



To: Committee Secretary Economics and Governance Committee

Parliament House

George Street Brisbane Qld 4000

Via email: egc@parliament.qld.gov.au Inquiry into the Queensland Government's economic response to COVID-19

From

McKinlay Shire Council Submission to the Queensland Governments Enquiry into the Covid 19 response

Dated 20.06.20

Terms of Reference

1. *That the Economics and Governance Committee inquire into and report to the Legislative Assembly on the Queensland Government's response to COVID-19 in relation to the economic response only;*
2. *That in undertaking the inquiry, the Committee should take into account the Australian Government's response to COVID-19 and its impacts on the Queensland Government's response;*
3. *That in conducting the inquiry the Committee is to be conscious of any requests for witnesses or materials and ensure that any requests do not unreasonably divert resources from the immediate COVID-19 response; and*
4. *That the Committee report to the Legislative Assembly by no later than 3 months after the conclusion of the Public Health Emergency declared under the Public Health Act 2005 regarding COVID-19.*

The McKinlay Shire supports the Terms of Reference for the Committee Secretary on Economics and Governance and its limits to the economic response only. It is critical given the national direction that any response of the State is relative to the Commonwealth response. The pandemic is not over and accordingly, analysis is essential but by its nature historical. Any analysis should be targeted towards the stages because of shear scale of response.

Background

McKinlay Shire Council is a rural remote Council in the North west of Queensland. McKinlay Shire has local leaders and community members with intimate local knowledge of community needs, based on its risk profile. The region has a well established pattern of wet seasons and seasonal weather events are often the reality with townships regularly experiencing isolation due to flood waters. The level of coordination between emergency services and government agencies is well understood and practised. The Shire is well prepared in its preparedness and understanding of recovery practices.

We are an active member of the disaster management framework and coordinate the McKinlay Shire Local Disaster Management group (LDMG) and are very familiar with State driven disaster management. Our most recent IGEM feedback was provided in June 2020 as part of the review of District level arrangements for the 2019 Monsoon trough event.

We acknowledge that the COVID-19 global pandemic has presented an unprecedented disruption for all Australians, and, in particular, for Queenslanders affected by the isolation of regional living along with other complex environmental issues such as drought, which still continue. Despite this, our regional communities have proven resilience, with the largest most recent event experienced in February 2019. This Monsoon Trough created an estimated \$58m damage to the Shire road network and millions of dollars in losses to landholders with the death of significant numbers of livestock and cattle farming infrastructure and well as damage to State infrastructure. We believe it is essential that policy makers and practitioners draw upon this lived experience to ensure that responses are informed by local level information and data to ensure a relevant response is applied. One of the most significant issues for the Covid-19 pandemic was its national scale and top down approach. This led to a one size fits all approach by the CMO, which most likely could not have been avoided, however could be improved for future events.

Terms of Reference Response

Economic stimulus

The State and Commonwealth should be applauded for the stimulus arrangements provided as part of the Covid-19 pandemic. There was a broad scale of assistance available quickly.

We recognise that the State response was aligned to the Commonwealth directions and, that, as a result, impacts followed that were not the making of the State. However for the purpose of this submission we have commented on the programs and supports and actions experienced at the local level.

Regional small business profiles

One of the issues with regions is their small business profile which is often lacking in contemporary skills which can be problematic in relation to form filling and bureaucratic processes. When combined with the time required to fill out and respond to grants and stimulus, there were support mechanisms that were hard to be maximised in our small community.

State level and Commonwealth business support

The closing of our pubs and cafes to normal trade, impacted significantly on our local economy and was devastating to the businesses concerned because they had no time to respond.

Two of our owners of cafes and pubs had only purchased the businesses in the past year or recent years and some of the criteria of support programs meant that they were not eligible for a lot of the supports available. As there are always businesses entering and leaving the market this should have been taken into account.

