged to guide or amplify action. Some measures had perverse outcomes, for example the childcare support package, by not considering the difference between communities resulting in further societal inequalities.

To improve future responses and recovery, we recommend establishing and maintaining relationships with local government through federal, state and territory government agencies to allow for better engagement and access to community networks in the time of crisis.

Future responses need to focus on improving communications by using a number of channels including local government networks and non-digital communications, provide translations for non-English speakers, and provide them in a timely manner to counter disinformation.

We recommend improving response and recovery mechanisms through planning and testing scenario responses across all levels of government, including local government. Building capacity and capability from the ground-up at the local government level is key to developing effective response and recovery arrangements.

Future emergency responses need to consider how local government can be supported to maintain local services for community wellbeing. The inability of local government to access Australian Government wage support and other support packages such as aged-care and childcare, coupled with the existing pressures on local government financial sustainability, hindered local government's ability to provide vital services to our communities. Access to emergency response funds is especially important to regional and remote communities as councils are often the providers of last resort ensuring the welfare of our communities.

Despite the loss of revenue experienced by local governments during COVID-19, councils provided additional pandemic responses to support local businesses and our communities. Councils delivered a range of on-the-ground support despite the lack of depth of financial resources enjoyed by other spheres of government. It is therefore critical that the local government sector receives adequate financial support.

We call for the reinstatement of the Local Roads and Community Infrastructure Program or similar with ongoing funding of $500 million per year, with funding indexed annually. This was a specific COVID-19 stimulus package that delivered significant benefits. Well-targeted infrastructure investment creates jobs and generates lasting economic, social and environmental benefits for communities. This type of infrastructure program builds and strengthens community connection which is invaluable in times of disaster.

We seek improved and transparent government decision-making, informed by local government, to restore public trust and reduce inequalities in response measures. This will support democratic processes and reduce the risk of disruption at the local level.

Conclusion
COVID-19 tested Australia's pandemic and emergency management responses. While there have been negative outcomes, there has also been opportunity. Local governments' digital transformation has brought efficiency and deepened community engagement. It was the impetus for many councils to rethink business as usual and adopt innovative solutions to provide services to communities. We look forward to the outcomes of this inquiry to build on the lessons learnt from this unprecedented event.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on the Australian Government's response to COVID-19. For further information on ALGA's position, please see the attached background information, or contact Denise Anderson on ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ or ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮

Yours sincerely,

Linda Scott

Linda Scott
President
Australian Local Government Association

Background

ALGA's response to the Inquiry's Terms of Reference is grouped below.

1. Governance

Local governments responded to the COVID through state/territory government's pandemic plans and emergency response arrangements. Local governments responded quickly and adapted our operations, and pivoted the way we delivered essential and valued services to communities. One example was the pivot libraries undertook to enable people to access content through a range of online platforms. Councils also used our libraries as central hubs to assist the community with digital engagement including encouraging students who did not have access to the internet at home to social distance outside closed libraries to access the library's WIFI network to continue schooling. There were several regulatory changes made by some jurisdictions, such as allowing online meetings, which assisted our sector to respond. Further examples of local government responses are listed in appendix 1.

1.1 National Cabinet

National Cabinet's focus on developing responses on health advice seemed a reasonable approach at the beginning of the pandemic when responding to a rapidly evolving threat to human health. However, it is our understanding that this approach was too narrow. The health advice did not extend to non-COVID health issues and lacked broad economic, social and cultural perspectives. This led to perverse outcomes and exacerbating existing inequities for regional and remote communities, children, the aged, First Nation Australians, women, those with disabilities or born overseas[1]. Some of these outcomes could have been avoided or minimised by National Cabinet seeking advice from diverse groups including local government.

The Independent Review into Australia's Response to COVID-19[1] found replacing the Council of Australian Governments with the National Cabinet meant local governments were often excluded from decision-making. Local government expertise and the experience of councils in supporting communities were under-utilised during the pandemic.

There were unintended consequences of some measures that could have been avoided if local government had been a full voting member of National Cabinet. For example, without access to JobKeeper and other support packages, the largest NSW provider of early education and care, NSW local government providers were close to insolvency and closure. This risked frontline workers including health care workers' ability to go to work. Further explanation is provided in section 4 on support packages.

