

# Annual Forward Plan of Reviews

2022–23



**IGEM**  
Inspector-General  
for Emergency  
Management



**Acknowledgement of Country**

IGEM acknowledges and respects Victorian Traditional Owners as the original custodians of Victoria's land and waters, their unique ability to care for Country and deep spiritual connection to it. IGEM honours Elders past and present whose knowledge and wisdom has ensured the continuation of culture and traditional practice.

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# 1 Introduction

The Inspector-General for Emergency Management (IGEM) is an independent role established under the *Emergency Management Act 2013* (the Act).

IGEM's objectives are to:

- provide assurance to the government and the community in respect of emergency management arrangements in Victoria
- foster continuous improvement of emergency management in Victoria.

IGEM undertakes system-wide reviews to support the achievement of these objectives, including reviews of the emergency management functions of responder agencies and government departments as prescribed in section 66 of the Act.

These reviews are based on an Annual Forward Plan of Reviews (the forward plan), developed by IGEM in consultation with the emergency management sector<sup>1</sup> (the sector) and shared with the Minister for Emergency Services (the minister). In addition, IGEM conducts reviews at the request of the minister under the provisions of section 64(1)(c) of the Act.

All of IGEM's assurance activities are guided by the *Assurance Framework for Emergency Management* (the Framework), which provides the foundation for a coordinated and collaborative approach to sector-wide assurance.

## Annual Forward Plan of Reviews – 2022–23

In developing the forward plan for 2022–23, IGEM considered recent reviews and inquiries, ongoing reform in the sector, state and local risk assessments, and other risks to Victorian communities.

IGEM also considered the risks and themes from its ongoing monitoring of previous recommendations made to the minister and other performance monitoring conducted under the Act. Targeted stakeholder engagement was conducted to inform its final selection of reviews.

Based on these considerations, IGEM will commence two planned reviews in 2022:

- Review of Victoria's emergency call-answer performance
- Review of Victoria's water safety arrangements.

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 put considerable strain on all parts of community and the government.

The first of IGEM's two reviews focuses on an acute, direct impact of the pandemic and the implications for emergency Triple Zero (000) call-taking. The second assesses water safety – an issue that is less directly impacted by the pandemic but will see risk of water-related death and injury compounded as Victorians' access and familiarity with water was significantly impacted by public health restrictions associated with the pandemic.

These reviews will be conducted under section 64(1)(b) of the Act.

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<sup>1</sup> Defined in the *Emergency Management Act 2013* as '...comprising all agencies, bodies, departments and other persons who have a responsibility, function or other role in emergency management'.

## Forward Projection of Reviews

Previously, IGEM has published a Forward Projection of Reviews in conjunction with its forward plan. This projection highlighted the potential review topics to be considered by IGEM in future years.

However, there is a significant amount of dynamic change, reform and continuous improvement activity underway in the sector. In addition, multiple key assurance activities related to emergencies have recently been completed, with significant recommendations accepted by government.

While this reform is in pursuit of system-wide improvements, the pace of change within the sector makes it difficult to predict and/or prioritise the potential topics for reviews in advance. IGEM has subsequently decided to pause its publication of projected reviews to allow for current and emerging risks to be considered on an annual basis. This will allow the most appropriate review topic/s and scope to be developed each year.

All future reviews will continue to be informed by IGEM's ongoing assurance role and consultation with the sector.

## 1.1 Document purpose

This document outlines IGEM's forward plan for 2022–23.

The intended audience is government and the emergency management sector in Victoria. The document is publicly available on the IGEM website ([igem.vic.gov.au](http://igem.vic.gov.au)).

The forward plan is prepared in accordance with section 66 of the Act and provides a high-level description of the reviews IGEM will conduct in 2022–23. This includes broad information specific to the context, aim, scope, stakeholders, approach, outputs, publication, implementation and intended review outcomes.

