

11 June 2021

Long-term Covid Readiness Plan Essential for Victorian Cities and Regions

Joint Statement by the Victorian Members of the Committees for Cities and Regions

Victorian members of the Committees for Cities and Regions are calling on the Victorian Government to actively consult with the community to develop a long-term Covid readiness plan for Victorian cities and regions.

As Victoria faces another long weekend under lockdown-style conditions, the Committees are calling for a common set of publicly available and industry-informed standards to be applied to decision-making on Covid restrictions in Victoria.

Metro/regional restrictions

As in 2020, the heavy travel restrictions and venue density caps imposed on Victorians this Queen's Birthday long weekend will render reopening unfeasible for many traders across the state, particularly as regional Victoria and metropolitan Melbourne continue to be divided.

A regional Victoria versus metropolitan Melbourne approach to Covid restrictions is still being used by the Victorian Government as a strategy to contain the spread while it continues to negatively impact local economies in areas with no listed exposure sites or community cases.

The Committees for Cities and Regions are again calling for a more nuanced response to containing the spread of the virus and managing outbreaks than the current metro-regional approach.

Inconsistency of restrictions

Despite improvements in Victoria's contact tracing systems, we believe that restrictions imposed upon Victorian communities do not appear to be consistently applied across multiple sectors in low-risk settings.

The Committees acknowledge the work of other industry peak bodies in highlighting the many examples of businesses and organisations in low-risk settings who are simply unable to open under the current restrictions, whilst other higher-risk settings are allowed to operate under comparatively eased restrictions. We are calling for greater consultation and a more nuanced approach to as restrictions are set and then eased.

Need for a long-term plan

We are also concerned that staged restrictions and roadmaps to recovery, which during last year's extended lockdowns were informed by community case numbers, now appear to be inconsistent with current Victorian restrictions.

This unpredictability of government decision-making contributes to the general unease in the community about unforeseeable restrictions that could be imposed upon Victorians at any moment.

The lack of a clear and consistent approach to reopening and locking down Victorian communities erodes business and consumer confidence to plan, resulting in damaging effects to local economies, community mental health outcomes and the reputation of Victoria as the place to be.

Inadequate government supports

The fourth set of Victorian lockdown restrictions have been increasingly difficult for businesses to bear, as business reserves now dwindle without the JobKeeper Payment after 18 months of repeated lockdowns in Victoria.

Overwhelming advice from the Committees' membership has indicated that the Victorian Government's Business Support Package payments are not enough to cover business losses in metropolitan and regional areas, and that is not economically viable for many businesses to reopen under the current restrictions.

The Federal Government's Pandemic Leave Disaster Payment is of some assistance to casual workers in metropolitan Melbourne, which has been declared by the Commonwealth as a Covid hotspot, but does not assist casual workers in regional communities who are working for businesses that are being significantly impacted by a lack of customers from Melbourne and current caps on numbers of patrons.

Of paramount importance to the Committees' business members is the ability to plan for trade and longer term investment. Subsidies are no substitution for certainty.

Helpful government action

The Committees were pleased to learn of the memorandum of understanding recently reached between the Federal and Victorian Governments to build a dedicated quarantine facility in Victoria.

We also welcome the increasing speed of the vaccination rollout in Victoria as Victorian and Federal Governments work together to vaccinate the state. We recognise that the sooner Victorians are vaccinated, the sooner Victoria can re-open, and the onus is on governments and communities to get vaccinated quickly.

A clear plan for the whole of Victoria

We acknowledge the efforts of the Victorian Government to engage with a wide range of industry bodies, and the COVIDSafe business practices they are proposing to improve their ability to track, trace and isolate.

We now call on the Victorian Government to actively consult with the Committees for Cities and Regions Victorian Network on the development of a longer term Covid readiness plan for the whole of Victoria.

Such a plan should:

- Provide clear guidance to give Victorian industry confidence to invest and employ;
- Cover issues including how vaccination targets, community transmission numbers and new virus strains will inform future Covid restrictions;

- Detail how a dedicated quarantine facility in Victoria will determine international arrivals caps; and
- Deliver a more nuanced approach to the current metro/regional divide such as postcode-specific restrictions.

We need to start planning for the long term as we learn to live with this virus and potentially face ongoing biosecurity threats.

Request for engagement with Government

The Victorian members of the Committees for Cities and Regions are a group of apolitical, not-for-profit, member-based organisations, who represent organisations across Victoria's business, not-for-profit, education, health and community sectors.

As representatives of a broad range of organisations, the Committees bring together common interests and concerns of a uniquely representative group of regional and metropolitan Victorian stakeholders.

Together, we are requesting meaningful engagement with Victorian Government in the development of a Covid readiness plan for the whole of Victoria.

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For further information, please contact Rita Romeo rromeo@melbourne.org.au +61 422 350 285 - Committee for Melbourne, Communications, Events and Engagement Manager.

ABOUT COMMITTEE FOR MELBOURNE

Committee for Melbourne (the Committee) works towards shaping a better future for Greater Melbourne. Together with our members, we make a difference by challenging the status quo and encouraging thought leadership to create change through confident and influential advocacy.

With over 150 member organisations drawn from across Greater Melbourne's major corporations, small and medium businesses, academic institutions, local government and not-for-profit entities, the Committee is an active connector.

The Committee's work embraces four key pillars: Future Economy, Infrastructure, Urban Optimisation and Liveability. Working with, and on behalf of our members, the Committee aims to ensure Melbourne's challenges and opportunities are addressed in ways that keep our city vital, inclusive, progressive and sustainable.

As a not-for-profit, member-funded entity, the Committee is politically independent and impartial. This allows us to freely and purposefully raise issues of importance to the growth and development of Greater Melbourne.

About the Committees for Cities and Regions Network

The Committees act as catalysts to help shape and change their communities in a strategic and consultative manner.

We research, validate and build community support for concepts and ideas that will significantly improve the economic, social, cultural and environmental wellbeing of their communities and citizens.

The Committees are not politically motivated or aligned and work in harmony with many groups, stakeholders and organisations that are also acting in the best interests of their communities.

Victorian Members of the Victorian Committees for Cities and Regions Network