We believe that the decision to exclude local government representation from the National Cabinet was a lost opportunity to strengthen COVID responses through our community networks and established relationships to make communicating with local residents more effective, drive economic development and maintain social cohesion and other health outcomes. We are uniquely placed to understand the availability of local and regional resources, and community capability. Councils are also uniquely placed to leverage local knowledge to capture a level of detail in planning that other levels of government may not be able to replicate.

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[1] Fault Lines: Independent Review into Australia's Response to COVID-1

Emergency management arrangements

The response and recovery arrangements varied to established practice in existing pandemic plans to respond in a more agile way. However, the move away from the agreed arrangements caused confusion and concern. The key impacts were that:

- Local government had no oversight of the local services being delivered to our communities, even though we were often the first contact point for many in the community seeking support and information.
- Recovery arrangements were not passed down to local government who may have had the capacity to assist our local communities further.
- Other levels of government were not able to use local government as a delivery partner.

Lack of agreement on critical definitions at National Cabinet also impacted local government and the services it provided communities. What constituted a front-line worker for instance, impacted delivery of waste collections in some jurisdictions.

1.2 Organised protest groups

We are already seeing the outcomes of poor governance in disfranchised and anti-government sentiment. The Independent Review[1] identified that COVID-19 responses were often designed and implemented without proper regard for the inequalities in society. This left vulnerable community members suffering unnecessarily and has created further societal inequities.

The perceived overreach of government regulations and their enforcement has undermined public trust and confidence in governments and other institutions that manage emergency responses[1]. The perception of a lack of fairness and compassion in decision-making has allowed fringe groups to build on disfranchised sentiment within communities.

Over the past six months, a number of Australia's 537 local governments have been impacted by a rise in the activity of local groups which have threatened the safety of our communities, council staff and elected representatives by seriously disrupting council meetings and community events, with a focus on local government's work to build liveable communities and smart cities.

The overwhelming majority of councils do not have safety and security coordination in place, nor do we have funding for this coordinated across states and territories, unlike our nation's state, territory and federal parliaments.

This has resulted in some council meetings moving back online to ensure the safety of democratically elected representatives, as well as the staff who support them, in the face of serious, credible threats to our activities. This is an emerging risk to our democracy and future responses need to address equity issues, be transparent and clear and avoid perceived regulatory overreach to prevent further civil disruption.

1.3 Local government elections

As the COVID-19 pandemic caused widespread disruption, several state governments (NSW, Vic and QLD) postponed or altered procedures for local government elections. Public safety was the main concern, but caution is always warranted for any action that has the potential to weaken democracy or diminish the right of the community to have a say in their own lives.

Local government elections should be conducted in a matter as similar as possible to state and federal elections. Consistency in elections and a common standard of voting methods encourages voter participation through reducing the risk of voter confusion.

Further, local government must not be considered any less significant and vital to the wellbeing of our communities than any other tier of government, and any changes to voting options should be considered across the board rather than targeting local government only.

Communities must retain a choice of voting options, including attendance voting, pre-poll, postal voting, and electronic voting if available. Democracy is too important to place at risk by removing voting options, even in prolonged disasters.

2.   Health Measures

2.1 Lockdowns

Decisions on lockdowns and border closures failed to consider the vast distances between services in regional and remote communities, ability of travellers to access suitable accommodation and supplies and road safety best practice. This sometimes caused a level of distress to people trying to follow the rules and to small remote communities concerned about their limited capacity to deal with any COVID outbreak.

Many local governments and communities, particularly on or near state borders, were not equipped to deal with the number of people waiting on either side of state boarders 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 or waiting for the opportunity to cross borders. Better planning and consultation with local governments would have assisted in managing these impacts.

Lockdowns, especially when targeted at a particular location, sometimes contributed to a sense of inequity and distrust in governments[1]. Lockdowns could be perceived by community as a measure that was being policed rather than as a managed health response. For example, this was heightened when Australian Defence Force (ADF) personnel were deployed into lockdown zones whose communities include immigrants and refugees who have previously experienced the impacts of war such as in Western Sydney.[2] This example highlights the importance of improved and transparent government decision-making, informed by local government, to restore public trust and reduce inequalities in response measures.

