

# How the Parliament of New South Wales navigated the COVID-19 pandemic

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April 2023



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# Foreword

The global COVID-19 pandemic has been an immense challenge for society and governments around the world. Parliaments play an essential role in democracy, and it was vital for them to continue operating in these difficult times.

Parliament is the legislative arm of the three elements in our system of government, together with the executive (the Cabinet) and the judiciary (judges and courts). Each has separate functions and acts to balance the power of the others. The Parliament of New South Wales is directly elected by the people to make state laws, control state finances, and discuss matters of importance to the community. It consists of two Houses that have different roles: the Legislative Assembly, where the government is formed; and the Legislative Council which acts as a 'house of review' by scrutinising the actions of the executive government and holding it to account.

The COVID-19 pandemic required extraordinary actions on the part of the executive arm of government to reduce the spread of the virus, protect individuals and groups at higher risk of infection and illness, and support the economy. These actions often needed to be taken rapidly, and in the context of limited information.

Parliament is particularly important in this environment to balance the power of the executive. Its role of making and reviewing laws and holding the government to account provided an important service to the people of New South Wales during the pandemic, and it was important for people to know that the principles of democracy and responsible government were being maintained despite the significant changes that were occurring throughout society and their lives.

Working out how to continue operations and conduct parliamentary business in a COVID-safe way was not an easy task in Australia's oldest parliament. The Parliament of New South Wales was very successful in adapting to the evolving situation. The changes and innovations that ensured parliament could continue to perform its functions during the pandemic have also strengthened its ongoing operations so that it will be able to effectively deal with other crises in the future.

There are many reasons why the Parliament of New South Wales was successful in navigating the COVID-19 pandemic. This publication mainly discusses the procedural and technological solutions that enabled parliament to continue to operate. These solutions alone, however, would not have been sufficient to guarantee success without the goodwill and commitment of the whole parliamentary community. Our colleagues in the Legislative Council and the Legislative Assembly, their staff, and the staff of the three parliamentary departments displayed great resilience, cooperation, and innovation to keep parliament running so that we could come together in person and virtually during this critical period for New South Wales.

We would particularly like to express our gratitude to the Clerk of the Parliaments, Mr David Blunt, the Clerk of the Legislative Assembly, Ms Helen Minnican, and the Chief Executive Officer of the Department of Parliamentary Services, Mr Mark Webb, for their advice and leadership during the pandemic.

The Hon. Matthew Mason-Cox MLC

President of the Legislative Council

The Hon. Jonathan O’Dea MP

Speaker of the Legislative Assembly

## Introduction

On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organisation declared COVID-19 to be a global pandemic. In the following days, the New South Wales Government began introducing public health orders to prevent the spread of the virus in the community. On 31 March 2020, a general public lockdown commenced in New South Wales, requiring people to stay at home except where they had a reasonable excuse not to. This lockdown remained in place until 15 May 2020.

While the community continued to be subject to various restrictions, the next general public lockdown did not occur until 26 June 2021, with the onset of the Delta variant of COVID-19. This lockdown continued until 11 October 2021, when restrictions were eased for those who were fully vaccinated (by that stage, this was almost 80% of the state population). On 15 December 2021 restrictions were eased for both vaccinated (by then, 93% of the state population) and unvaccinated people.

Tragically, since the beginning of the pandemic in 2020 to the end of February 2023, there were more than 6,000 deaths from COVID-19 in New South Wales, more than 19,000 deaths in Australia, and more than 6.8 million deaths worldwide.<sup>1</sup>

The ongoing operation of all parliaments during the pandemic was an essential part of the democratic process and supported the public's trust in governments at a time of considerable community anxiety and uncertainty. This publication outlines the measures that were taken to ensure the Parliament of New South Wales could continue to effectively fulfil its critical functions from the beginning of the pandemic in 2020 through to the end of 2022.<sup>2</sup> A timeline of key events appears on page 20. This publication was a collaboration between the Parliamentary Research Service, the Department of the Legislative Council, and the Department of the Legislative Assembly.

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<sup>1</sup> World Health Organisation, [WHO Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) Dashboard](#), last updated 28 February 2023, accessed 8 March 2023; NSW Health, [COVID-19 in NSW](#), current as at 3 March 2023, accessed 8 March 2023.

<sup>2</sup> See also T Drabsch, [The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on parliament](#), NSW Parliamentary Research Service, E-brief 1/2021, July 2021.

