

Review of the Auditor-General's Report to Parliament 13: 2012-13

Drink Safe Precincts Trial

Report No. 38

Legal Affairs and Community Safety Committee

August 2013

Legal Affairs and Community Safety Committee

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Abbreviations

Committee	Legal Affairs and Community Safety Committee
Drink Safe Precinct Report	Queensland Audit Office, Report No. 13: 2012-13, <i>Drink Safe Precincts trial</i>

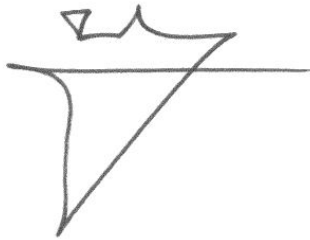
Chair's foreword

This Report presents a summary of the Legal Affairs and Community Safety Committee's examination of the Auditor-General's report, *Drink Safe Precincts trial*, pursuant to standing order 194B of the Standing Rules and Orders of the Legislative Assembly.

The Committee's task was, generally, to consider the Auditor General's findings in relation to the planning, implementation and evaluation of the two-year Drink Safe Precincts trial.

On behalf of the Committee, I thank the Committee's Secretariat and the staff from the Auditor-General's office for their assistance with the Committee's consideration of the Auditor-General's report.

I commend this Report to the House.

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a stylized 'I' and 'B' with a horizontal line extending to the right.

Ian Berry MP

Chair

Recommendations

Recommendation 1

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The Committee recommends the House note this Report.

Recommendation 2

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The Committee recommends the Government engage with the Queensland Auditor-General's Office to develop appropriate evaluation methodologies that can be adopted across the whole of Government for future trials or initiatives.

Recommendation 3

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The Committee recommends the Department of Premier and Cabinet as lead agency, ensures that clear protocols or guidelines such as those contained in the Australian National Audit Office publication – *Implementation of Programme and Policy Initiatives* are adopted by all departments for the conduct of future trials, especially in relation to the role of the lead agency in multi-agency initiatives.

1. Introduction

1.1 Role of the Committee

The Legal Affairs and Community Safety Committee (Committee) is a portfolio committee of the Legislative Assembly which commenced on 18 May 2012 under the *Parliament of Queensland Act 2001* and the Standing Rules and Orders of the Legislative Assembly.¹

The Committee's primary areas of responsibility include:

- Department of Justice and Attorney-General;
- Queensland Police Service; and
- Department of Community Safety.

1.2 Referral

Report No. 13 of 2012-13 of the Queensland Audit Office: *Drink Safe Precincts trial* (Drink Safe Precinct Report) was tabled in the Legislative Assembly on 21 May 2013 and in accordance with Standing Order 194B, was referred to the Legal Affairs and Community Safety Committee for consideration.

1.3 Role of the Auditor-General

The role of the Queensland Audit Office is to provide Parliament with independent assurance of public sector accountability and performance. This is achieved through reporting to Parliament on the results of its financial and performance audits.

¹ *Parliament of Queensland Act 2001*, section 88 and Standing Order 94.

2. Examination

2.1 Background

The Drink Safe Precinct Report, tabled on 21 May 2013, examined the planning, implementation and evaluation of the Drink Safe Precinct trial as a whole and the issues specific to each of the three precincts being: (1) Fortitude Valley; (2) Surfers Paradise; and (3) Townsville. In particular, it looked at whether the trial achieved its intended outcomes, including reducing alcohol-related violence and improving community safety within the three designated precincts.

The Drink Safe Precinct trials arose as the centrepiece of the former Government's response to the inquiry into alcohol-related violence undertaken by the Committee's predecessor committee.² That Committee made almost 70 recommendations to reduce alcohol-related violence across Queensland.

2.2 Key findings of the Drink Safe Precinct Report

The Committee notes the following key findings and issues identified in the Drink Safe Precinct Report, many of them indicative of lack of appropriate internal control:

