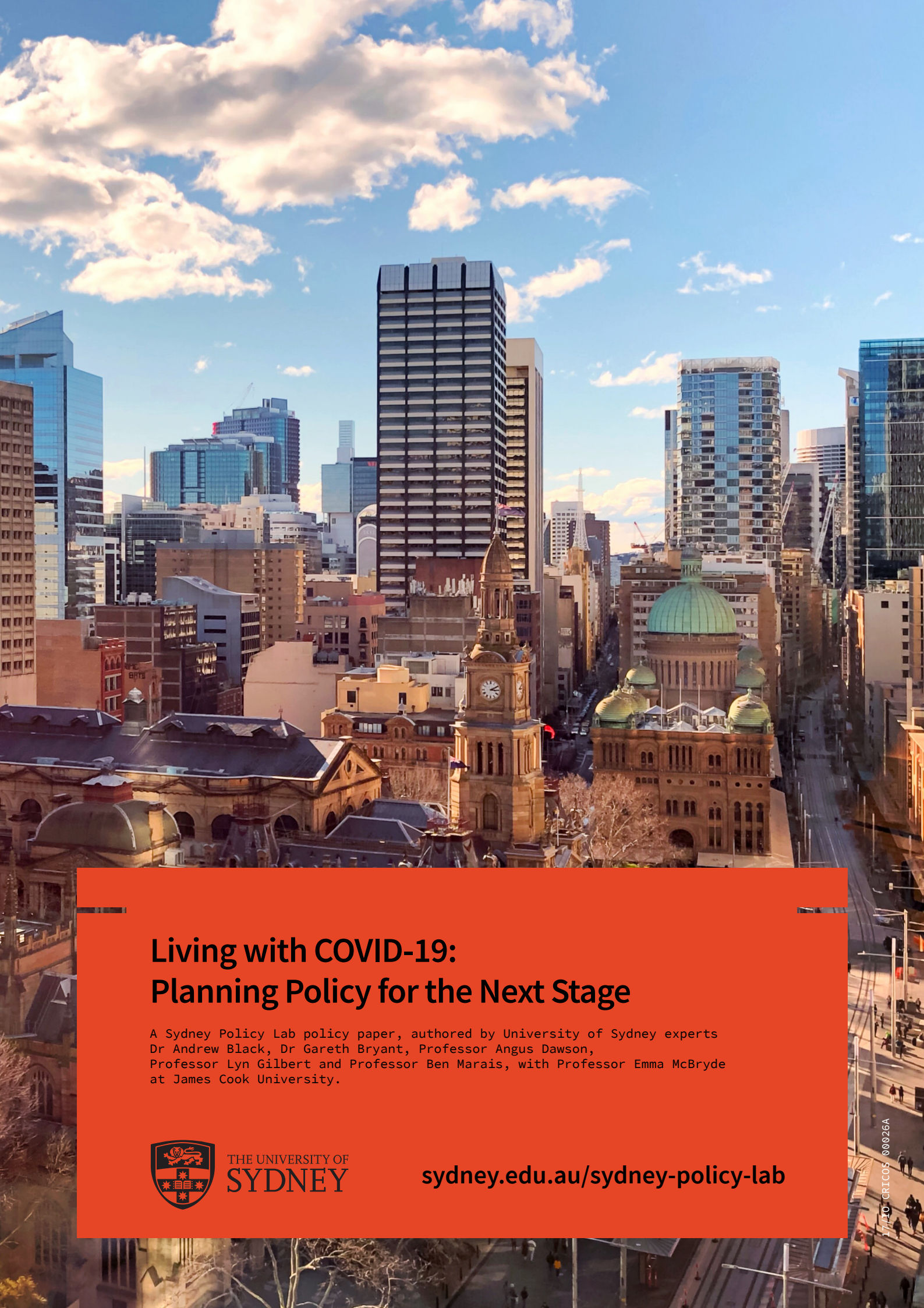




Living with COVID-19: Planning Policy for the Next Stage

A Sydney Policy Lab policy paper, authored by University of Sydney experts Dr Andrew Black, Dr Gareth Bryant, Professor Angus Dawson, Professor Lyn Gilbert and Professor Ben Marais, with Professor Emma McBryde at James Cook University.



