

# ISAAC'S EXPERIENCE OF COVID-19

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HELPING TO ENERGISE THE WORLD



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# ISAAC'S EXPERIENCES OF COVID-19

## INTRODUCTION

Isaac Regional Council's pandemic response reflected both a level of preparedness and an agile approach to disaster management. The uncharted territory following the outbreak of the Coronavirus worldwide, presented never-before faced challenges that tested disaster and emergency management responses across all Local Governments, including Isaac.

This paper reflects on how Isaac Regional Council managed its response to the pandemic and provides a lessons' learnt snapshot of policy development, its operational implementation and the transition to the new COVID-normal.

This paper is being presented from the viewpoint of the Organisational Safety Manager, who took a key leadership role in the delivery of Isaac Regional Council's COVID disaster and emergency response.

At Isaac Regional Council, the Organisational Safety Manager also holds the position of Deputy Local Disaster Coordinator, providing a unique opportunity to observe the process of disaster and emergency management. The Organisational Safety team is made up of three safety business advisors, a senior business advisor, a trainee safety officer, administrative support and rehabilitation coordinator.

## WORK DONE

### January – February 2020

The world went mad for toilet paper! People still went on cruises and booked trips optimistically....The Disaster management team began to monitor the evolving situation and discuss the possibility a pandemic being declared.

### March 2020

A meeting of the Emergency Management Committee (EMC) was called by the CEO. The EMC is part of Council's existing structure for emergency management. The committee is based on the Australian Standard for Emergency Management in Facilities. This group includes the Executive Leadership Team (made up of the CEO and Directors), Safety Manager, Media Manager, IT Manager, Communities Manager as well as other stakeholders as required. This group has been enacted previously to manage emerging situations. An example of the committee structure coming into action includes protestors against Adani potentially impacting Council roadways.

The EMC effectively manages situations by bringing together key stakeholders in the organisation to ensure a diverse group of decision makers. For the COVID-19 response, the EMC met face-to-face initially to

discuss the potential escalation of the crisis and how that might impact what was happening at the operational level and support the rationalisation of information into decision making for the Council's Local Government area.

The Local Disaster Management Group (LDGM) had a scheduled meeting in March which was still face-to-face. At this meeting a strategy of communication for the looming disaster declaration was developed. The LDGM scheduled an urgent meeting once the pandemic was declared and the group went to Alert level of its Local Disaster Management Plan (LDMP). A core group of members set up at the Local Disaster Coordination Centre (LDCC) headquarters and began to manage the communications and disseminate information from the State and Federal governments. Community messaging was critical as the situation escalated quickly. The Mayor and Deputy Mayor attended these meetings with the LDGM which included the CEO as the Council representative to ensure all communications and decisions were consistent.

As a region with a fly-in, fly-out workforce, the Mayor as Chair, advocated with the Resource Council for strict controls on workers coming and in out of region, as well as with the District Disaster Management Group.

The EMC which was initially concerned about compliance with segregation requirements, quickly enacted a regular pattern of communication to staff, branded specific to COVID-19 information bulletins, differentiating it from operational communications.

Council business continuity processes also commenced and a five (5) minute survey was created through Survey Monkey to help Council determine and implement the best support measures to ensure the continuity of Council's services. 419 employees completed the five (5) minute survey which helped the People and Performance team to gain insights into the health and wellbeing of Council employees, care arrangements that Council employees had, and redeployment options. This information allowed Council to further implement the best support measures to ensure the continuity of Council's services and the health and wellbeing of all IRC employees.

A daily Situation Report Framework was established utilising Council's existing technology (electronic safety management system) to capture workforce absenteeism through a daily roll call. This enabled Council to record, view and monitor the wellbeing of Council employees and ensure business continuity was maintained.

A revised Council on-call and back-up contact register was developed to ensure Council were able to quickly act in an event where an employee was unable to perform their usual critical business position. This register identified all business continuity rolls at least (2) two employee replacements, redeployment options and contact numbers.

