



Tasmanian Council of Social Service Inc.

Submission to Public Accounts Committee inquiry into the Government's response to COVID-19

August 2020



INTEGRITY
COMPASSION
INFLUENCE

About TasCOSS

TasCOSS is the peak body for the community services sector in Tasmania. Our membership includes individuals and organisations active in the provision of community services to Tasmanians living on low incomes and/or in vulnerable and disadvantaged circumstances. TasCOSS represents the interests of its members and their clients to government, regulators, the media and the public. Through our advocacy and policy development, we draw attention to the causes of poverty and disadvantage, and promote the adoption of effective solutions to address these issues.

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Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Tasmanian Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Tasmania's community services industry has been essential to the success of our state's health-focussed, compassionate response to the COVID-19 crisis. Together our more than 10,000 workers and tens of thousands of associated volunteers have worked with government, business and communities to support the needs of those people whose circumstances changed as a direct result of the response, as well as 120,000 Tasmanians who continue to live in vulnerable circumstances. Our industry's capacity to respond quickly and effectively has been a key to the success of the emergency response and the ongoing wellbeing of Tasmanians from all walks of life, and we know the heightened level of need will continue throughout the COVID-19 recovery period.

From this experience we learned that, despite the challenges of service delivery during a pandemic, reducing our services was not an option during a crisis with demand for support coming from a wider and deeper cross section of Tasmanians. We also learned that, with the right support and enabling environment from government, our industry was able to find new ways to deliver services and connect a wider range of Tasmanians with the support they need.

This submission draws on the experience of our members to highlight the issues that arose during the initial stages of the pandemic and how our industry mobilised and adapted to continue to support Tasmanians. We focus our response on the first and third terms of reference – 1) timeliness and efficacy of the government's response and 2) the impact, progress and outcome of the Government's economic recovery plan for Tasmania.

Timeliness and efficacy of the government's response

From the perspective of the community services industry, the Tasmanian Government's response to the immediate impact of COVID had two aspects. The first was targeted support to specific population groups. Significant measures include:

- Rent relief measures and moratorium on evictions. These measures meant that people who had experienced loss of income due to COVID could negotiate rent reductions and were protected from eviction for a period of time if they were unable to pay their rent.
- No utility disconnections. Aurora and TasGas committed to a moratorium on disconnections for people unable to pay a utility bill. This eased financial pressures for customers who had lost income as a result of COVID-19.
- Financial support for temporary visa holders. Because Jobseeker payment does not extend to people on temporary visas (TPVs), the Tasmanian Government stepped in to provide one-off payments to TPV holders. While not sufficient as a form of ongoing support, the payments were welcomed by TPV holders.
- Accommodation for people experiencing primary homelessness. The Tasmanian Government purchased accommodation in hotels for people who would otherwise be sleeping on the street.

It also provided more funding to the Safe Night Space to enable it to operate 24/7 and in the North and North West of the State.

- Additional and expanded funding for people escaping family and domestic violence. This was prompted by evidence-based concerns that at times of stress family and sexual violence can increase. This funding enhanced the capacity of our industry to provide support for Tasmanians who required services, including emergency housing, as well as primary prevention awareness campaigns.
- The Tasmanian Government launched a campaign to raise awareness of elder abuse. This was part of an effort to address concerns that stress and isolation caused by COVID-19 could result in increased instances of elder abuse.

We believe that these measures provided essential and, for the most part, timely relief to people and households who experienced financial hardship and required other support as a result of the impact of COVID-19. We encourage the Government to monitor closely the ongoing situation of these and other vulnerable groups and consider extending current supports and/or introducing new measures as appropriate.

The second aspect of the Tasmanian Government's response to COVID-19 was direct support for community services organisations (CSOs). This enabled service providers to continue to offer services, often by changing their service model to adapt to COVID-related restrictions and the needs and, where possible, preferences of their service users. Key among these were:

- Investing in a community services industry coordination role for TasCOSS. This facilitated communication both between the industry and government, and within the industry. CSOs found this to be an extremely valuable communication channel.
- Essential Technology Funds. These allowed CSOs to purchase hardware and software to enable service staff to work from home and to deliver services remotely, including by providing devices and data to service users.
- Flexibility of contracts. Government funders informed many organisations they were not required to deliver all contract outcomes or deliver on usual reporting during the pandemic period. This was highly valued by the industry because it allowed them to adapt their services to ensure continuity for their service users. (As noted below, however, some organisations struggled to deliver COVID-related responses as well as deliver their routine services.)
- Additional funding to provide mental health and family violence support. Funding to these areas allowed services to offer more services and engage with people in the population particularly vulnerable as a result of isolation, anxiety and the financial and other stressors of COVID-19.
- Funding for Alcohol, Tobacco and Other Drugs Council (ATDC) to ensure service continuity. The funding supported alcohol, tobacco and other drugs services to respond to the impact of COVID-19 at a time of heightened demand for those services.
- Various other organisations including emergency relief providers, Neighbourhood Houses Tasmania, Council of the Aging, Youth Network of Tasmania and Volunteering Tasmania also

received funds to respond to the impacts of Covid-19 on their service-users or population groups.