1. The audit found that the trial was not well planned, implemented or evaluated. It was adversely affected by the imposition of a short and unrealistic time frame, which '*caused problems throughout, particularly in terms of certainty of funding and in data gathering and evaluation*'.³
2. The trial lacked strategic leadership.
3. The final cost of the trial cannot be ascertained because the relevant data was not collected. The trial received \$9.097 million in government-approved funding, with all other costs to be met from existing agency budget allocations.⁴ No cost-benefit assessment was undertaken, so this vital information is unavailable to inform decisions about whether the trial was effective and value for money.
4. The evaluation used to assess the trial employed a broad range of data, from police, ambulance and hospital data sets. However, each had important limitations that adversely affected their relevance and the evaluation's usefulness.
5. No benchmarks or criteria were set to gauge the success of the trial. Accordingly, the evaluation's conclusions of the trial's success are open to alternative interpretations.
6. The results of the trial are 'mixed, inconclusive and the evidence does not lend support to the view [that the Drink Safe Precincts (DSP) trial has been effective in reducing the occurrence and severity of alcohol-related violence and improving community safety]'.⁵

Of significance, in the three key areas of Planning and Implementation; Evaluation; and Effectiveness and Outcomes, the Auditor-General made the following conclusions in his report:

Planning and Implementation

Planning for the DSP trial was undertaken in just three months. This compromised the ability to plan the trial's implementation and subsequent evaluation thoroughly.

² Law, Justice and Safety Committee, Report No. 74 – *Inquiry into Alcohol-Related Violence – Final Report*, March 2010.

³ Report No. 13 of 2012-13 of the Queensland Audit Office: *Drink Safe Precincts trial*, pages 1-3.

⁴ The full impact on agencies' budgets was not reported to government. See Report No. 13 of 2012-13 of the Queensland Audit Office: *Drink Safe Precincts trial*, page 13.

⁵ Report No. 13 of 2012-13 of the Queensland Audit Office: *Drink Safe Precincts trial*, page 3.

Despite this, the lead agencies managed to develop an intervention model that was consistent with better practice approaches and brought together a wide range of government, non-government, industry and community stakeholders.

The failure to identify and consider adequately the impact of the short time frames, alternative options, risks and mitigation strategies and resourcing and funding requirements reduced the trial's effectiveness, economy and efficiency. This led to additional agency inefficiencies, delays in the release of funding and disruption to the provision of some services for the trial.⁶

Evaluation

The evaluation was not well planned or implemented and does not provide reliable conclusions on the effectiveness of the DSP trial. As a result, decisions about the trial's future will not be as fully informed as they could have been.

The evaluation plan was ambitious, given the short planning time frame, data limitations and the broad range of data used. Using a limited range of data sets and placing greater emphasis on addressing shortcomings may have achieved more reliable results. For example, hospital data could have been enhanced by gathering additional patient information to supplement that collected by hospital staff, such as when and where the injury occurred.

The conclusions of the 14-month and 18-month evaluation reports are open to alternative interpretations because no benchmarks or criteria were set to determine success of the trial or individual interventions. Determinations of success were arbitrary and not benchmarked against previous alcohol-related violence initiatives. In addition, identified variances in key measures are equally likely to be due to several uncontrolled factors external to the trial, such as changes in patron numbers, than to the impact of the trial's interventions.

The 14-month and 18-month evaluation reports were of limited use, since they were completed after the two-year trial period had ended. Therefore, they were unable to guide any refinement of the trial or data collection. In effect, once the Department of the Premier and Cabinet has completed the final evaluation, it will have conducted three evaluations after the two-year trial period has ended, none of which will have assessed the extension periods.

Given the local nature of the DSP model, it would be more appropriate to have conducted an evaluation for each precinct, so that detailed information about the context, problems and interventions could be assessed and documented for each location. This is a fundamental weakness for a trial of a place-based model which is intended to tailor a suite of interventions to local circumstances.⁷

Effectiveness and Outcomes

There is no reliable or conclusive evidence that the DSP trial has achieved its intended outcomes of reducing alcohol-related violence and improving community safety.

The changes in alcohol-related violence and community safety measures identified in the 14-month and 18-month evaluations were limited and mixed. These evaluations do not allow for any reliable conclusions on whether changes in police crime data, ambulance calls or hospital admissions are attributable to the DSP interventions, or to other factors that were not controlled in the trial. In this respect, correlation does not equal causation.

⁶ Report No. 13 of 2012-13 of the Queensland Audit Office: *Drink Safe Precincts trial*, page 10.

⁷ Report No. 13 of 2012-13 of the Queensland Audit Office: *Drink Safe Precincts trial*, page 16.

Also, the evaluation is unable to identify or discern the impact of each of the different elements of the trial, so its ability to provide models for other precincts is limited.

