

Covid Preparedness in the Tourism Sector

A survey carried out by the Tourism Department (MCT)

March 2022



Ministry of Culture & Tourism

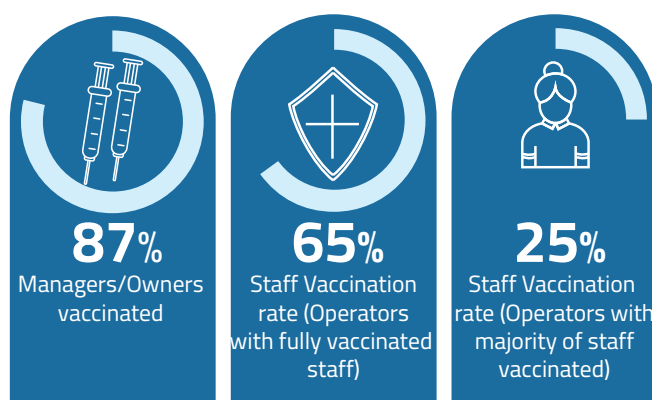


Introduction

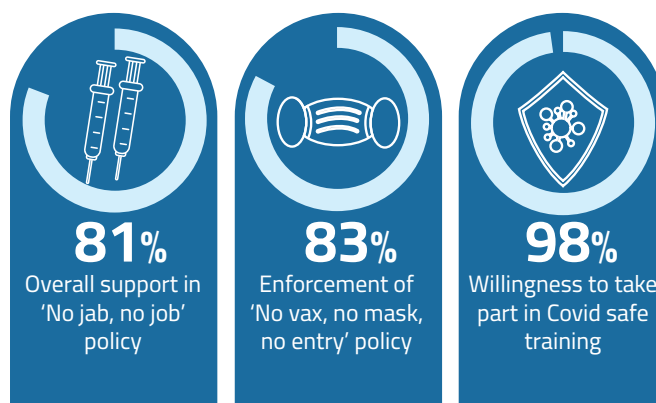
At the start of the Covid-19 pandemic Solomon Islands closed its border to international travel. Since March 2020 no tourists have entered the country, and business travel have been strictly limited to small number of essential staff. This has devastated the tourism sector with the majority of tourism staff losing their jobs and many operators going out of businesses.

After almost two years of no covid cases, community transmission started in January 2022. Previously the government was focused on keeping the country covid-free. Now the focus is on managing the outbreak and learning to live with covid. Part of the “new normal” is the implementation of covid-safe protocols which allows essential services to function. As the situation stabilizes the government are preparing for the gradual and safe lifting of restrictions. It is crucial that the tourism industry, in particular accommodation operators, are trained and ready for an influx of foreign travelers. To assess the preparedness of the sector, a survey was conducted by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism (MCT) from 4th March 2022 to 11th March 2022. The findings of this survey highlights that the tourism sector is well ahead of other segments of the population in terms of covid-readiness.

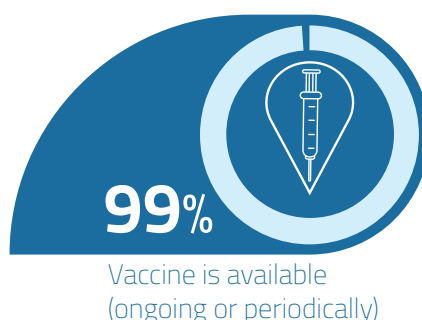
This can be illustrated with the exceptionally high vaccination rates in the tourism sector:



Support for government policies is high and the majority of operators follow guidelines issued by the government:



Apart from very remote areas operators feel that the vaccine has been made available to the community.