## Overview of operations during the pandemic

Apart from a five-month period that coincided with the two general public lockdowns, the Parliament of New South Wales maintained a relatively normal sitting pattern during the pandemic, with some sitting days added to make up for lost days. Committee work continued virtually even during the public lockdowns. Table 1 shows that while there was an overall decrease in the number of sitting days in the 57th Parliament (2019–22) compared to the 56th Parliament (2015–2018), the number of reports issued by committees increased in the 57th Parliament.

**Table 1: Key statistics**

Description	56th Parliament 2015–2018	57th Parliament 2019–2022
Legislative Assembly sitting days	207	165
Legislative Council sitting days	185	154
Bills passed	300	197
Committee reports tabled	160	256

The loss of sitting days associated with lockdowns meant that the full functions of parliament could not be performed at the height of the pandemic. The representative, oversight and legislative roles of parliament were limited at a time when they were needed to give the community confidence in the decisions that were being made by government and in the stability of democracy in New South Wales.

Determining how parliament could operate was an urgent priority of the three parliamentary departments (the Department of the Legislative Council, the Department of the Legislative Assembly, and the Department of Parliamentary Services) at the beginning of the pandemic, and an ongoing focus for the next 2 years. Key changes that were made included putting in place COVID-safe practices, adapting and where necessary establishing new parliamentary practices and procedures, rapidly transitioning to virtual committee meetings and hearings, and, in the second half of 2021, holding hybrid sittings of the Houses, with a mix of in person and remote attendance.

Changes often needed to be made rapidly in response to a dynamic and uncertain external environment. While business continuity and pandemic planning had occurred previously (such as for the SARS epidemic in 2003) the COVID-19 pandemic meant that existing plans needed to be activated and implemented in a sustained way. They also needed to be adjusted, and new processes and plans developed as the pandemic progressed. Existing

processes, governance arrangements and communication channels were often co-opted and used for planning and problem solving.

Flexibility, agility, planning, cooperation, and communication between the three parliamentary departments were essential factors in ensuring that implementation was successful. The parliamentary departments also drew on the experiences of their colleagues in Australia and internationally to find ways to navigate the challenges that faced all parliaments.

## COVID-safe parliamentary sittings

When the pandemic started, a parliamentary sitting required members of parliament to attend Parliament House in person. This meant it was essential that arrangements were in place to enable members of parliament to meet safely. These arrangements were continually reviewed and updated between 2020 and 2022 to reflect the changing circumstances of COVID in the community, the knowledge that was gained during this period and what was required to best support the effective operation of parliament at any particular time.

### 2020

The Legislative Assembly and the Legislative Council were originally scheduled to sit from 24 March 2020 for a two-week period. Following the declaration of the global COVID-19 pandemic they met for just one day, on 24 March, to urgently consider two bills relating to the government's response to COVID-19 and to conclude consideration of a bill to provide relief to people affected by the 2019–20 bushfires.

Both Houses immediately adopted new procedures to facilitate COVID-safe sittings. These included a change to seating arrangements, a new process for divisions to maintain appropriate social distancing (divisions are a more formal method for voting on a question than 'on the voices') and using electronic documents. The Speaker, Jonathan O'Dea MP, said, 'Today is a day like none other in the history of this Parliament'.<sup>3</sup>

A range of special arrangements were also put in place for the operation of the wider parliamentary precinct. These included:

- Social distancing requirements
- More regular cleaning
- Temperature checks on entering the parliamentary precinct
- Closing Parliament House to visitors.

In March 2020 the impact of COVID-19, the length of the lockdowns, and the potential for other restrictions were unknown. In the face of this uncertainty both Houses amended their sitting calendars on 24 March so that they were not scheduled to sit again until 15 September. Don Harwin MLC, Leader of the Government in the Legislative Council, explained that:

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<sup>3</sup> J O'Dea MP, [Hansard](#), 24 March 2020.



