



Tasmanian
Audit Office

COVID-19 – Response to Social Impacts

Report of the Auditor-General

No. 3 of 2021-22



Audit objective

To express a reasonable assurance opinion on the effectiveness of the Government's¹ processes to identify and agree the high priority social impacts to address as a consequence of the pandemic.

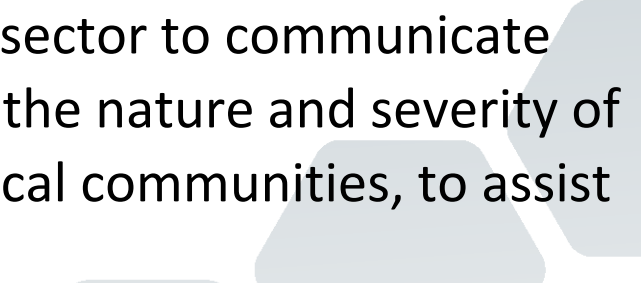
1. 'Government' refers to the Tasmanian Government unless otherwise stated.



Criteria

How robust were the Government's processes to identify and agree high priority social impacts to address resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic?

Sub-criteria:

1. Were sound structures put in place at statewide and regional levels to facilitate well-informed, timely and agile decision-making?
 2. Were effective communication channels established to enable Government entities and the community sector to communicate with Government decision-makers about the nature and severity of specific social impacts, including within local communities, to assist the Government in targeting support?
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Criteria

3. Were there effective mechanisms for disseminating information downwards to enable Government entities (at statewide, regional and local levels) and the community sector to operate effectively to address social impacts?
4. Was effective use made of information from relevant sources, including information obtained from Government and other organisations representing specific social groups to:
 - understand the issues and risks posed by the pandemic to the wellbeing of specific social groups
 - identify and agree the social needs to be prioritised and addressed by Government?



Scope

- Timeline: period leading up to 19 March 2020 to April 2021.
- Arrangements and activities at statewide and regional levels.
- Lead agencies reviewed:
 - Department of Police, Fire and Emergency Management
 - Department of Premier and Cabinet
 - Department of Communities Tasmania.
- We did not examine the Government's response to COVID-19, the operation of PESRAC, or the validity of the Government's decisions in determining which social needs to prioritise for support.



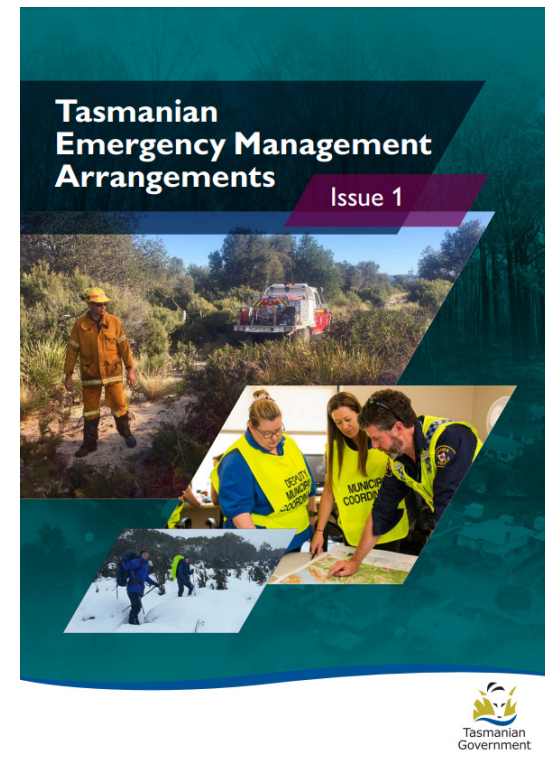
Conclusion

Except for the matter described below, processes put in place by the Government to identify and agree high priority social impacts to address resulting from the pandemic, as measured against the audit criteria, were, in all material respects, effective.

