



Tasmanian
Audit Office

COVID-19 – Response to social impacts: mental health and digital inclusion

Report of the Auditor-General

No. 7 of 2021-22

Audit objective

To express a reasonable assurance opinion on how effectively the Tasmanian Government allocated and monitored the use of resources to address the high priority social impacts it had identified from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Audit scope

- Timeline: March to December 2020
- The audit examined the following focus areas (which had many overlaps):
 - Mental health:
 - focus on prevention and early intervention support for people suffering situational distress
 - support for young people 16 to 25 years
 - Digital inclusion, and specifically the support provided:
 - to enable people to continue to access essential services remotely
 - for people who found it difficult to access services digitally to help them improve their digital access or access services in other ways.

Audit scope

- Involved the following agencies:
 - Department of Premier and Cabinet
 - Department of Communities Tasmania
 - Department of Health
 - Department of Education
 - Department of State Growth.
- We did not examine:
 - Government’s management of the COVID-19 outbreak (including suppression)
 - Operation of the Premier’s Economic and Social Recovery Advisory Council (PESRAC) and its recommendations for medium and longer term recovery
 - Support for people with clinically diagnosed moderate to severe mental health difficulties requiring clinical intervention.

Audit criteria

1. How effectively did the Government allocate resources to address the high priority needs it had identified?
 - use of organisations and mechanisms to provide support to people with high priority needs
 - capacity of organisations in determining the type and amount of resource allocation
 - coordination of resources involving different Government agencies and community organisations
 - targeted communication about the support available to Tasmanians with high priority needs and access for those seeking help to appropriate support services.

Audit criteria

2. How well was the use of resources monitored to ensure the high priority needs identified were addressed efficiently and effectively?
 - ongoing and effective monitoring at whole-of-government (State-wide and regional) and agency levels of the effective and efficient use of resources
 - timely action taken to address areas where this monitoring identified the desired impacts were not being achieved.

Audit conclusion

The Government's allocation and monitoring of resources to address the high priority social impacts of mental health and digital inclusion, as measured against the audit criteria was, in all material respects, effective.

Recommendations

The report made 4 recommendations addressed to the Government:

1. In an emergency recovery situation:

- Identify, within the Tasmanian Emergency Management Arrangements and supporting State and regional emergency recovery plans, who is the responsible agency for coordinating and managing services to support people who are digitally excluded.
- When operationalising recovery arrangements, promote widely support being provided at regional and local levels, which can be accessed both by Non-government organisations (NGOs) and local authorities for information and help them to coordinate their support.

Recommendations

2. As part of business as usual, establish a clear governance framework for cross-agency oversight and improvements to the system for low intensity mental health support. This should include having a single agency with lead responsibility for:
 - Establishing a strategic vision and plan, determining roles and responsibilities for delivery, and monitoring and reporting on the achievement of both key outputs and outcomes.
 - Identifying and addressing gaps and duplication in support.
 - Ensuring the seamless ability for users to access and navigate the system, including referrals between providers.

Recommendations

- Understanding capacity and how this will be addressed to manage demand, including through community and peer-based support and specifying standards of training for anyone providing support for situational distress.
- Having a comprehensive data-led approach to identifying and addressing these issues, using data currently collected by State and Commonwealth entities, as well as introducing new data sources as required.

Recommendations

3. As part of business as usual, and in alignment with the Our Digital Future strategy, establish a clear governance framework for cross-agency oversight and improvements to population digital inclusion by:
 - Defining specific and measurable key performance indicators and timelines, and monitoring and reporting on the achievement of both outputs and outcomes.
 - Identifying who leads on the provision of different types of support and the different roles and responsibilities for delivery.
 - Understanding capacity and how this will be used at State-wide and community-based levels to provide support.

Recommendations

4. Introduce a more outcomes-focused approach to contracting with NGOs. This should include:
 - Clearly defining the outcomes to be achieved.
 - Providing greater flexibility for NGOs to determine the activities they will undertake to deliver these outcomes.
 - Requiring them to demonstrate that the defined outcomes have been successfully achieved.

Mental health – situational distress

‘The circumstances in which people experience periods of anxiety and low mood, which although not clinically diagnosed, may cause a level of psychological distress. There are many factors that can contribute such as job losses, financial and family stressors, loneliness or lack of control --- all matters brought forward by the pandemic’ (PESRAC).

Mental health – situational distress

Systemic issues relating to mental health support existed prior to the pandemic, which were exacerbated during 2020:

- Complex and hard to navigate
- Siloed and fragmented services, with gaps in continuity
- No centralised point of access
- Staff shortages and long waitlists
- Lack of focus on prevention and early intervention.
- Young people – ‘the missing middle’.