Council undertook an inventory of all cleaning and sanitising supplies and this continued to be reported to the EMC.

All training and recruitment were reviewed, postponed or rescheduled as appropriate.

## **March and April 2020**

The Local Disaster Management Group (LDMG) met with the District and Queensland Health authorities to discuss the evolving situation and what support might be available. Council commenced the implementation of the roll back of Council workforce attending the workplace. Council allowed staff who were able to (i.e. not frontline or outdoor workers) to work from home. Council utilised existing work from home processes and checklists to commence transition of workforce to work from home. Staff were supported to take home computers and screens and desks to ensure suitable working from home conditions. Frontline service staff were at work during this time, pending the implementation of a remote phone answering system. However, Council offices were closed, reducing any contact with the public. Council's utilisation of its existing technology (remote access platform) facilitated a rapid transition to work from home. The only limitation was that only 100 people who could log on to this remote access system at any one time. To address this issue, employees only logged on when required.

A Work from Home Framework was developed and then implemented. It detailed how Council operations would continue during different levels of potential escalation of COVID-19. The framework provided detailed triggers and actions to ensure the health and safety of employees, whilst maintaining business continuity.

As effective communication was paramount, Council began to use its disaster management technology (Guardian IMS platform) to text staff. These messages went to personal mobiles and included messages of support/information, specially tailored communications, updates to any critical changes in protocols and personal messages from the Mayor and/or CEO.

The mental health and wellbeing of Council staff was a top priority for the leadership team and support departments such as Organisational Safety and People and Performance. To ensure staff were supported with readily available information, a designated information page was established on Council's intranet site. The site included mental health resources regarding managing change and mental wellbeing during the pandemic. Concerned that staff may be feeling isolated due to the nature of Council's rapid transition to working from home, Organisational Safety together with People and Performance developed a staff register and check-in process to ensure support was offered to staff on a weekly basis. A register was maintained and updated which included flagging any people of concern. The process of wellbeing checks was well received. This was a key initiative to support potentially vulnerable workers during this time. The CEO even got a call. The Organisational Safety team also met daily to check on each other's wellbeing and support one another, the manager was absent due to disaster management obligations and appointed an acting manager.

Guiding principles were prepared to help supervisors with what to do when staff members were impacted by COVID-19 which might affect their work for a variety of reasons. These guiding principles were to help supervisors make informed decisions on what to do and consider individual entitlements, local COVID



requirements. The current leave policy was revised and presented to a Council meeting for endorsement to reflect the unique situation of COVID-19 and the need to self-isolate.

Cleaning protocols, room allocations and vehicle travel arrangements were all developed and communicated to staff. Cleaning protocols were based on risk exposure and included a register to ensure that cleaning was being undertaken regularly.

The People and Performance team implemented a Family Domestic Violence Guide for managers and supervisors to help consider the risks that some employees might be facing due to the pandemic. This guide outlined how domestic family violence might play out during an emergency, the role and responsibilities that managers and supervisors had in responding to concerns of family and domestic violence and a checklist to help managers and supervisors navigate working through what an employee needed.

The People and Performance team conducted online support groups with the use of Council's employee assistance program provider. There were also some scheduled bingo and tai chi sessions held online for those who wanted to participate.

## **May 2020**

The EMC continued to meet regularly.

Development of more formalised arrangements for working from home included a Redeployment Framework to address any need to escalate work from home arranged as required under Council's Work from Home Framework.

A Flexible Working Conversation Guideline was developed to sit within the Work from Home Framework. This included an information booklet for employees and supervisors on creating good connections during working from home arrangements. An assessment sheet to support decision making between supervisor and staff member was also developed.

## **June 2020**

As Council staff returned to work a COVID-19 screening tool utilising Council's existing technology (Council electronic safety system) was implemented. This new tool allowed employees, contractors and visitors into identify any health concerns relating to COVID-19, ensuring workplace health and safety was maintained. There were electronic forms and hard copies as required, and this was reported through to the CEO regularly.

