EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This Review is a first for Australia. Its terms of reference were not dictated by a politician. It was independent of government. It was philanthropically funded. It was apolitical. The over 350 people who participated in this Review were not compelled to give evidence because of the coercive powers wielded by a Royal Commission. They were not pressured to testify before a government or parliamentary inquiry. Participation was entirely voluntary. They were assured of complete confidentiality, so they were able to speak freely. They participated because they wanted to help answer the Review's core question:

What can Australia learn from the COVID-19 pandemic to be better prepared for the next health crisis?

FOUR AREAS WHERE WE SHOULD HAVE DONE BETTER

All reviews are written with the benefit of hindsight. This Review is no exception. Understanding the context in which decisions were made is vital. Governments and public servants were making decisions in a fog of uncertainty. None of the Panel can be confident that they would have made decisions better at the time. But, looking back, we are persuaded that significant mistakes were made. Hindsight offers lessons for the future as long as we are willing to consider, in an open manner, what went wrong. These are the views we share.

1 $ **Economic supports should have been provided fairly and equitably.** Governments and businesses failed to urgently provide adequate sick leave to workers. This was unfair on those workers, helped the virus to spread and cost lives. Excluding migrants and international students from economic supports put people in danger. It unfairly forced charities, universities and businesses to pick up the slack. It has contributed to the labour force challenges we face today. Failing to include a claw-back mechanism for businesses supported by JobKeeper was a design fault. It was fiscally irresponsible and unfair when other groups in society were excluded from economic supports. Excluding casual and migrant workers from JobKeeper without a proportionate increase in, or access to, JobSeeker failed to get the balance right between supporting people in need and ensuring a flexible labour force.

2   **Lockdowns and border closures should have been used less.** Lockdowns and border closures have significant social and economic costs and should be a last resort. They buy us time to collect information and data on the virus, bolster health system capacity, and develop and distribute vaccines. But too many of Australia's lockdowns and border closures were the result of policy failures in quarantine, contact tracing, testing, disease surveillance and communicating effectively the need for preventative measures like mask wearing and social distancing. Politics also played a role. Localised outbreaks were inevitable. Statewide and nationwide outbreaks were not.

3   **Schools should have stayed open.** It was sensible to close schools where there was an outbreak and when little was known about how the virus spread. But it was wrong to close entire school systems, particularly once new information indicated that schools were not high-transmission environments. For children and parents (particularly women), we failed to get the balance right between protecting health and imposing long-term costs on education, mental health, the economy and workforce outcomes. The same applies to closing universities and vocational education and training centers. The social and economic costs were likely significant.

4   **Older Australians should have been better protected.** The problems in aged care were well known before the pandemic. Many of these problems have their roots in the sad reality that Australia's aged care system depersonalises older people. Funding was inadequate. The labour force was stretched. Fixing aged care requires changed attitudes. The decision to restrict aged care residents from going to hospital when they contracted COVID-19 was a mistake that cost lives. Restrictions on visits to aged care homes, long past the end of the outbreak, caused unnecessary pain and distress.

FIVE OVERARCHING LESSONS

1 **Have societal fault lines front of mind.** The overarching lesson from this Review, and the focus of its recommendations, is that policies were too often designed and implemented without proper regard for the inequalities in our society and the vulnerabilities of key communities. All governments should consider issues of fairness when they make policy. But at a minimum, we need to recognise the existence of disadvantage in our response to crises. Australia was too often playing catch-up during COVID-19, seeking to address predictable challenges only when they became evident. People experiencing social inequalities or particular vulnerabilities in our community suffered unnecessarily. They paid a higher cost. Much of this could have been avoided if planning had considered inequities from the outset.

2 **Plan, prepare and practise.** Preparation is key to accounting for societal fault lines. Most of Australia's pandemic plans were developed for a flu-like outbreak. They were not adequately scenario-tested and were quickly discarded. Australia needs plans in place. They must be regularly practised within well-coordinated, well-informed and well-funded institutions.

3 **Avoid the perils of overreach.** There were too many instances in which government regulations and their enforcement went beyond what was required to control the spread of the virus, even when based on the information available at the time. Such overreach undermined public trust and confidence in the institutions that are vital to effective crisis response. Many Australians came to feel that they were being protected by being policed. These actions could have been avoided if we had built fairness into our planning decisions and introduced compassion into their implementation.

4 **Be transparent, clear and consistent.** There was insufficient transparency in how decisions were made, who made them and why. The evidence relied upon was often unclear. A lack of consistency and clarity in rules led to unnecessary confusion, prosecutions and suffering. Transparency, inclusion and clarity ensure that decisions are made and supported by the best possible information and that public confidence in government intervention is maintained.

5 **Better balance competing trade-offs.** The response to COVID-19 produced sharp trade-offs between health, social and economic outcomes, between short-term and long-term considerations and between different parts of the community. The existence of these trade-offs needs to be acknowledged and carefully managed and evaluated through risk management and cost-benefit frameworks.

SIX RECOMMENDATIONS

The outcomes from the pandemic suggest that initiatives to address the well-known fault lines throughout society remained at the periphery of the planning process rather than being placed at its core. To be better prepared for the next health crisis, we need to place people who are disadvantaged at the centre of our planning. Social inequities need to be considered from the start. This is the core focus of our recommendations.