Targeted programs

Small business program response could be improved by more segregated support for the smaller business sector (e.g. lower turnover, small number of employees). Many of the benchmarks meant that our very small business sector was competing with much larger businesses for support, who, often, could dedicate resources to a quick and speedy response. A small business as an essential worker needed to keep going and was often time poor with little ability to keep abreast of frequent changes. As a result some of our businesses could not access oversubscribed funds. Small amounts of immediate funding access with minimal paperwork would be beneficial to small regions.

Financial support to Councils to provide this liaison role in conjunction with others would also assist on ground take up.

Availability of Financial counsellors

Our financial counsellors are based on the sunshine coast some 17 hours and 32 minutes drive away. This is not a practical solution. Business needs a 24 hour call centre, appropriately staffed, to access support and services and potentially help them fill out paperwork.

Job seeker – Commonwealth

The very businesses that needed it could often not access it at the small regional level.

Trading restraints - Restricted numbers

Constraint numbers at 10 and 20 were still not financially viable to businesses, even in a small town.

Half open is not an effective strategy and placed more financial pressure than necessary. This feedback was often provided to us over stage 1.

The detail of directives from the OLG was not always in line with broader CHO directive.

Commonwealth

The Commonwealth government directive to shutdown patrons entering cafes, clubs and pubs was a very extreme measure. Whilst this is an issue in urban centres where the larger populations exist, in the regions, these businesses are not run in the same way and do not have the same population issues or risks. As a result the regional risk response was unequal to the problem. It took a long period of time for this risk rating to change, despite being community transmission free for the whole of stage 1 in Western Queensland.

Post Covid education

Resources need to be available for small businesses that don't require min size workshops and cost.

Businesses need a platform of educational and promotional resources that are very flexible as well as a contact person.

Communication and utilisation of the District Disaster framework

One significant feature of this pandemic response was that the lead agency, Health, was not a proactive member of the disaster management framework. What I mean by this is that although Health had been a stakeholder of the District and Local level Disaster Management groups, they rarely attended and were not familiar with the leadership role. This was because the disaster events tended to be environmental in nature; for e.g. fire and flood. This group (without health) had built up decades of practice improvement. Rather than a seamless process, at the beginning of the pandemic with Health as the lead agency all of the communications were coming from Brisbane and required approval at the highest level for every small detail. It was very noticeable that Health could not provide effective communication down the chain in a way that was relevant to the local level. As a result, a lot of assumptions were made about the availability of resources (and the type of resources) for a small regional centre like ours. The messaging at community level was not clear enough. Do this, go there etc. Local communities found the messaging complex and ambiguous. This was not helped by the fact that constraints were not absolute. These were eventually varied for outback regions within the State.

Decision Making

The district management level decision making framework was not actively implemented (in its usual framework) for at least 4 weeks and resolution was as a result of proactive lobbying back up to McKinlay Shire Council Submission to the Committee Secretary on Economics and Governance

the CHO. The consequence of this lack of familiarisation with the usual decision making framework was that it was not efficient as it could have been and over the first 8 weeks, the management of the pandemic by both District and Local Government level took longer than necessary and was all consuming. At the Chief Executive Officer level, the management of local level co-ordination for the LDMG took up at least 40% of their time along with resourcing from 3 other officers. This was a result of almost daily changes to constraints and subsequent legislative changes.

Every decision was coming from Brisbane and a fair amount of these could have been delegated along the line to speed things up. By the end of Stage 1, things were significantly more efficient as experience was built up within Health.

Impact on the local Government

It was not appreciated that in order to meet as an LDMG, communicate to communities and stakeholders, it took time to re-interpret the CHO correspondence to a suitable level for the community reader. Combined with this was our corporate role in risk rating our own organisation, changing policy and procedures, working from home arrangements and other corporate changes. We led our own staff of 76 and over 100 contractors working for Council coming in and out of the Shire during this time.

The biggest impact was that early in March, by the time communication and messaging were ready, the rules had changed again and we had to keep going back to square one. As essential workers we were committed to keeping business as usual (within constraints) as well as running the LDMG stand up processes, which we coordinate, of which there was no other support available. The State had moved many workers home.

As the environment was getting increasingly constraining during the early stages of the pandemic this did create angst amongst external parties such as contractors. Many of our visiting contractors were doing essential repair and upgrade works which needed to happen adding pressure to our public health and essential service management obligations.

