COVID-19 – How to Plan and Put People First

March 2020

To date Australia has seen the number of cases continue to increase.

In the face of this risk, it's important that businesses take steps to plan for and protect against the possibility that the outbreak worsens and the potential implications for revenues, operations, customers, vendors and, especially, employees. Employers should make their people a top priority and work to both protect their health and keep them well-informed.

In doing so, however, employers must avoid overreacting or implementing certain measures prematurely, which could complicate their response and harm their relationships with employees.

Next we need to start considering the impact on our business, our customers and ultimately our community as a whole.

To do this we need to understand what we are facing.

Understanding the Virus

We already know that the Health sector are actively working to develop preventive and curative measures and it is important for employers to be aware of the nature of the virus and to share information with employees.

The novel coronavirus typically causes mild-to-moderate upper respiratory tract symptoms in healthy individuals, including:

- difficulty breathing,
- fever,
- cough, and
- fatigue;

These symptoms could be easily confused with those of the common cold or flu.

The incubation period for the virus ranges from two to 14 days.

It is believed to be spread through close contact with individuals who are actively coughing and sneezing.

The view of the potential for human-to-human transmission is changing as cases are identified with unknown sources around the world.

Planning for Worst-Case Scenarios

The first step to manage such an event is to put together a planning group dedicated to manage the current outbreak or to epidemic/pandemic response more broadly.

Ideally, this group can fit into an organization's existing crisis management, employee health and safety and/or business continuity frameworks.

Rather than waiting for questions to be asked, this group should aim to anticipate and proactively address senior leaders' concerns about a continuing — and potentially worsening — outbreak.

A significant focus for the group should be considerations for employees, including the following.

Employee Health and Hygiene

Employees should be informed of recommendations from the World Health Organisation (WHO) and local health authorities to help prevent illness and limit the spread of the virus. These recommendations include:

- Using the inside of a flexed elbow or a tissue when sneezing or coughing

- Washing hands frequently, including after coughing, sneezing and touching surfaces touched by others

- Avoiding hand-to-mouth and hand-to-nose contact

- Avoiding close contact with anyone showing symptoms

- Receiving flu vaccinations to minimize confusion of symptoms

Employees who have recently traveled overseas, where the outbreak originated, or any other affected country or have been exposed to someone with the condition should be advised to stay away from the workplace for 14 days and ensure that they have health professionals check monitor and evaluate any symptoms.

Employees who have been in contact with infected individuals should also monitor their temperature twice daily over a period of 14 days and watch for any symptoms that may develop. They should also contact their health care providers for advice/ instructions.

Employees should know senior leaders are monitoring the spread of the coronavirus and are ready to escalate response actions as needed.

Employees who show symptoms but have neither traveled overseas nor been in close contact with infected individuals may be suffering from the flu or common cold. These employees should seek advice from health care providers while avoiding contact with others.

Employers should communicate with employees about any online/telemedicine options that are available to them; consultations with medical professionals via online/ telemedicine or by phone could help ease employees' fears about visiting hospital emergency rooms and other health care facilities where viruses often spread.

If (as) the outbreak worsens, employers should also consider making available alcohol-based hand sanitizer (and face masks) — which have proven partially effective in reducing the spread of viruses — and encouraging all employees showing any symptoms to stay away from workplaces.

Paid Family Leave and Sick Leave

It is important for employers to consider not only their employees' needs but those of their families. And it's important that employees feel supported by their employers during a time of crisis.

During an outbreak, epidemic or pandemic — and without the right assurances from employers — employees could become so concerned with losing income that they will continue to work even if they or members of their families fall ill.

If the outbreak worsens, employers should consider whether to expand or extend policies related to paid family leave and sick leave. Such potential changes, however, should be balanced against concerns about employee absenteeism and reduced productivity.

Telecommuting and Travel

Several governments and public health authorities are (carefully) recommending to avoid nonessential travel.

Any employees who must or have plans to travel should be aware of the WHO's recommended precautions, including exercising good hygiene, thoroughly cooking meat and eggs and avoiding contact with live animals.

If the virus spreads, employers may wish to consider cancelling or postponing any business travel.

Local commuting may also need to be considered. Allowing employees to work from home — even if they are not symptomatic — and enabling virtual meetings could help to limit the spread of the virus or potential for transmission and lessen employee fears about exposure to it.

In making such decisions, employers should consider operational impacts — for example, whether virtual private networks and other technology systems can accommodate more remote workers and whether critical business can be conducted without face-to-face communication.

Taking a Measured Approach

At this stage, employers should be asking critical questions and considering their potential responses.

The volume of reported coronavirus cases and fears about it spreading further have already prompted strong measures by employers, health authorities and government officials. These include quarantines, severe travel restrictions and the temporary closure of many businesses.

The situation has and continues to change rapidly. Employers should be mindful and understand the impact in the local context as well be aware of the larger picture.

Taking sudden, visible action too early — such as mandating that all employees work from home — could send the wrong message to employees. However, choosing to take no action in light of the situation may also be an issue.