There was a gap between knowing that we need to account for societal fault lines and putting in place effective measures to address them. In some instances, this flowed from wrong-headed policies, such as deliberately excluding temporary migrants from financial support or preventing elderly people in aged care facilities from accessing hospital care when they had COVID-19. In other instances, government recognition of the adverse consequences of disadvantage came too little and too late. In virtually all cases, it reflected design flaws that flowed from not putting the most vulnerable at the centre of policy interventions.

Below, we set out our six recommendations that, if taken up as a coherent package, will set the framework for a future response that can accommodate the lessons outlined in this report. While they relate directly to measures that can improve policymaking during a crisis, they are framed against a broader recognition that governments need to prosecute a range of structural and institutional reforms to address persistent challenges to broad-based prosperity.

The recent Jobs and Skills Summit discussed some of these issues. But more action is required to address declining educational standards, the digital divide, health inequality, access to affordable housing, inadequate funding of aged and disability care, and the gap of disadvantage that separates Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations from the rest of society. Clearly, there are other weaknesses in Australia's social insurance system. Our Review does not seek to suggest how these wickedly complex problems of public policy should be addressed. Rather, it focuses its attention on ensuring that, in a crisis, the design and delivery of support is fully cognisant of the societal fault lines that will need to be addressed.

SIX RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATION 1

Strengthen crisis preparation, planning and testing. Pandemic plans should be wide-ranging. They need to be flexible and incorporate a broader range of transmissible, potential pandemic-causing pathogens. Plans should be regularly scenario-tested with key leaders, officials, ministers and representatives from business, unions and civil society. They should articulate the decision-making processes, the trade-offs considered and the balance of costs and benefits over time. Plans should identify risks and how these will be managed.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Establish an expert body and trusted voice on public health. Australia should establish a world-leading Australian Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (ACDCP). The ACDCP should be structured with state-and territory-based nodes able to coordinate research institutes and universities across jurisdictions. It should be independent and apolitical in its staffing appointments. It should be data-driven and have complete access to federal, state and territory government datasets. It should also have the capabilities to develop its own additional datasets as needed. It should act as an early warning system and as the key advisory body to the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC).

RECOMMENDATION 3

Improve government decision-making through broader advice and greater transparency. Australia should establish a panel of multidisciplinary experts, including business leaders and frontline community workers. It should have in place mechanisms to capture the voice of those with lived experience. Only then can we be confident that advice presented to the National Cabinet during health crises incorporates the broadest range of health, economic, social and cultural considerations, set within a risk management framework that balances short- and longer-term impacts. All levels of government should be required to invest in relationships with business and civil society to harness their expertise and networks in a crisis by committing to comply with the principles and core values for community engagement set out by the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2). The National Cabinet should clearly define its role in a health crisis, allocate responsibilities for key functions (for example, in relation to quarantine) and agree what constitutes an 'essential' worker or business. Its default position should be that it will publish all evidence and modelling that informs its decision-making. This may be politically challenging, but the greater transparency and openness will sustain public trust.

RECOMMENDATION 4

Enhance public service collaboration, capability and communication. The National Cabinet should seek to significantly improve the collaboration of public servants across jurisdictions and with business and civil society. It needs to establish a clear authorising environment for cooperative work. To this end, it is time to undertake a major review, not of the quality of particular public services, but of how their cross-jurisdictional effectiveness can be enhanced. Recent reviews of federal, state and territory public administrations suggest that they are seeking to address a number of common problems. The National Cabinet should agree to establish an interjurisdictional Public Service Centre of Excellence. Its immediate focus should be on enhancing digital skills and data analytics, placing greater emphasis on the professional skills required to deliver major projects, and improving risk management and evaluation. The National Cabinet should expand and improve the channels of public communication, particularly with those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. With this in mind, all governments should increase the diversity of public sector employees.

RECOMMENDATION 5

Modernise how governments use data. The Australian Government should amend the *Data Availability and Transparency Act 2022* (Cth) (DAT Act) and the *Tax Administration Act 1953* (Cth) (TAA) to make data sharing the default option. This would allow accredited private researchers to participate in the DAT Scheme established under the DAT Act, stimulate research in universities and improve access to administrative tax data for policymakers. Governments should encourage the sharing and linking of de-identified data between jurisdictions by reforming the Intergovernmental Agreement on Data Sharing between federal, state and territory governments. We should fast-track the development of interoperability frameworks for de-identified and anonymised health data. Governments should create elite data-led teams to build capabilities in empirical analysis. All of this should be undertaken in close consultation between the National Data Commissioner and the Privacy Commissioner, to ensure that confidential personal data is carefully protected.

RECOMMENDATION 6

Build a culture of real–time evaluation and learning in the public sector. The Australian Government should establish an Office of the Evaluator General. It needs to have a truly independent and empowered senior executive at the helm, quarantined funding and a remit that includes real-time tracking of policy performance during a crisis. The Office should perform randomised control trials, natural experiments and other robust forms of analysis. It should report directly to Parliament. Ideally, similar models of evaluation should be developed by state and territory governments. In addition, all jurisdictions should embed an evaluation requirement for all new major policy proposals, particularly those that require legislative approval.