



Surviving lockdown, getting everyone vaccinated, reopening and powering Sydney's economy back

July 2021



Committee
for
Sydney

Introduction

The path out of lockdown lies through vaccinations.

We can see in countries all over the world that once most of the population has been vaccinated, it becomes possible to re-engage with public life, even as Covid-19 remains present and continues to take a toll.

But how do we get from here to there?

The NSW Government faces a terrible choice: make the lockdown more draconian in hopes it will drive cases lower, or just continue with the current settings.

We don't know if further lockdowns will work against the Delta variant. We may be in this for a while.

The people who are continuing to go to work, thus spreading Covid-19, are the very people who enable the rest of us to stay home: the essential workers we all depend on.

Lockdown is incredibly difficult, especially for young people. But the end is in sight.

We should step into this phase of the pandemic with a sense of purpose and optimism: we know what we need to do.

The Committee has spent the last two weeks speaking with members, academics and people in Government.

This is our set of priorities for surviving lockdown, getting everyone vaccinated, reopening to the world and powering Sydney's economy back.



Recommendations

Surviving lockdown

1. Give people a roadmap
2. Expand income replacement programs
3. Reopen schools
4. Keep reopening construction
5. Move social life outdoors

Setting the stage for reopening

6. Do everything possible to achieve a high level of vaccination
7. Create powerful incentives for vaccination
8. Set a realistic vaccination target for reopening

Rebuild the sectors crushed by Covid-19

9. University and research strategy
10. Cultural and live performance sector strategy
11. Visitor and experience industry strategy

Moving into long term recovery

12. Shift to long-term management of Covid-19 as an endemic disease
13. Revive town centres, even as remote work changes them
14. Tell a more sophisticated story of Sydney.



Surviving lockdown

Give people a roadmap

What we need right now is hope – and that will come from a sense of what the roadmap out of this lockdown is. Consumer confidence, business confidence, the ability to plan, even basic mental health, are all going to benefit if we understand what the plan is.

In essence, we are suggesting that Government share more of its thinking.

Everyone understands we cannot have firm dates yet. What we're asking for is a roadmap that tells us what happens when certain vaccination targets are met, for example. The federal government's four stage reopening plan is a start, but as of this writing it lacks numbers.

Actions

- Federal government – Provide detail on its four-stage reopening strategy, including dates and vaccine coverage timelines
- State government to outline strategy for reopening, including timing for removal of distancing measures, vaccine passports or permits and transitioning out of reporting daily Covid-19 daily cases
- State government to set clear parameters on triggers for reintroduction of restrictions, so we understand how decisions will be made and business can plan ahead.



NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian has been fronting press conferences day after day.

Expand income support programs

JobKeeper was a policy success, despite anomalies, and government should be congratulated for bold, quick action.

Now we need income support again. Until controls end, this needs to be enough to allow workers whose jobs are not classified as critical the financial confidence to restrict movement by staying home.

Governments have sensibly expanded support in recent weeks. Raising JobSaver's turnover threshold to \$250 million is good, but support is also needed for highly impacted larger businesses (e.g. hospitality and entertainment industries).

More could also be done to encourage businesses to stay connected with stood-down workers to ensure a rapid bounce back.

Actions

- Measures to support business with turnovers above \$250 million from highly impacted industries – by either opening JobSaver to all businesses, regardless of size, with retrospective clawback provisions, if required; or targeted support
- Defer state taxes such as payroll tax for hard hit sectors
- Waive utility bills for people in the hardest hit LGAs.



Queues for Centrelink support.

Reopen schools

Lockdown is having a terrible impact on children's learning, social development, mental health and happiness.

We believe the number one priority for reopening, in terms of its human impact, is getting kids back in school.

It's encouraging to see government prioritise the return of Year 12 students, supported by rapid testing, and we would like to see this significantly expanded.