### 1.1.1 IGEM contact

For further information or to contribute to either review described in this document, please contact:

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## 2 Annual Forward Plan of Reviews – 2022–23

### 2.1 Review of Victoria’s emergency call-answer performance

#### 2.1.1 Context

The 2020 onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in Victoria resulted in two significant waves of infections. These were managed in part by the Victorian Government through Chief Health Officer directions and included long periods of lockdown.

Throughout 2020 demand for ambulance services remained manageable. However, demand for services skyrocketed in mid-to-late 2021 – just prior to and during the significant wave of infections and, as COVID-19 case numbers peaked and vaccinations reached pre-determined levels for easing of restrictions.

Public calls to triple zero (000) requesting ambulance services persisted through late 2021 and into 2022, in unprecedented and sustained numbers. For instance, in late September 2021 more than 3000 emergency calls were recorded per day for ambulance services – an increase of approximately 40 per cent on 2020.

The Emergency Services Telecommunications Authority (ESTA) has statutory responsibility for ambulance call-taking and dispatch in Victoria.

ESTA reports its non-financial performance to IGEM. In accordance with its functions under the Act, IGEM provides assurance to government and the community in respect of ESTA’s non-financial performance.

IGEM has specific, legislated assurance responsibilities relating to ESTA, as it determines the standards against which ESTA’s call-taking and dispatch performances are benchmarked, as well as monitoring and investigating ESTA’s non-financial performance.

#### 2.1.2 Background

ESTA’s emergency ambulance call-answer performance has been under sustained pressure, falling in December 2020 to marginally below the benchmark of 90 per cent of calls answered within five seconds. Performance remained mostly above 80 per cent until rapidly declining from September 2021. Single day performance during September 2021 fell below 20 per cent several times.

IGEM has screened numerous potential adverse events related to delays. This includes call-answer delays for ambulance and other agencies where there is a probable causal relationship to this surge in demand. IGEM became aware of these events from a range of sources, including notifications by ESTA, direct reports from members of the public and media reports.

ESTA, Ambulance Victoria (AV) and Emergency Management Victoria (EMV) collaborated to address performance problems, however the high levels of COVID-19 case numbers and emergency ambulance call activity revealed persistent vulnerabilities in performance.

To date, the identified adverse events from these call-answer delays are only part of the overall health care story, as the pre-hospital and hospital systems are also under sustained pressure from soaring demand.

IGEM recognises that long delays in getting through to an ESTA ambulance call-taker are potentially only the first delays that patients are experiencing in obtaining timely health care. There are additional flow-on effects for other Australian states and territories because ESTA's call-answer delays at times affect the ability of the Telstra 000 service to rapidly answer 000 calls for emergencies in those jurisdictions.

AV has conducted case reviews in collaboration with ESTA and linked cases of call-answer delay to severe harm to a patient. Many other patients may have suffered moderate or minor harm from extended call-answer delays due to waiting over 30 minutes for ESTA to answer its 000 calls.

Due to the complexity of each potential adverse event in the broader context of ongoing changing COVID-19 restrictions and health sector challenges, a traditional IGEM investigation (including root cause analysis) into each individual event would not present the best value for an assurance activity.

In the broader health context, there are other entities responsible for day-to-day monitoring of system performance, primarily Safer Care Victoria and the Department of Health, that both report to the Minister for Health and Ambulance Services.

Additionally, IGEM is currently undertaking a 'Review of Victoria's preparedness for major public health emergencies, including pandemics' that, in part, will consider the State's preparation for major health emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Considering all of these issues, as part of this forward plan, IGEM undertook consultation with the sector in December 2021 regarding its intention to undertake a thematic review of ESTA's preparation and management of the current surge in 000 calls. As part of the process, the review will collectively consider the previously mentioned adverse events and any impact that ESTA's call-answer delay has had on patient outcomes.

### 2.1.3 Aim

The aim of the review is to assess the sector's planning for and execution of its response to the COVID-19 related surge of calls to 000. The review will focus on how ESTA and its partners in both the health and emergency management sectors forecasted, prepared for and responded to the surge in demand.

IGEM aims to identify examples of both good practice and opportunities to learn, with the intention of making recommendations in the interest of fostering continuous improvement and strengthening arrangements for emergency call-taking into the future.