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Australia appears poised to relax some of its most stringent social distancing requirements in the coming days and weeks. Unlike most other countries, however, it does so against the backdrop of few active COVID-19 cases and apparently limited community transmission. This is an admirable achievement.

The next stage in Australia's battle against COVID-19, however, remains difficult and uncertain.

Activity in recent months has been fixated on the paramount task of limiting national caseloads and preventing overload of the healthcare system, but the markers of success are not so clear moving forward. As Australia considers when and how to ease the restrictions imposed, we must ask anew what success looks like.

Setting goals for the future is extremely difficult because at every turn we find uncertainty. We are only starting to decipher the biology of this novel virus and to understand the disease it causes. We also do not yet know the strength and length of post-viral immunity. Furthermore, the longer-term macroeconomic, social, political and other impacts of the restrictions used to suppress it are also difficult to predict. Even the best models of the likely impact of public health measures on disease transmission do very little to inform us about how the lives and livelihoods of ordinary people have already been affected and will continue to be affected into the future.

In the coming weeks, therefore, we must grapple with these questions:

How should we transition out of lockdown while the virus is still with us?

What does success in the near term look like?

What does our collective future hold?

The Sydney Policy Lab put these questions to a group of internationally respected experts in public health, infectious disease epidemiology, economics, mathematics, political philosophy and ethics, asking what they thought government and other institutions have to consider in order to make effective public policy for the near and longer term. In this brief policy paper, we distil their thoughts and present the four key considerations for forging a pathway out of COVID-19 lockdown.

As with the Lab's previous contributions to the COVID-19 debate, we put these experts' views forward not in the sense of offering a single prescription but rather in the hope that they may provide useful reflection for those needing to make immediate decisions and stimulate constructive discussion about the best way forward.

Four key considerations for forging a pathway out of lockdown:

1. Acknowledging that the virus is here to stay:

Policymaking should assume that global eradication of the virus is now essentially impossible. In the absence of a vaccine or a series of curative treatment options, COVID-19 will, therefore, remain a profound challenge for months or years.

There currently exists no global consensus on how to act in these circumstances. Countries like Sweden have avoided restrictive lockdowns to date, in the hope individual behaviour changes rather than government-imposed restrictions are sufficient to prevent health system overload and limit excess deaths. The aim there is to enable key aspects of social and economic life to continue while potentially building levels of protective immunity in the community. Australia, however, like many other countries, has explicitly rejected this approach based on the judgment that it provides

insufficient protection for vulnerable communities and that its benefits are currently deeply uncertain. Instead, therefore, Australia has joined other nations in imposing a lockdown that aims to suppress the virus, but which comes at the cost of significantly constraining everyday activity.

Given the difficulty of maintaining these forms of lockdown in the long term, we anticipate that the Australian States and Territories are now likely to adopt a “test, trace, isolate” approach. This seeks to open the economy while ensuring that those who are infected with, or have been exposed to, the virus are swiftly identified and placed into self-isolation. There are many reasons to support this endeavour. It is crucial to acknowledge, however, that there are no guarantees. Even with effective testing and tracing, society as a whole remains vulnerable to disease rebound in the absence of an effective vaccine. Efforts to continue to suppress the virus will likely therefore also include continued restrictions on travel and trade and it is possible that measures might have to continue to be adapted over time.

No one can be certain how best to navigate this difficult balance in a complex, free and democratic society or, indeed, whether these measures will seriously impede efforts to return the economy to growth. The most that we can expect is honesty from our decisionmakers that the virus will remain with us and that responding to it will continue to be demanding. The remainder of the points expressed here concern how to respond to that difficulty.

2. Setting clear national aims:

Despite uncertainties, public authorities should lay out clear criteria by which to assess the success or otherwise of the measures they propose.

