

RESPONSE TO PETITION

Petition No. 11 of 2022 House of Assembly

The petitioner of the undersigned Residents of Tasmania draws to the attention of the House:

- Government imposed vaccine and mask mandates have not stopped the spread or mitigated the risks of contracting COVID-19 in Tasmania.
- Vaccine and mask mandates have added significantly to already existing healthcare and education crises.
- There is increasing public concern that vaccinations and masking are unsafe, especially for children.

Your petitioners, therefore, request the House to call on the Government to:

- (1) Lift all mandates - for employees to be vaccinated and ensure employers state-wide follow suit.
- (2) End requirements for masking in schools, medical clinics and transport services.
- (3) Return to Tasmanians the right to choose medical interventions on a personal basis.

GOVERNMENT POSITION:

- Vaccination requirements under the *Public Health Act 1997* were introduced in 2021 and applied to employees in certain high-risk and vulnerable settings.
- There is no longer a vaccination requirement for certain employees under the *Public Health Act 1997*. However individual workplaces may require vaccination as part of their work health and safety practices.
- More than 99% of Tasmanians over 12 years of age have received two doses of a COVID-19 vaccine. Most of these people were not subject to mandates.

- While the Tasmanian Government strongly recommends that all eligible people stay up to date with their COVID-19 vaccinations, as has been the case throughout Tasmania's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, decisions regarding medical treatments, including vaccination, remain those of the individual.
- There is no longer a requirement to wear face masks in certain settings pursuant to the *Public Health Act 1997*, other than on aircraft and while a person is a close contact of someone with COVID-19.
- Separate from requirements under the *Public Health Act 1997*, workplaces may require vaccination or face masks based on their workplace health and safety risk assessments.

RESPONSE:

I. Tasmania's COVID-19 response

Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus. Most people infected with the virus will experience mild to moderate respiratory illness and recover without requiring medical treatment. However, some will become seriously ill and require medical attention. Older people and those with underlying medical conditions like cardiovascular disease, diabetes, chronic respiratory disease, or cancer are more likely to develop serious illness. Anyone can get sick with COVID-19 and become seriously ill or die at any age.

According to the World Health Organization, as of 13 July 2022 there have been 555 446 890 confirmed cases of COVID-19 worldwide, and 6 353 692 deaths worldwide.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the Tasmanian Government has prioritised the health, safety, and wellbeing of all Tasmanians, and this remains the case. Tasmania's response to COVID-19 pandemic has been measured, responsible and based on the available public health advice.

Risk-mitigation measures in Tasmania are informed by the current epidemiological conditions, as well as advice provided by the Commonwealth and Tasmanian Government Departments of Health, the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC), National Cabinet, and several peak bodies in Australia including the Communicable Diseases Network Australia

(CDNA) and the Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation (ATAGI). Experts in these groups continuously review best practice both nationally and internationally and update recommendations as the pandemic evolves, including about measures such as vaccination and mask-wearing.

Using stringent border measures throughout much of 2020 and 2021, Tasmania was able to largely avoid the Delta subvariant of COVID-19 which was responsible for a significant burden of disease elsewhere in Australia and around the world. By mid-December 2021, very high rates of vaccination in Tasmania supported the easing of border measures. This meant that the arrival of the Omicron variant of COVID-19, and establishment of community transmission, occurred in the context of a highly-vaccinated population – a highly unusual situation worldwide. Omicron is highly transmissible but is associated with less severe disease than Delta. These factors, combined with prudent measures such as mask-wearing and vaccination, have resulted in Tasmania having a lower incidence of severe disease, intensive care admissions, and deaths, relative to infection rates, than comparable jurisdictions.

2. Vaccination

Vaccination offers strong protection against severe illness (needing hospital admission and/or intensive care) and death. A third (first booster) dose of COVID-19 vaccine provides high vaccine effectiveness in the first one-to-two months after vaccination against severe disease, and moderate protection against symptomatic infection. Effectiveness against infection wanes at four-to-six weeks following vaccination. However, effectiveness against severe disease (including hospital admission and death) lasts for up to six months and possibly longer.

The Australian Technical Advisory Group (ATAGI) is a group of vaccine experts who carefully consider the risks and benefits of vaccination and make recommendations which can be found here: [Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation \(ATAGI\) | Australian Government Department of Health](#).

Regarding vaccine safety, the COVID-19 vaccines have been approved by the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) under the same processes as any medication approved for use in Australia. In its assessment of medicines, safety is a key consideration for the TGA. The TGA continues to review rolling data on COVID-19 vaccines, including the paediatric formulation of the Pfizer vaccination, using Australia's well-established safety monitoring processes for vaccines. This includes a robust vaccine vigilance system for

early detection and investigation of suspected side effects (also known as adverse events). Weekly reports can be found here: [COVID-19 vaccine weekly safety report | Therapeutic Goods Administration \(TGA\)](#).

Tasmania has achieved very high rates of vaccination coverage: over 99% of people aged 12 years and above have received two doses of a COVID-19 vaccine since the vaccine rollout began in February 2021. Vaccines for children aged 5-11 were approved to begin in January 2022 and since then, 58.68% of children aged 5-11 have received two doses. 72.56% of Tasmanians aged 16 and above have now had their “booster” (third) dose of vaccine. Most of those who have been vaccinated were not subject to a vaccine requirement.

The Tasmanian Government, based on public health advice, continues to recommend that all eligible Tasmanians stay informed about, and up to date with, their COVID-19 vaccinations. However, like all medical treatments, the decision to be vaccinated is a personal one that must be made by individuals.

3. Face masks

Use of facemasks remains an effective intervention against transmission of COVID-19 and other respiratory viruses, like influenza. If you are unknowingly infected with the virus, face masks can provide protection to other people with whom you may come into contact, including people at risk of severe illness, and slow the spread of illness in the community.

There are no longer mask-wearing requirements in place under the *Public Health Act 1997*, other than on aircraft and for close contacts in indoor spaces other than their homes. However, Public Health continues to recommend that people wear face masks when in public indoor spaces and/or where it is difficult to maintain physical distance, especially at times of high COVID-19 risk.

Throughout the pandemic, the above Public Health recommendations have always only applied to children 12 years and older. Children in middle primary school (i.e. from grade 3) can be supported to wear face masks if they are comfortable to do so. There is no evidence of harm to children from wearing face masks. Children under the age of 2 should never wear a face mask.

4. Duties of workplaces under work health and safety law

Under the *Work Health and Safety Act 2012*, persons carrying on a business or undertaking (PCBUs) have a duty to provide a safe workplace for employees and visitors. In order to fulfil this obligation, PCBUs must conduct a risk

assessment including for COVID-19 and to implement lawful and reasonable measures to mitigate risks identified. Depending on the workplace and on the risks identified, these measures may include vaccination and/or wearing face masks.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jeremy Rockliff', written in a cursive style.

Jeremy Rockliff
Premier
Minister for Health

Date: 3 August 2022