2.2 Health messaging
Local government assisted in health messaging to our communities. Local government has unrivalled knowledge and connections with local communities, helping to get the word out about the vaccine, using trusted local leaders to answer residents' questions, and helping dispel any myths or misinformation about vaccines. Elected representatives actively encouraged community members by promoting their own vaccinations and using council communication channels.

2.3 Immunisation programs
We made approaches to the Minister of Health and to the National COVID Vaccine Taskforce to offer local government assistance in the COVID-19 vaccination roll out. This was largely not pursued by the Australian Government. On offer was
- Local government's networks to access to priority groups and hard to reach groups (elderly, aged care, CALD). Councils are a trusted channel in our communities and provide community transport services to vulnerable community members.

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[2] Army to begin patrolling Sydney COVID hotspots to help police enforce lockdown rules - ABC News

- Access to our extensive community networks, to help educate local communities about key health responses including with multicultural and indigenous communities.

- The ability to reach out to itinerant, rough sleepers and those who are at risk of homelessness to ensure they can access health responses such as vaccination appointments.

- In thin health markets outside of metropolitan cities, local governments often play a role to ensure the communities access to health services. Councils have sometimes provided office space for GPs to practice in rural and regional areas.

- Local governments own about one third of Australia's public infrastructure and offered to provide public facilities for mass vaccinations. When we did provide a facility and used our extensive communication networks, greater coverage was achieved. For example, Longreach Regional Council in Queensland hosted a four-day mass vaccination event in the local town hall. More than 1050 locals out of 3000 were immunised, preferring this method over going to a GP clinic. Longreach Mayor Tony Rayner noted that "Due to our small populations and remoteness, it made sense to undertake a whole-of-community vaccination program" [3].

- Some councils already run immunisation programs for children and flu shots. However, we were not funded by the Australian Government to roll out the COVID-19 vaccination program despite public demand and existing infrastructure.

2.4 Mental health

Following years of drought, the impact of the catastrophic bushfires over 2019/20 and then the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a need for urgent action to ensure ongoing access to physical and mental health services and supports.

Access to health services – including mental health services – is an ongoing matter of concern, particularly in rural and regional areas. Although healthcare is a state and federal responsibility, we often take on additional responsibilities to meet the needs of our communities.

Even outside of emergency and recovery situations, many rural and regional areas struggle to fill vacant medical, psychological and health and wellbeing positions.

Regional communities also experience higher levels of youth suicide, worsened by a lack of youth counselling services, programs and centres. Councils across Australia operate youth centres and services, but often cannot fund these for full time staff or hours of operation.

The Australian Government's extra mental health support of $74 million was welcomed to expand access to digital services and bolster phone and online support services that complemented the expansion of telehealth services. Ongoing digital services are needed to support rural and regional areas with thin health markets.

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[3] Young, healthy people given vaccine in Longreach | The West Australian

3. Support packages

3.1 JobKeeper

Local governments were excluded from JobKeeper, despite the significant impacts of COVID-19 restrictions on our operations. Local government raises around 3.5 percent of Australia's total taxation revenue per annum and has an annual operational expenditure of around $43 billion (2020-21). Council revenue outside of the rating system through user fees for recreational programs, childcare fees, facility hire etc ceased during the pandemic, drastically reducing this source of revenue.

While most local governments tried 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; childcare centres, waste facilities, caravan parks, regional airports and visitor centres.

Some state and territory governments stepped in to safeguard council jobs and delivery of essential community services during the 2021 COVID-19 outbreak. Councils forced to stand down permanent or temporary staff may have been eligible for a job retention allowance in some jurisdictions.

3.2 Local Roads and Community Infrastructure

We welcomed the Australian Government's Local Roads and Community Infrastructure (LRCI) Program to deliver priority local road and community infrastructure projects. This stimulus measure provided $3.25 billion for projects that will have lasting community benefits. As cited by the then Assistant Minister for Local Government Kevin Hogan "the program was a commitment to back local councils and their communities through COVID-19 and secure a stronger future out the other side of the pandemic."

Councils own and manage around a third of Australia's community infrastructure, including roads and cycle paths, parks and gardens, bridges, libraries, community centres, sporting grounds, and swimming pools. These community facilities support every aspect of our day-to-day activities. They keep us safe, healthy, connected, and employed.