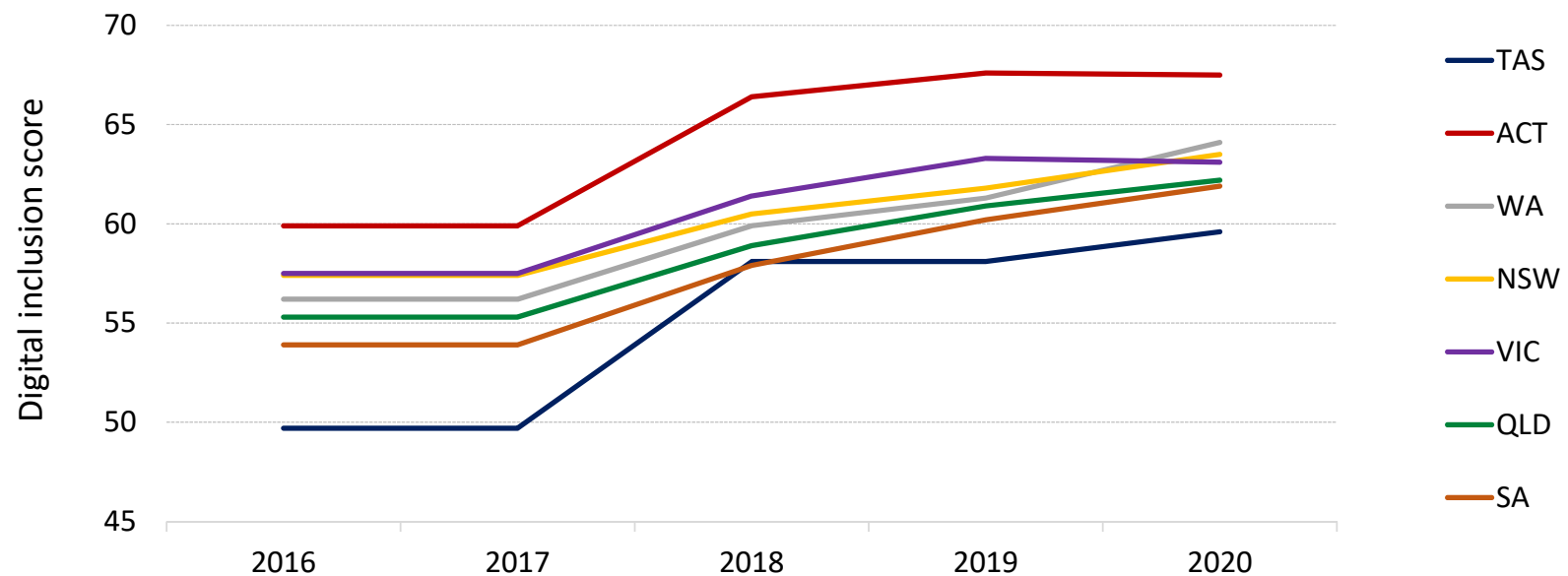
Digital inclusion

- Digital inclusion is whether a person can access, afford and have the digital ability to connect and use online technologies effectively.
- Australian Digital Inclusion Index.

‘Digital literacy is overlaid by other complex issues, including normal literacy, so it cannot be addressed in a box’ (State Growth interviewee).

Digital inclusion

Australian Digital Inclusion Index digital inclusion scores for states and territories from 2016 to 2020



Support provided by the Government in 2020

- A Tasmanian Lifeline - \$875,000
- Mind your Business - \$240,000
- Technology fund for Community Managed Mental and Other Drug Providers - \$450,000
- Migrant Resource Centre - \$120,000
- Rural Alive and Well - \$240,000
- Neighbourhood Houses Tasmania - \$700,000
- Mental health and other wrap around support for homeless people - \$826,500
- Men's Sheds - \$65,000
- Council on the Ageing Tasmania - \$65,000
- Youth Network of Tasmania - \$65,000
- Essential technology fund - \$350,000
- Digital Ready for Business - \$150,000

Use of existing organisations and mechanisms

- The Government funded providers with whom it already had well-established relationships. This enabled funds to be distributed quickly and efficiently.
- Digital mechanisms were used successfully to deliver support for situational distress and to continue to deliver other services.
- There were other ways the Government and other organisations adjusted their capacity to provide support for people with situational distress.