It makes sense to protect the elderly by keeping them as cloistered as possible until we get to higher rates of vaccination, but kids need to get back in school.

Actions

- Expedite vaccines for teachers and school staff as essential workers
- Put in place facility management rules to minimise spread
- Then bring kids back to school
- In line with this, we need to finish vaccinating the elderly and aged care workers with AstraZeneca, which will allow us to tolerate some community transmission from schools being open – this cohort is not held up by supply constraints.



Home schooling.

Keep reopening construction

Construction sites have not been a significant driver of Covid-19 spread, and the NSW Government is doing the right thing in a hard situation by moving quickly to partially reopen construction.

This is a sensible first step but given the way worksites function a partial reopening may itself create significant disruption and force some sites to remain closed. We need to quickly expand construction back to full steam.

Some of the LGAs where people are not able to leave to go to work are also home to parts of the construction workforce.

The construction industry has the capacity to run strict management systems – especially for large buildings and infrastructure, which already have highly controlled access and staff oversight procedures.

Actions

- Work to get the construction workforce vaccinated
- Allow fully vaccinated skilled workers back onto all sites
- Work with the industry to better define Covid-safe workplace practices
- In the longer run, allow fully vaccinated skilled workers to enter Australia to overcome the skills shortage.



NSW's tunnel boring machine in use on Metro rail construction.

Move social life outdoors

We have learned that Covid-19 is much less likely to spread outdoors.

New York City, London and other cities around the world worked to move bars and restaurants outdoors to great success.

Between now and the "great reopening" we should support bars and restaurants to serve customers outdoors.

This can be one of the positive bright spots to help us get through a difficult few months.

Actions

- Permit outdoor service as the first step to reopening the food and beverage sector
- Identify 25 high streets across Sydney where restaurants can take over the curb lane, and mobilise public works to allow quick temporary closures
- Fund restaurants with micro grants to set up their outdoor dining arrangements. Create a one-stop permitting shop for these streets.



Temporary outdoor dining provisions in The Rocks.



Setting the stage for reopening

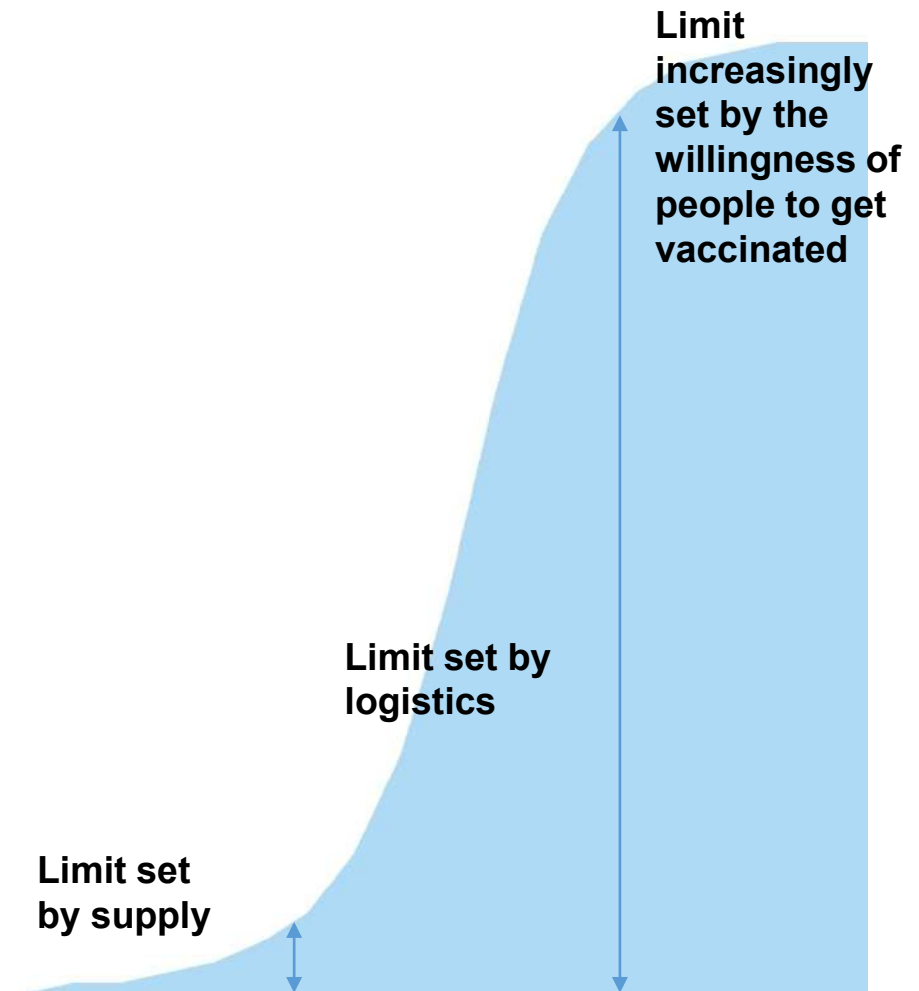
Do everything possible to achieve a high level of vaccination

