

# Advocacy Tasmania

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## Introduction

Advocacy Tasmania (AdvoTas) is an independent, client-directed advocacy organisation which supports people with disability, older persons, people living with mental health issues, and people experiencing issues with alcohol or other drugs.

Many of our clients are in identified high-risk demographics for COVID-19 due to age, pre-existing health conditions or other factors, and have expressed significant concerns about how their needs will be accounted for in building the “new normal” of Tasmania in a post-COVID world.

This submission reflects the disclosed experiences and expressed views of our clients regarding Tasmania’s social and economic recovery from the onset of COVID-19.

## A return to “how things were before” is not the goal

Many AdvoTas clients have expressed fears of being “left behind” in plans for a “return to normal”. While COVID-19 caused novel and critical issues in many areas, it also highlighted many pre-existing systemic issues for people who rely on support services in their day-to-day lives. Such issues reported by AdvoTas clients as being exacerbated by COVID-19 restrictions commonly included:

- Lack of access to telecommunications from residential aged care facilities causing acute isolation and mental distress
- Inadequate staff numbers or training in both aged care and disability services increasing the rate of safety violations and critical incidents, or leading to abuse and neglect
- Inadequate choice and control over day-to-day and life decisions for people living in disability group homes or other residential or inpatient services
- Inadequate respect for informed consent and dignity of risk for people with disabilities

*“I understand the staff at [residential aged care facility] are so busy all the time- I don’t want to bother them by asking them to bring me the office phone all the time just so I can have a chat. And I don’t want to talk to my family about private things*

*in front of a staff member, anyway. But I feel so isolated not being able to talk to my loved ones when I need to, and I can't afford how much they charge for a private phone. My kids live interstate, so it's not like they could come visit for a coffee, even before COVID-19."*

Particularly concerning trends were observed across 2020 with AdvoTas clients reporting a shift towards "paternalistic" attitudes in both government and non-government services. Clients reported being disallowed from making decisions about their own lives and actions, even where a person had no known decision-making capacity impairments and demonstrated full understanding of the risks and consequences involved. This manifested in situations such as individuals being placed under Emergency Guardianship Orders to prevent them from returning home after a hospital stay, being prevented by facilities from taking walks for exercise in the vicinity of their accommodation, or not being given the opportunity to have any input into the activity schedules of their funded supports.

Conversely, some changes implemented in response to COVID-19 restrictions demonstrated that providing flexible options for engaging with businesses, services, and workplaces is achievable and practical, and can provide benefits to social and economic engagement if that flexibility is incorporated into future developments.

While the cessation of face-to-face services created critical issues for many people- particularly those with communication impairments, who have limited family or community supports, or who are reliant on support staff for daily personal care- the new availability of remotely-delivered services created many benefits for individuals with mobility impairments, chronic physical or mental health issues, caring duties, and other needs.

*"Some of the lockdown changes for COVID-19 actually improved my life a lot. My disability means I've never been able to just go out to a doctor's office when I need to. Being able to have an appointment over the phone with my doctor whenever I have a health problem has been life-changing- I'm really worried that telehealth will stop and I will have to go back to not getting medical help when I need it."*

AdvoTas clients express a desire for a "new normal" which involves ongoing choice and flexibility over modes of access to social, community and economic activities.

### [A more productive and resilient Tasmania needs to plan for flexibility](#)

It is reasonable to expect that there will eventually be further outbreaks of COVID-19 infections in Tasmania, or other pandemic-level viral events, that necessitate lockdown procedures. Building increased choice and flexibility into "business as usual" community and service delivery settings will create a more accessible Tasmania at the same time as increasing resilience against future events.

*"I've been asking for disability accommodations to have a work-from-home arrangement for years, but was always denied because it supposedly wasn't possible. But this year has proved that it was always possible, and employers just didn't want to put the effort in to accommodate disability needs. Once everyone started working from home and I could set things up the way I need, my productivity actually went up, even with everything else that was going on. I'm really hoping I'll*

*be able to keep this once all the restrictions are over- everything's been set up now and I can get so much more done. I'm even looking at increasing my work hours. It would be pretty devastating to lose that now."*

Some AdvoTas clients reported that the shift to carrying out more day-to-day business online vastly increased their ability to participate in the community, both socially and economically. Others reported that the option of undertaking some activities face-to-face – even in a reduced or limited capacity – was necessary for them to maintain their participation, and that the removal of that avenue of participation negatively affected their overall functional capacity.

*"Usually every week I would go shopping with my support worker so I could choose things for myself. I can't order things online, it doesn't work for me. And if I send my support worker alone they don't get the right things, because I'm not there to see the options. But during lockdown I was told I wasn't allowed to go in to the shops with my support worker, and I couldn't get proper masks and things to be safe doing that anyway."*

It is notable that some issues being reported by AdvoTas clients across 2020 were a result of lack of accurate information about formal restriction requirements, or where individuals classed as being at high risk from COVID-19 needed to take more conservative precautions than those directed for the general population. AdvoTas clients report that relying on service providers or staff to convey up-to-date and accurate information was inadequate. However, these issues can be prevented in future pandemic events through the development and ongoing refinement of targeted communication strategies for high-risk or vulnerable groups, as well as planning ahead for effective sourcing and allocation of PPE and associated resources.

### Cost-of-living factors during restrictions

The most frequent issue reported by AdvoTas clients- and the issue most frequently reported as being clients' highest priority- was the lack of increases to federal pension rates to account for increased cost of living during COVID-19 restrictions. While AdvoTas notes that pension rates are managed federally, many of the factors reported as contributing to the increased cost of living could potentially be addressed through State Government-level strategies to reduce this effect in future restriction events.

Increased cost-of-living factors reported by AdvoTas clients included issues such as:

- Additional cost of obtaining appropriate PPE for individuals who require support for personal care or domestic assistance, since the majority were not eligible to access this via the NDIS
- Additional cost of sanitation and other COVID-19-safety supplies for households with high-risk members, particularly given all household members must take greater precautions for a longer duration than is required compared to the general population
- Higher cost of groceries and increased fees for home delivery of groceries where individuals were not able to safely physically attend shops- particularly where people had been forced to make multiple smaller orders rather than less frequent bulk orders, or purchase more expensive products than usual, due to supply management

- Higher cost of transportation via private vehicles or taxis where high-risk individuals could not safely use public transport, but were still required to move around in the community (e.g. to access medical services or therapies, providing care, or attending employment as essential workers)
- Higher costs associated with working from, or otherwise spending increased time, at home such as additional data use, heating, and power

AdvoTas clients report that strategies to address or mitigate these issues would significantly reduce the economic impact of future lockdown or restriction events on Tasmanian households and families where a member of the household is at high risk.

### Recommendations:

Reported experiences of AdvoTas clients indicate support for strategies which:

- Do not seek to return to the “old normal”, but which recognise there were many pre-existing systemic issues highlighted by COVID-19 which still need to be addressed, and aim to build resilience for future COVID-19 restrictions or other pandemic events
- Plan for more effective communication with vulnerable or hard-to-reach groups in the awareness that future pandemic (or similar) events are likely to occur
- Address cost-of-living factors to ensure households with high-risk individuals, which are likely to need to take more significant precautions than the general population, are not put under additional economic strain
- Aim for ongoing flexibility in all aspects of community and economic life by ensuring people always have a choice to participate in activities (such as healthcare, employment, and community events) either online or face-to-face, increasing overall accessibility and minimising the changes required to continue activities safely during any future restrictions.