As a result, there is no reliable information for decision makers to determine whether:

- the trial should continue;*
- further funding should be made available and, if so, the amount of funding required;*
- the DSP model could be applied to other entertainment precincts, in what circumstances and with what expectation of success.*

At a local level, the trial has been successful in bringing together key government, industry and community stakeholders through the steering committees. This has delivered greater communication and coordination to better address local issues. The appointment of police DSP inspectors has been crucial to this improvement.

The success of the local steering committees has not been fully exploited and issues common to all three precincts have not been addressed in a coordinated way.⁸

2.3 Department responses to Drink Safe Precinct Report

The Drink Safe Precinct Report was provided to the following departments for comment:

- Department of Premier and Cabinet;
- Department of Justice and Attorney-General,
- Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services; and
- Queensland Police Service.

There was unanimous support for the recommendation that if the model were to continue, the lead agencies must undertake more detailed planning, implement better oversight and monitoring, and redesign and strengthen the evaluation.

The responses received from the Department of Premier and Cabinet and the Department of Justice and Attorney-General were the most instructive in terms of providing comment on the broader issues. The Director-General, Department of Premier and Cabinet stated:

Although definitive conclusions about the trial cannot yet be drawn, there are positive signs that the trial may have reduced alcohol-related violence in some precincts. It is pleasing to see in the QAO report that this view is shared by local stakeholders. It is also pleasing to see the QAO identify core elements of the DSP trial as representative of better practice, including the place-based management approach and high-visibility policing.

... DPC will continue to encourage agencies to undertake detailed planning for evaluations to ensure that robust assessments are conducted of government policies and programs.

... I am committed to ensuring that quality evaluations are undertaken of key government initiatives and we will take into account the issues that the QAO has raised about better supporting and targeting our evaluations, in order to inform future policy development and decision making.⁹

⁸ Report No. 13 of 2012-13 of the Queensland Audit Office: *Drink Safe Precincts trial*, pages 22-23.

⁹ Letter from the Director-General, Department of Premier and Cabinet to the Auditor-General, 13 May 2013, pages 1-2.

The Director-General, Department of Justice and Attorney-General commented:

While DJAG agrees in principle with the recommendation that “the lead agencies undertake more detailed planning, implement better oversight and monitoring”, this seems to imply that if the DSP model is to continue beyond the trial period, it will continue in its current trial format and certain conditions will remain the same in the future.

The DSP trial arrangements, including the planning, monitoring and evaluation, were designed to test a new concept. Following the results of the full trial evaluation, the Government will make decisions about the future of the DSP approach which may result in the current model being re-designed, implemented in full or part or not continued.

The extensive level of oversight, monitoring and evaluation that have been integral to the DSP trial as a Government funded initiative are not considered sustainable on a long term basis. In this regard, it is possible that a continuation of DSPs, or extension to other locations, could see Government and other stakeholders assume different roles. If DSPs do continue under the same or different conditions, they will move to a ‘business as usual’ status with appropriate sustainable planning, monitoring and evaluation strategies adopted.¹⁰

2.4 Committee consideration

In order to gain a meaningful understanding of the audit outcomes, the Committee met with representatives from the Auditor-General's office on 5 June 2013 to discuss the Drink Safe Precinct Report in detail. Following that meeting, it appeared clear to the Committee that the Drink Safe Precinct trial, whilst well intentioned, was executed poorly and lacked coordination.

Some issues highlighted by the Auditor-General's office during the meeting were:

1. The reliability of conclusions from the evaluations may have been affected by displacement particularly in the Surfers Paradise precinct. The evaluation reports suggested that the trial had resulted in a reduction in alcohol-related violence in Surfers Paradise in particular.
2. However, over the relevant period there had already been a distinct drop in patronage due to council works and the closure of several venues. Notably, the improvement in indicators in Surfers Paradise coincided with deterioration in Broadbeach which suggested a shifting of harm.
3. Of the total amount of over \$9 million spent on the trials, approximately \$6.2 million was spent on police overtime alone.
4. A lack of strategic leadership was a significant issue. In particular, there appeared to be confusion as to which department was the lead agency. In this regard, it was noted that the Office of Liquor and Gaming Regulation expressed concern that its role as overall lead was ‘neither articulated nor defined.’¹¹
5. The methodology used in the surveys was seriously flawed.

The Committee appreciates the efforts of the representatives from the Auditor-General's office to fully apprise the Committee of its assessment of the Drink Safe Precinct trial. The materials provided to the Committee and the information gleaned from the meeting were very informative and helpful.