The key finding in ALGA's 2021 National State of the Assets[4] report is that two thirds of all local government assets are in good condition while around one-third are not. Specifically, nearly 1 in 10 of all local government assets need significant attention, and 3 in every 100 assets may need to be replaced. It highlights that there is a gap between what local governments can spend on community infrastructure assets, and what we need to spend to ensure our assets are maintained. Replacing poor quality infrastructure is estimated to cost $51bn – and replacing infrastructure in fair condition will range from $106bn to $138bn.

Well-targeted infrastructure investment such as the LRCI program creates jobs and generates lasting economic, social and environmental benefits for communities. It lowers costs for business and governments, connects workers to their jobs, and plays a vital role in place making and community wellbeing. While the LRCI program just touched the surface of funds required to replace poor quality infrastructure, councils cannot raise the revenue required themselves with 3.5% of Australia's taxation revenue. Local governments need and welcome the support of other levels of government.

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[4] 2021 National State of the Assets, available at https://alga.com.au/2021-national-state-of-the-assets-report/

3.3 Early childhood education and care

The Australian Government's childcare package required all childcare centres to waive the gap fees, however, the compensatory assistance package was only available to private sector childcare providers. In some states, local government is a significant provider of childcare and early education services, especially in regional areas, where it is often the only provider. Both local government and private sector providers are reliant on the gap fees to provide the income to run the centres. However, council-run childcare centres were locked out of JobKeeper and from the childcare package. With considerable advocacy from our sector, and stress for workers and parents, the support payments were extended to those councils in lockdown areas only. The Australian Government's response disproportionally affected regional Australians as local government owned childcare providers struggled to maintain services.

For example, almost half of all NSW councils operate centre-based early childhood education and care (ECEC) services. Many of these ECEC services cater to a high number of vulnerable families and children with disability.

In 2020 as the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in lockdowns, the decision of the then Australian Government to exclude council ECEC services from JobKeeper eligibility placed these services at risk of closure, which would leave families without the excellent and affordable childcare services they need. One Sydney council estimated it would lose $3 million over a three-month period as a result of this decision and would struggle to keep its ECEC service's doors open, while others were losing up to $50,000 per week.

Ultimately, the NSW Government was forced to intervene with an $82 million support package for council run services. However, this highlights the importance of ensuring council-run ECEC services operate on a level playing field with other providers, to ensure the communities that rely on them are not unfairly disadvantaged.

The current ECEC funding model is not equitable. Private providers tend to charge higher fees and receive the same government funding as not-for-profit, community based and local government services. These inequities were brought into stark focus during the pandemic. There was a huge demand for essential services during COVID-19 lockdowns and many large private providers either closed rooms or closed services entirely during this period, but these providers still received federal funding through JobKeeper aimed at retaining staff. This funding was not available to councils, yet all NSW local government ECEC services remained open.

3.4 Impacts on local government from stimulus measures

Some stimulus measures impacted council workloads, especially acute in the planning and building certification functions, with no prior notice and consultation. The HomeBuilder program provided funds enabling eligible owner-occupiers to substantially renovate or building a new home. This shifted people who were looking at buying established housing to instead building a new home. Local government had already identified a skills shortage for planners and building certifiers before the pandemic. This created a public backlash against councils trying to approve development applications before grant deadlines expired when we did not have the capacity to address the increased demand on services.

3.5 Local government stimulus measures

Despite the loss of revenue being experienced by local governments, councils provided additional pandemic responses to support local businesses and our communities. Councils were eager to do what we could to support small businesses in our local areas during the pandemic. However, local

government does not have the depth of financial resources enjoyed by other spheres of government. It is therefore critical that the local government sector receives adequate financial support.

While some councils were able to offer additional support through waiving or deferring fees and charges, many councils were not, owing to financial constraints and the compounding impacts of bushfire and drought adding to pandemic costs.

Councils made decisions appropriate to the specific circumstances of our communities, and available funding and resources. Measures included:

- Deep cleaning of public spaces
- Easing restrictions on parking and licensed footpaths so that customers could sit outside at restaurants, bars, and cafes. Councils allowed small businesses to establish outdoor service stations where customers could collect takeaway food, drink, and other products without entering premises
- The planning application process was expedited as well as environmental controls reduced to accelerate construction work as economic stimulus
- Introduced pedestrian-first streets, temporary bike-lanes to allow greater social distancing, and promoted the use of active transportation
- Waived regulatory and inspection fees, rents and rates, and
- Direct funding support to local businesses.