### 2.1.4 Preliminary scope

The review will consider the effects of the COVID-19 related call volume surge on ESTA's wider service delivery across all agencies and the effect on 000 services nationally. IGEM will use the catalogue of identified potential adverse events in relation to this issue as case studies to highlight the effects call-answer delays have had on the Victorian community.

IGEM will assess how the sector forecasted and mitigated the surge. It will consider AV's service delivery requirements for ESTA, and whether these influenced patient outcomes. This may include interactions between AV personnel embedded within ESTA centres, and ESTA management to address day-to-day management of surges in call activity and escalations. This will include times when AV declared 'code orange' and 'code red' periods during peak demand.

IGEM's review is not intended to replicate any aspect of the ESTA Capability and Service Review conducted by Graham Ashton AM APM at the direction of the minister. IGEM also understands that ESTA and AV are undertaking their own assurance work. IGEM expects it will be able to use the outputs of these assurance activities to inform its review and reduce burden and duplication.

IGEM's review is not intended to be a review of Victoria's health system and its broader performance. Additionally, ESTA's dispatch performance is not currently in the scope for this review.

## 2.1.5 Stakeholders and consultation

Stakeholders for this review include relevant emergency management sector agencies as prescribed in section 60A of the Act and those identified with a role in 000 call-answer performance.

In addition, IGEM will consult with other organisations and subject matter experts as required. These include, but are not limited to, the Coroners Court of Victoria, Safer Care Victoria, Telstra (000 Emergency Call Person), the Australian Government Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications, the Australian Communications and Media Authority, and Graham Ashton AM APM.

The extent to which IGEM will consult and engage with some of these stakeholders will vary. For example, the primary focus will be on ambulance call-taking, however due to the focus on ambulance activity, there may be consequences for ESTA's provision of services to other agencies.

## 2.1.6 Proposed approach and timing

This review will follow IGEM's standard review approach familiar to the sector and in accordance with the Framework. Documentary and interview evidence will be sought from relevant agencies, with additional evidence gathered through desktop research, ongoing monitoring activities and consultation with subject matter experts.

For the purposes of comparison, the review team will also consider evidence from other Australian jurisdictions or international organisations where there are similarities in terms of the size (population), complexity, political systems, pre-hospital and health care models.

IGEM anticipates delivering its report to the minister by 30 June 2022.

## 2.1.7 Review output, publication, implementation, and outcome

The primary output from this review will be a report for the minister detailing the key observations, findings and recommendations for improvement as appropriate.

In accordance with section 70(1) and section 70(3) of the Act, IGEM will provide agencies affected by the review with a draft copy of the report for comment and will consider any relevant feedback before preparing the report for the minister.

Any public release of IGEM reports is subject to the minister's approval under the provisions of section 70(6) of the Act and will be supported by a detailed communications strategy.

IGEM will promote and support sector-wide continuous improvement through monitoring and reporting on the implementation of recommendations considered appropriate by the minister (in agreement with other relevant ministers) and provided under section 70(8) of the Act to the State Crisis and Resilience Council for implementation.

The intended outcome of the review is to strengthen the planning, preparation and collaboration between ESTA and its partners in both the health and emergency management sectors to manage and respond effectively to 000 surge demands. Ultimately, this will minimise the risk to Victorians and all Australians in other jurisdictions reliant on the national emergency call service arrangements.

## 2.2 Review of Victoria's water safety arrangements

### 2.2.1 Context

Victorians and visitors to Victoria enjoy being in, on or around water. Many people spend their leisure time at residential, public and commercial swimming pools, rivers, creeks, lakes and dams, beaches, bays and the ocean to swim, paddle, sail, fish, socialise and play.