97% of staff were happy with arrangements to return to work and felt safe, although some individuals did require intervention and medical reviews before returning to work.

The EMC continued to meet to evaluate the COVID situation and to act as a forum for decision making and record actions taken.

The LDMG was at this point at lean forward and communications had eased. The group disbanded manning the local disaster coordination centre and staff returned to normal places of work, but the centre remained and continues to remain ready to respond. The Council remains at lean forward status.

### **July – September 2020**

Monitoring of the situation continued, and support messaging and support services were conducted regularly. The EMC continued to meet to focus on longer term outcomes for managing COVID-19 outbreaks. Council reintroduced some face-to-face meetings and the September toolbox supported RU OK day with Kit Kat chat.

### **October – December 2020**

EMC continued to meet and revise Council's guiding principles for supervisors to ensure that information remained current with government requirements and supported decision making about workers absenteeism. The EMC also began a longer-term view of the ongoing management of outbreaks and protocols for vaccinations and if Council's procedures would support the requirement for vaccination. Council's Fitness for Work procedure would be suitable to manage this requirement.

## **CHALLENGES**

Council faced several challenges whilst navigating its pandemic response. These included:

- A lack of an adopted business continuity plan for pandemic. This challenge was addressed by drafting a plan which was quickly brought into effect.
- Need for greater support for outdoor workers. While a strong focus was applied to the indoor workforce due to uncertainty in working conditions, the outdoor workforce still faced vulnerabilities which could have been better managed.
- Managing the level of fear balanced against the requirement to purchase cleaning and sanitising supplies.
- Ensuring that communication was consistently understood amid the rapidly changing government guidelines.

## **DISCUSSION**

Critical to the success of Council's pandemic response was the trust of the workforce and the impact it had on the effective transition to work from home and return to work processes with 97% of staff satisfied.

Council's willingness to listen to and address staff concerns, demonstrated its care at the highest levels of management. The CEO's 'war room' was used to monitor attendance and trends of illness. The CEO and ELT had transparency of people available for work each day via reports which were collated by the People and Performance team.

The business continuity processes both internally drafted and externally sourced, ensured a rapid and strategic approach to the identification of critical workforce. This sought to support decision making with transition to home and allow for continued operations if an outbreak were to occur.

Capability of the People and Performance and Organisational Safety teams with respect to psychological support, the concept of the wellness chat which was in place prior to the pandemic, was rapidly evolved to become a management tool for supporting staff. This did not interfere with the supervisor contact or other team meetings. As a result, Council have had no psychological claims submitted.

Council also implemented a rapid response and capability in developing supportive policy for decision making, such as leave arrangements and community chest funding.

Effective communications and delineation between disaster management and operations was utilised. Regular stakeholder engagement with management teams and workforce were important. The use of texting and notices, not just email ensured a wider and more personal distribution of messaging.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Council utilised its existing frameworks to manage the pandemic, these frameworks included Council's Emergency Management Plan, Work from Home arrangements and Fitness for Work procedure. Council were able to effectively and rapidly identify key stakeholders and pull together this decision-making group. This solid framework together with some developed WHS procedures supported the effective transition of workforce to home and returning to work.

The use of existing technological solutions worked to Council's advantage. The system for safety management included an electronic form development which could be utilised via an app. This information was then able to be collated into reports for the purposes of roll call and then later used for wellness checks.

Partnerships with stakeholders (inter directorates and disaster management and operations) was Council's strength. The level of trust from senior leadership down, facilitated a rapid and effective response to the pandemic. The wellness checks on staff supported staff and allowed Council an opportunity to identify concerns and offer ongoing support through the employee assistance program.

## **REFERENCES**

Work health and safety Act & Regulations 2011 (Queensland)

AS 3745 Planning for Emergencies in Facilities

<https://www.worksafe.qld.gov.au/>