3.6 Future responses

Local governments and the economy-wide digital transformation accelerated because of COVID-19 responses and will aid future responses. However, digital connectivity across Australian communities is not equitable. Regional and rural areas plus those from a lower socio-economic communities may not have access to digital information and intime reporting. Consideration of these communities is essential for future communication efforts.

Local governments provide essential services to our communities. Our inability to access Australian Government wage support coupled with the existing limits to local government financial sustainability should be considered in future responses. Supporting local government not only ensures vital services to all our communities are maintained but provides economic stimulus across the nation. Access to emergency response funds is especially important to regional and remote communities as they are the providers of last resort ensuring the welfare of our communities.

It is well recognised that recovery is best led at the local level, and we are well placed to deliver locally led recovery. This issue was also raised in the Tasmanian Audit Office's report COVID-19 – Pandemic response and mobilisation[5]. We overwhelmingly support locally led recovery and are supportive of the role that it has played in working with the federal, state and territory governments.

The coordination of recovery arrangements at the local, state, and federal level needs to be reviewed with attention to agreed roles and responsibilities, as has been recently demonstrated by the pandemic and other disasters such as significant flooding events in Queensland and New South Wales. It is essential that all three levels of government are coordinated, effective and timely in delivering recovery with the community. Future pandemics and other emergencies such as the increased frequency of climate change fuelled nature disasters, will continue to challenge

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[5] Report of the Auditor-General No.10 of 2021: COVID-19 – Pandemic response and mobilisation, 23 March 2021, available at: https://www.audit.tas.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2021-No-10-Report.pdf

government. Building capacity and capability from the ground up at the local government level is key to developing effective response and recovery arrangements.

Transparent, equitable and consistent decision-making is key to good governance and building public trust. Including local government in the decision-making process connects national government to communities, so no community is left behind.

Communications and engagement from the Australian Government was not aways clear. In developing the legal instruments to enact government decisions, the public sector needs sufficient capacity and capability to ensure effective communication, including with those enforcing and impacted by directions, to ensure the operational implications of the directions are consistently understood and addressed. To reduce misinformation and confusion, ensure public communications resources are developed and released at the same time as the directions and other requirements are introduced. For example, international travel arrangements, aged care arrangements and health advice.

For regional communities already struggling with thin health markets, future planning needs to consider how regional and remote areas can access pandemic health testing and screening services, local health care, transport arrangements to more specialised care and better arrangements to access immunisations. Katherine Town Council in the Northern Territory reported situations in which transport of critical ill patients was not readily available for transfer to Darwin due to a lack of vehicles.

4.   Recommendations

Reinstate local government representation to the primary intergovernmental forum in Australia, the National Cabinet as a full member extending to all meetings and voting rights.

Establishing and maintaining relationships with local government through federal, state and territory government agencies will allow for better engagement and access to community networks in the time of crisis.

Improve communications by using a number of channels including local government networks and non-digital ones, provide translations for non-English speakers, and provide them in a timely manner to counter disinformation.

Improve response and recovery mechanisms through planning and testing scenario responses across all levels of government, including local government. Building capacity and capability from the ground up at the local government level is key to developing effective response and recovery arrangements.

Future emergency responses need to consider how local government can be supported to maintain community services for community wellbeing.

Reinstate the Local Roads and Community Infrastructure Program or similar with ongoing funding of $500 million per year, with funding indexed annually. Well-targeted infrastructure investment creates jobs and generates lasting economic, social, and environmental benefits for communities.

Deliver improved and transparent government decision-making, informed by local government, to restore public trust and reduce inequalities in response measures. This will support democratic processes and reduce the risk of disruption at the local level.

Appendix 1: Local Government Assistance Measures during COVID-19

Summary of local government assistance measures

In general, councils implemented their own responses to COVID-19 based on capacity. Many councils choose to freeze rate increases, to freeze fees and charges, remitting fines and interest for late rate payments, settling creditor invoices expeditiously, and depending on capacity, implemented economic stimulus measures such as bringing forward capital works.

