



16 September 2021

Chair and Members
NSW Legislative Council's Public Accountability Committee
NSW Parliament
Email: Public.Accountability@parliament.nsw.gov.au

Dear Sir/Madam

Submission to the NSW Legislative Council's Public Accountability Committee for its inquiry into the NSW Government's management of the COVID-19 pandemic – with a focus on the COVID-19 situation and its impacts on the 12 Local Government Areas of concern.

We are pleased to make this submission which includes two attachments. The attachments are statements that Council has endorsed and were released together with community organisations and representatives in response to current COVID-19 outbreak. Most of the issues raised in these attachments continue to be relevant at the time of writing this submission.

Arab Council Australia (Council) is a secular community-based organisation. Council represents the interests of Australians from twenty-two Arab countries, with a membership that reflects this diversity and also includes people of non-Arabic speaking backgrounds. Over Council's 42-year history and with the support from community, business and government, we have and continue to deliver a broad range of services in welfare, social support, education and cultural activities to the Arab and non-Arab Australian communities. We have remained steadfast to working inclusively across diverse communities and sectors.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, and particularly during this current outbreak, Council has worked closely with other organisations at all levels to ensure that communities, particularly those in Western and South Western Sydney where our work is focussed, are informed and supported. Much of the public discussion and government focus has now turned to how we will 'open up' when vaccination rates are high enough. But that is still at least a month away, and as the current lockdown enters its third month measures are needed right now to support the people carrying the biggest burden. We wish to bring urgent attention to the following:

- Whilst we recognise that the situation is fluid and changes are occurring frequently, the approach by the NSW Government has been discriminatory and divisive, and has criminalised the communities of West and South West Sydney. Examples of this are the deployment of large numbers of police and the army to these areas; and the

imposition of a curfew imposed only on these areas within days of it being dismissed by the Premier and Chief Medical Officer as having no evidence of being a necessary or effective measure. We call on the government to have the same set of rules and restrictions for all groups of people that are equitably enforced, and for enforcement efforts be developed in consultation with impacted communities.

- The response by NSW Government to the crisis has exacerbated underlying vulnerabilities and disproportionately impacted Western and South Western Sydney communities socially and financially. We acknowledge that additional funding from the state has been made available in an attempt to address this, but the roll out has added further to the economic disparity. As you can see in the attached statements, we are especially concerned that people impacted by lockdowns do not have enough money to pay for basic necessities, essential utilities, and housing – without accumulating huge debts. We therefore call for accessible and streamlined access to payments, as specified in those statements.
- Government messaging on health and restrictions has continued to be inconsistent and confusing. A recent example being the announcement of easing of restrictions following the 70% milestone in the Road Map which failed to address the thousands who have tested positive to COVID (many of whom are living in the areas of concern) and whether they will access the same freedoms as everyone else as they wait for their vaccination. We call on the government to address this matter urgently and make the pathways out of restrictions clear as they apply to all citizens and circumstances.

To respond to this crisis, we need to build trust. And trust works when everyone is treated equally. We cannot risk more division by enforcing one set of rules for a particular group of people, and another set of rules for a different group. Vaccination will increase immunity to COVID, but it won't fix the inequality that is widening across the city. Even if the economy bounces back, the most impacted workers and businesses will face the new world with depleted savings, mounting debts, and lingering physical and mental health issues to overcome. The recovery strategy currently being developed by the Government must include commitments to genuine engagement with the leadership of Western and South Western Sydney, as well as stimulus measures that target the parts of our city that have been worst affected.

Sincerely

Randa Kattan
Chief Executive Officer

Attachments

1. Joint statement, titled "Responding to the NSW COVID-19 Outbreak", facilitated by Sydney Alliance and endorsed by various organisations – Issued on 12 August 2021.
2. Joint statement, titled "Community Priorities for Successful Handling of COVID Crisis", following Roundtable facilitated by David Shoebridge, MP



ATTACHMENT 1 - Arab Council Australia's Submission to the NSW Legislative Council's Public Accountability Committee for its inquiry into the NSW Government's management of the COVID-19 pandemic – with a focus on the COVID-19 situation and its impacts on the 12 Local Government Areas of concern.

Responding to the NSW COVID-19 outbreak

Facilitated by the Sydney Alliance, the following statement is endorsed by the undersigned and represents a cross section of community, faith and union groups from across the greater Sydney metropolitan. The statement was issued on 12 August 2021.