The Government is proposing this [date] based on the advice that it has received from NSW Health, the dimension of the public health crisis facing the State from COVID-19 and having taken note of what the Federal Parliament did yesterday, facing similar circumstances. The date chosen...is the next scheduled sitting date of the Legislative Council after the date chosen by the Federal Parliament.<sup>4</sup>

Acknowledging the unusually long length of adjournment the Leader of the House, Andrew Constance MP, stressed that the Legislative Assembly could be recalled as necessary in the public interest. Don Harwin MLC also noted that 'a majority of members can recall this House [the Legislative Council] at any time if they have a particular concern they wish to debate on the floor of the House'.<sup>5</sup>

Reflecting the uncertainty of the time, parliament returned earlier than anticipated. At the request of the government and having consulted with the leaders of all other parties, both Houses were recalled to sit on 12 May 2020 to consider three COVID-19 emergency measure bills. The Legislative Assembly sitting day extended to 13 May to conclude consideration of these bills, following their return from the Legislative Council with amendments. Procedures were varied for these sittings to balance the need for proper debate with COVID-safe requirements. For example, in the Legislative Assembly Question Time comprised five questions (rather than the usual ten). Four questions were asked by the Opposition and one by the crossbench.

In June 2020 the Houses met for their first full sitting period since February 2020, and the COVID-safe measures introduced earlier in the year were continued.

On 28 July 2020, the Speaker, with the concurrence of the House, ruled that the Speaker's Gallery would be considered part of the Legislative Assembly chamber for proceedings. The extension of the chamber into the Speaker's Gallery increased the number of members able to participate in the proceedings of the House by eight, with the composition of members seated in the Speaker's Gallery agreed by informal arrangement (pairing arrangements returned to usual practices).

Following advice from public health officials, the Parliament of New South Wales convened for all the sitting weeks that were originally scheduled for the second half of 2020, while continuing to maintain social distancing measures and with changes to the conduct of business in the chamber. In all, only 10 sitting days were not able to proceed as planned in 2020 due to the pandemic.

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<sup>4</sup> D Harwin MLC, [Hansard](#), 24 March 2020.

<sup>5</sup> D Harwin MLC, [Hansard](#), 24 March 2020.

## **Making parliamentary sittings COVID-safe**

### **Changing seating arrangements**

When the Legislative Assembly met on 24 March 2020, more than 50 of the 93 members were absent from the chamber. This was planned by the major parties and crossbench and was facilitated by pairing arrangements. In the Legislative Council, the smaller number of members (42 members) enabled social distancing requirements to be more readily accommodated. By utilising the public galleries in addition to the chamber, all Legislative Council members were able to continue to participate in the sittings.

### **Having a new process for divisions**

Both Houses adopted a new process for divisions. In the Legislative Assembly, the new procedure allowed members to enter and leave by separate entrances (for ayes and noes) to minimise opportunities for contact. A new eDivision app, which had been developed before the pandemic, assisted the House to accommodate the need for social distancing throughout divisions. In the Legislative Council, a new process allowed members to stand in their place to be counted for divisions.

### **Using electronic documents**

In the Legislative Assembly, a new sessional order allowed for matters that needed to be authorised or transacted in writing to be done electronically. Similarly, in the Legislative Council, temporary orders for a 'paperless chamber' were introduced, allowing amendments, formal business requests and notices to be lodged by email. After a short period of time, the 'paperless chamber' in the Legislative Council became a hybrid chamber (paper and electronic). In November 2022 the Legislative Assembly Standing Orders and Procedure Committee noted that the sessional orders relating to electronic transactions were worthy of adoption as permanent standing orders in the future.

While parliament only met in person in 2020, there was discussion throughout that year about the potential for virtual or hybrid sittings. Legal advice on the issue was obtained, and on 27 March 2020, the Speaker wrote an opinion piece in the *Sydney Morning Herald* advocating for a virtual parliament in New South Wales if needed.<sup>6</sup> The Speaker noted potential constitutional and technological barriers that would need to be examined. This was explored further in his detailed paper in the *Australasian Parliamentary Review*. The Speaker stated that a virtual parliament:

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<sup>6</sup> J O'Dea, [Why not a virtual Parliament? As Speaker, I don't want democracy halted by this virus](#), *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 March 2020.

...would help uphold robust democracy in NSW, as courts continue to operate under COVID-19 restrictions and executive government gains significant powers to impose restrictions on citizens.<sup>7</sup>

The Speaker noted that, even at these early stages of the pandemic, several other jurisdictions (such as the UK Parliament and the Welsh Assembly) had already moved to partial or even fully digitised methods for convening parliamentary sessions.

## 2021

The 2021 sittings continued with the COVID-safe seating arrangements introduced in 2020 still in place. The Legislative Assembly's 93 members were seated in a socially distanced arrangement across the chamber, the Speaker's Gallery, and the Cooper and Northern Galleries, with two additional benches and two single seats on the floor of the chamber behind the mace. The Legislative Council also retained social distancing, with members seated across the chamber and in the upper and lower public galleries.