Capacity and speed of organisations

- Funding to providers to enhance their ability to deliver services through telephone or digital access resulted in them being able to provide services more efficiently and effectively.
- However, community-based organisations providing early intervention mental health support, said they struggled to cope with the increased demand.
- This resulted in some organisations providing support where they did not have the right skills or experience, and clients being bounced between services.
- By late 2020, the Mental Health Council of Tasmania reported the youth mental health system was particularly impacted with many services closing their books and others with extensive wait lists.

Capacity and speed of organisations

- It took time for providers who received technology funding to acquire and adapt to using the new technology:
 - Supply chain delays.
 - Limited funding for training, including in designing platforms and making information user-friendly for clients.
 - Time needed to introduce policies for home working and ensure IT security.
- Training for people who provided support for situational distress was mixed.

Effective coordination

- Heads of agencies and other senior managers worked well together to decide how to address the identified social impacts. This included dividing responsibilities between agencies.
- NGOs collaborated effectively with other organisations (for example Lifeline and University of Tasmania, Youth Network of Tasmania and Council on the Ageing Tasmania, and Rural Alive and Well's Reach-Out Coordinators liaised with local councils and business support group, Tasmanian Council of Social Service and Mental Health Council of Tasmania).
- Department of Education collaborated with the Department of Communities Tasmania.

Effective coordination

- However, coordinating support was not always effective.
 - Local councils did not feel the Government communicated well with them.
 - Local councils know their local communities best. They can assist the Government to effectively target support and help to promote that support within their local communities.
 - Better coordination was required between NGOs at a local level to prevent services being duplicated.

Effective and targeted communication

'In some cases the act of engagement itself was very powerful. Clients were desperately wanting contact during COVID and being able to hear a voice on the end of the telephone or see a face on video was in some situations lifesaving'.

(Tasmanian Council of Social Service).

- Lifeline Tasmania's 1800 number and the Mental Health Council of Tasmania's #Checkin website provided alternative access points for people seeking help.
- The 1800 number is viewed by many as the most significant Government response. The success of the triage service has resulted in Department of Health deciding to continue to support the service's operation.

Effective and targeted communication

- The Government invested in targeted communication for young people.
 - Youth Network of Tasmania was funded to develop a communications campaign.
- The Migrant Resource Centre and other organisations provided vital access to support for culturally and linguistically diverse communities.
 - Helped to address significant language and cultural barriers.
 - City of Hobart worked with the City's International Student Ambassadors to deliver projects and disseminate information through their networks.
- Rural Alive and Well rebranded itself and invested in building trust.
- NGO's with a local presence had built trust with local people who saw them as a safe place to seek support.



Effective and targeted communication

'The support is low level. It gives members a reason to get up, a purpose in the community, people to talk to, things to laugh about'. (Men's Sheds)

'We helped people who were feeling lonely, fleeing family violence, needing help with navigating the social welfare system, struggling with technology'. (Neighbourhood Houses Tasmania)

'People would visit a Neighbourhood House to ask how to set up an email address or what to do when they got locked out of their bank account' (Neighbourhood Houses Tasmania).

Effective and targeted communication

- Improving digital access.
 - Department of Education issued 6,400 devices and 650 dongles to school children.
 - Department of State Growth undertook extra monitoring of free Wi-Fi hotspots.
 - Department of State Growth's Digital Ready For Business program was expanded.
 - Department of Health issued 2,500 smart phones to people testing COVID-19 positive to use in conjunction with other medical devices.
 - Community service providers such as Men's Sheds, the Migrant Resource Centre and Council on the Ageing Tasmania assisted with devices and guidance.

Effective and targeted communication

- Digital access was not suitable for many people.
 - Rural Alive and Well prioritised outreach support for rural workers not accustomed to regular internet use.
 - Schools produced home learning packs and often dropped them off to children's homes.
 - Local councils undertook letterbox drops, set up hotlines and produced roadside signage.
 - We consistently heard word of mouth was vital, particularly in areas with high rates of adult functional illiteracy.

Effective monitoring

- On the whole, contract management was undertaken effectively.
 - NGOs said contract management was handled well and relationships were strengthened.
 - Funding agreements properly defined objectives, activities and performance measures.
 - More focus on outcomes rather than outputs would have strengthened providers accountability for successful delivery.

Lessons for the future

- No agency was asked to take a lead on addressing specific issues relating to digital inclusion.
- Agency responsibility for situational distress and digital inclusion needs to be clear and communicated widely.
- Community-based support has a vital role to play.
- Remote service delivery was not suitable for everyone, especially young people.
- Migrants were particularly impacted.

Responses

Received from:

- Department of State Growth
- Department of Health
- Department of Communities Tasmania
- Department of Education

Thank you