UPDATES:

- **August 19th, 2021:** We welcome the announcement of the increase of rental support payment to \$3,000 as advocated by the Tenants Union NSW.
- **August 20th, 2021:** We welcome the announcement of \$5.5m in NGO support grants from NSW Government; filling gaps left by the Commonwealth.

Greater Sydney is in the midst of an unprecedented crisis with no end in sight. Four million people are now going into week seven of lockdown and, given the numbers of infections are climbing with millions yet to be vaccinated, this lockdown is not expected to end soon. Sadly, the virus is now spreading to regions with lockdowns extended beyond Sydney as a consequence.

The challenge confronting our community is threefold. To reduce transmission of the virus; to do so in a way that builds trust and social cohesion across the state; and to ensure the measures we take today don't create a future disaster for families across Sydney. We cannot let this virus result in a more divided community.

Lockdowns remain a crucial part of the strategy for addressing that challenge, along with vaccination.

People across the city and the state want to do the right thing, but they need to be supported to do so. From our position in civil society, representing diverse communities across the city and the state, we call for the following measures:

Financial support for people who have lost income

As a result of following government directions, thousands of people have lost work and income. They must be financially supported to stay at home and stay safe in the short term. They must be assured that compliance with lockdown requirements will not result in

eviction from their home, mounting debts for unpaid bills, and/or mortgage defaults down the track. This means:

- Anyone who qualifies for disaster payments due to lost income should also have access to extra funds to cover rent and essential utilities. Moratoriums on eviction and bills are not enough – they will only defer the disaster if they result in debts that will break households down the track. The existing rent reduction relief payments available must be extended from \$1500 to \$3000 to take account of the extended lockdown, and essential utility bills should be paid for all who have lost work due to lockdowns.
- All adult residents of affected areas who are not employed and/or have lost income should have access to Federal Government support payments of \$750 per week.
- All workers including casuals and sole contractors in the caring and gig economies should have access to paid pandemic leave for testing, vaccination, and any required isolation.
- Daily media briefings need to include not only the numbers of infected, tested and vaccinated people, and the police compliance component; they must also include a daily breakdown of social safety net provisions available to everyone.

Equitable enforcement of lockdown rules in partnership with communities

Public health is built on trust. Trust is destroyed when rules are enforced inconsistently across the city. Images of securitised streets in Western Sydney and sunbakers on Sydney beaches corrode trust. None of us can afford this kind of division. Lockdown rules should be equitably enforced, and enforcement efforts need to be developed in consultation with impacted communities.

Clear and consistent lockdown rules

Lockdown rules need to be clear and consistent, and developed in real partnership with public health experts and communities across the city. Constant changes and lack of clarity generates confusion and impacts compliance. Rules must be communicated in appropriate languages and via a range of channels.

Post-pandemic recovery plan

The issues above are urgent. Equally important, is a community-driven plan for the city and state's post-pandemic recovery that addresses the entrenched inequalities that have been revealed and worsened by the pandemic. An inclusive Summit should be held to ensure that planning for a recovery that tackles these inequalities is genuinely driven by community experiences, needs and expectations.

Organisational Endorsements

- Addison Road Community Organisation
- Alliance of Philippine Community Organisations
- Arab Australian Federation
- Arab Council Australia
- Australian Arab Affairs
- Auburn Small Community Organisation Network (ASCON)
- Blue Mountains Refugee Support Group
- Canterbury City Community Centre
- Community and Cultural Connections Inc (CCCI)
- Community Minds
- Community Migrant Resource Centre (CMRC)
- Council of the Ageing NSW (COTA NSW)
- Council of Imams NSW
- Democracy in Colour
- The Humanism Project
- Humanity Matters
- Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) Australia
- Jews for Refugees
- Justice & Peace Office Catholic Archdiocese of Sydney
- Kapit-bahayan Cooperative
- Mission Australia (NSW & ACT)
- Muhajirin Association
- Multicultural Assistance Task Force
- Multicultural Youth Affairs Network NSW
- Music for Refugees
- Muslim Women Australia
- National Tertiary Education Union NSW Branch
- Nature Conservation Council
- Neighbourhood Matters
- NSW Council of Social Service (NCOSS)
- Older Women's Network
- Our Lady of Dolours Parish, Chatswood
- ParraCAN
- Parramatta Nepean Presbytery (Uniting Church)
- Reconciliation for Western Sydney
- Settlement Services International (SSI)
- Shelter NSW
- Sisters of St Joseph
- St Vincent de Paul Society NSW
- St Vincent's Ashfield Social Justice Group
- Sydney Community Forum
- SydWest Multicultural Services
- Tenants' Union NSW
- Union for Progressive Judaism
- United Workers Union
- Uniting Church Synod of NSW & ACT
- Western Sydney Community Forum
- Whitlam Institute within Western Sydney University
- Women's Reconciliation Network
- Woodville Alliance