Shortly after the budget week in June 2021, the Delta general public lockdown occurred and, apart from one day, the sitting periods scheduled for August and September 2021 were postponed.

The Legislative Council sat briefly on 14 September 2021, but the sitting was cut short in accordance with a standing order that required a minister or parliamentary secretary to be present in the House. The government had earlier communicated its intention not to have a minister or parliamentary secretary present, relying on health advice from the Chief Health Officer that the September sittings should be deferred. As a COVID-safe plan had been developed for the Legislative Council, the Opposition and crossbench argued that this sitting should proceed so that the House could continue to fulfil its role as the house of review. Penny Sharpe MLC, Leader of the Opposition in Legislative Council, stated that:

The time for scrutiny and accountability has never been more important. Every day people are calling up their local members of Parliament for help. Our local members are working as food packers, translators, vaccine centre coordinators, community information hubs and are assisting thousands of people every day. This is important work, but it is not their primary job. Our elected representatives are the voice for our communities. We are entrusted to ask questions, seek answers and get help on behalf of the people we represent. It is our job, on behalf of the people of New South Wales, to hold the government of the day to account and to provide scrutiny of its decisions. If we are prevented from doing this, we are no longer living in a democracy. The fragile social contract that exists between those that govern and those that are governed must not be taken for granted.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> J O'Dea, [Socially distant but democratically together: Towards a virtual parliament in NSW](#). Spring 2019/Autumn 2020, *Australasian Parliamentary Review*, 34(2), 27–53, p31.

<sup>8</sup> P Sharpe MLC, [Hansard](#), 14 September 2021.

In 2022, a sessional order was adopted that allowed the Legislative Council to continue to sit in the absence of a minister. It has been proposed that this provision be part of the standing orders for the Legislative Council going forward.

### **Dealing with the first COVID-19 case in parliament: June 2021**

The June 2021 Budget week sitting coincided with the first case of COVID-19 in Parliament House, making for a very unusual Budget week. The Budget and related legislation were introduced in the Legislative Assembly on Tuesday 22 June 2021. Debate on the bills was adjourned until 24 June.

In the early morning of Thursday 24 June, the Minister for Agriculture, Adam Marshall MP confirmed that he had tested positive for COVID-19 and had been in the chamber of the Legislative Assembly and in attendance at various functions at Parliament House throughout the sitting week. This resulted in a number of members of both Houses, as well as some staff, being classified as close or casual contacts, requiring immediate isolation and testing. Parliament House was closed to all but party-nominated members and essential staff. Fortunately, no further cases were detected as a result of contact with the minister in the parliamentary precinct.

Thursday's sitting was postponed for a number of hours. As this occurred before the widespread use of rapid antigen tests, rapid PCR testing of members and clerks commenced to ensure that a quorum could be met and that proceedings could be held in both Houses in a safe manner.

The Legislative Assembly met at 4.00 pm for less than 30 minutes with 20 members in the chamber (satisfying quorum requirements). It agreed to a motion of the Leader of the House that the remainder of the sitting would be largely devoted to specific business. This included the passage through all the remaining stages of 2 of the 5 Budget bills, the Appropriation Bill 2021 and the Appropriation (Parliament) Bill 2021. The House also agreed that the Leader of the Opposition's speech in reply be postponed until 5 August 2021.

The Legislative Council received the budget legislation late on Thursday afternoon. Only 18 members, nominated by their parties, were permitted to attend the chamber. The Legislative Council conducted a ten-minute sitting during which budget speeches were incorporated in Hansard so that the Appropriation Bill 2021 and the Appropriation (Parliament) Bill 2021 could be passed and sent for urgent assent.

With the easing of restrictions in the community, both Houses sat again in October and November 2021. In an historic first, each House met in a hybrid arrangement, with some members participating remotely via video link and others participating in person in the

chamber. The Houses agreed to temporary orders to authorise remote participation. Under the temporary orders, members who were attending remotely were able to participate in debate, table documents, move amendments to bills and ask questions of ministers, but were not able to take points of order or vote. The participation of these members was recorded, published and broadcast as if they were in the chamber for the proceedings.