There has been steady growth in visitors to parks, piers and beaches over the last 20 years. The easing of COVID-19 restrictions has highlighted just how popular beaches are, with more Victorians visiting beaches in 2020–21 than ever before.<sup>2</sup>

The interest in spending time in and around waterways generates economic, social and health benefits however it also increases the risk of fatal drownings and non-fatal incidents that leave people seriously and sometimes permanently injured or impacted.<sup>3</sup>

Sadly, Life Saving Victoria recently reported Victoria's worst fatal drowning toll in 20 years. Between 1 July 2020 and 30 June 2021, 61 people drowned – an increase of 40 per cent compared to the 10-year average. Another 104 people were involved in non-fatal drowning incidents attended by paramedics.<sup>3</sup>

Drowning incidents occur in a variety of locations, involving people of all demographics. Males are over-represented in drowning statistics, and adults aged 65 and over are at the greatest risk of drowning. A quarter of fatal drownings in 2020–21 involved children aged 0 to 14 years.<sup>2,3</sup>

In 2020–21, nearly half of all fatal drownings occurred in a waterway within the person's residential postcode. Drownings occur while people engage in a variety of activities – some deliberately in the water and others entering the water unintentionally while walking, playing, boating or fishing.<sup>2,3</sup>

Key risk factors for drowning include weak or no swimming ability, being alone, poor or no supervision of children near water, alcohol and drug use during aquatic activity and failure to wear a lifejacket either properly or at all while boating or rock-fishing.<sup>3</sup>

Life Saving Victoria has noted that the significant increase in the 2020–21 drowning rate needs to be interpreted in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Public health restrictions impacted how often, in what ways and where Victorians interacted with water.

People have had limited or no exposure to waterways and aquatic recreation in over a year due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Fewer people have learnt swimming and lifesaving skills, people's familiarity with water and the way it behaves has decreased, and children's swimming ability and water safety knowledge can be over-estimated. In addition, people may visit remote locations and less familiar waterways to avoid others.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time there are environmental and societal changes that increase and change Victorians' exposure to water and increase water safety risk. Warmer weather, increased frequency of extreme weather events, relocation of families to regional areas and changing access to water-based recreation opportunities influence the location, frequency and types of water safety risks faced by Victorians.

### 2.2.2 Background

Preventing or reducing drowning deaths and non-fatal injuries is a complex challenge that requires a coordinated, multifaceted and multi-stakeholder approach, with community at its centre.

In 2016 the Victorian Government released the 2016–20 Victorian Water Safety Strategy. It leveraged elements of the Australian Water Safety Strategy and advocated for a collaborative approach to reducing drownings and aquatic injuries.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> 2021–25 Victorian Water Safety Strategy (2021), Victorian Government.

<sup>3</sup> 2020/21 Life Saving Victoria Drowning Report (2021), Life Saving Victoria.

<sup>4</sup> 2016–20 Victorian Water Safety Strategy (2016), Victorian Government.

Water safety education was a priority in the *Emergency Management Strategic Action Plan 2017–2020* with actions led by Life Saving Victoria in collaboration with the emergency management sector and schools. Technology-based initiatives using gamification and virtual reality were developed to complement existing water safety, emergency response and lifesaving programs targeted towards young people.

There have been multiple community-centred programs of work to improve water safety involving schools, workplaces, multicultural communities, young people and mass media campaigns.

In December 2021 the Victorian Government released its 2021–25 Victorian Water Safety Strategy. The strategy aims to ‘coordinate efforts across key agencies and stakeholders to achieve better water safety outcomes’.

The 2021–25 strategy reflects the principles of the previous strategy and the Australian Water Safety Strategy 2030. It focuses on promoting shared responsibility, effective collaboration and coordinated agency effort.

With record high numbers of fatal and non-fatal drowning incidents, continued high levels of exposure to drowning hazards and the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbating known risk factors, water safety is a critical issue for the aquatic industry, Victoria’s emergency management sector, the government and communities across the state.

Life Saving Victoria, EMV, government departments, local government and other organisations have led development of major strategic, educational and practical programs of work, yet there has been no discernible improvement in drowning outcomes in recent years. A review into Victoria’s water safety arrangements, investments and priorities is well-timed to identify opportunities for improvement and to complement initiatives described in the Victorian Water Safety Strategy.