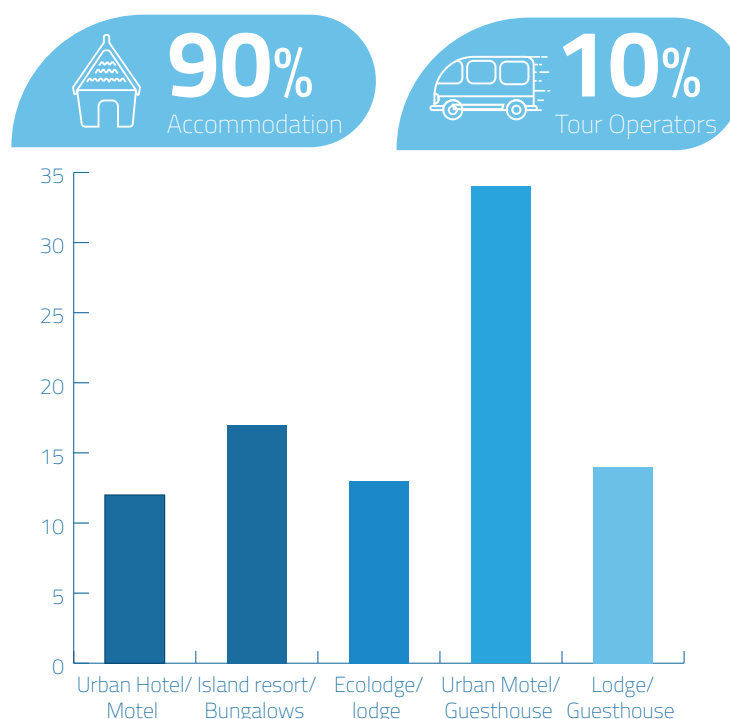
Methodology

The survey consisted of 18 questions designed to assess the readiness and willingness of tourism operator to implement covid-safe protocols. Participating operators was also given the opportunity to comment, ask questions and make suggestions. The data was compiled on the 11 March 2022.

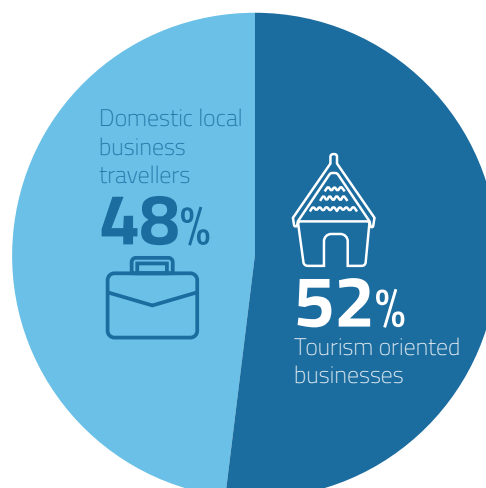
The survey was carried out by staff from Department of Tourism (MCT), Tourism Solomons (TS) and tourism officers from Honiara City Council (HCC). Operators were contacted through e-mail, phone and in-person visits. MCT's database for tourism operators from 2019 contains approximately 300 tourism operators. After two years of travel restrictions, it is estimated that 60-70 % of those businesses are no longer operational. 100 tourism operators participated in the survey. This represents an estimated 80 % of tourism operators that are still in business.

Survey Participants

Distribution of survey participants



Target market

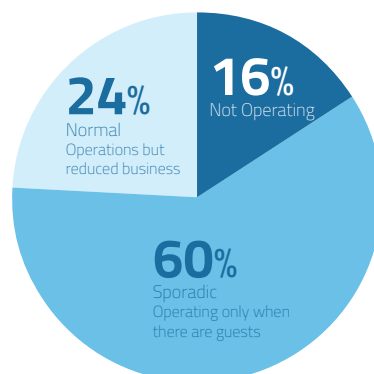


The tourism-oriented businesses (52%) are considered the key operators in terms of international tourism and business travel. The key operators are also the largest employers (77% of all tourism staff).