The industry has valued close and open communication with the government during the pandemic, including the ability to work with the State Control Centre on issues arising for Tasmanians and the community services industry, and work with funders around the need to vary contracts and reporting requirements. It is hoped this will continue. As we move into the recovery phase, more consultation will be key, particularly in regard to the ability to provide services to cohorts that will remain or become newly vulnerable to the ongoing and longer-term impacts of COVID-19.

The collaboration and partnerships that have emerged in communities were vital to ensuring essential needs have been met, including through new models of service delivery. As acknowledged in the Premier's Economic and Social Recovery Advisory Council's (PESRAC) Interim Report, the Government's recovery plan needs to enable locally-based service providers and communities, particularly in the regions, to continue to lead community-based recovery.¹

The impact, progress and outcome of the Government's economic recovery plan for Tasmania

This section focuses on areas the community services industry believes the Government needs to address in the next stage of its recovery plan.

Many organisations expect the current impacts to continue for some weeks and months. Foremost among these will be the increased demand on services resulting from COVID-19 impacts such as loss of employment, the mental health effects of isolation and frayed personal relationships. Areas of particular need will be:

- Those who experienced disproportionate levels of job losses – particularly young people and women.
- Those who experienced higher levels of isolation and anxiety, particularly older people, people with disabilities, LGBTIQ+ people and those with existing mental health needs.
- Temporary visa holders who require assistance with rent, purchase of food and other living expenses.
- Those who struggle to access, afford or use digital technologies, particularly when more services and employment opportunities require online access and skills.
- Those already experiencing hardship and disadvantage, who are likely to face additional challenges such as competing with more people to obtain employment.

There will also be ongoing impacts on the ability of CSOs to deliver their services. Requirements around workplace safety, including additional spacing, sanitising and need for Personal Protective Equipment, are already having an impact. Other challenges include supporting clients living in vulnerable

¹ https://www.pesrac.tas.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0016/250441/Interim_Report.pdf

circumstances to access services, upskilling existing staff and restructuring workforces and the costs incurred by offering multiple methods of service delivery that were previously not offered.

For some community services organisations, their focus on responding rapidly and effectively to the immediate impacts of COVID-19 meant they have been unable to plan adequately for a smooth transition to service delivery post-COVID-19. This includes:

- ensuring there is sufficient funding to continue current operations;
- in some cases needing to ‘double deliver’ on COVID-19 responses as well as original KPIs;
- preparedness for a potential ‘second wave’;
- an expected increase in demand for many services, particularly as some of the current supports drop away, for example Job Seeker supplement, protections around rental eviction and electricity disconnections; and
- the additional resources required to manage the safe return of staff to the workplace, including by supporting their mental health needs.

The key point here is there will not be a ‘snap back’ to business as usual for the community services industry; it will have to continue to adapt to changing service demand. Much of this changing demand will be driven by changes to the Commonwealth payments of JobKeeper and Job Seeker. Those changes will include increased demand by service users due to reductions in income as well as reduced ability to meet that demand for those organisations who lose staff or staff hours as a result of reductions in JobKeeper funding. Another COVID-19 outbreak would also have unknown effects on service demand and delivery.

Conclusion

The coronavirus pandemic represents a serious challenge to the health and wellbeing of Tasmania’s people and its economy. Without downplaying the difficulties we will face in overcoming this challenge, the recovery also presents us with opportunities- opportunities to do things differently so that we are better protected from and prepared for future shocks, whether health, economic, social or environmental. Key to this is investing in our greatest asset – our people. We have already seen what we can achieve when governments, business and industry and communities pull together in a crisis. Let’s harness that same spirit to ensure that our recovery from COVID is led by and for our people and our communities.

Recommendations

Investing in the community services industry

The community services industry responded to COVID-19 by making significant organisational and workforce changes at the same time as it designed new ways of delivering services. Many of these changes were possible because of the supports outlined above. In order to continue to work in this way amid the uncertainty of COVID-19 the industry needs a funding and contracting environment that enables this.

- 1) Combined pandemic planning between government and the community services industry. COVID-19 has established some excellent partnerships and models of working collaboratively, which supported those Tasmanians most affected by COVID-19 and could be built on for future crises. This should include strategic coordination, clear communication about the response plan and how each part of government, business and the community fits into that plan. A review of how the existing model, based on the Recovery Partners Network, worked during the pandemic would be a useful exercise..
- 2) Longer-term commitment to core government funding/multi-year funding agreements. This will allow organisations to provide more secure employment tenure as well as enable organisations to make longer-term and more strategic decisions about future workforce and service delivery requirements.
- 3) Additional funding to meet the increasing demand for services. We know that the aftermath of COVID-19 will be felt for many years, and many Tasmanians will need additional support to help keep them well and in a position to participate in their communities and in the economy.
- 4) Flexibility around contracts to allow delivery of service as the community's needs. This enables organisations the flexibility to respond to different levels and types of demand and to tailor service delivery in ways that put the person at the centre.
- 5) Flexible funding pools for drawing on in times of emergency. This could cover costs for: cleaning, sanitising and PPE equipment; infrastructure improvements to enable compliance with physical distancing and other requirements of a crisis; digital technology and training, for service delivery staff as well as service users.

