

2022 FEDERAL ELECTION POLICY STATEMENTS

PANDEMIC PREPAREDNESS: HARMONISATION OF REGULATIONS

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Key Points

- There has been considerable confusion caused by the myriad of rules, regulations, guidelines and advice in relation to COVID-19 across the federation. This caused confusion and inadvertent non-compliance; it reduced the effectiveness of measures; and it has unnecessarily raised the costs and inconvenience of compliance. Businesses and other organisations that operate in more than one state and territory have found it particularly difficult to inform themselves about, and comply with the myriad of different approaches.
- Australia's governments, in consultation with business and others, should expedite the development of common definitions, rules, advice, guidelines and legislation governing measures put in place to reduce the severity of, and disturbance caused by future outbreaks of COVID-19 and similar disruptions.

Policy Approach

While it has been far from flawless, Australia's management of the COVID-19 pandemic has been commendable. Certainly, the health and economic outcomes have been among the best in the world.

While not without dissonance, missteps and some confusion of responsibilities, the state, territory, local and federal governments have worked alongside each other to contribute positively to this relative success.

There are, nevertheless, many areas that have not worked well and these should be identified and solutions developed. The current pandemic is not over, and improvements should be made to the management of any further COVID-19 outbreaks as well as to our preparedness for future pandemics and similar disruptions.

One area that has been responsible for considerable confusion is the myriad of rules, regulations, guidelines and advice across the federation. This caused confusion and inadvertent non-compliance; it reduced the effectiveness of measures; and it unnecessarily raised the costs and inconvenience of compliance. Businesses and other organisations that operate in more than one state and territory have found it particularly difficult to inform themselves about, and comply with the variety of different approaches.

Examples include the variety of advice and regulations governing COVID safety at workplaces; the different definitions of "essential workers" and "essential industries"; the assortment of

rules about distancing in retail outlets, restaurants and bars and in workplaces; differences in when mask-wearing is required and the exceptions that have applied.

There have also been significant differences in definitions of close contacts and periods of quarantine/isolation. This has been particularly challenging since late December 2021 when National Cabinet decisions on this issue were announced by the Prime Minister, but then not uniformly adopted by all jurisdictions that had participated in the meeting.

Ai Group recognises there have been very different experiences (e.g. levels of infections) at various times across different states and territories and different regions within these jurisdictions. Accordingly, we are not suggesting a uniform national response to each outbreak. Rather, when responses are put in place, as much as possible, the same definitions, rules and regulations should govern the measures that are put in place.

Parallels can be drawn with the common definitions adopted by a number of different states in relation to payroll tax and the direction towards a common approach to Workplace Health and Safety that has been adopted, albeit partially, by most states and territories.

Whether under the leadership of National Cabinet, a revitalised Council of Australian Governments or whatever may succeed these intergovernmental arrangements, Australia's governments, in consultation with business and others, should expedite the development of common definitions, rules, advice, guidelines and legislation governing measures put in place to reduce the severity of, and disturbance caused by future outbreaks and similar disruptions.