
Appendix three – About the audit

Audit objective

This audit assessed the effectiveness of NSW Government agencies' coordination of the COVID-19 response in selected LGAs (an 'LGA of concern' and a regional LGA) after June 2021

Audit criteria

We addressed the audit objective by assessing two lines of inquiry:

1. **Coordinated response and strategy:** Were government decisions to apply LGA specific Public Health Orders supported by effective crisis management governance and planning frameworks?
2. **Tactical coordination and implementation/management of Public Health Orders:** Have agencies effectively coordinated in the communication (and enforcement) of Public Health Orders?

The following audit criteria will be used to enable the audit team to form conclusions against the overall audit objective:

Coordinated response and strategy:

- There were effective governance arrangements in place to support cross-government consultation when making decisions regarding public health responses in selected LGAs.
 - Relevant agencies and stakeholders were consulted regarding changes to Public Health Orders
 - Relevant agencies had the opportunity to review and comment on advice provided to government by external stakeholders
 - Advice to government included crisis management arrangements such as contingency and scenario plans, workforce management/surge plans, continuous improvement and redundancy planning
 - Agencies have established inter-agency data, information and advice sharing arrangements to support effective advice, decision-making and coordinated action
- Relevant agencies provided up-to-date evidence in their advice to government on Public Health Orders
 - Relevant agencies provided clear advice to government on Public Health Orders
 - Advice provided to decision makers was evidence based
 - Public health strategy was updated to reflect lessons learned in the first wave and subsequent events (including outbreaks in, and lessons from, other jurisdictions).

Tactical coordination and implementation/management of Public Health Orders

- Planning and governance frameworks used to coordinate communication and enforcement were updated based on latest evidence and the lessons from the first wave and subsequent events (including outbreaks in other jurisdictions).
- Agencies effectively coordinated the communication to frontline sector staff about the orders.
- Agencies effectively coordinated the communication to, and feedback from, communities impacted by the lockdowns.
- Agencies effectively coordinated to implement the orders
 - agencies effectively coordinated to provide specific supports to the communities impacted by lockdowns and to essential workers
 - agencies effectively coordinated to enforce Public Health Orders
 - agencies engaged in continuous improvement, where possible.
- Agencies have appropriate risk management arrangements to support coordination of the Public Health Orders
 - risk management arrangements recognise interagency relationships and agency-specific risks.

Audit scope and focus

In assessing the criteria, we focused on the coordinated response and strategy involved in application of Public Health Orders from a statewide perspective and with detailed perspectives in the Local Government Areas of Fairfield and Dubbo.

The audit assessed how agencies participated in cross-government governance arrangements, including:

- the provision of advice and intelligence to decision-makers
- enforcement operations seeking compliance with the public health response, including Public Health Orders
- the coordination of emergency management arrangements
- arrangements that complemented emergency management arrangements in turn enabling more willing compliance with the Public Health Orders.

Effectiveness of performance and coordination across agencies was reviewed through the:

- application of governance frameworks and entities to drive a coordinated approach to activities that supported compliance with Public Health Orders
- coordination of intelligence, data and advice to advise decision-makers, implement decisions, enable compliance, support communities and monitor performance and achievement of outcomes
- coordination and, where required, tailoring of communications to enable compliance and inform the community about supports
- sharing insights and impacts from frontline staff, communities and business back to developers of policy and advice and decision-makers
- learning and improving in an agile manner to anticipate and respond to the next challenge.

The arrangements covered by the scope of this audit included the State Emergency Management arrangements governed by the *State Emergency and Recovery Management Act (1989)*. This includes the:

- State Emergency Management Committee (SEMC, secretariat: OEM/Resilience),
- the State Emergency Operations Controller (SEOCN, typically Commissioner or Deputy Commissioner of the NSW Police Force)
- State Emergency Operations Centre (SEOC)
- The same structures were replicated at regional and local level. The LEMCs are chaired by Council CEOs or CEO equivalents whereas the LEOCON is a police role.

The scope also included the **public health arrangements** governed by the *Public Health Act* (1990) including the powers to issue public health orders. The *COVID-19 Legislation Amendment (Emergency Measures) Act No. 1* (March 2020) further amended aspects of the development of Public Health Orders (PHOs).