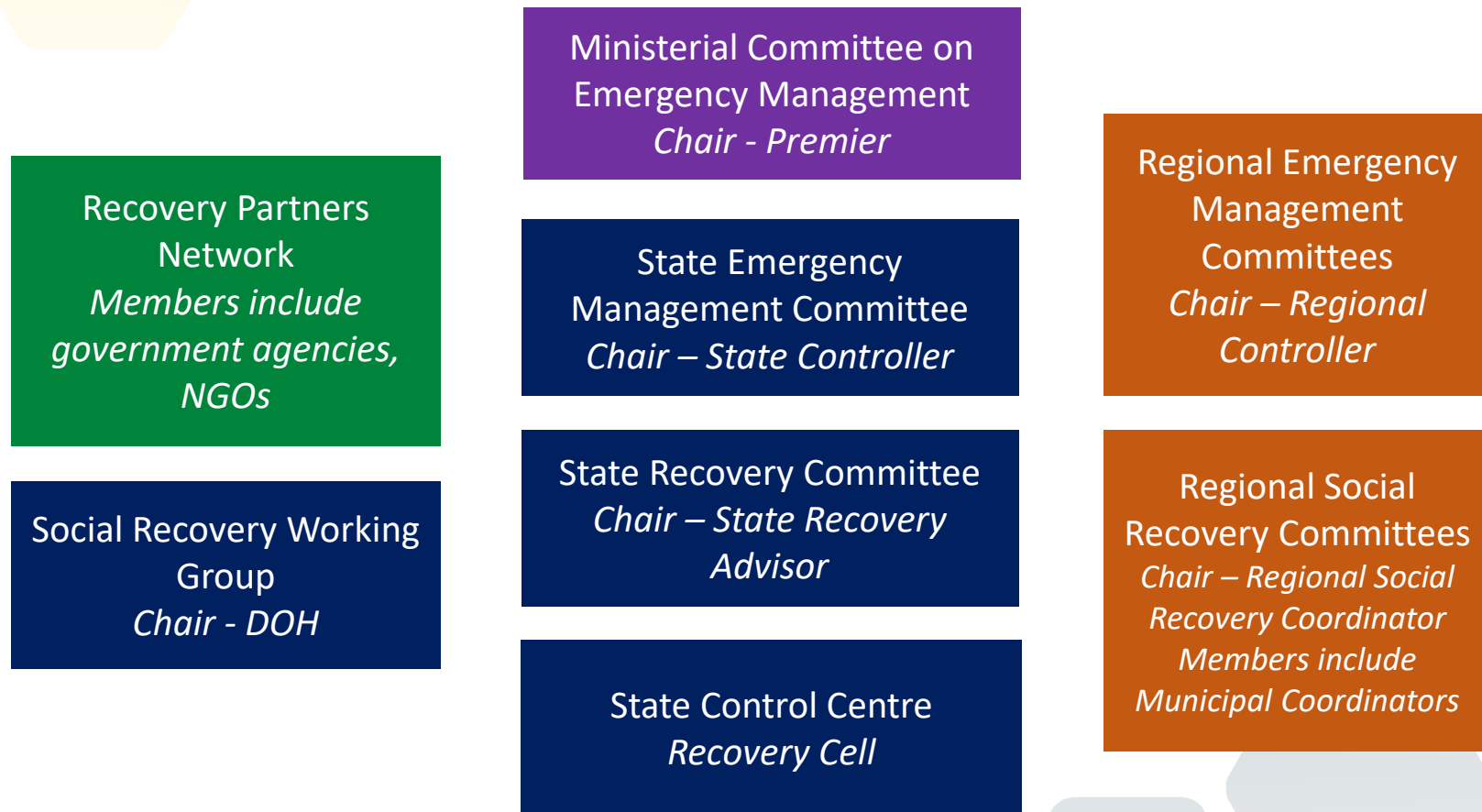
The strength of the Government's processes for identifying and agreeing the high priority social impacts to address resulting from the pandemic were not effective, as measured against sub-criterion 1, due to there being inadequate training and scenario testing. Some training had been provided to role holders at a State level, but this training was inadequate for a pandemic situation, and no training had been provided to incumbent regional and municipal recovery coordinators.

Introduction

- Social impact - the effects the pandemic and the Australian and Tasmanian Government suppression measures have had on the well-being of Tasmanians.
- The Government needed to make decisions quickly to preserve public health and ensure people received crucial social support.
- The Tasmanian Emergency Management Arrangements (TEMA) incorporate the Australian principle that emergency management should be locally and community led.



State and regional governance structure



Structures to facilitate decision making

- Aspects of the State-level governance arrangements were particularly effective to support decision-making, for example:
 - the State Recovery Advisor's direct relationship with National Cabinet
 - the daily Heads of Agency Coronavirus Interdepartmental Committee meetings
 - use of the Recovery Partners Network as a key forum for exchange of information between the Government and community sector.

Structures to facilitate decision making

- Operationalisation of the TEMA resulted in missed opportunities for using established networks, capability and capacity within regional and local areas.
- Some key role holders were unclear about the governance arrangements, their roles and responsibilities.
- Inadequate training and scenario testing.
- Inadequate oversight of the causal link between economic and social impacts at a regional level.
- Capacity was challenging at all levels of government.

Effectiveness of communication channels

- Mechanisms for escalating issues to the SCC from State, regional and local government levels and the community sector were mostly effective:
 - the formal Weekly Needs Assessment process enabled effective targeting of social impacts for support
 - use of the Recovery Partners Network for information exchange.
- Ineffective mechanisms for the Social Recovery Working Group to escalate issues.

Effectiveness of communication channels

- Communication downwards from State-level through the formal governance routes was only partly effective, hampered by the limited capacity at State-level.
- For a time this communication gap was successfully addressed through SCC Government Liaison role holders attending Regional Social Recovery and Recovery Partners Network meetings.
- Municipal Recovery Coordinators in particular felt they could not rely on information received from the regional committees to lead an informed response at a local level.

Effectiveness of communication channels

- The large volume of information received from different agencies made it unmanageable for many to extract the information directly relevant to them.

Use of information for decision-making

- Some early stimulus measures were not well targeted, though as far as possible the State Control Centre sought to remedy this.
- When introduced, the Weekly Needs Assessment process enabled triaging of decisions to ensure they were made at the most appropriate level. This process was refined as time went on to support better decision making.

Recommendations

Government agencies incorporate the following lessons into the planned review and/or future operationalisation of the TEMA and supporting State and regional emergency plans:

1. In planning recovery for each emergency event which is statewide or involves multiple local areas and has significant impacts, clearly communicate the specific roles and responsibilities of the governance bodies and role holders at State, regional and local levels.
2. Effectively use regional and municipal recovery capabilities in state-coordinated recovery.

Recommendations

3. At a regional level, ensure recovery committees have oversight of the different relevant recovery domains and causal links, including the link between economic and social recovery.
4. Ensure training and scenario testing is provided for emergency recovery for all identified role holders at State, regional and local levels.

Recommendations

5. Build an understanding of the needs of local users in order to strengthen communication from State-level to the regions and municipal areas by:
 - enhancing those communications mechanisms that have worked well
 - examining opportunities to streamline information flows.
6. Establish effective operational mechanisms for State-level recovery working groups to escalate issues they identify to the State Recovery Committee.

Responses received

- The Premier emphasised the circumstances of COVID-19 ‘required the Government to be innovative, flexible and decisive’ in applying recovery arrangements.
- All three agencies are generally supportive of the report and have made commitments to review processes for future pandemic emergencies.



Thank you