Keeping COVID-19 related deaths to a minimum is clearly one key criterion of success, but governments must also acknowledge that other considerations also shape their judgements and determine the societal trade-offs that are made. Denmark for example, has openly prioritised child education and used that commitment to guide its national decision-making. New Zealand could use its official calculation of national “wellbeing” to inform decision-making, although both short- and long-term national “wellbeing” should be considered.

Most governments, however, have been reluctant to set out priorities beyond a general dedication to protecting “lives and livelihoods”. This reluctance generates public debate and disagreement, such as the current stand-off between the Commonwealth and Victorian State governments regarding the opening of schools. It also makes it more difficult to recognise and address inequalities created by both the spread of the virus and containment measures. Without a clear set of consensus criteria by which to judge success, deadlock and narrow party politics threatens to dominate.

We call for an open discussion of key priorities and their potential costs in order to enable a proper assessment of the appropriateness or otherwise of specific containment measures.

3. Comparing different time horizons:

In addition to setting clear policy aims, it is also important that public authorities set clear time horizons, so that we can all look to the long term as well as to the immediate crisis.

In the immediate crisis, the time horizons for assessing policy impact are understandably short. We have become accustomed in recent weeks to daily updates on case numbers and weekly updates on policy proposals. This intense focus on the very near term will have to give way to longer-term policymaking. The three-year Federal election cycle in Australian politics already establishes one distinctive time horizon. It will be a priority for the Morrison government to secure the best possible public health and economic position towards the end of its current term.

It is important, however, that longer-term time horizons are kept in mind given the “scarring” effect of apparently short-term economic crises that can exacerbate

inequalities between cohorts that are least and most impacted, such as increased youth unemployment or interruption of education and training that cause seriously detrimental long-term consequences. Indeed, the generational inequalities that are at the core of COVID-19 and the responses we take to it are both complex and stark. A longer-term perspective is also important to ensure that short-term policymaking keep a variety of options open rather than close off pathways that society might like to take in the even relatively near future.

We recommend, therefore, that governments not only set out a clear set of policy priorities, but that this is accompanied by specific time periods within which progress towards those priorities should be assessed.

4. Cultivating openness, experimentation and public dialogue:

We need the policy debate to involve more than just politicians and public servants.

Whichever aims and time horizons are established, uncertainty will remain, posing a serious challenge to decision-makers. Success in such an environment requires a search for constant improvement and strict application of the scientific method, as new facts emerge. Policymaking should move slowly and cautiously, and create capacity, time and space to carefully reflect on the effects of each decision using multidimensional criteria encompassing health, economic and social outcomes. Scientists are trained to work in precisely this way, constantly setting and testing hypotheses, and using new findings to inform the direction of travel.

Politicians and policymakers usually have less scope to do so, given the time pressures and everyday realities of professional politics. But this is also influenced by the fact that neither the media nor the broader citizenry in Australia have been comfortable with such a cautious and deliberate approach in recent years. Instead, we have collectively demanded swift, immediate and often polarising positions from our politicians. This pandemic presents an opportunity for us all to contribute to shifting these expectations. However countercultural it is, we must be willing to allow decision makers, and the experts upon whom they rely, to reflect openly as they proceed and to engage the public in informed dialogue and shared decision-making amid great uncertainty.

This will be extremely difficult, but the stakes are so high that we must try to achieve it as a lasting legacy of these difficult times.

Applying these ideas

The themes we have outlined are intended to stimulate constructive discussion and provide a broad set of criteria by which proposals to progress out of lockdown can be judged and debated.

This document has been prepared with the help of University of Sydney experts brought together by the Sydney Policy Lab, including Dr Andrew Black, Dr Gareth Bryant, Professor Angus Dawson, Professor Lyn Gilbert and Professor Ben Marais, supported by Professor Emma McBryde at James Cook University. These experts are available for further discussions and eager to play a constructive part in finding workable solutions. Please contact us at policy.lab@sydney.edu.au for more information.

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