The hybrid sittings were made possible through collaboration between staff in the Departments of the Legislative Assembly, Department of the Legislative Council and staff in the information technology, Hansard, and broadcasting teams of the Department of Parliamentary Services. The staff drew on their experience over the past year running hybrid committee hearings to facilitate hybrid sittings in the Legislative Assembly and Legislative Council. This involved setting up big screens in the chambers, employing additional camera operators, and providing training to members on use of the video-conferencing technology. Although these processes were not without their challenges, the hybrid sittings ensured that all members were able to participate in the proceedings either in person or remotely.

The Parliament of New South Wales was an early adopter of rapid antigen testing and this was a key requirement of the COVID-safe plan that was developed for the October 2021 sittings. On sitting days it was mandatory for everyone entering Parliament House to have a negative rapid antigen test. This requirement for rapid antigen testing on sitting days continued for the rest of 2021 and into 2022. Members were also required to wear masks when in the chambers, except when speaking.

To make up for the postponed sitting weeks, the sitting calendar was amended to include 6 additional sitting days in November, including three Fridays.

## **2022**

When the Houses next met in February 2022, they did not return to the hybrid model. With these in-person sittings some COVID-19 safety measures remained in place, including rapid antigen testing, social distancing, and the requirement that members wear masks in the chamber unless speaking. Both Houses made use of the public galleries to maintain social distancing, and a maximum of 80 members were permitted in the Legislative Assembly chamber at one time.

Over the March, May and June 2022 sitting periods, these arrangements were gradually relaxed so that by June 2022, mask wearing became voluntary, all 93 members could sit in the Legislative Assembly chamber at any one time, and the chamber gallery in the Legislative Assembly was opened to the public (on the basis that visitors had passed a rapid antigen test and reserved a seat). The gallery in the Legislative Council was not opened to the public until later in 2022.

Mandatory rapid antigen testing continued on sitting days for most of 2022 but was discontinued for the September sittings. By that time more than 50,000 rapid antigen tests

had been used (this included mandatory testing on sitting days and voluntary testing on non-sitting days).

### **Reporting parliament during the pandemic: How Hansard adapted**

Hansard is the official report of the proceedings of the Parliament of New South Wales. In its long history, Hansard has always operated from within Parliament House, completing the report for each sitting or committee hearing live, on the day they occurred. Throughout the varying stages of the pandemic, Hansard had to continually adapt its production and publishing processes to ensure it was able to provide safe conditions for staff while producing the official report of the proceedings of parliament.

During the sittings of 2020, only half of the 34 Hansard staff were able to be in the building at any one time. During the first half of 2021, Hansard were able to have greater numbers of staff within Parliament House, but only one staff member in each chamber.

Hansard was operating at reduced capacity during this period, which meant that the report of proceedings for each day was produced over a week. This was the first time in its history that Hansard did not provide a same day report.

Further adaptation was required later in 2021. The Legislative Council sat on 14 September 2021, during the state-wide general lockdown. The nature of the lockdown rules, safety protocols at parliament, and the hybrid nature of the sitting itself meant that no Hansard staff were physically present in Parliament House for the sitting. For the first time, the production of Hansard was completed remotely. This had never been done before on a sitting day, and so there was no precedent to work from. Hansard staff used trial and error to test ways to work effectively and were able to produce the report to its usual high quality.

During the October sittings in 2021 Hansard operated in a hybrid way with some staff in Parliament House and most working remotely.

From February 2022, Hansard was able to return to its normal operations. Technological upgrades were made later in 2022 to allow staff to work effectively from home, so that Hansard can operate effectively should similar challenges present themselves in the future.

# Virtual and hybrid parliamentary committees

Parliamentary committees increase public awareness and debate on issues under consideration by parliament and benefit the community by reviewing proposed laws, facilitating more informed policy making and ensuring greater government accountability. Given their vital role, it was important that parliamentary committees continued to operate during the pandemic. While there had been some use of videoconference technology for Legislative Assembly committees before the pandemic, this was not common. During the pandemic committees operated virtually (with everyone remote) and as a hybrid (with a mix of remote and onsite attendance); there was also remote broadcasting of regional committee hearings, a first for any Australian jurisdiction.