Once a plan is developed, the planning group/ CMT or other Team should instead think carefully about how and under what conditions to activate elements of their plans. The Group should agree on precise action timeframe, relying on guidance from governments and public health authorities, for thresholds at which to implement specific policies and procedures. For example, it may be appropriate for businesses to distribute face masks and mandate social distancing and telecommuting in the event of a confirmed case involving an employee or an employee's family member.

Communication Is Key

While preparing for possible action as the outbreak continues, planning groups should focus on communicating with senior leaders and employees. The Working Group should provide senior executives and managers with information and insight to help them make sound decisions that address operational needs and ensure employees' well-being.

Employees, meanwhile, should know senior leaders are monitoring the spread of the virus and are ready to escalate response actions as needed. Arming employees with information — about the outbreak's progress, employers' responses and efforts by governments and public health officials to combat it — and using the right tone in communications can provide comfort to employees, correct misconceptions about the novel coronavirus and limit fear and anxiety.

Next Steps

As the situation evolves the Team will need to think and prepare for the implementation of the next stages of this situation.

Planning and prevention are the first steps to avoid what could be major impact on people, the business and the community as a whole.

The following guideline provides some key points of consideration in the stages of:

- Areas of consideration
- Impact on these areas
- Planning/ Prevention
- Response
- Recovery
- Improvement

COVID19 – GUIDELINE FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT

ORGANISATIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

	Impact Area	Planning / Prevention – Planning stage; be ready to implement or implement as deemed appropriate	Response – implement agreed strategies; coordinate and monitor outcomes	Recovery – implement resumption activities as appropriate	Improvement – debrief and review actions taken

Senior Management	• Whole of organisation	• Stay informed and up to date
		• Plan for possible impact
		• Plan for loss of Snr (key) Staff
		• Develop notification/ communication protocol
		• Reach out to Health professionals (GPs or local hospital) to understand their arrangements/ response/ reporting protocol at local level
		• Continuous communication with Staff. Carefully plan communication / messages
		• Control all outgoing public messages (Snr Mgt only)
		• Establish and implement all staff comms protocols (if affected)
		• Plan for leave arrangements
		• Review travel plans for staff
		• Plan for remote work
		• Communicate planned protocols
		• Track any staff travelling/ returning from overseas (affected countries) and establish protocol for them
		• Ensure regular and appropriate cleaning regimes of all shared areas (arrangements for/with cleaners)
		• Develop appropriate hygiene protocols for staff and prepare to make available appropriate resources if necessary
			• Implement remote work
			• Inform staff of leave conditions
			• Monitor staff
			• Track any affected staff and any quarantine measure to be implemented
			• Implement travel plan
			• Continue to monitor staff returning from overseas and implement protocol
			• Manage communications with external stakeholders
			• Utilise telephone and video conference calls instead of face-to-face meetings where possible
				• Take stock of affected staff; operations and services
				• Prioritise resumption to BAU
				• Continue to monitor all actions of business units
				• Return to normal
				• Continue to monitor reports
					• Review and debrief with:
					  o Govt authorities
					  o Business community
					  o Within Council and Mgt and Op level
					• Review implemented plans
					• Review BCP
					• Review comms plan
					• Review media views on Council's approach and maintain leadership role (good reputation)

ORGANISATIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

	Impact Area	Planning / Prevention – Planning stage; be ready to implement or implement as deemed appropriate	Response – implement agreed strategies; coordinate and monitor outcomes	Recovery – implement resumption activities as appropriate	Improvement – debrief and review actions taken
		• Plan for absenteeism and ensure redundancy through cross-training/ skilling among staff that hold critical roles			
Community	• Local outbreak • Panic	• Stay informed • Demonstrate leadership • Know Health authorities' protocols and any required action by LG • LEMO to reach out to LEMC and Health rep for plan and expected action	• Demonstrate leadership • Implement council actions and protocols as needed • Liaise with LEMC/ SEMC or body in charge • Maintain communication	• Monitor community impact & subsequent impact on council	• Work with and support community efforts to revitalise • Reputation value • Grant funding sources
Employees-sick; family (sick / no services; travel)	• No staff no service	• Education • Reach out to GPs or local hospital to understand their arrangements/ response/ reporting protocol • Plan hygiene protocols • Staff with symptoms to seek medical advice before coming to work • Protocol for notification to Snr Mgt • seek leave arrangements • Consider remote work • Speak with WorkCover & prepare Safety plan	• Immediately isolate • Staff to seek medical advice and testing • Quarantine • Check staff in close contact – medical test and monitor • Track staff absences • Prioritise work • Offer EAP or other assistance	• Develop and inform staff of new RTW protocols • Snr Mgt and Mgrs. to monitor impact as they initiate BAU; workload/ backlog stress	• Review implemented protocols • Use lessons to improve future response
Customers (incl all customer facing operations and care services that Council may offer)	• High level of contact with public • Increased exposure to or from	• Education • Plan hygiene protocols • Notify Snr Mgt • Reach out to GPs or local hospital to understand their arrangements/ response/ reporting protocol • Plan for closure if necessary	• Activate BCP • Consider closing customer facing services • Implement phone service only • Continuously inform public	• Notify public of BUA • Ensure staff ready to deal with full workload • Manage media	• Review BCP • Review implemented protocols against document • Use lessons to improve future response • Strengthen contingencies • Thank customers