### 2.2.3 Aim

The review aims to evaluate Victoria’s water safety arrangements – including capability, capacity and performance – to identify opportunities for learning and improvement. At a broad level, the review will examine:

- risk identification, mitigation and control measures
- drivers of demand for programs and services
- roles and responsibilities across community, industry and government
- planning and coordination between stakeholders
- appropriateness of resourcing and investment.

The review will make findings and observations related to system-level activities that have implications for the safety of Victorians in and around water. As appropriate, the review will make recommendations to improve water safety outcomes and increase the efficiency of government and industry investments.

### 2.2.4 Preliminary scope

The overall scope of the review will include information related to the review’s aims and the prevention, preparedness and response to water safety incidents.

The review will consider the arrangements, roles and responsibilities related to water safety in public spaces, including open water (for example beaches, lakes and rivers), water features (for example ponds and fountains) and public and commercial pools. As such, relevant aspects of public land management and dispatch of emergency service organisations will be considered.

The regulatory environments for residential pools and spas will be considered, however, individual compliance and behaviours will be out of scope.

Legislation and state-level plans, policies and strategies will be the focus of the review. Regional and local government plans and strategies will be considered to demonstrate shared responsibility, information sharing and implementation of state-level decision-making as appropriate.

The review will include evaluation of the coordination of government, not-for-profit and commercial organisations, including training and exercising, location and mapping identification, information collection and sharing, and collaboration in planning and preparedness. These elements will be considered in the context of broader emergency management arrangements, reflecting on the extent to which water safety arrangements are recognised within the sector.

The adequacy and effectiveness of people, financial, infrastructure and other resources will be considered in assessments of Victoria's water safety capacity and capability with consideration of trends in people's behaviour in and around water. Both the paid and volunteer workforce will be in scope for the review.

Water safety education will be in scope, including awareness and education campaigns, water familiarisation programs and swimming skill development. Water safety as it pertains to recreational boating will also be in scope. The communication and coordination of water safety education, and Victoria's capacity and capability to deliver this education will be considered.

The review will not consider individual deaths or injuries related to aquatic activities, associated legal proceedings and related coronial activities.

## 2.2.5 Stakeholders and consultation

Stakeholders for this review include relevant emergency management sector agencies as prescribed in section 60A of the Act and those identified with a role in water safety.

In addition, IGEM will consult with other organisations and subject matter experts as required. This may include community-based organisations, peak industry bodies, business representatives, national aquatic bodies and volunteers.

This review will provide an opportunity to explore the involvement and role of community in water safety. The level and methods of community engagement conducted throughout this review will be determined through detailed review project planning.

## 2.2.6 Proposed approach and timing

The review will be conducted as an assurance activity in accordance with the Framework.

IGEM will seek documentary and interview evidence from stakeholders that support the review's aims. Observational evidence may be considered from strategic forums, site visits and water safety activities.

This review will include an examination of publicly available documents, doctrine and effectiveness evidence provided by review stakeholders. The review will also consider evidence provided by relevant stakeholders during the conduct of other IGEM assurance activities.

The review is planned to be conducted as a single phase and IGEM anticipates that a report will be delivered to the minister by 30 June 2023.

## 2.2.7 Review output, publication, implementation and outcome

The primary output from this review will be a report for the minister detailing the key observations, findings and recommendations for improvement as appropriate.

In accordance with section 70(1) and section 70(3) of the Act, IGEM will provide agencies affected by the review with a draft copy of the report for comment and will consider any relevant feedback before preparing the report for the minister.

Any public release of IGEM reports is subject to the minister's approval under the provisions of section 70(6) of the Act and will be supported by a detailed communications strategy.

IGEM will promote and support sector-wide continuous improvement through monitoring and reporting on the implementation of recommendations considered appropriate by the minister (in agreement with other relevant ministers) and provided under section 70(8) of the Act to the State Crisis and Resilience Council for implementation.

The intended outcome of the review is to strengthen the arrangements, capability and intelligence associated with water safety in Victoria to create accurate profiles of risk and appropriate mitigation and response strategies.

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