Public health crisis arrangements were defined in a pandemic-based sub-plan that sits within the broader emergency management arrangements described above. NSW Health operated a State Health Emergency Operations Centre to support these arrangements and to work with the Public Health Unit in such an emergency. As with State emergency management arrangements, the Health arrangements had a statewide focus supported with delivery at the regional and local levels.

Because the arrangements operated as a sub-plan, much of the existing structures were used and liaison officers from NSW Health and the NSW Police Force sit on various committees and bodies to provide coordination.

The scope also included the **Delta Microstrategy Executive Committee** (ExCo). This was a complementary coordination arrangement that was set up in late July 2021.

- It was led by the Secretary, NSW Health and the SEOCON.
- It included representation across government to enable the right support for the community to comply with public health orders intended to suppress the spread of the pandemic.
- The pillars under the Micro-strategy focused on supporting aspects of the response such as communications and well-being measures.
- The Micro-strategy also provided a structure and arrangements for governing coordination and enabling collaboration across multiple agencies.

Although the Department of Customer Service (DCS) advised the NSW Government separately throughout Delta its work in communications was embedded as a working group within the Delta Microstrategy

A governance structure established by the Department of Premier and Cabinet (DPC) to function as a Program Management Office for the March 2020 variant was not used in the Delta crisis although there is some overlap between this structure and that used by the ExCo.

Alongside these governance frameworks and arrangements was coordination with the operational arms of government that delivered health, enforcement, emergency, communications and well-being responses as well as entities in local government, Federal government (including the Australian Defence Force) community, business, industry, and non-governmental organisations and charities.

Audit exclusions

The audit did not seek to:

- examine the rollout of the vaccination program
- specifically examine operational activities such as enforcement or clinical service provision
- make assessments on the quality of advice, supports or communications
- assess the integrity of grants programs either to businesses or community groups
- evaluate the nature of coordination with other jurisdictions during the pandemic although this did not exclude use of lessons learned from other jurisdictions during this and previous pandemics
- question the merits of government policy objectives.

Audit approach

The audit team conducted the audit in accordance with ASAE 3500 'Performance Engagements' and ASAE 3000 'Assurance Engagements Other than Audits or Reviews of Historical Financial Information'. The standards require the audit team to comply with relevant ethical requirements and plan and perform the audit to obtain reasonable assurance about an activity's performance against identified criteria and express a reasonable assurance conclusion against the audit objective.

Our procedures included:

- Interviewing staff on governance bodies and other staff who worked on coordination efforts across all auditee agencies. The main focus of interviews were to understand and analyse how coordination was achieved, communications, the interaction of emergency management arrangements with operations and supporting compliance with orders. The audit involved consultation with other stakeholders including:
 - Dubbo Regional Council
 - Fairfield City Council
 - Multicultural NSW.
- Examining minutes and other documentation of decisions-made including revisions, translation of Public Health Orders into operational instructions, risk and other governance plans, resource requirements, requests and sharing, communications and message plans and the approach to tailoring, records of meetings with communities impacted and how information was shared across agencies.
- Analysing data includes assessing data and evidence sources used, the balance of use and sharing arrangements, information and data around supports and communications within targeted LGAs, infringement data including QAs and alignment to Public Health Orders and use of demographic and cultural information for decision-making around enabling compliance and providing additional support where required.
- Evidence of lessons learned and planning including re-use or refinement of arrangements used from March 2020-early 2021 and incorporation of lessons from other jurisdictions.

We will also examine:

- documentation from other stakeholders obtained throughout the audit such as research and studies, statistical data and analysis
- information from other jurisdictions for comparison.

Audit methodology

Our performance audit methodology is designed to satisfy Australian Audit Standard ASAE 3500 Performance Engagements and other professional standards. The standards require the audit team to comply with relevant ethical requirements and plan and perform the audit to obtain reasonable assurance and draw a conclusion on the audit objective. Our processes have also been designed to comply with requirements specified in the *Government Sector Audit Act 1983* and the *Local Government Act 1993*.

Acknowledgements

We gratefully acknowledge the cooperation and assistance provided by the Department of Premier and Cabinet, Resilience NSW, NSW Health, the Department of Customer Service, the NSW Police Force, Aboriginal Affairs NSW, Fairfield City Council, Dubbo Regional Council and Multicultural NSW.

Audit cost

The estimated cost of this audit is \$680,000.