This is the single most important thing we need to do to get out of this cycle of lockdown. We don't yet know how high we can push the vaccination numbers, but the major limiting factor right now is supply. Soon that will shift to logistics, with the supply chain dynamics of getting the vaccines where they are needed the major limiting factor.

Later, we will confront the willingness of remaining people to get vaccinated – to achieve the highest level of vaccination possible, we will need to appropriately target different cohorts to ensure everyone has an equal opportunity to be vaccinated. This will require culturally relevant, multi-lingual communications as standard.

Actions:

- Prioritise access for those who keep the core of our society and economy functioning: supermarket workers, emergency service workers, utility workers and teachers
- Lead the campaign with positive messages about vaccination – this is your chance to be a hero and help Sydney get through this
- Use major employers, including government agencies, to deliver vaccines, repurposing flu vaccination programs and leveraging the accessibility of worksite vaccination programs.



The limiting factor on vaccination rates will change with phase, initially with supply, then logistics and ultimately willingness.

Create powerful incentives for vaccination

To achieve high vaccination rates, we need to create powerful incentives. That means treating people who have been vaccinated differently, allowing them to get parts of their lives back once they have been vaccinated.

This should include allowing people who are fully vaccinated to enter and leave the country without hotel quarantine, because we know flights where everyone is fully vaccinated are lower risk. This would apply to international students, business travellers, tourists and especially returning Australians.

Actions:

- Allow fully vaccinated people in and out of the country with home quarantine and testing
- Provide vouchers to fully vaccinated people that also stimulate the economy, e.g. dining, flights in Australia
- Require vaccinations to enter bars, restaurants, shops, public transport, schools and indoor workplaces
- Support with an immunity passport system
- Require vaccination for NSW Government employees
- Encourage other businesses to require employees to be vaccinated as a condition of employment
- If incentives are not enough, we may need to mandate
- Launch a campaign to bring Australians home by Christmas.



We should move to letting fully vaccinated people into and out of the country without hotel quarantine.

Set a realistic vaccination target for reopening

We need to make good faith efforts to get everyone vaccinated – even heroic efforts – and we then we need to be able to get on with life. We can't let people who are hesitant hold everyone else hostage.