## 2020

When parliament met on 24 March 2020 to pass emergency COVID-19 legislation and adjourn until September, one of the actions of the Legislative Council was to enable virtual committee hearings. Don Harwin MLC stated:

Other changes that we will make today include strengthening the capacity of another very important part of our work, the committee system, by broadening the way in which the committee system can do its work. We will be making changes so that deliberative meetings can be held by way of electronic means. This means that the opportunity for non-Government members, and indeed Government members, to scrutinise the activities of the Executive Government at this very worrisome time for everyone in the community will not be affected. The committee system will still be able to function—and function in a more practical way—during this difficult time for all of us.<sup>9</sup>

The Legislation Review Committee is a joint committee of the Legislative Assembly and the Legislative Council, and on 22 April 2020 it became the first committee during the pandemic to hold a meeting via videoconference. It tabled the Legislation Review Digest No 12/57 that day, which examined the COVID-19 Legislation Amendment (Emergency Measures) Bill 2020 and the Treasury Legislation Amendment (COVID-19) Bill 2020.

On 5 May 2020, the parliament's first virtual public hearing was conducted by the Legislative Assembly Committee on Investment, Infrastructure and Regional Development as part of its inquiry into Support for Drought Affected Communities in NSW. The hearing was originally planned to be held in Armidale. However, following the introduction of a ban on travel to regional centres, it became impossible for committee members and staff to

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<sup>9</sup> D Harwin MLC, [Hansard](#), 24 March 2020.

travel to Armidale, or for hearing witnesses to travel to an alternative location such as Sydney.

The hearing was held as a videoconference and was live-streamed on the parliament's website. The chair was in Parliament House, with all other members and witnesses connecting remotely from across NSW. On 15 May 2020 the chair of the committee, Justin Clancy MP, commented that while 'virtual proceedings are not without their technical and procedural challenges, they have enabled us to perform one of our most important roles—listening to public evidence'.<sup>10</sup>

On 7 May 2020, the Public Accountability Committee was the first Legislative Council committee to hold hearings via videoconference as part of its inquiry into the government's management of the COVID-19 pandemic. This was also a hybrid hearing with the chair in Parliament House and members and witnesses connecting remotely. Given the community interest in this inquiry, it was also the first committee to publish video recordings of the hearings to YouTube. Over the course of the pandemic, this committee held nine public hearings via videoconference.

There were some difficult technological and other challenges involved in organising hybrid committee hearings in the early months of the pandemic. Staff across parliament – in particular the information technology, broadcasting, and Hansard teams – showed innovation and collaboration to ensure parliamentary committees could continue their important work.

As COVID restrictions eased in the second half of 2020, committees were able to use a combination of hybrid and fully in-person hearings.

## 2021

Committees continued with hybrid and fully in-person hearings in the first half of 2021.

With the emergence of the Delta variant in June 2021, committees held virtual hearings in August and September. On 2 August 2021, the Legislative Council Standing Committee on Social Issues conducted the first fully virtual committee hearing by a Legislative Council committee. Others followed, including the 8 preliminary hearings for the 2021 Budget Estimates. In an Australian first, all committees live-streamed the hearings directly to YouTube. Legislative Assembly committees held two fully virtual hearings in September 2021. The first of these was for the Committee on Investment, Industry and Regional Development and the second was for the Public Accounts Committee.

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<sup>10</sup> J Clancy MP, Legislative Assembly Committee on Investment, Industry and Regional Development, Inquiry into support for drought affected communities in New South Wales, [Transcript](#), 15 May 2020, p1.



While partly virtual hearings had been held before, with committee members and witnesses participating remotely, these hearings were the first time all support staff were also working remotely. Extensive planning was involved to reduce the chance of technical difficulties. Strategies that were put in place to manage risks included hosting test meetings with staff and witnesses, the creation of a detailed schedule of events and administrative guide, and a WhatsApp messaging group to communicate quickly on the day. Additional procedures were developed to make sure the hearing ran smoothly. Technical resources provided by the Department of Parliamentary Services were relied upon to ensure that the broadcast could be live-streamed. The hearings were a success, and the committees were able to continue gathering evidence for their inquiries during the widespread lockdowns that were in place at that time.

Several hybrid hearings were held between October and December, including by the Legislative Assembly Committee on Community Services and Committee on Transport and Infrastructure. These inquiries involved the chair and committee members taking part in the hearings in person from Parliament House as well as by videoconference. Witnesses appeared before the committee by videoconference. In cases where there were multiple witnesses, a large screen was erected so that the committee members could see and hear all the witnesses in a panel-style configuration, and this view was broadcast live on parliament's website.

As the year progressed and the Delta wave passed, committees gradually moved from fully virtual to hybrid hearing models and then ultimately, more traditional face-to-face hearings in the lead up to Christmas 2021.