State and Territory Local Government Associations have been assisting councils through the process, through endorsing in-principal measures, coordination, providing templates and negotiating guidelines with State Governments.

Northern Territory

Some specific examples from Northern Territory local government COVID-19 responses include:

- Council meetings were limited to elected members and sometimes held online
- Citizenship ceremonies were held outside so mandatory social distancing could be observed
- Council staff were encouraged to be immunised and were tested regularly before work, wearing of masks was mandatory. At the height of COVID-19, only essential staff could work from council facilities
- Worked with other levels of government to ensure food supply chains continued to operate for remote communities. This extended to ensuring vulnerable communities members had access to essential supplies
- Providing a financial assistance package for ratepayers which included ceasing charging interest on overdue rates, waiving/deferring of rates based on financial hardship (both residential and commercial)
- Introduction of vouchers for residents to use in local businesses
- Waived market fees and alfresco dining fees
- Rates, Water and Sewerage concessions were offered through the Northern Territory Governments Business Hardship Register
- 2020-21 charges for these services were held at the 2019-20 levels
- COVID health packs were distributed to Community Care patients
- Several council facilities including libraries, visitor centres, waste facilities, swimming pools were closed for short amounts of time while they pivoted to different operational conditions
- Councils provided alternative services for aged care clients such as hampers. Youth packs for home-based activities when childcare centres closed
- Residents were unable to access social services such as Centrelink and there were no visiting officers as remote travel was restricted. Councils, such as Central Desert Regional Council, collaborated with Department of Territory Families, Housing and Communities to provide welfare services, food hamper packs and supported access to Centrepay, and
- Local governments drew on traditional owners and elders to encourage vaccination which assisted with getting residents to undertake the first round of mandatory vaccinations.

Tasmania

The following responses were adopted by some Tasmanian local governments:

- No penalties, charges, interest or debt collection for late rates payments and extended payment periods.
- Provide rent relief on council owned buildings where tenants are experiencing financial hardship until 30 June 2020.

- A common approach to hardship/assistance policies was devised with the Local Government Association of Tasmania and councils.
- Existing community grants were refocussed to support local business and not for profit recovery or conversion to a digital environment or circular economy until 30 June 2021.
- As a means of supporting local business recovery and injecting funds into communities in a timely manner, councils were encouraged to settle creditor invoices within a maximum 14-day timeframe (or sooner), irrespective of normal trading terms.
- A freeze in increases on general rates for 2020-21 period, however other fees and charges were indexed by CPI.

Western Australia

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 State Human Epidemic Controller 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.

Many WA councils choose to freeze rate increases, freeze increases to fees and charges and implement hardship policies. Some councils also implemented economic stimulus measures such as the bringing forward of capital works programs.

South Australia

South Australian councils ceased issuing penalties and charging interest for late rate payments and offered deferral to people under financial hardship. Some councils had a zero per cent rate increase for the 2020/21 financial year.

Public health monitoring and enforcement is customarily conducted by Authorised Officers (more commonly known as Environmental Health Officers) under the South Australian Public Health Act

2011. For COVID-19 operations, compliance monitoring could be conducted by any council officer. This function allowed for monitoring, reporting and education of health measures.

New South Wales

In NSW, councils provide direct employment for almost 200, 000 people and expend about $40 billion annually buying goods and services, supporting thousands of small and medium-sized business enterprises. Councils were denied financial assistance through JobKeeper and suffered significant revenue losses during the COVID lockdowns. Many councils depleted financial reserves to continue delivering the services our communities need and expect.

Splinter Awards

The NSW Local Government (COVID-19) Splinter (Interim) Award (the "Splinter Award") was first made by Local Government NSW (LGNSW) and local government unions in 2020 to assist NSW councils to keep staff employed during the COVID pandemic.

The Splinter Award was remade in 2021 and varied on 25 May, 6 July and 29 July 2021 to include additional employers that have opted-in to be covered by the award. 127 councils and county councils were covered by the award.

The Splinter Award provided special interim arrangements that gave councils and county councils greater flexibility to provide suitable alternative duties for permanent staff unable to perform their regular work, and clear leave balances, because of COVID Public Health Orders.