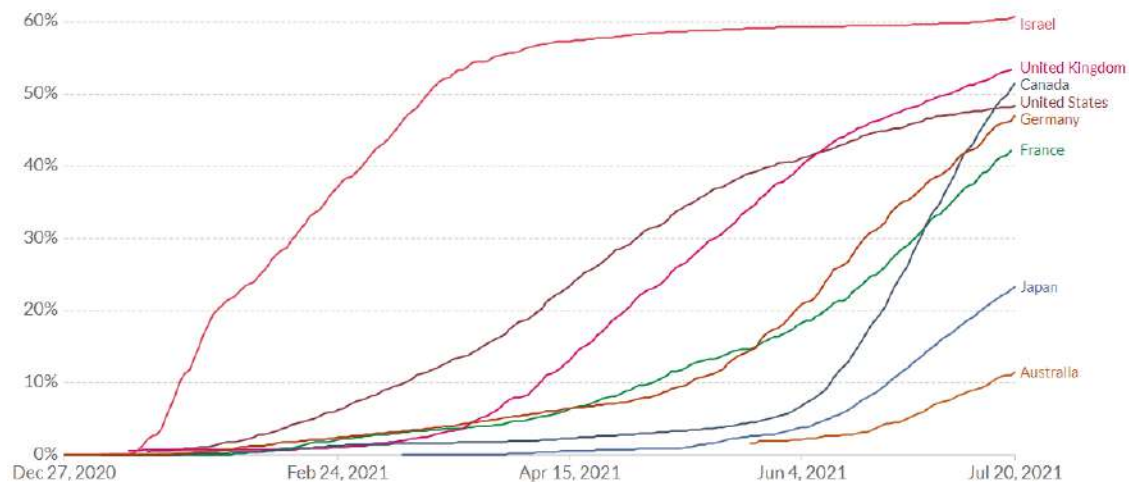
Public health advisers seem to be converging on 80 per cent vaccine coverage before reopening. There may be a risk of setting a requirement that we cannot achieve, or with a “long tail” that takes many additional months.

From 8 to 21% of Australians say they don't intend to get vaccinated. In San Francisco, with the highest rate in the USA, just 69% of the population has been vaccinated.

We don't know how high we can get here, but we should be realistic about this.

Actions:

- Strive to achieve a high vaccination rate. But once everyone has been offered the chance to be vaccinated, be willing to open back up.
- Alternately, if we are not willing to open up based on vaccine availability, we may need to turn to legal requirements to get vaccinated.
- Note: NSW has the opportunity to reopen to the world based on the success of its own vaccination strategy, regardless of what other states do.



Share of population fully vaccinated against Covid-19.
Source: Our World in Data.



Rebuild the sectors crushed by Covid-19

University and research strategy

Perhaps the most troubling long-term obstacle to Australia's economic competitiveness is the impact on university teaching and research – worth \$41 billion to the economy prior to the pandemic in 2018, and supporting a quarter of a million jobs.

For Australia to thrive in the future economy, a world-leading university sector is essential. It will take a focused effort to help the universities recover and rebuild.

Actions:

- Develop a national plan to renew Australia's higher education sector with a strong focus on funding R&D
- Resume efforts to safely return international students once the current lockdown is lifted
- Adequately resource Study NSW so we don't lose our competitive advantage
- Support universities to offer hybrid learning in traditional courses, short courses and linkages with VET
- Meet funding gaps in support for the medical technologies and pharmaceuticals sector to maintain our competitive edge in clinical research
- Targeted incentives for industry to partner on world leading technology – via Investment NSW
- Reform student visas, including work rights during and post-study, so we remain an attractive study destination.



For Australia to thrive in the future economy, a world-leading university sector is essential

Cultural and live performance sector strategy

Cultural institutions, the arts and live performance events have been hard hit, with cancelled shows for a year and a half hitting an underpaid and largely contingent workforce.

The community will need to feel confidence again to attend events, and organisers will need support to take risks putting on events – particularly to begin with. We need to view this as a rebuilding effort for the sector.

Actions:

- Increase investment in major festivals and events
- Ease COVIDsafe room capacity limits (4sqm rule) to improve viability of reopening
- Extend CreateNSW Stimulus Package for duration of the recovery while capacity restrictions remain
- Support and contribute to national insurance scheme for large scale events
- Extend Activate the City program beyond City of Sydney
- Create a rolling calendar of events in closed high streets providing free to public outdoor entertainment
- Expand funding to the existing Live and Local program
- Relax restrictions on use of public sites to enable commercial events/activations in parks and outdoor spaces during the recovery period.



