

Report highlights

What the report is about

This audit assessed the effectiveness of NSW Government agencies' coordination of the response to COVID-19, with a focus on the Delta variant outbreak in the Dubbo and Fairfield Local Government Areas (LGA) between June and November 2021. We audited five agencies - the Department of Premier and Cabinet, NSW Health, the NSW Police Force, Resilience NSW and the Department of Customer Service.

The audit also considered relevant planning and preparation activities that occurred prior to June 2021 to examine how emergency management and public health responses learned from previous events.

What we found

Prior to Delta, agencies developed capability to respond to COVID-19 related challenges.

However, lessons learned from prior reviews of

emergency management arrangements, and from other jurisdictions, had not been implemented when Delta emerged in June 2021. As a result, agencies were not as fully prepared as they could have been to respond to the additional challenges presented by Delta.

Gaps in emergency management plans affected agencies' ability to support individuals, families and businesses impacted by restrictions to movement and gathering such as stay-at-home orders. In LGAs of concern, modest delays of a few days had a significant impact on people, especially those most vulnerable.

On 23 July 2021, the NSW Government established a cross-government coordinating approach, the Delta Microstrategy, which complemented existing emergency management arrangements, improved coordination between NSW Government agencies and

led to more effective local responses.

Where possible, advice provided to government was supported by cross-government consultation, up-to-date evidence and insights. Public Health Orders were updated as the response to Delta intensified or to address unintended consequences of previous orders. The frequency of changes hampered agencies' ability to effectively communicate changes to frontline staff and the community in a rapidly evolving situation.

The NSW Government could provide greater transparency and accountability over decisions to apply Public Health Orders during a pandemic.

What we recommended

The audit made seven recommendations intended to improve transparency, accountability and preparedness for future emergency events.

Fast facts

108

days that Greater Sydney was subject to stay-at-home public health orders (26 June to 11 October 2021)

79.4%

of households in the Fairfield City Council LGA that speak a language other than English (ABS 2021 Census)

\$50m

in grants and payments to support individuals, communities, NGOs and Councils in high-risk areas from the Delta Microstrategy

113

Public Health Orders in force or commenced between 1 June and 30 November 2021

16.6%

of the population in the Dubbo Regional LGA that is Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander (ABS 2021 Census)

60

community languages used across live reads and community radio at the peak of the Delta outbreak (August 2021)