ATTACHMENT 2 - Arab Council Australia's Submission to the NSW Legislative Council's Public Accountability Committee for its inquiry into the NSW Government's management of the COVID-19 pandemic – with a focus on the COVID-19 situation and its impacts on the 12 Local Government Areas of concern.

Community Priorities for Successful Handling of COVID Crisis

The following statement is endorsed by the undersigned from across the greater Sydney metropolitan. The statement was issued following a Roundtable facilitated by David Shoebridge, NSW Greens MP on 26 August 2021.

As active community members, organisations and leaders working across Western and South Western Sydney during this crisis, we have seen our communities disproportionately burdened by the failures of the State and Federal Government responses to COVID-19.

After more than two months of lockdown and stricter measures unevenly targeting our communities compared to other areas, we are demanding better financial and moral support as well as accountability.

Too many decisions in this crisis have caused further hardship and unnecessary pain to Western and South Western Sydney, which is home to a large proportion of the state's essential workers. The top-down approach has occurred without any real engagement with us or our communities and this lack of engagement has resulted in far-reaching consequences that have been far more damaging than needed.

Going forward we urge that governments at all levels must act in better faith, and ensure that genuine community consultation and engagement is central to the way crises are managed.

The State and Federal governments must urgently address the following:

Pay people to stay home to stop the spread. Introduce a simple, easy to access pandemic payment without unfair exemptions.

Temporary residents and international students have once again been left out of financial support. Payments need to be easily accessible, universal and sufficient to prevent people from going into debt. The payments must be at least \$80 a day for those who were on income support before the lockdown and \$750 a week for those who are not working because of the lockdown.

Urgently supply additional housing and crisis housing.

When people test positive for COVID, they have nowhere to go and often transmit to their families and household members. It is how the majority of COVID cases are spread. This is a more significant problem in Western and South Western Sydney with smaller housing units and larger households. There must be easy to access emergency alternative accommodation available for those needing to isolate.

A better vaccine booking system. Easy to access and single-entry point.

The current vaccine booking system is difficult to use. It is not streamlined. There are multiple websites, multiple entry points and the booking systems are unnecessarily complex. There needs to be a clear, easy way to book vaccinations which will ultimately benefit the community across the board.

Priority vaccinations for aid and relief workers and volunteers.

Vaccines must be provided as a priority to paid and volunteer aid and relief workers who are on the ground in the hardest hit areas without adequate vaccine protection. This is in addition to prioritising frontline essential workers.

Clearer and more consistent messaging.

Access to information and public health resources is confusing and constantly changing. Organisations within these communities know their communities best and these valuable organisations need to be funded partners who are consulted with and trusted to deliver clear information to their communities.

One set of consistent rules for all of Greater Sydney.

The inconsistent and ultimately unfair application of rules across the city has made people living in the LGAs 'of concern' feel targeted. For example, the introduction of curfew is not evidence-based and is a policing rather than public health response to COVID. If there is a credible public health basis to curfews that justifies their imposition then they should be applied uniformly across greater Sydney. The fact this has not happened adds to a strong and justifiable sense that lockdown rules are unfairly targeted at W and SW Sydney and reinforce already damaging racial and economic discrimination.

Transfer of resource allocation from police and the army to community nurses, social workers and mental health support workers.

There must be a switch of resources from policing people to supporting people. The heavy presence of police and armed forces in LGAs 'of concern' has added to the stress of the situation. Many people have reported leaving their houses for exercise and getting stopped by police multiple times. Police are knocking on doors of households with COVID for the purposes of enforcing lockdown rules without any concern for wellbeing and welfare, whereas what those individuals and families need most is health and community support.

More mental health support.