## **2022**

In early 2022, with the Omicron variant causing a surge in COVID cases, the committees largely reverted to the hybrid model of hearings, with the chair and secretariat in Parliament House, and all other members and witnesses appearing remotely. Later in the year committees largely moved to in-person hearings, although members and witnesses continued to make use of remote participation in hearings where appropriate to do so.

# Engaging and contributing to the community of New South Wales

During the pandemic there was a range of ways that the Parliament of New South Wales continued to engage with and support the community of New South Wales.

## Using social media to communicate

The Parliament of New South Wales increased its use of social media to communicate during the pandemic. This included making extended footage of proceedings available on Facebook during the sittings of March 2020 and livestreaming committee hearings on YouTube. These practices increased the accessibility of parliament and have continued even with the resumption of in-person hearings.

## E-petitions

While e-petitions were in development prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, their introduction was accelerated by it. The Legislative Assembly began to accept online petitions from August 2020. This enabled the community to continue to present their direct requests to parliament and thus be involved in the legislative process. The Legislative Council's e-petitions platform was launched in October 2021.

## Virtual tour

In 2020, while the parliamentary precinct remained closed to visitors and public tours were suspended, staff from across parliament developed a virtual tour which was uploaded to the parliament's website. The virtual tour allowed the parliament to safely continue sharing stories and its history while the building remained closed. A new interactive virtual tour was launched in July 2022.

## Online events

The parliament turned many of its school education and public programs into online events. This included the NSW Constitutional Convention, which saw more than 130 students tune in to hear a keynote address from University of Sydney Professor Anne Twomey speak about the relevance of the Australian Constitution in responding to crises such as the bushfires and the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Catering initiative

The Parliament of New South Wales was one of the biggest contributors to homeless and vulnerable people during the pandemic. The *OzHarvest Catering Initiative* was a collaborative effort between the finance and catering teams and involved the Parliamentary Kitchen providing more than 180,000 meals to OzHarvest for vulnerable members in the community.

## Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic placed enormous pressures on all parts of society, including the Parliament of New South Wales. Parliament responded to these pressures in a positive, collaborative and innovative way, adopting many procedural changes and technological innovations to hold sittings and committee hearings in ways that had either never been done before, or had not been done in a sustained, consistent way.

The changes that occurred to support ongoing operations during the pandemic ensured that the Parliament of New South Wales could continue to fulfil its role in making laws, controlling finances, scrutinising the actions of the executive government, and discussing matters of importance to the community. The certainty of an effective parliament is important in the face of the uncertainty brought by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the disruption it brought to the lives of so many for so long.

Parliament also used this experience to ensure it is well-prepared to respond to future crises. Audio-visual, Hansard and other technology is being updated within Parliament House. Another important component of this preparation occurred in March 2022, when the Parliament passed legislation to remove any constitutional barriers to operating a virtual parliament in a time of crisis.

Responding to the COVID-19 pandemic required effective emergency and contingency planning, and broad collaboration and consultation with all members of parliament, staff and the government. Because of the planning and communication that occurred during the pandemic the Parliament of New South Wales was able to move quickly and flexibly as the external environment changed. This kind of preparation and response is essential for the future, irrespective of the form of the next crisis to face New South Wales.

### **New South Wales Constitution amended to allow virtual sittings**

In October 2021, the Legislative Council passed the Constitution Amendment (Virtual Attendance) Bill 2021. The Bill allowed a virtual sitting of a House if the Presiding Officer has declared that a public emergency exists, including a public health crisis, natural disaster, major accident, civil disturbance or act of terrorism, and it is not safe or practicable for members of the House to meet in person.

This Bill was introduced by David Shoebridge MLC as a private member's Bill, and in his second reading speech Mr Shoebridge stated that the purpose of the Bill was:

...to ensure that democracy and representation can continue even during times of crisis, when it is more important than ever that elected representatives do their jobs to represent their constituents, oversight Government power and make sure we can pass the laws that are needed to deal with a crisis.<sup>11</sup>

The Bill passed the Legislative Assembly in March 2022 and it came into force soon after. With an upgrade to the broadcasting system in 2022, the Parliament is now equipped with the right technology to facilitate virtual sittings of the Houses. However, new systems would need to be established to enable secure, remote voting. This is being investigated by the Department of Parliamentary Services.

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<sup>11</sup> D Shoebridge MLC, [Hansard](#), 13 October 2021.