Impact Area	**Planning / Prevention** – Planning stage; be ready to implement or implement as deemed appropriate	**Response** – implement agreed strategies; coordinate and monitor outcomes	**Recovery** – implement resumption activities as appropriate	**Improvement** – debrief and review actions taken
Services • High level of contact with public • Increased exposure to or from	• Education • Plan hygiene protocols • Equipment cleaning • Reach out to GPs or local hospital to understand their arrangements/ response/ reporting protocol • Plan for closure if necessary	• Activate BCP • Notify Snr Mgt • Limit customer contact • Hygiene • Provide masks and sanitiser • Consider closing customer facing services & implement phone service only	• Follow resumption actions on BCP • Notify stakeholders • Gradual return to BAU if necessary	• Review BCP • Review implemented protocols against document • Use lessons to improve future response • Strengthen contingencies • Thank customers
Operations • No staff • Work is delayed	• Seek alternative staff (deployment? Other council?) • BCP • Prioritise staff and workloads • Notification protocols	• Activate BCP • Deploy staff • Seek to outsource	• Resume normal • Implement resumption actions on BCP	• Review BCP • Review implemented protocols against document • Use lessons to improve future response
Suppliers **(of equipment parts etc.)** • Impact on stores • Critical supplies?	• Identify alternate suppliers • Stockpile critical supplies • Identify suppliers of critical stores and develop arrangements (MOU) • Review any contract liabilities in the case of delays, cancellations, or quality issues.	• Activate BCP • Contact alternate suppliers • Prioritise work	• Restock supplies • Prioritise orders • Any contract / agreement clauses breached by non – supply? • Monitor costs • Possible claim for additional cost?	• Review BCP • Review implemented protocols against document • Use lessons to improve future response • Strengthen contingencies • Build new or rebuild networks
Contractors (providing a service for or on behalf of Council) • Impact on services • Critical works	• Confirm contingencies of existing contractors • Identify alternate contractors	• Activate BCP • Engage alternate contractor • Bring work in-house	• Resume contractor services • Investigate any clauses breached in contract for non delivery – seek compensation • Consider extra work to catch up with workload • Review contractor KPIs	• Review BCP • Review implemented protocols against document • Use lessons to improve future response • Strengthen contingencies • Build new or rebuild networks

ORGANISATIONAL CONSIDERATIONS					
	Impact Area	**Planning / Prevention** – Planning stage; be ready to implement or implement as deemed appropriate	**Response** – implement agreed strategies; coordinate and monitor outcomes	**Recovery** – implement resumption activities as appropriate	**Improvement** – debrief and review actions taken
Activities/ Events (organised by Council or on Council premises)	• Possible cancellations	• Identify any upcoming events and plan how and if (threshold) they would be cancelled	• Cancel/ limit/ control • implement hygiene protocols	• Reschedule event • Investigate if any losses or costs are insured • Review procedures implemented	• Review implemented protocols against document • Use lessons to improve future response • Strengthen contingencies • Build new or rebuild networks
Reputation	• Acting too soon/ not soon enough • Loss of trust	• Demonstrate leadership • Carefully plan communication/messages • Control all messages (Snr Mgt only) • Communicate to all staff • Ensure only accurate information is issued • Prepare to manage a crisis (on reputation – wrong message/ wrong action/ timing)	• Implement comms plan • Monitor response/ reaction • Contain any adverse feedback • Monitor all media channels • Implement crisis plan (if necessary)	• Notify via media that Council is BAU • Regular media updates • Monitor any media backlash	• Use media to promote effective actions
Financial	• Increased cost • Impact due to financial markets (local and global)	• Monitor potential increased costs • Seek advice from insurer on cover • Monitor and plan to take action on investments	• BCP - Implement new expenditure protocol (if one needed/ developed) • Monitor expenditure (BCP) • Keep track of expenses • Communicate with Insurer • Monitor investment strategies and take action as needed	• Consolidate extra expenditure and seek to claim if possible • Review investment strategies	• Review implemented protocols against document • Use lessons to improve future response • Strengthen contingencies

ORGANISATIONAL CONSIDERATIONS					
	Impact Area	**Planning / Prevention** – Planning stage; be ready to implement or implement as deemed appropriate	**Response** – implement agreed strategies; coordinate and monitor outcomes	**Recovery** – implement resumption activities as appropriate	**Improvement** – debrief and review actions taken
Local economy	• Local businesses and services affected/ close down • Impact on tourism	• Reach out to community • Understand their exposure and help them to plan and prepare • Reach out to State and Fed governments for possible assistance	• Work with community and authorities to prevent spread and control • Maintain informed	• Work with community to revitalise • Engage and promote	• Review implemented protocols against document • Use lessons to improve future response • Strengthen contingencies • Monitor new events