Investing in Tasmanians

We encourage government investment in economic stimulus measures that create secure jobs, build our resilience to future health, economic and environmental shocks and help to reduce disadvantage.

- 6) Investment in social and affordable housing. The stay-at-home message during the worst of the COVID-19 outbreak so far in Tasmania highlighted more than ever the importance of safe and secure shelter. Investing in more affordable housing will not only improve the community's health and wellbeing, it will create direct and indirect jobs in construction and other sectors.²
- 7) Household energy efficiency upgrades. Investment in energy efficiency and solar now would quickly create thousands of jobs (in training, auditing, installation, manufacturing and retail), increase household disposable incomes to spend in the economy (through reduced household energy costs), and lead to improved health and wellbeing. The investment would also deliver on other government priorities including reduced energy bills, cuts in carbon emissions and reduced load on the electricity grid.³

² See for example Shelter's submission to PESRAC, June 2020 https://shelertas.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Shelter-Tas-Response-to-PESRAC_June2020_FINAL.pdf

³ ACOSS, Joint proposal for economic stimulus: health affordable homes, a national low-income energy productivity program, June 2020 <https://www.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Economic-Stimulus-Healthy-Affordable-Homes-NLEPP-June-2020-Final-18062020.pdf>

- 8) Digital connectivity and inclusion. As the Government recognises, digital inclusion brings multiple benefits to Tasmania's economy and society.⁴ And, in an increasingly connected world, internet access must be regarded as an essential service. It brings benefits to managing health and finance, accessing education and employment, connecting with friends and family and of course navigating government services which are increasingly online. Investing in greater digital connection across the state and in the knowledge, confidence and skills required to take advantage of that connection would benefit thousands of Tasmanians who are currently not accessing the internet – up to 25% of households in some parts of the state.⁵
- 9) Community-based mental health initiatives. The impact of COVID-19 on the mental health of Tasmanians is expected to continue for some time.⁶ Addressing this ongoing need, and need that is expected to be at higher levels than pre-COVID-19, requires an appropriately-resourced integrated, community-based mental health response.⁷
- 10) Establishing a robust food security system. Tasmania's social and economic recovery depends on our population having their fundamental needs met, including access to affordable, nutritious food. Building a food system that ensures this access, and that is resilient to future shocks, would also create jobs and income throughout the food chain, from primary producers to logistics and transportation to high-end food retailing.⁸
- 11) Employment and training programs, especially targeting groups more harshly affected by COVID's impact on employment such as women and young people and those at risk of long-term unemployment. Helping Tasmanians to get back into work is central to our recovery. Employment and training programs should focus on areas of workforce need, among which is community services, where workforce shortages exist and where demand is expected to grow, particularly in disability, aged care and early childhood.⁹ Programs should include adult literacy skills, digital literacy, health literacy and other adult learning because of the strong social, economic and health benefits in doing so.

⁴ Tasmanian Department of Premier and Cabinet, *Our Digital Future: Tasmanian Government Strategy for Digital Transformation*, September 2019

http://www.dpac.tas.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0010/485704/DRAFT_Our_Digital_Future.pdf

⁵ TasCOSS, *Understanding Digital Inclusion in Tasmania: Report on Research Findings*, 2018 <https://tascoss.org.au/new-submission-to-the-tascoss-vault-11/>

⁶ Mental Health Council of Tasmania, Media Release; *An Opportunity to Build a Mental Health System that Supports all Tasmanians* May 2020 <https://mhct.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/MEDIA-RELEASE-An-Opportunity-to-Build-a-Mental-Health-System-that-Supports-All-Tasmanians-15052020.pdf>

⁷ Mental Health Council of Tasmania, *Impacts on the Sector and Population Mental Health: Response to the Premier's Economic and Social Recovery Advisory Council's Phase One Consultation*, June 2020 <http://mhct.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/MHCT-PESRAC-Response-05062020.pdf>

⁸ Tasmanian Healthy Families Food Coalition, Submission to PESRAC, 2020 <https://www.eatwelltas.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/THFFC-submission.pdf>

⁹ Lisa Denny, *Insight Seven: Workforce Polarisation in Tasmania: Implications for the Future of Work and Training*, 2019 https://www.utas.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0004/1209784/UTAS-ISC-Insight-Seven-Workforce-Polarisation.pdf