



NIMBIN CHAMBER OF COMMERCE Inc

ABN: 49 142 400 194

✉ 81 Cullen St., Nimbin, NSW 2480

🌐 [www.nimbinaustralia.com.au](http://www.nimbinaustralia.com.au)

@ [chamber@nimbinaustralia.com.au](mailto:chamber@nimbinaustralia.com.au)

Dr Paul Douglas  
Director  
Public Health  
NSW Northern Local Health District  
[paul.douglas1@health.nsw.gov.au](mailto:paul.douglas1@health.nsw.gov.au)  
PO Box 126  
Port Macquarie 2444

cc The Hon Janelle Saffin MLA; [Gregory.bell@health.nsw.gov.au](mailto:Gregory.bell@health.nsw.gov.au)

14 September 2021

Dear Paul,

I write on behalf of Nimbin businesses and community regarding communication about Covid19.

Firstly, I'd like to convey our sincere appreciation to the Public Health teams for all your diligent public health work on the pandemic. We know this is difficult work and understand that the recent situation with a non-compliant positive case must have been exceptionally difficult for you and your team.

I would like to express concerns held by us in relation to the recent exposure risk on the north coast and the frustration in Nimbin regarding what was seen as a lack of information about exposure risks. Firstly, I will convey how this lack of information impacted Nimbin, then I will suggest a partnership approach that we believe would amplify the work of the Public Health Unit into the future.

#### **Lack of information**

- It was widely known, or assumed, in Nimbin that the Covid positive visitor had visited the village and some businesses. News circulated that the man had been in the pharmacy, the credit union and real estate. News also spread that he had inspected property in the Tuntable Creek area. We know that some of this 'news' was based on facts, because the pharmacy announced on Facebook that they were a casual contact site. We are also conscious that some of it may have been untrue.
- We know that in emergencies, clear information is essential to suppress unhelpful rumours and allay anxiety. This was our successful approach during the 2019 bushfire crisis.
- Like other communities in the Northern Rivers, Nimbin residents anxiously awaited a list of public exposure sites. A great many were bewildered when Nimbin was not mentioned in a list of impacted towns. Nimbin pharmacy was never listed amongst close contact locations on the Northern NSW Local Health District website and no explanation provided to the community as to why.
- Residents conveyed their bewilderment when, in an ABC Radio interview on the morning of 11 August 2021, information about Nimbin contact sites was still not forthcoming. Many communicated following the radio program that they perceived the exchange as evasive and that the ABC journalist had to work hard to extract a simple statement that the positive Covid case had visited Nimbin looking at real estate.

- As a result of this perceived evasiveness and lack of information, there was a growing perception that the community was being kept in the dark.
- In environments such as this rumours abound, anxiety is fed and respect for authority diminished.

We understand that the Northern Local Health District was dealing with a tough situation if the infected individual was not providing information about their movements. At the same time we would like to propose a way of relating to communities as partners in the effort to contain the virus. This partnership approach could be vital in the repeat circumstances we will undoubtedly see as communities open up.

**Such an approach would involve:**

- Finding a way to convey *some* information, even if there are constraints. For example, “*we know that the visitor infected with Covid19 visited the Nimbin area to look at real estate. We are not able to make public the location of a private house. Contact tracing is used in instances such as this*”. Such a statement tells people that yes, the man has been in Nimbin area, and the Public Health unit is dealing with the real estate situation.
- When knowledge of a contact site such as Nimbin pharmacy is spreading locally, it is particularly important that the health service make public this information, if it is correct. If they do not believe this to be correct, they should convey this. An explanation of why a local business was identified as a close contact and closed for deep cleaning would have been invaluable to the community and crucial for health service credibility in the recent event. Trust in health experts is our most precious asset.
- Frequent updates, with reassurance that more information will be available as soon as possible.

Above all, we would like to invite you to re-appraise a community such as Nimbin in terms of **assets** as well as risks. This would apply to any community that contains some networks of people who distrust public health messages about Covid19.

We would like to invite you to consider that Nimbin contains multiple networks and draw your attention to the many people who want to work with you, and who are actively encouraging fellow citizens that public health measures are important. This kind of social capital is particularly strong here, as evidenced by our town’s remarkable agency in the bushfire response, and in building community assets such as Nimbin Community Centre, Nimbin Health & Welfare, Nimbin Hospital Auxiliary, Nimbin Neighbourhood Centre etc.

This ‘healthy community’ network is a social asset of immense value in dealing with a pandemic. Unfortunately, it is **precisely this network** of concerned citizens whose trust is eroded by perceived evasiveness. The lack of information damages your relationship with your strongest allies.

We know it’s not the intention of Northern Local Health District to do this, but we want to let you know how it is perceived and offer a way forward where we can use the energy of our remarkable community to amplify the excellent and important work of the Public Health Unit in keeping us all safe.

Yours sincerely,



Diana Roberts  
President  
Nimbin Chamber of Commerce

cc [neil@cmjlegal.com.au](mailto:neil@cmjlegal.com.au) (Bangalow Chamber of Commerce)