Many people do not have access to the support they need. There must be a targeted access strategy including the urgent establishment of online counselling, this must be culturally

appropriate and in language with professional counsellors fluent in community languages and cultural practises.

Better hospital coordination.

We need more coordination across health districts. The Government needs to listen to its own research and leverage it. This crisis has exposed the chronic lack of hospital beds and ICU units in Western and South Western Sydney and that imbalance must be addressed as a priority.

Accessible health communication and support for COVID positive people isolating at home.

Many COVID positive people in SWS and WS have received one text message when they were notified but were not followed up by health staff for days. They were unsure and concerned about what they must do to keep themselves and their families safe. We acknowledge that the system is under stress and that each district employs a different process, however, easy access to information in the early days of infection is crucial for everyone's safety. We need each local health district in the areas 'of concern' to organise regular online webinars for people who have tested positive, providing them with accessible and clear information about what to expect and what they need to do.

IMMEDIATE ACTIONABLE TASKS

- People are having trouble paying their elevated energy bills due to the extended stay-at-home orders as well as home-schooling requirements. To address this the state government must immediately expand the availability of Energy Account Payment Assistance vouchers so they are much more widely available
- Of most pressing concern is the high registration fees paid by truck owner drivers who need direct assistance with the waiver of registration fees for trucks that are parked in LGAs of concern.
- With so many people without work or less work the costs of state fees and charges like vehicle registration should be temporarily reduced or waived in LGAs of concern.
- The social isolation of lockdown can be partly addressed by improved internet access. Wifi packages should be provided by the State Government to the most vulnerable such as pensioners and especially families with school-aged children in the LGAs of concern.

POST-COVID PRESSURES

- We know that many large and ongoing payments have been deferred because of the lockdown, especially rental and mortgage payments. Plans must be made now to assist people when deferred payments are due to survive the economic shock. This must include protections on evictions and direct financial support.

- This crisis has exposed the social and economic divide across Sydney and within communities. The patchwork of government assistance with its unfair exclusions, inadequate payments and arbitrary criteria has caused significant and unnecessary hardship. This must be reformed and progress made towards a universal financial support payment that leaves no one behind.

SIGNED

- Randa Kattan, Chief Executive Officer, Arab Council Australia
- Dr. Haroon Kasim, Co-Founder, The Humanism Project
- Rosanna Barbero, General Manager, Addison Road Community Centre Organisation
- Dr Rateb Jneid, President, Australian Federation of Islamic Councils
- Zeynep Korkmaz, Youth and Democracy Leader - Democratic Kurdish Community Centre of NSW
- Amar Singh, President, Turbans 4 Australia INC.
- Muslim Women Australia (MWA)
- Alex Long and Youth Ambassadors, CEO of Multicultural Youth Affairs Network (MYAN NSW)
- Julie Williams, community member and member of the Western Sydney Watch Committee
- Tiareteina Robertson, Youth Advocate Leader - Blacktown Youth Services Association
- Uncle Dave Bell
- Anjum Rafiqi, Stand with Kashmir Inc
- Bashir Sawalha, President of the General Union of Palestinian Workers, Australia and the Vice President of the Arab Australian Federation
- Abbas Raza Alvi, Community Networker and President - We Australians Are Creative Inc.
- Kersei Balewai Rabuatoka (Grace), Coordinator Volunteer Food Hampers
- Mohammad Rashedul Haque, President, Bangladesh Community Council Inc.
- Sheila Ngoc Pham, Independent Writer, Researcher and Health Communications Consultant
- Muhadissa Haidari, Youth Ambassador - Multicultural Youth Affairs Network (MYAN NSW) & Multicultural Support Worker - Community Migrant Resource Centre
- Abelrhman Dameen, Committee member for Sydney Sudanese Youth Organization, Activist and Community leader
- Shibly Abdullah, Lecturer & Program Coordinator, Accounting & Business Studies, Charles Sturt University Study Centres; Member, Muslim Community Core Team, Sydney Alliance; Social Activist and Community Leader, Bangladeshi Community
- Dr Vikrant Kishore, South Asians for Inclusiveness Inc.
- Jyotsna Sharma, Hindus for Human Rights Australia & New Zealand
- Neha Madhok on behalf of Democracy in Colour
- Yumi Lee, Manager, Older Women's Network NSW Inc.