## Timeline of key events

Date	Description
<b>2020</b>	
11 March	COVID-19 declared to be a global pandemic
13 March	Pandemic plan for the Parliament of New South Wales activated
15 March	First public health restrictions introduced in New South Wales
20 March	Australian borders closed to non-residents
23 March	Shut down of non-essential activities and businesses in New South Wales
24 March	First scheduled sitting day after beginning of global pandemic Sittings of both Houses to pass emergency legislation Adjournment of both Houses until 15 September
27 March	Legislative Council's Public Accountability Committee commences a new inquiry into the NSW Government's management of the COVID-19 pandemic
30 March	Parliament closes to the public
31 March	General public lockdown in New South Wales
22 April	Legislation Review Committee holds the first committee meeting via videoconference during the pandemic
5 May	Legislative Assembly Committee on Investment, Infrastructure and Regional Development conducts first virtual public committee hearing
7 May	Legislative Council Public Accountability Committee holds hearing via videoconference as part of its new inquiry into the government's management of the COVID-19 pandemic
12-13 May	Both Houses recalled for sittings to consider emergency COVID-19 legislation Both Houses adopt a sitting calendar for the next 2-3 months
15 May	General public lockdown ends
2 June	Both Houses resume regular sitting pattern
3 June	Pandemic plan revised and new operational guidelines released
10 August	Legislative Assembly launches online petitions
6 October	Parliament House reopens to the public
<b>2021</b>	
9 February	Legislative Assembly resumes sittings Social distancing measures continued in the chamber
16 February	Legislative Council resumes sittings Social distancing measures continued in the chamber
17 March	<a href="#">COVID-19 Recovery Bill 2021</a> introduced into the Legislative Assembly

10 May	First mass COVID-19 vaccination hub in Australia opens (Sydney Olympic Park)
24 June	First COVID-19 case in Parliament House during Budget week Special measures adopted and budget passed by both Houses
24 June	Parliament House closed to the public
26 June	General public lockdown in response to Delta variant
August-September	Suspension of sittings Legislative Assembly and Legislative Council committees hold fully virtual hearings
2 August	Legislative Council Standing Committee on Social Issues conducts first virtual committee hearing
September	Legislative Assembly committees hold 2 fully virtual hearings
14 September	Legislative Council hybrid sitting – adjourned early (1.30pm) due to a minister not being present when the House met (Standing Order 34)
11 October	Public lockdown ends for fully vaccinated people (almost 80% of the NSW population had been fully vaccinated)
12 October	Rapid antigen testing introduced as a mandatory requirement for entering Parliament House on sitting days
12 October	Both Houses agree to motions for hybrid sittings and additional sitting days in November
October	Legislative Council launches online petitions
1 November	International borders reopened for fully vaccinated people
November	Legislative Assembly continues its October COVID-safe practices and includes Friday sittings to make up for lost sitting days
28 November	Omicron variant detected
29 November	Parliament House reopens to the public
15 December	Restrictions eased for vaccinated and unvaccinated people
<b>2022</b>	
February	Both Houses resume fully in-person sittings with COVID-safe measures such as mask wearing, social distancing requirements and rapid antigen testing
25 March	Legislative Council Public Accountability Committee tables report on NSW Government's management of the pandemic
31 March	Constitution Amendment (Virtual Attendance) Bill 2021 passes Parliament
May	Mask wearing and social distancing requirements relaxed in the chambers and Legislative Assembly gallery open to public
September	Mandatory rapid antigen testing for sitting days discontinued

### **Acknowledgements**

The authors would like to thank the President of the Legislative Council, the Hon. Matthew Mason-Cox MLC; the Speaker of the Legislative Assembly, the Hon. Jonathan O’Dea MP; the Clerk of the Parliaments, Mr David Blunt; and the Clerk of the Legislative Assembly, Ms Helen Minnican, for their participation in interviews to discuss the operation of the Parliament of New South Wales during the pandemic.

The authors would also like to thank the Usher of the Black Rod, Ms Jenelle Moore, and Deputy Clerk, Mr Steven Reynolds, from the Department of the Legislative Council; Deputy Clerk, Ms Carly Maxwell, Ms Amanda Alam, Ms Ilana Chaffey, and Mr Matt Johnson from the Department of the Legislative Assembly; and Mr Ross Cameron, Mr Scott Fuller, Mr Andrew Keidja and Ms Vanessa Schlenert from the Department of Parliamentary Services for the information they provided about the operation Parliament House during this time.

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Wales navigated the COVID-19  
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Research Paper No. 2023-01

ISSN 2653-8318

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