

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

Why was there an Inquiry?

The offensive odour coming from Swanbank and New Chum industrial estates has been the subject of thousands of complaints by people living and working in nearby communities.

In response, the Queensland Government commissioned a comprehensive Public Health Inquiry, which was announced on 9 January 2025.

The Inquiry's scope was to investigate and report on the circumstances and possible causes of odour-related health concerns of the community living near the Swanbank and New Chum industrial areas and recommend actions to lessen the impacts.

How was the Inquiry conducted?

The Inquiry was conducted in accordance with Chapter 7 of the *Public Health Act 2005* by a panel chaired by specialist physician and Queensland's former Chief Health Officer, Dr John Gerrard. Dr Gerrard was joined on the panel by Dr Lyn Denison, an expert in air quality and its impact on human health.

The Inquiry was conducted in 3 phases:

- stakeholder engagement and information gathering
- community consultation
- health outcome data analysis.

This process involved extensive community consultation and ensuring feedback from the community helped inform the Inquiry's activities and final report.

Did the Inquiry undertake its own air monitoring?

The Inquiry undertook air quality monitoring at 3 sites in the community (South Ripley, Church and Riverview), and 3 sites within the industrial areas. Samples were analysed for the full range of pollutants to which the community might be exposed (suite of United States Environmental Protection Agency TO-15 VOCs) over

a 4-week period. This monitoring revealed that the concentration of VOCs was well below the health-based guidelines, consistent with the results of the monitoring undertaken by DETSI.

What is the Queensland Government doing in response to the Inquiry?

The Queensland Government has accepted all recommendations from the Inquiry to address odour management and risks on public health and wellbeing. An Inter-departmental Steering Committee will be established to oversee the implementation of the recommendations.

This will build on the significant action already taken to lessen odour issues, including stricter licence conditions, best practice composting and tougher penalties for non-compliance.

These approaches have led to a 70% reduction in community odour complaints in the past year, which is making a real difference to the community.

The Inter-Departmental Steering Committee will be supported by both community and reference groups to ensure their input into the oversight of the implementation of the Inquiry recommendations.

Will the community be updated on what is happening with the recommendations?

Yes. Community consultation and engagement has been at the heart of the Swanbank Public Health Inquiry's approach since the beginning and this will continue. An Inter-departmental Steering Committee will be established to monitor implementation of the recommendations. This will include ongoing engagement and regular updates on implementation progress for the community and industry.

The Inquiry says that exposure to offensive odour from the industrial areas is a public health risk. What does this mean?

The Inquiry found the odours from the industrial areas were highly offensive and affected the health and wellbeing of thousands of residents in neighbourhoods surrounding the industrial estates. The public health risk refers to symptoms reported by residents such as headaches, nausea, dizziness, watery or irritated eyes, runny nose, irritated throat, coughing, wheezing, skin irritation and sleep problems. However, there was no evidence of increased cancer risk to locals and the emissions causing the offensive odour from the industrial areas were not at levels that were toxic to human health.

Some individuals can be more susceptible to odours and experience the above symptoms at lower odour levels, including:

- children
- people with asthma, allergies, or chronic lung problems
- people with migraines, anxiety, or depression.

Even though the odour from the industrial areas has been reduced, some residents may continue to have symptoms and are encouraged to seek medical advice through their GPs.

To ensure that the offensive odours responsible for the symptoms are lessened, the government has taken specific actions requiring industries to control odour producing activities.

The report refers to 'odour annoyance'. What does this mean?

'Odour annoyance' is the term that health professionals use to describe smells that are unpleasant, strong, or long-lasting enough to interfere with daily life.

These smells are not toxic and do not cause cancer, but they can still affect a person's health and wellbeing. We know the symptoms are real. They vary and can include headaches, nausea, dizziness, watery eyes, runny nose, irritated throat, coughing or wheezing, and sleep problems.

Odours may affect some people more, including children, people with asthma, allergies or chronic lung problems, and people with migraines, anxiety or depression.

Odour annoyance can cause stress, similar to constant noise or other disturbances. Stress can affect your emotions and your body. Repetitive or ongoing stress can worsen health conditions such as anxiety, depression, and breathing issues.

What actions are already underway to stop the smell?

The *Environment Protection Act 1994* was updated in 2024 to include human health, safety, and wellbeing in the definition of 'environment', meaning odour could now be treated as environmental harm, with tougher penalties for breaking the rules.

The Queensland Government is already making changes through the Department of the Environment, Tourism, Science and Innovation (DETSI). This includes imposing stricter licence conditions, and a court-ordered restraint to provide a long-term shift to best practice composting.

Community odour complaints have reduced by 70% in the past year, indicating that these changes are making a difference.

How long will it take to implement the recommendations?

The Queensland Government is committed to implementing the recommendations as quickly as possible. That is why the Queensland Government will quickly establish an inter-departmental steering committee to ensure the recommendations are actioned in a timely manner.

Are there long-term health effects from the odours?

While the Inquiry found the odours from the industrial areas were highly offensive and affected the community's health and wellbeing, there was no evidence of any increased risk of cancer in the exposed population. Furthermore, the measured pollutant levels in the community were not at levels known to cause cancer. There is no current evidence to indicate that there are any other known long-term adverse health effects on the population from exposure to the odour. (e.g. adverse fertility or pregnancy outcomes).

The Queensland Government is focused on implementing recommendations from the Swanbank Public Health Inquiry to lessen odour impacts.

Are my children safe?

Although children may be more susceptible to odours and experience the above symptoms at lower odour levels than adults, there is no evidence that the odours produced by the industrial areas are at levels toxic to their health or cause any long-term health impacts.

Do the odours affect my fertility or pregnancy?

No. While the Inquiry found the odours from the industrial areas were highly offensive and affected the health and wellbeing of thousands of residents in neighbourhoods surrounding the industrial estates, there is no evidence to show odours affect fertility or pregnancy.

Are the odours affecting my pets?

The impact of odours on a pet is highly dependent on the type of animal and its sensitivity. If your pet shows signs of distress, please contact your veterinarian.

I have symptoms due to the odours. What should I do?

If people are experiencing symptoms due to odours, they can seek medical help by talking to their GP or by calling 13 HEALTH (13 43 25 84) for 24/7 confidential advice from a registered nurse.

People can visit the Queensland Government website and search 'mental health and wellbeing' for more information on mental health support (www.qld.gov.au/health/mental-health-and-wellbeing).

Ipswich Medicare Mental Health Centre, formerly known as Ipswich Head to Health, is a free, federally funded service for adult mental health care. People can walk in without an appointment or referral.

People should always call Triple Zero (000) in an emergency.



Visit www.health.qld.gov.au/swanbank-inquiry for further information.

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