

MEDIA RELEASE
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Auditor-General's report to Parliament on COVID-19 – response to social impacts – mental health and digital inclusion assessment

The Auditor-General, Mr Rod Whitehead, tabled his second Report on the COVID-19 – response to social impacts in Parliament today. The audit looked at how effectively the Tasmanian Government allocated and monitored the use of resources in 2020 to address 2 high priority social impacts: mental health (with a focus on situational distress) and digital inclusion.

Mr Whitehead found that by using existing relationships and agreements with community services providers, the Government was able to distribute COVID-19 funding quickly and efficiently. This included the Government funding organisations who already provided support for situational distress and other essential services to introduce or enhance digital service delivery, enabling them to continue to deliver services. Mr Whitehead found many service users appreciated the convenience of being able to access services digitally. He said 'The introduction of Lifeline Tasmania's 1800 number, in particular, provided an important alternative point of access for people seeking support.'

There were other ways local councils and other community providers adjusted their support to reach the most vulnerable, including through multiple phone check-ins. Many people preferred to seek support from local organisations they knew and trusted. This also help to relieve the burden on providers of more acute mental health support. The activities of local councils and NGOs, such as Neighbourhood Houses and Men's Sheds, provided an important first line of support. However, Mr Whitehead found this community support was not available across the whole of the State.

Prior to the pandemic, Tasmania's mental health system suffered from significant deficiencies including siloed and fragmented services, lack of a centralised point of access, and a shortage of specialist staff. Mr Whitehead found these issues were exacerbated in 2020. Community mental health providers experienced increased demand and clients presenting with increased complexity, which they could not cope with. Providers also needed time to adjust to delivering services digitally.

Mr Whitehead said, 'Although digital access helped many people continue to benefit from support, it was not suitable for others. For example, this was because they could not afford technology, they did not know how to use it or lived in areas with poor connectivity'. Mr Whitehead found examples of organisations providing information and helping with access to services in other ways. However, he found the barriers faced by people who were digitally excluded were not addressed well by the Government at a strategic level.

Mr Whitehead made 4 recommendations for Government agencies to incorporate the lessons from from the COVID-19 experience into future emergency recovery arrangements and future planning for low intensity mental health prevention and early intervention support and improvements to population digital inclusion.

The complete Report can be downloaded from www.audit.tas.gov.au.

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