

Lord Howe's new normal

COVID cases burst island's bubble



BY LIZ LANGDALE

THE Lord Howe Island community is adjusting to a new sense of normal after its COVID-free period ended.

The island has recorded 91 COVID cases since it opened to visitors in October 2021, and 12 of those cases are currently in isolation, according to a spokesperson from the island's board.

The island's Local Emergency Management Committee has been meeting since January 1, and implemented a COVID response plan to minimise the impact of the spike.

The vaccination booster clinic began earlier than planned, Rapid Antigen Tests have been sourced for critical clinical needs and a workforce continuity plan has been established to ensure critical services can be maintained.

The news comes after Norfolk Island paused visitor arrivals until January 26, in an attempt to stem its number of COVID cases.

The Lord Howe Island Board is urging visitors to get tested for COVID prior to travel to the world heritage-listed site.

The board spokesperson said people who become COVID positive on the island are required to isolate in their accommodation. None of the 91 cases have needed treatment on the mainland.

Lord Howe Island Coral Cafe owner Stevie Sia said his business was forced to close for a week in January after two staff members tested positive.

He's owned his business for the last 20 years and also runs the post office and the island's newspaper.

Mr Sia said there was an increased number of COVID cases at the start of 2022, after a New Year's Eve party.

"The first and second weeks of January was a bit of a struggle for businesses," he said.

Mr Sia encourages people to test themselves prior to travel to the island.

"We do have a small population and we do have some elderly people on the island."

The island community has a strong reliance on visitation to boost its tourism industry.



ADJUSTING: Lord Howe Island is no longer free of COVID cases. **Picture:** Jackson Arkadieff via the Lord Howe Island's Tourism Association's website.

"It's definitely good to see the island getting back to normal," Mr Sia said.

Arajilla Retreat owner Bill Shead said their accommodation has taken bookings

throughout 2022 and into 2023.

"The island is highly sought after," he said.

Mr Shead said the island has the right health practices

to mitigate the spread of the virus, through good ventilation at accommodation, outdoor dining venues and plenty of opportunities for people to social distance

through participating in outdoor activities.

"We're limited at any one time to 400 people, so it's definitely not a crowded destination," he said.

Online events to celebrate Australia Day

AUSTRALIA Day awards and citizenship ceremonies will move online in an attempt to keep the community safe as cases of COVID-19 rise.

Port Macquarie-Hastings Council CEO Dr Clare Allen and mayor Cr Peta Pinson said the decision to cancel the in-person ceremony at Wauchope RSL Club was not

made lightly.

"With the COVID-19 situation in our local community and escalating infections statewide, we feel this is the safest decision for all," Dr Allen said.

"We made this decision reluctantly as we were looking forward to celebrating in-person and recognising

our amazing award nominees and those taking up Australian citizenship."

The Australia Day awards and citizenship ceremonies will be separate online events.

The council received 19 nominations in the 2022 Australia Day awards with 16 citizens and three communi-

ty groups nominated across five categories.

Some 28 people are set to become Australian citizens on Australia Day.

Australia Day ambassador Donna Ciccio has reluctantly cancelled her trip to the region due to the COVID-19 situation.

"Cancelling the in-person

celebration is a hard call to make and it was made with a heavy heart," Cr Pinson said.

"Our priority is to protect the community as much as we can, and while COVID-19 safety plans were in place, we feel the current situation is a concern.

"We don't want to encourage people to congregate at

our event when the Omicron variant is running rife in our community.

"We are hoping to be able to honour our award nominees and winners and welcome our new citizens as best as we can and fingers crossed we will be back on track in 2023."



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