Groovin the Moo.

Visitor and experience industry strategy

Our tourism, hospitality and aviation industries have been crushed by the ongoing border closures and restrictions. The CBD is a ghost town and people will be worried for some time about making the journey into town.

We need to keep the firms that make up this sector alive, and we need to be ready to spring back into action to welcome the world back in, as soon as we can.

Actions:

- Continue to offer vouchers to support our hospitality, entertainment and tourism businesses, and incentivise getting back into our CBDs through subsidised or free transport
- Support business event industry with an insurance scheme to cover both event cancellations as well as costs incurred due to postponements as a result of continued lockdowns
- Ease the COVIDSafe room capacity limits (4sqm rule) as soon as possible to improve the viability of re-opening for a greater number of businesses
- Introducing a Licensed Venue Grant Scheme, for all licensed venues scalable according to business size and capacity
- Again, allow vaccinated people into and out of the country.



Sydney's visitor economy has been hard hit by the pandemic.



Moving into long-term recovery

Shift to long-term management of Covid-19 as endemic disease

Covid-19 will become an endemic disease in permanent circulation among humans, much like the flu, with continual mutations.

Australia will need to manage Covid-19 more like the flu — planning for frequent updates to the vaccine and for some number of fatalities each year.

This will take a major shift in our mindset and approach.

Actions:

- Shift emphasis of reporting to vaccinations, deaths and hospitalisation rates, rather than cases of Covid-19
- Retool the public health system to be more nimble in acquiring booster shots and vaccines for future diseases
- Support development of onshore production capability for mRNA vaccines.



Shift to long-term management of Covid-19.

Revive town centres, even as remote work changes them

The culture of work has permanently changed, and there will be more remote work in the future than there was in the past. Nevertheless, we believe CBDs are uniquely important places and the ability to bring large numbers of people together in a CBD will remain critical to Sydney's success.

The solution is not to try to force people back to work; it is to make the CBD and other key centres as enticing and magnetic as possible – so that people choose to be there.

We need to look at steps to encourage a greater mix of uses and activities, allowing entrepreneurs to try new things as society adjusts to the post-Covid world.

Actions:

- Create a high streets / town centres renewal fund to create better pedestrian environments. LGAs would be able to apply for funds, administered by DPIE. We recommend \$1-2 billion over four years in next budget
- Extend Fab Fridays lunch vouchers and Stay & Rediscover vouchers for use outside of the CBD (i.e. outside the 2000 postcode)
- Ease noise restrictions and licensing conditions to make it easier for venues to attract people
- Fund cultural institutions to remain open later at night.



Make our town centres and high streets fun and lively places.