Results Summary

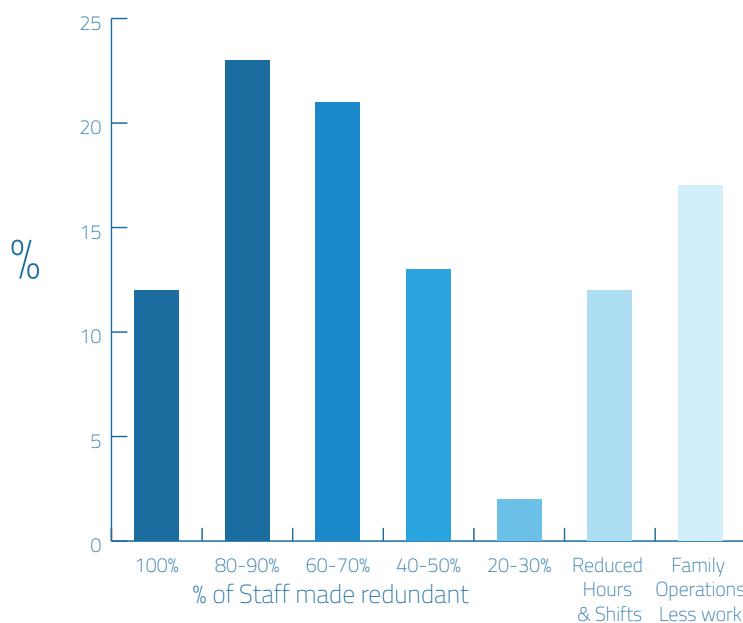
Sector Impacts due to Covid-19

Tourism operators' operational status since March 2020 (border closures)



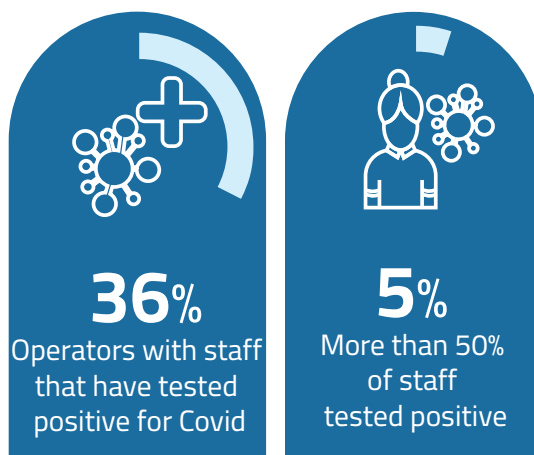
It is likely that the number of non-operations tourism businesses are much higher, since most of those would not have been participating in the survey. Since the outbreak of community transmission (January 2022) an additional 15 % of operators halted operations.

Tourism jobs lost due to COVID-19:



A large number of tourism staff and owners that are still employed are on heavily reduced hours and/or salaries. In many cases tourism staff and managers are not getting paid at all, but work for food and lodging. The main employers are the large hotels and key operators focusing on international tourists and business travelers. It is in this category where most jobs have been lost. Many smaller operations are family owned, and the staff are often family members or casual. While they have not had to lay off staff they have suffered financially from loss of business.

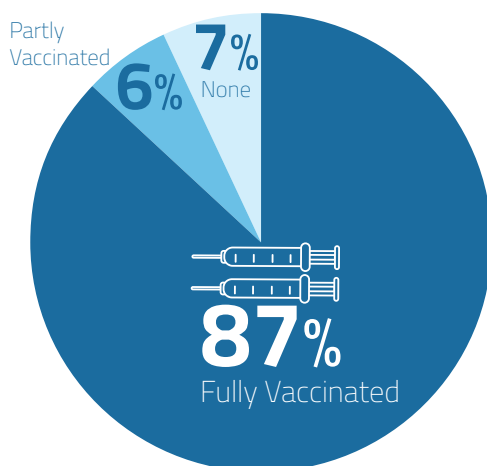
Tourism staff infected by Covid (as of 11 March 2022)



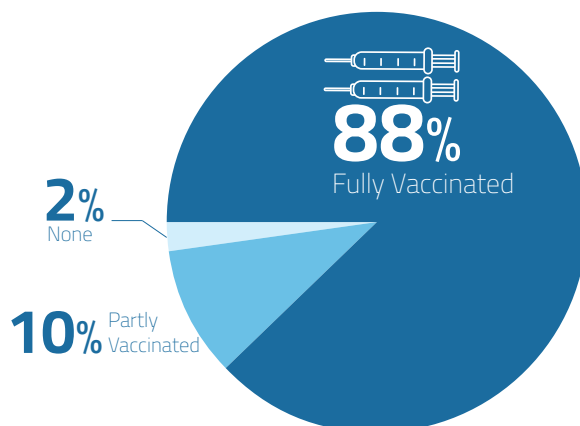
Some smaller operations report infection rates of 100% among staff and management.