¹⁰ Letter from the Director-General, Department of Justice and Attorney-General to the Auditor-General, 10 May 2013, page 1.

¹¹ Report No. 13 of 2012-13 of the Queensland Audit Office: *Drink Safe Precincts trial*, page 45 (Appendix A- Letter from the Auditor-General to the Director-General, Department of Justice and Attorney-General, 16 May 2013, page 2).

Conclusions

The Committee has carefully considered the outcomes and key findings in the Drink Safe Precinct Report, together with specific comments made during its meeting with the Auditor-General's office. The Committee concurs with the Auditor-General's overall evaluation of the Drink Safe Precinct trial and endorses his conclusions.

The findings in the Drink Safe Precinct Report highlight how critical effective planning and evaluation are to the success of program trials. Further, it is plainly unacceptable that the lead agency in such a substantial trial did not consider that its role was clearly articulated or defined. This should have been clarified much earlier.

On previous occasions, the Committee has stressed the importance of having a thorough and rigorous evaluation process to inform the success of a trial.¹² A meaningful evaluation process can be as important as the conduct of the trials themselves. The Committee is concerned the evaluation of this important trial was compromised by poor design, was not timely, and did not have clear criteria.

Combined with this, the data sets used to assess the trial had limitations that '*adversely affected their relevance and the evaluation's usefulness.*'¹³ As a result, the evaluation has '*not provided a strong evidentiary basis for reliable conclusions and its use will be limited for informing decisions on future similar trials.*'¹⁴

The Committee notes the Attorney-General's answer to Question on Notice No. 283 – where he stated:

*The evaluation of the Drink Safe Precinct pilot will inform the public and the Government about the success of this initiative. It will also serve to inform decisions on the future development of the Government's regulatory framework for liquor management and alcohol related violence in Queensland.*¹⁵

Unfortunately, it appears to the Committee it will be more difficult for the Government to make fully informed decisions on future programs than envisaged.

The Committee considers that this is an unsatisfactory outcome, especially given the cost of the trial.

The Committee accepts the Auditor-General's advice that '*there is little value to be gained by continuing the trial in its current format*'¹⁶ and notes that the difficult decision of whether to continue (or possibly extend) the trial, with refinements, is compromised due to the limited use of the evaluations conducted to date which did not provide reliable conclusions on the effectiveness of the trial.

The Committee hopes that lessons have been learnt from the implementation of the trial, and seeks the Attorney-General's assurance that a more robust approach will be taken to any future initiatives not just in relation to targeting alcohol-related violence, but in all areas within the Committee's portfolio area of responsibility.

¹² See Committee Report No. 18, *Youth Justice (Boot Camp Orders) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2013*, tabled 22 November 2012, pages 15-16 and Report No. 28, *Queensland Civil and Administrative Tribunal (Justices of the Peace) Amendment Bill 2013*, pages 11-12.

¹³ Report No. 13 of 2012-13 of the Queensland Audit Office: *Drink Safe Precincts trial*, page 2.

¹⁴ Report No. 13 of 2012-13 of the Queensland Audit Office: *Drink Safe Precincts trial*, page 15.

¹⁵ The Honourable Jarrod Bleijie MP, Attorney-General and Minister for Justice, Answer to Question on Notice No. 283 asked on 18 April 2013 by the Member for Mermaid Beach, Mr Stevens MP.

¹⁶ Report No. 13 of 2012-13 of the Queensland Audit Office: *Drink Safe Precincts trial*, page 1.

It is accepted that the trial cannot be restarted and the results to date are all that the Government will have to work to inform its future plans in this area. This is far from satisfactory. Given the current economic climate, the Committee considers it is vitally important that value for money is achieved in the conduct of all Government business.

The Committee makes the following recommendations.

Recommendation 1

The Committee recommends the House note this Report.

Recommendation 2

The Committee recommends the Government engage with the Queensland Auditor-General's Office to develop appropriate evaluation methodologies that can be adopted across the whole of Government for future trials or initiatives.

Recommendation 3

The Committee recommends the Department of Premier and Cabinet as lead agency, ensures that clear protocols or guidelines such as those contained in the Australian National Audit Office publication – *Implementation of Programme and Policy Initiatives* are adopted by all departments for the conduct of future trials, especially in relation to the role of the lead agency in multi-agency initiatives.