The intent was to retain as many people as possible, for as long as possible, as councils navigated through this pandemic.

Business support measures

Each council implemented its own COVID-19 response and recovery initiatives. Responses varied based on local needs and capacity. Some examples of council to business support include:

- **Lake Macquarie City Council**'s 'Vibrant Scene' pilot project allowed food businesses to apply to use council-owned land for outdoor dining and food van hamlets free of charge. Businesses and council staff come together to design outdoor dining 'precincts' on council-owned land such as parks, road reserves, carparks, etc. This collaboration ensured the precincts were designed to balance the needs of the community and businesses alike.

- **Northern Beaches Council** developed a business support plan in consultation with its five local chambers of commerce. The plan included a package of temporary measures, such as waivers for six months on outdoor dining, food health on premises and fire safety fees as well as more flexible and pragmatic arrangements for supplier deliveries to supermarkets and parking for take-away pickups. The package brought cost savings to local businesses of approximately $1.5 million.

- **Randwick City Council** provided a $2.3 million support package that included allowing gym and fitness groups to use council parks temporarily free of charge so long as groups have no more than 10 people and comply with any Public Health Orders, as well as temporary rent relief for businesses and not for profits using council owned facilities.

- **Penrith City Council** temporarily waived fees and charges for outdoor dining in the Penrith and St Marys CBDs, like multiple councils across the state that have done likewise.

Beaches and safety in public spaces

To prevent a reoccurrence of community concerns about the management of Sydney beaches (with overcrowding during early days of the pandemic), LGNSW convened a roundtable with Mayors whose local government areas cover the major Sydney beaches, NSW Police and Surf Life Saving NSW in order to establish what is needed to ensure that these important public spaces could be best managed as the weather continued to warm and community use increased.

The NSW Office of Local Government had advised councils that it is a matter for each council to determine whether or not to open any outdoor spaces for which they are responsible and to establish conditions that apply to their use. However, councils could not manage transport and access to these spaces and did not have powers or resources for enforcement when public spaces, such as beaches, become overcrowded.

As a result of the roundtable, local governments, NSW Police and Surf Life Saving NSW committed to working together to share real time information about beach capacity and share local government management plans across the beaches to ensure, where possible, there were clear and consistent decision authorities and rules for actions required.

Food hampers

Since 2018, the Australian Government had been progressively cutting funding to the program providing a basic living allowance (typically 89% of JobSeeker), casework support, assistance in finding housing, and access to torture and trauma counselling for vulnerable asylum seekers in the community while they waited to have their claim for refugee status determined.

From more than 13,000 people in the program in 2018, the federal government removed more than 7,500 people from the program leaving vulnerable asylum seekers in the community at risk of destitution and homelessness, and leaving many families without any income support. This situation came to a head in 2020 when this vulnerable cohort was joined by thousands of international students who found themselves unable to work during lockdowns and with no other way to support themselves.

The lack of support from other spheres of government put pressure on councils and non-government organisations and services, including local organisations and charities that were already overstretched.

Local Government NSW had advocated to the previous federal government – the sphere of government that ordinarily has responsibility for welfare of asylum seekers and temporary visa holders – but to no avail. The response from the federal government was that 'foreign students should be supporting themselves first and foremost.'

LGNSW then wrote directly to the NSW Premier, acknowledging that while this was properly the responsibility of the federal government, something needed to be done in the absence of any support.

OzHarvest was one of the community organisations that did terrific work in partnership with local government. With funding and premises from the City of Sydney and then with the later funding from the NSW Government, OzHarvest was able to provide food hampers to thousands of international students, asylum seekers and other temporary visa holders from two locations in central and inner western Sydney.

Noting the demand and that some students were travelling from afar to obtain the food hampers, these partners then looked to expanding to a third site in western Sydney.

Canterbury Bankstown Council was identified as a region in need and with a council able to partner with OzHarvest to deliver a hamper hub and much needed food relief that was appropriate and relevant to the local context. This hub was established in Lakemba.

Later during the pandemic, the NSW Government responded to calls for more support for those left vulnerable by the pandemic, with the announcement of more than $12 million in funding for temporary visa holders, including refugees and asylum seekers who did not qualify for Australian Government support packages, and $20 million for temporary crisis accommodation for stranded international students and temporary visa holders.