Tell a more sophisticated story of Sydney

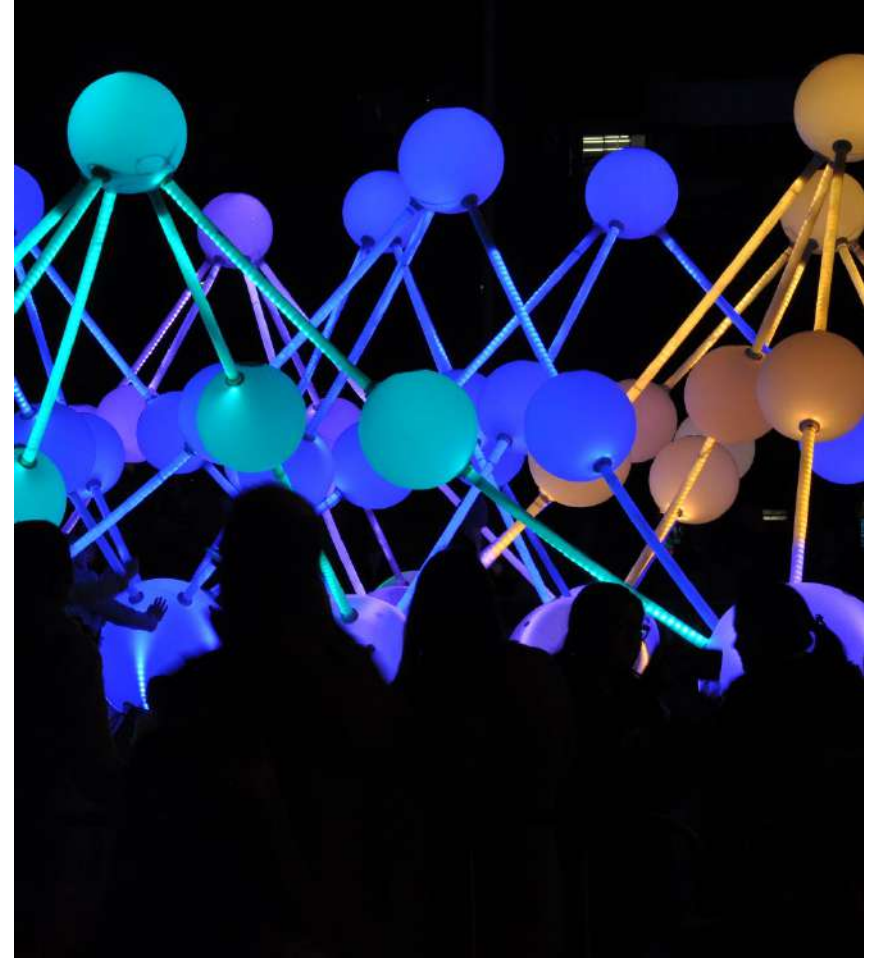
Sydney's brand faced limitations before Covid-19 – known internationally for our attractions and quality of life, it doesn't capture all we have to offer. The pandemic has exacerbated this, with a Fortress Australia mindset sending a message that we aren't a welcoming country, that we're closed for business.

Australia's great opportunity from its success in managing Covid-19 – safe, healthy and open – was lost because of failures to secure vaccine supplies. Now it's more complicated. It may prove more difficult to recruit global talent when people fear global connections can be taken away.

But Australia has a good story to tell, and so does Sydney – one that has people at its heart, celebrating First Nations culture and immigrants from all over the world.

Actions:

- Go to the world with a coherent story about Sydney, tailored for all markets – tourist, student, business meeting, inbound investment, talent attraction
- Set up a taskforce under Investment NSW focused on claiming NSW's place in the global imagination – going back for talent, investment and students poached away during Australia's long border closure.



Sydney has far more to offer than beaches and the harbour.

Conclusion

Sydney has everything it needs to get through an incredibly difficult situation and come roaring back.

We will be working closely with all of our members and our partners in Government to get through this in a proactive, strategic way.

We remain grateful for the incredible leadership of our State Government, on both the public health side and the economic management side. And we express our deepest appreciation for the essential workers who are keeping us going.

And remember: everyone get vaccinated!



Innovation Fund Partners

We would like to thank our Innovation Fund Partners for their support of the Committee for Sydney's research.

Our Innovation Fund Partners are future focused, and outcome driven. They are leaders of change.

Their combined investment underpins our annual research program and together with our members, enables us to grow our impact and output – striving to create a better Sydney that offers unparalleled opportunity and quality of life for everyone.

We are proud to work with our Innovation Fund Partners: Dexus, ICC Sydney, Western Sydney University and Campbelltown City Council.



The Committee for Sydney is the city's peak advocacy and urban policy think tank.

We are advocates for the whole of Sydney, developing solutions to the most important problems we face.

Our goal is to help Greater Sydney be the best city in the world.



Keep in touch

Committee for Sydney
sydney.org.au



@Committee4Syd



committee@sydney.org.au



+61 2 8320 6750