Operators' Attitude to Covid safe measures

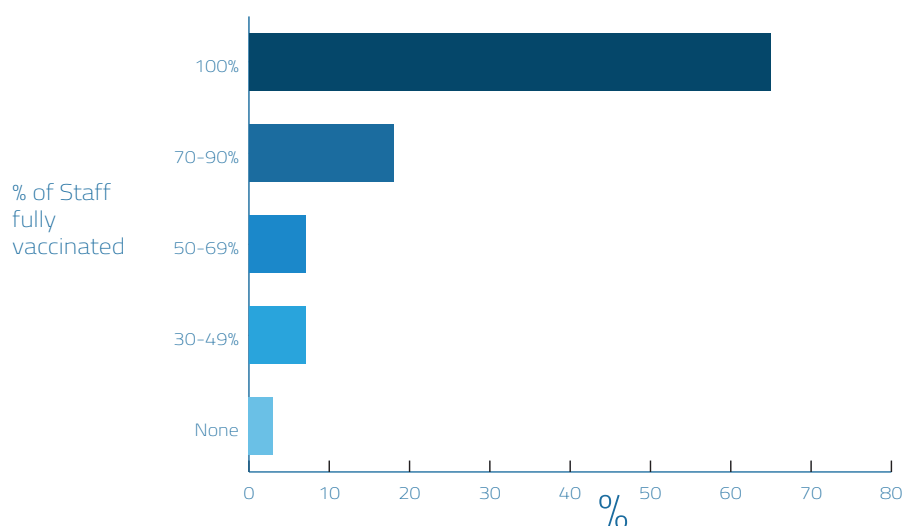
Vaccination rates among tourism business owners and managers;



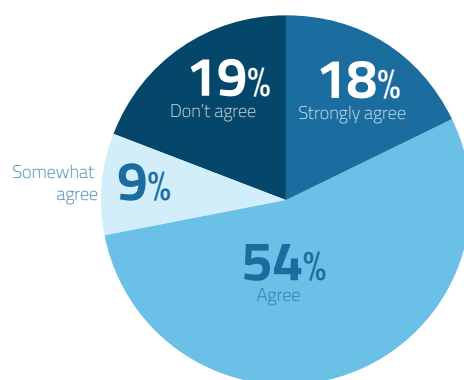
Among the key operators, vaccine rates among owners and managers are even higher;



Vaccination rates for tourism staff:



Overall support for the “no job, no job” policy” among tourism operators:

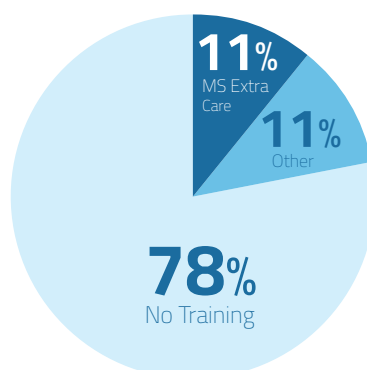


Willingness to take part in Tourism Minimum Standards Extra-Care training and implement Covid-safe protocols:

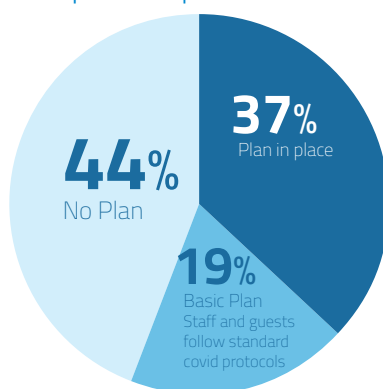


Operators’ Readiness to implement Covid safe measures

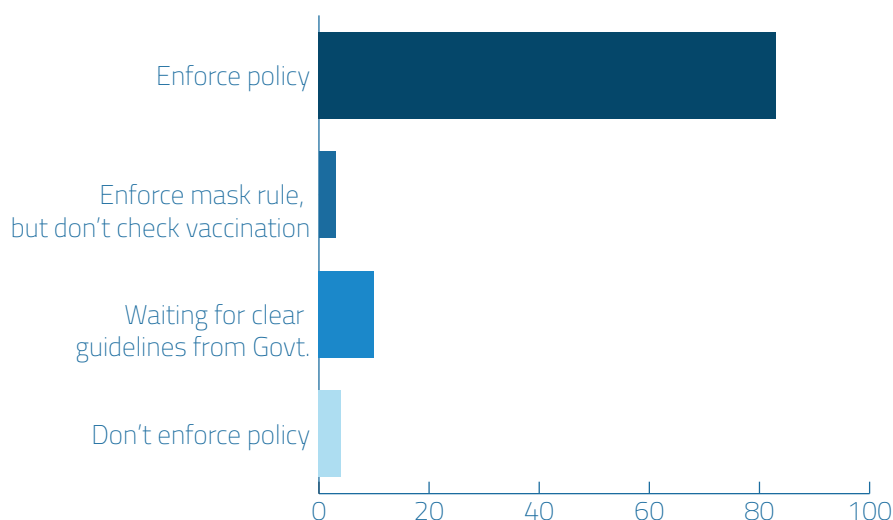
Tourism operators trained in Covid-safe protocols:



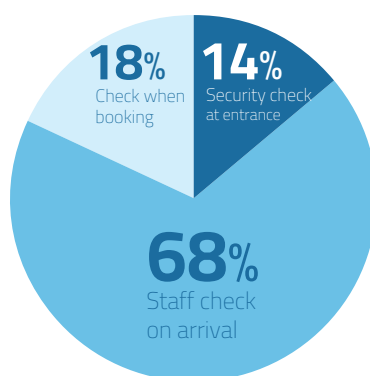
Tourism operators with a Covid-safe plan in place:



Tourism operators that enforce a “no vax, no mask, no entry” policy:



Tourism operators' methods for enforcing the “no vax, no mask, no entry” policy:



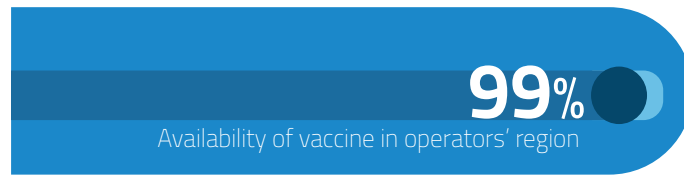
Tourism operations that can operate as a “bubble”:



Operating in a “bubble” means restricted contact with surrounding communities. This mainly applies to island resorts, live-aboard boats and operations in remote areas where staff live and work on site.

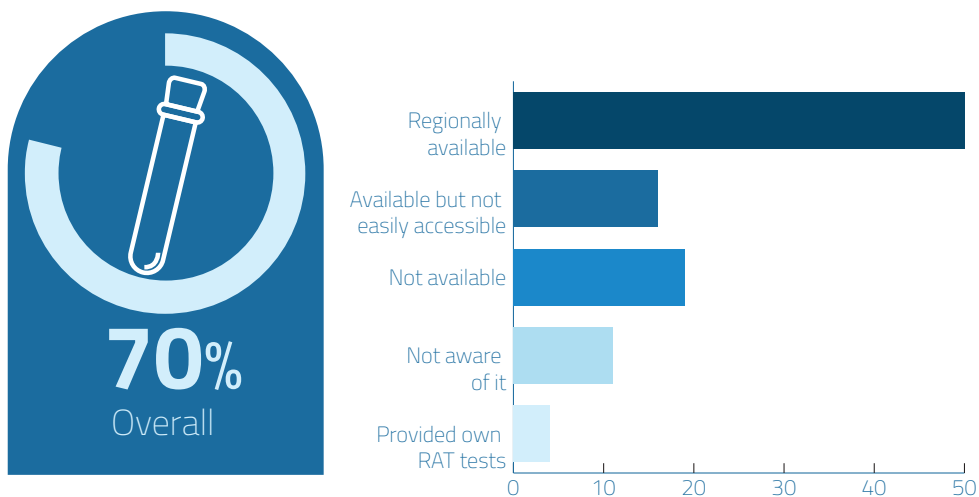
Availability of vaccine and tests

Availability of vaccine in operator's region:



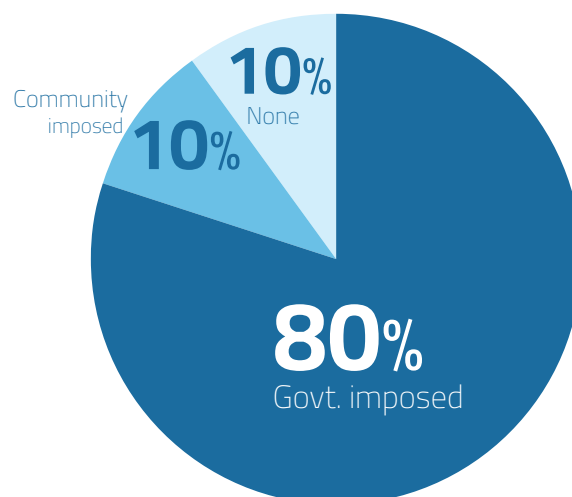
18 % of operators reported that vaccine had been available, but that visits from health teams were random and not well communicated locally, leading to tourism staff missing out on vaccinations

Operators access to RAT tests:

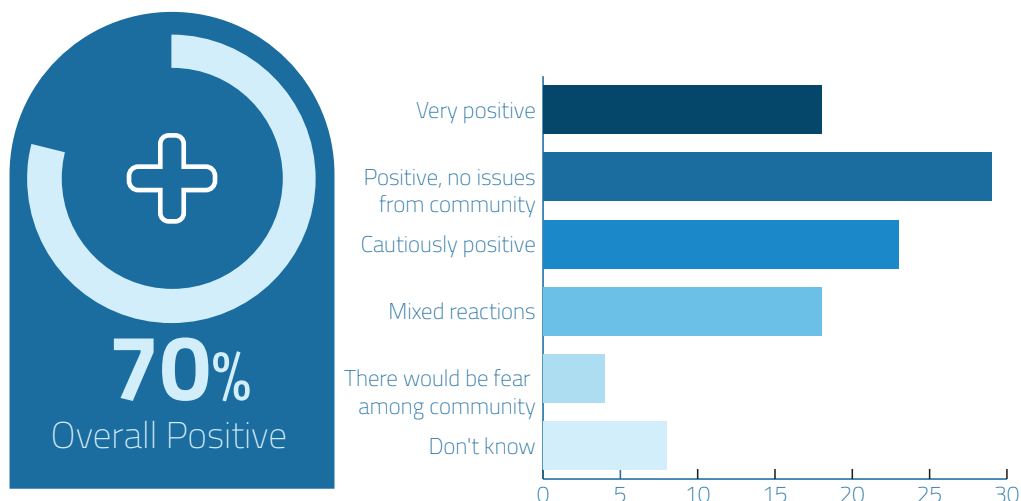


Covid restrictions and perceptions

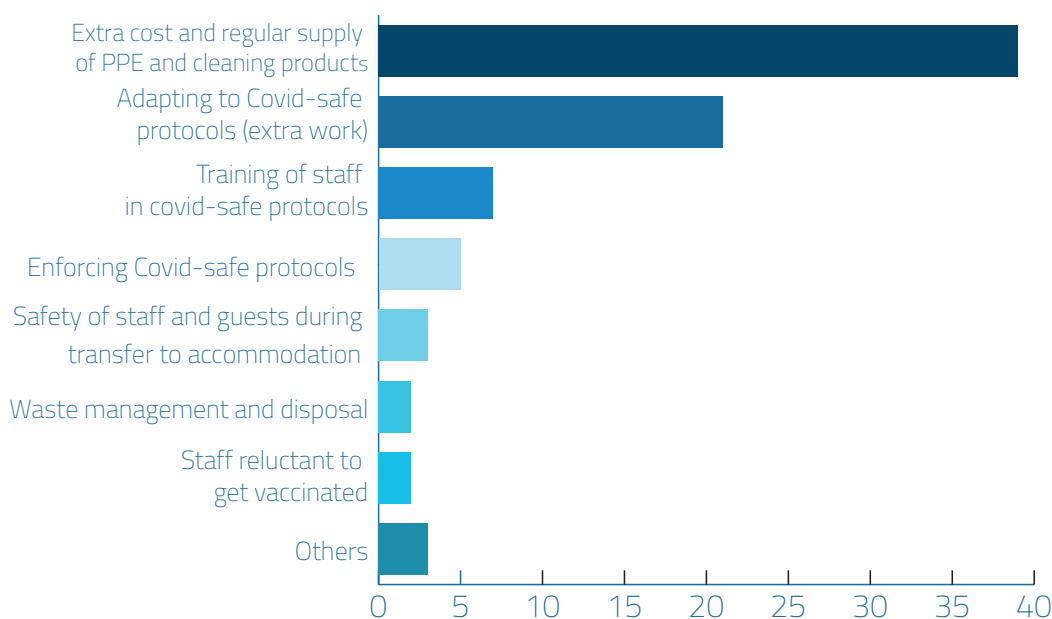
Operators experiencing restrictions in movement imposed by local government or communities:



Likely community reactions to border re-opening and tourists returning, as reported by tourism operators:



Key challenges for Operators to implement Covid safe protocols



18 % of operators did not anticipate any challenges as covid-safe protocols will be the new normal.

Questions from Tourism Operators

Below are some common questions raised by tourism operators during the survey

Border re-opening:

- Will quarantine continue when borders are re-opened?
- Will there be a phased approach in the opening of travel restrictions?
- Will there be a limit on number of arrivals, based on how much accommodation is available?
- Will the Munda international flights resume when the borders reopen?

Health:

- How would operators deal with a very sick or deceased guest? Is there a protocol for medical emergency repatriation in times of Covid-restrictions?
- What are the consequences/protocols for an accommodation where there is a covid case?
- Can RAT tests be supplied to remote operators so that they can test suspected cases on site?
- Can RAT tests be bought in Solomon Islands?

Funding:

- Is there any financial assistance available for the extra expenses incurred by implementing Covid-safe protocols?
- As the tourism sector have suffered two years of almost no income, is there any form of assistance available to save businesses that might otherwise not recover?

Suggestions and comments from Tourism Operators

Below are some suggestions raised by tourism operators during the survey

Border re-opening:

- Border re-opening should happen sooner rather than later as the industry is on the verge of collapse.
- Open up for business travelers, but initially limit to approved hotels in Honiara. Many projects and businesses are suffering due to lack of overseas technical expertise.
- Travel restrictions needs to be lifted so that tourism staff can return to work. Families of tourism staff are suffering enormous economic hardships.
- As Covid is already spreading in the community quarantine should be cancelled, but other entry-requirements (fully vaccinated and tested) should be maintained.
- Lift travel restrictions but maintain Covid protocols for visitors, community and operators.
- All visitors should be RAT-tested on arrival before travelling to their accommodation.
- There is a need for more awareness in the communities before border re-opening, particularly in remote areas.
- Initially limit tourist movements to operators with Covid-safe protocols and have the ability to operate in a bubble.
- Domestic borders should be open as locals and resident expats are a lifeline for operators who have had no foreign visitors for over two years.

Health:

- No measure will control or effectively contain the spread in the Solomon Islands. Those that are holding up the return to some form of normalcy (unvaccinated) will just have to accept the consequences of ignoring the benefits of the vaccine.
- The tourism sector need assistance to secure a regular supply of PPE-equipment.
- Perceptions are important in tourism so reasonably low numbers of cases and deaths are important. Vaccination should continue to be a priority.
- If vaccination is checked by immigration on before and on arrival, tourism operators should not have to check guests, as it can be assumed that all foreigners are fully compliant.
- Resident expats have all been vaccinated as a condition for their employments, therefore operators can assume they are vaccinated.

Funding:

- Tourism operators need financial assistance for PPE-equipment and cleaning products.
- Tourism operators need financial assistance to implement Covid-protocols and to prepare accommodations for guests.

Acknowledgements

The Tourism Department, Ministry of Culture & Tourism wishes to acknowledge the countless tourism operators who warmly responded to the questionnaires that were sent out as part of this survey. Special thanks is extended to the Tourism Solomons staff, Honiara City Council staff, Provincial tourism officers and those who assisted in the collection of responses. Your plentiful assistance is highly acknowledged through the compilation of this small yet significant study. Tagio tumas!