Services operations subject to directives both State and Commonwealth

Our staff members that ran direct businesses such as childcare, aged care and community nursing, tourism and libraries were not eligible for job keeper if they were not required. For our region most workers in town were essential workers, so we reduced casuals however struggled to provide services.

Not only was this a significant financial burden for a small regional council, to keep customer facing staff on the books, there was no recognition of the impact or associated compensation from any program. Blanket promises were made at the Commonwealth level for services such as Child care to be free to families, however the reality for our Local Government was that we didn't qualify for any job seeker subsidy and had to reduce casual workers unsupported. Our childcare operations which continued to be open to essential workers lost \$3400 per week in revenue due to Commonwealth decision making.

We applaud the State for setting aside scarce funding to mitigate some of this impact on this sector however it is not an area of State responsibility.

LDMG

The LDMG had a considerable workload and there was no additional support. Luckily for the west, it proved that there was no community transmission. If this had been a different scenario, the outcomes would have significantly changed as our ability to resource staffing was finite.

Local Government Elections

Local Government was undergoing elections which were held on 28 March 2020. This was an extraordinary burden on those running the elections, the candidates and the election workers because of constant change, early voting and postal voting. The caretaker period commenced on the 22 February 2020 and was a limiting factor in decision making which contributed to an overnight change in legislation. The election event commenced for this Shire on the 24 March and was not concluded until the 7 April at the distribution of preferences as per legislation. For 2020, the McKinlay Shire managed the election process. I believe if we had not, that our community would have struggled to maintain the election delivery.

LDMG Change of Disaster Management Arrangements

Once elections were over, we were required to change Chairs of the LDMG – as our Mayor was new to this position, this meant that we went from an experienced Chair to an inexperienced Chair in the middle of an unprecedented crisis. This was acknowledged at the time however training and induction happened on the ground by the local staff.

Messaging

Early in the process, every agency and stakeholder was messaging changes, this was creating a significant amount of confusion on the ground. The State moved quickly to simplify communications and stop over reporting. This was very effective, however there was a significant amount of communications even at the direct level which did lead to information fatigue by May 2020.

Constraint easing

As a regional shire that was within the west which was community transmission free throughout the stage 1, we do feel that easing in the west could have been done earlier than it was. Some of the constraint easing laws for pubs and cafes were really poorly informed however this was adjusted quite quickly.

Liaison with State**Premiers and Minister**

This was very good during Stage 1, the Premier was having a weekly meeting with Mayors and this was exceptional as matters could be directly raised and responses tailored to the sector.

The Minister for Local Government and staff were also very proactive in ensuring enough communications were coming through to Councils.

DDMG and Whole of Government Messaging

The DDMG level communication has a well established pattern and worked effectively throughout. This should be used in all events. Any other lead agency weaknesses should be identified as part of a review.

CHO Communications

Overall the CHO communications were regular and constant. In the beginning more delegation needed to happen to the District level. Over time whilst directives came from the CHO, the framework became more effective.

CHO – easing – regional scale

We realise that this pandemic was unprecedented. Future disasters of this nature would benefit from visitation by the CHO to the regions, where ever possible, to see the impact of the pandemic on the ground. I believe this would have contributed to better place based easing earlier (than just following the numbers) and a more effective response at the local level.

Digital Capacity

It is well known that our digital connectivity in Regional Australia is not as equitable as our urban counterparts. The risk mitigations required by the CHO did highlight the need for further investment into regional telecommunications especially the last mile infrastructure.

This has been one of the most significant positives coming out of the pandemic, the willingness of Australians and Queenslanders to embrace technology. Many regional residents have long subsidised their communications with digital communications, however never at this scale before.

This is one feature of the pandemic that should not be lost; especially the availability of e-health and many other e-services. In addition, regional capability and skills should be consolidated and built upon to ensure that capability advances are permanent. This will lesson the digital divide in relation to the essential skills for the 21st workforce for all regional Queenslanders and future events.

Mayor Philip Curr

McKinlay Shire Council.